

CHAPTER 11

THE PRICE OF HESITATION

MEMBERS of the Australian War Cabinet, assembled in Canberra on 8th December, heard the Secretary read a terse signal from the British Admiralty:

Commence hostilities against Japan repetition Japan at once.

The War Cabinet's first action was to agree that this situation should be accepted as involving a state of war with Japan. That formality over, the views of the Chiefs of Staff were heard. The Second Naval Member, Commodore Durnford,¹ who was acting in place of the Chief of the Naval Staff, Sir Guy Royle² (absent in Singapore) reported that all shipping in the northern area was falling back on Rabaul and Port Moresby; that army reinforcements for Rabaul on board the troopship *Katoomba* had been held at Port Moresby, and that all coastwatchers had been warned.

There were reports of Japanese air attacks on Nauru and Ocean Island— islands from which Australia and New Zealand obtained their supplies of phosphate rock for the manufacture of artificial fertiliser. As yet the War Cabinet had no details of these attacks and the fate of the small garrisons and staffs on the islands could only be guessed at. It was known that preparations had been made for the demolition of the machinery on the islands so that it would be denied to the enemy. On both Ocean Island and Nauru there was a garrison of 50 A.I.F. troops with two 18-pounder field guns. Commodore Durnford told the War Cabinet that an air attack from a Japanese aircraft carrier was unlikely in the early stages of the war; cruiser escort would be needed for such an operation. The Japanese had some fast merchant cruisers which probably were already in the South Pacific, and attacks on shipping could be expected. The R.A.N's escort capacity was limited but was sufficient to deal with an attack by armed merchant cruisers or a limited cruiser attack. An assault on Rabaul was possible.

The Chief of the General Staff, Lieut-General Sturdee, reported that the reinforcement of Port Moresby and Rabaul by a battalion at each base was being considered. The importance of Rabaul to the United States was emphasised in discussion. The Commander-in-Chief of the Netherlands East Indies had asked for and General Sturdee had approved the immediate dispatch of A.I.F. troops to Koepang. Air cover would be available for most of their journey from Darwin in the troopships *Zealandia* and *Westralia* and the Naval Staff therefore preferred immediate move-

¹ Vice-Adm J. W. Durnford, CB; RN. Comd HMS *Suffolk* 1939-40; 2nd Naval Member Aust Naval Bd 1940-42; comd HMS *Resolution* 1942-43. Director Naval Training Admiralty 1944-47. B. 25 Oct 1891.

² Admiral Sir Guy Royle, KCB, CMG; RN. 5th Sea Lord 1940-41; Chief of Naval Air Services 1939-41; 1st Naval Member and CNS 1941-45. B. 1885. Died 4 Jan 1954.

ment to a delay of four days until H.M.A.S. *Adelaide* could arrive from Port Moresby. This was confirmed by the War Cabinet. The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Burnett, explained that Namlea on Buru Island would not be reinforced by the R.A.A.F. until he was satisfied that the base was adequately guarded—a subject that would be reviewed with the Dutch authorities. He also emphasised the importance of airfield construction in New Caledonia as required by the United States forces.

The War Cabinet also surveyed the question of the return of No. 10 Squadron from Britain and No. 3 Squadron from Libya, taking into consideration the lack of combat units in Australia and the great value of these well-trained squadrons for operations either in Australia or the Far East. Some thought was given to the effect on the morale of the Australian forces in the Middle East of an assurance that action was being taken to safeguard their homes in Australia. The Chief of the Air Staff referred to the difficulty in bringing No. 3 Squadron back to Australia because its aircraft must come by sea. He was asked whether, in the light of local defence needs and the difficulty in providing naval escorts, the dispatch overseas of further contingents of E.A.T.S. trainees should be continued. The Minister for Air (Mr Drakeford) asked whether senior R.A.A.F. officers then abroad should not be recalled (Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was an example), but the War Cabinet decided that no such action should be taken immediately. A decision, made on 5th December, that one of the Empire flying-boats should be returned to Qantas Empire Airways by the R.A.A.F. was cancelled. The Chief of the Air Staff reported that, though there was a shortage of 250-lb bombs he considered that the air force held sufficient stocks to carry out bombing operations for three or four months. The War Cabinet then called on the Chiefs of Staff for an appreciation covering Australia and the adjacent areas, showing the possible forms of enemy attack, the scale of defence needed, the strengths of the Australian forces available to meet such attacks and their disposition at this time, together with a report on the state of training and equipment.

Next day Mr Curtin told the Advisory War Council that the Commonwealth would have to consider whether its manpower should be held for the defence of Australia. He said that he had asked the British Government to make an immediate review of the Empire Air Training Scheme resources in keeping with the assurance given to Mr Menzies in April 1941. After noting a message from Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham, in which he expressed his command's urgent need for long-range bombers, the council turned to the problem of Portuguese Timor. Timor had high strategic importance. If Japan should extend the economic influence she already held over Portuguese Timor into the military sphere—and her civil aviation agreement with Timor was regarded with misgivings—a serious threat to both the Dutch East Indian possessions and to Australia could develop. Dili, the Portuguese capital, had both an airfield and a flying-boat base and was garrisoned by an insignificant force. When in

November 1941 Japan's demeanour had become increasingly menacing, the politically-delicate venture of offering the Portuguese authorities protection and placing a combined Australian and Dutch military force in Dili was agreed to. The original plan for moving these Allied troops by land from Koepang was rejected because, in the monsoon season, the roads had become almost impassable. Therefore the movement was to be made by sea.

General Sturdee now reported that the 2/2nd Independent Company of the A.I.F. (about 250 men), which had been included in the force about to be dispatched to Koepang, would be available to move into Portuguese Timor if necessary, but the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Evatt,³ pointed to the difficulty created by the decision of the Portuguese Government to accept outside military aid only if the Japanese attacked their territory. It was agreed that, through the British Dominions Office, the Portuguese Government should be asked to authorise the Governor of Timor to request such aid. On the same day the War Cabinet affirmed the principle that Australian defence called for the return of Nos. 10 and 3 Squadrons, but added the qualification that, recognising the importance of the roles allotted to these units, the Government would not press for their return if their equivalent in aircraft strength could be made available—preferably in Catalinas. The War Cabinet also decided that the three R.A.A.F. squadrons in Malaya would remain there, that no further E.A.T.S. drafts would go overseas "for the present" because of the difficulty of providing naval escort, that an additional 500 women would be recruited for the W.A.A.F., and that, to avoid delays, Service Ministers would be permitted to initiate urgent defence measures for works and supply on their own authority.

A plea put forward by Mr Curtin on 7th November, when Mr Duff Cooper had outlined for the Advisory War Council the British plan to set up a defence council at Singapore, was revived on 11th December when the War Cabinet decided to ask the British Government to establish "a supreme authority for the higher direction and coordinated control of Allied activities and strategy in the war in the Pacific—preferably at Singapore".

We think it is essential to arrange for closer Australian association with the direction of the war in the Pacific (the War Cabinet's telegram stated) and have in mind the appointment of a representative of the Commonwealth Government to work in close touch with Mr Duff Cooper at Singapore.

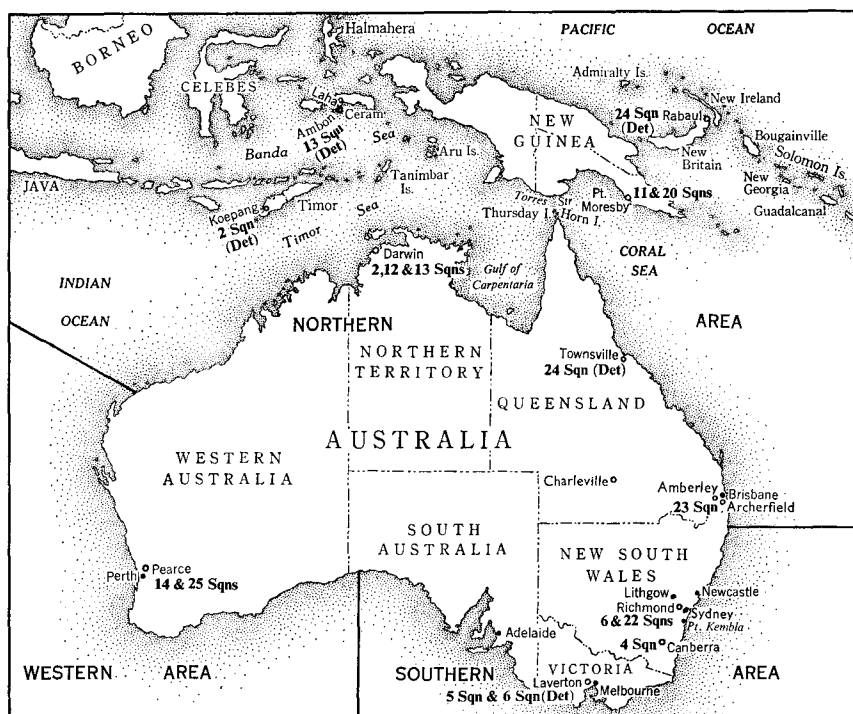
On 12th December the Chiefs of Staff were asked for a supplementary appreciation on the best disposition of the Australian forces to defend

- (a) Newcastle, Sydney, Port Kembla and Lithgow.
- (b) Darwin, Port Moresby and the islands to the north-east of Australia including New Caledonia.

In their main appreciation, dated 11th December, the Chiefs of Staff said that the most probable forms of attack would be against the outlying

³ Rt Hon H. V. Evatt. MLA NSW 1925-30; Justice of High Court of Aust 1930-40; MHR 1940-60. Attorney-General and Min External Affrs 1941-49. Chief Justice of New South Wales since 1960. B. East Maitland, NSW, 30 Apr 1894.

island bases, Darwin, and the Australian mainland, in that order. The first would probably take the form of attempts to occupy Rabaul, Port Moresby and New Caledonia; the second would become a strong possibility if Singapore and the Dutch East Indies were captured, and the most probable form of attack on the mainland would be naval and air bombardment of works in vital areas. Defeat of the Allied naval forces or the occupation of bases to the north-east "would enable the Japanese to invade Australia". A minimum scale of defence for each of the three



R.A.A.F. dispositions and areas of responsibility, 12th December 1941

armed Services was set out in relation to the varying and probable scales of enemy attack—a division of Japanese troops with naval escort, attacking Rabaul, Port Moresby, New Caledonia or Timor; raids on or an attempt to occupy Darwin; and three possible phases of attack on the mainland; direct naval attack, seaborne raids, and assault by a force of, say, eight divisions with ancillary units. The minimum air force strength needed to meet these was: 5 squadrons for Rabaul, 5 for Port Moresby, one squadron and 2 flights for New Caledonia, 2 squadrons for Timor, 3 squadrons and one flight for Darwin, 30 squadrons to meet a naval attack or seaborne raids on mainland centres other than Darwin, and 60 squadrons to counter a major military assault.

