

PART II

CHAPTER 21

I AUSTRALIAN CORPS RETURNS

TOWARDS the end of 1941 it was evident that the war was threatening to spread to other zones of vital importance to Australia. Defensive forces of Australian troops had been sent to Malaya, Darwin, Thursday Island, New Britain, Ocean Island, Nauru, New Caledonia, Timor and Ambon. A medical officer with orderlies was in Kavieng and a medical orderly in Tulagi and in Vila.

Overseas, in the Middle East, the position was rather less pressing, for Germany was heavily committed in Russia, and following the opening of a British offensive in Libya, British forces had at last relieved the defenders of Tobruk on 26th November. But, as has been pointed out in previous chapters, future threats in the Middle East were certain to be made in North Africa, where Rommel would try to sweep through to the Suez Canal, and possibly also in Syria, where there was danger of a German thrust through Turkey.

In the Far East, however, Japan's surprise attack fell on 7th December 1941 on Pearl Harbour, other strategic points in Malaya and elsewhere, and a declaration of war was followed by a series of well planned and executed landings of forces along a line stretching from Malaya to Rabaul. From the first it was evident that the entry of Japan into the war meant danger from the Far East, but the extent of the danger was not so easily foreseen until the speed and success of the Japanese military operations left a broad swathe of loss and ruin in their train.

Britain and Australia agreed that Australian forces should be diverted to resist Japanese aggression, and thus the Middle East phase was closing for most of the A.I.F. As we know, the 9th Division was reserved for further service in the desert, and the I Australian Corps, less this division and some base troops, was embarked from several ports in the Middle East in the movement known as "Stepsister".

MOVEMENT "STEPSISTER"

This movement began on 30th January 1942, and from that date onwards convoys carried the Australian corps in three flights. The field ambulances of the 9th Division, the 2/3rd, 2/8th, 2/11th, and the 2/4th Field Hygiene Section remained behind, together with the 2/3rd C.C.S. and the two general hospitals, the 2/6th and 2/7th. All the other Australian medical units participated in move "Stepsister".

The movement as seen from the viewpoint of these medical units had some element of mystery; it was generally known that the corps was bound for the Far East, but that was all. Some 60,000 troops and their equipment were involved and for this purpose an imposing number of ships were assembled, including large ships such as the *Mauretania* and other well known liners. Early in January warnings of movement were

given to some units, and rapid packing was necessary. Units allotted to the first flight were the 2/6th Field Ambulance, 2/2nd Field Hygiene Section, 2/4th Advanced Depot of Medical Stores, 1st Mobile Operating Unit and 1st Anti-malarial Unit, the 2/2nd C.C.S., 2/5th and 2/11th A.G.Hs., and the 8th Australian Special Hospital. In the second flight were the 2/4th, 2/5th, 2/7th Field Ambulances, 2/1st Field Hygiene Section, 2nd Anti-malarial Unit, the 2/1st C.C.S., the 2/2nd and 2/9th A.G.Hs., the 14th Australian Special Hospital, and the 2/1st Base Depot Medical Stores. In the third flight were the 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/13th Field Ambulances, 2/3rd Field Hygiene Section, the 2/1st and 2/4th A.G.Hs. and the 2/3rd Convalescent Depot.

One interesting medical feature of this move was that a fully equipped advanced depot of medical stores left on the first flight, and the base depot followed in the next flight. It was evident that previous emphatic requests for reserves of medical stores had produced a satisfactory result. The second flight was completed in the third week of February, but all the medical units scheduled to move with "Stepsister 3B" in the third flight were notified that the movement was postponed, though a week later again sailings were resumed. Beneath the smooth fulfilment of "Movement Stepsister" and only dimly realised by the participants were confused currents of high policy and rapidly changing military strategy.

The original intention of General Wavell, Supreme Commander of the ABDA (American, British, Dutch, Australian) area was to use the Australian corps in the reinforcement of Malaya, but by the time the first flight was ready to leave Suez it was obvious that the Japanese were driving the British troops back into Singapore and that the help would come too late. Therefore Wavell proposed to use the first division of Australians to arrive for the defence of an important group of aerodromes in southern Sumatra, and the following division to reinforce the garrison of Java.

A number of senior administrative and executive officers travelled from the Middle East to Batavia by air, and amongst them were the D.M.S., A.I.F., General Burston, Colonel Fairley, Consulting Physician and Lieut-Colonel MacCallum, A.D.M.S., H.Q., A.I.F. The detachment from the medical headquarters was concerned initially in making a survey of Java from the medical point of view. The intention was to carry out preliminary staff work for the provision of medical services in Java, selection of sites for medical units and the establishment of lines of evacuation, and the making of reciprocal arrangements with the Dutch authorities.

