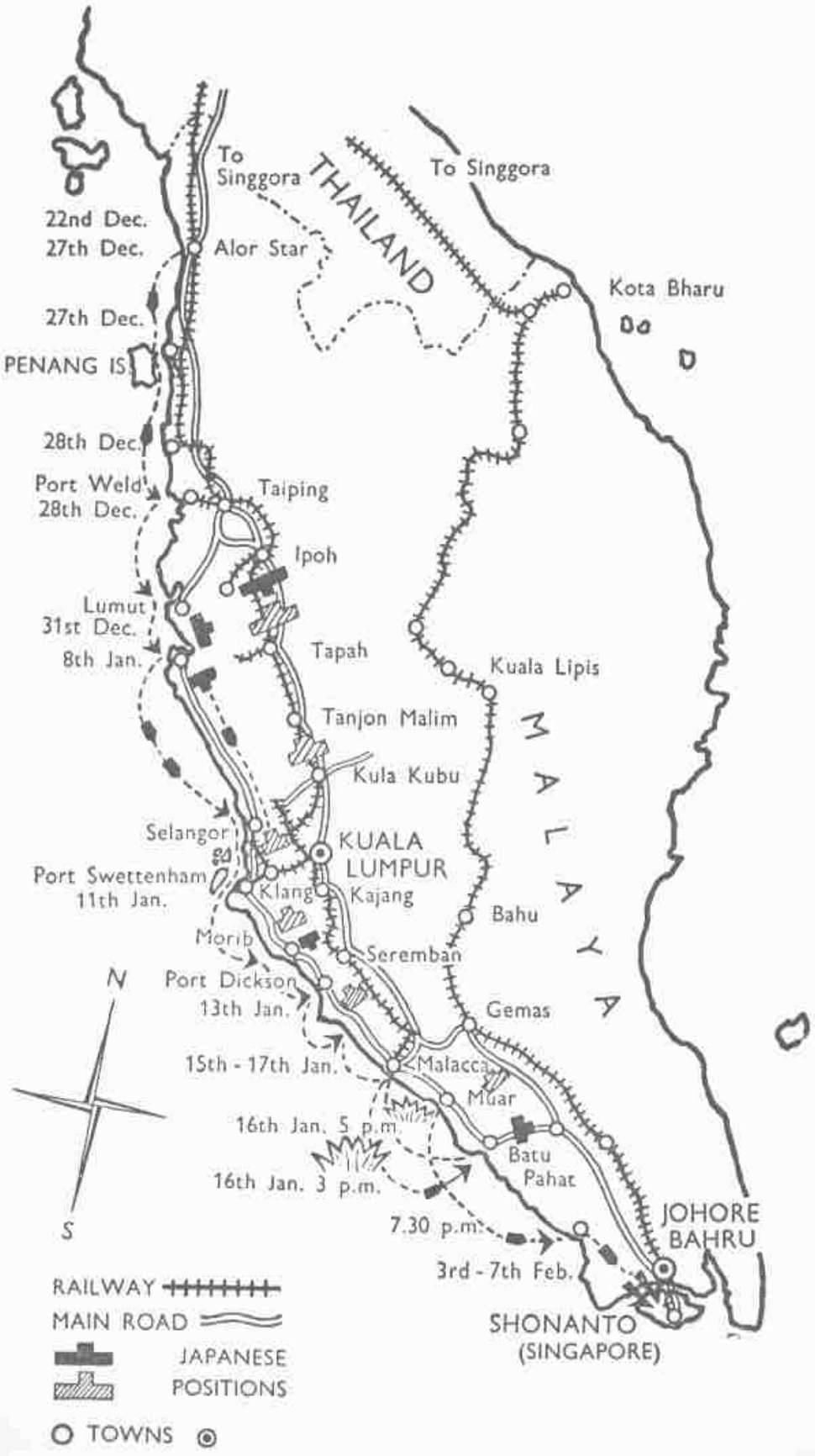


MALAYA

*This map is based on one that appeared in the "Nippon Times", 18th March 1942.*

# SOLDIER SURGEON IN MALAYA

*by*

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*To*
MY WIFE



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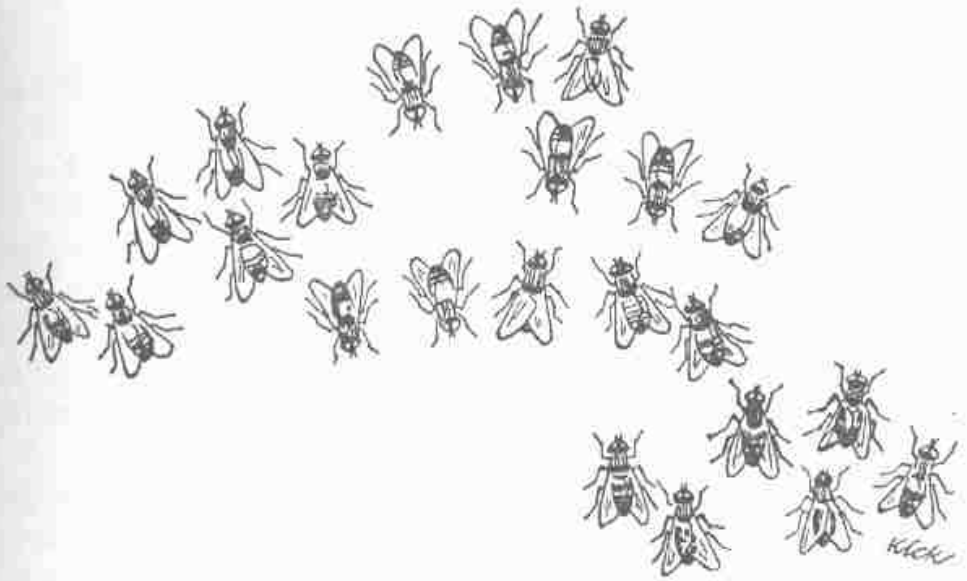
# CONTENTS

# ABBREVIATIONS

*A.A.M.C.*: Australian Army Medical Corps
*A.A.S.C.*: Australian Army Service Corps
*A.I.F.*: Australian Imperial Force
*A.G.H.*: Australian General Hospital
*A.S.C.*: Army Service Corps
*A.D.M.S.*: Assistant Director of Medical Services, usually Chief of the Medical Service of a Division
*A.A. and Q.M.G.*: Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General
*A.Q.*: Short for *A.A. and Q.M.G.*
*C. in C.*: Commander-in-Chief
*C.O.*: Commanding Officer
*C.B.*: Confined to barracks—a military punishment
*C.C.S.*: Casualty Clearing Station
*D.D.M.S.*: Deputy Director of Medical Services—usually at Corps headquarters
*Don R.*: Dispatch Rider
*H.Q.*: Headquarters
*M.A.C.*: Motor Ambulance Convoy
*M.O.*: Medical Officer
*O.C.*: Officer commanding Company, Battery, etc.
*Q.M.*: Quartermaster
*R.A.F.*: Royal Air Force
*R.A.M.C.*: Royal Army Medical Corps
*R.A.A.F.*: Royal Australian Air Force
*R.E.*: Royal Engineers
*R.M.O.*: Regimental Medical Officer



# 1

## *Prologue*

I'm a surgeon again, with a soul-satisfying job! My ward in the Roberts Barracks is filled with a hundred wounded Australians. Originally built to accommodate sixty healthy soldiers, it is surgically filthy. It stinks to high heaven of pus and crude disinfectants. Myriads of flies, hitherto almost unknown in the spick-and-span Changi of pre-war days, play in the long shafts of sunshine from the high windows down to the luminous yellow squares on the concrete floor. Nevertheless the patients are improving. Most of them can still smile or crack a joke with the orderlies. Underfed sappers are digging earth latrines to replace the bomb-shattered sanitary system, and the engineer officers are hopeful of restoring the water supply.

The men of my command have been merged with the staff of the Combined General Hospital and I am happy to be free of administrative worries, including stormy interviews with our Japanese captors.

I met the A.D.M.S. today and told him so. He smiled with evident understanding. Although he looked aged with anxiety

and physically thin on the lowered diet, his eyes still twinkled as he talked. "What happened to your war diary, colonel?"

"We didn't have time to complete it before the surrender, sir. The January records were burnt to save them from the Japs."

"I see," he said, and then thought for a moment. "Better start it all over again while the events are still fresh in your mind. The last ships away may have managed to get some of the records safely back to Australia. Don't forget the final operational moves in the fighting round Singapore and the exodus of your nursing sisters. Their work alone is worth recording."

I nodded in agreement and then went back to the corner of the veranda, where I shared an improvised bedroom with two other medical lieutenant-colonels; I gazed over the top of the palms towards Seletar.

Despite Colonel Derham's friendly instructions I could not raise any enthusiasm for the war diary. I wondered why. Was it because of the weariness of body and spirit, induced by the fact that we were part of a beaten army and prisoners of Nippon? Or was it from boredom, the longing for home, a warm bath, clean clothes, good food, sanitation and all the decencies of life that one does not fully appreciate until deprived of them by forcible detention behind barbed wire? I could not supply the answer. Perhaps it was the frustration, the heat, the apathy engendered by poor rations—rice, rice, and more rice, a most unsatisfying diet to a Western stomach.

My reverie was interrupted by the sight of my orderly-room sergeant, a capable brown-eyed lad from Tasmania. I recollected that he had done most of the writing of the war diary up to the outbreak of hostilities in Malaya.

As I hailed him, he came over from the adjoining tent lines clad only in shorts and boots, his lean, brown body gleaming in the sunlight.

"Sergeant, I have a task for you in your spare time."

"Yes, sir."

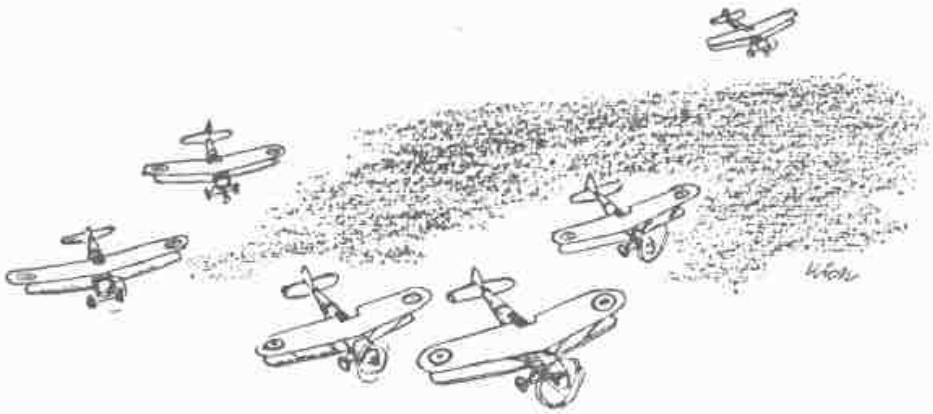
"I want you to rewrite the unit's diary right back to 1st December: that is, just prior to the Japanese attack on Malaya. Don't make it a day-by-day edition but rather a summary of the important events, with due regard for accuracy in dates, movements, and the numbers of casualties handled by our staff."

Sergeant Boxhall smiled. "There's not much paper available, sir, but I'll do my best."

As he departed I felt half angry with myself for farming out a tedious task to a subordinate. "Passing the buck," growled my conscience. "Hell! Who wants to read war diaries anyway, except the arm-chair brass hats and historians? What matters the modest part played by a casualty clearing station of one hundred men and eight nursing sisters in the grand drama of Malayan strategy, as the Japanese raced down from Singgora to Singapore in nine short weeks and made monkeys of the token defenders. Damned little, except that my surgical teams did save a few valuable lives from the human wreckage brought to them in the retreat. Yes, it is the human side that matters, and tending wounded men is an intensely human job. Why! I had even forgotten to recommend Sister Kinsella for the Royal Red Cross, earned many times over. Then there was the wounded Gurkha who wouldn't part with his *kukri*, even on the operating-table."

I went inside in search of a writing-pad and pencil.

*Australian General Hospital,*
*Prisoner of War Camp,*
*Changi,*
*Singapore Island.*
*26th March 1942.*



# 2

## *Battle Stations*

DURING the first week in December 1941 my outfit, known officially as the 2/4th Australian C.C.S., was parked on the western border of the Kluang aerodrome. As a battle position the edge of a 'drome is not such a bright spot for a casualty clearing station, but we were comfortable there. There was a pretty little civil hospital alongside, where we had the use of the operating-theatre. In return we let the Civil M.O., a very capable Englishman, use our X-ray gear and drink our beer in the mess. Everyone was contented. Our previous site had been a fearsome-looking mental hospital at Tampoi, ringed round with a high, iron fence. The men were glad to be quit of it.

Below our tent lines stretched the lawns of the hospital, girded by a double line of stately casuarina-trees. To the nor'west swept the wide expanse of aerodrome from which training planes were able to take off on three or four days a week, provided it didn't rain any more than usual. No one seemed quite clear as to why part of the six-million-dollar construction cost hadn't been diverted to providing all-weather concrete strips on the 'drome runways, but plenty had been spent on the officers' mess. We enjoyed several pleasant visits there. The planes consisted of Wirraways and a few Hudson bombers, but we were assured that Kluang was mainly a training aerodrome and that the real fighting material was distributed elsewhere. Later we were to find out, to

our great dismay, just how sparsely and carelessly it was distributed.

So life went on quietly, although shadowed by ominous portents from abroad. Work was easy, and amusements consisted of an occasional walk to the native shopping-centre in Kluang, a round of golf on the little course behind the aerodrome, or the hilarious interlude of a noisy Tamil funeral from the hospital morgue.

Meantime the international situation in the Pacific was growing tense. Kurusu, the Japanese delegate, had begun his talks in Washington. The British forces in Malaya had been advanced to the second degree of readiness, which meant that leave was cut out and units were to move at a few hours' notice to their deployment areas.

Headquarters had selected a hidden position for the C.C.S. on Coronation Rubber Estate, about five miles to the westward. I didn't like it because of its malarial possibilities and lack of a decent water supply. Nevertheless objections were overruled; plans were drawn up for a water supply and tent sites among the rubber-trees. A doleful prospect, for rubber-trees get you down after a while. Their regimented lines are gloomy, damp and depressing, displaying none of the majestic green cathedrals of vegetation or the riotous abandon of the jungle.

I bet my quartermaster that the unit would never occupy the place, and the hunch was so strong that we commenced looking round for an alternative, finally locating an excellent big bungalow on the Mengkibol Estate, two miles nearer to Kluang.

The manager, a grand chap named Pratt, assured us that we could have it in the event of an emergency and offered us all the help and native labour possible. I mentioned the idea tentatively to A.I.F. Headquarters, but was snubbed. I decided to shut up and bide my time. To induce an army headquarters to change a decision requires a lot of good salesmanship. Admittedly it has to make decisions and stick to them, but sometimes the results are either stupid or amusing. As Colonel Derham used to say, "Only a fool won't change his mind."

On Thursday, 4th December, I was summoned urgently to artillery headquarters for a conference with the area commandant. There I was informed that "Raffles" was being signalled to

all units in Malaya. "Raffles" was the code word indicating the advancement by force to the first degree of readiness. In other words war was imminent.

Kurusu was still talking in Washington. The ill-fated *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were in the vicinity of Singapore. Reports of Japanese convoys steaming south were coming in from the Air Force.

Radio sessions became popular. The men, avid for news, clustered round the entrance to the orderly-room tent whenever the sergeant-major tuned in our set to the bulletins from Singapore. The "Raffles" order was signalled within a few hours of the preliminary warning. Khaki-clad men all over Malaya started working feverishly to dig in at their battle deployment areas.

Next day the A.D.M.S. dropped in. He looked at me quizzically from under grizzled eyebrows. "What are your plans for movement away from the aerodrome, colonel? I don't like your position here, but the Coronation site is not ready for you."

Remembering my reconnaissance to Mengkibol I answered that I proposed staying pat until Japan launched her first onslaught. Then, if she picked Malaya as her first objective, I proposed moving out to a cosy corner I had in mind.

Colonel Derham pondered. "Yes, but you know that there is a grave risk of every aerodrome within reach of Thailand being bombed in the first week."

I agreed, but pointed out that the enemy's main thrust might come, in the first instance, against the Philippines or the Netherlands East Indies, in which case our Air Force could take care of sporadic raids over Malaya.

His eyes met mine for a long moment. "Air Force, colonel! Have you any idea of the air strength in Malaya?"

I replied that, from the statements of the Commander-in-Chief, from newspaper articles, and the general belief of the civil population, I thought the country was well protected by hordes of aeroplanes. I could see from my chief's expression that my reply bore little weight. For the first time I began to feel uneasy. Had I too fallen victim to the "It can't happen here" philosophy? After discussing a few routine matters and advising me to decide on arrangements for an emergency move, he departed without

giving me any more hints about the general situation. Then I sat down to analyse my sudden uneasiness of mind.

Had I not met Air Marshal Brooke Popham at Kajang in March and been impressed by his kindly bearing, also by his alertness that bespoke efficiency? Had he not just a bare month ago completed a conference with the Americans in Manila and stated with considerable publicity that Malaya was fully prepared? Japan could attack it if she dared! Had I not visited Sembawang aerodrome at Singapore in June as a guest of Group-Captain Brownell to see something of the air arm: its fine 'dromes in the eastern half of the Island, its connections with outpost 'dromes in the north as far up as Kota Bharu, its palatial quarters, its swimming pools and its arrangements for the speedy bomb-loading of Lockheeds? Then I remembered a significant remark by the group-captain. "We are having a lot of trouble with spare parts. Poor show when big planes are grounded, because spare parts are not available!"

"Gosh!" I thought. "Are we heading for a catastrophe similar to that of Greece and Crete?"

Stung into unusual restlessness by the reflection, I ordered the one-ton truck, our only means of quick transport at that time, and had the driver take me round to the medical hut at Kluang aerodrome. There I found Breheny, the medical flight-lieutenant from Melbourne. Proffering him a cigarette, I told him I had just come round for a yarn and a review of his medical arrangements. His patients were to be evacuated through our C.C.S. to the Base Hospital.

Those few preliminaries over, the conversation swung to the war situation. I popped my burning question. "Breheny, please don't answer this if you ought not to divulge the information. From your knowledge of the Air Force how many planes would you estimate are serviceable in Malaya at the present time?"

Breheny looked serious and thought for a while. Then he gave me his answer. "Well, unless a lot have been landed in Singapore in the last week or two, I should say one hundred and eighty of all types."

My heart sank. "One hundred and eighty of all types!" I repeated mechanically. So the shrewd hint by Colonel Derham had been justified and my worst fears realized. I still couldn't believe

it. "One hundred and eighty you said, Breheny? Just about a week's supply against a strong aggressor?"

"That's about it," he said quietly. "We need scores of faster fighters and light fighter-bombers."

I returned to the camp thoroughly depressed; *one-eight-o, one-eight-o, one-eight-o* drummed in my head. Even the truck tyres took up the mockery of the rhythm as they hummed along the tarmac road.

Captain Lee, the quartermaster, was waiting for me. Youthful and efficient, he was a hard worker who could perform miracles with rations and transport at the right time. He also was invaluable as the unit adjutant, for a large percentage of the other ranks came from his home State, Tasmania.

"Message from Major Fisher at Segamat, sir," he announced. "He and his party, including four nursing sisters, are due here by eleven hundred hours tomorrow."

"That's good! What about Major Krantz with his party at Batu Pahat?"

"Due on Monday, sir. All formations are getting on a war footing as rapidly as possible."

"Good work!" I grunted. "Look here, Lee, if anything breaks with Japan in the next few days, we pull out of this ruddy aerodrome site at the double."

The quartermaster grinned. "Yes, sir, where to and what with?" he said breezily.

Lee always had a cheering effect on me. My depression receded. I raised a grin in reply knowing he was alluding to our limited transport of four lorries. The overworked vehicles, coping at intervals with a hundred and thirty tons of equipment, were a stock subject for jesting.

"Mengkibol, I hope. I can't see Coronation Estate being ready in time. I'll have to ask Colonel Derham to help us with extra transport."

"A pound to a penny we don't get it," Lee said as he turned to leave.

"Pessimist!" I replied with a smile.

The next day, Saturday, was marked by the arrival in the hospital grounds of an aerodrome-defence company from the 2/29th Battalion, afterwards to play a gallant part in the torrid fighting at

Parit Sulong. Captain Victor Brand was their regimental medical officer. He was young and competent. I felt he would make good. Captain Brand justified my confidence some six weeks later by winning the Military Cross for coolness and bravery under fire.

The infantrymen were in great fettle. Digging slit trenches all over the place, they soon had their Bren guns arranged to give any attacker a hot reception.

Dr Lowis, chief of the civil hospital, took a philosophic view of his hospital buildings being ringed by death-dealing weapons. Wisely he arranged to move his patients to the Chinese-English school, a concrete building on the high ground near the Mosque. And here they sheltered under the flag of the Red Crescent, an emblem that even the Japanese might be expected to respect.

The town lights were "browned out" each night. When the air-raid sirens raised their doleful wail in practice all were "blacked out". Nippon's delegate was still talking in Washington as President Roosevelt was threatening to approach Emperor Hirohito direct. Idly we wondered if there might yet be hope for a peaceful solution.

Major Fisher and his party re-joined us. It was a pleasure to see our nursing sisters again and hear the enthusiastic remarks about their comfortable accommodation in the civil nurses' home. They were quite undaunted when I told them that they might not be long in residence.

"High time we ceased being pampered and got down to hard work," remarked Sister Kinsella, the senior. Her words were stimulating, but I couldn't help wondering what fate held in store for her and her splendid colleagues.

During the wee sma' hours of Monday, 8th December, air-raid sirens disturbed our rest. Cursing the people who practised these fiendish wails at such an hour, we rolled over and tried to sleep again.

Early in the morning we heard rumours of the bombing of Manila, Pearl Harbour, and Singapore, from a passing dispatch-rider. Agog with interest we awaited the news bulletin from Singapore Radio. It came, with all its stark implications of Nippon's treachery, and was followed by details of an attempted landing at Kota Bharu, the R.A.F's most northern aerodrome. Undoubtedly Malaya was for it. A sobering thought!

The news was followed by the usual exhortations to be calm. Then came a recording of "Land of Hope and Glory". I turned my thumb down to the sergeant-major, who bent over the receiving set to switch off the banal tune. As a melody nobody minds it, but radio stations seem to save it for shipwrecks, outbreaks of war and other grim occasions.

I waited with impatience for the expected arrival of the A.D.M.S. since I could not reach him on the overloaded signal wire. He arrived after lunch with no time to waste. It was apparent that he was entering on a period of intense activity.

"Well," he inquired, "what about this move to the comparative security of a rubber estate? It is quite evident that you must get away from the vicinity of the aerodrome. Our Intelligence reports that airfields are being singled out for special attention by the enemy."

I told him of my alternative plan for Mengkibol Estate. "I'm ready to start moving now, sir."

"Sounds all right!" he said. "Let's go out and look at it. When did you first think of getting away from the R.A.F.?"

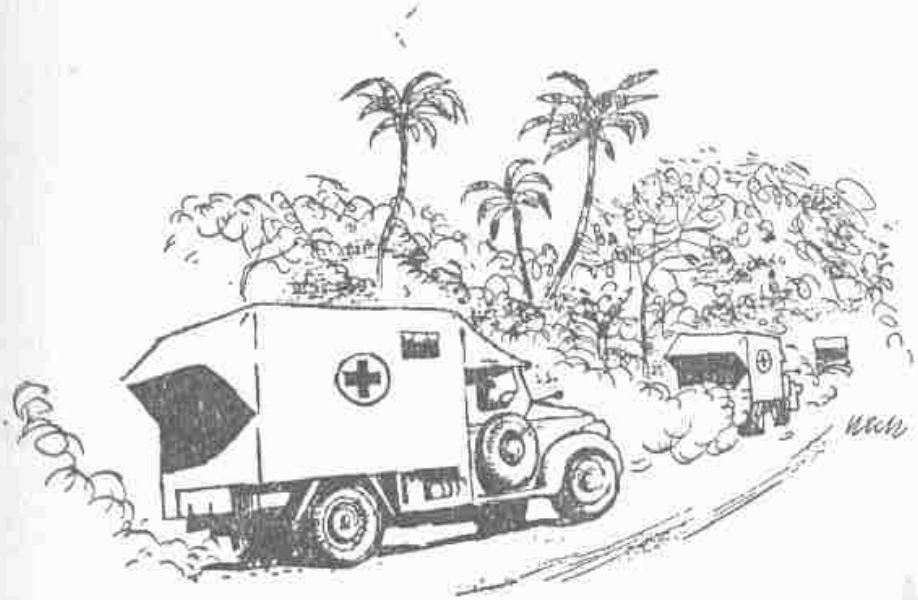
I returned his smile. "As soon as I confirmed your mysterious hint that British aerial supremacy in Malaya was not all we supposed."

On the way out in his car Colonel Derham told me the grim facts of the aerial attack on Singapore. "The Japs caught the city lit up like a gin-palace," he said, "and I don't know how many civilians were killed in the crowded streets. Our ack-ack guns seemed impotent against the planes. Some of the bombs shook A.I.F. Headquarters on the hill in Johore Bahru. A bad business, Hamilton!"

Then he added quite irrelevantly, "I shouldn't be surprised if you won a decoration before it's all over."

Caught unawares in my sombre trend of thought, I said slowly, "The only decoration I want is a returned soldier's badge in the lapel of a civilian coat when I reach home. I've got a wife and youngsters back there."

"Haven't we all," he said quietly. "I've a son over here among the stretcher bearers in the 9th Field Ambulance."



# 3

## *Mengkibol*

On arrival at Mengkibol, just off the Ayer Hitam road, I could see the A.D.M.S. was pleased with the site. He looked over the water supply, gave me a free hand to engage native labour to improve the roads, drove me back to Kluang, and told me to start moving the unit immediately. "Under your own steam or with whatever transport you can borrow," he concluded. "The Army has none to spare."

I saluted and said, "Yes, sir", but groaned inwardly. Normally the unit equipment and tentage required thirty-five trucks in convoy supplied by the Corps Reserve Motor Transport Company, but I had little hope of help from that source, since I knew it would be busy deploying the battalions to their battle areas.

Captain Lee rose to the occasion. Scenting an early move he had been out roving for additional vehicles. He came in looking pleased. Captain Ned Condon, boss of the 2nd Reserve M.T. Company and a good scout, would supply six for one trip only. Lieutenant Robertson, in charge of a section of eight ambulance wagons, agreed to break the Geneva Convention by ferrying equipment as well as patients, so that by late afternoon we had the kitchens and the bulk of the men's lines moved.

I went to the new site in the hottest part of the day to toil with the men till the sweat ran into my eyes and formed little rivulets in the hollow of my spine. Mr Churchill's promise to us was coming true. The "blood and tears" were to follow later.

In moving a casualty clearing station, or any field hospital for that matter, the commander fills a dual role of circus proprietor and furniture removalist. This illusion was strengthened by the sight of men working stripped to the waist as they erected marquees or unloaded surgical panniers, beds, anaesthetic gear, Soyer stoves, axes, shovels, and all the miscellaneous equipment necessary for efficient surgical work in the field. Corporal Keith Anders was outstanding in the erection of tents. Wielding a huge mallet with rhythmic skill, acquired during a two-year sojourn with Wirth's Circus in Australia, he justified his reputation for "one peg, one hit".

About five o'clock, while inspecting the broken pump on the bungalow well, I was lured by the beckoning coolness of the rubber-trees whose regimented shade surrounded the palm-lined clearing. Through one of the glades the green lawn of the manager's bungalow was visible, bringing visions to my thirsty soul of fragrant afternoon tea in fragile china cups. Conscience fought a losing battle on the grounds that I still had to see Mr Pratt about accommodation for the nurses, of whom the last party, with Major Krantz, had re-joined the unit at Kluang that morning.

The bungalow was constructed of teak wood, raised about eight feet above a stone-flagged courtyard which, bordered with flowers, made a shady outdoor living-room. On the lawn a little fair-haired English boy was playing with a puppy that cavorted joyously round him. The pup gave warning of my approach as the youngster called out, "Mummy, soldiers come!"

When Mrs Pratt came down the front stairway I inquired for her husband. "He's gone over to Batu Pahat," she said. "The authorities in Singapore have interned a Japanese manager from one of the estates there, and my husband has been asked to look after the native labourers until another manager is found. Won't you come in, and I'll make you a cup of tea?" She smiled brightly. "You look as if it might agree with you," she added.

Laughing, I waved my hand to young Anthony who had fol-

lowed us from the lawn into the ground-floor lounge. "Thank you. There is nothing I would like better."

Never was the beverage more welcome. Mrs Pratt was a sensible young English matron, unruffled by the upsets of war and ready to meet life as it came. She had just returned from the bombed areas of London. My favourable impression of her courage was sustained one week later, when I observed her cool demeanour during a vicious bombing attack on Kluang.

With two cups of tea and a large slice of cake tucked away, I had a guilty feeling that I was neglecting my job. I explained to my hostess that I must re-join my hard-working men. She nodded. "Would they like some iced beer?" she asked.

"Iced beer," I echoed. "They'd love it."

When she produced six big bottles of Tiger from the kitchen refrigerator and packed them carefully into a bucket, I told her that the only way in which she could receive adequate thanks would be for her to accompany me and see the looks of astonishment and pleasure on the faces of the toiling men, when the iced beer was produced. She came, saw, and laughed delightedly. The men wiped the sweat from their eyes, produced enamelled mugs from sundry corners, and drank her health with thirsty gulps.

Then on went the job with renewed vim. The bungalow was roomy enough to bed our small number of patients as well as the staff for the night, while the ground floor under the wide verandas made an excellent store, linen-room, dispensary, and men's mess.

The eight nursing sisters arrived at nightfall with their Chinese amahs, chickens, cook-boy and assistant. I had secured a comfortable two-storied, brick bungalow for them, not more than seventy yards from that occupied by the Pratts. Everyone liked the nurses. Hailing from Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia, they were representative of the best of our young nation's womanhood.

Their average age was thirty, and being glamorous had few attractions for them. They were keen to get on with the job for which they had enlisted. From the first day they joined us aboard the *Queen Mary*, they picked up the *esprit de corps* of the unit to an astonishing degree. As the youngest, Sister Shirley Gardham, was wont to explain, "Of course, a casualty clearing station does take us nearest to the front line." During the coming weeks of the

retreat down the Peninsula they were to prove their worth many times over in the grim work of succouring the wounded lads, with whom they had laughed and danced in the peaceful training period before Nippon struck.

Next morning I wrote to my wife.

*Mengkibol Rubber Estate,*
*Johore,*
*Malaya.*
*9th December 1941.*

SWEETHEART,

Yesterday was the anniversary of the day I left Newcastle. The Japs celebrated it by a sudden attack, caught Singapore with its pants down, and plunked a nice big bomb into the middle of Raffles Square.

Now I am the temporary squire of a landed estate, complete with a fully furnished bungalow as a homestead. It is the first time I have ever horned in on anyone's private home, but fortunately the owner and his family are in India. Doubtless the Army will compensate him, I hope!

The men have been warned to respect the household gods, and penalties are threatened for souveniring. I think they will behave if they have the same sense of intrusion on holy ground that possesses me. The sight of the family photos in the living-room, leading on to the playroom scattered with youngsters' toys, brought mist to my eyes and a gulp to my throat. In the telephone diary was an entry: "Dec. 8th—Children's Christmas party and tennis at Pratt's." By contrast war seems a beastly business. . . .

I worked till midnight last night, then suddenly felt tired. John Chalmers, the fair-haired, young doctor you met in Hobart, located me on the veranda. Presenting me with half a mug of rum and a cheerful face, he said, "Major Krantz and I have prescribed a snifter. It might help you along, sir!"

It did. On an empty stomach it aroused such a pleasant glow that, when making a final round before turning in, I leant over the veranda rail, listened to the snores of sleeping men, kissed my hand to the moon and said, "A fig for the flaming Japs!"

The days that followed were filled with the task of preparing a tented casualty clearing station for the reception of large numbers of wounded. As a protection against air raids the bungalow, which served as unit headquarters, was left in its clearing, look-

ing like a typical estate dwelling. Cars and trucks were not allowed near it. The pergolas of bougainvillea were undisturbed, tree preservation was enforced, and the Tamil *kebun* (gardener), a half-crazy old Indian, induced to continue with his care of the lawns and shrubs.

Over eighty tents, including Indian-pattern marquees, were erected to a careful plan among the long avenues of rubber-trees. The central road was named "Kinsella Avenue" in honour of the senior sister. To the right of it lay the surgical section under the care of Major Alan Hobbs of Adelaide, while to the left were the medical and resuscitation tents in charge of Major W. E. Fisher, a senior physician from Sydney.

Leading into the avenue a circular road, well hidden by the overhanging foliage of the trees, allowed the ambulance convoys to arrive and depart unobserved from above.

With the help of Mr McClure, the Public Works engineer for the district, and his Eurasian foreman, Mr Petsamo, a Chinese labour gang laid cement floors for the X-ray and operating-theatre marquees, stiffened the laterite roads with crushed granite, and dug bore-hole latrines for the patients.

One couldn't but admire the hard-working Chinese labourers. Accompanied by womenfolk and children they toiled for long hours on the job, only disappearing during air-raid alarms. In the midday breaks for "tiffin" the women produced delicate embroidery at which their calloused hands seemed even more adept than when employed in handling the heavy native shovel or *chungkul*.

A.I.F. engineers from the neighbouring field company, under the command of Major John Shaw, a Main Roads Board executive from New South Wales, piped water from a new well, then erected showers for patients and personnel, a great boon in a sweaty climate like Malaya.

All this work did not proceed without distractions from Nippon. Squadrons of bombers came over frequently, seeking out the railway line and aerodrome. Tired of delaying the task each time the wailing sirens rent the air, we arranged that the security of the slit trenches would only be sought when our spotters' whistles blew to signify the presence of hostile planes directly overhead.

In addition a gong was fashioned from a piece of old steel rail, to be beaten only if a paratroop landing was suspected on any

of the cleared areas of the estate. This signal was intended to summon the attached armed personnel such as truck drivers and sappers. Also volunteers from the batmen were armed with spare rifles from the pack-store. Under the tuition of Captain Newton Lee, who had secured a vicious-looking tommy-gun from H.Q., they became quite expert at combining with the drivers to form a small fighting platoon.

Remembering the grim incident reported from Crete, where Nazi paratroops used wounded men from an Australian hospital as a screen against invading New Zealanders, I argued with the A.D.M.S. that this force served two useful purposes. Firstly, it ensured that our armed personnel were used, as intended, for the protection of the wounded. Secondly, if the Japanese decided to respect the Red Cross, the arrangement would dispose the armed men a thousand yards away from the hospital tents, and so give the enemy no cause for complaint against a violation of the frequently misquoted clauses of the Geneva Convention.

At that time we had no knowledge of the Japanese attitude towards the Red Cross, except for an incident in the Russo-Japanese war, where captured Russian medical personnel were later returned, unharmed by the Japanese, to their own lines.

The A.D.M.S. inclined strongly to the view that the Red Cross emblem would be respected, but agreed that no benefit would accrue at that time from revealing our position to aerial reconnaissance, especially as corps anti-tank and armed line-of-communication troops had already moved into other parts of the estate, seeking the green camouflage of the tall rubber foliage.

When I explained my defence plans to a conference of C.C.S. officers, one or two looked a bit dubious and others smiled. I joined in the smiles and closed the discussion by saying, "Gentlemen, I know the plan reeks of low cunning but, until the Japanese attitude to the Red Cross is defined, I think a spot of gangster training will not come amiss."

As luck had it, Captain Lee's armed platoon was never called into action. Later on, Intelligence reports from northern Malaya confirmed Colonel Derham's view that the Japanese might respect the emblem.

A divisional order was then issued advising the use of Red Cross brassards by medical personnel, also forbidding combatant

units to bivouac or manoeuvre within one thousand yards of casualty clearing stations or hospitals. Our experience was that combatant units paid little attention to this order unless it suited them. I had no little difficulty in persuading the anti-tank battery to move away from the other side of our bungalow drive. A signal officer requested permission to park his signal section of some fifty men among the trees in front of the nurses' bungalow. I remarked, "I don't mind putting up with you blokes on my front doorstep but, when you start inviting all your low gunner friends in around you on the pretext of shortening the signal wire, something has got to be done about it."

If the anti-tank fellows had pulled out earlier to a new site, a tragedy might have been averted. They had a two-pounder gun —a lovely, mean-looking piece of artillery—mounted at the foot of the drive. While Major Shaw and I were yarning over a cup of tea, the calm of the afternoon was shattered by a loud bang that made the Chinese mess-boy duck for cover.

"Hullo, John!" I exclaimed. "Are some of your sappers popping off a slab of gun-cotton?"

"I don't think so. Let's walk down to investigate," he suggested.

As we walked towards the drive, a truck bearing anti-tank colours purred rapidly round towards our casualty admittance marquee. Three pale, shaken men jumped off, loudly calling for stretcher bearers. Going over, we saw the reason for their anxiety. From the truck, orderlies were gently lifting an inert form, whose face was a mask of blood. Poking from under a grey blanket was a mangled forearm from which a hand hung in shreds.

An anti-tank corporal seemed to be in charge. He looked up. "A dreadful accident, sir. This lad and his gun crew were at loading practice. A shell burst in the breech and he copped the charge fair in his face."

This was the worst casualty that had been brought to the station since its formation. With a thrill of professional pride I noted the efficient way in which stretcher bearers, resuscitation, blood transfusion and operating-theatre teams handled the poor lad in the next two hours. Except for the quiet comments of the surgeon to the anaesthetist, not a command was necessary. It was evident that the long months of training were bearing fruit.

The patient lost portion of his left arm and one eye, but it was

hoped that some vision at least could be preserved in the remaining eye. As soon as he was fit to move, he was transferred to the specialist care of Dr Robin Orr, ophthalmic surgeon at the 13th Australian General Hospital in Johore Bahru. Blindness with mutilation seemed a dreadful fate for a young soldier at this early stage in the campaign. Mercifully, none knew of the Gethsemane awaiting many others in the months ahead.

This introduction to bloodshed had a sobering effect on the unit. So also, a few days later, had the arrival of an Australian corpse and two wounded infantrymen from the company that had taken over our old hospital site on the edge of Kluang aerodrome.

As usual, grim Aussie humour relieved the tension. "Strike a light, the game's getting fair dinkum!" ejaculated a stretcher bearer as he picked up the dead man's steel helmet. It was riddled like a colander and smeared with grey matter. A jagged bomb fragment had sheared the cranium half off. This was our first battle casualty, probably the first suffered by the 8th Division in Malaya.

Early that morning we had watched the Nipponese bombers come over in a clear sky, twenty-seven planes gleaming in the sunlight, purposeful and menacing. From perfect formation at 6000 feet each group of three peeled off in a leisurely swoop on the aerodrome, undeterred by heavy fire from the Bofors and Bren guns.

"Cold meat for a British Hurricane! If we had any Hurricanes!" exclaimed a voice behind me in the slit trench. Just then a nicely placed burst from a Bofors scattered among a trio of Japanese planes that were regaining height after dropping their bombs. One plane staggered as if in difficulty. "Got the bastard!" said my neighbour happily. "May he fall in large lumps!"

I turned to find Sergeant-Major Bossward, a young Tasmanian, wearing a large smile on his soap-lathered face and nothing else except a towel round his waist. Noticing some blood on his foot I inquired, "Why the abbreviated garb? What have you done to your foot?"

He looked down. "I must have cut it getting into the trench. I was shaving when the Nips came over and didn't waste time dressing." As he spoke he unwrapped the towel from his waist,

dabbed the cut on the sole of his foot and tied the towel round his ankle. The all-clear blew and I leapt from the trench.

"Now, sarn'-major, you've got to get back to the bungalow in all your nakedness. Never let it be said that the nursing sisters caught the regimental sergeant-major improperly dressed." Max Bossward actually blushed as I teased him.

Back in the mess I learnt that a similar dilemma had befallen Major Hobbs. Also engaged in a morning shave, he had rushed to the nearest trench garbed in a bath towel. To his embarrassment he found it occupied by the senior nurse and one of the padres.

Later in the day I visited the aerodrome. It looked sadly battered, desolate of activity, the buildings in ruins, and the planes just heaps of twisted junk. Grim-faced airmen wandered listlessly about inspecting the irretrievable damage. They were aware of the lack of replacements.

The mood was infectious. I felt listless myself when I examined our old camp site on Hospital Hill. I found the patch of lawn where my tent had been pitched now turned into a bomb crater. Evidently the Japanese, mistaking the civil hospital buildings for the administration buildings of the aerodrome, had plastered them thoroughly with high explosive.

The commander of the 2/29th Battalion, Lieut.-Colonel "Robbie" Robertson, had experienced a narrow escape. Hearing the downward *whoosh* of a bomb above his office, he flung himself into the concrete drain outside. He escaped with a shaking, but his office was demolished.

At this time, apart from hostile bombing attacks, the war seemed distant. I had been so immersed in the business of establishing the wards that I had lost count of the days. Christmas was approaching—so Wong Chia Seng, our Chinese dhobi, informed me.

I looked up from my desk. "So it is, Wong. Are you going to celebrate?"

"No, no, colonel. Chinee no keep much Chlistmas. You likee pig?"

"Pig! Sucking-pig! You bet I would!"

"P'laps you likee two pig?"

I grinned back at Wong's cheerful smile. Wong was a good

fellow who had joined us in the early training days in Southern Johore. I had protected him and his three Chinese washermen against the machinations of Gula Mahomed's men, a rival gang who dhobied for the Army in Malaya on an official Malaya Command contract. Gula's men were sly, rapacious Mohammedans who never lost an opportunity of telling me what a venomous fifth-columnist I was harbouring in the person of Wong. Finding that Wong's men were good workmen I stuck to them, and Wong was grateful. In unit moves he mustered his squad of almond-eyed dhobis to help us load trucks. Never did he fail to produce clean pyjamas and bed linen for the wounded when they were most needed. They were so helpful that I retained their services in spite of the fact the A.I.F. had a mobile steam laundry just two miles away, a good unit that laundered thirty-five thousand A.I.F. garments a week until bombed out by the Japanese. Now it seemed that Wong wanted to give the unit a Christmas present.

"Look here, Wong, get me four pigs if you can, three for the men, one for the officers, and a turkey for the sisters. I'll pay you for them. I want the men to have a decent Christmas." With evident satisfaction Wong agreed. Doubtless he would make a handsome profit out of the transaction.

I waved him away as a travel-stained staff officer came up the bungalow steps. It was Major Bruce Anderson, deputy to the A.D.M.S., Colonel Derham. His eyes bulged when I led him into the mess-room where I gave him a *stengah*.

"Gosh!" he said, flopping into a cane chair. "How do you blokes manage such luxuries? I haven't seen anything so good for a long time." I didn't tell him of the grinding toil involved in digging in to our new location, but inquired for news of the infantry. "Fine!" he replied. "They'll fight all right."

We offered him another drink, but he declined. He asked for a bath instead. As he changed, we told him the local news and the latest jokes. "Thanks a lot!" he said. "I've got to get back by midnight to relieve the A.D.M.S. Good show you've got here! I'll let you take my appendix out some time—for nothing!"

# 4

## *An Uneasy Christmas*

As the December days flowed by in a whirl of activity, the Japanese divisions made steady progress south from Thailand where Pibul Songgram, their hireling puppet, had made entry easy.

Our official Intelligence reports, which came to me via the regimental medical officer of the nearby artillery, were either dull or lacked imagination. They described the fall of Penang as a tactical withdrawal. Later we were to hear from the lips of civilian evacuees that it was nothing less than a panic, a futile, egregious blunder due to a lack of foresight, a black blot on the prestige of Britain in the East.

Then came rumours of small patrols of Japs, armed with tommy-guns and dressed as Malays, surrounding our outposts in the northern jungle and forcing their withdrawal.

They did not tell of the gallant stand made by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a battalion that went into action almost a thousand strong and came out from the steaming paddy swamps of Kedah with seventy-nine survivors. Nor did they mention the fierce counter-attacks of the Punjabis who, holding high the hon-

our of India, died in their tracks by the hundreds. I felt that these warriors would give a good account of themselves because one battalion was commanded by Colonel C. C. Deakin, who had been on exchange duty in Australia before the war. I had worked under him when he was a General Staff officer with the 1st Division Militia in New South Wales. There Deakin, a good soldier, had taught many Australian officers the finer points of tactical manoeuvres. He would yield to no one in his praise of the Punjabis. "Real soldiers," he said. Asked his opinion of the Australian militiamen, he said bluntly, "Rough as bags, but I'd like to go on active service with them!"

Colonel Deakin was badly wounded in the Kedah fighting. I learnt later that he had been awarded the D.S.O. for the brilliant defence of a bridge-head, while sappers were preparing to blow the bridge.

We turned to other sources for news. Sometimes the *Straits Times*, or the *Malay Tribune*, was procurable. We read the authentic but belated and heavily censored stories of the war correspondents. One of them came into the C.C.S. one day.

"I can't get any decent information up front," he said. "It occurred to me that it might be easier to get stories from the rank and file of the casualties cleared through your hospital." We referred him north to the 5th Indian C.C.S. which was then in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur.

What our army had to be so secretive about, I don't know. The Japanese had agents everywhere, while the loyalty of the Malays in some of the northern States, particularly Perak, was questionable. The campaign was proceeding so rapidly that plans made more than twenty-four hours ahead were obsolete before they became operative.

In Washington, conferring with President Roosevelt, Churchill evidently was unaware of the true position in Malaya. He promised speedy support, especially in the air where it was most needed. But it never came. Singapore Fortress—a misnomer if ever there was one—was fast becoming another Maginot line.

Perhaps Churchill did know of Malaya's unenviable position, but could do nothing to alleviate the danger. Whitehall had decreed that Malay's function in the war was to produce rubber and tin to the utmost, thus becoming a "dollar factory". Practically all

labour was used for this purpose, and unhappily the country's defences suffered in consequence.

The troops were wont to laugh at the tiny Moths and Wirraway trainers flying over Kluang, like sparrows when no hawks were about. The Japanese had Messerschmidt-type fighters that were more than a match for the Buffaloes, whose pilots strove gallantly but ineffectively against the massed enemy raiders.

Strange and discomforting tales came from airmen who passed through our casualty wards. One described how a brother pilot had flown round an enemy convoy in the Gulf of Thailand on the Friday before the Nipponese attack was launched. He also reported that the mighty battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were cruising off the eastern coast.

If this were true, what a chance Admiral Sir Tom Phillips missed. The Japanese ships certainly were not out for a fishing trip. In fairness to "Tom Thumb", who gallantly lost his life with his two fine ships, one must quote a semi-official excuse for the War Department's vacillation in a tense situation:

> Had it been known definitely that these convoys were proceeding to Thailand, the government might have been induced to allow our troops in the north-west sector (11th Indian Division) to go forward to Singgora before the enemy arrived. The uncertain information available did not, however, justify the violation of Thai neutrality, a course which might have had a very adverse effect on American opinion.

As I was shaving, one of the padres brought me the news of the sinking of the two battleships. I was so incredulous that I abused him for a gossipy, tea-drinking parson who was a menace to the morale of the troops. Immediately I was sorry, the more so when I found his message to be true.

He forgave me. I went out into the sunshine to see if I could shake off the blues. A spell of hard manual work at pitching tents, combined with the facetious chaff of the men in Sergeant Bannerman's "general duty" gang, put new heart into me. After drinking a pint of morning tea with them, I came to the conclusion that things could be a lot worse. As one lad put it, "We've still got a bit of the Navy afloat!"

In the orderly-room each evening the dials of our radio raked

the ether for news. The B.B.C. gave merely a scrappy rehash of the Singapore bulletin—obviously doctored by Malaya Command for popular consumption—followed by a futile commentator who found it difficult to explain why the Japanese were maintaining the steady progress of eight miles a day in their march down the Peninsula.

For variety and to amuse the off-duty men gathered in the darkness of the porch below the veranda, the sergeant-major used to tune in to the Nippon-controlled station at Shanghai. Here a disagreeable nasal voice with a strong American accent would announce that "genuine world noos" was being conveyed to us by Pat Kelly of Shanghai.

Pat was quite a character. He seemed to know a good deal about the location of the various Australian units, and his ribald propaganda appeared to be aimed at causing dissension between the various components of the Empire forces. His nasty crudities bounced off the Aussies, themselves masters of invective. They roared with laughter when he called them ill-disciplined sons of convicts, while his Sunday evening serial, a burlesque called "Onward Christian Soldiers", had many amusing moments. The "Christian Soldiers" were Churchill, Roosevelt, Chiang Kai-shek, and Joe Stalin. Apart from the blasphemy and stupidity of the script the mimicry of their voices was rather well done.

Two days before Christmas Pat's booming voice advised us to have a very happy Christmas because we would certainly not be having a happy New Year. It was good enemy propaganda for, as events turned out, the hybrid blighter was right. The joke was on us! His advice was usually followed by the harsh announcement, "Manila has fallen! Hong Kong has crashed! It won't be long now, Singapore!"

One had an uneasy feeling that Mr Kelly might be right. This was our first experience of the Oriental Lord Haw-Haw. I had enough respect for his cunning approach to the minds of untutored listeners to shut it off when it became vicious.

Burdened with the subconscious anxiety of waiting for action, Christmas Eve in a rubber estate appeared a dismal prospect. Therefore I welcomed an invitation for the adjutant and myself to drop in for an evening drink at the home of the executive engineer, Mr McClure, in Kluang. Driving to the engineer's house

through the dark, tomb-like shadows of the native village was an eerie experience and a strain on our driver's sense of direction. However, the warm welcome from Mr and Mrs McClure, both charming Scotsfolk, the soft interior lighting of their bungalow and the sight of a large stocking on the Christmas-tree, all ready for their young hopeful in the morning, did more than the "drappie" of good Scotch whisky to cheer us up.

Wishing our friends the traditional greetings we then drove over to call on the Pratts. We found Mr Pratt's car in the main drive of the estate, held up by two big Aussie sentries, grim-looking in steel helmets and anti-gas gear but filled with the Christmas spirit. They wanted him to give the password which happened to be "coolabah", a difficult one for an Englishman. On his failing to pronounce it to their satisfaction they invited him to the sergeant's tent where he had to drink a pint of beer as a penalty for not being an Australian. Captain Lee and I knew the password, which enabled us to avoid the ordeal by beer, but we had to indulge in a long, humorous argument with the sergeant, two corporals, and a tommy signaller on the unsporting fighting methods of the Japs. The sergeant clinched the argument by saying, "Why, they go so low as to use fire-crackers and Alsatian dogs on their night-patrols. Blimey, colonel, with all apologies to your rank, sir, the flamin' bastards might even drop gas just after we've 'ad our plum puddin' tomorrow!"

This melancholy statement moved the cluster of hard-bitten faces round the hurricane lamp almost to tears. To avoid more beer we slid quietly away in the darkness to join Mrs Pratt at the bungalow. I had a box of sweets for young Anthony's Christmas stocking, which was filled at midnight and laid on the hearth ready for him in the morning. As we steered for home through the long, dank avenues of rubber-trees, my thoughts turned wistfully to picture the flushed, happy faces of my own youngsters as they took part in the Christmas excitements. Pray God our homes in Australia would remain inviolate from the invader.

Christmas Day dawned with a burst of sunshine in the promise of a cool morning. The padres were up bright and early as though contending with one another for the honour of holding the most services among adjoining units. Many of the men went to early Mass or Communion.

After breakfast the quartermaster issued each man with his Comforts Fund parcel and a bottle of beer. Meantime the cooks were busy carving up the pigs and poultry that Wong had procured. Everyone free of routine duties sat down at one o'clock to an excellent dinner.

The tables were gay with frangipani and orchids that the nursing sisters had gathered from the bungalow garden. The festival spirit must have puzzled the Chinese workers who were building the new well and strengthening the roads. They kept steadily at work until sundown, but their womenfolk did not neglect to search our garbage cans for toothsome morsels of pork before going home. Canny folk, the Chinese!

# 5

## *Ominous New Year*

THE British front line was now retreating on Ipoh. The Japanese were in Penang where the seizure of a large number of coastal craft enabled them to plan the outflanking of Port Weld and Taiping from the sea. Evidence was accumulating to confirm our views that the Japanese had a very active fifth column in Malaya. There seemed to be an entire lack of organization to combat it. One wondered why no efforts had been made earlier to use the large Straits-born Chinese population, or to enlist the many loyal and intelligent Indians into a sort of native guerrilla force.