The existing strength of the R.A.A.F. in squadrons and aircraft and their disposition at the time are shown in the accompanying table.

First Line

			Wirraways		
No. 4 Squadron	Canberra		12	aircraft	
" 5 "	Laverton		12	"	
" 12 "	Darwin		18	"	
" 22 "	Richmond		17	"	
" 23 "	Archerfield		12	"	
" 24 "	Townsville		12	"	(ordered to Rabaul)
" 25 "	Pearce		18	"	
			<u>101</u>		
			Hudsons		
" 2 "	Darwin		8	"	(ordered to Koepang)
" 2 "	Koepang		4	"	
" 6 "	Richmond		6	"	
" 6 "	Laverton		4	"	
" 7 "	Darwin (attached 2 Sqn.)		Nil	"	
" 13 "	Darwin		6	"	(2 ordered to Laha)
" 13 "	Laha		6	"	
" 14 "	Pearce		12	"	
" 23 "	Archerfield		3	"	
" 24 "	Rabaul		4	"	
			<u>53⁴</u>		
			Catalinas		
" 11 "	Port Moresby		6	"	
" 20 "	Port Moresby		6	"	
			<u>12</u>		
			Seagulls		
" 9 "	Richmond		11		6 shipborne and 5 land-based aircraft
Total first-line aircraft			<u>177</u>		

Second Line (Reserve)⁵

			Fairey Battles		
" 1 B.A.G.S.	Evans Head		36	"	
" 2 "	Port Pirie		36	"	
			Wirraways		
" 2 S.F.T.S.	Wagga		36	"	
" 5 "	Uranquinty		36	"	
" 6 "	Deniliquin		36	"	
			Ansons		
G.R. School	Laverton		18	"	
			Ansons (unclassified reserve)		
No. 3 S.F.T.S.	Amberley		54	"	
" 4 "	Geraldton		54	"	
Total reserve aircraft			<u>306</u>		

⁴ Nos. 23 and 24 Squadrons were of the composite type, having both Hudsons and Wirraways on strength.

⁵ Crews in the reserve squadrons were not operationally trained.

The scale of R.A.A.F. training was:			
Catalinas	14	crews	fully trained
Seagulls	3	"	"
	3	"	half "
Hudsons	40	"	fully "
	5	"	half "
	1	crew	quarter "
Wirraways	45	crews	fully "
	25	"	half "
	17	"	quarter "

In their supplementary appreciation dated 15th December the Chiefs of Staff regarded the industrial area represented by Newcastle, Sydney, Port Kembla and Lithgow as of such importance that they declared that "its defence to the limit of our capacity must not be compromised". They therefore allotted the highest priority to the forces assigned to this area and to those designated for their reinforcement. Of Darwin's defences they reported that the forces withdrawn from that area for service in the Netherlands East Indies were being replaced, that the anti-aircraft defences were relatively strong and that, though an increase in these defences was desirable, Darwin being the only Allied main fleet base at the eastern end of the Malay Barrier, this could not be achieved except at the expense of the vital industrial area in New South Wales.

If the enemy established a base in the islands to the north-east of Australia, an attack on Allied coastal and Pacific sea trade could be developed, operations against Australia would be facilitated, and a link in the Allied trans-Pacific air route would be denied. Key points were Port Moresby, Rabaul, New Caledonia and Suva. Port Moresby's ground defences consisted of one battalion, two coast guns and four anti-aircraft guns. Four more anti-aircraft guns were on the way. This garrison should be increased to one brigade group and the air force strength to the full capacity of the operational airfields.

Reviewing the situation at Rabaul the appreciation noted that the United States-Australian proposal to make it a fleet base for British and American naval forces was "now unlikely". The function of the garrison there was to protect the air base.

We do not consider reinforcement is possible in view of the hazard of transporting forces from the mainland and maintaining them (the Chiefs of Staff reported) but we consider it necessary to maintain an advanced observation line to obtain indications of enemy movement south. We must therefore rule out any question of withdrawal.

The problem of safe sea passage for the Rabaul garrison and remaining civil population was regarded as no less acute than that of reinforcement and a further point to be considered was the fact that a voluntary withdrawal would have a psychological effect on the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies.⁶

⁶ By direction of the War Cabinet (12th December 1941) children and women other than missionaries who might wish to remain, and nurses, were ordered to be evacuated compulsorily from both Papua and New Guinea.

In recommending that the existing garrison in Rabaul should be retained the Chiefs of Staff emphasised that the scale of attack which could be brought against Rabaul from bases in the Japanese Mandated Islands was beyond the capacity of the small garrison to defeat. Despite this the enemy must be made to fight for this forward observation line instead of gaining it at the first threat. It might be that sufficient naval forces would become available for the reinforcement and supply of Rabaul if American naval units should fall back on Darwin.⁷

New Caledonia—a link in the joint United States-Australian chain of air bases—could become a base for enemy operations against Allied shipping and its denial to the enemy was more important than its use to the Allied forces. Having made this point the appreciation went on to emphasise that a division of troops with strong air support would be needed to defend it, and Australia could neither provide nor support such a force. The 2/3rd Independent Company was leaving Sydney on 16th December “to enhance the morale of the Free French forces and for demolition purposes”. Suva, the Chiefs of Staff regarded as “of first importance”, and they recommended that, though its defence was primarily a New Zealand responsibility, Australia should inquire in what way assistance might be given for that task.

Increased reconnaissance operations were among the first and most obvious demands the Pacific war made on the R.A.A.F. in the Australian area. Among the tasks that fell to the squadrons so engaged was that of policing the Japanese pearling luggers still in the area. On 8th December a Catalina from No. 11 Squadron, piloted by Flying Officer Sloan⁸ with Flight Lieutenant Reid⁹ as second pilot, sighted three of these luggers and ordered them to proceed to Thursday Island. After a patrol lasting nearly ten hours this Catalina returned to Port Moresby. Two hours later the same crew in another Catalina took off again, this time in darkness, to make another search but the aircraft crashed into a hillside to the west of the town and all the crew were killed. These were the first R.A.A.F. casualties in the war in the Pacific.¹ The Hudsons of No. 24 Squadron operating from Rabaul joined with No. 11 Squadron and No. 20 Squadron in their exacting reconnaissance flights, area patrols and clearing searches for Allied shipping.

⁷ In retrospect (February 1948) Lt-Gen Sturdee and Maj-Gen Rowell who were respectively CGS and DCGS at the time this appreciation was written, noted the situation thus: “Whatever the number of troops deployed the effective defence of bases to which they would have to be moved would not have been possible without naval and air forces sufficient to support the land forces in this defence and to keep open the lines of communication to these bases from Australia. Such naval and air forces were not available and such action (as the movement of large army garrisons to the North-Eastern approaches to protect advanced bases) would therefore only have resulted in the investment of the garrisons concerned and their defeat. . . . It would only have reduced the forces available for the final defence of vital areas of the mainland.”

⁸ F-O L. J. Sloan, 2622 (Lt RANR), 11 Sqn. Commercial pilot; of Bellevue Hill, NSW; b. Brisbane, 1 May 1912. Killed in action 8 Dec 1941.

⁹ F-Lt N. P. Reid, 557. 23 and 11 Sqn. Regular air force off; of Graceville, Qld; b. Brisbane, 25 Sep 1915. Killed in action 8 Dec 1941.

¹ The other crew members were Cpls N. L. Ernst and E. J. O'Donnell, LAC C. J. Matheson, AC1's G. R. Peterson, K. N. Sidey and A. W. Magee.

Insistence on making a stand against the enemy at Rabaul led to the transfer of No. 24 Squadron's Wirraways to that base. One flight left Townsville on 10th December for Horn Island in Torres Strait. On the next stage—300 miles to Port Moresby—they were escorted by a Catalina. From there the route lay through Lae to Gasmata and on to Rabaul. A small store of 100-octane fuel had been placed at Gasmata a year earlier but there were no proper refuelling facilities. For lack of adequate maps the pilots pinpointed Gasmata on an Admiralty chart and, led by their commanding officer, Wing Commander Lerew, they reached that base safely. Refuelling was laborious. A native "bucket line"—with tins taking the place of buckets—was organised so that the aircraft tanks could be filled from 44-gallon drums. The runway at Gasmata presented further difficulties; grassed at the seaward end, the remainder was paved with coral. Lerew led the way off to seaward over a high cliff, but as the other pilots followed him one Wirraway flown by Pilot Officer Lowe² dropped as it crossed the cliff edge and struck the sea, breaking its tail-wheel. In spite of this Lowe managed to pull up and become airborne and the flight of four aircraft reached Rabaul safely.

Thinking they would profit from Lowe's experience, the pilots of the second flight took off from Gasmata in the opposite direction, but their aircraft bogged on the grassy section of the runway and they were able to get off only with the aid of natives who, holding up each wing, ran with them until enough speed had been gained for take-off when, as the Wirraways left the ground, they sprawled good-naturedly in the mud. Eventually all the Wirraways arrived safely at Vunakanau airfield, Rabaul. Here the squadron found that little preparation had been made. Their aircraft had to be lined up along the runway in the most inviting way from the enemy's viewpoint. A galvanised-iron shelter served as workshop and hangar and the living quarters were native huts borrowed from the army. There was no provision for an operations room, equipment storage or for medical, armament, photographic or parachute sections. Messing facilities provided by the army as best they were able had little to commend them. Thus the squadron began an active war role about which its members could have few illusions, for enemy reconnaissance aircraft had already been active; one had been reported over Kavieng and Rabaul on 8th December and another over Rabaul again next day. This last aircraft, identified as a twin-engined naval bomber, made three runs over the area, suggesting that this was a photographic reconnaissance and perhaps the prelude to a full-scale attack.

The other crucial area within the Australian operational purview was in the north-west. Some progress had been made at the various Netherlands East Indies bases by the R.A.A.F. installation parties working with Dutch cooperation. At each of the three main bases, Koepang, Laha and

² F-O J. C. Lowe, 402662; 24 Sqn. Clerk; of Labassa, Fiji; b. Sydney, 6 Jul 1915. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

Namlea, about 100,000 gallons of aircraft fuel had been stored and practically all accommodation—for one squadron at each base—had been completed, but there were deficiencies in bombs and ammunition. Airfield construction was in progress at Liang (northern Ambon), Djailolo (Halmahera Islands), Babo (Dutch New Guinea), Atambua (Timor) and Saumlaki (Tanimbar Island).