A.I.F. IN NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES

The convoy in the first "Stepsister" flight left Bombay for the Far East on 13th February, and early the same day a Japanese convoy of ships moved from the Anambas Islands towards southern Sumatra. The next morning the Japanese made a paratroop landing at Palembang, an important river port with large oil refineries.

On 15th February the *Orcades*, travelling ahead of the A.I.F. convoy arrived under escort at Oosthaven in the south-west of Sumatra, and arrangements were made to disembark some 2,000 troops. With these troops were two medical officers and thirty other ranks from the 2/2nd Australian C.C.S. who were to set up a camp dressing station. But before anything further could be done an order was received for the troops to be re-embarked and proceed to Batavia. This order was fulfilled on the following morning, but in the meantime news had been received that Singapore had fallen on 15th February. While efforts were being made to strengthen southern Sumatra, recognised by Wavell to be "the last outpost of Java to the west", the Japanese captured Palembang airfield, and landing forces of at least a division were making their way from Banka Straits up the River Musi. On 16th February Palembang was taken by the Japanese, all hope of holding southern Sumatra had vanished, and the evacuation of the island was inevitable. (It was now apparent that hope of strengthening the defence of Timor could not be realised, and reinforcements sent from Darwin were turned back on the same day. The return of this convoy to Darwin has been mentioned previously in Chapter 20.) A mission was sent from the A.I.F. corps headquarters in Java to participate in the evacuation of Sumatra: this included Brigadier C. S. Steele, Brigadier V. C. Secombe, Major I. Webster and Lieut-Colonel W. P. MacCallum.

Following the paratroop landing the utmost confusion prevailed on the 300 mile road to Oosthaven. It was only a narrow jungle road at best, and unfit for heavy vehicles. The chance of organising resistance or even of covering a retreat was slender, but the A.I.F. party organised an efficient withdrawal, which saved some valuable material, and enabled many civilians to escape; all manner of vessels ferried them across the Sunda Straits to Java. When the A.I.F. mission returned from Sumatra to Batavia the *Orcades* was at the chief port of Tanjong Priok, with the troops on board, having arrived on 17th February. A Japanese attack on Java was now imminent, and on 18th February Wavell regarded its successful defence as very doubtful, and recommended the diversion of the Australian corps to Burma.

On the 19th the Australian troops disembarked from the *Orcades* and the 2/2nd C.C.S. was despatched by train to Bandoeng in the hills inland from Batavia, where it was planned to set up a hospital. On the morning of the same day the Japanese attacked and seized the aerodrome on Bali, and bombed Darwin. They had also attacked Finschhafen on the north coast of Papua. The staff officers were then engaged in hurried preparations for "Black" Force, a formation which was hastily assembled as a nucleus of defence in Java under Lieut-Colonel A. S. Blackburn. Lieut-Colonel N. Eadie, commander of the 2/2nd C.C.S. was appointed as senior medical officer to the force, and the command of the C.C.S. passed to Lieut-Colonel E. E. Dunlop.

At Tanjong Priok the A.I.F. medical officers again met a scene of extreme confusion surrounding the collection and storing of medical supplies. MacCallum remarked that:

No one really knew what there was or where it was. In the stores everything was so indiscriminately packed that vehicles were literally covered by every variety of medical supply and only found by chance beneath piles of cooking utensils, auto-claves, Red Cross comforts, bales of blankets, stretchers, *et cetera*, all pitched together in a heterogeneous mass.

There was also lack of coordination in the movement from Suez with regard to supplies, evidenced by the delay in producing equipment belonging to a medical unit. The *Orcades*, for example, was also carrying the baggage of the 2/5th A.G.H., though not the members of the unit. However, with the help of Lieut-Colonel Marsh, liaison officer to the British headquarters, General Burston, and Lieut-Colonel MacCallum, some R.A.M.C. supplies were obtained belonging to a British unit which had become separated from the rest and diverted elsewhere, and these were sent to Bandoeng. The nurses came to Bandoeng with the C.C.S., but in view of the rapidly deteriorating position in Java they were returned to Batavia, re-embarked on the *Orcades* on 21st February and sent to Australia.

