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1949

THE
WAR IN MALAYA

by

LIEUT.-GENERAL A. E. PERCIVAL
C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.,
G.O.C. Malaya, 1941-1942

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Dedication

TO ALL THOSE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN
WHO TOOK PART IN THE CAMPAIGNS IN MALAYA AND BORNEO
AND TO THOSE WHO WAITED AT HOME
FOR THEIR RETURN

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Foreword

THE fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 was a great shock both to Britain and to her Allies. The shock was all the greater because the public generally had been led to believe that Singapore was impregnable. Accusations against our leaders, both military and civil, were made in our own country and abroad, and there were wild stories about the conduct of our fighting men and of the civil population. Many of the statements made and many of the opinions expressed were based on false or incomplete information. Some of them were founded on inadequate knowledge of Malayan conditions or of the factors which influenced decisions. Others were "last survivor" stories. I have hitherto made no effort to refute these accusations or to deny these stories. Some of my friends have wondered why. I felt that it would be better to concentrate on producing the true story and that it is due to all those who fought in Malaya and Borneo, and to the non-combatants who played their part and suffered equally with the fighting men, that I should record the knowledge which I alone possess. So that is why I have written this book.

It would have been easy for me, in the charged atmosphere which still surrounds the fall of Singapore, to have written a sensational story. It would have been equally easy to have written an apologia. I have tried to avoid both these pitfalls. I do not believe in apologies when there is no occasion for them and to descend to mere sensation would be to deprive the important events which took place in Malaya and Borneo both before and during the campaign of the serious study which they deserve. I have tried, therefore, in this book to give, as concisely as I can, a picture of those events as they are known to me and to explain why certain decisions were taken and the factors which influenced them. I have assumed that the great majority of my readers have little or no knowledge of the Far East, so I have tried to introduce them to the conditions which prevailed there at the time of which I write. I hope I have not been unsuccessful.

The preparation of a book like this five years after the events took place has naturally entailed a great deal of research. I have been fortunate to have access to such official records as reached

home. I have also been able to make use of a very detailed narrative of the operations compiled in the Changi Prisoner-of-War Camp by the late Lt.-Col. F. R. N. Copley, the Loyal Regiment, a member of my staff. This narrative was successfully hidden from the Japanese and recovered at the end of the war. Without it it would have been almost impossible to piece together the various parts of the story.

I hope that readers of this book will be in a position to pass a fair and unbiased judgment on the events which led up to the fall of Singapore. I feel confident that I can with safety leave in their hands the honour of all those who gave of their best and most of whom suffered either death or long years of imprisonment.

A. E. P.

April 1947

THE WAR IN MALAYA

THE LIFE OF Z. M. C. 111

Chapter I

MALAYA IN PRE-WAR DAYS

I FIRST went to Malaya in the spring of 1936 as General Staff Officer 1st Grade, Headquarters, Malaya Command. Maj.-Gen. W. G. S. (now General Sir William) Dobbie had shortly before been appointed General Officer Commanding. The Headquarters Staff was being expanded to keep pace with the development of the Singapore defences and I was the first officer to hold a first-grade appointment on the General Staff. I had just completed a course at the Imperial Defence College where officers of all the fighting services meet together with representatives of the Dominions and some civil servants to study jointly problems of Imperial Defence. My selection for this important appointment was, I believe, due chiefly to the late Field-Marshal Sir John Dill, who was at that time Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at the War Office and under whom I had served a few years previously as instructor at the Staff College, Camberley. Sir John Dill was always a firm believer in the necessity for close co-operation between the fighting services and civil governments and was anxious that the doctrines of the Imperial Defence College should be practised in Malaya where clashes of interests were already producing problems which required tactful handling.

I went to Malaya full of enthusiasm for the job, as those who are keen on their profession usually do when taking up a new appointment. I had studied the attack and defence of Singapore on more than one occasion at the Staff College and at the Imperial Defence College, and was anxious to see what the place was really like. I think I pictured the life there as rather resembling that of Malta, where I had served a few years previously and where everybody quickly gets to know everybody else. But I was quickly disillusioned. I had not realized, as in fact few people do until they go there, the size of Malaya or the vastness of the population of Singapore. As Chief of the General Staff of Malaya Command, I had expected to be a person of some consequence until I realized that defence was of very little interest to the great majority of the

people of Malaya in those days. Malaya was a rich commercial country whose people lived mainly on the production of rubber and tin. Before the arrival of the British more than a hundred years before, its people had been of a warlike disposition, but under British rule they had gradually learnt ways of peace and for many years they had been left alone to develop their industries and enjoy the benefits of civilization. They had not been touched even by the First World War, which had brought them great riches, though it is true that in the years which followed they had suffered severely from slumps in world prices which had led to severe reduction of staffs and caused much hardship among people with slender means. And so it was not to be wondered at that the people as a whole were not interested in defence. War had not come to Malaya for over a hundred years, so why should it come in the future? If the British Government liked to build a great Naval Base at Singapore—well, that was their business. Similarly, it was not to be wondered at that few people, except those in official positions, realized for some time that a 1st Grade Staff Officer had been appointed to Headquarters, Malaya Command. After all, military officers were birds of passage while the majority of civilians were permanent residents. The latter have their own friends and it is perhaps natural that they should get a little tired of trying to get to know successive military officers and their families who are certain to leave as soon as they have really got to know them. This situation has, in the past, given rise to a great deal of criticism of the civilians in Malaya, and especially in Singapore, by Service people. I believe it is to a large extent inevitable, and that it will always happen in places where the population is so great that people naturally tend to form themselves into groups with common interests. Anyway, that was the situation which I found in Malaya and, for my part, I was not sorry to be free for a time from too many social functions, for it gave me time to get down to the mass of work which I found waiting for me.

We were a happy team at Headquarters Malaya Command. Dobbie was a delightful man to work for. Although the directing hand was always there he never interfered unnecessarily in our work but was readily approachable whenever we needed a decision. There were some who wondered how his religious activities would be received by the people of Malaya, but they very soon got their

answer. The straightforwardness and simplicity of his character, based on his strong religious beliefs, very soon won for him the respect and even affection of all right-thinking people, as indeed they always will. Moreover, he was tireless in his efforts to promote harmony and a co-operative spirit between those who were in any way responsible for the defence and security of the country.

At that time our work consisted chiefly in developing the defences of Singapore in accordance with a War Office plan. Approval had to be obtained for all major expenditure and, owing to the shortage of available funds, demands were often heavily cut. It will be readily understood, therefore, that the G.O.C. was strictly limited as to what he could do on his own initiative, while delays were occasioned by the necessity to get War Office approval first for a project, then for an estimate and finally for a contract. It was not until after the outbreak of war with Japan that the G.O.C. Malaya was given a free hand with regard to such expenditure.

There were few troops in Malaya at that time and the majority of what there were were concentrated on Singapore Island. Here there were two British battalions, reinforced in 1937 by a third, the personnel of the coast and anti-aircraft defences, some administrative units, and the Singapore Volunteers. On the mainland there was one Indian battalion at Taiping, the Malay Regiment at Port Dickson, the Federated Malay States Volunteers, and units of the Straits Settlements Volunteers at Malacca and Penang. This garrison seemed small enough, but the strength of our garrison in Malaya, as elsewhere overseas, was based on the thesis that the British main fleet would sail for Malayan waters as soon as danger threatened and that the role of the other Services was therefore only to hold the fort until the fleet arrived. This would be a matter of only a couple of months or so. The main problem, therefore, was the local defence of Singapore. Nevertheless, during my tour, I found opportunity to do a great deal of travelling on the mainland of Malaya in order to visit the various regular and volunteer units. In the course of these visits I obtained a wide knowledge of the country and its defence problems and I also got to know a great many people. Wherever I went I received a warm welcome and, for reasons I have given, I found it easier to get to know the people on the mainland than those in

Singapore. It was, I think, as a result of one of these visits that the phrase "The back door to Singapore", which has since received such prominence, was first used in public. I had been attending a week-end exercise of one of the volunteer units and at the final conference I had stressed the increasing importance of the role of the Federated Malay States Volunteers on the mainland as being the defenders of the back door to Singapore. A few days later, somewhat to my dismay, a summary of what I had said was reproduced in a newspaper in the United Kingdom. No permission had been asked for nor had I been given any idea that a representative of the Press was present. I recount this story because it was typical of many similar incidents which happened while I was in Malaya and which accounted, I think, to some extent for the cautious attitude which some commanders displayed in their dealings with the Press.

In 1936 and 1937 things were moving fast in the Far East. In Japan the struggle for power between the Army and those who stood for constitutional government was at its height. In February 1936 occurred the cold-blooded murder of a number of Japan's leading public men by a band of soldiers, followed a month later by the appointment as War Minister of Count Terauchi, one of the most autocratic of Japan's generals who was later, during the Far Eastern war, to become Commander-in-Chief in the West Pacific area. Early in 1937 the Japanese people, alarmed at the dominance which the Army was establishing, brought back the more moderate party at the elections, but this only sufficed to stir on the Army to further efforts. In July 1937, war, which was to continue for eight years, broke out between Japan and China, although it was at that time, as afterwards, always referred to by the Japanese as the "China Incident". In Singapore one of the leading Japanese residents committed suicide by taking poison to avoid arrest on a charge of spying.

We in Malaya watched these events with the keenest interest. It was clear that the Japanese military leaders had taken the bit between their teeth and that the situation which was developing in Europe was likely to provide a suitable opportunity for their ambitious designs. It was, as usual with the Japanese who are past-masters in the art of secrecy, difficult to get any very up-to-date information as to the efficiency of their fighting services, but we saw them carry out combined operations on the China coast

with equipment which was far in advance of anything which we had at that time. They seemed to have no lack of special landing-craft which they used with great boldness, while we knew that ours at home had been limited by financial restrictions to what could be counted on the fingers of one hand. They also made use of special landing-craft carrying ships, the forerunners of those which played such an important part in the later phases of the war. Another matter which seemed to us of great importance was the fact that the Japanese were building a fleet of fast 18-knot merchant ships. We couldn't help feeling that they had some ulterior motive in this and that they might at some time be used for carrying troops instead of cargo.

In November 1937 I received orders to leave Malaya at the end of the year and return to the United Kingdom to take up an appointment as a Brigade Commander in the Aldershot Command. I felt so strongly that the tremendous change which had taken place in the whole problem of the defence of the Singapore Naval Base during the past year or so was not fully appreciated outside Malaya that I asked Dobbie for permission to draw up an appreciation and plan for an attack on Singapore from the point of view of the Japanese. To this he readily agreed. The document, when completed, received his approval and on his instructions I brought it home and handed it to the War Office. It will be discussed more fully in a later chapter. It is sufficient to say here that the plan recommended did not differ very materially from that adopted by the Japanese when they attacked Malaya four years later.

Another matter which caused me grave concern at that time was a lack of the necessary co-operative spirit between the Services on the one hand and the civil governments on the other as regards preparations for defence. It is true that much had been done by social gatherings and other means to enable officials of the various departments to get to know each other better and to understand each other's problems, yet few problems of common interest were really tackled jointly by combined teams. The following extract from a memorandum which I wrote on the subject in July 1937 is of special interest:

During the past year we have succeeded in building up a system of close co-operation between the Services. This has been done by regular monthly Staff Conferences, by conferences of commanders

to discuss specific subjects, and by visits to each other's offices whenever necessary.

Speaking broadly, and with reserve as regards the other Services, it cannot be claimed that the same is true as regards co-operation between the Services and the civil governments. There are, of course, constant discussions between the Governor and the Commanders, but there is not that combined examination of problems which is so necessary when a fortress like Singapore is under construction.

The memorandum went on to suggest various methods by which improvements might be effected and to plead that all concerned, both Service departments and civil governments, should strive to put into effect to the best of their ability and without delay the decisions of the Home Government as regards the defence of Malaya.

When I had been at the Imperial Defence College everything had seemed so easy. When difficulties arose between the representatives of military and civil interests they were almost invariably settled by a compromise. But it is one thing to compromise on paper and quite another thing to compromise when you have real interests to consider. This was the root of most of the difficulties which arose in Malaya. Never before had we attempted to build a fortress on the top of a rich and prosperous commercial centre. There were clashes of interests, and important ones too, at every turn, and the civil governments were constantly being called upon to protect the civil interests against military encroachments. That is a situation which is bound to arise in similar circumstances. In Malaya it was aggravated to some extent by an erroneous but widespread idea that, while the role of the Service commanders was to carry out the instructions received from their respective ministries, the main duty of the civil governments was to ensure that the military activities did not interfere with civil interests. I believe the difficulties could have been largely overcome if all decisions of the Home Government or of the Committee of Imperial Defence as regards defence matters had been conveyed simultaneously to the civil governments and to the Service commanders concerned through their respective ministries, so that all would have felt a responsibility for seeing that these decisions were carried out. In modern times the same results may be achieved by integrated staffs.

I left Malaya with mixed feelings. I felt that, in spite of all our

efforts, we had not yet succeeded in securing for the Army its rightful place in the Malayan community. One would have thought that people who were dependent upon the natural wealth of Malaya for their livelihood would have welcomed in their midst the representatives of a Service which was there for their protection. No doubt the great majority of people were glad in their heart of hearts that we were there. But there were certainly others, who were prone to make their views known freely through the Press and other mediums, who would have much preferred to remain free altogether of any military occupation. They fondly imagined that, so long as there were no troops in Malaya, they would be left alone to conduct their business in comfort and with much profit. The following extract from the leading article in one of Malaya's daily newspapers when the decision to fortify Penang was first announced well illustrates their point of view:

Although it has been hinted for some time that Penang would sooner or later become a fortified town, the definite announcement contained in last Friday's Government Gazette, of the acquisition of land for military barracks and defence purposes has been received in the town with mixed feelings. While there can be no doubt that the advent of a military population will bring prosperity to the traders and amusement places and, through them, to the town in general, there are not a few who view with some concern the disturbance of the restful and placid atmosphere of Penang that will result from the military invasion. Still the matter admits of discussion.

After admitting that there was something to be said for the construction of defences in the northern part of Malaya in view of the changed strategical situation, the article went on:

As regards the military barracks to be established at Tanjong Bungah on the rubber land on the other side of the road facing the Penang Swimming Club, the authorities are to be congratulated on the decision to place them thus well away from the town. A military population in the close vicinity of the town would not have been a pleasant experience for, without meaning any offence, we all know what soldiers are.

In point of fact, the military barracks were not built eventually at Tanjong Bungah but on a site south of, but at an equal distance from, Georgetown.

Nevertheless, during my stay in Malaya, I had grown really fond of the country and its people, as also had my wife. The

work, though exacting, was of absorbing interest—partly because it was so very different to the ordinary life of the peace-time soldier. One felt that one was really doing something that mattered—building fortifications that might very soon be wanted in repelling an enemy's attack, dealing with the thousand and one problems which have to receive attention in the preparation of a country for war, and training such troops as we had for an actual war role. I think we were the first to start actual training in the jungles and plantations of Malaya and to discover that they were not quite so impassable as had been thought. We also proved that the British soldier, if properly trained, is just as capable of standing up to extended operations in that type of country as are Asiatic troops. The standard of living was high, though one did not live at all luxuriously. One just lived an ordinary decent life much the same as one does at home, but with a little additional comfort added by an excellent Chinese house staff. And that was the type of life lived by most of the people with whom I came in contact. Malaya has become notorious for its "whisky-swilling" planters and the gaiety of its night life. While admitting that the consumption of alcohol is higher in a country like Malaya than it is at home, yet this is equally true of all hot countries, and there are many, among whom I am one, who believe that in those climates a whisky and soda in the evening is no bad tonic after a hard day's work. And as regards the gaiety of night life—well, why shouldn't people enjoy themselves in moderation provided they have the means to do it and don't carry it to excess? The fact remains that there were very few "drunks" in Malaya.

My wife and I made many friends in Malaya, both among Europeans and Asiatics. Naturally we came in contact mostly with Service people, but we found most of the civilians also both friendly and hospitable when we got to know them. In a big place like Singapore it is very easy to misjudge people because one does not know them or has only a passing acquaintance. Later one finds that they are much like oneself with just the same ideals and the same outlook on life. I particularly got to know well in the course of my duties a number of Volunteers of all ranks. By them I was always most hospitably received and for them I formed a great admiration. Many of them had fought in the First World War and were now giving up part of their hard-won leisure from a sense of self-preservation or of national duty to fit

themselves to take part in the defence of the country which they had temporarily made their home. I am proud to say that most of these men have remained my friends through the troubles of succeeding years.

Finally, being a lifelong sportsman myself, with a fair but not great ability at most ball games, I enjoyed to the full the unrivalled opportunities for sports and games of all sorts which existed at Singapore. The Padang, with its lovely Australian turf, the golf courses, the tennis and squash courts at the clubs, the many excellent private tennis courts, the swimming baths and many other places of recreation, were of equal attraction. Everywhere games were played with great keenness and with a high all-round standard of efficiency and, what is more important still, always in the right spirit.

And so I left Singapore in December 1937 with many regrets, though with keen anticipation of the new and important work which lay ahead.

Chapter II

ASSUMPTION OF COMMAND IN MALAYA

ON the way home from Singapore I received a wireless message asking me whether I would be willing to take up the appointment of Brigadier-General Staff, Aldershot Command, instead of Brigade Commander. As this was one of the best appointments in the Army for an officer of my rank I naturally accepted without hesitation. I was particularly delighted because Dill, whom I already knew well, was at that time G.O.C.-in-C. Aldershot Command. Later, during the difficult times through which we were to pass together, I got to know him even better. A more delightful man to work for it would be difficult to imagine. Endowed with great charm of manner, he was always courteous and considerate to his staff though he expected, and I think received, loyal and unflinching service at all times. Many times did we work together in Government House till the early hours of the morning putting the finishing touches to some training exercise or perhaps preparing his address at some conference, and those who heard the addresses will, I am sure, never forget them. He had such an uncanny knack of going for the things that mattered and of expressing his views clearly and decisively without treading on anybody's toes. Moreover, he always had the big point of view. But his was a difficult job, for he held responsibility at a time when our national resources were at their lowest. Whether as Commander-in-Chief at Aldershot, as Corps Commander in France, or as Vice-Chief, and later as Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the War Office, he always had to contend with a terrible shortage of trained men and of war equipment. I know perhaps better than any, for he talked very freely to me, how keenly he felt the folly which had allowed our national resources to sink to so low a level. But he worked indefatigably to do what he could to improve matters, always doing what he himself felt to be right regardless of what other people might think about it. In this he was fortified by a strong sense of religion and a faith and belief that things would come right in the end. His untimely death came as a great shock to all his friends but

we can be thankful that he lived long enough to know that his great work was having its reward and that the Allies were on the high road to victory.

I often discussed Singapore with Dill. When I joined his staff at Aldershot he asked me whether I thought it was impregnable. I told him that, in my opinion, far from being impregnable it would be in imminent danger if war broke out in the Far East unless there was an early realization in high places of the complete change in the problem of its defence which was then taking place. I showed him and discussed with him a prize essay, open to graduates of the Imperial Defence College, which I had just written for the Committee of Imperial Defence. In it I expressed the opinion that the areas which would be most vital to us in the event of a world war would be those adjoining the Suez Canal and the Malacca Straits and that, owing to the increased tempo of modern war, the system by which we held our overseas bases with skeleton garrisons only, relying on the arrival of the British fleet to make them secure, was already out of date and needed revision. Dill was in general agreement with these views. He never had any doubts as to the great importance to us of Singapore.

For a time, however, our thoughts were fully occupied with events nearer home. This is no place to attempt to describe the ceaseless preparations for war which went on at Aldershot in 1938 and 1939 or the move of the 1st Corps to France soon after the outbreak of war—the spearhead of the expeditionary force as its badge signifies—or that first winter on the Belgian frontier when most of our efforts to consolidate our front were frustrated first by torrential rains and then by a long and severe frost. It was not too pleasant sitting there with the knowledge that both the French and ourselves were woefully deficient in what really mattered in modern war—aircraft and armoured fighting vehicles. Nevertheless, everybody was determined to do what he could with the means available, and I well remember discussing what would be the right thing to do if the German armour flowed round our flanks, as assuredly it would do if they attacked, and the British force found itself marooned on a sort of island in a turbulent sea without any communications. The only difference between our expectations and what actually happened was that we expected the German armoured forces to pass round our left flank to cut

us off from the sea rather than round our right flank where they would have to negotiate the wooded country of the Ardennes.

In February 1940 I returned home to command the 43rd (Wessex) Division, which was then in training in Wiltshire, but at the end of April I was summoned to the War Office to rejoin Dill, who had just been brought back from France to take up the appointment of Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff. I was to be one of three Assistant Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff and was to co-ordinate the work of the Operations and Intelligence Directorates. It also fell to my lot to attend a number of conferences on the Vice-Chiefs of Staff level and sometimes to attend meetings of the War Cabinet. The two and a half months during which I remained at the War Office covered the closing phases of the operations in Norway and the German invasion of France and the Low Countries. It was, of course, a time of great interest and great activity but, as time went on, I became more and more convinced that the appointment which I held was really superfluous because much of the time I was merely a link between the Directors of Operations and Intelligence on the one hand and the Chief or Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff on the other. As the former had the various sections working directly under them, they alone were in a position to get a proper grip of the various problems which arose, and it seemed to me wrong that their opinions should not be available direct to the Chief or Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff. There was some justification for my position as long as the battles on the Continent were going on as by taking over some of the work I was able to relieve the strain on others, but when after the collapse of France there were for the time being hardly any overseas operations it seemed to me that the time had come for some reorganization and for the elimination of surplus staff. I therefore asked to be transferred to a field formation and was appointed to command the 44th (Home Counties) Division which had recently been evacuated from Dunkirk. Perhaps I was influenced in this request by the fact that, having served for the whole of the First World War as a regimental officer in France and Belgium, my leanings were rather towards active service in the field than the more sedentary, though none the less important, work at the War Office.

I spent the next nine months with the 44th Division, partly in Yorkshire in the East Coast defences but mostly in the Kent and

Sussex area of the South Coast, from which a large number of the men in the division came. It was a first-line Territorial Division and full of excellent material, though a bit disorganized after the evacuation from Dunkirk where, of course, it had lost all its heavy equipment and baggage. It was wonderful though how quickly it recovered as soon as new equipment started coming along. On the South Coast we had sixty-two miles of front which, even allowing for the fact that we were allotted an extra brigade, was a pretty long front for one division which was still short of much essential equipment. If the Germans had attacked there we should have had little or no chance of stopping them on the beaches. The best we could have hoped to do would be to slow them up a bit to allow time for our reserves, such as they were, to come into action. During my time with this division I was able to get some up-to-date ideas about the lay-out and construction of beach defences which were to prove useful later in Malaya, or it would be more correct to say that I was able to modernize my ideas, for I had already had considerable experience of this form of warfare theoretically in Staff College exercises and practically at Malta and Singapore. The difficulty is that the fronts are almost always too extended for the forces available to hold them, as the Germans found to their cost on D-day.

Towards the end of March 1941 I received a telegram ordering me to report at the War Office the following morning and to provide myself with tropical kit forthwith. On arrival at the War Office I was informed that I had been appointed General Officer Commanding Malaya in succession to Lt.-Gen. L. V. (now Sir Lionel) Bond and that I was to be ready to leave England by flying-boat in three days' time. This did not leave me much time to hand over the command of my division, provide myself with tropical kit, settle my private affairs and say good-bye to my family, but, as so often happened in those days, the movement order was quickly followed by another one to the effect that, as the flying-boat had to undergo repairs, the date of departure was postponed for three days. At the end of that time a further postponement was ordered and in the end I remained in a state of suspended animation for five weeks or so until we finally departed on 1 May 1941. I mention this incident because it shows the parlous state of our transport aircraft at that period of the war. If one flying-boat broke down there was apparently no replacement,

and so it happened that a number of quite important passengers had to wait for five weeks before a plane could be provided to take them to the Middle East.

For my part I was glad of the delay because it gave me time both to make frequent visits to the War Office and also to settle a number of private affairs, including those connected with the death of my dear mother who died early in April of that year. The news of my approaching departure was too much for that brave woman who, at the age of eighty-three, had stood up unflinchingly to many air raids in a much-bombed part of Hertfordshire, but I am thankful now that she was taken and was spared the awful anxiety of the years which were to follow.

My visits to the War Office enabled me to obtain information as to the defence forces which were then in Malaya and as to what reinforcements were likely to be available and also to study with the War Office Staff the new problems which had arisen in connection with the defence of Singapore. In particular I heard for the first time of the project to move British troops into Thailand (Siam), if opportunity offered, in order to prevent the Japanese occupying the southern part of that country. I gathered that the War Office strongly favoured an advance into Thailand in some form, and there was even talk of occupying all the southern part of the country south of the Isthmus of Kra. While realizing the great strategical advantages which would accrue if such a step could be taken, I could not help feeling that the proposal was a bit ambitious in view of the size of the country and the limited resources available. I also foresaw that difficulties would most certainly arise in being able to decide when the proper moment had come for the advance without causing political complications. The project was, however, at that time very much in its infancy and I promised to examine it fully when I got out to Malaya.

Before leaving England I had lunch with Dill, who had then just returned from his visit to the Mediterranean in connection with the German invasion of the Balkans. Though naturally much worried at the turn of events in that part of the world, he was still the courteous and considerate man I had always known him to be. It was the last time I saw him alive though we continued to correspond with each other. I shall always remember him as a great soldier and a perfect gentleman.

As for my own prospects, though naturally delighted at being

given an independent command, I could not help realizing that my future had become, to say the least of it, a little uncertain. Having fought during the whole of the First World War on the Western Front I was, I suppose, a "Westerner" by instinct, for I realized that the greater plums usually fall to those who remain nearer home. My preference, then, would have been for a field command in the West. In going to Malaya I realized that there was the double danger, either of being left in an inactive command for some years if war did not break out in the East or, if it did, of finding myself involved in a pretty sticky business with the inadequate forces which are usually to be found in the distant parts of our Empire in the early stages of a war. This is all quite natural and I have never been one to complain of what destiny decrees, but the fact remains that those who have the advantage of fighting with adequate resources at their disposal, both in manpower and more especially in material, have a better chance of making a name for themselves than those who have to struggle with the scales in this respect weighted heavily against them.

And so, as I have said, I left England on 1 May 1941 in a Sunderland flying-boat bound for Egypt, where it was intended that I should transfer to an Imperial Airways machine for the rest of the journey to Malaya. We left early in the morning and unescorted made the journey across the Bay of Biscay and down the coast of Portugal in broad daylight, but no German aircraft appeared. After spending a night at Gibraltar we left the following afternoon for Malta, the timing being so arranged that we did the last part of the journey under cover of darkness. Having a day to spend at Malta I called on my old chief, General Sir William Dobbie, who was then Governor. He kindly gave up an afternoon to show me round the defences and I thus had a further opportunity of studying coast defence problems. Before we left in the evening some heavy air attacks developed on the Grand Harbour, and we had the exciting spectacle of German and Italian aircraft diving to the attack through the beams of numerous searchlights with our anti-aircraft shells bursting all around them. Our flying-boat slipped out in a quiet interval between two of these raids and early next morning landed near Alexandria without further incident.

In Egypt I was held up for a week by the fighting which had broken out in Iraq where, under Axis influence, some of the

Iraqi troops had revolted and were attacking the British. In consequence, the Imperial Airways service between Egypt and Basra was temporarily suspended. The present Chief of the Air Staff, Lord Tedder, who was then the acting Air Officer Commanding Middle East, and whom I had previously known in Malaya, came to my rescue and kindly put me up during my stay in Cairo. He also, as soon as the situation in Iraq had cleared up, arranged for my transport in a R.A.F. plane to Basra via the desert route. It was an interesting journey, as fighting was still going on at Rutbah Wells, and when we landed for the night at Habbaniyah we were able to get a first-hand account of the curious battle which had taken place there two days before when the Iraqi forces, established on foothills overlooking the aerodrome, had been able to engage with close-range small arms fire any aircraft which left the hangars, and the aircraft, going out to bomb the rebels, had had to run the gauntlet as they dashed out from behind the hangars, through the gates and into the air. Eventually the Iraqis had been driven off by a counter-attack delivered by a small force of infantry brought in by air from India.

On arrival at Basra I found that the Imperial Airways flying-boat had already left, but by making an early start the next morning I was able to catch it up and we reached Karachi that night. Three days later we reached Rangoon where I was glad of a talk with Maj.-Gen. (now Lt.-Gen. Sir K.) Macleod, who was then G.O.C. Burma. He outlined to me his dispositions for the defence of that country.

As I had some secret papers with me I thought it wiser not to travel via Bangkok and had therefore asked for a R.A.F. plane from Malaya to be sent to meet me at Rangoon. I boarded this plane the following morning and, after a stop for refuelling at Alor Star, the most northerly aerodrome in Malaya, reached Singapore late in the afternoon of 15 May 1941 after a not uneventful journey of a fortnight. I assumed command the following day.

Since I had left Malaya three and a half years before, some considerable changes had taken place in the defence organization. In the first place a Commander-in-Chief Far East (Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham) had been appointed with headquarters at the Naval Base on Singapore Island. He was responsible directly to the Chiefs of Staff for the operational control and general direction of training of all British land and

air forces in Malaya, Burma, and Hong Kong, and for the co-ordination of plans for the defence of those territories. It was intended that he should deal primarily with matters of major military policy and strategy, but it was not the intention that he should assume any administrative or financial responsibilities or take over any of the day-to-day functions at that time exercised by the General Officers Commanding Malaya, Burma, and Hong Kong, or the Air Officer Commanding Far East, all of whom came under his command. These officers continued to correspond with the War Office, Air Ministry, Colonial Office and Burma Office on all matters on which they had previously dealt with those departments to the fullest extent possible consistent with the exercise of command by the Commander-in-Chief, but kept him informed as and when he wished. It will be noted that the Commander-in-Chief Far East exercised no command or control over any naval forces. He was responsible for keeping the Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Malay States fully informed of developments, though this did not absolve the General Officer Commanding Malaya or the Air Officer Commanding Far East from maintaining touch, subject to the Commander-in-Chief's general direction and supervision, with the Governor and High Commissioner. The Commander-in-Chief Far East was also responsible for maintaining touch, where appropriate, with His Majesty's representatives in various foreign states in the Far East. The degree of "operational control" of British land and air forces, which the Commander-in-Chief Far East should assume, was defined as meaning "the higher direction and control" as distinct from "detailed operational control".

To enable the Commander-in-Chief Far East to carry out his functions he was allowed only a very small staff, consisting of seven officers drawn from all three Services with the necessary clerical and cipher staff. For intelligence purposes he had at his disposal the Far East Combined Intelligence Bureau, though it remained under Admiralty control. Although the establishment of his staff was later increased to fifteen it was never, allowing for sickness, etc., sufficient for the work to be done. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that, when this headquarters was created there was no war in the Far East, while there were insufficient trained staff officers to meet our requirements in the

active theatres of war. He would be a bold man who would say that the decision was wrong.

On assuming command the Commander-in-Chief Far East had issued the following instructions to his subordinate commanders:

You will correspond direct with Headquarters Far East on questions of policy affecting strategy or operations. On other questions you will repeat to the C.-in-C. Far East such of your communications to the War Office, etc., as you judge of sufficient importance.

That then was my position *vis-à-vis* the Commander-in-Chief Far East. Although his headquarters were situated at the Naval Base and therefore at a considerable distance from the Army Headquarters, Brooke-Popham's private residence was on the outskirts of Singapore. He was always readily accessible and my personal relations with him throughout were of the happiest. He informed me on my arrival, as indeed I had already ascertained at the War Office, that the two main principles which were to guide his actions were, firstly that it was the Government's policy to avoid war with Japan, and secondly that until a fleet was available reliance for the defence of the Far East was to be placed primarily on air power.

Another important change which had taken place in the Far East since I had last been there was that the China fleet, such as it was, was now based on Singapore instead of being based on Hong Kong, and the Commander-in-Chief China, Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, flew his flag ashore at the Naval Base. Most of the more powerful units of the China fleet had by that time been moved to take part in the war in the West. There were in the Far East no battleships, no aircraft carriers, no heavy cruisers and no submarines. The Naval Base, which was nearing completion, had, however, assumed increased importance owing to the facilities which existed there for the repair of ships of all types. There was now a Rear-Admiral Malaya, an appointment which was filled shortly after my arrival by Rear-Admiral Spooner, who was later to lose his life after the fall of Singapore.

Of more importance for the time being than the strength of the fleet which, as has been shown, was almost negligible as far as major operations were concerned, was our strength in the air, and I made anxious inquiries about that. There were certainly more aircraft than when I had left Malaya but I was not encouraged

when I was told that the same old Vickers Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers as before were still there, for I knew full well that, though they might have been reconditioned and fitted with new engines, their age must run into double figures and that they could not be considered of much account in modern war. It is true also that there were fighters where there had been none before but, having seen the paramount importance of the modern up-to-date fighter in the Battle of Britain, I was far from feeling happy when I was told that our fighters were a type which I had not heard of as being in action elsewhere, i.e. the American-built Brewster Buffalo. However, a fighter was a fighter and we were in no position to pick and choose at that time. I was more disturbed to find that there were no heavy bombers, no dive-bombers, no transport and no Army Co-operation aircraft in Malaya.

There was some consolation, however, and that was in the person of the Air Officer Commanding Far East, Air Vice-Marshal C. W. H. Pulford, who had a short time before arrived to take over command. An ex-naval officer and a keen exponent of the torpedo-bomber in naval warfare, he was a man of my own way of thinking in most matters military or non-military. We immediately struck up a close friendship which was to endure until we parted on the eve of the fall of Singapore, he to meet his death with the rear-admiral and I to spend long years in captivity. As my family were not with me, he lived with me at Flagstaff House, and I believe that our close comradeship was a not unimportant factor in fostering the spirit of co-operation which, from the time of our arrival, developed between our respective Services both on the headquarters staffs and in the field units.

Pulford, whose responsibility extended to the whole of the Far East and who had a big task to perform in preparing his command for war, suffered greatly from lack of a trained staff. He had in fact only one officer on his staff who had been trained at the R.A.F. Staff College. This threw a great deal of additional work on his shoulders and was, I think, largely responsible for a deterioration in his health.

At my own headquarters we suffered similarly, though not perhaps to the same extent, from a lack of trained staff. As relations with Japan became more strained and the garrison of Malaya increased, so there had been an increase in the strength of Headquarters Malaya Command. After the outbreak of war

with Germany, the filling of vacancies on the staff had become more and more difficult as the supply of trained staff officers in the Far East became exhausted. The supply of trained staff officers from home was naturally limited by non-availability and by difficulties of transportation. Regular units serving in Malaya were called upon to supply officers with qualifications for staff work until it became dangerous to weaken them any further. At the same time, the work at Headquarters Malaya Command became more and more heavy, including as it did war plans and the preparation of a country for war in addition to the training and administration of a rapidly increasing garrison. Before war broke out in the Far East our staff was never greater than that normally allotted to a corps in the field and was always far smaller than that in other theatres of war where the forces were of a strength approximately equal to our own. Headquarters Malaya Command had, in fact, to combine the functions of a local War Office with those of a field force. In these conditions, which I believe have been little appreciated outside our headquarters, it was often quite impossible for staff officers with the best will in the world to get out and about the field units as they would like to have done. Even as it was, several of those who had been longest in Malaya were suffering from poor health resulting from overwork long before war broke out. But there was little hope of relieving them. The whole staff were a conscientious and loyal body of men to whom my sincere thanks are due.

There were many more troops in Malaya than when I had left. In the northern part of the country was the 3rd Indian Corps whose headquarters was just being formed at Kuala Lumpur. It was commanded by Lt.-Gen. Sir L. M. Heath, who had only recently arrived in Malaya. He had come straight from the Middle East where he had commanded the 5th Indian Division at the battle of Keren and in the subsequent operations in Eritrea, for which he had been awarded the K.B.E. A veteran of the First World War, in which he had been severely wounded in Mesopotamia, he enjoyed a considerable reputation in the Indian Army where he had had much frontier experience. As a result of his wound he had partially lost the use of one arm, though this seemed to cause him little inconvenience. What was probably a greater handicap was a constitutional inability to eat certain sorts of food from which he was a permanent sufferer.

Heath had two Indian Divisions, the 9th and 11th, under his command. The former, which contained two infantry brigades only and was far from complete in other arms, was disposed on the east coast and was commanded by Maj.-Gen. Barstow, whom I had known previously at the Staff College. He was an officer of wide experience who proved himself a brilliant commander during the campaign until he was lost, almost certainly killed, during the operations in Johore. The 11th Indian Division, which at that time also contained only two infantry brigades but had a fuller complement of equipment, was in Kedah and Province Wellesley. It was commanded by Maj.-Gen. Murray Lyon, an officer who had transferred some years previously from the British Service to the Indian Army—a brave and gallant officer but with a more limited outlook than Barstow.

On Singapore Island also changes had taken place as the infantry had been organized into two brigades and a fortress commander had been appointed. This appointment was held by Maj.-Gen. F. Keith Simmons, who had been in command at Shanghai and had come to Singapore when that place had been evacuated the previous year. He was a fairly senior officer, having graduated at the Staff College in one of the early courses after the First World War. More recently he had been military attaché in Spain. He had a particularly tactful and courteous manner which was an undoubted asset in his dealings with the civilians of Singapore. He worked unceasingly for the welfare of the troops in that city. Under his command, in addition to the infantry, came the Fixed Defences, commanded by Brigadier Curtis, a most efficient artillery officer and an expert in coast defence, and the Anti-Aircraft Defences, commanded by Brigadier Wildey who, by enthusiasm and hard work, had made the most of his limited resources.

Finally, in reserve in the Malacca-Negri Sembilan area but with headquarters at Kuala Lumpur, was the Australian Imperial Force. This title is perhaps a little misleading because, although it included a most excellent base hospital and administrative units on a lavish scale, the fighting troops at that time consisted of one brigade group only. Later a second brigade group arrived, but the A.I.F. never had more than that and was in fact always a little top-heavy with a very high proportion of administrative personnel compared to the fighting troops. The 8th Australian

Division, from which this contingent had been drawn, had been formed later than those which were already fighting in the Middle East and included in its ranks a number of men with considerable interests, financial or otherwise, in their own country who had had to settle up their home affairs before offering their services. There was excellent material in the division both in the ranks and among the commissioned officers. It suffered, however, from a lack of up-to-date senior officers, trained in the methods of modern war. Many of those in responsible positions of command, although they had fought with distinction in the First World War, had had little or no practical training for many years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. This was to prove a serious handicap. It is not sufficient that a commander should be merely brave himself, though that is naturally an important attribute. He should also be fully versed in the conduct of modern war and, as far as possible, be practised in the art of command under conditions approximating as nearly as possible to those of actual war.

Among the senior officers who had, so to speak, been out of harness for some years was the commander of the A.I.F., Maj.-Gen. H. Gordon Bennett. It is not for me to criticize a system under which such appointments are made, but modern war gives little time for commanders to learn their trade and I believe that, if the Commonwealth is to get full value from the forces which it raises on mobilization, greater provision should be made for training officers for the higher commands in time of peace. Nevertheless, I formed the opinion that Gordon Bennett, who, though slightly built, was wiry and tough, would fight well when the time came and I hope and believe that my attitude towards him as the commander of a Dominion Force was correct and proper. When I took over command, one of my first actions was to inquire whether there were any instructions defining my authority over the A.I.F. I was informed that there were none. After discussion with Gordon Bennett it was agreed that, though he would not raise objections to his force being split up if the situation demanded it, yet it would naturally be expected to fight better as a whole under his command and therefore should, if possible, remain as a composite force. Difficulties arose, however, from time to time in connection with certain administrative matters common to the Army as a whole in which Gordon

Bennett claimed special treatment for his force, thus creating a difference between Australian and other troops. I felt that differences of this sort were unfortunate as my policy was to treat all troops alike. Gordon Bennett has stated that he had special instructions from his Government defining the position of his force in the army of Malaya. I consider it most desirable from every point of view that the position of such a force should be clearly defined and that there should be no doubt in anybody's mind as to what that position is. It was not so in Malaya.

Finally, a word about civil affairs. The Governor and High Commissioner, Sir Shenton Thomas, was still there. He had recently received an extension of his term of office and was now in his seventh year—a long time in that trying climate. He and Lady Thomas were always very hospitable to the troops and entertained freely at Government House. Among the senior officials some of the old faces had disappeared but, taken all round, there had not been many changes.

I noticed a distinct change in the attitude of the Press. During my previous tour, some sections of it had not been too friendly to the military, but now it seemed to be wholeheartedly behind the war effort and was constantly advocating measures for the welfare of the troops.

Chapter III

THE PLAN OF DEFENCE

It is now necessary to go back and see how the defence plan had developed since it was first decided, after the termination of our Treaty with Japan, to build a Naval Base at Singapore. First of all I cannot stress too strongly that the object of the defence was the protection of that base and that the holding of any part of Malaya, whether it be Singapore Island or part or the whole of the mainland, was merely a means to that end. That is equally true of the problem as it presented itself right at the beginning and as it was at the time of the Japanese invasion, although the methods adopted, of course, varied as the years passed.

Right up to the late 'thirties the security of the Naval Base depended ultimately upon the ability of the British fleet to control the sea communications to Singapore. During that period the nearest Japanese base was 1,700 miles from Singapore and the long sea voyage would both have limited the size of the expedition and would also have greatly prejudiced the chances of obtaining surprise. Moreover, in the early days the range of military aircraft was very limited compared to what it is now, and the Japanese, if they had wished to support an attack on Singapore with shore-based aircraft, would have had to seize some territory comparatively close to Singapore itself and there develop an air base. This would all have taken time and would have enabled the British fleet to reach Far Eastern waters before the main attack could be launched. The only chance the Japanese had of success therefore really lay in a *coup de main* attack direct on to Singapore Island itself. It was against this type of attack that the defences were initially laid out. The problem was one mainly of the defence of Singapore Island and the adjoining waters. For this a comparatively small garrison only was required.

The rapid development of air power towards the end of the 'twenties and the early 'thirties greatly affected the problem of defence. On the one hand, Singapore became exposed to attacks by carrier-borne and shore-based aircraft operating from much greater distances than had previously been thought possible. On

MALAY PENINSULA



INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY
DEFACTO SETTLEMENTS
FEDERATED MALAY STATES
UNFEDERATED MALAY STATES
HEIGHTS (OVER 2000)
RAILWAYS
MAIN ROADS



SUMATRA

the other hand, our own defence aircraft would be able to reconnoitre and strike at the enemy much farther from our own shores. This led to the lengthy discussion on the relative merits of the gun and of aircraft for the defence of fortresses, which was very sensibly settled in May 1932 by a ruling that coast defences should be organized on the basis of co-operation between the three defence services. It was laid down that the gun should retain its place as the main deterrent against naval attack but that the Royal Air Force should continue to co-operate in the defence of Singapore with such forces as might from time to time be considered desirable. It was further laid down that such co-operation should extend to all branches of the defence, including fighters for anti-aircraft defence and offensive operations against aircraft carriers and capital ships and against other forms of attack by sea, land, and air.

Before considering the defence plan as it developed in later years let us turn for a moment to the topography of Malaya, for nobody could appreciate the problem rightly without a fair knowledge of the size and characteristics of the country. Those who look at Malaya on a small-scale map may be surprised to find that in area it is very nearly as large as England and Wales. Nor, if you eliminate some of the south-western parts of England and Wales, is it unlike those countries in its general features. Malaya is about 400 miles long, as the crow flies, while its width varies from about 200 miles in the widest part to about 60 miles in the narrowest. It is bounded on all sides, except on the north, by sea. The Island of Singapore corresponds approximately in size and position to the Isle of Wight. Down the centre of Malaya runs a range of hills rising to some 7,000 feet which forms a backbone to the peninsula, and there are only a few communications between east and west. The west coast area is much more developed and more thickly populated than is the east. Through it run the main road and rail communications linking Singapore with the north. There are also a number of lateral roads, especially in the central area, and branch railway lines which link the main north-south communications with coastal centres. In the east coast area there are few roads, the only ones of importance being those constructed to connect the ports of Mersing, Endau and Kuantan with the interior and the internal road system in the State of Kelantan. The only road communication between this

State and the rest of Malaya is a fine-weather track which follows the coast of Trengganu to Kuantan. The east coast railway branches from the main line at Gemas in northern Johore and, running east of the mountain range, passes through the State of Kelantan into South Thailand where it rejoins the main line at Haad'yai Junction, near Singora. The main roads in Malaya are well metalled and the railways are all single-track metre gauge.

In the extreme north of Malaya, where there is much rice grown, the country is in places more open than it is in the south, but there is little really open country as we know it. There are also some comparatively open areas in the tin-mining country in the States of Perak and Selangor. By far the greater part of the country, however, is covered with vegetation. There are the vast rubber plantations situated along the road and rail communications which, while providing good cover from the air, can easily be traversed by men on foot, by animals, and in most places by light-tracked vehicles. There are the various other plantations, some thick and some comparatively open. Finally there is the jungle of varying types, some dense and almost impenetrable and some providing little or no obstacle to the passage of men or animals, and there are the formidable mangrove swamps which only the fittest of men can traverse. Except for the rice and tin-mining areas, visibility is almost everywhere restricted to a hundred yards or even less.

On the east coast there are good sandy beaches almost throughout. There are also some good stretches of sandy beach on the west coast, but a great deal of this coast is covered by mangrove swamps.

To sum up, the country generally tends to restrict the power of artillery and of armoured fighting vehicles. It places a premium on the skill and endurance of infantry. As is true of most types of close country, it favours the attacker.

The climate throughout Malaya is humid and enervating, though not unhealthy for normal people. The temperature, which is not excessive, varies little, and similarly the rainfall, which comes mostly in tropical storms, is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year. Between April and September the wind blows from the south-west and between October and March it blows from the north-east. During the latter period rough seas are at times encountered on the east coast.



THE FAR EAST



PHILIPPINE ISLANDS

PACIFIC

OCEAN

NEW GUINEA

ARAFURA SEA

GULF of CARPENTARIA

AUSTRALIA

BANDA SEA

TIMOR SEA

THURSDAY IS.

The efficiency of Europeans who work at high pressure for long periods is liable to be affected unless periodical visits to places where the climate is more invigorating are possible.

Malaya is a country where troops must be hard and acclimatized and where strict hygiene discipline must be observed if heavy casualties from exhaustion and sickness are to be avoided.

Such was the country in which the defences of the Naval Base had to be built. Although political and commercial considerations demanded that some development of the east coast area should take place, it had always been the policy of the army authorities to limit, as far as possible, developments in this area so as to exploit to the maximum the natural obstacles provided by nature. With the development of air power, however, other considerations arose. Up to the early 'thirties the only R.A.F. aerodrome in Malaya was at Seletar on Singapore Island. The construction of two additional aerodromes on Singapore Island was immediately put in hand while a fourth was provided by the civil airport at Kallang, on the eastern outskirts of Singapore Town, a really wonderful engineering feat which converted a virgin swamp into a modern up-to-date aerodrome with a flying-boat base adjoining. So far there was no difficulty, except as regards the actual work of construction, because all these aerodromes were within the defended area, but it was another matter when the Royal Air Force proposed to build aerodromes on the east coast of the mainland. They must, they said, be able to get the maximum value from their aircraft by being able to find and hit the enemy as far as possible from the shores of Malaya. Therefore, their aerodromes must be as near the east coast as possible. All this was very logical, but it was obvious that the protection of these aerodromes was going to be a commitment which the army at its existing strength could not possibly undertake satisfactorily. The danger of constructing aerodromes in an area where the defence forces might not be strong enough to prevent them falling into the hands of the enemy was also obvious. On the other hand, the methods of rapid construction of aerodromes evolved during this war were then but little known, and it took months, if not years, to construct aerodromes in Malaya, so that if they were to be there when wanted construction had to start well in advance. The solution of the problem, as I saw it, depended mainly on the probability or otherwise of there being sufficient modern aircraft

on the spot when the time came for them to go into action to deal the enemy such a shattering blow that he would only be able to land a small proportion of his invasion forces. If this was not likely to happen, then it would be much better to construct the aerodromes farther inland where it would be easier for the army to defend them and infinitely more difficult for an enemy, even if he succeeded in landing, to capture them. This was a point of view which, during my tour as staff officer in 1936 and 1937, I never ceased stressing, but I was invariably assured that the mobility of air forces would enable sufficient air strength to be concentrated in Malaya when the time came. It is true that, when the time did come, we were heavily engaged elsewhere, but that was not the only reason for our inability to reinforce the air force in Malaya quickly. The cutting of the reinforcement route by the Japanese would in any case have made it difficult for any but the longest-range aircraft to reach Malaya. In the event, when war with Japan broke out, there were three modern aerodromes in the State of Kelantan, one at Kuantan, and a landing-ground at Kahang, in Eastern Johore, with quite inadequate forces, either land or air, to defend them, while only one or two enemy ships were at any time sunk by our air forces. This was the first of two serious failures to face realities which were largely responsible for the weakness of the army dispositions when war broke out. Selection of sites for aerodromes should be made jointly by army and air force authorities, a system which, though too late, was set up in Malaya in 1941. A proper consideration of the problems of defence will then be assured.

The other failure to face realities occurred in 1937 and onwards. The defence policy was still based on the fundamental assumption that the British fleet would sail from home waters immediately on the outbreak of war with Japan, if not before, and that on arrival in the Far East it would immediately put an end to any danger to Singapore. It followed from these assumptions that the defence plan only had to provide against such types of operations as the Japanese might hope to complete successfully within a limited period and that the role of the garrison was confined to holding out for that period.

In 1937 it seemed to me, as it did to many other students of the world situation, that events in Europe had reached such a stage that it was at least doubtful whether, in the event of war

breaking out with Japan, the British public would allow the British fleet to leave home waters for the Far East, while if we were already at war with Germany it was certain that the fleet would not be able to leave. The whole conception of the defence of the Singapore Naval Base was therefore changed. It was in these circumstances that I wrote the appreciation for an attack on Singapore from the point of view of the Japanese, already referred to in Chapter I of this book. In this appreciation it was pointed out that, as a result of the political situation in Europe, it was unlikely that the British fleet would be able to sail immediately for Singapore when required and that in consequence a more deliberate form of attack could be undertaken by the Japanese. The plan recommended consisted of preliminary operations by the Japanese to seize aerodromes in South Thailand and in Kelantan, the Island of Penang, and the naval and air facilities in Borneo, followed by the main operation to capture Singapore itself. From this appreciation deductions were made as to the main points in the defence plan which required attention. These deductions stressed the probability of the Japanese making use of territory in South Thailand, the increased importance of the defence of North Malaya and of Johore, for which only meagre forces were available, the threat from Japanese activities within Malaya, the urgent need for the strengthening of our air forces and of our local naval craft and for more infantry, and the unsatisfactory situation as regards food stocks. This appreciation received the full concurrence of General Dobbie, who himself wrote shortly afterwards:

It is an attack from the northward that I regard as the greatest potential danger to the fortress. Such attack could be carried out during the period of the north-east monsoon. The jungle is not in most places impassable for infantry.

It was, to say the least, unfortunate that this appreciation did not, as we had hoped, have the effect of bringing home to the authorities in England the change in the whole problem of the defence of the Singapore Naval Base. The existing policy that the British main fleet must sail for Singapore in the event of war, whatever the circumstances might be in European waters, was reaffirmed. What a short-sighted policy. How could the British main fleet ever leave home waters if we were fighting to keep our supply routes open for our very existence? Perhaps the definite

limit to the amount of money at that time available for rearmament had more than a little to do with the decision. But should not the Government in such cases take the public fully into its confidence and vote more money with a clear explanation of why it is required? National interests should come before any party or private considerations.

It was not until the summer of 1939 that it was officially recognized that the British fleet might not be able to sail from home waters for the Far East on the outbreak of war with Japan, but even then the only action taken was to dispatch a brigade group from India to Malaya and to authorize an increase up to 180 days of reserves of all descriptions to be held in Malaya. The defence plan still contemplated holding only Singapore Island and part of the State of Johore. A scheme to construct outer defences of Singapore in the southern part of Johore had been drawn up by General Dobbie and work had started but had later been suspended. This was partly due to a cut in the estimated expenditure. The centralized system of financial control tended to have a crippling effect. When things go wrong the public are naturally inclined to blame the man on the spot. Why was this not done and why was that not done? The answer generally is that the man on the spot was not a free agent. He certainly was not in Malaya in peace-time. Obviously he cannot be given unlimited financial powers, but when he is dealing with such an important link in our system of imperial defence as Singapore, he can and should be given wider financial powers, in consultation with his financial adviser, than was the case in pre-war days, or else it should be made clear that he cannot be held responsible. Again, it is a question of the Government taking the public into its confidence.

The extension of the period before relief to 180 days of course affected vitally the whole problem of the defence of the Naval Base. The Japanese would now have ample time to establish an advanced base, possibly in South Thailand, where they could build up their forces for an attack on Singapore and establish air bases within bombing range of that place. Further, if they invaded Malaya from Thailand they would be able to increase greatly the scale of air attack on Singapore by using advanced aerodromes. Clearly the defence problem, which had hitherto

remained one of the defence of Singapore Island and of a portion of Johore only, had now developed, as had appeared inevitable to those on the spot as early as 1937, into one of the defence of the whole of Malaya. Small wonder then that General Bond, who had succeeded General Dobbie as G.O.C. Malaya, asked for official confirmation of this in the spring of 1940. He pointed out that the northern frontier of Malaya might have to be held against a considerable force for a matter of months and estimated that he would require for this something in the nature of three divisions with two tank regiments. He realized that it might well be impossible to send such a force at that time, when Germany was just starting upon her invasion of Western Europe and when our trained troops were alarmingly scarce and ill-equipped, even for the defence of our own homeland, and he suggested that the Royal Air Force might assume a greater share of responsibility for the defence by making it impossible for the Japanese to maintain a base within striking distance of our aerodromes even if it could not prevent them landing. If this could be done, then his estimate of the land forces required could be reduced.

In the summer of 1940 the threat to Singapore was greatly increased by the internal repercussions in Japan which followed the collapse of France in June of that year. Democracy appeared to have failed and totalitarianism raised its head in Japan. There was a general feeling that this unique opportunity for the advancement of Japan's destinies must not be missed. A new cabinet, under the premiership of Prince Konoye, took office in July. In it the influence of the Army was predominant. With a view to freeing themselves from economic dependence on the United States and the countries of the British Empire, the plan for establishing a Co-Prosperity Sphere of Greater East Asia, about which we were to hear so much in later years, was launched.

Fortunately Dill who, as has been seen in a previous chapter, was fully conversant with the Singapore problem, was now Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and at last the gravity of the situation was fully realized in military circles at home. In August the Chiefs of Staff officially recognized the necessity for holding the whole of Malaya, and laid down that, until a fleet should again become available, reliance should be placed primarily on air power. The role of the land forces was defined as the close defence of the naval and air bases, internal security, and the defeat of any

enemy land forces which might succeed in gaining a footing despite the action of the air force. Then there was the question of building up the air force. The Battle of Britain was at its height and clearly it would be difficult to spare any aircraft in the immediate future. It was estimated that a minimum of 336 first-line aircraft would be required. And so it was laid down that the aim should be to complete this programme by the end of 1941 and that in the meantime the absence of aircraft should be made up by the provision of additional land forces. Unfortunately the air programme never even approached completion.

In September there were two further serious developments in the Far East. Firstly, Japanese troops occupied the northern part of French Indo-China, which gave them a base very much nearer to Malaya than they had ever had before. Secondly, Japan signed a Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy and thus became definitely committed to the Axis connection. The political object of the pact was clearly to prevent the United States from coming to the armed assistance of Britain, but in return Japan expected, after the defeat of Britain, to be able to take over all the British and Dutch possessions in the Far East. Militarily, the pact provided an opportunity for Japanese-German staff talks, of which the Japanese were quick to take advantage. Japanese naval and military missions were immediately dispatched to Berlin, while the German Government sent experts to Japan to study an attack on Singapore and to assist in developing the Japanese aircraft industry. The Japanese mission to Berlin was headed by Lt.-Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita, who later commanded the Japanese forces in the attack on Malaya and who undoubtedly learnt from the Germans the technique of "blitz" tactics which he employed in that campaign. Similarly the rapid technical and tactical progress made by the Japanese air force, which caused some surprise in the Malayan campaign, was no doubt due to the assistance they had received from their German friends. The whole conception of the defence problem had again been changed because a Japanese invading force, instead of having to be transported all the way from Japan, could now be concentrated and prepared, with its land-based supporting aircraft, within close striking distance of Malaya. There is also evidence to show that from this time onwards the Japanese Government began to pile up supplies of war material, using for the purpose a large percentage

of the money which was voted for the prosecution of their campaign in China. In fact, the comparative slowness of their progress in that country can probably be explained, at least to some extent, by the fact that their leaders were now concentrating all their efforts on preparations for their southward drive.

In October a joint tactical appreciation was prepared in Malaya. It estimated that 566 first-line aircraft would now be required and that, when this target was reached, the strength of the land forces should be twenty-six battalions with supporting arms, ancillary services, etc. The Chiefs of Staff declined to increase the previously approved air scale though they accepted the revised army estimate.

It was in the autumn of 1940 that reinforcements in strength began to reach Malaya. The latter part of the summer was a period of much anxiety, as indeed it was also in the United Kingdom, for had the Japanese taken the bit between their teeth and decided to attack then, as there were strong grounds for thinking they might do, they would have found extremely little to oppose them and might well have brought off a quick success with comparatively small forces. But apparently their leaders decided that more time was required to develop and consolidate their military strength and, like the Germans, they let the opportunity pass. The first reinforcements, in the shape of two British battalions with some administrative troops, came from Shanghai in August on our evacuation of that place. These were followed in October and November by the 6th and 8th Indian Infantry Brigades and the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division. In February 1941 the first contingent of the Australian Imperial Force, consisting of the headquarters and administrative units of the 8th Australian Division and the 22nd Australian Infantry Brigade Group, reached Singapore. In March the 15th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 1st Echelon of Headquarters 9th Indian Division arrived from India and one field regiment from the United Kingdom, followed in April by the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade.

When I took over command in May 1941 the troops in Malaya were disposed as follows:

The Commander of the 3rd Indian Corps (Lt.-Gen. Sir Lewis Heath) with headquarters at Kuala Lumpur, was responsible

for the whole of Malaya north of Johore and Malacca and for the Island of Penang, which lies off the west coast of Province Wellesley some 350 miles as the crow flies from Singapore. In the east coast sub-area he had the 9th Indian Division with its two brigade groups only, less one infantry battalion. One of these brigade groups, the 8th (Brigadier Key), was in the Kelantan area, and the other, the 22nd less one battalion (Brigadier Painter) was in the Kuantan area in the State of Pahang. In the northern sub-area he had the 11th Indian Division, also of two brigade groups only. One of these, the 15th (Brigadier Garrett), was at Sungei Patani, in South Kedah, while the other, the 6th (Brigadier Lay), less one battalion, was at Tanjong Pau in North Kedah. There was also one infantry battalion each in the State of Perlis, the Island of Penang, and at Kroh on the Thailand frontier in North Perak. The battalion at Penang was there for accommodation only and was not part of the garrison, which at that time consisted of one infantry volunteer battalion, two 6-inch batteries with searchlights, some Royal Engineer and administrative units. The approved scale of defence for Penang, which it had been decided to fortify in 1936, was much greater than this, but the remaining equipment for the fixed defences had not arrived and there were no anti-aircraft defences. Then there was the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force (Brigadier Moir), organized on a State basis and consisting of four infantry battalions and some supporting units, which was not yet mobilized. This force, which was not fully trained for mobile warfare, had been allotted static tasks in defence of aerodromes and other vulnerable points. Brigadier Moir also commanded the lines of communication area which lay south of the River Perak on the west coast, for which he had a separate staff. In corps reserve, located south of Kuala Lumpur, was one infantry battalion.

The Commander of the Singapore fortress (Maj.-Gen. Keith Simmons) was responsible for the defence of Singapore and adjoining islands and of the eastern area of Johore. He had under his command all the fixed defences, i.e. coast defence guns and searchlights, the anti-aircraft defences, the beach defence troops, the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force (except for the battalion at Penang), and the various fortress and administrative units. It was a pretty important command, especially as he also became heavily involved with civil problems connected with the

defence of Singapore. In addition to this he had the responsibility for the defence of the east coast of Johore where the small port of Mersing, connected to Singapore by a good motor road, had always been thought to be a likely landing-place for an invading force. For the defence of this area he had to rely on what field troops could be made available from Singapore—not a very satisfactory state of affairs and one about which I never felt very happy. In fact the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Paris), which was entrusted with this task, had also a role assigned to it in the defence of Singapore fortress. This was the brigade which had come from India in August 1939 and, having been nearly two years in Malaya, was probably the best trained and most experienced brigade in the country. On Singapore Island there were, in addition to the Volunteer Forces, two infantry brigades available for manning the beach defences, i.e. the 1st Malaya Brigade (Brigadier Williams), which consisted of two battalions only, and the 2nd Malaya Brigade (Brigadier Fraser).

In Command Reserve was the A.I.F., i.e. the 8th Australian Division less two infantry brigade groups. It was located in the Malacca-Negri Sembilan area with headquarters at Kuala Lumpur. It was to be prepared to operate anywhere in Malaya.

There were also in Malaya several States Forces units from the Indian States. With traditional loyalty to the Empire their services had been offered by the rulers of the States concerned. They were a valuable addition to our forces though they varied greatly in training, strength, and efficiency. Being, from lack of transport and of field training, more suitable for a static role they were employed principally on aerodrome defence, coming under the commanders of the areas in which they were situated. During the campaign which followed some units showed themselves fully qualified to take their place with other fighting troops in the general scheme of defence; others found their lack of training and of war experience a great handicap in operations which were a severe test for even the most highly skilled troops.

So far the defences of Malaya only have been discussed. But Malaya Command had commitments also in British Borneo, an area of much the same size as Malaya itself, and in Christmas Island which lies some 200 miles south-west of Java. These commitments will be discussed more fully in a later chapter. Unfortunately there were few troops available to meet them. In

consequence there were at this time only a small force of one Indian battalion (less one company) with some local forces and administrative detachments at Kuching in Sarawak, a detachment of about one infantry company and one 6-inch battery with some engineers at Miri, where the important oil-fields are situated, and a small coast artillery detachment at Christmas Island.

It would be a mistake to look upon the problem of the defence of Malaya as a local problem only. The defence of all the interests of the anti-Axis countries in the Far East was really one vast problem which required a great deal of joint study and planning. Of course, what could be done at that time was limited because all our eventual allies had not then entered the war but, as the situation became more strained, so it became possible for more to be done and in fact, after the Commander-in-Chief Far East had established his Headquarters at Singapore in November 1940, a great deal of spade-work was done at international conferences held at Singapore.

The basic assumption of active French collaboration from Indo-China had, of course, vanished with the collapse of France, but China, Holland, Australia, New Zealand, India, Burma, and later the United States were all vitally interested. Agreements were reached for the co-ordination of the defence in the event of war breaking out, though no political commitments were involved by these agreements.