On 7th December the crew of a flying-boat, in which Group Captain Scherger was flying from Ambon to Koepang, sighted the Japanese pearling mother ship *Nanyo Maru* steaming through Wetar Strait. Next day, in the knowledge that Australia was at war with Japan, the Hudsons were ordered to attack the enemy vessel. At dusk they found their target, bombed it accurately and so damaged it that it went aground and was abandoned by its crew.⁴ This was "first blood" to No. 2 Squadron which, four days later, was completely established at Penfui with the commanding officer, Wing Commander Headlam,⁵ serving also as base commander under A.C.H. Darwin.

The third flight of No. 13 Squadron and No. 2 Squadron's two remaining flights were in readiness to move to Namlea and Koepang respectively when required. The movement of the remaining ground staffs of the two squadrons was subject to the provision of transport. When Scherger was at Ambon he was disturbed to find that the supply service had failed; stocks of ammunition and fuel were quite inadequate, maintenance facilities were negligible, and dispersal for aircraft at Laha, for example, was very poor. "The facilities for operations at Laha, Namlea and Babo (Dutch New Guinea) were typical of any ill-equipped operational base," he wrote obliquely in his report. Equipment issued to the Hudson crews was insufficient and there were no spare engines for their aircraft, although spares and equipment had been ordered in September. Dutch air strength on Ambon consisted of three groups of Catalinas (9 aircraft in all), and a fighter patrol of four Brewster Buffaloes, two of which soon became unserviceable.

Orders for the first air strike by an Australian squadron in the Netherlands East Indies against an enemy land target were given on 10th December to No. 13 Squadron's two flights based at Laha—a bombing raid on Tobi Island, the westernmost point in the Japanese mandated area, about 170 miles east of Morotai Island in the Halmaheras. Photographic reconnaissance had indicated that the Japanese were developing the island as a submarine base and there was the added probability that the enemy might use it as a base for air attacks against Allied shipping. At 5.45 a.m. the six Hudsons took off. Almost immediately the leading aircraft, piloted by the squadron commander, Wing Commander McDonald, crashed into the sea. There were no survivors. Flight Lieutenant

⁴ The crew got ashore and made their way to Koepang where they were interned by the Dutch.

⁵ Air Cmdre F. Headlam, CBE. Comd 2 Sqn 1941-42, Controller of Operations HQ North-Western Area 1942; comd 2 ANS 1942-43, 2 AOS 1943; SOA HQ North-Western Area 1943. Regular air force officer; of Hobart; b. Launceston, Tas, 15 Jul 1914.

Dunne⁶ then led the other five Hudsons which flew on to the target and attacked with bombs and gunfire from about 800 feet. An administrative building and storehouses in the wharf area were damaged, the aircraft remaining over the target for about a quarter of an hour without any opposition. The unusual clarity of radio reception at the time was demonstrated when an involuntary exclamation by the captain of one Hudson, Flying Officer Ross,⁷ who, as he watched his bombs go down, remarked, "That will fix them!" was clearly heard by the operators at the base at Halong. The attack revealed a lack of coordination in operational control that provided a sharp lesson; the Central War Room at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, first learned of the operation when a signal was received reporting its results.

Squadron Leader Ryland,⁸ then at Namlea where the squadron's three remaining Hudsons arrived on the day of the attack, now took command of No. 13 Squadron, which in the interim from Squadron Leader McDonald's death had been commanded by Squadron Leader Parker.⁹ Two days later all the Hudson units in the area received instructions from the Central War Room that, as their striking power was so limited, their aircraft should not be used on long reconnaissance flights unless no other means of gaining information were available. About 11 a.m. on the same day (12th December) the operations room at Halong received a signal stating that seven tri-motored bombers were heading south and might be expected over Ambon in about 20 minutes. The attack was awaited but nothing happened and some hours later the Dutch headquarters apologetically explained that the report was false—a coastwatcher had misread his Dutch-English dictionary. No. 13 Squadron was now operating from three bases—Laha, Namlea and Darwin, where all aircraft inspection, engine changes and repairs of any consequence were undertaken.

On 17th December the A.I.F. force that had been assigned to Ambon disembarked. It consisted of the 2/21st Battalion and 213 men in other detachments. On the 12th the A.I.F. force assigned to Timor had arrived at Koepang. It included the 2/40th Battalion, the 2/2nd Independent Company and other supporting troops and totalled 1,400 officers and men.

While the operational units of the R.A.A.F. in the Australian and Netherlands East Indies were cutting their combat teeth, those in Malaya were already deep in the throes of a bitter defensive conflict. From Butterworth No. 21 Squadron was able to make but a small contribution

⁶ W Cdr R. A. Dunne, DFC, 260420. 13 Sqn and 1 OTU (RAAF Special Transport Flight); comd 23 Sqn 1944-45. Commercial pilot; of Sydney; b. Warracknabeal, Vic, 10 Oct 1913.

⁷ Sqn Ldr W. L. Ross, 260679. 13, 100 and 21 Sqn. Salesman; of Rose Bay, NSW; b. 12 Feb 1915.

⁸ Gp Capt J. P. Ryland, CBE, DFC, 250188. Comd AOB Namlea 1941, 13 Sqn 1941-42; CFI 1 OTU (comd 1944); comd 79 Wing 1944-45. Commercial pilot; of Elsternwick, Vic; b. Melbourne, 26 Jul 1911.

⁹ Gp Capt P. A. Parker, DFC, 153, 8, 7, 21 and 13 Sqn and HQ North-Eastern Area; comd 12 Sqn 1941, 100 and 30 Sqn 1942, 32 Sqn 1943, 13 Sqn 1943-44, 21 Sqn 1944-45, 85 Wing HQ 1945. Regular air force offr; of East Kew, Vic; b. London, Eng, 1 Jun 1916.

until it received replacement aircraft. Its limited role was mainly tactical reconnaissance. On one such sortie Flying Officer Sheppard¹⁰ and Flying Officer Sproule took off at 10.40 a.m. on 9th December. When about 12 miles across the Thai border they observed a large block across the Jitra-Ban Sadao road and a sandbag barricade which they took to be a machine-gun emplacement. Still more significant was a group of between 12 and 15 tanks at Ban Sadao. As the Buffalo pilots dived to attack the tanks they saw a Japanese soldier standing near them waving a flag, but they were unable to find any explanation for this and there was no anti-aircraft fire, nor did they encounter any enemy aircraft. Near Jitra they found an enemy motor transport column which they also attacked leaving four trucks blazing and several others damaged.

Singora, from which increasingly powerful enemy air strikes were now being mounted—as the fate of Alor Star and Sungei Patani indicated—was an obvious target for the R.A.F. bombers. As General Percival wrote later, it was “a wonderful target had we had an adequate and balanced air striking force”. Though adequacy and balance were just what it lacked, R.A.F. Command did strive to strike the enemy here. Two attacks were planned for 9th December. One was made by six Blenheims of No. 34 Squadron; they met heavy fighter opposition and three of the Blenheims were shot down. There was no clear observation of the result of their bombing but the crews that did return claimed that, at least, they had scored hits on a congested airfield. The other attack, which was to be made by all available Blenheims of Nos. 34 and 62 Squadrons from Butterworth, was never made—at least, not as planned. Just before the time for take-off, Japanese bombers caught all the Blenheims but one on the ground with disastrous results. The pilot who succeeded in taking off, Squadron Leader Scarf¹¹ of No. 62 Squadron, circled the airfield until it was obvious that none of his comrades was airborne. He then turned north determined on a lone strike on Singora. The Blenheim was subjected to repeated enemy fighter attacks and concentrated anti-aircraft fire, yet Scarf held to his course and loosed his bombs on the target. In the action he was severely wounded, but he retained control of the bomber, now damaged by enemy fire and, choosing the shorter route to Alor Star, made a crash landing there without injury to his crew. In hospital that evening Scarf died.¹

After these costly operations Air Headquarters ruled that daylight bombing of land targets must cease until fighter escort could be provided. Actually No. 21 Squadron did attempt to provide some cover for the Blenheims that day. At the urgent order of Norgroup Headquarters, four

¹⁰ Sqn Ldr G. M. Sheppard, 280628. 21, 4 Sqns; 73 and 72 Wings; and RAAF Cd. Clerk; of St Peters, SA; b. St Peters, 28 Dec 1914.

¹¹ Sqn Ldr A. S. K. Scarf, VC, 37693, RAF. 62 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; of Wimbledon, Eng; b. Wimbledon, 14 Jun 1913. Died of wounds 9 Dec 1941.

¹ Though his gallantry was not formally acknowledged until long afterwards it won for him the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross.

Buffaloes flown by Flight Lieutenants McKenny,² Williams and White³ and Flying Officer Montefiore⁴ were directed to rendezvous with Blenheims assigned to attack Singora. The aircraft were airborne for about two hours but the rendezvous was not made because of bad weather and they returned to Butterworth about 5 p.m.

Williams and McKenny had just landed when 27 Japanese dive bombers and 27 fighters were seen. The two Buffaloes climbed straight for the enemy formation which moved unwavering through the somewhat limited anti-aircraft barrage until first one bomber and then a second broke out and turned seaward leaving trails of black smoke. But the bombs fell squarely on the airfield. Williams and McKenny continued to climb until several Zeros broke away and dived on them, the leader firing on McKenny who replied with his own guns until his aircraft burst into flames and he was forced to bale out and parachute into the sea between Butterworth and Penang. Williams was attacked by 3 enemy fighters. With his guns jamming he had no choice but to dive away, drawing his attackers through the anti-aircraft fire as he did so. After making one attempt to land and being forced by the speed of his approach to "go round again", he succeeded in landing and leaped from the cockpit into a trench as his pursuers swept the runway with their gunfire. Flying Officer Montefiore, after firing at a Zero which later was claimed as destroyed, also baled out when his aircraft was shot down. He landed unhurt in a palm tree and, "borrowing" a native's bicycle, made his way back to the squadron. The fourth Buffalo pilot, Flight Lieutenant White, fought until his aircraft was riddled by enemy bullets and then made a forced landing on Penang Island. Unhurt, he too made his way back to Butterworth. McKenny had come down in the sea with his face severely burned. He managed to reach and cling to a native fish trap from which he was rescued by an elderly English naval officer who put off from the island in a launch.

