

CHAPTER 14

AUSTRALIA BECOMES A BASE

IN their statement of strategic geographical needs the American Chiefs of Staff, as we have noted, included the base on Wake Island. The garrison was now being attacked almost daily by aircraft based on Wotje and Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. An important variation occurred when, on 21st and 22nd December, heavy attacks were made by carrier-based aircraft. Next day a strong Japanese force—this time the enemy was not taking the task lightly—landed on the island. The garrison fought back for a time but, with no prospect of relief, resistance was hopeless, and to avoid needless casualties the commander ordered his force to surrender.

An American naval force commanded by Rear-Admiral Frank J. Fletcher in the carrier *Saratoga* was then on its way to relieve Wake. On the morning of 23rd December it was still about 400 miles distant, and on orders from Pearl Harbour abandoned the attempt.

Two days after the loss of Wake Island the Japanese seized the island of Jolo, in the Sulu Archipelago—a move which put the eastern coast of Borneo and the oil port of Tarakan under immediate threat.

Even in the face of continued reverses in the Philippines, General MacArthur had been maintaining his hope that reinforcements could and would arrive. In recent messages to Washington he had referred to the possibility of making counter-attacks on Formosa, but now his bombing force was about to move to Darwin. Six Flying Fortresses took off on 17th December and 4 more next day. On the 19th the enemy attacked Del Monte with 12 fighters which destroyed 3 B-18's (Digby bombers) that had just landed, but missed the remaining Fortresses that were being loaded under camouflage for the flight to Australia. By 20th December all the surviving heavy bombers—14 of them—and 145 officers and men had been moved to Batchelor.¹

However urgently MacArthur may have wished to send his heavy bombers against Formosa, he made it clear that his first need was fighter aircraft and bombs for the support of his army. He asked that these should be sent by aircraft carrier. General Brereton also shared these hopes. He listed 10 squadrons of "pursuit" aircraft as the most immediate need and suggested that it would be advantageous to have 200 of these aircraft and 50 dive bombers sent by carrier in addition to the 52 Dauntless dive bombers and 18 fighters that were expected to reach Australia before the end of the month for delivery to the Philippines. The movement of the Flying Fortresses to Darwin he regarded not as a withdrawal of forces but as action "to facilitate maintenance in order that the remaining

¹ Their destination was to be Darwin but the surface of the airfield there was unequal to the weight of Flying Fortresses and so all the bombers were sent on to Batchelor.

planes might be used to the best advantage".² The confidence of MacArthur and his air commander was based largely on the high hopes still held in Washington. President Roosevelt had specifically ordered that reinforcements should be sent to the Philippines "with all speed" and MacArthur had been informed on 15th December not only that the strategic importance of the Philippines was fully recognised, but that there would be no wavering in the determination to provide support. Authority had been given already for the dispatch of 65 Fortresses and of 15 LB-30A's (the export version of the Liberator bomber) which had been repossessed from the R.A.F. But, before these could be sent, the loss of Wake Island had closed the trans-Pacific ferry route. Hurried efforts were made, therefore, to develop an alternative route across the Atlantic, Africa and India, so that these aircraft might reach the Philippines.³

While this hopeful planning had been going on the enemy forces in the Vigan area had been reinforced. Lieut-General Wainwright, commanding the North Luzon force, unable to deploy his troops in sufficient strength in the narrow terrain between the mountains and the beach, decided to await their advance. He considered that at this stage the only way to deal with the situation was by air attack and the Japanese had seen to it that this was no longer possible. "That was the day I realised, for all time, the futility of trying to fight a war without an Air Force," he wrote later.⁴ Under energetic Colonel George and an engineering staff, native labourers had built five earthen runways to the south of Manila, the intention being that these would be available for the Fortresses. To these airfields frustrated pilots without aircraft now went to man and develop their defences as best they could.

Meanwhile the commander of No. 27 Group, Major Davies, secretly briefed 20 selected pilots with whom he left for Australia on the night of 18th December. Their mission, made in three war-worn transport aircraft, was to bring back their long-awaited dive bombers. Under orders from General MacArthur General Clagett accompanied them to organise the air corps units that were expected to arrive at Brisbane in the same convoy. These units were to stay in Australia and assemble aircraft while the remainder of the force and equipment in the convoy went on to the Philippines—or so the Commander-in-Chief hoped.