Chapter IV

FURTHER PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

ONE of the first problems to which I turned my attention after reaching Malaya was that of an advance into South Thailand. I use this expression "South Thailand" advisedly because I can't help thinking that the term "Kra Isthmus" was used a good deal too loosely at that time and that some misunderstanding resulted from it. This was probably due to the use of a small-scale map. On the map which I have in front of me as I write the Kra Isthmus is shown as the narrow neck of land which lies just east of Victoria Point, the most southern point in Burma. That is 250 miles from Perlis, the most northerly part of Malaya from which South Thailand stretches in a south-easterly direction for another 140 miles or so before it reaches the Kelantan border. Those are big areas when you are talking in terms of a division or so. The immediate advantages of an advance into South Thailand, should it be found to be practicable, were obvious. It would enable us to meet the enemy on the beaches instead of allowing him to land unopposed and base himself on Singora (or Songkla, as called on some maps), a small port with a good anchorage only fifty miles as the crow flies from our frontier. Moreover, there were two good aerodromes in South Thailand, one near Singora and one at Patani farther south. These would be very useful for our air force and conversely, if the Japanese seized them, they would bring their air force within close range of Malaya and enable them to do great damage to our shipping in the Straits of Malacca. Yes, there was no doubt about the advantages, but was it a sound operation of war? There were many factors to be considered. First of all there was the time factor. In some respects the situation was not unlike that which faced us when we sat on the Belgian frontier in the early part of the war and with which, from my experience as B.G.S. 1st Corps, I was well acquainted. In each case we had a neutral State between us and the enemy whose territory we would like to have entered but for political reasons were unable to do so. In each case there was the question whether, when the enemy made the first move and thus freed us

from political implications, we should have time to reach our objective before the enemy anticipated us. In the case of Thailand the situation was even more complicated because any premature move on our part might have led to war with Japan, and it was the policy of our Government, hard pressed as it was in Europe and the Middle East, to avoid a Far Eastern War if it possibly could. For this reason the Commander-in-Chief Far East was told that he was not to move into Thailand without previous reference to the War Cabinet. This would obviously take time and as permission could not well be sought before it became reasonably certain that the Japanese were on the point of moving in themselves it seemed unlikely that we should ever get the necessary permission in time. To make matters worse the Thai Government had declared its strict neutrality and announced its intention of opposing any troops who might enter their country, so we had to take into account the probability of some delay in reaching our objective. We also knew that all the bridges on the main road were being reconstructed. We suspected, as subsequently proved to be the case, that this work was being done at the instigation of the Japanese to facilitate their advance, but anyway it left us in doubt as to what sort of state the bridges would be in if we wanted to use them and we had to allow extra time for this. Then there was the question of what forces could be made available if we decided to move forward and how we could maintain them if we reached our objective. We could not move any forces from Singapore or South Malaya because, with the control of sea communications in the enemy hands, those areas were themselves exposed to direct attack. Nor could we move any of our forces, already too weak for their job, from the east coast. We should therefore have to rely on what could be made available of the 11th Indian Division. There were two routes leading from South Thailand into North Malaya—the main road from Singora via Haad'yai Junction into Kedah and a secondary road from Patani via Yala to Kroh in North Perak where it branched, the better road going west into Province Wellesley and the other, which was reported to be fit only for light transport, turning south to join the main north-south road west of the Perak River. We should have to cover both these approaches with our small force. As regards maintenance, there was the single line railway from Kedah which we could use if we could push railhead forward, but

the bridges might be demolished by the Thais and it would not be safe to rely on it. So in the early stages we should have to rely on mechanical transport. A careful examination of our resources showed that we had not at that time nearly sufficient of this, though the situation became easier later on as more M.T. arrived. Finally, there was the question of our equipment. We had no tanks while the Japanese, if they came, would be pretty certain to bring some tanks with them. During the period of the south-west monsoon (April-September) the ground on the east coast of South Thailand is comparatively dry and suitable for tank action, but during the north-east monsoon (October-March) it becomes waterlogged. Therefore we concluded that, if we fought there during the south-west monsoon, we should be at a serious disadvantage but that during the north-east monsoon the Japanese tanks would be confined more or less to the roads where we should be better able to deal with them.

These were some, but by no means all, of the considerations in this complicated problem. It was a problem of the first importance. If we moved into Thailand and brought it off successfully great results might be achieved. If we failed, we might easily lose our whole force and the peninsula of Malaya would lie open to the Japanese as far south at any rate as Johore. It was a problem which clearly demanded the closest examination and that it received. It was examined departmentally and at joint inter-Service conferences, and here briefly are the decisions reached:

- (a) An advance as far north as the Kra Isthmus was quite out of the question with the forces at our disposal.
- (b) We had not sufficient force, and especially administrative services, to occupy simultaneously both the Singora and Patani areas, but we could attempt in favourable circumstances to seize and hold the Singora area and to fight defensively on the Patani-Kroh route.
- (c) The "favourable circumstances" would only arise (i) during the period of the north-east monsoon, and (ii) if we could be sure of twenty-four hours' start before the estimated time of the Japanese landing.

Provided we could get the twenty-four hours' start it was therefore decided to undertake the advance during the period October-March, if an opportunity arose.

The Commander-in-Chief Far East never ceased to stress the vital importance of receiving early permission, but until the end of 1941 there was no certainty that the United States would stand by us if we became involved in war with Japan through our own action, and it was but natural that in these conditions our Government should move cautiously.

The next step was to implement the above decisions and prepare for the operation which became known as *MATADOR*. Detailed plans were worked out, maps were printed, money in Thai currency was made available, and pamphlets for distribution to the Thais were drafted, though, to preserve secrecy, they were not to be printed till the last moment. The 11th Indian Division had the dual task of preparing either to move forward or to stand and fight on the frontier—a task very similar to that which fell to our field force in France in 1939. In such circumstances, the "advance" plan is naturally the more attractive and as such is apt to receive the greater attention.

By a special arrangement made by the Commander-in-Chief Far East, authority was given for selected officers in plain clothes to carry out reconnaissances in South Thailand. This led to some curious incidents as the Japanese were obviously doing the same thing. The two parties frequently met and even stayed together in the same rest-houses. Much useful information was brought back, but difficulty was experienced in reaching areas of special importance, such as the aerodromes, on the approaches to which Thai police were usually posted.

We now had to turn our attention to the defence of the northern frontier. The role of the forces in Kedah, apart from the possible implementation of *MATADOR*, was to protect the aerodrome at Alor Star and the group of aerodromes in South Kedah and Province Wellesley. The former, unfortunately, like the aerodrome at Kota Bharu in Kelantan, had been converted from a civil aerodrome and had thus been sited without any consideration whatever being given to its defence. From this point of view it was in a thoroughly bad position because it forced us to go forward into the enclosed country instead of taking advantage of the more open country to the south. The frontier area itself was unsuitable because it was in a bad malaria belt and so, after a careful examination of the problem on the ground, a position was selected covering the road junction at Jitra, where the road to Perlis branches off

from the main trunk road to Thailand. It was far from an ideal position—in fact I would go so far as to say that nobody ever really liked it—because it was far too extensive for the force available to hold it, but it was a question of making the best of a difficult job, and I have yet to meet anyone who “knew of a better ‘ole”, as Bruce Bairnsfather would have said. Work on this position was immediately put in hand, the greatest strength being concentrated astride the two roads. Between them and the sea was a stretch of some twelve miles of open or semi-open country intersected by canals and ditches and with practically no roads. This was held by a skeleton pill-box defence combined with the maximum use of natural obstacles. For a time, work on the defences progressed fairly well, but later heavy rains caused delays and also caused the mechanical diggers which had been brought up specially for the anti-tank ditch to become “bogged”. The work on the defences had to be done by the troops themselves as there was no money available at that time for the employment of civil labour on this work. At times, therefore, the preparation and training for MATADOR interfered with the work and caused further delays. It was for these reasons that, when war broke out, the defences were still incomplete though a great deal of work had been done.

On the Kroh front the problem was very different. Here the road forks immediately west of the frontier, the one as already stated going to Province Wellesley and the other southwards into Perak. A defensive position was constructed astride the former, but this was obviously unsatisfactory by itself as it did not in any way cover the latter road. To cover the two with one position it was necessary to go into Thailand and, of course, no work could be done there in peace-time. Reconnaissances were, however, carried out and a position known as “The Ledge” was selected, some thirty-five to forty miles on the Thailand side of the frontier. Here for some miles the road is cut out of the side of a steep hill and it was thought that it would be possible with very little labour to block this road if we could succeed in reaching the area before the Japanese. It would then be possible to hold the position with a comparatively small force.

Farther east a number of bush tracks crossed the frontier into Perak. These could only be used by small parties on foot, but nevertheless they constituted a threat to our communications and

we could not afford to neglect them. To watch them we formed a special platoon of local men which was incorporated in one of the volunteer battalions.

Along almost the whole of the east coast of Malaya there are sandy beaches which might have been made for an invading force to land upon. For much of the year the sea off this coast is calm but during the period of the north-east monsoon it becomes intermittently rough, though there are always calm periods between the storms. At one time it had been thought that landings during this period were out of the question, but this fallacy had been exploded as early as 1937 when, after a careful examination of the problem, we established the fact that landings could take place even at the height of the monsoon though the time-table might be subject to delays amounting to a matter of days. For this reason I thought it unlikely that the Japanese would select a date for their attack during the period December-February when the monsoon is at its height as it would involve running considerable risks. It is interesting to learn now that it was publicly stated in Tokyo after the outbreak of war that the Japanese General Staff had been opposed to any postponement of the attack beyond 8 December because a further three months must then have been allowed to elapse before conditions of weather, tide, and moon, would again be equally favourable for an attack on the Malay peninsula. So in this case also apparently the Japanese appreciation of the problem did not differ very widely from our own. It was for this reason presumably that General Tojo stated, on assuming the premiership, that a time limit must be set to the negotiations which were at that time being carried on in Washington between representatives of the United States and of Japan.

Although it had originally been the policy to avoid as far as possible development of the east coast, yet for reasons already stated it had come about that by 1941 the army was committed to the defence of three areas on that coast, i.e. the State of Kelantan right up in the north, Kuantan about half-way down the coast, and the State of Johore in the extreme south.

In the State of Kelantan, one of the Unfederated States of Malaya, the country is in parts rather more open than elsewhere. There are large rice-growing areas with copses dotted about and in some places country lanes not unlike those in England. The

State is divided into two by the Kelantan River which, flowing roughly north, empties into the sea close to Kota Bharu, the capital of the State. The east coast railway line crossed the frontier into Thailand, but there were no roads across the frontier though, as in Perak, there were some tracks and navigable rivers. The three aerodromes—a completed one at Kota Bharu, one nearly completed at Gong Kedah, thirty miles farther south and not far from the coast, and one under construction at Machang, not far from the railway—were all east of the Kelantan River. The main task assigned to the commander of the Brigade Group in Kelantan was to secure these aerodromes for the use of our air force and to deny them to the enemy. It was obviously a pretty difficult task with the small force at his disposal. Before I took over command there had been some discussion on the general principles of beach defence. One school of thought held that it would be better to watch the beaches only and to keep the main force more concentrated farther back and to fight on prepared positions astride the communications; the other argued that that policy would enable the enemy to fight on an equality with us and that it would be better to hold the beaches at the most likely landing-places so as to hit the enemy when he was most vulnerable and where it would be easiest to combine the action of the three Services. The Commander-in-Chief decided in favour of the latter policy and orders were issued to all local commanders accordingly. This is a recurrent problem which arose in many other theatres in the course of the war, including the defence of our own country. When you have not nearly enough forces for either plan, as was the case in Malaya, it becomes rather a choice of evils, though there the problem was really solved for us by the location of the aerodromes. For my own part, however, I am in agreement with the Commander-in-Chief that the best plan is to break the enemy up, if you can, on the beaches. If you can also keep a reasonably strong reserve so much the better but, though a commander should make every effort to build one up, that is just where the difficulty comes in when you have not got sufficient forces. Anyway the plan in Kelantan, to which I gave my approval, was to hold the beaches covering the aerodromes and to keep a reserve on the main road which runs from Kota Bharu to Krai. Railhead was at Krai, where the main reserves of supplies and stores of all descriptions were held.

Going south we had no troops in the State of Trengganu, one of the least developed States of Malaya in which communications are extremely poor, except a company of the Malay Regiment at Dungun, where there was a large Japanese-owned iron ore mine. This company was there for the purpose of controlling the considerable Japanese staff if trouble came, but I later withdrew it as it seemed an unnecessary dispersion of force. When war broke out these Japanese were arrested by the local police but, on our withdrawal from the State, they regained their liberty and became the local administrators. A good scheme to deny boats and other property to the Japanese had been worked out in Trengganu and was successfully carried out when the time came by the British Adviser's staff.

Kuantan lies nearly a hundred miles by road from Jerantut on the east coast railway and another thirty miles from Kuala Lipis, the most important town in that part of the country. Those are big distances when you have at the farther end a detachment of only one weak brigade group. But it had to be there to protect the aerodrome. The problem of defence was much the same as that of Kelantan but on a smaller scale. The aerodrome was situated some ten miles from the coast but between it and the cantonment of Kuantan was the Kuantan River, crossed only by a slow ferry. Again there were long beaches—far too long to be held in strength, but we could not afford to let the enemy come and land there unopposed, so we deployed one battalion on the beaches and held the other back to watch the river line and guard the aerodrome. Communication with Kuantan was by a civil land line and military wireless, both subject to frequent interruptions. For some reason we could never get the wireless to be reliable in Malaya. It was not from want of research or from lack of experts. We had many wireless enthusiasts and some very expert ones in Malaya. It was something to do with the topographical or climatic conditions. Sometimes it would work perfectly well but at others, and generally when you most wanted it, it would fade right away and often remain out of action for quite long periods.

In East Johore, large areas of which are still under virgin jungle, there are two small towns of strategical importance, Mersing and Endau, situated about twenty miles apart. Mersing is ninety miles from Singapore and connected to it by a motor

road. There are good landing-beaches both north and south of the town and a small port though, owing to the shallowness of the water, ocean-going vessels have to lie some way out. It had always been considered a likely landing-place for a Japanese invading force. Mersing is also connected to Kluang in Central Johore and thence to Batu Pahat on the west coast by a motor road which branches off from the Mersing-Singapore road at Jemaluang. Endau, a smaller town than Mersing, is connected to it by a motor road. It lies in the extreme north-east corner of Johore on the Endau River on which, some twenty miles up-stream, was situated an important Japanese-owned iron ore mine at Bukit Langkap. From here large quantities of iron ore were shipped to Japan annually, being brought down-river in a fleet of Japanese-owned barges and loaded into Japanese steamers which lay off the mouth of the Endau River. South of Mersing there are a number of waterways which give access to the main Singapore road. We therefore had to provide against the possibility of a landing at Endau, to make use of the Endau River or to advance on Mersing, a landing in force at Mersing, or landings in the rivers to the south to strike at our communications. Clearly the Jemaluang road junction was a vital centre in this part of the country, so our general plan was to hold the Mersing area as strongly as we could with a detachment at Endau and other detachments watching the rivers to the south and with a reserve in the Jemaluang area.

In view of the possibility of enemy landings on the east coast, detailed plans had been made with the civil authorities for the removal or destruction of all boats or other surface craft on this coast on receipt of specified code words.

Another matter which required urgent attention was the organization of air defence. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War this had been, for all practical purposes, limited to the anti-aircraft defence of selected objectives on Singapore Island, of which the Naval Base had first priority. These defences had been laid out in accordance with a War Office plan and had entailed a great deal of work in connection with the acquisition and preparation of sites, the laying out of communications, etc. But with the extension of the defence to cover the whole of Malaya, the arrival for the first time in the country of some fighter aircraft and the requirements of passive defence, the problem had assumed vastly increased proportions. We unfortunately could not find

any guns or searchlights for the defence of any of the cities on the mainland nor even for Penang, for which anti-aircraft defences had been approved as early as 1936 but for which no equipment had become available. But we did provide some defence, though very inadequate, for a few of the aerodromes and we managed to organize a light anti-aircraft battery for mobile operations in the northern area. In the Singapore area there were, when I took over, three Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiments, one Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and one Searchlight Regiment, which were later reinforced by a very untrained Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment from India. Soon after my arrival I decided to place the anti-aircraft artillery, which had previously been under the Commander Singapore fortress, directly under my own command, except for that which was allotted to the northern area which was placed under the Commander 3rd Indian Corps. I did this because it had now become necessary to build up a co-ordinated air defence scheme for the whole of Malaya. The first step was to co-ordinate the fighter and gun defence and, with this object in view, all the fighters allotted to the defence of Singapore were placed under the command of Group Captain Rice, an officer who had recently arrived from England where he had had considerable experience in connection with the air defence of Great Britain. It was also arranged that, during a hostile attack, he should issue orders direct to our anti-aircraft artillery. That arrangement worked very satisfactorily.

The next problem was to establish an air-raid warning system, and here we were up against considerable difficulties. In the first place, it was difficult to find suitable watchers in the more sparsely populated parts of the country; secondly, and more important still, was the paucity of communications. In Malaya there was the trunk telephone system which followed the main arteries of communication and some local services, but these were quite inadequate for a warning system. We drew up a scheme with the civil government for a duplication and extension of this system, but most of the material had to be brought from overseas and the scheme had not progressed very far before war came. Nevertheless quite a useful system was built up for the Singapore area and, as long as we held a reasonable part of the mainland, we could generally reckon on getting about half an hour's warning of the approach of enemy aircraft. This, however, was not true of the

mainland where, especially as regards the northern area, there was never any adequate warning system.

Much attention was given to the defence of aerodromes for we anticipated that the Japanese might well copy the tactics of their German friends whose air-borne troops had, in the European war, landed on Allied aerodromes in Holland, in Crete, and elsewhere. The Commander-in-Chief laid down that, as regards anti-aircraft weapons, the defence of aerodromes would take precedence over everything except the Naval Base. I also allotted to the defence of aerodromes such infantry as could be made available, generally Indian State Forces troops or Malayan Volunteers, and a few armoured cars which had been specially constructed locally for the purpose. The perimeter of aerodromes even at that time, however, varied between three and five miles and the forces we could spare for their defence were far from sufficient. In the event, the Japanese did not exploit the tactics of landing ground troops on aerodromes though the anti-aircraft defences of the aerodromes everywhere got plenty of practice against bombing aircraft.

Let us now turn our attention for a short time to Borneo, that huge island, partly British and partly Dutch, of great strategical importance flanking, as it does, the sea routes from Japan to Malaya and Sumatra on the one side and to Java and the southern area on the other. The British portion, which lies along the northern seaboard, consisted of four territories, i.e. British North Borneo, controlled by the British North Borneo Company with headquarters in London, the Island of Labuan, a British colony administered by a Resident, Brunei, a British Protected State with its own Sultan, and Sarawak, a Malay State which had, for many years, been governed by members of the Brooke family. Borneo is in reality part of the outer defences of Malaya because it possesses some fine natural harbours and the western part of it was, even in those days, within easy striking distance of Malaya for bomber aircraft. It would have greatly strengthened the structure of defence in the Far East if it could have been strongly held, but neither the Dutch nor ourselves had the necessary resources. As a base for our aircraft British Borneo would have been of the greatest possible value, especially so long as Indo-China remained in the hands of our French allies, provided two conditions existed, i.e. that we had aircraft to operate from it and

that we could protect the aerodromes with sea or land forces. Plans for the construction of aerodromes and development of air facilities were well advanced but when, towards the end of 1940, it became clear that neither of the above two conditions could be fulfilled they had to be cancelled except as regards the landing-ground near Kuching, in Sarawak. The Commander-in-Chief informed the Governor of North Borneo that his territory could not be defended and that the volunteers and police at his disposal should be utilized for purposes of internal security. No attempt was made to defend Labuan. The State of Brunei was of some importance as in it lay the large Seria oil-field which, with that at Miri, in Sarawak, supplied the refinery at Lutong. In peace-time much of the oil from these fields went to Japan. It was at first intended to attempt to defend them and a 6-inch battery was mounted, but later this was found to be impracticable and a policy of denial was decided upon. In consequence, a partial denial was carried out before hostilities opened, and only a sufficient garrison was left there with the necessary technicians to complete the work.

It was decided to hold Kuching, which lies at the extreme western end of Sarawak, a State over 450 miles long with few communications, partly because there was already a landing-ground there and partly because its occupation by the enemy would bring them within close striking distance of the Dutch aerodromes in North-West Borneo. One Indian battalion (less one company to Miri), and some administrative detachments were therefore sent there and steps were taken to develop local forces, i.e. volunteers and a body of native troops known as Sarawak Rangers. The O.C. Troops Sarawak and Brunei was told that his primary object was to secure the landing-ground at Kuching for the use of our own air force and to deny it to the enemy but that if, owing to overwhelming force, this object could no longer be attained, then he should act in the best interests of West Borneo as a whole, his line of withdrawal being by the bush track into Dutch West Borneo.

In September 1941 centenary celebrations, marking a hundred years of Brooke rule, were held at Kuching. There was much rejoicing. The celebrations were made the occasion of another historic ceremony, i.e. the handing over by the Rajah, Sir Charles Vyner Brooke, of much of his responsibility to a Council. In October the Rajah left the State for a holiday in Australia.

Chapter V

THE WAR CLOUDS GATHER

SHORTLY after taking over command I was instructed to review the army strength required for the defence of Malaya. Before doing so I decided to make myself completely *au fait* with the problem as it presented itself at that time—a problem which was so very different to what it had been when I had left Malaya three and a half years earlier. And so I toured all parts of Malaya to visit the various formations and study the problems on the spot. Nowadays a commander travels about in some luxury in his own private aeroplane, but it was not so in Malaya at that time. Not only were there no military transport aircraft of any sort but the resources of the R.A.F. were so thin that the A.O.C. asked me to refrain from using his aircraft for communication purposes except on special occasions. In consequence I and my subordinates, if we wanted to travel by air, as often as not used the civil air line or went in single-engine Moths piloted by members of the Volunteer Air Force. All credit to those men who were amazingly clever in the way they found their way about over that inhospitable country, where a crash meant almost certain death and where there was little chance of a forced landing, but I must confess to a feeling of relief at times when all had arrived safely.

In assessing the strength required, a commander in a theatre which is for the time being inactive is usually, I think, inclined to err on the side of understating his requirements, especially when the national resources are so strictly limited as ours usually are. He knows that what resources are available are so badly wanted elsewhere and feels that, if he asks for and gets more than his minimum requirements, he will be tying up troops and material which might be invaluable in the active theatres. That at any rate is the way I approached the subject in 1941, and I asked for what I thought was the absolute minimum in view of the greatly increased threat to Malaya which was then developing. This I explained in a private letter to the War Office saying that if, as might well be the case, I could not get what I wanted, then I would do the best I could with what I did get. Now, a commander of

the land forces cannot assess his requirements until he has an estimate of what damage is likely to be done to the enemy before they can launch their attack—in our case before their invading forces could land on the shores of Malaya. This is a naval and air problem—in our case chiefly an air problem because the naval forces at that time were too weak to do much damage. And so I asked for and was given an estimate of what damage it was thought the air force would do, and it was on this that I based my estimate of the land forces required. There is no need to go into details of my estimate here. The main differences in it compared to those which had been submitted previously were that it made provision for a 3rd Corps reserve in North Malaya of one complete division and certain Corps troops units, for a complete division instead of only two brigades in the Kelantan-Trengganu-Pahang area, for two regular infantry battalions for Penang and for a brigade group instead of only one battalion in Borneo. It also asked for two tank regiments. This was not the first time that tanks had been asked for from Malaya. They had been asked for as far back as 1937 and on several occasions after that date. The weight of the tanks which could be used in that country was limited by the carrying capacity of the bridges which, in some cases, was not very great. This estimate received the general approval of the Commander-in-Chief and was accepted by the Chiefs of Staff, but it was recognized that the target could not in the existing circumstances be fulfilled in the foreseeable future.

One day towards the end of July, on my return to Singapore from a visit up-country with the A.O.C., we were sent for by the Commander-in-Chief and told that the Japanese had moved into South Indo-China. That was one of the most momentous moves in the whole of the Far East drama. It gave the Japanese Navy a first-class base within 750 miles of Singapore and it gave them airfields within 300 miles of Kota Bharu, the nearest point in Malaya, and 600 miles of Singapore. It gave them a base from which they could launch a sea-borne expedition against Malaya with a short sea-voyage instead of having to bring it from Japan or Formosa as they would have done in pre-war days. Moreover, it brought them right up against the frontiers of Thailand and enabled them to increase their pressure enormously on that State. No step in the strained relations which already existed could have been more provocative. It is easy to see in it the influence of the

military leaders which, after the collapse of France, had become predominant in Japan. It could not be allowed to pass unnoticed, but in the political atmosphere which now existed any counter-measures were likely to precipitate a crisis. The British and United States Governments and the British Dominions immediately "froze" all Japanese assets in their territories, to which the Japanese retaliated by "freezing" British and American assets in Japan and in territories controlled by them. At the same time the Government of the Netherlands East Indies stiffened its attitude towards the Japanese demand to be allowed to purchase increased quantities of oil. The effect of these measures was virtually to deprive Japan of those commodities which she required most urgently for war purposes, i.e. rubber, oil, and scrap iron. How could she even continue to carry on her war with China for long without these commodities? On the other hand, how could she terminate that war without loss of face? These were questions to which there was no answer, and it is not surprising that a large-scale mobilization of the Japanese Army was ordered which was completed about the middle of August. The Japanese Navy had already been mobilized early in July. Sir Robert Craigie, the British Ambassador to Japan, has told us that it was obvious to him in August that another southward move was impending and that he informed the British Government accordingly. In Malaya the immediate action taken on hearing of the Japanese move into South Indo-China was to order an increased degree of readiness for all troops, an order which was modified after a week or two owing to the strain which it imposed on the troops and the interference with the construction of defences and with training. We were also authorized by the home government to expel Japanese from defence areas in Malaya if we thought it necessary to do so. This was a problem which admitted of arguments on both sides. It was obviously desirable that the enemy should not get first-hand information of our defence preparations if we could avoid it, but with so many potential agents among the mixed population of Malaya it was unlikely that the mere fact of expelling Japanese would prevent them getting this information. Also, if we expelled them, they would merely cross the water and join the Japanese forces and be available as guides and interpreters when they invaded Malaya, while if we let them remain where they were we might be able to seize and intern them when war broke out. We

also had to bear in mind that our Government still wanted to avoid, or at least postpone, war with Japan if it possibly could, and therefore any provocative act was to be avoided if possible. In the event, we decided to remove all the Japanese from that part of south Johore which overlooks the Naval Base and the approaches to it. In point of fact, a good many of the Japanese removed themselves as soon as the "freezing" order had been put into force and doubtless joined the Japanese Army, as many of them appeared again during the invasion, some even as high-ranking officers.

With the usual Axis technique the Japanese attempted to defend their occupation of South Indo-China by saying that they had information that we were on the point of invading it ourselves. Such a suggestion is, of course, absurd. They also attempted to make great capital out of our concentrations near the frontier of Thailand as being a threat to that country. The true facts have already been given in a previous chapter. There was never any suggestion of our occupying any part of Thailand unless it became quite clear that the Japanese were on the point of doing so themselves.

These important events in the Far East unfortunately clashed with even more important events in Europe and in Africa. Russia had been attacked by Germany and was fighting for her life while our forces in North Africa had been driven back by Rommel's counter-attack and our life-line through the Suez Canal itself was being threatened. Small wonder then that no very considerable reinforcements were available for the Far East. Nevertheless, during the summer and autumn of 1941, a fairly steady trickle of reinforcements continued to reach the army in Malaya. In August the second Australian contingent, the 27th Brigade Group, arrived, and was accommodated temporarily on Singapore Island pending the completion of hutted accommodation in West Johore and Malacca. Lt.-Col. Maxwell, the C.O. of one of the battalions in the 22nd Australian Brigade, was appointed by the authorities in Australia to command this brigade in place of its original commander who had been prevented on medical grounds from accompanying it. Recommendations for these appointments went direct from the G.O.C. A.I.F. to his own Government and did not pass through my headquarters. In September the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Carpendale), landed at Port Swettenham and was allotted as a reserve to the 3rd Indian Corps. It was

stationed in the Ipoh and Taiping areas. This brigade consisted of three Gurkha battalions which, like other Indian units, had lost a large proportion of their leaders and trained personnel under the Indian expansion scheme. Later, some field and anti-tank artillery arrived, mostly from the United Kingdom, and one reconnaissance regiment, the 3rd Cavalry, from India. This latter was in process of being mechanized.

Other arrivals included various technical and administrative units and personnel, and a considerable quantity of weapons, ammunition, motor transport, supplies, and other war material from the U.K., India, Australia, America, and South Africa, only occasionally impeded and thrown out of gear by sinkings en route. All of this considerable expansion called for a corresponding expansion of Command Headquarters, but this was difficult to meet. Apart from establishment restrictions, there was a pronounced shortage of staff officers and clerks with the necessary training and experience to fill vacancies in an establishment which had grown in a comparatively short time from the peace-time headquarters of an overseas base to the headquarters of a field army and the military staff of a country on the eve of war. The situation was aggravated by the exasperating conditions which practically prohibited the employment at Command Headquarters of Indian Army officers, among whom was the largest available source of supply. This was explained by the fact that British Army personnel in Malaya were paid at British rates of pay, plus colonial allowance, and were liable to home income tax. The Indian Army in Malaya was paid at Indian Army rates and was liable to no income tax. How this worked out in practice may be illustrated by the case of a 1st Grade General Staff Officer of an Indian Division, a British Service Officer, whose combined pay and allowances were less than those of the Indian Army 3rd Grade Staff Officers working under him. By regulations an Indian Army officer, on employment at the headquarters of a British formation, came off the Indian establishment and was paid at British rates. It could hardly be expected that many Indian Army officers, even the most patriotic, would in these circumstances be willing or able to accept the heavy financial loss which the acceptance of a staff appointment at Command Headquarters would entail. To further complicate matters, there was an astonishing variety of war establishments in Malaya—British, Indian, Australian,

Colonial, State Forces, Regulars, and Volunteers. Hardly any two units of the same type were equipped in the same way. This surely is a matter which could be co-ordinated in time of peace.

The arrival of these reinforcements brought about certain alterations in the defence plans. In the first place, Gordon Bennett had for some time been pressing for a change in the role allotted to the A.I.F., urging that his force should be given a definite territorial responsibility instead of being kept in reserve. Personally I have always looked upon a reserve as a position of honour, but I think Gordon Bennett felt that the prestige of the Australian forces, which elsewhere were in the forefront of the operations, might suffer and the morale of his troops be affected. I had myself never been happy about the arrangement under which the commander of the Singapore fortress and part of his garrison had responsibilities also for the defence of the east coast of Johore, and as the 22nd Australian Brigade had now been training for six months and would undoubtedly benefit from being given some responsibility in the coast defences, for which it was fully ready, I felt that the time had come to make the change. Accordingly the responsibility for the defence of Johore and Malacca passed to the Commander A.I.F. at midday on 29 August. The 12th Indian Infantry Brigade Group came into Command Reserve, though it remained for the time being under Singapore fortress for administration.

The other changes were in North Malaya where the arrival of the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade enabled the Kelantan force to be reinforced by the battalion which had previously been held in corps reserve. I also sent up to Kelantan an Indian State Forces battalion from the south for aerodrome defence and some supporting units.

The standard of training among the various units in Malaya at this time varied greatly. There were some, especially those which had been in the country longest, which were well trained. The best trained units were undoubtedly those whose commanders were ready at any time to go and spend a few days in the jungle. Other units, chiefly the more recent arrivals, were much less well trained. Practically all the Indian Army units had suffered severely from the rapid expansion of that army which had only been commenced a year after the outbreak of war with Germany. Officers and non-commissioned officers had been withdrawn to

meet the needs of this expansion until the lack of leaders, and even of potential leaders, reached a dangerously low level. Few units had more than two or three British officers with experience of handling Indian troops and of the junior British officers only a few had had Indian experience. The majority of the troops were young and inexperienced. Both British and Australian units suffered from the lack of leaders with experience of modern war. In these conditions the first essential was to develop the training of the individual and of the junior leaders, especially as it was clear that individuality would be of first importance in any operations in Malaya. I hoped later on, during the "close season", when the north-east monsoon would be at its height, to be able to withdraw temporarily some of the troops from the beaches and to hold formation exercises. Curiously enough we had planned to study problems of defence against a Japanese advance from South Thailand by an exercise to take place early in December, in which troops of the 11th Indian Division were to take part. Of course this had to be cancelled and we had to do the operation as the real thing instead of as an exercise. It was a great pity we were not able to bring this off as we should undoubtedly have learnt a great deal of value from it.

Work on the defences caused great interference with training. It may be asked: "Why was not this work done with civil labour?" The answer is twofold. Firstly, there was not at that time very much surplus civil labour available in Malaya and, secondly even if there had been, there was not the money available to pay for it. Beyond this, a great deal of the work was of a skilled or semi-skilled type for which special training was required. Further interference with training was caused by the state of tension which followed the entry of the Japanese into South Indo-China and continued in varying degree right up to the outbreak of war.

In September, when the state of the defences had made reasonable progress, I decided that we must give up more time to training and issued an instruction defining the relative importance of training and of defence works. Some formations and units were able to take advantage of this, but in general the war came before the training of the majority of even the smaller formations could be completed. None of the troops which came to Malaya had had any previous experience of jungle warfare; some of them had in fact been specially trained for desert warfare. Jungle

warfare is not a thing which can be learnt in a day—it is a matter of months of hard work—and so it was not to be expected that in the conditions which existed the army in Malaya could be fully trained for the task which lay ahead of it.

For intelligence from outside Malaya we were mainly dependent upon the Far East Combined Bureau, an inter-Service organization under the control of the naval Commander-in-Chief. Inside Malaya our intelligence mostly came from the Civil Police Intelligence Branch, an efficient organization which was greatly handicapped in its work by the excessively complicated constitutional organization of Malaya. On Command Headquarters we had only a small intelligence staff whose work consisted mostly in collecting and co-ordinating information received from outside sources. Those who have had first-hand knowledge of the Japanese and their methods will know the extreme degree of secrecy which permeates all military matters. They are in fact so secretive that one wonders sometimes how they ever succeed in getting things done. It is a crime, for instance, in time of war to mention in advance even the routine move of any officer. Destinations are hardly ever divulged until the last minute. Soldiers overseas are practically cut off from any sort of communication with their families at home. This sense of secrecy is instilled into every soldier from the day he joins and, as is the custom of the Japanese soldier, he obeys the instructions implicitly. It is hardly to be wondered at then that our information of the Japanese intentions and their methods was not in all respects very accurate though it would be untrue to say that we were in any way surprised by their attack. In the strategical field, General Headquarters Far East apparently did not believe until the end of November that Japan might be on the verge of starting war, which is a little strange when compared with Sir Robert Craigie's statement that he had warned the British Government in August that a new southward drive appeared to be imminent. It appears that there must have either been another failure on the part of our Government to trust the man on the spot or else a failure to communicate his views to the most important military headquarters in the Far East. The forces which Japan might have available for a southward drive were fairly accurately gauged, though it was not thought, and very naturally so, that she would be so ambitious as to attack British, American, and Dutch territories

simultaneously. On the other hand, there was in certain respects an under-estimate of the efficiency of the Japanese army and air forces. This applied particularly to the mobility, individual initiative and ability to overcome difficulties quickly of the Japanese soldier and to the performance of the naval single-seater fighter known as the Zero type. There is no doubt that the Japanese army and air force had both greatly increased in efficiency since the start of their war with China, partly as a result of their close liaison with the Germans and partly because they were able to use China as a training-ground for their troops and to try out their new weapons and new methods of warfare. With this increase in efficiency our intelligence had been unable to keep pace. Successful intelligence in the Far East is a matter of long study of the people and their habits combined with a knowledge of their language. It is not to be expected that ordinary Service officers put on to this work at short notice will have immediate success. It is necessary to take a long-term view and to build up from the bottom an organization based on a corps of professional experts.

All great leaders are agreed on the vital importance of administration in war and Malaya was no exception to this rule. The administration of a newly created and constantly increasing army in a semi-developed and in parts very sparsely populated country taxed our resources to the utmost. The provision of accommodation, often at short notice, was particularly difficult. In Malaya there are no large country houses or farm buildings which are so invaluable for billeting troops in the United Kingdom or in other parts of Europe. There are, it is true, excellent modern school buildings, many of which the civil authorities readily made available, but beyond this one is dependent for the most part on accommodation specially constructed. Some of the Indian units brought tentage with them, but even tents are not too pleasant in the Malayan climate for long periods because they are almost certain to become waterlogged after the heavy rainstorms which are a feature of that country. So we went in for hutted camps. These, of course, took some time to build in spite of the fact that we received great assistance from the Public Works Department. Often we had to wait long periods for material and fittings required from overseas. Sometimes units arrived before their accommodation was ready and had to be temporarily housed

elsewhere, but on the whole the builders did their job well and the accommodation provided was as good as could be expected under the circumstances. We came up against one serious difficulty, however, which arose from the actual selection of sites for the camps. In the early days the decision had been left to local commanders who had, perhaps naturally, selected sites in the rubber plantations where there would be good cover from the air. This there certainly was, but from the health point of view the sites were far from desirable. Rubber trees shut out the rays of the sun so that everything under them becomes damp, and darkness sets in early. This tends to have both a physical and psychological effect on those who have to live in these conditions—a state of affairs which caused me much anxiety for I realized that it might affect adversely the morale of the troops. It was impossible to move the camps so we had to do what we could by thinning the trees and by organizing “change of air” camps in more salubrious places. Incidentally, every rubber tree cut down cost a considerable sum of money in compensation so that was another factor which had to be considered. Undoubtedly these camps affected to some extent the fighting efficiency of the troops, though the full effect is impossible to assess. The disease became known as “Rubberitis”.

The welfare of the troops was catered for by the N.A.A.F.I., which expanded rapidly and took over responsibility for the Indian as well as the British troops. In addition the inhabitants of Malaya of all races were most hospitable in entertaining and in every way helping the troops. In most of the large towns clubs were organized and run for the benefit of the troops, very often entirely by the local civilians, many of whom travelled considerable distances and spent long hours in the work. To them the thanks of all Services are due.

The pre-war hospital accommodation was, of course, quite inadequate for the increased garrison. The A.I.F. took over a wing of the fine new civil hospital at Malacca, where a most up-to-date and splendidly equipped base hospital was established. Elsewhere schools and other buildings had to be taken over and equipped as temporary hospitals. There were also convalescent and “change of air” camps for both British and Indians. The medical services were supplemented by Red Cross organizations supplied by the governments of Australia and of India.

It has been said that it was the policy to accumulate 180 days' reserve stocks of all descriptions in Malaya. As regards foodstuffs these were approximately complete before hostilities broke out. The situation as regards ammunition, except in certain categories, and petrol was also satisfactory. The problem of the distribution of these stocks required very careful consideration. Initially they had all been held on Singapore Island in specially constructed accommodation but, when the rapid increase took place, the policy had been to disperse the dumps so as to limit the risks of loss or damage from air attack. With the extension of the defence to cover the whole of Malaya, however, it became necessary to locate a proportion of the reserves on the mainland. It was an unusual situation because with the loss of sea supremacy any part of Malaya had become almost equally exposed to attack. A successful enemy attack on Johore, for instance, might result in all our troops in Central and North Malaya being cut off from Singapore and they might have to depend for a time on their own resources. It was also necessary to hold certain reserves well forward to meet the requirements of operation MATADOR should that project be implemented. It was therefore decided that the main reserve stocks should be held on Singapore Island, that reserves on a scale to be fixed in each case should be held in the forward areas, and that the balance should be held in advanced depots in Central Malaya.

Water presented no problem in Malaya except on Singapore Island. Here we were dependent upon two main sources of supply (a) reservoirs at Gunong Pulai, in South Johore, and (b) rainwater catchment areas and open-air reservoirs on Singapore Island. Of these there were three, the Seletar, Peirce, and MacRitchie reservoirs. Water from the Johore reservoirs was brought by above-ground pipe-line to Singapore where it filled two high-level covered reservoirs at Pearls Hill and Fort Canning. The supply from the Seletar, Peirce, and MacRitchie reservoirs was ample to give a restricted supply indefinitely even if the population was increased by refugees, provided the control of these reservoirs remained in our hands and the machinery for distribution continued to operate.

As for weapons, the scale of armament had been dangerously low early in 1941. After March, however, a steady and increasing flow came to Malaya, but it was not until November that

formations received the higher scale of weapons and were issued with the modern 25-pounder guns for their artillery. Even then many units were below establishment in light automatics and rifles and there were never more than a few of these weapons in reserve.

In peace-time, married families accompanied the troops to Malaya. After the outbreak of the Second World War, however, no married families of the army or air force were allowed to enter Malaya, but those that were already there remained there. The same policy applied to officers' families. Families of officers coming to Malaya from China were sent to Australia where living was very expensive, as it was also in India. In consequence, a number of officers of both the British and Indian service became financially embarrassed. On the other hand, women were urgently required in Malaya as V.A.D.'s, car drivers, for work in offices and for other war work. At the request of the Commander-in-Chief I recommended to the War Office that officers' families should be allowed to enter Malaya at my discretion, but this request was refused though they were allowed to visit Malaya for short periods.

Leave ex-Malaya was another matter which required attention. Many officers and men had already been in Malaya for periods considerably longer than the normal peace-time tour and there was no prospect of them being relieved. To avoid as far as possible a deterioration in their health and consequently in their efficiency a scheme was drawn up whereby all ranks might get leave ex-Malaya in turn if they wished to take it. Unfortunately, owing to expense and difficulties of travel, few were able to avail themselves of this privilege.

Following an administrative tour which I made of all the principal depots, hospitals, and other installations in Malaya I was satisfied that, as far as lay within our power, everything possible was being done to ensure maintenance of the essential administrative services should war break out.

Chapter VI

CIVIL DEFENCE

THE defence of a land which is inhabited by several races of mankind each with its own customs, characteristics, religion, and standard of life, is already a new and vital problem which has arisen out of the Second World War. In the United Kingdom and the Dominions, the full collaboration and co-operation of the people is taken as certain, but in the case of Malaya there were at least five different peoples concerned who had to be united in a common effort for the defence of their natural or adopted homeland. It cannot be said that such unity was achieved and this is the task which now faces our administrators in that far-off land.

Since the war we have heard a great deal about the constitution of Malaya, but it is not the purpose of this book to enter into discussion about what is admittedly a very complex and a very delicate problem. But we should make a great mistake if we did not learn from experience, and it is right that the facts as they existed and as they affected the all-important question of defence should be generally known and given full consideration.

In the first place, the form of government of Malaya, as it existed in 1941, was probably more complicated and less suited to war conditions than that of any other part of the British Empire. As is our custom, it had been evolved over a number of years without any consideration for war requirements. Broadly, it was divided into three parts. Firstly, there were the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca, and Penang, with Province Wellesley, combined into a British colony administered from Singapore by the Governor acting through an executive and legislative council. Secondly, there were the four Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang—federated for certain centralized services and administered by a Federal Government at Kuala Lumpur but otherwise governed by their own Sultans assisted by British Residents. Thirdly, there were the five Unfederated Malay States of Johore, Trengganu, Kelantan, Kedah, and Perlis, which were governed by their own Sultans assisted in each case by a British Adviser. These States,

like the Federated States, were Malay territory and each of them had been incorporated in the British Empire by separate treaties. In most of these treaties, if not in all, the British Government undertook to defend the territories of the State concerned against external aggression—an undertaking which was probably intended for local wars and was quite inapplicable to a world war but which, in at least one case, gave rise to serious recriminations when we were forced to abandon territory. The Governor of the Straits Settlements was also High Commissioner for both the Federated and the Unfederated Malay States so that the machinery of government was in fact centralized in his person.

In pan-Malayan matters the High Commissioner could not deal with the four Federated States as one entity. He had to consult each, either direct or through the Federal Secretariat. Sometimes he had to deal with the Federal Government as well. So more often than not the Governor and High Commissioner had to deal with eleven separate bodies, all of which had to be in agreement before measures affecting Malaya as a whole could be introduced. Correspondence between governments does not as a rule pass very quickly and it only required a little extra delay on the part of one of these governments to hold up a measure for what was often an exasperatingly long period. As an instance of this, in 1941 it took four months to get on the statute book a measure to restrict the hours during which alcoholic liquor could be sold, though this had become urgent to conform with war conditions. In addition to this, there were customs frontiers between the various States and the permission of the State ruler concerned always had to be obtained before land could be used for defence purposes. Generally, it is true, these rulers were co-operative and helpful but delays frequently occurred and there was even a case during the height of the campaign when strong protests were made against the cutting down of rubber trees without permission in order to make gun positions.

In the Police Intelligence Service also the complicated constitution had a crippling effect. There were multiple separate police forces in Malaya and, although the Inspector General of Police Straits Settlements was also Civil Security Officer for the whole of the country, there was bound to be some lack of co-ordination and delay when prompt action was most required. The situation

was to some extent improved, though it remained far from satisfactory, by a scheme for co-ordination which received final approval in 1939. A much simpler and more centralized system is obviously necessary.

One of the lessons of the war in Malaya was the hampering effect of this complex constitutional organization. Whatever constitution is evolved in the future it will not be satisfactory from a defence point of view unless it is very much simpler and unless, at least when danger threatens, there is a stronger and more centralized control at the top.

The bulk of the Asiatic population consisted of Malays and Chinese in approximately equal proportions. In general the Chinese, the more industrious and commercially minded race, were to be found in the towns and larger villages, while the Malays inhabited the country districts and the sea-boards being content to live on the natural products of the soil.

The weakness of the Chinese community was that it was not itself united. In the first place part of it, i.e. those who had been born in the Straits Settlements, were British subjects but the remainder were not. With few exceptions they were loyal adherents of the British Empire and many contributed liberally to our war effort, but not all, at any rate before war broke out, were prepared to take an active part in the defence of the country. This was shown by our inability to fill the ranks of the Chinese units of the volunteer forces. Probably the most powerful group were those who owed political allegiance to the Kuomintang, but the most active and vocal group were the pro-Communists to be found almost exclusively among the working classes. There were a few supporters of Wang Ching Wei, who were in sympathy with Japanese aims. The temporary reconciliation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party which followed the invasion of Russia by Germany resulted in Malaya in the formation of a united front which, by the time war broke out with Japan, had absorbed all Chinese with the exception of the pro-Wang Ching Wei party. Like most other things in Malaya, however, this came too late and, although many Chinese worked unceasingly for the Allied cause and some courageously came forward to take the lead and rally their people, the community as a whole throughout lacked homogeneity and strong central control.

The Malays were, on the other hand, up to a point more united but were at that time in the broad sense less politically minded. Their allegiance was, however, probably more to their own local rulers than to the British Empire, as was evidenced during the operations by a tendency to set more store on the defence of a State than of the country as a whole. That they could still fight and fight well, however, when properly trained and disciplined was proved by the men of the Malay Regiment and of other regular units in the fighting services. But the Malay civil population, taken all round, was inclined to be apathetic throughout the campaign, though there was no very extensive fifth-column activity. For this I believe we have only ourselves to blame. I believe that if we had taken much more trouble to make the people of Malaya war-minded in the years before war broke out and if steps had been taken to organize them to take a part in the defence of the country, even if it had not been possible to supply them with modern arms, we should have had very much more help from them when the crisis arose. After all, have we not seen what could be done by the resistance movements in many countries in Europe and would not the same have happened had our own country been invaded? There is no reason why the same should not have happened in Malaya if plans had been made in good time. The trouble was that the country had been free from war for so long, and until the last minute it was not fashionable even to talk about war. Often we learn only by bitter experience and Malaya no doubt has learnt its lesson from the tyranny of the Japanese occupation.

The majority of Indians in Malaya were whole-heartedly British in their loyalty, especially the Indian traders and those in the clerical classes and professions. But Indian nationalism, working through the Central Indian Association of Malaya, was becoming very active and bidding for control of the Indian population of the country on a strongly Nationalist basis. The Sikh community, strongly organized within itself, was very susceptible to the anti-British propaganda emanating from overseas.

There were a number of Japanese in Malaya, chiefly in the larger cities such as Singapore and Georgetown, in Penang, and in the country districts where they owned rubber estates and iron ore mines. Their knowledge of the country undoubtedly proved

of great value to them during the campaign, especially in the fighting round Batu Pahat, where there were very large Japanese-owned rubber estates. Although access to the defence areas was forbidden to the public and restrictions were imposed on photography and similar activities, it was quite impossible to maintain secrecy as regards the location and the general nature of the defences being constructed. Many people have wondered why the Japanese were allowed such freedom in Malaya in the pre-war days. The answer is that it was the policy of the British Government to treat all foreigners alike and that it is likely to lead to trouble if discrimination is shown against the nationals of any particular country. It was only under the pressure of the events of 1941 that departure from this well-proved policy was authorized. As a matter of fact, it is unlikely that the Japanese would in any case have had much difficulty in obtaining any information, topographical or otherwise, which they might have required from Malaya, in view of the cosmopolitan character of the population.

Enough has already been said in this book to show that the sense of citizenship in Malaya was not strong nor, when it came to the test, was the feeling that this was a war for home and country. Undoubtedly more might have been done in pre-war days to develop a sense of responsibility for service to the State in return for the benefits received from membership of the British Empire.

The problem as to how much each part of our Empire should contribute to imperial defence is almost as old as our Empire itself. Was it not one of the contributory causes of the American War of Independence? And is it not still one of the main problems to-day? Malaya has often been accused of not being sufficiently generous in her contributions, but such accusations are not altogether justified. There are many ways in which overseas parts of the Empire can make their contributions. In the first place there is the annual monetary contribution from various parts of the Colonial Empire assessed according to their revenue. Under this heading Malaya with its great wealth contributed more than most other parts of the Colonial Empire. Then there is the maintenance of local forces. In principle, each part of the Empire is responsible for its own local defence, but what exactly does that mean? And, where you have a country like Malaya of great

strategical importance, where does local defence end and Imperial defence begin? That is the problem which it is always so difficult to solve. Malaya, it is true, maintained many local forces. In addition to the Malay Regiment, maintained and paid for by the Federated Malay States, there were the volunteer forces in the Straits Settlements, in the Federated Malay States and in several of the Unfederated States. There was also the Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the Malayan Volunteer Air Force. The State of Johore maintained its own military forces. Further, in times of affluence, special gifts were made to imperial defence. The Federated Malay States, for instance, gave as a free gift the battleship *Malaya*, the Sultan of Johore gave the battery of 15-inch guns, which came to be known as the Johore Battery, and the Straits Settlements gave some local naval craft. Nobody could deny that these were generous gifts. Where some criticism might be levied is as regards the way in which the volunteer forces were maintained. It is one thing to raise forces but it is quite another to maintain them at a proper state of efficiency. Modern military units are expensive luxuries, and the volunteer units in Malaya never reached a really satisfactory standard of efficiency. For many years the Government of the Straits Settlements allotted a fixed lump sum for its volunteer forces which then had to be apportioned between the three Services. There was never really enough for any of them, especially as the cost of maintenance rose each year. The result, as far as the army was concerned, was that the Straits Settlements volunteer force was never properly equipped or trained for war. As regards training, only once was part of the force called up for training. That was in the spring of 1941 when things began to look threatening. It had been intended to call up the other part of the force later in the year but strikes on the rubber plantations intervened. The plantation owners asserted that these strikes were made possible by the absence of a number of Europeans on volunteer training, and the remainder of the training was cancelled at the request of the Government. Thus it came about that volunteer training was almost without exception confined to week-end and evening work, and anybody who has had any experience of volunteers knows that this cannot be adequate.

A factor which had a considerable influence on the preparations for war in Malaya was the role allotted to that country for its

participation in the Second World War. It was to produce the greatest possible quantities of rubber and tin for the use of the Allies. In fact, the view of the Colonial Office appears to have been that the output of rubber and tin was of greater importance than the training of the local forces, for in December 1940 the Governor was instructed that "the ultimate criterion for exemption (from volunteer service) should be not what the General Officer Commanding considers practicable but what you consider essential to maintain the necessary production and efficient labour management." The Government could hardly be blamed therefore if it insisted on the production of these commodities to the prejudice of defence, but neither could the General Officer Commanding be blamed for the volunteer forces not being in a more efficient state.

Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War there was a Defence Committee Malaya, modelled on the Committee of Imperial Defence at home. The Governor was chairman of the Central Committee, while the members were the heads of the fighting services and the leading civil officials. There were a number of sub-committees, the members of which were as a rule partly military and partly civil. A great deal of useful planning work, which was invaluable when war came, was done by these sub-committees. In particular, the proper utilization of available man-power, a most difficult problem in all parts of the Empire, had been carefully examined. It was clear that in time of war, as in time of peace, the government of the country must be carried on and that many business firms must continue to operate. In addition, special war-time officials would be required. On the other hand, there was no leisured or retired class in Malaya which could be called upon for war-time expansion.

Soon after the outbreak of the Second World War the Defence Committee Malaya and its sub-committees were dissolved and were replaced by a War Committee and Controllers. Then the Governor and High Commissioner, under the powers conferred upon him, ordered that all European males resident in Malaya between certain ages should be liable for service in one of the volunteer corps. Exemption tribunals were set up throughout the country and many men had to be granted exemption from military service, even after allowing for the fact that government and business could be carried on temporarily with reduced staffs.

There was always potential friction in these claims for exemption, as the military authorities naturally wanted all they could get while government departments and business managers were equally naturally disinclined to risk cutting their staffs too much. The real trouble was that there were not enough men to go round. No liability to military service was imposed upon the Asiatic population. Many of them were of a type unsuitable for training as soldiers, sailors, or airmen, and the difficulties of nationality, of registration, and of selection would have been great. Moreover, there were no rifles or other arms available with which to equip Asiatic units.

Passive air defence in Malaya had a slow start. In the United Kingdom preparations had started in the middle 'twenties, first in a small way under the direction of the Committee of Imperial Defence and later, as political tension increased, as a department of the Home Office. In Malaya they only started under the impetus of the Second World War. It was unlikely, people said, that war would ever come to Malaya, so why spend a lot of money on air-raid precautions which would probably never be required? And so there was a lot of lee-way to make up. A great deal of work was, it is true, done as soon as the danger began to be realized. Organizations for passive air defence, based in general on those at home, were built up in the large towns, warning sirens were installed at the main centres, and some air-raid shelters were constructed. The situation as regards these needs some explanation because it has from time to time been the subject of much adverse comment. It is true that what was provided was very inadequate throughout Malaya for the needs of the civil population, but the construction of air-raid shelters in Singapore and in some other low-lying places was not an easy matter. The water-level was near the surface so that in most places the digging of trenches was not only useless but dangerous because they soon became filled with water and became breeding-places for mosquitoes. Many of the streets were narrow and there was little room for the building of shelters above ground. Apart from the blocking of traffic, the medical authorities advised against the building of shelters in streets on the ground that, by stopping the circulation of air, they would be dangerous from a health point of view. In some of the streets, however, shelters were provided by filling in the space between pillars supporting overhanging

buildings, but in general the policy was to provide accommodation in attap camps built in open spaces outside the town. It was hoped that in this way some dispersion from the crowded areas of the town would be brought about—a very sound idea in theory, but in practice it did not work too well because the camps provided were built of very inflammable material and became death-traps under aerial bombing or artillery bombardment. Perhaps with a little more determination and a little more expenditure of money some more adequate shelters could have been provided in the shape of above-ground shelters constructed on the open spaces similar to those which were to be seen in nearly all the large towns of Great Britain. I am of opinion also that a great deal more could have been done in the way of provision of shelters for their employees by government bodies, by private firms, by hospitals, and by organizations such as the Singapore Harbour Board.

"Black-out" in Malaya was also a difficult problem. Complete "black-out" means shutting out most of the ventilation and everybody who has lived in the tropics knows how extremely disagreeable that is. The alternative during "black-outs" was to live in great discomfort or in complete darkness. Neither of these are very good for the morale. When war started the standing orders at the combined Army and R.A.F. operational headquarters were to turn out all lights during air-raid alarms, and I well remember during the first air attack on Singapore sitting in darkness for the best part of an hour. This was obviously quite hopeless as, apart from discomfort, it caused great interference with the work, so we immediately had the orders altered and thereafter we always kept the lights on and did our best with the "black-out". To alleviate the situation a modified system of "brown-out" was introduced throughout the country, the "black-out" only being applied when the hostile aircraft were actually approaching a given area. This allowed normal activities to continue with a minimum of risk and was on the whole satisfactory.

In view of the scorched earth policy which was ordered during the campaign, and which will be discussed later, it is of interest to note at this stage that a "denial" scheme to provide for the invasion of Malaya had been prepared and necessary instructions issued. This scheme was directed principally to the destruction or removal of everything that might facilitate the movement of

invading forces. It laid down, for instance, that on receipt of special code words all vehicles and water craft must be destroyed or removed from specified areas and that essential parts of machinery should be removed. Careful plans also were worked out for the removal of civilians when the time came from certain areas which were thought to be most exposed to attack, such as the south coast of Singapore Island and the east coast of Johore. In Johore part of these plans were put into effect, resulting unfortunately in much congestion in the western areas of that State to which the evacuated people were moved and in which the heaviest fighting eventually took place.

A matter which had certainly not been tackled sufficiently thoroughly before war broke out was the control of civil labour, the failure of which was to have a crippling effect during the operations. Incidentally, this experience was not confined to Malaya only. It was common in the countries of most of our Allies in the Far East. Before the war the matter had been discussed on many occasions and draft proposals had been put before the Government. It was contemplated that in time of war the large labour forces which would be set free on the estates would become available and would be used, still under their own foremen, under the general supervision of the Director of Public Works. The question of conscription of labour had been discussed on more than one occasion but, in accordance with the advice of those best acquainted with labour in Malaya, had been rejected as unworkable. Knowing the intricacies of the Chinese labour system and the independent outlook of the Chinese, I agreed with this view. I thought we should get more out of them by letting them run their own show than by exercising too much compulsion which might result in a feeling of hostility. The Chinese are notorious as great workers if properly handled, and I still believe that the failure of our policy was due more to a lack of unity and leadership among the Chinese themselves and, to some extent, to the evils of the system of contracting than to any inherent faults in the policy. At the same time, the problem should have been tackled on much broader lines and more concrete plans drawn up than was actually the case.

Generally speaking the relations between the Services and the civil government were much better in 1941 than they had been when I was previously in Malaya. On the highest levels a friendly

atmosphere existed and in all grades, both in Singapore and up-country, there was more combined examination of problems than I had known before. We were particularly lucky to have a Secretary for Defence, Mr. Dawson, who was always ready to join in our deliberations and who was universally liked and respected. At the same time, the war machine was far from being geared up to concert pitch. Matters requiring quick decision were still the subject of lengthy correspondence and, even when decisions had been taken, there were sometimes long delays before they were implemented. It requires something more than the mere threat of war to change a bureaucratic system, especially in the East, which has been built up laboriously through several generations. I believe that the machinery of planning might have been expedited at that time if there had been more round-table conferences at which decisions could have been taken and if there had been more regular meetings of the War Committee with a proper agenda and a quick circulation of minutes. Actually this committee only met when it was required to consider some special matter and that only occurred at irregular intervals. Both the Services and the civil government were represented on this committee and problems affecting the defence, both military and civil, could have been discussed frankly and more expeditiously than by routine methods. Similarly reports on the work of the controllers could have been made and the information could thus have been disseminated to all concerned. The great importance of real team work between the civil and the military has been amply demonstrated in this war, but it requires a war to bring these lessons home and, once again, let us not forget that Malaya had been free of war for many years.

Within the Services there was no trace of friction. At all levels there were joint conferences and constant interchange of visits both official and unofficial. Probably never before in the history of Malaya had things been so harmonious.

When discussing the relationship between the Services and the civil government it is only right to state that I was myself, as General Officer Commanding Malaya, an *ex officio* member of both the Executive and Legislative Councils of the Straits Settlements though there was no military representation in the governments of the Federated Malay States or of the Unfederated Malay States. In the councils of the Straits Settlements the General

Officer Commanding was responsible for representing the views of all the Services. He attended the meetings of these councils and dealt with documents circulated for the views of members but of course he took no part in the work of the secretariat. There were some who held that the General Officer Commanding should be free of these commitments which inevitably caused some distraction from his military duties, but personally I feel that the advantages gained from the joint deliberations with the civil authorities which the arrangement made possible far outweighed any disadvantages which accrued from it. I would indeed go further and say that there should be some military representation also in the Central Government of the Federated Malay States so that all matters affecting the defence of the country, civil as well as military, can be certain of receiving full and proper consideration.

I come now to that somewhat delicate subject—the Press in Malaya. The local Press in Malaya was divided into two categories, i.e. the English Press and the vernacular Press, in which each Asiatic community had its own paper or papers. Incidentally this at once introduced a complication because the vernacular Press included a Japanese newspaper so that at Press conferences we either had to request the representative of that paper not to attend—a rather invidious thing to have to do—or else be very careful what we said. When the war clouds gathered, war correspondents began to arrive in Malaya, their numbers increasing as the situation worsened. Naturally these war correspondents were not content to kick their heels about in Singapore doing nothing. They wanted news for their papers. And so it became apparent early in 1941 that some special organization to deal with the Press was necessary. This was worked out and came into operation in May. The Commander-in-Chief China assumed responsibility for Press relations and a Commander R.N., called up from the reserve, was put at the head of the Services Press Bureau. This had the undoubted advantage that the Press relations of all three Services were grouped under one head, but I am inclined to think that it was unfortunate that the responsibility rested with the navy because most of the matters about which the Press required information concerned either the army or the air force. The Commander-in-Chief Far East would in point of fact probably have taken over the responsibility, which

he actually did in December, had he had a strong enough staff to handle the matter.

The Press wanted news. That was the crux of the thing. Unfortunately a defended area, such as Malaya was becoming, is not the sort of place where you can easily give away news without prejudicing security. Moreover, the Service commanders are tied by their responsibilities to their own ministries for preserving military secrets. In Malaya the position was further complicated by the delicate political relationship which had developed between the British Empire and Japan, when any false step might further embarrass our Government. In such circumstances a Service commander is naturally, and quite rightly, apt to be very cautious. Nevertheless, we did what we could to meet the requirements of the Press by showing them what we were allowed of the defences, arranging visits to the troops, and holding Press conferences. As regards the latter, I have myself always been a firm believer in taking the Press into one's confidence as much as one can because I believe that it is better to give newspaper correspondents accurate data upon which to work than to leave them to base their reports on data which may be only half true or even entirely false. For this reason I agreed to give Press interviews at regular intervals as also did some of the other Service commanders. But in this matter there must be reciprocity on both sides. You cannot expect a commander to give information or express opinions which are going to receive world-wide publicity unless he can be certain that his statements are going to be accurately quoted. My friends of the Press will, I feel sure, forgive me for saying that in Malaya this was not always the case, either as regards the local or the world Press. In saying this I have no wish to generalize, but it only requires one indiscreet correspondent, attempting to create a little extra sensation, to queer the pitch for the rest. This was in fact what almost invariably happened in spite of the most careful arrangements for circulating official précis of what had been said, and I always read the papers on the mornings following my conferences with some fear and trepidation as to what trouble I might have created for myself. Towards the end of 1941 all Press conferences were, for this reason, forbidden by the Commander-in-Chief Far East on instructions, I believe though I am not certain, from higher authority. In consequence, I was not at liberty to hold Press conferences during

the campaign and only once in the closing stages did I take the law into my own hands when the situation was becoming critical.

It may be of interest to record here a talk I had with Cecil Brown, one of the leading American representatives. There had been some trouble with the censor over some telegrams he wished to send about the situation in the Pacific and I thought, as a matter of interest, that I would like to get to the bottom of the matter, so I invited him to come and have a private talk with me in my office. He told me that the corporation which he represented was one of the biggest and most influential in the Middle West of the United States; that he had realized how much the Far East meant both to his own country and to ours and how weak the Allied forces there were; that in his opinion the situation could only be saved if the United States stood firmly behind the British Empire in Far Eastern policy, but that the people of the Middle West who had a big say in American policy were still woefully ignorant, taken as a whole, about the problems of the Far East. He therefore conceived it his duty to do all he could to ensure that the situation was put fairly and squarely before the people of the Middle West. Although it may not have been an excuse for attempting to break through the censorship regulations in a foreign country, that was at least logical reasoning and showed a breadth of vision which was not at that time universal among our friends across the Atlantic. Later, Cecil Brown had the good fortune to be one of the survivors when the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk and no doubt went home with a good story.

It was a pity that some of the war correspondents only reached Malaya a short time before the Far Eastern War broke out and that some of our leading newspapers had not up till then been directly represented. Enough has been said already to show the great complexities of the situation in that country, and it was only at the end of my first two years there that I myself began to feel that I knew something about it. First impressions, both of men and of things, are not invariably correct and, when given world publicity, may sometimes mislead the public. In my experience of life I have found that men with the most impressive personalities are often the first to crumple up in face of adversity whereas the least impressive often turn up trumps. I would almost go so far as to say that you don't know what a man is worth until you have lived with him in a prisoner-of-war camp. The more I see

of life the more convinced I become that it is necessary to be fully acquainted both with men and with things before one can with fairness make public statements about them.

I have seen it stated in print that I made extravagant statements as regards the strength of the defences of Malaya. That I deny categorically. I doubt if there are any records now of the statements I made but, if there were, they would show that I always took the same line, i.e. that we would do our best with whatever forces might be available. This seemed to me to be the only sound line to take because if one had expressed concern about the weakness of the defences one would have been giving information to the enemy while, if one had been over-optimistic, one would have been misleading one's own people with serious consequences when the truth became known.

In Singapore were established the Ministry of Information Far East, under Sir George Sansom, and the Malayan Information Bureau. In the same building as the office of the Public Relations Officer were the offices of the Chief Censor with his staff of subordinates, i.e. press censors, cable censors, mail censors, etc.

Nevertheless, an atmosphere of unreality hung over Malaya. In the restaurants, clubs, and places of entertainment, peace-time conditions prevailed. Having just come from England, where austerity had already become the fashion, I must confess to rather an uncomfortable feeling when provided with an almost unlimited amount of food in the hotels and restaurants. It is true that there was little shortage of food at that time in Malaya, but most of the foodstuffs consumed by Europeans had to be imported and one knew how scarce shipping was. In connection with food, committees had twice been appointed to draw up schemes for rationing of food in time of war but had reported that the difficulties were so great that food rationing was impracticable. Eventually a modified scheme was drawn up to cover European foodstuffs, but there was never any proper scheme for Asiatic foodstuffs. I could not believe that a scheme was impracticable although the difficulties in the way of producing a perfect scheme were undoubtedly great. That this view was correct was shown by experience in other parts of the Far East where satisfactory schemes were introduced and carried out. I am afraid it is true that long immunity from war had made it difficult to face realities in Malaya.