Butterworth station had been severely damaged, chiefly by fire, and the explosion of delayed-action bombs added to the confusion. That evening the Norgroup commander, Wing Commander Forbes, whose headquarters had been moved to Bukit Mertajam, near Butterworth, ordered the withdrawal of No. 21 Squadron to Ipoh. No. 62 Bomber Squadron moved to Taiping and only No. 27 Squadron, which now had no aircraft serviceable, remained. In the meantime the servicing party of No. 21 Squadron, which had been left at Sungei Patani, on being told by men of the 11th Indian Division that the enemy was approaching and they should evacuate the airfield, withdrew to Butterworth. Unserviceable aircraft that were capable of flight were sent to Singapore for repair. The ground staffs of these units had endured much and their confidence had been shaken by what Air Vice-Marshal Maltby later described as

² Sqn Ldr C. R. McKenny, 574. 21, 21/453 Sqn, 2 FSHQ, 86 and 80 Sqn. Regular air force off; of Neutral Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 30 Apr 1918. Killed in action 13 May 1944.

³ F-Lt A. M. White, 573; 21 Sqn. Regular air force off; of Stirling, SA; b. Parkes, NSW, 9 Mar 1916. Killed in action 14 Dec 1941.

⁴ Sqn Ldr H. V. Montefiore, 290629. 21, 21/453, 77, 25 and 85 Sqn, 6 FSHQ, 11 FSH. Salesman; of Mt Lawley, WA; b. Perth, WA, 20 Feb 1915.

"the opportuneness of the enemy's attacks and pernicious rumours of disasters in the land fighting".

There was no senior officer at Butterworth with sufficient weight to take control (he wrote in his despatch) and some of the personnel of No. 21 (F) Squadron R.A.A.F. and No. 27 (NF) Squadron R.A.F., both of which had already been driven out of Sungei Patani, did not behave at all steadily. Other units, however, maintained their order.⁵

No. 21 Squadron's few serviceable Buffaloes were flown first to Penang where, in the dusk, despite lowered undercarriages and navigation lights, they were mistaken for enemy aircraft and were fired on (without damage) by Penang's pathetically weak anti-aircraft batteries—a few machine-guns. Next day (10th December) they flew to Ipoh. Meanwhile the remainder of the unit moved by road and rail, arriving at their new base at 3.30 a.m. and camping by the roadside because no quarters could be found for them at the time.

As though to emphasise the impotence of the British air forces, Penang was subjected to a severe air attack on the day that Butterworth was left without any operational aircraft. Georgetown, the main centre of population, was blasted by more than 40 bombers escorted by a large number of fighters. The townspeople, to whom this was a new experience, thronged the streets and many were hit as, too late, they tried to flee to shelter in the hills, while the gallant and under-staffed civil defence and medical services strove to remove the dead and dying from the streets. Flying Officer Hood, who with White, visited the island next day in a vain attempt to recover White's Buffalo, which he had crash-landed there in the Butterworth battle, wrote later that they had seen dead civilians still lying in the streets. The telephone exchange, fire brigade and many other public buildings had suffered severely. On the roads there was a line of "pitiful natives trudging into the bush. . . . The hospital was doing a marathon job in taking care of casualties but (the staff) were afraid that the place would be bombed. . . . Penang had fallen by the wayside without (in effect) a shot being fired in its defence."

The island, which had considerable military importance because of its port facilities, its use as a depot for ammunition and stores, and the fact that it was the departure point for two overseas cables, was now under grave threat. General Percival's plan had been that, if his troops on the mainland were forced back, they should retire on the axis of the west coast communications and that the Penang garrison should be strengthened in an endeavour to withstand the enemy's pressure. That plan was no longer practicable. Every fighting man was needed on the mainland to avoid the threat to the airfields in central Malaya and sheer military necessity now dictated that Penang must be abandoned. On 15th December the commander of the island's garrison was ordered to complete evacuation by the night of 16th-17th December.

⁵ Maltby Despatch, para 222. This section of the despatch deals with an episode which occurred before Maltby took up duty with AHQ, which was on 12th January 1942.

At Ipoh, to which Norgroup Headquarters had also moved by this time, the situation was far from encouraging. Squadron Leader Allshorn records a "very strained" conversation he had with Wing Commander Forbes who ordered him to re-form his squadron. When Allshorn asked for 12 replacement aircraft to enable him to do this he was told that it would be some days before these could be made available. But Air Headquarters acted promptly and issued orders that the squadron was to receive 16 Buffaloes "immediately" and a proportion of new pilots. That night a group of the unit's pilots, led by Allshorn, left by train for Singapore to bring back these aircraft. There was little in the way of airfield defences at Ipoh but all who could man a machine-gun were given posts at which they waited in expectation of an enemy raid. For food the squadron was referred to an army unit about eight miles away. Here the rations available were quite inadequate and drinking water was particularly precious because, it was reported, all the streams had been contaminated. From its own limited strength the squadron, temporarily under the command of Williams, had to form a station administration. Ground staff trained for technical duties had thus to serve as cooks, messmen, transport drivers and guards. There were no facilities for maintenance but—an anti-climax for a fighter squadron almost without aircraft—the dispersal facilities were excellent: good aircraft pens dispersed over a large area and well camouflaged. These dispiriting circumstances were made worse by the fact that here relations between the R.A.A.F. and R.A.F. were not happy. Hood of No. 21 wrote later:

We found the R.A.F. very hostile because we had left them to it the night before. The fact remained that they were unable to do anything and had no hope of replacements. . . . No one seemed to know what to do . . . and the logical reasoning of our C.O. . . . was that we, at least, would get a place where we could stand and fight back with a reasonable chance of being successful. . . .

On the eastern side of the peninsula circumstances were no less depressing. When the air force convoy from Kota Bharu was moving south by train Wing Commander Davis obtained permission from Air Headquarters by telephone to detach a party of 67 airmen at Jerantut and move them by road transport to Kuantan in the hope that they would be able to assist in operations from that base. When only a few miles from their destination, Davis and his party met another air force party which included R.A.A.F. ground staff travelling in the opposite direction in a variety of vehicles. These men reported that Kuantan also was being evacuated.

As Davis had guessed from this meeting the situation at Kuantan was very discouraging. Though the airfield had not been under attack during the night of 8th December the ground staff had been working under extremely difficult conditions. Flight Lieutenant Bulcock, who was responsible for the preparation of all serviceable aircraft for further operations, wrote later:

The airfield was absolutely pitch dark and orders had been issued not to show a light. The rain still fell in heavy showers and [some of] the aircraft, scattered hundreds of yards apart, simply could not be found. Then one of the old tanker-towing tractors broke down and it was necessary to load lorries with drums and use a hand pump, a slow and exhausting business. In a few minutes the lorries were immovably bogged; one tractor had to do the whole job; scouting parties couldn't find their way back to the tractor, or didn't want to. . . . And we were a front-line operational station!⁶

Next morning Air Headquarters, anxious about the concentration of aircraft at Kuantan, ordered that all but 12 Vildebeestes and the 13 Hudsons of the two Australian squadrons should return at once to Singapore. In the early part of the day 3 Hudsons from No. 8 Squadron made a parallel track search to seaward but within sight of the coast. One pilot, Flight Lieutenant Arnold, reported a convoy which he listed as 2 cruisers, 7 destroyers and 3 transports. Preparations for action against these ships were prevented by a surprise attack by nine Japanese Navy Type-96 bombers which attacked the airfield from 5,000 feet. There was an interlude when a Hudson crew with Flight Lieutenant Widmer⁷ as captain made a plucky attack on an enemy bomber that came within range of their guns. The enemy aircraft was believed to have been destroyed and the unusual incident of a Hudson turned interceptor interrupted the Japanese bombing run. But the attackers completed their bombing and later swept the airfield with gunfire that was "even worse than the bombing". Three aircraft were destroyed on the ground and some damage was done to buildings, stores and equipment. Except for one minor wound there were no casualties. There were only a few Thompson sub-machine-guns and rifles on the station for defence and, since there was no fighter cover (the valiant effort of Widmer and his crew could scarcely come within that category) and no anti-aircraft artillery, the enemy aircraft were able to do much as they pleased. The bomb-fusing store, armoury, station workshop and equipment store were destroyed along with the bulk of the squadron's supplies, which had been unloaded only the day before from the ship which had brought most of the ground staff from Singapore. However, petrol, oil, bombs and torpedoes sufficient for offensive operations for several weeks remained untouched.

Soon after receiving the news that Kota Bharu had been evacuated Squadron Leader Henderson sent a signal to Air Headquarters suggesting that in the light of this happening and since his squadron had fulfilled its reconnaissance role, it should move to a base where it would be under air defence. Not long after this signal had been sent and before a reply could be received from Air Headquarters—a reply which, in fact, instructed him peremptorily to stay where he was as the bombing of Kuantan "was not in the scheme of things"—the enemy aircraft made their attack. A report of this raid was sent to Air Headquarters by secret telephone.

⁶ Bulcock, *Of Death But Once*, p. 38.

⁷ Sqn Ldr R. Widmer, DFC, 559. 21, 8 and 14 Sdns; 10 Gp and 1st TAF. Sheep station overseer; of Camperdown, Vic; b. Ultima, Vic, 12 Mar 1916.

Confusion followed the reply which was interpreted by some as meaning that all airworthy aircraft with their crews were to be flown to Singapore, and by others that Kuantan was to be evacuated entirely. Henderson understood that the aircraft were to leave, and while he was preparing for their departure the evacuation rumour spread so rapidly that most of the squadron and station headquarters ground staff appropriated what transport they could find and set off in disorder along the road to Jerantut, 102 miles away.⁸ About 4 p.m. the 7 airworthy Hudsons took off with the remaining members of No. 8 Squadron, and flew to Sembawang. The station commander, Wing Commander Councell,⁹ disturbed by what appeared to him the unduly alarming report of the attack sent to Air Headquarters, gave an assurance that it had been greatly exaggerated. Bulcock, who remained on the station, wrote later:

In half an hour that little flame of panic had spread like wild-fire. I looked out on a deserted station. . . . There were only four of us left—the C.O., the Adjutant, the Armament Officer and myself . . . myself still too numb to appreciate the sarcasm of the other men's conversation. Then I realised they were talking of Australians, that I was an Australian, and that many curious glances were being cast in my direction. . . . For the first and last time I felt ashamed of being an Australian. . . . The next day twenty-three men returned in a couple of trucks and a party of them was put on to salvaging as much kit as possible from the airmen's barracks. By this time it seemed fairly definite that A.H.Q. had given up all hope of using the station again, for orders had come through to save what we could and get out as soon as possible. It seemed absolutely incredible to us that such action was necessary.¹

Since the party from Kuantan which Wing Commander Davis had met had no officer in charge of it he took control and, with his own party, returned to the railway and entrained them for Singapore. At Sembawang Davis found that four Hudsons of his own squadron had arrived safely; the fifth had been destroyed by the enemy.