² *The Breton Diaries*, p. 55.

³ The route was from Tampa (Florida) through Trinidad, thence through Belem and Natal (Brazil), across the Atlantic to Accra (Gold Coast) and on to Khartoum, Cairo, Habbaniya, Karachi and thence through India and Ceylon to Bandung, Java. As early as 1939 this route had been considered by the USAAF for ferrying heavy bombers to the Philippines. The Liberators were now sent to MacDill Field near Tampa, to prepare for the flight (most of the Fortresses promised were still in the factory). The first serious delay then occurred. Few of the crews had had any training in long-distance flying or, in fact, in manning four-engined bombers. The urgency was great, and a plea for time to give the crews something like adequate training was agreed to only after appeal to Washington and then very reluctantly. The task of setting up refuelling bases at 12 points on the route was also vast; it entailed the construction of tanks and the sea transport from America of from 500,000 to 1,000,000 gallons of 100 octane fuel at each base (the RAF was now consuming about 90 per cent of the output from the Abadan refineries).

⁴ J. M. Wainwright, *General Wainwright's Story* (1946), p. 28.

By 22nd December the enemy's real thrust against MacArthur's forces was no longer in doubt. Between 70 and 80 transports, carrying troops estimated to number 80,000, had entered Lingayen Gulf. These forces landed at Santo Tomas, about 100 miles north-west of Manila. Another strong Japanese force, within 24 hours, had landed at Antimonan, on the east coast of Luzon, about 75 miles from Manila. On the 24th, 18 American fighter aircraft struck at 40 transports in Lopez Bay, southern Luzon, with bombs and gunfire. But no such attack could check the enemy. The small fighter force then resumed reconnaissance operations.

The Japanese advance having now gained momentum, MacArthur ordered the withdrawal of his forces into the Bataan Peninsula. While the main assault on Luzon was taking place, Davao, on the south coast of Mindanao, had been seized by the Japanese who thus gained another valuable base. To attack the enemy forces at Davao 9 Flying Fortresses—the greatest combat force No. 19 Group could then mount—were prepared at their new base at Batchelor. For their 1,500-mile flight extra fuel tanks were placed in the bomb bays which limited the striking power of each aircraft to four 500-lb bombs. Communications between Manila and Batchelor at this time were roundabout, to say the least, and there were long delays between dispatch and receipt which placed a very serious handicap on all operations.⁵

The bombers took off on the morning of 22nd December and it was more than 48 hours after the enemy had landed when they penetrated the overcast and dropped their bombs on the Davao dock area. The Japanese, apparently, were surprised. There was no fighter interception and no anti-aircraft fire but cloud so obscured the target that the result of the attack, which later proved to be negligible, could not be seen. In darkness the Fortresses landed at Del Monte, the crews anxious lest the airfield had already fallen into Japanese hands. They found their American comrades still in possession but learned that only the day before the enemy had attacked with 54 bombers. At 3 a.m. five of the Fortresses—all that were ready and airworthy—took off to attack enemy transports in Lingayen Gulf. Four reached the target to find that "eight rows of transports paralleled the land and, close in, a long line of cruisers and destroyers were bombarding the shore".⁶ Again the attack was ineffectual. Enemy fighters prevented the bombing force from landing at San Marcelino as ordered, so they set off on the long flight back to Batchelor where, by 24th December, all 9 aircraft had returned safely.

⁵ "Radio communication between the Philippines and Batchelor Field was primitive, slow and a little like something out of a musical comedy. As Combs described it, an order originating from Headquarters in Manila, or later in Corregidor, would be sent over to the naval station at Cavite which radioed it to a ship out in the harbour at Darwin, which handed it over to a commander in the Navy in his room at a Darwin hotel and he, observing the international courtesies, gave it to the R.A.A.F. who saw that it got to the American Air Officer and, usually, it was handed in to the little tent in which Walsh and Combs had their quarters. . . . Almost never was a message received within twenty-four hours of its origin. In that interval anything could have happened at Del Monte."—Edmonds, *They Fought With What They Had*, p. 179.

⁶ Edmonds, p. 184.