Chapter VII

THE EVE OF WAR WITH JAPAN

DURING the autumn of 1941 there was a succession of visitors to Singapore. From India came the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Archibald (now Field-Marshal Viscount) Wavell, the Maharajah of Patiala, and others; from Australia came General Sturdee, the Chief of the General Staff, and a party of newspaper editors and other representatives; from China came the British Ambassador, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr (now Lord Inverchapel); from Thailand the British Minister (Sir Josiah Crosby) and from the United Kingdom a War Office liaison officer. There was also a continual stream of officers between Australasia and the Middle East. Mr. Duff Cooper arrived in Singapore on his appointment as Cabinet representative in the Far East. We were, of course, glad to see these visitors and were able to have valuable discussions with them, but it meant that one was tied down to Singapore for a good deal of the time. The visit of the War Office liaison officer in particular was very welcome because one was able to explain the situation to him and state one's requirements much better than one could have done on paper. It was intended that there should be regular visits but unfortunately war intervened before the next officer could arrive.

The attitude of Thailand at this time caused us much speculation. It was obvious from reports we received that the Japanese were already getting a strong grip on the country by peaceful penetration, but right up to the last the British minister in Bangkok seemed to believe that there was such a strong pro-British element in Thailand that, if we could help them with arms and equipment, they would join us in resistance to the Japanese. In July a Thai military mission, consisting of an army colonel who had been trained at our Staff College and an air force officer who had been attached to one of our air squadrons, visited Singapore where they spent a considerable time. In November the colonel returned and was in fact still in Singapore when war broke out. He was eventually interned. What was the object of these visits? Were they definitely intended to deceive us or were they genuine?

Knowing the two officers concerned I cannot believe that they were playing a double game, but I think it is quite possible that they were sent, unknown to themselves, to throw dust in our eyes. For there can be little doubt that some at least of the highest officials in Thailand were at that time in close touch with the Japanese. Had it not been so, the Japanese surely could never have made all the secret preparations in South Thailand in anticipation of their arrival and, when hostilities opened, the Thais would not have opposed our advance into their territory as they did. Probably the dominating factor which influenced the actions of the Thai authorities was fear. They saw powerful Japanese forces concentrating on their frontiers, they had practically no modern equipment themselves and their requests to us for material assistance had been unsuccessful. So they followed the example of other weak nations and threw in their lot with the stronger side. It is difficult to blame them but what a difference it might have made to the course of the war if all these nations had seen the red light in time and rallied to the flag of freedom.

The continuation of the diplomatic talks in Washington between the Americans and Admiral Nomura, who was joined about this time by Mr. Kurusu, seemed to indicate that the Japanese might still be trying to find a peaceful solution of the impasse which had developed in the Far East following the mutual freezing of assets by the British and American Governments on the one side and the Japanese Government on the other. The fact that most of the Japanese merchant shipping had been necessarily withdrawn from the high seas as a result of the suspension of trade also deprived us of what is normally a sure indication of approaching war, i.e. the withdrawal of shipping to home ports. In November, however, Japanese aircraft began to fly over British territory both in Malaya and in Sarawak. The aircraft flew very high and it was not possible to intercept them and find out their business, but it was pretty obvious that these were photographic reconnaissances, and a nation does not risk creating a diplomatic crisis in this way when tension is already high unless it is prepared for war. This was the first positive indication of Japanese intentions. Others were the increase of Japanese aircraft in Indo-China from under 100 at the end of October to about 250 at the end of November, the strengthening of the Japanese naval forces in the South China sea by four

cruisers and some destroyers, and reports that a number of motor landing-craft had left the coasts of Central China, though there was no indication as to where they had gone. In view of these activities precautionary steps, including the guarding of certain vulnerable points, were taken in Malaya on 22 November.

Towards the end of November I received reports of an unsatisfactory state of affairs at Kuching in Sarawak and decided to visit the place myself. Ordinarily one would have gone by air, but as aircraft were so scarce and the landing-ground at Kuching, which was then being extended, was often unfit for the operation of the heavier types of aircraft in wet weather, I decided to make the journey by sea. The Commander-in-Chief China kindly placed a destroyer at my disposal, H.M.A.S. *Vampire*, which was then in Malayan waters. We arrived at Kuching on the morning of 28 November.

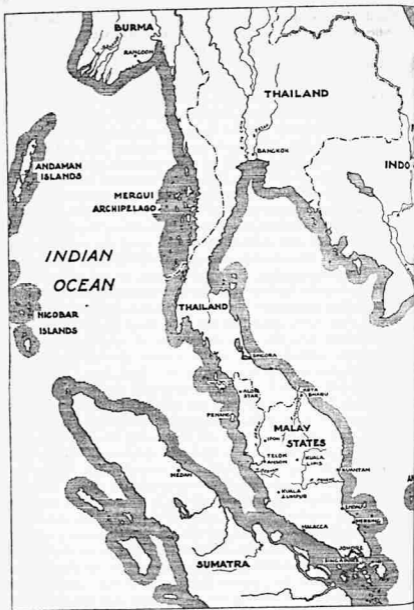
I spent two days at Kuching during which I went all round the defences, discussed and settled many matters with the O.C. Troops (Lt.-Col. C. M. Lane) and attended a meeting of the Council. One of the things which impressed me most was the vastness of the area which we were trying to defend. The town of Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, a country nearly as large as England with a population of only about six to the square mile, lies some eight miles from the coast and is approached only by waterways. The intervening country is mostly bush-covered or marshy. The landing-ground is some seven miles south of the town. The problem was complicated by the fact that there were large Japanese-owned rubber plantations to the east of the aerodrome. The O.C. Troops only had at his disposal one Indian infantry battalion, the 2/15 Punjab Regt. (of which one company had been detached to the oil-fields in East Sarawak), the Sarawak Rangers, a reconstituted local force composed of Dyaks, the Sarawak Volunteers, and some administrative detachments. The local forces were only very partially trained and poorly equipped as we could not even find enough rifles to complete their establishment. So the problem was not an easy one. The original object in sending the detachment there was to protect the landing-ground. This could only be done in that vast country by close defence of the landing-ground itself, but that would leave the town completely undefended, and it was hardly to be expected that the volunteers, who had taken up arms in defence of their

homes and families, would be prepared to abandon Kuching and go and sit on the landing-ground. Of course, the only true defence of the place was to prevent the enemy ever landing by air and sea attack, but then we had insufficient aircraft or ships available for this. So as usual we had to compromise. The Sarawak Rangers were employed as scouts north of Kuching, a role for which they were best fitted, and some detachments of regular troops were pushed forward to block the waterways in the hope of being able to hit the enemy when he was most vulnerable, i.e. when he was in boats. The remainder of the force was held back in reserve near the landing-ground which was put into a state of defence. Nobody could pretend that this was a satisfactory situation, but at least it would make the enemy deploy a bigger force to capture the place than would have been necessary if it had not been defended at all and that, I think, is the true way to look at it. It is not very pleasant though, either for the troops or for the civilians who have to remain in isolated places like that, as was abundantly patent to me when I attended the Council meeting. I was told that Japanese aircraft had already flown over the town and I was asked where our aircraft and anti-aircraft guns were. It is cold comfort to people in that position to tell them that it is against the principles of war to disperse military resources. All they are thinking about is how they are going to be defended when the enemy bombers come. The best I could do was to promise to send them a few anti-aircraft guns and to tell them of the arrival of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, which were due at Singapore in a few days' time—not that I expected the anti-aircraft guns to be of much practical value but I felt that the moral effect of their presence there would more than counterbalance some slight dispersion of force. Unfortunately war broke out before they could be dispatched, so the people of Kuching did not even have that comfort. I felt that Sarawak at that time was badly in need of strong leadership and it was a very great pity that Rajah Brooke, who had left for a holiday in Australia after the centenary celebrations, had not returned, for his influence, based on a hundred years of family tradition, would have been far greater than that of a newly appointed Council. I left the country with a sense of great sympathy for the people but with an uneasy feeling that all was not well and with a feeling of frustration that one could do so little to put things right.

On the evening of 29 November, while listening to the wireless news at Kuching, we heard that all troops at places of entertainment at Singapore had been ordered to return to barracks forthwith. This sounded ominous but I did not know at that time what the cause was. When I boarded the destroyer early the following morning, however, for the return journey, I found that the captain had received instructions to return to Singapore with all possible speed. We did the journey in twenty-four hours and reached the Naval Base early on 1 December. On arrival I learnt that the Commander-in-Chief had received a telegram from the War Office to the effect that it was expected that the Kurusu negotiations at Washington might break down at any time and that offensive operations might be started by Japan against Thailand, the Netherlands East Indies, or the Philippines. The second degree of readiness was ordered on that day and the volunteers were mobilized. Air reconnaissances over the China Sea were instituted.

The following day, i.e. on 2 December, the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle-cruiser *Repulse*, escorted by four destroyers, arrived at Singapore. This was an historic occasion. It was the first time that a battle fleet had been based on Singapore. I can remember now the thrill it gave us all as we watched those majestic ships steaming up the eastern channel of the Johore Straits and coming to anchor at the Naval Base. But yet one wondered. When I had been a student at the Royal Naval Staff College I had been told that the essence of naval warfare was a balanced fleet, i.e. a fleet consisting of all types of warships, each with their own part to play, and here we saw these two great ships arriving accompanied only by a few destroyers. We knew that there were only a few light cruisers and a few destroyers at Singapore and that none of them were modern ships. There were no aircraft carriers, without which a battle fleet loses most of its value in modern war, no heavy cruisers, and no submarines. Obviously this was not sound strategy and obviously a great risk was being taken. All the same we were glad to see the big ships and we assumed that they had been sent in an eleventh-hour effort to deter the Japanese from going to war. If that was so they were too late because there is no doubt now that the Japanese were irrevocably committed to war before they arrived.

I think it was the next evening that I was invited to dinner with Admiral Spooner and his charming wife to meet the new arrivals.



HAINAN

THE MALAY PENINSULA AND SURROUNDING AREAS



CHINA

DURHAM
HARBOUR

LAMBANG

CHINA
SEA

PALAWAN

JEBELTON

BRITISH
NORTH
BORNEO

LABUAN

BRUHEI

SARAWAK

NATUNA
ISLANDS

BORNEO

KUCHING

LANDS

It was a delightful evening as I already knew most of them intimately. Admiral Sir Tom Phillips I had met when I was at the War Office and he at the Admiralty. John Leach, the captain of the *Prince of Wales* and one of the finest of men, had been an instructor at the Royal Naval Staff College when I was a student there and was a great personal friend of mine. So also was Bill (now Sir William) Tennant, the captain of the *Repulse*, and Captain Bell of the Naval Staff, whom I had also known at Greenwich and met several times since. I felt that here at any rate was a group of men who could do the trick if anybody could do it. How little we expected at that time that within a week both the two great ships would be sunk, that Admiral Phillips and Captain Leach would both be lost, that Captain Tennant would go down with his ship but would be picked up from the water, and that our host, Admiral Spooner, would die some months later marooned on a desert island with no ship to take him off. What a queer trick fate was to play on us.

Let us now review the strength of the forces at our disposal and the organization for defence as it existed immediately prior to the outbreak of war.

Taking the army first, we had the equivalent of about 3½ divisions with, in addition, the anti-aircraft defences and the fixed defences of Singapore fortress, but we had no tanks. In all there was probably a ration strength of rather over 80,000 which included a large number of base and other administrative personnel. This force was disposed as follows:

(a) Lt.-Gen. Sir Lewis Heath, the Commander of the 3rd Indian Corps, was responsible under myself for everything north of Johore and Malacca including the implementation of MATADOR if that was ordered. His headquarters were at Kuala Lumpur and he had under him:

- (i) *The 11th Indian Division* of two brigade groups in Kedah and Perlis and with one additional battalion at Kroh in north Perak watching the Patani road. Another battalion accommodated in Penang was earmarked to join the Kroh Force if war broke out.
- (ii) *The Penang garrison* consisting of one volunteer infantry battalion, two 6-inch coast defence batteries with searchlights, one field company and some administrative units.

- (iii) *The 9th Indian Division* of two brigade groups only, of which one strong group with some additional aerodrome defence troops was in the Kelantan area and the other, a weak group, was in the Kuantan area.
- (iv) *The Lines of Communication Area* on the west coast in which was the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force, less one battalion on the Kelantan lines of communication.
- (v) *One Infantry Brigade* in reserve in the Ipoh area but ready to join the 11th Indian Division should fighting develop on that front.

(b) Maj.-Gen. Gordon Bennett with the A.I.F. of one division less one brigade group and with the Johore military forces under his command was responsible for everything in Johore and Malacca except elements of the Singapore anti-aircraft defences located in Johore and the Pengerang defences in the south-eastern corner of Johore.

(c) Maj.-Gen. F. Keith Simmons, the Commander of the Singapore fortress, was responsible for the defence of Singapore and adjoining islands and of the Pengerang area in South-East Johore. He had under him:

- (i) *The Fixed Defences* which were divided into two fire commands, i.e. the Changi fire command which covered the approaches to the Naval Base and the Faber fire command which covered the approaches to Keppel Harbour and to the western channel of the Johore Straits. In each fire command was one 15-inch and one 9.2-inch battery and a number of 6-inch batteries, also searchlights and smaller equipments.
- (ii) *Field Troops* of two infantry brigades, etc., to man the beach defences. Included in these was the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force less the Penang and Province Wellesley battalion which, for operational purposes, was under the Commander of the 3rd Indian Corps.
- (iii) *Fortress Units* which included field companies, Royal Engineers, etc.

(d) Brigadier A. W. G. Wildey, the Commander of the anti-aircraft defences, was responsible in co-operation with other arms for the defence of selected targets in the Singapore area against

hostile air attack. He had under his command four heavy anti-aircraft regiments, one light anti-aircraft regiment less one battery which was under 3rd Indian Corps, and one searchlight regiment. During an attack, Group Captain Rice, the co-ordinator of the air defence of the Singapore area, was authorized to issue orders to him direct. Most of the guns were of the static type and the range of the 3·7's was very limited by modern standards. A few mobile guns were placed under the Commander 3rd Indian Corps for work in the forward areas and a senior officer was allotted to his headquarters as anti-aircraft adviser.

(e) The Command Reserve of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade Group under Brigadier A. C. Paris. This brigade group was to be prepared to operate anywhere in Malaya, and the Commander 3rd Indian Corps had been informed that, in the event of an advance into Thailand, it would immediately be moved north and placed under his orders. Both the Commanders of the 3rd Indian Corps and of the A.I.F. were instructed that, in the event of this brigade group being committed to operations, they must be prepared to replace it with another infantry brigade group if called upon to do so.

This brigade had been carrying out formation training in the Port Dickson area during November and some of the units were still in that area. The brigade headquarters and the other units had returned to Singapore.

(f) In Borneo, Lt.-Col. C. M. Lane with one Indian infantry battalion, less one company, and some local units was responsible for the defence of the Kuching air landing-ground. In the Miri area of east Sarawak there was a detachment of one 6-inch battery, one infantry company, and a demolition squad. It had been decided that it was useless to attempt to defend the refinery or either of the oil-fields. In consequence, a partial denial scheme, whereby the oil output was reduced by some seventy per cent, was carried out before the outbreak of war. The orders to this detachment were to complete the denial scheme as soon as war broke out and withdraw to rejoin their units. No regular military forces were maintained in Labuan or in British North Borneo, though there was a small volunteer force in the latter territory. The senior civil officials were responsible for internal security.

(g) In Christmas Island there was a coast defence detachment

with two 6-inch guns. It was responsible for the protection of the phosphate deposits.

(h) In the Singapore area and elsewhere in Malaya, there were a number of command troops and of base and other administrative units for the maintenance of all troops in Malaya.

Such were our dispositions. They had been forced on us primarily by the necessity for protecting aerodromes, most of which had been sited without any regard to their security, though it must in fairness be admitted that it would in any case have been necessary to hold most of Malaya if only to prevent the enemy landing and establishing aerodromes at his leisure. In that case, however, more suitable dispositions could have been taken up. A comparison has already been made between Malaya and England and Wales, shorn of some of the south-western areas. It will give a good idea of the dispersion of the land forces if I now develop that comparison. Let us further assume, therefore, that the enemy with a superior fleet and air force is in occupation of Norway and that Scotland is a neutral State, whose territory may not be entered unless the enemy is advancing with the obvious intention of landing in the south of Scotland or has already violated some part of that country.

Imagine then one weak division in Cumberland and Westmorland watching the main road and railway approaches from Scotland with a reserve brigade in the Lancashire area ready to support it; on the east coast a strong brigade group in Northumberland and a weak brigade group in the Humber area; in the south of England one division of two brigade groups only, one of which is about the mouth of the Thames while the other is in the Oxford area; and finally on the Isle of Wight, where army headquarters is situated, strong coast defences on the seaward side and reasonably strong anti-aircraft defences. The Command Reserve, which consists of one brigade group only, is partly on the Isle of Wight and partly in the area of the Cotswolds, where it has recently been training. To complete the picture, we must bodily remove Portsmouth, the naval base which the defences are designed to protect, from Hampshire and put it down on the north coast of the Isle of Wight.

I wonder how the people of England and Wales would feel if they knew that their safety depended on those defences. I have

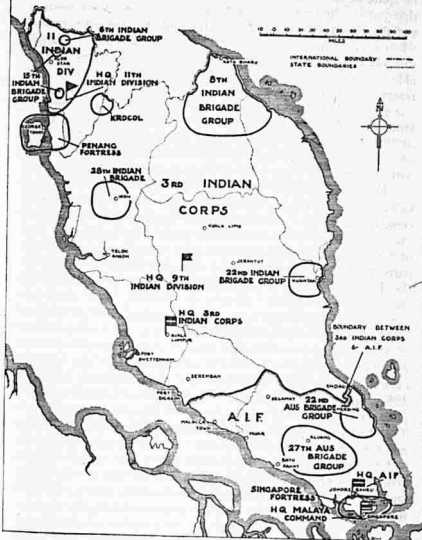
an idea they would not sleep very comfortably in their beds, and I believe they would be still more unhappy if they knew that there were no tanks in the land forces and that the navy and air force were quite incapable of preventing the enemy landing. Their discomfiture would be complete if they knew that, in spite of a high determination to do their best, the majority of the troops were quite inexperienced in modern war and that many of them were only very partially trained, a state of affairs which in general applied to the junior leaders as well as to the rank and file.

Let us now turn to the other Services—very important in this case because the defence of Malaya, as indeed of all peninsulas, must in the end depend largely upon naval and air power. Without this the enemy will always be able to turn the flanks of the land forces from the sea and make their task doubly difficult.

On the outbreak of the Second World War the greater part of the China fleet had of necessity to be withdrawn for operations elsewhere. There remained at Singapore only a few light cruisers and destroyers and a very inadequate fleet of craft for local defence which was strengthened later by the arrival of three gunboats from the River Yangtze. On the arrival of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the newly formed Eastern fleet, commanded by Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, replaced the China fleet. As regards material defences, the approaches to the Naval Base and to Keppel Harbour were strongly defended by mine-fields, booms, submarine nets, and other devices. In the general naval situation there were two glaring weaknesses. Firstly, there was no balanced fleet, for there were no aircraft carriers, heavy cruisers or submarines, though it is true that arrangements had been made with the Dutch naval authorities for some of their submarines to operate in the waters off Malaya in the event of our both becoming involved in war—an arrangement which they honoured to the letter when the time came. Secondly, there was a great shortage of local naval craft, such as motor torpedo boats, suitable for coastal defence and capable of operating in the shallow waters off the Malayan coast. Had we had these, the enemy would never have been able to turn our flanks from the sea with light forces transported in shallow-draught coastal craft as in fact he did. In short we no longer controlled the sea communications either in the ocean or in the coastal waters.

What of the air force? We have seen that our requirements

DISPOSITION OF FORCES 8 DEC 1941



had been assessed at a total strength of 566 first-line aircraft, a figure which the Chiefs of Staff accepted as an ideal but found to be quite beyond the limits of their resources. They considered that 336 first-line aircraft should give a very fair degree of security and this became the target figure. It should be stressed here that when a strength of so many first-line aircraft is fixed as a target it implies that that strength can be maintained in face of reasonable casualties, which in turn means that there must be adequate reserves to take the place of those which are lost. Unfortunately our commitments in the Middle East and in Russia during the latter part of 1941 made it impossible to build up our air force in Malaya to anything like the target figure, and when war broke out we had all told only 141 operationally serviceable aircraft without counting a few light aircraft manned by the Volunteer Air Force. It is worth considering how this figure of 141 was made up. To start with, there were 43 Brewster Buffalo fighters, comparatively slow machines whose performance at heights exceeding 10,000 feet was relatively poor. The interrupter gear of the two fuselage guns also was faulty. They could not be compared to the best modern fighters and in fact were outclassed by the Japanese Navy "O" fighter. There was one squadron of Blenheim night-fighters. As regards bombers, there were two squadrons of Blenheims, a reasonably modern medium bomber which, however, suffered from lack of range, and two squadrons of Vickers-Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers. The latter had since 1940 been officially considered as an obsolete type and were to have been replaced by Beauforts built in Australia but, owing to difficulties in getting material, it had not been possible to complete the latter in time, so the Vickers-Vildebeeste were still there. They had a very limited range and a speed of less than a hundred miles per hour—not much fun for the unfortunate fellows who had to fly them. Then there were two squadrons of Hudson general reconnaissance machines, neither of which was up to strength. These were modern machines which were to be used for seaward reconnaissance and for attacks on shipping. Finally there was one flight of aircraft for co-operation with the fixed defences and there were three Catalina flying-boats. To make matters worse, there were few reserves and a great shortage of spare parts as a result of which flying had had to be curtailed during the greater part of 1941 at a time when it was of the utmost

importance to train pilots as quickly as possible, for many of the pilots had had no experience in flying operational aircraft. Few of the fighter pilots, for instance, had had any previous experience in flying fighter aircraft. They were made up of pilots drawn from the other squadrons and of men straight from the flying training schools—many of them Australians and New Zealanders. Some of the squadrons in fact were manned entirely by the Royal Australian Air Force.

There were in Malaya no transport aircraft, no long-range bombers, no dive-bombers, no army co-operation aircraft and no special photographic reconnaissance aircraft. To sum up, there was in fact no really effective air striking force in Malaya, there were none of the aircraft which an army specially requires for close support or for transport purposes, and the fighters were incapable of giving effective support to such bombers as there were or of taking their proper place in the defence. The blame for this state of affairs cannot be laid on the Air Officer Commanding at that time, the late Air Vice-Marshal Pulford, who was as concerned as we all were about the weakness of the forces at his disposal and repeatedly represented the situation to higher authority; nor can it be laid on the Commander-in-Chief Far East, who never ceased pressing for reinforcements; nor, I think, can it be placed upon our national leaders at that time who had other and even more pressing calls to meet. The trouble goes right back to those pre-war days when, in spite of all warnings, our leaders would not really face the dangers which threatened us and allowed vital strategical areas like Malaya to remain weak in the pious hope that all would be well on the day.

Nevertheless, there was throughout the fighting services a firm resolve to do our best, with the limited means at our disposal, to ensure the security of the great Naval Base which had been entrusted to our care. I have nothing but admiration for the way in which all ranks courageously faced a situation which was prejudiced from the outset through lack of resources to compete with the magnitude of the task.

Chapter VIII

OPENING OF HOSTILITIES

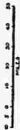
UP to 5 December, *MATADOR* was not to be carried out without reference to London, but on that day the Commander-in-Chief Far East received a telegram authorizing him to carry it out without reference to London in either of the two following contingencies:

- (a) If he had information that a Japanese expedition was advancing with the apparent intention of landing in South Thailand, or
- (b) If the Japanese violated any other part of Thailand.

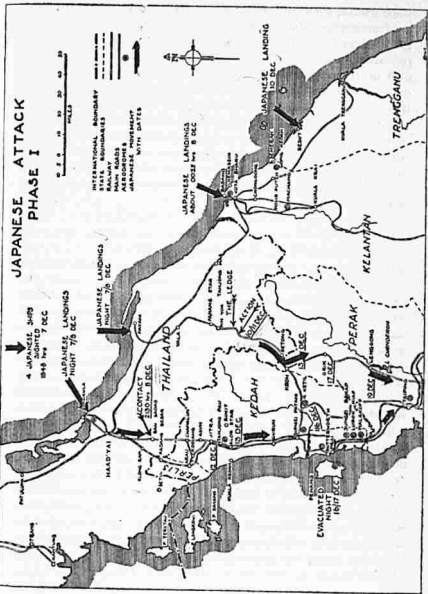
This was news of the first importance. It gave us in fact freedom from the control of London for which we had been pressing for so long and made *MATADOR* look a possible operation. Up to that time it had never really seemed likely that we should get the necessary permission in time. It was not, however, all plain sailing because the carrying out of *MATADOR* would almost certainly mean war with Japan and it was still the policy of His Majesty's Government to avoid war if possible. It was therefore a very difficult decision that the Commander-in-Chief had to make. In fact the whole future of our Empire might have depended upon what he did.

I felt that this change in the situation was so vital that I decided to go to Kuala Lumpur the following day, Saturday, 6 December, to discuss it with Heath. I travelled by the Civil Air Line plane which left Singapore daily early in the morning and returned the same evening. Shortly before 3 p.m., when I was at the headquarters of the Federated Malay States Volunteers in company with Heath, we received a message to the effect that the morning air reconnaissance, which was watching the approaches to the Gulf of Thailand, had at about 11.30 a.m. that day reported having sighted two Japanese convoys, consisting of warships and transports, approximately eighty miles ESE. of Point Camo, the most southerly point of Indo-China, steaming westward. A reference to the map showed us that, if they continued on the

JAPANESE ATTACK PHASE I



- INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY
- STATE BOUNDARIES
- RAILWAYS
- MAIN ROADS
- AERODROMES
- JAPANESE MOVEMENT WITH DATES



same course, these convoys would strike the coast of South Thailand somewhere about Singora. So after all, it seemed, we had got the news in time and should be able to put MATADOR into operation. Heath immediately ordered his Corps to assume the first degree of readiness and, in anticipation of MATADOR being ordered, instructed Murray Lyon to be prepared to move forward the 11th Indian Division at short notice. After discussing plans in further detail I left Kuala Lumpur at 4.30 p.m. for the return journey to Singapore. It was a curious sensation seeing everybody going about their business in the ordinary way quite oblivious of the bedlam that seemed certain to break loose in a day or two's time. One longed to tell them the news but of course that was out of the question.

On returning to my headquarters at about 6.30 p.m., I was informed that one convoy consisted of twenty-two 10,000-ton merchant vessels escorted by one battleship, five cruisers and seven destroyers and the other of twenty-one merchant ships escorted by two cruisers and seven destroyers. Obviously this was a big expedition and I was a little surprised to find that MATADOR had not yet been ordered. But the Commander-in-Chief had information which I had not got, i.e. that another small convoy, consisting of one cruiser and three merchant ships, had been sighted farther west but steering north-west. At a conference between the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Admiral Layton and Admiral Sir Tom Phillips's Chief of Staff (the Admiral himself was then at Manila visiting the Commander of the American Asiatic Fleet) it was decided that the probability was against the main convoys continuing their course due west and that they were more likely to follow the small leading convoy round Point Camo, possibly making for a good anchorage at Koh Rong on the west coast of Indo-China which could be used as a base for the next move against Thailand. Bearing in mind the policy of avoiding war with Japan if possible, Brooke-Popham decided that he would not be justified in ordering MATADOR on the information he had up to date but impressed upon Pulford the vital importance of maintaining contact with the convoys.

Contact had been made by Hudson aircraft of No. 1 Royal Australian Air Force squadron at the limit of their patrolling range. This made it impossible for them to remain in contact until relieved, so a Catalina flying-boat was sent out to shadow

the convoys during the night. As this flying-boat failed to make contact, a second Catalina was sent out early on 7 December and instructed that, if no contact was established, a search was to be made off the west coast of Indo-China in case the convoys had, as anticipated, concentrated in the Koh Rong area. No reports were received from this boat and, from information published in the Japanese press when we were prisoners-of-war, it seems certain that it was shot down. If so, this was the first act of war in the Malay area between Japan and the British Empire. Three Hudson aircraft sent out on the morning of 7 December similarly failed to make contact owing to bad weather which forced two of them to abandon the search.

In the meantime at Singapore we had been making all necessary preparations for war. All troops were brought to the first degree of readiness and the combined Army and Air Force Operational Headquarters was opened at Sime Road near the Singapore Golf Course some three or four miles out of the town itself. The administrative branch of Headquarters Malaya Command, however, remained at Fort Canning with the headquarters of the Services, partly because the accommodation at Sime Road was not completed and partly because it was more convenient for them to remain in close touch with the civil departments. After returning from Kuala Lumpur on the evening of the sixth I discussed the situation both with the Governor and with Brooke-Popham—and incidentally had to absent myself from an attractive dinner-party to which I had been invited that evening.

Sunday, 7 December, was a day of suspense. We were all ready waiting for the flag to fall and, like runners in a race, feeling a bit impatient. Lunch-time came and still not a word from our reconnaissance aircraft. Further reconnaissances sent out in the afternoon only sighted a few single merchant vessels in the Gulf of Thailand. We began to wonder whether our conviction that we were on the eve of war was really false and whether after all this was only a demonstration against Thailand after the Hitlerian fashion. The evening passed and still no word came. But at a little before 8 p.m.—I cannot remember the exact time—we got our answer. At 6.48 p.m., a Hudson aircraft on reconnaissance in the Gulf of Thailand and flying low in very bad weather had sighted four small Japanese vessels, which looked like destroyers, about seventy miles off Singora steaming south. We also learnt

later that at 5.50 p.m. another Hudson aircraft had been fired on by a Japanese cruiser. Should it prove that the Catalina flying-boat was not in fact shot down, then this was the first act of war.

It will thus be seen that for a period of nearly thirty hours after the first sighting, the air reconnaissances sent out had failed to make contact with the main invasion forces. To what was this due? Partly to a lack of aircraft to cover the area properly, partly to bad visibility, and partly, it may be assumed, to the misleading tactics purposely adopted by the Japanese. But it stands as a classical example of the danger of relying on visual sighting from aircraft in climatic conditions such as those which exist in the region of Malaya, Thailand, and Burma. No doubt modern science will do much to eliminate this danger.

In an instant the problem had changed from one which was almost entirely political to one which was mainly strategical. It is true that there was still no certainty that the ships seen were part of an expedition advancing to attack South Thailand or Malaya, but there was little doubt in my mind that this was the case and I felt that we should have been fully justified in moving into Thailand if it had been strategically to our advantage to do so. But was it? One of the conditions which had always been laid down for MATADOR was that the forestalling of the Japanese in the Singora area was essential to the success of the operation. That necessitated twenty-four hours' start before the Japanese landed and rapid movement of our force once the order was given. These conditions did not exist now. The enemy convoy, if it was bound for Singora, could reach there about midnight 7-8 December whereas, if MATADOR was put into operation, it was unlikely that our leading troops, even if they met with no opposition or obstacles on the way, would arrive there before about 2 a.m. on the eighth. That would have meant an encounter battle which, I felt, with our small and untried force and lack of reserves would have been very risky, especially as the enemy was expected to include tanks in his force. There was the further complication that part of our force had, owing to lack of motor transport, to move forward by rail and be linked up with its transport in the forward area. For these reasons I informed the Commander-in-Chief at a conference held at Sime Road that I considered operation MATADOR in the existing circumstances to be unsound. We then went together to the Naval Base where a conference was held with

the Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet, who had just returned from Manila. It was at this conference that the final decision was taken by the Commander-in-Chief Far East at about 10.30 p.m. not to order MATADOR that night. The possibility, however, of putting it into operation the following day, if the development of the situation showed it to be feasible, was not precluded. The Commander of the 3rd Indian Corps was informed of this decision before midnight.

I went to bed hoping to get a little sleep in preparation for the morrow which promised to be a busy day. But there was not to be much rest that night. Somewhere about 1 a.m. a telephone message reported that what seemed to be hostile ships had appeared off Kota Bharu in Kelantan shortly before midnight, and a little later another report came in to the effect that the enemy were shelling our beach defences and had commenced landing. The first landings actually took place at the junction of the Badang and Sabak beaches about half an hour after midnight. The point of landing was almost exactly opposite the Kota Bharu aerodrome, and there is no doubt that the Japanese ships were guided in by a light displayed prominently on rising ground behind the beaches. Our field artillery engaged the enemy ships and the tows as they approached the shore, and the enemy troops got a warm welcome as they landed from men of the 3/17 Dogras manning the pill-boxes. But the defence was too thin and, though the Dogras in this area fought doggedly and were killed almost to a man, it was not long before the Japanese had got control of this section of the beach.

In the meantime, there was great activity at Singapore. Messages were flying in all directions to announce the outbreak of hostilities. It was a tense moment. In addition to our heavy commitments in other parts of the world, we were now also at war in the Far East. There was no time to think out all the repercussions of this but its general effect on the conduct of the war was only too obvious. There were many things to be done, not the least among which was the rounding-up and internment of all the remaining Japanese civilians throughout Malaya.

We were not for long, however, left in peace at Singapore to get on with our work. Somewhere about 4 a.m.—I have no record of the exact time—the sirens went and shortly afterwards came the well-known sound of falling bombs. Most of them were

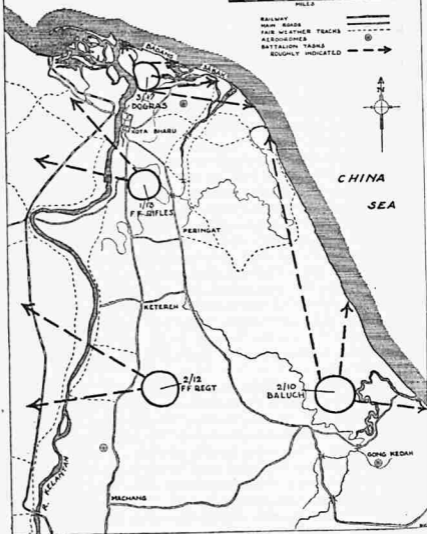
KOTA BHARU AREA



- RAILWAY
- MAIN ROADS
- FAIR WEATHER TRACKS
- AERODROMES
- BATTALION TASKS
- ROUGHLY INDICATED



CHINA
SEA



directed against the aerodromes but a few fell in the very centre of the town and did some damage. For some reason the headquarters of the civil A.R.P. organization had not been manned and lights were still on in some of the streets when the aeroplanes arrived—not that this really made much difference for there was no mistaking the water-front at Singapore even at night. It must be admitted that this raid came as rather a surprise for the nearest Japanese aerodromes were 700 miles from Singapore, which was a considerable distance at that stage of the war though nothing later on, and we hardly expected the Japanese to have any very long-range aircraft. It was a bold enterprise on their part. It was also the first indication most of the citizens of Singapore had that war had broken out.

One of the first decisions which the A.O.C. and I had to take jointly was how best to use our air force. The Hudsons of No. 1 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force, based on the Kota Bharu aerodrome, were already attacking the Japanese ships and landing-craft off that coast, and the Vickers-Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers, operating from east coast aerodromes, had joined in the attack. One ship, which is believed to have carried tanks, was set on fire and sunk. It was claimed by both the air force and the gunners. Perhaps they both had a finger in the pie. There were other bomber aircraft on the Kedah and Province Wellesley aerodromes and we decided to send these across the mountains to attack the enemy shipping off Kota Bharu at dawn. When they got there they couldn't find the enemy ships—they had probably withdrawn by then—so went on to Patani in South Thailand where they were met by enemy fighters. Some bombs were dropped on enemy ships but probably without result. On return to their aerodromes some of our aircraft were attacked by Japanese bombers and fighters and considerable losses were sustained. The rapidity with which the Japanese got their air attacks going against our aerodromes was quite remarkable. Practically all the aerodromes in Kelantan, Kedah, Province Wellesley, and Penang, were attacked on that day and in most cases the bombers were escorted by fighters. There is little doubt that these fighters were operating from the aerodromes in South Thailand which had been got ready for their use and where stocks of fuel and other necessaries had already been accumulated. To allay suspicion the grass was allowed to grow on the Patani aerodrome right up

to the last minute, but reports received by us, unfortunately just too late, showed that it was all ready for the reception of the Japanese aircraft, with drums of petrol hidden under the trees, the day before the invasion took place. The performance of Japanese aircraft of all types and the accuracy of their bombing came as an unpleasant surprise. By the evening of the eighth our own air force had already been seriously weakened.

One of the most urgent requirements was to find out as soon as we could just what the enemy was doing. So air reconnaissances were sent to Singora and Patani at dawn. They reported that the enemy had landed at both those places and that the aerodromes were already in use. It was obviously too late now to put MATADOR into operation, so I authorized the Commander of the 3rd Indian Corps to set in motion certain harassing activities which had been planned and also to lay demolition charges on the roads and railways.

It so happened that a routine meeting of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council had been fixed for 10 a.m. on the morning of the eighth at Singapore. I felt it would be all to the good to give these representatives of the people some first-hand information of what was really happening, so I snatched a few minutes to go down and address them. Everybody was quite calm. Even in Singapore itself, apart from a few groups of people discussing the news, there was no outward sign that anything abnormal was happening.

On returning to my headquarters I received permission from G.H.Q. Far East to move troops into Thai territory if I wished to do so. It will be remembered that the position selected for defence on the Kroh-Patani road was well inside Thai territory, so I now ordered the Commander of the 3rd Indian Corps to occupy the defensive positions on both the Singora and the Kroh-Patani roads. In a telephone conversation with him I also suggested that he should send a mobile covering force across the frontier towards Singora to make contact with the enemy and to harass and delay him. This was in accordance with the ordinary text-book procedure and, beside imposing delay on the enemy, it would give much-needed time for our main force to settle into their position.

There is no doubt that this change from an anticipated offensive to a defensive had a great psychological effect on the troops. Although the chances of being able to put MATADOR into operation

had never, up to the last moment, really been very great, yet it is a fact that the offensive is always more attractive than the defensive and, when there is a possibility of both, people tend to concentrate on the former rather than on the latter. Perhaps we at headquarters, who were in a position to appreciate the political factors more clearly, did not communicate our views sufficiently to the forward troops, or perhaps they did not percolate through Corps Headquarters, or perhaps the degree of secrecy which it was necessary to preserve in this matter had its effect. I cannot say for certain who, if anybody, was at fault, but the fact remains that the 11th Indian Division was much more confident of being able to operate *MATADOR* than were commanders farther back. So much so that on the seventh, Murray Lyon, the divisional commander, had as a precautionary measure moved two of the battalions of his 15th Infantry Brigade a distance of some miles to Anak Bukit station to entrain. On the eighth, when the order to man the defensive positions was given, these battalions had to retrace their steps—never a good thing to do. Added to all this, heavy and continuous rain fell during the next few days, so that the troops completing the defences in waterlogged ground were never dry. As a result, when the Japanese attack developed, morale was not at its highest and the division was, to some extent at least, caught on the wrong foot. In war we British are always meticulously careful not to lay ourselves open to the charge of breaking faith with neutrals—and no doubt in the end it pays us to do so. But there have been many cases where military plans have in consequence been seriously prejudiced, and Malaya in December 1941 is certainly one of them.

On the North Kedah front the first troops crossed the frontier at 5.30 p.m. They consisted of two companies and the carriers of the 1/8 Punjab Regiment with some anti-tank guns and a detachment of engineers. The whole column was mechanized and had received orders to move towards Singora to harass and delay the enemy. At the same time an armoured train, with a detachment of the 2/16 Punjab Regiment and some engineers, advanced into Thailand from Padang Besar in Perlis, a small State in the extreme northern corner of Malaya. At dusk, which comes on at about 6.30 p.m. at that time of year, the Singora column had reached Sadao, a village some ten miles north of the frontier. Here it halted and awaited developments. At about

9.30 p.m., a column, closed up and with full headlights blazing, was seen coming down the road. It was headed by tanks and the two leading tanks were quickly knocked out by our anti-tank guns. But the Japanese infantry who were following in lorries quickly debussed and, as they were so often to do later in the campaign, started an enveloping movement through the woods. It was not the intention that this column should become engaged in a dog-fight in darkness—its job was to harass and delay, which had already been effected by forcing the enemy to deploy—so the commander now ordered the column to withdraw. It fell back through the other half of the same battalion which was holding an outpost position at Kampong Imam, destroying some bridges on the way. Meanwhile the armoured train party had successfully destroyed a large railway bridge in Thailand before withdrawing to Padang Besar.

Reference has already been made to the plan of action on the Kroh front. It was, in brief, to counter any Japanese advance along the road from Patani by seizing the Ledge position. This was a stretch of road some thirty-five to forty miles beyond the frontier which formed a defile where the road was cut into a steep hill-side which rose sharply to the west of the road and fell away to the Patani River on the east. The intention was, having seized it, to carry out on it a series of demolitions. The force, which was known as Krohcol, was originally to have consisted of the 3/16 Punjab Regiment stationed at Kroh, the 5/14 Punjab Regiment from Penang, an army troops company sappers and miners, a field ambulance and the light battery of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force, the whole under the command of Lt.-Col. Moorhead, the C.O. of the 3/16 Punjab Regiment. In the event, the 5/14 Punjab Regiment, less one company which was retained at Penang, did not join the column until after operations had been launched, and the volunteer battery, which had been unable to mobilize in time, had to be replaced by a mountain battery withdrawn from the north Kedah front. It was realized that the force was weak for so important a role but there were no other troops available. Everything depended upon reaching the Ledge position in time.

At 1.30 p.m. on 8 December, Moorhead received orders to occupy the Ledge. His force was not yet concentrated so he decided to hold Betong, a village a few miles across the frontier,

with one company and the carriers of his own battalion and to move the remainder of the battalion with the sappers through them straight on to the Ledge. In spite of the Thai Government's pronouncement that they would defend their country against all-comers, it was hoped that the Thais would at worst be passively neutral. But it was not to be. The leading scout of the 3/16 Punjab Regiment was shot dead as he crossed the frontier. Throughout the afternoon the advance of the column along this jungle road was disputed by snipers and road blocks. The opposition amounted probably to only a few score men but they fought skilfully. Many of them were concealed up trees and would let scouts and advanced guards through, reserving their fire for main bodies in rear and for parties clearing road blocks. On two occasions our leading troops were charged, and altogether in hilly country and without guides they found the opposition very awkward. By nightfall they had cleared three miles of road at a cost of fifteen casualties to themselves and twenty-four to the enemy—all of them Thais. We were already well behind schedule.

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

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

from north and south, but before these attacks could be put in dawn broke to show nine enemy ships steaming away leaving a number of motor landing-craft behind them. This gave a feeling of great optimism which was later somewhat dispelled when our air reconnaissance located twenty enemy ships discharging into landing-craft under cover of a group of islands which are situated not far from the Kelantan coast.

Fierce fighting developed on the beaches, and losses on both sides were heavy. At first the counter-attacks both from the north and from the south made progress, but they were both held up in front of the posts which the enemy had originally captured and the breach remained open. It was essential that this breach should be closed before nightfall in order that reserves could be re-formed and an unbroken front presented to the enemy's next big effort. So Key gave orders at about 10.30 a.m. for his remaining reserve, the 1st Frontier Force Rifles less one company watching the land frontier and one covering Kota Bharu, to counter-attack from the north and the 2nd Frontier Force Regiment less two companies from the south. The attacks went in during the afternoon but did not succeed in closing the gap. The elements were against them. Heavy and drenching rain which had set in in the morning had made the tracks almost impassable for wheeled transport and had turned the waterways into raging torrents. Several men were swept away and drowned. By dusk both attacks had been held up, but the Japanese, on their own admission, had suffered on this day as heavy casualties as they suffered on any other day in Malaya.

In the meantime, the situation in the air was developing unfavourably for us. The enemy had established constant fighter patrols over Kota Bharu aerodrome making it most hazardous for our bombers without fighter support to leave the ground. The anti-aircraft detachment of the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery defending the aerodrome was in action almost continuously throughout the day, and splendidly it acquitted itself, but the defence was too weak to beat off the attack. Some of our aircraft were destroyed while others remained earthbound. At about 4 p.m. the Air Officer Commanding ordered the evacuation of the aerodrome. Thus began the long series of evacuations of aerodromes which had been laboriously prepared and for the protection of which our troops had been specially disposed. As a

result many valuable aerodromes fell into the hands of the enemy and damaging blows were struck at the morale of our troops.

What was Key to do? One of the aerodromes which it had been his task to protect had already been evacuated by our air force and, if he continued to fight in the swamps of Kota Bharu, it was quite likely that the enemy would land another force farther down the coast and cut his communications—a danger which was constantly to recur in this campaign. He rang up his divisional headquarters at Raub where, fortunately, he found Heath in consultation with Barstow, the divisional commander. He was given permission to withdraw his troops from the beaches if he found it necessary to do so. He decided to await the latest reports from his forward troops and make his decision accordingly. These, when they arrived, were not encouraging. In the area of the Badang and Sabak beaches the situation was very confused and communications scarce. Visibility was almost nil. The enemy were said to be infiltrating between and behind the posts. From farther south came reports of smoke to seaward from behind the Perhentian Islands which might indicate a new landing in preparation. There were no longer any aircraft available to carry out reconnaissances or to make attacks if enemy ships were seen. In these circumstances Key decided to withdraw from the Sabak and Badang beaches and from the Kota Bharu aerodrome and to take up a position covering Kota Bharu town with his left on the Kelantan River. It was pouring with rain and pitch dark and communications were reduced for the most part to liaison officers. It is therefore not surprising that some of the orders went astray and that some confusion ensued. What is indeed more surprising and what testifies to the high state of discipline of the units engaged is that by the time dawn came the new line was manned in reasonable strength and that the great majority of the sub-units and individual soldiers who became detached made their own way back and joined up again later on.

To meet this attack in Kelantan I decided to use one battalion of the Command Reserve. Accordingly at about 11.30 a.m. on the heighth, the 4/19 Hyderabad, which was then in the Negri Sembilan area on the completion of brigade training, was placed under orders of the 3rd Indian Corps and immediately moved up by rail to Kelantan. In the 3rd Indian Corps area the 28th Indian Brigade was ordered to move up the same day to the area of the

Alor Star aerodrome and placed under orders of the commander of the 11th Indian Division.

So the first day of war drew to a close. We had not been surprised, but it cannot be said that things had gone in our favour. The enemy had got a footing in Kelantan and had landed large forces unopposed at Singora and Patani. Worse than that he had struck damaging blows at our air force which had suffered considerable losses. It was clear that the fight would be grim and arduous, but we were all determined to give of our best to the limit of our resources.

Chapter IX

THE BATTLE FOR KEDAH

ON 10 December the Far East War Council was formed at Singapore. Its composition was as follows:

Chairman: The Rt. Hon. A. Duff Cooper, Cabinet representative in the Far East.

Members: The Governor and High Commissioner Malaya; the Commander-in-Chief Far East; the Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet; the General Officer Commanding Malaya; the Air Officer Commanding Far East; Mr. Bowden, representing Australia, and later Sir George Sansom, as being responsible for propaganda and Press control.

Secretary: Major Robertson, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (staff officer to the Cabinet representative in the Far East).

In addition to the above, Maj.-Gen. Gordon Bennett, commanding the A.I.F., was told that he was at liberty to attend meetings if and when he wished to do so, so that when matters affecting the Australian troops were under discussion they would be properly represented.

In January, after the departure from Singapore of Mr. Duff Cooper and Sir George Sansom, the Governor and High Commissioner became chairman, Mr. Scott took Sir George Sansom's place, and Mr. Dawson became secretary. Later Brigadier Simson, as Director-General of Civil Defence, joined the Council.

The Council met at Sime Road at 9 a.m. daily and the meetings usually lasted about two hours. As the operations in the Far East developed, the discussions in the Council tended to concentrate somewhat naturally on what was happening in Malaya and in Borneo. Hong Kong was fighting an isolated battle and really nothing much could be done to help the garrison there. The responsibility for the defence of Burma was, on 15 December, transferred from the Commander-in-Chief Far East to the Commander-in-Chief India. So in effect there was little left but the Malaya and Borneo theatres. It has been suggested that the

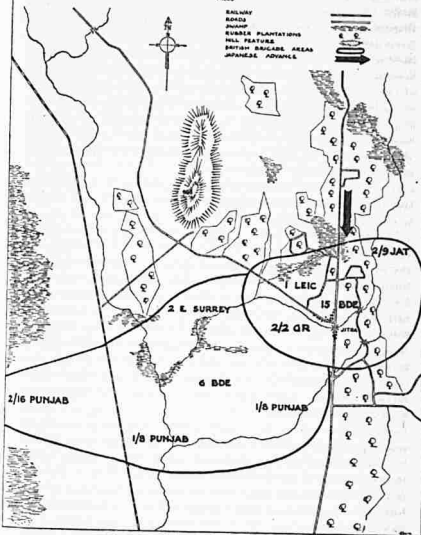
composition of the Council tended to concentrate interest too much on what was happening in these theatres at the expense of the wider issues. Personally I do not hold that view. I feel that if the composition of the Council had been more limited and its discussions confined to the bigger issues, there would have to have been other meetings on a lower level and some of the members would of necessity have had to attend both. When things were moving so fast it was difficult enough to find time even for the one meeting. I do think, though, that it might have been better if the meetings had been held a little later in the mornings, as was done with the War Cabinet meetings in London, so that the Service commanders could have had more time to discuss with their staffs and, when necessary, with each other matters scheduled for discussion at the Council meetings.

The plan for the defence of the Jitra position in north Kedah was to hold it with two brigades forward, the 15th Indian Brigade on the right and the 6th Indian Brigade on the left. Of the two forward battalions of the 15th Brigade the 2/9 Jats extended from the hills on the right flank of the position to a point exclusive of the main road. On their left were the 1st Leicesters, whose front included both the main and Perlis roads. West of the latter they linked up with the 2nd East Surreys, the right battalion of the 6th Brigade whose front included the wooded Pisang salient forward of the Alor Changlih canal. On their left the 2/16 Punjab Regiment was responsible for the whole front from the railway to the sea. It had permanent positions on the railway and coast only and patrolled the several miles of padi and marsh which intervened. The remaining battalion of the 15th Brigade, the 1/14 Punjab Regiment, had the role of delaying the enemy between the frontier and Asun and of occupying an outpost position at Asun, subsequently coming into brigade reserve. The outpost position of the 6th Brigade at Kampong Imam on the Perlis road was to be held by the reserve battalion, the 1/8 Punjab Regiment less the two companies which, as we have already seen, had been sent forward into Thailand to make contact with and delay the enemy. The 28th Indian Brigade less one battalion was to come into divisional reserve on arrival in the Alor Star area. Its detached battalion had the role of lines of communication and paratroop protection between Alor Star and Sungei Patani. The divisional artillery consisted of 155th Field Regiment of two

JITRA AREA



RAILWAY
ROADS
SWAMP
RUBBER PLANTATIONS
HILL FEATURES
BRITISH BATTALION AREAS
JAPANESE ADVANCE



batteries each of eight 4.5-inch howitzers, the 22nd Mountain Regiment, less one battery in Kelantan, armed with an assortment of weapons, the 80th Anti-Tank Regiment, less one battery in Kelantan, with thirty-six 2-pounders, the 16th Light A.A. Battery with sixteen Bofors and, on its way up, the 137th Field Regiment with twenty-four 25-pounders. Of the other divisional troops the 3rd Cavalry was in Penang with a squadron at Sungei Patani. This unfortunate regiment, "mechanized" in the phrase of one of our politicians "in the sense that it had been deprived of its horses" was, on paper, the divisional reconnaissance regiment with an imposing array of armoured vehicles. Of these it actually had none and, if it had had them, it would not have been able to drive them. It consisted of three squadrons of dismounted men, many of them recruits, sent from India with little training and no vehicles and equipped in Malaya with a few unarmoured trucks. Its fighting vehicles were scheduled to arrive later. It was totally unfit for its role of divisional reconnaissance unit.

During the afternoon and evening of the eighth, the 6th and 15th Indian Brigades moved into the Jitra position and set to work to complete the defences. There was much to be done. Some of the wire and some anti-tank mines, which had been kept ready for MATADOR, had to be put out. Posts which had become waterlogged and fallen in had to be cleared, as also had fields of fire where they had become overgrown. To make matters worse the rain, which started again on the eighth, continued almost without ceasing up to the twelfth, the day of the Japanese attack. The effect of the rain on the demolitions, all of which were charged on the eighth, must also be taken into consideration when the story of their failure is told.

On the Singora road there was no contact during the ninth, the enemy apparently being held up by the demolitions carried out by our covering force, or it may be that he was waiting till more of his troops and equipment could be landed. Early on that day our air force attacked targets in the Singora area but, owing to total lack of fighter support, several aircraft were lost and little was effected. The enemy air force also was very active. Alor Star aerodrome was again heavily bombed during the morning and it was so obviously untenable that its evacuation was ordered by the Air Officer Commanding. The sound of the explosions and the sight of the burning buildings had a great psychological effect

on the troops of the 11th Indian Division who had been told that their task was to secure this aerodrome for the use of our air force.

A bogey which first raised its head on this day and continued to do so later on was the paratroop and air-borne landing threat. Lines of communication protection troops were kept constantly on the move tracking down reported paratroops, none of whom actually existed. Some of these scares may have been caused by fifth columnists; many were undoubtedly caused by well-meaning but ignorant people who mistook the puffs of bursting A.A. shells for opening parachutes. Such is one of the handicaps of fighting with inexperienced troops in a country whose people are unaccustomed to war.

Contact with the enemy was re-established on the Singora road shortly after midnight on 10-11 December, and our covering troops, who were in a poor tactical position, withdrew behind a stream immediately south of the Changlun cross-roads. To conform with this movement our covering troops on the left flank withdrew from the State of Perlis to a position about Koding. It would have been most unwise from a strategical point of view to have left troops in that State, but this withdrawal provided the first instance, of which there were many afterwards, of our inability to provide for a native State the protection which we had guaranteed it by treaty. In such a loose confederation it was perhaps natural that the native rulers should be thinking first and foremost of the security of their own States, and our inability to ensure this did nothing to strengthen the ties between them and the British administration.

The Jitra position was not yet ready, so on the tenth Murray Lyon instructed Garrett, the commander of the 15th Indian Brigade, that he must hold the enemy north of Asun, a swampy defile three miles north of the Jitra position, at least until the morning of the eleventh. Garrett asked for another battalion and was given the 2/1 Gurkha Rifles, less one company, from the 28th Indian Brigade. This latter battalion took over the defence of the Asun position releasing the whole of the 1/14 Punjab Regiment for operations in the forward area.

At about 8 a.m. on the eleventh the 1/14 Punjab Regiment was attacked in the Changlun position. For a time all went well but by about midday enemy troops, who had worked round the right flank, had succeeded in establishing themselves in the centre of

the battalion's position. Mortar bombs fell about battalion headquarters and Garrett, who was there at the time, was wounded in the head but insisted on carrying on. The role of the battalion was to delay but not to become involved, so it was decided to withdraw behind the next good anti-tank obstacle at Asun. Murray Lyon, however, wanted more time to complete the Jitra defences and appears to have instructed the covering force not to withdraw behind the Asun obstacle until compelled to do so. A temporary position was therefore selected about two miles in front of Asun and subordinate commanders were sent back to reconnoitre it. By 4.30 p.m. the withdrawal was well under way. It was pouring with rain and visibility was poor, when straight down the road came the blitz. Out of the mist and rain, blazing indiscriminately ahead and to both sides with cannon and machine-guns, came twelve medium tanks. Behind them were light tanks and charging infantry. Before the men of the covering force, few of whom had ever seen a tank before, had recovered from their bewilderment the tanks had passed through them and were approaching the bridge in front of the Asun outpost position. The sapper in charge of the demolition pressed the exploder but it failed. It was not until the leading tank was almost on the bridge that it was hit by a bullet from an anti-tank rifle and brought to a standstill. The road was blocked and other tanks were knocked out. The blitz had been temporarily stopped but at heavy cost. The 1/14 Punjab Regiment had been completely overrun. Some of them made their way back but many were never seen again. Some guns were lost and the brigadier himself was cut off and did not rejoin till the following day.

The enemy tanks had for the time being been halted in front of the Asun position, but the 2/1 Gurkha Rifles were soon being hard pressed by infantry. By 6.30 p.m., the tanks had come on again and were engaging battalion headquarters. Shortly afterwards the battalion commander decided to withdraw all his three companies, but communications had been broken and the order did not reach many of the forward troops. They continued to fight where they were until they were overwhelmed. Thus this battalion also became, for the time being, a total loss and a severe blow, of which the news did not filter back to divisional headquarters or to any of the troops on the Jitra position for several hours, had already been dealt to the 11th Indian Division.

It was not the only disaster on this luckless day. On the Perlis road, as may often happen with inexperienced troops, a demolition was exploded prematurely behind the covering and outpost troops. For various reasons it was not repaired in time, and all the transport, guns, and carriers of the covering and outpost troops and seven anti-tank guns in the main Jitra position were lost.

Withdrawals are admitted to be among the most difficult operations of war even for seasoned troops, and the above incidents, which have been described in some detail, serve to illustrate the great difficulty of conducting them successfully with inexperienced troops. They had a profound influence on the battle of Jitra.

But this was not all that Murray Lyon had to think about. The situation of Krohcol was now such as to cause him great anxiety. Opposition from the Thais continued throughout the morning and early afternoon of the ninth until our leading troops were approaching the village of Betong when it suddenly ceased. Here the column stopped for the night. At dawn the following morning the 2/3 Australian Reserve M.T. Company, a tough and cheerful lot of men, most of whom had had experience in the First World War, arrived to embus the 3/16 Punjab Regiment and take it forward to the Ledge. When about four miles short of its objective, however, the advanced guard came under fire, this time from Japanese troops. It continued to advance for one and a half miles and then was held up. The Japanese force landed at Patani had, with the help of the Thais, won the race for the Ledge. An encounter battle developed in which there was heavy fighting with considerable casualties on both sides, but again the issue was decided by Japanese tanks. The 3/16 Punjab Regiment fought splendidly on this day as it did also the following day, meeting repeated Japanese attacks with the utmost steadiness, but it had lost most of one company in a Japanese tank attack and by the evening of the eleventh its casualties had passed the 200 mark. In the meantime, however, the 10th Mountain Battery and the 5/14 Punjab Regiment less one company had arrived at Kroh and had been ordered to take up a position about ten miles north of Betong. Moorhead estimated that he was opposed by four enemy battalions and reported accordingly to Murray Lyon, under whose orders he then was. It was the night after the disastrous affair at Asun, and Murray Lyon in reply sent a personal message to the effect that the object of Krohcol must now be to

ensure the safety of the whole division by preventing the enemy from debouching on to the lines of communication about Sungei Patani. Moorhead was given full permission to withdraw as necessary to the Kroh position where his stand must be final.

At sea a great disaster had befallen us. On the eighth, Admiral Phillips, with a view to helping us to repel the invasion, had decided to take action with his two capital ships against the Japanese forces in the Gulf of Thailand. He was put into direct touch with the Air Officer Commanding Far East with regard to the air co-operation required and asked for three things:

- (a) Reconnaissance one hundred miles to the north of the force from daylight Tuesday, 9 December.
- (b) Reconnaissance to Singora and beyond ten miles from the coast starting at first light on 10 December, and
- (c) Fighter protection off Singora at daylight on 10 December.

The Air Officer Commanding replied that he could provide the first, hoped to be able to provide the second, but could not provide the third. The doubt about the second was that the reconnaissance would have to be provided by Blenheim IV's based on Kuantan aerodrome, and it was uncertain whether this aerodrome would be out of action or not. The reason why the third requirement could not be provided was mainly that the northern aerodromes were either untenable or else had been badly damaged by bombing. This meant that fighters would have had to operate from aerodromes at considerable distance from Singora and, owing to the short endurance of the Buffalo, they would have been able to remain only a very short time over that area before having to return to refuel. There was a shortage of fighter aircraft and it was therefore impossible to guarantee continuous fighter protection.

Late on the afternoon of Monday, 8 December, the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Repulse*, escorted by four destroyers, left Singapore. It is more than likely that their departure was announced by a pro-Japanese wireless set which throughout the campaign transmitted messages from the Singapore-Johore area but which defied vigorous and repeated efforts to locate it. In any case, on the evening of 9 December the British fleet, when steaming northwards off the east coast of Malaya,

appears to have been located by a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft and by a Japanese submarine. A Japanese air striking force, which was being held in readiness in south Indo-China for this purpose, set off for a night attack on the fleet but ran into thick weather and was forced to return to its base. The Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet, however, realized that his movements had been seen and that the element of surprise had been lost. He decided to abandon the project of entering the Gulf of Thailand and to return to Singapore. Then intervened one of those chances of fate which so often influence great events. Early on the night 9-10 December beach defence posts in the Kuantan sector had reported hostile ships closing the shore. Fire was opened and spread along the front. No landings actually took place, but there is evidence to show that there was either an attempt to land or a feint. Reports of these happenings which were sent back by wireless were transmitted to the Eastern Fleet and the Commander-in-Chief, spoiling for a fight, decided to clear up the situation before returning to Singapore. Reconnaissance aircraft were flown off and the fleet closed the shore. But the Japanese were not idle. At dawn they sent off more reconnaissance aircraft which, at about 10.15 a.m., located the British fleet for the second time. Off went the air striking force again and at about 11.15 a.m. it attacked the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* when about sixty miles off Kuantan. Torpedo-bomber attacks succeeded high-level attacks with startling rapidity. The great ships were turned this way and that to meet the attacks but they could not be turned quickly enough so rapidly were the attacks delivered and before long both ships had been dealt mortal blows. By 1.20 p.m., both ships had been sunk. Fighter aircraft from Singapore answered the S.O.S. call immediately but could only arrive in time to see the ships go down and to protect the destroyers as they picked up the survivors. Fortunately two thousand one hundred and eighty-five of the ships' crews were saved, though many of them were badly burned and most of them were suffering from shock. But the Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet, Tom Phillips, was lost, as also was John Leach, of the *Prince of Wales*. Bill Tennant of the *Repulse* went down with his ship but had the good fortune to be picked up by a destroyer.

The news of this disaster spread rapidly through Malaya. There is no denying that its moral effect was great, as few people,

even in the Services, knew that the fleet had put to sea. Only a week before, the arrival of these splendid ships had been heralded with great rejoicing, and now they had gone. It hardly seemed possible. But when the first effects had worn off dismay gave place, at least among the British, to a grim determination to avenge them. Anyway, we knew now what we were up against.

Professional and amateur naval strategists may argue for many years to come whether Admiral Phillips was right to accept the risks he did and whether he got all the air support that could have been given him. Perhaps the latter question is easier to answer than the former. I can say without hesitation that he did. Pulford had been a naval officer himself. He knew what the navy wanted, told them what they might expect, and left no stone unturned to do everything possible to help them. I was constantly with him during those days and I know this to be true. As regards the first question, let us realize that the ships had been sent out to the Far East as a threat to the Japanese in the hope of deterring them from entering the war. The threat failed, partly because by the time they arrived the Japanese were already irrevocably committed to war. The Commander-in-Chief then found himself in the invidious position of having an unbalanced fleet—two capital ships with very little to protect them. It was no good keeping the ships inactive at the Singapore base where they would have been subject to constant air attack. Perhaps, taking the long view, the best course would have been to join up with other Allied naval forces. Certainly the presence of these ships in the battles round Java would have been invaluable. But who at that time could have foreseen the events of the next few months? The immediate problem was to hold Malaya and neighbouring allied territories, and it was in an endeavour to help to solve this problem that Tom Phillips led out his fleet. He gallantly "marched to the sound of the guns", as we say in the army, and in doing so he followed the great traditions of his Service. Undoubtedly he accepted great risks, but "nothing risked nothing gained", so let us pay tribute to a very gallant effort which failed more from the inherent weakness in the composition of our fleet and from the brilliance of the enemy's attack than from any fault in planning.

In the sphere of naval operations, some slight compensation came from the success of a flotilla of Dutch submarines which, quickly coming to our assistance in accordance with a pre-war

plan, sank four Japanese ships in the waters off Patani and another two off Kota Bharu.

In the air the situation was not much better. The Japanese Air Force was already well established on the aerodromes in South Thailand. Indeed, photographs showed that there were at least a hundred aircraft massed on the Singora aerodrome—a wonderful target if we had had anything with which to attack them. There were also, of course, the long-range aircraft operating from the aerodromes in South Indo-China. The Japanese probably had at least 500 modern aircraft available at this time. Constant attacks were kept up on our small air force and its bases in North Malaya, in which we suffered heavy losses. The situation was made worse by our lack of fighter protection and of proper anti-aircraft ground defence. On the tenth the large aerodrome at Sungei Patani in South Kedah had to be evacuated and by the eleventh practically all the aerodromes in North Malaya had become untenable. On the tenth also the first of a series of heavy Japanese air attacks on Penang Island took place. It was carried out by seventy enemy bombers and Georgetown was the target. There were no anti-aircraft defences except small arms fire, for the guns destined for Penang had never arrived, and there were few shelters. The inhabitants thronged the streets to watch the attack, so novel did it all seem. The casualties from this raid ran into thousands. A large part of the population left Georgetown and moved to the hills in the centre of the island, but the A.R.P. and the medical and the nursing services stood firm. The small garrison, in addition to manning the defences, had to assist the civil administration by replacing the personnel of essential municipal services. They also had to help to remove and bury the corpses which were left putrefying in the streets. This experience was to be repeated in other places in Malaya.