Collectively the Malays seemed utterly unreliable. The native element in the Malay Police Service broke down, and Intelligence reports revealed that the entire native establishment in Trengganu, a large sultanate in the north-east, had gone over to the enemy. Even the vital telephone and postal services throughout the Peninsula were still in the hands of Malay operators who had ample opportunity to plug in on military trunk calls.

The main north and south road, a fine concrete highway, was burdened with military vehicles heading for the battle areas. Hundreds of cars, filled with civilian evacuees seeking safety to

the south, rolled in the opposite direction. Accidents were frequent, especially at night when the enforced blackout made driving hazardous.

Dispatch-riders were having a bad time. Almost every day one was admitted with a smashed leg. Their injuries were all of the same type, a compound fracture of the shin-bone, doubtless caused by the heavy cycle engine tipping over as they lost control and crushing the leg into the roadside gravel. It was peculiar that several complained of having been run off the road by native-driven civilian cars. It paid to keep off the roads at night.

We were alert for sabotage in our own area. One morning the hygiene corporal, his sun-browned face furrowed with concern, reported that someone had put two cuts in the driving belt of the water pump during the night.

This sounded serious. I dropped what I was doing and accompanied him across the lawn to Kinsella Avenue, the shortest way to the clear, sparkling *sungei* (creek) that babbled along at the lower boundary of the camp and formed our main water supply. We walked through the shady avenue, now a well-built laterite road with the medical tents to the left and the surgical wards on the right. A hundred yards downhill lay the pumping motor and the newly constructed well. The cuts in the belt were deep but not irreparable. A glance at the near-by rubber-trees showed each with its tapping-cup in position. A dripping of fresh latex revealed that a new shaving of bark had been made that morning by a tapper.

"Looks more like a mischievous piece of work by an ignorant Tamil rather than sabotage, corporal. A tapper may have been trying out his knife on the belt whereas a good fifth-columnist would have kicked the magneto off the motor."

Corporal Roberts looked dubious. An ex-Gallipoli veteran, he was one of my best men. He seemed pleased when instructed to put an armed picket in the vicinity with orders to shoot unauthorized intruders. I told him I would arrange for the estate manager to warn his tappers away from the area. The machinery and the well would be protected by an apron of barbed wire. We had been lucky to get the well dug and the pump and piping installed, for much of the coolie labour in the district was being scared off by Japanese bombers.

A very heavy raid on 29th December thoroughly unsettled the Chinese contractor's staff. His men took two days off to get their women and children away from the town. That was the last we saw of them. The old Tamil gardener also had disappeared. The Chinese are not cowards, but dislike any interruption of their peaceful working routine.

On New Year's Eve the nurses gave an impromptu party in their bungalow. With the other two senior officers, Majors Hobbs and Fisher, I made an early official visit to wish them well, then volunteered to look after the camp while the younger officers enjoyed themselves.

Remembering previous cheery New Year's Eves in Australia I cursed my luck at having to play the heavy father. One short year ago I had been helping to paint Hobart's leading hotel a mild shade of pink. Wearing a silly paper hat, I had blown a trumpet at midnight, made speeches, posed for a flashlight photo, and danced the Highland fling to the skirl of bagpipes, all with a gay abandon that shook off at least twenty of my forty-one years.

The press flashlight hadn't looked so good in the cold print of next morning's *Mercury*. My wife's remarks when she saw it later were even colder: "Time you reached the years of discretion, isn't it?" An uncomfortable five minutes was relieved only by a promise to repeat the dinner in her honour at an early date.

I chuckled quietly at the memory, then groaned as the air-raid siren went and the dimmed lights were switched off. I pulled the chair towards the strip of moonlight silvering the edge of the veranda. One was learning to listen to the night noises. The blackout evidently hadn't come amiss at the nurses' party judging by the laughter and snatches of gramophone music that came floating over in the still air. Above the chirping of crickets, the hoarse croaking of bullfrogs, and the *tock-tock* of a night-jar, I thought I could pick up the faint drone of aeroplane engines heading south. "Pat Kelly must have been right," I mused. "Sounds like a New Year packet of trouble for Singapore."

The reverie was broken by the arrival of Alan Hobbs and Ted Fisher bearing a bottle of "Auld Angus", a noble wine from Scotland. Slaked with water it made a braw drink, a bright comforter in an otherwise lonely night. I was glad of the comradeship of two such loyal friends.

Alan Hobbs, senior surgeon with the unit, dark-eyed, keen and capable, hailed from Adelaide. By careful planning and hard training he had produced two good surgical teams, leading one himself and entrusting the other to Major Syd Krantz, also from Adelaide.

Ted Fisher—he hated being called Walter Edward—was the specialist physician from Sydney. With a patrician bearing and a keen brain that did not suffer fools gladly, he was the rare type of medical officer who, flung from civil life into the crudities of the A.I.F., quickly mastered Army methods and made himself efficient in his new role. My heart warmed to him from the first day I saw him on the training field at Brighton Camp, Tasmania, where his soldierly appearance and deep voice commanded attention. In Malaya he made a special study of tropical diseases under a master malariologist, Dr John Field of the Institute of Medical Research at Kuala Lumpur. When hostilities broke out he organized the resuscitation of the wounded, paying special attention to the training of intelligent orderlies in blood transfusions. I liked him all the more because he had refrained from protests, when I heaved the hygiene work at him as well. Steadily he drove Corporal Roberts and his squad, combating flies, watching the anti-malarial drains, building bigger and better latrines. He was touchy about teasing references to Chic Sale, author of *The Specialist*, although I don't think he had ever bothered to read that famous authority on the art of building rural conveniences.

So the three of us yarned of home and of visits to the big clinics of London, New York, and Vienna; we criticized Army strategy, in which we displayed little confidence, and occasionally essayed to probe the immediate future. No one needed to be reminded that 1942 would be an eventful year for the unit.

Padre Bashford came in, loosening his collar and wiping the sweat from his neck. Malayan nights are torrid. We poured him a drink which he held aloft to wish us good fortune in the New Year. The all-clear sounded as a luminous watch dial showed two minutes past twelve. Padre had been to the nurses' party, which had recovered its second wind with the arrival of a quartette of Air Force officers. He refused to disclose whether he had kissed the Matron.

"Auld Angus" lived up to his labelled description of being as "Gentle as a lamb". We slept like babes till reveille, undisturbed by the return of the roisterers and caring less for the ill-omened portents of 1942.

# 6

## *Quickening Tempo*

After the Perak River fighting of 28th December the Nipponese swept through the tin-mines and paddy swamps, outflanking the III Indian Corps under Lieut.-General Sir Lewis Heath and advancing to the Slim River. Kuala Lumpur, capital city of the Federated Malay States, was bombed. Port Swettenham was threatened from the sea. The west coast was becoming dangerous.

The A.D.M.S. arrived in a dust-covered car. He looked tired and restless. "I don't like the exposed position of the 10th Hospital at Malacca," he announced. "It is nearer to the front line than any other Australian formation. I've got to move it in the next few days."

I whistled softly. The 10th Australian General Hospital, commanded by Colonel E. Rowden White of Melbourne, had come over with us in the *Queen Mary* and subsequently established itself in the large civil general hospital at Malacca. It had eight hundred tons of equipment which would normally require six weeks to move to a new site. In the present circumstances this time-allowance was out of the question.

"Where are you going to put the 10th?" I inquired.

The A.D.M.S. stubbed his cigarette. "I don't know yet. I'll let you know through Glyn White in the next few days. I have a tentative site on Singapore Island in mind. Meantime, please send all your sick to the 13th Hospital at Tampoi and keep your beds as clear as possible."

I walked down the drive to farewell his car. As it disappeared in a flurry of dust, another staff car swung into the shade of the parking area. I recognized the red-tabbed occupant as Colonel Ray Broadbent, head of the administrative branch of the A.I.F. in Malaya. He waved to me from the car window. "I've got an injured man for you here. Picked him up on the Ayer Hitam road."

Glancing into the back of the car I saw a pale-faced Australian with a smashed leg. His hands clutched a dispatch satchel. "Another Don. R.?" I inquired as I sprang on to the running-board and directed the driver to the reception tent.

"Another Don. R.," he answered. "The Jap planes are flying low to give the motor cyclists special attention with their machine-guns. I'll take care of his dispatches, some of them may be important."

I liked the A.Q. Jaunty and blunt, he demanded efficiency and saw that he got it. He and the A.D.M.S. (Colonel Derham) combined well in the successful management of the A.I.F. medical services, and both were intensely loyal to their leader, Major-General Gordon Bennett. I asked him to look round the layout of the casualty clearing station, leading him briskly through the medical and surgical sections which at that time had most of their beds empty.

He knew how to inspect a unit; he checked the surplus rifles in the pack-store—"Get them back to base, we'll need 'em soon"—counted the patients' kits, cast a critical eye over the polished

sterilizers and clean white linen of the tented wards, and then smiled at the ingeniously arranged darkroom in the X-ray marquee. He paid particular attention to our cover from aerial observation, also to the ramparts of clay being erected by perspiring orderlies to render the operating-theatre blast-proof.

Getting into his car he said, "Good show, Hamilton! I hope you don't have to move soon." This was the sort of enigmatic remark that I was coming to associate with General Staff officers. Move into a good spot, expend tremendous labours in the erection of camouflaged tents, cook-houses, latrines, build roads and store-huts, and make patients, nurses, and men comfortable, even arrange a supply of beer and cigarettes, then some "higher authority" would come along and say, "Move!" The next war I elected to attend would be a nice quiet, static one. Mobile shows like this in a hot climate were no good for the nervous system.

Laughing at my growls, I recollected that the 10th Hospital at Malacca was due for even rougher treatment. On 6th January Lieut.-Colonel Glyn White's voice came faintly over the signal wire from Johore Bahru, "The old man (meaning the A.D.M.S.) has decided to move the 10th to the Island but the new site won't be ready for three weeks. Can you take twenty nurses and five officers at the C.C.S. tomorrow? They will leave Malacca at 0800 hours and reach you at lunch-time."

"What! More women!" I exclaimed. "I'll do it, Glyn, but God knows where I'll put them. Are they accompanied by the usual collection of Chinese amahs and cooks?"

"Their amahs and cooks have bolted into the blue," he answered. "Tell your quartermaster I'll send him some extra tents. Good luck!"

As I hung up the receiver, I caught the eye of the quartermaster who had followed the drift of the conversation. "Newton," I said, "whip round to the estate manager and ask him if he would mind vacating his big bungalow to bunk in with Mr McKendrick at the little "Rivertex" bungalow. Mr Pratt's wife and youngster managed to get away to Australia yesterday, and I know that he and McKendrick are good friends. Oh, and my compliments to both of them. Would they please feed with us on Friday night?"

This arrangement would make the biggest bungalow on the estate available for twenty nurses. Mr Pratt was more than kind.

Cheerfully he gave up his bungalow and mentioned that the Kemp bungalow, on a hill two miles away, was also vacant. It was fine to have spare accommodation up my sleeve for emergencies.

The nurses of the 10th Hospital arrived in ambulances, chattering excitedly as they recognized old friends and ex-patients among the troops. They were delighted with their new quarters, having been under the impression that they would have to rough it in tents. Matron Paschke, Royal Red Cross, a popular and resourceful lady, was in charge. When I apologized for failing to secure a cook-boy for the bungalow she said cheerfully, "Good lord! We don't need one, or amahs either; if twenty strong healthy women can't look after themselves in a lovely place like this, I'll eat my tin hat."

Indeed their bungalow was set amidst beauty. Its cream walls were capped by a red, tiled roof. Around it green lawns, bordered by red-flowered hibiscus hedges, stretched out to the edge of the clearing where a row of stately palms, fronds waving gently in a cool breeze, divided the garden from the more sombre trees of the rubber plantation.

Meantime our own nurses were exchanging greetings with the new arrivals and showing them their favourite slit trenches in the grounds. Men from the Signals, camped in the adjoining rubber, came over to welcome them. Army nurses always were attractive to fighting men. The O.C. Signals said he would vouch for their safety in the event of an air raid. Never did Sir Galahad accept a protective assignment more eagerly.

Japanese planes were now over Kluang every morning when the air was clear and visibility excellent. Each day at dawn when my diminutive batman, Paddy Maloney, woke me with a cup of tea he was wont to say pleasantly, "Lovely morning, sir." At last I protested, "Paddy, that's the wrong thing to say. You should tell me the weather is lousy, dull, dismal, and utterly unsuitable for aerial activity. Then I might have peace of mind for another ten minutes' sleep."

Lots of interesting visitors came from other units at this time, for reserve line-of-communication troops were deployed all along the road from Kluang east to Mersing and from Kluang west to Batu Pahat. Lieut.-Colonel Mac Sheppard had his 2/10th Field

Ambulance at Kahang to the east, moving later to his northern battle station between Labis and Segamat.

Mac and I were old friends who, as our units worked closely in liaison, saw one another frequently. He was a good leader with a fine unit that included three officers and half a dozen smart N.C.Os, who had been under my command in a militia field ambulance in Newcastle, New South Wales.

Mac liked having a bath at our bungalow, vowing that the war wasn't fair when it required him to bivouac out in a damp rubber estate while I enjoyed the luxury of a fine bedroom with pink curtains and a bathroom attached. I countered by remarking, "You are safer in the rubber, Mac. Think of the risk I take from incendiary bombs, to say nothing of having to climb down a wooden ladder and run fifty yards to a slit trench." Then we'd laugh at one another's playful lies and celebrate our meeting with a cup of tea or a bottle of Tiger.

The mention of Tiger, the best-known brew of beer in Malaya, recalls a visit by Major Peter Campbell, the supply officer. Peter was a cheerful optimist and his visits were always enjoyable. If he brought no good news from divisional headquarters he would make up some, just to be sociable. On this occasion I led him into the mess, poured him a *stengah* and said, "What's news, Peter?"

Beneath the playful query lay a genuine desire for accurate news of the front line. It had now swayed along the Slim River, broken in a major debacle there, re-formed for the defence of Kuala Lumpur, then been swept away again before the irresistible penetration of the Japanese, who had used tanks effectively in the flat country to the north-west and west of Kuala Lumpur. With Malaya's capital in his hands, it was obvious that the invader was in a position to outflank the main north and south road through the low-lying, populous country around Klang, Sepang and Port Dickson.

The fighting front had reached country we knew well, for the C.C.S. had spent eight delightful months training at Kajang, a pleasant town fifteen miles south of Kuala Lumpur. I wondered how the Kajang section of the Volunteer Defence Corps was faring. It included many old friends of our sojourn there: Alec Davidson, genial Scottish planter and splendid host; Hume Brett of the Malayan Police; Gerry Sanders, husband of the lovely

Danish girl, whose *smörgasbord* had to be eaten to be believed; Dr Seeverathnam, chubby little Indian doctor who tended to the ills of the townsfolk; and Dato Razali, relative of a sultan, who administered justice to a peace-loving community.

Noting Peter's arrival, my officers crowded round to hear his news. They had no faith in the cryptic Intelligence reports which recorded daily, "Contact has been successfully broken with the enemy", but said little else of real value. Peter certainly made his contribution realistic. Perched on the edge of the dining-room table he took a draught from his tumbler, lit a cigarette with tantalizing slowness and held forth. "Well, boys, the Japs are in the bag! We've only got to hang on until the end of this month and everything will be fine and dandy. I saw three transports unload at Singapore yesterday. There is a new Indian brigade of Jats down at Malacca and over four hundred Hurricanes are on the way here from the Middle East. Wavell has arrived at Batavia and is going to give the Japs merry hell."

We laughed. Peter's optimism was infectious. "The four hundred Hurricanes are hard to believe, Peter. We haven't seen anything but Brewster Buffaloes and Moths take the air against Tojo's squadrons," someone chipped in.

"Just wait till the end of this month," replied Peter. "The R.A.F. mechanics are assembling three Hurricanes a day at the Ford factory in Singapore."

"How about the A.I.F.?" I interposed. Peter's brown eyes sparkled. "Best news of all, sir. General Gordon Bennett is to command a mixed division of two A.I.F. brigades, the 22nd and 27th, with the 44th Indian Brigade made up of Jats and Gharwalis. The force will hold a line from Muar on the west through Gemas in the centre, to Endau and Mersing on the east coast where the 22nd Brigade is well dug in. Duncan Maxwell's 27th Brigade will hold the Segamat-Gemas area and the Indians will look after the west flank."

I nodded approval. I had heard a brief outline of the scheme from the A.D.M.S. It was evident that this formation would provide a strong buffer if the tired divisions of III Indian Corps in the north were forced back any farther. It looked as though Gordon Bennett could put up a strong line of resistance with his fresh troops, while the exhausted Indian divisions retired through

his lines to reorganize in the rear. I had a lot of admiration for General Bennett, and for his two Australian brigadiers whom I knew very well.

Duncan Maxwell, commander of the 22nd, was six feet two of fine Australian who left his medical practice at Cootamundra to bring over the 2/19th Battalion in the *Queen Mary*. He and Brigadier Taylor, in civil life a Sydney analytical chemist, paid us an occasional visit. Maxwell's brother, equally tall, was a planter and volunteer area commandant from Malacca. He stayed as our guest one night and liked the casualty clearing station so much that he demanded an A.I.F. identity disc. Asked why he wanted it he said slowly, "You see, colonel, I have just returned from a visit to my estate. My home and my life's work have been raped by Malay looters from the neighbouring district. If I am wounded I want the maximum in surgical care, so that some day I may return and bring them to justice."

I reached for the soda. "Peter, your cheery news deserves another drink. I am sorry we are out of your favourite Tiger brew."

"Thank you, sir. By the way, would you like three truck-loads of Tiger stout for the unit?"

Looking at Peter cautiously I beckoned to Newton Lee, the quartermaster. "Not joking are you, Peter? Did I hear you say Tiger stout—three truck-loads?"

"Honest as the day, sir! The only catch is you'll have to supply your own loading party at the railway station and your own lorries."

I gasped. "You mean railway trucks, big eight-ton trucks, full of grog! And you want me to take delivery free, gratis and for nothing!"

Peter's fine teeth flashed under his slender, dark moustache. "That's correct! I can't get it through to the rightful owner in Kuala Lumpur. The Railway Operational Maintenance Corps is casting a wicked eye on it—I'll bet some of the troops are full as owls already—so I've got to get the liquor out of harm's way or else destroy it as dangerous cargo. It occurred to me that a well-regulated medical unit would be just the place for its orderly distribution."

Smiling at the gross flattery in Peter's last remark I turned to the quartermaster. "Newton, this sounds like manna from heaven.

Will you confer with Major Campbell forthwith and arrange a loading party to transport as much of the boo–er–Tiger to your Q store as soon as possible?"

Peter was as good as his word. Room could not be found for all the stout, but we took about sixty cases and distributed a fair number to neighbouring units as "comforts". I sent up a case to Mac Sheppard and one to Lieut.-Colonel Neal, dapper little C.O. of the 38th Indian Field Ambulance, who had his field dressing stations in position to evacuate the wounded from the Indian brigade on the west flank of the A.I.F.

Apparently the train crews took the remainder of Peter's stout by train to Gemas, for a day or two later we heard an amusing sequel from Reg (Bunny) Reid, a dental captain who had volunteered for the job of railway transport officer at that station. It concerned an Australian volunteer engine-driver, tough variety, who had adjourned for a little refreshment while his new fireman got up steam. Their goods train was parked in Gemas siding. On returning to his engine the driver climbed aboard, looked at the boiler gauges and said, "No bloody good! Not enough steam to blow yer 'at off! Stoke 'er a bit more, mate, while I go an 'ave another flamin' drink."

The fireman, who happened to be a R.N. Scottish stoker from H.M.S. *Repulse* gave him a dirty look. "Listen, Aussie! If ye'd clear the beer frae yer een, ye'd ken that when I say 'steam's up', steam is up. Why d'ye no try a wee bit burl wi' the throttle?"

"Good oh!" said Aussie, willing to oblige. "We'll give it a go."

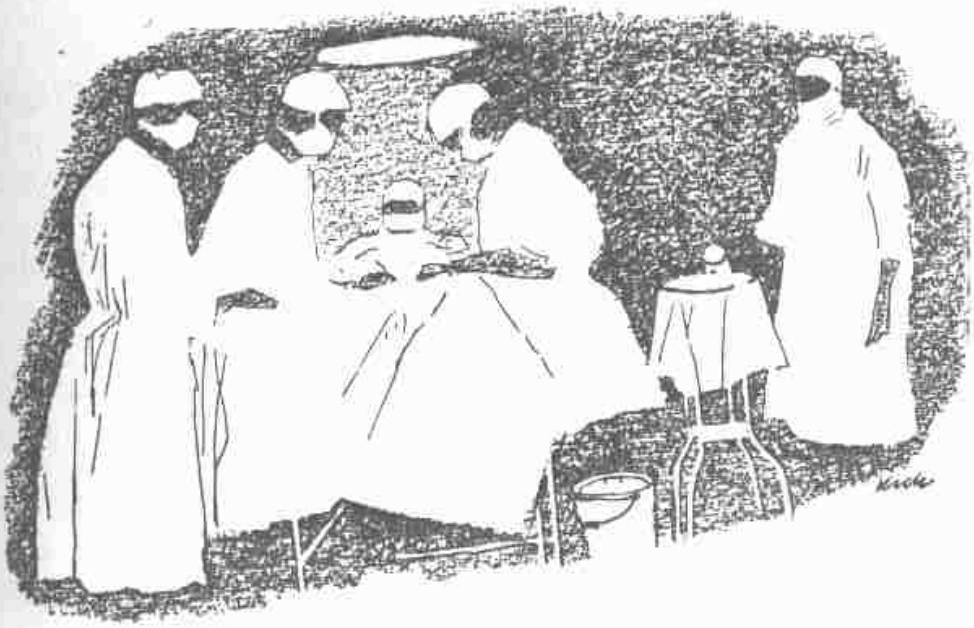
He did, with a good deal of zest. The engine, which happened to be in reverse gear, shuddered convulsively. With wheels grinding furiously and clouds of steam spewing from the cylinder boxes it pushed the clanking, protesting line of trucks clean through the crossing gates at the far end of the station.

The shouts of the excited Asiatics on the platform and the screams of the Eurasian station-master told the Aussie that all was not well; hastily he shut off steam, applied the brakes, and dismounted. After inspecting the damage he returned and said to the fireman, "You win, Jock! Steam is up!"

Leaning over the rail of the cab he waved away the voluble

harangue of the agitated station-master. "Looks like we done yer gates in, mister," he drawled.

Reg Reid assured me subsequently that the F.M.S. Railways sent a bill for the damaged gates to the A.I.F. It arrived after Gemas was in enemy hands.



# 7

## *Awaiting the Wounded*

I RECEIVED a belated letter from Hume Brett of Kajang in answer to a Christmas greeting. He told me that the erstwhile happy little town had been bombed. Our former camp in the high school was occupied by the 5th Indian C.C.S. which was awaiting casualties from the fighting around Kuala Lumpur. There had been great carnage among the natives, when a Japanese bomber scored a direct hit on a crowd drawing rice rations from the godown at the railway station.

This news was sickening. I had known and laughed with the little brown-eyed village urchins at Kajang and called many of them by name. They were shy, gentle, lovable kids who seemed to have all the delightful tricks of Australian children. I tried not to picture them lying in the hot dust round the godown, little limbs smashed to pulp, eyes dilated with numbed terror, lips whimpering in semi-consciousness, wondering why the motionless bundles next to them, vaguely like their parents, did not answer. This made the war too personal. I strove to brush the mental image away. I was afraid because I thought in terms of my own

bonny youngsters, whose latest photographs had just arrived from home.

A tour of the C.C.S. offered the best available antidote for the blues. Picking up my steel helmet I went down from the office and across the lawn. It was a delightful morning. The heat of the sun had not yet burnt into the coolness of the clearing where the undergrowth fringing the shady trees glistened with a dewy freshness. An Indian plied his scythe on the lawn, a leisurely study in slow motion. Peter, the fox terrier bequeathed to us by the former occupant of the bungalow, basked in the shade of a frangipani-tree. Bougainvillea ran in a riot of purple over the top of the tennis-court wire and on to a camouflaged dug-out that Sapper Dixon, our little R.E. electrician, was constructing for himself alongside his work bench.

The fox terrier ambled over to inspect the dug-out. He was a perky, inquisitive animal, and a friend of Private Smith, the C.C.S. bugler. At reveille it was his custom to accompany the first bars from the bugle with a long, melancholy howl. This made the bugler laugh and spoil the tune. The resultant discords amused the awakening troops, some of whom hurled catcalls at both dog and bugler; in all, reveille became a merry affair.

Sapper Dixon noticed my tin helmet. "Leave it for half an hour, sir. I'll put on the camouflage wiring," he offered.

"Thank you, Dixon. How are you getting on with the hospital wiring?"

Dixon was a wizard with a kit of tools and scrounged materials. His job was to keep the four-kilowatt generator going and the surgical unit supplied with electric light. He had a passion for making new surgical instruments for Major Hobbs out of odd bits of metal.

"I'll have the X-ray room completed today, sir," he answered. "The operating-tent is fully equipped now."

This was heartening. I continued down the drive to the medical tents on the left, found them empty but in the meticulous state of neatness on which Major Fisher always insisted, then crossed to the right where Sergeant Cann's tall form filled the entrance to the X-ray marquee.

"Morning, sergeant! Is Major Chalmers inside?"

"No, sir, he's taken Sergeant Bannerman with a fatigue party to dig extra slit trenches for the nurses."

John Chalmers, later fated to die heroically by enemy action, had a passion for doing good by stealth. Australia has produced many fine soldier-doctors, but among the younger group I knew of none finer than Chalmers. Assistant-Superintendent of the Royal Hobart Hospital in civil life, backed by seven years' experience as a militia officer, he was one of those useful all-rounders who gladden the heart of a hospital commander. His knowledge of X-ray work was especially valuable.

It was close and humid inside the big tent. "Hot weather for digging," I remarked. "Show me your darkroom, sergeant. Major Chalmers tells me you have overcome a good many difficulties."

There was no doubt that the radiographer sergeant had been ingenious. At the far end of the marquee was a square, closely petitioned off with dark army blankets. The interior was in total darkness, but the sergeant touched a switch and the area was flooded with electric light, revealing the developer tank, drying racks, film clips and, wonder of wonders, a little electric fan in the ceiling; as it purred smoothly the stuffy atmosphere was kept at least bearable.

I dropped formality, for I had known the sergeant from the time he left school. "Nice work, Ron! A bit different from your swanky, tiled developing-room at Newcastle Hospital."

Cann smiled. "I think I'll be able to appreciate it all the more when I get back."

Major Syd Krantz came in at that moment, so I went with him to his surgical ward to see the Air Force patient he had operated on three days previously. An unfortunate flight-sergeant had walked into a whirling propellor at Kluang aerodrome. The prop laid his left shoulder open like a side of raw beef. Brought to our resuscitation room shocked and exhausted from loss of blood, he had needed a large transfusion to revive him sufficiently to make an operation possible. When we looked at him later in the theatre, it seemed as though his arm must be amputated.

Syd Krantz, gowned, masked and gloved, was standing ready while his surgical team carefully cleansed the large, gaping wound. As we watched, a pulsation was noticeable in the depths of the wound. Syd's skilful hands gently separated the torn

muscles, revealing the main artery and vein of the arm intact. I saw his face relax under the mask and knew, as he did, that the arm had a chance. Our eyes turned to Major Hobbs, looking on from the foot of the table. Syd grunted. "I think we'll give it a go!"

Alan Hobbs agreed. The torn limb was sutured gently into position, the wound drained with a *tulle gras* dressing and the arm bandaged to the chest. Then Sister Kinsella took charge, shooed the deeply interested spare orderlies from the theatre, and applied her splendid nursing technique to the task of nourishing the small spark of life left in the patient. Towards midnight another transfusion helped tremendously, and the flight-sergeant made rapid progress. His arm was saved.

Now he smiled wanly as Syd and I approached his bed. He vowed that he felt very well indeed. Leaving the tent I met Sister Kinsella, busy supervising the midday meal for her charges. "The R.A.F. sergeant is a credit to your skill, sister," I said cheerfully. "I think I'll recommend you for a nice comfortable job as Matron of a base hospital."

Sister's eyes twinkled, "Don't you do any such thing, colonel. I'm quite happy where I am."

Leaving the surgical section I walked up the slope to the fringe of the clearing, where the dental department was very tidily established. Some enthusiast had made a gravel path to the doorway and erected a sign announcing the consulting hours. The dental officer, Captain Stuart Simpson, was doffing his white gown as I entered. He smiled a welcome.

"Finished for the morning, Stuart?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, with hostilities so close most of my patients from surrounding units have departed for the front line. Can I help anywhere else?"

"That's just what I want to ask of you. I know you have had training as an anaesthetist. I'd like you to act in that capacity with one of the surgical teams. Captain Higgin, our new reinforcement, will do likewise with the other team. When casualties are heavy, we will work the two teams on an alternating day and night schedule. It will mean closing your dental department, because I want your staff-sergeant to take a shift in charge of the stretcher bearers. Your dental corporal can relieve him on the night-shift."

Captain Simpson seemed pleased with the new assignment and from the grin on the face of Staff-Sergeant Hill, who had been fiddling with a denture at the back of the tent, I guessed the re-arrangement would work smoothly.

On the way back to the bungalow I picked up my steel helmet. Sapper Dixon had fitted it with a wire frame into which one was supposed to poke green foliage for camouflage. I took out a piece of white heather from my wallet and stuck the twig in the top of the helmet. A favourite aunt in Scotland had sent the heather from my native heath as a New Year's Day greeting. Dixon watched me with interest as I fixed it in position.

"That ought to bring us luck, sir. I hope it stays there."

"No harm in hoping," I replied vaguely.

# 8

## *Under Japanese Pressure*

KAJANG fell. The open country between there and the west coast enabled the agile Nipponese patrols to bypass the Seremban gorge, strongly held by anti-tank guns and a battalion of Highlanders.

With complete aerial observation and numerical superiority the Japanese were our masters in the deadly game of outflanking. Malaya Command was handicapped by lack of air support to a degree of impotence. At no stage did we hear of a brigade being held in reserve for a counter-attack; there just didn't seem to be any reserve as far as III Indian Corps was concerned. The line-of-communication units of this battered force commenced to filter through the A.I.F. area, and it looked as though the headquarters would be at Rengam, a small railside village sixteen miles south of Kluang.

I met some of the weary officers and gave them a feed. They spoke of their troops going as long as twelve days without rest, too exhausted to fight properly. Many of them had marched in stages, fighting as they came, all the way from the Thailand border. It was evident that they had been assured of a rest as soon as the Australian line at Segamat was reached. A false expecta-

tion, for the only ones to achieve any real rest in a retreat are the dead.

Colonel Derham paid me a hurried visit from the new Westforce H.Q. at Yong Peng. Dragging a map from his case he showed me the red-pencilled battle line. Then he sat back, drank a cup of tea and told me his plans for the evacuation of the wounded. Australians were to come back through Mac Sheppard's field ambulance south of Gemas, Indians through Colonel Neal's 38th Indian Field Ambulance somewhere near Muar. My unit was to receive wounded from both outfits and relay them on by road or ambulance train to the 13th Hospital at Johore Bahru.

Visits from the A.D.M.S. were always an inspiration; he was so clear and concise in his handling of the medical services. Before departing he dropped formality in the human way we all liked and said, "Well, Tom, what do you think of it all?"

Lighting a cigarette I spoke with optimism, "Sir, I'm confident our general will hold the Japs with Westforce. The new line seems a strong one, with the troops fresh and fighting fit. In case they drive the enemy back, turning the retreat into an advance, I've made a reconnaissance north to the Socfin Oil Palm Estate just south of Labis. There is a fine estate hospital there that would do very well for a C.C.S. or, alternatively, for a field ambulance."

Colonel Derham smiled at my enthusiasm. "Ah, then you think the retreat may stop when the A.I.F. goes into action? Well, we shall see. Meantime—" he paused, and I saw that familiar teasing twinkle in his eyes—"if I were you I'd be inclined to look for a new site somewhere south of Rengam. It is propable you will need it more than one to the north."

As I thought over his remark, he jumped into the car, waved cheerily and was gone. Once again he had left me with an enigma that made me vaguely uneasy about the battle situation. This time I was kept too busy to worry over it. Lieut.-Colonel Glyn White, who had been given a well-deserved O.B.E. in the Victorian New Year Honours for his fine administrative work, rang me up from Malacca.

"Glyn White here. Can you take in at Mengkibol ten officers and thirty-seven other ranks from the 10th Hospital, also the remainder of the motor ambulance convoy under Lieutenant Griffiths?"

Since this request meant the provision of extra tentage for the men, housing for the officers and rations for all, I made a rapid mental calculation. Realizing I still had an extra bungalow available—the ambulance vehicles could park under the cover of the rubber-trees—I suddenly felt flippant.

"Yes, Glyn, can do! I'm running a ruddy boarding-house for refugees now and can take everything but a brigade of artillery. Send 'em along."

Glyn's infectious laugh came over the phone. "Good oh! They will arrive on the eighth. Send Newton Lee down tomorrow. I'll help him with the Q problems."

On the morrow I took Captain Lee aside to the map table and put my finger on the main road leading south to Johore Bahru, at a point where it swung close to the railway.

"When you are on your way to Glyn White's office in Johore Bahru, I want you to go in on the estate roads round this point and see if you can locate a site suitable for a C.C.S. Buildings will be essential because, if by any mischance the Japs outflank us here, we may have to make a smart getaway down the Singapore road. We won't have time to take all our tents."

Captain Lee scanned the map. "Not much in the way of housing here, sir, but I'm told there is a small estate hospital at Sedenak and also one at Fraser's Estate, five miles farther south."

"Look at them both," I answered, "and see if you can get back tonight. The 10th A.G.H. crowd arrive the day after tomorrow. We have to erect extra tents for them."

Lee picked up his tommy-gun, gave his revolver holster a hitch into place—he always travelled with a miniature arsenal—and departed in the one-ton truck.

The staff from the 10th Hospital duly arrived led by Colonel E. R. White, a kindly, courteous Melbourne specialist whom everyone liked. I made the officers comfortable in the Kemp bungalow and placed the men in tents near my own fellows. They all looked tired out, for moving a general hospital at short notice is no mean task. The job had been completed in three weeks, every piece of equipment having been moved from Malacca on to rail and road transport.

Next morning under Major Lyall Andrews, who knew my unit well, they rallied again and helped to instal timber supports round

the reception tents, ready for the wounded. These gave extra stability and more head-room. Tent maintenance was the very devil in Malaya, where the average life of a tent in the hot, humid climate was only eleven months. The tents were beautiful when new, being finely woven of heavy cotton and fresh from Agra, Delhi or Cawnpore in India. They had white cotton ropes that did not shrink with moisture, but were quickly spotted with greenish-brown fungus after the first month's use, and the dark corners harboured white ants intent on their nefarious work of destruction. The latter could eat a hole as big as a dinner-plate almost overnight. My men were experts with tents by now, having had plenty of practice, for the casualty clearing station required no less than one hundred and six, of which fifty-four were marquees.

On rounds one morning with Sergeant Bannerman my attention was drawn to a marquee secured between two rows of rubber-trees. From the end of one corner rope to the roof of the tent lay a brown band about two inches wide. On closer inspection the band was seen to be seething with movement; it was an army of karinga ants on the move from one rubber-tree to the other, taking a short cut across the tent-fly. Millions of the vicious little creatures were bunched in tight columns that brooked no opposition. Idly I put the burning end of a cigarette in the middle of one column, incinerating three or four luckless ants. Still kicking wildly, the survivors lay in their tracks while their marching comrades swept irresistibly on. However, it was noticeable that three or four returned to each wounded ant, almost as though they had been detailed as stretcher bearers, and commenced the task of half carrying, half shoving the wounded karingas along the main stream again.

"Looks as though they have a field ambulance company here and there in the column, sergeant."

"Yes, sir, but I'd hate to be badly wounded and fall into the path of that army," replied Bannerman smiling.

An orderly came down with a message. Would I kindly ring Colonel Glyn White as soon as possible? Cursing, I made for the office. Ringing up headquarters was now an hour's job, for the party line in the estate area was jammed with messages in code.

I sat down on a chair and asked the orderly-room sergeant to get the number. I heard him at it.

"Hullo! This is GUFI, I want Colonel White at RADO, please." Then came a pause as a look of resignation settled over the sergeant's face. He was a patient man, that sergeant.

"No, I'm not goofy! G-U-F-I, G for George, U for Uncle, F for Freddy, I for Ink. . . . Yes, GUFI, and I want R-A-D-O, R for Robert, A for Ack. . . ."

Unable to stand any more I retired along the veranda to the mess-room where I got Lee Ah Tan, our cheerful Hunanese mess-boy, to extract the milk from a coconut that had fallen from the tree and nearly brained me earlier in the day. The milk was cool and refreshing. I held up the glass to inspect it, meditating somewhat irrelevantly on the fact that every year in Malaya twelve people die from being hit on the head by falling coconuts —a futile way to die, but perhaps better than a slow demise from the creeping paralysis of old age, or the convulsive agony of heart seizures.

Seeing Ah Tan's wide grin in the doorway I aired my bazaar Malay. "*Susu kelapa bunya baik.*" His smile widened. "Yes, tuan, coconut milk very good."

That was the worst of Lee Ah Tan. He always made my Malay look silly by translating it back into English. A sad result of his close association with our unit cooks was the introduction, when excited, of vigorous Australian swear-words into his quaint vocabulary, a propensity the wily cooks did their best to foster.

Glyn White came on the phone. Could I accommodate a section of the 2/3rd Motor Ambulance Convoy?

"How many, Glyn?" I asked cautiously. "Oh, about fifty vehicles and their crews. They've been adding on a few on the way down from Thailand."

"Well, it will mean bivouacking in the rubber, unless you can move the personnel of the 10th Hospital on to their new home. Then I might be able to do something with the spare bungalows."

"Stone the crows!" said Glyn, who had a remarkable fluency in Australian idiom. "I'd forgotten you still had a portion of the 10th parked with you. Could you ask Colonel White to ring me today? I've got a big school in Barker Road, Singapore, which I think

will be suitable for a hospital. I want him to bring the Matron and the quartermaster down to look it over."

"Right! I'll let him know," I said. "When can I expect the 2/3rd M.A.C.?"

Before Glyn could answer, the screeching wail of an air-raid siren at the other end of the line (it seemed to be going off in Glyn's room) interrupted the conversation. I could hear him dancing with rage and using very bad language.

"Tut-tut, my little colonel!" I said. "You must never swear on the phone."

"Hell!" said Glyn when the din eased sufficiently to make his voice audible. "I just get started on a conversation when some bloody nitwit blows the air-raid warning right in my ear. Cheerio! I'm off in the general direction of a slit trench."

Turning from the telephone I found Major Chalmers at my elbow, looking amused. Still smiling at Glyn White's concluding remarks, I said, "Sounds as though bombs are falling on administrative headquarters at Johore Bahru, John."

Blowing an elegant smoke-ring, Chalmers grinned. "Better there than here, sir. It might slow down the stream of bumf they keep sending out. By the way, all our anti-gas equipment has arrived, capes, hoods, wallets, detectors, and eye shields. May Captain Lee and I issue it to the men this afternoon?"

"What! More anti-gas gear!" I sighed wearily. "The men will look like Christmas-trees if you hang any more equipment on them. Seriously, John, and I know you are keen on anti-gas training, do you think our men could fight or work efficiently in this sweaty, exhausting climate if they wore every item of equipment that regulations require them to wear?"

John Chalmers demurred. He was loyal to his training at the Anti-gas School. "I think they should at least carry the gear for their own protection, sir."

I leant forward in my chair. "Well, I don't. It has been obvious for a month that the Japs are not using gas. They are using tanks and unorthodox things such as water-wings, fire-crackers, and Alsatian dogs with patrols, but their infantrymen are very lightly clad. Ours are like lumbering elephants by comparison and Command seems to be loading them up still more. I'm betting a pound to a pinch of salt that, when the A.I.F. forward battalions go into

action in a few days' time, the men will dump all their surplus gear, including the anti-gas, and the battalion commanders will get rid of half of their transport vehicles."

John nodded. I think he was really in agreement with me. "You think that the Japs will be down on Segamat in a few days' time?" he asked.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anything to stop them. They've come round on the west-coast flank via Port Dickson. I expect some fresh news from the A.D.M.S. when I ring him at Westforce headquarters this afternoon."

Later in the day I got a clear line through to Colonel Derham at Yong Peng. He had crisp and clear instructions for me. The 5th Indian C.C.S., with Lieut.-Colonel Pierson and British officers, was coming under his control and would enter our area that night. They were to establish their clearing station at the government experimental farm near the Ayer Hitam road. I was to send an officer to meet the advance party there, guide their officers in and make them acquainted with the locality. I was to act as area commandant for the medical units in the Kluang-Mengkibol area and to take the 2/3rd Motor Ambulance Convoy under my wing, as arranged by Lieut.-Colonel Glyn White.

I was to work in co-operation with the Malaya Command ambulance train at Kluang Station, and use it for the evacuation of casualties to Johore Bahru. Major Robert Dick, commander of the M.A.C., would provide any vehicles I required for emergency evacuations by road.

Lastly he told me that I was to be under the local administration of III Indian Corps, whose headquarters were newly established at Rengam. Brigadier R. Seaver, whom I had met previously at Kuala Lumpur, was the medical chief (D.D.M.S.) of the corps. Colonel Derham himself would look after our operational movements and Lieut.-Colonel Glyn White would supervise the evacuation of casualties to the general hospitals.

The last section of the orders sounded so involved and unlike the A.D.M.S. that I queried it. "Don't you think the triple medical control will prove confusing, sir?"

"Of course it will! It's damn silly! But it is an order, and will be obeyed," he replied.

From the snap in the answer I knew that the arrangement had

been hatched out in the brain of that vague, omnipresent being known in the army as "higher authority". The A.D.M.S. was too good a soldier to elaborate his protest.

Our conversation would have been baffling to a foreign listener. In order to preserve telephone secrecy we talked in phrases that sounded like a crossword puzzle, using the names of commanders in a familiar way to indicate units; for instance the 2/3rd M.A.C. became "Dick's show" and the 5th C.C.S. "Pierson's outfit".

I assembled the officers in conference and told them of the new plans. Major Chalmers was sent to meet the 5th C.C.S. which was expected in the late afternoon. It rained steadily and heavily. Men sloshed about in the mud underfoot. Major Robert Dick, son of the late Director-General of Health in New South Wales, arrived an hour later.

Bob and I had trained our units together at Kajang, where I saw his motor ambulance convoy built up to a very efficient unit of seventy-five motor ambulance wagons, plus a workshop and repair section. The drivers had been enlisted in Sydney from the thirty-five to forty-five age-groups. Many of them were much older, and were known as the "Old and Bold". Tough characters on pay nights, when it was customary for a few hard heads to reach saturation point in beer, they had established a splendid record in evacuating wounded from the 3rd Corps field ambulances and hospitals all the way down from Thailand. The tougher the job the better they liked it. Their only losses had been two wagons cut off by Nipponese patrols. Brigadier Seaver was full of praise for their work, and I knew that Bob was being recommended for a Distinguished Service Order.

I promised Bob the Kemp bungalow as soon as it was vacant, but characteristically he declined it; he said he preferred to bivouac with his men in the rubber. He thought he would move his train of vehicles that night, the roads being safest from aerial machine-gunning after dark. He expected to be bivouacked in our area by dawn the following morning, 13th January.

Accompanied by Captain Lee, John Chalmers returned from Ayer Hitam about ten that night, tired, wet and muddy. He reported that the advance party of the 5th C.C.S. were in a bad condition, being near to exhaustion from fatigue. Encumbered as they were with all the racial impedimenta of bearers, sweepers,

water carriers and unskilled natives, that clutter up the average Indian medical unit, their numbers proved too large for the small building allotted to them. In the growing darkness they took possession of the cow-byres of the government experimental farm. Their vehicles became bogged, the tired Indian drivers became voluble and finally apathetic, as exhausted men will. As John Chalmers remarked, "A good time was had by all, with cow manure predominant." Both he and Captain Lee agreed that the site was not suitable for the treatment of wounded men.

Apparently the A.D.M.S. didn't think so either, because next day his deputy, Major Bruce Anderson, came over to say that he had to find another site for the 5th C.C.S. He looked at me hopefully. "Can you find room for them, sir?" This request was not unexpected.

With a lot of low cunning (which in the army is sometimes called "initiative"), we had made a tentative reconnaissance in preparation for it. I pushed my cigarette case over to Bruce. "Now look here, young feller! I'm already burdened with bits of two extra units and a bungalow full of spare nurses. Why add Mother India to my troubles? The best place for this Indian C.C.S. is at Rengam where the estate hospital is available. It is handy to the ambulance train route through Rengam Station, which is just a nice distance behind us. Our show will handle all the wounded while the 5th are moving over. Then we can work systematically, Australian and local wounded going direct to Rengam."

Bruce laughed happily at the suggested solution of his problem. "Thanks, sir! I think Colonel Derham will approve. If I send Colonel Pierson over, will you have a senior officer guide him to Rengam?"

"Surely," I replied. "Any time today will be suitable."

Lieut.-Colonel Pierson and Major Nardell, his surgical officer, arrived just before lunch. The colonel, tall, white-haired, and sallow, did not seem well. He told me that his C.C.S. had been close to the fighting all the way from northern Kedah and during the past week he had had very little sleep. Major Nardell gave me an interesting account of the types of wounds encountered and spoke of the difficulties attendant on a surgical unit with a mixed British and Indian staff, to say nothing of the different racial customs among the patients, all of whom had their

own religious fads and fancies in diet and dress. I made a mental note that our orderlies must not remove the *kukri* from a Gurkha or the turban from a Sikh, unless they happened to be unconscious.

Blessing my luck that such a mixed circus—which really performed amazingly well—was not coming into my territory, I asked Major Alan Hobbs to guide the two officers to Rengam. Returning about three hours later he informed me that arrangements had proceeded smoothly and the 5th C.C.S. hoped to be established for the reception of wounded within forty-eight hours.

Another interesting visitor on the night of the 13th was Lieut.-Colonel Malcolm, an elderly Scotsman, to whom we took an instant liking. He was a regular, having had many years of service with the Royal Army Medical Corps. His present command was the 1st Malayan C.C.S., which was a more mixed bag than the 5th. For good measure it had Malays and Straits Chinese mixed in with three brands of Indians. Formed only three months ago the staff had practically no equipment and, except for the technical officers, very little basic training. Colonel Malcolm said that Malaya Command had sent him up to relieve the tired 5th C.C.S. This surprised me as the 5th knew nothing about a relief. I asked him to stay to dinner while we talked over the situation.

During the meal under brownout lights I noticed that he was in pain. Confessing that his car had been bogged on the way up from Singapore, he said that the heavy lid of the boot had fallen on his spine while he was searching for a spade. Peeling off Colonel Malcolm's shirt, Major Hobbs located a big bruise in the small of his back. We insisted on his returning to Singapore by ambulance as his car was still bogged, assuring him that we would not only salvage his car on the morrow but would also communicate with Colonel Pierson to ascertain if he wished relief. As he was being placed on the stretcher of a comfortable ambulance wagon, Malcolm smiled wryly, saying with his soft Scottish burr, "This is a fine way to send a man home!"

Captain Lee, standing behind me, replied cheerily, "True Australian hospitality, sir! We always send our guests home in ambulances."

Bob Dick came up to see me next morning when I found time

to yarn over the doings of his unit. He described the rape of Kuala Lumpur, proud capital of Malaya, not only by the enemy but by looters prior to the arrival of the Nipponese. Robinson's, Whiteway's, and other fine British emporiums had been thrown open when the fall of the city seemed inevitable, and passers-by were invited to help themselves. Forty thousand gallons of whisky from the bond stores were destroyed ruthlessly.

"An awful waste," said Bob, who was a graduate of Edinburgh.

"We had a rotten job near our former camp at Kajang," he continued. Remembering Hume Brett's letter I invited him to tell me the story. Puffing away at his pipe, Bob stretched out his long legs and reminded me that his M.A.C. was bivouacked at Kajang when the rice godown was bombed. "Over forty boongs were killed," he went on (in A.I.F. fashion Bob called all Asiatics "boongs", irrespective of race). "And they were smelling to high heaven in the hot streets. The Malay police constables had walked out on Brett, the dazed villagers were apathetic and, as O.C. Police, Brett had all the responsibility. He tackled it magnificently on his own. My men volunteered to help him with burial parties. We gave the bodies a hasty but adequate burial, for it was a distasteful task."

"I'm sure it was," I agreed. I hadn't the heart to ask Bob the proportion of Kajang children among the slain, so I swung the subject round to the condition of his vehicles.

"They are all in tiptop order," Bob asserted. "A few have bullet holes in wind-screens and mudguards, but the mechanical parts are sound. Borneo Motors and other big firms in Ipoh were giving cars away as the end came, so we discarded our few crocks and replaced them with brand new machines. Even my N.C.Os are driving cars now, and the section officers travel in a new sedan each."

Our conversation was interrupted by the sharp crack of a revolver. It came from the men's mess underneath the house, where a few late-comers were finishing breakfast. I stuck my head out of the window and saw the regimental staff-sergeant bustling about.

"Who fired that shot, staff-sergeant?" I roared.

"One of Major Dick's drivers," he replied, naming the man. I recollected the fellow, a tough guy who had given us no end of

trouble at Kajang. I looked at Bob who smiled and nodded. "Bring him up here, staff-sergeant," I said. "See that he is disarmed and escort him yourself."

The tough guy was produced. After firing the shot for pure devilment, he managed to rid himself of revolver and holster and looked as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"What revolver, sir?" he replied with an air of innocence to my first question. The blatant evasion made me short-tempered.

"You cheap gunman! Who do you think you are, anyway? Al Capone?" I blazed.

Stiffening to attention he cocked one eye towards Major Dick. "I'm a good soldier, sir."

"I know from previous experience what sort of soldier you are," I barked back. "I'm turning you over to your own C.O. for punishment. Now get out of my sight before I become really hot-tempered. You are under open arrest."

He dived downstairs muttering under his breath. I felt he was challenging my birth certificate. I turned to Bob Dick who seemed vastly amused by the incident.

"Had much trouble with that bird lately?" I asked.

"Strangely enough, no," he answered. "All the bad hats were well behaved as soon as they scented the fighting. I had great difficulty in restraining some of them from driving the ambulance cars right up to the front line. If I can keep them away from liquor, they are all right. They enjoyed themselves in Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur, when the stores were thrown open and looting was permissible. I think some of them have a case of whisky buried by the roadside every ten miles between there and here."

Laughing heartily, I said, "What on earth for?"

"Just in case they get thirsty when our troops start advancing north again," replied Bob with a chuckle.

# 9

## *Action*

DURING the afternoon of the fourteenth a dispatch-rider dismounted from his dusty motor cycle and excitedly informed us that the Japanese were coming down on the A.I.F. at Gemas. He said we might expect the first battle casualties late that night. The news electrified the camp, for the A.I.F. troops were fighting fit, well able to give a good account of themselves.

What remained of the day was spent in checking the hospital equipment. Serum and blood transfusion sets were inspected. Trestles were arranged in orderly rows in the reception tents, thus allowing a patient to be moved smoothly on the one stretcher from the time he arrived till he reached the operating-theatre. The two padres arranged to work in alternate twelve-hour shifts serving out hot drinks and Red Cross comforts from their special panniers. We were to find later that many patients improved greatly under the warming influence of blankets, hot meat extracts, coffee, and cigarettes, even to the extent of making blood transfusions unnecessary.

Irrespective of the teams allotted, I think the whole unit stayed awake that night to see the first casualties arrive. Preparations had been made to handle a maximum of two hundred, with

emergency room for more at the 5th C.C.S. farther south. To our astonishment only five arrived, including two with minor wounds. Inquiry from the convoy sergeant elicited the gratifying news that, so far, no more had filtered through from the advanced dressing station.

"Most likely our blokes are givin' the Nips a bashin', sir," he concluded.

I had to admit that this was a reasonable explanation, which was confirmed later in an interview with the two lightly wounded men in the pre-operative marquee. One, a tall, lively youth was puffing contentedly at a cigarette. He had a gunshot wound of the shoulder and wore his arm in a sling. Awaiting the surgeon's attention in the operating-theatre he held the attention of an admiring group of orderlies.

"Gosh!" I heard him exclaim. "We tore into them after they came across the bridge. Black Jack had our company lying in ambush in a good possie just above the main road. We must 'uv knocked out about four hundred in the first three minutes."