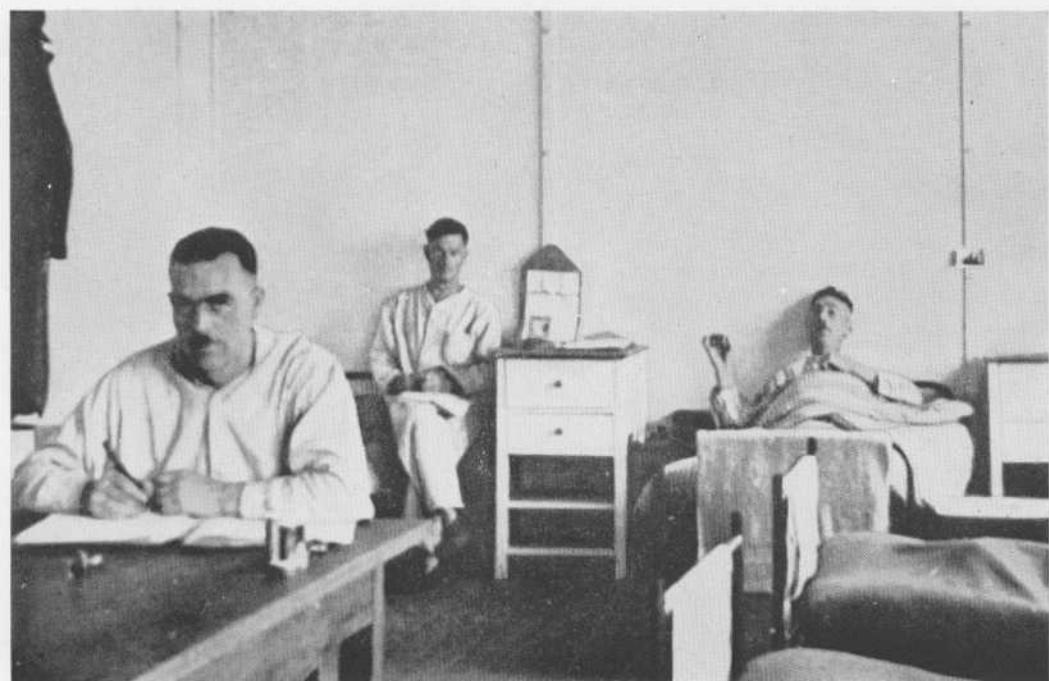
ALTERED PLANS FOR THE A.I.F.

Meanwhile the remaining ships of the first two flights of the "Stepsister" movement, were at sea, and the destiny of the A.I.F. 6th and 7th Divisions was in doubt. It was evident that the plan of using the A.I.F. in the Netherlands East Indies had been frustrated by the rapid movements of the Japanese. At that stage this plan would have been a useless sacrifice. It was impossible to expect that a division could be landed and be ready for action in less than a month, and the whole corps could not be ready before the middle of April. These delays were somewhat increased by the fact that equipment had not been packed in a tactical pattern on the transports, that is, carried with the troops who were to use it. Wavell had warned the Chiefs of Staff that the Japanese would invade Java before the end of February, and that there was little chance of repulsing invaders with the forces at hand, and pointed out that the urgent problem was then the destination of the Australian corps. As the risk of landing any more of this force in Java was too great, the question to be solved was which was the more pressing assignment of the corps, Burma or Australia. Burma was, as Wavell said "a most important but somewhat distracting commitment", and the adequate defence of Australia was vital to a successful resistance to the Japanese. He advised that Burma should revert to control by the headquarters in India, and after initial refusal the Chiefs of Staff on 21st February transferred the responsibility of Burma to the Commander-in-Chief of India. This still did not affect the issue so far as Australian troops were concerned, and Wavell concluded that at least one Australian division should be sent to reinforce Burma. The remaining corps troops and the 7th Division were then at sea, and in view of the



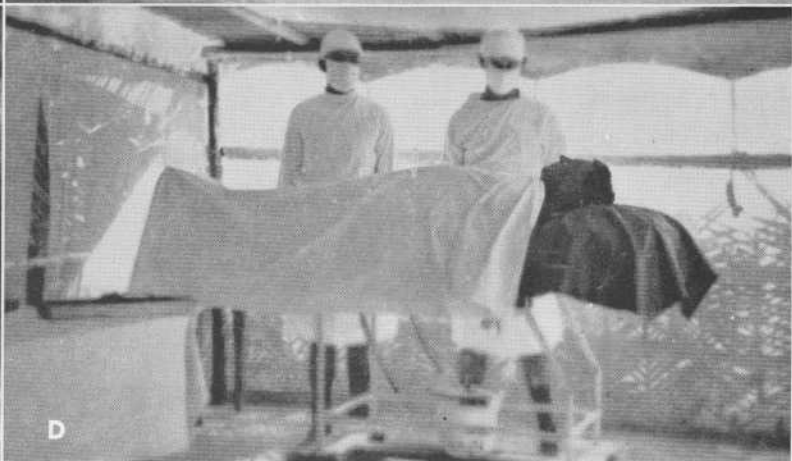
The 2/5th Australian General Hospital, Piraeus, Greece.

