

CHAPTER 15

DEFENCE OF WESTERN AREA

DAWN on 8th February brought with it still greater enemy air activity. Aided by observation from a balloon moored over Johore Bahru, from aircraft, and from vantage points on the ground, guns pounded the island with increasing ferocity during the day. The weight of these attacks fell principally in the 22nd Brigade's sector. General Bennett's headquarters were bombed during the morning, and although only one man was killed, documents at this operational nerve-centre were sent flying.¹

The shelling and bombing played havoc with communications generally, and especially with those of the 22nd Brigade. Although the bombardment seemed wasteful in relation to the number of casualties it caused, it was to pay the Japanese handsomely as a means of hampering control of the defenders' operations. As it continued, line communications were cut, in some instances every ten yards or so. The 22nd Brigade's wireless sets had been called in for overhaul when the brigade got back to the island, and were returned only on the morning of 8th February. They were sent up to the battalions in the afternoon, but effective use was not made of them. The artillery response to the bombardment included fire to the mainland opposite the 44th and 22nd Brigades; but the scale and intensity of the enemy fire were far more evident than any retaliatory measures.²

Taylor's headquarters and those of his battalions were among the targets attacked by guns and aircraft. In the 2/19th Battalion area the bombardment prevented Major Robertson from completing his reconnaissance on taking over command. The Causeway sector also was under fire. The shelling increased during the evening until it reached drumfire intensity. Australian signallers were unable, despite constant and valiant efforts,³ to cope with the damage to lines, and most of Taylor's companies lost touch with their battalion headquarters.

¹ General Bennett's diary entry that "anyhow, a little less paper in this war will improve matters" (*Why Singapore Fell*, p. 173) reflected his attitude to what he considered excessive staffing behind the fighting men.

² Referring to the continuous artillery and mortar fire during a period of 15 hours on 8th February, Lieut-Colonel Varley, commanding the 2/18th Battalion, wrote in his personal diary: "During my four years' service 1914-18 I never experienced such concentrated shell fire over such a period. Pozieres was the heaviest shelling I experienced in that war. In 2½ days I lost 50 out of 56 men. The German shells seemed more effective in causing casualties. On this occasion 80 shells were counted falling in D Coy area (Captain Chisholm) in one minute; Lt Jack Vernon's platoon area had 67 in 10 minutes and this was typical of the whole area. Battalion HQ had 45 shells in 7 minutes; half an hour's spell then another similar dose and so on throughout the whole area all day. Our signal communications were cut and repaired and cut again."

The fact that the battalion's casualties were light, despite the intensity of the barrage, was attributed by Varley to the necessity for the construction of slit trenches holding one or two men having been impressed upon all ranks, and their having provided themselves with this cover. Varley warned his companies to expect attack by enemy troops during the night.

³ Lieut-Colonel Oakes was to write that the devotion to duty of the signallers, both divisional and regimental, was outstanding, adding: "I myself, from the shelter of a slit trench in which I was crouching saw a regimental signaller lying in the open near by, in the middle of a severe shelling bout, transmitting messages on a line phone he had connected up. And this was typical of the whole tribe throughout the campaign."

As a guide to his company commanders in the absence of other orders, Taylor had instructed them that, if strong enemy attack overwhelmed portion of a force, the remaining elements should fight their way back to company headquarters. As a last resort, battalions should form perimeters around their headquarters. The battalions had been trained in such manoeuvres. At 8 p.m. Taylor sent a direction to Lieut-Colonel Assheton, commander of the 2/20th Battalion, that if he were forced to form a perimeter the battalion should then fall back on the 2/18th at Ama Keng, north of the Tengah airfield. His intention was that there, with the 2/19th farther to the left, the three battalions should hold a line from Ama Keng to the Sungei Berih in the hope that reserves would be sent up and would operate after first light. The instructions were realistic in the circumstances as they developed, but no prepared defences existed along the Ama Keng-Sungei Berih line. Further, because of the extent of the 22nd Brigade's front, adequate means of mutual support in such operations were absent.

Bennett, perturbed by the pitch of the gunfire, rose from his bed in a bungalow near Bukit Timah village and rang his duty officer, Major Dawkins, telling him to ask the 22nd Brigade headquarters if it had any reports from forward posts, and to instruct them to switch on their beach-lights.

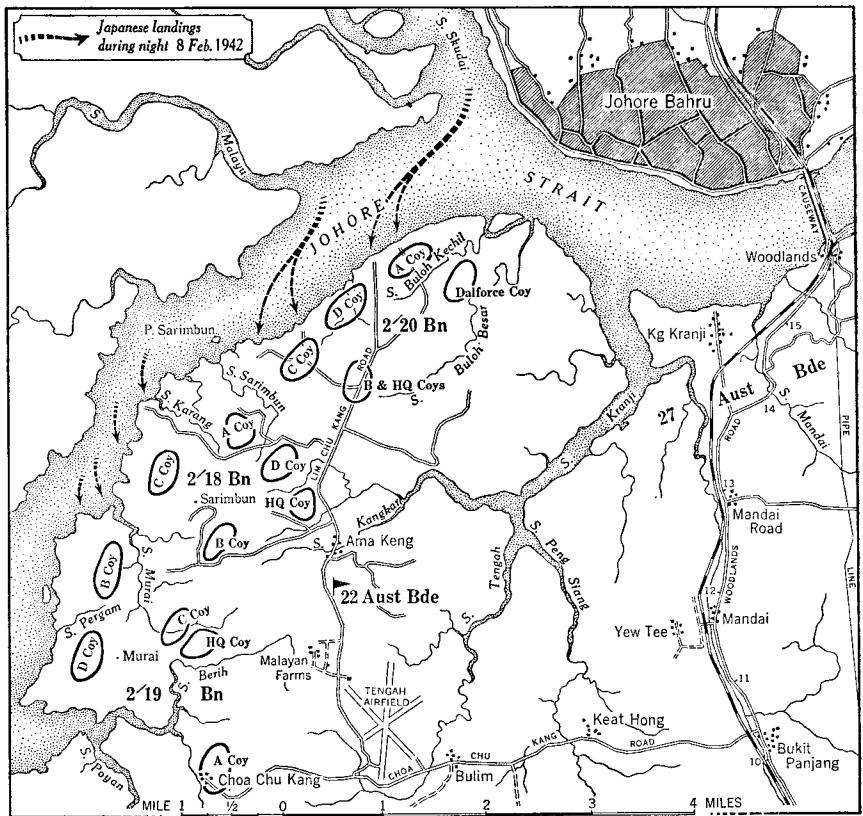
They replied that all lines to forward posts had been cut by shell fire and that linesmen were out effecting repairs (wrote Bennett afterwards). Dawkins mentioned that he thought the brigadier had ordered that no beach-lights were to go on in order that the patrol which was going over to the mainland might get across the straits safely.⁴

As Dawkins did not appear to be worried even after contact with the brigade, Bennett returned to bed; but being uneasy he got up again and motored with two of his staff officers to his operations room, which he reached at 11 p.m. There at 11.30 p.m. he received from Taylor a telephone call telling him of extensive landings on his sector, and of penetration having occurred. Taylor estimated the enemy strength as six battalions, spoke of his lack of reserves with which to meet the situation, and asked for a fresh force to be made available for counter-attack at dawn. Bennett thereupon undertook to send the 2/29th Battalion (Lieut-Colonel Pond) to his aid.

Although the damage to communications had made it difficult for Taylor to piece together a clear picture of what had happened, the landings, aided by heavy concentrations of mortar as well as artillery fire, had in fact begun soon after 10.30 p.m. in all his battalion sectors. It had been arranged that calls for defensive artillery fire should be given in the first instance by means of Very lights fired from the area being attacked; and that the calls should be relayed by observation posts. However, it was uncertain because of the nature of the terrain whether such signals from even the observation posts would be seen at the gun positions, and not enough Very pistols were available to supply all the posts requiring them.

⁴ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 174.

The artillery liaison officers at battalion headquarters were therefore to convey requests from battalion to battery or regimental headquarters. Because of the extent of the front, four primary tasks, covering river mouths, road ends, and beaches, had been indicated in each battalion sector. It followed from these circumstances that with signal lines being constantly cut, and forward wireless sets unused, delays would occur in bringing down defensive fire; also that in the event of many demands



Dispositions, 22nd Brigade, 10 p.m. 8th February

being received, the artillery could respond to only some of them. So it happened, and as Very lights shot up but did not bring the desired result, the Japanese reaped the benefit of their bombardment, while the Australians were at a loss to understand why their artillery had, it seemed, left them in the lurch.

Even the calls which eventually reached the guns were so rapid that the guns were unable to keep up with the tasks. As an instance, one request through a liaison officer was to "bring down fire everywhere". Again, lack of visibility because of the beach-lights not being used seriously limited

observation. Nevertheless, the artillery records indicate that the guns were constantly firing to meet such needs as became known and could be met under the fire plan, for what it was worth in the circumstances. Had communications been in order, and had the beach-lights been operated,⁵ the invaders' casualties might have been greater. As it was, having carried out their characteristic policy of disrupting communications, and in the absence of artillery fire directed on to them as they neared their landing-points, they were able to leap ashore for the most part in darkness, opposed only by infantry weapons.

Men of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion attached to Captain Richardson's⁶ "D" Company of the 2/20th blazed at boats and barges as they came inshore near the end of the Lim Chu Kang road. A barge carrying explosives caught fire and fortuitously lighted the scene at one point for several minutes. Other barges were set alight, and few of the Japanese managed to scramble ashore. Soon afterwards more landing craft reached a swamp area near by and were hotly engaged. Many were beaten off or sunk, but, as happened at other points on the front, the men and weapons immediately available to meet the invaders were insufficient to cope with their numbers and the tactics they employed.