I pricked up my ears at the mention of Black Jack. So the forward battalion was the 30th commanded by my good friend Fred Galleghan whose lusty, hearty ways, coupled with dark hair, had led to him being known as "Black Jack". It was almost a term of affection among his men with whom he was very popular. He, in turn, was very proud of his battalion. On one occasion, in a burst of enthusiasm, he described it affectionately as "the best bunch of bastards in the A.I.F., bar none". I knew him well, having seen service in pre-war days as M.O. with his militia battalion in Newcastle, N.S.W., and I had no doubt as to his dour fighting qualities. They had been proven at Gallipoli where old Diggers described him as "a bit young, but a bloody good sergeant!"

With him this time he had as medical officer a young brown-haired Sydney graduate, Captain John Taylor, whose gallant behaviour was later to bring him a Military Cross. At Changi I had the opportunity to question Taylor closely about the memorable action on that day at Gemas. Here is the account, more or less in his own words.

> The battalion took up a position astride the main road about seven miles north-west of Gemas village. Colonel Galleghan sent B Company forward to the Sungei Gemenchal bridge, reinforced by

a party of engineers and artillery. They prepared an ambush near the bridge and slept there on the night of the 13th January.

From dawn next morning, hidden in carefully prepared positions in the jungle fringing the high laterite banks on either side of the road, B Company awaited the enemy. The position was an ideal one for an ambush. The engineers had mined the bridge which was ready for blowing at the throw of a switch, and the reinforced firepower of the company was trained on the four hundred yards of road to the south.

The only question worrying the commander was whether the Japanese would walk into the trap or, proceeding warily, cross the Sungei higher up with the usual patrols protecting their flanks. Evidently the lack of opposition on the main road from Tampin had made the Japanese careless, however, for they not only walked into the trap, they cycled in.

At four-fifteen in the hot afternoon, when the tension of watchful waiting was becoming almost unbearable, one hundred and twenty Japanese soldiers cycled confidently round the bend above the bridge. Laughing and chattering among themselves, rifles strapped along the cross-bars of the cycles, they swept gaily over the bridge. Here was a relaxed, impudent enemy, assured of victory. Dressed in a mixture of civilian and military dress, many nondescripts in their ranks appeared to be fifth-column guides ready to pose as Malays or Chinese if need be.

B Company allowed them to proceed unmolested, for it was playing for higher stakes, and the reserve company down the road would take care of the cyclists.

At length a long column of infantry appeared, the leading files blithely doing their typical jogtrot down the slope to the bridge. B Company commander must have hugged himself with delight. Over the bridge they came, more than four hundred of them, until they were within ten yards of the deadly steel muzzles hidden on the high banks above them. Another two hundred were bunched on the bridge and on the incline beyond. The human target was complete.

A signal, and the trembling fingers of the company's machine-gunners tightened grimly on the triggers. The rifles and mortars joined in. Above the sudden pandemonium came a shattering roar as the sappers demolished the bridge with its human freight. The cyclists reappeared, having turned about on hearing the firing. The nature of the trap was not fully apparent to them and they died as they dismounted and fumbled for their rifles. None called for a quarter.

It was just sheer slaughter at point blank range. The Japs, realizing that retreat over the bridge was cut off, fought with fanatical bravery. The few officers left standing among the heaps of dead on the road drew their bright *samurai* swords and leapt for the banks, only to be received on waiting bayonets as they topped the crest. The remainder of the column beyond the bridge retired in disorder. We discovered later that a whole brigade had been held up by the ambush. The enemy casualties were tremendous for such a short action, nearer seven hundred than four hundred. Our own losses, killed, missing, and wounded, were under twenty.

Here one of the wounded, Private Brown, admitted to the surgical ward later that night, takes up the thrilling tale.

When the Jap cyclists came back, some of the boys hopped down on to the road and got into them with bayonets. Four of them round me mate had managed to unsling their rifles and were giving him a bit of a rough time, so I got a couple of them with jabs from me own bayonet. Then I tripped over me mate, or over one of the fallen bikes, so the others came at me with their rifles in one hand and their bayonets in the other, not having time to fix them. They gave me a good few belts round the head so I lay back and pretended to be dead. Blow me if they didn't give me a few more prods for luck and then dashed into the jungle!

Private Brown, despite the modesty of his narrative, must have survived a remarkable ordeal. Major Hobbs assured me that he had no less than five bayonet wounds of his scalp, a linear fracture of his skull, and three or four other gashes on his bruised neck and chest. Not even unconscious, he smoked contentedly and made light of his wounds.

I saw him a month later in a ward of sick and wounded at St Patrick's School, Singapore. With his wounds soundly healed he was growling about a mild attack of tinea between the toes! I hope someone recommends him for a decoration.

Major Hobbs and his surgical team worked throughout the rest of the night but, the number of wounded being much less than expected, were able to turn in about 6 a.m. A delicate skull repair had delayed them somewhat.

I tossed about uneasily in bed, subconsciously listening to the measured thudding of the generator, the gear-whining departure

of the last ambulance (had the driver been fed by the night kitchen-staff before he left?), and the murmur of two voices from the dimly lit orderly-room where Sergeant Boxhall and Warrant-Officer Bossward shared a vigil by the telephone.

Awakened towards dawn by the loud ringing of the instrument—a doctor usually being allergic to telephones—I heard the sergeant take a long cipher message.

Impatiently I called out and he brought the message along. "I knew you were tired, sir, and I thought I'd leave it till you got up."

"What's in it, anyway?" I snapped. "It must be important at this hour."

A smile creased the sergeant's face in the reflected glow from his torch. He shared my opinion of unnecessary cipher messages.

"To all unit commanders, sir, from the General Officer Commanding in Malaya, urging them to stand steadfast in the face of the enemy."

"What bosh!" I swallowed hard. "What does he think this is? The battle of Trafalgar? Take it away, sergeant. Send an acknowledgment and, for the love of Mike, let me get another hour's sleep."

Sleep would not come, but Private Maloney arrived with a mug of tea that he pushed deftly under the mosquito-net.

"What time is it, Paddy?"

"Just on six, sir."

Pushing aside the net, I swung my feet down into a pair of wooden clogs and clip-clopped out on to the veranda where the morning air gave promise of a fine day.

"I'll drink the tea out here, Paddy. How did the squads like working all night?"

"Didn't mind it a bit, sir! The stretcher bearers, Meadows and Johnstone, did a great job. They found they could manage the stretchers single-handed, so they made their two mates turn in for a sleep in case they should be wanted today."

Paddy was a mine of information that I seldom neglected. Often he gave me an inkling of pending events long before dispatches arrived from headquarters. As he settled down on the steps to polish a pair of shoes and exchange battle gossip (obtained by devious routes from the lighter casualties of the night before)

with his brother batmen, I leant over the veranda railing and drew contentedly at a cigarette.

From the room behind me came a barrage of snores. Major Fisher and the other officers were catching up with lost sleep. Captain Tom Brereton's bulky form was enshrouded in a ghostly mist of mosquito-netting at the far end of the veranda. Tom vowed he liked sleeping there because he not only got more air, but could spring easily to the ladder leading to the slit trenches.

Major Chalmers, an early riser, was up and about. I saw him, dressed in pyjamas and steel helmet, conferring with Private Lockwood, the air defence picket, at the other side of the garden.

Across the far side of the lawn from the direction of the surgical tents came Sister Kinsella and Staff-Nurse Farmaner, a perky little West Australian who was always full of fun. Gum-booted against the wet ground underfoot they dragged their respirators and tin helmets wearily by the supporting straps. Waving a "good morning", I called, "You two been in the operating-theatre all night?"

Brushing a damp wisp of hair back from her forehead Sister Kinsella smiled. "Yes, colonel. We are going over for breakfast now, but we'll come back at eleven to make up a fresh stock of dressings for tonight."

"You'll do no such thing! You will go home and top off the bacon and eggs with a good sleep. If I catch either of you in the lines again before sundown it will be a week's C.B. for you both." I tried to look stern, but failed deplorably.

"But, colonel, someone has to prepare the stock dressings for the theatre," they chorused. "We are not a bit tired."

"But me no buts! You look tired to me," I replied. "The 10th A.G.H. nurses over in the other bungalow are just dying to lend a hand. I'll get two of them to relieve you."

I was a bold man to mention the 10th nurses, knowing that the professional *esprit de corps* was jealously guarded by the C.C.S. sisters, although the withering looks and sniff in reply rather startled me. What grand, wholesome women they were! With busy preparation leaving them no time for sleep on the previous day, they had just completed twelve hours' work in the tented operating-theatre, where the concrete floor quickly tired

one's feet and the concentrated odours of mud, blood and sweat mingled with the fumes of ether and the steam from the sterilizers to produce a visual and olfactory *mélange* of great intensity.

Sister Kinsella's retaliatory wise-crack was drowned by the wail of the air-raid siren. She held her fingers to her ears until it ceased. I bellowed to the sergeant-major to "ease the din".

"Better make for a slit trench, sister," I warned. "The Japanese planes will be here shortly."

"Blow them!" she replied stoutly, putting her helmet on at a comical angle. "We are not going to be done out of breakfast. Come on, Farmaner!" Off they trudged through the two hundred yards of rubber to their bungalow, quite unperturbed by any thought of Nipponese bombs.

A party of 10th A.G.H. sisters came over later in the morning inquiring for mail and news. Their eyes sparkled when they heard that the A.I.F. at last stood in the way of the Japanese.

"Do you think there will be many casualties?" they asked.

"Not a large number, owing to the open nature of the fighting," I ventured, "but the Jap rush will take some stopping and it's a safe bet that there will be plenty of work to do here every night from now on."

"Oh, do let's help, colonel!" they exclaimed. "We must have a hand in nursing our own lads. We know so many of them."

There was no doubt about their fine *esprit de corps* either. I parried all their requests by taking them through the wards and showing them the wounded. The wards were quiet, clean and tidy. As they spoke quietly to the wounded who were awake, and evidently appreciative of the visit, one could sense that the maternal and protective pity of Florence Nightingale for wounded men was resurgent in the breasts of her fledglings from Australia.

Before the sisters left they made me swear by all that was holy to call on them if the night's casualties promised to be heavy. I was powerless against the united appeal of seven wheedling women, and they knew it. When I told Sister Kinsella later about my subjugation—somewhat airily and with a guilty conscience—she gave me a look which made me feel like seven henpecked husbands, a sort of "Oh-yeah!" look.

# 10

## *Visitors and More Action*

Brigadier R. Seaver, Medical Director of III Indian Corps, and his deputy, Major Feinhols, a South African from the Indian Medical Service, both likeable men, arrived before lunch.

The brigadier, tall, elderly and white-haired, with a golf handicap of six, was very sensible about the triangular control of the casualty clearing station. His remarks about the efficiency with which Major Bob Dick's ambulance drivers had moved the wounded from the jungle in the north were pleasing to hear. He seemed impressed by his inspection of our hospital lines. As we talked later over a cup of tea, he said, "Hamilton, if I'm unlucky enough to be wounded I want to be brought to this C.C.S." Coming from such an experienced old boy I thought this was an extremely pretty compliment to the unit.

Praising Colonel Derham, he advised me to keep in close touch with him, at the same time offering to help me with any local difficulties. Before leaving he recalled that he had known one

of our cooks, Arthur Harrison, as a young leading jockey in India way back in the early 1920s. At that time Harrison's father had been a prominent trainer in Bombay.

Mr R. P. Phillips, an Australian Red Cross representative, came up the drive as they left, his small car filled with Red Cross comforts for the medical units. He had joined us on the 13th January, exhausted and unshaven after a strenuous retreat from the north where he had rendered excellent service to the forward field ambulances.

Since coming to Malaya I had revised my ideas about the Red Cross organization. In Australia one subconsciously thought of it in terms of voluntary aids, T.B. sanitoria, and languid society women with their interminable charity matinées and cocktail parties. Now I was prepared to take my hat off and admit I had never visualized the wide range of Red Cross activity on active service. From Mr Basil Burdett, cultured, kindly, and capable Commissioner for South East Asia, down to the junior officers of his field staff who went forward to the dangerous regimental aid posts in the fighting line, there seemed to be no flaws in the chain of efficiency. This may have been due in part to Burdett's uncanny knack of selecting the right men, with the full drive of his powerful personality behind them. Admittedly I had a bit of explaining to do when Basil Burdett inquired about a sewing-machine—purloined from the 13th Hospital by our sisters with the connivance of a friendly padre—but Basil just smiled cheerfully and said, "If you can assure me that the machine is usefully employed, your sisters may keep it." This assurance was not difficult, as the sisters in their spare time had made a completely new set of operating sheets and towels. The commissioner heaped further coals of fire on my head by leaving a fine radio set that proved a great acquisition to the patients.

More interesting visitors arrived that day. My brother-in-law, a young sapper-sergeant, whirred in on his motor cycle bringing me the good news that he had won a commission. Breaking my rule about no drinking before sundown, I opened a congratulatory bottle of beer.

"What neck of the woods are you in now, Edward?" I inquired.

He drank thirstily. "Damn good beer, this! We are muckin' about between Mersing and Kota Tinggi, mainly on preparatory

demolitions and landmines. You ought to see the town of Mersing. Every house has been razed as flat as a pancake. The Malays were evacuated and all the shops were left without occupants. The lads from the battalions had a great time souveniring from them before the general heard about it and pushed out an order that they were to behave."

I refilled Edward's glass with the remainder of the beer. "Isn't there a contingent of the Johore Military Forces out in that area, Edward?"

He grinned cheerfully. "I'll say there is! A funny incident happened at the Mersing wireless station which was in the charge of an Asiatic lieutenant and a platoon of Johore Malay privates. Their orders were to blow up the wireless station in the event of Mersing being evacuated. Well, when the civilian order went round for all Asiatics to evacuate, the Johore lieutenant must have assumed that his Malay soldiers were included; he pulled the detonator plug and made a grand mess of the wireless station. Then with all the confidence of the Duke of Plazo Toro he led his men away from the area, much to the astonishment of the A.I.F. who thought he was a fifth-columnist gone mad. The Sultan of Johore was damned annoyed about the whole business and, it was rumoured, demanded an apology from the A.I.F. for daring to suggest that his men were running away. Anyway he must have won the argument for we later got a screed from A.I.F. Headquarters explaining the whole incident and whitewashing the stupid lieutenant."*

I laughed at Edward's pithy story. "I saw that screed about. Seriously, do you think the Johore force is worth anything, except to do some pretty stamping on a parade ground?"

"Well, who can tell at this stage?" said Edward. "We've yet to prove ourselves against the Japs, but I'm tipping that all the boongs in it will be paid off and sent back to their kampongs before this show's over."

I was particularly interested in the sergeant's blunt opinion,

* The following is a comment by Colonel A. P. Derham, Medical Chief of the 8th Division in Malaya: "Some Johore troops did fight better than some Australian troops, including some whole Australian units, and, if I were asked for a judgment on my own scanty knowledge, I would say that it was we who let down the Sultan of Johore, and not *vice versa*."

for it is always difficult to tell beforehand how men of any race will behave when confronted with a hard-hitting enemy. This thought may have prompted General Sir Thomas Blamey to remark to Colonel C. G. W. Anderson (after reviewing the 2/19th Australian Battalion at Mersing), "A good show, Anderson, but will they fight?"

Edward's opinion was confirmed by another visitor, Captain Hall, medical officer to the Johore Volunteers (Engineers) who were bivouacked on the eastern boundary of Kluang. Hall, a genial Scot, had been in civil practice at Rengam for the past ten years and knew the State of Johore thoroughly.

"It is an unfederated State," he explained, "and its policy is Malays first, last, and always. This is the first time they've been involved in a large scale war. I think the Malay regiment will put on a good show, but it is difficult to foretell what the native smallholders will do. They probably express the situation with their favourite *tidapa*—what does it matter!"

Captain Hall had come over to requisition a few drugs from our dispensary. Before his departure I took him over to the map table where I pointed out the country to the south. Putting my finger on a village marked Kulai, twenty odd miles north of Singapore Island, I said, "I believe you are familiar with all the rubber estates down here, Hall?"

Nodding, he said, "Aye, fairly well."

Knowing my Scot, I knew that this meant "very well".

"All right then! I may be forced to move the unit south in a hurry. Can I look to you for guidance in choosing a new site?"

Captain Hall stubbed his cigarette butt. "Aye, sure ye can. Any time you like. Just send over a message to the camp." Hall was a fine type. I was to find him most useful and obliging in the next ten days.

The phone buzzed noisily as I went in search of a bath. I heard the sergeant-major answer it with our code name. In a little while he followed me into the room, bearing a signal message that I held up in the diminishing daylight. It read: "Expect convoy with 36 wounded approx. Many more will follow, probably 100." The message was from the main dressing station of the 2/10th Field Ambulance.

I handed it back to the sergeant-major.

"Get the men to their evening meal now. See that they have a good one. Warn the night-shift to get as much rest as possible before the convoy arrives, and tell the stretcher parties they will have to work all night. Send a message to Major Dick by the first outgoing ambulance telling him I will want two sub-sections of five cars, each to evacuate lightly wounded first thing in the morning. Ring the railway transport officer at Kluang to have the ambulance train ready for wounded going south in the morning. Would he, please, telephone me two hours prior to its arrival?"

When I met the officers at dinner, the first cars of the convoy were already turning in along the edge of the rubber-trees towards the reception tents.

Captain Higgin completed his meal hastily and dashed over to the admission marquee. I turned to the others. Like myself, they did not seem very interested in eating.

"Gentlemen, we have a heavy night's work ahead, with more to follow. Major Hobbs has arranged the surgical duties and you will work to his roster. If the work banks up I'll form a third team myself. During the night we will evacuate all the lightly wounded to the 13th A.G.H. by road, using Major Dick's ambulances for the purpose. In this way I hope to save the nurses and orderlies much extra work, for they will require all their energies for the seriously wounded. Remember to examine each patient thoroughly for multiple wounds.

"Major Fisher will be in charge of the resuscitation and transfusion teams. Captain Brereton will assist him. The padres will work with Captain Higgin in the reception tents and Major Chalmers will assist with the anaesthetics until required in the X-ray department. Captain Lee will see that the pack-store and night kitchen-staffs are on the job. Remember that the convoy drivers will need a meal or a hot drink before returning north. I am going over to enlist the aid of some extra nurses from the 10th Hospital bungalow."

"Better not bring too many, sir," interposed Major Chalmers, "or our own nurses will be ruffled. They are very keen to handle all the wounded themselves."

"I know that," I replied, "but there are limits to physical endurance in a hot climate and I'm not going to have them exhausted

at this early stage. I shall ask for three volunteers only for a start."

An ambulance driver drove me to the 10th bungalow where the nurses were sitting round in cool housefrocks enjoying the freshness of the night air. They greeted me expectantly, with the exception of one youthful brunette who shut her book with a snap and murmured audibly, "Oh, I thought it was an Air Force car arriving."

When I announced that I wanted three volunteers to work throughout the night with the C.C.S., there was a clamour of excitement and I had to ask Miss James, the senior sister, to decide who should go. Three of the nurses were already upstairs changing into neat uniforms in order to steal a march on the others.

Within ten minutes I had three capable nurses, fully garbed, gum-booted, and laughing excitedly as they urged the driver to step on the gas in case they missed something. They were going into their particular bit of battle for the first time.

I saw these nurses during the night with faces still smiling, but more tensely, as they gave their gentle, experienced care to the wounded. They worked like Trojans alongside our own nurses and orderlies. I saw them again as they came off duty in the grey light of the morning. No longer were they laughing. Muddied boots and sweat-stained frocks were evidence of the strenuous twelve hours' toil. They carried their steel helmets and respirators wearily by the equipment straps. As I thanked them I remarked quietly, "Grim work, sisters?"

Two nodded mutely but the third, a tall, dark girl whose name I did not know, stopped and looked into the misty distance over the tree-tops. "It's not that so much," she said slowly. "It's the utter futility of it all. Oh. . . ." She faltered. "How heart-breaking to see these fine men, many of them our friends, torn and mutilated for life. Why is war so beastly?"

She but gave utterance to the eternal anguish of women in wars throughout the ages. I felt it keenly, for I had no reply.

An extract from the unit war diary covers that night. In the laconic fashion of Army journalese it states:

> 15 Jan. '42. At 1800 hours a convoy arrived with 36 casualties, and from this time more arrived steadily. During the period 1800

hours to 0600 hours on 16th, 165 cases were admitted and 35 operations carried out by Majors A. F. Hobbs and S. Krantz. The C.O. took over in the morning and completed the remaining cases in order to give the other surgeons a rest. 73 cases were evacuated by the 2/3 M.A.C. at 0600 hours. Prior to this, ambulance convoys were leaving each morning at 0900 but, in view of the increasing number of casualties arriving, ambulances were dispatched as soon as a load accumulated in the evacuation wards. During this period of continuous activity the personnel of the unit demonstrated the value of their training prior to the outbreak of hostilities in this country. Lt.-Col. J. O'Dwyer R.A.M.C. (Malaya Command) arrived at 1930 hours, 15th Jan., and departed at 0830 hours, 16th Jan.

John O'Dwyer, assistant to Brigadier Charles Stringer, chief of the Army Medical Service in Malaya, had come on a visit of inspection. With a genial Irish brogue he announced that he would like to stay the night, so I gave him a meal and arranged for his driver-batman to make up a canvas cot on the veranda.

"Phew!" said John, "this place is in pitch darkness. I had a job to find it under blackout conditions. I suppose we'd better leave the inspection till daylight."

"Not on your life," I said. "I'm going to take you round tonight. You will see a C.C.S. in full swing under canvas and blackout conditions."

John jumped at the idea. Although a regular, he confessed he had never seen a tented casualty clearing station in action. Neither had I until I saw my own at Mengkibol.

Equipped with shaded torches we groped our way cautiously into the rubber groves, where the bobbing of dimmed hurricane lanterns marked the stretcher bearers as, with shouted instructions, they guided the drivers of the ambulance cars up to the doorway of the reception marquee.

I took Colonel O'Dwyer through the long line of "brigaded" tents. Wounded soldiers—unshaven, blood-stained and dirty—were lying side by side on trestle-supported stretchers. Each man had a field medical card tied to his shirt. The clerks, stripped to the waist in the humid atmosphere, sorted the red cards (serious cases) from those wearing white cards which denoted less serious injury. Captain John Higgin was busy classifying those requiring resuscitation prior to operation, while Padre Quirk, assisted

by volunteers from the day staff, was kept busy handing out hot cocoa and cigarettes. Many of the casualties hadn't had a meal for two days. "Too busy fightin'," they explained tersely.

John O'Dwyer seemed impressed. Nowhere in peacetime training could similar sights and smells be reproduced so poignantly. "Come and see Major Fisher in the transfusion ward," I invited.

We entered but Ted had no time to do any more than nod a brief greeting. Bending over the arm of a poor fellow who looked exsanguinated, he pushed a bright stainless steel needle into a vein and connected it to a vacuolitre jar of blood. At least ten more patients were awaiting his services. They lay strangely quiet in the gloom beyond the brightness of the electric bulb over the transfusion table. Many of them had an M marked in indelible pencil on their foreheads. The morphia given them at the main dressing station was doing its merciful work.

"Better take a glance at the theatre, John," I suggested. On the way over I pointed out the activity in the pre-operative section where nurses were sponging the patients and changing them into clean pyjamas. "Back-breaking work," O'Dwyer commented.

Staff-Nurse Gardham, a fine girl whom the Chief Matron in Hobart had thought "perhaps too nervous for a casualty clearing station", passed us with an armful of clean linen. She was lighting the muddy path from the store tent with a hurricane lamp, and I couldn't resist saying to her, "Miss Nightingale, I presume."

She flashed a smile, but rebuked me primly. "I'm much too busy to talk to you, colonel."

O'Dwyer smiled. "Nothing nervous about that girl. You seem to have a grand team of nurses, Hamilton."

On the gravelled path at the entrance to the theatre, I held aside the canvas flap for O'Dwyer to enter. As our eyes adjusted themselves to the bright lights inside, a fantastic scene worthy of a minor Dante's "Inferno" was revealed. Nearest to us two muscular orderlies, suntanned to the waist and streaming with perspiration, were lifting a man into position for the surgeon, Major Krantz. Syd, gowned, gloved and masked, signalled recognition at us over the top of the mask, then continued to direct the orderlies. The patient submitted almost gratefully to the gentle ministrations of the anaesthetist, whom I saw was Captain Michael Woodruff. Major Chalmers must have gone to his beloved X-ray

room, allowing Michael to take over the anaesthetics. Mick's garb as an anaesthetist was rather unorthodox, consisting only of shoes, shorts, and a mask. There was no doubt about his ability as he watched the patient's measured breathing. He looked up with a grin as I ranged alongside. "Hullo, sir. Bloody hot, isn't it?" he called above the hiss of steam from the sterilizer. I grinned back in agreement. It is a sure sign that things are going smoothly for the patient, when the anaesthetist remarks pleasantly on the weather.

Pulling O'Dwyer's sleeve I led him along to the other table where Alan Hobbs, his anaesthetist Stuart Simpson, and a gowned and gloved assistant, Private Jack Burwash, were bent in intense concentration over an inert patient who had an area of brain exposed. We tiptoed quietly past so as not to disturb them. In the corner, beyond the arc of brilliant light, lay a third patient, with Sister Farmaner in attendance. "Has your patient had his operation yet, sister?" I asked.

"Just completed, sir," she replied. "I'm awaiting the bearers who will take him to the ward."

I nodded. "Where is Sister Kinsella? I want her to meet Colonel O'Dwyer."

She pointed to the short, canvas tunnel leading into the sterilizer tent, that had been added to the side of the operating-theatre. Sister Kinsella was loading a hypodermic syringe. She smiled a friendly greeting when I presented the colonel.

"You don't mind if I go on with my work," she said.

"Not a bit, sister," I answered. "I just wanted to show Colonel O'Dwyer the sterilizers." I pointed out the polished array of field sterilizers that were the pride of Sergeant Syme's heart. He came through the outer door flap as we looked at them. "They are a bit noisy tonight," he said as though describing temperamental prima donnas. This was an understatement. The bubbling of boiling water was drowned by the methodical roar of the kerosene blowers under the autoclave. From outside came the *phut-phut* of the powerful motor that operated the electric generator. As one of our orderlies from Melbourne remarked, it sounded "like a flamin' launch runnin' up the Yarra on a dark night".

I took O'Dwyer down the bank that led to the kitchen where a dim glow of light shone. "Be careful you don't trip over the

tree roots," I said. "We will see if the kitchen can provide us with a cup of coffee."

Private Arthur Harrison, ex-jockey and now hospital cook class one, was in charge.

Complete in white cap and apron he had a mess table rigged like a coffee stall, from which he satisfied the needs of the patients and the sharp appetites of the ambulance drivers. I noted with approval that he was also preparing a tray for the nursing staff. This thoughtful gesture was typical of the fine team spirit that pervaded the unit.

"Looks like a busy night for you, Harrison," I commented as we sipped the coffee.

"Yes, sir, but we can take it." He turned to Colonel O'Dwyer. "Would you like a biscuit with it, sir?"

O'Dwyer looked up. "No thank you. I say, are you by any chance the son of Arthur Harrison, the horse trainer of Bombay?"

Harrison beamed with pleasure. "Yes, sir, that's me."

"Yes," I chipped in. "Harrison here had seven winning seasons as top jockey in India, from 1913 to 1921. Brigadier Seaver remembers having seen him ride frequently during that time."

"Well, well," said O'Dwyer as he put down his cup. "It's a small world and a long way from a Bombay racecourse to an Australian C.C.S. in Malaya."

I liked the jockeys we had in the unit. All were good workers. Harrison could speak Hindustani like a native, as well as five other Indian dialects. His picturesque swear-words were a constant joy to his cobbers and a source of anxiety to Major Fisher who thought highly of his work. On many occasions he was extremely useful as an interpreter for wounded Indians. They always brightened up on hearing their native tongue spoken so fluently.

Another ex-jockey was young Neil Connolly, a well-known rider from Melbourne. Neil had a flair for assisting in the operating-theatre, but we always assured him that he would find the Turf much more lucrative than helping surgeons. He was a quiet lad who on off-duty nights could yodel like a Tyrolean mountaineer until the tops of the rubber-trees rang with sound, and the night-jars set up a protesting chatter.

John O'Dwyer left early next morning. "Gosh!" he said in his

attractive brogue. "You've got a great show here. I'd like Brigadier Stringer to come up and see it, but he's pinned down in Singapore."

"Thanks, John," I replied. "Please give the brigadier my kind regards."

My message was sincere because I greatly admired the directorate of the medical service. The D.D.M.S., Brigadier Stringer, did not spare himself in his passion for efficiency. His two loyal assistants, Lieut.-Colonels O'Dwyer and Maisey, found him a hard but lovable taskmaster. Their preparatory work was to bear valuable fruit; for the service they administered, in spite of much ill-informed and personal criticism of Brigadier Stringer, functioned extremely well and lived up to the best traditions of the R.A.M.C. motto—*In Arduis Fidelis.*

Warrant-Officer Bossward was busy that morning. I found him controlling the movements of a long line of ambulance cars down the tree-covered shade of Kinsella Avenue. Each car moved slowly until it came level with the evacuation tents, where it stopped to receive four wounded men.

The stretcher bearers worked swiftly, but with gentleness, under the direction of Staff-Sergeant Hill. The day was hot and the back doors of the ambulances were clipped wide open to give the patients more air. As the last car moved off, Bossward came over and said, "That's the last convoy for today's ambulance train, sir. The men have loaded seventy-six patients in fifty minutes."

"Fine!" I responded. This was extremely good work for two loading squads working on a narrow roadway, even allowing for the fact that the patients had been lined up in the tents beforehand.

Entering the pre-operative tent I found eight cases remaining who were still awaiting operation. The surgeons in the theatre willingly volunteered to carry on, but I would not hear of it. "You've been working all night while I've had a sleep. Which of the anaesthetists is least asleep on his feet?"

Stuart Simpson volunteered, as did two additional sisters from the 10th Hospital, who had just come in as sightseers. Orderly Jack Burwash, who had been working all night with Alan Hobbs

but said he felt as fresh as a daisy, and Private Maloney, my batman, completed the scratch team.

The nurses, although strange to the theatre, worked splendidly, but it was a long, tiring morning. Each patient had multiple wounds and two were in a serious condition. I shall never forget one, Private Swan, who was coughing blood through the white anaesthetic mask, as I probed for a bullet at the apex of his right lung. When I identified the supposed foreign body as a piece of shattered shoulder blade and removed it, he had a very small safety margin left, but we got him back to bed and careful nursing worked wonders. Later, I was delighted to learn that he not only made excellent progress, but got back to Australia in the last hospital-ship before Singapore fell.

# 11

## *Valour and Retreat*

THE next few days were a repetition of the 15th January, with hard work for all hands; more blood, more sweat, and no tears. It seemed the battle situation was going badly. Temporarily repulsed by the gallant 30th Battalion at Gemas, the Japanese had exercised their usual tactics and come round heavily via the sea coast at Muar. News came of them crossing the Muar river and advancing down the Yong Peng road, north-west of Bakri village.

General Gordon Bennett rushed the 2/29th Battalion across

from Mersing on the east coast to strengthen his weak flank, and the Australians became part of the 45th Indian Brigade where they had the lusty support of their kinsmen of the 2/19th Battalion led by Lieut.-Colonel C. G. W. Anderson, a doughty fighter. The remainder of the brigade consisted largely of Jats and Gharwalis fresh from the plains of India and largely inexperienced in jungle fighting. A company of the Royal Norfolk Regiment, not long arrived in Malaya, was assigned the job of holding the Parit Sulong bridge just south of Bakri.

On the night of the 16th January, amid heavy tropical rain, Major H. C. Jones, brigade-major of the 45th, was brought to the casualty clearing station. He had nasty wounds of the shoulder and head, but refused an anaesthetic or opiates until he had seen me and obtained a promise that I would send to Australian headquarters for a staff officer to take notes on the dispositions of his brigade. I gave him a cigarette as Sister Gardham came along the dimly lit tent with hot water and fresh dressings. While she tended his wounds I persuaded him to give me the full story, so that I could transmit it to headquarters myself as soon as possible.

Jones drew comfort from the cigarette. His lips tightened on it at times when spasms of pain made him falter, but he kept his information going in the racy fashion of his breed. Although weak and exhausted, he had guts with a capital G. He used them to keep awake until midnight, when Captain Tom Mitchell of the Australian General Staff arrived in answer to my urgent call. After rattling off the technical details to Mitchell, Major Jones said, "Thank God! Now, doc, what about that anaesthetic?"

General activity during that same day is covered by a pithy report from our veteran paymaster, Sergeant John Sherriff, which I have permission to quote verbatim.

> In the morning I went to Yong Peng with the driver of the utility truck to get certain maps for the C.C.S. While there, enemy planes came over, forcing us to take cover twice. We were then compelled to go on to Labis, as advanced headquarters was still there. On the way back through Labis we witnessed many natives looting shops which had been destroyed by shell-fire and aerial bombs. We got one case of aerated drinks and took them back to the boys at Mengkibol.

It will be noted that our pay-sergeant was not lacking in initiative.

The R.M.O. of the 2/29th Battalion had eight wounded to treat on the night of the 16th January, when the battalion made its first contact with the enemy. Captain Brand sent the worst of them, peppered by mortar fragments, to us via the 38th Field Ambulance, an Indian unit. The first light of next morning found the battalion astride the Muar road just three hundred yards past Bakri village. The Japanese, reinforced during the night, attacked heavily. Captain Brand told me later that the onslaught was heralded by nine tanks that advanced down the centre of the road spitting blue flame. An Aussie anti-tank gun spat back viciously with high-velocity shells and managed to scupper the lot, a fine piece of shooting.

Unfortunately the battalion commander, Lieut.-Colonel Robertson, lost his life in the fighting that followed. While making a reconnaissance on the pillion seat of his orderly's motor cycle he was ambushed, shot through the knee and thrown from the cycle. He died subsequently from a fractured skull. The orderly escaped, although at the cost of a shattered arm that later had to be amputated.

The news of Colonel Robertson's death was depressing. He had paid me several friendly calls when at Kluang and I knew, unofficially, that his health was not good. He had a strange premonition of personal danger, but resolutely put it on one side; he stuck gamely to his job with a mental courage that outclassed mere physical bravery. So passed a gallant gentleman who died leading his battalion in battle.

On Sunday, 18th January, Captain Brand managed to clear eighteen wounded by ambulances from his regimental aid post to the C.C.S. where they arrived in time for effective surgical treatment. Later in the day the Japanese, fighting with fanatical bravery, surrounded the battalion and established a road-block between it and the Bakri cross-roads. On either side of the road lay deep ditches and swampy paddy fields.

The story of the heroism displayed by the Australians in fighting their way out, the desperate plight of their own and Indian wounded, who were in trucks used as part of the enemy's road-block, and the magnificent attempts at rescue by Lieut.-Colonel C. G. W. Anderson with his 2/19th Battalion, is rightly the

privilege of the units concerned. But Captain Vic Brand must have experienced a grim day on the Monday, for the Japs commenced heavy shelling of the encircled troops. "It didn't do much damage," he commented dryly, "as long as the men took cover. A stray party of Indians, raw to jungle fighting, suffered most. I remember snipping off mangled legs and arms with a pair of scissors, then doing what I could for them with the shell dressings from my pannier."

Lieut.-Colonel Neal, of the 38th Indian Field Ambulance which lost its B Company at Bakri, subsequently spoke highly of Captain Brand's work. The whole of the medical service applauded when it was recognized later by the award of a Military Cross. Neal himself was recommended for a D.S.O.

During this warfare of rapid movement the position of the casualty clearing station had not been forgotten by the A.D.M.S., who was at Yong Peng. He seemed anxious about our nurses and insisted on hearing from us twice daily. Enemy planes were bombing road traffic with special attention to the cross-roads at Yong Peng and Ayer Hitam, where youthful traffic cops from the Provost Corps were eliciting universal admiration by their gameness in sticking to a most unpleasant job. "Blowed if I'll ever call them 'mug coppers' again," said an irrepressible Aussie whose pay-book had many entries in red ink. "Them blokes 'as got guts."

Fortunately the C.C.S. still had a fairly safe exit to the south via Rengam. On Saturday, 17th January, Colonel Derham sent me news of a Japanese penetration near Yong Peng, including news of snipers around A.I.F. headquarters. On Monday afternoon I got the following message which stirred us into a bustle of movement: "There are now none of our own troops between you and the enemy. Send nursing sisters to 13th A.G.H. immediately and move south to selected position as soon as possible."

This news was not unexpected or so alarming as it seemed. It was distinctly unorthodox for a casualty clearing station to be up in the front line, but in mobile warfare anything can happen. On reflection it appeared that our troops would probably fall back on the Ayer Hitam cross-roads. I thanked my lucky stars that there were thirty miles of swampy country between us and

the advancing Japanese. Transport looked like being a problem, but Major Bob Dick solved it for me in characteristic fashion.

Bob had just arrived from a consultation with the A.D.M.S. He confirmed the news, adding that the road situation was becoming stickier. He offered to clear the wounded from the wards with every free ambulance at his disposal.

At 5.30 p.m. I called a conference of the officers. Unfortunately Major Fisher had been stricken with dengue and it was necessary to send him to the 13th Hospital with the nurses. Each officer was allotted a movement and packing job in his own department. Captain Lee was requested to perform the usual miracle of securing extra lorries ready for a move at dawn the next morning. Mr Phillips, the Red Cross officer, asked if he could help in any way, so I sent him off to seek out Captain Hall of the Johore Volunteer Engineers in their camp at Kluang.

"Tell him I want to take advantage of his offer to help me with a reconnaissance," I said. "Ask him to bring his own car if possible. I will supply the maps."

It was now nearly dark. I knew that, without Hall's expert guidance, it would be impossible to find my way about the maze of secondary roads in the great rubber estates, where I hoped to find new accommodation for the C.C.S.

While awaiting Hall's arrival I had a phone call from the A.D.M.S. telling me that the 2/10th Field Ambulance would be taking over the Mengkibol site. Major Krantz and Captain Brereton were to remain behind with a team of six orderlies in order to give surgical assistance to any wounded who might arrive with the ambulance. In a way this was fortunate, since it would save dismantling the operating-theatre marquees, but it also meant finding a building of sorts to accommodate the theatre at the new site I was seeking.

I told Colonel Derham my intentions and then phoned Major Feinhols of the III Indian Corps to tell him what was afoot. Feinhols groaned when I told him I wanted twelve three-ton lorries to help move the hospital equipment, but agreed to see if any were available. He promised to divert the stream of wounded for two days through to the 5th C.C.S. stationed at Rengam, although I knew the poor old 5th would soon have to retreat as well.

Captain Hall arrived as I left the telephone. Leading him over to the map table I recalled our conversation of the previous week regarding a new site. Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, he said, "I think it would be best to take you to Fraser Estate at the 22nd mile-peg north of Johore Bahru. It is about forty-six miles from here but if you think that is too far we could look in at Sedenak Estate on the way back. Both places have small estate hospitals that might be used."

"Sounds all right," I replied. "If the Japanese advance keeps up the steady average of eight miles a day, forty-six miles will only mean a week's stay for the C.C.S. Anything under that throws the hospital out of gear and means extra hardship for the wounded."

Setting off in Hall's car we reached the Rengam road, secure in the knowledge that the darkness would protect us from the enemy planes that had been machine-gunning along it that day. It was too early yet for the roads to be congested with heavy British supply convoys, moving north under the same protective gloom.

I relaxed in the car, content to let Hall take the strain of driving with dimmed headlights. Reaching the cross-roads at Simpang Rengam the car headed south on the main highway, followed by a friendly wave from the provost corporal on traffic duty.

"Well, Hall, this looks like the start of our retreat to Singapore," I observed gloomily.

"Aye, it does that!" he assented.

Curious to gain the independent views of a colleague who had practised medicine for twelve years in Malaya, I continued, "What do you think of it all? Why was Malaya in such a state of unpreparedness for invasion? Why were her Civil Servants so complacent, at the eleventh hour still writing long letters to one another about 'having the honour to be one another's obedient servants', despite Churchill's orders for Government officials to cut out the memoranda and get on with the national job? Why has no attempt been made to enrol all the Chinese and Indians for service?"

Gazing ahead through the darkness Hall took a pull at his cigarette. "Because," he said slowly and with emphasis, "Malaya

has been strangled by the old school tie. Life has been so orderly and easy, too easy. The Civil Service has been in such a comfortable groove for so long that it is now unable to forget its traditional routine and free itself from the binding red tape of colonial administration. The planters and business people have little or no voice in the running of the country, although the Chinese keep demanding a larger share. Still the old hackneyed 'consideration will be given' is the answer to urgent requests for vital reforms."

Hall's words confirmed my own preconceived impressions garnered during ten months in Malaya. They were not cheery. Abruptly I switched to other topics, and the time passed pleasantly till the car pulled up at the entrance to Sedenak Estate.

Noticing a military sign with a Red Cross pennant at the roadside, I jumped out to scrutinize it. Out of the gloomy shadows of the tall trees an Indian picket approached, saluting as he saw the shoulder badges on my drill shirt. In contrast to the Australians, Indian soldiers seldom lost an opportunity of saluting. It was not necessary after nightfall, anyway. However I returned his courtesy.

"What unit is in here?" I inquired.

"The 27th Indian Field Ambulance at estate hospital, *sahib*."

"Ah! Thank you. We shall not go in."

The picket saluted as I left him, and again as the car departed.

I turned to Hall, sitting quietly at the wheel. "Well, that puts Sedenak out of the picture. A field ambulance unit has beaten us to it. Let's go on to Fraser Estate and have a look at the hospital there. I hope we don't find an ammunition column in occupation."

Hall smiled. "I wouldn't be surprised," he said in his dry Scotch way.

The white 22nd milestone out of Johore Bahru was found without difficulty, despite the increased volume of military traffic. My shaded torch confirmed the lettering on it as "J.B.22". Opposite was a red laterite road entrance and a sign saying, "Kepong Malay Ltd, Fraser Estate".

"An easy place for ambulance cars to locate," I reflected as we turned in to the winding, tree-lined avenue.

Once or twice the car took the wrong road fork but eventually

pulled up alongside a dark clump of low buildings, which Hall announced as the estate hospital. The speedometer indicated that we had travelled five miles from the main road.

"A bit far in," I commented. "Perhaps we can inspect the buildings first. If they are unsuitable we can look elsewhere. Time is precious. If there is a reasonable water supply and possibilities of clean sanitation, I'll take them."

"Aye!" replied Hall. "Here comes the dresser now." He indicated a tall Asiatic in a white voluminous *tunni* who had just emerged from the loom of the nearest building and was scarcely discernible as a human being.

"Best sample of a Tamil ghost I've ever seen," I observed. "Can you tell him in Tamil that I would like to look over his hospital? Then tell him gently that I may want to take it from him tomorrow."

The dresser, polite and obliging, answered our questions readily in good gutteral English. One of his numerous progeny, risen wraith-like from the ground, produced an electric torch. With its aid we stumbled through the group of four unlighted hutments and a native kitchen. In one dark ward a female figure, extremely pregnant, brushed past me with noiseless feet, the whites of her eyes shining above the white of her robe. Groans came from under the mosquito-net, covering a hard, plank bed, with a subdued regularity that bespoke approaching travail to our professional ears. The familiar smell of Tamil was all around, and one was aware of patient eyes watching from the surrounding gloom.

"Woman's ward," the dresser announced. Smiling to myself, I felt inclined to inquire if he had a man's ward of the same type, but was sobered by the thought that on the morrow our sudden requisitioning of the hospital would bring the brutality of war very vividly to these peaceable people.

I asked about the latrines. "Six Asiatic bore-hole type," replied Hall, after consulting the Tamil. "No worse than usual. The Government regulations prescribe one for every ten beds, and this place has only forty beds."

"H'm! Extra tents will help. What about the water supply?"

"One deep well and a hand pump here," said Hall, "but the

rubber factory about half a mile away is sure to have a good supply."

"Good!" I said. "This seems to be the best spot available, especially as other units are crowding the surrounding estates, unless —in the words of the immortal Bill—'You knows of a better 'ole!' "

"I know of no other place suitable for wounded and so well hidden in the rubber," said Hall, looking up at the foliage overhead. Indeed I felt that we had been fortunate in our find. I was grateful to Dr Hall. We decided to drive to the manager's bungalow where we could apologize for our intrusion and ask for his help.

The house stood on the crest of a hill three-quarters of a mile away. How Hall found his way there in the darkness I know not. A welcoming voice greeted us, as we blinked in the soft glow of light from the front hall. I felt very conscious of my muddied boots, holstered revolver, and rumpled appearance. A warm handshake dispelled my shyness as Captain Hall introduced me to Mr Donald Murchison and his wife, two friendly Scots from Argyllshire, who have been my close friends ever since. Three other guests, refugees from the north, were also presented to us, including an elderly tin miner, Mr Ramplen Jones, whose nickname we discovered later was "Rumblin' Bones". He had just been on a very happy year's leave in Australia and was pleased to see the Australian slouch hat again.

Tired as I was, I could have dallied for an hour or so in such pleasant surroundings. Over a very welcome *stengah* I apologized for the necessity that drove me to barge in on a man's estate, commandeer his hospital, and upset his Indian labour force.

Without batting an eyelid Mr Murchison absorbed my story and assured me of his ready co-operation. "We were expecting it," he commented quietly. "You shall have the hospital tomorrow and all the help my labourers can give you." It was surprisingly easy to discuss movement details with him for he had been a captain of the First Royal Scots in World War I.

Readily he consented to me telephoning the news through to Glyn White at administrative headquarters. Glyn knew the estate quite well from a previous survey.

"I thought you might decide on Fraser Estate," he said. "I've sent Captain Shearer up to see Mr Murchison. He has instruc-

tions to put the whole matter on an official A.I.F. basis for you. He may arrive at the bungalow before you leave."

We did not await Captain Shearer's arrival, but encountered his car taking up the width of the narrow road near the estate railroad crossing. As the drivers juggled for a clear passing, I took Shearer aside and told him the details of our move. He seemed pleased, for it was now late and he had had a trying time with the heavy traffic coming through Kulai village. He gave me the welcome news that Colonel Kent Hughes had arranged to send Captain Lee twelve lorries for our move next morning. Lee's efficiency in transport matters was remarkable. It seemed that my worries were resolving very smoothly indeed.

Thanking Shearer, we shot out on to the main road. The first five miles were easy going, until we caught up with a British artillery regiment on the move north. It was cheering to see the squat howitzers and sleek 25-pounders advancing. My spirits rose. Since the convoy was well handled, with the vehicles spaced at the regulation ten to the mile, our car slid past without any undue delay. Then Indian medical units coming south were encountered, with unskilled native drivers as usual taking up the greater part of the road.

Slowing down, Captain Hall drove very carefully, muttering comments in fluent Doric. Even so we caught up with a traffic jam, at length finding ourselves in the midst of a north-bound Indian supply column. Here there was no regulation spacing, the trucks being parked bumper-bar to bumper-bar. What a grand target for a Japanese marauder pilot when daylight came! In the darkness jemadars and their subordinates rushed about shouting at the tired drivers in voluble Hindustani. Unperturbed by the din, most of the drivers seemed to have seized the opportunity for a little snooze.

Our car edged past as opportunity offered, till we came to a milling crowd trying to shift an overturned truck from the roadside ditch. Beyond this the convoy had got on the move again, enabling us to reach the turn off at Simpang Rengam and reach the C.C.S. at Mengkibol ten minutes before midnight.

Captain Lee was still about, finishing his preparations for an early start next morning. As Hall and I ate an improvised supper of tinned herrings, army biscuits and jam, washed down with a

glass of Tiger stout—our first food for the past nine hours—Lee told us of the progress made in packing the equipment. Major Fisher and the nursing sisters had gone off early in the evening. A signal had come in to say that the destination of the nurses might be changed to the 10th Hospital, which we believed to be established at Barker Road, Singapore.

Thanking Captain Hall for his help, I turned in to dream of Japs equipped with water-wings, bayonets held in their gold-filled teeth, swarming across the swamps in a desperate attempt to reach the C.C.S. before dawn. It was a troubled nightmare, for which I blamed the tinned herrings and stout rather than my mental fatigue.

Cool daybreak brought welcome relief. From then until the midday sun blazed directly overhead, the camp was a hive of activity. The trucks, which miraculously arrived on time, were loaded in quick succession and dispatched with the advance party. Of our domestic staff, Lee Ah Tan and Wong the dhobi, elected to accompany the unit, but the other two Chinese mess-boys departed for parts unknown. Wong's dhobi team stuck to him, and formed themselves into a loading party for one of the lorries on which Captain Lee had promised them a lift. I arranged for them to stay in an empty house in the coolie lines at Fraser Estate where they could continue to cope with all the laundry work for the unit. This they did with great energy. I marvelled that even under the trying conditions of rapid movement our supply of clean pyjamas for the patients never failed, nor were the staff left for long without freshly laundered shirts.

I was glad now that I had retained Wong's services, despite the temptation to rely on the Australian mobile laundry unit at Kluang; this very efficient steam laundry had been shot up twice by enemy bombers and now we were separated from it by a long distance.

When Captain Lee, who had gone ahead with the advance party, sent the one-ton truck back I loaded it with the office gear, including the confidential ciphers and the personal luggage of some of the officers, and departed for our new camp. Before leaving I bade farewell to McKendrick and Pratt, the estate managers who had been so helpful. They also were getting ready to depart. In fact, earlier in the week we had given McKendrick some help

with the work of preparing his factory for demolition and his stores of raw rubber for burning.

They were fine chaps, philosophic about the loss of their possessions, but solaced by the knowledge that their wives and children had embarked safely for Australia. Now they were anxious to join the armed forces.

The one-ton truck, expertly driven by Driver Tom Munn, reached Fraser Estate untroubled by any threats from enemy planes. There the advance party was busy erecting extra tents for the wounded. Walking round with Staff-Sergeant Taylor we schemed out a workable plan for the tent lines that involved the construction of about four chains of a road circuit. By nightfall I had Mr Murchison's assurance that his Chinese contractor would start on it next morning. He was as good as his word, for next day a gang of Chinese, working like beavers, drove a laterite road sufficiently far to give the ambulance cars adequate turning room.

The whole of that day, Wednesday, 21st January, was occupied with rapid preparation for the reception of wounded who were expected in large numbers that night. Bob Dick had moved the headquarters section of his ambulance convoy into an adjacent area of the estate. He told us that Kluang was fast becoming a sticky battle area. Colonel Mac Sheppard would not be able to hold wounded for us much longer in his overcrowded field ambulance unit. Captain Lee confirmed this news later. He had kept the truck drivers running a shuttle service between Kluang and Fraser Estate, in order to bring back as much of our equipment as possible. He went up with them himself on the last trip to see if any more tents could be retrieved, but ran into a hot spell of Japanese planes playing merry hell with bombs and machine-guns along the Ayer Hitam and Rengam roads. From five planes diving on Kluang village two made a run at his car, but he and Cecil Craske, his driver, managed to escape the vicious bursts of gun fire by jumping out and lying low in the roadside ditch.

On the same day British anti-aircraft guns shot down no less than thirteen planes between Ayer Hitam and Singapore. One cannot say that they were all enemy planes because one youthful gunner casualty confessed to me later that a R.A.F. Hurricane was included in the three that his gun-crew bagged near the Ayer

Hitam cross-roads. This was probably excusable, for rarely were our planes seen in the air. I shall always remember the ironic cheer from our troops that greeted a tiny Moth flying bravely in the wake of five fast Japanese raiders. All honour to the pilot who manned it, but the spectacle was a pathetic and disheartening sight for the infantry who badly needed the support of fast, modern dive-bombers.

One could understand the shouted query of a grimy corporal, as he emerged from the roadside scrub and saw the Moth. "Hey! Does your mother know you're out?"

# 12

## *Clearing More Casualties*

NIGHT brought an influx of wounded men in the last stages of exhaustion, dirty, sweaty and blood-stained. Some lay pallid, with shallow respiration and lacklustre eyes. Others excited with the release of nervous tension, were garrulous. One was silent, furtive with what looked like a self-inflicted wound.

Fortunately the staff was ready, led by a grand team of surgeons who had thrown their shirts off to labour on the hastily assembled wards with the orderlies. A field telephone had been installed by Signals in a tented orderly-room. This enabled me to report progress to headquarters. When I asked for Glyn White I was switched on to his deputy, Captain Vincent, a likeable officer whom everyone called Joe.