(Brooke Moore)



Stalag 383 Hospital Ward.

(Brooke Moore)



(Photographs taken surreptitiously during captivity on Timor by Sergeant E. Fuller)

P.O.W. camp, Timor.

A.—Admittance and discharge hut. B.—Hospital huts. C, D.—Operating theatre.

urgent need for saving Rangoon and keeping open the Burma Road, he advised that this Australian force should be diverted to Burma.

This advice was strongly supported by the British and American military and political leaders, and pending the approval of the Australian Government, Mr Churchill on 22nd February sanctioned a diversion of the leading ships in the "Stepsister" convoy towards Burma. However, after exchange of cables with the British War Cabinet the Australian Government would not agree to the use of Australian troops in the defence of Burma, and Mr Curtin, the Australian Prime Minister insisted on behalf of his War Cabinet that the ships be turned back.

On the ships there was much speculation as to their destination. Originally it was assumed that this was Java but the abrupt change of course suggested that it was Rangoon. However, hesitation and delay on 23rd February suggested a further change of destination, to Colombo. The war diary of the 2/6th Field Ambulance in the second flight from Suez summarised the movement by saying that twelve ships sailed from Bombay for Sumatra, steamed south-east for eight days, and north-west for five days, and then turning back south-west, arrived at Colombo. The postponement of movement of the "Stepsister 3B", the third flight from Suez, followed by its reinstatement a week later was explained afterwards by this rapid alteration of plans. No request was made by the British Government for forces to be sent to Ceylon for its defence, but after considerable hesitation the Australian Government turned back to Colombo two brigades of the 6th Division, accompanied by the 2/4th A.G.H., which were *en route* with the last flight.

Meanwhile a decision had been made by the Chiefs of Staff to leave in Java for its defence such forces as were available. The direction of all forces in the N.E.I. was taken over by the Dutch commanders, and the ABDA Command ended on 25th February after a brief six weeks' existence. The force remaining in Java included 5,500 British troops, 6,000 R.A.F. personnel without aircraft and mostly unarmed, about 3,000 Australians, and 500 United States artillery. British patients in hospital were as far as possible evacuated to India.

Unfortunately it did not prove possible to send an Australian hospital ship to pick up casualties from Java: the Military Board in Australia hoped to be able to turn the N.E.I. hospital ship *Oranje* round from Fremantle on 4th March, and the D.G.M.S., Major-General Maguire, arranged for extra surgical and nursing staff, but this movement was not carried out.

This episode of attempting to establish medical services in Java was a sad and frustrate one for the small parties involved. From the beginning the prospects were gloomy. The early supremacy of the Japanese in the air permitted the paratroop landing at Palembang, and the heavy bombing of Bandoeng and other important places.

Conditions in Java made improvisation very difficult. Accommodation was limited and unsuitable, roads were poor, and there was a dense native population. The facilities for evacuation of the sick by rail were

extremely meagre, and the southern ports were unsuitable for sea transport of sick and wounded. When the A.I.F. headquarters party boarded an aircraft with a very narrow margin of safety the medical staff officers left the 2/2nd C.C.S. with the greatest regret, for its function of caring for "Black" Force could have only one end. For some days the 2/2nd C.C.S. was engaged in gathering supplies of food and necessary equipment, then this unit joined with a R.A.F. hospital in Bandoeng in staffing and running a 1,200 bed hospital, which was well equipped and supplied. This was known as the 1st Allied Hospital in Java, and obtained most of its supplies from a British general hospital which had just moved after evacuating its patients. Food suitable for other than the native population was very scanty. On the 27th February some fifty patients were received from Batavia, and on the following day the total exceeded one hundred, including some air raid casualties. Bandoeng and other centres had by this time suffered severe air raids by the Japanese in which the Allied planes were destroyed in the air or on the ground.