As the Japanese poured in, they pressed on Richardson's right flank. A machine-gun on this flank had been knocked out in the afternoon's bombardment, but the other machine-gunners were firing at ranges down to ten yards. Such barbed wire obstacles as had been erected were valuable in temporarily halting enemy parties where they were exposed to withering fire. The water in the cooling system of the guns was boiling as the fight continued. As a counter to this fire, the Japanese tethered a barge to a fish trap about 100 yards offshore and poured mortar and machine-gun fire from it into the area. The machine-gunners nevertheless stuck to their task until about 1.30 a.m., and those who could be spared from the guns used bayonets on the enemy. The machine-gunners had fired about 10,000 rounds from each gun when, almost without ammunition, and with reports of Japanese on both flanks, Lieutenant Wankey⁷ ordered his platoon's machine-guns to be destroyed, and organised the platoon into a fighting patrol, taking the platoon's wounded with it. He had counted some twenty landing craft, carrying an average of twenty-five men each.

Richardson's infantry meanwhile had been engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the Japanese as they came inland. Although signals for close

⁵ The lights were manned by men of the British 5th Searchlight Regiment. A record attached to the Australian artillery headquarters' diary indicates that they were placed under command of Brigadier Taylor, who delegated his power to the unit commanders in charge of the sectors in which the lights were situated. N.C.O's in charge of them were instructed that they were not to be used without specific instructions. The cable of one light was destroyed and the light put out of action before the landings, but although the other lights were in working order, authority was not received to switch them on. Brigadier Taylor's subsequent explanation was that insufficient time had been available for the preparatory work necessary to protect the lights; he felt sure that once they were exposed they would be shot out by the enemy; and he therefore considered it better to reserve their use for actual emergency, when they should operate, as would artillery, on the signal for defensive fire being given. However, perhaps because of misunderstanding or confusion, they failed to do so.

⁶ Capt R. J. D. Richardson, NX35012; 2/20 Bn. Gazier; of Raymond Terrace, NSW; b. Orange, NSW, 21 May 1915.

⁷ Lt M. E. Wankey, MC, WX9392; 2/4 MG Bn. Letterpress machinist; of North Perth, WA; b. Narrogin, WA, 4 May 1918.

defensive fire were sent up they brought no apparent response. Ammunition ran short, and the company was withdrawn to a position along a fighter strip about 800 yards from the shore. With a Bren gun and a haversack of grenades, Sergeant Dumas⁸ distinguished himself in covering the withdrawal of his platoon. The company, reinforced at its position by a reserve platoon and three carriers, held until 5.30 a.m., when, on orders from Lieut-Colonel Assheton, the platoon and carriers were withdrawn to help form a battalion perimeter. Richardson's company failed to receive a message conveying a similar order, but when at first light what were thought to be tanks were heard approaching, a further withdrawal of 200 yards was made to a knoll which, it was hoped, would provide a satisfactory obstacle to them, at least on its northern and eastern sides.

Because of the landing on the right of Richardson's company, orders had been brought about midnight to Major Merrett's⁹ which in its position farther to the right had been practically undisturbed, to fall back to the right of the battalion perimeter. A composite platoon of pioneers and bandsmen at the end of the Lim Chu Kang road which had been heavily engaged with the enemy was also withdrawn to the battalion perimeter soon after.

On the left, Captain Carter's¹⁰ company had suffered severely from the preliminary bombardment, and from mortar fire from the near-by island of Sarimbun which had been occupied by the enemy before the main landings commenced. Japanese then landed in strength in the company area, supported by machine-gun fire from the opposite shore. Despite fierce fighting, the invaders forced a passage along the Sungei Sarimbun between Assheton's battalion and the right flank of the 2/18th (Lieut-Colonel Varley). The company was accordingly ordered, in the early hours of the morning, back to the battalion perimeter.

By 2 a.m. on 9th February, Headquarters Company (Major Cohen¹), "B" Company (Captain Ewart²) which had been in reserve, what remained of Carter's company, and the battalion's forward transport, were in the perimeter. There they were joined by two Dalforce platoons. Merrett's company arrived at about 7 a.m. As Richardson's men had not reached the position they were to have occupied in the northern part of the perimeter, two of Merrett's platoons were placed astride the Lim Chu Kang road and one was placed in their left rear. Richardson's company, still on the knoll it had occupied earlier, was thus exposed to the full force of attack by the Japanese who had advanced into the surrounding area. During the night the battalion perimeter had become a target for thousands

⁸ Sgt H. S. Dumas, NX31208; 2/20 Bn. Clerk; of Point Piper, NSW; b. Adelaide, SA, 27 Mar 1914. Missing presumed died 10 Feb 1942.

⁹ Maj R. O. Merrett, ED, NX35002; 2/20 Bn. Millinery manufacturer; of Manly, NSW; b. Mosman, NSW, 7 Jul 1905.

¹⁰ Carter was in hospital at the time of the Japanese landings on Singapore Island, and the company was commanded by Lieutenant J. V. Mudie.

¹ Maj R. H. Cohen, NX499; 2/20 Bn. Company director; of Manly, NSW; b. Waverley, NSW, 14 Apr 1911. Killed in action 9 Feb 1942.

² Maj A. C. M. Ewart, NX498; 2/20 Bn. Mechanical engineer and company manager; of Parramatta, NSW; b. Parramatta, 9 Nov 1909.

of rounds of light machine-gun fire, and Japanese infantry were pressing hard on the right flank. The Australians used their 3-inch mortars to marked effect, and from time to time threw the enemy back by bayonet attack. As dawn broke the struggle continued.

Two main landings had occurred on the 2/18th Battalion's front, one on the right against "A" Company (Captain Johnstone) and one on the left against "C" Company (Captain Okey). Johnstone's company had two platoons (7 and 8) forward on small hills which as the tide rose became islands. The tide had reached this stage at the time, and two motor craft landed about eighty Japanese on the island occupied by 8 Platoon (Lieutenant Vernon³). Many of the Japanese in this wave were killed, and the survivors dispersed; but under heavy mortar fire another landing followed, in greater strength. Again, the Japanese lost heavily, but the platoon was badly weakened, and Vernon decided that the time had come to withdraw to company headquarters. The water presented a serious obstacle, particularly as some of his men were wounded and some of the fit men could not swim. With keen resourcefulness, he tied together a number of rifle slings, fastened one end of the line at each side of the water, and thus contrived an aid by which the non-swimmers and the wounded were assisted to cross. He himself made repeated crossings to help the wounded. At a near-by island position, 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Gibson⁴) was attacked. Although it fought desperately, the odds proved too great, and its few survivors also withdrew. No. 7 Platoon (Lieutenant Richardson⁵) was by-passed on both flanks. It stayed in position throughout the night, and next day, then tried to reach its battalion. Only a few of the men succeeded.

Meanwhile company headquarters had lost contact with its forward troops, and, with Japanese estimated at two or more companies approaching, the plan to assemble the company in a defensive perimeter was abandoned, and, about 3.30 a.m., the headquarters and the newly-formed reserve platoon moved off towards battalion headquarters north of Ama Keng.

A still more dangerous situation resulted from the landing in the sector held by Okey's company, amid a wild complex of hills and inlets between the mouth of the Sungei Murai and the terminus of a road to the coast north of it. The area adjacent to the river mouth had been recognised as a likely landing place, and as it could not be adequately defended by small arms fire, had been included in the defensive fire plan as a task for artillery and mortars. A machine-gun platoon was sited in two sections close to the water's edge at the end of a narrow peninsula dividing the river mouth from an inlet north of it. When the Japanese were seen

³ Capt J. M. Vernon, MC, NX34879; 2/18 Bn. Station hand; of Inverell, NSW; b. Beecroft, NSW, 7 Dec 1907.

⁴ Capt J. E. M. Gibson, NX31612; 2/18 Bn. Clerk; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Cairns, Qld, 8 May 1916.

⁵ Lt G. D. Richardson, NX35127; 2/18 Bn. Civil servant; of Raymond Terrace, NSW; b. Raymond Terrace, 23 Nov 1917.

approaching, Very lights were fired by Okey's forward troops, but answering fire was not evident to them. In scattered positions on the hills, the infantry saw the enemy swarm ashore. One of the machine-gun sections, with Lieutenant Meiklejohn,⁶ the machine-gun platoon commander, opened fire against six approaching barges, and kept on firing for two hours, despite retaliation by hand grenades, as the Japanese landed and crossed the neck of the peninsula. Then, with ammunition running short, Meiklejohn led his section along a jungle path where they came upon a party of Japanese resting. He shot some with his revolver, and another was knocked out with a swing from a tripod, but Meiklejohn lost his life in attempting to cover his section's withdrawal. The other section made a similar stand on the beach until it was informed that a near-by infantry platoon was almost surrounded, and about to withdraw. While coming out, this section also encountered Japanese troops. Private Spackman,⁷ attacked by a Japanese officer with a sword, bayoneted him and used the sword against another Japanese. Although most of the section were wounded, it reached battalion headquarters.