While they had been absent 3 other Fortresses had attacked Davao air-field and harbour, but without appreciable results.

On Christmas Eve Brereton received orders from MacArthur to "proceed to the south" with his headquarters to organise advanced operating bases from which to protect the lines of communication, secure bases in Mindanao and support the defence of the Philippines. That night, accompanied by three staff officers, he left in a navy Catalina. He reached Surabaya on Christmas Day. Here, in conference with Rear-Admiral W. A. Glassford, commander of the United States Navy task force, and the Dutch commanders, Brereton agreed that the Flying Fortresses should move immediately from Australia to Malang, 80 miles south of Surabaya, and that his own headquarters should be set up in Surabaya with those of Glassford. He then flew on to Australia reaching Batchelor on 29th December.

Meanwhile, on Luzon, the Japanese invasion was at full flood. On Christmas Day, after Manila had been mercilessly bombed, and as the end of this most fateful month and year drew near, the enemy made still further landings on the Luzon coast. What was left of the air force in the Philippines—between 6,000 and 7,000 officers and men with only 16 Kittyhawks and 4 P-35's that could be classed as fit for combat—had withdrawn into Bataan. The general disorganisation of their headquarters and lack of decisive orders caused great confusion. In these somewhat chaotic circumstances the local air command passed to Colonel George whose mind must have held bitter memories of his bold and urgent pleas for air reinforcements seven months earlier. For the most part the airmen under his command were now to form infantry reserve units while still dreaming of aircraft that never came.

Under pressure from the mounting list of Japanese successes, President Roosevelt's assertion that Australia would be a base of the utmost importance was now becoming fact. First indication of this had come when the American convoy so anxiously awaited in the Philippines, was, on 12th December, redirected to Brisbane, the forces it carried being designated Task Force South Pacific, and the senior officer, Brigadier-General Julian F. Barnes, being named as commander not only of this force but of all American army forces in Australia. But General Barnes' command was brief. On 21st December he was informed that General Brett, who would soon reach Australia, would organise and command all American forces and that, until his arrival, General Clagett, who reached Brisbane on the 22nd, would assume command.⁷ Barnes became Clagett's Chief of Staff. The United States Military Attaché, Colonel Van S. Merle-Smith, under instructions from Washington, had made arrangements for the reception of the convoy at Brisbane and for the

⁷ In August 1941, Brett had been sent to Britain and the Middle East to study R.A.F. operations and report on the expansion of technical maintenance for American aircraft operated by the R.A.F. He then visited India and China, leaving Chungking on 24th December for India again, and Java for conferences with the British and Dutch Commands before coming to Australia.

assembly of the aircraft it carried.⁸ It arrived on the 22nd and on the 23rd the first American formations to come to Australia on a war mission disembarked. Brisbane's Ascot and Doomben racecourses provided their first camp sites while the R.A.A.F. stations at Archerfield and Amberley accommodated the units that would undertake the assembly of American aircraft.⁹ But the convoy had been loaded in what, for America, were then still peacetime conditions; there had been no thought of tactical loading, with each ship containing complete units. Thus practically the entire cargo had to be unloaded, and equipment that was to go on by sea was then reloaded into the two fastest ships. With Australian water-side workers working 24 hours a day this task was completed by 28th December, and two days later both ships were at sea again and on course for the Philippines. Only when the assembly of the aircraft from the convoy began was it realised that essential parts for the Dauntless dive bombers (trigger motors, solenoids and mounts for the guns) were missing. None of the dive bombers could be ready for operations until these parts had been ordered from Washington and flown to Australia.¹

Quite the most urgent American problem in Australia was the provision of adequate base facilities so that the flow of war materials, and particularly aircraft, might reach the Philippines. But by 22nd December cable messages from General Marshall began to reflect doubt that the American units could be sent to the Philippines. While the route across the Atlantic and Africa was being developed both the American Army and Navy were preparing bases on an alternative trans-Pacific route by way of Christmas Island, Canton Island, Samoa, Fiji and New Caledonia. Townsville was selected as the Australian port of entry. The second stage of this route was planned for the passage of short-range aircraft from the east coast of Australia to the Philippines thus: Brisbane, Townsville, Cloncurry, Daly Waters, Darwin, Koepang, Macassar, Balikpapan or Samarinda, Tarakan, and thence to airfields near Del Monte, with an intermediate stop at one or other of several bases on the route from Del Monte to Bataan. The total distance from Brisbane to Bataan by this route was almost 5,000 miles—about 25 hours' flying time for a fighter aircraft. But the loss of Davao had created a very real fear that Del Monte, too, might soon be lost, and that the final section of the route would be cut.