On 9 and 10 December, twenty-two Glen Martin bombers and nine Buffalo fighters arrived from the Netherlands East Indies. We must never forget the promptitude with which the Dutch came to our help both on the sea and in the air. Later also they sent a land detachment specially trained in guerrilla fighting.

As a result of the enemy's fighter superiority it was decided on 11 December that bombing, except in special circumstances, must be confined to the hours of darkness. It had also become clear that we could not hope to regain superiority without powerful

reinforcements. The safe arrival of these reinforcements therefore became the first essential in our air strategy. In consequence it was laid down by the Commander-in-Chief that the primary task of our fighters would be the defence of the Singapore base and the protection of convoys bringing land and air reinforcements to Malaya. This meant that the Army would suffer greatly from the lack of air support in the fighting on the mainland—a situation which had to be accepted but which had a very big influence on the course of the operations.

On 10 December I issued the following Special Order of the Day:

In this hour of trial the General Officer Commanding calls upon all ranks Malaya Command for a determined and sustained effort to safeguard Malaya and the adjoining British territories. The eyes of the Empire are upon us. Our whole position in the Far East is at stake. The struggle may be long and grim but let us all resolve to stand fast come what may and to prove ourselves worthy of the great trust which has been placed in us.

We left the 11th Indian Division on the eve of the battle of Jitra and rather disorganized as a result of the misfortunes which had befallen their covering and outpost troops. It had little respite, for shortly after midnight, 11–12 December, the Japanese launched their attack against the left forward company of the 2nd Jats east of the Singora road and before long the frontage of attack had been extended to cover the right forward company of the Jats and the right forward company of the Leicesters on their left. Fighting went on for the rest of the night and as so often happens in night battles, the fog of war descended upon the battle-field. Reports of enemy penetration reaching formation headquarters were almost invariably exaggerated if not entirely false. The situation was made worse by the excessive width of the defensive position which made it comparatively easy for enemy troops to infiltrate between posts. No doubt these reports and the dangerous situation which was developing on the Kroh front influenced Murray Lyon when, at about 8 a.m., he asked 3rd Indian Corps for permission to withdraw his division to the Gurun position thirty miles to the south. This position on the southern edge of the large rice-growing area of Kedah was one of the strongest natural positions in North Malaya. It had been reconnoitred and selected as a rearward defensive position but

had not yet been put into a state of defence. Nor had a long thirty-mile withdrawal straight to this position ever been contemplated in our pre-war planning, for it would have prejudiced the defence of the aerodromes which it was our task to protect. When the request reached 3rd Corps headquarters, Heath was already on his way to Singapore to confer with me with regard to our east coast strategy, so the request was telephoned direct to my headquarters. Apart from the objections to the proposed plan from a tactical point of view I felt that such an early and long withdrawal must have a most demoralizing effect both on the troops and on the civil population. This view was endorsed by the Far East War Council, so I replied to the effect that, pending further orders, the battle must be fought out on the Jitra position. Actually at that time the Leicesters were still holding their positions as also were most of the Jats, though as regards the latter the true state of affairs was not known until long afterwards.

During the morning the Japanese infantry continued to attack our right flank in close formation, supported by the fire of their tanks, of which several were now immobilized. In spite of heavy losses they succeeded in effecting deep penetration. The situation was not improved by the fact that, as already related, Garrett, the commander of the 15th Indian Brigade holding that front, had himself been wounded and cut off the previous evening and did not rejoin till later in the day. As a temporary measure Carpendale, the commander of the 28th Indian Brigade in reserve, was ordered to command both brigades. Apart from the difficulty of the dual command he was handicapped by the fact that he was not fully *au fait* either with the terrain or with the defence scheme.

The Japanese advance on the right flank was temporarily halted by a counter-attack launched by reinforcements drawn from the 6th Indian Brigade on the left, but early in the afternoon a wide gap had developed between our reserves facing the enemy on this flank and the right of the Leicesters who were still holding their original positions. To fill this gap Carpendale ordered the Leicesters to withdraw and take up a new position south of Jitra facing both east and north. South of this position was the River Bata, unfordable and crossed only by the main road on an iron bridge. This bridge was the enemy's immediate objective and late in the afternoon he succeeded in bringing it under close-range fire. It was our life-line and for a time there was much confusion

on the road. The situation became so menacing that at about 7.30 p.m. Murray Lyon again asked for permission to withdraw. The request reached me while I was still in conference with Heath. After consultation we informed Murray Lyon that his task was now to fight for the security of North Kedah and suggested that the best tactics might be to hold up the enemy tanks on good natural obstacles and to dispose his forces to obtain considerable depth on the two parallel north-south roads which cross the rice-growing area thus obtaining greater scope for his artillery. He was also informed that reserves would be sent as soon as possible for operations in his divisional area.

The divisional orders for the withdrawal from Jitra were sent out at 9 p.m. The plan in outline was that the 28th Indian Brigade, reconstituted under Carpendale and with one battalion of the 15th Brigade under its command, should hold a position between Langgar and the south bank of the River Kedah at Alor Star. This meant a withdrawal of some ten miles. The 6th Indian Brigade was to occupy a position seven miles farther back at Simpang Empat. The remainder of the 15th Indian Brigade was to be in reserve. This withdrawal would have been difficult under the most favourable conditions. With the troops tired, units mixed as a result of the day's fighting, communications broken and the night dark, it was inevitable that orders should be delayed and that in some cases they should not reach the addressees. This was what in fact occurred. Some units and sub-units withdrew without incident. Others, finding themselves unable to use the only road, had to make their way as best they could across country. On the left flank there were no roads so some parties reached the coast and, taking boats, rejoined farther south. Some again were still in position the following morning. The fact is that the withdrawal, necessary as it may have been, was too fast and too complicated for disorganized and exhausted troops, whose disorganization and exhaustion it only increased. On the day after the battle the strength of the 15th Indian Brigade was only about 600 and it was temporarily unfit for further fighting. The 6th Indian Brigade, though still a fighting formation, had also had serious losses. In the 28th Indian Brigade one battalion had suffered severely but the other two had only had light casualties. Several guns had been lost, chiefly through becoming inextricably bogged in the deep mud or by being cut

off on the wrong side of demolitions. A large number of vehicles were lost for similar reasons. The loss of Bren gun carriers and other war material had also been heavy. These were serious losses as there were few replacements in Malaya.

The 11th Indian Division needed to be relieved, rested, and reorganized before it was called upon to fight again, but there were no troops available to relieve it. Nor for another four weeks was the division to be relieved—weeks during which it was constantly fighting, withdrawing, and standing to fight again, with scarcely a respite.

In the battle of Jitra, as elsewhere, the Japanese infantry showed themselves resourceful and masters of infiltration tactics. They attacked in the traditional Japanese manner without regard to loss. They showed a shrewd appreciation of the moral value of noise, especially when it could be produced by Chinese crackers or other methods in rear of our troops. For supporting fire they relied chiefly on the infantry gun and the mortar, though they also used stationary tanks as strong-points. It is, however, probably true to say that the battle of Jitra was half lost before it began. The necessity for covering the Alor Star aerodrome had forced us to take up a weak tactical position. The change from an anticipated offensive to a strategical defensive had, as has been stated, an adverse moral effect on the troops. The temporary loss of two battalions on the previous day had left serious gaps in the reserves on the right flank. In consequence, when the enemy broke into the defences, the reserves were not strong enough to prevent them getting control of the one vital artery of communications. Veteran troops would have found these conditions trying enough. They were in some cases too trying for the young and inexperienced troops of which the 11th Indian Division was composed.

On 12 December I placed the Command Reserve, the 12th Indian Brigade Group, at the disposal of the commander of the 3rd Indian Corps for employment on the west coast. With exception of the 4/19 Hyderabad Regiment, which had to be withdrawn from Kelantan, the brigade group began to move forward immediately by road and by rail.

Chapter X

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM NORTH MALAYA

ON the Kelantan front we had left our troops struggling back on the dark and wet night of 8-9 December to their new positions in front of Kota Bharu. When dawn came their total strength only amounted to about 700 men, while of the commanders of the three infantry battalions engaged one had been wounded and the other two were missing with a large number of their men. Before long strong enemy pressure developed down the main road from the aerodrome to the town and there was some infiltration behind our positions on either side of the road. Many of the Japanese troops were lightly clad and equipped, and our troops, not for the last time in Malaya, experienced great difficulty in telling friend from foe and Japanese soldier from Malay or Chinese villager. The situation quickly became confused. Fortunately civil plans had worked smoothly under the capable direction of Mr. Kidd of the Malayan Civil Service. The Sultan of Kelantan and his household and all European women and children had left for Kuala Krai, where military railhead had been established, and the few Asiatic civilians who wished to leave were doing so in an orderly manner and under control. There was therefore no further point in covering the town of Kota Bharu, so Key decided to withdraw his battered force to a position some four miles south of the town with the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment on the right, the 1/13 Frontier Force Rifles on the left, and the Dogras in reserve. The withdrawal of the forward units did not go according to plan as the enemy were by this time already across the road between Kota Bharu and Kubang Kriang, but the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment fought its way through to Kubang Kriang village where, fortunately, it was joined by its commanding officer and many men of the battalion who had been cut off the previous night. Hot on their heels came the enemy and there followed a stiff, confused fight at close quarters. By 11 a.m. the enemy had captured the village and most of our troops withdrew towards Peringhat, four miles farther south. Here they were joined by two companies of the 2/10 Baluch Regiment

withdrawn from the beaches to the south, and the position was stabilized. In the meantime the welcome news had been received at brigade headquarters of the arrival at Kuala Krai of the 4/19 Hyderabad, the battalion which had been sent up from Command Reserve. Orders were sent to this battalion to move up into a position about Ketherah, twelve miles south of Kota Bharu. By 5 p.m. the battalion was in position with good fields of fire across scrub and padi fields. Other troops were withdrawn through it. By nightfall, therefore, the 8th Brigade had been able to pause for breath, take stock of itself and find the state of affairs much less unsatisfactory than it had thought. Many large parties previously missing had rejoined their units, which had been fed, rested, and had fully recovered their spirits. Furthermore the brigade was now comparatively concentrated in favourable country instead of being spread out over great distances of swamp and padi with few communications.

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

The new position was astride the main road with the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment on the right and the 2/10 Baluch on the left, the other two battalions of the 8th Brigade being echeloned back along the road. The demolition of the great Guillemard bridge over the Kelantan River, the longest

railway bridge in Malaya and an engineering showpiece, was ordered.

The time had now come to review the whole question of policy with regard to our Kelantan force. Its task, it will be recalled, had been to protect the three aerodromes in that State for the use of our air force and to deny them to the enemy. Our air force no longer required them, and it was more than doubtful if our small force could prevent the enemy using them though it could certainly be a nuisance value. On the other hand, it was now clear that the enemy's main thrust was going to develop down the west coast, whether with a limited objective or not we could not yet tell, and it seemed probable that we should require all the force we could muster to stop that thrust. It was a problem in which both the Commander-in-Chief and the other Services, as well as the civil administration, were interested, so Heath came down to Singapore on the twelfth for a conference on this subject. The alternatives were either to leave our force in Kelantan to do what it could there or else to withdraw it for employment elsewhere. We were very much influenced by the precarious situation as regards its communications. There was no road behind it between Kuala Krai and Kuala Lipis—only a single line railway which twisted and turned through wild undeveloped country and crossed many rivers and ravines. It only required one of the bridges to be broken by enemy air action or by sabotage and the whole force would have been lost. And the enemy held complete supremacy in the air. The situation was perilous in the extreme. There were other factors to be considered—the possible loss of material and equipment, the effect on morale of a withdrawal and the fact that the enemy's forces in Kelantan would be freed for operations elsewhere—but the overriding considerations were the vulnerability of the communications and the need to concentrate our forces to meet the west coast threat. After full consideration I decided to withdraw the Kelantan force as soon as rolling stock could be made available. The decision was submitted to the Commander-in-Chief the same afternoon and approved by him. Orders were issued immediately and the evacuation of surplus stores started at once. The operation had to be conducted with the utmost secrecy if it was to have any chance of success.

On the twelfth the enemy became very active and attacked in strength, but the 2/10 Baluch Regiment counter-attacked, coming

to close grips with the enemy and inflicting casualties. The enemy was now evidently using fresh troops and a prisoner taken on this occasion stated that his unit had marched the twenty-six miles from Kota Bharu and gone straight into action for the first time. On the following day the 2/10 Baluch Regiment again inflicted casualties on the enemy who were trying to advance round their flank.

During the next few days the withdrawal continued systematically, the enemy being made to fight for each position, with comparatively little loss to the defenders. By the sixteenth all surplus stores and equipment had been evacuated and the withdrawal of the troops by rail began. The 4/19 Hyderabad were the first to leave to rejoin their brigade which, as has been stated, had been moved up to the help of the 11th Indian Division. On the nineteenth the railhead at Kuala Krai was evacuated. The rearmost troops withdrew from Kuala Krai on foot as the large railway bridges south of that place had by then been destroyed. Practically all the stores and all the vehicles, except about eighty, for which no railway flats were available, were successfully evacuated. A rear-guard under Lt.-Col. McKellar, known as Macforce, was left behind to watch the railway and prevent the repair of the bridges. It included troops of the Pahang Volunteers and of the Malay Regiment and carried out its duties most efficiently. On completion of its withdrawal on 22 December, the 8th Indian Brigade concentrated in the Kuala Lipis-Jerantut area, except for the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment, which rejoined its own brigade at Kuantan.

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

It was as well that we succeeded in extricating our force from its perilous position in Kelantan, for the situation on the west coast soon began to cause us the greatest possible concern. When dawn broke after the battle of Jitra there were only three companies on the south bank of the Kedah River with one company watching the right flank at Langgar, four miles east of Alor Star. During the next two or three hours other troops came in but they were weary in the extreme and the situation remained what is usually officially called "confused". The Japanese themselves did their utmost to keep it so. During the morning Murray Lyon was himself standing on the bridge south of Alor Star with his C.R.E. watching the troops come across when a motor cyclist followed by two more emerged from the town and approached the bridge passing some of our vehicles as he did so. As he accelerated past the General he waved and laughed at him. The General himself was the first to exclaim, "My God, that's a Jap", and he and his companions were quick enough to account for the remaining two motor cyclists, but the leader continued on his course. Farther south there was much sniping by Japanese troops in Malay dress, several of whom were killed. These were bold tactics and they had their effect, for bridges were blown with some of our troops and vehicles still on the far side and there were further losses. On the railway a strange thing happened. The demolition of the bridge was ordered but was not an entire success. It sagged in the middle but did not break. It was therefore decided that the armoured train, which had also been left on the wrong side, should add a crowning service to those which it had already rendered and complete the demolition of the bridge, sacrificing itself in the process. Its crew bade it farewell, opened the regulator to set it off towards the bridge, pulled the whistle and jumped off. The whistle jammed and the train, wailing like the lost soul which it was about to become, rumbled on to the bridge and on, over the crack, and still on, to the safety of the south bank with the note of its whistle changing to a shriek of triumph as it continued slowly southward with its crew sprinting after it. They managed to get on board and stop it, and the train continued its career until eventually wrecked by a bomb in Ipoh Station a fortnight later.

In the Alor Star area an intermittent fire fight continued throughout the day, but the Japanese only made one determined

attempt to cross the River Kedah. That was in the afternoon when they succeeded in gaining a temporary footing on the south bank but were driven back by counter-attack. Our troops were clearly in no sort of condition to withstand an attack in strength, so after darkness fell they were withdrawn to the Gurun position. At dawn the following morning the remnants of the 6th Indian Brigade were also withdrawn from the intermediate position at Simpang Empat, six miles farther south, and by midday on the fourteenth all our units, or what was left of them, had reached their allotted positions at Gurun. Most of them had had no rest for a week and were to have none now, for the position had to be prepared for defence. As soon as war broke out, orders had been issued for a large civilian working party to be assembled to work on the Gurun position under the supervision of military officers, but no work had been done and there were no labourers there. Whether they had assembled and dispersed or never assembled at all I cannot say as reports on this point are conflicting.

Things were bad enough on the front of the 11th Indian Division but now a very real threat to its communications also developed. Early on the morning of the twelfth (the day of the battle of Jitra) the enemy had again attacked the 3/16 Punjab Regiment on the Kroh front but were driven back. An out-flanking movement, however, forced the Punjabis to withdraw with heavy casualties to one of their forward companies. Eventually this regiment fell back through the 5/14 Punjab Regiment to Kroh. Its strength, including reinforcements, was now about 400. After destroying some bridges on the Grik road it moved into a prepared position two or three miles west of Kroh on the road to Baling, which lies thirty miles east of Sungei Patani, a key point on the communications of the 11th Indian Division. The 5/14 Punjab Regiment with attached troops was left to delay the enemy, which it succeeded in doing for another twenty-four hours, but by dusk on the thirteenth the whole of Krohcol was concentrated in the position west of Kroh. The village of Kroh lies close to the frontier and from it a metalled mountain road runs west into the fertile areas of Province Wellesley and South Kedah. It was to cover this road that the defensive position had been prepared. Another metalled road, however, ran south for five miles to Klian Intan where, for twenty miles, it became an unmetalled rough mountain road until it rejoined the metalled

road at Grik, which joins that place with Kuala Kangsar on the main west coast highway. The road north of Grik was little used in peace-time and special reconnaissances had reported that it was passable only for light M.T. in dry weather. This road, whatever its capacity, now lay open to the enemy and, taking the long-term view, constituted an even more serious threat than the more direct road into Province Wellesley to the whole structure of our defence of North Malaya. Fortunately the 12th Indian Brigade Group was now beginning to arrive and a company of the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders with some armoured cars of the Federated Malay States Volunteers was immediately sent to Grik to block this road. This detachment, small as it was, was soon to play a heroic part in the grim struggle to avoid the Japanese pincers.

To relieve the commander of the 11th Indian Division of some of his responsibility, the 3rd Indian Corps took over direct responsibility for the Kroh front at midnight on 12-13 December, and the following night Heath himself moved up with advanced headquarters to Bukit Mertajam in Province Wellesley, which had been selected and prepared for this purpose in pre-war days. At midday on the fourteenth, Paris, the commander of the 12th Indian Brigade Group, took over command of Krohcol and moved it to Baling where it was absorbed into his force.

It was in this very critical situation that the policy as regards Penang had to be considered. As previously stated, the island of Penang had, since 1936, officially been a fortress. In fact, in December 1941, it was very far from being one. Of the fixed defences which had been approved for it only the two 6-inch batteries with their attendant searchlights had been installed. They were sited to cover the approaches to the anchorage, which lies between Penang and the mainland, from the north and from the south. None of the anti-aircraft defences had arrived. For the beach defence of this island, which is fifteen miles long by ten miles wide, there was only the partially trained Penang and Province Wellesley battalion (less one company) of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force, although two regular battalions had been asked for. Other troops on the island included the 1st Independent Company, a company of the 5/14 Punjab Regiment, a mixed reinforcement camp and some administrative detachments. The civil airport was too small for normal R.A.F. requirements.

The only fighter defence was provided by five Buffaloes which were able to operate for one day only from the Butterworth aerodrome on the mainland. The effect of the first bombing of Georgetown has already been seen. On the twelfth, at a meeting between the Fortress Commander (Brigadier Lyon) and the Resident Counsellor (Mr. Forbes), it was decided to evacuate on the following night all European Service families and such sick and wounded as could be moved from the military hospital. The Resident Counsellor was also asked to arrange for the evacuation of all civilian European women and children. This decision was taken as a normal measure to evacuate *bouches inutiles*. On the thirteenth, fifty naval ratings, survivors from the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, arrived to operate the ferries, the crews of which had disappeared. On the fourteenth the municipal commissioners of Georgetown presented a memorandum to the Fortress Commander stating that the civil administration had broken down and pointing out the dangers which might result from the fouling of the water and the collapse of the sanitary and conservancy services.

The original object of defending the island of Penang was to secure the anchorage against sea and air attack. In the event of our troops on the mainland being driven back, it had been my intention that they should fall back on the axis of the west coast communications, throwing into Penang two additional infantry battalions with supporting troops, and that we should then endeavour to hold Penang. But that plan did not contemplate the critical situation which had now developed on the mainland. There was no question of transferring any troops to Penang. On the contrary, every single man we could lay hands on was required on the mainland to avert the disaster which threatened. For if the 11th Indian Division, which was already in a state of great disorder, could not be saved and if the double threat which had developed from the Kroh front could not be averted, the road to the south would lie open to the Japanese. That would mean that the troops of the 9th Indian Division on the east coast would in their turn be cut off and the Japanese would have an uninterrupted advance until they came to Johore. Moreover, all the aerodromes in Central Malaya would fall into their hands. The time had obviously come to reconsider our whole policy towards Penang. The matter was of such importance that I brought it before the

Far East War Council on the morning of 14 December. The pros and cons were discussed and carefully considered. Admiral Layton, who had succeeded Admiral Phillips as Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet, said that the anchorage at Penang was no longer of any value to the Navy. It was decided that our ability to hold Penang must depend upon the result of the battle on the mainland; that it would be bad tactics to split our forces; and that we ought to concentrate upon trying to avoid the calamity which threatened us on the mainland. The bad moral effect of evacuating Penang was realized, but we felt that it had to give place to military necessity. In accordance with this decision, I dispatched a telegram to Heath, within the area of whose command Penang lay, authorizing him to make use of such part of the garrison of Penang as could be made available to take part in the Kedah operations. He was also informed that, should it become impossible to cover Penang from the mainland, the policy would be to evacuate the island removing by sea the garrison and such essential stores as might be found possible and to destroy the remainder. Instructions on similar lines were issued by the Governor to the Resident Counsellor Penang.

Let us return now to the fortunes of the 11th Indian Division at Gurun. The position selected was astride the main trunk road and railway about three miles north of the village of Gurun. On the west of the road is the steep rocky feature known as Kedah Peak, which rises almost sheer from the plain to a height of 4,000 feet and dominates the surrounding country. On the east of the road and extending away to the south are numerous rubber estates with their network of estate roads. Parallel to the front of the position ran a lateral road from Yen on the coast to Kg. Kubar crossing the main road at Guar Chempadek. This position was occupied with the 28th Indian Brigade on the right and the 6th Indian Brigade on the left. The latter was responsible for the vital railway and road sectors of the front. In reserve was the depleted 15th Indian Brigade. But there was little time to settle into this position. As already related, our last troops had only reached it at midday on the fourteenth and by 3 p.m. the enemy, who had followed up quickly in M.T., were already attacking our forward localities. The attack started with an air bombardment of the Guar Chempadek cross-roads under cover of which

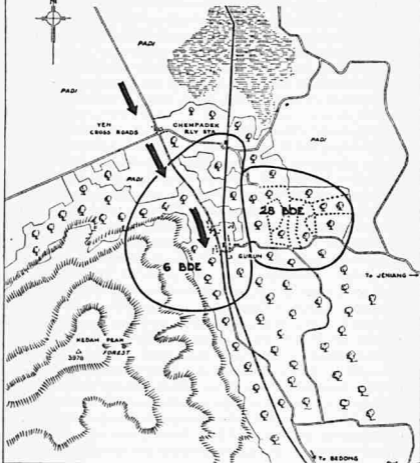
lorry-borne infantry advanced supported by tanks. The position at the cross-roads was lost but later recaptured by a spirited counter-attack led by Brigadier Lay in person, and orders were issued for the cross-roads to be reoccupied in strength during the night. The enemy, however, anticipated this move. Pushing boldly down the main road under cover of darkness, his troops penetrated deep into our positions. There were many local encounters between parties of the two sides which met as they moved about during the night and at 7 a.m. the headquarters of the 6th Indian Brigade itself was attacked. With little warning it was rushed and overwhelmed by a strong force of the enemy. The brigade major, staff captain, signalling officer, and many others were killed. Only the brigadier himself and one or two men survived. The main road and the country to the west of it lay wide open.

On the front of the 28th Indian Brigade there had been little activity during the night and at dawn on the fifteenth it was still holding its positions, as also was the right flank of the 6th Indian Brigade on the railway. Some troops of the 28th Brigade were now ordered to operate against the flank of the Japanese force advancing down the main road while others were ordered to Gurun to block their advance. While these moves were in progress Murray Lyon himself arrived at Gurun to see what was happening. He quickly took in the danger of the situation and ordered an immediate withdrawal behind the Sungei Lalang, seven miles south of Gurun and five miles north of Sungei Patani, where the 1st Independent Company from Penang was already in position. Later in the morning, on return to his own headquarters where the three infantry brigadiers and the C.R.A. were assembled, he decided to withdraw that night behind the River Muda, which forms the boundary between Kedah and Province Wellesley. The main road bridge and the ferry crossing at Kota to the west of it were to be held by the Independent Company and by a squadron of the 3rd Cavalry, both recently transferred to the mainland from Penang and the only fresh troops available. It was a sorry plan but the best that could be done. Except for one dauntless but tired brigade the division had little fight left in it. There was much to be done. Transport and bivouac arrangements had to be made, large supply and ammunition dumps at Sungei Patani had to be cleared or destroyed,

GURUN AREA



- RAILWAY
- MAIN ROADS
- ESTATE ROADS
- RUBBER & TREE CULTIVATION
- SWAMP
- BRITISH BRIGADE BOUNDARIES
- JAPANESE ADVANCE



further demolitions had to be prepared and aerodrome defence troops at the South Kedah aerodromes had to be withdrawn. During the morning the R.A.F. had evacuated Butterworth aerodrome also. It had been heavily and consistently raided during the week, during which the Japanese air arm had concentrated almost exclusively on knocking out the R.A.F. on its northern aerodromes. Many of our aircraft had been destroyed on the ground. Here, as elsewhere, the manner of evacuation was not beyond reproach. Throughout the campaign the air force pilots and air crews, battling against heavy odds with inferior material, lived up to the highest traditions of their Service. The ground staffs, however, many of whom had been in the Service but a short time and had absorbed but the rudiments of true discipline, suffered much under pressure from lack of training and of tradition. It was ever so. You cannot throw raw, untried troops into the turmoil of battle and expect to get the best out of them.

Much of the credit for averting a catastrophe must be accorded to two companies of the 2nd East Surreys and to Lt.-Col. Selby's 2/9 Gurkha Rifles which, between them, held at arm's length an enemy thrust which might otherwise have swept on and annihilated the disorganized remnants of the division in rear. One company of the Gurkha Rifles held on so long that it was eventually cut off and had to take to the wooded country. It rejoined its battalion four days later with all the men but two, still in possession of their arms.

For the chaos and failure of these two days lack of communication between divisional headquarters and forward troops was largely responsible. There was no time to lay out a proper system and reliance had to be placed largely on civil lines. These usually followed the railway and often when railway bridges were blown the communication system went with them. The rapidity of the withdrawal succeeded in breaking contact with the enemy but at an enormous price. The remnants of the 11th Indian Division were collected between the River Muda and Bukit Mertajam, tired out, dirty and dispirited with their few remaining weapons clogged with mud and rust. Many had been without sleep for seven nights or longer and many without food. Some had been lucky and found stocks of food in the coolie lines of abandoned rubber estates; some had been fed by villagers; few by the normal supply system. There had been crippling losses in men, guns,

ammunition, small arms, equipment, transport, and supplies. And this was the division which was to pull itself together somehow and go on fighting for another desperate month before it first sighted relief.

It was in these circumstances that the final decision to evacuate Penang was taken by Heath. Most of the combatant troops had already been transferred to the mainland. There was no air defence whatever for the island and only a tiny garrison left. There was little chance of holding it for more than a few days and, unlike Tobruk, it did not constitute any real threat to the enemy's advance. It was better to take away all who might be of any further use for the prosecution of the war and to destroy as much as possible of the material that could not be removed. At 11 a.m. on the fifteenth, Heath issued orders to Lyon, the Fortress Commander, for the evacuation to be completed by the night 16-17 December. The success of the evacuation depended upon strict secrecy until the last possible moment. Before then much had to be done. Troops had to be collected from all over the island. Arrangements had to be made for the destruction of such installations as the cable and wireless stations, international cable terminals, oil installations, dock facilities, the aerodrome, shipping, the fixed defences, and large stocks of ammunition and other war equipment. Time and the supply of explosives were both inadequate to complete the destruction, but the amount achieved reflects the greatest credit on Lyon's foresight and powers of organization. The most serious failures were the Penang broadcasting station of the British Malayan Broadcasting Corporation, which within a few days was pouring forth a foul stream of lies and anti-British abuse, and a number of small vessels and barges in the harbour which were neither removed nor scuttled. The latter was probably due, at least in part, to the masters and crews having disappeared. The Japanese later made great use of them in developing their threats to our communications from the west coast. When the omission was discovered a destroyer was sent by night to mine the southern exit from the harbour but this could not have been entirely successful. Shipping for the evacuation had to be found locally and was strictly limited. The remaining troops and all Europeans, except a few who remained behind at their own request, were evacuated. Asiatics serving in the Volunteers were given the option of being evacuated

or of staying. The majority decided to stay to protect their families. Lack of transport would have made it quite out of the question to evacuate large numbers of Asiatics. Moreover it was undesirable at that stage to increase the population of Singapore. Except as regards those who wished to take an active part in the war and those who were in real danger from the Japanese, it was better in Penang as on the mainland that the Asiatics should remain in their homes.

The hurried withdrawal of the 11th Indian Division had now exposed the rear of the 12th Indian Brigade Group which had absorbed Krohcol and was now in the Baling area, so to fill the gap between these two formations the 5/2 Punjab Regiment of the 12th Brigade was sent to watch the River Muda in the Merbau Pulas area. Here, early on the sixteenth, the sentry on the Batu Pekaka bridge, which had been partly demolished, was hailed by a civilian, in appearance a British planter. Covering him with his tommy gun the sentry signalled him over. As he reached the sentry the man sprang at him and grappled with him. But the Punjabi was alert and a few seconds later a plucky German lay dead on the bank. Throughout the rest of the day the 5/2 Punjabis were engaged at this bridge repulsing repeated Japanese attacks.

On the morning of the sixteenth, Heath visited Murray Lyon and decided to withdraw the 11th Indian Division behind the River Krian, the southern boundary of Province Wellesley, where the swampy ground combines with the river to form a good natural obstacle. The 28th Indian Brigade was to withdraw at once and the remainder next day. The 28th Brigade arrived at Nibong Tebal, where the main road and railway cross the river side by side, in the early hours of the seventeenth and relieved men of the 3rd Mixed Reinforcement Camp who had been hurried there from Penang. Fifteen miles to their right, at the crossing at Selama, were the 3/16 Punjab Regiment and the 10th Mountain Battery which had been sent there on withdrawal from Kroh. The withdrawal of the remainder of the division, including the rearguard from the River Muda, and of advanced headquarters 3rd Indian Corps from Bukit Mertajam, was carried out by daylight on the seventeenth. The division concentrated in the Taiping area covered by the troops on the Krian River line. The 12th Brigade Group fought a rearguard action from the Titi Karang area, to which it had been withdrawn from Baling, to the Selama

area. By the eighteenth all troops were south of the River Krian and at last there was a little respite for these harassed weary men.

It was not long, however, before a new threat developed. On the Grik road contact had been made a little north of Grik on the night 16-17 December. Our small force was hard pressed on the seventeenth and fell back to the area south of Sumpitan. Here it was reinforced by two platoons of the 1st (Perak) Battalion of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force. It now became clear that the enemy had directed the main body of his Patani force down this road, difficult as it was for wheeled transport, and was endeavouring to cut off the 11th Indian Division by reaching the main road at Kuala Kangsar. Indeed, reports from Japanese sources have subsequently indicated that this was a strong attack and that their grand strategy was to cut off and annihilate the whole of the troops in Kedah and Province Wellesley.

Chapter XI

OPERATIONS IN NORTH PERAK

It was necessary now to review the results of the first ten days' fighting. At sea the Japanese navy had obtained undisputed control of the waters east of Malaya though it had as yet made no attempt to interfere with our communications either to the south or to the east by naval or air action. Even the submarines of the Royal Dutch Navy, which during the first few days had operated so successfully in the waters east of Malaya, had by now almost been wiped out. The main concern of the Japanese Air Force was obviously to confirm and extend the superiority which it had already established. Most of its attacks, therefore, were still directed against our aerodromes. The strength of our air force, including Dutch reinforcements, was now only a little over a hundred. The Japanese probably outnumbered us by about four to one while their aircraft were technically superior to ours. As regards the army, our strength on the west coast, apart from the volunteer units, was now barely one division. Owing to the difficulties of air reconnaissance it was impossible at the time to know at all accurately what strength we had against us. We thought we had roughly one division based on Singora and one on Patani with a third division in Kelantan. Actually it appears that the Japanese made their initial landings with two divisions, or perhaps a little more, and one tank regiment. Of these most of the 5th Division, which was one of their crack divisions and had been specially trained in amphibious operations, landed at Singora. In addition, about the middle of December a division of the Japanese Imperial Guards arrived in South Thailand by train from the north and started to move down in support of the forward troops while a second tank regiment arrived in December or early January. The strength of these Japanese divisions could be put at about 20,000 each and of a tank regiment at about 150 tanks. We had no tanks, a situation which caused us much embarrassment when considering the tactics to be adopted. In addition to their actual formations it is probable that the Japanese also held strong reinforcements at their base camps, for throughout

the campaign they kept the same formations in the front line for prolonged periods and always seemed able to fill them up with fresh troops. Another factor which had to be taken into consideration was the condition of the troops of the 11th Indian Division. Though their morale was by no means broken, they were undoubtedly very exhausted by almost continuous fighting and movement both by day and by night. Moreover, it is not too much to say that the Indian troops in particular were dismayed to find the British so outclassed in the two essentials of modern war—aircraft and tanks. As regards the enemy's strategy, it was now pretty clear that he intended to continue his advance down the west coast with a view to attacking Singapore from the north. Combined with this, his naval and air superiority made it possible for him to land a force on any part of the east coast with a view to attacking our communications or even to attack Singapore Island itself. It was not at all an enviable position in which we found ourselves. We could not risk denuding our already weak garrisons of Singapore and Johore any further, for a successful enemy attack there would have broken the whole fabric of our defence. There were some who thought that we ought to withdraw all our forces at once from North and Central Malaya and concentrate in Johore. This view was held by some of the commanders in the forward area who, having seen the aerodromes which they had been told to protect evacuated, perhaps quite naturally began to wonder what their future role really was. Looked at purely from the point of view of the land operations there was much to be said for this point of view, but it failed to take account of the long-term strategy. Our task was still the protection of the Singapore Naval Base, and if we had withdrawn our forces to Johore at that stage we should have allowed the enemy to establish their superior air force within close striking distance of that establishment. Moreover, it would have been able to reach out and attack our convoys bringing reinforcements to Singapore. We knew that every endeavour would be made to send reinforcements to Malaya but we also knew that no reinforcements could arrive before some time in the first half of January. Yet it had already become abundantly clear that our only hope of turning the tables on the enemy was to get these reinforcements in safely. This applied both to reinforcements for the air force and for the army. Already by seizing the aerodrome at Victoria

Point in South Burma the enemy had made it impossible for fighter reinforcements to fly to Malaya and even the longer-range aircraft had to come via Sabang, the island off the northern tip of Sumatra. Fighters either had to come crated by sea or else be flown off carriers. I held the view that the first step towards recovery of any sort was to regain control of the air and that this could only be done by bringing in more fighters. I was prepared to make almost any sacrifice to get these fighters in safely and to get them into the air. As regards the latter, it was clear that we should in the future have to rely on aerodromes in Johore and on Singapore Island and the existing ones were already becoming very congested. There was urgent need to increase the ground facilities, but there was no time to make big aerodromes. So the A.O.C. started on a programme of building a series of air strips and I promised him all the help I could. I agreed in fact to give him priority for such civilian labour as he required. This was later to cause us much embarrassment but I never departed from the agreement. To ensure the safe arrival of the convoys, fighters would also be required to protect them during the last stage of their journey to Singapore, and I agreed to give this priority over other requirements. It was the old story—there weren't enough fighters to go round and the forward areas were left desperately short.

I have said that our task was still to ensure the security of the Singapore Naval Base. This was confirmed about this time by the Chiefs of Staff in a telegram in which they emphasized that no other consideration must be allowed to compete with this. On 18 December, in accordance with a proposal made by President Roosevelt, an inter-Allied conference took place at Singapore. The conference decided that the immediate plan should be to dispose our combined forces then available in the Far East so as to:

- (a) Keep the enemy as far north in Malaya as possible and hold him in the Philippines, and
- (b) Prevent the enemy acquiring territory, and particularly aerodromes, which would threaten the arrival of reinforcements.

The conference also recorded its opinion that our urgent and immediate need was for reinforcements which must be on a scale,

not only to meet the present scale of attack, but also that likely to be put into the field against us.

On 17 December I decided to go to Ipoh, an important road and rail centre in the State of Perak, to discuss the situation with Heath. Before I left Singapore, Heath rang me up on the telephone and said he was very anxious about his troops on the Krian River in view of the situation which was developing on the Grik road. He asked for permission to withdraw his whole force behind the River Perak—one of the largest rivers in Malaya. I told him that he could do this if he really thought it absolutely necessary. Although the River Perak is a very fine natural obstacle, it has distinct limitations as a defensive position because the road and rail communications in Central Perak run roughly parallel to it for a distance of about seventy miles which makes the lines of communications very vulnerable.

On arrival at Ipoh about midday on the eighteenth I found that orders had already been issued for the withdrawal behind the River Perak but no movement had yet taken place. The situation on the front was slightly better. There had been no fighting on the Krian River line and the 1st Independent Company had already been dispatched to Lenggong on the Grik road to help to stabilize that front. Moreover, the 12th Indian Brigade Group was moving back into reserve at Kuala Kangsar. In view of my instructions I wanted to impose all the delay we possibly could on the enemy, and it seemed a pity not to take advantage of the good ground west of the River Perak. On the Grik road, which was now the dangerous front, the enemy were still nearly forty miles from the main road at Kuala Kangsar, and there seemed no reason why in that close country we could not hold them up for several more days. Heath agreed with this view and that afternoon he sent out a fresh instruction to the effect that, while adhering to the general policy of withdrawal behind the River Perak, the enemy would be held west of the river as long as possible without permitting our forces to become inextricably committed. Heath and I then went off for a reconnaissance of the River Perak, a fast-flowing river about a quarter of a mile wide in most parts. We looked particularly at the Blanja bridge, the first crossing south of the main road and some twenty miles from it. This bridge, which was constructed of pontoons, was likely to become a vital point

when our withdrawal started. Between it and Kuala Kangsar on the main road a good secondary road ran parallel to the river on the west side, but there was no road on the east side. This we thought would be a weakness as far as defence was concerned because it would give the enemy easy access to the river while at the same time making it very difficult for us to watch it. From there we went north to Kuala Kangsar, where we met several units which had just come back from the fighting farther north. Most of them were in good heart though badly in need of rest. The great Iskandar bridge north of Kuala Kangsar, by which the main road crosses the River Perak, was being prepared for destruction. It was one of the finest bridges in Malaya and it seemed terrible that it should have to be destroyed when it had, comparatively recently, been built at such great cost. We got back to Ipoh late at night and talked at length in the special train in which Heath had established his headquarters. It was quite comfortable that night but became the centre of an air attack the next day and had most of its windows broken. I left for the south again the following morning.

During the visit I discussed many matters with Heath. It was obvious that both the 6th and the 15th Indian Brigades were unfit for the battle until they had been rested, reorganized, and re-equipped. These brigades were in the process of concentrating in the Ipoh area and were both very weak. We decided that the only thing to do was to amalgamate them into one brigade which was to be known as the 6/15 Indian Infantry Brigade. This was to be done by amalgamating battalions which had similar characteristics, i.e. the two battalions of the 16th Punjab Regiment became one, the two British battalions (the Leicesters and the East Surreys) were joined and became known as the "British Battalion", and so on. All this was done in the space of a few days and the success of the scheme, at least in most cases, says much for the co-operative spirit of all concerned. Indeed the British battalion, which was to distinguish itself greatly during the remainder of the campaign, has without doubt formed a perpetual link between the two famous regiments from which it was formed.

All other units had to be re-equipped as far as our slender resources would permit, but we were already getting short of arms and equipment and we could not make good all the deficiencies.

For the rest of the campaign there was always a shortage of light automatics and of anti-tank rifles.

The question of formation commanders also had to be considered. All the brigade commanders of the 11th Indian Division were now in hospital. The command of the 6/15 Brigade was given to Lt.-Col. Moorhead, who had distinguished himself as a tactician and leader on the Kroh road. The 28th Brigade was already being commanded by Lt.-Col. Selby of the 2/9 Gurkha Rifles, and it was decided to leave him in that appointment, which he filled with great success for the remainder of the campaign. Then there was the question of the divisional commander. It was already apparent that the Japanese troops were, taken as a whole, much more skilful in the tactics of bush warfare than were our own troops. I felt that an officer with the widest possible experience of bush warfare was required to lead the 11th Indian Division in future and suggested that Brigadier Paris, the commander of the 12th Indian Brigade, should succeed Murray Lyon who, though undoubtedly a brave and tireless leader, had had limited experience in that particular type of warfare. Paris, a senior and most experienced officer, had been in Malaya for two and a half years and commanded what was probably at that time the best trained brigade in the country. Heath agreed to this change which took place a few days later. That left vacant the command of the 12th Indian Brigade, which was given to Lt.-Col. Stewart, of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a fine fighting soldier who had made a special study of bush warfare tactics.

We decided that all troops must be given a minimum period of forty-eight hours' rest as soon as that could be arranged. The only way to do this seemed to be to organize the defence in depth by brigades as soon as the Perak River had been crossed. Owing to the vulnerability of our communications to an attack across that river it did not seem sound to attempt any protracted defence north of Ipoh, even though a withdrawal would expose the rich Kinta Valley tin-mining area which lies immediately south of that town. It was therefore arranged that Heath should select and have prepared a series of positions between Ipoh and Tanjong Malim. In point of fact he accompanied me on my return journey for part of the way and we made a preliminary reconnaissance of some of these positions together. In selecting positions, priority was given to tank obstacles and cover from air in both of which

arms the enemy were well equipped while we were entirely deficient.

To the 9th Indian Division we assigned the task of continuing to deny the Kuantan aerodrome to the enemy and of securing the 11th Indian Division and its communications against attack from the east coast. I conveyed these instructions verbally to Barstow whom I met by arrangement on my way south.

Finally, we felt that the farther and the faster the Japanese advanced south the more vulnerable would their communications become. We knew that the administrative arrangements of the Japanese Army have never been very strong, but I don't think any of us realized fully at that time how very sketchy they in fact were. There were two ways of attacking these communications, one from the sea and the other by land. I had already, when leaving Singapore, left instructions that a special raiding party of fifty picked Australians was to be formed to operate from the sea against the enemy's communications, and the Royal Navy was organizing a west coast flotilla of lightly armed craft which was to be based on Port Swettenham. It was a great pity that we could not make use of the Independent Company which had been specially trained for this sort of work, but it was too badly required at the front at this time to warrant its withdrawal. As regards attacks on the Japanese communications by land, the Gurkhas were selected for this work, for which their characteristics were specially suited, and arrangements made for a special party of these grand little fighters to be trained in guerrilla fighting.

I returned to Singapore on the morning of 20 December and shortly afterwards issued a paper containing information of the Japanese tactics and instructions as to how they should be countered. In this I stressed that the first essential was rigid discipline and absolute steadiness and, secondly, that the enemy's outflanking and infiltration tactics must not lead to withdrawals which should only take place on the order of higher authority. I suggested that the best method of defence might be for a holding group to be dug in astride the main artery of communication with striking forces on the flanks ready to attack as soon as the enemy made contact with the holding group. With a view to trying to curb the many wild rumours which were flying about, aggravated by the difficulty of finding out what really was happening, I ordered that the spreading of rumours and exaggerated

reports of the enemy's efficiency must be rigidly suppressed. I pointed out that in this type of warfare it was generally the efficiency, alertness, and cunning of the individual which counted; that troops must expect to be shot at from unexpected directions and that all must be prepared to hit back; and that we could not defeat the enemy by sitting in prepared positions and letting him walk round us but that we must play him at his own game and attack him on every possible occasion. I believe that these instructions were fundamentally sound. There was no lack of offensive spirit among the troops, but though the spirit was willing the flesh very often was weak, and it was the utter weariness which overcame most of the troops during the campaign rather than any defence complex which made it so difficult for commanders to organize attacks.

If my readers will turn for a moment to the map of Malaya they will see that there is only one road in the centre of the country which joins the west coast area with the east. This road runs from Kuala Kubu (north of Kuala Lumpur) via Raub to Jerantut and thence to Kuantan. This lateral road was now assuming great importance, for if our forces on the west coast were driven back beyond Kuala Kubu the enemy would be in a position, if they could capture Raub, to cut the only road communication of our forces on the east coast. This situation caused me to review the whole question of our policy as regards the Kuantan garrison. I discussed the problem with the Commander-in-Chief Far East and the Air Officer Commanding, and it was agreed as a general policy that we should withdraw the Kuantan garrison at a time to be decided later in accordance with the development of the situation.

Let us return now to the battle-front and first see how things were going on the Grik road. The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the first battalion of the 12th Indian Brigade to reach Kuala Kangsar, had been ordered to move up this road at dawn on the nineteenth, after a short night's rest, and Lt.-Col. Stewart, their commanding officer, going on in advance reached Lenggong, thirty miles north of Kuala Kangsar, early that day. The Japanese were then in Sumpitan, a large village four miles farther north, and Stewart ordered the Independent Company to move forward immediately and recapture it. The attack was carried out

by this small unit with fine spirit and after a sharp and gallant action it captured the village but later, in face of a counter-attack and shortage of ammunition, it was ordered to withdraw. The Argylls and a battery of artillery had now come up, and that night the forward troops took up position at Lenggong with a company of the 5/2 Punjab Regiment watching their rear at Kota Tampan, where the Perak River approaches the road. It was as well that this company had been posted here for late the next day a body of Japanese infantry, exercising as usual much initiative, came down the river on rafts and attacked the right of the company. In the meantime, the Argylls had been heavily engaged all day at Lenggong and in the evening had to send back a strong detachment to clear their communications. By the twenty-first the Argylls had concentrated again in the Kota Tampan area, where they held off renewed enemy attacks while the 5/2 Punjab Regiment occupied positions west of Chenderoh Lake. This large lake, which measures several miles both in length and in breadth, is situated just east of the Grik road and on its southern shore is the great Perak hydro-electric power station which supplies the State of Perak with electric current. The Japanese now began to exploit this lake and several rafts laden with soldiers were sunk. It was difficult, however, to prevent this movement at night and the approach through the lake gave the Japanese the opportunity of by-passing Kuala Kangsar and of threatening the main road and railway bridges over the River Perak and the communications east of them. Fortunately, the 4/19 Hyderabad Regiment, which, it will be remembered, had been withdrawn from Kelantan, now came on the scene and was concentrated east of the River Perak to meet this threat. But the enemy was now only some twelve miles from Lawin, where the Grik road joins the trunk road west of Kuala Kangsar. The small force which had been opposing them on this road for the last week had done its duty gallantly but with considerable loss, and the situation now clearly demanded the speedy withdrawal of the 28th Brigade Group before it could be cut off in its positions north of Taiping.

On 19 and 20 December there had been some activity on the right of the extensive Krian River position and, to avoid being outflanked, the 28th Brigade Group had fallen back to more concentrated positions at Ulu Sapetang and Bagan Serai after destroying the bridges over the Krian River. But the situation

was still a delicate one. These troops were forty miles west of the vital road junction at Lawin, whereas the Japanese on the Grik road were, as we have seen, only twelve miles from it. There was also the possibility of a sea-borne landing in the Port Weld area directed at Taiping. Three valuable days had already been gained, but it was clearly high time that our scattered forces got back behind the Perak River, and there is no doubt that Murray Lyon, who now had command of all troops west of the river, was absolutely right when he ordered a general withdrawal to commence on the night 21-22 December. The 28th Brigade Group fell back with its right column on the main road with orders to cover the withdrawal of the 12th Brigade Group across the Iskandar bridge and with its left column directed on to the Blanja pontoon bridge. The reader may wonder how it was possible for infantry to cover such great distances in such a short time. The answer is that it was frequently possible throughout the campaign, by the use of troop-carrying transport and requisitioned civilian vehicles, to make the weak infantry brigade groups or even larger formations fully mobile. On the afternoon of the twenty-second the 5/2 Punjab Regiment on the Grik road repulsed a determined enemy attack and inflicted heavy casualties in two well-laid ambushes, but this was the last fighting west of the Perak River. During the night 22-23 December, all troops, except for a bridgehead at Blanja, were successfully withdrawn across the river. The Blanja bridgehead was withdrawn the following night. A gap was successfully blown in the Iskandar bridge. At Blanja a portion of the pontoon bridge was swung to the eastern side and the pontoons sunk.

In sixteen days the Japanese had succeeded in capturing the whole of that part of Malaya which lies north and west of the Perak River, including the island of Penang, and also the State of Kelantan. The undefended State of Trengganu lay open to them. They had also sunk two capital ships and decimated the offensive strength of our air force, which had been driven off the northern aerodromes into which so much money and labour had been poured. There is no denying that those were remarkable achievements. Yet they were not nearly so remarkable as had been planned and the Japanese were already well behind their programme. For we now know that their grand strategy was to cut off and destroy the whole of our forces in Kedah by a rapid

thrust from Patani via Kroh to cut the west coast communications west of the Perak River and that they hoped to reach the line of that river in two days. Had they done so, not only would our land communications to North Malaya have been severed but the whole structure of our defence would have been undermined. The road to the south would have lain wide open and the communications to our east coast forces would have been exposed. As a result of all this hard fighting and of these desperate situations we still had a force with which to oppose the enemy on the line of the Perak River. That was no mean achievement.

South of Ipoh in the Kinta Valley lies one of the most productive tin-mining areas in the world. Here much of the country has been cleared and, though the ground is broken and intersected with water-courses, it is in general more open than most parts of Malaya. In consequence, it is better suited to artillery action, an arm in which we had definite superiority. Twenty miles south of Ipoh the main road and railway and the surrounding country are dominated by a rocky bastion in the township of Kampar, which rises precipitately from the plain to a height of 4,000 feet. Here a position was selected where it was hoped that it would be possible to make a protracted stand and it was rapidly being put into a state of defence. Other positions farther back were selected in the Tapah, Bidor, and Slim River areas, and finally one north of Tanjong Malim to cover the important Kuala Kubu road junction. The plan was for the reorganized 6th/15th Indian Brigade Group, which had now been partly, though far from completely, re-equipped, to occupy the Kampar position while the 12th and 28th Indian Brigades fought delaying actions on the main road north of Ipoh and on the Blanja front respectively. This they succeeded in doing with much success. On 26 and 27 December, the 12th Brigade Group was heavily engaged in the Chemor area (ten miles north of Ipoh), where it succeeded in inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy whose units moved forward in close formation. By the twenty-sixth all troops in Ipoh had moved south and as much as possible of the military stores had been evacuated. Some it had been necessary to destroy. Among the last to leave their posts were the Chinese and Eurasian girl operators of the telephone exchange who were handling military traffic and who continued to do so in the face of bombing and the approach of the enemy until ordered to leave. All honour to them. On the left

flank, where our forward troops had fallen back from the line of the Perak River to Siputeh, there had been no contact except by fighting patrols. The 12th Indian Brigade on the main road front, however, had now been in action continuously for twelve days. The men had fought well and knew it, and their morale was unbroken, but their condition was like that of troops who have had twelve strenuous days of manœuvres under foul conditions. Tired troops against fresh troops inspired by success and capable of exploiting to the full the mobility conferred on them by their ability to live on the country, to eat its rice and to move on its cycles; fighting blind against an enemy in possession of detailed information of our strengths, movements, and dispositions and enjoying also the advantages of freedom of the seas and supremacy in the air. That was the picture. I had issued instructions that the 3rd Indian Corps, while imposing the maximum delay on the enemy, must remain in being as a fighting formation, for I had no reserves with which to replace it. It was vital that the 11th Indian Division should not be sacrificed, and Paris, who had now taken over command, quite properly decided to fall back behind Ipoh on the night 27-28 December. The withdrawal of the 12th and 28th Brigades was timed to begin at 7 p.m. It was a complicated move as transport was insufficient for a single lift and the routes of the two brigades converged in an awkward bottleneck at Senlu. It proceeded, however, without a hitch. And so Ipoh went to the enemy.

The 28th Indian Brigade moved into its allotted position on the right flank of the Kampar position while Stewart, now commanding the 12th Indian Brigade, was given the task of delaying the enemy's approach to the main position held by the 6th/15th Brigade with freedom of action north of Kuala Dipang. It was hoped that the delay would last for three days, but early on the twenty-ninth the Brigade Group was again in contact with the enemy. The attack was repulsed but, realizing that the enemy was now in strength, the divisional commander ordered the brigade to withdraw that evening through the Kampar position and to come into reserve at Bidor. The enemy followed up closely and again tanks produced a demoralizing effect on tired troops, but the situation was saved by the Argyll armoured cars and carriers. Eventually the Kampar River was crossed and, after several abortive attempts, the large bridge over it was blown.

Actually this demolition was not of great moment for, as so often happens with the Malayan rivers which rise and fall rapidly, it was found shortly afterwards that the river was fordable for all arms.

The 12th Brigade Group went to Bidor that night. It had had a gruelling time for, since the battle of Gurun, it had borne the brunt of the fighting and in its doggedly fought rearguard actions between Batu Pekaka and Selama, on the Grik road and in the Ipoh area, it had gained time for the reorganization of the remainder of the 11th Indian Division and for the occupation of the Kampar position. It had also inflicted delay and heavy casualties on the enemy though it had suffered severely itself. Like many other formations it needed rest and rebuilding but that was not to be.

The long and vulnerable communications south of the 11th Indian Division now began to cause us anxiety, for they could be threatened either from the sea or from the lower reaches of the Perak River. To meet this threat the 1st Independent Company had been sent to the Telok Anson area, a small port near the mouth of the Perak River, from which it sent out distant boat and cycle patrols. It was supported by an infantry battalion at Changkat Jong.

Both sides now tried to make use of the sea off the west coast of Malaya. The Japanese had for years had a fleet of self-propelled craft specially designed for landing operations, and in the middle of December a number of these were landed at Singora and conveyed by road across country to the Kedah coast where they were launched on 22 December. We on our side had no such craft but, as already recorded, a west coast flotilla had been improvised from local craft and an Australian raiding party organized. It was known as Roseforce from the name of the liaison officer seconded to it. It went into action for the first time about Christmas, when after an approach journey and landing by night it ambushed successfully a M.T. column west of the Perak River. Lorries and staff cars containing high-ranking officers were destroyed. This little operation showed the great possibilities of such attacks against the enemy's very vulnerable communications and it was hoped to repeat it on many future occasions. But again it was not to be. Before many days had passed the Japanese Air Force had made it impossible for our small unprotected craft to move in daylight and H.M.S. *Kudat*, the base depot ship for the force, was bombed and sunk in the

harbour of Port Swettenham. The final blow fell on 1 January. Some time before war started in the Far East we had ordered from America five "Eureka" fast coastal vessels which we had contemplated using for this very purpose. They arrived in December and we handed them over to the Royal Navy to man and operate. They left Singapore on the last day of December destined for Port Swettenham to join the west coast flotilla, but when approaching that place early on 1 January they were spotted and attacked by Japanese aircraft. All five vessels were either sunk or driven ashore. It was not long, as will be seen, before the Japanese began to develop their own coastal operations always supported by their aircraft. The outstanding lesson from all these operations round the coasts of Malaya is that supremacy in the air is a prerequisite if they are to be conducted successfully without heavy losses.

In the air the Japanese effort was concentrated chiefly against our aerodromes until 23 December. On that day heavy attacks were made against troops in bivouac areas and on the move. These attacks continued for the rest of the month. Our troops were almost entirely without air support as all the remaining fighters, except a few which operated from Kuala Lumpur, had by now been withdrawn to the Singapore area. Air attacks against the Singapore area were not renewed until 29 December when the first of a succession of night attacks took place. Our own air striking force, which seldom consisted of more than half a dozen machines, carried out night attacks against enemy occupied aerodromes. The Sungei Patani aerodrome, in particular, where over a hundred Japanese aircraft had been located, was attacked on several occasions. In addition, aerial reconnaissances were carried out daily off both the east and west coasts as far as the availability of aircraft permitted.

And so closed in Malaya the momentous year of 1941 in which war had again come to that country after so many years of peace. Before we resume the story of the operations in the New Year, let us digress for a little to see what had been happening in other parts of the far-flung Malaya Command and to consider some of the problems of the civil front which were already beginning to have such an important influence on the development of the campaign.

Chapter XII

OPERATIONS IN BORNEO

ALTHOUGH during the years which preceded the war it had gradually been assumed that the General Officer Commanding Malaya was responsible also for the military defence of British Borneo it had, as has been shown, never been possible through lack of resources to station more than token forces there. It was never in fact considered that these forces would be able to do much more than give time for the all-important oil-fields in East Sarawak and Brunei to be demolished and to force the enemy to deploy a larger force than they otherwise need have done to capture the air landing-ground at Kuching, thereby depriving them at least temporarily of the use of this force for operations elsewhere. In war, the General Officer Commanding Malaya, with no transport aircraft at his disposal, could obviously exercise little control over the operations in British Borneo, and equally the O.C. Troops Sarawak and Brunei would himself have little control over the Miri portion of his force. Kuching and Miri are, as the crow flies, some 400 miles of virgin jungle apart, and the only communication between them was by coastal steamer once a week, the journey in each direction taking thirty-six hours. There were no railways in Sarawak and no roads except in the immediate neighbourhood of the few small towns.

The oil-fields, which were worked by the Sarawak Oil-fields Ltd., were in two groups—the one at Miri in Sarawak, a short distance from the coast up the Miri River, and the other at Seria in Brunei, close to the sea-shore. These groups were thirty-two miles apart. The field at Miri was the older one of the two. From it the oil was pumped to the refinery at Lutong on the coast, from which loading-lines ran out to sea as there were no deep-water wharves at Lutong and no ocean-going vessels could come alongside. The Seria fields were comparatively new and still in the process of development. From it the oil was pumped through pipe-lines to the Lutong refinery. Seria, Miri, and Lutong were connected by a road which, for most of its length, ran either along or close to the beach, but a through journey for M.T. was not

possible owing to river obstacles. The beach itself is practically straight and suitable for the landing of troops. The oil-fields were, therefore, for practical purposes, impossible to defend against a determined attack with the resources at our disposal. All that could be done was to ensure that they would be of little use to the Japanese if they captured them and, in accordance with instructions received from the Home Government in August 1941, a scheme of complete destruction had been drawn up with the object of making it impossible for the enemy to obtain oil from the fields at least for an extended period. The scheme was not to be influenced by any considerations of the eventual recovery of the fields for our own use. A party of civilian experts was flown out from Europe to advise on this scheme. The responsibility for carrying it out devolved upon the Army—no small responsibility in view of the exposed situation of the oil-fields and the great value of their contents to the Japanese if they could capture them intact.

As has already been related, in order to reduce the amount of work which would have to be done if and when the time came, steps were taken late in 1941 to cut down the production of the fields and to ship away the machinery thus rendered surplus. The Miri portion of the fields was closed down completely. At Lutong one of the two refining plants was closed down. At Seria all the flowing wells were closed and cemented up. All surplus machinery was then shipped away. Orders for the final demolition of the oil-fields reached the O.C. Troops Miri and Seria (Major Slatter of the 2/15 Punjab Regiment) on the morning of 8 December. The first step was the wrecking of engines, pumping machinery, and furnaces. The next was the denial of the gas-lift wells at Seria. Then the sea-loading lines were blown up and the various subsidiary plants, laboratories, etc., were laid waste. The programme went to time without a serious hitch and in a manner reflecting the greatest credit on all concerned, and particularly on Major Davis of the 2/15 Punjab Regiment and on the young R.E. officer, Lt. Hancock, upon whom the responsibility for most of the detailed arrangements had devolved. Although the Japanese claimed to be obtaining oil from the fields within a few weeks of occupying them, it could only have been in very small quantities. A long period must have elapsed before the production and export of oil from Miri or Seria reached any figure worth

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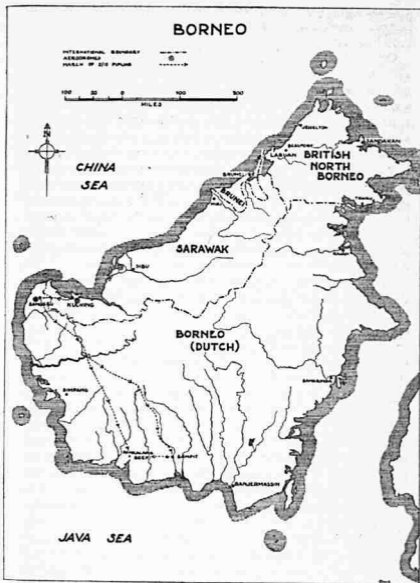
CHINA
SEA

BRITISH
NORTH
BORNEO

SARAWAK

BORNEO
(DUTCH)

JAVA
SEA



considering. The damage done to the Sarawak oil-fields was certainly among the most successful of those organized under the scorched earth policy.

On 13 December, H.M.S. *Lipis* (a former coastal steamer) and one other small steamer arrived at Miri from Kuching to take off the troops. There also arrived in the roads, unnotified, a steamer from Hong Kong with a British captain and a mutinous Chinese crew. A guard was put on this vessel and the three vessels left for Kuching, taking with them the troops, a detachment of Straits Settlements police, which had been sent from Singapore as reinforcements to Brunei, most of the senior officials of Sarawak Oil-fields Ltd., and most of the equipment of the 6-inch battery. At midday on 14 December, H.M.S. *Lipis* was attacked by a single enemy aircraft which was engaged by small arms fire but succeeded in inflicting casualties among the troops. Among the killed was the gallant Major Slatter, who had himself seized a light automatic and was engaging the enemy aircraft from the bridge. There were no other incidents on the voyage and the three ships reached Kuching safely. The 2/15 Punjab company rejoined its battalion; the remainder of the troops and the police returned to Singapore.

The destruction of the oil-fields had been completed not a bit too soon, for at 3.30 a.m. on the sixteenth Japanese troops landed at Seria. From here some of them proceeded by road to Belait and thence to Danau, which they reached on the twenty-second. On the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth, Dutch aircraft attacked Japanese ships lying off Miri.

From 16 December onwards, enemy reconnaissance aircraft were frequently sighted over Kuching. On the nineteenth the town of Kuching itself was attacked from the air with bombs and machine-gun fire, special attention being paid to the Chinese quarter. A general exodus from the town started and continued throughout the next day. By the twenty-third the O.C. Troops reported that there had been a complete break in civil labour. Air attacks were also made on the landing-ground but without much damage being done. Let me repeat here that there were no anti-aircraft defences of any sort, except small arms fire, at Kuching. When London and other British cities were attacked by the Luftwaffe in 1940 there was a considerable exodus to the countryside even though most of our cities had at least some

measure of anti-aircraft defence. It is not for us, therefore, to criticize the people of Kuching for leaving a town which was for all practical purposes defenceless against air attack.

During the twenty-third, reconnaissance aircraft from Singapore sighted a force of nine Japanese warships and transports at sea, evidently heading for Kuching. Although the first sighting was made during the morning it was not until 8.30 p.m., owing to communication difficulties, that the information was received in Kuching. By that time O.P.s north and north-west of Kuching had already reported searchlights to seaward. Before arrival, however, the convoy had been attacked by submarines of the Royal Dutch Navy, who reported having sunk or disabled three transports and one tanker. There is no evidence to show whether this was before or after the sighting by our reconnaissance aircraft referred to above.