It appeared that, true to form, the Japanese were avoiding head-on encounters as far as possible, and taking advantage of the gaps which existed among the widely-spaced points of resistance to penetrate the Australian rear. The invaders made their way on to roads through the battalion sector towards the Lim Chu Kang road. They were thus approaching battalion headquarters, and when Varley was able to assess the situation he sought, at 1.30 a.m., with Taylor's approval, to concentrate his men in the battalion perimeter about Ama Keng and the road junction 500 yards to the north, where he would have greater command and they would be available for mobile action when daylight came. Taylor placed the 2/10th Field Company (Major Lawrence⁸) consisting of 200 men who had been employed throughout the preceding week in the battalion perimeter, under Varley's command. Varley ordered Major O'Brien's company, stationed at the branch of the road from the Murai which is shaped like a question mark, to dispose of a party of Japanese reported to be in the vicinity, and clear a way for Okey's withdrawal. The Japanese, however, were encountered in greater strength than had been expected, and others had infiltrated to the Australian rear, with the result that the company was cut off and divided. Efforts to rejoin the battalion failed, and only remnants of the company eventually reached rear positions where they were collected and redrafted.

Okey's company had been heavily engaged meanwhile. The characteristic Japanese tendency to bunch together under fire was again evident where No. 15 Platoon was occupying a hill position, and many of the invaders fell before the fire of automatic weapons and hand grenades with

⁶ Lt J. T. Meiklejohn, WX9393; 2/4 MG Bn. Warehouseman; of Victoria Park, WA; b. Kataning, WA, 7 May 1920. Killed in action 8 Feb 1942.

⁷ Cpl C. J. Spackman, WX7715; 2/4 MG Bn. Dairy hand; of Karridale, WA; b. Pingelly, WA, 27 Feb 1917.

⁸ Maj K. P. H. Lawrence, ED, VX45686; OC 2/10 Fd Coy. Civil engineer; of Hartwell, Vic; b. Toora, Vic, 14 Feb 1901.

which the platoon sought to repel them. Then, as the weight of the attack increased, the platoon withdrew and found its way back to "D" Company (Captain Chisholm⁹), in reserve near battalion headquarters. The rest of Okey's company became split up in the darkness, amid hills, swamp and jungle, and under attack. Those who got to O'Brien's former headquarters found that the patrol left there to meet them had been driven away from the position. Of the whole of Okey's company, only four officers and 41 others reached battalion headquarters early on the morning of 9th February. There, with three officers and forty others of Captain Johnstone's company, they went into position on a rise west of the Lim Chu Kang road. Chisholm's company, comprising five officers and 136 others east of the road was covering the road approach to Ama Keng from the north at 3.30 a.m., but in the darkness had also lost contact with some of its men. The 2/10th Field Company went into a sector extending from the Sungei Murai road to the Lim Chu Kang road, 250 yards south of the junction.

In the 2/19th Battalion area, under cover of darkness, Lieut-Colonel Robertson had moved his headquarters, bombed during the day, to a position just north of the upper reaches of the Sungei Berih. His "B" Company (Major Keegan) and a headquarters company platoon were forward near the shoreline, with the Sungei Murai between them and Varley's battalion. The left forward position was occupied by "D" Company (Major Vincent). Captain Thomas¹ "C" Company was a little west of battalion headquarters, and "A" Company (Captain Cousens²) was at Choa Chu Kang village, south-east of the Berih at the end of the Choa Chu Kang road. This road ran eastward to the southern boundary of the Tengah airfield, and through Bulim and Keat Hong villages to Bukit Panjang village, on the road from the Causeway to Singapore.

This battalion which as has been shown was largely comprised of reinforcements, was responsible for the left flank of the 22nd Brigade, adjacent to the right flank of Ballentine's 44th Indian Brigade. The boundary between the two brigades was the Choa Chu Kang road and the wide tidal basin formed by the Sungei Berih and the Sungei Poyan which separated the forward elements of the brigades. With its broad expanse, the estuary could be expected to attract Japanese landing craft. It was accordingly included in defensive fire plans for the 2/15th Field Regiment and the batteries of the 44th Indian Brigade sector. More machine-guns were posted in the area than elsewhere on the Australian front. These were concentrated chiefly on the estuary and on high ground north of the village. But because of the opportunities they had had for observation, the Japanese were perhaps as well aware of these dispositions as were Taylor and

⁹ Capt J. W. S. Chisholm, NX34713; 2/18 Bn. Grazier; of Graman, NSW; b. Goulburn, NSW, 5 Jun 1906.

¹ Maj R. E. Thomas, NX70189; 2/19 Bn. Private secretary; of Cammeray, NSW; b. Sydney, 13 Mar 1916.

² Maj C. H. Cousens, NX34932; 2/19 Bn. Radio announcer; of Sydney; b. Poona, India, 26 Aug 1903.

Robertson. At any rate, only five or six craft entered the estuary, where they were driven off or sunk by artillery fire, and the few Japanese who landed were disposed of by a detachment of Punjabis of the 44th Brigade.

The main assault on Robertson's front was made at a small promontory, covered by coconut trees, in the northern corner of Keegan's sector. There a platoon saw craft approaching estimated at up to fifty in number, and promptly shot off signals for defensive fire, but again without apparent result. An attempt to transmit the request through battalion to brigade headquarters failed because the line had been cut. Fierce fighting broke out, and quickly spread to the whole of the sector. Though Keegan's company held its main ground, and inflicted heavy losses, the Japanese advanced past its right along the Murai. To counter this movement, the greater part of Thomas' company was moved up to the headwaters of the river. Its patrols soon reported what appeared to them to be enemy troops moving on Ama Keng at the battalion's rear.

By 3 a.m., as the struggle in his sector continued, Keegan decided that to save his company with its large proportion of wounded, it must be withdrawn. Keegan and remnants of his platoons succeeded in reaching the perimeter which had been organised around battalion headquarters. Thomas' company also was withdrawn, and ordered to send a fighting patrol to investigate a report of Japanese movement east of this position and astride the battalion's line of withdrawal; but before it left the perimeter it was attacked. The Japanese were held off, and Vincent's company, unmolested at its position near the Sungei Berih, had been withdrawn to the perimeter by 6.30 a.m., but lost two platoons which were cut off by the enemy on the way. Meanwhile a patrol had been sent to contact Cousens' company, but apparently failed to do so.

In the 44th Indian Brigade's sector, apart from the artillery fire on landing craft in the Berih basin, and the encounter by the Punjabis already mentioned, the night was uneventful. Next morning the two 6-inch guns of Pasir Laba Battery were put out of action by air bombardment and artillery fire.

Japanese post-war accounts showed that the full volume of artillery fire available to their *5th* and *18th Divisions* had been concentrated on important points on the opposite shore, preparatory to the landings, for which thirteen infantry battalions were available, with five in reserve. Expected obstacles in the Strait, and opposition by water craft, were not met during the crossings, but the accounts refer to intense fire having been encountered at the landing points, and to stubborn resistance on land. In the ecstatic language employed by a Japanese army information service narrator, as translated,

the courageous warriors of our landing forces . . . gradually closed in on the enemy position through the concentrated fire of machine-guns and mortars. Words cannot describe the glorious hand grenade and hand-to-hand fighting encountered in various

places by these courageous warriors after destroying layer after layer of barbed wire entanglements. . . .³

As successive waves of Japanese got ashore, wearing compasses on their wrists to help them to find their way, the Australians became hopelessly outnumbered.⁴ Particularly to raw reinforcements among the Australians, this first experience of battle was like some wildly disordered nightmare, the more stark because of the contrast between the beauty of the tropical night and the savagery of action. Despite the stand at first made against the invaders, the long and sparsely-manned front lost cohesion and drive as contact failed and isolation increased. Some were overrun or outflanked. Others saw that to stay in their exposed positions, out of reach of orders, invited death or captivity, and would serve no useful purpose. As in a bushfire in their own country, with the flames rapidly encircling the men who sought to keep it in check, withdrawal offered the only prospect of being able to continue the fight. Runners and liaison officers did their best to make up for the earlier and concurrent damage to communications, and signallers were constantly and heroically at work repairing them, but the transmission delays gave the Japanese further advantage.

At 3 a.m. (9th February), as General Bennett became increasingly aware of the seriousness of the situation, he ordered the Special Reserve Battalion (Major Sagers) and the reserve company of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion to stand to, and at 4.45 a.m. ordered them to the 22nd Brigade area, with instructions as to the position the Reserve Battalion was to occupy. Delay occurred in moving the 2/29th Battalion, which he had ordered to the area soon after midnight, for in its defensive role it was widely dispersed and had first to be concentrated. Because of this, and a hitch in supplying it with transport, it did not reach the Tengah airfield area until 6 a.m. There, at 7.45 a.m., it was joined by Sagers' battalion, with the exception of one company which lost its way and did not arrive until 11 a.m. At 8.30 a.m., General Percival ordered his only reserve, the 12th Indian Brigade (Brigadier Paris) to Keat Hong to come under Bennett's command. Meanwhile, in response to a request by Bennett, ten Hurricanes had engaged in a dawn battle with eighty-four Japanese aircraft coming from Johore; then, with one of their number lost, they hastily landed, refuelled, and made a second attack. Despite the desperate odds against them, they fought to considerable effect.

³ *Malaya Campaign* (ATIS translation). In another document the commander of the *18th Division* (General Mutaguchi) described how, with the left wing of his landing forces, he took part in the battle, using hand grenades, and received minor injuries. This part of the force, he related, took the wrong road in the darkness and entered the operational area of the *5th Division* near Ama Keng.