⁸ The convoy consisted of seven transports or cargo vessels and the tender *Niagara*, escorted by the cruiser *Pensacola*. Of a total Air Corps strength of more than 2,000 there were 48 pilots, a number of whom were cadets and almost all of whom still required operational training. As mentioned, in addition to the 52 Dauntless dive bombers of No. 27 Group, there were 18 Kittyhawks. Air force supplies included nearly 7,000,000 rounds of .50 calibre ammunition, more than 5,000 bombs (from 30-lb to 500-lb) and several thousand barrels of aircraft fuel and oil.

⁹ United States forces disposed near Brisbane on 30th December 1941 were: Nos. 11, 22, 9 and Headquarters 7 Bomber Squadrons; 88 Reconnaissance Squadron and a variety of ancillary units, the total strength being 198 officers, 6 flying cadets and 1,724 other ranks. Other ships, carrying equipment and aircraft fuel and oil, were diverted to reach Sydney on 28th and 31st December.

¹ In *Global Mission* (1949), p. 290, General Arnold wrote that inexperienced mechanics did not know that the solenoids were in boxes nailed to the insides of the crates, which were burned, solenoids and all.

In establishing their bases in the Commonwealth it was natural that the Americans should endeavour to economise in sea and air transport space by obtaining the greatest possible amount of their needs in Australia. Two obstacles were Australia's own expanding defence needs and a rail transport system in which there were breaks of gauge. It was now that the value of General Brereton's earlier visit began to be really appreciated. On that visit, as we have noted, he had initiated three major projects: establishment of airfields for the trans-Australian ferry route, provision of airfields for the tactical operation and training of members of the U.S.A.A.F., and development of bases for an American air force of, initially, four bombardment groups, four fighter groups and one fighter training centre. When American troops arrived in Australia all three projects had been adopted and months had been saved.

No. 27 Group pilots who had reached Darwin from the Philippines left on 23rd December in a Qantas flying-boat, and on Christmas Eve alighted on the Brisbane River alongside the ships of the American convoy. After all they had endured Brisbane on Christmas Eve "seemed almost like the Promised Land", as one American chronicler has written, adding "and in a way it was to be, for no troops in the world's history ever received a warmer welcome than the Australians offered ours".² But these planeless pilots had come for dive bombers that were desperately needed in the Philippines. They had found them, but, in the absence of crucial gun parts, they came under the same shadow that clouded the Malayan scene for the Australian Buffalo pilots.

The first of several Allied staff conferences was held at Amberley on 28th December. American officers accepted responsibility for the assembly of their aircraft but, since these aircraft had to be ferried to Darwin, coordination with the R.A.A.F. was necessary and it was agreed that Group Captain Lachal,³ at that time commanding No. 3 Service Flying Training School, should assume general supervision. Refuelling depots with adequate supplies were required at Charleville, Cloncurry, Daly Waters and Darwin.⁴ On the same day Clagett and Burnett agreed to inaugurate a training program—night flying, dive bombing and air gunnery—for the Dauntless crews at Archerfield and the Kittyhawk pilots at Amberley. This was undertaken by Major Davies with Group Captain Lachal again accepting the responsibility for general supervision. Here was the genesis of a long and important phase of collaboration between the U.S.A.A.F. and the R.A.A.F.

² Edmonds, p. 176.

³ Air Cmdre L. V. Lachal, CBE. Comd 10 Sqn 1939-40; SASO Southern Area 1940-41; comd 3 SFTS 1941-42, RAAF Stn HQ Amberley and 5 SFTS 1942; Director of Postings 1942-44; SASO 9 Group 1944; AOC Eastern Area 1945. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 18 May 1904.

⁴ The 100-octane fuel still available from the N.E.I. had an aromatic content so high that it would destroy the self-sealing linings of the American fuel tanks. A ship carrying 400,000 gallons of American aircraft fuel had been sunk while on her way to Brisbane and supplies were far short of the pre-war estimate of needs—100,000 gallons. Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol I, p. 230.