He had some news to relay from Colonel White. "You are being reinforced early tomorrow morning by Colonel Malcolm and his No. 1 Malayan C.C.S.," he said. "They are equipped to handle Indian, Malay and Chinese patients. As soon as they are dug in, Asiatic casualties will be brought to you via the Indian field ambulances."

"That means we will handle all the combined casualties from up the line," I commented.

"Yes," said Joe. "The Malayan C.C.S. may require more tents. If so I'll have them sent up by ambulance train to Kulai Station."

As Vincent rang off at the urgent request of Signals, who were pressing for the use of the line, the drone of heavy ambulance engines came through the rubber towards our clearing. The wayward headlight from a motor cycle could be seen through the trees as it led the convoy in.

I walked over to the reception tents, dimly lit by shrouded hurricane lamps, to see how the unloading progressed. As each car rolled to a standstill opposite the entrance, its broken, human freight was quickly cleared by our squads of stretcher bearers. They handled the wounded with speed and gentleness. When unloaded, each car moved to a parking place farther round the circuit, where the driver restocked it with fresh blankets and stretchers from our pack-store before proceeding to the kitchen for a well-earned meal.

In the reception tents, which were filling rapidly, Captain Higgin and Major John Chalmers moved busily up and down the rows of stretchers supervising the classification of the patients, most of whom bore field medical labels with a brief description of their wounds. Two or three benches near the entrance were filled by "sitting" or "walking" cases. Eagerly they accepted the mugs of steaming cocoa, the biscuits and the cigarettes offered them by the two padres who evidently were determined to make a hard-working night of it.

Sniffing the cocoa, a boyish young officer on a near-by stretcher raised himself on one elbow. "Gosh!" he ejaculated. "I haven't had a feed in three days." Through the grime of his unshaven face I recognized a well-known infantry subaltern. "Well, we may be able to remedy that," I said as I checked the field medical card pinned to his shirt. "Flesh wound through left thigh, no haemorrhage. That shouldn't prevent you eating at any rate." Sending round to the cook-house I procured for him a plate of hot M and V, the famous army meat and vegetable ration, that can be very appetizing to a hungry man.

Recognizing the lieutenant also, John Chalmers found time to bring him a tot of whisky. "This'll put hair on your chest," he said. Sniffing the glass, a gleam entered the lieutenant's eyes followed by a spreading smile on his pale face as he downed the

contents. "This is heaven! I always did like the Army Medical Corps," he remarked.

When the reception tents were clear and the pressure of work easier, I turned towards the concrete path that led to the pre-operative section. Near the corner of the marquee where the padres had placed the Comforts Canteen, a small group of interested stretcher bearers clustered round a grizzled, elderly sergeant. Capped by grey hair, his set, grim features betokened that he had been through a bad time. As his voice rose excitedly, I caught a mention of Gemas. Surmising that he was a member of the 2/30th Battalion, I lingered to listen.

"Yeah!" he exclaimed, taking a swig of cocoa from his mug. "I've done a fair spell 'ere among the flamin' swamps, an' I thought I could take it, but them little bastards 'ave got me down, blast 'em."

Sensitive to the note of tragedy behind his evident bitterness, I pushed forward into the dim circle of light. "Surely it's not so bad as all that, sergeant. Let's fix your wounds and you'll feel better after a good sleep."

Dumbly he looked up, his gaze travelling slowly from the red cross on my left arm to the rank badges on my shoulder. Instinctively he tried to rise, but I pushed him gently back on to the bench.

"I've no wounds on my body, colonel," he said simply.

Just then Captain Higgin arrived bearing an opened letter. "This will explain the sergeant's case, sir," he whispered. Thanking him I took the note over to the lamp. From Captain Taylor, R.M.O. to the 30th, it described how the sergeant's platoon had been caught by heavy enemy mortar-fire. Shaken, but with few casualties, it had been able to re-join the company. A neighbouring platoon was not so lucky. It lost two men killed outright, one of whom was the eldest son of the sergeant.

The note went on to describe the father's distress, stating that the C.O., who had a genuine affection for the old chap, had decided to send him down the line for a rest. Would I oblige by sending him on with a special memo of help, as he had been a most efficient and popular N.C.O. with the battalion?

When I turned round from reading the letter, I found that the orderlies discreetly had scattered to their duties, leaving me alone

with the stricken man. Uncomfortably I said, "I'm awfully sorry about your son, sergeant."

Tears started in his eyes as he raised his head. "It's me own fault," he cried. Then, half to himself, "The blasted game ain't fair. Here's me as sound as a bell and 'im lying in a swamp. One bloody mortar bomb they give 'im, all to hisself. I shoulda been alongside 'im, watching 'im, steerin' 'im right. . . ." His voice trailed away in a sob.

Fatigued and overwrought he was helped away to a comfortable night's sleep in a stretcher bed. Next morning he went on to base. I hoped that time would bring healing to his soul.

The pre-operative room was full of serious cases having their wounds cleansed with antiseptic soap and water before going on to the operating-theatre.

Evidently Sapper Dixon had been coaxing a recalcitrant generator motor, because it started with a sudden roar; electric light came on in the bulbs strung across the room.

In the adjoining room Captain Michael Woodruff was busily unpacking jars of blood serum. In Major Fisher's absence Michael had taken charge of the resuscitation of shocked patients before and after operation, a life-saving job.

I nodded towards the jars. "Likely to need any of them tonight, Mick?"

Michael paused in his work, and straightened up. "I hope not, sir. Major Hobbs tells me from the theatre that all goes well."

Content with this news, I went down the covered way to the theatre where Alan Hobbs and his team of orderlies were hard at work. The indefatigable John Chalmers was now administering anaesthetics. The heat was terrific, for the brilliant light was screened from outside by a couple of army blankets hung across the doorway.

After a final tour of the wards, where most of the patients were sleeping off the effects of utter exhaustion, I made for my own tent feeling that all was well for the remainder of the night. The coolness of the night air tempted me to defy the anti-malarial precautions by sitting in the doorway, relaxed in singlet and underpants. It was pleasant to take time off for reflection.

The unit was working smoothly. I had no uneasiness about its ability to do its particular job as a field hospital. We should

need reinforcing though, if all the battle casualties were to be handled. I was glad that guides had been selected to meet the 1st Malayan C.C.S. due early next morning.

Then, too, lorries would be required at Mengkibol to bring back Major Krantz and the light surgical section.

My friend, Lieut.-Colonel Neal, would be having a rough time with his Indian field ambulance in the Yong Peng area, for reports had come in with the wounded that enemy aircraft were pounding mercilessly on all the roads leading to Ayer Hitam. I smiled as I pictured the dapper little fire-eater in the midst of it all, probably encouraging his stretcher bearers with potent curses in English, Urdu and Hindustani. I wondered if he had received the case of stout I sent him from Mengkibol.

I fell asleep as the returning convoy of empty ambulances roared out of the clearing, leaving the darkness disturbed only by the raucous throatiness of bullfrogs and the staccato thudding of the generator.

The camp was awaking next morning when Driver Munn piloted Lieut.-Colonel Malcolm and his officers into the reception area. Perched on their luggage in the back of a Malay-driven three-ton truck, they looked bright but grimy.

Greeting Colonel Malcolm with pleasure I inquired into the whereabouts of the rest of his convoy of nine trucks. Apart from another truck-load of British N.C.Os I couldn't sight anything that looked like a C.C.S. on wheels. Malcolm was assured by his sergeant-major that they were close behind, but the truth was that seven of the lorries had gone astray in the maze of estate roads. They did not arrive till three hours later.

In a way this was fortunate, since it enabled me to plan ahead with Colonel Malcolm and to have his staff meet mine over a breakfast of strong tea, bully-beef stew and bread. A tin of salmon was added for his two Indian jemadars, Hindu medical graduates who held a viceroy's commission. They wore a single star on their shoulder straps.

The officers were weary after a trying trip over the congested main road from Singapore. I recognized Dr Emory among them, having met him previously in Kuala Lumpur. Although it was the first time some of them had been mixed up in a battle cam-

paign, they all vowed that they were looking forward to some real action.

"I used to feel that way too," I grinned. "Now I'd much rather be home, vegetating quietly in my private practice."

Breakfast over, I took Colonel Malcolm and Major Nairnsey, his second-in-command, for a walk round the various departments.

We agreed that, as the Malayan C.C.S. was lightly equipped, it would be better if the two units combined in the handling of all wounded as far as the operating-theatre. The Australian section could then take care of the British and Australian wounded, while the post-operative nursing and feeding of Asiatic casualties would be the responsibility of the Malayan section. Majors Hobbs and Nairnsey co-operated by drawing up a roster of surgical teams to cover each twenty-four hours. Malcolm had some good clinicians with him, including Major Smythe who had been a surgeon at the Alexandra Hospital in Singapore. A quietly spoken Irishman, he was to reveal in the next few days an intimate knowledge of modern traumatic surgery. In Major Fisher's absence I was also glad of the able assistance of Captain Cruickshanks, a Scottish physician, for the medical problems of malaria and dengue were ever present.

In addition to taking control of all the medical cases, Cruickshanks formed a blood transfusion team to alternate in shifts with Captain Woodruff. Emory and Nairnsey took turns as anaesthetist, while their dental officer supervised the reception and evacuation of the convoys. To assist him we hauled up one of our huge forty feet by forty feet tarpaulins by tackles and lashings to a ring of adjacent rubber-trees, where it served to protect the stretcher patients from the heavy tropical rains that bothered us quite a lot. It was the only occasion on which I saw one of these unwieldly tarpaulins (of which the powers that be had equipped us with six) earn its passage in our overworked transport.

The allocation of the two Indian jemadars was left to Colonel Malcolm, since I was a little uncertain of their technical qualifications. He suggested they would prove useful in attending to the medical needs of the Indian patients, and in the general administration of the Asiatics. There was more to this than met the eye. In a mixed camp of Moslems, Hindus, Sikhs, and

Chinese, no less than four separate kitchens were required for religious reasons. Also, the different sects had varying ideas about hygiene; the Chinese and Malays in particular were cheerfully indifferent as to when and where they fouled the ground.

One couldn't help being amused by the enthusiasm of the Malay truck drivers, although they possessed powers of exasperation that would have driven an Australian commander balmy. A mudguard or an axle meant nothing in their young lives; if a tree stump stood in the way of a truck, it had been put there providentially by Allah to test the strength of the bumper-bars. Usually the stumps won easily.

That same afternoon I was forced to borrow two of Colonel Malcolm's trucks, since our own four were fully employed chasing extra supplies. I wanted to bring our rearguard surgical team, with its gear, back from Mengkibol. From reports received of increasing enemy pressure down the railway line at Kluang, it promised to be a sticky trip for the drivers.

Colonel Malcolm gave me two of his best Malay drivers to whom the sergeant-major passed on careful instructions about the route. In turning, the leading truck, however, hit a tree, taking a long splinter from the side wall of the lorry. This episode did not allay my anxieties, so I sent hastily for two of my own men who could be spared, the pay-sergeant and Private (Shorty) Seabrook.

To the pay-sergeant I said, "Look here, Sherriff, I want you and Seabrook to sit alongside these Malay drivers. Get the trucks to Mengkibol as soon as possible, load them with the C.C.S. gear and tell Major Krantz that Major Dick will supply an ambulance car to bring him back with his orderlies. If the Malay drivers fail you, push them out of the drivers' seats and drive yourselves. Return as soon as you can."

Sergeant Sherriff, an ex-Gallipoli veteran, was a man of few words. The subsequent report in his diary is laconic, being confined to the bare essentials of the day's work. I have his permission to quote it.

> Thurs. 22/1/42. Made out the acquittance roll for the pay. I then went back to Mengkibol Estate in charge of two transports driven by Malays. They were such bad drivers that we were constantly in

trouble with other convoys on the road. Removed the rest of our equipment and personnel from there and returned to Kulai. Got astray in Fraser Estate and reached camp, after an exciting experience, just as reveille was sounding. . . .

Colonel Malcolm lent me more than trucks. His unit was in possession of a large Red Cross flag about thirty feet square. Although we were well hidden by the rubber-trees, I decided to display it over the roof of the surgical ward. It was believed that the Japanese Air Force was respecting the red cross as long as it was well away from military objectives. It might protect badly wounded patients from overhead explosives. Our own flag had been left behind at Mengkibol.

Later in the day I was glad that the Red Cross emblem was well displayed, for Major Chalmers drew my attention to an ammunition column preparing to camp about three hundred yards away on our right flank.

"A.I.F. as usual," John said with a grin. "I spoke to the captain in charge, but he pretended he hadn't seen our flag, although it was easily visible between the trees from where I talked to him."

"Right!" I said. "Come with me and we'll have a word in his ear. I never did like shells in my backyard."

Fortunately, when we arrived among the camouflaged ammunition trucks, I found the captain talking to an A.S.C. colonel whom I knew well. They smiled when they saw me, evidently knowing the purpose of my visit. Greeting them cheerfully I gestured towards my encampment on the other side of the gully. Amid the dark green of the foliage the red cross could be seen gleaming against its background of white. "One thousand yards from that flag please, gentlemen; or do I have to telephone a complaint to the Assistant Quartermaster-General?"

"All right! We'll go quietly," said the colonel, still smiling. "Captain here didn't realize he was so near your position."

"Like hell he didn't," murmured John Chalmers as we followed the track home. "Why! I spoke to the blighter last night, and he knew damned well we were located at the estate hospital!"

As we crossed the *sungei*, which rippled along at the bottom of the gully, we came upon three A.S.C. drivers from the column

having a much needed bath in the clear stream. Seeing us talking to their C.O. they had summed up the situation.

"Excuse me, sir," one inquired anxiously. "Have us blokes to get on the move again?"

"Only one thousand yards, as far as the Red Cross is concerned," I answered.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "Nobody loves us! This is the first decent wash we've had in three days."

My sympathies were with these decent lads. If any men of the services are entitled to commendation for meritorious work in Malaya, it should be awarded to the motor transport drivers. Most of their spare time was spent on the maintenance of their trucks, which they handled with the smoothness of limousines. Day and night they belted along the roads despite steamy heat, tropical rain, or Japanese light bombers against which they had no protection, except their own vigilance and dexterity at the wheel. The Aussies seemed particularly well fitted for this type of work, taking to it like ducks to water. Their language, addressed to a recalcitrant engine, was a delight to hear, being strongly reminiscent of the old time bullock-drivers of outback Australia.

At night another batch of Australian wounded arrived but fewer than expected. From the news they brought it was evident that the 2/19th Battalion, with portion of the 2/29th, had been surrounded by the Japanese in the swampy paddy fields between Bakri and Parit Sulong. To the north-east the 2/30th Battalion had withdrawn to Yong Peng where it was heavily attacked by enemy artillery and dive-bombers. Here the C.O.—my friend Black Jack Galleghan—became so angry at the lack of aerial support, and so terse on the phone to divisional headquarters, that he actually obtained the services of several R.A.F. planes for one hour. This wasn't much, but it raised the morale of his men as they cheered lustily, perhaps ironically.

Depressed by the fragmentary news of missing battalions, I judged that we could expect a fairly heavy influx of casualties as survivors filtered through. Further preparations were made with this possibility in mind, even to the selection in a quiet rubber glade of a site for a small cemetery. In a banal remark to the chaplain, Padre Bashford, I said, "One never knows."

The estate manager, Mr Murchison, delighted us with a

generous gift of fruit, fresh from Kulai village, for the wounded, many of whom had not eaten for twenty-four hours. Amazingly energetic in our interests, he was down at daybreak every morning to see that the road-gang of coolies was on the job. Equally kind, his wife offered us the hospitality of her lovely bungalow for hot baths or a rest in the evening. The grim business in hand gave us little time for rest. My daily bath consisted of a splash from the cement tong at the Indian dresser's cottage, now used as a quartermaster store. The men bathed at a clear pool in the *sungei* with little regard to the dangers of scrub typhus or leeches.

Miraculously a few cases of Tiger stout had accompanied the Q store from Kluang. One very hot morning, having helped the men erect the heavy tarpaulin, I took Mr Ramplen Jones, who had come down with Mr Murchison, round to the store counter. Here we downed a couple of foaming pannikins. Leaning back with a satisfied belch to light another cheroot, Ramplen Jones remarked, "By Gad, colonel, having a drink with you Australians reminds me of my very happy leave down under. What a time I had there! I learnt to say 'bonzer' and 'dinkum', as well as lots of your funny swear-words, but I never could become accustomed to your short and snappy whisky drinking. You know, in Malaya we like our drinks 'long' so that we can linger over them."

Laughing delightedly I promised the old boy that some day I'd take him to a big pub on the coal-fields of New South Wales, preferably on a pay Friday about 6 p.m., where he would really see beer drinking—quick, two-fisted drinking, with no beg-pardons for jolted elbows—at its brightest and best.

Sleep was less disturbed that night, enabling the surgical teams to snatch some rest. Dawn brought Major Krantz and Captain Brereton back from Mengkibol with their men. Unshaven and fatigued after an exciting experience, they had spent nearly all night covering the forty-eight miles to Kulai.

Major Krantz reported that the 2/10th Field Ambulance was starting to retreat also, leaving an advanced dressing station at Mengkibol for stragglers. Our section there had handled over seventy cases, mainly light casualties. Difficulty had been experienced in keeping the site clear of combatant units that kept crowding back in search of fresh deployment positions to stem the steady advance of the enemy. In the excitement our big Red

Cross flag had been forgotten, but undoubtedly it would prove useful to the field ambulance. It was arranged that Krantz and his men should have a day's rest until we received the impact of the expected casualties that night.

Brigadier Seaver and Major Feinhols of III Indian Corps arrived around ten, when I had time to sit down and talk with them over a cup of morning tea. The dear old Brig, feeling badly neglected by Corps Communications—if such a name can be applied to the fellows at headquarters who are supposed to keep every branch of the service informed about what's going on—was doubtful of the exact positions of some of the field ambulances. I was able to help him with information garnered from ambulance drivers and visiting officers. One bewildered Indian jemadar from the 15th Ambulance (Lieut.-Colonel Chopra's) had been marooned at the casualty clearing station for two hours that morning. In brainless fashion, his convoy drivers had pushed off with their empty cars, leaving him stranded. I took a poor view of his inefficiency, but I don't think he will ever understand the wrath of the mad Australian colonel.

Major Feinhols told me he was afraid that one of Colonel Chopra's companies had been cut off at Rengam by the rapid penetration of the enemy down the railway. The ambulance train had been bombed twice from the air. It was rumoured that Major-General A. E. Barstow, commander of the 9th Indian Division, had been captured whilst going up the line on a fettler's trolley. Major Charles Moses of the A.I.F. had been with him, but managed to escape under heavy fire.

Actually General Barstow had been killed instantaneously by a burst of light machine-gun fire to the side of the head. His body was reported to have been found by Major G. T. M. Hayes, of the Indian Medical Service, who was with a search party. It was decently buried in a slit trench about four hundred yards in front of the manager's bungalow on the rubber estate that adjoined the railway line. So passed a brave soldier and splendid leader.

When Feinhols added that the enemy were holding the ridge covering the railway line, apparently waiting to ambush General Barstow's 22nd Indian Brigade as it withdrew southward, I said, "I'm glad I came back this far, otherwise the casualty clearing

station would have been in a spot of bother! Did the 5th Casualty Clearing Station escape?"

"Yes," replied Feinhols. "They are on the way back to Singapore Island. Yours is now the only casualty clearing station functioning forward of Johore Bahru. The new headquarters of the III Indian Corps will be at the building in Johore Bahru formerly occupied by the A.I.F."

"I hope it brings you more luck than it brought the A.I.F.," I said dryly, for I had a feeling that the ornate buildings on the hill would make a remarkably good target for the Japanese planes (probably guided by a fifth column on the ground) had revealed an uncanny flair for picking our corps headquarters.

I knew the place well. It had been built thirty years ago for a former *Menteri Besar*, the Sultan's Prime Minister. The old *Menteri*, becoming melancholic one night, had run amok on his family with a kris. Since then the premises on the lonely crest of Bukit Semyun had remained unoccupied, the Malays alleging that it was haunted by the *hantu* or evil spirit of the first owner.

The dynamic little Colonel Neal bustled in at midday, cursing the loss of his B Company at Bakri on the 18th. He had not abandoned hope of rescuing his officers and men until, after many gallant attempts, he was forced to withdraw under severe enemy pressure.

Captain Hetherington of the Command Pay Office arrived to deliver a swag of Straits dollars to the pay-sergeant.

"What does one do with money these days, John?" I asked.

"Hanged if I know," he replied. "But the Army always pays, war or no war."

"I'll remember that when I get back to Australia," I retorted. "I've made a special note of all the promises made by politicians to soldiers." For some unknown reason, he laughed.

The day being quiet, we called a pay parade, Captain Simpson taking the job of pay officer. Few of the men drew more than twenty dollars, for they had no means of spending it, and few were affected by the urge to gamble.

I persuaded Sergeant Little, the tall English pharmacist from the attached sub-depot of medical stores, to take me on a reconnaissance run round the estate. He had a sporty, red automobile with an open body that made it ideal for sightseeing. Watching

the tracks carefully, I plotted the position of neighbouring units on the map, including the Motor Ambulance Convoy headquarters, well hidden in the rubber.

Emerging on the main road near Kulai village, we found it almost deserted; the native shops were barred and shuttered. North of the village, our three-ton truck was encountered, lying on its side in the ditch. Driver George Reid seemed very upset as we pulled up. He complained that a native-driven lorry had forced the truck over on to a heap of loose road metal, causing the wheels to skid badly.

"I begged help from an English light aid detachment that was passing," said George, "but the officer in charge wanted to set fire to the truck and write it off as a total loss. I had a bit of an argument with him over this. The old girl's only got a broken stub-axle and I reckon it can be fixed. Captain Lee came along later. He has gone for the recovery truck from the Motor Ambulance Convoy workshop."

I gave silent praise for a reliable driver like George, for the old three-tonner had served us faithfully during the hard work in Malaya. It was recovered and repaired late that evening.

My reconnaissance decided me against attempting to use the ambulance train for evacuating wounded. The only crossing available was narrow, with high embankments, and very vulnerable to air attacks. Bob Dick assured me that adequate motor ambulances were available to convey large numbers of wounded by road to the 13th Australian Hospital, located in the Johore mental hospital at Tampoi.

Originally, the casualty clearing station had started the general hospital at Tampoi, handing it over to the 13th Australian General Hospital in November 1941. Since then Colonel D. C. Pigdon had enlarged it to a total capacity of one thousand beds. Glyn White was now intent on moving the whole hospital to Katong on Singapore Island, if Japanese pressure would afford him enough time. It meant a tremendous transport job for Colonel Pigdon and his staff. The 10th Hospital was now established at Oldham Hall, a school in Barker Road, Singapore.

Many Indian sepoys arrived among the wounded that night, principally Gharwalis and Jats. Not typical of the seasoned troops imbued with the fine traditions of the Indian Army, they seemed

youthful, raw, and hobbledehoy by comparison. It was pathetic to see some, who were seriously wounded, roll their dark eyes round in mute appeal like those of a stricken animal. Others, who had been cut off at Muar, were footsore, hungry, and exhausted from straggling cross-country through the jungle. With the help of the jemadars they were soon arranged in orderly classification. Their compatriots in the Asiatic lines took charge of the exhaustion cases, having them fed and tucked in for the night in remarkably quick time.

Major Smythe's surgical team had a long, tiring session in the sweaty heat of the tropical night. The surgical technique was first class, Indian sepoy, British tommy and Australian digger alike being handled with the same skill and gentleness.

In the reception tents our orderlies worked amongst the Australian walking wounded, some of whom were vociferous about the constant, forced withdrawals of their battalions under enemy pressure.

"I reckon we've been sold by Malay fifth-columnists," said one.

"Why don't the heads push up a brigade to help our blokes?" demanded another.

"Why!" he repeated, his voice rising above the roar of the generator, "becos' they 'aven't bloody well got one, that's why!"

"Air support is what we want," said a third man, who appeared a little older and less emotional than the others. With this view there seemed to be a general concurrence, testified by a chorus of "My bloody oath!" and "You've said it, mate!"

Dawn on the 24th January found the casualty clearing station and its Malayan annex fairly full. With the help of Major Dick's ambulance cars it was decided to evacuate a large convoy of wounded to Johore Bahru and Singapore, leaving only those who were too ill to be moved.

Enemy aerial activity on a regular three-squadron basis was now a daily routine over Southern Johore and Singapore, where the native inhabitants of the crowded slums were suffering horribly. The casualty clearing station was grateful for the protective cover of the rubber-trees. Around noon we heard a series of terrific thumps from the direction of the railway crossing. "Hullo!" exclaimed someone. "They are having a pot-shot at the railway line. I hope they don't include us before the convoy leaves."

Ramplen Jones arrived from the bungalow shortly afterwards, bearing the news that a Japanese bomber had crashed on an isolated section of the big 8000-acre estate. Before crashing the airmen apparently had dumped their bombs, but this did not save the pilots from incineration.

Jones asked me if I'd put a phone call through to Singapore for him. While awaiting the connection, he said, "Colonel, I'd like your advice. Murchison and I are worried about Mrs Murchison and Mrs Hutchinson who are the only two ladies left in the district. Hutchinson is on service with the Malay Volunteers, leaving his wife all alone with her youngster. What do you think we should do?"

"Get them down to Singapore at once," I said with emphasis. "If possible, put them aboard a ship bound for Australia or the Old Country. In two days' time this estate is going to become very unhealthy, and before long the whole of Southern Johore will be a large battle area. Everyone is rushing for sanctuary on Singapore Island but, if you want my frank opinion, there will be damned little sanctuary for anyone there while the Japs continue to hold aerial superiority."

Ramplen Jones thought for a moment. "Thank you, colonel. I think you are right. Perhaps tomorrow we may be able to take the ladies down by car."

Waving cheerily, he departed with his characteristic jaunty stride. "There goes a man," I reflected, looking at his thin, squared shoulders and erect carriage. The old chap—if sixty can be called old—had been tin-mining in Malaya for the better part of a lifetime. When on the verge of retirement to a comfortable income from his mining investments, the war had crashed through the fabric of his dreams. His mines were partially destroyed, his assets lost. Yet he could laugh over it, insisting that he still had the priceless gift of life itself, to say nothing of many stout friends in similar circumstances.

Colonel Derham called in at lunch-time looking less tired than I expected. He addressed me by my Christian name, a sure sign that he had no administrative bones to pick. As we fed on bully-beef, biscuits, tea, and jam, he greeted Colonel Malcolm and his officers cordially. Afterwards he drew a plan of the main road to the south and pinpointed Scudai. "Half a mile past this village,"

he said, "a road leads off to the left. My new location will be a few hundred yards along it at A.I.F. rear-headquarters. If you can't get in touch with me, make contact with Glyn White who is still at Tampoi. You may have to move your unit back behind Scudai tomorrow. The best place will be somewhere on the fringe of Johore Bahru. Glyn White will advise you when to move. I'll hear all about it from him. Now, I must go." With a smile and a wave of his hand he was gone.

During the afternoon I had a short conference with Major Hobbs and Captain Lee. Having found it best, in previous moves, to keep one jump ahead of headquarters, we decided that Lee should visit Glyn White, bring III Indian Corps into agreement and, most important of all, find a good place for the casualty clearing station.

Captain Lee's mission relieved me of extra work and worry, enabling me to make preparations for the move on the morrow. Major Dick and his adjutant, Captain Parsons, were more than helpful. "Tell us where you want the serious cases sent and we'll shift them. If you're short of a lorry we'll loan you one. In fact, if you fail to obtain lorries tomorrow, tell us and we'll shift the whole ruddy casualty clearing station in relays of ambulances."

"Service with a smile," I commented gratefully. "I've a good mind to team up with you chaps in the transport business when I return to Australia. It might pay better dividends than surgery."

Captain Joe Vincent rang me from Glyn White's headquarters that evening to tell me that Captain Lee had arrived and would stay overnight. The 13th General Hospital was on the move to Singapore and all Australian casualties in the next week must be sent to the 10th Australian General Hospital at Barker Road. The Alexandra Hospital was full, and now taking British officers only. British other-ranks had to be sent to the Gillman Hospital, and Asiatics to the 17th Combined General Hospital at the Union Jack Club in Singapore.

Scribbling a memo of the information, I reminded Joe that the consignment of tents delivered to Kulai Station for the 1st Malayan Casualty Clearing Station would not now be required.

"Better get 'em back while the going is good, Joe, or the Japs'll have 'em. Please tell the commander of the Royal Australian

Engineers that I won't want his sappers to instal the new water pump he promised me."

Light, misty rain was falling as I emerged from the shelter of the dimly lit orderly-room. It was necessary to throw the shrouded beam from my torch cautiously here and there in order to avoid falling into freshly dug slit trenches. The first of the regular ambulance convoys was just pulling in, foreshadowing a busy night for the surgeons.

A quick tour of the hospital revealed all the sections in readiness, even to shaded hurricane lamps in the latrines. Stumbling over a steel tent-peg, I was reminded that similar obstacles in the darkness could be dangerous to the unwary ankles of the patients.

The reception tents smelt of wet clothing, unwashed bodies, hot coffee, antiseptics, and whiffs of the acrid exhaust fumes from the ambulance cars. Major Chalmers beckoned me to the extreme end where six stretcher patients lay in a row. A shaded electric bulb shone down on bewhiskered, tired-looking men with torn, dirty clothing and bare, swollen feet. One of them seemed to know me, but I failed to identify him.

Chalmers came to the rescue. "Captain Lloyd Cahill," he announced, "with some other survivors from the 2/19th Battalion that was cut off at Parit Sulong on Monday last. The poor blighters have been the best part of a week struggling through to our forward lines."

This was grand news. Lloyd Cahill was the battalion medical officer. We had feared the Japanese had got him. I shook him warmly by the hand. Words were not necessary. The young officer who had smiled in recognition was Lieutenant Austin whom I had met at the base depot in November. He was suffering from a gunshot wound of the right shoulder that had not been dressed until he reached the field ambulance that morning. "Lucky the maggots didn't get to it!" said the irrepressible Chalmers.

Cahill was very exhausted and his feet were bruised and torn by jungle thorns. As he munched hungrily at biscuits and coffee, I listened to his vivid narrative.

"The Japanese cut us off by another road-block," he said between mouthfuls. "We had been joined by stragglers from the 29th Battalion. My aid post was cluttered with wounded, but we managed to get them into a truck that was sent forward with a

Red Cross flag to the Japs in the hope it would be allowed through.

"To our horror the Japanese incorporated the truck in the road-block, calling on us to surrender. Colonel Anderson, whose leadership has been an inspiration all through, told them bluntly, 'Nothing doing'. After dusk one of our subalterns—I think it was Austin over there—crawled forward unobserved to the truck. He released the handbrake, and the truck steered gently back down the slope from the road-block. The wounded had a hell of a time. The Japs hurled everything but the kitchen stove at them, and at us too for that matter. After several attempts it became obvious that we couldn't break through the block, so we decided to split those who could walk into small groups and take to the jungle. Colonel Anderson planned to lead the fit men in a bayonet charge on the Japanese flank. I hope he made it. My group of lightly wounded steered south-east, receiving a considerable amount of help from friendly natives on the way." For a moment he paused reflectively. "Jove! I feel a new man after that meal," Cahill added.

I passed him a packet of cigarettes from the padre's table. "We're glad to see you alive, Lloyd. There is a rumour in that Colonel Anderson won through with about four hundred men. Turn in for a sleep when your feet have been dressed. Tomorrow you will go on to the 10th Hospital for a week's rest."

Alan Hobbs and his surgical team bore the brunt of the work that night. He had one particularly desperate case, a young artillery lieutenant with a shattered shoulder but whose arm he hoped to save. Only the beneficial effects of a blood transfusion had made operation possible. I remember seeing the pale, recumbent form of the officer in the transfusion room during the early part of the evening. Blood was dripping steadily from a flask into a vein of his bared arm, but he was scarcely aware of Captain Woodruff's ministrations. Alongside him lay an Indian private, being transfused with Australian blood from another apparatus in the hands of Captain Cruickshanks. The only sign of life was the occasional roll of the whites of his eyes, gleaming above his sunken cheeks. His arm was steadied by a board braced to the table, the needle being held lightly in his vein by adhesive tape. Although he looked all in, he never whimpered.

The scene lifted one's thoughts from the mundane to the

spiritual, expressing as it did the all-embracing humanity of Medicine. Humble Indian peasant, side by side with a highly trained representative of the white race, was receiving the same skilled treatment from a doctor whose healing art held no distinction of creed or colour. Both were pulled back from the shadows by blood from generous, unknown donors.

Alan Hobbs' skill brought further results. The officer's haemorrhage was arrested, his arm made safe for the time being, but the operation taxed his strength so much that in the early morning another transfusion was necessary. He responded mightily, enabling his safe transfer to the 10th Hospital escorted by Captain Brennan, a young doctor attached to Major Dick's ambulance convoy. The Asiatic, who also stood his operation wonderfully well, was able to proceed on a stretcher in the same ambulance.

It was a great relief to be able to tell Mr Murchison that the two unoccupied graves in the little emergency cemetery would not be required. Death had claimed only one casualty, a corporal from the Provost Corps, who had been mutilated by a bomb fragment while controlling the traffic through Kulai village.

Most of the wounded patients were on their way to Singapore hospitals by noon. Feeling sure that Captain Lee would bring me back a movement order, I set the various components of the unit to work at dismantling tents and packing equipment. The lull afforded time for a letter to my wife.

*Malaya (what's left of it),*
*25th January 1942.*

DARLING,

It is high noon. At midnight we expect to pack up and start another rush down the road to Singapore. Napoleon, in his retreat from Moscow, had nothing on us. It is warm weather with tropical rain, but everyone is cheery. Better still, our teams are handling the wounded well, and we don't look like losing a single stick of equipment.

In the last ten days we have cleared eleven hundred wounded and sick through the casualty clearing station. Many of them were cases of exhaustion so the figure by no means represents a total loss to the army. After my experience with Indian units filtering through our lines, I find I've still a lot to learn about Mother India.

Fortunately a good many of the Aussies, cut off at Muar, suc-

ceeded in escaping the Japanese. Lloyd Cahill, a medical officer, bruised and exhausted, brought in a party the other night. He evaded recognition until John Chalmers looked under his grimy whiskers. His companions were all cheerful, but badly in need of sleep. As one tent orderly remarked, "If they lie down, they sleep. If they stand up, they sleep. And if I sit 'em in a corner till I get a stretcher ready, they still bloody well sleep!"

A story of Peter Campbell, whom you may remember, arrived in last week. Peter and his men were pulling 6000 gallons of petrol out of Muar, to save it from the Japanese. While loading the trucks, his drivers heard shots from across the river. Picking up their rifles they had a hot half-hour's exchange of fire with a Jap patrol. This done, they completed loading and drove the trucks away from the danger zone. Subsequently, when parked by the roadside for tea, they "discovered" a case of brandy among the petrol drums. Peter let each man have a double tot in celebration of their baptism by fire. Peter said it must have been good brandy, because he had great trouble in restraining them from going back to Muar for another crack at the Japs.

Johnny Brooks, well known in Newcastle, is driving Peter's car. Both are positively enjoying the war! I take time off for a laugh myself occasionally. Yesterday we had an outback, lanky character brought in with a bullet in the left buttock. Disgustedly he said, "I was pickin' them off nicely one by one, when a Jap up a tree potted me in the backside. 'Ow the 'ell can I write 'ome and tell me girl friend where I'm wounded?"

I should not be retailing naughty stories in your letters, but I guess you realize that war strategy is taboo. Actually I don't know how the world war is faring, because I haven't seen a Singapore newspaper for a week. Newton Lee has just come in with orders, so now for more work even if, as I suspect, it is a Sunday. . . .

Captain Lee's reconnaissance had been a valuable one. He looked tired. "Spill the beans, Newton, then have a rest till teatime," I said. "The staff are already packing."

Newton sat down alongside the table. "We are to start moving tonight, sir. Our new site, secured after a considerable amount of running about, is the old mental hospital at Johore Bahru. You may remember it as a group of brick buildings on the narrow neck of land between the main highway and the waterfront. It stinks a bit, but the empty wards have not been bombed, and the water supply is reasonably good. There is no electric light."

"I know it well," I replied. "The site is very exposed, but there are a few bomb-proof shelters. We may have to rely on Red Cross flags. What about Colonel Malcolm's casualty clearing station?"

"Orders are being issued for it to take over two hundred beds from the No. 1 Malayan General Hospital, which is still located in the Johore Bahru civil hospital, but likely to move over to Singapore in the next few days," continued Lee. "I took a look at it, on the advice of III Indian Corps, but there seemed to be a mild brand of chaos developing between the civil and military administrations. This will become worse if two casualty clearing stations move in as well. Colonel White thought that we would be better off on our own at the old mental hospital."

I agreed with the decision, for I was aware that Colonel Tommy Carr, an eye specialist from Derby, England, had been having a tough time in command of the military section of the Sultan's great hospital. Tommy was a lusty, six-foot chunk of hearty good nature whom I had first seen nineteen years previously striding down the Friargate in Derby with a column of Sherwood Foresters, to which Territorial battalion he was then regimental medical officer. Many a pewter pot of good Burton ale had I enjoyed in Tommy's rooms, where he kept open house for the young house-surgeons of the adjoining Royal Infirmary. How pleasant it would be to see Tommy again, to remind him of my postgraduate year in England, and perhaps to celebrate our meeting with a pot of Tiger stout. I recalled the hilarious evening when his bosom pal, Dr Kenneth Maclachlan, had taken me along as a guest to a convivial gathering of the Derby Burns Club. There I noticed that one of the members was a dusky gentleman with crinkly, black hair, unmistakably a negro. His Scottish surname belonged to a famous clan. Seeking enlightenment of this phenomenon from the affable old chairman, he replied, "Wha kens but oor ancestors may hae been a wee wheen careless in the West Indies?"

Afterwards Maclachlan drove me home backwards, with his car in reverse, just to prove his sobriety!

Discarding the temptation to indulge in further day-dreaming, I plunged into the work in hand. A short conference sufficed to inform the officers of the projected move. Leaving the sergeant-

major with a few additional instructions, I crossed towards Colonel Malcolm's tent.

Passing the partially dismantled reception tent, I saw six Indian sepoys descending from an ambulance that had just arrived. Calling Staff-Sergeant Hill over, I inquired, "Why the Indians? The field ambulances have been notified that the casualty clearing station is closing for twenty-four hours. Are they all walking wounded?"

The staff-sergeant scratched his head. "Something funny about their arrival, sir. They are not wounded, but the jemadar wants me to put them through the admission book. He seems to think they are cases of exhaustion. The ambulance driver says he picked them up at the side of the road near Sedenak."

At a loss without an interpreter, I beckoned the sepoys to follow me to Colonel Malcolm's tent. Malcolm, with many years of experience in India behind him, questioned them closely in Hindustani. Then turning to me he explained that they were not wounded, but lost.

"Probably they are simple labourers recruited less than six months ago from their native villages. It takes two years at least to make an Indian soldier. The cream of the Indian Army is in the Middle East. Don't forget the men who stormed Keren with the original III Indian Corps, or who helped the Australians in their drive to Benghazi."

I confessed that this was my first experience with battle-stragglers. "What shall we do with them?"

Malcolm thought for a moment. "My sergeant-major is taking a truck into Kulai to see about our tents at the station. I'll tell him to turn them over to the traffic police for redirection back to their company."

To this incident there was a dramatic background, but of this I was not fully informed until many months later when I had access to the notes made by Colonel Derham, who wrote:

> Most of the troops of the 45th Indian Brigade, which was overwhelmed at Muar, had had only six months' training. My Indian Army friends told me that it takes five years to train an Indian soldier, and that must include some real fighting. The lads of the 45th Indian Brigade were indeed bewildered jungle boys when

> once they had lost their white officers and their few seasoned Indian non-commissioned officers.
>
> During the first 48 hours of the fighting at Muar all the British Commanding Officers, 2nd-in-Commands, and Adjutants, had been killed fighting at the head of their men. The Brigade Commander, Brigadier Duncan, and his Staff Captain (I think) had been killed near Bakri where the Brigade-Major (Jones) was severely wounded and taken to the 2/4th C.C.S. . . .

I wish Colonel Malcolm and I had known of this record of great gallantry at the time we encountered the survivors in the casualty clearing station.

I told Malcolm of the new orders, adding that I would be leaving for Johore Bahru about dusk. Generously he gave me permission to take the large Red Cross flag with us. It was to prove a godsend in the next three weeks.

Before leaving the estate I called on Mr Murchison to thank him for his help. I pressed him to try to join us later, for I had permission from the Assistant Director of Medical Services to secure the services of anyone whose knowledge of the country, and of the native languages, would assist the unit.

Donald Murchison seemed attracted by the offer. He had secured passages for his wife and Mrs Hutchinson in the *Duchess of Bedford* due to sail on the thirtieth. At present they were safe in Singapore, but he could not leave until his responsibilities were discharged. These involved the destruction of his factory, the burning of the store of raw rubber, and the provision of a hidden rice reserve for his loyal native staff, with whom he had worked for so many years.

Captain Lee came on duty after an early tea, full of renewed energy. He suggested that, as the transport problem was under control, he could supervise the remainder of the loading, leaving me free to clear off and plan the siting of the various sections at Johore Bahru. He had arranged for Major Fisher, now fully recovered, to meet me there.

Private Maloney heaved our personal gear on to the one-ton truck amidst a miscellaneous load of office records, valises and panniers. It drove off in charge of the pay-sergeant, with Maloney sitting on the tail-board in a very cramped position.

I followed in the car with Driver Craske. It was a fairly good

sedan that had been impressed by Captain Lee in Singapore. Some wit had attached a neat plate to the front bumper-bar with "Oysters for Sale" on it. This waggish craze for naming vehicles had become popular in the A.I.F. now that war had relaxed the "spit and polish" regulations. "Leaping Lenas" and "Tokio or Bust" were commonplace, while many of the ambulance drivers had the names of their home towns neatly stencilled on the car bonnets. The ambulance donated by the 3BO Radio Club of Victoria was an obvious sitter for the slogan, "Lifebuoy"!

Dusk was falling as we turned out of the estate road to find that the main highway was fairly clear of traffic. Noting the small cooking fires of units camped by the roadside under the screen of rubber-trees, I thought idly of the topical English song, "Everything stops for tea". The twinkling points of light, strangely homelike, denoted a large number of troops in the neighbourhood. I had been told that the left flank was manned by Gurkhas. This was comforting, as they would form a stout protection from the Pontian Ketchil area whence came a large amount of Singapore's water supply. Let Pontian Ketchil be overrun by the Japanese, and Singapore would fall like a ripe plum.

Would a line be held across Southern Johore? The query started a train of pessimistic reflection. Although our forward troops were still resisting fiercely at Ayer Hitam where the dogged 30th Battalion had lured the Japanese into another ambush, inflicting over four hundred casualties, one could not shake off the withdrawal complex. I had seen General Gordon Bennett move his advanced headquarters back into Fraser Estate that morning. The general was not a man who would stay far in the rear of his front line unless necessity demanded it. Now the wily Nipponese seemed to be doing most of the outflanking on the eastern side of the railway line at Rengam. Loss of life did not appear to worry them. They seldom bothered about a frontal attack unless supported by tanks and aircraft, but persisted with outflanking tactics. There was no doubt about their superior mobility and quick adaptability to the trying conditions of the jungle.

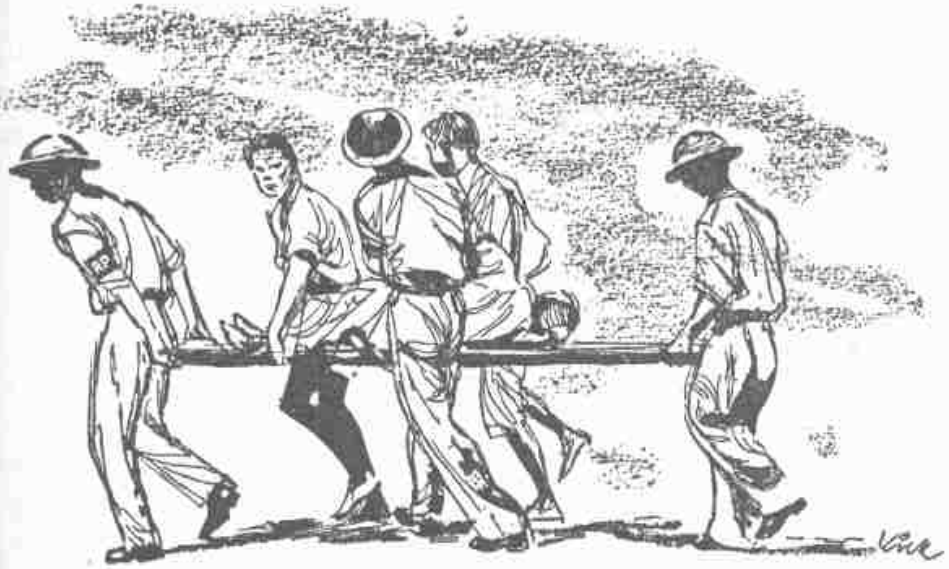
Blaming tiredness for my gloomy premonitions, I concentrated on the road ahead. We caught up with the dim outlines of a convoy which close examination in passing revealed as an Indian field ambulance unit.

"Hullo!" I said to Craske. "There's something unusual; a field ambulance retreating ahead of a casualty clearing station." Craske, a silent youth, nodded.

"Might be making for the Island," he observed. "There has been a fair amount of military traffic heading for Singapore today." Making a mental note of the divisional number painted on the tail-boards of the vehicles, I determined to inquire their destination at the first opportunity.

Passing through Scudai, we turned off along the waterfront of the Johore Strait. The sky had cleared, leaving a night of brilliant starlight that threw into prominence the low hill of Bukit Supreme capped by the lovely outline of the Sultan's *Istana Ejah* (green castle). This beautiful home had been built for his Romanian bride, regardless of expense. Before Nippon struck, our nurses had bathed in its swimming pool, and enjoyed cool drinks with the Sultana.

About a mile farther on, the car turned sharply through a stone gateway into the compound of the derelict mental hospital. The next stage in our dismal retreat had been reached.



# 13*

## *Final Stages in Johore*

EVEN the most modern of mental hospitals are depressing places to people who are more or less sane. When they are dilapidated, minus electric light, and with a plumbing system that has been messed about by Japanese bombers, then, as one of my men remarked, "They are definitely on the nose!" Indeed the place was redolent of generations of former inhabitants, Asiatics whose body odours seemed to have permeated the mildewed plaster on the walls.

Using a shaded torch to save stumbling in the dark, I made for the group of wards at the southern end. Here I found the senior sergeant of the advance party who told me that Major Fisher had arrived and made a preliminary survey of the new layout. With his help the men were posted as pickets to guide the incoming lorries to their correct off-loading points. A little foresight along those lines always save a devil of a lot of double-handling of equipment. The first three lorries arrived promptly, the orderlies working with a will to empty them for the return trip to Kulai.

Feeling hungry, I made for the kitchen where I found Cooks Harrison and Weymouth dishing out an astonishingly good

* This and subsequent chapters were written in a prison camp at Tavoy, Burma.

brew of hot tea accompanied by bully-beef and biscuits. Informal feeds such as this made for good comradeship, one of the finest emotions of army life.

The unit was small enough to handle by verbal orders only. Even if these were sketchy on occasions, each man knew his particular job so well that one could rely on full efficiency. This was instanced particularly well by the hygiene corporal and his men who performed Herculean labours in making each new site conform to decent hygiene standards, and in guarding our innards from the numerous diseases attributable to bad water, flies and mosquitoes.

The roar of traffic over the high wall bordering the main road had died down to a steady hum.

"It will be at least two hours before the trucks return from Kulai," I told the men, at the same time advising them to snatch a little sleep. They had another long working day ahead.

In the officers' sleeping area I found a hurricane lamp burning near the stretcher that Paddy had rigged ready for me, but I decided not to turn in until the next relay of lorries arrived. There were three other mosquito-nets draped over improvised beds in the room. From one of them I recognized Major Fisher's melodious snore. Evidently portion of the medical staff had come down with the lorries. Seeing a busy twenty-four hours ahead, they had very sensibly turned in.

Wrapping a blanket around me, for the night air was cool, I settled down in a rickety camp chair. My eyelids drooped, tempting me to surrender to the delicious feeling of approaching sleep. It seemed only seconds before a torch was flashed in my face and I heard an orderly say, "A British staff officer to see you, sir."

My watch showed the time as a half-hour after 1 a.m. Stretching the cramp out of my legs, I went over to the doorway where I made out the tall, slim figure of a major. Noting instinctively that his cap bore the familiar "Snake and Ladder" badge of the Royal Army Medical Corps, I held out a hand in welcome.

Saluting, he said, "Glendenning, sir, of the 11th Indian Division. Sorry to disturb you but I'm trying to locate Major Dick. I thought you might know his whereabouts."

"No trouble," I assured him. "Major Dick told me he expected to establish his new camp tonight about two miles up the road

towards Scudai. I have a hunch he will arrive within the hour to advise me of its exact situation. In fact, you probably saw some of his vehicles parked inside the entrance gate. The drivers are awaiting his arrival with orders."

"Yes," said Glendenning. "Seeing them there enticed me in. I have some orders for Major Dick that are rather important."

"Why don't you wait awhile to see if he turns up," I said. "When did you feed last?"

Glendenning smiled. "Not in the past eight hours. I will accept your offer to await Dick's arrival, but please don't bother about food."

"Nonsense!" I insisted. "I feel like some more myself. Come over to the kitchen and we'll forage the grub."

A lamp was still burning in the kitchen, but the men had gone in search of sleep. Private Harrison, fully dressed, snored peacefully on a blanket in the corner. Finding some hot water, I opened a tin of coffee and milk. Giving Glendenning a camp stool, I perched on a box of tinned fruit and shoved the remains of the bully-beef and biscuits across the table to him.

"Ever had a feed in a mad-house?" I inquired as I refilled his pannikin.

"Hardly," he answered with a laugh. "I don't suppose I shall ever have another quite like this one."

I liked Glendenning; I had met him previously at Kluang.

"Look here," I said. "An Indian field ambulance came down the road ahead of me last night, seemingly bound for Singapore. Since then I've seen other medical convoys headed in the same direction. Are they being replaced, or is it all part of another strategic withdrawal?"

Gravely, Glendenning considered the question. "I don't know what's in the mind of Malaya Command, of course, but all surplus medical units have been ordered back to Singapore Island where they will be re-allotted to new positions. It is partly for that reason I have to see Major Dick, as his convoy of seventy-five ambulances will be the last to service the units remaining on the mainland. He will bring the wounded either to your casualty clearing station or to Colonel Malcolm's."

I nodded absently, my brain thudding under the impact of the phrases "UNITS REMAINING ON THE MAINLAND" and "NEW POSI-

TIONS ON SINGAPORE ISLAND". It all sounded like preparation for what the news communiqués called "a withdrawal according to plan". Yet there was still a devil of a lot of territory in Southern Johore available to fight over, including the vital Pontian Ketchil sector, with its water reservoirs. Wasn't anything going to be done about that?

Lighting Glendenning's cigarette, I paced restlessly up and down.

"That's a cheery lot of news you've just given me," I said. "I thought that Westforce, well backed by reinforcements from the East Anglian Division, would be able to hold a line somewhere between here and Rengam, but now it appears that everyone is hell-bent on seeking sanctuary in Singapore.

"Sanctuary!" I added bitterly. "There is no sanctuary there. The place is fortified in front, but not in the rear. It is simply another Maginot line in reverse."

Glendenning, like most well-bred Englishmen, was a sympathetic listener. At that hour I was pessimistic, and weary enough to need one badly. I poured out my views on the campaign, cursed the blunders, waxed sarcastic about governments who promised the aerial support that never came, opened the vials of long suppressed wrath on Australian politicians, who had assured us that Malaya would never be another Greece or Crete, and ended up by apologizing to Glendenning for the strain my petulance had put on his courtesy.

Letting off steam did me good. Glendenning, who had been through similar periods at Dunkirk, smiled responsively. Just then the noise of our truck crews was heard at the gate. Through the bars of the window, I could see their lights as the cars swung into the compound.

"Come and see Major Chalmers," I said. "Either he or Captain Simpson may be able to give you news of Major Dick."