⁴ An Australian officer related that: "The Japanese barges carried mortars and much ammunition. The mortars were set at a fixed elevation and were fired rapidly as the barges moved across, so that when they first began to move, the bombs were falling short of the shore, yet the elevation was not changed. The bombs falling in the water gave a moderate screen of spray and smoke, then as the barges moved on, the mortar barrage advanced across our positions. This barrage looked worse than it was and casualties were few. In many cases, however, men withdrew before this creeping barrage or else were destroyed by it. Thus when the Japanese beached they met stern opposition in some places and were repulsed, but in other cases there were substantial gaps in our line, into which they penetrated very rapidly."

As yet no attempt had been made to land in the 27th Brigade sector, but it had been severely shelled during the 8th and the night of the 8th-9th. Several more Indians had made their way from the mainland across the Causeway during daylight on 8th February, thus further demonstrating how little reliance could be placed on the gap blown in the structure as an obstacle to enemy troops. At night (8th-9th February) Lieutenant Smyth,⁵ of the 2/30th Battalion, who had just gained his commission, and Privates Calvert⁶ and Barnes,⁷ crossed the Strait in a boat to act as a listening and observation post near the mainland. Like the Japanese on many of their patrols, they were clad only in shorts and sandshoes. On their way back, after they had located some enemy machine-gun positions, another boat appeared through the darkness. Smyth at first thought it might be another Australian patrol boat, and challenged it from a distance of only a few feet. The response was an attempt to ram Smyth's boat. With instant decision he leapt into the enemy craft, threw a hand grenade among its occupants, and leapt back again. Then, on a pre-arranged plan, the Australians capsized their craft and swam off towards separate points on their own shore.

Soon Calvert and Barnes heard calls for help, but were unable to find their officer. Whether he had been wounded by his own grenade, had been hit by subsequent fire from the enemy boat, or had suffered some other mishap was not discovered; but his action had saved his men's lives.

Heavy machine-gun fire broke out from the enemy shore after this incident, and a call for defensive artillery fire was sent up from the position to the right of the Causeway, occupied by Major Anderson's company of the 2/30th Battalion. Forward Vickers gunners blazed at the Japanese, and 25-pounders and 4.5-inch howitzers joined in the fire, which lasted for about half an hour. The Australian gunners in this area were aided by a beach-light which illuminated barges about 700 yards to the left of the Causeway. This exchange, to the accompaniment of much yelling from the Japanese, was followed a little later by another burst of fire from their side, but no other engagement occurred during the night. Very lights seen shooting skyward from the 22nd Brigade's sector gave a hint, however, of enemy assault in that direction.

By 6 a.m. on 9th February Brigadier Taylor had concluded that the situation on his front was becoming desperate. He had reports of his battalions being hard pressed, and of Japanese penetration to his rear. Firing was being heard in Ama Keng, 200 yards forward of his brigade headquarters. Thereupon he ordered the headquarters to a position just behind Bulim, placing the brigade protection platoon and some brigade personnel west of the Tengah airfield, to link with Pond's battalion. His

⁵ Lt F. M. Smyth, NX68127; 2/30 Bn. Regular soldier; of Neutral Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 23 Aug 1914. Killed in action 8 Feb 1942.

⁶ Pte C. L. Calvert, NX72474; 2/30 Bn. Casual shearer and farm worker; of Dubbo, NSW; b. Dubbo, 20 Nov 1920. Died while prisoner 25 Jun 1943.

⁷ Pte J. H. Barnes, NX37531; 2/30 Bn. Labourer; of Weetaliba, NSW; b. Marrickville, NSW, 21 Jan 1922.

plan was to form a line, with the aid of the Jind battalion stationed at the airfield, from the north of the field to west of the junction of the Lim Chu Kang and Choa Chu Kang roads, to link with Cousens' company of the 2/19th at Choa Chu Kang village. Going to the airfield area he met Pond. To Taylor's surprise, as he did not know that the Reserve Battalion was to be made available to him, he met Saggars also, soon after 8 a.m. Taylor ordered him to dispose two companies in depth behind Pond's battalion, and the missing company to extend the left flank when it arrived. He also disposed the reserve company of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion which he found had been sent to his aid. Meanwhile small parties coming in from forward battalions had reported that they had been overrun or by-passed by large Japanese forces, and that companies were fighting their way back to the airfield.

From their perimeter on the 22nd Brigade's right flank the men of the 2/20th Battalion saw large numbers of Japanese crossing the Lim Chu Kang road forward of their position towards the east. The Japanese were scattered by mortar fire, and a platoon cleared the road for some way northward, hoping that this would help Richardson's company to rejoin the battalion. It was found, however, that the Japanese were crossing the road southward of the perimeter also. After further attempts to deal with the situation, Assheton concluded that the stream of invaders made the odds too great, and at 9.15 a.m. ordered a withdrawal to Ama Keng, where he hoped to join forces with Varley's 2/18th Battalion.

Moving to a protective position on the left flank, Ewart's "B" Company was ambushed, the battalion Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Lennon,⁸ was killed, and Ewart was wounded. The ambushing party was in turn destroyed by Lieutenant Cornforth's⁹ platoon of "A" Company and the survivors of Ewart's company pressed on. They, however, found the Japanese in the position they were to occupy, and lost more men in a further clash. Covering the withdrawal from its position in the former perimeter, Major Merrett's company less Cornforth's platoon held out under attack until 10 a.m. Then, when withdrawal was attempted, it came under heavy machine-gun fire from high ground at its rear, and split into small parties in attempts to avoid it. Cornforth's platoon, separately engaged after disposing of the ambush, was joined by Lieut-Colonel Assheton, and ordered also to withdraw.

Richardson's company clung to its position until it received at 10.30 a.m. Assheton's earlier order to withdraw into the 2/20th Battalion perimeter. Although, with Wankey's machine-gun platoon, it reached the former headquarters of the battalion, only dead men were found there. Pushing on through country now overrun by the enemy, it was split into two parties by an ambush at Ama Keng. Forced into the swamps, men

⁸ Lt J. J. Lennon, NX65413; 2/20 Bn. School teacher; of Wee Waa, NSW; b. Inverell, NSW, 9 Sep 1914. Killed in action 9 Feb 1942.

⁹ Lt R. G. W. Cornforth, NX59134; 2/20 Bn. Salesman; of Mosman, NSW; b. Mosman, 19 Jan 1919.

were lost in making river crossings, but remnants of both parties reached Bulim, exhausted and without arms. At this stage seven of the battalion's officers had been killed, three wounded, and one captured, and many other ranks had been lost.

Having established the nucleus of a battalion perimeter north of Ama Keng as previously stated, and while waiting for more of his men to come in, Varley had given orders that his headquarters be moved back to the southern edge of Ama Keng, and had gone to report to brigade headquarters. When he returned he found that his headquarters had been moved farther back than he had intended, to the north-western corner of Tengah airfield.¹ Although this affected his plan to form the perimeter he stayed in the forward area to direct his forces as they came in, and about a third of his battalion was in position just before dawn. Soon the Japanese attacked the rise occupied by remnants of Johnstone's and Okey's companies, and drove them east of the road. The enemy began to press the flanks of the engineers at Chisholm's rear, and moved behind a long ridge west of the road towards the Tengah airfield.

Major Lawrence, commanding the engineers, had received no orders for some hours, so, at 8 a.m., he went to see Varley and was given orders for Chisholm to move his company westward and attack the Japanese in the rear. His return was delayed by having to avoid parties of Japanese, in the Ama Keng village area, and when he got back he found that the situation had gone from bad to worse. Not only had the number of Japanese increased, but six of their aircraft were swooping over the area, raking it with machine-gun bullets. Johnstone initiated an attack by eighty of his and Okey's men and about fifty engineers with bayonets, hand grenades, and a Bren gun, covered by rapid rifle fire from other engineers. Despite the barrage of mortar and machine-gun fire with which the Japanese defended themselves from a rise they now occupied, the Australians got to within twenty yards of them. Lawrence, however, was unable to find Chisholm, and Johnstone's men and the engineers had insufficient force to cope with the situation unaided. At this critical stage, orders were passed by word of mouth to withdraw to a hill about half a mile to the south. Most of the infantry moved accordingly, but as no order reached the engineers, under Captain Dolamore² in Lawrence's absence, they held on, knowing that in doing so they were giving other men a chance to come in. Seriously wounded men were loaded on to a truck, but had to be abandoned when it was stopped by a road-block. Walking wounded were helped to the airfield by their mates. Corporal Johnson,³ a field company cook, made seven trips across swamp for this purpose. At last, near 9.30 a.m., when some Australians were

¹ The move was subsequently attributed to a misunderstanding by the second-in-command of the battalion.

² Capt W. H. Dolamore, VX27638; 2/10 Fd Coy. Civil engineer; of Bairnsdale, Vic; b. Malvern, Vic, 27 Apr 1909.

³ Sgt C. H. Johnson, VX28836; 2/10 Fd Coy. Baker and chef; of Sth Melbourne; b. Launceston, Tas, 1 May 1902.

seen passing behind the position, Dolamore decided that his company's task was completed, and ordered its withdrawal. Not only had these technical troops made a valiant stand, but Lieutenant Heathcote,⁴ commanding the last section of the engineers to leave, provided another example of courage. Under heavy fire, he halted two trucks and he and 14 men loaded them with about twenty wounded infantry. He and another were killed and two sappers were wounded. Near brigade headquarters, Lieutenant Dobbie,⁵ commanding a section of engineers, came upon a party of Assheton's and Varley's men, and led them and the rest of the engineers back to the north-eastern end of the airfield, where they linked with a company of the Johore Volunteer Engineers.