Chaplain C. MacLeod and an orderly, Private I. R. Thurlow, were placed in charge of four patients, including Major C. Moses of the 8th Australian Division headquarters, from Malaya, who was to be returned to Australia. This party boarded a Dutch tramp steamer at Tjilitjap, where survivors from the battle of the Java Sea were taken on board with a ship's surgeon. This ship sailed, and reached Fremantle safely on 10th March 1942. The main body of the 2/2nd C.C.S. however, remained in Java caring for the casualties of "Black" Force, and with most of the defensive force was captured by the Japanese.

In all the A.I.F. suffered 2,840 casualties in Java, of these 751 were killed in action or died while prisoners, 60 were wounded, and the remainder were taken prisoner. Though efforts have always been made to keep medical units together in transit, it was fortunate that the 2/2nd C.C.S. was sub-divided into four parties during the voyage. Three of these parties were small and were detailed to supply medical services on transports returning to Australia. In this way a small nucleus of the unit reached Australia, and the unit was rebuilt there and was able to carry on the tradition of service in the war in the Pacific.

Most of the ships in the "Stepsister" convoys returned to Australia *via* Colombo, where they called to refuel; some travelled *via* South Africa. Many went direct from Colombo to Adelaide where the main reception camps were established. No outstanding medical events occurred during the voyage of the convoys to Australia. There were the customary difficulties with ventilation and water supplies, and on some ships the medical supplies were insufficient for the needs of the voyage. With the exception of the brigades left in Colombo, which were brought back to Australia on the return trips of some of the convoy ships, the Australian corps headquarters and the 6th and 7th Divisions arrived in Fremantle on various dates in March 1942. By this time the Japanese had invaded Java and had occupied Rangoon.

Though the journey was accomplished safely some damage was sustained by certain equipment. On arrival in Australia one unit, the 2/6th Field Ambulance, found its vehicles had suffered apparently deliberate damage; wheels were broken, headlights were wrenched off, and tools were gone. It would have been a catastrophe had the unit landed to work in Sumatra or Java. There might have been difficulties in assembling equipment with the units in some instances, as it was sometimes loaded on vessels other than those carrying the personnel. One field ambulance, the 2/13th, after being divided into eight parties, embarked on three different ships. This, of course, was due to the difficulties of arranging details of a large troop movement, but the damage of equipment just mentioned was presumably due to fifth column activities. These agencies were also probably responsible for the loss of a cargo of 120 tons of quinine purchased in Java by the advice of Colonel Hamilton Fairley. Great difficulty was experienced in gaining access to the factory at Bandoeng, and though the quinine was actually shipped at one port, it appeared that it was unloaded when the ship called at another port in Java, though it was not possible to discover by whose authority this was done.

THE A.I.F. IN CEYLON

The 2/12th A.G.H. had been established at Colombo for some time before the events just described. Colonel G. W. Macartney, the commanding officer, arrived on 11th September 1941, and on 23rd October the members of the unit, complete with nurses and voluntary aids, disembarked and occupied a hospital site at Welisara, where six wards were completed and others were under construction. The patients received at this stage were those on return to Australia, and others from the hospital ship *Vita*, mainly from naval ships. In January 1942 a conference was called by the Minister for Health at which tentative arrangements were made for the assistance of civilian patients should the necessity arise.

On 24th January the first Australians were admitted from Malaya. In February over 250 evacuees from Singapore arrived, chiefly women and children, and were accommodated in empty wards. They presented some difficult problems of discipline. They were later embarked on a ship proceeding to England. A useful service was developed in this hospital, that of occupational therapy, in charge of a sister who had had brief training before leaving Australia. A wide range of occupations was followed, with such success that British hospitals asked for assistance in establishing similar departments; one British nurse was attached for a training course.

During February 1942 some 200 A.I.F. patients were admitted and as in addition considerable calls were made for medical supplies for use on transport ships, application was made for replacements from the Middle East. The D.M.S., A.I.F. Middle East and other members of the medical corps headquarters visited the hospital on their way back from the Netherlands East Indies to Australia. This visit of General Burston was very valuable, as it was on his urgent and personal representation that essential

medical supplies were made available. When the 16th and 17th Brigades of the 6th Division, A.I.F. arrived in Ceylon a formation known as "A.I.F. Ceylon" was established under the command of Brigadier Boase. The General Officer Commanding in Ceylon was Sir Henry Pownall. The D.D.M.S. Ceylon was Colonel O'Hanlon, Colonel N. L. Speirs of the 2/4th A.G.H. was appointed as A.D.M.S., and Major C. H. Selby D.A.D.M.S. A.I.F. in Ceylon. The 2/12th A.G.H. continued to serve the Australian troops in Ceylon and those in passage. On 18th March survivors from H.M.A.S. *Yarra* were admitted in bad condition, suffering from exposure and exhaustion.