When Brereton reached Darwin he conferred with Major Combs, then commanding the Fortress formation, and made known his decision, already noted, that the group should move to Malang in Java. In contrast to the pilots of No. 27 Group on arrival at Brisbane, the Flying Fortress crews had little to compensate them for all they had endured. To them "Batchelor Field must have looked like the outpost of a lost world. . . . The stops along the line had sad, lost echoes in their names . . . as all names have in that tortured and irrational land where water and women become the focus of man's existence and his dreams."⁵ Their aircraft were not in good condition and the men themselves were weary. Their first task on arrival was to dig weapon pits for protection against air raids, which seemed to give the place a "more familiar look". But the enervating weather—shade temperatures up to 118 degrees and frequent rain—took its toll, and maintenance with no greater facilities than they had had at Del Monte, called for great effort. It was not surprising therefore that the crews and ground staff welcomed Brereton's latest order; Java would be much more in keeping with their idea of a "promised land". Brereton told them that they were going north again to do what they could to hold Java because they were the only air power the Allied nations had in the South Pacific area—perhaps an understandable exaggeration in the circumstances though true only in terms of heavy bombers. With some bitterness he spoke of his efforts to prevent the highly-trained group from being sent to the Philippines without adequate fighter protection. Now, instead of a group, they were barely a squadron.

By 31st December 10 Fortresses had landed on Singasari airfield, six miles from Malang. This was now the full strength of No. 19 Group, which began to prepare for a new phase of combat still with their war-worn aircraft but in high hopes that new aircraft would arrive soon.⁶

General Brett reached Darwin on 31st December. He was met by General Brereton who recorded later that Brett was disappointed to learn that the War Department had specifically excluded the air force from his new command. The two generals left almost immediately for Melbourne, flying by way of Townsville where Brereton renewed his acquaintance with Air Commodore Lukis, the air officer commanding Northern Area, "a dark, husky, energetic man with a keen sense of humour". On New Year's Day Brett conferred in Brisbane with General Clagett, General Barnes and Air Commodore Bladin, then Assistant Chief of the Air Staff. Barnes became Brett's Chief of Staff and Clagett soon returned to the United States. "In spite of his disappointment at not assuming command of the air force" (which Brereton had retained) "General Brett was perfectly splendid," Brereton wrote in his diary, adding, "the whole theme of his conference was ways and means of providing and forwarding air troops and supplies to the Air Force in Java."⁷ Next day Brett

⁵ Edmonds, p. 177.

⁶ Of the four other Fortresses one was withheld at Batchelor because of electrical trouble and the other three required major overhaul.

⁷ Brereton, pp. 73-4.

sent a radio message to General Marshall telling him that it would be impossible to undertake much in the way of tactical operations until he had developed an American "establishment" in Australia, including a large air base at Darwin and a supply and repair base at Townsville. Next day he flew to Melbourne where he conferred at length with the Australian Chiefs of Staff. Brett had found common ground with General Wavell on the main principles of Allied strategy and with this agreement as background he presented his conclusions to the Australian defence authorities. He proposed a defensive strategy until such time as sufficient forces could be built up to undertake offensive operations by working from Burma into China and towards Shanghai to acquire advanced bases, by exerting slow pressure through the Netherlands East Indies and Malaya, and by exerting similar pressure from Australia into the islands to the north. On 4th January he ordered the two ships of the original convoy, then on their way to the Philippines, to go to Darwin and discharge all cargo and troops there.

On 3rd January General Marshall received a memorandum from his Assistant Chief of Staff, Brigadier-General Leonard T. Gerow, outlining the operations necessary for the restoration of American control in the Philippines, and concluding that "the forces required for the relief of the Philippines cannot be placed in the Far East Area within the time available". He recommended that "for the present" Allied efforts in the Far East be limited to holding the Malay Barrier, Burma and Australia and to operations projected northward "to provide maximum defense in depth"—a plan that would have received the full approval of the Australian Chiefs of Staff.