Fortunately Chalmers had seen Major Dick's convoy pulling in to its new hide-out, so he was able to give Glendenning precise directions. Thanking us, Glendenning departed. I was not to see him again until I encountered him in a prison camp some three months later. Debilitated by dysentry and early starvation, he looked a shadow of his former self.

When both Chalmers and Simpson assured me that they were as fresh as daisies, I turned in and slept like a drugged man until well after dawn.

The soft yellow light of the early sun in a cool Malayan morning usually brings cheerfulness. This one was no exception. Having freshened up with a shave, I made for the kitchen, intent on breakfast. There, most of the orderlies were assembled in a queue, full of wise-cracks for the cooks, and playfully observant that those worthies ladled out the appropriate amounts of stew, bread, butter, and tea.

In the rear of the kitchen the officers were waiting, picnic fashion, for Lee Ah Tan to set out their meal. They had picked a pleasant spot on a small veranda, shaded by a casuarina-tree that intercepted the strengthening rays of the sun. Scarcely ten yards away the placid waters of the Johore Strait rippled against an old, moss-grown retaining wall, and thence spread, gleaming and sparkling, to the opposite shore where the outline of Singapore Island and numerous smaller islets, covered in luxuriant vegetation filled the rim of the horizon.

"Morning, gentlemen," I greeted the officers. "Did anyone in these peaceful surroundings say there was a war on?"

"I suggest waiting until ten-thirty for the answer, sir," said Major Burnside. This sally raised a laugh because ten-thirty was well known as the usual calling hour of the three enemy air squadrons that bombed Singapore relentlessly on a regular timetable. They were popularly known as "Tojo's twenty-seven".

Surprised to see Burnside, I inquired if he had slept the night in the camp.

"Yes," he replied. "I arrived early with Major Fisher. I've been ordered to remain indefinitely with your unit."

Burnside, a brilliant young scientist from Melbourne, was in command of one of the smallest units in the army, a mobile bacteriological laboratory that was capable of doing a wide range of scientific investigation with forward medical units, such as a casualty clearing station. We were always pleased to see his three vehicles parked in our lines.

Ambulance cars full of wounded started to arrive soon after breakfast. When the sergeant-major mustered our men to detail their duties for the day, I had a short talk to them. Although

many had worked throughout the night, I pointed out that enough equipment must be set up to handle the incoming casualties properly. Fortunately the exhausting work of pitching tents was not necessary as the ex-mental wards were spacious. Not a man growled. With me, they felt that our work was easy compared to that of the fighting units.

I advised Major Chalmers not to unpack the generator or the X-ray equipment until it could be ascertained how long we were likely to remain there. I had a feeling it would not be for long. This was confirmed by a phone signal from Major Feinhols who told me that our stay would be limited to forty-eight hours. At the same time he asked me to take all the casualties that arrived in the interim.

"You are giving me a tough assignment, Major," I growled into the phone. "You know it takes a clearing station the best part of forty-eight hours to establish itself. Good surgery is handicapped if serious cases have to be moved immediately afterwards."

"I know, but do what you can to keep a light surgical section going," he begged. "I'll endeavour to have the brigadier give you a decision tomorrow."

Ill-pleased at the lack of a definite instruction, I decided to await news of the forward situation arriving with Captain Lee's rear party from Fraser Estate.

Ken Burnside's forecast of war signs at the hour of ten-thirty was fulfilled almost to the minute. Above the banshee wails of the air-raid sirens, and the shattering roar of the heavy ack-ack guns on the hill overlooking the main road, came shouts from the men. "Yeah! Tojo's twenty-seven all right! Look pretty on the skirts of those low clouds, don't they?"

Moving swiftly in tight formation, the raiding planes were visible to the west as they sailed serenely towards Singapore, evidently intent on a bad morning for the docks at Keppel Harbour. From force of habit I donned my tin helmet. I used to tell myself it might save a crack on the skull by a lump of flak from our own shells. With momentary vexation I noticed that the sprig of white heather in the top of the helmet had been torn. Part of it was missing.

The thumps of falling bombs reverberated in the warm air, heavy with menace, evoking pity for the poor, unprotected natives

in the dockside slums. Beyond displaying the usual sporting interest in the raid to the extent of wagering on the exact number of planes, the men kept hard at the job. I felt we would be ready to offer the wounded a reasonable amount of comfort by nightfall. Majors Hobbs and Krantz had the operating-theatre assembled, and Major Burnside volunteered to alternate with Captain Woodruff in giving blood transfusions. Major Fisher resumed his usual job in the resuscitation section, although he may have found the apparatus a little more the worse for wear than it was at Mengkibol.

The day passed quietly, enabling the men selected for night duty to snatch six hours' sleep in the afternoon. Captain Lee came down with the last relay of lorries from Fraser Estate. He reported that our position there had been taken by the 15th Indian Field Ambulance, while Colonel Neal's ambulance simultaneously was moving in slow stages from Sedenak right back to Singapore Island.

The news confirmed my foreboding that a withdrawal to Singapore was planned. I tried to visualize the role of the casualty clearing station. Would it function as a small garrison hospital, assuming the Island was besieged, or would it merge with one of the Australian General Hospitals? Not having been in Singapore since early November, I lacked sufficient knowledge of recent events there to do any more than theorize. One thing certain was that every available building would be crammed with refugees or Service units by the time the casualty clearing station arrived.

During the night we received a hundred and forty-three Australian and British casualties. Of these, the sick and lightly wounded were inspected and relayed to the 10th Hospital. Numerous small wound incisions and dressings were performed, while surgical intervention was required in eight severe abdominal cases. For this the surgeons required good illumination over the incisions. It was impossible to rig electric light in the time available. My surgical senses were shocked by a visit to the theatre, where I witnessed five orderlies holding hurricane lamps aloft in a circle round the patient, while Major Hobbs sewed up two gashes in a coil of intestine.

Somewhat sharply, I asked Sergeant Symes why he wasn't using the incandescent petrol lamps which gave a much better light.

"Too unreliable, sir," he answered. "Most of the mantles are broken."

"Well, for heaven's sake take care to keep naked lights away from the ether."

Alan Hobbs must have overheard our whispered conversation. He straightened up without interrupting the rapid play of his hands. Smiling cheerfully through his surgical mask he said, "Nothing has blown up so far. Wouldn't some of our former tutors in anaesthesia turn grey-haired, if they were here now?"

"Things have become a bit primitive," I agreed. "How are your patients faring?"

"Remarkably well," said Hobbs. "In fact I've been amazed at the uniformly good results, in spite of the lack of all the chromium do-dahs of a modern theatre."

Major Hobbs was right. The majority of our surgical cases did well. Gas gangrene was conspicuous by its absence, and only on rare occasions did sepsis rear its ugly head. Limb wounds, once they were cleansed and excised, could be immobilized in plaster-of-Paris casts with perfect safety. This was confirmed later by consultation with Dr Charles Osborn and other surgeons of the general hospitals who took over our serious cases.

The orderlies were not so bright as usual next morning. They appeared listless, while the surgical teams, having finished all urgent work, were obviously in need of sleep. Making a rapid tour of the wards I found all the new patients reasonably comfortable, except twenty who had arrived just before dawn. The dental and pay-sergeants were giving them personal attention.

"Where are the nursing orderlies?" I inquired.

"Gone down for their breakfasts, sir," said Staff-Sergeant Hill. "They are pretty fagged. Sherriff and I are giving them a spell."

"Patients first" had always been the code of the casualty clearing station. It must not be relaxed. I got the sergeant-major to call a muster parade, told the men I knew they were tired, assured them they were not half so tired as the rearguard holding the Japanese at bay, and finally became so mean in my remarks that I could see several becoming restive. I finished by reminding them that not one of us had any right to breakfast, while twenty patients lay unattended.

Actually we were missing our nursing sisters badly. This was

the first time I had ever thrown a verbal whip at the men when they were tired, but I felt that a little hard driving was necessary at the right time. To their credit, they took it like sportsmen although my remarks must have stung. Within an hour the wards were clean, the new patients washed and fed.

Feeling it was unfair to the surgeons to have them work another night under the same crude conditions, I determined to obtain a decision from III Indian Corps about our pending movements.

Major Feinhols, answering the telephone at headquarters, told me that Brigadier Seaver had not yet arrived at his office. Either my language was terse or my impatience plainly apparent, for he said, "Look here, I'll bring the brigadier down to see you as soon as he comes in."

This sounded a very fair offer, so I mooned about the office hoping they would not be long. A bunch of notices on the wall alongside the phone attracted my attention. They were copies of routine orders of the No. 1 Malayan General Hospital, that had been quartered there prior to moving to the top floors of the big civil hospital.

"Careless of the office staff to leave them about," I mused as I scanned them idly. Fairly innocuous, they dealt mainly with disciplinary items. One piece of fatuity caught my eye. Dated 16th January, it read: "The attention of other ranks is drawn to slackness in saluting. Henceforth officers, when recognized as such, will be saluted at all times."

"When recognized as such" was priceless. With memories of Black Jack Galleghan up front, his colonel's insignia in his pocket, revolver on hip, and three days' growth on his saturnine visage, I chuckled to myself. "Good old British Empire! *Morituri te salutamus!*"

Undoubtedly saluting had its place in Army training. My own experience was that a good officer could always draw a salute without calling for it officially. I could not imagine the necessity for frequent salutes in a busy hospital after five weeks of active hostilities. Perhaps the registrar had been liverish, or short of blurb to put in his daily routine orders. The roneoed signature —"T. E. Ashdown Carr, Colonel"—at the bottom seemed vaguely familiar.

Again my thoughts flew to Tommy Carr, light-hearted, boisterous, a good companion. It would be quite in character for him to sign any routine form without bothering to read it. I had myself been guilty of this misdemeanour on many occasions.

Lost in a brown study I was surprised when a car pulled up outside and Brigadier Seaver walked in, followed by Major Feinhols. Close behind them bustled two Royal Army Medical Corps officers (from another car), who buttonholed the brigadier with vigorous complaints about conditions at the civil hospital. The small office seemed full of officers, all arguing at once. Taking a seat on the table edge alongside Feinhols, who looked worried, I murmured slyly, "Carry on gentlemen. I'm in no hurry."

Feinhols shook a typewritten screed under my nose. "Look what the brigadier's orders are, colonel, and look what they've done!"

"Look what who's done?" I inquired. "If it's a brawl, I'm staying out of it."

Feinhols, a soldierly character who took his job very seriously, continued, quite unaware of my light-hearted cynicism.

"No. 1 Malayan General were supposed to leave behind sufficient staff at the civil hospital to run two hundred beds, until Colonel Malcolm's casualty clearing station moved in. Instead of doing this they have retired to Singapore, lock, stock and barrel. Two of their officers, whom you see here, have been left to carry the baby. Quite rightly, they complain that they can't handle two hundred sick unaided by orderlies and staff. The whole situation at the hospital would have been chaotic, had not the civil doctors rallied round and worked magnificently for military and civilian wounded alike."

"Good for them!" I said. "But are you sure Colonel Carr received your orders? In action, orders have a strange trick of arriving late, or even of not turning up at all."

Glumly, Feinhols admitted this was a possibility. "Colonel Carr is not in command now," he said. "He's been transferred to the Indian hospital-ship *Wee Sui*, in Singapore Harbour, and Colonel Middleton has taken his place. The unit has had about five commanding officers in the same number of weeks."

"Whew!" I whistled. I could imagine the "mild chaos" in the

organization, as Newton Lee had described it. His advice to me to stay clear had been very sound.

Somehow I was glad Tommy Carr was out of it all. At Changi, much later, I met two cheery souls from the Sherwoods—both recovering from nasty abdominal wounds. They assured me with wide grins that the lucky blighter had sailed away in the *Wee Sui*, a day before Singapore fell.

When Feinhols had calmed the troubles of the two Royal Army Medical Corps officers—who retired looking as though there was still a catch somewhere—the brigadier, looking weary, sat down.

"I'm getting too old for this game, Hamilton. Now for your worries! I really don't know what you're going to do. I think your best plan would be to get rid of your heavy equipment here, stay open as a light surgical unit for another day, and then move over to the Island."

While there was a human side to the brigadier that I liked immensely, I felt his suggestions sounded the death-knell of my unit as a useful entity. His recommendation that I dump our valuable heavy equipment left me cold. I had no intention of losing it without a struggle. Hackles raised but outwardly quiet, I asked, "Where are we to go on the Island, sir? Have you reserved a suitable site for us?"

"No, I haven't," he admitted. "Although your A.I.F. headquarters may have done something about one. Frankly I don't know whether you'll find a suitable place now."

"I'll find one, or bust," I said, with a confidence that I did not feel. "Will you give me permission to search for one today? If I can find a suitable building, will you let me move tomorrow, first thing?"

The brigadier thought for a moment, asked Feinhols a question or two, then said in his kindly way, "Perhaps you are right, Hamilton. See what you can do today with a reconnaissance. You might let me know the result by telephone tonight. Glyn White may be able to help you considerably. I'll tell him of our intentions, but I must ask you to receive wounded tonight, even if you do start to move."

Although this might prove a strenuous assignment, I felt so relieved at gaining a decision that I promised to carry on somehow. Before leaving, the brigadier confirmed my surmise that it

was the intention of the General Officer Commanding to break contact with the enemy, evacuate Johore, and withdraw all troops to Singapore Island.

"A sad decision! Heaven knows what it will be like on the Island," he said, with a slow shake of his white head.

"What about the remainder of the Australian brigade at Mersing, on the east coast?" I asked.

"I expect they will effect a gradual withdrawal via Jemaluang and Kota Tinggi," he replied. "It is possible that on the way back they will lay one or two traps for the enemy."

Melancholy news. Mersing was the best-defended position in the Peninsula. While the Japanese had command of the sea, rendered possible by the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, it was difficult to stop them outflanking our troops by progressive coastal landings. Their mastery in the air, whence swift planes harassed our lines at will, was now self-evident.

As far as could be ascertained, the gallant 2/30th Battalion was now back at Simpang Rengam where, on the 26th January, with the doughty support of the Gordon Highlanders, a stand had been made at the cross-roads. In grim hand-to-hand fighting another lot of severe casualties had been inflicted on the overconfident Sons of Heaven.

During the morning, Captain Lee had been to Tampoi where he had interviewed Lieut.-Colonels Glyn White and Kent Hughes regarding our future movements.

"They say we have been allotted the Singapore Dairy Farm," he said. "I might slip over this afternoon and have a look at it."

"I'm coming with you," I said, giving him the substance of my conference with Brigadier Seaver. He grinned sympathetically when I told him of the troubles of Colonel Malcolm's casualty clearing station at the civil hospital.

"That casualty clearing station will also have to shift soon," he said. "Probably Colonel Malcolm will rejoin his 'heavy section' at the Chinese high school."

"He is lucky to have a base on the Island," I commented. "You and I have yet to find one."

Lunch over, we left on our reconnaissance. Captain Lee took the wheel of the car because Driver Craske, like the other drivers, badly needed some sleep. I left Major Hobbs in charge, having

informed all the officers at lunch-time of recent developments.

Passing the usual stream of military traffic crowding the narrow main street of Johore Bahru, we swung to the right over the mile-long causeway that connected Singapore Island to the mainland. The Causeway was a hive of engineering activity, British and Indian sappers erecting coils of Dannert wire and other roadblocks, while labouring parties pounded at the concrete with compressed air drills as a prelude to inserting plugs of high explosive. At the northern end the bascule bridge was being prepared for demolition. Turning right where the main road ran along the mangrove-fringed coastline of the Island, I speculated on the defensive possibilities of the place. What I saw was not encouraging for it was painfully evident that, while the front door of Singapore bristled with barbed wire and concrete pillboxes, the back door facing the mainland was like Mother Hubbard's cupboard. To an enemy skilled in the use of military landing craft, and protected by artillery fire from the Johore shoreline, a landing anywhere west of the Causeway looked an absolute sitter.

When the sedan neared Bukit Timah village, a green and white sign marked "Singapore Dairy Farm" indicated a left turn up a narrow, gravelled road.

"I've a feeling in my bones I won't like this ruddy cow farm," I remarked to Lee. "Do you remember the night you found the 5th Indian Casualty Clearing Station bogged at Ayer Hitam?"

Newton Lee, a man of few words except when someone insulted his quartermaster store, laughed at the memory.

"Ankle deep in mud and manure," he said. The road, winding up the side of a tree-covered slope, emerged on to a grassy hillside, flanked by Tamil coolie hutments. Away on the right were four galvanized iron buildings, set in concrete frames and spaced about three hundred yards apart. We inspected the nearest building, which was empty. It consisted of a long double row of cowbails, fairly modern, with a glassed-in store and office at the far end. A fine layer of manure on the concrete floor and in the gutters pointed to recent occupancy by bovine tenants.

Disapproving of the place from the start, I was loath to condemn it in case it was the only site available. Too bare, too conspicuous, it looked extremely vulnerable.

"I think we might do better than this, Newton," I said, with a hope I was far from feeling.

"I doubt if you will, sir," he replied. "Every worth-while building is already occupied."

Nevertheless we drove off, and turned south on Bukit Timah Road as far as Holland Road.

"Administrative headquarters are shifting into two buildings up here," said Lee, pointing to Holland Road.

"Let's drive up then, and we may find Glyn White," I said. "I want to tell him the dairy farm is a rotten place for a casualty clearing station. Whoever thought of it doesn't know anything about the danger of infecting surgical wounds with anthrax and tetanus."

Headquarters had certainly bagged two palatial bungalows for themselves, either of which would have served the casualty clearing station very well. Glyn White had not yet arrived.

"This is the place we ought to have," I said. "You don't suppose they'd hand it over?"

Lee laughed at my wishful thinking.

"Ever hear of any headquarters parting with accommodation to a field unit?" he asked.

I admitted that I had not, so we turned the car round to scan the roadsides thoroughly for signs of unoccupied dwellings. Our luck was out. In dismal silence we retraced our route through Bukit Panjang village, some six miles from the Causeway.

"Looks like the cow paddock after all," I said. "We can't select a place any farther north of here or we'll have the hospital within range of enemy artillery fire from Johore. Hey! Pull the car up for a minute. Here's a prospect!"

Pulling into the roadside at my sudden exclamation, Captain Lee stopped the car. We had just passed the junction of the Choa Chu Kang Road with the main highway, and I had seen amid the trees on the left a modern two-storied building. A sign, reading "Bukit Panjang English School", flanked a wide gateway that led into a green *padang* in front of the main wing.

School buildings make quite good military hospitals. The inside of this one, with spacious rooms built round an open courtyard, looked particularly attractive. The only sign of life on the ground floor was a cook in a Royal Air Force kepi, who was scrub-

bing a mess table near an improvised kitchen. He seemed interested in my approach.

"Would you mind telling me who lives here?" I asked politely.

"Yessir! About fifteen officers and thirty other ranks of the R.A.F.," he answered, with the promptness of an old regular.

"May I see your senior officer, then?"

"I'm sorry, sir, he won't be in for an hour yet. All officers and men work at the Ford factory down the road. They are assembling plane parts."

"Oh! I see," I said slowly, at the same time having a good look round the scene. Thanking the obliging cook, I walked outside towards the gate. From a prior knowledge of Malayan high schools I knew that the place would suit a casualty clearing station admirably. Of course it was near an artillery target in the crossroads, and jammed between the railway line and the main north road, but compared to the cow farm it was such a palace that I resolved to discount the tactical disadvantages.

The *padang* would take extra tentage, besides making a fine turn-around for ambulance traffic. The Air Force had built a kitchen. Ah! The Air Force—there was the snag. Dammit! A mere handful of officers and men had no right to use a big building as a boarding-house when a casualty clearing station required it for wounded fighting men. They could go and live on the job at the factory or, better still, do some badly needed flying. This sounded so unjust that I chuckled with the realization that, subconsciously, I had been working up an argument to gain possession of the building. I was in much better spirits when I re-entered the car.

"That's a suitable place," I called to Lee who was dozing over the wheel in the stifling heat of the sedan interior. "Would you like to look at it? It is our last hope."

Lee, who had had very little sleep in the last three days, trod wearily on the self-starter. "If you don't mind, I'll take your word for it, sir."

"Right! Then we'd better drive to Tampoi and see Colonel Kent Hughes. Keep a look out for Glyn White's car in case he passes us along the road."

Fortunately both Glyn White and Kent Hughes were in the former's dismantled office when we arrived. Explaining our objec-

tions to the dairy farm, we put forward the alternative suggestion of the Bukit Panjang school, skating lightly on the fact that the R.A.F. was in legal possession. Kent Hughes, scion of a brilliant Victorian family, having asked a few shrewd questions, made up his mind without delay.

"Go, take the school," he said. "I'll endeavour to make your action official with Malaya Command. In any case, the A.I.F. has been told to fend for itself in the western sector of the Island, and to assume responsibility for its defence."

This order eased my conscience by giving me an official background on which to work. Frankly I did not like hijacking the R.A.F. quarters, mainly because the Air Force comprised many pleasant fellows. I'll still doff my hat to the memory of those of them who, for lack of better machines, took the air in Wirraways against hopeless odds to assail the Jap squadrons.

Returning to the casualty clearing station we called Major Chalmers into conference.

"John," I said. "You have been selected to play the part of the cuckoo in the nest, the nest in this case being an R.A.F. one."

Chalmers stroked his nose, his face wrinkling gleefully as I outlined the situation. I indicated the need for a combination of firmness and tact. "Your rank should be high enough to carry you through the inevitable arguments. If the Air Force brings too much pressure to bear, send me an SOS or phone Colonel Kent Hughes at Holland Road. Take a truck-load of our equipment together with your own baggage. Drive to the Bukit Panjang school, see the senior officer there—probably he's only a flight-lieutenant—and tell him you have been instructed to commence opening a light section of the casualty clearing station in the building. Furthermore you are expecting the main body in the morning. I'll have the trucks loaded early tomorrow, and by noon we should be able to present the Air Force with a *fait accompli.*"

Saluting in naval fashion, Chalmers said, "Aye, aye, sir!" He gloried in dilemmas that had an element of buccaneering in them. At his suggestion it was arranged that Major Burnside should take him over in the car belonging to the mobile bacteriological laboratory. Burnside could select a corner of the school grounds for his vehicles.

I was more than a little anxious when Chalmers set out, fear-

ing that, if his intrusion were repulsed, I would be forced to seek yet another site. Burnside had promised to return that night, but administrative details kept me so occupied that I did not have a chance to see him until breakfast next morning.

The meal was a lively one, for everybody was jubilant at the thought of settling down to steady work in good buildings on the Island. In war, one lives very much from day to day, untroubled by premonitions of the weeks ahead. Casualties had not been severe during the night, enabling relays of officers and men to average four or five hours' sleep. There was a good deal of banter about Chalmers' engagement with the Air Force, in our first inter-service tangle.

"It will be dead easy," said one of the younger officers.

Burnside looked up from his bacon and mash. "I'm afraid it isn't going to be easy, sir. The English flight-lieutenant gave Chalmers a courteous reception, but was quite firm in stating that he had no intention of vacating the school without orders from R.A.F. headquarters."

As this did not sound reassuring, I asked Burnside what had been John Chalmers' reaction.

"Well, when I left," Burnside continued, "he was ensconced in a mess-room chair behind a large *stengah*. He appeared to be on the best of terms with several Australian flying-officers who were there. For their part, they were anxious to give Chalmers the building as soon as they heard it was wanted for wounded, but their flight-lieutenant was adamant, even to the extent of threatening to report any of them who took individual action against his instructions."

This was better news, as it indicated the presence of allies among the potential opposition. Hoping that time and Colonel Kent Hughes would square matters officially for us, I set about having the lorries loaded for dispatch to Bukit Panjang. At the same time our remaining patients were cleared to the 10th Hospital by ambulances.

The high spirits of the unit personnel were reflected in an incident during the loading of the lorries. As usual, the loading officer, Captain Simpson, was badly handicapped by a shortage of trucks. There had been no response to our appeals to other units, and scrounging methods had proved ineffective. This was

rather surprising, for the registrar of the 13th Hospital once had alluded to the casualty clearing station as the "best team of scroungers in Malaya".

About eleven, in answer to a call from Simpson, I saw a fine three-ton truck that had just driven into the compound. Standing alongside, in the gorgeous turban and trim service uniform of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, was a tall Sikh driver. Saluting ceremoniously as I approached, he said, "Lorry is here as ordered, *sahib*."

"That's what he told me," whispered Stuart Simpson, drawing me aside. "It's a lovely lorry, but I thought we'd better not use it without consulting you. Where did you get it?"

"From the fairies," I replied. "It has just blown in like 'Hansel in on Robin'—if you remember your Burns. I don't know who sent it, but don't let's look a gift-horse in the mouth. Load it quickly, and whisk it off."

The loading crew, sensing a jest, had the truck loaded in a shade over five minutes. Just as it was ready to drive off, an agitated jemadar from the Royal Indian Army Service Corps drove in, berated the driver soundly in Hindustani, then explained to Captain Simpson in voluble English that his poor misguided and misbegotten driver had brought the vehicle to the wrong unit. I joined in to listen to the harangue. A loquacious Indian is always worth watching, with his flashing white teeth, rolling eyes, and arms waving like a semaphore. Captain Simpson introduced me. Between handshakes, salutes and scattered intra-Empire compliments we endeavoured to persuade the worthy jemadar that it would be much easier for the Sikh driver to travel a few short miles (thirteen to be exact) to Bukit Panjang than to give our weary men the trouble of unloading there and then. His obvious respect for higher rank, allied to his native politeness, caused the jemadar to weaken under our plausible arguments. Finally he consented to our use of the lorry for one trip only. Well pleased with the agreement, Captain Simpson proceeded to test the truck's springs by adding a couple of tons to the load. It creaked out shortly afterwards with one of our orderlies perched on top as a guide to the driver.

After two o'clock the work had gone on so well that I was able to send Hobbs, Fisher and Burnside away to help Chalmers with

the organization of the new hospital at Bukit Panjang. No distress signals had come from there so I assumed that all was well. Later in the afternoon I left the remainder of the work at Johore Bahru in charge of a small rear-party and moved over to the school.

To my pleasant surprise I found all the Air Force officers packing their kits preparatory to moving out. Generously, they left us their mess crockery, furniture, and a plentiful supply of attractive drinks, including a case of English beer which we had not sampled for a long time. Everyone, even the little flight-lieutenant, was so decent that I felt coals of fire descending on my head. When thanking them I arranged that our mess should pay for any food or drink that was left, but the subsequent exigencies of war never gave us a chance to repay the debt.

John Chalmers' report, given to me that evening over a pot of beer in the mess-room, was colourful.

"A damn fine lot of lads," he said. "Although the little flight-loot was a bit touchy at first. He said he couldn't do anything except through the proper channels—you know how long that takes—and this morning he produced a deputy assistant provost marshal to warn me off the premises."

"How did you fare with the deputy assistant provost marshal?" I asked, with keen interest.

"Shucks!" said John. "He was only a flying-officer and I wasn't frightened of him. He asked me if I knew what an Air Force deputy assistant provost marshal was, and I said I didn't. Then I invited him to have a drink which he did, and insisted on returning it. When we were having the second round, the flight-lieutenant came in, so we had another drink. While we were discussing the problem amicably over the beer the first convoy of casualty clearing station trucks arrived. Suddenly the schoolrooms seemed to fill with army drivers, shouting orderlies and piles of gear. In fact the whole place was a minor bedlam in no time at all. The R.A.F. officers, apparently deciding that the game was moving too fast for them, left to telephone their Singapore headquarters for further advice. They returned a little later looking fairly happy, and said they had agreed to concede the place to the casualty clearing station."

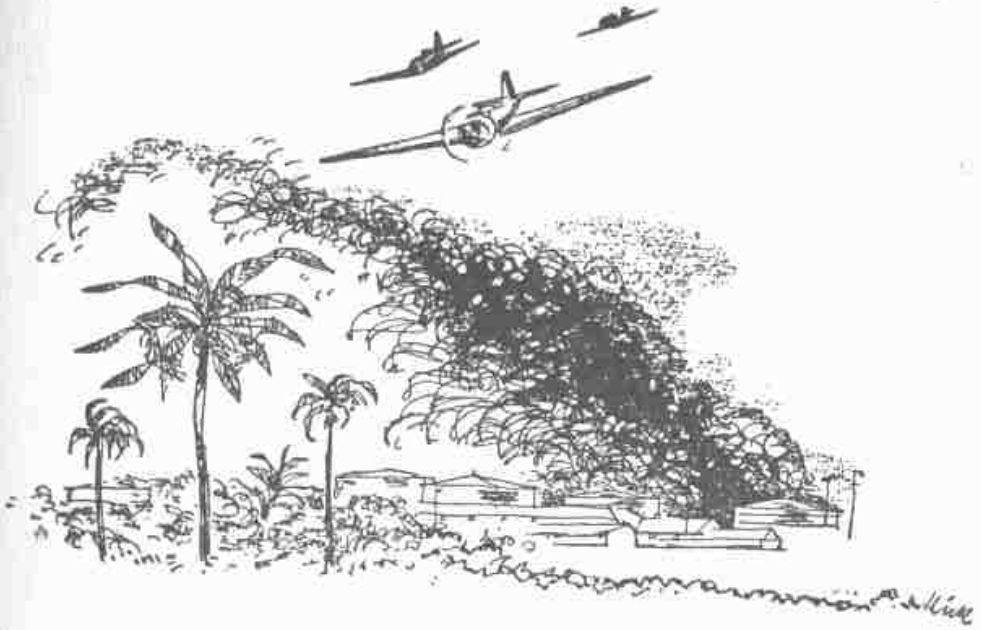
Delighted with the whimsy of John's recital, I laughed heartily

"Well done, John! But tell me, how were you able to invite Air Force officers to have a drink in their own mess?"

"Easily," said John, sinking the last of his beer. "About two-thirds of them were Aussies. Last night, when they heard we were an Australian unit, they wanted to give me the whole show. Verging on insubordination to their little boss over it, they insisted on making me an honorary member of their mess; then they promised to clear out this morning, orders or no orders. We had a whale of a night round the bar counter. I didn't feel so good this morning."

"Valiant service in a good cause," I commented. "Have a night-cap before you turn in."

Chalmers yawned, then burped happily. "No more for me, sir. I'm off to chase some sleep."



# 14

## *Bukit Panjang*

Directed by Majors Hobbs and Fisher, the remainder of the staff worked till a late hour making the surgical and medical departments ready for any patients who might arrive unexpectedly. The task was not easy as it had to be done under blackout conditions for fear of roving enemy aircraft.

Indeed, the Nipponese attacks on Singapore became more intense each day. Sergeant Sherriff who, in company with Sergeant Little, had visited the Medical Stores Department in the city, noted in his daily log:

> 27/1/42. Went to Singapore. While there experienced a severe bombing raid. Took shelter in a trench in front of the Supreme Court. One bomb fell about 100 yards away. The next fell amongst Chinese fishing craft on the waterfront, destroying about sixty of them. During the trip home we saw one enemy bomber brought down. A Hurricane fighter also came down at great speed, out of control and in flames. . . .

The school was the most comfortable billet the casualty clearing station had occupied since Mengkibol. Built largely of wood, a potential fire hazard for incendiary bombs, it had enough room

on the ground floor to take all bedridden cases. The upper floor, including an orderly-room and dispensary, was available for the staff.

Captain Lee and I shared the teachers' room upstairs. The attached bathroom and toilet provided great comfort when the attenuated water supply functioned. It is so easy to become either constipated or diarrhoeic in fast-moving warfare.

Wong, the dhobi, could not find a place to wash clothes, but Lee installed him in the empty coolie lines at the dairy farm. Here he worked faithfully until shelled out by Japanese artillery some eight days later.

The accommodation had to be supplemented by tents, as a section of ambulance drivers was attached to the unit. These were erected round the perimeter of the *padang*, the centre being clearly marked by Colonel Malcolm's large red cross. Slit trenches were dug, and space set aside as an ambulance park.

While considering the parking space for vehicles, I discovered our modest transport wing of four lorries and a car had been increased by three civilian trucks, one of which was painted bright red. It appeared to be in charge of Sapper Richards. His pal, Dixon, was also in possession of a truck on which he had stored his generator and electrical gear. He was busy camouflaging it with a green tent-fly when I saw him.

"Where did you and Richards pinch the trucks, Dixon?" I asked.

Dixon looked up furtively. "Well, sir, we knew you were in a hurry to get the stuff over from Johore, and me and Richards thought it would be O.K. to pick up two trucks abandoned on the roadside. Captain Lee thinks we might be able to keep them. The third one was found here."

Apparently the transport staff had been applying the principle of the Lord helping those who helped themselves. Captain Lee's eyes twinkled when I inquired casually about the "abandoned" trucks, but his answer was cryptic.

"Everything's jake!" he said. Once before we had been in a lot of bother for attempting to take away a car from the 10th Hospital. The 10th were quite hurt about it.

The main road outside our new camp was busy, with civilian refugees from Johore pouring along it all day; anxious Europeans,

in cars driven by turbaned Indian syces, Malay families crammed in old Fords, Chinese in rickshaws pulled by wiry coolies, venerable Tamils afoot, and crowds of agile native children, all heading for the supposed safety of Singapore. Going in the opposite direction was an endless stream of military traffic, each lorry having an aircraft spotter perched on the tail-board or atop the cab.

When enemy planes appeared, the vehicles, except those driven by hardy souls with an utter contempt for danger, stopped at the roadside while the occupants sought safety in the ditches —deep, smelly places, often half full of water. A civil engineer, who was taking two hundred labourers to build a road for the artillery through the swamps, arrived at the job with barely fifty, the remainder having sprung from the trucks at the first sound of an air-raid siren.

"Too scared to swallow their own spit!" he declared ironically. "I can't say I blame them, poor devils!"

The morning of 29th January was spent in erecting marquees within the school courtyard for use as extra wards. Mac Sheppard arrived with his second-in-command, Major Hugh Rayson. He told me he had been instructed to park the main dressing station of their field ambulance in the rubber plantation on the opposite side of the road. From there all lightly wounded would be cleared direct to the general hospitals, leaving the casualty clearing station to deal with the serious cases that required urgent surgical aid.

This was good, for it brought the surgical role of the casualty clearing station into proper focus once again, and simplified the allocation of the medical officers. I celebrated our reunion by giving Mac a bottle of whisky and an invitation for his officers to share our bathroom.

Another visitor was Major Bob Dick who gave me the new position of his headquarters at the nine-and-a-half milestone. He also was bivouacked in rubber, his ambulance cars still busily employed in clearing wounded from the other side of the Causeway.

"They'll be bringing you more customers soon," he said.

Basil Burdett, Red Cross commissioner, paid an informal visit, anxious in his kindly way to see that we had adequate comforts for the sick. I accused him of overworking, for his fine, sensitive face seemed more care-worn than when I had last seen it at Kluang. He admitted difficulty in securing suitable assistants for

his work, which now included the whole of the British and Dutch forces in Malaya and Sumatra.

Remembering our admirable friend Mr Murchison, from Fraser Estate, I recommended him strongly to Burdett who promised to interview him at the earliest opportunity. This occurred next day when Donald Murchison drove in to greet us. He told me he was now ready for a job with the Army, having finished off his estate business. Basil must have liked him, because next day Murchison was back in khaki as duly accredited Red Cross officer to the casualty clearing station and associated medical units.

This was the last time I saw Basil Burdett. He was killed on Sunday, 1st February, when the Moth plane, in which he had taken a lift to Sumatra, landed during an air raid on the aerodrome. The machine got down safely, but when Burdett was walking across the drome towards the Dutch representative waiting to greet him, a bomb fell about ten yards away, wounding him so mortally that he died in ten minutes. The authentic details were given me many months later by Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Coates, who was in Sumatra prior to capture.

The news, with no details, travelled fast through the medical corps. We cursed the tragic irony of fate that had entrusted such a valuable life to a pathetic little Moth, gallant but unarmed. The full significance of Burdett's loss was only realized during our subsequent long period of incarceration, when one saw clearly what immeasurable benefits his energy, his undaunted spirit, and his flair for aiding suffering humanity, might have brought to the weary sick in the prison camps.

Many severe casualties were received during the afternoon and night of the 29th. We were glad of the help received from the field ambulance, which contributed two shifts of experienced orderlies to take the place of the nurses who were still at the 10th Hospital. Two patients, grievously wounded, died during the night, despite the efforts of the resuscitation team. Next morning our padres had the mournful job of arranging burials in the new A.I.F. cemetery at the top of Reformatory Road.

When Glyn White telephoned, I tackled him about letting our sisters rejoin the unit. "There won't be any more danger here than where they are now," I assured him. "There is a small,

empty bungalow at the far end of the *padang* that can be cleared out and made ready for them."

Finally Glyn consented. Eager to bear the good news to the nurses, I went by car to the 10th Australian General Hospital at Barker Road, a fine suburban street lined by substantial homes set in tropical gardens. After a cordial welcome from Colonel E. Rowden White and Matron Paschke, who readily agreed to the immediate transfer of the sisters, I was greeted by many old friends, including Majors Carl Furner and Lyall Andrews, who formerly had been on the staff of the casualty clearing station, also Lieut.-Colonels Cotter Harvey and A. E. Coates, the senior physician and surgeon respectively, of whom I had seen very little since our trip over in the *Queen Mary*.

Cotter was busy, but Colonel Coates took time off for a few puffs at his pipe. "Where is all this going to end, Tom?" he asked reflectively.

"Damned if I know, Bert," I answered, "but if something doesn't happen soon I think we're in for another Dunkirk."

Six months later he was to propound the same question, as he sat on the other side of a crude table in a prison camp at Tavoy, idly watching me scribble these notes. My response still was, "Damned if I know!"

The 10th Hospital was working at high pressure. Extra tents had been erected to take the overflow of sick from the old school buildings where it was scarcely possible to squeeze between the crowded beds.

Our nurses, thrilled at the idea of coming back to the casualty clearing station, made haste to pack their belongings. Scorning my apologies for the poor accommodation I had to offer, they assured me that even a tent would suffice. Their fine morale was stimulating, and later in the day, when they arrived at Bukit Panjang, the orderlies greeted them with cheers. In fact, many hirsute privates who had been pleading overwork and an inexplicable loss of razor blades as a reason for their unkempt appearance, turned up at roll-call next morning clean-shaven and neat as new pins.

I still insisted on the early morning administrative parade, finding it not only a useful method of maintaining formal discipline, but also an easy channel through which news of the changing

battle situation could be passed on to the non-commissioned officers and men.

As dawn gatherings in the open were liable to attract the attention of roving enemy planes ("drawing the crabs", the men termed it), the parades were kept short and snappy. Two anti-aircraft pickets, Privates Lockwood and Lapton, were enjoined to maintain a sharp look-out. Frequently during the day their whistles shrilled the warning series of short, sharp blasts; but the men, who had become accustomed to them, usually kept on with their work, apart from an occasional glance skyward to assure themselves the bombers were intent on other objectives. Tengah aerodrome, five hundred yards on the other side of the railway line, was frequently plastered, causing the school buildings to shake with the repercussions of the bursting bombs.

The bombers did not overlook our troops in Johore Bahru, or the III Indian Corps headquarters on top of the hill. Major Peter Campbell and his driver, Johnnie Brooks, brought in Joe Mayo with a steel slug in his back. This was bad luck for Mayo, who had joined up only five days previously; his Army number, MX1, signified that his was the first enlistment of a Malayan resident in the A.I.F.

Brooks and Mayo were close pals. Both were from my home town of Newcastle, New South Wales, although for the past seven years Joe Mayo and his family had lived in Singapore, where he became one of Malaya's leading jockeys. Wearing the slouch hat as only Australians wear it, wiry and short in stature, shrewd from a practical knowledge of the ups and downs of life, both he and Brooks had typical brown hatchet faces that crinkled easily with good humour.

Now Mayo's face was pale from loss of blood, while Brooks, with a small wound between the eyes, displayed much more concern about his mate's condition than his own.

"Major Hobbs will take good care of Joe," I assured him. "You'd better stick around for a while until your wound is dressed and an X-ray taken."

"Ah! Strike a light, doc! A piece of stickin' plaster 'ull do," he protested. Major Campbell pointed to the first aid room. "Off you go, Johnnie, I'll wait for you. Better have the X-ray as the colonel advises."

While awaiting his driver, Peter Campbell showed me the car. There was a jagged hole in the side above the driving seat, and an outlet hole in the roof. The windscreen was a fragmented fringe around the frame. Several smaller holes allowed daylight to stream into the back of the sedan body. Peter grinned wryly as he pointed to the boot, which was intact.

"There are a hundred hand grenades in there, colonel. I was taking them up to one of the outlying units. We copped it near the corner of Jalan Lartin, just down the hill from III Corps headquarters, which appeared to be the bomber's main target. Luckily, we just managed to reach the safety of the roadside ditch as a bomb burst on the corner. Fortunately the explosion didn't touch off the grenades, but it was ghastly to see what it did to a bunch of natives." His face tightened. "There were four little Malay kids among them. It was pitiful to hear their moans without being able to do much for them."

Peter's unvarnished story took away what appetite I had for lunch. News of children being maimed always made my stomach contract. I tried to turn my thoughts to other matters. Evidently the Japanese had not taken long to find the new location of III Indian Corps. This was not surprising, as Johore was full of fifth-columnists; large Japanese rubber estates had existed there for many years.

Brigadier Seaver and Major Feinhols arrived unexpectedly at four o'clock, both very tired and fed up.

"We haven't come on business this time," said the brigadier, "but to see if you can spare us a cup of Australian tea. I'm told it's a first-rate reviver."

"Why, surely, sir," I answered, glancing curiously at the old boy's sweat-marked, rumpled jacket. "Come into the mess."

While Lee Ah Tan prepared a pot of fresh tea, the brigadier, prompted occasionally by Feinhols, told me of the bombing attack on his headquarters. Apparently the Nipponese planes, precise and deadly, had swooped on their objective with a facile accuracy that revealed their contempt of any opposition. The brigadier had spent part of the time spread-eagled on his office floor, until a lull allowed him to reach a trench. A General Staff colonel had lost an arm, many men were wounded, and the building was shattered.

I did not remark, "I thought corps headquarters would be

bombed", because the brigadier was not responsible for its wide-open location. There was too much tragedy about for smugness and it was evident that both men had been through a nerve-wracking experience. That was the last I saw of the likeable, kindly brigadier. He was bombed again while escaping to Sumatra after the surrender, but rumours reached us that he had survived.

Colonel Derham also paid the unit an informal visit during our late evening meal. Although he chatted pleasantly to the officers, including John Chalmers—whose leg he loved pulling gently—it was patent that his thoughts were elsewhere. On the way downstairs to his car, I outlined the main features of our work. His keen eyes swept over the tents, the buildings and the vehicle lines. The awaited comment did not come. Instead he leant with his back to the gate-post, looked up at the sky for a long moment, and said softly, "Do you believe in prayer, Tom?"

Startled by the query, I hesitated. "Why, y—yes, I believe I do."

"Well, pray tonight," he said earnestly. "Pray for a dark, cloudy sky with a ground mist. Pray that the enemy artillery won't have enough information to range on the Causeway. Our troops are crossing from the mainland at midnight."

Nodding slowly, I gazed skywards over the tree-tops, my mind engrossed with the implications behind Colonel Derham's statement. There had been heavy clouds with poor visibility for most of the day, and enemy aerial activity had been low. Now, following heavy tropical showers, the clouds were breaking up to display rugged gaps, through the clearest of which the pale edge of the moon shone mistily. As if annoyed by the lunar appearance, a dark mass of cumulus billowed in to fill the gap, but an upward-driving air current gave it no rest, and streaks of mist swirled in to replace it.

"I should not like to forecast from that skyscape," I said to my chief as he stepped into his car, "but I'll join with you in that prayer."

As the car slid away I recollected that his eldest son would be amongst the A.I.F. contingent crossing Johore Strait that night.

General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the Nipponese Commander in Malaya, had a weak point in his strategy that had not passed unnoticed at A.I.F. headquarters; it was a constant failure to follow the successive British withdrawals closely enough to maintain

contact with the retreating troops, on whom he might have inflicted unpredictable damage. On the other hand, he may have been so satisfied with his easy progress that he was content to avoid frontal attacks and the risk of further ambushes, as at Gemas and Ayer Hitam.

Fortunately, on this occasion Yamashita again failed to exploit his advantage. The British troops crossed the Causeway on the night of the 30th/31st January. On the following morning a series of loud, deep-toned explosions indicated to our listening ears that the link with the mainland was in process of destruction. Not until Monday, 2nd February, did the Japanese artillery range on to Singapore Island.

On the morning of the 31st, after a night that had witnessed truck-load after truck-load of tired but cheery troops pass down the road to their new sectors, an officer gave us details of the crossing, in which—as the official communiqué would say—"everything went according to plan".

"A jolly good show," he commented, "with the weather just right. The A.I.F. and other components of Westforce formed the vanguard. The rearguard—except for small parties of the East Surreys and the Gordons, who crossed later in sampans—was formed by the survivors of the gallant Argylls. Believe it or not, they came over in great style, their pipes skirling in full blast, cheered on by the Aussie detachment manning the bridge-head. Their colonel was the last man to cross. I'm a Sassenach, but I think the tune on the pipes was 'Blue Bonnets o'er the Border'."

This was a recital to thrill the blood of a Scot. I gave heartfelt thanks that there had been no casualties in a delicate military operation which, but for a benign providence, might have been accompanied by indescribable carnage.

The whole of the Malay peninsula was now in Japanese hands, except for one or two allied commandos who were still making forays on the long enemy line of communications. The back door of the much-vaunted fortress of Singapore was wide open to an attack for which, incredible as it may seem, no solid preparation had been made. So busy had we been that the stark facts of an ugly battle situation were slow to penetrate our understanding. It was known that Westforce was to defend the western half of the Island, while III Indian Corps, strongly reinforced by the

newly-arrived 18th British Division, was to defend the Naval Base and the eastern sector. The 18th, an East Anglian division, comprised many seasoned soldiers from Dunkirk, albeit softened by a three-month voyage in troopships, one of which (the *Empress of Asia*) was sunk by bombs on her arrival off Singapore Harbour.

Although the defence plans were none of my business, I was not happy about them. In the lull that followed the blowing of the Causeway, many disquieting rumours filtered down the line. One, brought in by Captain Lee, was authentic. It was to the effect that the Naval Base had been abandoned by the Navy, and the floating dock demolished.

"Abandoned!" I ejaculated sharply. "Why, they can't do that! The whole purpose of being here is to defend the base. Without it the Island becomes just another collection of palm-trees and native kampongs surrounding an open city."

"Nevertheless it's true," said Lee. "I've just accepted a gift of two beautiful refrigerators from there. The A.I.F. is salving as much of the furniture as possible."

About an hour later his depressing story was confirmed. From the gateway I noted lorry-loads of office furniture and fittings passing southward on the main road. One pulled up, and the driver came over. "I see you are running a hospital here, sir. Would you like some furniture?"

Thinking of the nurses' bungalow, I accepted the offer.

"Where did you get the wardrobes?" I inquired.

"From the Naval Base," he replied. "They've blown up the valuable machinery and the gates of the dry-dock. We've been left to clear up the houses and offices. All the Asiatic labourers have been paid off, and the Navy staff have gone to join ships."

"What lousy news!" I thought, as I showed him where to put a few comfortable chairs for the nurses. "Surely the Island can hold out till Churchill's promised aid arrives."

We believed that it could, although the wish was father to the thought. Our artillery resources were still strong, and the morale of the troops seemed good, although in those around us we noticed much puzzled anxiety and conjecture over the evacuation of the Naval Base. The pall of smoke hanging low over the destroyed dockyard was a constant reminder of its loss to Britain.

Also, there was a steady increase in the number of men pass-

ing through the casualty clearing station with cards marked N.Y.D.(N), which is the army way of saying that a man is suffering from a nervous disorder not yet diagnosed. As many of them were infantrymen who had been fighting by day and moving by night, with very little sleep in between, we regarded them as suffering from nervous exhaustion rather than neurosis.

A few, who had gunshot wounds of the hands or feet, received the benefit of any doubt that crossed our minds when told that the injuries were accidental. It is not easy to disbelieve a wounded man when he states that he was cleaning his rifle and "didn't know it was loaded". Here one came up against a conflicting ideology in the conceived role of the medical service: whether to subordinate humanitarian duty to one's patient to the need of hard-pressed fighting units for every available man. On occasions it seemed better to let a robust neurotic fill a hospital bed until his case was carefully diagnosed, than risk sending a genuine nervous wreck back to his battalion.

Indeed, hospital beds were almost at a premium, although an Australian hospital-ship was expected in a few days' time with accommodation for 180 patients. The 10th and 13th hospitals were now taking patients from the casualty clearing station in alternate periods of twenty-four hours, the 13th having established itself in St Patrick's School at Katong, a seaside suburb on the south-east of the Island.

Glyn White ordered us to send four nurses there, as the hospital was short-staffed. So reluctantly we had to part with Sister Hannah and Staff-Nurses Gardham, Dorsch and Raymont. Loud in their lamentations at having to leave us again they went away like good soldiers amid a chorus of "good-byes".

The last day of January was a quiet one, with no raids from the bombers. Major Bob Dick came over before noon and seated himself on the office table. Refusing a cigarette, he pulled out a pipe. As he pushed fresh tobacco into the bowl, his eyes twinkled. "You were right about that wild driver of mine," he announced.

"Which wild driver?" I inquired, momentarily puzzled.

"You remember," said Bob, "the hard-boiled gent who blazed off with a revolver in your mess at Mengkibol. Don't you recollect abusing him, although I was inclined to support his statement that he was a good soldier?"

"Oh, yes!" I laughed at the recollection of the incident. "What's he done now?"

"Well," said Bob, "the other night, when I was detailed to supply an ambulance car company in case of casualties during the Causeway crossing, I included him and his cobber, another tough bloke, in the assignment. And what do you think the two rascals did when they found things were all quiet up at the Causeway?"

"Ran across into Johore Bahru and looted the Sultan's palace," I suggested facetiously.

"They did not," said Bob, his voice rising with mingled amusement and scorn. "They turned the ambulance round and beat it hell-bent for Singapore's red-light area where they parked it in Lavender Street, outside a Chinese brothel. It remained there all night—my ambulance, mark you! Can you imagine it!"*

"Shocking!" I said. "Dereliction of duty in the face of the enemy!"

Then I roared with laughter, and Bob joined me as we saw the humour of his reprobates' social engagements in the midst of battle.

"Have they returned to the fold yet?" I asked as we recovered from our mirth.

"Yes," said Bob. "Rolled in about an hour ago looking as innocent as two cherubs. 'A little bit of tyre trouble' was their excuse. They had forgotten the watchful eyes of the Provost Corps in the city and the fact that the parked ambulance was easily identified by its number and unit markings. What should I do with them? They are sure to become infected and be an all-round blasted nuisance."

"In the Japanese Army they'd be shot within twenty-four hours," I said seriously, "whereas, in our pampered set-up, a court martial—after a long delay—might let them off with three months in prison. However, you know the book of rules as well as I do."

"Then I think a field court martial is indicated," said Bob.

* The following comment was made by Colonel A. P. Derham, C.B.E., D.S.O., when he kindly criticized the manuscript: "This must not be published. These two men should have been court-martialled and shot . . . not because they went to a brothel, but because they deserted in the face of the enemy at one of the most critical moments in the history of the British Empire; and my objection to the publication is made even more strong by your suggestion that it will only cause a laugh."

"They'll run the risk of a stiffer sentence; although it's going to mean an awful lot of paperwork for me," he added, as I led him along the veranda towards a cup of tea.

Gerry Sanders and his friend Warin, two planters from Kajang who had been generous hosts to the unit during its stay there, called in to greet us. Warin had been the last European to leave Kajang after a brisk period of duty as air defence warden.

"I didn't get away until two days after the British front-line troops had retreated through the village," he related, "and I had to cycle south for forty miles before I caught up with them. At first they thought I was a fifth-columnist."

"How on earth did you cycle south when all the road bridges and culverts had been demolished?" asked Captain Simpson, a particular friend of Warin.

"Quite easily," replied the latter. "Although the sappers had blown the main road pretty thoroughly, there were a few parallel tracks in the neighbouring estates that had been overlooked. I picked up another planter on the way who had a good knowledge of the countryside, so it wasn't very difficult to find our way."

"I'll bet the Japs found it with equal ease," said someone in the circle of interested officers. "Why in the name of common sense didn't the army use you blokes as guides in the districts you knew so well? You can't tell me that former employees of Japanese estates haven't been used right and left as guides by the enemy."