In the first hours of 8th December, when news of the approach of enemy aircraft towards Singapore was received, No. 453 Squadron at Sembawang was at the alert. Flight Lieutenant Vigors, a young Irish

⁸ It was these airmen who had been intercepted by W Cdr Davis on his way to Kuantan from Jerantut.

⁹ W Cdr R. B. Councell, 26049, RAF, 205 Sqn RAF; comd RAF Stn Kuantan 1941, 205 Sqn 1941-42, 7 AFU 1943-44, 55 RU and 102 PDC 1944-45. Regular air force offr; b. Walworth, Eng, 7 Sep 1908.

¹ Bulcock, pp. 41-4. The evacuation from Kuantan and other airfields in northern Malaya was later the subject of a court specially convened on the order of AVM Pulford by Gp Capt McCauley, soon after that officer's return to Singapore from the Middle East. The court comprised McCauley (president), Gp Capt C. K. J. Coggle, RAF, and F-Lt G. H. Mocatta, RAAF. (Mocatta, the Station Intelligence Officer at Sembawang, was in private life a barrister and solicitor.) Six copies were made of the court's report. Four were sent to AHQ at Sime Road, Singapore, the fifth to Gp Capt Coggle and the sixth was retained in RAAF files. All six copies were subsequently lost or destroyed because of enemy action. In 1946, at the request of the Air Ministry, McCauley, with the assistance of Mocatta who had by this time returned to civil life, compiled a report of the inquiry and its findings from such relevant documents as had been preserved and from his best recollection. This report has been relied upon largely for the account of the evacuation given here. The court found that as Henderson was engaged in arranging the evacuation of all airworthy aircraft he had not had either the time or the opportunity to control the ground staff and apparently no other officer had taken control of them. It also found that the order from Air Headquarters concerning the evacuation was either confused or confusing; that the station commander had not prepared any plan for defence or for an emergency movement from his station and had failed to take charge of the evacuation; and that the evacuation of ground staff had been disorderly and uncontrolled.

Battle of Britain pilot, who was temporarily in command of the squadron, and two equally enthusiastic Australian flying officers, Vanderfield² and Grace,³ who had also been in combat over Britain and in the Middle East, sought permission to take off to intercept. Their request was refused and when Vigors suggested that they might take off "anyway" he was told that if they did they would be placed on a charge for disobedience of orders. Dismayed at this order, which to them was inexplicable, these three eager and experienced pilots stood helplessly watching the enemy bombers drone across Singapore Island in clear moonlight. Though, with their fellow pilots, they remained ready for action there was no call on them in the first two days of war. As already noted, No. 453 Squadron had been given, nominally at least, the responsibility for providing air cover for the Eastern Fleet then lying in Singapore Harbour—the battleship *Prince of Wales*, the battle cruiser *Repulse*, 3 cruisers, and 11 destroyers (including H.M.A.S.'s *Vampire* and *Vendetta*). These ships represented a considerable naval force then lying within striking range of the enemy's invasion operations. This fact was very clearly in the mind of the fleet's commander. Admiral Phillips had just returned from Manila where he had been conferring with the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Hart. On learning of the invasion he asked Air Headquarters whether air support could be provided in these terms:

- (1) Reconnaissance 100 miles to the north of the force from daylight, 9th December.
- (2) Reconnaissance to Singora and beyond, 10 miles from the coast, starting at first light on 10th December.
- (3) Fighter protection off Singora at daylight on 10th December.

Air Vice-Marshal Pulford, apparently most reluctant to admit that he could not provide for needs so obviously vital, replied tentatively that he could grant the first request, hoped that he could provide the second, but had great doubt whether he could give fighter protection off Singora. Late in the afternoon of 8th December Phillips put to sea in *Prince of Wales* with Captain Leach⁴ as his flag captain, accompanied by *Repulse* (commanded by Captain Tennant⁵) and a screen of four destroyers, including H.M.A.S. *Vampire*. Pulford's definite reply was to follow by signal, but though he had deferred his decision he could not improve on his tentative reply. That evening Phillips received the confirming signal which expressly stated that no fighter protection could be provided off

² Sqn Ldr R. D. Vanderfield, DFC, 402068. 258 Sqn RAF, 453, 76 and 79 Sqs; comd 110 MFCU 1944-45. Commercial traveller; of Enfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 25 Nov 1914.

³ Sqn Ldr B. A. Grace, DFC, 402053. 258 Sqn RAF, 453 and 76 Sqs; SO Training 9 Gp 1942-43; comd 82 Sqn 1944-45. Company director; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 29 Apr 1912.

⁴ Capt J. C. Leach, DSO, MVO; RN. (1914-18: HMS *Erin*.) Director of Naval Ordnance, Admiralty, 1941; comd HMS *Prince of Wales* and Flag Officer to C-in-C Eastern Fleet 1941. Lost in sinking of *Prince of Wales* 10 Dec 1941.

⁵ Admiral Sir William Tennant, KCB, CBE, MVO; RN. Comd HMS *Repulse* 1940-41; Flag Officer Levant and Eastern Mediterranean 1944-46; C-in-C America and West Indies Stn 1946-49. B. 2 Jan 1890.

Singora on the 10th.⁶ The first request by Phillips was met.⁷ Compliance with the second, which would have to be undertaken by Blenheim IV's from Kuantan, was dependent on whether that base could be held long enough against the increasing pressure of the Japanese forces. Fighter protection off Singora was out of the question because all the northern airfields were now either untenable or too severely damaged to be used and the range of the Buffalo fighters was too short and their number too few to provide adequate air cover from any base farther south.⁸

Apparently determined that the striking power of his ships must be used at this critical time, despite the known hazards, Phillips took his squadron northward by a divergent course on which he hoped to avoid detection by enemy reconnaissance aircraft. He planned to arrive off the coast of Thailand between Patani and Singora at dawn on Wednesday the 10th. While the ships were steaming northward the admiral signalled to the captain of *Repulse* instructing him to inform his ship's company of the enemy's progress on land and in the air and that Japanese transports were lying off the coast.

This is your opportunity before the enemy can establish himself. We have made a wide circuit to avoid air reconnaissance and hope to surprise the enemy shortly after sunrise tomorrow, Wednesday. . . . We are sure to get some useful practice with high-angle armament, but wherever we meet I want to finish quickly and so get well clear to the eastward before the Japanese can mass too formidable a scale of air attack against us. So shoot to sink.⁹

But, late in the afternoon of the 9th, three enemy reconnaissance aircraft were sighted. They remained well out of gun range and shadowed the British ships until nightfall. Phillips thereupon decided to abandon the Singora operation, reasoning that, with foreknowledge of the presence of his squadron, the enemy convoy would have dispersed by the time his force could arrive and that, most probably, enemy aircraft would be waiting for him instead. At 8.40 p.m., therefore, he turned his ships about and steamed for Singapore. Earlier the destroyer *Tenedos* had been detached from the squadron to return to Singapore because her fuel supply was low. Her captain was instructed to signal to Singapore next morning that the squadron would return early. About 11 p.m. the admiral received a report from his chief of staff in Singapore, Rear-Admiral Palliser,¹ stating that the Japanese land forces had made further advances and that the R.A.F. had been forced to evacuate still more airfields in the north. The message added that Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham was contemplating the diversion of all air operations to the defence of Singapore.

⁶ The words "off Singora" did not appear in the text of the signal but were implied in the light of Admiral Phillips' request.—Maltby Despatch, para 212.

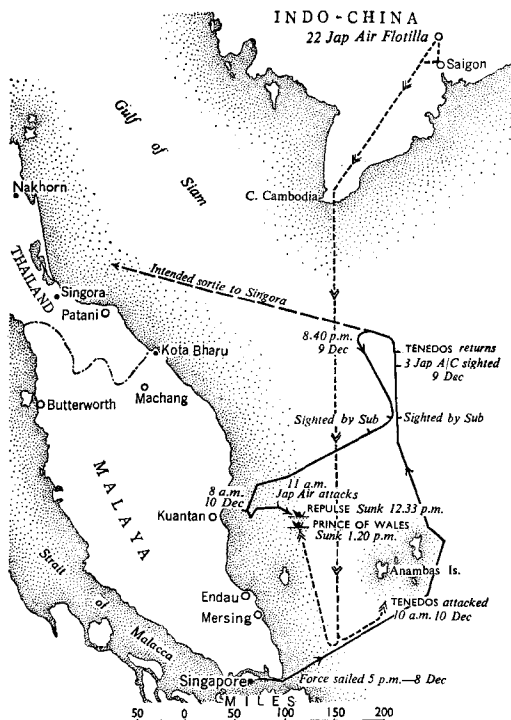
⁷ The reconnaissance sorties agreed to were carried out on 9th and 10th December, but one of the Blenheims on the Singora patrol on the 10th had trouble with faulty wireless transmission.

⁸ Unlike the Japanese, the RAF Command had not introduced the detachable auxiliary fuel tank on their fighters.

⁹ Quoted by O. D. Gallagher, in *Retreat in the East* (1942), pp. 40-1.

¹ Admiral Sir Arthur Palliser, KCB, DSC; RN. Comd HMS's *Excellent* 1938-40, *Malaya* 1940-41; Chief of Staff to C-in-C Eastern Fleet 1941-42; comd 1 Cruiser Sqn 1943-44; Chief of Supplies and Transport, Admiralty, 1944-46; C-in-C East Indies Stn 1946-48. B. 1891. Died ?? Feb 1956.

Early next morning Phillips received a further signal stating that the enemy was making a landing 140 miles north of Singapore, near Kuantan.² He steamed to investigate, reaching the estimated position of the invasion force at 8 a.m., but found no sign of any enemy convoy or escort. The squadron therefore continued southward along the coast until 9.30 a.m. when it turned north-east to investigate small craft sighted earlier. Shortly before 10 a.m. the flagship received a signal from H.M.S. *Tenedos*, then about 140 miles to the south, reporting that she had been sighted by enemy aircraft, and soon afterwards another message stating that the destroyer was being bombed. Twenty minutes later a Japanese aircraft was sighted from the flagship. An anxious hour passed and then nine enemy bombers flying in orthodox formation were seen bearing towards the British ships. Selecting *Repulse* as their first target, they began attacking through a barrage of anti-aircraft fire. The bombing was accurate but it achieved only one direct hit—on *Repulse*—and that without causing much damage. A lull followed and then the true weight of the attack became apparent—torpedo bombers swept in



on both capital ships at low altitude. Watchers in *Repulse* saw a mass of water and smoke rise from *Prince of Wales* aft and on the port side, apparently the result of a torpedo explosion, perhaps two simultaneously. With her speed much reduced and her steering erratic and a list to port, it was clear that the flagship had received a crippling blow. Some enemy aircraft went down in flames in the face of the blast from the warships' guns but the attack had not ended. In *Repulse*, Tennant, puzzled by the absence of any signal from the flagship that might bring fighter protection from Singapore, decided, at 11.50 a.m., to send one himself. As he did so another high-level bombing attack began but the enemy failed to gain any direct hits. *Prince of Wales* was now flying the "not under control" signal and

² Early on the night of 9th December beach defence posts reported hostile ships closing on the Kuantan coast. Artillery fire was opened along the sector but no landing was made; an attempted landing was frustrated or the enemy had made a feint. Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 129.