Ten minutes later, i.e. at 8.40 p.m., an order from Air Headquarters Far East for the demolition of the landing-ground was received in Kuching. There is no doubt that this came as a great shock to the defenders who had been encouraged by the confident belief that the landing-ground was of strategical importance and who, not unnaturally, believed that our aircraft would be operating from it as soon as Kuching was threatened. The fact, of course, was that there were no aircraft to send there. This unexpected development also had the effect of putting the O.C. Troops (Lt.-Col. Lane) in the same quandary as that in which many other subordinate commanders found themselves during the course of the Malayan campaign. He had been told that his primary object was to secure the air landing-ground for the use of our air force and to deny it to the enemy, but it was now quite clear to him that our air force was no longer in a position to use it and, once it had been demolished, there seemed no point in denying it any longer to the enemy. At that time we in Singapore were only just beginning to realize that it was not possible to deny the use of an aerodrome to the enemy by demolitions for more than a few days and Lane no doubt thought, as we had done, that the Kuching landing-ground, once demolished, would be useless for a very considerable time. In the instructions issued to him Lane had further been told that if, owing to the enemy's strength, his primary object could no longer be attained, then he should act in the interests of the defence of West Borneo as a

whole, his line of withdrawal being by the bush track into Dutch West Borneo. It is necessary here to explain what was in my mind when these instructions were issued. As British and Dutch air plans had become more closely co-ordinated, it had been decided that Singkawang II should become the principal Anglo-Dutch air base in West Borneo. This aerodrome was situated, not at Singkawang which is on the coast of Dutch West Borneo, but at Sanggau, sixty miles inland and about thirty miles from the Sarawak border. The R.A.F. already had a small ground staff with some stores there and it was through the W.T. station there, manned by Dutch personnel, that military communication between Singapore and Kuching was maintained. This aerodrome at Singkawang II was also of great strategical importance because it was only 300 miles or so from Singapore and from the communications between Singapore and the Sunda Straits through which our sea-borne reinforcements now had to come. In other words, in Japanese hands it would constitute a very serious threat both to the defence of Singapore and also to the security of Java and Sumatra. Looked at from the broad strategical point of view the denial to the Japanese of the aerodrome at Singkawang II was undoubtedly of far greater importance than the denial of the landing-ground at Kuching. Unfortunately, between Krokong, the end of the road on the Sarawak side, and the beginning of the road on the Dutch side, there was only a bush track quite impassable for wheeled transport. That meant that all the transport and much of the reserve ammunition, supplies, and other stores of a force moving by this route would have to be destroyed or left behind. The decision to use it was therefore one which no commander would lightly take. These were the considerations which now faced Lane, and they should be carefully weighed by anyone who passes judgment on the operations which followed.

The country between the town of Kuching and the sea is practically roadless but is intersected by a number of waterways which flow northwards to the sea. The main river is navigable for small ocean-going vessels as far as Pending, which lies some four miles east of Kuching. Some of the other waterways are navigable for light craft. The principal roads radiating from Kuching run east to Pending, north-west to Matang, and south to Serian, a distance of forty miles from Kuching. The Serian

road passes the aerodrome some eight miles south of Kuching. At that point a road takes off to the west which, after passing Bau, terminates at Krokong, fifteen miles short of the frontier. The River Bintawa was crossed at Batu Kitang by a vehicle ferry.

On the morning of 24 December, observers at an O.P. north of Kuching reported Japanese transports anchored in Santubong Bay and landing-craft making for the Santubong River, one of the waterways referred to above. The first landing took place at Lintang on the banks of that river. Other craft penetrated farther inland, some being engaged by our forward posts at Pending and elsewhere while others succeeded in penetrating as far as Kuching Town itself. Many of the Japanese troops were dressed in British and Sarawak police uniforms, a ruse which on more than one occasion deceived the Indian soldiers.

These developments were unknown to Lane for some time as a cable upon which he depended for information from his forward posts had been cut during the bombing of the town. At 4 p.m., however, it became known that the enemy had entered Kuching and had planted the Japanese flag on the Astana, the residence of His Highness the Rajah; also that the Chief Secretary and the Secretary for Defence were in their hands. At 6.30 p.m., Lane ordered his forward detachments to withdraw to the aerodrome.

In Singapore little was known of these events nor were they to be heard of for several days to come. The civil W.T. station had fallen into enemy hands and repeated efforts from both the Singapore and Kuching ends to gain touch with each other via the Dutch station at Singkawang II failed except for one message. That was a request from Lane for further instructions in view of the new situation created by the demolition of the landing-ground. I replied to the effect that he should fight the enemy for as long as possible and that subsequently he should act in the best interests of West Borneo as a whole, withdrawing if necessary into Dutch territory. I do not know whether this message was ever received.

On the morning of 25 December, Lane decided to withdraw his force into Dutch West Borneo that evening. The European women and children, the sick, and some officials with the State records, were sent on ahead and crossed the river safely, but then trouble developed at the ferry after firing had broken out in the vicinity, the native ferrymen disappearing and leaving the ferry

on the far side of the swift-flowing stream. The withdrawal from the aerodrome, which was now being attacked from the east and from the south, was expedited, but the rearguard company was unable to extricate itself and suffered heavily. The total casualties of this battalion during the fighting in Sarawak were four British officers and 229 Indian other ranks, a proportion of which could be classified as "missing".

After trekking through the jungle on the twenty-sixth, the force crossed the frontier on the twenty-seventh and that evening reached Siloeas, the road-head on the Dutch side. Here it was met by the Dutch district officer and farther on by the Dutch military commander, who arranged for it to occupy the barracks which had been built for the R.A.F. at Singkawang II (Sanggau) aerodrome. In the meantime, Lane had been able to get a message through to Singapore, as a result of which containers of food, ammunition, and water were hurriedly prepared and an effort was made to arrange for the R.A.F. to drop these supplies. For lack of suitable and available aircraft the effort came to nothing. Efforts to ascertain the possibility of landing aircraft on the aerodrome itself were also unsuccessful as no information could be obtained as to whether it was in a serviceable condition. Eventually the supplies required by our troops there were sent by sea to Java, where we had a military liaison officer, with a request that they should be forwarded to Borneo as early as possible.

Sanggau was reached on 29 December and the force then came under the orders of the local Dutch commander. Its further adventures, therefore, do not belong to this history but may be briefly summarized to round off the story.

The 2/15 Punjab Regiment, after re-forming and being as far as possible re-equipped though still without transport, was allotted local defence tasks in the Siloeas-Sanggau area. Stragglers and local agents reported that the Japanese had landed 3,000-4,000 troops in Kuching. They soon had coolies at work on clearing and bridging the Bau road and on repairing the landing-ground, from which aircraft were operating within two or three weeks. On 7 January the Japanese arrived at the Sarawak-Dutch West Borneo frontier and between then and the eighteenth much bitter fighting took place between there and Sanggau. The 2/15 Punjab Regiment fought gallantly in an endeavour to prevent the enemy reaching this important aerodrome, losing about another 150 men,

but it succeeded in gaining time for the aerodrome, its installations and bomb stores, to be demolished.

By that time the Japanese had landed another force on the west coast of Borneo, so retreat in that direction was out of the question. The battalion, therefore, struck south-eastwards, fighting a rearguard action as far as Ngabang, where contact with the enemy was lost. The battalion was now operating independently again, and it was decided to move to the south coast in two columns in the hope of being able to find transport there to take it to Java. One column was to make for Sampit in the centre of the south coast and the other for Pankalang Boen, 120 miles farther west. The columns started on 3 and 5 February respectively and, after traversing wild and undeveloped country, reached their destinations simultaneously. The Sampit column, however, found the Japanese already in possession and, after a brief skirmish, moved off to join the west column, which it succeeded in doing after six days' march through dense jungle on a compass bearing. By the end of March, officers and men were exhausted after a feat of endurance which assuredly will rank high in the annals of warfare. Since leaving Kuching most of them had marched over 800 miles through some of the worst country in the world, most of the time on half rations and carrying with them their light automatics, rifles, equipment, and ammunition. It says much for the morale of this fine battalion that it remained a formed and disciplined body till the end. The Netherlands East Indies had already surrendered to the Japanese and on 3 April the 2/15 Punjab Regiment became prisoners of war.

What did this battalion accomplish for all its journeyings? That is a question that may well be asked. It was not a political sacrifice, as has been suggested. It was sent to Sarawak, firstly to ensure that the important oil-fields at Miri and Seria did not fall intact into the Japanese hands, and secondly to secure for our air force the use of the landing-ground at Kuching and to some extent also of the Singkawang II aerodrome, but in any case to ensure that they also did not fall intact into Japanese hands. The force was never strong enough to stop the Japanese—that was due to lack of resources—but it did make the Japanese deploy a fair-sized force, it did gain time for both the oil-fields and the air facilities to be denied to the enemy as far as this could be done and it did help to prevent the enemy from occupying the all-important

aerodrome at Singkawang II until 18 January, thereby making a definite contribution to the delay imposed on their southward advance. A military sacrifice it may have been, but it was a sacrifice which, judged by results, was in my opinion fully justified.

I must complete this story of the loss of British Borneo by relating briefly the events in Labuan and British North Borneo. It will be recollected that the only military force in these territories was a small volunteer force in British North Borneo which the Governor had been instructed by the Commander-in-Chief Far East to use for internal security purposes.

On 3 January a small Japanese force took possession of the Island of Labuan. On the same day a detachment from this force proceeded in a captured motor vessel to Mempakul on the coast of British North Borneo and from there to Weston, a small port at the mouth of the River Padar. At Weston, the detachment commandeered a train and proceeded to Beaufort, twenty miles distant. Here it was reinforced and on the sixth Japanese troops from Beaufort, moving by train, entered Jesselton, fifty-six miles distant. British North Borneo was divided into two administrative divisions, the West and the East Coast Residencies. The whole of the west coast area was now under Japanese control and the Governor, Mr. C. R. Smith, whose headquarters were at Sandakan, now severed all connection between the West and East Coast Residencies.

On 19 January a Japanese force, estimated at 600 strong, arrived at Sandakan, the capital of British North Borneo. It had assembled at Bangghi Island off the north coast of British North Borneo two days earlier. It came in two coastal vessels which had been captured in Brunei waters and in twelve Japanese motor fishing vessels. The troops from the latter, after landing in two creeks north of the town, reached Sandakan by land at 9 a.m. The two coastal vessels entered the harbour at about 9.30 a.m. The Governor surrendered the State and refused to carry on the administration under Japanese control. He and his staff were interned. Tawau, situated on the east coast near the Netherlands East Indies border, was occupied by the Japanese on 24 January, and Lahad Datu, between Tawau and Sandakan, on 26 or 27 January. Kudat on the north coast was occupied about 1 February. The whole of British Borneo was then under Japanese control.

British North Borneo, under the energetic and able leadership of its Governor, had done more than most of our possessions in the Far East to prepare itself, as far as its very limited resources would admit, for the possibility of war. It had co-operated readily in the preparations for the construction of the aerodromes and landing-grounds, which had been part of the original air plan, it had raised and equipped under its own arrangements a small volunteer force and it had prepared careful plans for the denial of military facilities to the Japanese should they come. In these plans the Governor had had the wholehearted co-operation of both the European and native population. Under his orders a great deal of denial work was done which incensed the Japanese occupying forces and made their treatment of the internees all the harsher. In particular, coastal vessels and local craft, including a number of Japanese-owned craft, were sunk. It is no reflection on the way this work was carried out, but a valuable lesson for the future, to state that the Japanese, without the help of heavy modern machinery, succeeded in raising many of these craft in a very short space of time. For all their faults they are in many ways a resourceful and practical people.

In pre-war days little was known by the general public about this outpost of our Empire, but the affection and loyalty shown to the Europeans there by the native population during the Japanese occupation is a wonderful proof of the benefits brought by British rule and of the soundness of our system of government. I have little doubt that in the years to come this will be appreciated more fully than it is now by many of those who cry so loudly for independence.

Chapter XIII

SOME ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS

WE British have fortunately had little experience in the past of campaigns fought in our own country or in territory under our control. It is true that at the beginning of this last war we had to make preparations to meet invasion at home, but theory and practice are very different things. In Malaya we had to put our plans into practice and we soon came up against new and difficult problems—problems which were made infinitely more difficult by the fact that we were fighting not in our own country but in a country to whose people we had promised our protection. As it was towards the end of December 1941 that these problems began to have an important influence on the course of the campaign, it will not be out of place to discuss them at this stage in the story.

We know now, as many of us suspected at the time, that Japan's aims were based on her own self-interest, i.e. the expansion of the Japanese Empire. But she was clever enough to launch her offensive to the accompaniment of slogans such as "Join the Co-Prosperity Sphere of Greater East Asia" and "Asia for the Asiatics". In doing so she endeavoured to rally to her standard the native races of the East to drive out what she described as "the white intruders". That was a fact which had a profound influence on our problems, because it was quite useless for the white population to try to stand alone in the East. We had at all costs to endeavour to retain the goodwill and active support of the inhabitants of the countries in which we were fighting.

One of the first and most difficult problems which confronted us in Malaya was the question of how much damage we ought to do as we fell back. Before the war started fairly comprehensive "denial" schemes had been drawn up. They envisaged, generally speaking, the denial to the enemy of material which might be of value to him for his war effort. They included, for instance, plans for the removal of means of transport, i.e. coastal craft, lorries, etc., and of essential parts of machinery from commercial installations. By this means it was hoped that it would be possible to get the wheels of industry moving quickly again when the

country was reoccupied, as we hoped it would be very soon. About the middle of December, however, instructions were received from home to the effect that an unrestricted scorched earth policy was to be applied throughout Malaya. It will be remembered that a few months previously the Russians had successfully applied such a policy as they fell back through their own country in face of the German onslaught. If the Russians could do it, why could not we do it? From a purely military point of view, it would obviously be the right thing to do. Yet there is a great difference between a dictator of a totalitarian state imposing a scorched earth policy as his armies fall back through their own country and an European power imposing a similar policy as its forces are driven back through an Asiatic country to which it has promised its protection. If we deprived these people of the necessities of life such as food and water, or of modern amenities such as electric power for their hospitals, they would say that we were not treating them in accordance with our promises and would become a fertile ground for Japanese propaganda. The destruction of road and rail bridges was a different matter. That was a military necessity and would be no more than an inconvenience to the inhabitants. It had in fact been our policy to do this since the beginning of the campaign. Then there were the big commercial installations—the tin mines, the rubber estates, and the factories. Many of these were owned by European firms, but there were thousands of small Asiatic-owned businesses. The scorched earth policy could certainly be applied to the former as the problem was the same as if one had been operating in one's own country, but it was not so easy as regards the latter. If these people were to be left for any length of time under Japanese domination, one did not want to deprive them of their means of livelihood. It really boiled down to the potential war value of their businesses. If they were going to be of real value to the Japanese, then they had to go. Otherwise it seemed better to leave them. It was with these ideas in mind that the Far East War Council considered the instructions to apply an unrestricted scorched earth policy. After an exchange of views between London and Singapore, instructions were issued that the scorched earth policy was to be enforced, but that it would not apply to such things as foodstuffs already issued to the civil population, to water supplies, or to power plants.

Certain practical problems arose in the application of the policy. Fires and explosions behind the fighting front both give a sure indication to the enemy that a withdrawal is contemplated and are liable to have a bad moral effect on one's own troops. On the other hand, a scorched earth policy cannot be applied successfully at the last minute or it will certainly fail. The decision as to when to order it in any particular area is an important one and must be made by the military commander. In general, authority to make the decision was delegated to the commander in the field, but in some of the more important cases, such as putting out of action the Batu Arang coal mines and big concerns like the Pahang Consolidated tin mines, the decision was taken at Singapore. Then there was the question of how to execute the demolitions. Obviously the Army could not undertake this work over such a large area. It must be done by the owners themselves. All we could do was to send officers round to see that the plans had been prepared and were adequate. When the time came, the orders for the demolitions had to be issued through the civil authorities and one had to trust the proprietors or their representatives to see that the work was done. Human nature then enters into the problem because men who have spent long years in developing a business and who look forward to the day when their activities can be resumed are naturally tempted to try to save something from the wreck. Nevertheless, a very great deal of property was loyally and completely destroyed without thought of the past or the future. One can only hope that, when the question of compensation is finally settled, those who in this way did their duty unflinchingly will receive their just reward.

In places there were very large quantities of rice stored in bulk. It was almost impossible to prevent some of these stores falling into the enemy's hands. Distribution to the local population was not always practicable owing to lack of transport. Again, rice does not burn easily and, if you remove the covering and expose it to the rain, the top portion only of the store is affected. So the Japs got some of it.

Such were some of the initial problems which confronted us in the application of the scorched earth policy. I shall have some more to say about it later on.

Another important matter which came before the Far East

War Council at about the same time concerned the evacuation of women and children. In the old days before the advent of "total war", women and children were of course, for the most part, *bouches inutiles*, and it was customary to remove them to a safer place. Of course, some of them were still *bouches inutiles*, but I cannot help thinking that the home authorities, when they issued instructions for the evacuation of all women and children, were living a little in the past and had failed to appreciate the part which women play in the modern "total war" and especially their role in a war in Malaya. As nurses, as motor drivers, as clerks, in the A.R.P. services and in many other ways women were doing invaluable work in which they could not be adequately replaced. Then, and of even greater importance, there was the question of differentiating between European and Asiatic women. The compulsory withdrawal of all European women, just at a time when success or failure might turn on whether or not we could succeed in rallying the Asiatic population round us, was bound to be most damaging to our cause. There were, it is true, some women who were doing no war work whose presence was an encumbrance. The sooner they were got out of the way the better. There were others who had children and they also were better in a place of safety. But we felt that it would be very wrong at that stage to order away the many who were doing valuable war work and who wished to stay. Moreover, if the European women were sent away, why should not the Eurasian, Chinese, and other Asiatic women who were working side by side with them also be sent away? That, even if it had been practicable, would have left big gaps in the administrative services and what is the good of building up these services if you are going to cripple them as soon as war breaks out? In the end we sent away the *bouches inutiles* and we compelled none of the women to stay if they wished to leave. Only at the end, when I knew how the Japanese had treated nursing sisters at Hong Kong, did I order ours away, and that decision I shall always regret, for many of these brave people lost their lives at sea. For the rest, let us pay tribute to those gallant souls who stayed behind and suffered the rigours of internment. I know there are many who will not agree with me, but I for my part am quite certain that they took the right course and that they made a very valuable contribution to the general war effort and especially to the maintenance of morale.

Civil defence now began to assume great importance. However carefully plans may have been laid in time of peace it is unlikely that in any country the machine will work smoothly until it has been properly run in. That applied particularly in Malaya where, with very few exceptions, the people had had no experience of war. Things are difficult enough when the enemy's action is confined to air attack, as it was in the United Kingdom. They were infinitely more difficult in Malaya where, from the very first day, the country was being invaded and there was no time to run the machine in. As always happens in such cases, the wildest rumours were sent flying round with their damaging effect on morale. The situation was no doubt aggravated by the difficulty of giving the people exact news of what was happening. In a retreat that is almost impossible to do because one is usually trying to slip away without letting the enemy know that one has gone and the last thing one wants to do is to let the enemy know where one is going to make the next stand. In Malaya the effect of our early reverses and of the uncertainty which accompanied them was doubly great as a result of the pre-war talk of the impregnability of Singapore.

Towards the end of December it became evident that vigorous action was required if civil defence was to keep pace with the march of events. This was particularly the case in the Singapore area where, in spite of a reasonably efficient A.R.P. organization, there was still much to be done, especially as regards the material protection of buildings and other important installations. The control of labour and of transport were other matters which required urgent attention. It was in these circumstances that Mr. Duff Cooper, the Cabinet representative in the Far East, proposed the introduction of martial law and the appointment of a Director-General of Civil Defence.

Now martial law is usually introduced when the civil government is no longer capable of maintaining law and order in a country. It is applicable particularly in the case of internal trouble and especially when the military are able to concentrate all their efforts on the restoration of normal conditions. In Malaya neither of these conditions prevailed. Although there was a certain amount of apathy, there was no internal disorder and the armed forces were already fully occupied in endeavouring to repel an invader. It seemed to me that martial law would put a further

and unnecessary strain on those forces, and especially on the commanders and staffs. For that reason I did not welcome the proposal. Eventually martial law was declared in the colony of Singapore only, Keith Simmons being appointed administrator. Heath and Gordon Bennett were authorized to declare martial law at their discretion in the Federated Malay States and in Johore and Malacca respectively, but they never found it necessary to do so.

The question of appointing a military governor was also discussed at different times. We have, of course, military governors at places where defence is of paramount importance, such, for instance, as Gibraltar and until recently Malta. For a short period before war broke out there was temporarily a military governor at Hong Kong. This does not necessarily mean that there is any difference in the system of government. The advantage of such an appointment is that a military governor is likely to be more experienced in matters of defence than a civil governor. One of the main objections to the appointment of a military governor in Malaya shortly before or after war broke out was the complicated political organization of the country which would have been very difficult for anyone to take over at short notice. In my opinion the solution in these days of "total war" lies in the training of governors, before appointment to a post of such responsibility, in the art of governing both in peace and in war. Such training could be given at a very much enlarged Imperial Defence College.

I come now to the creation of a Directorate of Civil Defence. I was asked if I would make my chief engineer, Brigadier I. Simson, available for the appointment of director-general. Simson had only recently come to Malaya from the United Kingdom where he had had considerable experience in passive air defence work. I was naturally loath to lose the services of so important an officer at this juncture, but I agreed to make him available provided he retained concurrently his appointment of Chief Engineer Malaya Command. Had he not done this he would have suffered considerable financial loss as there was no provision in the civil establishment for a Director-General of Civil Defence. The directorate was created on 31 December, Simson being appointed Director-General, and Mr. F. D. Bisseker, the general manager of the Penang Smelting Works and the

senior unofficial member of the Legislative Council, Deputy Director-General. Bisseker was also appointed Director of Labour and Transport. In the original proclamation the directorate was to cover Singapore and the State of Johore but, for constitutional reasons, Johore was subsequently excluded so that ultimately the directorate operated in Singapore Island only.

The question which immediately arose was "what was included in the term civil defence"? In creating the directorate, Duff Cooper had given the Director-General plenary powers, subject only to reference to the War Council where considered necessary. This presumably meant that he could issue orders direct to the various departments of the Government. Where then did the Colonial Secretary come in and where did the Governor himself come in if the Director-General could refer direct to the War Council? It seems to me that the situation was analogous to the appointment of a Minister for Defence in the United Kingdom with no responsibility to the Prime Minister. In a country at war within its own territory, practically every department of state is to a greater or less degree concerned with civil defence, the ultimate responsibility for which must rest with the head of the civil government. To attempt to relieve him of this responsibility or to by-pass him is certain to lead to trouble. Such was the case in Malaya. I do not in any way wish to belittle the efforts of the Director-General or his staff. They did all that it was humanly possible to do, but they were in my view handicapped from the start by a faulty organization. This is not a case of being wise after the event, for I expressed a similar opinion when the new directorate was first suggested. As I saw it working, I became more and more confirmed in that opinion. To make matters worse it suffered also from lack of an adequate clerical staff and of suitable office accommodation. It is true that an expansion of civil defence in the broadest meaning of the term was urgently required, but the framework was already there. There was a Secretary for Defence and there were organizations for dealing with labour and transport. I feel convinced that it would have been better, instead of creating a new organization at short notice, to have built on that framework, strengthening it as necessary with men of character and proved ability.

The failure of civil labour had from the very beginning a crippling effect on our war effort. It started up in Kedah where most of the civil labour disappeared as soon as war broke out, including the labour force which was being assembled for the construction of the Gurun position. It happened in Penang, where the municipal workers left Georgetown for the hills as soon as the bombing started. It happened on the railway which was only kept going by a volunteer military operating unit and by the use of troops. It happened at the Singapore docks where ultimately ships had to be discharged and loaded with military labour. And it happened in the end in Singapore Town itself, where it made no small contribution to the situation which brought about the final capitulation. It was not due, speaking generally, to default on the part of the management or of the leaders. With few exceptions, the leaders, both European and Asiatic, stuck to their posts manfully. Particularly was this so in the case of the railway, the posts and telegraphs, and the survey department. I do not think either that it was due to fear, for the Chinese, who formed a large part of the labour force, are not people who normally set great store by human life. I believe that it was due more to the spirit of apathy which prevailed throughout Malaya and the feeling on the part of the workers that this war was no affair of theirs. There was very little real patriotism or deep-rooted love of country in this mixed population, so why should they risk their own lives and those of their families? There was plenty of food in the country for them to live upon, so why should they not get out of harm's way until it had all blown over? That seemed to be the general attitude. What was the solution?

In the first place, it may be asked, "Why did you not form military labour companies?" That indeed would have been a very good solution, for all experience showed that the Asiatics of Malaya, of whatever race, were extremely good workers so long as they were under military control. Shortly before war broke out we had received War Office authority to expand our two labour companies up to six, and we immediately set about trying to get recruits, but by the beginning of January only one additional company had been formed. The reason for this was almost entirely financial. We were still bound by War Office regulations and the War Office refused, in spite of representations, to increase

the fixed rate of forty-five cents per day for coolies. At that time the current rate in Singapore was in the region of one dollar per day plus free rations and accommodation. So you could hardly blame the coolies for not joining up. Eventually I had to take the law into my own hands and inform the War Office that I was going to accept decisions by the Director-General of Civil Defence as to conditions of service reached after consultation with all interested departments. A Director of Army Labour was appointed and he had under him a corps of officers, recruited mostly from civilians, who understood the Asiatic labourers and who could converse with at least some of them in their own language.

Then it may be asked, "Why was not labour conscripted?" I have already explained in a previous chapter that the view of those best qualified to judge, with which I agreed, was that we were likely to get better service by a voluntary system, provided we could get the support of influential leaders, than by compulsion. As the difficulties increased, there was a growing demand in some Service quarters for compulsion to be applied. It was in answer to this demand, and when the voluntary system had failed to produce the required results, that a measure was passed on 20 January to introduce compulsion. It came too late for its value to be disclosed.

From the army point of view, the failure of labour in the Singapore area had very serious consequences. I have already explained that, in the hope of regaining some measure of air supremacy, I had agreed to give the air force first priority call on all civil labour for the maintenance of the existing aerodromes and for the construction of new air strips. A considerable labour force was required for these purposes, especially when the Japanese Air Force began bombing the aerodromes every day. It was hardly ever forthcoming, and I frequently had to provide working parties from our reinforcement camps. Thus not only was there no civil labour available for work on our own land defences of the island, but there was very often no military labour available either.

The Japanese, of course, in their advance applied a system of forced labour to meet their requirements. The workers probably got nothing except their subsistence. As a short-term policy that undoubtedly pays and it may be that we British are a bit

too soft in our methods. But there is the other side to the picture. Acts of repression are not quickly forgotten and, as the Japanese found to their cost, are apt to react upon the oppressor. Perhaps, after all, our methods are the best in the long run.

I have referred earlier in this book to the Combined Operations Room where the operational staffs of the army and air force worked. I would like to say something more about this room now in the light of experience because, though it may seem a small matter, I believe it exercised a great influence on the higher direction of the campaign.

As early as 1936 the idea of the operational staffs of the fighting services working together had begun to take shape in the plans for the bomb-proof headquarters at Fort Canning. That, when built, was already too small but, following a combined operations exercise early in 1941, it was decided to build a large room where the army and air force staffs could work at Sime Road adjoining R.A.F. headquarters. On the other side of it were built offices for the Army operational staff. The idea was that the staff officers of the two Services and their clerks should all work in the Combined Operations Room, though they had their own rooms to which they could go if they wanted to. This was excellent in theory. In practice it had many faults. It meant that our staff officers were permanently in that room because they could not in fact work in two places. That in turn meant that their clerks were permanently there too and—worse than that—it meant that the commanders had to spend much of their time there, so as to be close to their staff officers. Had we worked entirely in our own offices, either we or our staff officers would have been faced with a journey of a hundred yards or so every time we wanted to talk to each other—and that during the black-out was not too pleasant. The conditions in the Combined Operations Room were not conducive to good work or clear thinking. They were too cramped and there was too much noise. The problem may not arise again in these days of integrated staffs, but I am sure the right solution in those conditions is for staffs to work in their own offices and to have a common room where everything of interest to all Services, i.e. situation maps, intelligence reports, messages, etc., can be seen, and where conferences can be held. It may seem a

small point to some, but I feel sure that all who have had experience of the working of headquarter staffs will agree with me that the conditions under which they work have a very great influence on their efficiency and, in consequence, on the efficiency of the fighting formations which they direct.

Chapter XIV

OPERATIONS IN CENTRAL MALAYA

DURING the last few days of December and the first of January some most important changes took place in the higher direction of war in the Far East. Both the Commanders-in-Chief left Singapore, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham on relief by General Sir Henry Pownall, and Sir Geoffrey Layton on the move of the headquarters of the Eastern Fleet first to Batavia and then to Colombo. The relief of Brooke-Popham was in no way connected with the course the war was taking for, although not officially announced, it had been decided some time before war broke out. He had been sent out originally to establish the new headquarters and, now that this had been done, it was only natural that he should hand over to a younger man. On the departure of Sir Geoffrey Layton, Rear-Admiral Spooner became senior naval officer at Singapore. Early in January, Mr. Duff Cooper, the Cabinet representative in the Far East, also left Singapore on the termination of his appointment. He was succeeded as chairman of the Far East War Council by Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor and High Commissioner Malaya. Finally there was the appointment of General Sir Archibald Wavell (now Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell) as Supreme Commander of the newly created Allied South-West Pacific Command. He arrived at Singapore by air on 7 January and after a tour of the forward area left again on the eleventh for Java where the headquarters of the new command were to be established. It actually came into being on 15 January. With him went the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief Far East which was absorbed into the new organization, Sir Henry Pownall becoming Chief of Staff to Sir Archibald Wavell.

I have no wish to suggest that any of these changes were wrong or that things should have been arranged otherwise, but it cannot be denied that the general effect was far from healthy. The Far East is at all times a part of the world which "wants knowing", and many of the problems, both operational and administrative, with which we were grappling had about them at least a degree of novelty. Continuity was required and, with so many changes

in the higher appointments, that was difficult to achieve. Further, these changes and movements, at a time when the steadying of morale both in the fighting services and among the civil population was of such paramount importance, had, to say the least, an unsettling effect.

Let us now return to the battle-front in Malaya. When we left it, our forward troops on the west coast were on the point of occupying the Kampar position south of Ipoh while on the east coast we were still holding Kuantan with a brigade group in reserve in the Kuala Lipis-Jerantut-Raub area. Our task was still to defend the Naval Base, and our general strategy of holding the enemy for as long as we could at arm's length from Singapore to enable reinforcements to be brought in had been confirmed by higher authority. We now knew that we might expect to receive an Indian infantry brigade with attached troops during the first few days of January and the whole of the 18th British Division, which was en route to the Middle East and was being diverted at sea, later in the month. Of this division, one brigade group with some other units was coming on ahead in large American liners, for which the special permission of the American authorities had been obtained. They were extremely valuable ships, so their safe arrival and dispatch were of the utmost importance. In this convoy also were coming fifty Hurricane fighters in crates with their crews. In them lay our first hope of regaining some sort of air superiority. It was altogether a most valuable convoy, the chief danger to which, of course, lay in air attack. If the enemy could, before its arrival, be in a position to operate his aircraft from the aerodromes in Central Malaya, especially those at Kuantan and Kuala Lumpur, the scale of that attack would be greatly increased. I felt that we ought to do everything in our power to prevent him doing this, and therein lay the key to our strategy at that stage of the campaign. The convoy was due to reach Singapore about 13-15 January.

In addition to the Hurricanes referred to above, a flow of reinforcements of the longer-range type of aircraft had been started from the United Kingdom and the Middle East. These included fifty-two Hudsons. Again our hopes ran high, but only to be dashed as time went by and few aircraft arrived. Of the fifty-two Hudsons only sixteen ever reached Singapore and less

JAPANESE ATTACK

PHASE II



- STATE BOUNDARIES
- RAILWAY
- RAIN BENCH
- HEADQUARTERS
- JAPANESE ADVANCEMENT
- JAPANESE WITH BATTLE
- BRITISH ROAD



than half of all the aircraft that started ever arrived. That seemed to lend force to our pre-war contention that it is better to keep at least a good nucleus of your anticipated aircraft requirements in or near the area concerned and not to rely too much on long-distance reinforcements.

On 27 December our air reconnaissance had reported thirty-four Japanese ships lying off Singora. It seemed probable that this indicated the arrival of a fresh division or at least of strong reinforcements for the divisions already in Malaya. As regards the Japanese plan of campaign, it was clear that they intended to continue their advance down the west coast and, in support of this, it seemed likely that they would attempt some landings from the sea. On the east coast they had complete liberty of action. I thought a combined sea and air attack against Kuantan was likely, and I could not disregard the possibility of an attack against the east coast of Johore or even against Singapore Island itself. There was also the possibility of an air-borne attack directed against our aerodromes.

The time had clearly come to formulate a plan of campaign for the next few weeks in some detail. Before doing so it was necessary to find out what the troops in the forward areas were capable of, so I decided to go north again and visit the formations of the 3rd Indian Corps. I left Singapore by road on 30 December for Kuala Lumpur, and on the way I took the opportunity of finding out what the situation on the railway was. There had already been reports of the disappearance of a number of the junior employees and I wanted to try and find out the cause of this. One of the railway stations which I visited was typical of the rest. It had been bombed by a single plane and a lucky hit had set fire to an ammunition wagon. Explosions had taken place. The Indian stationmaster was still in his office, but the rest of his staff had gone. There were no signalmen, no shunters, and no labourers. Inquiries showed that most of these men had taken off their wives and families and gone to the country villages. Part of the trouble was that most of the shops also had closed and there was little food to be had in the town. That was a difficulty which could have been got over by the establishment of canteens, but to get the railwaymen back to work was not so easy. In fact, we never really succeeded in doing it, though we managed to keep the railways running by other methods.

I spent the night with Heath at Kuala Lumpur and the following day we motored up to Tapah where the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division was. Tapah is about a hundred miles from Kuala Lumpur and we stopped at several places on the way, so it was afternoon before we got there. One of the places we looked at was the Kuala Kubu road junction, where the road that goes over the mountains to Kuala Lipis takes off from the west coast trunk road. This junction had now become of great strategical importance, because, if the enemy succeeded in reaching it while the 9th Indian Division was still on the east coast, the only land communication to that division would be seriously threatened. We discussed the possibility of using the 9th Indian Division, or part of it, to strike the enemy in flank at this point as he advanced down the west coast road. Farther on we stopped to look at a position north of Tanjong Malim, which was being prepared under Heath's instructions. A large civil labour gang, collected from the neighbouring estates, was working here, and a great deal of clearance and wiring had been done. It was hoped to make a strong position of it to cover the Kuala Kubu road junction, but, like most other positions in Malaya, there was weakness on the flanks which could be turned by the enemy moving through the rubber or the jungle. North of the Slim River we met Stewart, the commander of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade. He was reconnoitring a position for his brigade in an area where the road and railway, which at this point ran close to each other, passed through a dense jungle belt. The position had much to commend it because the denseness of the jungle would obviously make it difficult for the enemy to employ his favourite outflanking tactics. It would also be quite impossible to operate tanks except down the main road. On the other hand there was no natural anti-tank obstacle on the road itself, and we should have to depend upon our anti-tank weapons and artificial obstacles to stop the enemy tanks. Still that seemed a fair risk to take as the tanks could only come on in single file. All the same, I couldn't help being a little apprehensive as to what would happen if the Japanese tanks did break through and, as we had so little behind the front, wondering how far they would go before they were stopped. Both Heath and I impressed on all commanders we met the vital necessity of a good anti-tank defence.

At Tapah we discussed the situation with Paris, the commander

of the 11th Indian Division. He was as usual calm and confident—two valuable characteristics in the situation in which we found ourselves. Things on the Kampar front were going quite well and he expected to be able to hold the enemy there. I had calculated that, if we were to prevent the Japanese getting the use of the Central Malaya aerodromes before the mid-January convoy arrived, we must hold him north of the Kuala Kubu road junction until at least 14 January. That would give Paris a depth of seventy miles in which to manœuvre during the next fortnight. This he thought he could do without much difficulty, so he was instructed to hold on to the Kampar position for as long as possible and in any case not to fall back behind the Kuala Kubu road junction before 14 January without permission.

No sooner had this decision been taken than a telephone message came through from corps headquarters to the effect that our air reconnaissance had reported some small steamers with barges in tow moving south down the Perak coast that morning. So the Japanese had not been long in starting coastal operations. We had our small garrison at Telok Anson and south of that the responsibility for coast defence rested, under 3rd Indian Corps, with Brigadier Moir, the commander of the lines of communication area. He only had weak forces at his disposal, so Heath immediately ordered the 9th Indian Division to send a battalion to Kuala Lumpur to come temporarily under Moir's orders, while I instructed Command Headquarters to request the navy and the air force to do what they could to deal with this threat.

It was getting late before we left Tapah for Fraser's Hill where we were to spend the night. The long drive on the narrow road, passing the columns of military traffic which had begun to move after nightfall and climbing the steep and twisty road to Fraser's Hill, was a bit of a nightmare, but a night spent in the cool and peaceful atmosphere of the rest-house there did us a world of good. The next morning we left early for Raub, where the headquarters of the 9th Indian Division was located.

The talk with Barstow centred chiefly round the orders to be given to the Kuantan force. Towards the end of December long-distance patrols sent out from there had made contact with enemy troops moving southward through Trengganu by the coast road. As a result of this the Kuantan garrison had been redispersed, the left flank being strengthened, a skeleton force only watching

the sea front, and the bulk of the force with most of the material and transport being held more concentrated west of the River Kuantan. The information from the front, however, was not very up to date at the time of our visit as all communications had temporarily broken down and a staff officer who had been sent to ascertain the situation had not yet returned. It will be recollected that the distance from Raub to Kuantan by road was about 150 miles. That will give some idea of the distances over which we were working and the difficulty of maintaining communications. We did not know at the time of our talk that Kuantan was already being strongly attacked by land.

Barstow had instructed Painter, the commander of the Kuantan force, that he was to hold the aerodrome there for another five days provided that he did not thereby jeopardize his force. When he issued that instruction the importance of getting in safely the mid-January convoy was not known to him. We now calculated that we should have to hold the aerodrome until 10 January if we were to prevent the enemy using it before the middle of the month. That would give the Kuantan force a minimum of four days to get back before any threat could develop against the 9th Indian Division from the west. So it was arranged that the Kuantan force should hold the aerodrome until the tenth and amended instructions were issued.

From Raub we returned to Kuala Lumpur, where I stayed the night with Heath and his wife. We were, however, soon faced with another problem, for late that evening Paris rang up to say that an enemy force had landed at Utan Melintang, situated near the mouth of the River Bernam, only a short distance south of the mouth of the River Perak. The significance of this was immediately apparent, for the River Bernam is navigable for small craft almost as far as the main west coast trunk road, so that the presence of the enemy in that neighbourhood exercised a very real threat to the communications of the 11th Indian Division. Paris said that he thought he could go on holding the Kampar position, where a strong attack had already been repulsed, but that, if he did so, his ability to hold the enemy north of the Kuala Kubu road junction for any length of time might be prejudiced. He asked for permission to withdraw from Kampar at his discretion. This was granted.

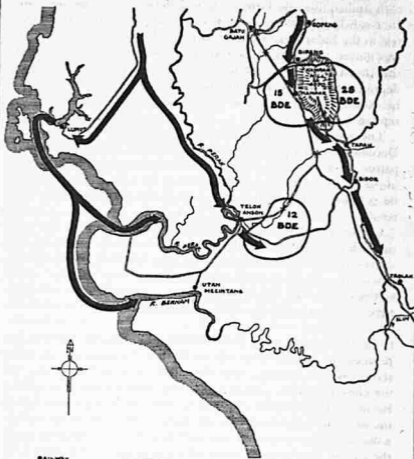
The next day, 2 January, I returned to Singapore after visits

to Port Swettenham and Port Dickson. It was a long day as we had to motor over 250 miles in addition to holding conferences at various places and it was nearly midnight before we got home.

I considered at this stage the possibility of relieving some of the troops of the 3rd Indian Corps with the whole or part of the A.I.F.—a course which at first sight appeared attractive but on detailed examination had many objections. In the first place it would have involved a dangerous weakening for several days of the garrison of the vital area of Johore, which consisted in any case of only two brigade groups. Even if the relief could have been completed, we should not have been very happy with a tired and battered garrison in that area which might at any time be the scene of a sea-borne invasion. Apart from this there were practical difficulties of transportation as most of our resources at that time, both road and rail, were fully occupied with the day-to-day work of evacuation of a vast area. Finally, there was the question of high policy concerning the employment of the A.I.F. I was most anxious that, when it went into action, it would go as a formation under its own commander and I had given an undertaking that it would not, if it could possibly be avoided, be split up. I did not think that the time had yet come to depart from that undertaking. For these reasons I considered the project unsound.

The Kampar position south of Ipoh was probably the strongest occupied in Malaya. The main position was semicircular covering the township of Kampar from the north, west, and south-west, on a frontage of about four miles. The eastern flank rested against the steep rocky feature known as Gunong Brijang Malaka. Close under its western slopes ran the main road bordered by narrow belts of rubber plantation. Beyond these lay an extensive, open, tin-mining area, broken only to the south-west where the Cecily Estate, a large rubber plantation, encroached eastward from the Kinta Valley over what was otherwise a tin-mining preserve. Fields of fire for small arms, except in the Cecily Estate area, extended up to 1,200 yards and more. Artillery observation generally was good and from forward O.P.s on the slopes of Gunong Brijang Malaka it was a F.O.O.'s dream. On the eastern flank the mountain was circled by a loop road which, leaving the trunk road at Kuala Dipang, passed through Sahum and Chen-deriang and rejoined the trunk road a little north of Tapah. The

KAMPAR - TELOK ANSON AREA



RAILWAY
 MAIN ROADS
 WLA FEATURE
 APPROX BRITISH
 BRIGADE AREAS
 JAPANESE THRUSTS



main Kampar position was held by the 6th/15th Indian Brigade Group and the position on the loop road covering Sahum by the 28th Indian Brigade Group. It had been hoped that the 12th Indian Brigade Group would be able to enjoy a little well-earned rest in the Bidor area, but this was not to be. Late on 1 January it was moved to Changkat Jong on the Telok Anson road to meet the threat which was developing from the west coast. That deprived the divisional commander of his main reserve and he had to withdraw a unit from the 28th Indian Brigade to replace it.

The four-day battle of Kampar opened on the night 29-30 December with extensive artillery harassing fire and offensive patrolling on our side. During the four days so much was happening at once on widely separated parts of the front that it will only be possible here to summarize what happened and to state the result.

On the thirtieth the Japanese developed minor activity opposite the Sahum position on our right, which was increased on the thirty-first. A small enterprise was also launched in the Cecily Estate area. In other words, the enemy were pursuing their usual tactics of attacking the flanks. On the thirty-first these activities were continued. On the front of the 28th Brigade Group there were many local encounters which ended very much in our favour. Here, for the first time, the Gurkhas were matched against the Japanese in conditions of terrain familiar to them—rough hilly scrub-covered country—and there was no question which was the cleverer fighter. Their supporting artillery, the 155th Field Regiment (Lanarkshire Yeomanry) also did excellent work and the losses inflicted on the enemy were heavy. Whether it was a result of this or whether this activity was merely an attempt on the part of the enemy to draw off our reserves to that flank I do not know, but on New Year's Day the Japanese launched what was undoubtedly their strongest attack against the sector of the Kampar position held by the British battalion. From 7 a.m. till dusk, fighting went on in this sector and particularly on the extreme right of our position in the hills. The enemy tried to outflank us and he tried to infiltrate between our posts. Defended localities were isolated but held their ground. O.P.s were lost but recaptured by counter-attack. When darkness fell our positions were still intact. In its first day's fighting as a combined unit, the

British battalion, under the inspiring leadership of Lt.-Col. Morrison, had shown itself to be worthy of the great traditions of the regiments from which it was formed, the Leicesters and the East Surreys. It was to add to them on the following day. With it worked in complete harmony and with no less gallantry its supporting gunners, the 88th Field Regiment. New Year's Day drew to a close with the situation intact at Kampar and all quiet at Sahum. But the integrity of the Kampar position was dependent also on the security of its back door at Telok Anson, and in that area disturbing events were taking place.

On 31 December, Japanese troops had been reported at Lumut and Sitiawan. At the latter place they were busy getting the small civil landing-ground into order. On the morning of 1 January our boat patrol discovered a tug with four barges stuck on a sand-bank at the mouth of the Perak River. Unfortunately neither the navy nor the air force was able to take advantage of this unique opportunity. In the evening of the same day as has already been recorded, a flotilla of seven small steamers accompanied by numerous barges or landing-craft appeared in the mouth of the Bernam River and landed some troops at Utan Melintang, where they were engaged by our patrols which fell back on Telok Anson. The uncertainty as regards the intentions of this force, which was now poised to strike at his communications in either of several directions, naturally caused Paris deep concern and forced him to deploy what he could spare of his division to meet the threat. Actually the enemy convoy was only staging for the night, though this could not be known at the time. His concern was not lessened the following morning when another landing took place at Telok Anson, this time by a force which appears to have come down the Perak River in boats. This force was opposed by the Independent Company and some sharp fighting took place in the streets and on the outskirts of the town before the Independent Company fell back on the 12th Indian Brigade, the forward troops of which were then in position four miles to the east. It has been suggested that this brigade might have been more effective if it had opposed the landing at Telok Anson, but it must be remembered that it was responsible for protecting the communications of the division and it had to keep in mind also the threat from Utan Melintang which could have developed east of Telok Anson. By 2 p.m. the brigade was itself being attacked and heavy fighting went on all

afternoon in the Changkat Jong area. In the evening Stewart reported that he was being attacked by about a regiment and that he doubted his ability to keep the enemy from the main road at Bidor for more than twenty-four hours. It was that report which forced the decision to withdraw from Kampar, though it is doubtful whether our position there would have been tenable for much longer in any case, for with no reserves in hand we were still in a position of being unable to accept major losses.

To the struggle which had been going on at Kampar from dawn to dusk on the second, it is difficult to do full justice. It was a classic example of what can be achieved by grit and determination and it brought out the finest characteristics of the various troops engaged. There were the enemy's repeated attempts to gain possession of Thompson's Ridge and Green Ridge, commanding positions which would have enabled them to enfilade our positions in the lower ground. The attacks were made with all the well-known bravery and disregard of danger of the Japanese soldier. There was the dogged resistance, in spite of heavy losses, by the men of the British battalion and their supporting artillery, and finally, when the enemy had captured a key position and the battalion reserves were exhausted, there was a charge in the old traditional style by the Sikh company of the 1/8 Punjab Regiment. Through a tremendous barrage of mortar and machine-gun fire they went, led by their company commander, Captain Graham, until he fell mortally wounded, and then by their Subedar. Their cheering rose to a roar as they charged, routing the enemy with heavy loss. The situation was completely restored, but only thirty of this gallant company remained. The battle of Kampar had proved that our trained troops, whether they were British or Indian, were superior man for man to the Japanese troops.

That same night the 6th/15th Brigade Group started to withdraw. The withdrawal was closely followed up but, covered by the 28th Brigade Group, it eventually disengaged and moved to the Tapah-Bidor area.

On 3 January the Japanese again attacked strongly in the Changkat Jong area, supported by their air force, but were repulsed. In the evening the 12th Brigade Group withdrew to the Trolak sector of the Slim River position. The 6th/15th

Brigade Group followed them to a covering position at Sungkai. The 28th Brigade Group moved to the Slim River village area.

During the whole of this time our troops were fighting practically without air support. Those who have had a similar experience, when enemy planes seem to be always in the air reconnoitring, bombing, and machine-gunning, and when you never see one of your own planes, will know what that means and what a great moral effect it has. It was not the fault of our air force in Malaya. Their resources at that time were at their lowest. They did their willing best and it was no fault of theirs that it was a poor best. The responsibility lies much higher than that.

In the meantime, the enemy's activities off the west coast were causing grave concern, for they had now got complete liberty of action both on the sea and in the air. Though much of the coastline in this area is covered by mangrove swamps, there are nevertheless numerous places where landings can take place. Among the more important of these were Kuala Selangor, forty-five miles south of the mouth of the Bernam River and, farther south still, Port Swettenham, where docks and other facilities existed. From Kuala Selangor roads radiated eastwards to the Batu Arang coal mines and thence to Rawang on our main lines of communication, south-eastwards to Kuala Lumpur, and southwards to Klang and Port Swettenham. It was a likely landing-place and here a small detachment, including some field guns, was in position. It had not long to wait, for late on the 2 January the enemy appeared and closed the shore but were driven off by artillery fire, one small steamer being sunk. The Japanese, however, were not to be denied and during the night of 3-4 January they appear to have landed a force at a point eight miles farther north, for at about midday on the fourth our patrols met this force moving south by the coast road. Driving back our patrols this enemy force advanced eastward along the north bank of the Selangor River until it reached the bridge at Batang Berjuntai, where a sharp engagement took place. It was now only a dozen miles from Rawang, whereas our foremost troops were still seventy miles north of that place. The situation looked serious and the divisional commander was forced to dispatch the tired 6th/15th Brigade, heroes of the Kampar battle, to meet this threat. It reached Batang Berjuntai early on 6 January and stabilized the situation. The denial scheme at the Batu Arang

coal mines was put into force, thus leaving available in Malaya only such coal as might be in stock.

These events on the west coast had an immediate effect on our whole strategy in the east, for it was no longer certain that we should be able to hold the enemy north of the Kuala Kubu road junction for the specified time. Rapid decisions had to be taken but, before dealing with them, let us see what had been happening in the Kuantan area.

We have seen that, after the fall of Kelantan, the Kuantan defences had been re-oriented so as to strengthen the northern flank facing the State of Trengganu and that the bulk of the force and its transport had been withdrawn west of the Kuantan River. After patrol encounters on the Trengganu coast, a Japanese column, which had been brought down in M.T., attacked our forward posts on the morning of the thirtieth and confused fighting over a wide area took place in the rubber plantations throughout that day. At the same time the Japanese Air Force made repeated attacks on targets in the Kuantan area, including the ferry across the Kuantan River, which had been split into two working halves. One half only remained in action. By the morning of the thirty-first, the Japanese were attacking the ferry and here some desperate fighting took place. They were held off, however, and during the following night our rearguards were withdrawn across the river and the ferry was destroyed. The effect of this unfortunately was not as great as had been hoped because, as a result of the dry season, the river higher up was in places quite fordable.

During the next two days no major action took place, but there were patrol encounters north of the aerodrome indicating that the enemy intended to attack from that direction. Reports were also received of a large enemy concentration in Kuantan Town itself and on this our artillery was turned—apparently with excellent results. Throughout the campaign the Japanese troops showed an extraordinary lack of appreciation of the effect of artillery fire and frequently failed to take the most elementary precautions. There is no doubt that our artillery, when it got an opportunity, did great damage. The pity was that the close country and lack of observation made opportunities so scarce.

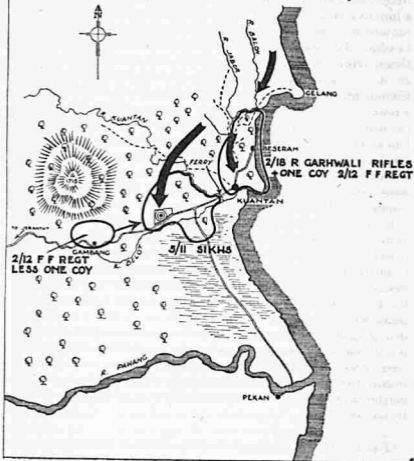
Heath was now faced with the choice of relinquishing the

THE KUANTAN OPERATIONS

30 DEC 1941 — 3 JAN 1942



MAIN ROADS
ESTATE ROADS
MARSHLAND
WOODED AREAS
ARE DRONES
BRITISH AREAS
JAPANESE ADVANCE



Kuantan aerodrome or risking the loss of the 22nd Indian Brigade Group as a result of its communications being cut. The decisive battle was likely to come in the west, and we couldn't afford to lose this brigade with all its equipment. So early on the morning of the third Painter received orders from Barstow to withdraw to Jerantut forthwith. By dusk the Kuantan force, except for the rearguard of the 2nd Frontier Force Regiment with some attached troops, was already on the way. At 7.30 p.m., the enemy delivered a furious attack against the rearguard as it was about to leave the aerodrome. There was fierce and bloody fighting at close quarters in which the darkness, added to the noise of shots and bursting shells, caused great confusion. Attack after attack was repelled as the rearguard gradually withdrew. Throughout Lt.-Col. Cummings, commanding the 2nd Frontier Force Regiment, was a tower of strength, moving rapidly in a carrier from one part of the battle-field to another until, twice wounded, he collapsed from loss of blood. For his gallantry and leadership he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Eventually the rearguard extricated itself but not before it had suffered grievous losses in the fighting on the aerodrome and in an ambush on the road in which part of it was trapped as it withdrew.

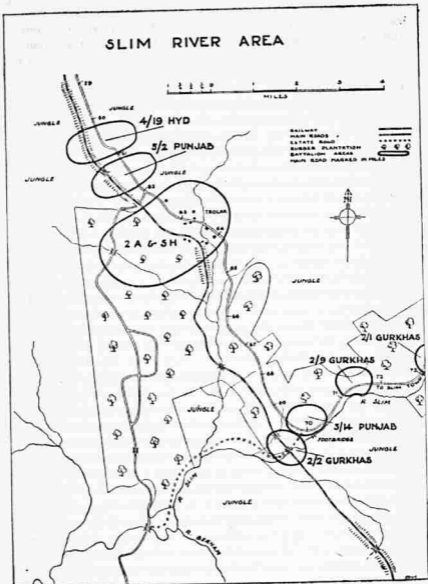
By the eighth the Kuantan force was concentrated in the Raub-Bentong area. Two of its battalions had suffered heavy losses but it was still a fighting formation. The action of this force, like that of many other forces in Malaya, had been greatly influenced by events elsewhere. It can be claimed, however, that by denying the Kuantan aerodrome to the enemy for a month it had greatly decreased the scale of air attack which the enemy was able to deliver against the Singapore area. There is little doubt also that it inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy—probably greater than those which it suffered itself. A Japanese officer has since admitted that their casualties in the Kuantan area were in the neighbourhood of 2,000, a large proportion of which were caused by our artillery fire.

The withdrawal of our force from Kuantan had taken place not a day too soon, for on 7 January was fought the disastrous Slim River battle. With one of its brigades, the 6th/15th, detached to protect its lines of communication, the 11th Indian Division was now fighting a delaying action with two brigade groups only

available on the main road front. These brigade groups were disposed in depth in two separate areas, the 12th Brigade Group being north of Trolak and the 28th Brigade Group in the vicinity of Slim River village. Divisional headquarters was some way back at Tanjong Malim, where it could also watch developments in its line of communications area. The 12th Brigade had behind it three weeks of continuous fighting and withdrawal during which it had only had two days' rest—if two days of being bombed by day and tormented by mosquitoes at night deserve the name. The position it was occupying was that which Stewart had been reconnoitring when we met him on our way north on 31 December. He had organized it with his three battalions in depth astride the road and railway. The 28th Brigade Group was resting in harbours near the Slim River village some five miles farther back ready to man its positions when ordered. Such work as it had been possible to do on the defences in these two areas had had to be done by night, for by day the Japanese aircraft had been constantly in the air bombing and machine-gunning. That again broke into the hours of rest and made the tired troops even more tired than they were before. There had not been much fighting on the ground during the days preceding the seventh except on the evening of the fifth when a strong attack down the railway had been repulsed with loss.

At about 4 a.m. on the seventh, in bright moonlight, the attack came in straight down the road. It was led by infantry who cleared the road blocks in front of the foremost localities—rather inadequate blocks it seems, for full use had apparently not been made of the concrete anti-tank cylinders which had been sent up specially for that purpose—and then the tanks came through and advanced down the road firing as they went. On they went, some two dozen of them, through the forward battalion and were not halted until they came to a cutting in the road in the area of the 5/2 Punjabis where mines had been laid. Here there was fierce fighting at close quarters and several tanks were destroyed or immobilized, our troops attacking them with small arms, grenades and fire-bottles, for there were not many anti-tank guns or rifles available. Farther on they were opposed by the Argyles, who again fought gallantly in a battle of men against machines. For over two hours the tanks were held up but then they managed to clear the blocks and continue the advance, supported by infantry.

SLIM RIVER AREA



There had been plenty of time for the news of what was happening in front to reach the troops behind, but communications had never been very strong owing to so much equipment having been lost in the earlier battles and what there were had been destroyed at the very beginning of the attack. And so it happened that the break-through by the Japanese tanks came as a complete surprise to the troops in rear of the forward brigade. Some units and individuals met the tanks as they moved along the road on their ordinary business; others were surprised in their bivouac areas. There was much confusion. Typical of many was the experience of Col. Harrison, the G.S.O.I. of the 11th Indian Division. As vague reports of trouble in front began to trickle through to the headquarters of this division, Col. Harrison was sent forward to find out what was happening. As he motored along, still well behind the front, he suddenly found himself face to face with Japanese tanks which came round a corner only a short distance in front. Only a quick dive from the car in the nick of time saved his life, but the tanks passed on behind him and there was no chance of getting back to report to the divisional commander.

At the village of Slim, fifteen miles from their starting-point, the Japanese tanks captured intact the bridge by which the road crosses the Slim River, but they had nearly shot their bolt, for a short distance farther on the leading tank was stopped by a 4.5-inch howitzer of the 155th Field Regiment, which had hastily been brought into action. But the damage had been done. The two forward brigades, as well as many supporting and administrative units, had been thrown into confusion and the Japanese tanks were in undisputed possession of the one and only road which was fit for wheeled traffic, for we had no tanks with which to attack them. What were these two brigades to do? It may be said that they should have fought on where they were for as long as possible, but that would lose sight of the fact that the standing orders to this division were that it was to remain in being as a fighting formation for there were no reserves behind it. The other alternative was to cut their losses and get out what they could down the railway line. That was the course which was eventually adopted after heavy fighting all day with the Japanese infantry. The remnants reached Tanjong Malim seventeen miles away the following morning.

Our losses from this battle were very heavy. The three battalions of the 12th Indian Brigade mustered only the equivalent of about a company each. The battalions of the 28th Indian Brigade were in much the same plight. In the artillery, the engineers and the administrative units the losses were on the same scale. Large numbers of guns and wheeled vehicles had been lost. For the time being the 11th Indian Division could hardly be called an effective fighting formation.

It would be easy to lay the blame for this disaster on the failure to organize adequate anti-tank defence, or to warn the troops in rear of what was happening, or to blow the bridges, but to do so would divert attention from the real cause, which was the utter weariness of the troops, both officers and men. They had been fighting and moving by day and night for a month and few of them had had any proper rest or relief. To their physical fatigue was added a mental fatigue brought about by the enemy's complete supremacy in the air and on the sea and by a general sense of futility. In the exhausting and enervating climate of Malaya this was too great a test of human endurance, and the troops had reached a stage when their reactions were subnormal. It was not unexpected. In fact, it was the anticipation of something of this sort happening that had prompted me to ask for more troops for the west coast front, but our Imperial commitments elsewhere had made it impossible to supply them. I was quite aware at the time that the increasing fatigue of the troops introduced an element of danger into our strategy of trying to hold the enemy as far north as we could, but the great advantages to be gained warranted the risk and the policy had the approval of higher authority.

Chapter XV

THE RETREAT TO JOHORE

THE first reinforcement convoy reached Singapore on 3 January. It brought the 45th Indian Infantry Brigade Group and a Pioneer Battalion, a non-combatant labour unit. The 45th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Duncan, was part of the 17th Indian Division. All the units of this brigade group had, with the exception of one battalion, been raised during the preceding few months, for the expansion of the Indian Army had not started until a year after the beginning of the war with Germany. The troops were very young, unseasoned and under-trained, and straight off the ship after their first experience of the sea. Such training as the brigade had done had been for warfare in the open spaces of the Middle East, which had been its intended destination until war with Japan broke out. Only a short time before it left for Malaya its divisional commander had expressed his opinion that it was unfit for service overseas. It was typical of many formations and units which came to Malaya. In making these statements I have no wish to blame anybody for sending these troops to Malaya. After all, it was better than having none at all. But it does serve to illustrate the difficulty of expanding rapidly enough for the needs of a major war when our armed forces have been allowed to sink to such a low level as they were before this last war. I would have dearly liked to give the troops of the 45th Brigade Group a period of training under Malayan conditions before sending them into action, and it was with this in mind that I sent them up at once to the Malacca-Jasin area where accommodation and facilities existed. But it was not to be and it was not long before the brigade found itself involved in a death struggle with the flower of the Japanese army.

On 5 January, at a conference held at Segamat in North Johore, I had given out my plan for the withdrawal to and defence of Johore. At that time I still hoped that we would be able to come back in our own time and that we would at least be able to impose substantial delay on the enemy. I did not contemplate giving up Kuala Lumpur until the middle of the month at the earliest, by

which time our forces would, I hoped, be getting a bit stronger. The plan in outline was that the 3rd Indian Corps was to fall back slowly by the west coast roads and take up a position on the general line Segamat-Muar, while the A.I.F. remained responsible for the defence of the east coast. Gordon Bennett, I think, would have liked the whole of the A.I.F. to be transferred to the west coast and the 3rd Indian Corps to take over the east coast, but I did not feel that this was a sound proposal. It would have involved some very complicated moves as we could not afford to leave the east coast weakly defended even for a day and it is always simpler for a formation to fall back on its own communications. Moreover, one of the divisions of the 3rd Indian Corps was in reasonably good fettle, even if numerically weak, and there was the fresh 45th Brigade Group just arriving. So I told Gordon Bennett that I could not at that time agree to his proposal but that I would watch the situation carefully. Gordon Bennett had for some time, under my instructions, been planning the defence of this area and after the conference he and I and Heath went to look at the Muar sector on the left flank which presented some difficulties. The Muar River itself, after rising in the central mountain range, passes a few miles west of Segamat and then winds a tortuous course through swampy valleys to the sea at the town of Muar, or Bandar Maharani, as it is marked on some maps. West of Segamat it is crossed by two road bridges and by one railway bridge, but in the whole stretch of forty miles, as the crow flies, between there and the sea there is no bridge. At Muar, where it is several hundred yards wide, the river is crossed by a vehicle ferry. As a result of our reconnaissance we decided to site the defences on the south bank of the river so as to make the best use of the water obstacle.

Another matter discussed at that time was the possibility of the Japanese attempting a landing direct on to the west coast of Singapore Island which, in view of our naval weakness, seemed to be not out of the question. Keith Simmons, the commander of the Singapore fortress, had some time previously been instructed to make plans for the defence of the north and west coasts of the island and he was now told to pay particular attention to the latter. The appearance of what appeared to be Japanese military landing-craft off the coast of Selangor a few days previously had made the west coast threat look a great deal more possible than

it previously had done. From what we now know this view was fully justified.

Before the plans which I have outlined above could be put into effect the situation was completely altered by the disaster at Slim River, recorded in the last chapter. On the morning of 7 January, the day on which that battle took place, General Wavell reached Singapore en route to Java where the headquarters of the new South-West Pacific Command were to be established. Early the following morning he left for Kuala Lumpur to see for himself the situation at the front. Accompanied by Heath he visited the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division at Batu Caves and then went forward to see the troops who had survived the Slim River battle. It was only too apparent that they were no longer in a condition to withstand the enemy's advance and that immediate steps must be taken to withdraw them behind fresh troops for a rest. The decision was therefore taken to withdraw the battle-front without delay to Johore where a new front could be formed with such fresh, or comparatively fresh, troops as could be made available. Verbal instructions were issued by Wavell to Heath to start preparing plans at once for this withdrawal pending the issue of written orders. Wavell returned to Singapore the same evening. On the eleventh he left Singapore for Java.

On the ninth, as a result of instructions received from Wavell, I issued revised orders for the withdrawal to and defence of Johore. The main points of these orders were as under:

- (a) Gordon Bennett was to concentrate one brigade group of the A.I.F. in the Segamat area as soon as possible.
- (b) The 45th Indian Infantry Brigade Group was to come under Gordon Bennett's command at once and the 9th Indian Division as soon as it entered Johore.
- (c) The 3rd Indian Corps to withdraw from its present position into Johore as soon as possible under orders to be issued by the corps commander, covering its withdrawal with the maximum number of demolitions.
- (d) After withdrawal the 3rd Indian Corps, less the 9th Indian Division, to take over operational responsibility for South Johore up to and inclusive of the line Endau-Kluang-Batu-Pahat, absorbing the 22nd Australian Brigade Group, which was still on the east coast. Gordon Bennett with his newly

organized force, to be known as Westforce, was to be responsible for that part of Johore which lies north of the above line.

It will be observed that the main difference between this plan and the original one was that the State of Johore, instead of being divided longitudinally so that each force would be in depth and fall back on its own communications, was now divided laterally. The new plan also involved the temporary splitting up of the A.I.F., which I had been doing my utmost to avoid. All the same, I do not see how any better plan could have been evolved in the circumstances as they existed at the time.

For those who are not acquainted with the topography of Malaya it will be of interest to point out here that this withdrawal to Johore extended over a distance from north to south of nearly 150 miles and involved the abandonment of the States of Selangor and Negri Sembilan, two of the most highly developed States in the whole of Malaya, and of the ancient colony of Malacca; also of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of the Federated Malay States, and of many other prosperous towns. The military evacuation of Kuala Lumpur had started over a week before, but there were still vast quantities of military and civil stores there and in other parts of the area to be evacuated which it was quite impossible to move. Pillars of smoke and flame rose into the sky as rubber factories, mine machinery, petrol, and oil stocks, were denied. Small wonder that British prestige sank to a very low ebb among the population.