"Precisely!" broke in Sanders, who was dressed in the uniform of the Selangor Local Defence Corps. "Take the case of the Local Defence Corps, mainly composed of men who fought in the last war. In Kuala Lumpur and Kajang we drilled, we mapped the estate tracks, we knew every power station, factory and reservoir. Not only were we competent to handle Malays and Tamils, but we could converse with them in their own languages. Loyal natives could have been welded into a useful organization in local districts, but what happened? When war struck we were mobilized, played about for a few days like boy scouts—with apologies to the scouts—and then were disbanded."

"What did you do then?" asked John Chalmers.

"Like most of the other planters whose families were safely overseas, I set fire to the surplus rubber in the estate factory, gave the coolies food, money, and permission to loot my bungalow,

"I think we might do better than this, Newton," I said, with a hope I was far from feeling.

"I doubt if you will, sir," he replied. "Every worth-while building is already occupied."

Nevertheless we drove off, and turned south on Bukit Timah Road as far as Holland Road.

"Administrative headquarters are shifting into two buildings up here," said Lee, pointing to Holland Road.

"Let's drive up then, and we may find Glyn White," I said. "I want to tell him the dairy farm is a rotten place for a casualty clearing station. Whoever thought of it doesn't know anything about the danger of infecting surgical wounds with anthrax and tetanus."

Headquarters had certainly bagged two palatial bungalows for themselves, either of which would have served the casualty clearing station very well. Glyn White had not yet arrived.

"This is the place we ought to have," I said. "You don't suppose they'd hand it over?"

Lee laughed at my wishful thinking.

"Ever hear of any headquarters parting with accommodation to a field unit?" he asked.

I admitted that I had not, so we turned the car round to scan the roadsides thoroughly for signs of unoccupied dwellings. Our luck was out. In dismal silence we retraced our route through Bukit Panjang village, some six miles from the Causeway.

"Looks like the cow paddock after all," I said. "We can't select a place any farther north of here or we'll have the hospital within range of enemy artillery fire from Johore. Hey! Pull the car up for a minute. Here's a prospect!"

Pulling into the roadside at my sudden exclamation, Captain Lee stopped the car. We had just passed the junction of the Choa Chu Kang Road with the main highway, and I had seen amid the trees on the left a modern two-storied building. A sign, reading "Bukit Panjang English School", flanked a wide gateway that led into a green *padang* in front of the main wing.

School buildings make quite good military hospitals. The inside of this one, with spacious rooms built round an open courtyard, looked particularly attractive. The only sign of life on the ground floor was a cook in a Royal Air Force kepi, who was scrub-

bing a mess table near an improvised kitchen. He seemed interested in my approach.

"Would you mind telling me who lives here?" I asked politely.

"Yessir! About fifteen officers and thirty other ranks of the R.A.F.," he answered, with the promptness of an old regular.

"May I see your senior officer, then?"

"I'm sorry, sir, he won't be in for an hour yet. All officers and men work at the Ford factory down the road. They are assembling plane parts."

"Oh! I see," I said slowly, at the same time having a good look round the scene. Thanking the obliging cook, I walked outside towards the gate. From a prior knowledge of Malayan high schools I knew that the place would suit a casualty clearing station admirably. Of course it was near an artillery target in the crossroads, and jammed between the railway line and the main north road, but compared to the cow farm it was such a palace that I resolved to discount the tactical disadvantages.

The *padang* would take extra tentage, besides making a fine turn-around for ambulance traffic. The Air Force had built a kitchen. Ah! The Air Force—there was the snag. Dammit! A mere handful of officers and men had no right to use a big building as a boarding-house when a casualty clearing station required it for wounded fighting men. They could go and live on the job at the factory or, better still, do some badly needed flying. This sounded so unjust that I chuckled with the realization that, subconsciously, I had been working up an argument to gain possession of the building. I was in much better spirits when I re-entered the car.

"That's a suitable place," I called to Lee who was dozing over the wheel in the stifling heat of the sedan interior. "Would you like to look at it? It is our last hope."

Lee, who had had very little sleep in the last three days, trod wearily on the self-starter. "If you don't mind, I'll take your word for it, sir."

"Right! Then we'd better drive to Tampoi and see Colonel Kent Hughes. Keep a look out for Glyn White's car in case he passes us along the road."

Fortunately both Glyn White and Kent Hughes were in the former's dismantled office when we arrived. Explaining our objec-

tions to the dairy farm, we put forward the alternative suggestion of the Bukit Panjang school, skating lightly on the fact that the R.A.F. was in legal possession. Kent Hughes, scion of a brilliant Victorian family, having asked a few shrewd questions, made up his mind without delay.

"Go, take the school," he said. "I'll endeavour to make your action official with Malaya Command. In any case, the A.I.F. has been told to fend for itself in the western sector of the Island, and to assume responsibility for its defence."

This order eased my conscience by giving me an official background on which to work. Frankly I did not like hijacking the R.A.F. quarters, mainly because the Air Force comprised many pleasant fellows. I'll still doff my hat to the memory of those of them who, for lack of better machines, took the air in Wirraways against hopeless odds to assail the Jap squadrons.

Returning to the casualty clearing station we called Major Chalmers into conference.

"John," I said. "You have been selected to play the part of the cuckoo in the nest, the nest in this case being an R.A.F. one."

Chalmers stroked his nose, his face wrinkling gleefully as I outlined the situation. I indicated the need for a combination of firmness and tact. "Your rank should be high enough to carry you through the inevitable arguments. If the Air Force brings too much pressure to bear, send me an SOS or phone Colonel Kent Hughes at Holland Road. Take a truck-load of our equipment together with your own baggage. Drive to the Bukit Panjang school, see the senior officer there—probably he's only a flight-lieutenant—and tell him you have been instructed to commence opening a light section of the casualty clearing station in the building. Furthermore you are expecting the main body in the morning. I'll have the trucks loaded early tomorrow, and by noon we should be able to present the Air Force with a *fait accompli.*"

Saluting in naval fashion, Chalmers said, "Aye, aye, sir!" He gloried in dilemmas that had an element of buccaneering in them. At his suggestion it was arranged that Major Burnside should take him over in the car belonging to the mobile bacteriological laboratory. Burnside could select a corner of the school grounds for his vehicles.

I was more than a little anxious when Chalmers set out, fear-

ing that, if his intrusion were repulsed, I would be forced to seek yet another site. Burnside had promised to return that night, but administrative details kept me so occupied that I did not have a chance to see him until breakfast next morning.

The meal was a lively one, for everybody was jubilant at the thought of settling down to steady work in good buildings on the Island. In war, one lives very much from day to day, untroubled by premonitions of the weeks ahead. Casualties had not been severe during the night, enabling relays of officers and men to average four or five hours' sleep. There was a good deal of banter about Chalmers' engagement with the Air Force, in our first inter-service tangle.

"It will be dead easy," said one of the younger officers.

Burnside looked up from his bacon and mash. "I'm afraid it isn't going to be easy, sir. The English flight-lieutenant gave Chalmers a courteous reception, but was quite firm in stating that he had no intention of vacating the school without orders from R.A.F. headquarters."

As this did not sound reassuring, I asked Burnside what had been John Chalmers' reaction.

"Well, when I left," Burnside continued, "he was ensconced in a mess-room chair behind a large *stengah*. He appeared to be on the best of terms with several Australian flying-officers who were there. For their part, they were anxious to give Chalmers the building as soon as they heard it was wanted for wounded, but their flight-lieutenant was adamant, even to the extent of threatening to report any of them who took individual action against his instructions."

This was better news, as it indicated the presence of allies among the potential opposition. Hoping that time and Colonel Kent Hughes would square matters officially for us, I set about having the lorries loaded for dispatch to Bukit Panjang. At the same time our remaining patients were cleared to the 10th Hospital by ambulances.

The high spirits of the unit personnel were reflected in an incident during the loading of the lorries. As usual, the loading officer, Captain Simpson, was badly handicapped by a shortage of trucks. There had been no response to our appeals to other units, and scrounging methods had proved ineffective. This was

rather surprising, for the registrar of the 13th Hospital once had alluded to the casualty clearing station as the "best team of scroungers in Malaya".

About eleven, in answer to a call from Simpson, I saw a fine three-ton truck that had just driven into the compound. Standing alongside, in the gorgeous turban and trim service uniform of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, was a tall Sikh driver. Saluting ceremoniously as I approached, he said, "Lorry is here as ordered, *sahib*."

"That's what he told me," whispered Stuart Simpson, drawing me aside. "It's a lovely lorry, but I thought we'd better not use it without consulting you. Where did you get it?"

"From the fairies," I replied. "It has just blown in like 'Hansel in on Robin'—if you remember your Burns. I don't know who sent it, but don't let's look a gift-horse in the mouth. Load it quickly, and whisk it off."

The loading crew, sensing a jest, had the truck loaded in a shade over five minutes. Just as it was ready to drive off, an agitated jemadar from the Royal Indian Army Service Corps drove in, berated the driver soundly in Hindustani, then explained to Captain Simpson in voluble English that his poor misguided and misbegotten driver had brought the vehicle to the wrong unit. I joined in to listen to the harangue. A loquacious Indian is always worth watching, with his flashing white teeth, rolling eyes, and arms waving like a semaphore. Captain Simpson introduced me. Between handshakes, salutes and scattered intra-Empire compliments we endeavoured to persuade the worthy jemadar that it would be much easier for the Sikh driver to travel a few short miles (thirteen to be exact) to Bukit Panjang than to give our weary men the trouble of unloading there and then. His obvious respect for higher rank, allied to his native politeness, caused the jemadar to weaken under our plausible arguments. Finally he consented to our use of the lorry for one trip only. Well pleased with the agreement, Captain Simpson proceeded to test the truck's springs by adding a couple of tons to the load. It creaked out shortly afterwards with one of our orderlies perched on top as a guide to the driver.

After two o'clock the work had gone on so well that I was able to send Hobbs, Fisher and Burnside away to help Chalmers with

the organization of the new hospital at Bukit Panjang. No distress signals had come from there so I assumed that all was well. Later in the afternoon I left the remainder of the work at Johore Bahru in charge of a small rear-party and moved over to the school.

To my pleasant surprise I found all the Air Force officers packing their kits preparatory to moving out. Generously, they left us their mess crockery, furniture, and a plentiful supply of attractive drinks, including a case of English beer which we had not sampled for a long time. Everyone, even the little flight-lieutenant, was so decent that I felt coals of fire descending on my head. When thanking them I arranged that our mess should pay for any food or drink that was left, but the subsequent exigencies of war never gave us a chance to repay the debt.

John Chalmers' report, given to me that evening over a pot of beer in the mess-room, was colourful.

"A damn fine lot of lads," he said. "Although the little flight-loot was a bit touchy at first. He said he couldn't do anything except through the proper channels—you know how long that takes—and this morning he produced a deputy assistant provost marshal to warn me off the premises."

"How did you fare with the deputy assistant provost marshal?" I asked, with keen interest.

"Shucks!" said John. "He was only a flying-officer and I wasn't frightened of him. He asked me if I knew what an Air Force deputy assistant provost marshal was, and I said I didn't. Then I invited him to have a drink which he did, and insisted on returning it. When we were having the second round, the flight-lieutenant came in, so we had another drink. While we were discussing the problem amicably over the beer the first convoy of casualty clearing station trucks arrived. Suddenly the schoolrooms seemed to fill with army drivers, shouting orderlies and piles of gear. In fact the whole place was a minor bedlam in no time at all. The R.A.F. officers, apparently deciding that the game was moving too fast for them, left to telephone their Singapore headquarters for further advice. They returned a little later looking fairly happy, and said they had agreed to concede the place to the casualty clearing station."

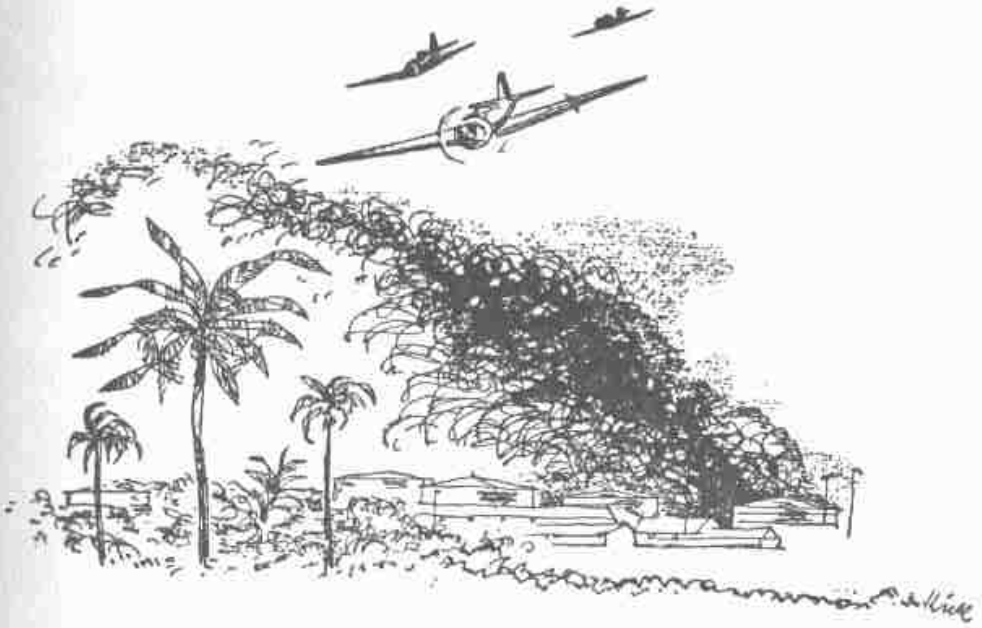
Delighted with the whimsy of John's recital, I laughed heartily

"Well done, John! But tell me, how were you able to invite Air Force officers to have a drink in their own mess?"

"Easily," said John, sinking the last of his beer. "About two-thirds of them were Aussies. Last night, when they heard we were an Australian unit, they wanted to give me the whole show. Verging on insubordination to their little boss over it, they insisted on making me an honorary member of their mess; then they promised to clear out this morning, orders or no orders. We had a whale of a night round the bar counter. I didn't feel so good this morning."

"Valiant service in a good cause," I commented. "Have a night-cap before you turn in."

Chalmers yawned, then burped happily. "No more for me, sir. I'm off to chase some sleep."



# 14

## *Bukit Panjang*

DIRECTED by Majors Hobbs and Fisher, the remainder of the staff worked till a late hour making the surgical and medical departments ready for any patients who might arrive unexpectedly. The task was not easy as it had to be done under blackout conditions for fear of roving enemy aircraft.

Indeed, the Nipponese attacks on Singapore became more intense each day. Sergeant Sherriff who, in company with Sergeant Little, had visited the Medical Stores Department in the city, noted in his daily log:

> 27/1/42. Went to Singapore. While there experienced a severe bombing raid. Took shelter in a trench in front of the Supreme Court. One bomb fell about 100 yards away. The next fell amongst Chinese fishing craft on the waterfront, destroying about sixty of them. During the trip home we saw one enemy bomber brought down. A Hurricane fighter also came down at great speed, out of control and in flames. . . .

The school was the most comfortable billet the casualty clearing station had occupied since Mengkibol. Built largely of wood, a potential fire hazard for incendiary bombs, it had enough room

on the ground floor to take all bedridden cases. The upper floor, including an orderly-room and dispensary, was available for the staff.

Captain Lee and I shared the teachers' room upstairs. The attached bathroom and toilet provided great comfort when the attenuated water supply functioned. It is so easy to become either constipated or diarrhoeic in fast-moving warfare.

Wong, the dhobi, could not find a place to wash clothes, but Lee installed him in the empty coolie lines at the dairy farm. Here he worked faithfully until shelled out by Japanese artillery some eight days later.

The accommodation had to be supplemented by tents, as a section of ambulance drivers was attached to the unit. These were erected round the perimeter of the *padang*, the centre being clearly marked by Colonel Malcolm's large red cross. Slit trenches were dug, and space set aside as an ambulance park.

While considering the parking space for vehicles, I discovered our modest transport wing of four lorries and a car had been increased by three civilian trucks, one of which was painted bright red. It appeared to be in charge of Sapper Richards. His pal, Dixon, was also in possession of a truck on which he had stored his generator and electrical gear. He was busy camouflaging it with a green tent-fly when I saw him.

"Where did you and Richards pinch the trucks, Dixon?" I asked.

Dixon looked up furtively. "Well, sir, we knew you were in a hurry to get the stuff over from Johore, and me and Richards thought it would be O.K. to pick up two trucks abandoned on the roadside. Captain Lee thinks we might be able to keep them. The third one was found here."

Apparently the transport staff had been applying the principle of the Lord helping those who helped themselves. Captain Lee's eyes twinkled when I inquired casually about the "abandoned" trucks, but his answer was cryptic.

"Everything's jake!" he said. Once before we had been in a lot of bother for attempting to take away a car from the 10th Hospital. The 10th were quite hurt about it.

The main road outside our new camp was busy, with civilian refugees from Johore pouring along it all day; anxious Europeans,

in cars driven by turbaned Indian syces, Malay families crammed in old Fords, Chinese in rickshaws pulled by wiry coolies, venerable Tamils afoot, and crowds of agile native children, all heading for the supposed safety of Singapore. Going in the opposite direction was an endless stream of military traffic, each lorry having an aircraft spotter perched on the tail-board or atop the cab.

When enemy planes appeared, the vehicles, except those driven by hardy souls with an utter contempt for danger, stopped at the roadside while the occupants sought safety in the ditches —deep, smelly places, often half full of water. A civil engineer, who was taking two hundred labourers to build a road for the artillery through the swamps, arrived at the job with barely fifty, the remainder having sprung from the trucks at the first sound of an air-raid siren.

"Too scared to swallow their own spit!" he declared ironically. "I can't say I blame them, poor devils!"

The morning of 29th January was spent in erecting marquees within the school courtyard for use as extra wards. Mac Sheppard arrived with his second-in-command, Major Hugh Rayson. He told me he had been instructed to park the main dressing station of their field ambulance in the rubber plantation on the opposite side of the road. From there all lightly wounded would be cleared direct to the general hospitals, leaving the casualty clearing station to deal with the serious cases that required urgent surgical aid.

This was good, for it brought the surgical role of the casualty clearing station into proper focus once again, and simplified the allocation of the medical officers. I celebrated our reunion by giving Mac a bottle of whisky and an invitation for his officers to share our bathroom.

Another visitor was Major Bob Dick who gave me the new position of his headquarters at the nine-and-a-half milestone. He also was bivouacked in rubber, his ambulance cars still busily employed in clearing wounded from the other side of the Causeway.

"They'll be bringing you more customers soon," he said.

Basil Burdett, Red Cross commissioner, paid an informal visit, anxious in his kindly way to see that we had adequate comforts for the sick. I accused him of overworking, for his fine, sensitive face seemed more care-worn than when I had last seen it at Kluang. He admitted difficulty in securing suitable assistants for

his work, which now included the whole of the British and Dutch forces in Malaya and Sumatra.

Remembering our admirable friend Mr Murchison, from Fraser Estate, I recommended him strongly to Burdett who promised to interview him at the earliest opportunity. This occurred next day when Donald Murchison drove in to greet us. He told me he was now ready for a job with the Army, having finished off his estate business. Basil must have liked him, because next day Murchison was back in khaki as duly accredited Red Cross officer to the casualty clearing station and associated medical units.

This was the last time I saw Basil Burdett. He was killed on Sunday, 1st February, when the Moth plane, in which he had taken a lift to Sumatra, landed during an air raid on the aerodrome. The machine got down safely, but when Burdett was walking across the drome towards the Dutch representative waiting to greet him, a bomb fell about ten yards away, wounding him so mortally that he died in ten minutes. The authentic details were given me many months later by Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Coates, who was in Sumatra prior to capture.

The news, with no details, travelled fast through the medical corps. We cursed the tragic irony of fate that had entrusted such a valuable life to a pathetic little Moth, gallant but unarmed. The full significance of Burdett's loss was only realized during our subsequent long period of incarceration, when one saw clearly what immeasurable benefits his energy, his undaunted spirit, and his flair for aiding suffering humanity, might have brought to the weary sick in the prison camps.

Many severe casualties were received during the afternoon and night of the 29th. We were glad of the help received from the field ambulance, which contributed two shifts of experienced orderlies to take the place of the nurses who were still at the 10th Hospital. Two patients, grievously wounded, died during the night, despite the efforts of the resuscitation team. Next morning our padres had the mournful job of arranging burials in the new A.I.F. cemetery at the top of Reformatory Road.

When Glyn White telephoned, I tackled him about letting our sisters rejoin the unit. "There won't be any more danger here than where they are now," I assured him. "There is a small,

empty bungalow at the far end of the *padang* that can be cleared out and made ready for them."

Finally Glyn consented. Eager to bear the good news to the nurses, I went by car to the 10th Australian General Hospital at Barker Road, a fine suburban street lined by substantial homes set in tropical gardens. After a cordial welcome from Colonel E. Rowden White and Matron Paschke, who readily agreed to the immediate transfer of the sisters, I was greeted by many old friends, including Majors Carl Furner and Lyall Andrews, who formerly had been on the staff of the casualty clearing station, also Lieut.-Colonels Cotter Harvey and A. E. Coates, the senior physician and surgeon respectively, of whom I had seen very little since our trip over in the *Queen Mary*.

Cotter was busy, but Colonel Coates took time off for a few puffs at his pipe. "Where is all this going to end, Tom?" he asked reflectively.

"Damned if I know, Bert," I answered, "but if something doesn't happen soon I think we're in for another Dunkirk."

Six months later he was to propound the same question, as he sat on the other side of a crude table in a prison camp at Tavoy, idly watching me scribble these notes. My response still was, "Damned if I know!"

The 10th Hospital was working at high pressure. Extra tents had been erected to take the overflow of sick from the old school buildings where it was scarcely possible to squeeze between the crowded beds.

Our nurses, thrilled at the idea of coming back to the casualty clearing station, made haste to pack their belongings. Scorning my apologies for the poor accommodation I had to offer, they assured me that even a tent would suffice. Their fine morale was stimulating, and later in the day, when they arrived at Bukit Panjang, the orderlies greeted them with cheers. In fact, many hirsute privates who had been pleading overwork and an inexplicable loss of razor blades as a reason for their unkempt appearance, turned up at roll-call next morning clean-shaven and neat as new pins.

I still insisted on the early morning administrative parade, finding it not only a useful method of maintaining formal discipline, but also an easy channel through which news of the changing

battle situation could be passed on to the non-commissioned officers and men.

As dawn gatherings in the open were liable to attract the attention of roving enemy planes ("drawing the crabs", the men termed it), the parades were kept short and snappy. Two anti-aircraft pickets, Privates Lockwood and Lapton, were enjoined to maintain a sharp look-out. Frequently during the day their whistles shrilled the warning series of short, sharp blasts; but the men, who had become accustomed to them, usually kept on with their work, apart from an occasional glance skyward to assure themselves the bombers were intent on other objectives. Tengah aerodrome, five hundred yards on the other side of the railway line, was frequently plastered, causing the school buildings to shake with the repercussions of the bursting bombs.

The bombers did not overlook our troops in Johore Bahru, or the III Indian Corps headquarters on top of the hill. Major Peter Campbell and his driver, Johnnie Brooks, brought in Joe Mayo with a steel slug in his back. This was bad luck for Mayo, who had joined up only five days previously; his Army number, MX1, signified that his was the first enlistment of a Malayan resident in the A.I.F.

Brooks and Mayo were close pals. Both were from my home town of Newcastle, New South Wales, although for the past seven years Joe Mayo and his family had lived in Singapore, where he became one of Malaya's leading jockeys. Wearing the slouch hat as only Australians wear it, wiry and short in stature, shrewd from a practical knowledge of the ups and downs of life, both he and Brooks had typical brown hatchet faces that crinkled easily with good humour.

Now Mayo's face was pale from loss of blood, while Brooks, with a small wound between the eyes, displayed much more concern about his mate's condition than his own.

"Major Hobbs will take good care of Joe," I assured him. "You'd better stick around for a while until your wound is dressed and an X-ray taken."

"Ah! Strike a light, doc! A piece of stickin' plaster 'ull do," he protested. Major Campbell pointed to the first aid room. "Off you go, Johnnie, I'll wait for you. Better have the X-ray as the colonel advises."

While awaiting his driver, Peter Campbell showed me the car. There was a jagged hole in the side above the driving seat, and an outlet hole in the roof. The windscreen was a fragmented fringe around the frame. Several smaller holes allowed daylight to stream into the back of the sedan body. Peter grinned wryly as he pointed to the boot, which was intact.

"There are a hundred hand grenades in there, colonel. I was taking them up to one of the outlying units. We copped it near the corner of Jalan Lartin, just down the hill from III Corps headquarters, which appeared to be the bomber's main target. Luckily, we just managed to reach the safety of the roadside ditch as a bomb burst on the corner. Fortunately the explosion didn't touch off the grenades, but it was ghastly to see what it did to a bunch of natives." His face tightened. "There were four little Malay kids among them. It was pitiful to hear their moans without being able to do much for them."

Peter's unvarnished story took away what appetite I had for lunch. News of children being maimed always made my stomach contract. I tried to turn my thoughts to other matters. Evidently the Japanese had not taken long to find the new location of III Indian Corps. This was not surprising, as Johore was full of fifth-columnists; large Japanese rubber estates had existed there for many years.

Brigadier Seaver and Major Feinhols arrived unexpectedly at four o'clock, both very tired and fed up.

"We haven't come on business this time," said the brigadier, "but to see if you can spare us a cup of Australian tea. I'm told it's a first-rate reviver."

"Why, surely, sir," I answered, glancing curiously at the old boy's sweat-marked, rumpled jacket. "Come into the mess."

While Lee Ah Tan prepared a pot of fresh tea, the brigadier, prompted occasionally by Feinhols, told me of the bombing attack on his headquarters. Apparently the Nipponese planes, precise and deadly, had swooped on their objective with a facile accuracy that revealed their contempt of any opposition. The brigadier had spent part of the time spread-eagled on his office floor, until a lull allowed him to reach a trench. A General Staff colonel had lost an arm, many men were wounded, and the building was shattered.

I did not remark, "I thought corps headquarters would be

bombed", because the brigadier was not responsible for its wide-open location. There was too much tragedy about for smugness and it was evident that both men had been through a nerve-wracking experience. That was the last I saw of the likeable, kindly brigadier. He was bombed again while escaping to Sumatra after the surrender, but rumours reached us that he had survived.

Colonel Derham also paid the unit an informal visit during our late evening meal. Although he chatted pleasantly to the officers, including John Chalmers—whose leg he loved pulling gently—it was patent that his thoughts were elsewhere. On the way downstairs to his car, I outlined the main features of our work. His keen eyes swept over the tents, the buildings and the vehicle lines. The awaited comment did not come. Instead he leant with his back to the gate-post, looked up at the sky for a long moment, and said softly, "Do you believe in prayer, Tom?"

Startled by the query, I hesitated. "Why, y—yes, I believe I do."

"Well, pray tonight," he said earnestly. "Pray for a dark, cloudy sky with a ground mist. Pray that the enemy artillery won't have enough information to range on the Causeway. Our troops are crossing from the mainland at midnight."

Nodding slowly, I gazed skywards over the tree-tops, my mind engrossed with the implications behind Colonel Derham's statement. There had been heavy clouds with poor visibility for most of the day, and enemy aerial activity had been low. Now, following heavy tropical showers, the clouds were breaking up to display rugged gaps, through the clearest of which the pale edge of the moon shone mistily. As if annoyed by the lunar appearance, a dark mass of cumulus billowed in to fill the gap, but an upward-driving air current gave it no rest, and streaks of mist swirled in to replace it.

"I should not like to forecast from that skyscape," I said to my chief as he stepped into his car, "but I'll join with you in that prayer."

As the car slid away I recollected that his eldest son would be amongst the A.I.F. contingent crossing Johore Strait that night.

General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the Nipponese Commander in Malaya, had a weak point in his strategy that had not passed unnoticed at A.I.F. headquarters; it was a constant failure to follow the successive British withdrawals closely enough to maintain

contact with the retreating troops, on whom he might have inflicted unpredictable damage. On the other hand, he may have been so satisfied with his easy progress that he was content to avoid frontal attacks and the risk of further ambushes, as at Gemas and Ayer Hitam.

Fortunately, on this occasion Yamashita again failed to exploit his advantage. The British troops crossed the Causeway on the night of the 30th/31st January. On the following morning a series of loud, deep-toned explosions indicated to our listening ears that the link with the mainland was in process of destruction. Not until Monday, 2nd February, did the Japanese artillery range on to Singapore Island.

On the morning of the 31st, after a night that had witnessed truck-load after truck-load of tired but cheery troops pass down the road to their new sectors, an officer gave us details of the crossing, in which—as the official communiqué would say—"everything went according to plan".

"A jolly good show," he commented, "with the weather just right. The A.I.F. and other components of Westforce formed the vanguard. The rearguard—except for small parties of the East Surreys and the Gordons, who crossed later in sampans—was formed by the survivors of the gallant Argylls. Believe it or not, they came over in great style, their pipes skirling in full blast, cheered on by the Aussie detachment manning the bridge-head. Their colonel was the last man to cross. I'm a Sassenach, but I think the tune on the pipes was 'Blue Bonnets o'er the Border'."

This was a recital to thrill the blood of a Scot. I gave heartfelt thanks that there had been no casualties in a delicate military operation which, but for a benign providence, might have been accompanied by indescribable carnage.

The whole of the Malay peninsula was now in Japanese hands, except for one or two allied commandos who were still making forays on the long enemy line of communications. The back door of the much-vaunted fortress of Singapore was wide open to an attack for which, incredible as it may seem, no solid preparation had been made. So busy had we been that the stark facts of an ugly battle situation were slow to penetrate our understanding. It was known that Westforce was to defend the western half of the Island, while III Indian Corps, strongly reinforced by the

newly-arrived 18th British Division, was to defend the Naval Base and the eastern sector. The 18th, an East Anglian division, comprised many seasoned soldiers from Dunkirk, albeit softened by a three-month voyage in troopships, one of which (the *Empress of Asia*) was sunk by bombs on her arrival off Singapore Harbour.

Although the defence plans were none of my business, I was not happy about them. In the lull that followed the blowing of the Causeway, many disquieting rumours filtered down the line. One, brought in by Captain Lee, was authentic. It was to the effect that the Naval Base had been abandoned by the Navy, and the floating dock demolished.

"Abandoned!" I ejaculated sharply. "Why, they can't do that! The whole purpose of being here is to defend the base. Without it the Island becomes just another collection of palm-trees and native kampongs surrounding an open city."

"Nevertheless it's true," said Lee. "I've just accepted a gift of two beautiful refrigerators from there. The A.I.F. is salving as much of the furniture as possible."

About an hour later his depressing story was confirmed. From the gateway I noted lorry-loads of office furniture and fittings passing southward on the main road. One pulled up, and the driver came over. "I see you are running a hospital here, sir. Would you like some furniture?"

Thinking of the nurses' bungalow, I accepted the offer.

"Where did you get the wardrobes?" I inquired.

"From the Naval Base," he replied. "They've blown up the valuable machinery and the gates of the dry-dock. We've been left to clear up the houses and offices. All the Asiatic labourers have been paid off, and the Navy staff have gone to join ships."

"What lousy news!" I thought, as I showed him where to put a few comfortable chairs for the nurses. "Surely the Island can hold out till Churchill's promised aid arrives."

We believed that it could, although the wish was father to the thought. Our artillery resources were still strong, and the morale of the troops seemed good, although in those around us we noticed much puzzled anxiety and conjecture over the evacuation of the Naval Base. The pall of smoke hanging low over the destroyed dockyard was a constant reminder of its loss to Britain.

Also, there was a steady increase in the number of men pass-

ing through the casualty clearing station with cards marked N.Y.D.(N), which is the army way of saying that a man is suffering from a nervous disorder not yet diagnosed. As many of them were infantrymen who had been fighting by day and moving by night, with very little sleep in between, we regarded them as suffering from nervous exhaustion rather than neurosis.

A few, who had gunshot wounds of the hands or feet, received the benefit of any doubt that crossed our minds when told that the injuries were accidental. It is not easy to disbelieve a wounded man when he states that he was cleaning his rifle and "didn't know it was loaded". Here one came up against a conflicting ideology in the conceived role of the medical service: whether to subordinate humanitarian duty to one's patient to the need of hard-pressed fighting units for every available man. On occasions it seemed better to let a robust neurotic fill a hospital bed until his case was carefully diagnosed, than risk sending a genuine nervous wreck back to his battalion.

Indeed, hospital beds were almost at a premium, although an Australian hospital-ship was expected in a few days' time with accommodation for 180 patients. The 10th and 13th hospitals were now taking patients from the casualty clearing station in alternate periods of twenty-four hours, the 13th having established itself in St Patrick's School at Katong, a seaside suburb on the south-east of the Island.

Glyn White ordered us to send four nurses there, as the hospital was short-staffed. So reluctantly we had to part with Sister Hannah and Staff-Nurses Gardham, Dorsch and Raymont. Loud in their lamentations at having to leave us again they went away like good soldiers amid a chorus of "good-byes".

The last day of January was a quiet one, with no raids from the bombers. Major Bob Dick came over before noon and seated himself on the office table. Refusing a cigarette, he pulled out a pipe. As he pushed fresh tobacco into the bowl, his eyes twinkled. "You were right about that wild driver of mine," he announced.

"Which wild driver?" I inquired, momentarily puzzled.

"You remember," said Bob, "the hard-boiled gent who blazed off with a revolver in your mess at Mengkibol. Don't you recollect abusing him, although I was inclined to support his statement that he was a good soldier?"

"Oh, yes!" I laughed at the recollection of the incident. "What's he done now?"

"Well," said Bob, "the other night, when I was detailed to supply an ambulance car company in case of casualties during the Causeway crossing, I included him and his cobber, another tough bloke, in the assignment. And what do you think the two rascals did when they found things were all quiet up at the Causeway?"

"Ran across into Johore Bahru and looted the Sultan's palace," I suggested facetiously.

"They did not," said Bob, his voice rising with mingled amusement and scorn. "They turned the ambulance round and beat it hell-bent for Singapore's red-light area where they parked it in Lavender Street, outside a Chinese brothel. It remained there all night—my ambulance, mark you! Can you imagine it!"*

"Shocking!" I said. "Dereliction of duty in the face of the enemy!"

Then I roared with laughter, and Bob joined me as we saw the humour of his reprobates' social engagements in the midst of battle.

"Have they returned to the fold yet?" I asked as we recovered from our mirth.

"Yes," said Bob. "Rolled in about an hour ago looking as innocent as two cherubs. 'A little bit of tyre trouble' was their excuse. They had forgotten the watchful eyes of the Provost Corps in the city and the fact that the parked ambulance was easily identified by its number and unit markings. What should I do with them? They are sure to become infected and be an all-round blasted nuisance."

"In the Japanese Army they'd be shot within twenty-four hours," I said seriously, "whereas, in our pampered set-up, a court martial—after a long delay—might let them off with three months in prison. However, you know the book of rules as well as I do."

"Then I think a field court martial is indicated," said Bob.

* The following comment was made by Colonel A. P. Derham, C.B.E., D.S.O., when he kindly criticized the manuscript: "This must not be published. These two men should have been court-martialled and shot . . . not because they went to a brothel, but because they deserted in the face of the enemy at one of the most critical moments in the history of the British Empire; and my objection to the publication is made even more strong by your suggestion that it will only cause a laugh."

"They'll run the risk of a stiffer sentence; although it's going to mean an awful lot of paperwork for me," he added, as I led him along the veranda towards a cup of tea.

Gerry Sanders and his friend Warin, two planters from Kajang who had been generous hosts to the unit during its stay there, called in to greet us. Warin had been the last European to leave Kajang after a brisk period of duty as air defence warden.

"I didn't get away until two days after the British front-line troops had retreated through the village," he related, "and I had to cycle south for forty miles before I caught up with them. At first they thought I was a fifth-columnist."

"How on earth did you cycle south when all the road bridges and culverts had been demolished?" asked Captain Simpson, a particular friend of Warin.

"Quite easily," replied the latter. "Although the sappers had blown the main road pretty thoroughly, there were a few parallel tracks in the neighbouring estates that had been overlooked. I picked up another planter on the way who had a good knowledge of the countryside, so it wasn't very difficult to find our way."

"I'll bet the Japs found it with equal ease," said someone in the circle of interested officers. "Why in the name of common sense didn't the army use you blokes as guides in the districts you knew so well? You can't tell me that former employees of Japanese estates haven't been used right and left as guides by the enemy."

"Precisely!" broke in Sanders, who was dressed in the uniform of the Selangor Local Defence Corps. "Take the case of the Local Defence Corps, mainly composed of men who fought in the last war. In Kuala Lumpur and Kajang we drilled, we mapped the estate tracks, we knew every power station, factory and reservoir. Not only were we competent to handle Malays and Tamils, but we could converse with them in their own languages. Loyal natives could have been welded into a useful organization in local districts, but what happened? When war struck we were mobilized, played about for a few days like boy scouts—with apologies to the scouts—and then were disbanded."

"What did you do then?" asked John Chalmers.

"Like most of the other planters whose families were safely overseas, I set fire to the surplus rubber in the estate factory, gave the coolies food, money, and permission to loot my bungalow,

then came down to Singapore where I heard Colonel Fletcher had been commissioned to form a special Local Defence Corps battalion. Now I'm again in the Local Defence Corps," said Sanders, with a shrug of his shoulders, "but so far we haven't done anything more than act as traffic cops at road-blocks and bridges."

"Poor organization and a sad waste of knowledgeable men," I reflected, as I excused myself to answer a call on the telephone.

The call was from police headquarters to say that they knew of no charge against Wong, our Chinese dhobi, who had been in a peculiar mix-up that morning. While busy in the office after breakfast a florid, fat, unpleasant-looking civilian brushed his way past the sergeant-major, and overflowed on to the only vacant chair. In white topee and grubby drill suit, he looked like a rather seedy pillar of the early colonial Empire. I waited patiently while he wiped the perspiration from a flushed forehead. Fixing a pair of watery eyes on my shoulder badges, he said, "Colonel, I have come as a patriotic Britisher to tell you that you are nursing a viper in your bosom. Beware lest his hand does not turn and strike, not only you but the whole British force on this Island. You have a dangerous fifth-columnist in your midst."

Taken aback by this spate of fulsome oratory, and fearful of a further admixture of my anatomy with his fatuous metaphors, I sat up and growled in parade-ground style. "Who are you, please? What right have you in a military unit's lines without a pass?"

This knocked him back a bit, giving me time to regain command of the situation, which the imp in me felt might prove amusing.

With a diminuendo into a muttering bluster about "vipers, cads and rogues", my fleshy visitor commenced to search his pockets, pulling out firstly a visiting card, which I ignored, and secondly a greasy wallet from which he extracted a civilian identity card.

His name was of no importance but his profession was listed as "shipping manager", his place of birth, "London, England". Later I summed him up as an ill-bred cockney, painfully conscious of his share in bearing the "white man's burden", the type that never misses an opportunity of browbeating inoffensive Asiatics.

By dint of keeping him to the point with crisp, short questions

I found that the viper in my bosom was Wong, the dhobi, who, my informant alleged, was a deserter from one of his ships and a veritable Japanese spy in disguise.

"Where is Wong now?" I asked, when he mentioned that he had seen him in a taxi that morning.

"In jail, I hope," he answered. "I gave immediate orders for his arrest as a deserter."

"You did, did you?" I exclaimed, with some heat. "Didn't it occur to you that I might want some say in the matter?"

The pompous, little manager rose from the chair, drawing himself up to his full height of five feet six.

"Colonel! I must say I find your manner rather aggressive. Can it be that you refuse to accept my testimony against that of a scoundrel?"

"I have not proved Wong a scoundrel any more than I have you," I said coldly. "Come back tomorrow, when I'll tell you the result of my investigations."

This insult was too much for the little windbag. Slamming his hat on his head, he took up his stick and shook it from the doorway. "The law will take its course! I am sorry for you, sir! I bid you good-bye!"

I turned to find Sergeant-Major Bossward trying to hide a grin.

"Get police headquarters on the phone, sarn'-major," I asked, "and find out from the linen corporal if he knows of Wong's whereabouts."

Corporal Eastall reported from the linen store before the telephone call was answered. Interrogated regarding Wong's movements, he said he had not seen him that morning.

"He was on the job yesterday when the truck delivered a load of soiled linen."

"You don't know of Wong being involved in any trouble, corporal?"

"No, sir, except that he seemed to be in fear of a man who he said tried to persecute him. I don't know any details because Wong's English is terrible. His work has always been satisfactory."

"Right! Thanks, corporal! Tell Wong to see me if he turns up this afternoon."

About an hour later, when contact was made with police head-

quarters and I had patiently explained to the Eurasian switchboard girl that I wanted information about a Chinaman and an English shipping manager, I was told that a report would be given later in the day.

Scarcely had I completed the conversation when Wong appeared at the office door looking quite unlike his usual immaculate self. He had a beautiful black eye, a bruised lip, a torn collar, and his neat white suit was soiled with dirt.

Moved to sympathy by his forlorn appearance, I said, "Sit down, Wong, and give an account of yourself."

Wong was very near to tears. "Col'nel, this mo'ning when I come along to see Cop'l Eastall for clothes, taxi with bad man wait fo' me at gate. Man say he shoot if I no get in taxi. Velly bad mans, col'nel. Catch Wong's neck in taxi and hit eye with fist." Here Wong gave a demonstration of his struggle in the taxi. "He say he call pleece and put me plison, but Wong jump out and lun away quick."

"Why didn't you come here for help?" I asked.

"Too much flightened in case bad man's taxi wait again," he said.

Wong's story rang true. I made him produce his identity card and shipping discharges for inspection. I remembered he had come to me originally with a satisfactory certificate from the authorities in Singapore. His last shipping discharge showed that he had a permit to remain for two years in Malaya, still valid for another four months.

"These are satisfactory, Wong, but why should a European take all the trouble to waylay you with a taxi?"

"He velly bad mans," repeated Wong. "He angly like hell, when I leave ship and no want me to go. Him mad!"

"All right, Wong. Off you go, and bathe that eye. I'll take care of your troubles."

Much as I would have liked to probe deeper into the background of the bizarre incident, time did not permit, nor did I hear any more of the queer aggressor. It may have been an upsurge from Singapore's strange underworld, restless even in wartime.

# 15

## *A Fateful Month Begins*

FEBRUARY was ushered in with a bang—a loud, ear-splitting one at that. Aero-engines at a low altitude wakened me to an expectant uneasiness around 5 a.m. No warning whistle came from Private Lockwood, who was on "spotter" duty in the grounds. Concluding that the plane was a friendly one I rolled over in bed. Immediately the bomber seemed to swoop in a roaring crescendo right over the roof. The building shook with the crash of a detonation near by. This was followed by two more explosions farther on.

Springing from under the mosquito-net, I stuck head and shoulders out of the open casement. In the early grey light I could barely distinguish the outline of the picket at the gate.

"Why the hell didn't you blow your whistle?" I called angrily. "That lot wasn't far off."

"About a mile, sir," said Lockwood calmly. "I thought he was one of ours because his navigation lights were burning brightly. He had me tricked properly. He was just over us when he let the stick go. I'll bet it woke the patients up."

Interested in this new version of enemy tactics, I pushed my feet into a pair of pattens and clip-clopped down the stairs to the

gate, where I found Lockwood giving his mates an account of the raider's approach.

Pointing over the trees to the north-east, where a black pall of smoke with an underglow of red flame was spreading against the dawn skyline, he exclaimed, "Looks like he got one of the oil tanks!"

"Probably preparing a target for the eleven o'clock visit of Tojo's twenty-seven," I thought gloomily, as I went in search of a cup of tea and a cigarette.

My surmise was correct. In the bright, warm sunshine of mid-morning the three squadrons came over in tripple-arrow formation, sailing serenely like a covey of silver geese. White puffs from the shells of the ack-ack guns floated leisurely round them, but the formation, unwavering, made straight for the heavy, black smoke that denoted the objective.

Haze obscured the movements of the planes as they drew swiftly away, but the numerous loud *crumps* reaching our ears told us that the destructive cargo had been delivered; and with no small measure of success, as was soon revealed by great billows of oily smoke rolling with renewed energy to darken the sky and fill the air with the smell of petroleum.

At noon we had a surprise visit from Lieut.-Colonel Galleghan, accompanied by his adjutant, Captain Peach, and one of his senior officers, Major Noel Johnston. The battalion regimental medical officer, Captain Taylor, was also in the party, so hidden under a fortnight's growth of beard that I failed to recognize him. The quartette, although grimy and weary, were in jovial spirits, each demanding a bath and a shave. Greeting them as long-lost friends I complimented Galleghan and Taylor on their decorations, the immediate award of which had just been announced.

While they undressed in our sleeping quarters, and I made sure that the shower was working, Fred Galleghan sat back and laughed. "By God, you blokes in the medical corps do yourselves well! Are you aware that we haven't had a decent sleep for fifteen days, and we've each lost about a stone in weight?"

"Do you good, Fred," I countered. "You look much better without a pot-belly. What about staying for lunch with us? I'll give you some good beer along with it."

Galleghan's eyes twinkled as he surveyed his companions in

various stages of undress. "That settles it," he said. "George Ramsay can look after the battalion for an hour or two while we delve into the flesh-pots. Why," he added, "we'd stay for the beer without the lunch. Don't tell me you have your nurses here as well?"

"Four of them," I answered. "As a special compliment to you I'll waive our mess rules and invite them to meet you."

Luncheon was a very happy affair, the presence of the nurses adding gaiety to the chatter that swept in pleasant waves round the table. Everyone was anxious to hear of the exploits of the 30th Battalion at first hand, so the visitors had an attentive audience as they detailed in breezy fashion many of the exciting incidents they had experienced.

One story, vouched for by Colonel Galleghan, concerned a platoon of Indians that had been sent to establish liaison with the outposts of the 30th. The platoon lost its way in the dark, and the worried jemadar forgot the number of the battalion that was his objective. At length he reached the headquarters of the 30th; on being asked the battalion he was seeking, he replied, "I do not know, but they are the Australian Black-Jacks."

Our friends were not left undisturbed for long. A message came from Major Ramsay saying that orders had been received for the battalion to take up its new defensive positions on the northern shore of the Island. Colonel Galleghan was wroth. "As you see, no peace for the wicked! My men have very little chance of getting a much needed rest."

"Good luck and good hunting, anyway," I called, as his car drove off.

After the blowing of the Causeway, military admissions to the casualty clearing station, apart from bomb-blast casualties, were confined mainly to cases of exhaustion and sickness. Major Alan Hobbs had to amputate the leg of a courageous youth whose main artery at the back of the left knee had been perforated. By careful nursing, and a policy of watchful waiting, it had been possible to save more of the limb than was at first expected.

At nightfall the reception staff were pleasantly surprised by the arrival of thirty-three exhausted men from the Norfolk Regiment, of which we had lost track at Fraser Estate. They were survivors of the 4th Royal Norfolks who had been trapped with the Australian 29th Battalion at Parit Sulono. Their medical

officer, Robbie Welsh, a young Scottish graduate, had stayed behind to tend the wounded and take his chance with the Japanese.

After many tribulations these weary men had escaped in stolen sampans down the coastline from Batu Pahat. Their travels embraced a graphic series of strange adventures of which they were able to relate no more than a fragmentary outline to the orderlies who undressed them.

"Sleep is their main need," said John Chalmers, the admitting officer on duty. "Once that is obtained they should be little the worse, except for some loss in weight and some swelling of the feet."

"How did they fare for food?" I asked.

"Principally pineapples and coconuts," he said. "Chinese and Malays helped them considerably, although the Malays were very timid. Luckily, our fellows did not fire on them as they crossed Johore Strait."

Yawning, Chalmers went off to bed. I looked round the reception room, now empty except for Private Gandion, the night clerk, who checked the entries in his admission book with the aid of a shrouded lamp. Behind him Corporal Bond, the day clerk, lay in the shadow of the stairway, snoring gently. The place was quiet. Too quiet, I thought as I turned in.

It was not quite daylight when I wakened with a premonition that something was amiss. In a few seconds I was brought to my feet by the shrilling of the picket's whistle and the loud roar of a plane directly overhead. The attack was on so swiftly that there was no time to do any more than drop flat on the floor as the first bomb screamed down. In my half-awakened state it seemed destined for a direct hit on the hospital. I remember thinking, "Oh God! I hope I won't be killed in my pyjamas."

The explosion missed us, and successive ones seemed a little farther away. I retrieved myself from a situation that was fast becoming ludicrous and went downstairs. Most of the men were under cover in the slit trenches. The raider had dropped a trail of bombs starting half a mile north of the school and finishing with a well-placed "stick" on the oil tanks. His tactics were similar to those of the previous morning. Soon another black wall of oily smoke rose to foul the morning air. This looked too close to the

casualty clearing station for comfort. I cursed our location in the oil tank and factory area.

Eleven o'clock brought the usual flights of bombers over the smoky objective. Ignoring the anti-aircraft guns, they succeeded in setting fire to three more tanks from a height of six thousand feet. There was nothing wrong with the accuracy of their bomb-aimers.

The flak from the British ack-ack shells kept dropping round the school. It paid to keep under cover. I mentioned this to one of the cooks, a slow-speaking Tasmanian, who stood near me at the gate as we watched the gyrations of the bombers. A hot nose-cap from a shell whizzed down between us, thudding heavily into the ground. Cookie, full of interest, picked it out but promptly dropped it when the hot metal singed his fingers.

"Gee!" he ejaculated. "A man 'ud be stiff to cop one o' them on his head, wouldn't he, sir?"

Feeling strangely naked without my steel helmet, I hastily agreed. We moved back under the cover of the concrete porch.

The burning tanks attracted Nipponese planes several times during the day, culminating in a final visit around eight-thirty from another lone raider. Skimming the top of our building he planted a stick of bombs squarely in the centre of the burning oil, causing it to leap up in a hot frenzy of flame that was reflected by the under-surface of the low cloud-bank. It seemed certain that the fire would burn steadily for the next few days, despite the efforts of a crew of game Eurasians who passed down the road on an antiquated fire-engine, with bells clanging merrily in the best fashion of a small-town fire-brigade.

Next day, as one wag remarked, the Nipponese planes became really cheeky, and a new note, a devil's tattoo of machine-gun fire, obtruded on the even roar of their engines.

I was inspecting the pack-store tent on the edge of the *padang* when the insistent whistling of the picket, accompanied by a rush of men from the tents, warned me that some new aerial devilry was afoot. From the doorway I saw three single-engined fighters diving at Tengah aerodrome. Then a fourth appeared at five hundred feet over the trees fringing the railway line on our boundary. Machine-guns crackling, it was heading straight for our tents. I dived into the nearest slit trench, a straight one

in direct line with the raider. As I crouched against the red soil, I knew fear such as I had not experienced since childhood, when, with thumping heart, I had hidden behind a hedge from an irate Presbyterian minister whose garden I had been raiding.

Idly, I wondered if the Japanese pilot knew of the old maxim, "Don't shoot till you see the whites of his eyes." I did not see the whites of his eyes, but his machine screamed over close enough for me to see the sunlight reflected from his goggles. His guns must have shut off, because, as the shadow of the plane crossed the road, they blazed forth again at the field ambulance bivouacs among the rubber-trees on the other side. Then came the heartfelt thought that our Red Cross flag had been observed and respected. Mercifully, the pilot had eased his thumbs from the firing buttons.

Not a little relieved by the anticlimax to an uncomfortable anticipation of death, I made for the mess where I slaked my thirst with a bottle of grapefruit juice. Drinking slowly, I meditated on the psychology of fear, oft defined as a product of a vivid imagination. Mine was vivid enough but it had always portrayed a cool, calm, soldier-like bearing in moments of danger, and an absolute contempt for death; in short, a sort of schoolboy heroism engendered by reading *Ivanhoe* and other tales of medieval bravery.

Now, these comfortable illusions shattered, it required a mental readjustment to face the stark fact that I had been scared. Scared not only psychologically but physiologically, for my pulse-rate had gone up, digestion had stopped, and the adrenal glands —sensitive to all degrees of fear—had constricted my blood vessels to produce a dry tongue with an almighty thirst; hence the grapefruit juice.

All these reactions being normal, I arrived at the conclusion that any man, in possession of the primary instinct of self-preservation, who says he is not afraid when enduring an aerial attack is a damned liar. From now on my attitude towards those unfortunate souls who lost control of their nervous systems during the stress of the campaign would be much more tolerant.