In Major Robertson's sector, the machine-gunners, stationed on the estuary of the Sungei Berih and the Sungei Poyan, ordered to meet Vincent's company at its headquarters, were delayed in getting their guns from the water's edge, and by the time they reached the company headquarters' site it had been abandoned. Encountering Japanese troops now in possession of the area, the party destroyed their machine-guns and split into small groups. One platoon disappeared, but the other reached Cousens' company. Meanwhile the battalion position had been surrounded, and Robertson ordered an attack, with carriers in close support, hoping to break through towards Tengah. The attack began about 7 a.m., but a ridge across the line of withdrawal was held in strength by the Japanese, and only 200 yards were gained, at the cost of heavy losses and disablement of four carriers. The battalion's transport was captured, contact with Thomas' company was lost, and under increasing enemy pressure dispersal through the swamps was ordered as the only practicable alternative to capture or extinction. Some detachments failed to receive the order, and many men were killed, captured, or died of exhaustion. Robertson, Keegan, Chaplain Greenwood, and about forty others managed to reach the Jurong road and rejoin the brigade. Other groups found their way to rear areas and were reassembled for further action.

Cousens' company had remained unmolested at Choa Chu Kang, but contact with the rest of the battalion was lost. When some of the Australians cut off in the earlier fighting emerged from the swamps and reached the company's position, Cousens, about 8 a.m., sent Lieutenant Shaw, a British Intelligence officer attached to him, to try to reach battalion headquarters. On his way, Shaw met Taylor on the Choa Chu Kang road, was told that battalion headquarters had been isolated, and was given an order to Cousens to withdraw his company and the machine-gun platoon with it to the south-eastern corner of Tengah airfield. The move began at 9 a.m.

Lieut-Colonel Assheton with a group of his and Varley's men meanwhile had sought to attack from a small defensive locality north of the

⁴ Lt C. T. Heathcote, VX39027; 2/10 Fd Coy. Mining engineer; of Melbourne; b. St Kilda, Vic, 1 Feb 1917. Killed in action 9 Feb 1942.

⁵ Lt F. A. Dobbie, VX45595; 2/10 Fd Coy. Clerk; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Bendigo, Vic, 12 Mar 1908. Died while prisoner 15 Aug 1943.

airfield, but found the enemy pouring in too strongly to leave him any hope of success. Endeavouring to protect withdrawal of the wounded, he went forward with three Bren gunners to a small knoll. There the party was met by a blast of machine-gun fire at short range. Assheton, encouraging the machine-gunners by moving from one to the other in the positions he allotted to them, was hit and one of the machine-gunners killed. Another was wounded, but the third continued to fire upon the Japanese as they advanced in close order. Two men who attempted to rescue Assheton found that he too was dead. Nevertheless, his and the machine-gunners' valiant action achieved its purpose, for the force was enabled thereby to disengage, and withdrew across country to Bukit Panjang village.

Varley also tried to make a stand, after the Japanese broke through the positions he had established near his former headquarters. Having been forced to withdraw to near Malayan Farms with a party of his men, he sent his wounded to the rear in trucks found in the area, and told one of them, Sergeant Wagner, to ask brigade headquarters for instructions. Then, joined by Captain Griffin⁶ with about thirty more members of the battalion, and Major Merrett with about twenty-five men of the 2/20th, he disposed the group for defence of the near-by portion of the airfield. However, Wagner soon returned with orders from Taylor as a result of which Varley led his force to the south of the airfield for re-organisation in the Bulim village area, behind Pond's battalion.

From early morning on 9th February, while resistance was still being maintained by the Australians north of the Tengah airfield, Brigadier Taylor, as shown, had sought to establish a stop-line from the northern end of the airfield to the Choa Chu Kang village behind which he might build strength and from which a counter-attack might be launched. In his initial dispositions, the Jind Battalion was on the right and the 2/29th Battalion on the left, with Sagers' battalion in reserve. Communication between brigade and Western Area headquarters was intermittent and inadequate, but at 9.30 a.m. a liaison officer reached Taylor with orders from Bennett to counter-attack and recapture Ama Keng village, using Pond's 2/29th Battalion for the purpose.⁷ Taylor went forward with Lieut-Colonel Wright,⁸ commander of the 2/15th Field Regiment, and discussed a plan for the counter-attack with Pond, who prepared to carry it out; but as the Japanese worked round to the east of the airfield, the brigadier subsequently decided that to do so would involve unjustifiable risk.

⁶ Capt R. S. Griffin, NX34712; 2/18 Bn. Sales representative; of Sydney; b. Brisbane, 8 Jun 1910. Killed in air raid while prisoner 15 Jun 1943.

⁷ The question arises whether in these circumstances it would have been advantageous if Bennett had visited the 22nd Brigade and seen for himself the situation on that front. On the one hand was the desirability of being on hand at his headquarters ready immediately to receive and act upon information from his three brigades or instructions from Malaya Command. On the other the main attack had fallen on the 22nd Brigade and it was being driven back in some confusion; communications were seriously disorganised and by going forward to it the divisional commander could not only gain his own impressions of the state of affairs but could exert an immediate influence upon them.

It is a problem that faces every commander, senior and junior, in a force that is hard pressed or actually withdrawing, and is frequently a subject of debate.

⁸ Lt-Col J. W. Wright, DFC, NX12233. (1st AIF: 12 LH Regt; 2 and 4 Sqns AFC.) CO 2/15 Fd Regt. Company secretary; of Wahroonga, NSW; b. Quirindi, NSW, 4 Jan 1892.

As Taylor saw the situation, his two main problems were now to prevent the Japanese from getting around the airfield towards the Kranji-Jurong area, as yet unmanned; and to protect the right flank of the 44th Indian Brigade. He estimated that by midday the Japanese could have landed twelve battalions. To meet such a situation he had at his disposal some 500 men of his own brigade; Pond's and Sagger's battalions; the Jind Battalion and the reserve company of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion—a force small in comparison, and one comprising units either hastily organised, in process of reorganisation, or, in the case of the Jind, trained solely for airfield defence. Were he to hazard one of the only intact battalions upon a counter-attack possibly or probably foredoomed to failure, he might jeopardise all prospect of a successful stand in his sector. He was doubtful also of being able to hold the stop position for long, especially as once night came it would be particularly vulnerable to attack and outflanking movements. In these circumstances he cancelled the counter-attack order about 11 a.m., decided to readjust his line so that it would face west on a line from east of the Tengah airfield through Bulim towards the Jurong road, and sent Beale,⁹ his brigade major, to inform Brigadier Ballentine and General Bennett of his intention.

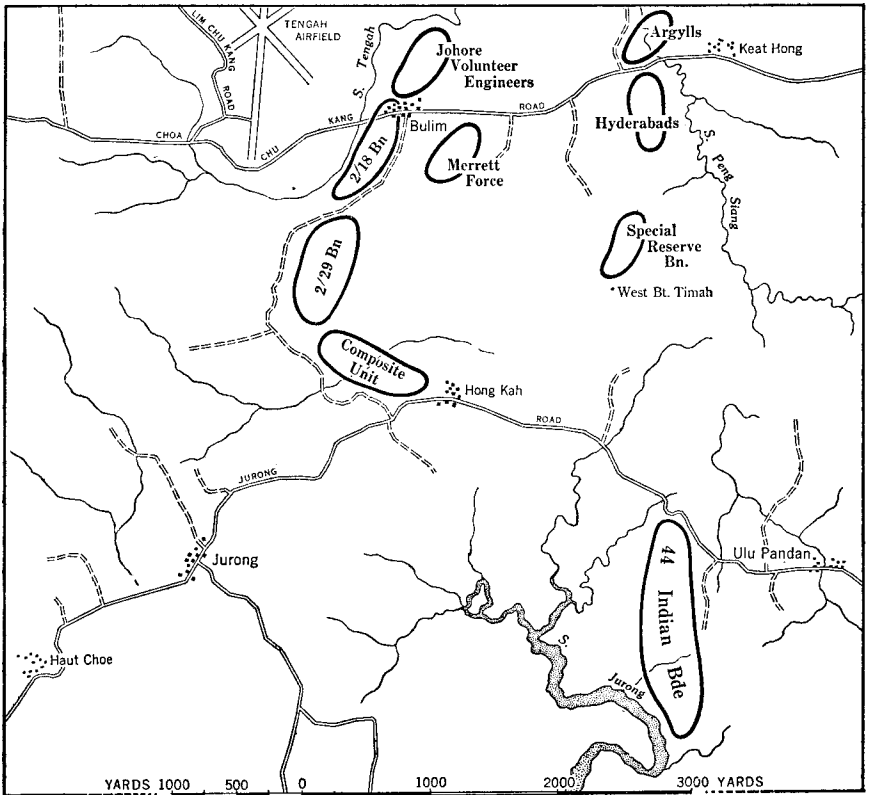
On the airfield during the morning the carrier platoon attached to the 2/18th Battalion opened fire with six machine-guns on an enemy company in close formation, with such effect that a Japanese movement to the east of the 2/29th Battalion was checked for the time being. The Jind Battalion on the airfield had stood its ground despite bombing and machine-gun fire until, by 11.30 a.m., because of Japanese movements which threatened to outflank them to the north-east, the field was made unserviceable and the battalion withdrawn. The men of the 2/29th, although so many of them were newly-arrived reinforcements, in action for the first time, stuck to their job, and a party of Sagger's men with Thompson machine-guns held out against an attempt to get round Pond's right flank. By midday, however, enemy pressure necessitated sending a company of the 2/29th (Captain Lloyd) to the airfield to strengthen this flank.