On the morning of the tenth I held another commanders' conference at Segamat. The outline orders were confirmed and supplemented by allotment of supporting arms and by administrative instructions. Two infantry battalions from the garrison of the Singapore fortress were ordered to the mainland, the 2/17 Dogras to the east coast and the 2nd Loyal Regiment (less one company) to the Segamat area. It was decided that the main line of resistance should be on the general line Batu Anam-Muar. Batu Anam is some eight miles west of Segamat and in front of the Muar River. It was selected because there was a large open area astride the road there where we thought we could make good use of our superior artillery. I laid down that there was to be no withdrawal beyond the line Segamat-Muar without my personal

permission. As our area of manœuvre was becoming so restricted, I felt that the time had now come to exercise more direct personal control of the operations than had previously been possible.

After the conference, we did a rapid reconnaissance of the position to be occupied. We spent some time examining and discussing a forward position west of Gemas which Gordon Bennett had selected for a major ambush. These were tactics which I had constantly been advocating as I felt that the terrain was so admirably suited to them and that the Japanese disregard of ordinary precautions as they advanced would make success almost certain. And so it proved. But you must have fresh troops for ambushes and the pity was that we so seldom had any. The position selected in this case was where the main road passed through a belt of thick jungle. There were small wooden bridges over streams which could be blown at the right moment and there was a good obstacle behind covered by gun-fire where the enemy tanks could be stopped. Altogether almost an ideal position.

The next day I went forward and visited the troops in the forward areas. On the way back I saw a sight which was all too common in Malaya in those days—the destruction of a village by fire. This was the large village of Gemas, typical of many similar villages with its rows of wooden shops and dwellings, all built of the flimsiest material. What had set it on fire I do not know. It may have been a bomb or it may have been a fifth-column agent. But in a very few minutes it was a blazing furnace and before long there was very little village left. It was a sad sight.

For the withdrawal of the 3rd Indian Corps there were available two good roads in the west coast area, i.e. the main Kuala Lumpur-Segamat trunk road and the coastal road Klang-Morib-Port Dickson-Malacca, and one secondary road which lay between these two. The 9th Indian Division, moving along the high ground on the right, had the tortuous and little-used road Bentong-Durian Tipus and thence either via Kuala Pilah or Bahau to join the main trunk road two miles north of Tampin. As the ferry at Muar had only a most limited capacity, the weakness of this road system was that all roads converged at Segamat through which all southward-bound wheeled traffic had to pass. This would have taxed the most carefully planned traffic organization. In the circumstances of a hurried retreat, congestion and traffic jams are almost certain to occur even in an experienced

army with a good traffic control organization. Picture then the situation in our semi-trained army with drivers and traffic control personnel often speaking different languages, with all roads leading to one bottle-neck and with nerves already on edge. Traffic jams there were, but it was fortunate that they occurred chiefly at night when the Japanese aircraft were not often active. In the end we got away with much bad language but without much material damage. But I anticipate, for we had to break off contact before all this happened.

On the morning of 10 January the situation on the west coast front was that the 28th Indian Brigade, with various units besides its own under command, was in position near the village of Serendah, five miles north of Rawang on the main road; the 6th/15th Brigade, also with other units under command, was blocking the roads south of Batu Arang, and on the west coast road there was a composite force, under Lines of Communications Area, north of Klang where the Kuala Lumpur-Port Swettenham road crosses a large tidal river. The long withdrawal was to start that night.

Soon after dawn the Japanese attacked the Serendah position in strength with strong air support and, adopting their usual tactics, began to envelop both flanks. The job of the 28th Brigade was to avoid being enveloped before the withdrawal began, so the forward troops gradually fell back after hand-to-hand fighting between Gurkhas and Japanese in Serendah village. Two or three miles south of this is the village of Sungei Choh. The 3/17 Dogras, who had opposed the first landings at Kota Bharu so stoutly and were now loaned to the 11th Indian Division, were the first to reach the village and found it already held by the enemy. They gallantly attempted to clear the village with the bayonet, but were prevented from coming to grips by the stout creeper-clad fences surrounding the houses. The battalion casualties in killed, wounded, and missing, were very heavy, and another fine battalion had lost much of its fighting value, for there were no longer any trained reserves with which to fill the gaps. Eventually, late in the day, the brigadier managed to extricate what was left of his brigade and withdraw, in pouring rain and overcrowded transport, through Kuala Lumpur to a reserve area at Tampin.

The 6th/15th Brigade, after leaving Batang Berjuntai where

one of its battalions had had a rough time, was left comparatively unmolested on the tenth. It provided the rearguard for the withdrawal through Kuala Lumpur which was completed in the early hours of the eleventh and at 4.30 a.m. the last bridge in the Federal capital was blown. The brigade went to Labu, west of Seremban.

On the coast road things were more lively, and fighting developed over a wide area. After an unsuccessful attempt to capture Klang in the morning the enemy moved eastwards and cut the main road between Klang and Kuala Lumpur. After dark they succeeded in ambushing two columns of our troops as they withdrew along this road. Nevertheless, most of our troops including those from Port Swettenham got clear away and moved during the night to the Port Dickson area, but the big bridge at Klang was rather ineffectively blown.

Contact with the enemy had now been broken off, and during the next three days the withdrawal continued without interference except from the air. By the fourteenth all troops of the 3rd Indian Corps had passed through the forward troops of Westforce and the command of the forward area passed to Gordon Bennett. Heath assumed responsibility for South and East Johore at 8 p.m. on the same day. During the withdrawal, demolitions were carried out on all roads. In particular gaps were blown in all bridges over what might constitute an anti-tank obstacle but, as usual, they did not seem to impose any great delay on the enemy. In fact, throughout the campaign, the Japanese showed themselves adepts at overcoming obstacles. The bridges, big and small, destroyed by our troops as they fell back, some of them no doubt not too effectively, ran into many hundreds. In our pre-war planning we had anticipated that by this means we should be able to impose considerable delay on the enemy, but this was in fact far from what happened. Although these extensive demolitions must have had some considerable effect on the Japanese maintenance problem, even the gaps over the biggest obstacles—and there are some big ones in Malaya—never delayed the advance of their armies for more than two or three days at the outside. In a rough practical way the Japanese were certainly very efficient.

At this stage Heath represented to me that an Indian Army officer was required to pull together and re-establish confidence

in what remained of the 11th Indian Division. To this I agreed, though at the same time I took pains to explain to Paris that the change by no means indicated loss of confidence in him. He was succeeded by Key, whose place in command of the 8th Indian Brigade was taken by Lay. At the same time Col. Challen took over command of the 6th/15th Indian Brigade.

Our rapid withdrawal from North and Central Malaya had taxed our administrative organization to the utmost. For reasons I have explained earlier in this book a proportion of our reserves of all descriptions had been placed at selected sites on the mainland of Malaya. In particular many of them were in the Kuala Lumpur area, which was an additional reason for wanting to hold on to it for as long as we could. There was also a large dump just south of Segamat, which had been sited there to serve both east and west coast railways. This again influenced my decision to hold a position west of Segamat. By careful organization we managed to evacuate a good proportion of our reserves. The exception was petrol which, being contained in large drums, was bulky to handle and required more transport than we had available to move it. Most of it had to be denied on the spot by puncturing the drums and letting it run to waste. To avoid the Johore Causeway bottle-neck we now created new dumps in the South Johore area. Another problem which faced us in this curious war was how to keep the troops in the forward areas supplied when the enemy, as so frequently happened, cut the road communications behind them. One of the guiding principles of administration in the field is to keep your reserves mobile in the forward areas, but it is no good doing that if you have not got control of your own communications. The best answer, of course, and the one which was such a big factor later on in the success of our operations in other theatres, is to supply your forward troops by air. But then we had no proper aircraft available for this and our air force even had very few containers for supply dropping. So I had to resort to what seemed the only solution and order that seven days' reserves of all sorts would be held by troops in the forward areas if they were in danger of having their communications cut.

The rapid increase in the population of Singapore Island as refugees streamed south caused us some concern as regards the food situation. There were some who asserted that refugees

should not be allowed to cross the Causeway, but again we were up against the colour problem. Naturally we did not want to leave Europeans to the mercy of the Japanese, so why any more should we leave Asiatics, many of whom were doomed men if the Japanese got hold of them? There was no time to sort them out, so we took what seemed to be the right and proper course and, while trying to persuade them to stay in their own homes, allowed those who wanted to do so to come to Singapore.

The need for increased hospital accommodation in the Johore and Singapore areas now began to make itself felt. All the hospitals in North and Central Malaya and the large Australian base hospital at Malacca had been cleared. The Alexandra military hospital was full and new buildings had to be taken over. Included among these was a wing of the large new civil hospital at Johore Bahru. Both the War Office and Australia had been approached with a view to provision of hospital ship accommodation but, owing to the needs of other theatres of war, no final arrangements could be made and no ship could be promised. With the help of the navy, however, the *Wu Sueh*, a Yangtze river boat of 3,400 tons and five feet draught, had some time previously been bought and redesigned as a hospital ship. She was not considered capable of making an ocean voyage, though later she did so. It was, however, the best that could be done and might at any rate make transport possible to the Dutch East Indies.

One of the most serious consequences of the rapid withdrawal was the congestion which developed on the railway. There was only a single line except at the stations and there were not enough sidings in the south to accommodate all the trains we wanted to bring back. In consequence, thirteen trains fully laden with valuable material had to be parked on the Malacca branch line and there they had to be left. Last minute efforts to destroy them by air attack were made, but this was only partially successful. On one of these trains was a large consignment of maps of Singapore Island, which had been printed to a special order by the Malayan Survey at Kuala Lumpur. Many may have wondered why they had to fight the battle of Singapore without maps. That was the reason.

In spite of the loss of the aerodromes in Central Malaya, the important convoy of large American liners reached Singapore

safely on 13 January. The ships were discharged with great rapidity and left again in a very short time. I must say something here about the arrival of these convoys because they were operations which demanded the utmost care and the most careful planning, and also because very little was known about these operations outside those directly responsible. They were essentially combined operations in which all three Services were involved. The navy was responsible for routing and docking the ships and for their protection from sea attack, the air force for their protection against air attack, and the army for anti-aircraft ground defence once they had come within the umbrella and for the discharge of the cargoes. The air force took over their responsibility as the convoys passed through the narrow Banka Straits off the coast of Sumatra, 300 miles south of Singapore. From there on they were within easy range of the Japanese aircraft based either on the Malayan aerodromes or, after they had occupied them, on those in West Borneo. If the convoys were going to the Naval Base they had to pass along the south coast of Singapore Island and enter the Johore Straits from the east. These were periods of great anxiety. The great ships appeared to be so vulnerable and it seemed almost impossible that they could escape detection. And we knew that they had on board men and material that we so badly needed. It speaks volumes for the care with which the plans were worked out and for the secrecy with which they were kept that only one ship of these convoys was lost before it had discharged its cargo. But the story of that will come later.

In the convoy with which we are dealing came the 53rd British Infantry Brigade group, one heavy and one light anti-aircraft regiment, and fifty Hurricane fighters packed in crates. On the face of it these were very valuable and important reinforcements. The 53rd Brigade Group was part of the 18th British Division, one of the second-line Territorial formations, which had left England during the previous October destined for the Middle East. When war with Japan broke out it was off the east coast of Africa and, as we have already seen, was diverted for service in Malaya. The 53rd Brigade Group came on ahead direct, while the remainder of the division went to India where it was landed for a fortnight or so before coming on to Malaya. When the 53rd

Brigade Group arrived at Singapore it had been at sea for eleven weeks so that the troops, although fit, were naturally very soft. Few of them had ever been out of England before and practically none of them had been in the Tropics. They arrived without their transport and the artillery without its guns, which were coming on in a slower convoy. These deficiencies we were able to make up temporarily on a modified scale. I naturally wanted to leave this brigade for as long as possible in a quiet area, for it had a hectic time ahead of it unpacking and sorting out equipment, drawing and issuing vehicles, guns, and tropical clothing, and generally becoming accustomed to the strange surroundings. Any officer who reads this story, and especially commanding officers and quartermasters, will know what that means. Time was also required for the troops to become acclimatized. So I put them first of all into billets and camps on Singapore Island in the hope that it would be possible later to move them to the east coast in relief of the 22nd Australian Brigade Group which would then be able to rejoin the A.I.F. We even got so far as to send forward an advance party to arrange the relief. But the swift march of events on the west coast eventually made this impossible.

About this time we had a further proof of the loyalty and whole-hearted co-operation of our Dutch allies. It came in the form of the offer of a detachment of *Marechaussées*, native troops with European officers specially trained in guerrilla fighting in the jungle. I accepted the offer and the detachment arrived at Singapore about the middle of the month. During the latter part of January it operated against the Japanese communications and had considerable success, inflicting a number of casualties and doing material damage. Eventually it exhausted its supplies and was forced to leave the country, about half of the force returning to Sumatra by sea.

We had great hopes of the Hurricane fighters. We had seen what they could do in the Western theatre and we saw visions of them clearing the navy "O"s out of the air in a very short time. To avoid the danger of losses on the aerodromes while they were being assembled, they were dispersed in ones and twos all over the island and one suddenly came across them in the most unexpected places. All ranks of the air force set to work with a will to get them ready for the air, a task which was completed in an incredibly short space of time. But again we had counted our

chickens before they were hatched. The machines themselves were not of the most modern type. There were only twenty-four pilots and there was no formed squadron ready for service. None of the pilots had had experience of flying in Malayan conditions, which are very different to those in the West, and there was no time to give them this experience. In short, the air force reinforcements suffered from the same limitations as the army reinforcements. For a day or two these Hurricanes did much damage, but then the Japanese, with their infinitely greater resources, got the measure of them. Casualties could not be replaced and after a week or two our temporary advantage had vanished.

To offset to some extent the increase in our strength through the arrival of reinforcements we had now lost the services of the Federated Malay State Volunteer Force as a formed body—and that in rather an unexpected way. This force had been recruited on a State basis and, as the withdrawal took place, the Asiatic members of the force rather naturally began to show concern for the safety of their families, most of whom were residents of the States in which they were serving. We were faced with the alternative of attempting to compel them to fulfil their contracts, at the expense almost certainly of discontented and rather ineffective units, or of allowing those who wished to do so to hand in their arms and disperse to their homes. This was no time to try to enforce the letter of the law. What was important was that the troops which we did have should be full of the fighting spirit. Moreover, we were desperately short of weapons and could make much better use of them elsewhere. So I decided to let those go who wanted to. Each man, as the State to which his unit belonged was evacuated, was given the option of coming south with us and continuing the fight or of handing in his arms and returning home. The great majority of the Asiatics chose the latter course.

Reviewing the situation at this stage (the middle of January), I estimated that the Japanese had a minimum of five divisions with adequate local reserves in Malaya and at least two divisions with a formation of air-borne troops in reserve in Indo-China or on the water. Their army in Malaya included an armoured component which conferred a great advantage upon them as we had no tanks. We had a total of approximately three divisions with fixed and anti-aircraft defences. In addition we might expect

to receive the equivalent of about another division before the end of the month. In the air, the Japanese probably out-numbered us at this time by about four to one, while the all-round performance of their machines was distinctly better than that of ours. From 10 January onwards they made daylight attacks with bombers escorted by fighters against the Singapore area, mostly directed against our aerodromes. On the twelfth three attacks were made by a total of 122 aircraft while on the same day our photographic reconnaissance recorded 200 aircraft on aerodromes in Malaya excluding those in Kelantan. On the sea, Japanese coastal vessels were now able to move freely down the west coast covered by aircraft.

It was very important that we should hold as much as possible of the State of Johore. In the first place, we wanted room for manœuvre and we wanted room to deploy reinforcements on the mainland as they arrived. Then, as in Central Malaya, there was a string of aerodromes and landing-grounds in the centre of Johore—the unfinished aerodrome of Kahang on the right, the large modern aerodrome at Kluang in the centre and the small aerodrome at Batu Pahat on the left. If the Japanese could get possession of these their attacks on Singapore would be greatly intensified. Finally, there were political considerations. The State of Johore was an Unfederated Malay State bound to us by treaty. It maintained at its own expense a small military force and had in the past made a most generous contribution to Imperial Defence. These factors made it politically desirable that we should hold as much of that State as possible.

A large part of the State of Johore, especially in the western area, is under rubber and other plantations. The centre and eastern areas are not so highly developed, though here also there are some extensive rubber plantations. Communications are limited. Through the west coast area run the railway, the main trunk road, and a fairly good coastal road. There is also a good motor road from Johore Bahru, the capital, which lies at the northern end of the Causeway, to Mersing and thence to Endau. There is only one lateral road which runs from Jemaluang south of Mersing to Kluang and thence to Batu Pahat. This road, therefore, was of great strategic importance.

I estimated that the 18th British Division could not be deployed and ready to fight on the mainland at the earliest before the end

of the first week in February, i.e. three and a half weeks ahead. We were obviously going to have our work cut out to hold the enemy for as long as that, especially as the fighting value of some of our troops was not now what it had been at the beginning. Nevertheless, we were all determined to make a great effort—especially the Australians, who had now got their chance. I felt that the crisis of the campaign had come and that its result might well be determined within the next few days.

Chapter XVI

OPERATIONS IN NORTH-WEST JOHORE

By midday on 14 January the dispositions of Westforce were complete. I would stress here that, on account of the vastness of the country in which we were operating and the comparative weakness of our forces, no form of purely static defence offered any prospect of success because the enemy would always be able to walk round our flanks. My view was that it was essentially a war of mobility and that our best chance of slowing up the enemy's advance was to block him astride the main arteries of communication and hit him with such strength as we could muster when he tried to move round the flanks. The dispositions of Westforce were based broadly on this conception. Thus on the main trunk road the 8th Brigade of the 9th Indian Division was disposed in depth in battalion areas astride the road and railway as a holding force. On its right was a battalion of the 27th Australian Brigade located in a rubber plantation with a mobile offensive role, while another battalion of the same brigade was in reserve in the Buloh Kasap area where the road and railway cross the Muar River. It might be argued that our main position should have been behind this river obstacle, but there was thick vegetation with little visibility along its banks and it would have required a larger force than we had got to defend it properly. To the left of the 8th Brigade and some little distance from it was the 22nd Brigade of the 9th Indian Division. It had a dual role, firstly of covering the approaches to Segamat from Malacca, and secondly of stopping any Japanese forces which might fan out round the flanks of the 8th Brigade. In the words of Barstow, the divisional commander, "We're going to squeeze this lemon hard and some of the juice may run out at the bottom. Your job is to catch it and see that none of it gets away." Some distance in front of the main position on the trunk road was the ambush laid by the 2/30 Battalion of the 27th Australian Brigade with supporting troops, which I will describe in more detail later.

It will be appreciated from the above that units of the various formations were somewhat intermingled. Especially was this the

case as regards the artillery units. All the complications which arose were, however, happily settled without friction, thanks to the excellent spirit of co-operation between British, Australian, and Indian troops, which had grown up during the few days during which Westforce had been settling down into position. A fine lead in this respect had been given by Barstow, the senior commander on this flank and one of exceptional qualifications, who now had his first opportunity in the campaign of really exercising command. The personification of drive and kindness, his tall, spare figure, gentle manner and terrific energy made an immediate and lasting impression, and he set an example which all were quick to follow. The advantages of training at our Staff Colleges, where students from all parts of the Empire learn to work together for the common good, were well illustrated in his general outlook. In general, Westforce by 14 January had their tails well up and were confident that they would be the first to put a definite stop to the enemy's progress down the peninsula.

On the left flank at Muar the 45th Indian Infantry Brigade was also in position with some Australian artillery in support as it had no artillery of its own. This new and untried brigade had an exceedingly difficult task allotted to it, and one that was to prove beyond its powers, for it not only had to watch a tortuous river line on a front of twenty-five miles as the crow flies but it also had to be prepared to protect its own left flank and rear against sea-borne landings. It was disposed with two battalions forward on the river line and one in reserve, the latter being responsible also for watching the coastline. To make matters worse, the brigade commander had been told to establish an outpost position across the river and two companies of each of the forward battalions were allotted to it. In my opinion this was a tactical error. The river obstacle should have been used as the basis of the defence and there should have been no more than a few patrols in front of it. I have the impression that Gordon Bennett's attention was concentrated unduly on what he considered to be his main front and that he looked upon the Muar sector rather as a flank from which no real danger was likely to develop.

The battle opened most auspiciously with a great success at Gemas. The 2/30 Australian battalion was disposed with one company forward immediately east of the bridge over the river

Gemencheh and some three miles in front of the main battalion position. Seven hundred yards of road were covered by the weapons of this company, while the fire of the artillery was to come down on the road beyond. The rest of the force was in position just west of Gemas covering an anti-tank obstacle. This battalion, under the energetic leadership of its commander, Lt.-Col. Galleghan, had been practising these tactics for some time past in the quieter areas of Johore. It was expected that the Japanese would arrive on the fifteenth, but at 4 p.m. on the fourteenth their leading troops appeared mounted, as had been anticipated, on bicycles. Twenty minutes later 250 cyclists had passed through the ambush area, 500 were in it, and another 500, all on bicycles, were seen approaching. At that moment the bridge was blown and timber, rocks, bicycles, and bodies were thrown high into the air, while the fire of the Australians swept through the helpless Japanese within and approaching the ambush. Only one thing went wrong—when the artillery fire was called for it was found that the telephone line had been cut by the Japanese who had passed through the ambush area. The company then fell back on to the main position. On the fifteenth the enemy attacked this position with infantry supported by tanks, so once again their sappers must have done a quick repair job. Fighting went on throughout the day, several enemy tanks being knocked out by our anti-tank guns. The following night the force withdrew to a position east of Gemas. It had inflicted several hundreds of casualties on the enemy and destroyed several tanks at a loss to itself of under a hundred casualties. It was a very fine performance and showed clearly what could be done by trained troops in this type of operation. It was not until the evening of the eighteenth that the Japanese attacked again on this front. Unfortunately events elsewhere intervened as usual and prevented us completing the trial of our new tactics. As far as they went they had been outstandingly successful.

The Japanese air offensive against Muar had started on the eleventh. The bombing of the town, as in other places, started a general exodus, among those who left being the Asiatic employees of the waterworks and of the power station and the ferrymen. The manning of the ferries became another job for a hard-worked company of sappers and miners already engaged on preparing

bridges for demolition, the construction of a river boom, the obstruction of open spaces against air landings, the laying of minefields, and many other jobs. By the fifteenth, Japanese troops were firmly established along the north bank of the river though little news of their advance had come from the outpost troops. A small party had also been landed on the coast south of Muar and another at the lighthouse near Batu Pahat, another small town at the mouth of the river of that name thirty miles down the coast from Muar. During the following night groups of the enemy appear to have crossed the River Muar above Muar town. In the morning steps were taken to attack them and drive them back, but the penetration turned out to be on a bigger scale than expected and before long they had cut the road which leads from Muar to Yong Peng, a village on the main trunk road, at a point between Muar and Bakri where the reserve battalion was located. The commanding officer of this battalion ran into the road block and was killed.

In the meantime a series of disasters had happened in the Muar area. The troops who had been sent to eject the enemy from the area east of Muar had suffered heavily, a fresh landing from barges or special landing-craft had been made at the mouth of the river, the battalion commander, second-in-command, and all company commanders had been killed, and the battalion, with two companies lost across the river and deprived of most of its British officers, had practically ceased to exist. The right forward battalion, which had had little contact during the day, succeeded in withdrawing its two companies from across the river and occupied a perimeter position for the night in the Jorak area close to the river. By nightfall all that remained of the rest of the brigade was concentrated in the Bakri area. Muar was in the hands of the enemy.

Bakri is thirty miles from the village of Yong Peng through which passed the only road communications to Westforce still seventy miles to the north. The situation was very threatening and demanded action both by Gordon Bennett and by myself. Gordon Bennett immediately withdrew the reserve battalion, the 2/29th, from his 27th Brigade and sent it by M.T. to reinforce the Muar front. It arrived the following day. For my part, I was fortunately up forward at the 11th Indian Division headquarters when the events recorded above took place. Here I took two

NORTH - WEST JOHORE AREA



decisions. Firstly, as I thought that Gordon Bennett with his small divisional staff already had his hands more than full in controlling two such widely separated fronts, I decided to make the 3rd Indian Corps responsible for the protection of his communications against these threats from the west. I therefore extended its area of responsibility to include the area bounded by the road from Ayer Hitam to Yong Peng and thence to Batu Pahat. Secondly, I placed the 53rd British Brigade Group, recently arrived at Singapore, under orders of 3rd Indian Corps and ordered it to move the following night to the Ayer Hitam area. Gordon Bennett has expressed his disappointment that this brigade was not used to relieve his own 22nd Brigade on the east coast so that the latter could have been transferred to his command. The fact of the matter, apart from any other reason, was that there simply was not time in the existing situation to carry out the relief.

At noon the following day, after a short visit to the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division at Ayer Hitam, where the lateral road crosses the main trunk road, I met Gordon Bennett at his rear headquarters on the Paloh road some four miles east of Yong Peng. I took Key and Fawcett, the B.G.S. of 3rd Indian Corps, with me. An important decision had to be taken. We were faced with the alternatives of starting immediately a rapid withdrawal of the whole Segamat force or of trying to stabilize the Muar front. Gordon Bennett and I were both very averse to ordering a withdrawal from Segamat. We felt that it would be so damaging to morale. The Australian troops had only just gone into action with orders to stop the enemy and had already had a success. The Indian troops, who had had such a bad time up-country, were just beginning to find their feet again and another withdrawal would undoubtedly put them right back. But if we left them there we might easily lose the lot. We decided to take a chance and anyway to make an effort to stabilize the Muar front. To this end it was arranged that Gordon Bennett would strengthen the Muar force with any troops he could make available from the Segamat front while I, for my part, issued orders for the immediate relief of the 2/19 Australian battalion from Jemaluang on the east coast front by a battalion of the 53rd British Brigade and for the dispatch of that battalion to the Muar front to come under orders of Westforce. This relief was carried out with such dispatch

that the battalion reached its destination on the morning of the eighteenth. It should be noted that at this time we had little idea of the strength of the enemy opposing us on the Muar front. Indeed, throughout the campaign we were so blind from lack of ground visibility and lack of air reconnaissance that we frequently under-estimated the strength of the enemy opposed to us. It appears certain now that Duncan, the commander of the 45th Indian Brigade, was equally in the dark, for at that time he was still planning a counter-attack to recapture Muar. It was only when he started to move forward that he found himself opposed by strong enemy forces which included some tanks. He therefore decided to organize a perimeter defence near the Bakri road junction and to concentrate on withdrawing into it his detached right forward battalion. Contact was made with it, but the road was blocked by enemy detachments and it was not till twenty-four hours later that it reached the vicinity of the perimeter camp. Almost at the last moment it was ambushed. The commanding officer and his adjutant were killed and there were many casualties. The young Indian recruits were helpless. They did not even know how to take cover and there were not enough officers to control them. I say this in no spirit of disparagement. It was the penalty of years of unpreparedness for war coming out in all its stark nakedness.

On the eighteenth our Intelligence Service reported that the Japanese were advancing with two divisions in the front line, a division of the Imperial Guards being in the Muar area and the 5th Division, known to have been specially trained in landing operations, on the main road. It was only then that the real threat from Muar became apparent. We did all we could to harass the enemy in this area including air attack and shelling of Muar town itself by a gunboat during the hours of darkness, but I felt that our chances of holding up this division for any length of time were remote, especially as further landings had been reported a few miles north-west of Batu Pahat on the afternoon of the eighteenth. That evening Gordon Bennett rang me up. We both felt that to hang on any longer in front of Segamat would be to court disaster and I at once gave approval to his suggestion that he should immediately withdraw his whole force on that front behind the River Segamat as a preliminary to a further withdrawal should such become necessary. This decision was naturally taken with

the utmost reluctance, but events were to prove that it was undoubtedly the right one. In fact, had it been delayed even for twenty-four hours it is probable that the greater part of that force would have been lost.

At the same time I regrouped the forces by placing the whole of the Muar front temporarily under 3rd Indian Corps. This decision, although nobody raised any objection to it at the time, may seem strange and needs some explanation, especially as it had to be reversed not long afterwards. The reasons for it were twofold. Firstly, it was necessary now to co-ordinate all the operations in the Muar-Yong Peng-Batu Pahat area, which could only be done by putting this area under one command. Secondly, the Westforce commander and staff were now faced with an intricate problem on the Segamat front and were not in a position to give the same attention to the Muar front as were the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division. In any case the latter were already responsible for building up a supporting position west of Yong Peng. It has been suggested that at this stage all available troops should have been used to counter-attack up to Bakri to relieve the force there. That is a local view which might naturally have been held by those interested only in the safety of the Muar force, but it fails to take into account the wider threat which was developing from the coast down as far as Batu Pahat. The fact of the matter was that sea-power, supported by air-power, had become, as so often in our history, one of the dominating factors in the situation—only this time it was the enemy and not we who held the trump cards.

Five miles west of Yong Peng is a long causeway flanked on each side by swamps. A little farther on the road runs for a mile and a half through a defile between the ridges of Bukit Payong. Here it is joined from the south by the road from Batu Pahat. About five miles beyond the end of the defile the road to Muar crosses a stream called the Sungei Simpang Kiri by a bridge at Parit Sulong. The distance from Parit Sulong to Bakri is about fourteen miles.

Since the morning of the seventeenth a battalion of the 53rd British Brigade had been in position astride the defile on Bukit Payong, the dominating feature in that part of the country. It sent forward a platoon to garrison Parit Sulong bridge. On the afternoon of the nineteenth the battalion was attacked from the

direction of the Batu Pahat road and was driven back from the defile which thus fell into the enemy's hands, severing all land communication with the Muar force. In this action some excellent work was done by a battery of the 155th Field Regiment.

In the Bakri area also things were developing badly that day. In the morning enemy columns coming in from the south cut the road behind our defensive position, at the same time capturing and destroying much transport which had been parked in that area. Brigade headquarters received a direct hit from a heavy aerial bomb and was practically wiped out, though the brigadier and brigade major escaped with a bad shaking. In the afternoon repeated attacks were made on our position and there was much bitter fighting at close quarters.

At 2.20 p.m. on the nineteenth I held a conference at Yong Peng. Heath, Gordon Bennett, Key, and Duke (the commander of the 53rd Brigade) were present. It was decided that the 53rd Brigade Group should hold a position from the bridge at Parit Sulong to the high ground west of the causeway and that the 45th Brigade Group should be ordered to withdraw at once through it to a position west of Yong Peng; also that the Segamat force should continue its withdrawal at once. The withdrawal of the latter force could only be carried out at night owing to the enemy's air supremacy, and we estimated that the force could not be clear of Yong Peng till the night 23-24 January at the earliest. So we still had to hold the enemy on the Muar front west of Yong Peng for four and a half days. The situation was extremely critical. As the only communication with our Muar force was now by wireless from Headquarters Westforce, Gordon Bennett was instructed to send the order for withdrawal on return to his headquarters. It got through and the Muar force started to concentrate ready for the withdrawal on the evening of the nineteenth.

It should be explained that Duke now had only one of his own battalions in his brigade. One battalion was at Batu Pahat where a separate force had now been organized and one had been used for the relief at Jemaluang, from which place it was now again withdrawn. In place of them he had an Indian battalion and later the 2nd Loyals, which had been brought forward from the Singapore garrison. This breaking up of an organized formation is, of course, contrary to all military teaching but, with so many

danger points and so few troops to guard them, it proved most difficult to avoid.

Events anticipated the full implementation of the above plan for, as we have seen, even as it was being made the forward troops of the 53rd Brigade Group were being driven off the defile west of the causeway. During the following night and the morning of the twentieth, great efforts were made to recapture this position. Some progress was made, but the necessity for staging the attacks with a force which was only then being assembled, combined with the thickness of the jungle, militated against success and the enemy remained in possession of the defile.

In the meantime the difficult withdrawal from the Segamat area was going well though closely pressed by the enemy and by the morning of the twentieth the force was east of the double bottle-necks formed by the rivers Muar and Segamat with comparatively light losses in men and material. By the morning of the twenty-first the 27th Australian Brigade Group was already in position covering the vital road junction at Yong Peng. The forward brigade of the 9th Indian Division was in the Labis area, where it again ambushed the leading Japanese troops with success.

At this stage, i.e. early on the morning of the twenty-first, I again regrouped the forces, transferring the command of all troops on the Yong Peng-Muar road to Gordon Bennett. The reasons for this were that he already had one of his brigades in the Yong Peng area, that he alone now had communication with the Muar force, and that the operations of the Segamat and Muar forces required very careful co-ordination. This with shortened communications he was now able to do. There are obvious disadvantages in such rapid changes of command, but in very mobile operations they are not easy to avoid. The problem is further complicated when the army is made up of contingents from different parts of the Empire which, quite naturally, prefer to serve under their own commanders. But the avoidance of too much insularity should in the future be one of the corner stones of our military doctrine.

At 4.30 a.m. on the twentieth orders were issued for the withdrawal from Bakri to begin. The column moved with Australian troops as advanced guard and rearguard and with Indian troops as flank guards to the guns and vehicles, which had to move on the road. Block after block was encountered and the fighting

developed into a series of desperate attacks to clear them. The Japanese fought like demons and each block had to be cleared at the point of the bayonet. To make matters worse the column began to telescope under pressure of repeated enemy attacks from behind, in which tanks played a prominent part. It was in an attempt to repel one of these that Duncan, the commander of the force, was killed while personally leading a bayonet charge. A very gallant officer who, with the situation collapsing about him, remained to the end a model of calmness, courage, and devotion to duty. By nightfall, after twelve hours of bitter and bloody fighting, the column had advanced less than three miles. There was no time, however, to be lost, and Lt.-Col. Anderson, who had succeeded to the command of the force, ordered the advance to be continued immediately. Better progress was made during the night and by dawn the column was approaching Parit Sulong bridge, only to find it strongly held by the enemy. An attack to dislodge them failed. At 8.30 a.m. a new danger appeared in rear of the column in the shape of heavy tanks. Some of these were knocked out but, supported by their artillery and by their air force, the Japanese pressed their attacks until the area occupied by our force measured only 200-300 yards in each direction. Dead and wounded were lying everywhere. The place was becoming a shambles. An effort was made to get the Japanese to allow trucks with wounded to pass through their lines, but this they refused unless the whole force surrendered. At dusk the enemy attacked again with tanks, several of which were knocked out by our artillery and by infantry tank hunters.

While this was going on we had at midday on the twenty-first held another conference at Yong Peng. At this conference we considered what could be done to help the Muar force and formulated plans for future operations. It was reported that arrangements were being made for an early counter-attack by the 2nd Loyals, the only fresh battalion available, to recapture Bukit Payong with the object of subsequently reopening communications with the Muar force. For various reasons, in no way due to any lack of effort, this attack never got going. Even if it had, the chances of a single battalion advancing seven miles through that type of country were, in my opinion, quite remote. It should be noted that at this time the 53rd Brigade was under orders of Westforce. At the conference I undertook to arrange for medical

and other supplies to be dropped over the Muar force. This was done the following morning, though again lack of suitable aircraft and of dropping equipment proved a great handicap.

At dawn on the twenty-second, the Japanese renewed their ground and air attacks on the confined space occupied by the Muar force. The Australian gunners during this action fought with the most desperate gallantry, man after man falling before the fire of the Japanese tanks and machine-guns, only his place to be taken by another. A new attempt was made to force the bridge but without result. At 9 a.m. Anderson, realizing that his force could not resist much longer, gave orders for all guns, vehicles, and heavy weapons to be destroyed and for those who could walk to take to the jungle and make for Yong Peng. Eventually some 550 Australians and 400 Indian troops, out of the 4,000 or more who comprised the Muar force, succeeded in rejoining. The wounded who could not walk were of necessity left behind. It stands to the eternal shame of the Japanese that they were subsequently, almost without exception, massacred in cold blood.

In the 45th Indian Brigade the killed included all the officers except two (both wounded) of Brigade Headquarters and Signals, all the battalion commanders and seconds-in-command, and two of the three adjutants. Of the British officers who remained, only two or three had more than a few months' service. The brigade was shattered beyond repair and there was neither time nor sufficient trained personnel to build it up again.

The Battle of Muar was one of the epics of the Malayan campaign. Our little force by dogged resistance had held up a division of the Japanese Imperial Guards attacking with all the advantages of air and tank support for nearly a week, and in doing so had saved the Segamat force from encirclement and probable annihilation. The award of the Victoria Cross to Lt.-Col. Anderson of the A.I.F. was a fitting tribute both to his own prowess and to the valour of his men.

By midnight on 23-24 January the rearguards of both the Segamat force and of the 53rd Brigade Group had passed through the Yong Peng bottle-neck and we breathed again. Another Japanese effort to annihilate our forward formations had been frustrated, but it had been an exhausting time for all concerned. Here is a typical day in my life at that time. Rise at 6 a.m. at Flagstaff House, where I usually slept at that time as it was easier

to get some rest there. Dress and breakfast and to the office at 7.30 a.m. where I received reports of the night's events and discussed the agenda for the Far East War Council meeting with Torrance, the B.G.S. He usually attended these meetings when I was away. Leave by car for the battle-front at about 8.30 a.m., taking one of the staff officers with me. The B.G.S. stayed behind both to attend the council meetings and to deal with the many important matters which came up every day. Yong Peng is eighty-five miles from Singapore and we would get up there before noon. Then there would be interviews and usually a conference and generally a visit to some of the troops. Back to Singapore in the evening where we would usually arrive about 7 p.m. Then conferences with the senior staff officers, drafting of a personal report to the supreme commander and very often talks to the civil authorities. It would often be near midnight when I got home for a late supper and usually well after midnight before I got to bed. A critic would say, "It is quite wrong for a commander to work those long hours. It gives him no time to think and plan ahead." That is perfectly true in theory, but when things are as critical as they were at that time a commander must exercise close personal supervision. The problem also was made no easier by the dual functions of command headquarters and by the extent of the area over which operations were taking place.

It was encouraging, however, to know that our efforts were being appreciated, for on the twenty-fifth I received the following telegram from General Wavell:

Recent reports of heavy fighting on the Muar front show what determined resistance your troops are making against odds. You have not much ground behind you and this resistance is necessary and well timed. I have no doubt that troops have inflicted severe casualties on the enemy. Well done.

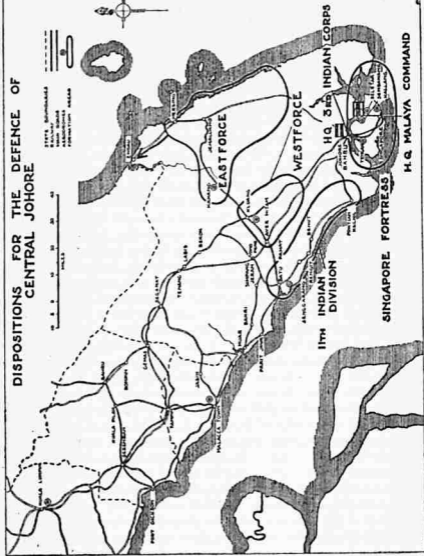
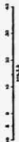
Chapter XVII

OPERATIONS IN CENTRAL AND EAST JOHORE

WE were now back on a ninety-mile front on the general line of the one and only lateral road which runs from Mersing on the east coast via Jemaluang, Kluang, and Ayer Hitam to Batu Pahat on the west coast. Behind us there was no prepared position upon which to fall back, for the pre-war project to construct defences from Kota Tingghi to the west coast had, as we have seen, made little progress, largely for financial reasons. Nor was the country generally very suitable for anything in the nature of a protracted defence. The main body of the 18th British Division had not yet arrived and it would be at least another fortnight before it could be deployed on the mainland. But some other reinforcements had arrived. These included the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Ballantine), a sister brigade to the 45th which had fought at Muar. It was equally raw and only semi-trained. I dared not send it into action at once on the mainland, so I decided to retain it on Singapore Island in the hope that it would get a chance of some training and also be able to work on the defences. We found it accommodation in the south-western part of the island. The reinforcements also included 7,000 Indian troops. They also were extremely raw and untrained. To make matters worse there were very few non-commissioned officers among them and that was what we most needed now in the Indian units. After discussing the matter with Heath, I decided that it would be unwise and even dangerous to draft more than a proportion of these men to the units. The balance were retained in the reinforcement camps. From Australia came a machine-gun battalion and 2,000 reinforcements. Many of the latter had only been in the army for a few weeks. Excellent material they were but not soldiers as yet. I have no wish to blame the authorities either in India or in Australia for sending these untrained men. After all they had no better to send at that time. But I make these factual statements so that the public may understand from this concrete case what in fact are some of the fruits of our failure to prepare for war. Let it not be forgotten also that these untrained men

DISPOSITIONS FOR THE DEFENCE OF CENTRAL JOHORE

STATE BOUNDARIES
 RAILWAY
 HIGH ROAD
 FERRY ROUTE
 BRIDGE



were included in all estimates of the strength of the garrison of Singapore Island.

From the middle of January, i.e. as soon as they could escort their bombers with fighters, the Japanese Air Force carried out daylight attacks on targets in the Singapore area on a scale of two or three attacks daily by formations of twenty-seven or more bombers. They were mostly directed against our aerodromes, but some against the Naval Base and later the docks area. The air defences of Singapore, both active and passive, were now thoroughly tested and within their limits worked satisfactorily. They were, of course, seriously handicapped by the contraction, and eventually by the total loss of, the warning system. They were handicapped also by the fact that the Japanese aircraft usually flew at heights of over 20,000 feet which rendered our 3-inch A.A. guns quite ineffective. But the co-ordination of the guns and the fighters under a senior air force officer worked smoothly, though the appointment of an air defence commander, having under him all the means of air defence, would probably have been better. For a few days there were some great aerial battles as our Hurricanes went into action but these died down as the Japanese Air Force again asserted its superiority. Matters were made very much worse than they otherwise would have been, both on the aerodromes, at the Naval Base, and later at the docks, by the disappearance of civil labour as soon as the bombing started.

The air directive issued from the headquarters of the South-West Pacific Command is of interest. It laid down that the protection of convoys should take precedence over all other tasks, but that all available air effort should be directed against expeditions threatening the east coast of Malaya or endeavouring to pass south of Singapore. Further, it stressed the importance of slowing up the Japanese advance on land by attacking Singora and by intervening in the land battle, and of reducing the scale of the Japanese air attack. That directive, in view of the extreme weakness of our air force at that time, suggests a failure to appreciate the realities of the situation. For instance, the attacks on Singora were seldom made by more than half a dozen machines and it is idle to suppose that this could have any material effect on the rate of the Japanese advance.

It was still my intention to deploy the 18th British Division on the mainland if I could, as this was the only way of achieving our

object of protecting the Naval Base. We were up against much the same problem as had arisen in Central Malaya, i.e. the defence of the string of aerodromes and landing-grounds at Kahang, Kluang, and Batu Pahat, with a view to preventing the Japanese doubling the scale of their air attacks on the Singapore area and on the reinforcement convoys as they came in. The one lateral road which connects these places was an important factor in the problem.

The orders for the further conduct of the operations were given out at conferences held at Yong Peng on 21 January and at Rengam on 23 January. Briefly, they were to the effect that, after the withdrawal from Yong Peng, all troops in Johore, except those in the extreme south which formed part of the defences of Singapore, would come under the 3rd Indian Corps. These troops were to be grouped into three separate commands. Firstly, there were those on the east coast, to be known as Eastforce, whose role was to hold Jemaluang and Kahang with detachments forward in the Mersing area. These came under Brigadier Taylor, the commander of the 22nd Australian Brigade which was already in this area. Secondly, there was Westforce under Gordon Bennett which consisted of the remainder of the A.I.F. and the 9th Indian Division and which was responsible for the defence of Kluang and Ayer Hitam. In fact, it became responsible for the defence of the two lines of advance via the railway and the main trunk road which passed through these two places respectively. Thirdly, there was the 11th Indian Division under Key, whose role was to hold the Batu Pahat area and operate on the west coast road. The 53rd British Brigade Group, as soon as it could be released by Westforce, was to join this division.

It will be seen that the defences were in fact concentrated round four areas, i.e. the Jemaluang-Mersing area, the Kluang area, the Ayer Hitam area and the Batu Pahat area. These areas were to a large extent inter-dependent because, if the enemy succeeded in capturing any of them, he would be in a position to move against the flanks of the adjoining ones. The weakness lay in the fact that in some areas, especially between Ayer Hitam and Batu Pahat, there were secondary lines of advance along which Japanese mobile troops (and they were all pretty mobile) could move against our communications.

It was for reasons indicated above that I laid down that the

general line Jemaluang-Kluang-Ayer Hitam-Batu Pahat would be held and that there would be no withdrawal from this line without my personal permission. I am doubtful even now whether this decision to keep the final authority in my own hands was a wise one, though it was made after talking the matter over with Heath. In favour of it was the fact that there were many considerations involved which could not be known to the local commander in Johore. Against it it could be argued that things were moving so rapidly that only those in close touch with the situation could be in a position to make the necessary quick decisions.

As Batu Pahat proved to be the decisive area in our long line of defence it will be best to take the operations in that area first. Batu Pahat itself was a district centre and small coastal port of the same type as Muar. The town lies some seven miles from the coast on the south bank of an estuary which was crossed by a power-driven road ferry. Roads radiate from the town north-westwards to Muar, northwards to Bukit Payong, and thence to Yong Peng, eastwards to Ayer Hitam, twenty miles away, and south-eastwards along the coast to Pontian Kechil and thence to Johore Bahru, passing on the way through the fishing villages of Senggarang, Rengit, and Benut. Batu Pahat itself is dominated by the jungle-covered Bukit Banang, which lies to the south of the town. Before the war, many rubber estates and iron ore mines in this district were owned by the Japanese who had spread their influence far and wide. When their forces arrived here, therefore, they were on well-known and prepared ground. In fact, one of the former residents returned as a colonel commanding troops.

Batu Pahat had first been garrisoned on 15 January by troops of the 11th Indian Division and it was, as we have seen, on the following day that the leading Japanese troops landed near the lighthouse. After a skirmish they disappeared on to the jungle-covered slopes of Bukit Banang. Here they remained, defying the attempts of our rather inexperienced troops to expel them, raiding our gun positions and communications, and being supplied by air when they ran short of food and ammunition.

The strategical importance of the Batu Pahat area was obvious, and immediate steps had to be taken to strengthen the garrison. The headquarters of the 6th/15th Indian Brigade (Brigadier Challen) was moved there and by the evening of the nineteenth the garrison consisted of two British battalions, a company of the

Malay Regiment, a weak field battery of four guns only, a heavy anti-aircraft battery and some administrative units. The landing-ground, which lies a few miles south of Batu Pahat, had already been denied. The task allotted to the force commander was to hold the town and to keep open the road to Ayer Hitam, being assisted in this latter task by troops from Ayer Hitam itself.

Contact was first made with Japanese troops on the Batu Pahat-Ayer Hitam road on the evening of the twenty-first at the same time, it will be remembered, as the Muar force was making its final stand at Parit Sulong. In point of fact, the enemy narrowly missed making a good bag, for the corps and divisional commanders, after a visit to the Batu Pahat garrison, had passed along this road only a short time before. In fact, the operations had now become so fluid that there was always a chance of meeting enemy troops on the road anywhere near the front line. During the next thirty-six hours there was a series of encounters on this road until it was finally closed by the Japanese on the morning of the twenty-third. It afterwards transpired that the Japanese during this time were passing strong forces across this road to strike against the communications of our Batu Pahat force.

Challen realized the danger, and on the evening of the twenty-third, being unable to communicate with higher authority owing to a breakdown in W.T. communications, began to withdraw to Senggarang but later, communications having been restored, he was instructed to make a further effort to hold Batu Pahat with the aid of a fresh battalion which was due to arrive the following morning. It is quite likely that Challen's decision was the right one—at least as far as his own force was concerned, though he was not in a position to appreciate the full effect of a withdrawal on the general strategy. It was a case where personal contact would have been invaluable but ground communications were so precarious that that was hardly possible. The very uncertain W.T. was inadequate to give commanders behind the true picture of the situation.

Throughout the twenty-fourth fighting continued in the town, where the British battalion and the 2nd Cambridgeshires fought stubbornly, but most of these troops had now been on the move for several days without sleep. On the morning of the twenty-fifth the enemy attacked again with fresh troops, released no doubt from the Muar front, and at midday Challen reported that

he doubted his ability to hold the town much longer. The situation was reported to me by telephone and I arranged to attend a conference which Heath was summoning at rear headquarters Westforce at 3 p.m. that day. As other portions of the front were involved and as our ability to continue fighting much longer in Johore was at stake, I felt that a full discussion with my subordinate commanders was desirable before definitely authorizing a withdrawal from any part of the front.

On the east coast we still held Mersing though our forward detachments had been in contact with enemy troops moving down the coast from Kuantan and had had to withdraw from Endau. On the twenty-first also our air reconnaissance had reported an enemy convoy of warships and transports off the coast of Trengganu moving south. In the Kluang area the 5/11 Sikhs had fought a highly successful action in the course of which they killed some hundreds of the enemy. This was an example of what could be done by a well-trained battalion splendidly led by its commanding officer, Lt.-Col. Parkin. The vital Kluang area, including the aerodrome, was in danger of falling into the hands of the enemy, and the 5/11 Sikhs were ordered to make a flanking march and attack the enemy from the west as part of a general brigade counter-attack. The counter-attack did not come off and the battalion, after establishing contact with the enemy, was ordered to withdraw. Parkin decided that the only way to disengage without heavy losses was to attack the enemy first, which he did with such success that the Japanese fled in confusion before the Sikh bayonets. In thirty hours the battalion marched over thirty miles and fought this successful action.

Rear headquarters Westforce was situated in a rubber plantation at the twenty-first milestone on the main trunk road. It was here that the commanders' conference took place at 3.15 p.m.—a little late as I had been held up by congestion on the road. Key told us of the critical situation at Batu Pahat and of the efforts he was making to relieve the force there by pushing forward the 53rd Brigade. He strongly advocated an immediate withdrawal from Batu Pahat. We all agreed that there was no other possible course and he went off at once to his headquarters to send the necessary orders. We had to face the fact that this would involve the loss of the area Ayer Hitam-Kluang with the advantages which it would confer on the enemy. These would include a good

aerodrome within sixty miles of Singapore, the control of the lateral road to the east coast, and the loss to us of the chain of observer stations which were already at the minimum distance to give warning to Singapore and for which no possible alternative existed. It was with a heavy heart, therefore, that I ordered the withdrawal of Westforce from Kluang and Ayer Hitam that night, instructing Heath who, it will be recollected, was responsible for all operations in Johore, to continue the withdrawal on subsequent nights in accordance with the development of the situation and to co-ordinate the movements of the columns on the east and west coasts with those of Westforce. The real danger, of course, now was on the west coast flank as I no longer had any reserves with which to meet a break-through either by land or from the sea.

The 53rd Brigade occupied Benut and Rengit without opposition and its forward detachment reached Senggarang, a village thirteen miles from Batu Pahat, but the rear of this detachment was attacked as it approached the village. In fact, the Japanese detachments, which had been moving south across the Batu Pahat-Ayer Hitam road, were now beginning to close in on the coast road which from now on was never free of road blocks. We have had full accounts of the march of these Japanese columns from prisoners who were forced to accompany them. As typical of many similar movements they are of interest. The Japanese moved chiefly by tracks, their only transport being bicycles. They carried with them on the man several days' supply of rice and commandeered other food from villages. They drank water from the streams and ditches. Their ammunition and other necessary stores were carried by impressed civilians. Medical stores were almost non-existent. The wounded and sick were just left—to die or to recover. They marched long distances each day. When resting their protective precautions were very sketchy. The road blocks seem to have consisted generally of about a company equipped with mortars, light automatics, and rifles.

The Batu Pahat force withdrew during the night 25-26 January and reached Senggarang at dawn. I had hoped that this brigade would have been able to brush aside opposition and continue its fight down the coast. But it was not to be. Finding its passage blocked south of Senggarang it deployed its leading battalion and attacked but made no headway. Other attacks were put in later

in the day, some of them led in person by Lt.-Col. Thorne, the gallant commanding officer of the 2nd Cambridgeshire, but without success. This was just another case of the troops being too tired for effective action. In the meantime, the divisional commander had organized a column of armoured cars and Bren gun carriers at Benut to go forward and relieve the Batu Pahat force. But the Japanese were already in control of the road. The column was ambushed and only one officer got through. He reported the situation to Challen who in the evening decided that there was no possibility of reaching Benut with his guns and vehicles by the following morning, as he had been ordered to do. He gave orders for units to make their way to Benut by foot after destroying all wheeled vehicles. The wounded were left behind in charge of R.A.M.C. personnel and of Padre Duckworth, better known as the cox of the Cambridge boat, all of whom subsequently worked untiringly and with great devotion. The Japanese did not molest the wounded.

Benut is thirty-one miles from Batu Pahat and the task of reaching it thirty-six hours after leaving that place was, if viewed in the light of the existing conditions, clearly beyond the powers of a force which had already been fighting for several days. The better course would have been to order it to move to Senggarang as a first step and then to have seen how the situation developed.

One part of the Batu Pahat force moved east of the road and reached Benut. The remainder, totalling some 2,000 officers and men, were evacuated by sea by the Royal Navy during the four succeeding nights—an operation of great difficulty on account of the shallowness of the water inshore. Its successful accomplishment reflected the greatest credit on those responsible for it.

North of Ayer Hitam the enemy had made contact again on the twenty-fifth but were well held by the 2nd Loyals. On the night 25-26 January, Westforce fell back south of the line Kluang-Ayer Hitam, and this important area passed to the enemy. The 2nd Gordons, sent forward from garrison duty at Singapore, relieved the 2nd Loyals and had their baptism of fire.

About this time the east coast of Johore came at last into the limelight. The original defence plan here had been based on the assumption that the Mersing area would be attacked from the sea, and both the 12th Indian Brigade, which originally had the responsibility for its defence, and subsequently the 22nd

Australian Brigade, one of the best-trained formations in jungle fighting in Malaya, had put in an immense amount of work in the construction of the defences. These, when war broke out, were among the strongest of any part of Malaya. But, like those at Kuantan, fate decreed that they should never be tested, for the attack again developed by land from the north, where contact was first made in the State of Pahang on 14 January. The following day our air photographic reconnaissance, which the two pilots, Flight-Lieut. Phillips and Sergeant Wareham, kept up day after day with what seemed to be charmed lives, reported the arrival of a large convoy at Singora, and it seemed that our expectation of a sea-borne attack on the coast of Johore was about to be fulfilled. That this expectation was justified is now apparent, for we have learnt from Japanese sources that this convoy brought two fresh divisions to Singora which it had been the intention of their high command to launch against the east coast of Johore. For some reason, however, the plan was changed and they were eventually sent by land to the Kluang area.

The land threat from the north and the withdrawal of a battalion from the 22nd Australian Brigade to help in the Muar operations necessitated a reorientation of the Mersing defence plan—to the great disappointment of the Australians who were prepared to fight to the last there. The new defence centred round Jemaluang with Mersing held only as an outpost. Moreover, we had had to withdraw our advanced troops from Endau, a likely landing-place twenty miles north of Mersing.

Between the eighteenth and the twenty-third, there were several small encounters north of the Mersing River which ended in our favour. The next two days passed uneventfully. The reason for this became apparent early on the twenty-sixth, when our air reconnaissance reported two transports and many small craft, escorted by two cruisers and twelve destroyers, closing the shore at Endau. Our lack of air striking strength was again pitifully evident and cost us dear. Air headquarters put all that they could muster into two attacks on this convoy, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, delivered mostly by the ancient *Vildebeestes* escorted in the morning by *Buffaloes* and in the afternoon by *Hurricanes*. The enemy kept a constant screen of scores of navy "O" fighters, operating from Kuantan, over the convoy and some desperate fighting took place. Only about half a dozen of the

Vildebeestes survived the two raids, but the most tragic aspect of the loss was the throwing away of highly trained torpedo-bomber crews condemned to fight in aircraft which should long ago have been on the scrap-heap. On the credit side a minimum of thirteen fighters were destroyed and both transports were hit—but the landing was not prevented; in fact, it was probably well under way before the attacks took place. Our air striking force in Malaya, even such as it was, had now vanished for good.

The enemy convoy was also attacked the following night by two of our destroyers, one of which after a gallant action was itself sunk.

The new enemy troops lost no time, for no sooner had they landed at Endau than they started marching south and in the evening crossed the river west of Mersing. A little farther south the Australians had laid an ambush for them. Two companies of their 2/18 Battalion were in position astride the road with a company forward on either flank ready to attack the enemy column as soon as it entered the box. The supporting artillery was also in position ready to fire on the road. Into this trap the leading Japanese battalion marched at midnight. The result was not quite so devastating as it had been at Gemas, partly owing to the confusion which generally attends night fighting, but still the enemy were dealt a severe blow which slowed up their advance and enabled Eastforce to fall back in accordance with the general plan. Over 300 Japanese graves have since been counted in this area while our losses were less than 100.

It was now the morning of 27 January and the full significance of the dispersal of the Batu Pahat force and the opening of the west coast road to the enemy was apparent. Although provisional arrangements had been made for a withdrawal to the island and an outline plan issued, I still hoped even up to this late hour that it might be possible to avoid putting it into effect, especially as the 18th British Division was on the point of arriving. I had been given discretion by the Supreme Commander South-West Pacific to withdraw to the island if I considered it advisable, and I now decided that I could no longer risk the loss of the whole of our forces on the mainland by delaying further. I therefore approved a plan which was being worked out by 3rd Indian Corps for the withdrawal.

Many people have wondered why we did not hold a bridgehead

in South Johore covering the Causeway. The possibility of doing this had been made the subject of a special study, but I had decided against it for what seemed to me very cogent reasons. Firstly, there had not been sufficient time to prepare defences and, without proper defences, the position was too extensive for the forces we had available. Secondly, it would have been extremely risky to have occupied a position in South Johore with only a single channel of communication behind us and that the very vulnerable one of the Causeway. Lastly—and this was the determining factor—our flanks would have been in the air, especially as we no longer controlled the sea approaches, and it would have been possible for the enemy to have landed a force behind us direct on to the shores of Singapore Island. For these reasons it seemed to me far better to concentrate on the defence of the island itself, making use of the water obstacle provided by the Straits of Johore.

The plan envisaged a co-ordinated withdrawal by night on all four routes with a final withdrawal to the island on the night 30–31 January. To avoid congestion at the bridgehead, this final withdrawal through the Johore Bahru area was to be carried out rapidly in M.T. For the immediate ground defence of the Causeway an outer and inner bridgehead were organized. The passage of so large a force over the Causeway in the course of a single night naturally gave us cause for some anxiety, for if the enemy had succeeded in blocking the Causeway by air attack there would almost certainly have been great confusion. To reduce this danger as far as we could, careful plans were made for the anti-aircraft defence of the Causeway and for the conveyance of troops, but not vehicles, by water craft as an alternative to the Causeway.

Apart from some skirmishes near Benut on the west coast road and later in the neighbourhood of the Gunong Pulai reservoirs, one of the main sources of Singapore's water supply, most of the fighting during the four days' withdrawal developed on the front of Westforce, where the Japanese followed up quickly and aggressively. The problem here was complicated by the fact that on the railway front, along which the 9th Indian Division was retiring, there was a gap of twenty miles between Rengam and Kulai in which no through road followed the railway line, though there were many estate roads east of the railway extending as far

south as the village of Layang Layang. That meant that no wheels could accompany the column over this stretch of the railway; they all had to proceed south by the main road.

On the main road front the Japanese pressure was continuous, strongly supported by their air force which, as always, had undisputed control. That is not a good tonic for tired and harassed troops. Where were the Hurricanes, they asked, which were going to sweep the air, and what were the chances, as they had been told, that even though we had been driven off our northern airfields we had only to hold on for a few weeks before our air force would stage a come-back from aerodromes in Sumatra? To say that intelligent troops were becoming despondent as to the answer is far from implying that they were less determined to fight on. In fact, during this retreat some of the fighting on the main road by both Australian and British troops was of a very high standard. Enemy attacks were met by counter-attack which many times ended in a bayonet charge, while their tree-top snipers were hunted out and shot down. Our troops were getting used to this strange type of warfare. But, as always, it was the threat to the communications which dominated the situation.

On the railway front disaster overtook the 9th Indian Division on 28 January. For some reason a wide gap developed between the 22nd Indian Brigade, which was forward, and the 8th Indian Brigade, which was supporting it. Into this gap enemy troops penetrated, moving round the eastern flank by estate roads, and they occupied Layang Layang. Barstow, unhappy about this gap and not knowing that the enemy was already between his two brigades, went forward by the railway with two staff officers to confer with Painter, the commander of the forward brigade. A little south of Layang Layang the party was fired on by Japanese at close range. Barstow threw himself down one side of the embankment, his staff officers down the other side. That is the last that was seen of Barstow. There can be little doubt that he was killed. The loss of this gallant and gifted officer was a severe blow and had its effect in a much wider circle than that of his own division.

The 22nd Indian Brigade, in an endeavour to rejoin its division, started to move through the jungle west of the railway aiming for Sedenak. Only one battalion of this brigade, the 5/11 Sikhs, was

at anything approaching its proper strength. The others were mere skeletons after their heavy losses up-country. To start with things went well, the 5/11 Sikhs again distinguishing themselves in a brush with the Japanese, but soon the density of the jungle began to tell its tale. Moreover, there were with the column a number of stretcher cases which had to be carried by the troops. The average rate of advance did not exceed half a mile per hour, but the march was continued by day and by night. It is on such occasions as this, when a force is really up against it, that the value of true leadership comes out, especially among the regimental officers and N.C.O.s. Parkin, the C.O. of the Sikhs and a strong disciplinarian, was at his best. The value of British leadership, backed up by experienced Indian officers and N.C.O.s, was well demonstrated, as also was the weakness which results from the lack of experienced and trained junior leaders. On the twenty-ninth a member of an Indian medical detachment, which had been captured by the Japanese, joined the column. He was the bearer of a general invitation in writing from the Japanese to all Indian troops to abandon their British officers and be welcomed by their loving Asiatic brethren. As an earnest of the fraternal sentiments of the Japanese he had been warned that, if he failed to deliver the message, he would be beheaded. That was typical of the ruthless methods of those who preached "Asia for the Asiatics". Needless to say, the invitation was refused.

Desperate efforts were made to locate this brigade both by ground and air reconnaissance. In particular Flight-Lieut. Dane, a resident of Malaya and member of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force, was untiring and quite fearless in the efforts he made. In fact, the whole of this Volunteer Air Force, flying a miscellaneous collection of light flying club aircraft, was at this time doing most gallant work. Operating from a temporary landing-ground on Singapore Island, these frail and defenceless aircraft were carrying out daily reconnaissance patrols and generally managing to get back.

Unfortunately we entirely failed to ascertain the brigade's whereabouts though we postponed the final withdrawal as long as could safely be done. The best we could do was to arrange for survivors to be ferried across to the island by the Royal Navy. Ultimately about one hundred officers and men were saved in this way. Most of the rest became prisoners of the Japanese. It is

of interest to record that for many of the Indian troops the turning-point in this grim struggle came when the wounded had to be left behind in the Tamil lines of a rubber plantation owing to the extreme exhaustion of the bearers. This action, which may often be necessary in modern war but is contrary to the teaching of the Indian frontier, seemed to undermine the determination of these men to continue the unequal struggle.

The final withdrawal across the Causeway on the night 30-31 January was carried out without incident and with little interference from the enemy's air force. By about 6 a.m. on 31 January all troops, except those in the bridgeheads and those still missing, were back on Singapore Island. All were weary. Many had been fighting, and withdrawing to fight again, in an exhausting climate and cruel country for seven weeks on end in the face of a powerful enemy equipped with every advantage. The most remarkable thing perhaps is that so many of them were still full of fight after such an ordeal.

By 7 a.m. the last battalion of the outer bridgehead, the Gordons, was crossing the Causeway. Behind it came the inner bridgehead, the Argylls, headed by their pipes. At 8 a.m., Lt.-Col. Stewart stepped out of Johore on to the Causeway—the last to do so. The Causeway, which was solidly built, was seventy feet wide at the water line and wider below it. Its demolition presented certain technical difficulties. Nevertheless, a demolition charge had been successfully inserted in it by the Royal Navy and at 8.15 a.m. it was exploded. A moment later the water was racing through a seventy-foot gap. The operations on the mainland were at an end and the battle of Singapore had begun.