Comforted by the self-analysis, I drank a silent toast to the Japanese aviator whose sporting gesture recalled the words of Colonel Derham when I had been reluctant to exhibit the red

cross at Kluang, "Use it, Hamilton. It has saved my life once or twice, and may save yours. A man who allows himself or others to be wounded needlessly is worse than a fool."

A touch of comedy was provided in the afternoon by the arrival of Major Philip Head, a well-known Sydney barrister, who was divisional legal officer. He was mounted on a big sanitary truck labelled "Singapore Municipal Council".

"Rehearsing for the Lord Mayor's Show, Phil?" I called out as the driver brought the truck to a stop. Head smiled, pausing to wipe a sweaty forehead. "Not much doing in the legal business these days," he said, "so I'm delivering tins of petrol. Do you want any?"

"You bet!" I replied. "A supply here will save trucking it from the supply dump. How much can you give me?"

"The whole ruddy truck-load," said Phil. "Where'll you have it?"

"Well away from the building," I said, remembering the risk of fire.

With the aid of one or two helpers we slid back the partitions of the truck and unloaded about forty tins of petrol at the far end of the *padang*. We stopped for a breather. Any undue exertion in that muggy climate made one sweat profusely. "How are things at divvy headquarters?" I inquired.

"Quiet at present," answered Head. "The enemy bombers haven't found our position yet. Everyone is waiting to see if the Jap will try a jump on to the Island."

He would not dally for a cup of tea. Laughingly, he intimated that it was not customary for sanitary carters to mix socially with their clients. His ungenteel vehicle was an indication of the wholesale way in which civilian transport was being impressed for Army purposes. Obviously the requisitioning had been overdone, because headquarters had issued an order only that morning directing all civilian vehicles to be handed in forthwith.

This may have been the reason—or it may have been sheer goodwill—that prompted Captain George Murphy to visit me with an offer of five fine sedan cars, free of all encumbrances.

"Take one for yourself, colonel," he urged. "I've got a dandy little Austin, light as a feather to handle, just the thing for sliping in and out to the city. She's in tiptop order."

George was a good friend. I opened my cigarette case for him. "George, you should have been a car salesman. You are the only man who has ever offered me an automobile as a gift. I feel like bursting into tears at having to refuse it. Already I have an excess of civilian lorries, and I've got to get rid of three of them by tomorrow. Haven't you seen the order from headquarters?"

"I have," admitted George, "but it wouldn't be difficult to wangle a special dispensation from the senior transport officer. Confidentially, the real reason for off-loading the sedans is that our transport unit is under orders to embark at twenty-four hours' notice."

"What!" I exclaimed. "You mean you may be ordered to join a ship and quit the Island! Good grief, man! Do you realize how lucky you are?"

"Yes," said George soberly. "It may come off or it may not. Orders are being changed hourly, but there is no doubt that there are many surplus transport units here. We might be of more use in Java, or even back in Australia. Surely your unit will soon be in the same position, now that the general hospitals are all well established. They'll probably embark the casualty clearing station in a hospital-ship later on."

This was a train of thought that had never occurred to me. It seemed rather fantastic, for one's expectations were that the Island would stand siege of perhaps two or three months, by which time General Wavell would have obtained sufficient reinforcements from the Middle East to sweep the invaders from Malaya. No one, to my knowledge, expected the defence to cave in so gloriously within a fortnight.

"I'll believe the hospital-ship when I see it, George. Remember the old Army motto, 'Blessed are they that expect nothing, for they will get nothing!' Seriously, I think the whole medical service will have its hands full from the moment the Japanese attack commences. It may be that the casualty clearing station will be required to form an additional hospital."

Murphy pondered this over, then extended his hand for a firm handshake. "Good luck, colonel, whichever way things go. I hope we meet again." We did meet again, one year later, in a prison camp in Southern Burma.

Lieut. Goninan, my brother-in-law, arrived with the short

tropical twilight. "Just to let you know I'm still in the land of the living!" he explained. It was good to see him again, for the engineer companies had been engaged on dangerous demolition work with the rearguard in Johore, where they laid many road-mines in the path of the invader.

"Haven't blown yourself up yet?" I chaffed, knowing the tricky nature of landmines.

"No, but been damn near doing it once or twice," laughed Edward.

We stood in the *padang*, enjoying the cool evening air and exchanging news from home. A large Marmon-Harrington truck pulled in, loaded with extra tents for the quartermaster. When the driver descended from the cabin we recognized him as Syd Wansey of Newcastle.

"Hullo, Syd!" I exclaimed, greeting him warmly. "I haven't seen you since we had that cup of tea together on the sundeck of the *Queen Mary*."

"No, by Jove!" responded Syd. "I'll always remember the tea. First decent cup I had since leaving Sydney."

Syd was typical of A.I.F. democracy. A wealthy, young journalist with an Oxford University education he could have had a commission in the Intelligence branch of the army for the asking. Scorning the office jobs he had enlisted with a group of pals in the 20th Battalion under the command of another Newcastle man, Lieut.-Colonel Bill Jeater, who licked them into shape the hard way.

"Now I'm a full-blown driver," Syd announced. "When Colonel Jeater was appointed to General Base Depot he wanted some qualified drivers, so I hopped in and got myself a job."

I invited he and Edward to a cup of coffee to celebrate our impromptu reunion, but Syd waved towards the truck saying he had tons of work ahead. Edward, pleading anxiety for his beloved engineer section, departed to re-join it.

The electric lights gave trouble in the operating-theatre that night. I reminded Captain Lee that we could do with a second generator.

"We'll have one tomorrow," he said. "There is one set aside for us at the base ordnance depot in Tanglin. I'm going in with the lorry to pick it up."

"I'll go with you," I said. "I'd like to see something of Singapore. We'll take the car."

Located between the Alexandra Military Hospital and the fashionable suburb of Tanglin, the ordnance depot was a prime military objective. Crammed with a thousand and one varieties of armaments, the long rows of camouflaged huts were bound sooner or later to attract the bombers. The streets between the huts were congested with Indian, British, and Australian vehicles, loading or unloading.

The business of the generator being completed, we left Driver Stocks to take it back to the hospital in his truck.

"Have you any other business in Singapore, sir?" asked Lee as the car made for the exit gates.

I looked at my watch. "Newton, I have a wild urge to go to a movie show. Suppose we play truant for an hour or two at the Cathay?"

Captain Lee thought it might be managed, but murmured a warning that the programme probably would be a lousy one. And lousy it was. A slushy Edwardian melodrama! Captain Lee, yielding to the drowsy comfort of the dress circle, which held very few patrons, fell asleep. Elated with the schoolboy novelty of the diversion, the rumbling of a guilty conscience nevertheless made it difficult for me to concentrate on the screen. Admittedly an army staff car had no right outside a cinema, but if a Nosy Parker of a provost marshal happened to report it, I should up and say boldly to the general that I had been to the movies! Did he not think I was entitled to an afternoon off once in two months? Did not the Chinese take time off from battle when it rained? And, anyway, the battle business was in the doldrums until the Japanese made the next move.

Just as I was clinching my argument with the general, my cane fell to the floor with a thud. I realized that I also had been asleep. A crash of loud music from the film kept my attention focussed on the screen long enough to see the twin babies of the heroine die a heart-rending death in the swirling rapids of a flooded river. Serves the little so-an-sos right. Hell's bells! One was better back at a nice respectable war.

The battle business was not in the doldrums when the car returned us to Bukit Panjang. When it stopped at the gate, an

ear-splitting crack that seemed to come from an empty sky rocked the building. Hastily we jumped for cover behind the concrete porch.

"Gee! That bomb was close!" said a young orderly, peering upwards in search of a raiding plane.

"That wasn't no bomb," said another, older and wiser. "Don't you know a flamin' shell when you hear it crackin'?"

Artillery shelling! This was a new and disturbing problem for the casualty clearing station. With not a few misgivings I went upstairs in search of Alan Hobbs. I found him in the mess discussing the day's happenings with John Chalmers over a cup of tea.

"Hullo," I greeted them. "Anything doing?"

"Plenty," smiled Alan Hobbs. "John has been trying all afternoon to chase a battery of Australian artillery out of our backyard."

"Yes," said John. "The gunners have a nerve coming so close to the hospital. You had only just left when the whole place was startled by a terrific four-gun blast from the back of the building. Some of the nervous patients were so affected that they dived under their beds and refused to come out. On investigating I found that a battery of 25-pounders had come down the side road from Choa Chu Kang and established their blinking guns about two hundred yards from our fence. The major in charge pleaded he didn't know he was so close to a hospital, but I've persuaded him not to fire again from that position. He has promised to shift farther away during the night. 'A damn pity,' the major said, because he had his gun-pits all nicely dug."

Two sharp bursts, farther away and not so loud as the one that startled me, brought us smartly to our feet. We went on to the balcony.

"Looks like the artillery major has drawn the crabs," said John dryly. "I'll bet that's a Japanese counter-battery ranging for him now. It won't be so bad if they don't include us in the bracket."

"I'm going to look at the map," I said. "Bukit Panjang crossroads won't be healthy much longer."

The map showed that the casualty clearing station was about twelve thousand yards in a direct line from the high ground on the other side of the Strait, where, presumably, Japanese guns

would be mounted. If these were field-pieces equivalent to our 25-pounders—and they sounded as though they were—then they would have a maximum range of seventeen thousand yards, with a devastating accuracy at ranges under that. Therefore, if A.I.F. guns persisted in drawing their fire towards the casualty clearing station, it would soon be time for us to move to a more sheltered position. In any case it would be necessary to look to the safety of the patients and nurses.

A consultation with Colonel Derham brought agreement on these deductions. He said that Glyn White would arrange a movement order on the following day, if the firing continued.

No choice was given by the enemy. Spasmodic shells from his batteries raked both sides of our area, causing two casualties: one to a flight-sergeant of the R.A.F. who was sheltering near the road, and the other to the artillery major, who, poor chap, had an arm blown off. Stray shells, passing over us, hit the 10th Hospital at Barker Road, resulting in five serious casualties among the patients.

Unaware of this, I sent our nurses back there despite the protests of Sister Kinsella. "Why on earth can't we stay with the unit? We don't mind the shelling a bit, in fact we've been too busy to notice it," she pleaded. The courage of these fine women was an example to everyone.

I joined Captain Lee in a conference with Glyn White at the Holland Road headquarters. Glyn White looked worried. "Bad news for you, colonel. I've got to split the casualty clearing station up between the two general hospitals, because I can't find a site for the 200-bed show I wanted you to form."

"Hell!" I swore. "What about 'Ben Nevis' in Thompson Road?" "Ben Nevis" was a fantastic conglomeration of mixed Chinese and Victorian architecture; it had been built by a wealthy Chinaman whose sense of humour must have been in the ascendant when he christened it.

Glyn White shook his head. "The Air Force have it. Colonel Broadbent wants the casualty clearing station to remain in the western sector, and Thompson Road is too far to the east. As an alternative he thought you might make use of the quarry at the back of Reformatory Road."

"A quarry!" I exclaimed. "When will the staff learn that a

casualty clearing station can't function at short notice in such an unprepared site. My surgical teams would be better to join the general hospitals, if a quarry is the only other choice."

"I'm afraid it is," said Glyn, "but I'll tell Colonel Broadbent your views."

Leaving Lee with Glyn White to arrange details I went, weary in spirit, to the 10th Hospital to see how many of our staff were required. As soon as I arrived there I was called to the telephone to hear Glyn White's cheery voice say, "Hold your horses! There is still a chance of keeping your unit intact. Colonel Broadbent has agreed to you making a reconnaissance of the back areas in the western sector. He will give you two hours to find an alternative site to the quarry."

"Good for him!" I yelled joyfully. "Two hours isn't much, but it's better than nothing. Tell Lee to bring the car round."

Captain Lee drove me west as far as the Pasir Panjang beach, lined with barbed wire, landmines, and turbaned Sikhs, then round a wide circuit back to the Bukit Timah Road, which was the eastern boundary of the sector. With envious eyes we gazed at big buildings, all fully occupied. Even a visit to the stone quarry, desolate and barren except for rusty machinery, was not neglected. Everywhere we drew an absolute blank.

There was still half an hour left. In desperation I pulled out the map and stopped the car, the better to pinpoint our location. "Almost back to our starting-point," I observed. "Here's a dead-end road above the racecourse leading to a spot marked 'Swiss Rifle Club'. Do you know it, Newton?"

"Yes," said Lee, "but it's over the boundary. I have not been right up to the club."

"Blast the boundary," I said irritably. "It's our last chance. Driver, make for the Swiss Rifle Club."

Deviating from the entrance to Singapore's palatial race-track, now housing a British convalescent depot, a gravelled road led up the hill past groups of handsome bungalows, occupied either by civilians or Indian Army transport units. At the top of the rise the road passed through an ornate gateway into a beautifully wooded glade, then curved in a graceful circuit through the porch of a pleasant two-storied club-house, built in the style of an Alpine chalet. Two or three tents were pitched on the lawn

opposite, where three or four men in familiar blue uniforms were lounging.

"Air Force again!" I groaned. "They seem to have a mortgage on all the desirable sites."

Newton Lee smiled. "No harm in us having a look," he said. "It might mean another job for John Chalmers."

Alighting from the car, a sweeping glance embraced the luxury of well-kept lawns, tennis courts, bowling alley, secluded rifle range in a glade of its own, and, wonder of wonders, the shimmering gleam of clear water in a green-tiled swimming pool.

Drawing a deep breath I grinned happily. "Marvellous! What price the stone quarry now, Newton? This place will do admirably."

"Except for the little matter of the Air Force," he cautioned. "Here comes one now."

A brown-faced officer of middle age, who walked with a limp, approached.

"Goo' day," he greeted us. "Anything I can do?"

"We're in luck," I thought. "He's an Aussie."

Explaining our mission, I inquired about the prospects of obtaining room to accommodate two hundred sick.

"Easy," he drawled. "There are forty-seven acres here, including the rifle-range, and only forty airmen, most of whom are pushing off to Batavia in two days' time. Then you can have the whole show to yourselves. We've been using it as a rest camp. If you want the use of the club-house you may have to negotiate with the Swiss members. They are neutrals, you know."

This sounded too good to be true.

"What about your own headquarters?" I asked doubtfully.

"Hell! Don't take any notice of them or you'll never get here," he said breezily. "Our administrative branch just sits on its collective arse, and doesn't know its own mind for five minutes."

"Thanks a lot!" I said, jumping back into the car. "Now to tackle our own headquarters. Come on, Newton, we've got five minutes left."

Colonel Broadbent was seated in a rough, atap hut by the side of the Jurong Road, one of a collection that resembled a small Malay kampong. Cars were parked under cover two hundred yards away. The place was quiet, the only indications of a tactical

headquarters being the multiple lines of signal wire concealed in the long grass at the side of the entrance track.

Greeting us brusquely, he listened without comment to our advocacy for the facilities available at the Swiss Club. Then bending over his map he put a circle of blue pencil round the club area, and wrote above it the number of my unit.

Distinctly encouraged, I said, "Then you approve of our recommendation, sir?"

"Yes," he replied, "but I can't allow you to barge in on the Air Force again without proper permission." Picking up one of a battery of telephones, he barked, "Malaya Command, please!" Then—*sotto voce*—"Rest camp, eh! What do they want a rest camp for?"

Colonel Broadbent's conversation with his opposite number at Malaya Command was a model of diplomatic approach, but throughout it one could sense the calm assumption that his request would readily be granted. As he replaced the receiver, I remarked, "I'm sorry we're in holts with the Air Force again. Couldn't accommodation for their forty men be found at one of the aerodromes?"

"Aerodromes!" he laughed sardonically. "There are no aerodromes left. Blasted to bits, everyone of them!"

Nonplussed by this stark news, I did not answer, so he pushed an open packet of cigarettes towards me, and continued, "You may shift your unit to the Swiss Club as soon as possible. I'll take the responsibility. Good-bye."

Stammering our thanks, we took the good news to Glyn White at Holland Road.

"Fine!" said Glyn, "now we can build the casualty clearing station up into a tented hospital of two hundred beds."

"Not so fast, please," I pleaded. "What about giving us a clear forty-eight hours to move, stick the tents up, and establish ourselves properly at the Swiss Club. The men will have enough heavy work on the tents without handling wounded as well."

Glyn nodded sympathetically. "Sure!" he said. "If it's any further help, I can make your first two hundred cases all medical —neurotics mainly. I'm at my wit's end to find a place for them."

Relieved by this assurance, I sent Chalmers and Lee off to the

Swiss Club to pave the way for a unit "move", timed to start at dawn the following morning, 6th February.

An enemy plane upset the start by coming in early at a low altitude with crackling machine-guns, and forced us to go to ground, so that the first loaded truck was not dispatched until the sun was fairly high. After that, loading proceeded briskly, despite sundry stray shells which, overshooting the burning oil tanks, fell uncomfortably close.

# 16

## *The Swiss Club*

LEAVING Bukit Panjang after lunch, I found John Chalmers working vigorously at our new site. Stripped to the waist in the hot afternoon sunshine, his head shaded by a battered felt hat, he not only directed the incoming trucks but helped to manhandle the equipment. Momentarily free from the threat of artillery fire, the men worked with a will on the tents, erecting so many by tea-time that I was able to reward them by calling a swimming parade at the pool. Our sleeping tents were pitched in a sylvan setting on the terraced, green slopes above the pool where plenty of cover was provided by stately trees and luxuriant shrubs. A paved path led down to the pool, where the splash of water from the hillside *sungei* running through it made a soothing contrast to the cacophony of war, still growling faintly in the distance.

The men, exulting in the unexpected pleasure of a swim, made the welkin ring as they danced on the springboards, or hurled their lithe, brown bodies from the diving tower into the clear, cool depths. Jack Coombe, a practiced diver, broke the surface

after a graceful one-and-a-half, whooping gleefully, "Gee! The old man knew how to pick a good possie for us!"

When I stripped to join in the fun I thought what a pleasant place it must have been in peacetime; say on a warm Sunday morning, with the prosperous Swiss families disporting themselves in the water or relaxing in the shade of gaily coloured umbrellas, where they would be served long, iced drinks by white-clad native servants. Why had it all been exchanged for the vile futility of war? Why were sane people cowering in holes in the ground lest they be torn apart by jagged shell fragments? Who wins a war, anyhow?

Our new acquaintances of the Air Force were genuinely helpful, led by the breezy flight-lieutenant who had advised us to take the place. Not only did he give our cooks room in the kitchen, improvised in the bowling alley, but insisted on the men accepting a gift of two thousand cigarettes.

"They might as well have them," he said. "I'm off to Sumatra in the morning."

"What's behind all the Air Force moves?" I asked.

"Well!" he replied, "You know how it is here; the 'dromes are smashed so badly that the avenue bordering the civil airport has been turned into a runway for the few surviving Hurricanes. Bombers haven't a hope of taking off safely with a load, so it has been decided that they would be safer if based on Sumatra."

"Then how about fighter support for the ground forces?" I inquired anxiously. He shrugged his shoulders. "The R.A.F. pilots—a grand lot of blokes—feel the position keenly. They'll fly in any old crate that will hold together, if there are no more undamaged planes or runways available. We hate like the devil meeting our cobbers from the front line. As soon as they sight our blue uniforms they snort, 'Why the hell don't you blue orchids get up and give us a hand?' "

Whether it was the unusual peace of the night or the glum tidings of my Air Force friend that caused me to sleep restlessly, I know not. While debating whether an early morning dip would freshen me up, I noticed that the last sprig of white heather—attached to my steel helmet for luck—was missing.

"Luck!" I laughed mirthlessly. "Wavell and Churchill will

need more than white heather to extract Singapore from this mess!"

The flight-lieutenant limped over to my tent after breakfast. "Have you heard from our administration wing about your occupancy here?" he asked.

"Not a word," I replied. "This time I'm leaving the argument to my divisional boss."

"Well," he continued, "the wing-commander's been rousing on the phone about something or other; wants to talk to you. He's no friend of mine, so I told him you were not available. That seemed to make him a bit sore, although I assured him we were happy as bugs in a rug. Perhaps you'd better give him a ring."

"How would you advise me to tackle him?" I asked.

"If I had your rank, I'd tell him to go jump in the harbour," said the flight-lieutenant.

Engrossed in supervising the work in the new encampment, I forgot all about the wing-commander until, out of breath and soaked with perspiration, I toiled up the slope to answer a call on the club-house phone.

The blasé, Mayfair drawl of the wing-commandah—as he called himself—was not conducive to cooling me down. Its mellifluous babble fascinated me as I listened to a declamation on the enormity of my sin in daring to poach on Air Force preserves.

"Wait a minute," I protested. "Malaya Command promised that suitable arrangements would be made through your office."

"Precisely," the patronizing voice continued, "and I offered your hospital temporary shelter. Shall we say, in simile, that your —ah—predicament was rather akin to that of a beggah, who, having lost his home through circumstances over which he had no control, knocked at the door of a rich landlord to ask for a night's lodging. His plea having been granted, the beggah not only made himself at home, but proceeded to occupy the host's best bedroom!"

My amazement at the verbal flatulence of the fellow was replaced by a dull anger at his stupid incomprehension of the exigencies of war. This was no flying ace, but an administrative *poseur* with a mind like a desk of neat pigeon-holes, quite oblivious of the Japanese menace just sixteen miles away. I felt inclined to scream, "Me a beggar! You bloody nincompoop!"

Instead, having read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends*, I managed to say meekly, "Yes, wing-commandah! I suggest you get in touch with Colonel Broadbent of the A.I.F. I'm sure he will appreciate your views. . . . Good-bye!"

Seething with rage I jotted the conversation down in my pocket-book, vowing that some day, when untrammelled by King's Regulations, I would let him have the full measure of my contempt.

Glyn White came up the drive as I was unloading my suppressed emotions into the sympathetic ear of Alan Hobbs. I showed Glyn my pencilled note of the wing-commander's remarks. Glyn swore, "Who does he think he is, anyway? Give me the memo and I'll show it to General Bennett. You can take it from me that your unit stays here, Air Force or no Air Force. I've told Colonel Broadbent that I'm sending you patients tomorrow."

"Right oh! Glyn," I said, waving my hand towards the rows of newly erected tents. "If the first hundred are all 'medical' we can take them from tonight onwards. I'll require another day for surgical cases, because I intend to erect the operating-theatres on the smooth surface of the tennis courts."

"Fine!" said Glyn. "Seems a damn shame to spoil such lovely courts."

Alan Hobbs and I agreed, for the courts looked a picture in the sunshine, their level, green-tinted surfaces blending well with the surrounding foliage; and adorned, as if ready for play, with net posts and fresh white lines.

"Perhaps they represent the best bedroom in the wing-commander's simile," I murmured to Alan as we measured them for the marquees.

"Then the Army Medical Corps' bedspread is in the right place," said Alan, indicating the large Red Cross flag that had just been pegged out in the centre of the courts.

While Sergeant Bannerman and Staff-Sergeant Trevor Taylor kept all hands on the job of erecting the heavy marquees, I took time off to pay a courtesy call on Mr Nedbee in the upstairs lounge of the club.

Mr Nedbee was a dignified senior member of the Malayan Civil Service who had been obliged by the war to leave his post at Malacca for the doubtful refuge of Singapore. His Swiss friends

had invited him to stay at the club, until he could secure passages for his wife and daughter (a good-looking lass) on a crowded, outgoing liner. With years of British tradition behind him, I'm sure that it had never entered his head to accompany them. As a Japanese officer once said, "Breetish are stubborn fools!"

I suspected that my action in gate-crashing the R.A.F. rest camp had outraged an official conscience attuned to the precision, order and decorum of the Civil Service.

"Don't you think, colonel," he suggested with pedantic courtesy, "that you should come to a satisfactory agreement with the Club Committee regarding your tenure of a property belonging to a body of neutral citizens."

"Neutrals!" I had forgotten that. Neither had I considered the separate problems of the club servants, the stocks of choice liquors, the care of the grounds, nor the cleaning of the swimming pool; items which Mr Nedbee was careful to emphasize.

Feeling abashed, but respecting the dear, old gentleman's evident goodwill, I asked him to arrange a meeting with the committee for the following afternoon. I almost apologized for the fact that Japanese explosives were making peacetime formalities a little difficult.

In the mess tent at sundown, the officers—all in great fettle after a swim—were inclined to ribaldry when I told them of Mr Nedbee's advice. They had just finished ragging the padres, who had gone up to the forward artillery posts during the morning to arrange Sunday services for the next day. I recollected that the two clerics had been missing at lunch-time but in the hot afternoon I had seen them, pouring with sweat, making the earth fly from the slit trench alongside their tent until it formed a deep tunnel.

It appeared that their arrival near the gun-pits at Choa Chu Kang had been greeted by a prolonged barrage of high explosive from the Japanese, which not only sent the gunners to ground but compelled the padres to flop into an evil-smelling ditch where they lay for nearly two hours. In a final dash to the greater safety of a slit trench Padre Bashford was covered in black mud, and lost his wallet and pay book. "I didn't think one could shelter only five yards from a shell-burst and still survive," he said. "It was nerve-wracking."

John Chalmers sat back laughing. "That'll teach you to go monkeying about with fire-arms, Bashy! Better stay out of the front line unless you're well insured."

I broke in on the merriment to announce that the unit would be taking medical patients next day.

"Good!" cried Chalmers. "Then we'll have a party tonight. Absolutely our last chance before the patients arrive!"

"Not a bad idea," I assented, "so long as you don't disturb Mr Nedbee."

"That's easily fixed," returned John. "We'll invite the poor old coot to the party and cheer him up a bit, also our Air Force cobbers and any strays who happen to blow in. Newton's got some whisky, besides all the grog left over from Bukit Panjang. Hooray!"

Chalmers' joviality was infectious, spreading even to the men's tents on the other side of the glade, whence came bursts of song, interlarded with Private Connolly's tuneful yodel, ringing clear as a bell above the din of the cicadas. While Lee Ah Tan cleared the table, I sat alone with Major Hobbs discussing plans for the next day's work.

Owing to the strict blackout—and also because the liquid refreshments happened to be stored there—the party was held in the men's dressing-room on the ground floor of the club. It was a long narrow room fitted with the conventional wash-basins and toilet conveniences. When I entered the dimly lit place I discerned through the mist of tobacco smoke a group of officers gathered around Mr Nedbee, who was holding a glass on high. Seeing me, they whooped down and dragged me into the circle, where Major Krantz poured me a large glass of beer.

"How do you like our blackout arrangements?" he inquired, his face creased in a wide smile. Looking up, I saw that the sole electric light bulb was covered by a pair of blue swimming vees.

"Very effective," I replied with a laugh. "Do you know that this is the first time I have ever been to a party held in a lavatory?"

"Me too!" chimed in John Chalmers, signalling to me to *yam sing* my beer—*yam sing* being the Chinese equivalent of "bottoms up". "But it's a super lavatory!"

I looked curiously at Nedbee, now joining awkwardly in a rousing camp song, to observe his reactions to the fantastic scene.

Did he realize that we were simply letting off steam after a long period of strain? Or did he regard it as a vulgar exhibition of bad taste in the face of the serious troubles confronting Singapore?

John Chalmers must have read my thoughts. Leaning over, he whispered hoarsely, "He's now on his third *stengah*. I'll have him cock-fighting before the night is out. Get an eyeful of his pyjamas. I wouldn't let him change for the party. He's quite human. Fought in the last war and isn't averse to a good yarn."

Mr Nedbee enjoyed the evening, although he left before the rough-and-tumble termination. Next day I received a courteous, written invitation to dine with him on the Sunday night.

Major Fisher, somewhat hoarse from his vocal efforts at the party, assisted by Captain Tom Brereton, received the incoming patients in the section prepared for them. The padres, despite their harrowing experience of the previous day, had gone up the line in a borrowed ambulance to conduct services among the troops. The rumble of gun-fire seemed a bit closer in the still morning air.

At ten o'clock twenty-seven Japanese heavy bombers swept down on Singapore, while dive-bombers whirled and banked over Bukit Panjang. Two lighter reconnaissance planes came low over our tents, evidently searching for a British heavy battery that had moved in two miles to the eastward, where four guns had been barking since daylight.

Although the roar of planes and the clatter of gun-fire were disturbing, the sergeants kept the tent-pitching squads steadily at work until we had two sides of a hollow square tented by noon. Then I was summoned to the front of the club-house where an ambulance had just driven in. Father Quirk, the Roman Catholic padre, was standing by the tail-board. "Colonel, look inside," he said in a low voice, visibly agitated. "Can you do something for these poor people? I picked them up at Bukit Panjang village."

With the assistance of the driver, I rolled up the canvas screen at the back of the ambulance. What I saw in the shadowy interior made me feel sick, made me want to shut down the screen to hide the horror within.

"Oh, Christ!" I moaned in pity.

Blood trickled in slow drops from the shattered bodies of the Malay family slumped on the stretchers. The father, already

dead, and the mother breathing her last shallow breaths, occupied the two upper births. In the lower, and on the floor between, lay four young children, mute, wide-eyed with fear. On the near side the splinted shin-bone of a little girl protruded through her torn bloodstained *sarong*. Her large brown eyes followed my every movement as I made a rapid examination of her brother and two sisters. Unwhimpering, they seemed to have lost all sense of pain. Quick surgical help might at least save their lives. I patted the hand of the little girl with a gentle gesture of sympathy, but she drew it away in terror.

Shutting down the flap quickly, I turned to Father Quirk with a face as agonized as his own. "Padre, our surgical tents are up, but it will take at least two hours to equip them for operating. I can do better elsewhere. Driver, take your car as quickly as possible to the Singapore General Hospital. Give the surgeon in charge my compliments, and ask him for mercy's sake to give these youngsters his personal attention."

As the ambulance drove off I turned, only half-conscious of my surroundings, to look up at three dive-bombers still wheeling lazily over Bukit Panjang. Shaking a clenched fist at them I cried, "Stop it, you fiends! God damn you for malignant evildoers! Bombing helpless Malay kids on a sunny Sunday morning! Why doesn't someone stop it!"

The outburst restored me to a measure of calm, but the whole world had gone grey; and the war had become personal. If, by giving Singapore to the Japanese there and then, I could have prevented the further slaughter of innocents, I would have handed it over with a glad sigh of relief.

I walked towards the water-tap near the porch, for my mouth was parched. A battered Humber Snipe, with bullet holes through the back of the body, drove up. From it alighted a fat transport major whom I disliked intensely. The sight of a Red Cross brassard on his arm made my gorge rise, for he had sneered at it in peacetime. He seemed a bit unnerved.

"Colonel, I've been bombed!" he shouted, puffing for breath, sweat running off his fat jowls.

"Too bad! What do you want me to do about it? Sit down and cry?" I snapped, feeling in no mood to talk to him.

For a moment he looked at me queerly, then, disregarding the

cold welcome, went on to tell me that he had come to reconnoitre a fresh site for his unit. Could he use the rifle-range as a transport park?

"No, you can't," I said firmly. "The place is cluttered up with enough vehicles already. Any additions will bring enemy planes on us like hornets. There's a fine stone quarry you can have on the other side of Reformatory Road. The granite blocks make ideal cover from shell-fire."

Either the fat major did not like the malice aforethought in my last remark, or the stone quarry was too far from the flesh-pots of the city. He drove off in a huff.

Colonel Neal came round the corner with John Chalmers. I greeted him warmly. He joined me in a cool drink in the mess tent.

"I've just been borrowing a small size in tin helmets from Chalmers," he said. "I haven't bothered to wear one so far, but the flak up at the Naval Base is dropping like rain. By the way, the Jap planes were going hammer and tongs at Bukit Panjang as I came through. I'm afraid Sheppard's field ambulance and the motor ambulance convoy are copping it. There are rumours of some casualties. Now I must be off. Cheerio."

Urgent work claimed Chalmers and me as well. Fisher and Brereton had admitted over one hundred cases, mainly neuroses, or "bomb-happies" as the rank and file called them. They were of a strange breed that, hitherto, we had not encountered in the mass. Unwounded, physically in good condition, some apathetic, others abnormally tensed in a perpetual state of anxiety, they represented a severe loss to the hard-working units in the fighting line. Certainly they were not happy when the enemy gun-layers switched overhead to find a new target in Newton's Circus, a busy road junction between us and the city. Captain Brereton complained that they were hard to control.

"In a passive way," he explained. "They wander about with a glassy look in their eyes, refusing to stay for long in any one spot, but tending to hug the cover of the trees with one eye cocked warily at the Jap planes. In fact," he added, "if a bomb drops near by they'll be off into the bush like rabbits. What the hell can I do with a major, for instance, who sits down on the ground and sobs bitterly every time I order him into bed?"

"Keep them occupied," I suggested. "Why not put 'em to work digging slit trenches near their tents? We need the trenches, and they can be told the work is for their own protection."

Major Fisher agreed with this suggestion which worked well in practice. Soon fifty men were making the soil fly from the soft ground, needing no better spur than the occasional rumble of a shell overhead. Captain Brereton supervised them, smiling contentedly.

Four o'clock found Captain Lee and me grouped round a table in the upper lounge of the club with the president and three amiable representatives of the Club Committee. To my surprise I found that the R.A.F. had no written agreement with them, despite the affected protestations of the wing-commander. I began to like the Swiss.

Under the soothing influence of the president's hospitality, the cognac and the coronas, I cheerfully agreed to assume full tenant's rights to the club and the appurtenances thereof, including control of five Malay gardeners, one Chinaman and a cook.

A decorous business conference in any peaceful city could not have been more impressive, but the off-stage noises of rumbling guns and whining shells made an odd back-drop to the unreal castle-building. Only a restrained sense of humour kept me from bursting out hysterically, "Can't you see that all this is a bloody farce! Don't you realize that Singapore is doomed? That tomorrow your fine club may be blown to smithereens?"

After an inspection of the grounds, I agreed with business-like gravity to have a lease prepared, signed, sealed, and delivered at the president's office on the following Wednesday. Needless to say it was never signed, for on Wednesday we were shelled out of the place, and the Asiatic servants hopped it for parts unknown.

I dined with Mr Nedbee that night at a table lit by the faint glow from a paraffin lamp. The curried chicken and iced fruit salad, served by the Chinese head-boy, were a change from our dreary menus of bully-beef and tinned herrings, so that when our chairs were drawn out to the soft darkness of the porch-top I was in a mood to relax with a good cigar and listen to Mr Nedbee's quiet philosophy.

Confessing to almost sixty years of age, he had been a prisoner of war in the 1914-18 fracas. Measured, orderly years in the

Malayan Civil Service followed, only to terminate when the flames of Japanese frenzy touched the peaceful shore at Malacca.

"My family is safe now," he said, "and I feel that my work for Malaya is done. Death—" he looked up slowly as a large calibre shell roared overhead—"would mean little to me, but I'd hate to be taken prisoner a second time."

My admiration for him rose when I reflected that he had made no effort to escape; instead he had been content with a humble job as an air defence warden. Such men are unbeatable.

A new note was introduced into the dissonance of duelling artillery that night, signalled by a dull *boom* from the south-east. Four seconds later an express train passed overhead as half a ton of high explosive shrieked towards Johore.

"Heavies!" I exclaimed. "From Changi!"

"Yes," agreed John Chalmers. "The big guns there are supposed to have a traverse of three hundred and sixty degrees, although I don't suppose the gunners ever dreamt they'd be firing backwards over the Island."

The big gun, occasionally joined by two others, kept on firing for a long time. Smaller pieces joined in until sleep was difficult.

"Something's doing up at the Strait," said John. "This might be Singapore's big moment!"

Something was doing—with a vengeance! As the Sunday night merged into the wee sma' hours, the Japanese descended on the upper corner of the Island held by the Australian battalions. It seems fitting to set down the verbatim reports of eye-witnesses from both sides, as given to me later in varying circumstances.*

Lieutenant John Walker of the Notts and Derby Regiment (Sherwood Foresters) said in his soft Derbyshire accent that his platoon had been patrolling the coastline between the Naval Base and Pulau Ubin, an island. The latter had been held by a British patrol that withdrew under orders when the Japanese landed. This landing was not a strong one, being merely a feint to draw attention from the determined one on the Australian front to the west of the Causeway. The Japanese made no attempt to cross from the island to Changi. Private Charlie Moore, of the

* Lieutenant John Walker and Private Charlie Moore, both badly wounded, told me their narratives in the Roberts Hospital, Changi.

West Australian Machine-Gun Battalion, a splendidly trained unit, gave the following account:

> Me and me mates were sittin' pretty in a good possie on the beach, with one leg of the tripod in the water. We had a bonzer target in the crowded boats, and our gun sputtered as sweetly as a typewriter. We bowled 'em over like ninepins until they started to come from all directions. Artillery was wanted then. We sent up the Verey lights, but it was about an hour and a half before we got a reply from the artillery. Then it was too late. Why didn't they fire?
>
> I kept our gun going until I stopped this slug in the chest, then me mates took over, but I think they were surrounded later and had to withdraw.

Another account was given to me by an artillery officer.

> The guns did all they were asked to do, but we could have done more had we been allowed. Admittedly the signal wires were often cut by the enemy barrage, but there seemed to be a hell of a lot of red tape about getting permission to fire; for instance, we were not allowed to bombard the Government tower on the hill at Johore Bahru where the Japs had established an observation post.

Lieutenant (Choi) Sasaki,* aged 23, a fighting wildcat of a machine-gun officer in the Imperial Nipponese Army, demonstrated with flashing eyes and vehement gestures how his military landing craft had started from the south-western corner of Johore, and proceeded, at full speed with lights showing, towards the Causeway. When fire was drawn from the defenders on the opposite side of the narrow strait, the lights were extinguished. Then the motor barges were turned about and steered back to a preselected landing-place on Singapore Island.

"It was ver' bad place," continued little Sasaki, his voice rising as he recalled the excitement. "Orstralians shoot ver' hard, ver' fast, *brrp, brrp*" (here he imitated the rattle of machine guns), "so

* This section was vividly related to Captain Lee and myself in the rat-infested hold of the hell-ship *Celebes Maru*, during a hot night in late May 1942, when the ship—deserted except for a portion of my unit and a few Japanese guards—lay at anchor in the gulf of Tavoy. Sasaki, unusually decent and generous to us, spoke English fairly well. He wanted to talk of Western classical music, but we drew him on to speak of Singapore, while we munched hungrily at a tin of bully-beef that he had brought us.

that Nippon soldiers jump down among mangroves, and sweem, sweem in mud, oil and dark. Hoi! Hoi! What beeg mess! We throw off packs, off shirts, off everything except sword and material for fight. Then we fight with glory in mud. Ah! Orstralians! They are for me a grand souvenir of fight for Seengapoor. What you say? A gallant memory.

"When morning come we have crawled to railway line past mangroves. When I look up—all quiet! About feefty metres away I see road where lie many dead mens, er . . . er . . . p'raps twenty-seveen Orstralian, ver' sad, ver' sad!" Here Lieutenant Sasaki stood erect at the salute. "I give them salute of honour. Then on to objective; more fight begin, grand fighting, but no water, no food! For five days we drink from stream and eat coconut; dam' near starve! But on feefth day take Mandai Hill where we rest. Ah! Beautiful rest! Never I forget Orstralians and grand fighting they give me at Seengapoor."

Marvelling at the stamina revealed by Sasaki's men between the landing and the capture of Mandai Hill, I could not help asking, "And where did you train for all this fighting, Choi?"

"Ah! French Indo-Cheena," he answered readily. "Every day for six months, twelve hours every day, dig jungle, sweem swamps, but keep sword and guns clean, ver' hard!"

Sasaki had too much regard for our feelings to add that the Japanese were good fighters. No white troops would stand such a hard, animal-like training; but jungle warfare and animal life have so much in common.

The casualties caused by the Japanese landing meant more work for the medical service. While the civilian and military inhabitants were startled into a frenzied activity paralleled only by that of an ant-heap into which a stick has been thrust.

New reinforcements, still arriving from Australia and India, were wasted, for there was not time to train the men in the particular type of warfare the situation demanded. Sixteen hundred Indians—rustic types—arrived in the charge of six Indian jemadars; all were wearing heavy, winter clothing! They were handed over to experienced engineers for road-construction work. Frank Wayman, a senior engineer, said that about eight hundred could be mustered for work. Most of them were adepts in evasion when confronted with a pick and shovel.

Many of the Australian late-comers were no better. Colonel Anderson, V.C., who received six hundred and twenty to fill the depleted ranks of his hard-pressed battalion, told me that scores of them did not know how to load a rifle, while hand-grenades and mortars were absolute mysteries.

One of the new arrivals, a New South Wales miner, supplied an amusing recital of his experiences as I dressed his wound. "Fancy me in a flamin' 'orspital! Stiff luck, I call it. A man woulda been safer down a mine," he groaned.

"What the devil did you enlist for?" I asked, perhaps a little irritably, for many more serious cases were awaiting attention.

"Well it was like this, Mister." He had never learnt to address an officer by rank, and I didn't bother to check him, for his manner was ingenuous. "After the New Year the Guv'ment wuz gonna call all us blokes up for the militia, see? So in January I tossed up to see if I'd enlist or stay in the 'Ome Defence. Me penny fell 'eads for the call-up but, bein' a bloody fool, I enlisted just the same. Anyway me girl friend said she'd like me to be an 'ero.

"Then things begun to 'appen to me; shoved into camp, cook-'ouse slushy, peelin' spuds all day and every day for three flamin' weeks, strike me! Then one day the sargint comes around where we wuz dodgin' a fatigue, and bawls out, 'All youse blokes is booked for the overseas draft in two days' time. Won't youse be sorry, ha, ha!' 'E 'ad a narsty laugh, that sargint! But he wuz right about me bein' sorry. So we gits aboard a Dutch boat with a jaw-crackin' name and lands up in Singapore where 'ell starts poppin' before we're even in the 'arbour. Then I cops this, fair in the kick. That all 'appened in five weeks. Ain't a bloke stiff?"

The greater part of 10th February was spent in dodging shells and low-flying planes. When emerging from the lavatory after lunch, there was a whip-like explosion overhead and I was blown back in again. Dignity ruffled, I returned to the office upstairs where I found that a jagged lump of shell had pierced the window above Sergeant-Major Bossward's table and lodged in the opposite wall. Then came a report that the quartermaster's store had been hit. Investigating, I found a ragged hole in the floor near Jack Coombe's bed and an exit hole at a higher level through the wall. Coombe and his assistant, Joe Long, who had been in the hut at the time, were uninjured.

With artillery duelling overhead, it was apparent that the place had become too hot to hold a hospital. Accordingly Captain Lee and I decided to whip over to the Holland Road headquarters to obtain Colonel Derham's permission to move that night.

Before leaving I greeted twelve new reinforcements who had arrived, including two doctors, Captains White and Cumming. I was relieved to find they were all good men; we needed their services badly, for we had been shorthanded from men falling ill with malaria.

Holland Road had been blitzed by Japanese aircraft. We found it battered and desolate. Colonel Broadbent was poking about among the rubble at the back of the bungalow. He told us that we might find Colonel Derham attending to the wounded in a deep ditch near the road. After a search, made hazardous by .303 bullets that pinged and zipped from a burning ammunition truck on the other side of the road, we found him bending over a man on a stretcher.

"Can we give you a hand, colonel?" I called out as we joined him. Looking up in surprise, he said calmly, "No, thank you, this is the last case awaiting the ambulance. All I want is a blanket for the poor chap."

Then, as if realizing who we were, he asked, "Why have you come here?"

Briefly I explained our battle situation, and the proposed plans for a move that night. He considered them carefully before replying, "You must do as you think fit for the next forty-eight hours. Make your own decisions, as it is unlikely that I shall be able to make contact with you until we find temporary headquarters. Glyn White will pilot you through any official difficulties. I wonder why that ambulance is so long in coming!"

As we tramped up the road to the car, still with a wary eye on the popping ammunition, I reflected on the accuracy with which the Japanese had located our administrative headquarters. Their fifth-column guides must have been active, for it transpired later that no less a personage than General Sir Archibald Wavell had been there when the bombing started. In conference with him were Lieut.-General Percival and half the brass hats of Malaya Command. Wavell must have made a flying trip from Batavia to con the desperate situation of Singapore.

The hot reception prepared by the Japanese, or the woeful tale told him by those directing the defence of the Island, may or may not have inspired his dismal order of the day which I quote verbatim, together with a rider issued by General Percival on the following day.

It is certain that our troops in Singapore Island heavily outnumber any Japanese who have crossed the Straits. We must destroy them.

Our whole fighting reputation is at stake and the honour of the British Empire. The Americans have held out in the Bataan Peninsula against far heavier odds, the Russians are turning back the picked strength of the Germans. The Chinese with an almost complete lack of modern equipment have held the Japanese for four and a half years. It will be disgraceful if we yield our boasted fortress of Singapore to inferior enemy forces.

There must be no thought of sparing the troops or civil population and no mercy must be shown to weakness in any shape or form. Commanders and senior officers must lead their troops and if necessary die with them.

There must be no question or thought of surrender. Every unit must fight it out to the end and in close contact with the enemy.

Please see that the above is brought to the notice of senior officers and by them to the troops.

I look to you and your men to fight to the end to prove that the fighting spirit that won our Empire still exists to enable us to defend it.

A. P. WAVELL. GENERAL.

*Singapore*
10/2/42

*Commander,*
*III Ind. Corps,*
*A.I.F.,*
*Southern Area.*

I attach a copy of an order I received from the C. in C. Western Pacific Command, General Sir Archibald P. Wavell, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C.

The gist of this order will be conveyed to all ranks through the medium of all commanding officers.

In some units the troops have not shown the fighting spirit which is to be expected of men of the British Empire.

It will be a lasting disgrace if we are defeated by an army of clever gangsters many times our inferior in numbers. The spirit of aggression and determination to stick it out must be inculcated in all ranks. There must be no further withdrawals without orders.

There are too many fighting men moving about in back areas. Every available man who is not doing other essential work must be used to stop the invader.

A. PERCIVAL. LT.-GENERAL.
G.O.C. MALAYA.

*Adv. H.Q.M.C.*
11/2/42

For some curious reason these orders were not passed down to the A.I.F.* or, if they were, they did not progress beyond divisional headquarters. Had they reached the men who had borne the brunt of the fighting in Malaya, they would have evoked howls of rage and derision, recalling as they did the futile "stand and die" order of General Gamelin to his bewildered Frenchmen earlier in the war. When I saw them later I was reminded of the comment of Strategicus in the London *Spectator*, which ran something like this: "An army is very much like a horse; if there is a good rider in the saddle it has confidence in facing a difficult journey."

* Colonel A. P. Derham writes: "When this order of the day was handed to me by a senior A.I.F. staff officer for promulgation to the A.A.M.C. units, I read it, put it back in its envelope, tore it into small pieces, and threw it in the waste-paper basket under the nose of the staff officer. My medical units had not run away from anything, had usually been the last to retreat when retirement was ordered, and, almost without exception, officers and men had done their duty, regardless of danger. Among these were outstanding ambulance drivers and the regimental medical officers.

"I refused to promulgate such a contemptuous and uninspiring order to them. I have only recently learnt on good authority that the order was issued on the direct instruction of Churchill and not Wavell, which is a great relief to me. It was so unlike the inspiring orders of Sir Ian Hamilton at Gallipoli, which produced results. When we were holding the edge of the cliffs, with no reserves, on the nights of 20th, 26th, 27th April 1915, the order was given that no officer or man was to yield even a yard of ground—no man did, and not a yard of trench was lost. The men were no better than the 8th Australian Division in Malaya, and not so highly trained, but there was discipline and leadership. They had only enlisted eight months before, and more than two months of those were spent at sea."

Without seeing Wavell's order, there were gallant men prepared to carry out its precepts to the letter. One such was Lieut.-Colonel "Sapper" Boyes, an Australian Staff Corps graduate who next day led a scratch battalion—hastily formed from the personnel of the base units—to hold a weak point in the British line astride the Jurong Road. Barely a company escaped destruction, the majority, including Colonel Boyes and the battalion medical officer, dying valiantly in the petroleum-soaked scrub on the outskirts of Bukit Timah.

Overtaking me in fragmentary fashion, this news was grievous, for I knew Sapper's family. Little, fair-haired Virginia, his only daughter, had been the playmate of my own children in the carefree years before Hitler's insanity ripped the world asunder.

# 17

## *Of Nurses and Hospitals*

THE MOVE of the casualty clearing station from the Swiss Club was the most haphazard in the unit's experience. The headquarter company of the 10th Field Ambulance came crowding in to take over from us. Then Colonel Hedley Summons, of the 9th Field Ambulance, arrived with a note from Colonel Derham urging us to enter written and separate protests about the proximity of British batteries to Red Cross units.

Indeed the increasing intensity of the shell-fire was giving us food for thought. Another British artillery unit had moved in behind us on to the edge of the racecourse, where its hard-

working guns were attracting vigorous replies from the enemy. Major Krantz, in charge of the emergency surgical team, showed me where a Japanese shell had ripped through the top of the operating-theatre marquee.

Afterwards the Japanese always referred with awe to the "battle of Bukit Timah", where it was evident that our artillery had been fortunate enough to range with many batteries on to a heavy, enemy troop concentration.

With much noise off-stage, and much ironmongery flying overhead, I sat behind a concrete pillar on the upper floor of the Swiss Club in an impromptu conference with Colonels Sheppard and Summons. They too had been advised to make their own decisions.

Colonel Summons advanced the view that further moves were futile, being only a postponement of the inevitable last stand. He suggested that our three units group together, there and then, to form a composite hospital that would rely on the Red Cross to protect staff and patients when the Japanese arrived.

Sheppard and I were of the opinion that the proximity of our own artillery made any claim to Red Cross protection unfeasible. In any case, if a surrender were inevitable, it would be better to let our share become part of a general capitulation, with a possibility that the plight of the wounded would be given consideration.

Meanwhile our unit lines were filling up with exhausted survivors of the fighting round the burning oil-dumps. Fortunately the surgical cases were being directed to the general hospitals. Many of the former were black from head to foot with oil and soot. All were very hungry, a condition that our cooks were able to remedy quickly. As soon as it was realized that there were no seriously injured, I lined them up on the brink of the swimming pool, gave each one a cake of soap, and said, "Go to it, boys!"

Many were so refreshed by the cleansing swim that they were able to go off later in search of their units—"in case our mates think we've let 'em down!"

The swimming pool was a horrible mess of soapsuds and oil afterwards, but it was a case of any port in a storm.

My grand team of officers and non-commissioned officers had been hard at work packing up, although the men were jaded, and very fed up at seeing their neat hospital tents being dismantled.

A rumour that there had been a landing at Penang and Port Swettenham by a combined British and American force galvanized them into fresh activity.

"Churchill has come good! Singapore has a chance yet!" they chorused with all their old-time zest as they piled the equipment on to the trucks.

I hated myself for allowing that rumour to spread, for I felt it was not true. However, it helped to load nine borrowed lorries in double-quick time. The radio promise of speedy aid given by Churchill—"Singapore will not fall"—had kept all ranks buoyed up with hope. Until that day I had not heard even a whisper of surrender; but when listening to a London news bulletin that same night, I heard, "The news from the Far East is bad, and there is worse to come." I felt in my bones then, that there was to be no reprieve for Singapore.

Captain Lee, who had been out scouting for accommodation, returned to say that the best he could find consisted of two civilian bungalows in Gilstead Road.

"We won't be able to take patients there," he said, "but the location is near enough to the 10th Hospital to fit in with any scheme for amalgamating the medical units."

"All very well if the artillery doesn't butt in again," I replied. "Anyway it means a house and home till something better turns up. Place guides on the lorries, and let them move off as soon as possible. Major Krantz and Captain Brereton will remain with the rear party."

The Gilstead Road bungalows were crammed to capacity with our personnel of one hundred men, but the absence of patients gave officers and men time to rest, as well as a welcome chance to overhaul their personal gear. The loaded lorries were parked for the night at intervals along the tree-covered road.

Major Fisher and Staff-Sergeant Taylor were called to the rescue of six European ladies, all elderly spinsters or widows, sheltering in a small bungalow on the other side of the street. They appeared to have been forgotten in the civilian exodus. One became hysterical under the tension of increasing gun-fire. "I call it disgraceful!" she cried. "Here am I, stranded without a taxi, and the Japs only five miles away. Why can't you men do something about it?"

The staff-sergeant wilted under the warmth of her harangue and the ill-concealed amusement of his men, so Major Fisher allotted one of the trucks to take the good ladies to the comfort of friends in the city.

A more pathetic case was that of a poor Eurasian woman found cowering over a four-day-old babe in the shelter of a roadside ditch. Terror-stricken, she had fled from a nearby maternity hospital that had been hit by a shell. Again a lorry was pressed into service to take her to a place of safety.