Another illustration of the awareness that it was now too late to aid MacArthur by delivering heavy bombers to the Philippines was a decision that all ferrying flights must report to General Brett at Darwin. Thus none of the heavy bombers promised after Roosevelt's assurance of reinforcement "with all speed" was delivered to its original destination.

From those who were aware just how the American forces were now being deployed and were conscious of Japan as the "ever-present" enemy, the plan to defeat Germany first must have demanded great faith in the virtues of the long-term plan. This must have been sharply apparent when it was realised that, whereas the American forces being prepared and dispatched for service in the European theatre were labelled "preparatory and precautionary deployments", the limited reinforcements then being sent to the Pacific were dispatched with the prospect, if not the certainty, of almost immediate combat. Apart from the question whether it was any longer possible to provide even indirect aid for the forces in the Philippines, the island chain between Hawaii and Australia, now becoming increasingly vulnerable, was a matter of concern at the conference at Washington.

New Caledonia provided one example. Australia had been given responsibility for its defence but a practical fact was that if the island

was to be made really secure it was necessary to base a substantial American ground force there. The crucial problem was not so much the provision of men, equipment or aircraft as it was one of providing the ships to transport them. The only course remaining was to revise the size of the convoys which were to carry American forces to Iceland and Northern Ireland. This was done and enough shipping space was squeezed from them to transport 21,800 men, including the ground forces for New Caledonia, and certain air units and aircraft that could be spared immediately.

On 3rd January General Wavell was appointed Supreme Commander of the A.B.D.A. Area (the initials deriving from the four nations concerned in the agreement—American, British, Dutch and Australian) and next day the appointment was publicly announced. That day Brett received a directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington designating him Deputy Commander-in-Chief to General Wavell in the ABDA Area (“ABDACOM” as the Command was to be designated).⁸ In this capacity he was also to be responsible for maintaining communications and supplies for all American air forces from Australian ports to the Netherlands East Indies. On 5th January, in keeping with earlier instructions, Brett assumed command of the United States Army Forces in Australia (U.S.A.F.I.A.). Brereton, still formally commander of the Far East Air Force, now received a new appointment as commander of all American Air Forces in ABDA Command. He was directed to report to General Wavell for instructions and to operate under his strategic control.

On 9th January, in company with Air Chief Marshal Burnett, Brett and Brereton flew to Batavia to meet Wavell and review the whole command position. Next day Brereton learned that he had been appointed Deputy Chief of the Allied Air Forces in the new command, the Chief being Air Marshal Sir Richard Peirse,⁹ R.A.F., who would not arrive for another two or three weeks. It had been agreed between Brett and Brereton that staff duties should not be allowed to interfere with Brereton’s task of directing the American Air Force and, after a conversation with Wavell, it was decided that he should serve both as Deputy Air Commander, ABDA Command, and Commander of the American Air Forces.

With the new headquarters at Lembang near Bandung sufficiently advanced for occupation Wavell formally moved in on 15th January and inaugurated ABDA Command. On this day Brereton received still another directive, this time from the War Department, Washington, appointing him Commanding General of all American forces both ground and air in Australia and in the ABDA Area. If he accepted this command he could

⁸ The Combined Chiefs of Staff’s Committee, set up in Washington during the Allied Conference, was the joint Anglo-American body responsible to President Roosevelt and to Mr Churchill from which General Wavell would receive his instructions. This committee eventually assumed complete responsibility for the coordination of the entire Anglo-American war effort.

⁹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, KCB, DSO, AFC. Dep. Chief of Air Staff 1937-40; Vice-Chief of Air Staff 1940; AOC-in-C Bomber Cd 1940-42, India 1942-43; Allied Air C-in-C South-East Asia Cd 1943-44. B. 1892.

not remain on Wavell's staff nor could he retain command of the Far East Air Force. He thereupon asked Wavell to inform the Combined Chiefs of Staff that he preferred to remain on ABDA Command staff and retain command of the American Air Forces and this was accepted in Washington.

In these circumstances Brereton left for Australia with full authority to take such action as was necessary. His first step was to close Far East Air Force Headquarters at Darwin and send his staff to ABDA Command, "transferring the airfields at Darwin and Batchelor (departure points for reinforcements to Java) to ABDA Command Control".¹

But, from the point of view of both the Supreme Commander and the Australian Government, an important territorial discrepancy had occurred in Wavell's directive.