Chapter XVIII

THE SINGAPORE FORTRESS

THE Island of Singapore is oblong in shape with a maximum length from east to west of 27 miles and a maximum width from north to south of 13 miles. It is separated from the mainland of Malaya by the Straits of Johore across which the only permanent communication is the Causeway with a length of 1,100 yards. The Straits west of the Causeway, which are the narrower, vary in width from 600 to 2,000 yards. They are navigable at high water for small medium-draught vessels though the channel is narrow and tortuous. East of the Causeway the Straits are wider, varying in width from 1,100 to about 5,000 yards, and are navigable for the biggest vessels afloat as far as the Naval Base. In the middle of these Straits at their widest point lies Pulau Ubin, with a length of $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles and a width of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. To the east of that island is the mouth of the River Johore, which gives access at Kota Tingghi to the main Johore Bahru—Mersing road. Covering the mouth of this river is the island of Tekong. A few miles east of Tekong lies Pengerang Hill at the southern tip of the Johore mainland. Immediately south of Singapore Island and separated from it by the waters of Keppel harbour lie the islands of Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani. The former was a military reserve. Three miles farther south-west lies Pulau Bukum, where was situated the Asiatic Petroleum Company's main reserves of naval fuel, petrol, and lubricating oils.

The town of Singapore is situated in the south of the island and extends for some six miles along the water front with a depth of about one and a half miles. Immediately north of it is an extensive residential area covering several square miles of country. The docks area is situated in the western part of the town. The population of Singapore Town in peace-time was in the neighbourhood of 550,000, but by the end of January 1942 it was probably nearer a million.

Main roads radiate from Singapore Town in all directions. The principal is that known as the Bukit Timah road which, crossing to the mainland by the Causeway, becomes the main road to the north.

The only hill features of importance lie in the western part of the island. The principal are the Bukit Timah group of hills which lie just north of the village of that name, Bukit Mandai, some three miles north of Bukit Timah, and the Pasir Panjang Ridge, four miles in length, which runs from Pasir Panjang village on the south coast to the western outskirts of Singapore Town.

Apart from the built-up areas, Singapore Island like the rest of Malaya is thickly covered by rubber and other plantations while on the northern and western coasts there are extensive mangrove swamps. These swamps had of recent years, owing to extensive irrigation works, lost much of their value as a military obstacle.

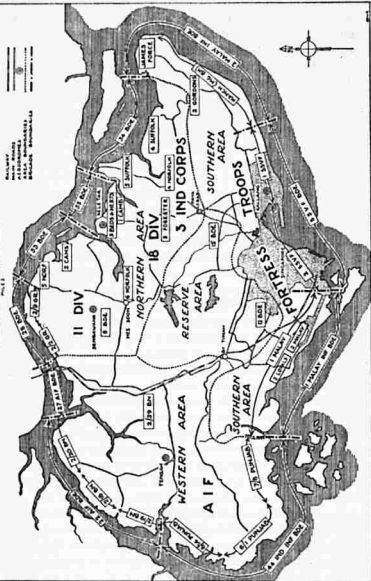
In the centre of the island lie the important MacRitchie, Peirce, and Seletar reservoirs, and the municipal catchment area, a large jungle area traversed only by a few tracks. To the north the Naval Base reservation covers a large tract of country.

Visibility is everywhere restricted. Even from the hill features referred to above, little detail can be seen of ground objects.

The general organization of the defences of Singapore Island before the outbreak of war with Japan has already been outlined in Chapter VII. Naturally these defences had been laid out primarily to repel an attack from seaward, for which purpose they were reasonably strong, even allowing for the fact that the infantry defences were weak, that there were few mobile troops, and that there were no tanks. But as the Japanese advanced southwards down the peninsula, it became evident that the anti-ship guns must be prepared to engage targets on the land front of Singapore. That was not such an easy matter to arrange. Firstly, only a proportion of the guns could be made available for this task as some were ruled out either from lack of range or from limited arcs of fire. Secondly, the heavy guns had only very little high explosive ammunition. They could of course, and in fact did, fire their ordinary armour-piercing shells, but the effect of these against land targets is limited because they bury themselves deep in the ground before exploding. Thirdly, observation of fire was difficult as the topography was highly unfavourable to ground observation while air observation was out of the question in view of the local superiority of the Japanese Air Force. Nevertheless, an improvised but workable counter-bombardment organization was built up and fields of fire were cleared. A large proportion of the

SINGAPORE ISLAND DISPOSITION OF TROOPS 8 FEB 1942

RAILWAY
 MAIN ROAD
 AIRFIELD
 AREA UNOCCUPIED
 BRIDGE



officers and men of the fixed defences were regular soldiers, many of whom had been for some years at Singapore. They looked with great pride and even affection on these defences in the building up of which they had taken great personal interest. It was a bitter blow to them that they were never to be tested against enemy ships, but they set to work with a will to prepare for their new role.

The construction of permanent beach defences had been started in 1936 when I was on the staff of Malaya Command. We had not at that time had very much experience of this sort of thing and we gave up a great deal of time to the consideration of the problem and to testing out different theories. The defences were only constructed to cover part of the southern coastline of the island of Singapore, including Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani, but even so they extended for about twenty miles and there were at that time only about half a dozen battalions available to man them. As time went on they were developed and additions made in the form of timber tank obstacles, land mines, barbed wire, and finally timber scaffolding. This latter obstacle was only constructed late in 1941 to the design of the tubular scaffolding which had been erected off many parts of the coasts of Great Britain when invasion threatened. It could only be erected at low tide and much of the work, therefore, had to be done at night. It was put up entirely by military labour.

A word should be said here about land mines in Malaya. As corrosion sets in very quickly in that humid climate nobody quite knew for how long they would remain "live" after being put out. On the other hand, once you have put them out you cannot safely take them up again because they may at any moment explode. The result of this is that, if you lay your minefields and nothing happens, the mines may be "dead" by the time you want to use them. In fact, you have to judge your time very carefully if you want to get full value from them.

In the western part of the island the Rivers Kranji and Jurong both rise in the central group of hills and flow respectively north and south. Between the sources of these two rivers is only a comparatively narrow neck of land, which was the natural place for a switch line to oppose a landing on the western shores of the island. Here the ground had been cleared though no actual defences were constructed until after the outbreak of the war with Japan.

The fact that no defences had been constructed on the north and west coasts of the island in pre-war days, and only limited defences even after the war started, has been the subject of much critical comment even in the highest quarters. It has been imputed to a lack of foresight on the part of successive general officers commanding. Such criticism is most unjust. In the first place, general officers commanding had no authority to construct defences when or where they liked. The defences of Singapore were built up in accordance with a War Office plan, though of course recommendations of the local commander always received consideration. Then there was the question of the object of the defences. It was quite definitely the protection of the Naval Base—not the defence of Singapore Island. Now a very ordinary principle of warfare is that you site your defence in advance of the object to be protected; the distance in advance depends upon the range of the enemy's weapons and increases as that range becomes greater. The Naval Base itself lies on the north shore of Singapore Island, and it would have been sheer folly to have sited the defences also on the shores of that island allowing the enemy to bomb, shell, and machine-gun the Naval Base at will. It would have been very nice no doubt to have had defences there in addition to those up-country, but finance prohibited that. As has already been stated, the expenditure on the defences in Malaya was always strictly controlled from home, and such money as was made available, apart from the defences on the south coast of the fortress, was of course spent, and quite rightly so, on defence works on the mainland. Even for these works there was never sufficient money available.

When the Japanese started their advance down the Peninsula it soon became apparent that we might be driven back to Johore or even to Singapore. As early as 23 December the question of the defence of the north shore of Singapore Island received my attention and on that day I instructed Keith Simmons, the commander of the Singapore fortress, to start making reconnaissances for defensive positions. That was work which necessarily took a few days as there was a great deal to be done besides the actual siting of the defended localities. Gun positions, O.P.s, assembly positions for reserves and sites for headquarters had to be selected and arcs of fire laid out. As the fortress staff already had its hands pretty full, some special officers were made available for this

work. It was intended to start the actual construction of the defences about the beginning of January, but then labour difficulties intervened. There were no troops available and from the beginning of January onwards civil labour failed to an increasing extent as the bombing became heavier. Even the air force, which had priority for this labour for work on the aerodromes and new air strips, seldom got enough and there was none available for our defence works. Sometimes even I had to make available men from our reinforcement camps for work on the aerodromes. Air Vice-Marshal Maltby in his official report has written:

I wish to pay tribute to the help which the R.A.F. received from the army in Malaya. Despite its own acute needs and great shortages it gave ungrudging help—in defence of aerodromes at cost to its vulnerable points, in working parties and native labour to repair aerodromes at cost to the construction of military defences, in maintaining signals communications and in many other ways.

That is a fine and generous tribute which reflects vividly the spirit of co-operation which existed at the time between our two Services. And it explains why there were not more material defences on the shores of Singapore Island when our weary troops fell back there. But that is not to say that no work had been done. In fact, a very great deal had been done. Sites for forward defended localities and for reserves had been selected. Artillery observation posts and gun positions had been reconnoitred and selected. Locations of formation headquarters had been fixed and communications arranged. Machine-gun positions had been constructed. Oil obstacles and depth charges had been placed in creeks which appeared to be likely landing-places. Spare searchlights had been collected and made available. Anti-tank obstacles had been constructed. The lay-out of the defences was very much complicated by the fact that the northern and western shores of the island are heavily intersected with creeks and mangrove swamps. The general plan of defence was to cover the approaches with defended localities and to hold mobile reserves ready for counter-attack.

The anti-aircraft defences had been sited in accordance with a plan which was designed eventually to cover the Naval Base, Keppel harbour, and Seletar and Tengah aerodromes, but the lay-out was not scheduled to be completed earlier than the middle

of 1942. Some of the guns and searchlights had been sited in Johore, but these had all been withdrawn on to Singapore Island towards the end of January. Some units had been sent to Sumatra for the defence of the aerodromes there. There remained for the defence of the Singapore fortress area four heavy anti-aircraft regiments less one battery, two light anti-aircraft regiments less one battery, and one searchlight regiment.

As regards air defence, a decision had been made to withdraw all aircraft from Malaya before the end of January, but at my urgent request one squadron of fighters was left on Singapore Island. I made this request as much for reasons of morale as for anything else. We had already had experience of the effect on morale of the complete absence of any air support and I felt that, if this situation continued during the fighting for the island, there might be a complete break in morale among the civil population and possibly also among some of the troops. There was only one aerodrome now which was not under observed artillery fire and that was the civil airport at Kallang, so it was on this aerodrome that the fighter squadron was based. It consisted chiefly of Hurricanes which formed part of a reinforcement of forty-eight machines which had just been flown off an aircraft carrier west of Java. These Hurricanes were of the latest type and did some splendid work before those which were left were forced to leave Singapore on 10 February. The aircraft which had gone to Sumatra had their own troubles and we did not see any of them again, but that is another story.

On 29 January the main body of the 18th British Division arrived. It excluded, of course, the 53rd Brigade Group which had already been in action in Malaya and some other units which were coming in a later convoy due to arrive the following week. The division was commanded by Maj.-Gen. M. Beckwith-Smith, a Guards officer who had commanded the 1st Guards Brigade at the beginning of the war. An excellent officer beloved by all ranks in his division. His death from diphtheria in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp was a great shock to all his friends. In order to give this division, if possible, a chance of getting acclimatized I decided to hold it initially in Command Reserve. Some people hold the view that this division should never have been sent to Malaya at that late hour—that it was just a waste of valuable man-power and material. I do not agree with that view.

It was certainly very bad luck on the men of the division that they should be thrown into the melting-pot to spend so many years in captivity and to suffer such grievous losses, but, when the decision was made to send the division to Malaya, the intention was still to hold Singapore for as long as possible and it was right that every effort should be made to strengthen its defences. It was just the luck of war.

In the same convoy as this division arrived a light tank squadron from India. They were the only tanks ever to reach Malaya on our side. The tanks themselves, I fancy, had been collected from various training establishments and the squadron hastily formed. When they reached Singapore, some of them had to be put straight into ordnance workshops before they were fit to take the road. Some never did take the road.

An armoured brigade was due to arrive in the Far East early in March. When asked for my views on the destination of this brigade I recommended that the destination of one Cruiser regiment at least should be left in abeyance until nearer the time of arrival, as I felt that it might prove extremely valuable but that it was too early as yet to say whether it would be possible to bring it to Singapore.

The administrative situation when we fell back to the island did not, as a whole, give cause for any great anxiety, though there were shortages in one or two important commodities such as field-gun and light anti-aircraft ammunition. The military dumps and depots had been widely dispersed in accordance with the pre-war policy to avoid excessive loss from air attack. The weakness now was that many of them, and especially the main ones, were in the centre of the island, where they were more exposed to capture by the enemy than if they had been in the town area. For instance, the main military food supply depot was just east of Bukit Timah village while a large dump of food back-loaded from the mainland was on the race-course. This was not an ideal arrangement, but the fact of the matter was that the Singapore Town area had become so congested with the influx of refugees from the mainland that there was little spare room in it. Similarly there were two large petrol depots near the race-course, so that the Bukit Timah area had become of very great tactical importance. On the other hand, most of the civil government's food reserves, both for Europeans and Asiatics, were in the Singapore Town area.

As regards water, we were now dependent on the three reservoirs. The level in these was rather lower than usual owing to the abnormally dry season, but there was, with care, an adequate supply even for the greatly increased population of Singapore Island. The two pumping stations were working at full pressure, and up to the end of January breaks in the mains due to air bombardment had been successfully dealt with.

Hospital accommodation in this congested area was very short. The Alexandra Military Hospital, situated just west of Singapore Town, remained the main hospital for British troops, as did the Tyersall Park Hospital to the north of the town for Indian troops. But many more than these were now required and temporary hospitals were established in military and government buildings, in the large Cathay building, in schools and in clubs. On the civil side there was the large General Hospital and there were many other smaller hospitals. These hospitals were often handling over a thousand casualties a day amid shells, bombs, the firing of our own guns, and the general turmoil of battle. I cannot speak too highly of the work of the medical staffs, both military and civil.

On withdrawal to Singapore Island I naturally took over the duties of martial law administrator from the fortress commander, and the question arose as to what extent, if at all, I should take over responsibility for civil administration. In the old days, when fortresses were besieged, it was customary for the military commander to take complete control, but this was a very different problem, the like of which we have seldom before experienced in our history. Let me make it clear that the Governor was still in office as the King's representative and responsible direct to the Colonial Office and that the various government departments were still functioning. It was suggested to me that I should take over control of some at least of these departments. That in my view would have been quite wrong. It might have been possible for a Supreme Commander Malaya, had there been one, to do so, but there were two reasons why I, as Army Commander, should not do so. The first was that the higher direction of these departments involved a knowledge of their organization and of personalities. Without this a change-over at this stage was likely to lead to at least temporary confusion rather than to any improvement. The second, and the most cogent one, was that both I and my

staff were far too fully occupied with the direction of operations to take on this additional responsibility.

The fact of the matter was that Singapore was not a fortress in the accepted meaning of the word. The dictionary defines a fortress as a "fortified place" or "stronghold". The so-called Singapore fortress was not a place. It was a large area of land and water with strong anti-ship defences, reasonably strong anti-aircraft defences, but weak land defences. It included a civil population of a million or more with its own administration. Before and during the war many exaggerated statements were made in public about the strength of the Singapore defences. I have little doubt that these statements misled both the public and many of the troops who came to defend Singapore. As a result, the shock of the loss of that place was all the greater.

It should be appreciated also that many of the troops who fell back on to Singapore Island had never before seen that place and equally had a false idea of its impregnability. They were disappointed not to find strong permanent defences ready to occupy—and they were very tired. The withdrawal of the air force and the evacuation of the Naval Base also had a bad moral effect, both on some of the troops and on certain sections of the civil population. The former knew that they had been sent to Singapore to defend the Naval Base and they began to wonder what they were now fighting for. The psychological effect of the evacuation of that base is no doubt difficult to realize except by those who experienced it, but it was great. The "Singapore Naval Base" had in fact come to be one of the corner-stones in the whole set-up of the British Commonwealth. Rumours were circulated that Singapore was not to be defended. It was to counter these that I made the following public announcement in the Press:

The battle of Malaya has come to an end and the battle of Singapore has started. For nearly two months our troops have fought an enemy on the mainland who has held the advantage of great air superiority and considerable freedom of movement by sea.

Our task has been both to impose losses on the enemy and to gain time to enable the forces of the Allies to be concentrated for this struggle in the Far East. To-day we stand beleaguered in our island fortress.

Our task is to hold this fortress until help can come—as assuredly it will come. This we are determined to do.

In carrying out this task we want the help of every man and woman in the fortress. There is work for all to do. Any enemy who sets foot in the fortress must be dealt with immediately. The enemy within our gates must be ruthlessly weeded out. There must be no more loose talk and rumour-mongering. Our duty is clear. With firm resolve and fixed determination we shall win through.

On Singapore Island there was, of course, a vast amount of war material and there were enormous stocks of all sorts, both military and civil. The implementation of the scorched earth policy became an operation of major importance. Some time towards the end of January, the War Office had asked me to give a personal assurance that, if the worst came to the worst, nothing of military value would be left intact for the enemy on Singapore Island. That was a big problem, and after careful consideration I came to the conclusion that no guarantee could be given. Some of the equipment, such as coast defence guns, could in any case only be destroyed at the last minute and there would always be an element of uncertainty about that. Some installations were near hospitals and could not be demolished. The fact is that you cannot fight and destroy simultaneously with 100 per cent efficiency in both. So I replied to the effect that I would make all possible arrangements to ensure that, in case of necessity, the destruction of everything of military value should be carried out, but that I could not guarantee that this would in fact be done. Very careful plans were made. As far as the fighting services were concerned, the policy briefly was that the authority responsible for the dump, depot, or establishment concerned would be responsible for the preparation and execution of denial schemes. As regards the orders to put the schemes into effect, I reserved to myself the responsibility for giving the order if time permitted but, to provide against the contingency of this not being possible, I laid down that there must always be on the spot day and night sufficient personnel with a reliable commander who would in the last resort and failing any orders act on his own initiative to ensure that the policy of His Majesty's Government was carried out.

The implementation of the policy as regards civil installations became the responsibility of the Director-General of Civil Defence. He was assisted by a small select staff drawn mostly from the Public Works Department. He had to deal with government departments and with private owners, both European and

Asiatic. The complications of his task need no stressing. To avoid damage to morale much of the preparatory work had to be done in secret. The task in any case is an uncongenial one, for nobody likes having their property destroyed, especially when the prospects of compensation are still uncertain. It says much for the energy and loyalty of the Director-General of Civil Defence and his devoted band of helpers that so much scorched earth work was eventually done at Singapore. This included the destruction of very large quantities of liquor, to which there was naturally some opposition. The order for its destruction was delayed as long as possible and was only given in the interests of the civil population having in view the disastrous consequences which might have resulted had it fallen into the hands of the Japanese.

As speed was the essence of the Japanese plan it seemed certain that they would launch an attack against Singapore Island as early as possible in order to free troops and aircraft for operations elsewhere and in order to open sea communications to the Indian Ocean. It seemed equally certain that the main attack would come from the mainland as it had done at Hong Kong, but they were in a position to launch simultaneously with this a sea-borne and/or an air-borne attack. So we could not with safety neglect the defence of any part of Singapore. As regards the attack from the mainland, everything pointed to this developing from the west as the main communications down which the Japanese were advancing led to that part of the front. I thought it very likely that, combined with this, the Japanese would make a sea-borne attack via the Straits of Malacca, as they now clearly had plenty of their special landing-craft on that coast. There was also a possibility that the force which was advancing from Mersing would come down the Johore River to attack either Tekong Island or the Changi area.

The length of the coast-line of Singapore Island, Blakang Mati, and Pulau Brani is seventy-two miles. In addition to this there was the island of Tekong and the Pengerang defended area. The total strength of the garrison at the beginning of February was, as far as I can estimate, somewhere in the region of 85,000 men. That is not to say that there were 85,000 fighting men, for this number included the non-combatant corps, i.e. the Royal Army Medical Corps, the Pioneer and Labour Units, etc. It also

included a large number of Base and administrative personnel, who had had little training in the use of weapons, and a number of men for whom no arms were available. It would probably not be far wrong to say that about 70,000 of the total number were armed and equipped, i.e. the equivalent of about four weak divisions with Command and Base troops. When all the "over-heads" are deducted, that is not a large number to defend a coast-line of about eighty miles.

I organized the defences into five Commands, each coming directly under me. They were:

- (i) *The Northern Area*, which extended from Changi exclusive on the right to the Causeway exclusive on the left. The 3rd Indian Corps (Lt.-Gen. Sir L. M. Heath) was responsible for this. I had originally intended that it would have its own two divisions only plus the 12th Indian Brigade but, as a result of the loss of the 22nd Indian Brigade on the mainland, it was found necessary to incorporate the remains of the 9th Indian Division in the 11th Indian Division. I was forced therefore at the last minute to place the newly arrived 18th British Division under 3rd Indian Corps and to keep the 12th Indian Brigade as Command Reserve.
- (ii) *The Southern Area*, which extended from Changi inclusive along the south coast to the River Jurong inclusive. It also included Pengerang, the islands of Tekong and Blakang Mati, Pulau Brani, and Pulau Bukum. It was commanded by Maj.-Gen. F. Keith Simmons. It comprised most of the original Singapore defences, including practically all the fixed defences. Under command were the 1st and 2nd Malaya Infantry Brigades and the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force.
- (iii) *The Western Area*, which extended from the River Jurong round the west coast to the Causeway inclusive. This was the danger area and I had specially selected for it the Australian Imperial Force under command of Maj.-Gen. Gordon Bennett because I thought that, of the troops which had had experience of fighting on the mainland, it was the freshest and the most likely to give a good account of itself. Under command I placed the recently

arrived 44th Indian Infantry Brigade which, it will be recollected, was already in the south-western part of the island.

- (iv) *The Anti-Aircraft Defences* (Brigadier A. W. G. Wildey), which had been reorganized to meet the new situation, special attention being given to the docks area.
- (v) *The Command Reserve*, which now consisted only of the very weak 12th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Paris). It was my intention, as soon as the direction of the attack was known and this reserve was committed, to create a new reserve by withdrawing troops from parts of the front which were not threatened.

Pulau Ubin presented a difficult problem in this new orientation. I would like to have held it in strength, both on account of the observation which it afforded and to prevent the enemy concentrating for an attack behind it. But it would have taken a lot of troops and we could not afford to hold it and the Changi area behind it. So I decided to occupy Pulau Ubin with fighting patrols only and to use the observation from it for as long as we could.

To make use of all possible resources I took two other steps. Firstly, I organized the personnel of all combatant administrative units to defend their own establishments. Secondly, I arranged to expand rapidly a force of Chinese Irregulars which had been operating on the mainland under the command of Lt.-Col. J. D. Dalley of the Federated Malay States Police Force. This force was recruited from all classes of Chinese—college boys and rickshaw pullers, loyalists and communists, old and young. Later it became the centre of the resistance movement in Malaya and did much to help British troops marooned in that country. The members of Dalforce, as it was called, were exceedingly tough, and in spite of their lack of training would, I have no doubt, have made excellent fighters had we been able to arm and equip them properly. As it was, the effort, though most praiseworthy, came too late to have any real effect on the course of events.

The basis of the defence was that the enemy must be prevented from landing or, if he succeeded in landing, that he must be stopped near the beaches and destroyed or driven out by counter-attack. I laid special emphasis on the offensive spirit as will be

seen from the following extract from an instruction issued to all formation commanders on 3 February:

All ranks must be imbued with the spirit of the attack. It is no good waiting for the Japanese to attack first. The endeavour of every soldier must be to locate the enemy and, having located him, to close with him.

On the morning of 5 February we suffered a serious blow when the transport *Empress of Asia*, well known to many travellers in Far Eastern waters, was sunk by Japanese aircraft off the south-west coast of Singapore Island. She was one of a small convoy of four ships—the last to reach Singapore—which was bringing the remaining units of the 18th British Division and some other troops and transport. As usual, the final approach to Singapore had been made under cover of darkness, but the *Empress of Asia*, whose speed was less than that of the other ships, had dropped behind and was attacked by aircraft when passing the Sembilan Islands, only a few miles from Keppel harbour. She received several direct hits from dive-bombers, fire broke out, and she soon began to sink. All troops had to take to the water. Some acts of great gallantry were performed, especially by members of the hospital staff. Rescues were quickly effected by the Royal Navy. The loss of life fortunately was small, but nearly all weapons and equipment on board were lost and the ship became a total wreck. I met the survivors on the quay. Splendid men but no weapons. What a tragedy! But it was the only ship that was sunk of those bringing reinforcements, so we were really very lucky.

The first week of February was very tense. There was so much to be done and so little time to do it in. Most of the work on the defences had to be done at night as all the northern and western coast-lines were under direct enemy observation. It was a curious sensation looking across the Straits at the Japanese occupied coast-line of Johore and it reminded me forcibly of the First World War. The artillery on both sides was active though, owing to shortage of 25-pounder ammunition, I had to put restrictions on ordinary harassing fire programmes. The Japanese produced one battery with a specially long range of about 24,000 yards, which shelled the Government House area from about Johore Bahru. That surprised everybody. The Japanese Air Force directed its attacks mainly against the Singapore docks and the

Kallang aerodrome. As usual, most of the civil labour at the docks disappeared and we had to do most of our own loading and unloading. Our own fighter squadron was almost continuously in the air during this week and did some splendid work, both material and moral.

I had laid great stress on the necessity for active patrolling across the Straits to find out what the enemy was doing. Early on the morning of 8 February two of the A.I.F. patrols returned after being in enemy territory for over twenty-four hours and reported that on the seventh large enemy reinforcements had arrived in the rubber plantations opposite the western shores of Singapore Island.

Chapter XIX

THE BATTLE OF SINGAPORE I

THE Western Area held by the A.I.F. was a particularly difficult one. Much of the coast-line is covered with mangrove swamps which had been partially drained and did not therefore provide any very formidable obstacle. In the extreme west there are a number of short, but very steep, valleys. In the north the broad, but also very short, Kranji River provides a natural boundary between defensive sectors. Gordon Bennett had naturally selected this as an inter-brigade boundary, allotting the sector to the right of it to his own 27th Brigade and that to the left of it as far as the Sungei Berih to his 22nd Brigade, the one which had been engaged on the east coast of Johore and which, except for the battalion which had taken part in the Muar fighting, was probably the freshest of all the formations which had fought on the mainland. The south-western part of the island was held by the 44th Indian Brigade.

At first sight it might appear that the 27th Brigade had an easy task compared to the others, but it was responsible for the defence of the all-important Causeway and one of its battalions was under Headquarters A.I.F. in area reserve. The break in the Causeway itself had not proved quite so effective as we had hoped. It was all right at high tide, but at low water it was fordable for men on foot though not for vehicles. The Japanese made great efforts to repair it and provided some good targets for our artillery. Later, after they had got a footing on the island, they did manage to effect some temporary repairs.

It is with the front held by the 22nd Australian Brigade that we will now deal, for it was against that front that the main weight of the Japanese attack was directed. The defence problem was not an easy one. Between the headwaters of the Rivers Kranji and Berih is a comparatively narrow neck of land in which lies Ama Keng village. That in many ways would have been the easiest line to hold, but to do this would have sacrificed the great advantage which the defender of a coast-line always has of being able to hit the enemy when he is most vulnerable, i.e. when he is

landing from his boats. That is why I had laid down a forward policy for the defence with a view to stopping the enemy landing or, if he did land, to throwing him out again quickly. In the sector we are discussing this involved, owing to the convex shape of the coast-line, a front of 15,000 yards for the brigade—or an average of nearly three miles for each of the three battalions. Before the war we used to reckon on a battalion holding four or five hundred yards of front. Of course, those ideas soon went by the board, but still three miles for a battalion, even with a water obstacle in front of it, is a pretty formidable proposition. I have never seen the orders issued by the commander of this brigade, but it seems that he felt anxious about the extent of his front, as I know Gordon Bennett did too, for I understand that an order was issued later on to the effect that the forward troops, if overrun, were to fight their way back successively to company and battalion perimeter positions.

The 2/20 Battalion A.I.F. with a company of Dalforce attached was on the right on a very wide front, the 2/18 Battalion in the centre, and the 2/19 Battalion on the left. Both these last two had rather narrower frontages than the first. The 2/19 Battalion, it will be remembered, was the battalion which had suffered so heavily at Muar. It had since absorbed a large number of reinforcements but had had little time really to settle down again. There was a machine-gun company distributed along the front and the brigade was supported by Australian artillery.

As had happened all the way down the peninsula, military operations were complicated by the presence everywhere of large numbers of civilians. The Government had already evacuated civilians from parts of the south coast and now we had to clear a strip along the north and west coasts, so all the rest of the Island was becoming very congested. Besides creating complications when actual fighting was going on, this made the work of fifth columnists comparatively simple. It is even reported that a Japanese captain did a complete reconnaissance of our positions before the attack took place.

Shelling started on the front of the A.I.F. at about 10 a.m. on 8 February, headquarters and communications receiving special attention, but for some reason the reaction to this and to the patrol reports which had been received that morning does not seem to have been very quick. It may have been that the restrictions

which had been placed on harassing fire had a crippling effect, though these had not been intended to cover a special case of this sort. Whatever the reason, full advantage was not taken of the opportunity to strafe the enemy's concentrations.

In the afternoon the bombardment increased and it reached its height after dark. The roar of the guns and the crash of bursting shells reminded one forcibly of the bombardments of the First World War. It was obvious that the Japanese had brought up a lot more guns for this attack and that they had plenty of ammunition. Many of the forward defences were flattened and most of the telephone lines were cut. The first attack on the front of the 2/20 Battalion came in at about 10.45 p.m. and very soon the whole front from the right of that battalion to the right of the 2/19 Battalion was engaged, while other craft attempted to enter the mouth of the River Berih but were driven off. The first flights were brought across the Straits in special armoured landing-craft. Successive flights came in more vulnerable types of craft. There seemed to be large numbers of the special landing-craft, as many as forty to fifty appearing on the front of one of the forward companies. Each landing-craft carried forty men. They were engaged by our defences and a furious battle raged on the beaches, our machine-guns firing incessantly until they had no ammunition left. Many of the leading landing-craft were sunk or driven off, but others came on, and the Japanese got a footing ashore at many points. I believe that was solely due to the weakness of our defences which resulted from the extended fronts, aggravated by the fact that, again for reasons unknown, our artillery defensive fire was slow in coming down. That may have been due to the cutting of the telephone lines by bombardment or to the fact that it is not easy to see light signals in that wooded country. On the other hand, it seems that there was a strange and unfortunate reluctance to use the wireless. It appears also that our beach searchlights were never exposed. Some of them may have been destroyed by bombardment. In any case, this failure was not too serious for in one area at least a burning Japanese barge loaded with crackers supplied the necessary illumination. No, the chief reason why the Japanese got ashore was because we were too thin on the ground.

The strongest enemy attack was directed from the west up the banks of the River Murai with Ama Keng village as its objective.

In this area a wedge was driven between the 2/18 and 2/19 Battalions.

At about midnight the commanders of the three battalions, in accordance with the orders outlined above, ordered their forward troops to withdraw into battalion perimeters. The 2/20 Battalion on the right concentrated in the Namazie Estate, but the 2/18 Battalion was too closely engaged by the enemy and only a small proportion of them reached their perimeter at Ama Keng village. A similar fate befell the 2/19 Battalion on the left. Finally, when the commander of the 2/20 Battalion ordered a withdrawal to Ama Keng village, where he hoped to join up with the 2/18 Battalion, he found it occupied by the enemy.

These tactical movements at night in thick country and in the middle of a battle which in many places was being fought at close quarters were undoubtedly too difficult. In such circumstances the only way to fight the battle is for the advanced posts to hold on and for reserves to counter-attack up to them if the opportunity arises. The result in this case was much confusion and disorganization, groups of men becoming detached and lost in the close country. Those are conditions which produce stragglers and that there were stragglers in this case cannot be denied. In fact, a great deal has already been written about the stragglers in Singapore Town—some of it true, some much exaggerated. Let us see what the true picture was. These men were not long-service soldiers and discipline was not deep-rooted. They had volunteered for service and had been sent to Malaya to defend the Naval Base. They knew that the Naval Base was no longer of any use and they knew also that Australia, their homeland, was being threatened. Some of them belonged to units which, after heavy casualties on the mainland, had had no time to regain their full fighting efficiency. They had fought well throughout a long night against heavy odds and were exhausted. Later in the week the 22nd Australian Brigade again distinguished itself by its dogged fighting. That is the true picture. Let it be judged on its merits. And let it not be supposed that there are no stragglers in other battles. Not all men are heroes, though the readers of military histories who have no practical experience may get that impression. I remember on one occasion in the retreat of March 1918 being sent with a party of men to clear stragglers out of a village. In that village we found men of twenty-one different

units. Even our military regulations admit that there will be battle stragglers in the instructions they contain for the organization of stragglers' posts.

I have said that the 22nd Australian Brigade fought against heavy odds in this battle. That may surprise some of my readers who have read reports of an almost unopposed landing by a handful of Japanese. Fortunately we have now got evidence of the strength of the Japanese attack and of the methods they employed. It appears that the initial attack was carried out by two divisions—the 18th (transferred from the east coast) on the right and the 5th on the left. During the night 8–9 February, 13,000 troops were landed on the island and another 10,000 landed shortly after dawn. Later the Guards Division joined in the attack. In reserve in the Kluang area of Johore were two divisions and it is probable, though not certain, that there was yet another division in reserve. So altogether the Japanese appear to have had five, or probably six, divisions available for this attack on the island.

For some time we were at a loss to know how the Japanese had conveyed their landing-craft to the Johore Straits, as it did not seem possible that they could have been brought round by sea without our knowledge. We now know that they were brought overland by road from Pontian Kechil on the west coast of Johore.

It must be admitted that the Japanese feat in mounting this attack in the space of about a week was a very fine military performance. No doubt many of the plans were thought out and laid in advance, but even so their completion and implementation in that short time would have done credit to the staff of any first-class military power. The fighting of their troops also was of a very high order. The landing operations were conducted with the greatest determination in spite of what must have been very heavy losses. Some of the Japanese soldiers, I have been told, swam the Straits carrying their rifles and ammunition with them. Each man was equipped with a wrist compass and, as soon as they had landed, they went straight off without any delay to their objective. In an operation of this sort the Japanese soldier is at his best—quite fearless and filled with determination, come what may, to reach the point to which he has been ordered to go. I cannot help thinking of a discussion which took place shortly before the war as to whether the art of swimming should be included in the

training of the British soldier. The war surely must have dispelled any doubts which existed on that point. I wonder how many valuable lives we lost during the war because men could not swim. The numbers must have run into many thousands.

It was some time before the full significance of what was happening reached the headquarters in rear. Owing to the destruction of communications reports were slow in coming in and, as so often happens, the first reports were optimistic. At my headquarters, which were still at Sime Road where I now slept in my office, it was not until the early hours of the morning that we could be certain that this was in fact the main attack and that it was not going to be followed by another attack elsewhere. I had learnt in exercises we had held in England not to commit your reserve until you are quite certain you are dealing with the real thing. That was why it was not till 8.30 a.m. that I ordered the 12th Indian Brigade, the only Command Reserve, to move forward to the Bukit Panjang-Keat Hong village area, where it was to come under Gordon Bennett's command. It had already been given a warning order shortly after midnight to prepare for this move. The so-called 12th Brigade at this time consisted only of two very weak battalions—the Argylls, 400 strong, of whom 150 were marines, and the 4/19 Hyderabad, 440 strong, of which a large number were newly arrived reinforcements. That was typical of the state of many of our battalions.

Before this Gordon Bennett had moved forward his own reserve—and he had done all he could to create reserves from his reinforcement depot and elsewhere—and plans had been made to launch a counter-attack to recapture Ama Keng village. But the Japanese had anticipated this move and by 8 a.m. were already attacking Tengah aerodrome, held by troops of the Jind Infantry, one of the best of the Indian State Forces units. By the time the 12th Brigade arrived the problem was to stabilize the front and it was put into position in the right section of the Kranji-Jurong line.

At 11 a.m., with a view to creating a new reserve which I could call upon if necessary, I ordered Heath to put his own reserve, the 6th/15th Brigade, at one hour's notice and not to commit it without reference to me.

About midday there was a lull in the fighting and I went forward to see Gordon Bennett. His headquarters were just west of Bukit Timah village in some estate buildings, where they came

in for a good deal of shelling and bombing. Accommodation was cramped and altogether it was not a very healthy spot. We discussed the conduct of the battle. We decided that his 27th Brigade should continue to hold the Causeway sector and that with his 22nd Brigade and the reinforcements which had been sent up he should try to stabilize the front on the Kranji-Jurong position. Then there was the question of what orders should be given to the 44th Indian Brigade. Ballantine was still holding his extended positions round the coast but had sent some of his reserves to look after his right flank. His only line of communication along the Jurong road was now directly threatened and obviously it was no use the brigade staying where it was. I thought at first that it might be used to counter-attack the enemy's right flank, but it was extended over such a wide area that it would have taken a long time to concentrate it for such an attack. So eventually we decided that it should be ordered to fall back on to the left of the Kranji-Jurong position. Finally, I said I would move up the 6th/15th Indian Brigade immediately to a rendezvous on the Bukit Timah road with its head near the race-course and place it under Gordon Bennett's orders. In making this decision I was influenced by the paramount necessity of preventing the enemy reaching the important food and petrol dumps east of Bukit Timah village, the loss of which would seriously weaken our ability to resist.

Upon return to my headquarters, I and my staff worked upon a plan to meet the eventuality that the enemy's advance down the Bukit Timah road might force us to withdraw our troops from the other parts of Singapore Island. The plan in outline was to hold a perimeter which would include the Kallang aerodrome, the MacRitchie and Peirce reservoirs and the Bukit Timah depots area. Heath and Keith Simmons came to my headquarters and were given this plan verbally on the evening of 9 February. It was issued in writing as a secret and personal instruction to senior commanders and staff officers shortly after midnight, so that responsible senior officers might know my intentions in case the situation developed too rapidly for further orders to be issued.

During the evening of 9 February, the Japanese artillery concentrated on the front held by the 27th Australian Brigade. At about 7.30 p.m. the enemy attacked on a front between the

Causeway and the River Kranji. Again a large number of his landing-craft were knocked out by artillery and machine-gun fire, but again he succeeded in getting a footing.

On this same night a naval force of three fast armed patrol vessels was sent into the western channel of the Johore Straits with the object of sinking the enemy's landing-craft and disrupting his communications. It was a bold move as they were exposed to small arms fire from both sides as they went up the Straits. They penetrated nearly to the Causeway and sank a few landing-craft, but could not stay for long in such an exposed and perilous position.

At midnight our line stretched from the Causeway, which we still held, to the Kranji-Jurong switch line and thence along the Jurong River, where the Malay Regiment, except for detachments which had fought up-country, came into action for the first time. But there was a gap between the 27th Australian Brigade and the Kranji-Jurong line, and a further withdrawal carried out after midnight left the important hill features overlooking the Causeway undefended. This was the key to the northern defences and should have been held at all costs until evacuation was ordered in accordance with the general plan. To protect its own flank the 11th Indian Division had to recapture this position later in the day.

In confused fighting like this, unit and formation commanders must be well forward with their troops if they are to have any hope of controlling the battle. It is an art which is taught and practised in peace training, but many war-time commanders are undoubtedly handicapped from lack of experience when it comes to controlling a quickly moving battle. It happened in Malaya and I have no doubt it happened in other theatres.

The 6th/15th Brigade, as soon as it had reached its rendezvous on the Bukit Timah road, was moved forward to occupy a position in the Kranji-Jurong line just north of the Jurong road. It had a tedious march against the stream of traffic and did not reach its new positions until 4.30 a.m. Meanwhile, the 22nd Australian Brigade, which was still in the Bulim area a little in front of the Kranji-Jurong line, was ordered to fall back at 6 a.m. to a position on the right of the 6th/15th Brigade. Again something went wrong; there seems to have been loss of contact and a mistaken order. At any rate the brigade concentrated too far back leaving

a gap in the Kranji-Jurong line of which the enemy were quick to take advantage. A strong attack drove our troops back on both flanks and penetrated into the gap.

That morning Wavell visited Singapore for the last time, having come by air from Java. We went straight up to see Gordon Bennett and found him at a new headquarters off the Holland road south-east of Bukit Timah village. The Japanese also had apparently found him there, for no sooner had we arrived than a bombing attack developed and the unedifying spectacle was seen of three general officers going to ground under tables or any other cover that was available. There was a good deal of debris and a few casualties outside, but the party of V.I.P.s escaped untouched though I lost both my car and my field glasses.

Gordon Bennett was not quite so confident as he had been up-country. He had always been very certain that his Australians would never let the Japanese through and the penetration of his defences had upset him. As always, we were fighting this battle in the dark, and I do not think any of us realized at that time the strength of the enemy's attack. The information at A.I.F. headquarters as to what was happening in the Causeway sector was very meagre. It was not till we reached the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division later on that we found out the true state of affairs. The fact of the matter was that the communications of the 27th Australian Brigade now ran back through the 11th Indian Division's area and not through the A.I.F. area. I later had to put that brigade temporarily under 11th Indian Division.

As a result of this visit I ordered Heath to withdraw three more battalions from the 18th British Division and to send them to the Bukit Timah road to come under Gordon Bennett's orders. Regrettable as it was, these battalions had to be drawn from different brigades. There was no other alternative as there was no time for reliefs to take place. The force was commanded by Lt.-Col. Thomas and was known as Tomforce.

After we left A.I.F. headquarters we passed an undisciplined-looking mob of Indians moving along the road. They were carrying rifles and moving in no sort of formation. Their clothing was almost black. I must confess I felt more than a bit ashamed of them and it was quite obvious what the Supreme Commander thought. Only recently have I learnt the truth. This was the

administrative staff of a reinforcement camp on the move. The quartermaster had some rifles in store and, good quartermaster as he was, had determined that they must be taken. So, having no transport, he had given one to each man to carry. The blackened clothing came from burning oil. That is another point—and a big one. Burning oil sends up billowing smoke full of black particles. These particles, when they come down, cover the ground and blacken everything with which they come into contact. Many of our troops looked more like miners emerging from a shift in the pits than fighting soldiers. It is difficult to keep one's self-respect in these conditions, especially when things are not going too well. Another example of the difficulties of combining scorched earth and battle fighting.

After a brief visit to headquarters 3rd Indian Corps we went on to headquarters 11th Indian Division, north of Nee Soon village. Key was well forward with his troops and in close touch with the situation, but a bit anxious about his left flank. The junction of the Mandai and Bukit Timah roads was clearly the key to the situation here, and I sent a personal instruction to the 27th Australian Brigade to try to push forward and get control of it again.

Then back again to the headquarters A.I.F., which we reached at about 2.30 p.m. There we heard of the unsatisfactory situation in front of Bukit Timah village, though there was no very clear picture of the positions occupied by our own troops. In fact, some of them were far from where they were thought to be, as will be seen later. Bukit Timah was vital to the defence—partly because it is an important road junction, partly because there is direct observation from the hills north-west of the village as far as Singapore Town itself, and partly because of the important dumps and depots which lay to the east of it. So I told Gordon Bennett to stage a counter-attack to re-establish the Kranji-Jurong line. Orders for this were issued without delay. The counter-attack was to be made in three stages. The first was to secure by 6 p.m. the same evening the Bukit Panjang and Bukit Gombok features. These two hills lie a little west of the main road north of Bukit Timah village and parts of them were already held, so very little advance was necessary. The second and third stages, which were to take place on the morning and afternoon of the following day respectively, aimed at re-establishing the

Kranji-Jurong line. As events turned out, this counter-attack was still-born for the enemy attacked first and during the night penetrated deep into our position.

We got back to Command Headquarters at about 4 p.m. There I was given two very disturbing reports. The first was that the enemy were approaching Bukit Timah village. My B.G.S. told me that it had come from a brigade major and that he had every reason to think it was true. The significance of this was that the large reserve petrol depot was only 500 yards east of the village and must not at any price be allowed to fall into the enemy's hands. The responsibility for ordering its destruction rested with me and now I gave orders for destruction to take place. It was set on fire at 6 p.m. and burnt furiously for two or three days.

The other piece of news was even more disconcerting. It came from Keith Simmons who said that the 44th Indian Brigade had passed through his front and was now at Pasir Panjang village on the south coast four miles from where it was supposed to be. I could hardly believe this, so I went forward again to headquarters A.I.F. to find out what was happening. Later I went to the Reformatory Road, where at dusk I met the brigade marching back to its position. It had been collected by its officers and was now marching in good order, though of course everyone was pretty tired. I later learnt that one of the battalion commanders had asked for and been given by the brigade commander permission to move his battalion a short distance for tactical reasons. That was quite a normal procedure but, while moving, the battalion had been attacked from the ground and from the air and the movement had continued. It had become infectious and other battalions had joined in and it was not till they reached the sea that their officers had been able to regain control. It was one of the strangest things I have ever experienced. It was not fear. It was just the result of putting raw and semi-trained troops, lacking in experienced junior leaders, into a modern battle. It is not fair either to the troops themselves or to the commanders deputed to lead them.

On the way back I experienced some of the difficulties of sorting out traffic blocks at night when the drivers speak many different languages. Our military police were pretty efficient, but I did not envy them their job. It was 9 p.m. before I got back to my house. There I said good-bye to General Wavell. He left

at midnight by flying-boat but in the black-out fell down some steps when embarking and sustained injuries which forced him to lie up for some days on his return to Java. Before leaving he issued orders to the effect that Singapore must be held to the last. I have felt since that he took away with him a false idea of the weight of attack which had been thrown against us, for the simple reason that, fighting blind as we were, none of us at that time had fully appreciated it ourselves.

Our last fighters left Singapore on this day. Kallang aerodrome was now so full of bomb craters that it was seldom usable. This gallant squadron had done great work, battling all the time against tremendous odds.

Shortly after 8 p.m. the Japanese launched a strong attack from the west against Bukit Panjang village and now for the first time tanks made their appearance on the island. Astride the Bukit Timah road south of Bukit Panjang village the 12th Indian Brigade, or what remained of it, was in position. Members of the brigade staff, going forward to find out what was happening, found themselves face to face with Japanese tanks. There was great confusion as friend and foe became inextricably mixed and the tanks were only stopped a short distance in front of Bukit Timah village. The 12th Brigade, decimated after its gallant efforts, ceased to exist as a formation, though parties of Argylls formed themselves into guerrilla bands and went on fighting.

At 6 a.m. on the eleventh, after a few hours' sleep at Sime Road, I woke up to the sounds of machine-gun fire. Thinking it was probably only some anti-aircraft fire, I sent my A.D.C., Stonor of the Argylls, who had been untiring in his efforts to help me the whole campaign, out to investigate. He soon came back saying there appeared to be a battle going on beyond the end of the golf-course about a mile from where we were. I thought it was time to move. We had prepared an alternative headquarters on Thomson Road but there was no point in going there now, so I decided to join rear headquarters at Fort Canning. Accommodation there was very congested as Headquarters Southern Area and Anti-Aircraft Defences were also there. The General Staff went into the bomb-proof shelter which had been constructed before the war. It was never meant to hold as many bodies as this and the ventilating arrangements were inadequate. In consequence the general staff room became terribly hot and the staff

worked under most unpleasant conditions. Air headquarters also moved to a new site in Singapore Town.

The enemy's successful attack during the previous night had created several danger points. In the first place, a wide gap had developed between the MacRitchie Reservoir and the troops on the Bukit Timah road. To fill this I sent up a composite force from the reinforcement camps. It was reminiscent of March 1918 in France when every last man had to be put into the line. Secondly, a strong attack was launched shortly after dawn against the rear of the 6th/15th Indian Brigade from the direction of Bukit Timah village, forcing it to fall back south-eastwards except for one battalion, the Jats, which had never received the order cancelling the counter-attack planned the previous day. Then, Bukit Timah village itself had fallen into the enemy's hands and a counter-attack by Tomforce, launched with the object of recapturing the village, was held up on the line of the railway. Later in the morning a strong enemy attack developed against the 22nd Australian Brigade, now reduced to a few hundred men only, which was in position a mile south of Bukit Timah village near the junction of the Reformatory and Ulu Pandan roads. Fierce fighting went on in this area throughout the day during which the brigade, which had incorporated the 2/4 Machine-gun Battalion now fighting as infantry, held its ground most gallantly in face of infantry attacks supported by aerial bombing, artillery, mortar, and small arms fire.

Farther south the enemy reached the Buona Vista 15-inch battery which was destroyed as they swarmed round the guns.

During the morning I went up the Bukit Timah road to see Tomforce. It was a strange sensation. This great road, usually so full of traffic, was almost deserted. Japanese aircraft were floating about, unopposed except for our anti-aircraft fire, looking for targets. One felt terribly naked driving up that wide road in a lone motor-car. Why, I asked myself, does Britain, our improvident Britain, with all her great resources allow her sons to fight without any air support?

The three battalions of Tomforce were spread out on a wide front astride the Bukit Timah road. Commanders were finding the problem of control in this close country extremely difficult. The usual infiltration by enemy snipers was taking place and the tree snipers were there too. It was all very strange for these

troops fresh from the English countryside. In the evening Thomas withdrew his force to a more concentrated position in the race-course area.

On the front of the 11th Indian Division the Japanese penetrated between the 8th and 28th Brigades towards Nee Soon village. Here also the forward troops fell back to form a more concentrated defence of that vital area.

At midnight on 11-12 February the 3rd Indian Corps (northern area) took over command of all troops as far left as the Bukit Timah road inclusive. To fill the gap in the golf-course area and to protect the reservoirs a new composite force had been formed from the 18th British Division. It consisted of three infantry battalions, a battery of artillery, a weak squadron of light tanks and a detachment of mechanized cavalry. It was under command of Brigadier Massy Beresford, an able and energetic officer who quickly got a grip of the situation and produced order out of growing chaos. Once again I was impressed with the advantages which trained and experienced commanders enjoy when faced with problems in mobile warfare. Massy Beresford took Tomforce under his command and so became responsible for all the front from the Thomson Road to the Bukit Timah Road.

A painful incident on the eleventh was the destruction by fire of the Indian Base Hospital at Tyersall as a result of enemy action. The hospital was in a hutted camp which burnt so fiercely that few of the patients could be got out. There was a large number of casualties.

We had now lost all the food and petrol depots and dumps in the Bukit Timah area, in spite of our efforts to hold them. That was a serious blow, for we now had only about fourteen days' military food supplies in the depots which remained under our control. As regards petrol, so little now remained that I had to issue an order that no further supplies, either army, air force, or civil, must be destroyed without my permission.

Chapter XX

THE BATTLE OF SINGAPORE II

THURSDAY, 12 February, opened with a strong Japanese attack with tanks down the Bukit Timah road. I went up to see what was happening and came to the conclusion that there was a very real danger that the enemy would break through on that front into Singapore Town, for we had very little behind the front with which to stop him if he once effected penetration. It was terribly difficult at this time, as indeed it had been throughout the campaign, to know just how strong our defences were. Units would report their strength as being down to an odd hundred or two, but a little later a company perhaps, which had been detached and lost in the thick country, would turn up again and up would go the fighting strength.

I went to see Heath. We agreed that it was no good leaving troops guarding the northern and eastern shores of the island when there was such imminent danger of losing Singapore Town itself and that the time had come to take up a perimeter defence round the town. Such a perimeter defence must of course include the water supply. So I instructed Heath to withdraw his troops from the northern beaches and to select and occupy a position covering the water supply and linking up on the right with Southern Area which would be holding the Kallang aerodrome. I also instructed Keith Simmons to make arrangements to withdraw from the Changi area and from the beaches east of Kallang as soon as he received orders to do so.

Then I went on to see the Governor. He was still at Government House which was being shelled intermittently. I told him of the situation on the Bukit Timah road and of possible developments. Several important decisions had to be taken. One concerned the Malayan Broadcasting Station which was now less than a mile from the front line. We decided that the time had come to destroy it. Another concerned the stocks of currency notes held by the Treasury. I had always imagined before that you could get rid of them at the last moment by a good bonfire, but it was not as easy as all that. They had to be conveyed to a

place where they could be destroyed and lorries were required for that. So, if we were to ensure their destruction, it must be done in good time. On the other hand, we hoped to go on fighting and, if we did so, we should want money. A tricky problem. We decided to destroy some of the notes and to keep the rest—a good old English compromise.

The application of the scorched earth policy in Singapore was undoubtedly detrimental to morale. There is a vast difference between the application of such a policy in defence of a nation's homeland and its application in a distant land inhabited by Asiatic peoples where the property to be destroyed has been built up laboriously over the years by Government or by private enterprise and where, in many cases, those responsible for the implementation of the policy have themselves in the past been the leaders of progress in their respective spheres. Few people can see their castles knocked down without pangs of remorse.

Heavy fighting developed along the whole front. On the right a determined enemy attempt to capture Nee Soon village was repulsed by units of the 8th and 28th Indian Brigades. This attack was made by the Japanese Imperial Guards supported by tanks. In the Pandan area south of Bukit Timah village the 22nd Australian Brigade Group was still holding its advanced position in spite of repeated attempts by the enemy to dislodge it. It held this position for over forty-eight hours, but it was getting so exhausted and was so isolated that Gordon Bennett withdrew it to the Tanglin area after dark. Farther south the Japanese concentrated their attacks against the 44th Indian Brigade and the 1st Malaya Brigade. Here the young soldiers of the 2nd Battalion of the Malay Regiment showed great steadiness in circumstances which might well have affected experienced veterans. On this front the Japanese artillery was assisted by an observation balloon which was moved on to the island. It was maddening to see it sitting up there looking at us when an odd fighter or two could have knocked it down in a few minutes.

At 8.30 p.m. I ordered the demolition of all the Changi defences and the withdrawal during the night of all troops from the Changi area and from the south-east coast to the Singapore defences. That was a hard decision to make. As staff officer and as commander I had seen those defences growing and being brought to their high state of efficiency. I had myself worked on many

problems relating to them. I knew well what they meant to the officers and men who manned them. And yet, what was the good of keeping them? If Singapore fell, they would have been exposed to the whole weight of the Japanese attack, both from the air and by land, and could hardly have held out for long. The only hope was to concentrate everything on the defence of Singapore.

The administrative situation now began to cause great anxiety. The military food reserves under our control were sufficient for only about seven days' consumption, though in addition to this units held reserves of varying quantity and there were also the civil food reserves. We only had one small dump of petrol on the island in addition to what was in vehicle tanks. But the water situation caused most concern. In the Singapore Town area breaks in the mains from bombing and shelling began to gain steadily over repairs with the result that from 12 February pressure failed seriously. Royal Engineer personnel and military transport were called in by the Director-General of Civil Defence to assist the civil staff, and special water-carrying parties were organized. But the high-level reservoir at Pearl's Hill near the General Hospital was already empty and the Fort Canning reservoir was losing water rapidly.

The superstitious would no doubt look upon Friday, 13 February, as a day of ill-omen, and so it proved to be. It opened with a scare of a Japanese landing on the island of Blakang Mati. Communications were broken and for some time it was difficult to get news but eventually it turned out that it was the landing of some of our own troops who had escaped by sea from the west part of Singapore Island which had given rise to the report. There were so many rumours flying about that it was difficult to know which to believe and which to ignore. In addition to Blakang Mati, there were still also garrisons on Tekong Island and at Pengerang in southern Johore, neither of which places were being attacked. So I made plans to bring the Dogra battalion from Tekong over to Singapore the following night—plans which, as will be seen, had to be abandoned later from lack of any means of transport. So this unfortunate battalion for the third time found itself in an area which was not attacked and in the end never came into action.

The main Japanese offensive during the thirteenth developed

along the Pasir Panjang Ridge to the west of Singapore Town. It was a key position on that part of the front, for it not only overlooked the country to the north but also gave direct access to the vitally important Alexandra area where our main ammunition magazine, the main ordnance depot, the military hospital, and other installations were grouped. The attack was made by the Japanese 18th Division and was preceded by a two hours' artillery, air, and mortar bombardment. The attack fell chiefly on the Malay Regiment which was holding this feature and which fought magnificently. On this and the following day the regiment fully justified the confidence which had been placed in it and showed what *esprit de corps* and discipline can achieve. Garrisons of posts held their ground and many of them were wiped out almost to a man. It was only when it was weakened by heavy losses that the regiment was forced to give ground. Those who have described the resistance on Singapore Island as half-hearted do scant justice to resistance such as this.

In the Tyersall-Tanglin area, Gordon Bennett had organized an all-round perimeter defence into which most of the units of the A.I.F. had been drawn. I have been surprised to read in his book *Why Singapore Fell* that he sent a telegram to the Prime Minister of Australia telling him that, in the event of other formations falling back and allowing the enemy to enter the city behind him, it was his intention to surrender to avoid any further needless loss of life. That seems to me a most extraordinary procedure. No doubt he was perfectly entitled to communicate with his own Prime Minister but surely not to inform him of an intention to surrender in certain circumstances when he had not even communicated that intention to his own superior officer.

Farther to the east the 3rd Indian Corps was reorganizing its defences. On the left it had the 18th British Division, in touch with the A.I.F. south of the Bukit Timah road. By the evening of the thirteenth this division was fighting for the first time as a complete division with the 53rd Brigade on the right, the 55th in the centre and the 54th on the left, but there had been much mixing of units as a result of the piecemeal way in which they had been withdrawn from the beach defences. That could not be avoided and it was impossible at that time to sort them out. On the right of the 18th British Division was the 11th Indian Division astride the Serangoon road and south of Paya Lebar village. On

its right the latter was in touch with the eastern defences of Southern Area which included the Kallang aerodrome.

There were still a number of small ships and sea-going craft lying in Singapore Harbour including some naval patrol vessels. On the morning of the thirteenth Rear-Admiral Spooner decided that it was no longer safe to keep these at Singapore and that they would be of more use for the general prosecution of the war at Java. Accordingly he decided to sail them all for Java that night and to go with them himself. There were in all about fifty of these little ships with accommodation for about 3,000 persons in addition to the crews. It was the last opportunity that could be foreseen for any organized parties to leave Singapore and vacancies were allotted to the Services and to the civil government at a conference held by the rear-admiral. The army was allotted 1,800 vacancies. This was no evacuation comparable to our evacuations from Dunkirk, Greece, Crete, or elsewhere. It was an attempt to get out from Singapore a number of highly trained men and women (staff officers now surplus to our requirements, technicians, business men, etc.), whose knowledge would be of value to the Allies for the further prosecution of the war. There was also the danger that the Japanese might forcibly exploit this knowledge if these people fell into their hands—a danger which subsequent events proved to be well founded. It was more than once suggested to me that arrangements should be made for the evacuation in the last resort of important personages and of as many others as the available transport could take. This I refused to countenance. Our job was to hold Singapore for as long as we could and not to evacuate it, and any suggestion that arrangements for evacuation were being made would have had a most disastrous effect. Moreover, nobody could say what the future held in store for us, and in my view the right place for an officer, and especially a senior officer, is with his men, unless of course he is ordered away, until it is quite certain that he can be of no further service to them. That may mean the ruin of a career and the end of personal ambitions, but one of the corner-stones in our military system is that an officer stands by his men, and that in the end will bring greater happiness.

I have previously referred to Pulau Bukum, the island which lies south-west of Blakang Mati and on which were held large oil fuel reserves by the Asiatic Petroleum Company. These

reserves were the responsibility of the navy. Spooner was naturally anxious to dispose of them as our navy could no longer use them and they would be a valuable prize for the Japanese. On the other hand, all Singapore knew of their existence and took not a little pride in them. I feared that the sound of explosions and the sight of billowing black smoke rising from this island would have a most adverse moral effect both on troops and civilians and for that reason I had for some time opposed the destruction of these stocks. But now they were very exposed and the small garrison which was all that I could spare was inadequate to resist a Japanese attack. So I agreed with reluctance to the demolition which took place that afternoon. It was partially, but not entirely, successful.

At 2 p.m. I held a conference at Fort Canning. It was attended by senior commanders down to divisional commanders and by some of my principal staff officers. We discussed the future conduct of the operations and particularly the possibility of staging a counter-attack to relieve the pressure on the defences. All formation commanders were agreed that, owing to the exhaustion of the troops, a counter-attack would have no chance of success at that time. They stressed the fact that the continual day and night operations without possibility of relief were beginning to have their effect on the troops. We also felt that we could not disregard entirely the interests of the vast civil population. We knew too well the Japanese characteristics and what might happen if they broke through into the town. As a result of the views put forward I formed the opinion that the situation was undoubtedly grave but was not hopeless. I felt, however, that, as the situation might develop rapidly at any moment, I ought to have a freer hand to take such action as I thought right than had been given me up to that time. I therefore sent a telegram to the Supreme Commander giving him a picture of the situation as I saw it and asking if he would consider giving me wider discretionary powers. In his reply, while appreciating our situation, he stressed that continued action was essential in the wider interest of the war in the Far East and instructed me to continue to inflict the maximum damage on the enemy for as long as possible.

At the conference we also discussed the allotment of vacancies to formations for evacuation the following night. I decided firstly that all female members of the Military Nursing Service should

be sent. This decision was made as a result of a report received from G.H.Q. on the treatment of nurses by the Japanese after the capitulation of Hong Kong. Then I decided that trained staff officers and technicians no longer required could be sent at the discretion of formation commanders. The reason for sending staff officers was that at that time there was a great shortage both in India and in Java where G.H.Q. was forming. Block allotments were made to formations, but it was not incumbent upon them to fill them if they did not wish to do so.

After the conference I went up to Government House to discuss things with the Governor. I found a sentry on the door but the house empty. The sentry told me that a shell had penetrated into one of the shelters under the house and had killed ten or a dozen men; also that the Governor and Lady Thomas had moved to the Singapore Club. Lady Thomas, who later showed remarkable bravery and powers of endurance during the long period of captivity, was unfortunately at this time unwell and had had to take to her bed. As I looked over the town from the grounds of Government House I could hear shooting everywhere, and as I drove back to Fort Canning some shots were fired close to the car. Whether these shots were fired by Japanese infiltrators, or by fifth columnists, or whether they were only looters being shot I do not know. It was all a bit weird and uncanny.

Later in the evening I said good-bye to Pulford. I shall never forget that parting. We had become firm friends since we had been together. He offered to stay with me if I wished it, but I told him he ought to go as there was no more he could do at Singapore. I little knew that I was sending him to his death. He had been very keen on his job and was terribly disappointed at the way things had gone in Malaya. "I suppose you and I will be held responsible for this," were his last words to me, "but God knows we did our best with what little we had been given." He left Singapore with Spooner in a fast patrol boat but from the very first things went wrong. The intention had been to move by night and hide in creeks by day, but soon after leaving Singapore the boat ran aground and in getting her off one of the crew damaged his arm. There was no doctor on board so Spooner decided to go straight ahead. North of the Banka Straits they were chased by a Japanese destroyer and had to run their craft aground on a deserted island. The Japanese dismantled the patrol boat's

engines and left them there. Efforts to get the news to Java and efforts made by G.H.Q. in Java to find them all failed. There was little food on the island and one by one the party sickened and died. After three months the survivors of the party, some twenty odd, out of an original muster of over forty, were found and taken off by the Japanese. Among those who died on the island were both Spooner and Pulford—the latter, I think, from a broken heart as much as from anything else. And so passed a very gallant officer.

The experience of this party was typical of what befell the remainder of the flotilla of little ships. During the embarkation at Singapore there was much confusion as a result of enemy bombing and some of those detailed to leave never got on board. There were also some "gate-crashers", as I suppose is to be expected in such circumstances. On the fourteenth the flotilla encountered the Japanese naval and air forces which were then assembling for the attack on Palembang in southern Sumatra the following day. Many ships were sunk and some were run aground. Few reached their destination. The loss of life was appalling—and that among some of the best who had stood by Singapore to the last. It took months and years to trace the missing. Some of them probably never will be traced. It was a great tragedy.

The effect of the collapse of civil labour now began to make itself more and more felt. At the docks all civil labour had long since disappeared. In the town area débris from the bombing and shelling remained untouched, the dead remained unburied and water ran to waste from the mains from lack of labour to clear the demolished buildings. Practically all offices, business houses and shops were closed. There were few people on the streets and public services were practically at a standstill. One would see groups of Indians moving from area to area to avoid the shelling. The Chinese for the most part seemed to remain indoors or disperse to the outskirts of the town. All hospitals were working to capacity as there were a large number of casualties every day. They did a wonderful job of work. In the afternoon Japanese troops entered the great military hospital at Alexandra and there another tragedy took place. They claimed that Indian troops had fired from the hospital. Whether they did so or not I cannot say. As a reprisal the Japanese bayoneted some members of the staff and some of the patients, including one poor fellow as he lay on

the operating table. Then about 150 of the staff and patients were marched out and incarcerated in a bungalow. There was only room to stand and there they spent the night. The next morning they were taken out and executed. There have been many horrors in this war but for cold-blooded barbarity that surely will rank very high.

It was early on 14 February that the water situation really became serious when the municipal water engineer reported to the Director-General of Civil Defence that he considered a complete failure of the water supply was imminent. At about 10 a.m. I held a conference at the municipal offices at which the chairman of the municipality was present in addition to the above two officials. I was informed that, owing to breaks in the water mains and pipes caused by bombing and shelling, a heavy loss of water was going on, though the two pumping stations at Woodleigh and Mackenzie Road were still working. The municipal water engineer estimated that the water supply would last for forty-eight hours at the outside and that it might only last for twenty-four hours. I promised additional Royal Engineer assistance, but that could not be provided till the afternoon as all available Royal Engineer personnel were at that time fighting as combatant troops.