Morning brought a rough but welcome meal from the cooks, and an early visit from enemy planes that were now concentrating on the artillery batteries round the Swiss Club. Major Krantz, who had re-joined us during the night, reported that the shelling around the club had become so intense that the two field ambulances had been forced to move also.

At ten o'clock a raid by low-flying light bombers was so intense that we were forced to dive into dug-outs that had been excavated in the garden of the shrapnel-spattered house next door. I hurtled through the doorway of the nearest tunnel just ahead of a frightened Alsatian dog, in time to miss a bomb which burst so close to the entrance that the blast ripped at the wide legs of my shorts. Wondering what was attracting the planes I looked over the open gully at the back of the house. There I saw an Australian battery moving in between us and the 10th Hospital.

I pointed it out to Major Chalmers. "How these confounded gunners must love the medical units!" he groaned.

"Slip over to the battery commander," I said, "and tell him his guns are only a hundred yards from the hospital. If he draws counter-battery fire from the Japs, the hospital will get most of it." About twenty minutes later John returned to report that the battery commander had agreed to co-operate by moving farther away.

Then Captain Joe Vincent arrived with a message from headquarters ordering the casualty clearing station to augment the staffs of the two Australian hospitals. A surgeon and fifteen orderlies were required for the surgical wing of the 10th at Manor House, while the remainder of the unit, with its equipment, were to link up with the 13th at Katong.

Alan Hobbs volunteered for the surgical job at the 10th, as

also did the members of his surgical team who would have followed him anywhere. Captain Alec White and two orderlies were detailed for a dangerous job with a fighting battalion. This was an assignment that troubled me for I felt I might be sending them to their deaths.

Then Mr Murchison arrived in time to join us on our move to Katong. Piling my personal belongings in his car, we set off to lead the convoy of unit trucks through the streets of Singapore.

The bomb-swept city presented a sorry appearance; the majority of the shops were boarded up. Here a ramshackle residence was afire, the flames hissing under the hoses of a volunteer fire-brigade; and there military traffic, circling round the craters in the road, pressed forward with supplies of much-needed ammunition for the troops fighting round the ever-narrowing perimeter. Skeletons of burnt-out cars, twisted remnants of their pristine, glittering selves, huddled in the gutters as though ashamed of their nakedness. Here and there a furtive looter peered from the shadows of wrecked shop-fronts.

Even the canal seemed bereft of its usual stench as it crept seawards under North Bridge Road. The brothels of the Jalan Besar were heavily shuttered. No longer did chattering Chinese charmers, flat-chested in exotic Shanghai frocks, lounge in the doorways of Lavender Street.

Outside the deserted cafés a few old women, grey-haired, and drab in their black silk trousers, staggered along under enormous baskets of household chattels, saving what they could from the menace of modern artillery.

Once the pride of the Straits Settlements, now an area of black desolation, the civil airport at Kallang came into view. The airport hotel was a mass of blasted concrete, the control tower a skeleton of bare steel girders gaping forlornly over shattered runways and tangled heaps of junk metal that had once been trim Buffalo or Hudson planes.

Across the span of the tarred road lay the ribs of a crashed Hurricane. Another lay broken-backed, rusting among the trees at the roadside. Great gashes in the red-tiled roofs of empty bungalows testified to the vigour of enemy bombing.

An air of brooding expectancy pervaded the scene, the only signs of life being a few Tamil children who peered round the

hibiscus hedges with fear manifest in every gesture. No longer did they greet the convoy with thumbs thrust up in the cheerful sign of victory, or call out the familiar "Hullo, Joe!" of peacetime. Instead, they slid away in frightened silence, ready to stampede at the first sound of a plane.

Much more activity was noticeable as the car swung into the East Coast Road, where the massive buildings of St Patrick's School lay between the road and the sea. A Red Cross flag flew at the entrance gates where the pickets were engaged in a vociferous argument with a section from the Manchester Regiment that had apparently been ordered to establish a machine-gun post on the other side of the road.

"Why don't ye scram outa here with yer bloody gun?" they bawled. "Don't ya know this is a flamin' 'ospital?"

As Murchison pulled the car to a stop in the gateway, the picket sergeant, who knew me, said, "Colonel Pigdon's orders sir, will you please leave any fire-arms or ammunition here? No armed men are allowed into the hospital area."

Dismounting, I dragged off the web equipment that held revolver holster and ammunition pouch. "Here you are, sergeant. I've been wanting to give it away for a long time. The pistol is a lovely Smith and Wesson, but I've never been able to hit a haystack with it."

This casual handing over of a fine weapon was too much for the sergeant in charge of the machine-gun. "Can I have it, sir?" he said eagerly. "We haven't one in the section, and it might be handy." So, instead of being placed on a forlorn dump, the pistol was given to one who might yet have a chance to make it earn the cost of its manufacture.

Colonel D. C. Pigdon, commander of the 13th Hospital, heaved his tall, spare frame from a chair as I entered his office: "Glad to have you, Hamilton, but I'm hanged if I know where I'm going to put everyone. Sheppard and his field ambulance may be joining us as well. Meantime there is a spare bungalow with an adjoining pavilion to house your unit. What are your own plans?"

"Give me a job as a surgeon," I begged. "My officers and men are keen to help wherever you need them."

"Fine!" he said. "We have twelve hundred casualties at pres-

ent, and expect many more in the next few days. I can use all the men you've got, particularly the nursing orderlies and technicians. I've arranged that they shall work as far as possible under their own officers."

Thanking Colonel Pigdon for this friendly gesture, I asked him his views of the military situation. He shrugged his shoulders expressively. "You know how things are as well as I do. We can't retreat any farther without ships. Why in the name of heaven Australia hasn't sent up hospital-ships to evacuate the casualties is beyond me. Many will die as a result. Conditions, grim enough now, are getting worse every hour."

A brief look round the crowded hospital revealed that the commander, if anything, had understated the case. The staff was overworked, the wards full of men whose wounds required constant attention. Clean linen, drugs and antiseptics were running short and, worst of all, the municipal water supply had been cut off.

It was staggering to visualize a large hospital without an adequate water supply. Even with an emergency quota obtained with much labour from an old well in the grounds, there was very little available for any purpose except drinking, while the flushing of sanitary conveniences was an impossibility.

Fatigued by the anxieties of the day, I walked across the grounds to the bungalow that had been allotted to us. Prior to our arrival it had been occupied by the nurses, the last of whom were standing by for a passage on the next available ship out of Singapore.

Sister Shirley Gardham, youngest of our nurses, was waiting on the lawn to greet me with news and greetings from the others. "We hate leaving, colonel, at a time when we could be of so much use in the hospitals. Can I take any messages back to Australia for you?"

I looked down at her youthful face flushed with the excitement of her impending departure. Mindful of the day her father in faraway Tasmania had entrusted me with her welfare, I prayed momentarily, "May God take care of you on a hazardous journey, lassie."

Out loud, I said, "Thank you, sister. In case I shouldn't be able to get a message back to my wife, would you please post this from

the first Australian port? It's a letter I wrote this morning in the hope of getting it through."

Neither of us were capable of expressing our thoughts. She must have known I was doomed to imprisonment, or worse. Mercifully, I was ignorant of the cruel, sad martyrdom awaiting her and her fellow nurses.

Her lips trembled. "Of course I will, colonel. What's more, I'll deliver it personally." Then with a half-strangled sob she took the letter, and ran back to her quarters in the bungalow next door.

After a late meal with the officers who assured me that the men had been comfortably quartered, we sprawled on the lawn bordering the sea-shore, where the rising tide lapped round the landmines and the double apron of barbed wire.

"Would to God the north shore of the Island had been protected in a similar way," I reflected.

Seaward, the calm waters stretched in the starlight to blend with the pall of smoke over Pulau Bukum. To the right spread the straggling foreshores of Singapore Harbour where the anchored ships were silhouetted black against the fiery glow from the burning oil tanks on another island, Blakang Mati. The rumble of heavy gun-fire came spasmodically on the breeze.

"How's this for a grandstand seat at the battle?" said John Chalmers, brightly. "Feels more like the Nero touch," rejoined another officer. "The hospital stopped a bomb on the far corner of the top floor two days ago, fortunately with no casualties. I'm told it was not deliberate, for the Jap planes have left the place alone since then. Everyone behaved very well, taking a cue from the nurses, who were magnificent."

Sleep came easily that night in a cool upper bedroom. Next morning, having arranged with Major Fisher to organize our orderlies and technicians for work in the hospital wards, Captain Lee and I called for volunteers from the drivers to rescue the remainder of the unit equipment, including the X-ray plant, from Gilstead Road. The journey was not without danger, for it meant passing through an area that was now under shell-fire. The drivers did well, being able to rescue all the valuable gear except some mattresses not considered worth the risk involved in a return trip.

Captain Lee and I went up to Gilstead Road to see them at

work, then pushed on to the 10th Hospital at Barker Road, where the grounds were congested with artillery vehicles. Major Lyall Andrews was striding up and down the drive talking pungent Australian to the crews of three Bren carriers. Later in the morning the area was shelled, causing a few casualties among the patients, and forcing Colonel White to attempt the heartbreaking job of moving twelve hundred patients and six hundred tons of equipment inside twenty-four hours.

All available ambulances and lorries were mustered for the superhuman task—one which any civilian hospital staff would say was impossible. However the "impossible" was done without chaos or lack of control; the serious cases were sent to the Singapore General Hospital under Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Coates and the lightly wounded to the restaurant of the large Cathay building in the heart of Singapore.

We returned to Katong in time to wave good-bye to the remaining nurses who were off for embarkation. Smiling wistfully, they fluttered tiny handkerchiefs to us from the open doors of the ambulances, as orderlies and doctors lined the drive to cheer them on their way.

From the lawn that night we watched their small ship, the *Vyner Brooke*, sail out of the harbour, etched against the sunset that came redly through the smoke from the fires in the stricken city. The dock area had been the principal target of the Nipponese bombers that day. Doubtless the departure of the ship had not been unnoticed by the enemy Air Force.

We were not at all happy. From the depths of a deck-chair a cynical wag remarked, "Well boys! Black Friday tomorrow! It's the thirteenth of February."

"Oh, shut up!" said the misanthrope on my left. "If we had any sense we'd collar that little Chinese ship out there and clear off ourselves."

"You'd blow yourselves up on the landmines before you got through the barbed wire," said John Chalmers, who had joined the group. "Anyway, what about the wounded blokes up in the building there? Who's going to look after them?" No one had any answer to that.

Before turning in, I listened to the late radio bulletin from Singapore, anxious to find out if the Japanese were outflanking

on the east coast of the Island. One sentence was comforting: "There has been no enemy landing at Changi."

The booming of the heavy guns from that direction served to confirm the message. I dozed fitfully until midnight, when a message from Arthur Home, registrar of the hospital, summoned me to the main gate.

At the hospital gate all was confusion. Pickets barred the entrance to a line of cars banked up along the road to the east. Slim officers with English accents ran from car to car shouting information. Drivers cursed as they thrust gears into reverse out of the cluttered fairway.

In the semi-darkness I saw Arthur Home's shiny pate with its fringe of white hair. He was arguing with a captain of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force.

"What's the matter, major?" I called.

"Plenty!" he shouted. "The Volunteers are trying to take possession of the hospital grounds. Worse than that, they are establishing a road-block at our eastern boundary. Colonel Pigdon has gone in to Malaya Command for an urgent conference. Will you handle this?"

I turned to the Volunteer captain who had been looking uneasily at the long line of transport. "Well, what about it?"

"Sorry, sir," he stammered, "but my orders are to rendezvous here with the remainder of the battalion. The school, which we didn't realize was a hospital, is planned as the right flank of our new line when we've completed the withdrawal from Changi."

"A hospital the right flank of a fighting line!" I exclaimed angrily. "Do you want an unholy massacre? Don't try to tell me you didn't know this was a military hospital. The Red Cross flags have been up long enough for you to have seen them days ago."

Uncomfortable, the captain answered mildly, "Perhaps you'd better talk to our commanding officer, sir."

"What's his name?" I barked. "And how the devil do I find him in this mix-up?"

"Colonel James, sir. Ah! Here he comes now!"

A tall, white-haired man appeared out of the darkness. He nodded briefly in introduction.

"Look here, colonel," I went on, "I'm acting commanding officer of this hospital, and I want your reasons for turning it into

part of your new line. Surely you're not serious in placing a roadblock where it will endanger the lives of patients? You've got the whole of the East Coast Road to choose from, yet you pick on a crowded hospital as a good defensive location! Why? Why withdraw from Changi at all?"

"I have my orders from Malaya Command," he said stiffly, "and I intend to obey them."

"Then it's a damned disgrace!" I retorted heatedly. "And high time somebody showed Malaya Command how to run a war. There has been no landing at Changi."

This last remark was a shot in the dark, because I had no authority for it other than the radio bulletin, but evidently it found a target, for there was a queer pause until the colonel, looking closely into my eyes, said slowly, "That is not true."

His observation was made in such a peculiar manner that I felt he was not calling me a liar but, rather, was dubious himself about the real situation at Changi. Informing him frankly that my statement had no better basis than a radio report, I contended that he still had no right to incorporate the hospital in a combatant front line. Although we parted like two dogs who have seen the futility of snarling over a bone, my argument must have carried weight, for the battalion cleared off north to the Changi Road, leaving the entrance again in comparative peace.

Major Home took me down to his office for a cup of coffee and a talk over the serious problems besetting the hospital. I gathered that Colonel Pigdon had gone into Singapore for a momentous consultation with Brigadier Stringer, as to whether the hospital should move into the beleaguered city or stay outside to take its chance between the opposing battle lines. "What a chance!" I thought. "I wonder who invented that corny proverb about the frying pan and the fire."

Finishing the coffee, I went back to "knit up the ravelled sleeve of care" with an hour or two of sleep. Arthur Home said he would sit up until Colonel Pigdon returned.

# 18

## *Black Friday*

BEFORE breakfast, I met Colonel Pigdon at his office where he told me of his discussions at headquarters. Brigadier Stringer, reluctantly forced to the conclusion that to move the hospitals inside the rapidly closing British perimeter was not only impolitic but dangerous, made the hardest decision of his career. Two large general hospitals, the Gillman and the 13th Australian, were to take what chances providence offered them outside the defence line. A third, the Alexandra, was little better off as it was in an area surrounded by military objectives.

The 17th Combined General Hospital, full of Indian patients who had been bombed out of Changi Barracks, had crowded into Tyersall Park where the accommodation consisted of flimsy atap huts, built for civilian evacuees from northern Malaya.

Captain Frank Wright, a veteran Red Cross officer with this unit, told me later that the hospital was no sooner established in its new location than retreating artillery batteries parked round

it, a circumstance that immediately drew attention from Japanese aircraft.

Incendiary bombs were showered down, causing a holocaust in the inflammable wooden huts. Most of the badly wounded patients had no escape. Captain Wright witnessed thirty-five of them burnt to death as the flaming palm-thatch crashed down on their cots. "They were literally roasted alive," he said. "I can hear their cries still ringing in my ears."

Colonel Pigdon's orders to stay at Katong were in writing, "in case some damn fool tries to alter them," he explained. They seemed to provide the only sensible solution, for large hospitals cannot be moved overnight. Assembling the staffs of his unit and mine, he detailed the grim news: rations would be cut down immediately as only two weeks' supply was available. If any convalescent patient or orderly wanted to join the fighting force inside the perimeter, he was at liberty to go. The remainder would stay and tend to the wounded.

Many lightly wounded officers and men, led by Colonels Anderson and Galleghan, who had been recuperating from illnesses caused by the hardships of the campaign, got out of their beds to re-join their units in the city.

Only one of my unit—a recent reinforcement—accepted the invitation. I heard that he made his escape from Singapore, but eventually was captured in Sumatra. I liked the lad, for his work had been good, so that I did not judge his motives for leaving us too harshly.

The predicament of the sick presented a challenge to the Army Medical Corps that could not be side-stepped. In the wards the hard-pressed doctors and orderlies were missing the trained skill of the nursing sisters.

At first it was a terrific task to assemble order out of the threatening chaos, but Colonel Pigdon and Major Home tackled it calmly, firstly at a breakfast conference of all officers and, secondly, at a conference of the senior surgeons and physicians in his office. We arranged that Major Fisher, assisted by the greater part of my unit, would take care of six hundred medical cases in the convent building to the west of the hospital. I offered my own services, under the direction of Colonel Charles Osborn, the

senior surgeon, to take charge of a ward containing a hundred casualties.

I was on the verge of leaving the office for the ward when a car pulled in and a major from Malaya Command alighted. Entering, he announced to Colonel Pigdon that it had been decided to move the 13th Hospital into the city at the Cathay and partly at the Victoria Hall.

Colonel Pigdon, amazed at this stupid change of plan, demanded the new order in writing, at the same time showing the major the written order of Brigadier Stringer. Nonplussed, the staff officer decided to go back to Fort Canning to clarify his dilemma.

Colonel Pigdon, his face taut with worry, turned to me. "Colonel, in case we do have to attempt a last minute move, would you take my car on a run into Singapore and see what accommodation is like at the Cathay? It will have to be good or I'm staying right here!"

"Gladly!" I agreed. "I'll go now."

On the way in we passed crowds of men, soldiers, convalescents, civilians—afoot and on trucks—all making for the supposed safety of the narrowing zone inside the new battle line. I noticed that the Manchesters had retreated, so that their forward machine-gun emplacements were well on the Singapore side of the hospital. The streets around the Cathay were thronged with troops and fleeing civilians.

Battling my way up four flights of stairs, I eventually located Glyn White and Captain Lee, busy as beavers amid the pandemonium in the dimly lit bowels of the vast building. At another table in the corridor Colonel E. R. White talked rapidly into a telephone. His hospital was in the throes of establishing itself in the restaurant and surrounding apartments. Catching Glyn White's signal to wait a few minutes I passed the time of day with Lyall Andrews, who awaited Colonel White.

"What do you think of this for a bloody picnic?" shouted Lyall cheerily above the din.

"Just about describes it," I shouted back as I watched squads of stretcher bearers, sweating profusely in the dank warmth, manoeuvre laden stretchers round narrow corners at the end of the alley-way.

"Got room for another hospital here?"

Lyall paused to see if my query was facetious. "There won't be room for a louse after we are all jammed in," he snorted.

Glyn White pushed through the throng to join me. "Hell! I'd love a cigarette and a breath of fresh air," he said.

"I can't give you the fresh air," I said; "but here's the cigarette."

Quickly I outlined for him the confused series of orders received by Colonel Pigdon. Glyn wasted no time in coming to a decision.

"Tell Colonel Pigdon to disregard any order other than that given him by Brigadier Stringer. The 13th Hospital is to stay outside the perimeter. God knows! The brigadier didn't make the decision hastily."

"Suits us!" I exclaimed. "Would you mind scribbling it down officially, so that Colonel Pigdon will be left in no doubt?"

As Glyn's obliging pen flew over the paper, I mentioned the Victoria Hall.

"Don't waste time looking at it," he advised. "Other hospitals are already in occupation—mainly the No. 1 Malayan—and it's packed to the doors."

We shook hands a little self-consciously, each knowing what the other was thinking. Glyn's voice broke as he gave me a parting slap on the shoulder. He used my Christian name for the first time, "Good luck to you, Tom, whatever comes. I hope we meet again." The wealth of comradeship in his handshake was the most pleasant experience in one of the worst days of my life.

Getting out of the Cathay skyscraper, a great fabric of concrete and steel in three sections, was much more difficult than getting in. A stream of perspiring humanity surged up and down the narrow stairs or eased through the tortuous corridors. Timid family groups, Chinese and Indian, squatted round islets of baggage, evidently determined to make the structure a refuge from shell-fire. In shadowed corners Chinese wantons lay in the close embrace of amorous Australian stragglers, quite oblivious of their surroundings.

Alongside them, wounded men lay on stretchers that had been dumped down in any available space, while the bearers fought their way upstairs to locate the wards of the newly installed hospital. Well-dressed officers, making their way up to the palatial

flats above, stepped carefully over the legs of tired soldiers from the convalescent depot who were slumped half-asleep in convenient doorways.

I followed a tall brigadier and asked him if he could give me any information about the battle front east of Katong. Declining to evince any interest, he pushed past me into the manager's office, where he adjured a dejected-looking Chinaman in a dirty white suit to see that the air-conditioning plant was kept going at all costs.

Possibly the brigadier belonged to one of the bridge fours keeping calm in the old tradition round a card-table upstairs, for comedy and tragedy held the stage in at least two other luxurious flats.

The first featured all the nuance of a passionate interlude between an Australian major and a dark-eyed coquette. "It was wonderful, doc!" he declared later. "Think of it! The first time I had ever made love under shell-fire. What a thrill!"

In the second apartment a devoted wife lay dead across the left arm of her husband, a European. Her husband's revolver, with one expended cartridge, had fallen between them. Fearful of being parted they had planned a suicide pact, but somehow the man failed to meet the challenge of the smoking pistol. I examined his arm in Changi camp a month later. It was paralysed from the shoulder downwards by a fixation hysteria. In explanation he said simply, "Ah, yes, it bore the burden of my dead wife's body for over four hours." No wonder his private hell had left him half crazy.

Sighing for a lungful of fresh air, I found my way back to the ground floor. The lifts were out of order. A freak bomb-explosion in the street outside had lifted the back axle of a car so high into the air that it had fallen like a plummet down the lift well. In the centre of the front hall sat an immobile group of richly dressed Chinese ladies with children and luggage piled high around them.

"Who are they?" I inquired of a passing sergeant.

"Millionaires!" he said crisply. "The Loke Yew family. They own the joint. Tough luck they've been pushed out!"

The entrance to the Cathay theatre opened off the hall, so—to complete the reconnaissance—I stepped into the foyer. Dimly lit and full of A.I.F. convalescents from the hospitals, the great

auditorium was a welter of noise. On the front of the stage a padre —one of the hearty type—swung his arms vigorously to lead the uproarious audience in community singing. The bathos of "There's a long, long trail awinding" was followed by the absurdity of "Keep the home fires burning". The home fires of the Loke Yew family certainly were burning. Two days later the roof of the theatre was pierced by a shell that burst inside with terrific force, and caused sixteen serious casualties among the convalescent patients; six others were decapitated instantly when the flat, brass rail on the dress-circle balustrade was blasted from its sockets.

I breathed with relief when I emerged from the sandbagged entrance into the comparative freshness of the sunny street. Rejoining the car I noticed that the cooking for the 10th Hospital was being done on Soyer stoves in the little park opposite the building.

At Katong I reported the sorry story to Colonel Pigdon. He was more than ever convinced that his decision to stay at Katong was wise. Half an hour later the major from Malaya Command arrived back to confirm Brigadier Stringer's original order.

Throughout the rest of the day I worked in the ward assigned to me. It was grossly overcrowded with a hundred and thirty patients who needed not only fresh dressings to their wounds, but a complete change of bed linen. The stench of pus was nauseating. Although not the worst cases in the hospital by any means, their nursing was heavy enough to give me an aching back; it made me realize how much we were going to miss the nurses.

I was assisted by Major Robin Orr, a gentle, kindly eye-doctor from Melbourne, who willingly put his speciality on one side for the hurly-burly of general surgery. Mr Webb, a Red Cross officer, who kept the records admirably, and two energetic but untutored orderlies completed the team. Fortunately gas gangrene was conspicuous by its absence; wide excision of the wounds in the forward areas had not only proved a life-saving measure, but justified the modern surgical policy of the Army Medical Corps. It was obvious that ugly scars would remain in some cases unless skin-grafts were applied to the healing surfaces.

The return to clinical work was stimulating, a great mind-soother. To me it seemed that the healing of broken bodies was

one part of modern warfare that did not represent the futility of man's endeavour. "Some of these poor lads will need surgical care for months to come," I reflected. "Even if we are taken prisoners of war, the real task of the medical service has only just begun."

Majors Fisher and Chalmers, with the rest of the casualty clearing station, had the adjoining convent filled with medical cases. In order to be near their patients, they moved down into a little bungalow at the convent gate.

Singapore General Hospital, within the perimeter, was not so fortunate. The Japanese bombers pounded the dock areas relentlessly and caused heavy casualties that taxed the ambulances to the limits. The dead had to be dumped in heaps in the gully below the hospital. As one orderly described the scene in the wards—"there was a patient in every bed, one between every two beds, and one on a mattress under every bed. The floors of the operating-theatres were sticky with blood."

Colonel Coates had to desist from a delicate brain operation when a shell fragment cracked through the roof of his theatre, showering patient, surgeon and nurses with brick dust and plaster.

Ugly scenes were witnessed at the wharves, where belated refugees, army deserters—including the two bad eggs from Major Dick's convoy—fought their way aboard the ships to the exclusion of many highly trained technical men whose continued service would have been extremely valuable to the Allies.

Many of the ships did not get far from Singapore; they were sunk by enemy planes in the narrow straits with considerable loss of life. Several fine British Army nurses were killed, as well as the courageous wife of Brigadier Stringer, who had stayed by her husband to the last.

From the lawn at Katong we watched the last of the ships pull away from the fiery inferno of the dockside. Overhead, the smoke pall from the burning oil tanks hung like a black shroud. No longer did we speak of Singapore holding out. Instead we wondered when the devil's work of destruction would cease.

With the shadows of defeat closing over Singapore, and with no knowledge of what one's fate might be in the next two days, there was no joy in waking to a bright, sunny morning. Hard work in the wards provided the antidote. Not only had I to be surgeon, but nursing sister and probationer as well. Never again

will I listen without anger to anyone who describes the army nurse as a good-time girl.

A goodly proportion of the wounded men had not had a bowel movement for five days, having come from overcrowded wards in the city. Several had wounds that were fly-blown, including a man—under the care of Major Krantz—who had taken a terrific swipe across the back of his neck from a Japanese officer's sword.

Cleanliness being a primary charge, we organized a dhobi gang, under Corporal Eastall and the faithful Wong, to deal with the accumulation of soiled linen. Water carriers, hygiene men, and drivers, toiled to avert a breakdown in sanitation. Sergeant Bannerman and his general duty squad laboured as stretcher bearers.

Enemy planes circled the buildings occasionally, but appeared to respect the red cross. Later we found that St Patrick's School had been selected as headquarters for the Japanese Air Force.

Scant news from the battle line reached us. We heard that the Japanese had taken an awful bashing at Bukit Timah from our artillery. Sergeant Sherriff could not have been happy that day, for he made the following entry in his diary:

> 14/2/42. Another day of waiting for something to happen, as we had been told that the Americans were almost at hand to aid us. But we now despair of any assistance; we feel that we have been left and sold into the hands of the enemy . . . many of us feel it most bitterly.

This was no lamentation by a novice, for the worthy sergeant was a Gallipoli veteran with the ribbon of a Military Medal on his chest.

At a later date Captain Lee told me of the happenings in the heart of the city. Colonels Summons and Sheppard, with their respective field ambulances, had established an emergency hospital at St Andrew's Cathedral inside the perimeter. They were assisted by Major Dick's motor ambulance convoy. The Adelphi Hotel, opposite the cathedral, was used as an annex.

The open parkland between the cathedral and the harbour front was thronged with artillery units, and the whole area was under spasmodic shell-fire.

Straggling troops wandered aimlessly about the streets with provosts trailing them to re-establish discipline. On the night of

the fourteenth, fifth-column snipers—growing bolder as the Japanese closed in—commenced shooting at them from the house-tops. When Captain Lee was crossing from the Adelphi to the cathedral a bullet whizzed past his head. He decided to forgo the cigarette he had just lit.

Colonel Pigdon sought me in consultation near nightfall. We stood outside his office, surveying the buildings. "Hamilton," he said. "It is evident that the battle line may pass the hospital tonight. The nearest British outpost is about two hundred yards east of the convent—a few Manchesters manning a pillbox. What do you think should be our best course in the interests of the patients?"

"Plaster the place with Red Cross flags, and light them up!" I replied. "We're on the spot with a vengeance but, apart from the uncertain hope in the red cross, there is a small loop-hole. The Japanese forward patrols may bypass us down the Changi Road. If so they won't meet any opposition until they run into the Manchester outposts, although the Manchesters are still too close for my liking."

"And mine too!" he rejoined. "I think you are right. I'll have hurricane lamps placed over every Red Cross flag. Our electricity supply is a bit sick."

"What about the mobile generator?" I inquired, remembering that Sapper Dixon had mentioned it to me. "The more lights the better. Let them show out from every window of every ward."

Colonel Pigdon set the electricians to work. Soon the flags were floodlit, while those outside the convent were hung with hurricane lanterns. The scene, after such a long period spent in blackouts, was reminiscent of Christmas-tide.

The knowledge that our fate was in the lap of the gods brought a strange hush to the hospital. Patients and orderlies tended to stay within call of one another. Sergeant-Major Bossward came over to my room from the pavilion where the men were quartered, "Sorry to worry you, sir," he said, "but our fellows are a bit uneasy."

Slow to cotton on, I invited him to sit down. "I'm uneasy myself, Max," I confessed, "but what can we do except wait quietly?"

"That's the hard part," he replied slowly. "If we were armed it might be easier, but waiting under a mosquito-net for a bayonet

thrust isn't so good. Do you think—" he hesitated—"do you think the officers would join the men in the pavilion? After all we've been through together, I think the men would like it."

Then I understood. Here was a call that could not remain unanswered among decent men, the call of mateship, the call of mutual trust, of loyalty and leadership. I answered breezily to relieve the embarrassment, feeling a little ashamed that the suggestion had not come from me rather than from the sergeant-major. "A good idea, Max! Have the batmen move our paliasses over, and put mine next to Paddy Maloney's. I'll show him he is just a novice where snoring is concerned."

Down the lane at the convent Major Fisher must have been thinking along the same lines, for he and Captain White elected to spend the night in the wards occupied by patients suffering with nervous ailments.

Very few of us slept much at all, for mosquitoes were troublesome, and, from stray bursts of machine-gun fire coming from the Changi Road, we sensed that the Japanese patrols were gradually outflanking the hospital.

Such a tense environment was not good for patients whose nerves were already strained to breaking point. Major Fisher averted a stampede at the convent by a measured, steadying talk that put renewed confidence into the waverers. He and Mr Murchison, on a late round of the buildings, had a few words with a trigger-happy sentry from the Manchesters. Knowing that our own outposts were more to be feared than those of the enemy, they were successful in persuading the Manchester section to withdraw its machine-gun post before dawn broke.

Sunday, the fifteenth, marked the close of the dreadful retreat. I remember overhearing Wally Roberts, one of our steadiest men, say sorrowfully, "There doesn't seem to be much doubt about it now, with us back here on the beach. This is the third retreat I've been in."

"Where were the other two, Wally?" I asked, as I rolled up my bedding.

"Gallipoli and the Somme," he answered, "but this is longer drawn out." His opinion was substantiated later by two friends from the Sherwood Foresters who had been rescued at Dunkirk.

"This is worse than Dunkirk!" was their verdict.

Indeed when Japanese ferocity over Singapore climbed to a new peak at 11.30 a.m., General Percival decided that it was useless for the British forces to resist any longer. His decision may have been hastened by a bombardment of the city from the sea, where enemy warships had crept in to the outskirts of the minefields as soon as the heavy defence-guns were silenced from the land.

A major from Malaya Command, bearing a white flag, was sent by car in the direction of the Nipponese line at Bukit Timah. The forward enemy officers took him to the advanced headquarters of General Tomoyuki Yamashita where he was informed that the Japanese commander would deal with no one but General Percival.

Accordingly General Percival went out, accompanied by a staff officer. I have seen enemy photographs of the conference between the British and Nipponese commanders that took place in the office of the Ford factory at Bukit Timah.

Across a large table lined by smirking Japanese officers, with burly Yamashita the central figure, General Percival, pale and careworn with the burden of tremendous responsibilities, pleaded for honourable conditions of surrender. Coldly, he was informed that the terms would be "unconditional".

This must have been a great moment for the triumphant Japs, a chance for the despised Asiatic to put his heel on the neck of the hated white man. Nimble pressmen and staff photographers made the most of it with pencils, flash bulbs and clicking cameras. What an ordeal for poor old Percival! In the succeeding months, whenever a grinning Nip flourished one of the shameful photographs under my nose, I boiled inwardly with homicidal rage.

# 19

## *Singapore Falls*

OFFICIALLY our hospital was now abandoned to the unpredictable mercy of the Japanese, none of whom had yet appeared in the vicinity. A few shells that lobbed in the convent end of the grounds during the morning seemed to come from the north-west, possibly from our own guns. Fortunately no one was killed.

In the afternoon, the sporadic machine-gunning ceased. Listening patients, tense in the high-walled wards, relaxed as the sounds of close warfare abated. Nearing the end of a hard day's work one was conscious of a perceptible hush throughout the hospital corridors. Everyone waited.

Outside, enemy aeroplanes still wheeled lazily in formation over the burning portions of the docks, from which black smoke belched in great clouds. Small craft around the harbour lay motionless on a leaden sea. Around six there was a complete cessation of all gun-fire, and it was observed that the planes were no longer dropping bombs.

Most puzzling of all was the eerie silence that constrained one to talk in moody tones scarcely above a whisper. God knows there was little enough to be cheerful about. Gradually came the realization that much of the useless slaughter was finished. The dull feeling of hopelessness was replaced by one of mild relief that the miseries of Singapore were over. Was it too soon to believe that the hospital had been spared a fiendish massacre?

We could have suffered the same fate as the Alexandra Hospital where Japanese troops, attracted by the firing of Indian sepoys, went through the hospital with the bayonet, stabbing indiscriminately in a mad frenzy of blood-letting.

Over two hundred and seventy of the patients and staff were killed, including the surgeon in the operating-theatre who, although bayoneted three times, lived to tell the tale. His patient on the table was not so fortunate.

My brother-in-law was a patient in one of the wards. He said that all officer patients above the rank of captain were taken from the ward by the Japanese. They have never been seen since.

"Aren't I lucky I'm only a lieutenant," said Edward, as I dressed his wounds at a later date. "The blighters came right down to the bed next but one from mine. Then they stopped. A Jap wakened me with a knife under my nose next morning, but he only wanted my wristlet watch."

At the Gillman Hospital, also outside the perimeter, six medical officers sat down quietly in a small room to await the Japanese. One of them was called out to give an injection of morphia to a patient. When he returned, the room was empty. His colleagues have never been traced.

He went looking for Major Paddy Doyle, a fine Irish doctor from Dublin, who told me that he had enlisted "because he felt he owed the old country a bit".

"I was coming down the stairs," said Paddy, "dressed in my best uniform to receive the Japs. A horde of them rushed into the front hall where, after a bit of chatter and much pointing at my rank badges, they tied us up by the wrists. We were made to squat down like crows, in one of the front rooms. Then in came a big, husky Japanese lieutenant who removed his tunic and rolled up his sleeves. Unsheathing his sword, he tested the edge with his thumb and gave it a few preliminary flourishes. It looked as though he had been appointed our executioner. When the first three victims were dragged forward and placed in front of him with bowed heads, I had a funny feeling at the back of my neck. It was our turn next. Suddenly there was a bit of a din outside and a Japanese soldier rushed in and jabbered at the lieutenant. The lieutenant went outside. He was replaced by a squad of soldiers who came in and fixed bayonets in front of us. I felt half

sorry that the officer with the sword had gone away; being bayoneted is a messy business, beheading gets it over quicker.

"Then the lieutenant rushed back again, all smiles and jabbering excitedly. He called out, 'Breetish, they are feenished!' We were untied and given cigarettes by our captors. The time was about ten minutes to six. Was I sweating!"

At precisely the same time in the 13th Australian Hospital relieved emotions, demanding an outlet, bubbled spontaneously. As I doffed my gloves and gown in the operating-theatre a runner came requesting my presence in the commanding officer's office. There I found Colonel Pigdon and Major Home, grimly cheerful, opening a magnum of Veuve Cliquot.

Pushing a generous glass of the lovely vintage towards my hand, Colonel Pigdon said, "I don't quite know what we are celebrating, but it's probably the last champagne we shall taste for a long, long time, so cheerio!"

He smiled. I knew that behind the smile lay the same relief that was evolving in my own bewildered mind. Relief from incessant strain, from anxiety, from countless unknown fears and torments. One could now drift with the tide a little, leaving future dispositions to the Japanese commander.

Had we but known it, we were at the start of many months of dreary hardship. Our numbed brains were incapable of plotting the way ahead. Major Home attempted a light-hearted prophecy.

"I'll bet you both a good dinner that we are back in Australia by Christmas."

"Which Christmas?" I asked, stimulated by the champagne. "If you mean 1942, I'll take the bet. I'd cheerfully sacrifice twenty quid to be out of this mess."

"Twenty quid!" exclaimed Home with a laugh. "Why, twenty quid wouldn't even pay for the wine at the dinner I'm planning."

While I had been engaged with operative surgery in the late afternoon, other events had been taking place in the area. Drivers Reid and Rossiter from the casualty clearing station (much against my inclinations) had been detailed by the hospital transport officer to run the gauntlet into Singapore. George Reid tells his own story.

> In the mid-Sunday afternoon my mate and I were called to drive two loads of convalescents into Singapore. We took the trucks up

to the discharge office where the men got aboard. At the gate the picquet wanted us to take a lot of spare rifles which he had accumulated but, as the truck bore Red Cross flags, we refused.

On leaving the gate numerous natives started to signal us to go back, so we stopped for a consultation. Concluding that the signals were only to warn us of mortar-fire on the road ahead, we went on for another half-mile. Then a party of Japanese moved out across the road in front of us. We turned to go back. Rossiter got his truck round very smartly in one lock, and got his men back to the hospital but my big three-tonner, nearest the Japs, was slower.

As soon as we started to turn, the Japs sprayed us with tommy-guns. The chaps in my truck jumped out to shelter in the drain. The truck stalled on the second lock. I ducked behind one of the big rear wheels, but stopped a bullet in the right knee.

It felt like a burn at the time. In place of the expected thrill at being wounded, all I had was a shiver up and down the spine. Some of the men made a break for it, but I had to hobble to the roadside and put my hands up until the Japanese realized I was wounded. This and my Red Cross brassard probably saved my life, for the other men in the truck were tied up and marched off. The Japanese delivered me back to the hospital where they had a look through one of the wards.

How fared the men in the truck? Here is the story of Corporal Croft, a young Australian from the 30th Battalion, who was "executed", but survived to come under my care in the hospital at Changi.

We were marched up a lane for a distance of about two miles. We were in file, each with his left hand tied to the man behind. We were taken into a native house where there were other prisoners, British, Indian, and Straits Volunteers. We were searched and then made to squat down. At sundown a Jap came in and took the three Straits Volunteers outside. Then three shots rang out, followed by an awful cry. Every prisoner realized what was in front of him.

A chap from my unit was in the next three to be taken out, and again three shots were heard, but no cry. My turn came. I cannot honestly say how I felt. We were blindfolded and made to sit on the ground outside. My next impression was a terrific bump that knocked me flat on my back. I was then hauled by the feet and rolled into a drain with water in it. I was in a dazed condition for a while, then began to realize that I was still alive. Tied and blind-

folded, I lay very quiet, but no one came near me. Lifting the cloth from my eyes I found it was dark, so I untied my wrist with some difficulty and slipped my boots off. I crawled for a long time in the darkness, then sat up with my back to a tree until daylight. A Eurasian man found me and helped me back to the hospital.

God bless the good Samaritan who helped Corporal Croft. One doesn't have to be white to be Christ-like. A killer's bullet had entered the corporal's head under the left eye to emerge from the back of his neck on the right side. Its course did no vital damage except to leave a facial palsy. His only wish was to forget the dreadful experience.

On the moonlit lawn by the sea-shore that night the circle of officers was unusually quiet. No one quipped or jested, everyone was weary of speculating on what the future held. An unwritten law bound us to the patients in the hospital, but no such bond held the fighting men in Singapore, many of whom were hell-bent on escaping.

A British battery commander bought a Chinese junk. After having it stolen, he bought a second one in which he embarked his hard-fighting battery. Reaching Sumatra after many adventures they were recaptured there.

Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Coates was the only Australian surgeon with official orders to escape. He told me the sad story of the s.s. *Kuala*, loaded with three hundred women and children. Bombed off Sumatra, it sank with terrible loss of life. British troops, especially nurses in charge of the civilians, distinguished themselves by magnificent acts of heroism. Colonel Coates sacrificed his own chances of escape in order to tend the wounded at an improvised hospital in Sumatra.

On a lonely beach at Banka Island our own nurses were shot down in a cold-blooded horror that recalled the historic martyrdom of Nurse Cavell. Mercifully, we were not to hear of it until many months later when the news filtered along the underground grapevine of the prison camps.

Before turning in, I reflected that I should have gone down to the convent to make sure that Major Fisher and his staff were all right. Earlier in the day he had reported "all quiet". Captain White was the night-duty officer. I hoped he had remembered to

put up the lamps over the Red Cross flags. White arrived back at dawn next morning, looking very ruffled. "I've been tied up half the night," he said, peeling off his shirt preparatory to a bath.

"Tied up!" I echoed, looking at Alec curiously. It was evident that he had been through an ordeal. "Tell me about it, while you undress."

Alec sat down on the edge of a stretcher. "In the late afternoon yesterday, sir, I went out to inspect the red cross at the convent gate, in case the Japanese arrived. Just as I got round the gate-post, wham! Three of them grabbed me and tied my hands behind my back."

"What then?" I asked, deeply interested. "Oh, they led me into an empty room where they left me with a guard while they searched the buildings. Then they came back with an officer who ordered me to be untied. He gave me a cigarette.

"One of our men had had his wristlet watch taken by a Jap during the search of the building. When the officer heard of it, he gave the man back two wristlet watches.

"Then I was led out to the road where the Japs were trying to stop two of our trucks from the hospital. I shouted to warn the drivers. One turned his truck and got away but the other was wounded."

"That was Driver Reid," I commented.

"Yes," White continued. "Probably you know of his experience. The Japs seemed a bit excited over it; they took me back to the room and tied me up again. Finally I was given a feed and some more cigarettes. At night the Japs became more friendly, but they wouldn't let me come up here until morning. From their talk during the night they all appeared to be in great spirits over the fall of Singapore. They are now bivouacked in an empty building alongside the convent."

It was a good thing for Alec that he did not know of the fate that had overtaken the men in Corporal Croft's party. He might have been made to join them. His first week with the unit had been a hectic one.

Indeed the Japanese arrival at the hospital was utterly different from what we had expected. Lacking in drama—although on our side there was plenty of repressed tension—it began quietly with the establishment of a road post at the front gate. Then came

one or two Nipponese privates, curious to see what went on in the wards. I was dressing Sergeant Burke's suppurating wound when a patient sang out from the corner bed, "There's one o' them little monkeys behind you, sir."

Looking round with forceps and dressing in my hands I saw at close quarters my first live specimen of a Nipponese infantryman. Strangely like an anthropoid ape, who would have been happier up in the branches of a tree, he seemed uneasy under the concentrated stares of the patients. Dressed in peaked cap and dirty khaki drill breeches, with puttees and black rubber shoes, he remained impassive when I said, "What do you want?"

It was evident that he knew no English. His shoes, with a separate compartment for the great toe, reminded me of the cloven hoof. Then I waved my forceps towards the patients to indicate that I was busy, and dangled the foul dressing under his nose. The stink of pus had the desired effect. Drawing back hastily, he turned on his heel and left the ward.

In the courtyard below a party of high officers alighted from a red-flagged car, looked around briefly, spoke to no one, and departed.

The 10th Hospital at the Cathay was visited in similar fashion, although there General Yamashita paid a personal call that was courteous and not unfriendly. He must have felt on top of the world after his victory which, incidentally, brought him the popular title of "Tiger of Singapore".

At the Alexandra, so legend has it, a Japanese officer wearing white gloves called to express official regret for the massacre. "So sorry! Veree sorry!"

The terms of surrender were broadcast that evening by the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas. With my friends, Major "Bon" Rogers of Tasmania and Major Bert Nairn of Western Australia, I listened in for the last time to the world at war. Bert turned the dials till the B.B.C. came over clearly. Then we heard the first shocked verdicts of the English-speaking world on the incredible fall of Singapore, described later by Winston Churchill in the House of Commons as the greatest disaster in British military history.

Singapore did not suffer the fate of Nanking where in two days of fanatical rapine the Japanese slaughtered eleven thousand

men, women and children. On the contrary General Yamashita, acting the pre-arranged part of "liberator of the Asiatics from British Imperialism", had his soldiers schooled like children to demonstrate their ideas of racial superiority—often with comical results. At any rate he kept them "off the beer", for which we were thankful.

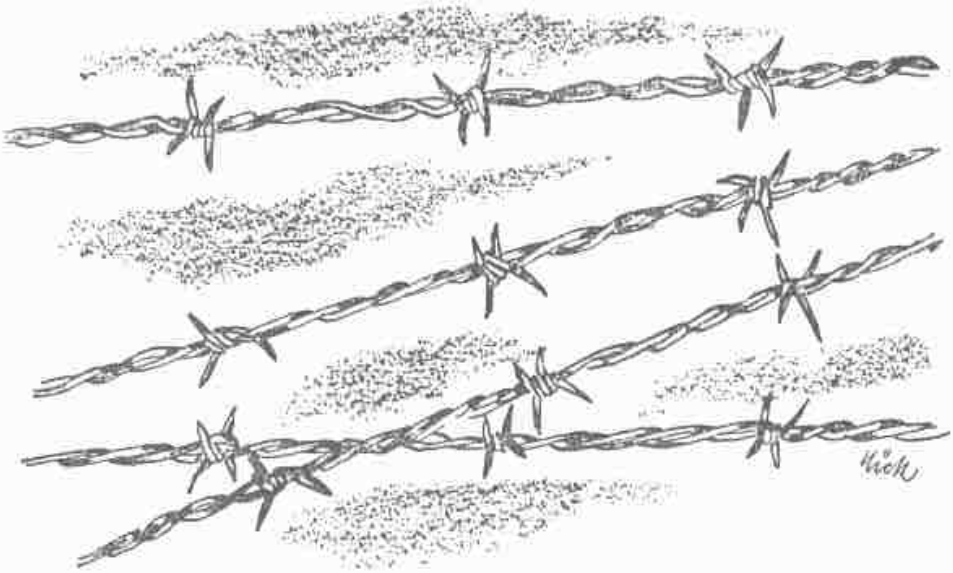
The cloven hoof was not hidden so carefully from his European prisoners. Glyn White, his face drawn with worry and lack of sleep, arrived out at Katong with a Japanese order that left Colonel Pigdon aghast.

All the patients and personnel of the hospital were to be moved to Changi immediately. Three days and nineteen lorries would be allowed to complete the order. No respite was permissible.

"This is a death-sentence for at least twenty critically ill patients," said Colonel Pigdon, pale with anger. "Why must the little brutes take it out on the sick! Fractured thighs will have to be resplinted for transport, undoing the good work of the surgeons; blood transfusions will be impossible for at least three days, and urgent operations will just have to wait. What a travesty of mercy from a nation that claims to be civilized!"

Nevertheless the job was done. Three days later I followed the men of my casualty clearing station through the barbed-wire gate of Changi, there to encounter the sad, speculative eyes of fellow-prisoners wondering if there would ever be a road back.

Seeing them, Donald Murchison remarked quietly, "This is going to be the survival of the fittest."



# 20

## *Epilogue*

For some there was a road back. It traversed that *via dolorosa*, the Burma-Thailand railway of infamous memory, where the toll was a human life for every rail, and one for every sleeper.

For the survivors, freedom in Bangkok in the autumn of 1945 tasted sweet, a sweetness that brought unaccountable tears to the eyes of those who had thought they would never savour it again.

For me it meant a relief from endless anxieties concerning hundreds of emaciated sick men in jungle camps. Dakotas of the Royal Air Force came roaring in to transport them to safety, while their medical care was taken over by the keen young medical officers of the 7th Indian Division.

On the personal side I was free to go wherever I wanted in Bangkok, in a car driven by an obsequious Japanese corporal; free to order for breakfast an egg and three sausages, flanked—believe it or not—by a large helping of rice, but it was yet too early to subject one's stomach to the full impact of rich meats. The mundane sausage, brown and sizzling, had always been the central object in my dreams of food, dreams that starving men try to linger over as they wake with the saliva dribbling from their mouths.

On 24th September, while the mercy planes whirred overhead in the afternoon sunshine, I sat in the shady lounge of the bungalow occupied by Colonel Ashley's Indian casualty clearing station. Alongside me was Colonel A. Sage (Royal Red Cross), Principal Matron of the Australian Army Nursing Service. She had flown up from Singapore to greet the rescued prisoners and to bring me news of our missing nurses.

"I'm afraid Sister Hannah is the only one alive," she said quietly. "She is well and wishes you to know that she suffered nothing except starvation and illness. I found her in a Sumatran camp where her companions, Staff-Nurses Raymont and Gardham died of illness." Good God! Stifling the cry of agony in my throat, I responded with set face. "I feared they were all dead, Miss Sage. The only information I have been able to gather is condensed in a statement given to me some months ago by Lieut.-Colonel Milner of the Royal Corps of Signals who was a prisoner in Sumatra before being transferred to Thailand. It reads:

> "Fifteen nurses landed on Banka Island from a ship which was bombed by Japanese aircraft after leaving Singapore in February 1942. They were found by a Japanese patrol on Radji Beach on 21st February. The patrol marched them to the water's edge and made them wade in waist deep. The Japanese then sprayed them with bullets from a machine-gun.
>
> One nurse, feigning death, escaped. Later at Palembang, although in terror of discovery, she made a statement to Group-Captain Rice (now dead) and Air Commodore Modin. The statement is buried at Mulo School, Palembang. It is thought that some of the nurses were Australian. The Japanese commander at Banka Island was named Orita."

Miss Sage nodded. "It is true. The survivor was Sister Vivian Bullwinkel. She too is safe in Singapore."

"Thank God for that!" I said. "The details of the massacre are heart-breaking, but the men of my unit—and of the whole 8th Division—will want to know and remember. Wait! I'll write them down in my note-book as you tell me."

Then, as the Matron's sympathetic voice related the saddest narrative in Australia's military history, my pen wrote on grimly.

"Sisters Balfour-Ogilvie, Wilmott, and Farmaner were shot at Radji Beach on 21st February 1942.

"Matron Drummond, of the 13th Hospital, was also shot down by the Japanese patrol. Sister Dorsch was last seen on a raft after the ship was bombed. Later her identity disc was found on the beach by a Mrs Armstrong (now dead) who witnessed the burials.

"Miss Paschke, Matron of the 10th Hospital, was seen on a raft after the ship sank. She gave up her place to a younger nurse, then tried to swim to the beach.

"Miss Kinsella, Matron of the casualty clearing station, was last seen floating on a raft. She is said to have given her place in a life-boat to a nurse who could not swim."

Softly, Miss Sage put her teacup down on the table. For a long moment neither of us spoke.

"It is rather an ordeal speaking of it," she said. "You must have known these nurses very well. What fine women they were."

I had no words to answer her. If speech had been possible my response would have been, "Australia had none better."

Those grand nurses were not the only victims of Japanese savagery. Some two weeks later I heard of the fate of Brigadier Arthur L. Varley, of Inverell, one of the most courageous soldiers I have ever known. He had been taken from our prison camp at Tamarkam in Siam with a draft that included Major John Chalmers and three orderlies from my unit. As usual, John had been the first to volunteer as medical officer for the draft.

They sailed from Singapore for Japan in an aged, filthy hell-ship, the *Rakuyo Maru*, which bore no international markings to indicate that she was crowded with defenceless prisoners. On 12th September, 1944, an American torpedo pierced her guts, and the depths of the China Sea claimed hundreds of weakened men. Struggling swimmers were crushed under the propellors of racing Japanese destroyers, but some were lucky enough to survive until picked up by the submarine four days later.

Arthur Varley was last seen in the water on the second day. John Chalmers died after two days of thirst and exposure on a raft. Private Brettell, a fine little English orderly from my unit, and Lance-Corporal Barrow also died.

*Vale*, John Chalmers! Always his brother's keeper, he was a man to inspire and guide the helpless. Or would he have laughed outright if anyone had told him so?

Almost, one can picture him under a burning sun on that frail

raft whispering through cracked lips before he turned in h
final report. "Here, take my possie, mate. It'll make things a b
easier for you."

*Before Atrides men were brave:*
*But ah! oblivion dark and long*
*Has locked them in a tearless grave*
*For lack of consecrating song.*

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