Tennant began closing his ship on her in the hope of giving some aid. Minutes later, another torpedo attack began. Tennant manoeuvred his ship to "comb" the torpedoes as they approached from the starboard bow but part of the enemy formation broke out and turned in on the port side leaving little or no chance for evasion.³ The Japanese tactic succeeded and the battle cruiser received a torpedo amidships on the port side. Once again it was the flagship which suffered most; three, possibly four more torpedoes hit her. Now *Repulse* received another hit aft, which jammed her steering and then three more hits in succession. A list developed rapidly and then "the loud-speakers spoke for the last time: 'All hands on deck! Prepare to abandon ship. God be with you! . . .' It was 12.25 p.m."⁴ About ten minutes passed and then the battle cruiser turned over and sank. *Prince of Wales*, down by the stern and drifting, was now subjected to another bombing attack. Only one bomb hit her and it did small damage. At 12.50 p.m., Phillips sent a signal to Singapore asking that tugs be sent to meet his ship but very soon she was beyond all aid. Half an hour later she followed her consort to the bottom of the South China Sea. The crews of the three destroyers gave magnificent service in the rescue operations that followed. More than 2,000 lives were saved including that of Tennant who was picked up by the *Vampire*. Phillips and Leach went down with their ship. Of the complement of the *Prince of Wales* 327 officers and men were lost and of that of *Repulse* 513.

In the Combined Operations Room at Singapore the first news from *Prince of Wales* on 10th December was a signal (presumably that sent from *Tenedos*) received early in the morning, indicating that the warships might return sooner than was originally planned. Throughout the rest of the morning no word came from the squadron whose position was not then known. About midday a signal originating from *Repulse* stated simply that the two capital ships were under enemy air attack in a position about 60 miles east from Kuantan. Eleven aircraft of No. 453 Squadron were standing by specifically prepared to give air cover to these ships should they be known to be returning to Singapore. Six minutes later these fighters took off for the scene of the attack 165 miles away. The customary briefing of the pilots had been omitted; the squadron had been "scrambled" and when the pilots were airborne they were instructed by radio-telephone to patrol a specific area where they would find their objective. The details were too secret to be communicated over the air. They arrived only in time to witness the rescue operations of the destroyers. Two aircraft presumed to be Japanese were seen flying northward but at too great a distance for interception.

While the battle was being fought those at the Kuantan airfield heard heavy firing and explosions, but it was not until that night, when they

³ To "comb" a torpedo attack is to turn the ship head on to the attackers and steer between the visible courses of the torpedoes. The Japanese released their torpedoes at a range of between 1,000 and 2,000 yards and from heights stated to be up to 300 feet. The 18-inch and 21-inch torpedoes used in the attack left a readily visible track. One torpedo recovered had a tail fitting or "drogue" to prevent it from diving to too great a depth.

⁴ Gallagher, p. 51.

learned that *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had been sunk "right on our very doorstep", that they realised their significance.

Air Vice-Marshal Maltby observed (in retrospect) that had Admiral Phillips notified Air Headquarters of his change of plan—his decision to close on Kuantan in the hope of engaging an enemy invasion force there—it was conceivable that No. 453 Squadron might have moved to Kuantan. It is recorded that Air Vice-Marshal Pulford, on meeting Captain Tennant on his return to Singapore, was greatly distressed and exclaimed, "My God, I hope you don't blame me for this. I had no idea where you were."⁵ While this evidence points to the failure of Phillips to inform Singapore of his whereabouts or that his ships were under air attack as the main explanation for the entire absence of fighter cover when it might have been provided, there is evidence in plenty to show that Phillips may well have believed that such help was out of the question. On the question of why he did not call for aid beforehand, there was the risk he would take in breaking wireless silence by signalling that his ships had been sighted by enemy aircraft.

A Japanese account of the battle credits submarines and not aircraft with the detection of the British ships.⁶ Headquarters of 22nd Air Flotilla at Saigon received a message at 4 p.m. on 9th December from a submarine which reported them as steaming northward, the position being given (incorrectly) as 7 degrees north, 105 degrees east. Aircraft being bombed-up for a raid on Singapore were hurriedly rearmed with torpedoes and at dusk took off for a night attack. Bad weather and probably the inaccuracy of the position report foiled them and they returned to base. At 3.15 a.m. on the 10th another submarine reported the British squadron steaming south. Ten bombers took off at 6 a.m. on a sector search and an hour later 88 aircraft—27 bombers and 61 torpedo aircraft—also took off. It was not until shortly before 11 a.m. that fortune turned sharply against the British force; one of the aircraft on the sector search, now homeward bound, sighted them and its signals brought the striking group in to attack. In all 9 bombers and 37 torpedo aircraft attacked *Repulse*, claiming one or two direct bomb hits and about twelve torpedo hits. *Prince of Wales* was attacked by 18 bombers and 24 torpedo aircraft and received probably only one bomb but ten torpedoes. After the attack one aircraft remained to observe the result and when 10 British Buffalo fighters were sighted it took cover and evaded them. Japanese fighters reached the scene of the battle too late to take part. On return to Saigon the striking force was rearmed for a second strike, but before they took off again news that both British capital ships had sunk was received. Four Japanese bombers were lost, three of them from one group which attacked from greater altitude than the other groups.⁷

⁵ Grenfell, *Main Fleet to Singapore*, p. 128.

⁶ US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogation of Japanese Officials*, Vol II, p. 333, Capt Kameo Sonokawa. Capt Sonokawa was flight leader, Genzan Group, 22nd Air Flotilla. There is no doubt that reconnaissance aircraft did detect and shadow the British ships. Probably these were army aircraft and apparently their signals were forestalled by the submarine reports. The news of the approach of the British warships was signalled to the convoy lying off Singora and the transports put to sea at sunset, dispersing to the north until advised that danger of attack had passed.—XXV Army Operations in Malaya, November 1941-March 1942. (Japanese Studies in World War II, No. 85, Hist. Div. US Army.)

⁷ Capt Sonokawa told interrogating officers that tests had shown that 10 per cent of torpedoes would run truly when dropped from 650 feet and 50 per cent truly when dropped from 325 feet. Consequently in training an effort was made to drop at from 65 to 165 feet, the low altitude giving the additional advantage of protection because of the depressing limit of the anti-aircraft guns of the ships being attacked.

The Japanese had now not only successfully landed a strong invasion force and driven the opposing air force from northern Malaya, but had eliminated the two most formidable units of Britain's Eastern Fleet. And all this had happened within three days. It was against this dark background that the Far Eastern War Council was formed in Singapore on 10th December with Mr Duff Cooper as chairman.⁸ Before it the new council had a military challenge that could scarcely have been more threatening.

On the morning of the 9th, the four promised Dutch squadrons had reached Singapore—three bomber units with a total of 22 Glenn Martin bombers and one fighter squadron with 9 Buffaloes. But it was reinforcement with a qualification—the Dutch bomber crews had not been trained for night flying. One squadron of 9 aircraft was therefore sent back to the Netherlands East Indies for the needed training, and the other squadrons were to be sent back in succession. This was made more necessary because the Glenn Martins were slower than the R.A.F. Blenheims and had no better protective armament.

There were now no aircraft of R.A.F. Command based in north-eastern Malaya, Kuantan remaining as an advanced landing ground for refuelling only. By nightfall on 9th December it was estimated that, from its initially inadequate strength, the command had already lost aircraft equivalent to three bomber squadrons and one fighter squadron or approximately a quarter of the total number of operational aircraft in service 48 hours earlier. Air Headquarters later computed that on 8th, 9th and 10th December the Japanese had used a daily average of more than 120 aircraft in northern Malaya and estimated that more than 100 aircraft were based in the Singora-Patani area and at least 280 in Indo-China.⁹

In spite of the considerable hazards Qantas Empire Airways crews were continuing to operate their flying-boats on the shuttle service between Singapore and Karachi on behalf of British Overseas Airways Corporation. On occasions these crews undertook specifically military operations as when the flying-boat *Corsair*, commanded by Captain R. B. Tapp, carried a full load of aircraft fuel from Singapore to Sabang Island, off the northmost tip of Sumatra, a flight on which the aircraft exhausted even the contents of the 100-gallon auxiliary fuel tank with which it had been fitted, and the crew had to broach the cargo so that they could reach their destination. The Qantas crews quickly learned that the Japanese observed a fairly regular time-table for their air attacks on the ports through which the flying-boats staged, and thus it was generally possible to avoid these raids.

⁸ Composition of the council was: Mr Duff Cooper, the Governor and High Commissioner of Malaya, Sir Shenton Thomas, C-in-C Far East, C-in-C Eastern Fleet, GOC Malaya, AOC Far East, Australian representative, V. G. Bowden, and (later) Sir George Sansom, a Foreign Office expert on Japan, with a regular army major as secretary and staff officer to the chairman. Maj-Gen H. G. Bennett, commanding the AIF in Malaya, had the right to attend.

⁹ Types identified were the Navy Zero fighter, the Navy 96 and Army 97 twin-engined bombers and the Junkers 87N (Japanese version) dive bomber.

By 11th December the enemy air forces, having gained superiority in the air over northern Malaya, began to attack the defending land forces. One more attempt was made to strike the Japanese aircraft on the ground at Singora. At dawn on 12th December eight Blenheim bombers of No. 34 Squadron set out from Tengah. Few of them reached the target because of extremely bad weather which itself accounted for the loss of several aircraft. This vain attempt illustrated a point which later became a matter for contention between Air Headquarters and General Percival's command.