From there I went to the Singapore Club where I met the Governor. He also was worried about the water situation and stressed the dangers which would result if Singapore with its large population was suddenly deprived of its water supply.

I felt that the water situation was undoubtedly serious but that it had not yet rendered the further defence of Singapore impossible. I still hoped that we could get the situation under control. A curious thing was that by the evening of that day the Japanese were really in a position to turn off the whole supply from the reservoirs if they had wished, and known how, to do so. Why they did not do so I do not know.

I reported the situation to the Supreme Commander who in his reply urged that resistance should be continued and added, "Your gallant stand is serving purpose and must be continued to limit of endurance." A few words of encouragement in the situation in which we found ourselves have a wonderful effect. Much more than exhortations to remember the deeds of one's forefathers, which leave one a little cold.

During the day there had been much fighting along the whole front. The main Japanese thrusts were made in the Alexandra area on our left front and south of the MacRitchie Reservoir. In the former area heavy fighting went on throughout the day, in which the Malay Regiment and the Loyal Regiment specially distinguished themselves. The latter eventually found themselves defending their own barracks. By the end of the day our troops had been driven back by the weight of the attack to the line Alexandra-Gillman Barracks-Keppel golf-course. The Alexandra ammunition magazine was temporarily out of action owing to fires started by enemy shelling. On the front of the 18th British Division the 1st Cambridgeshires continued to distinguish themselves by holding on to a position west of Adam Road where they had been for three days, but farther north a strong enemy attack supported by tanks late in the afternoon made a deep dent in our position almost as far as Mount Pleasant Road, one of the main residential areas of Singapore. Along the Braddell Road the enemy gained some ground, but on the Serangoon Road front a strong attack was stopped by the 11th Indian Division when within a few hundred yards of the vital Woodleigh pumping station. The staff of this station stuck to its work manfully under close range small arms fire and continued pumping to the end. On the eastern front of Southern Area there were some local engagements between the 1st Manchester Regiment, a machine-gun battalion withdrawn from the beaches, and enemy detachments. Our light anti-aircraft guns had some wonderful targets on this day as the Japanese aircraft, with no fighters to oppose them, were flying about at low altitudes. Several were brought down, but our reserves of Bofors ammunition were now getting short.

I spent the afternoon visiting the 18th and 11th Divisions and then went back again to the municipal offices and on to see the Governor. At the municipal offices I conferred with the same officials as in the morning. The water engineer reported that the situation was very slightly better and I instructed the Director-General of Civil Defence to send me at 7 a.m. the following morning an accurate statement of the situation as it appeared at that time.

I went home feeling rather more hopeful. I thought that with any luck we might be able to master the water difficulty, while

at the front, in spite of one or two danger spots, the enemy's rate of advance was on the whole being slowed down.

At Fort Canning we had taken over one of the adjoining houses and here an improvised mess had been established. The Chinese servants as usual rose to the occasion and ran a wonderful show considering the difficulties and the numbers they had to cater for.

Sunday, 15 February—Black Sunday. The first event of the day was a Communion Service at Fort Canning, but then the bad news started to come in. The water report from the D.G.C.D. showed a serious deterioration. He summed up the situation by saying that he anticipated that the water supply would not last for more than another twenty-four hours. I told him to verify this and to come to a commanders' conference which had been summoned for 9.30 a.m. Then I received a disturbing report on the administrative situation generally. The military food reserves under our control had been reduced to a few days, though there were still fairly large civil reserves. Deprived of the Alexandra ammunition magazine, where fires were still burning, the 25-pounder field-gun ammunition reserves were getting very short and the reserves of Bofors ammunition were almost exhausted. We had practically no petrol except what was in vehicle tanks.

That was the situation which I had to report when the conference assembled. The D.G.C.D. was asked to report on the water situation in more detail. He confirmed what he had said before and added that, if total failure took place, it would be some days before piped water could be obtained again. Ways and means of overcoming our various difficulties were discussed. None of them were really vital except the water problem. Heath stressed the danger of the water shortage as it affected the Indian troops, while the danger to the civil population was also taken into account. I felt that there was no use in remaining passively on the defensive as we were. There seemed to be only two possible alternatives, i.e. either to counter-attack to regain control of the reservoirs and of the military food depots and to drive back the enemy's artillery with a view to reducing the damage to the water supply system, or to capitulate. I put these alternatives to the commanders. They were unanimously of the opinion that in the existing circumstances a counter-attack was impracticable. Some of them also doubted our ability to resist another determined

attack and pointed out the consequences that might result to the crowded population in the town. It was in these circumstances that I decided to capitulate.

While this conference was taking place, Beckwith Smith, all communications having broken down, had arrived at headquarters 3rd Indian Corps to report widespread infiltration on his front during the night and that he thought the situation very critical, as he no longer had any reserves with which to eject the enemy. On the left of our front also the Japanese had renewed their attacks and, in spite of some bitter fighting by the Loyals, had driven our troops back to the east end of the Alexandra depots area and of the Keppel golf-course area.

The only thing to cheer our gloom was a telegram received from the Supreme Commander that morning, from which the following is an extract:

So long as you are in a position to inflict losses and damage to enemy and your troops are physically capable of doing so you must fight on. Time gained and damage to enemy are of vital importance at this juncture. When you are fully satisfied that this is no longer possible I give you discretion to cease resistance. . . . Inform me of intentions. Whatever happens I thank you and all your troops for your gallant efforts of last few days.

I feel sure that my readers will not wish me to recount in any detail the painful events which took place during the remainder of that day. The meeting with the Japanese commander, Lt.-Gen. Yamashita, took place in the Ford factory near Bukit Timah village in the evening. There was not much chance of bargaining, but I did what I could to ensure the safety of both troops and civilians. In this connection it should be recorded that General Yamashita never allowed the main body of his troops to enter Singapore Town. He received more placidly than I had expected my statement that there were no ships or aeroplanes in the Singapore area and that the heavier types of weapons and some of the military equipment and all secret documents had already been destroyed under my orders.

Little did I think at that time that later in the war I should myself be present at General Yamashita's capitulation—but so it was to be.

Hostilities finally ceased at 8.30 p.m. on 15 February 1942, British time.

The general line of our foremost positions then ran from right to left approximately as under:

The Kallang aerodrome (civil airport)—the junction of the Serangoon and Braddell roads—the junction of Braddell and Thomson roads—the Broadcasting Station—Adam road—Raffles College area—Tyersall area—Tanglin area—Mount Echo—the biscuit factory—the Alexandra ammunition magazine—Mount Washington—the eastern end of the Keppel golf links.

We also held Blakang Mati, Pulau Brani, Tekong, and the Pengerang area.

Japanese troops entered Singapore Town on the morning of 16 February; 175 medium and light tanks took part in a military demonstration.

After the cessation of hostilities it was five and a half days, with engineers and water parties working at full pressure, before water again reached the lower levels of Singapore Town which had been deprived of it. It was ten days before water again reached the General Hospital and many other buildings on the higher levels.

And so after seventy days of great and continuous effort, fighting and marching day and night with little or no rest, the army of Malaya passed into captivity.

Chapter XXI

RETROSPECT

THE fall of Singapore came as a great shock to the British public and, as usual, there was a hunt for scapegoats. Press and public charged the military commanders and the civil administration of Malaya with gross incompetence. Such has always been the British custom. In all wars many of those who have risen early to positions of responsibility have fallen by the wayside while those who later have had the advantage of fighting with the fully developed resources of the Commonwealth behind them have emerged as conquering heroes. Other nations are sometimes more generous, realizing that lessons learnt in the hard school of adversity are often more valuable than those learnt when things are easier. Thus we saw Rommel, driven out of Africa with the loss of his entire army, given another even more important command in the European theatre.

Before Japan entered the war the British public generally, like a large part of the American public, was profoundly ignorant about things in the Far East. It knew that there was a place called Singapore and that there was a great Naval Base there, but it knew little about its geographical importance or about the wider problems, political, strategical, and commercial, of the Far East. This ignorance was reflected in the outlook of the troops who came to defend Singapore. Few of them had any clear idea of the importance of the task which was being entrusted to them except that it was to defend the Naval Base. I once asked an intelligent young soldier why it was that our men had such a hazy knowledge of the Far East. He replied, "Because we are never taught in our schools", adding that in his view a great deal more time might be given up to teaching the problems of Empire. I entirely agreed with him. I am delighted to know that "Current Affairs" has now been introduced as one of the subjects in the Army education curriculum. I hope it is equally being taught in the schools.

Coupled with this general ignorance of the problems of the Far East was a failure to appreciate the aggressive intentions of

Japan and the rapid increase in the strength and power of her fighting forces. For that the public cannot be blamed, for the true state of affairs was never put before them by our national leaders. The first act of militant aggression by the Japanese was in June 1928 when the old Manchurian war lord, Marshal Chang Tso-Lin, was murdered by a bomb exploded under his train as it entered Mukden Station. That was followed by the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in September 1931 when Japan successfully flouted the League of Nations of which she was at that time a member. For a time Japan's designs were directed against Russia with the idea of securing herself from a blow from behind before she embarked on her drive to the south. The object of her attack on China in 1937 was primarily to secure for herself an adequate supply of raw materials. In the meantime, on 25 November 1936, she had concluded the anti-Comintern Pact with Germany, and it was under German influence that she eventually decided to change her plans and to drive southwards instead of attacking Russia. That decision was not made until after the Tripartite Pact was signed in September 1940. It was made as a result of pressure from Germany to attack Singapore. Thereafter a group of German and Italian specialists was established in Tokyo to study the best methods of reducing Singapore while General Yamashita, who had been selected to lead the Japanese Army of Malaya, was sent to Berlin where he spent several months studying the most modern German methods of warfare. The Japanese themselves have attributed their success in Malaya, among other things, to their pre-war preparations, to the fact that this campaign was the centre of interest throughout their whole army, to the fact that their commanders, senior staff officers, and troops were specially selected, and to the fact that their land operations were closely supported by powerful naval and air forces. This fact is important because it has often been asked why Singapore did not hold out longer when the Chinese had frustrated all the Japanese efforts to subdue them for several years and when the combined American and Filipino forces were able to hold the Japanese at bay for another two or three months. I do not in any way wish to belittle the efforts of our gallant Allies, but in passing judgment on Malaya it must be realized that Singapore was the place above all others which the Japanese wanted to capture and that against it they threw the pick of their armed forces.

Of what did those forces consist? Here again many misleading statements have been made. I have seen it stated that 100,000 British surrendered to 30,000 Japanese. That, of course, is sheer nonsense. Does anybody seriously think that the Japanese, advised by their German friends, would have been so foolish as to try to win the prize they wanted so badly with 30,000 men? The Japanese may have been inexperienced in the higher direction of a modern war, but they are certainly not fools where the military arts are concerned. But they are a secretive race, and it is never easy to get accurate information on military subjects. There is now no doubt, however, that we under-estimated their strength, but even their own statements vary widely. It is safe to say that they employed a minimum of 150,000 men in the Malayan campaign, though some Japanese reports suggest much higher figures than this. They also employed two tank regiments which probably contained somewhere between 200 and 300 tanks. For the attack on Singapore Island the Japanese say they employed some 68,000 combat troops in addition to their administrative units. They also had reserves and L. of C. troops on the mainland. There can be little doubt therefore that at the end of the campaign there were over 100,000 Japanese troops on Singapore Island and in South Malaya.

It appears that the Japanese found it impossible to deploy all their divisions on the limited operational fronts and that they therefore adopted the expedient for much of the campaign of keeping the same divisions in front line and feeding them from behind. In this way they had fresh troops in action every thirty-six hours or so while our troops were fighting for weeks on end without rest.

On the British side the total number of officers and men who took part in the campaign (excluding the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force) was a little over 125,000, though the strength in Malaya at any one time was considerably less than this. This number included a large proportion of command, base and lines of communication troops, many of whom belonged to non-combatant units or were unarmed owing to shortage of personal weapons. At the time of the capitulation the total of British forces in the Singapore fortress area was in the neighbourhood of 85,000, but this again included a large number of administrative troops, some of them non-combatant and all inadequately trained for a fighting role, and also the very poorly trained reinforcements

which had recently arrived. We never at any time had more than one squadron of obsolescent light tanks.

It was in the air and on the sea, however, that there was the greatest disparity of strength. The Japanese say that their Third Air Division which took part in the Malayan campaign was composed of three army air brigades and two additional air regiments, and that its strength at the outset was 670 aircraft, which included 100 heavy bombers. Later 270 replacement aircraft with their pilots were received from Japan. That would give a total strength of 940 aircraft. Our air force had all told, including reinforcements, little more than a quarter of this number. Many of them were obsolescent types and there were no reserves. The Japanese fighters and medium bombers had ranges of 1,500 to 1,600 miles, which enabled them to operate from bases outside the range of our own aircraft. On the sea the Japanese had complete superiority after the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*.

The immediate object of the Japanese at the outset of the operations appears to have been, firstly, to cripple our air force and, secondly, to cut off and destroy the whole of our forces in Kedah by a rapid thrust from Patani via Kroh to cut the west coast communications west of the River Perak, which they hoped to reach in two days. Thereafter their strategy consisted of a continuous land and air offensive pressed with the utmost vigour with the object of advancing into South Malaya and capturing Singapore before our reinforcements could arrive. Their offensive was supported by their navy on the east coast and, as soon as they could transport their landing-craft across the peninsula, on the west coast also. These sea-borne operations had good and continual air cover. Had there been available at Singapore some flotillas of fast armoured and properly equipped coastal craft, it is certain that the enemy would not have been able to exercise the constant threat to our communications with sea-borne forces which they did in fact succeed in doing.

British pre-war strategy in Malaya was based, as has been shown, on the thesis that there would always be a British fleet available to go to the Far East when required and that, on arrival, it would control sea communications in the waters off Malaya. The failure to modify that strategy in conformity with the changed conditions when the German menace developed in Europe and when Japan and Germany came together in 1936 was the first

cause of the weakness of our defences in Malaya. The army dispositions, moreover, were dictated primarily by the necessity for protecting aerodromes from which large air forces, when available, would operate. Looked at from the army point of view alone, these dispositions were faulty because the comparatively small force available had to be widely dispersed. They were doubly faulty when the large air forces did not materialize and when the aerodromes fell like ripe plums into the enemy's hands. Surely the lesson of this is that the siting of aerodromes should always be done jointly by Air Force and Army and that they should never be sited in places where they cannot be properly defended.

It is of interest to speculate as to what might have happened if *MATADOR* had been put into effect. Looked at from the air point of view it would undoubtedly have had great advantages if it could have been successfully accomplished, for not only would it have enabled our air force to use the important aerodrome at Singora, but it would also have denied to the Japanese the use of both that and the Patani aerodrome. On the other hand, it was never intended, owing to lack of adequate resources, to occupy Patani itself and, if the Japanese had succeeded in landing there and we had failed to hold them on the Patani-Kroh road, there might well have been an early and irreparable disaster. *MATADOR* suffered from the dangers always inherent in such projects, namely the difficulty of deciding when the time has come to enter neutral territory. It would have been folly to attempt to reach Singora on the night of 7-8 December when the Japanese were already close to that port. Had we done so we should probably have become involved in an encounter battle with our forces still dispersed and with the Japanese having the advantage of a tank force against which we should have had no proper counter. The latest time at which *MATADOR* could have been ordered with any possible prospect of success was when the Japanese convoys were first sighted on 6 December. But at that time international considerations predominated.

Our later strategy was influenced by the necessity for ensuring, as far as lay in our power, the safe arrival of our land and air reinforcements, for it was only with their help that we could hope to turn the tables on the Japanese. The strategy adopted, therefore, aimed at a gradual fighting withdrawal with a view to an eventual concentration in South Malaya where it was hoped that the main

battle would be fought. That this strategy was not successful was due primarily to a lack of strength in all three Services, but particularly in the navy and air force. In fact, the army after the first few days had to bear practically the whole weight of the Japanese attack with little air or naval support. This was the main cause of defeat, for the enemy's sea-borne thrusts continually forced us to make detachments to meet them which, combined with the lack of reserves, left our forces on the main central front far too weak for the task in hand. Once again it was proved that a balanced force of all three fighting services is necessary for success in modern war and that an army alone, however well equipped, is no match for an enemy enjoying the advantages of sea-power and air-power. But the army of Malaya was further handicapped by the complete absence of an armoured component. That, apart from the moral effect which will be discussed later, had a decisive influence on our tactics, for we had to move from obstacle to obstacle giving up, very often, more ground than we otherwise need have done. This lack of an armoured component was due, not to any weakness in our army organization, but to inability, owing presumably to lack of resources and commitments elsewhere, to send an armoured component to Malaya when it was asked for.

Successful fighting in jungle country is largely a question of the confidence and self-reliance of the individual. That cannot be acquired without a reasonable period of training in such conditions. It probably requires a minimum of six months' continuous training before ordinary troops become good jungle fighters. That, as has been shown, was only possible in Malaya for those troops which had been longest in the country, and most of those were well trained. Criticisms of the training in Malaya of the later arrivals fail to take into account the demands on military man-power imposed by the necessity for putting into a state of defence a whole country the size of England and the frequent orders for varying degrees of readiness which resulted from the state of political tension prior to the outbreak of war. In this connection, it must be remembered that it was only late in 1940 that the policy of holding the whole of Malaya received official sanction, so that little more than a year was available for the construction of defence works. Those who had any responsibility for the defence of the coasts of Britain in 1940, when much

more man-power was available, will, I feel sure, understand what that means.

A most important aspect of training to fight in jungle is the ability to live on the country and, if necessary, to exist on short rations and with little water. In that the Japanese held a distinct advantage. Their columns were frequently dispatched into the jungle carrying a week's rations. They made great use of local resources and for long periods were able to dispense with the normal system of supply. They were, of course, more ruthless in their methods *vis-à-vis* the local inhabitants than is our custom and they had the advantage that their basic foodstuffs were almost everywhere obtainable. But our troubles were partly of our own making. In the years preceding the war, great stress had been laid on the welfare of the troops. That is excellent so long as it is not allowed to obscure essentials, such as the ability of the soldier to endure hardships when conditions demand it. When I was a prisoner-of-war I had the opportunity of very intimate talks with men of all ranks. One of the most intelligent of them, a regular soldier with a few years' service, once said to me, "We soldiers, sir, don't want to be pampered. All we want is to be treated fairly and to be given a man's job to do." Those are simple words and I cannot help thinking that there is a great deal of truth in them. Certainly there was a tendency to pamper the soldier before the war and even during the early part of the war. In the Far East it required the experience of war and later of the prisoner-of-war camps to prove that Europeans are capable of enduring hardships under Eastern conditions and of living on Asiatic food to a far greater extent than was ever before thought possible. That is a lesson which must never be forgotten.

I now come to the all-important question of morale. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities confidence had been steadily growing among the forces in Malaya due in a great measure to the steady flow of arms and equipment, but few realized the magnitude of the task of defence, made more difficult from week to week by the increases in commitments. I have said that the great majority of the troops were young and inexperienced and in this connection Field-Marshal Viscount Montgomery has written as follows:

New and untried troops must be introduced to battle carefully and gradually with no failures in the initial ventures. A start should be made with small raids, then big-scale raids, leading up gradually

to unit and brigade operations. Great and lasting harm can be done to morale by launching new units into operations for which they are not ready or trained and which are therefore likely to end in failure. When new units and formations are introduced to battle there must be no failure.

Those are very true words as all who fought in Malaya will testify, but they are not always applicable when the enemy is calling the tune. That was our problem. The very first impact of the Japanese attack, which was heavier than had been anticipated and which, to some extent, caught our troops on the wrong foot, had an unsettling effect, from which there was never a real opportunity to recover completely. Rather was the effect increased when it became apparent that the Japanese, that distant Eastern race about which the ordinary man knew so little, held complete supremacy both in the air and in armoured fighting vehicles, the two essentials of modern warfare. The effect of that cannot be over-estimated even though we were fighting in a country whose woods and forests provide some natural protection against these two weapons. I must confess that at the outset I myself hoped that, helped by this protection with which nature had provided us, we should not suffer too much from the advantage which the enemy held in these two arms, but I was very soon disillusioned. It is the psychological rather than the material effect which is so damaging and it becomes more so as troops suffer increasingly from physical and mental exhaustion. When that state arrives, human reactions tend to become slower and disaster may at any time result. Another thing which had a bad psychological effect on the troops concerned the aerodromes. When our own air force evacuated them it was found impracticable to deny them to the enemy by demolitions for more than a very few days. We were therefore faced with the problem, not of holding them for the use of our own air force, but of holding them to deny their use to the enemy air force. The effect on the troops needs no stressing.

In these circumstances leadership was of paramount importance, and it was there that most of our units were not strong. It was nobody's fault. It was just that there were not enough trained leaders to meet the demands of the expansion which had taken place in the armed forces. In this matter the Indian units were harder hit than the others because the young Indian soldiers

needed leadership above all else—and they needed British leadership. In each Indian unit there was only the bare minimum of experienced British officers and casualties among these were soon heavy—partly because, true to their traditions, they readily accepted personal risks in leading their men, and partly because the Japanese no doubt made special efforts to eliminate them, well knowing how badly they were needed. They could not be adequately replaced, for such officer reinforcements as we could make available, excellent fellows as they were, had not the necessary knowledge of the Indian soldier or of his language. In the A.I.F. also the officers were of a splendid type, but the nucleus of officers properly trained in the art of war, and especially of modern war, was very small. In jungle warfare it is more than ever the junior leader that matters, for small bodies so often get detached from the rest and have to act on their own initiative.

When there is any weakness in leadership, *esprit de corps* and regimental tradition become of even greater importance than in normal circumstances. Before the war there was a body of opinion, both inside and outside the army, which held that there was little or no value in regimental tradition. If any practical demonstration is needed to disprove that theory, it is to be found in the Malayan campaign. It would be invidious to mention any special regiments, but time and again units with a strong regimental tradition behind them gave of their best in circumstances which might well have dismayed even the bravest.

The trials of the campaign were very great, and it was hardly to be expected that the inexperienced troops would withstand them as steadfastly as would regular seasoned troops. Nevertheless, it stands to their eternal credit that, although they became more and more exhausted and were bewildered and often disheartened, their morale was never broken. Throughout the campaign and right up to the end there was a great deal of heavy fighting, much of it at short range and even hand-to-hand, in which our troops fought courageously and well. Had they not done so, we should never have been able to extricate ourselves from the many perilous positions in which we found ourselves.

I am of opinion that we did not make proper use of the local forces. We tried to train them more or less on the lines of regular troops. That, I think, is a mistake, for it is not possible in a

country like Malaya for volunteers to give up sufficient time to reach a proper standard of proficiency. On the other hand, reinforcing units arriving in Malaya from overseas are badly in need of men with local knowledge to act as their guides and helpers. That is one job for the volunteers. Others could form specialist units, i.e. engineers, signals, railway units, armoured car units, docks units, etc., according to their special calling. Others again could be trained for coast defence or as garrisons of vulnerable points, but there should be no attempt to train them in mobile operations. In saying this, I do not, of course, include regular units such as the Malay Regiment which have shown themselves worthy to take their place with troops from any other part of the Commonwealth.

In modern total war, labour plays a prominent part both in the areas of operations and on the home front. Its organization and control demand very careful consideration. I have shown that during the campaign in Malaya there was a breakdown in civil labour. For this there were several reasons. In the first place, labour in Malaya presents a very complicated problem—less complicated perhaps on the mainland, where much of it is provided by Tamils, than on Singapore Island, where the bulk of the labour is Chinese. The Tamils mostly come from the estates where they are already organized with their own overseers and they have a common language. On Singapore Island, on the other hand, most of the labour is controlled by contractors. The Chinese labourers are divided into clans, or "Bangsar", as they are called in Malaya, each of which has its own language, and these clans are not always in harmony among themselves. There are few Europeans who can speak even two of the languages, which greatly complicates the problem of control. The second main reason for the breakdown was that before the war the labour problem had not been tackled with sufficient energy or foresight. I think that its importance was perhaps not fully realized, and in any case everybody was working "all out" at that time and it was not easy to find anybody with the time to tackle such an intricate problem. When war came we had to fall back, as far as Singapore was concerned, on the contractor system, and that proved most unsuitable for war needs. As soon as this became apparent, efforts were made to replace it by controlling labour direct and later by a measure of compulsion. But all these came too late. There was

no time to give them a proper trial and no deductions can therefore be drawn as to what might be best. One thing seems certain and that is that labour must be carefully organized and properly administered. In my opinion, as much labour as possible should in war be brought under military control.

A great deal of criticism has been levelled at the civil administration of Malaya. Much of it is unjust. It had been told that the primary duty of the people of Malaya was to produce as much rubber and tin as possible for war purposes. It had to keep this object in mind while making at the same time preparations against eventual attack. It had also to watch over the interests of a mixed population of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans. In the circumstances, it was inevitable that clashes of interests should occur. It was further handicapped by a constitution totally unsuited to war requirements. Even at home it required the impulse of national danger to bring about that complete harmony and co-operation between the ministries which is so essential in modern war. Perhaps it was not surprising that in Malaya with all its complications we never quite arrived at that perfect state. But, as war is now all-embracing, the integration of military and civil control is a matter which in the future must be properly planned. The first essential is that all the most senior officers and civil officials should, before assuming their appointments, be trained in matters of Imperial defence at a common school.

What was so difficult to attain in Malaya was a determined and united effort on the part of all, both military and civil, to repel the common foe. Nevertheless when war came many men and women of all races, both official and unofficial, played a creditable and often a heroic part in the defence of the country. Many of them lost their lives and many of them suffered long periods of imprisonment or internment at the hands of the Japanese. Most of them suffered heavy losses of property. Let us remember and appreciate the self-sacrifice and suffering of these people, and above all let us pay tribute to the three hundred brave women who spent three and a half long years in internment, most of it in a common jail.

So far I have dealt chiefly with the handicaps which beset us in the Malayan campaign and with the lessons which should be drawn from it. Let me conclude by summarizing some of the

achievements. We know now that the Japanese, instigated by their German friends, set out to capture Singapore as part of the general strategy of the World War and that they meant to capture it quickly. They hoped to reach the Perak River in two days and in so doing to cut off, and subsequently destroy, all our forces in North Malaya. Then, presumably, they would have marched triumphantly on Singapore, unopposed at any rate until they reached Johore. This danger was averted, as were others when Japanese forces landed on the west coast of Perak and later at Muar. Thus, with great difficulty and with narrow margins, we extricated our forces from three successive pincer thrusts. Had we failed to do so on any of these occasions, there would have been complete and irreparable disaster. For that the chief credit must go to the fighting troops, for without great fighting at critical moments it could not have been done. Let us not forget either the less spectacular operations of administration, of communication and of command which were going on steadily day and night. Then there were the losses inflicted on the enemy. What their total casualties were will perhaps never be known accurately, but undoubtedly they were heavy. Many of their armoured fighting vehicles were destroyed even though, until the last few days, we had none with which to oppose them. It is estimated that over three hundred enemy aircraft were destroyed by our land and air forces. Several enemy ships were sunk and others were damaged.

The retreat from Mons and the retreat to Dunkirk have been hailed as epics. In the former our army was able, with the help of a powerful ally, to turn the tables on the enemy. In the latter our army was evacuated by the navy with the loss of all heavy equipment. Each of these retreats lasted approximately three weeks. The retreat in Malaya lasted ten weeks in far more trying conditions. There was no strong ally to help us and no navy to evacuate the force even if it had been desirable to do so. Those ten weeks may well have been of far greater importance to the war as a whole than was realized at the time. They enabled Australian divisions to be taken back from the Middle East to defend their homeland, and they enabled the deplorably weak defences of India to be developed. Had there been no war in Malaya the Japanese tentacles might well have stretched much farther than was in fact the case. Perhaps, therefore, the judgment

of history will be that all the effort and money expended on the defence of Malaya and the sacrifice and subsequent suffering of many of those who fought in the Malayan campaign were not in vain.

A great many of the causes which contributed to our defeat in Malaya had a common origin, namely the lack of readiness of the British Commonwealth for war. Our shortage in fighting ships and in modern aircraft, our lack of tanks, the inexperience of many of our leaders and the lack of training of most of our troops can all be attributed to a failure to prepare for war at the proper time. This unpreparedness is no new experience. It is traditional in the British Commonwealth. But it is becoming more and more expensive and, as the tempo of war increases, more and more dangerous. It is the duty of governments in time of peace to put the issues fairly and squarely before the people, however unpalatable they may be. If that is done, I do not believe that we shall again have to take the risks that we took in Malaya.

In 1941, when the crisis came in the Far East, it was too late to put things right. Then we were engaged in a life and death struggle in the West, and war material which might have saved Singapore was sent to Russia and to the Middle East. The choice was made and Singapore had to suffer. In my opinion this decision, however painful and regrettable, was inevitable and right.

Chapter XXII

CAPTIVITY

It is not my purpose to attempt to recount all the untold hardships and sufferings endured by the troops who went into captivity after the fall of Singapore. The horrors of the Burma-Siam railway, of some of the camps in Borneo and elsewhere, and of the journeys between various places in the Far East can only be told by those who experienced them. All I can do is to attempt to give a general picture of the conditions in the camps as I saw them myself, to present some of the problems with which we were faced, and to show how we attempted to overcome them.

The first step of the Japanese was to impose a colour bar. All the Asiatic prisoners, officers and men, were segregated and taken off to separate camps. Of them I shall have nothing to say for, except on rare occasions, we never saw them again. The Indian troops especially were subjected to terrible ordeals in an endeavour to force them to join the Indian National Army, raised in Singapore under the leadership of Chandra Bose to assist the Japanese in the invasion of India. The maintenance of loyalty to the King-Emperor in those terrible conditions, cut off from their friends and with the full force of Japanese "persuasion" directed against them, demanded high moral courage and cost many of them dear. Yet a high proportion held out. The Gurkhas, I have been told, who were subjected to a similar ordeal, resisted to a man.

On 17 February the British and Australian troops were marched to Changi Camp at the eastern extremity of the island. It was obvious from the start that the area allotted was inadequate for our numbers and I protested to the Japanese staff but without success. At first the congestion was tremendous and no doubt increased the number of deaths which took place. Later, as working parties were sent away, things became rather easier and health improved.

The Changi Camp differed from most of the others in so far as administration was concerned for, subject to general directives from the Japanese, this was left largely in the hands of the British and Australian commanders. At first this was done no doubt

because the Japanese had little or no organization ready to deal with prisoner-of-war camps, but at Changi it persisted in varying degree till the end of the war. We accepted the situation, for we felt that in this way we might be able to make things easier for the troops. The Japanese in fact went so far as to make senior officers personally responsible for everything which the men did, including attempts to escape. They announced that any men caught trying to escape would be executed. Their trump card, of course, was always food. From the first this was terribly short and there was always the possibility, or even the probability, that the sins of the transgressors would be visited upon the community as a whole by a reduction of the ration. In these circumstances, I thought it necessary to issue an instruction as to escapes. It was to the effect that, while it was the duty of every officer and man to attempt to escape if he could, he should only do so after making proper plans and provided his chances were reasonably good. To escape from Singapore was extremely difficult. On the one side there was the sea and on the other the jungles of Malaya where the chances for a white man of avoiding detection were not great. Some attempts at escape were made, but I have never heard of anybody getting clean away. I regret to say that the Japanese on more than one occasion carried out their threat of execution, though this was not always the case. When they did so they usually found the firing squad from Sikhs who had gone over to their side. These Sikhs, it should be said, were not all soldiers. Some were ex-policemen while others were just civilians who had enlisted in the Japanese Army to earn a living.

The doctors were the busiest people at Changi and a wonderful job they did. A hospital was improvised from ordinary barrack blocks and it was soon full to overflowing. The Deputy Director of Medical Services, Brigadier Stringer, was ordered by the Japanese to clear all sick and wounded immediately from the hospitals in Singapore, however ill they might be, and take them to Changi. Soon the various diseases common to such conditions became rampant—dysentery in its various forms, beri-beri, and so on. For weeks the number of patients in the hospital never fell below the 2,000 mark. At the time it was probably one of the largest hospitals in the world. And there was very little equipment and practically no drugs except what the doctors had been able to bring with them. It was pitiable. It was not to be

wondered at that the death-rate was heavy. Over five hundred had been buried in the British and Australian cemeteries before the autumn, but after that the numbers fell rapidly as the situation was got under control. It seems invidious to mention any names from that devoted band of doctors but some of the temporary repairs to limbs carried out by Colonel Julian Taylor, the London surgeon, with improvised materials, were almost beyond belief.

The camp was organized into areas which were allotted to formations. For this we retained the same formations as we had had in the fighting on Singapore Island. At the outset morale was naturally pretty low. It took some time to recover from the shock of what we had gone through. But after a time things began to get better. I attribute this in no small measure to the excellent example of the area commanders. Among the first to recover were the Australians, now under the command of Maj.-Gen. C. A. Callaghan, whom I had promoted to that rank to take Gordon Bennett's place. A more loyal and courageous man I never met. Later he was to win universal admiration by the way he bore uncomplainingly his own personal sufferings; but he never gave in and emerged at the end with flying colours. He set about his task by insisting on smart turn-out and punctilious saluting, and very soon the A.I.F. challenged comparison with any other formation in the camp. In his work he had the able assistance of a devoted staff, in which stood out Jim Thyer, the G.S.O.I., a fine soldier and most able staff officer whose views were always worth listening to. Another area commander who did great work was Beckwith Smith, the commander of the 18th British Division. He quickly set about organizing courses of instruction for his men and kept the *esprit de corps* of his division going in a wonderful way. Although he himself died before the end of that year, his work remained and the division, or what was left of it, emerged at the end of the war with its colours flying and its morale still high.

Another body of men who had a great opportunity were the padres, for it is a fact that in adversity men turn to religion for moral support. Very soon churches began to appear. In some cases the ruined remains of existing buildings were adapted for this purpose; in others new buildings were erected with such material as could be found. In the grossly overcrowded camps building material was scarce and many of the churches seemed,

as it were, to grow out of nothing. Under the direction of the padres they were built by the willing hands of voluntary workers—and there was never any lack of volunteers. Services were held on Sundays and on other days too. Many a man who had never entered a church in his own homeland attended those services.

In our military textbooks certain instructions are given as a guide to the conduct of prisoners-of-war. One of our biggest problems was how to apply those instructions, for we found ourselves in a situation which had certainly not been contemplated when they were written. There are two Conventions which govern the treatment of prisoners-of-war, i.e. the Hague Convention of 1907 and the Geneva Convention of 1929. Japan was a signatory of the former but, though her representative had signed the latter, she had never ratified it. The Japanese therefore always professed to follow the provisions of the Hague Convention but would not admit any liability to follow the Geneva Convention, which is much more far-reaching, though they always said that they would adhere to its provisions as far as they could, i.e. as far as suited them. So we were dealing with a fanatical and temperamental people who, for all practical purposes, only played to the rules when it suited them to do so. We had to adjust our actions accordingly. There is nothing to be gained in such circumstances in being obstinate when matters of no real importance are at issue. For instance, everything possible was done at Changi to humiliate the officers. Badges of rank had to be removed; Japanese private soldiers had to be saluted; and so on. It was unpleasant, but didn't really do anybody any harm. In point of fact, it probably annoyed our own other ranks more than anybody else. But when questions of principle or matters which may react adversely on our own conduct of the war are concerned it is a different matter. Then a firm stand must be taken and the situation must be faced whatever the consequences. As an example of this I will relate an experience which I myself had at Changi. The Japanese had instructed me to provide some technical experts to repair some anti-aircraft guns which we had ourselves destroyed. Of course we had the men available, but I pointed out, as politely as I could, that this was not a fair demand and asked for it to be reconsidered. For some time no more was heard of it and I thought the matter had been dropped, but one Monday evening, just as we were sitting down to supper, I was

sent for to the camp office. I saw by the face of the Japanese officer that things were not going too well. He asked me if I would supply the men and I said "No." He said, "Then you refuse to obey the orders of the Imperial Nipponese Army." I replied, "Your orders are illegal but, if you persist in giving them, then I do." With that he flew into a rage, tore up the papers, threw them on to the floor, and I quite expected him to draw his sword and finish the matter there and then. Luckily the crisis passed, but before long I found myself being taken in a car to the Changi jail (the place of internment of all the civilians) where I was pushed into a bare empty room and the door locked. That door was not opened again for two and a half days nor was any food passed through it. I had nothing but the clothes I stood up in, but fortunately there was a basin with running water in one corner of the room. By Wednesday night I was feeling a little "peckish", so I told a sentry who occasionally looked through the bars of the door, that I wanted to see the officer. Before dawn the next morning there was a clanging of keys and the door opened. I speculated whether I was to be taken out and shot or released. Either was quite possible. The officer said, "You wish to see me," to which I replied, "Yes, I have been here long enough." He said, "Can you tell us where those anti-aircraft guns were last seen?" That was too easy, for I knew quite well that the Japanese must know their location as well as we did. So "face" was saved and out we went. A bottle of whisky was produced to consummate the deal. But it still wasn't finished, for I spent the next fourteen days in solitary confinement, though with proper food and with reasonable comfort. That story, I think, illustrates so well the Japanese characteristics—uncontrollable temper which leads them to a dead end and then a face-saving operation to extricate themselves.

In July it was announced that all senior officers of the rank of full colonel and upwards were to be moved to Japan (or Nippon as it had to be called at that time), where a special camp was being prepared "with all proper amenities". There was much speculation as to what sort of ship we should go in. Some, the super-optimists, held that the Japanese had now decided to treat senior officers properly and that we should travel in a luxury liner. Others said that we should go on a naval ship. I doubt if anybody

got the right answer, which was the hold of a very small and dirty cargo ship. Into that hold were packed over four hundred souls including all senior officers, their orderlies, a party of engineers, the Governor, and four other senior civilians. Before embarking we were tested for dysentery and disinfected. The Japanese are great people for tests and inoculations. They talk a lot of hygiene but seem to miss its substance. They will insist on finger-nails being clean, but a fly-covered refuse dump adjoining a kitchen means nothing to them. They seem to have absorbed western ideas but not to have learnt how to apply them.

We left Singapore on 16 August 1942, or rather it would be more correct to say that we embarked on that day, for we lay alongside for the next two or three days and everybody who knows Singapore will know what that means. The conditions were appalling. We were all packed into one hold where there was barely room to lie down. Perspiration just poured from the naked bodies. At night the rats came out and swarmed over the recumbent forms. By day we were allowed on deck by parties for limited periods. Food, of a sort, was passed round twice a day. There was no proper lavatory accommodation—only just some wooden latrines built on the stern of the ship. We were on the ship altogether for a fortnight. Perhaps I was lucky, for after a few days I developed slight internal trouble and was allowed to travel in the first officer's cabin. Although it was difficult to talk to the ship's officers, as none of them talked English, they seemed to me to be a very much pleasanter type than the military officers. They were just simple, seafaring folk much the same as one meets the world over. They were very abstemious on the voyage, but my companion became very drunk as soon as we reached port, and I was not sorry to leave.

As always happened, our destination was kept a profound secret, and it was only during the voyage that I discovered from one of the ship's officers that it was to be Karenko, a small seaside town on the east coast of Formosa (or Taiwan as it was then called). We landed at Takao, a fine natural harbour at the southern extremity of the island, and our first move was to a staging camp at Heito not far from there. That involved a march of two or three miles to the railway station, carrying our baggage, and then a short railway journey. At that time the Japanese were on the crest of the wave and our arrival was made the occasion to

impress the local population. Large crowds were turned out for the show, but it was obvious, even then, that the sympathy of most of them were with us. For the Formosans are mostly of Chinese origin, and few of them had any affection for the Japanese. As one of the Formosan sentries once said to me, "Me Chiang-Kai-Shek man. When the Americans come, I throw away my rifle and go join them."

Heito as a camp had no redeeming feature. It had been built for coolie workers at a neighbouring quarry. It was on a bare, desolate bit of land with a swamp adjoining where mosquitoes bred in their thousands. Our arrival was marked by an incident which is of interest because it was typical of what occurred in every camp. The Japanese Army Headquarters at Tokyo had decided that every prisoner must sign a declaration to the effect that he would obey all the rules and regulations of the camp and that he would not try to escape. Of course, such a declaration was quite irregular. I have always thought that the Japanese only wanted it so that they could justify themselves in executing men who were caught trying to escape. On arrival at Heito Camp we were presented with this and asked to sign it while we were still on parade. As senior officer I had to give the lead. I pointed out that they had no right to ask for such a declaration and refused to sign it. I soon found myself in a cell in the guard-room but later was let out. The discussions continued for some three hours. It began to get dark and rain came on. We had a number of very sick men as a result of the voyage who had been kept standing on parade all that time. Finally, I asked to be allowed to discuss the matter with other senior officers and civilians, and we decided that a signature given under compulsion in those conditions need not be considered as binding on the individual. I believe that was the view taken at most camps. At Changi the struggle went on for two or three days with the troops all cooped up in one barracks and was only terminated to save human lives.

The next move was to Karenko where we found the American senior officers from the Philippines already in residence. Later we were joined there by British and Dutch senior officers and civilians from the Netherlands East Indies and by Sir Mark Young, the Governor of Hong Kong. Our numbers were about four hundred all told and we were housed in a Japanese barracks designed to accommodate one company or a little more. The

congestion was considerable. Colonels and brigadiers were usually five in a tiny room. Governors and generals were not much better. We were divided into squads, each squad having its own leader nominated by the Japanese. I had the doubtful honour of being appointed squad leader at first but very soon got the sack, for I did not see eye to eye with the Japanese. Our treatment at this time sank to the lowest possible level. The Japanese announced that they regarded us as equal to coolies and they more or less fitted their treatment to those views. Any private soldier of the guard was allowed to slap any prisoner of whatever rank in the face on any pretext, real or imaginary. Protests were ignored. All officers were made to work in greater or less degree. Admittedly the work wasn't hard—it usually consisted of gardening which on fine days was welcome as a change from barrack routine—but the compulsion was there all the same. The food ration sank to a very low level—so low in fact that it was pitiable to see big healthy men wasting away to mere skeletons. It consisted of three meals a day of small quantities of watery soup and rice. The camp commander seldom appeared, a remark which applies also to the commandant of the group of camps. In fact, the whole Japanese prisoner-of-war camps system seemed to be centralized in a group commandant who seldom visited his camps and who was quite unapproachable.

We had several visits from journalists while we were at Karenko. They were all very confident at that time that Japan would win the war even if she had to go on fighting for a hundred years. I always made a point of telling them that they were very ignorant of the resources of the British Commonwealth and of the United States and that in the end they were bound to be beaten. On one occasion a group of the most senior of us were collected and told that the mayor of Karenko had invited us to tea. We were taken to his house where we were hospitably received and tea was provided. But then the trick was exposed. Cameras were produced and photographs were taken of the Allied prisoners "enjoying tea and a smoke in their comfortable quarters". That was typical of the Japanese methods.

Early in 1943 things took a turn for the better. It seemed that the Japanese had begun to realize that their treatment of us was far from being up to the accepted standard, or it may have been that even then they had begun to see the red light. The first sign

was a cessation of the slapping, but even that was not obtained without a struggle. As a *quid pro quo* they tried to get us to write to our respective governments urging an improvement in the treatment of Japanese prisoners and internees in their hands. We told them that we were certain there was no room for improvement and that in any case it was no business of ours. That did not go down too well but before long the slapping practically stopped. The next thing was a thinning out, a hundred odd of the most senior of us being sent to another camp some way down the coast. Our short stay there was marked by two events of importance. The first was the arrival of the first consignment of Red Cross stores, and the second was a visit from the representative of the International Red Cross in Japan. The Red Cross stores, which came from South Africa, worked wonders. Hats, boots, and foodstuffs were included. It was the first good food we had had for over a year, and I definitely believe that it saved several lives, for the vitality of some had reached a very low ebb. The visit of the Red Cross representative, Dr. Paravicini, was as usual carefully staged. He was not allowed to talk to us individually, but we were able to tell him at a conference what we chiefly needed. But the difficulty in getting Red Cross stores to us was chiefly one of transportation aggravated by the reluctance of the Japanese to distribute them. When the war finished large quantities of undistributed Red Cross parcels were found in Japan.

In June a small party of governors and lieutenant-generals of the three nationalities, with one or two major-generals to fill up, moved to a specially built camp at Moksak near Taihoku, the capital of Formosa. Here we spent the rest of our time on the island. The treatment was the best we had. Each officer had a small room to himself. There was a library of English and American books, which had been the property of an Englishman living in Formosa, table-tennis and a gramophone with a good supply of records which we were able to buy locally. For a time also the food was better. In October I received my first letter from home, just twenty months from the beginning of the captivity, but it was not until the end of January 1944 that I received the first letter from my wife. That was over two years since I had last heard from her, a very long and trying time. After that letters came more regularly for a time, but later they

slowed down again. Of all the letters sent to me less than half ever arrived and, of those that did arrive, the average time taken was over seventeen months. That was probably better than most other people, for there were some who hardly ever got a letter at all. The main trouble again lay in the distribution at the Japanese end. I believe they insisted on every letter being translated and censored before delivery and, as they employed only very few translators, they of course never had a chance of keeping up with the job.

At Moksak we had another example of Japanese deceit. They were very anxious for some reason to get a "talkie" film showing the supposed conditions under which we were living and our general satisfaction with them. It was probably required for propaganda purposes. They started by saying that the Red Cross required the film, but soon it became obvious that it could be nothing whatever to do with the Red Cross, for they produced a list of subjects about which people were to talk. I refused to have anything to do with it, protesting that it was against my instructions. Great pressure was brought to bear as it was obvious that they were very anxious that I should appear in the film. Finally a message was brought from the camp commandant to the effect that, if I refused to take part in the film, I should not be sent home when the time came for repatriation. I replied that I would be quite happy to receive that decision as the Japanese would not be in control when that happy moment arrived. The movie men duly arrived and the film was taken. The next day there was an invitation from the camp commander to go to a neighbouring river to fish. It was the first time anybody had been outside the narrow confines of the camp for six months and some accepted the invitation. When they arrived, the movie men were lined up on the bank. But there was a danger that there might be no fish, or, if there were, that they would not be caught. To provide against that eventuality a live fish had been brought out in a can and was duly affixed to one of the rods before the photograph was taken!

News of the outside world was one of the most important items in our lives. At Changi we had got the BBC news daily through the medium of illicit wireless sets worked by some brave men at great personal risk, but after leaving there we neither had the sets nor the experts to work them. In Formosa, however, we had

been allowed to have one and sometimes two daily papers, which were printed in Japan in English throughout the war. They were the *Nippon Times* and the *Mainichi*. When I say daily, I do not mean that we received them daily. Actually they arrived in batches anything from one to three months after date of publication. Naturally their news was very biased and a great deal was withheld, but still it was possible, with the aid of some good maps which we had, to get a pretty good idea of what was going on. In point of fact, the Japanese press was never quite as muzzled as was the German press. At times quite candid leading articles and statements by public men were published. I well remember one article—I think it was in the summer of 1943—in which the writer said, "If we don't win the war this year we shall regret it for a hundred years." It looks as if he was not very far wrong.

The delivery of these papers continued until the day before the Allied landing in Normandy, and then it ceased. From then till the end of the war we got no papers, but we got the news of the invasion of Europe in rather an interesting way. For some reason, I think probably for propaganda purposes, the Japanese had issued to us a wireless receiving set. It was a controlled set with which you could only get the Japanese broadcasts—in Japanese. Simultaneously with the issue of this set there was a strange disappearance of all dictionaries which became quite unprocurable. So for some time the set languished in the library unused. One day I thought I would listen to the news and found I could pick up a few names. I then quietly removed the set to my own room, and set to work, assisted by Mr. C. R. Smith, the Governor of British North Borneo. We neither of us knew any Japanese but after a time found that we could begin to make a little sense of the military communiqués. We listened in four times a day and spent hours in sorting out what we had jotted down. In the end we were able to issue a daily communiqué and were right up to date until we left Moksak in October 1944. Then we had to leave the set behind. The Japanese obviously did not like our listening in, but I don't think they ever had any idea how much we were able to get out of it.

In October 1944, when there was a danger of the Americans capturing Formosa, we were hurriedly moved by air to Japan and thence, to our complete surprise, by sea to Korea and train to Manchuria. The journey, as we did it, was quite comfortable.

In fact we received better treatment during that journey than at any other time during our captivity. At the airport where we landed in Kyushu Island we were even waited on by trim Japanese waitresses and the aerodrome commander came to ask if we had all we wanted. On arrival in Korea we had a good meal at a large modern hotel. Things were really looking up and we thought that at last we were going to receive the treatment due to our rank. But that hope was short-lived. In Manchuria we were soon back in the bad old ways again, though it is fair to say that the food, which now consisted of soya beans, bread and vegetables, was more filling and sustaining than the rice diet. Also we found quite a large consignment of Red Cross stores waiting for us which lasted us, more or less, until our release.

Of our stay in Manchuria there is not much to be said. We were completely without news so it was just very dull and boring. There weren't many letters either, and our own outward letters were so heavily censored that they ceased to be of much value. We were allowed to write one a month, and I confined mine to the words, "I am well. Best love." The weather was intensely cold in the winter with temperatures round about minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit, but generally fine and sunny. It would be quite a good climate in normal conditions. We were given good warm clothing, and the barracks in which we lived were centrally heated, so it was not too bad. We made continued efforts to communicate with the representative of Switzerland, our Protector Power, but, as far as I know, without result. In fact we had practically no contact with the outside world.

Every Christmas our comrades, the Americans and Dutch, received official messages of greetings from their countrymen at home. We British received none. We wondered whether we were entirely forgotten. It came as a great thrill to me therefore to receive a letter, shortly before the end of the captivity, from my friend Sir John Dill. It was three years old, but in it he said, "I constantly think of you. Do not think that you are forgotten." A few days later I heard to my great sorrow of his death.

Here are some impressions of the Japanese. In giving them, let me make it clear that my contacts were almost exclusively with officers and men of the Japanese Army, and that my qualifications to express views on the Japanese race in general were limited. As

soldiers the Japanese officers and men had many good qualities. They were determined and stubborn fighters but not highly skilled in the arts of modern war. They were extremely tough and their obedience to orders was invariably immediate and unquestioning. Their loyalty to their Emperor was profound. By our standards their army was financially very poor. The standard of its equipment was low and the emoluments of officers and men a mere pittance. But they are a practical people in a rough and ready way and able to make do with much less than we should. Secrecy seemed to be bred in them. It was almost impossible ever to get any Japanese soldier, officer or man, to give away information or even to discuss the war. But they carried secrecy to an extreme, and it made one wonder how they ever got their operations successfully carried out. When it comes to a question of human suffering the thin veneer of their recently acquired civilization is all too apparent and primitive instincts tend to predominate. They are almost all of them subject to fits of uncontrollable temper. But I would say that the most outstanding characteristics are ignorance of world affairs and narrow-mindedness. Perhaps this is not surprising when one remembers that it is little more than eighty years since Japan emerged from isolation. I believe there were few people in Japan who had any conception of the resources of the Western Powers. The populace in their ignorance were led by their leaders to believe that Japan was all-powerful. In the end it was their inability to keep pace with the industrial and scientific expansion of their opponents which brought about their undoing.

And here are some reflections on the life of a prisoner-of-war. The reactions of individuals are surprising. Very often those who have been looked upon as the weakest turn up trumps, while others tend to take the line of least resistance. The key to the conduct of each individual is his store of moral courage, for in no circumstances that I have ever encountered is moral courage of such paramount importance. In my view moral courage is a more priceless gift than physical courage, for it is one thing to lead your men gallantly in the heat of battle, but it is quite another to stand up for your principles in cold blood far from any help. Other qualities required are patience and tolerance. In the unnatural atmosphere of a prisoner-of-war camp when tempers are

strained and nerves are on edge it is only too easy to quarrel with your neighbour. Those who have learnt the art of free discussion without loss of temper have acquired something worth having. But greater than all other qualities in those conditions is the possession of Faith—faith in the ultimate triumph of Right over Might and faith that, be it sooner or be it later, the day of deliverance will inevitably arrive.

Finally, let me pay tribute to the British soldier. Throughout those long years he bore his trials with courage and dignity. Though compelled to live almost like an animal, he never lost his self-respect or his sense of humour. At the end he emerged weakened in body but with his spirit unimpaired. It was an outstanding performance.

Chapter XXIII

DAWN

OUR Day of Deliverance came on Sunday, 19 August, 1945, several days after the end of the war in the Far East. Till then we knew nothing of the atom bomb, or that Russia had invaded Manchuria, or that the war had finished. But we guessed that something big was on foot, for we had seen many Japanese aeroplanes flying southwards, and there had been constant air alarms, and a move to an unknown destination, for which all preparations had been made, had been suddenly cancelled. On Saturday the eighteenth we were told that an American officer and N.C.O. were expected at our camp at Seian, 200 miles north of Mukden. They arrived early on the nineteenth and gave us the glad news. They belonged to a small party sent by General Wedermeyer, the Commanding-General of the U.S.A. forces in China, and dropped by parachute near Mukden to contact the prisoner-of-war camps. So prompt was his action that they arrived there before the Japanese had heard of the end of the war, and they very nearly paid for their audacity with their lives. There was no aerodrome near Seian, so in the evening the American officer left again for Mukden to arrange for transport. Then the fog of war, or rather of peace, again descended upon us. All telegraph and telephone communication ceased and all trains stopped running. It was due to the advance of the Russian armies into Manchuria. For the next four days we remained completely cut off from the world, but on Friday the twenty-fourth things began to move again with the arrival of a Russian mechanized detachment. We hired some buses and lorries and set off with the Russians for Mukden. August is the month of tropical storms and heavy rainfall in Manchuria, and little did we know of the state of the roads. For the next two days we struggled along washed-out roads, over broken bridges and through swollen rivers. Finally we stuck fast in a river-bed, but fortunately there was a light railway near at hand, and we reached the Harbin-Mukden railway in a train driven by one of our own orderlies. And so to Mukden. Throughout the journey the endurance of the Russian and Manchurian

drivers alike was quite remarkable. They went on driving and digging out their vehicles by day and by night with no rest and, as far as one could see, with little or no food. We were told, too, that the Russians had been doing this for several days and nights before we joined them. They certainly were very tough.

On arrival at Mukden we met our American friend again who brought us the welcome news that two transport aeroplanes were waiting for us on the Mukden airfield, and that General Wainwright of the United States Army and I had been personally invited by General MacArthur to attend the ceremony, to be held in Tokyo Bay shortly, at which Japan would formally surrender. At that time there was no direct air route to Japan so it was arranged that we should travel via Chungking and Manila. We set off the following morning and, after crossing the Gulf of Liau-tung west of Port Arthur and some awe-inspiring mountain ranges south of Peking we landed at Sian in the Yellow River Valley late in the afternoon. Here we were most hospitably entertained by the Americans and by the British Mission, and here we tasted again for the first time the delights of civilization—a good meal, a comfortable bed and, I say it without apology, a long whisky and soda. Our next stop was at Chungking where again we were shown the greatest kindness both by the Embassy staff and by all ranks of the British Military Headquarters. There I left the rest of the British party and, with Wainwright, headed south in a plane placed at our disposal by General Stratemyer, Commander of the American Air Force in China. I was able to take with me also my orderly, Sergt. C. W. Crockett of the Royal Army Service Corps, who had been with me for the whole of the captivity. A former Welsh schoolboy Rugby football international, he was the finest type of young regular soldier. Always most meticulous in his appearance and correct in his conduct as a prisoner-of-war, he had throughout those long years set a most wonderful example of courage and fortitude and had won for himself universal admiration and esteem. I was glad that he was now able to be in at the death.

Before reaching Manila we had a good opportunity of studying the Bataan Peninsula and Corregidor, the island fortress which guards the entrance to Manila Bay. Corregidor had been captured by the Japanese by direct assault in 1942, and had been recaptured by the Americans by joint sea and air attack in 1945.

Little remained of the fortress except a mass of ruins. Manila was a sad sight. During the recapture of the Philippines very heavy fighting had taken place in the town itself which the Japanese had defended stubbornly. As they were driven out they had set fire to the principal buildings as a result of which much of this well-built and attractive town had been reduced to ruins.

At Manila we joined several of the Allied representatives who were to sign the instrument of surrender—the French General Leclerc, the Dutch Admiral Helfrich, and General Sir Thomas Blamey, the Australian Commander-in-Chief. We left very early on the morning of the thirty-first for Japan, stopping for lunch and refuelling at the island of Okinawa which the Americans had captured at such great cost and which they were using at the end of the war as the base for their offensive against Japan. Every bay and inlet was full of American ships and craft of all descriptions, and on the island itself there were miles of newly constructed roads and numerous camps and aerodromes. It certainly is very remarkable what the Americans can do in the way of construction when they once get busy.

We reached Japan that evening and landed at the Atsugi airfield some miles from Yokohama. By agreement with the Japanese the Americans had taken over a bridgehead at Yokohama and had landed an air-borne division there. Those were the only Allied troops in Japan at the time though the American 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, composed of some of the finest-looking troops I have ever seen, began to arrive the next day.

Yokohama, where we stayed, was an interesting and rather awe-inspiring sight. The bombings and the fires which followed had caused terrible havoc, especially to the wooden structures of which the town was largely built. There were large areas where there was literally nothing left standing. There was not even any rubble. There were just acres and acres of waste land. I have seen a good many bombed and shelled towns, but never have I seen such complete desolation. This did not apply, however, to the district where the more modern buildings were situated, some of which, including the hotel in which we stayed, had remained more or less intact.

It has often been said that the war would have gone on for a long time had it not been for the atom bombs. I doubt it. From what I was able to see myself and from what I was told, I formed

the definite opinion that the Japanese were down and out before the atom bombs ever fell. There was little food, petrol, clothing or transport in the home islands, and their industrial capacity had been enormously reduced by bombing. Their navy was crippled and their maritime marine reduced to about twenty-five per cent of its pre-war capacity. Most of their aeroplanes were grounded. They were, in fact, beaten at the centre, though it is true that their overseas armies could have gone on fighting a guerrilla war for a very long time.

The Japanese defeat was in my opinion brought about chiefly by the cutting of their sea communications followed by the destruction of their industrial establishments by air bombardment.

At the hotel I met General MacArthur for the first time. It was a very kindly and thoughtful act on his part to invite Wainwright and myself to attend this final ceremony. He greeted us most cordially and made us immediately feel at home. I was to see a good deal of him during the next few days, and was greatly impressed by his personality, ability, and breadth of vision. Older than he looks—he was sixty-five at the time—he was full of life and energy. He quite obviously knew what he wanted and meant to have it. His success both as a commander in the field and as an administrator in occupied Japan have surely proved him to be one of the very big men of the war.

Sunday, 2 September, was the day fixed for the formal surrender of Japan. It took place on board the United States battleship *Missouri* which was anchored in Tokyo Bay. There is not much spare space on the decks of a modern battleship after all its war equipment has been fitted in, but the stage had been set on what open space there was—the table in the middle with a single chair on each side of it, the Allied officers who were to sign for their respective countries behind one chair and an empty space behind the other in which the Japanese delegation was later to take its place. Opposite one end of the table facing seaward were the Allied officer spectators, and opposite the other end on a specially built platform the Allied press and cinematograph operators. Among the spectators, who consisted mostly of senior American officers, were only very few British officers. These comprised a few senior officers of the British Pacific Fleet, the Dominion representatives and Lt.-Gen. Charles Gairdner, the Prime Minister's representative with the American Supreme Commander, who

was the only British Service Army officer besides myself to be present at this historic ceremony.

A few minutes before the appointed hour, 9 a.m., General MacArthur arrived and took up his position. From that moment to the end of the ceremony he very definitely dominated the proceedings. He was attended by General Sutherland, his Chief-of-Staff, who carried the Instrument of Surrender which had been sent out by special messenger from Washington.

A minute or two later the Japanese delegation arrived escorted by an American officer. It was headed by Mr. Shigemitsu, neatly dressed in morning coat, top hat and white waistcoat, and walking with the aid of a stick, for he had lost one of his legs. He was the Japanese Foreign Minister, and one could not help feeling some sympathy for this man, for he represented a class which had, one felt, been forced into the war against their will by the military leaders. Behind him came the Chief of the Japanese General Staff, a short thick-set man, typical of the Japanese military clique. He aroused no feelings of sympathy whatever, for one felt it was his class which, more than any other, had been responsible for the war and all its suffering in the Far East. He was followed by the remainder of the delegation representative of other interests who, except for the interpreter, took no part in the proceedings.

After a short speech by General MacArthur the two leading Japanese delegates were called upon to sign the document. The Foreign Minister signed "By command and in behalf of the Emperor of Japan and the Japanese Government", and the Chief-of-Staff "By command and in behalf of the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters". The last paragraph of the document is of particular interest. It reads as follows:

The authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the State shall be subject to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers who will take such steps as he deems proper to effectuate these terms of surrender.

The significance of this paragraph, of course, is that it made the Emperor, who for centuries had been a demi-God to the Japanese people, subordinate to an ordinary human being—a change which cannot fail to have a far-reaching effect on the future of the Japanese race.

At 9.8 a.m. on 2 September, 1945, General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, accepted the

surrender "for the United States, Republic of China, United Kingdom, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and in the interests of the other United Nations at war with Japan". Before doing so he invited Wainwright and myself to stand immediately behind him as a token to the world that the might of the United States and of the British Empire cannot be challenged with impunity even when they are fully occupied in other parts of the world. He also, with kindly thought, presented each of us with one of the five pens with which he wrote his signature. Subsequently the representatives of the Allied Nations appended their signatures to the document. With General MacArthur's signature the war with Japan officially terminated. It was a great and impressive moment which will never be forgotten by those who were fortunate enough to be present. The proceedings terminated with a great fly-past of the United States Air Force in which hundreds of planes of all types took part.

At the reception after the ceremony I met many of the leading American sailors and soldiers. Among them were Admiral Nimitz, a quiet and cultured man with a great charm of manner, and Admiral Halsey, a fighting sailor of the bulldog breed, small and determined. It is not for me to talk of the magnificent war records of these two men. They are known throughout the world.

Immediately after the ceremony Wainwright and I left for Manila to attend the surrender of the Japanese forces in the Philippines which was due to take place the following day. MacArthur was very anxious that we should go to this—Wainwright because he had been the American commander in the Philippines at the time of their surrender to Japan in 1942, and I to meet again my old opponent General Yamashita, now commander-in-chief of the surviving Japanese forces in those islands. A typhoon forced our plane to take a circuitous route, and it was after midnight before we reached Manila. Then we had another plane journey and a long motor drive up to the hill station of Baguio where the ceremony was to take place. It was midday on the third before we reached our destination. As Yamashita entered the room I saw one eyebrow lifted and a look of surprise cross his face—but only for a moment. His face quickly resumed that sphinx-like mask common to all Japanese, and he showed no further interest. He was much thinner and more worn-looking than when I had last seen him, and his clothes bore testimony to

the rough conditions in which he had been living. For after the loss of Manila the remaining Japanese forces had taken refuge in the mountains in Northern Luzon where, with no supply services and little to live upon, they had been hunted for weeks by the American troops. Whatever Yamashita's transgressions of the laws and usages of war may have been—he was subsequently executed for the crimes against humanity committed by his troops—there can be no doubt that he was a most able and determined commander, and a very tough fighter, as his record both in Malaya and in the Philippines will prove. It is a great pity that the Japanese commanders allowed, and sometimes even ordered, the atrocities which were committed by their officers and men, but that again may be due in some measure to lack of time, since their country emerged from its isolation, in which to absorb fully the accepted doctrines of civilization.

On 5 September I said good-bye to my American friends. Nobody could have been kinder and more hospitable than they were during the time I had been under their care, and that was true of all ranks from top to bottom. The feeling that one was again among friends enabled one to face the inevitable camera and autograph book with goodwill and a smile.

After two days at Headquarters of South-East Asia Command in Ceylon, a forty-eight hours' flight in a York brought me to an aerodrome near Swindon on the morning of 10 September, rather more than four years and four months after I had set out from England. There a great thrill was in store for me, for waiting on the aerodrome I found that brave woman who had, with such courage and fortitude, endured so much during those long years of waiting—my wife. The War Office had with great consideration arranged that she should be there to meet me. So the joys of home-coming were complete.

The next few weeks were busy ones. Letters and telegrams poured in from friends and well-wishers. They came from all over the world, but especially from the United States of America where the significance of what happened in the Far East has always been, and still is, more fully understood than it ever has been in our own country.

But it was some months later before the crowning event took place. It was at an Investiture at Buckingham Palace which I had attended to receive a decoration which had been awarded

to me early in the war. After I had passed the Royal presence and joined the throng in the room outside, an equerry came to me and said, "The King wishes to see you after the ceremony." For a quarter of an hour he talked to me with the greatest sympathy and understanding. So the King understood. It made me feel very happy.

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