Major Merrett, with fifty men of the 2/20th who had collected at Bulim, was sent to the left flank of the 2/29th. Brigadier Paris reported to General Bennett during the morning, and was directed to join forces with Taylor's brigade. Ballentine telephoned Bennett's headquarters about midday, pointing out that unless the Japanese were held the 44th Indian Brigade would soon be outflanked and in danger of being cut off. Thyer told him that there was every possibility that Taylor would have to withdraw to the Kranji-Jurong area, and that he should make plans for this. As a result, Ballentine ordered withdrawal of his beach defence guns, and forward posts of the Australian machine-gunners attached to him.

The 12th Indian Brigade reported to the 22nd Australian Brigade at midday that it had begun to arrive at Keat Hong, a mile and a half east of Bulim. About 1 p.m. Taylor gave orders for occupation of the line

⁹ Maj R. F. S. Beale, VX12397; BM 22 Bde. Regular soldier; of Sydney; b. Mosman, NSW, 4 Nov 1900. Executed by Japanese 15 Feb 1942.

through Bulim towards the Jurong road. The positions to be occupied were in fact forward positions of the Kranji-Jurong area already surveyed,¹ and Captain Wyett, who had been engaged in that task, assisted the movement. A detachment of the Johore Volunteer Engineers which had arrived during the morning went into position on the right, north of Bulim and the Choa Chu Kang road; the 2/18th Battalion, about 330 strong, astride the road forward of Bulim village and to the south of it; and the 2/29th between the 2/18th and the Jurong road, with a company which had



Bulim line, 9th February

become detached from the Special Reserve Battalion, about 150 survivors of the 2/10th Field Company, and a small party of the 2/20th Battalion on its left. The company of the 2/19th Battalion which had been at Choa Chu Kang village, and about sixty men of the 2/20th Battalion, came under command of Major Merrett as "Merrett Force", which was placed in a reserve position near the 2/18th Battalion.

Paris reached Taylor at 1.30 p.m. He discussed with him the disposition of the 12th Brigade, which at this stage comprised the Argylls, 400

¹ Planning and pegging of a defence system had been almost completed on 8th February, and a good deal of digging had been done, though the Chinese labourers had dispersed under bombing attacks. Australian engineers had extended the anti-tank ditch.

strong including 150 marines, and the 4/19th Hyderabad, numbering 440 including many newly-arrived reinforcements. The Argylls were placed north of the Choa Chu Kang road, and the Hyderabads, guided into position by Major Fraser (who like Wyatt had been engaged in surveying the Kranji-Jurong area, and was now Bennett's liaison officer with the brigade) continued the line 600 yards south of the road towards the West Bukit Timah reserve position, extending northward of that feature. To this latter position Taylor ordered Sagers' Reserve Battalion, less its company in the Bulim line.

Beale and Major Moses, the Australian liaison officer with the 44th Indian Brigade, met early in the afternoon at Ballentine's headquarters, where a plan for Ballentine's and Taylor's brigades to occupy jointly the Kranji-Jurong area was formulated. Bennett, however, hoping perhaps that Paris' brigade would enable Taylor to stand his ground, refused when Moses returned to Western Area headquarters at 2.30 p.m. to sanction the plan.²

Percival, who, as well as sending Paris to the western sector had drawn Heath's 6th/15th Brigade (Colonel Coates) into command reserve, at an hour's notice to move, called on Bennett soon after. Bennett thought he "seemed very worried",³ as well he might have been in view of the events of the night and morning, and the menacing situation with which he was now confronted. Decisions were reached as a result of discussion between the two generals based on a further report of the situation on Taylor's front. They were that Maxwell's brigade should continue to hold the Causeway sector, and that with the other forces available to him Bennett should try to stabilise the position in the Kranji-Jurong area. For this latter purpose the 44th Indian Brigade was to withdraw at once to the southern part of the line. Particularly because of the food and petrol dumps east of Bukit Timah village, the 6th/15th Brigade would be ordered up to the Singapore racecourse, near the village, where it would come under Bennett's orders.

Obviously Percival had concluded that the situation was very grave. He had now committed his two reserve brigades to deal with the threat from the west; and when he got back to his headquarters he and his staff began drawing up a plan for withdrawal, if the Japanese succeeded in breaking through the Sungei Kranji-Bulim-Sungei Jurong line, of the whole of his forces to a defensive perimeter. This would include Kallang airfield, the MacRitchie and Peirce reservoirs, the depots in the Bukit Timah area and hills immediately west of Bukit Timah village, and would reach the south coast at Pasir Panjang village. On this line, if necessary, "the final battle for Singapore" as the subsequent order put it, would be fought.

With the loss of Tengah airfield, and only Kallang serviceable to the few remaining aircraft—which despite overwhelming odds had been in the

² War Diary of AIF Headquarters.

³ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 176.

air almost continuously throughout the week—it was decided to withdraw them to Sumatra. Hopes were entertained that they would be able to use Kallang as an advanced landing ground. Orders were received by Bennett's headquarters from Malaya Command to blow an ammunition magazine near the junction of the Peng Siang and the Kranji, in the 27th Brigade's sector, and the task was passed to the engineers. In the early belief that attack on the island would come from the sea, most of the ammunition on the island was stacked there and at Nee Soon, and it was estimated that the Kranji magazine held 60,000 tons.

In implementing the decisions reached with Percival, Bennett instructed his artillery commander about 4 p.m. to support the 27th and 22nd Australian Brigades and the 44th Indian Brigade along the Kranji and thence to the Jurong. Extensive reconnaissances and plans had been made during the past week for such an eventuality, and orders were issued immediately whereby the artillery would deploy accordingly, with the 2/10th Regiment on the right, 2/15th in the centre, and the 5th on the left (south). As the dispatch of the 2/29th Battalion to the 22nd Brigade sector had left the 20th Battery (2/10th Regiment) without infantry protection, it was being moved at this time from a position near the junction of the Kranji and the Peng Siang to east of the main road to the Causeway. The new order necessitated the battery occupying positions which the 60th Battery had been shelled out of, and required extensive realignment of communications being carried out under fire.

While Taylor's men were re-forming at Bulim, Taylor accompanied Paris on a reconnaissance of the Kranji-Jurong rear line, saw Sagger's men going into position there, and inspected the Bulim line. Pond's battalion, covering the readjustment, was not pressed by the enemy when it broke contact and cleared the airfield road junction.

Near the end of the afternoon Bennett decided to withdraw his headquarters from Jurong road to Holland road, and left for the new location. Ballentine withdrew his headquarters to Jurong, though not before the headquarters had been heavily bombed. Though serious congestion occurred while the rest of his brigade was pulling out of the south-west sector, its withdrawal to the Kranji-Jurong line was completed by 10 p.m. Meanwhile only minor patrol activity occurred in front of Bulim. It seemed that the Japanese, having swiftly carried through the first phase of their offensive in Taylor's sector, needed time to develop the second.

In retrospect, Taylor's front, with its excessive dispersal of units, had been about as capable of withstanding a concentrated assault as a sieve is of holding water. Thus it could not reasonably be expected that the enemy could be prevented from landing.⁴ If, however, the 22nd Brigade could then make a stand between the Kranji and the Berih or thereabouts, further toll might be taken of the invaders; a forward base for counter-attack

⁴ Even when their legions were ensconced behind the heavily fortified Atlantic Wall, Hitler's generals were to take such a possibility into account (in planning to repel the Normandy invasion). In 1944 and 1945 when the Japanese were on the defensive they seldom tried to hold the beaches.

might be established; and time might be gained for a build-up of forces between the Kranji and the Jurong. However, such tactics would depend upon sufficient contact and control being maintained to ensure an orderly withdrawal. In the darkness, and when communications failed, this ceased to be a practical possibility by forces so widely dispersed as the forward policy required, and the line through Bulim presented the next best chance of checking the enemy.

To what extent did artillery play its part in opposition to the Japanese landings? As against the 168 artillery guns massed by the Japanese for the assault, 266 were available for the island's defence generally. These were, however, scattered all over the island, and as has been shown a much smaller allocation of artillery had been made to the Western Area than to the Northern Area, which so far had not been attacked. However much this dispersion might have been considered necessary for defence of the island from almost any quarter, it meant that as the situation had developed the defenders of the Western Area particularly were at a great disadvantage compared with the Japanese. The enemy had superior means of observation; their area of attack was limited and clearly defined; and they therefore could concentrate therein the whole or part of their fire where and when it would best serve their purposes.