Air Headquarters took the view that the raid had been made to meet the demands of Malaya Command so that the ground forces should have all protection possible from enemy air attack. The Air Staff held that the correct employment of their forces at this stage was in attacks on shipping and troop concentrations in the Singora area where Japanese reinforcements were still arriving rather than in cooperation with the army to delay the enemy's advance. G.H.Q. on 12th December issued a War Instruction which ordered that "for the present, assistance to the 11th Indian Division is to take precedence over other R.A.F. offensive tasks".¹

For tactical reconnaissance these army forces had to rely chiefly on the two or three Buffaloes of No. 21 Squadron at Ipoh. Pulford therefore decided that No. 453 Squadron should move from Singapore to that base, the intention being that it should return when No. 21 Squadron had been re-equipped. The ground staff of No. 453 therefore remained at Sembawang when their unit's 16 Buffaloes took off early on 13th December in four flights—two of three aircraft each and two of five each. One flight of three—Wing Commander Neale,² who was to take command at Ipoh, and Pilot Officers Brown³ and Livesey⁴—lost their direction in very bad weather. In attempting a forced landing Livesey mistook a paddy field for a crop growing on firm ground. His aircraft overturned several times but he escaped unhurt. Neale was killed when his aircraft struck a tree on its landing approach and burst into flames and Brown was also killed when his aircraft crashed and burned. The other pilots flew to Ipoh by way of Butterworth where one flight—Vanderfield, Ser-

¹ AVM Maltby in his despatch (paras 235-36) states: "The GOC was approached again at about this time but reiterated that 'bomber policy must give immediate relief to his troops' which, in his view, could only be achieved by bombing aerodromes." The despatch here incorporates a note by General Percival in which he states that he had no recollection of this approach and asserts that there was no strong difference of opinion on the subject between AVM Pulford and himself. Since up to that time there had been practically no air attacks on the ground troops, it was very unlikely that he (Percival) should press for immediate relief for his troops. As long as the enemy air forces held control over northern Malaya the chances of the RAF doing damage to Japanese shipping and troop concentrations were remote. The only chance the RAF had of regaining some control was by destroying enemy fighters on their "weakly defended" airfields. If he had at that time pressed for an attack on Singora airfield it would have been for that reason. Maj-Gen Bennett, in a letter to Australian Army Headquarters dated 13th December 1941, wrote: "... There is insufficient cover in the air to enable the Army to carry out its role without molestation from the enemy's air force. I fear a repetition of Crete." H. G. Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell* (1944), p. 69.

² W Cdr L. J. Neale, 29174, RAF. 13 Gp and ASO (Operations) HQ Fighter Cd 1940-41; comd RAF Stn Sungei Patani 1941. Regular air force offr; of Congleton, Cheshire, Eng; b. Bootle, Cumberland, Eng, 3 Mar 1905. Killed in action 13 Dec 1941.

³ P-O D. R. L. Brown, 41687, RNZAF; 453 Sqn. General hand and taxi driver; of Whangarei, NZ; b. Oldham, Lancashire, Eng, 23 Jun 1917. Killed in action 13 Dec 1941.

⁴ P-Lt T. W. Livesey, 402870. 453, 21/453 Sqns and 1 FSHQ; comd 1 FSHQ 1944. Master builder; of Vaucluse, NSW; b. Sydney, 5 Mar 1914.

geants Read⁵ and Collyer⁶—had just refuelled when enemy bombers made another attack on Penang across the strait. The three pilots immediately took off and intercepted three enemy bombers which were quickly joined by six dive bombers. Vanderfield found that the undercarriage of his aircraft would not retract but he went into action. He claimed two bombers and Read and Collyer three dive bombers between them. After rearming and refuelling Read and Collyer made successful low-level gunnery attacks on enemy troops and road transports to the north of Alor Star. By this time another flight of Buffaloes had reached Ipoh. They had just refuelled when warning of the approach of enemy aircraft was received. All available Buffaloes took off to intercept more than 40 enemy fighters. Vigors engaged the enemy until his petrol tank exploded and the aircraft caught fire. He baled out over Penang and as he descended one enemy pilot made several attempts to kill him. Though he had been badly burned on the legs, hands and arms, and wounded in one thigh, he succeeded in collapsing the canopy of his parachute when each attack was made and landed in a clearing on Penang Mountain from where he was carried to hospital by a rescue party. Residents of Penang reported that three aircraft had crashed into the sea near the island, and, though there was no confirmation that they had been shot down by Vigors, he was believed to have been the only pilot to have engaged them. Pilot Officer Angus⁷ was attacked before he had climbed beyond 800 feet. His aircraft was seriously damaged but he crash-landed in a paddy field and escaped with a wound in one leg. Flying Officer Grace was scarcely airborne when he was attacked, but he succeeded in shooting down one of the enemy fighters.

Next day four Buffaloes of No. 453 Squadron led by one from No. 21 Squadron, flown by Flight Lieutenant White, attacked Japanese transport columns moving down the roads from the north. Three enemy dive bombers intercepted and White, who was last seen attacking one of them from the rear, is believed to have been killed by the enemy rear-gunner's fire. Another of the Buffalo pilots, Sergeant Oelrich,⁸ was heavily attacked before he could gain height and was killed when his aircraft was shot down. Sergeant Seagoe⁹ had one shoulder shattered by an explosive bullet fired from the ground, but with the other two surviving pilots succeeded in returning to Ipoh from their costly operation.

By 15th December the two fighter squadrons could put only three aircraft fit for combat into the air, a state for which enemy action was not solely responsible. The whole burden of maintenance had been

⁵ Sgt M. N. Read, 402952; 453 Sqn. Jackaroo; of Coonamble, NSW; b. West Maitland, NSW, 21 Jun 1917. Killed in action 22 Dec 1941.

⁶ F-Lt V. A. Collyer, 402935. 453, 23 and 84 Sqn. Wool classer; of Narrabri, NSW; b. Narrabri, 7 Dec 1917.

⁷ F-Lt G. L. Angus, 403009. 453 Sqn, 1 PRU, 82 and 77 Sqn. Clerk; of Turrumurra, NSW; b. Ashfield, NSW, 17 Jun 1920.

⁸ Sgt R. R. Oelrich, 402875; 453 Sqn. Assistant chief clerk; of Coogee, NSW; b. Summer Hill, NSW, 7 Feb 1918. Killed in action 14 Dec 1941.

⁹ F-Lt G. E. G. Seagoe, 402883. 453 and 76 Sqn and 109, 114 MFCU's. Clerk; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 10 Jun 1916.

placed on the already overworked and understaffed ground crews of No. 21 Squadron, who also had to cope with increased trouble with the Buffaloes' guns. For example, when 3 Buffaloes intercepted 3 unescorted enemy bombers over Ipoh, only 4 of the total of 12 guns would fire. One bomber was shot down but there was little doubt that had all their guns been serviceable, the Buffalo pilots would have brought the score to 3. The harassed armament staff and Sergeant Haines¹⁰ in particular accepted this as a challenge and worked tirelessly to overcome the trouble. The pilots paid tribute to him when, in their next engagement, all their guns were operating. On the day that the squadrons' combat strength was reduced to 3 aircraft, reinforcements arrived. Squadron Leader Harper, back from his visit to Australia, flew in to the base leading a formation of 10 replacement aircraft, 4 of which were for No. 21 Squadron. Before daylight on the same day Allshorn led a flight of 7 replacement Buffaloes off the runway at Sembawang for the flight to Ipoh. Soon after take-off they encountered what Flight Lieutenant Kinninmont later described as "the dirtiest weather we had ever seen . . . solid front stretching high up and miles long and raining like hell". Allshorn found a break in the dense cloud and turned through it, Kinninmont following. Separated from the other pilots they flew low over the rain-drenched jungle until they sighted an emergency landing ground at Port Swettenham. Allshorn landed safely but Kinninmont's aircraft ran off the runway into a swamp and overturned. He escaped unhurt. The rest of the flight was scattered in the rain and darkness. Hooper escaped with cuts when he crash-landed his aircraft in a paddy field where it overturned three times. The four other pilots returned to Sembawang and made the flight to Ipoh later in better weather. In only one week of war the Australian airmen had learned that the weather in Malaya could be a worse enemy than the Japanese.

The responsibility of R.A.F. Far East Command for the defence of Burma had, perforce, received little attention. In the face of the bitter fighting in Malaya it was understandable that Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham's theory that Burma's best defence lay in the defence of Malaya should still hold—he had little enough to fight with there, and could not spare men and equipment for the neighbouring area where the Japanese had given little more than a hint of their full intention. But it was also true that that hint had become significant. Part of a regiment of the *5th Japanese Division* had landed at four points well to the north of Singora. From the coast they had moved across the narrow tongue of southern Thailand into the parallel, and similarly tapering, extremity of Burma. By 9th December, the Japanese troops had reached Victoria Point, Burma's most southerly town, port and air base.

¹⁰ W-O E. H. Haines, BEM, 8481; 453 Sqn. Fitter; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 10 Nov 1918.

Meanwhile on 12th December the change which the Commander-in-Chief, India, General Sir Archibald Wavell¹ had most earnestly advocated—the transfer of the Burma theatre to his command—was ordered by the British Prime Minister.² Simultaneously the Air Ministry appointed Air Vice-Marshal Stevenson³ to command the air forces in Burma, promising him reinforcements (chiefly from the Middle East) of 4 fighter, 6 bomber and 2 army cooperation squadrons, plus one general reconnaissance squadron “with the object of making a front in Burma should the Japanese campaign prove successful”.⁴ Pending the arrival of Stevenson, Group Captain Manning continued to wrestle with the problems of shortage of men, aircraft and supplies, while Colonel Chennault cooperated with him in unorthodox fashion and longed for sufficient forces to be able to strike the enemy as he had in China. At his base at Toungoo, Chennault had noted, with understandable bitterness, the dramatic early successes of the Japanese air forces to whom he had given such forceful “lessons” in combat more than three years earlier and about whose capacity in men and in aircraft he had been issuing unheeded warnings for so long.

Chafing at the Allies’ lack of capacity to strike offensively, Chennault, on 10th December, sent a photo-reconnaissance Kittyhawk over Bangkok. When he saw the pictures taken from this aircraft, revealing the docks “jammed with enemy transports disgorging troops and supplies” he “exploded”; and the airfield was shown to be packed with Japanese aircraft parked wing-tip to wing-tip. With an over-simplification as typical as his outspokenness, Chennault declared that “a dozen bombers could have wrecked the Japanese air offensive in twenty minutes . . . one of the . . . times . . . when a kingdom was lost for want of a few planes.”⁵ Preparations were being made for a new base for the group at Kunming but, on 11th December, No. 3 Squadron A.V.G. moved to Mingaladon to join the R.A.F. in the defence of Rangoon.