It is not clear (the Supreme Commander signalled on 10th January to Australia) . . . whether or not I am responsible for the defence of Port Darwin. Since this defence must depend on control of the Timor Sea, which is in my area, it appears that Port Darwin is my responsibility, but I should like confirmation.

This had already been noted in Australia and the Chiefs of Staff had promptly recommended that Darwin should be included in the ABDA Area. They remarked that Mr Churchill had omitted that port and, in fact, any part of Australia when, in his cable of 3rd January, he had defined the area.² Members of the Australian Advisory War Council, on 6th January, had also expressed their concern at the omission and had strongly advocated an Australian voice in all councils on Pacific strategy. Failure to set up any joint body for operations in the Pacific, or to provide for more direct consultation with the Commonwealth than that already contemplated, was a situation the Council was "quite unable to accept".³

The United States Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, now proposed the formation of another area—the ANZAC Area—which would include the eastern coast of Australia and all New Zealand. A naval force under the strategical direction of the Commander-in-Chief, United States Navy, would cover the eastern and north-eastern approaches to this area in cooperation with the air forces operating in it.

On the specific question whether the defence of Darwin lay within Wavell's command, the Australian War Cabinet and the Advisory War

¹ Brereton, p. 80.

² Churchill had cabled to Curtin (in part): "General Wavell's command area is limited to the fighting zone where active operations are now proceeding. Henceforward it does not include Australia, New Zealand and communications between the United States and Australia, or indeed, any other ocean communications. This does not mean, of course, that those vital regions and communications are to be left without protection so far as our resources admit. In our view the American Navy should assume the responsibility for the communications, including the islands right up to the Australian or New Zealand coast. This is what we are pressing for." W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol IV (1951), p. 8.

³ Three months later the Australian demand for a voice in the making of "Higher" policy was answered. The Pacific War Council, attended by representatives of Great Britain, Australia, China, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands and the Philippines, and presided over by President Roosevelt, assembled in Washington on 1st April 1942, for the first of more than 30 meetings.

Council on 20th January approved a recommendation of the Australian Chiefs of Staff that that part of Australia north of a line from Onslow to the south-east corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria should be included in the ABDA Area. This was promptly adopted by the Combined Chiefs of Staff. It was a decision that must have met with American naval approval for Darwin, though 1,200 miles to the east of Surabaya where the United States Asiatic Fleet had its operational base, had become—for lack of a better place—the service base for that fleet.

At Lembang Wavell had now begun a task which Mr Churchill described later as “. . . one which only the highest sense of duty could induce him to accept”. “It was almost certain,” he added, “that he would have to bear a load of defeat in a scene of confusion.”⁴ The truth was that every major problem that confronted the British in Malaya, Burma and India, the Americans in the Philippine Islands, the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies, and the Australians in operations directly to the north of their continent, was now Wavell’s direct responsibility. He is reported to have remarked that he had heard of men having to “hold the baby” but that in this command it was “twins”; it would have been correct to have said “quintuplets”. Though five Commanders-in-Chief were to serve within his command, Wavell had been charged with the strategical direction of all their forces. The command was constituted to comprise “initially all land and sea areas including general regions of Burma, Malaya, Netherlands East Indies and Philippine Islands. . . .” He was designated “Supreme Commander . . . of all Armed Forces afloat, ashore and in air, of ABDA Governments, which are or will be (a) stationed in the area, (b) located in Australian territory, when such forces have been allotted by respective governments for service in or in support of the ABDA Area”.