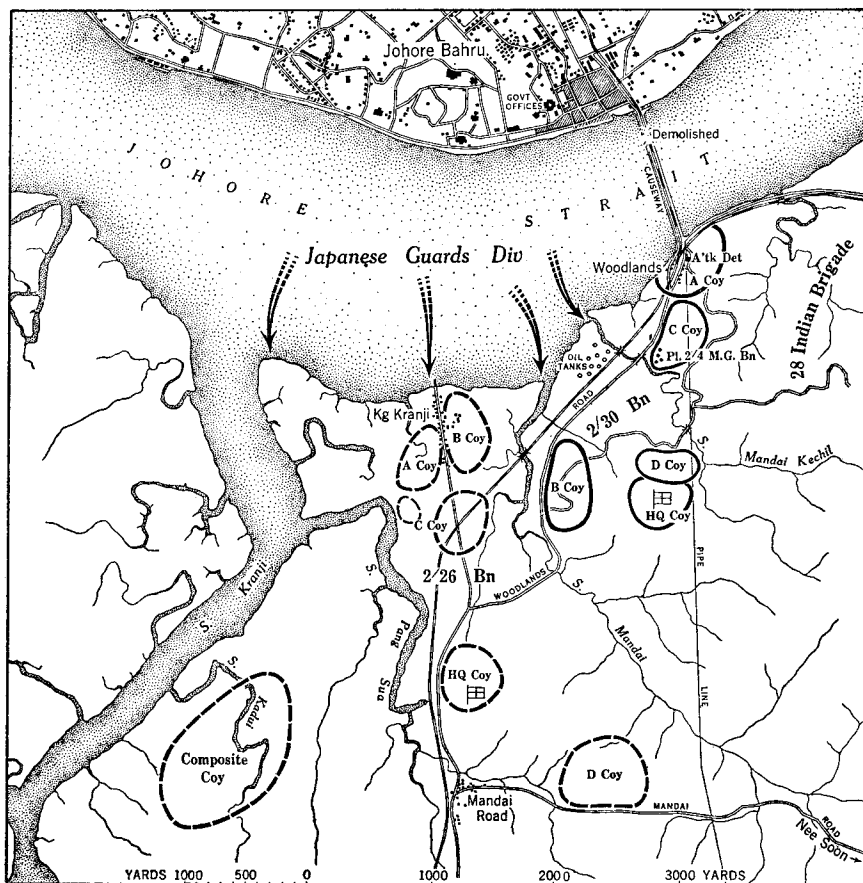
To these advantages possessed by the enemy was added the fact that disruption by bombardment of line signals in the Western Area, and the circumstances relating to wireless transmission, undoubtedly caused serious delays and lack of precise direction during the initial landings when maximum artillery support was needed. However, during the night of 8th-9th February, the 2/15th Regiment fired 4,800 rounds, more than 90 per cent of them after the first reply to defensive fire signals; and the 2/10th Field Regiment, in Maxwell's sector, fired 400 rounds to the area from the mouth of the Sungei Skudai to the mouth of the Malayu in which the Japanese had been reported to be massing. Added to this was support from Jephson's⁵ group. During the morning of 9th February this group, and the 2/10th Field Regiment, fired on Japanese in the Malayan Farms area, and the 2/15th Regiment fired on the Tengah airfield as the Japanese gained possession of it during the day. Ironically, the Australian artillery received on the evening of the 9th an order from Malaya Command cancelling its previous limitation of non-operational ammunition expenditure which had so heavily handicapped defensive artillery action while the Japanese were building strength for their assault.

By the end of 9th February the invaders had gained their first objective—Tengah airfield—and were transporting additional men and material, including tanks, across Johore Strait as quickly as they were able. Seeking to hold the Choa Chu Kang and Jurong roads to the centre of the island were the forces on the Bulim line and those which had occupied the Kranji-Jurong line proper—the 12th Indian Brigade on the right, the

⁵ Lt-Col E. W. F. Jephson, MC. CO 5 Fd Regt RA. Regular soldier; b. 5 Nov 1897.

Special Reserve Battalion near the centre, and the 44th Indian Brigade on the left, with the 15th Indian Brigade in reserve.

From the Causeway sector groups of men of the 22nd Brigade had been seen early on 9th February crossing the Sungei Kranji and its south-eastern tributary the Peng Siang. This and the news of the fighting in the 22nd Brigade sector which filtered through to Brigadier Maxwell deepened



Causeway sector, 8 p.m. 9th February

the concern he felt about the gap to the south of his two battalions, left by the transfer of his 2/29th Battalion to the 22nd Brigade. It appeared to him that the enemy had committed himself to making his main attack in that sector. Opposed by only one brigade on a long and therefore thinly-held front, the invaders appeared to be pushing rapidly towards the headwaters of the Sungei Kranji and the Choa Chu Kang road, leading to the southern extremity of the 27th Brigade sector at Bukit Panjang. From there to the rear of the battalion positions was a distance of three

miles. Maxwell felt convinced that the enemy would exploit this gap rather than assault the relatively concentrated forces north of it—the 2/26th Battalion in the swampy area near the mouth of the Kranji, the 2/30th Battalion adjoining the Causeway and the III Indian Corps east of them. It had been estimated during the night of 8th-9th February that the Japanese had landed eight battalions in the west, and others might now have followed them. If Maxwell's troops remained in the positions they occupied they might be cut off by enemy troops from that direction streaming through the gap and so gaining access both to Singapore and to the rear of the 28th Indian Brigade.

Consequently he sought, at 11 a.m., permission to withdraw his 2/26th Battalion to a line from the junction of the main (Woodlands) road from the Causeway and the Kranji road, to a point on the Peng Siang due west of the 12-mile post (nearly two miles north of Bukit Panjang). This would align his troops on a north-south axis, facing west, and do something to close the gap. The request was refused, but Maxwell was authorised to use the fourth platoon of each rifle company in the battalion to form a composite company. With "D" Company of the 2/26th, the composite company would be responsible for 600 yards to the battalion's rear along the east bank of the Kranji and the Peng Siang, thus serving the purpose Maxwell had in mind.

Artillery and air attack on the 27th Brigade's sector were intensified during the morning, and threatened to cut its line communications as the 22nd Brigade's had been cut the day before. As on that occasion, signallers distinguished themselves by constant endeavours to keep the lines in order despite the extent and hazards of the task. The communications problem was accentuated by the distance from the battalion positions of brigade headquarters. A further request was made by Maxwell to Western Area headquarters about midday that he be permitted to occupy a north-south line from the junction of the Kranji-Woodlands road to the 12-mile post on the Woodlands road. The brigade would thus be withdrawn from the area west of the road, and its right flank would be two miles south of the Causeway. This appears to have been granted, conditionally upon the withdrawal of the brigade not being commenced before the oil tanks near the Causeway, in the 2/30th Battalion's sector, had been demolished.⁶ The move would in fact bring the brigade into the north-south alignment of the forces in the Western Area which as has been shown was ordered by General Bennett during the afternoon.

At 1.30 p.m. Brigadier Maxwell held a conference with Lieut-Colonel Galleghan, commander of the 2/30th Battalion, and then ordered him to obtain hospital treatment for ear trouble which was causing him partial deafness; Major Ramsay⁷ was to take command of the battalion during his absence. Lieut-Colonel Oakes who, because of a delay in his transfer,

⁶ General Bennett said after the war that he himself did not give permission for any withdrawal from the Causeway.

⁷ Col G. E. Ramsay, ED, NX34999; 2/30 Bn (CO Feb 1942). Public relations officer; of Cremorne, NSW; b. East Maitland, NSW, 8 Jan 1899.

had only that day taken over the 2/26th Battalion from Lieut-Colonel Boyes, was also called in. During the course of the afternoon he was ordered to extend his left flank along the Kranji and Peng Siang for the time being, as had been authorised during the morning. The 2/30th Battalion was to be responsible for enabling the engineer detachment to wreck the oil tanks before first light on 10th January; the withdrawal of both battalions was to follow immediately upon completion of this task.

Instead of then stringing the battalions out along more than 3,000 yards from the 12-mile post to the Kranji-Woodlands road, however, Maxwell decided to concentrate them along what evidently he considered the vital portion of the line. Thus the 2/30th was to be immediately forward of Bukit Mandai, inclusive of the road to Nee Soon, where it would be in a position to resist passage to the rear of the 28th Indian Brigade. The 2/26th Battalion would be to the south of this position, extending the line towards the next vital road junction—that of the Choa Chu Kang and the Woodlands roads. In the event of being forced to give ground, the brigade would have freedom of manoeuvre, by withdrawal either to the east towards Nee Soon, or to the south along the Woodlands road or the Pipe-line east of it.⁸ Oakes was to give the order for the withdrawal from the Causeway-Kranji positions, and to coordinate the movements of the two battalions.⁹ He returned to the 2/26th late in the afternoon with a heavy responsibility on his shoulders, especially as he was new to his command and unfamiliar with the sector in which it was situated; but he was an officer in whom Maxwell had great confidence. The withdrawal would expose the left flank of the 11th Indian Division for a distance of about two miles. It was necessary therefore that it should be informed of the plan, so that its commander could make any necessary readjustment of his forces also—a task that would be possible provided he received adequate notice. This would normally be transmitted by Western Area headquarters, and by liaison between the 2/30th Battalion and the Indian unit adjacent to it. Ramsay received the orders through his Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Eaton, who returned from brigade headquarters with Oakes. Eaton told him that the situation on the 22nd Brigade's front was considered to be extremely serious. Ramsay, concerned at leaving a position which he considered his battalion capable of holding, subsequently discussed the plan by telephone with Oakes. The two agreed that having regard to the tactical position generally, and their lack of adequate knowledge of what was happening on the 22nd Brigade front, they would not be justified in asking their brigade headquarters to reconsider the order.

⁸ Brigadier Maxwell pointed out (post-war) that at this stage his brigade positions were not being attacked other than by aircraft and artillery; that his decision therefore was made on tactical grounds and not in response to enemy pressure on the front the brigade occupied at the time.

⁹ Oakes' recollection after the war was that he had not been given such definite orders about withdrawal, and himself took a larger responsibility for the subsequent movements of the two battalions.

Meanwhile, having staged the diversionary landing on Ubin Island, the Japanese *Guards Division* had been assembling for an attack on the Causeway sector. The width of suitable landing points between the Causeway and the Kranji was considered too narrow to allow more than one battalion to cross the Strait at a time, and the Japanese Command feared that after the warning given by the crossings to the 22nd Brigade's sector, the operation would involve heavy casualties. As against this, the command took the view that the attack would contain British forces in and about the area which otherwise might be employed elsewhere, and if the *Guards* could gain access to the main road from the Causeway into Singapore, the Japanese would virtually command the island. With these considerations in mind the command decided to accept the risks involved. In barges assembled at the mouth of the Sungei Skudai, a battalion of the *4th Guards Regiment* was launched upon the initial assault on the night of 9th February.