The A.I.F. units which arrived in Ceylon from the Middle East included the 2/1st and 2/2nd Field Ambulances, the 2/3rd Field Hygiene Section and the 2/4th A.G.H. The 2/4th A.G.H. was opened in St. Peter's School on 10th May to receive patients; the most prevalent diseases were malaria, pyrexia of unknown origin and tinea. The pyrexia was due to dengue for the most part, as there was a local epidemic. During April and May dengue appeared in all the units; the vectors in Ceylon were *Aedes aegypti* and *A. albopictus*. There was ample need for anti-mosquito precautions, as malaria was also rife. In one instance the field hygiene section found an anti-tank regiment camped in a native village on the bank of a stream where malaria was hyperendemic. The chief vector was *Anopheles culicifaciens*, and as few mosquitoes were noticed at first, nets had not been used. The general rule was then laid down that unless instructions to the contrary were given anti-malarial precautions must be observed. Though the incidence of malaria in the south-west coastal sector was the lowest in the island, the risk was always present, and could easily rise dangerously if the troops were exposed in action or otherwise in highly malarious areas. Skin complaints were prevalent, so too was *otitis externa*. Though dysentery was not a serious problem it was endemic, and an outbreak of bacillary dysentery during June coincided with an increase in the flies in the area. Venereal disease occurred in disappointingly large numbers: in June there were 110 men in a special wing of a camp hospital, and later, on representation by Major Selby, a prophylactic centre was opened. A hospital was later set up on one of the ships which returned the force to Australia, and the patients were all taken back.

The defence plans involved some medical difficulties. There were fixed defences in four areas, all with perimeters of defence, to protect Colombo, Galle, and the airports for land and water aircraft. Small holding stations were established in these areas, and the 2/2nd Field Ambulance, after some difficulty in obtaining motor transport, set up dressing stations, and was prepared to form a 200 bed hospital. A hospital, equipped with a surgical team, was budded off from the 2/4th A.G.H. and attached to the 2/2nd M.D.S. at the tea factory at Hulandawa under Major Ley. After proving its surgical capabilities by trial this was resolved back into its components, ready for immediate resumption of activity should need arise. The two field ambulances began training for jungle warfare. The 2/1st Field Ambulance set up in attractive surroundings at Horana, but pre-

cautions in water sterilisation and mosquito protection were soon found necessary. A nucleus of an M.D.S. was held ready here. Patients from the 16th Brigade area were taken to the 2/4th A.G.H. by motor ambulance, and those from the 17th Brigade area to 2/12th A.G.H. by rail.

Plans were made for medical evacuation in the event of enemy attack. It was evident that the enemy would cut off the coast road by destroying the bridges, and a reconnaissance by Speirs, Littlejohn and Selby showed that severely wounded would probably not survive the journey involved. Therefore facilities for dealing with and holding casualties near the defence perimeter were necessary. With both the general hospitals in use 2,000 patients could have been held in the area. However, fortunately, these plans were not exposed to trial. The only hostile incident during the stay of the A.I.F. in Ceylon was a bombing raid carried out by the Japanese on 5th April. No serious damage was suffered, and heavy losses were inflicted on the raiders. News of the approach of an enemy convoy of ships also reached Colombo, but the loss of supporting aircraft forced their diversion when 200 miles away.

During June preparations began for a movement of the A.I.F. from Ceylon. The force, known as "Schooner" Force for the purposes of this movement, was instructed to travel without its motor transport, with the exception of specified technical vehicles, including mobile dressing stations; the remainder of the vehicles were finally loaded in India. In July the move was successfully made, and the A.I.F. brigades and associated troops reached Australia at the end of that month. Some difficulty was found at first in ensuring that medical officers should be evenly distributed through the ships of the convoy, but with the support of Brigadier Boase this was done. This was fortunate, as a case of virulent smallpox occurred among the crew of a small ship, which might otherwise not have had a medical officer on board.

The 2/4th A.G.H. left Colombo with the force, and transferred some 300 patients to the 2/12th A.G.H., which remained behind while the 9th Division A.I.F. was committed to action in Egypt, and eventually arrived in Australia on 1st January 1943.