The Japanese began sporadic air raids in the Tenasserim area with an attack on Tavoy airfield. Burma Command, having been obliged to base all its plans on the assumption that air reinforcements would come from Malaya, was now in the position of having to try to accomplish the almost impossible task of sending air aid to Far East Command. In his correspondence to London, the Governor of Burma, Sir Reginald Dorman-

¹ Field Marshal Rt Hon Earl Wavell, GCB, GCSI, GCIE, CMG, MC. GOC-in-C Middle East 1939-41, India 1941-43; Supreme Comd SW Pacific Jan-Mar 1942. Viceroy of India 1943-47. B. Colchester, Essex, Eng, 5 May 1883. Died 24 May 1950.

² In his despatch Wavell describes the efforts of his predecessor as C-in-C India, General Auchinleck, and later his own, to induce the British Chiefs of Staff to make this change and refers to the placing of Burma in Far East Command instead of under India as “the cardinal mistake”.

³ AVM D. F. Stevenson, CB, CBE, DSO, MC. Director Home Operations, Air Ministry 1938-41; AOC 2 Gp Bomber Cd 1941, Burma 1942, Bengal Cd 1943, Northern Ireland 1944, 9 Gp Fighter Cd 1944; British Commissioner Allied Control Commission Rumania 1944-47. Regular air force offr; of London; b. 7 Apr 1895.

⁴ AVM D. F. Stevenson, *Air Operations in Burma and the Bay of Bengal, January 1st to May 22nd 1942*, para 3.

⁵ Chennault, p. 126.

Smith,⁷ suggested that, however important the bombing of German industry might seem, Britain should spare bombers for the Burma campaign until the Japanese thrust had receded. His point of view coincided with that of Chennault:

We have here (he wrote to Mr Amery on 11th December) aerodromes capable of receiving reinforcements, but it is, at the moment, plaguily difficult to see whence they will come. . . . What really infuriates is that we are incapable of taking the offensive against targets which present themselves, e.g. concentration of Japanese planes seen at Bangkok today by our fighter patrols. . . . Believe me, our need is very urgent.

Next day Dorman-Smith wrote that Victoria Point airfield had been blown up, adding:

I have talked to American Lend-Lease people here tonight. They are mad-keen to give us supplies but feel unable to take the necessary responsibility. . . . Their recital of the armaments which they can give us now is mouth-watering.

On 13th December, Rangoon, capital of Burma, its name anglicised from the ancient Burman word *Yangon* meaning, ironically, "the end of strife", received its first air raid warning. There was no attack and the number of fighters—British and American—circling over the city gave its people great heart. Again there came news of another bombing raid in Tenasserim; this time it was Mergui that suffered. And then there came a lull in the enemy's activity in the air over Burma.

Meanwhile, far out in the North Pacific, the enemy were also turning their attention to the American island bases they had already attacked from the air. The Japanese, having given the air units two days in which to "soften up" the American defences at Guam, landed a force of about 5,000 at different points on the island on 10th December. After the small defending force had offered brave but hopeless resistance for about half an hour the inevitable was accepted; the island was surrendered after 42 years of American possession and the Japanese began to build up a naval and air base that would aid them in their long-range Pacific Ocean operations.

Next day a Japanese naval force attempted to land on Wake Island under cover of gunfire from escorting warships. But they took the island's garrison much too cheaply. The American shore batteries, aided by the four surviving Wildcat fighters, withheld their fire until the enemy ships were close to the shore, and then replied so effectively that the invading force was beaten off with the loss of two destroyers. The Wildcat pilots were having some success against enemy bombers that attacked regularly each morning. In those first few days of war two bombers were destroyed by their interception, the anti-aircraft batteries brought down a third, and several were damaged. Still hoping that relief might arrive the garrison remained defiant.

⁷ Col Rt Hon Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, GBE, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries 1939-40; Governor of Burma 1941-46. B. 10 Mar 1899.

A British parallel for the gallant defence of Wake Island was being provided simultaneously in beleaguered Hong Kong. There the garrison of six battalions (two of them Canadian) having withdrawn to the island proper, prepared to do their utmost to withstand the *38th Japanese Division* reinforced with heavy artillery and possessing undisputed control of the air. On the night of 12th-13th December the Japanese commander's demand that the garrison surrender was defied. Naval and air bombardment of the island followed but still the defenders held out.

In their initial attacks on the Philippine bases the Japanese had deprived the Far East Air Force of so much of its offensive and defensive capacity that the defenders now faced the prospect of invasion in a "confused and nervous state".⁸ At 3 a.m. on 9th December the enemy bombed Fort McKinley, just south of Manila, destroying the beam wireless station of Pan-American Airways, and Nichols Field where a hangar and other airfield buildings were wrecked. The two Flying Fortress squadrons of No. 19 Bombardment Group were summoned from Del Monte, Mindanao. It was intended that they should attack enemy airfields in south Formosa but the Japanese disposed otherwise. That night General Headquarters learned that one enemy seaborne force was approaching Vigan Bay on the north-west coast of Luzon and a second was closing on Aparri. Early on the next day five Fortresses attacked six transports that were putting troops ashore at Vigan under cover from a strong naval escort but with no effective air protection. Only 100-lb demolition bombs were used and the attack did little more than interrupt very temporarily the progress of the enemy's landing operations. One crew claimed that they left a transport sinking from a direct hit.

Fear that the heavy bombers would again be caught on the ground by a Japanese air attack dominated the thinking of the American air commanders. Instead of preparing the five aircraft that made the first attack on the enemy at Vigan for a second strike, the command ordered them back to Del Monte, 600 miles away. Three other Fortresses, prevented from landing at Clark Field by an air raid alert, were also sent back to the Mindanao base. The heavy bombers that remained made individual sorties, some of them with their bomb racks only partly filled because raid alarms had forced them to take off before they were ready. General Brereton has recorded a long-distance telephone conversation he had on 11th December with General Arnold in Washington, thus:

He was excited and apparently under a great strain. "How in the hell could an experienced airman like you get caught with your planes on the ground?" General Arnold asked. "That's what we sent you there for, to avoid just what happened." I tried to explain what had happened, but halfway through the conversation the Japs came over strafing the field. "What in the hell is going on there?" General Arnold shouted. "We are having visitors," I replied. I asked General Arnold to withhold his judgement until he got a complete report on what happened at Clark

⁸ Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol I, p. 214.

Field, and said that we had done everything in our power to get authority to attack Formosa on 8 December but had been relegated to a "strictly defensive attitude" by higher authority. . . .⁹

A squadron of Kittyhawks and some aged P-35's also went into action over Vigan.¹ Several landing craft were sunk and ships damaged but inevitably the attack lacked anything like the strength needed to prevent the landing. Late that afternoon (10th December) Japanese aircraft were operating from Vigan airfield. Similarly, at Aparri, the enemy, after landing practically without opposition, promptly occupied the local airfield. Thus they had quickly gained two bases for close-support air operations.² Though their invasion forces lacked air cover the Japanese air units were by no means inactive. Del Carmen was attacked heavily and 12 P-35's were destroyed on the ground and 6 damaged. It was soon apparent that this raid was but a preliminary to much heavier attacks. About 12.30 p.m. on 10th December a large force of enemy bombers with fighter cover was seen approaching Cavite and Nichols Field. There was some interception by American fighters which cost the enemy several of their escort but the bombing force, in three formations of 27 aircraft each, swept on undisturbed at almost 20,000 feet while American pilots, who had been on patrol for so long that their aircraft had little fuel left, fought and flew until their aircraft were either shot down or forced down with empty tanks. Nichols Field received a rain of bombs that destroyed the main hangar, the air depot, fuel tanks, and several aircraft on the ground. At the naval base at Cavite the shipyard facilities, barracks, stores and hospital were soon blazing and in ruins. The loss of life was heavy, many people being trapped in the burning buildings. A submarine and a minesweeper were sunk. That night Far East Air Force had only 12 Flying Fortresses and 30 fighters fit for combat. General Headquarters thereupon issued an order that no more combat missions were to be flown by the fighters which were to be reserved for reconnaissance operations.

MacArthur's dilemma about how best to deploy his ground forces became still more acute on the next day when a third enemy force began to land at Legaspi in south-eastern Luzon. On 12th December Japanese aircraft struck once more at Clark Field and at Batangas and Olongapo. These bases were again their targets on the day following, with Nielson and Nichols airfields added. On 14th December 6 Fortresses were listed for an attack on the enemy bridgehead at Legaspi but only 3 aircraft reached the target area. Their bombing had little effect on the landing operations and only one of them returned. There were some exceptions to the ruling against fighter combat, as when 3 Kittyhawk pilots were allowed to dive-bomb enemy aircraft on the ground at Vigan and when

⁹ *The Brereton Diaries*, p. 50.

¹ So worn were the engines of the P-35's that of 16 aircraft that took off from Del Carmen only 7 reached Vigan.

² According to Japanese records 18 fighters were based on Vigan airfield on 11th December and 24 on Aparri airfield on the 12th.

one of the 3, Lieutenant Boyd Wagner, who commanded No. 17 Pursuit Squadron, shot down 4 enemy fighters near Aparri and then went in to attack aircraft on the ground.

At Del Monte, where the remaining Fortresses were based, no facilities existed for proper servicing and maintenance. It was also apparent that it would not be very long before the enemy turned their growing air offensive against such an obvious target. Rumours that the Japanese settlers at Davao, who numbered about 30,000, were arming themselves and preparing to drive across Mindanao to the airfield, made the prospect gloomier still. Meanwhile at Olongapo 7 Catalinas of the American Navy's No. 10 Patrol Wing were caught on the water by Japanese air raiders and all destroyed. On 15th December the wing was ordered south to the Netherlands East Indies. All these disturbing factors weighed with General Headquarters which, acknowledging the corollary that the Japanese control in the air over Luzon defied further serious challenge, ordered that all airworthy Fortresses should be withdrawn to Darwin, 1,500 miles away. The movement was not immediately possible and there was no intention of giving up the struggle to defend the Philippines, but the decision did mean that in one week the Japanese had gone a long way towards driving the Far East Air Force out of the territory.

The significance of this situation, when linked with the already disastrous state of the Malayan campaign and the enemy's successes at all other points, may not then have been fully apparent, but none could doubt that in hesitating to strike before the enemy's offensive was fully mounted against Malaya and the Philippines, the Allies had given the Japanese the opportunity they most urgently needed. Seen in retrospect this is still more obvious. Before a shot had been fired or a bomb dropped in the Pacific, the planners in Tokyo had insisted that Japan must capture the rich natural resources of the southern area at the beginning of the war. And they had insisted further that unless the command of the air and the sea was immediately secured the minimum requirements for the mobilisation of supplies could not be fulfilled. Now, after only one week of war, wrecked aircraft and sunken ships in the Malayan, Hawaiian and Philippine areas were tragic testimony to the enemy's achievement of his first objective. Already the cost of Allied hesitation had proved very high.