Movements to extend the left flank of the 2/26th Battalion were in progress when about 8.30 p.m. the Japanese lifted their bombardment of the Causeway sector, and barges were seen by the Australians approaching its shore. Soon after 9 p.m. enemy troops began landing against the battalion's two forward companies. The main assault was about a pier between the mouths of the Sungei Mandai and the Sungei Kranji, where wire and other defensive works had been demolished by the bombardment. Other landings were made in swamps along the frontage, and some Japanese went up the Sungei Mandai (between the 2/30th and the 2/26th Battalions) and the Sungei Mandai Kechil (in the 2/30th Battalion area).

Lights in the 2/26th Battalion area did not function, and although all serviceable flares¹ were used in calling for defensive artillery fire, they brought no immediate response. The battery which had been sited west of the Woodlands road in support of the 2/26th Battalion had been ordered to move after dark to the Mandai road area because of the concern felt, presumably at Western Area headquarters, about the brigade's left flank, and it was not in action when the attack started. It was not until the attack had been observed from Ramsay's sector that the battery supporting his battalion, and his mortars, fired to Oakes' sector. The other battery opened up later. Australian machine-gunners on the front of the 2/26th did not come into action until twenty minutes after the first landing because they had not seen the flares, which were to be their fire signal also. The battalion's mortars fired on the Kranji pier area, scoring heavily, but the Japanese persisted in their endeavours, with the result that they were soon engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with Oakes' forward platoons.

Soon after 9 p.m. a standing patrol forward of the 2/30th Battalion's "B" Company (Captain Duffy) reported enemy movement on the mouth of the Sungei Mandai, but only a small force of Japanese landed at this stage, and these came under mortar and machine-gun fire. News then

¹ Some of the cartridges, swollen by humidity, would not fit the flare pistols.

arrived of the landing against the 2/26th Battalion generally, and Japanese were seen gathering on the mainland shore about 300 feet west of the Causeway. A beach-light

outlined the figure of a Japanese officer at the head of the Causeway, shouting and gesticulating to imaginary troops apparently to divert attention from the activities farther up the bank (wrote the diarist of the 2/30th Battalion). Several well-placed shells deprived him of any further interest in activities whilst the main weight of shell fire fell on the troops he had been striving to cover. Subsequent flashes revealed them to be in the act of entering barges, but the accuracy of the shell fire at least discouraged them in that endeavour.²

Meanwhile, the battery supporting the 2/30th was running short of ammunition because additional supplies had not arrived. Fire to the mainland foreshores had to be restricted, and despite streams of bullets from two machine-guns manned by the battalion's carrier crews at vantage points near the Causeway, a line of Japanese barges managed to reach the Sungei Mandai Kechil. There, apparently, they awaited reinforcements. Ramsay regarded the spot as a bottleneck, into which fire could be poured from machine-guns and mortars when the right time arrived. Pending that, standing patrols were used to keep touch with the Japanese and prevent infiltration.

By midnight the forward troops of the 2/26th Battalion had concentrated in the vicinity of Kampong Kranji, where although they had suffered heavy casualties they held firmly. Some Japanese who managed to enter a house in the centre of the position were dislodged with automatic fire and grenades. Corporal Rogers³ and four others with guns, grenades and finally bayonets drove back an enemy party which attempted to charge along the road into the area. The corporal felled a Japanese with the muzzle of his gun when its magazine was empty. As he fell the Japanese grasped Rogers' legs and brought him down too, but Lance-Corporal Lee⁴ finished the struggle with his bayonet. Confused fighting followed, with both the Australians and the Japanese uncertain of the movements of their opponents. A report came from the 2/30th Battalion of the penetration of the Sungei Mandai, and a patrol led by Sergeant Brennan⁵ was sent to deal with it. The patrol came upon some Japanese attempting to draw a barge to the bank of the river, and wiped them out with grenades.

Demolition of the oil tanks, situated forward of Duffy's company of the 2/30th, was delayed because the truck with the explosives and gear for the task was hit by a shell. Lieutenant Watchorn,⁶ in charge of the demolition party, had to walk four miles to make good the loss, while the Japanese were building up their strength. Eventually, with the assist-

² Narrative with the 2/30th Battalion war diary.

³ Cpl J. Rogers, QX1690; 2/26 Bn. Station hand; of West Maitland, NSW; b. West Maitland, 5 Dec 1901. Died while prisoner 16 Dec 1943.

⁴ Sgt G. F. Lee, QX12611; 2/26 Bn. Labourer; of Lanefield, Qld; b. Brisbane, 4 Sep 1917.

⁵ Sgt R. N. Brennan, QX10622; 2/26 Bn. Station hand; of Maryborough, Qld; b. Wondai, Qld, 15 Jul 1915.

⁶ Capt A. B. Watchorn, MC, VX9737; 2/12 Fd Coy. Student; of Sandy Bay, Tas; b. Hobart, 27 Sep 1916.

ance of Sergeant Wilstencroft⁷ and the other members of his party he coolly set the charges within earshot of the enemy.

Colonel Oakes, who had been under the impression that the 12th Indian Brigade was responsible for the area immediately left of his battalion, received about 3 a.m. from one of his officers a report that that brigade's position extended no farther north than Bukit Panjang. This appears to have influenced the extent of the move by the two battalions which he was soon to set afoot. About 4.30 a.m., as 2,000,000 gallons of petrol went up in flames and smoke from the tanks, the surrounding area was vividly illuminated. Blazing spirit flowed down creeks into the Mandai Kechil and on to the waters of the Strait. It was assumed that this inflicted serious loss on the Japanese.⁸ Concurrent fires at the naval base added to the lurid impact of the scene. The task upon which the pre-determined withdrawal of the 2/26th and 2/30th depended having been performed, the battalions withdrew. The mortars and machine-guns of the 2/30th swept the Japanese in its sector with two final barrages. Shouts and screams from the enemy made it evident that the fire was finding its mark. The signal line to the 2/2nd Gurkhas on the 2/30th Battalion's right had been disrupted, but a written message was sent to inform them of the 2/30th's new position. It was assumed that information about the withdrawal plan would have reached the 28th Indian Brigade, of which the Gurkhas were a part, through the usual higher command channels.

Although the withdrawal conceded the Japanese the forward area of the Causeway sector, the resistance had caused them heavy casualties, and they had been able to make little headway. Then, as the stream of fire from the tanks flowed on to the water in the vicinity, further impeding their progress, reports which reached General Nishimura made the situation appear so serious that he asked *XXV Army Headquarters* for permission to cancel the attack in the Causeway sector and to land on Singapore Island behind the *5th Division*. Headquarters staff officers were hurriedly sent to investigate the situation. It was then found that opposition had subsided, and the operation continued as originally planned. These circumstances were of course unknown to Brigadier Maxwell, whose information about the situation on his front was insufficient to enable him to assess the actual strength of the enemy landing, or the fact that a division was available to exploit it. In any case, cancellation of the withdrawal order while the fighting was in progress would of course have been a hazardous proceeding, particularly as Maxwell had no reserve with which to influence the outcome and no troops guarding the stretch south of the Kranji road.

The Japanese had used collapsible boats, small landing craft and pontoons for their crossings of the Strait. The small landing craft were

⁷ Sgt R. Wilstencroft, MM, NX50642; 2/12 Fd Coy. Roadmaking ganger; of Annandale, NSW; b. Fairy Meadow, NSW, 19 Sep 1903.

⁸ The Japanese had been apprehensive that the vast amount of petrol and oil stored on Singapore Island would be used to lay a sheet of flame over the waters of the Johore Strait wherever invasion was attempted. That it was not done fitted in with the pattern of unpreparedness of Singapore's landward defences.

brought by rail and sea along the west coast, and hand-carried in the final stages to the embarkation points to avoid detection; the collapsible boats and pontoons were mainly carried on trucks. The collapsible boats, constructed of plywood with rubber joints and built in two sections, were capable of being assembled by one man in two minutes. Propelled by a 30 horsepower 2-cylinder outboard motor, each could carry twelve fully-equipped troops with a four-man crew; linked together in threes they were capable of carrying field artillery pieces. Two types of pontoons were used. One, similar to but heavier in construction than the collapsible boats, was linked together in threes to carry heavy vehicles and tanks up to 16 tons. The other type, of steel construction, was commonly used for bridge building, but could also be used as a landing craft. Altogether 297 craft of all types (including 200 collapsible boats) were allotted for the operation, but the number used was about 10 per cent less.

Little time had been available for training the infantry in the crossings to be made. The assault troops of the *Guards Division* practised boarding on 8th February in an area near the embarkation point; the *5th* and *18th Divisions* on 4th February in an area to the rear. However, both these divisions had had previous experience in amphibious operations: the *5th* had received specialised training before the outbreak of war, and the *18th* had carried out river crossings in south China.



Mandai road, about two miles from Mandai Road village, showing the dense vegetation encountered by the troops even on Singapore Island.



(Australian War Memorial)

Choa Chu Kang road, near Bulim village. In this area a Japanese attack was repulsed by the 2/29th Battalion on the morning of 10th February. Post-war photograph.



(Australian War Memorial)

The plight of the civilians of Singapore, swollen to over a million by refugees from the north, worsened as the area held by the defenders was reduced and air attacks and shelling increased in intensity. In the above photograph a Chinese doctor attends an air raid casualty.



(Australian War Memorial)

Two grief-stricken Chinese women lament the death of a child.