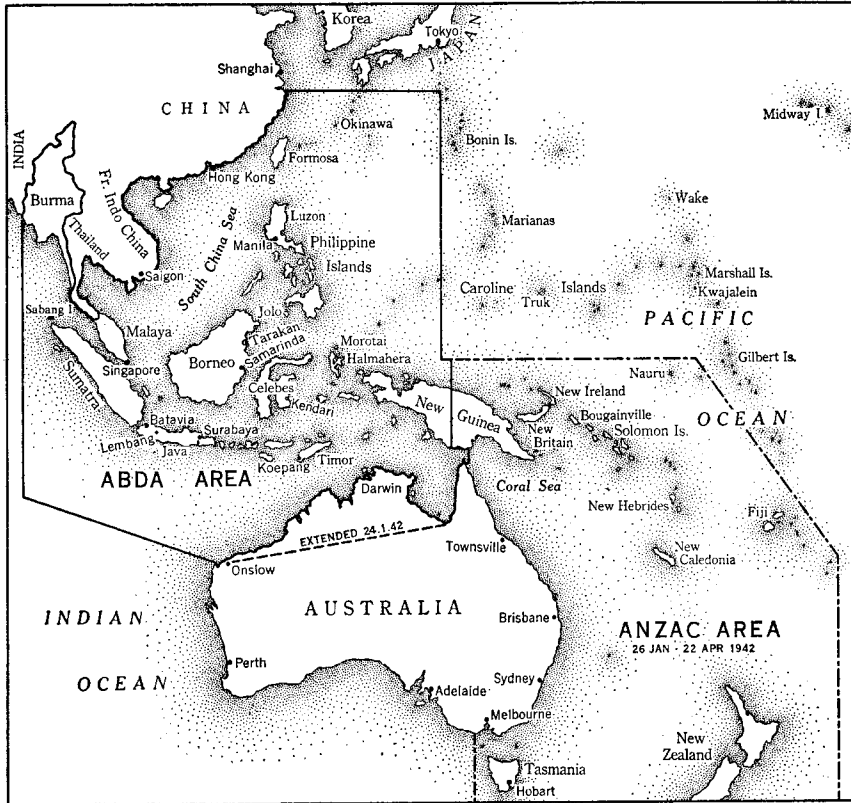
The strategic concept and policy of command, as set out in the directive was, “not only in immediate future to maintain as many key positions as possible, but to take offensive at the earliest opportunity and ultimately to conduct an all-out offensive against Japan”. The directive added, “The first essential is to gain general air superiority at the earliest moment through employment of concentrated air power. The piecemeal employment of air forces should be minimised. . . .”

Inclusion of Burma in the ABDA Area was for operational purposes only; administrative control remained with India Command. This was a result of compromise between the British and American viewpoints. The Americans held that since China should have every encouragement to press on with the war against the Japanese, Burma, providing the only supply route to China, should come within ABDA Command. The British view was opposed to divided command in Burma and to American control of communications which were essential to the British forces there.

Simultaneously with Wavell’s appointment as Supreme Commander, ABDA Area, General Chiang Kai-shek had been appointed Supreme

⁴ Churchill, Vol III, p. 600.

Commander of Allied Land and Air Forces in the China theatre. Eventually it was agreed that an American Army officer would command all United States forces in China and any Chinese forces that might be assigned to him; such of these forces as might operate in Burma would come under Wavell's command. The American commander would also control American supply services to China, including the Burma Road



The ABDA and Anzac Areas

operations and, if need be, and with the authority of the British Command, he would arrange additional bases in Burma and in India to support the Chinese war effort.⁵

ABDA Command's air component, named Abdair, was divided into 6 groups—Norgroup, in Burma; Wesgroup, comprising R.A.F. Far East Command in Malaya, northern Sumatra (including Palembang) and western Borneo; Cengroup, in western Java and southern Sumatra; Easgroup,

⁵ Lt-Gen Joseph W. Stilwell took up duty as Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-shek on 10th March 1942; on 19th March he assumed command of V and VI Chinese Armies in Burma.

in eastern Java and the islands to the east as far as Flores and Celebes (but not the Molucca Sea); Ausgroup in the Darwin area; and Recgroup, which consisted of all seaward reconnaissance units in the command—British, Dutch and American—with headquarters in Java.

The United States Asiatic Fleet, based on Surabaya, had no carriers, but some Catalinas of No. 10 Navy Patrol Wing had come down from the Philippines. Units of the Dutch Navy Air Force also operated Catalinas for air reconnaissance.

Wavell had few illusions about the strength he had available to meet that of the enemy. With the enemy then already established in Penang he did not consider that the air bases in northern Sumatra could be held. He knew that much depended on the capacity of the forces in Malaya to hold the enemy north of Johore until reinforcements arrived. After a second visit to Malaya on 13th January Wavell cabled to the Chiefs of Staff that the battle for Singapore would be "a close run thing".