

# A BITTER FATE

Australians in Malaya & Singapore

DECEMBER 1941 - FEBRUARY 1942



# A BITTER FATE

Front cover main picture:

*A gun crew of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment AIF in position on Singapore Island, looking north over Johore Strait. (AWM 012449)*

Back cover picture:

The air and ground crew of a Hudson of No. 8 Squadron RAAF at Kuantan.  
(Courtesy Rawdon 'Mick' Green)

**A BITTER FATE: AUSTRALIANS IN MALAYA & SINGAPORE,  
DECEMBER 1941 – FEBRUARY 1942**

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Commemorations Branch  
Department of Veterans' Affairs  
GPO Box 9998  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Phone: 02 6289 1111  
Email: [commemorations@dva.gov.au](mailto:commemorations@dva.gov.au)

Researched and written by Dr John Moremon, Historian, with Dr Richard Reid, Historian, Commemorations Branch, Department of Veterans' Affairs.

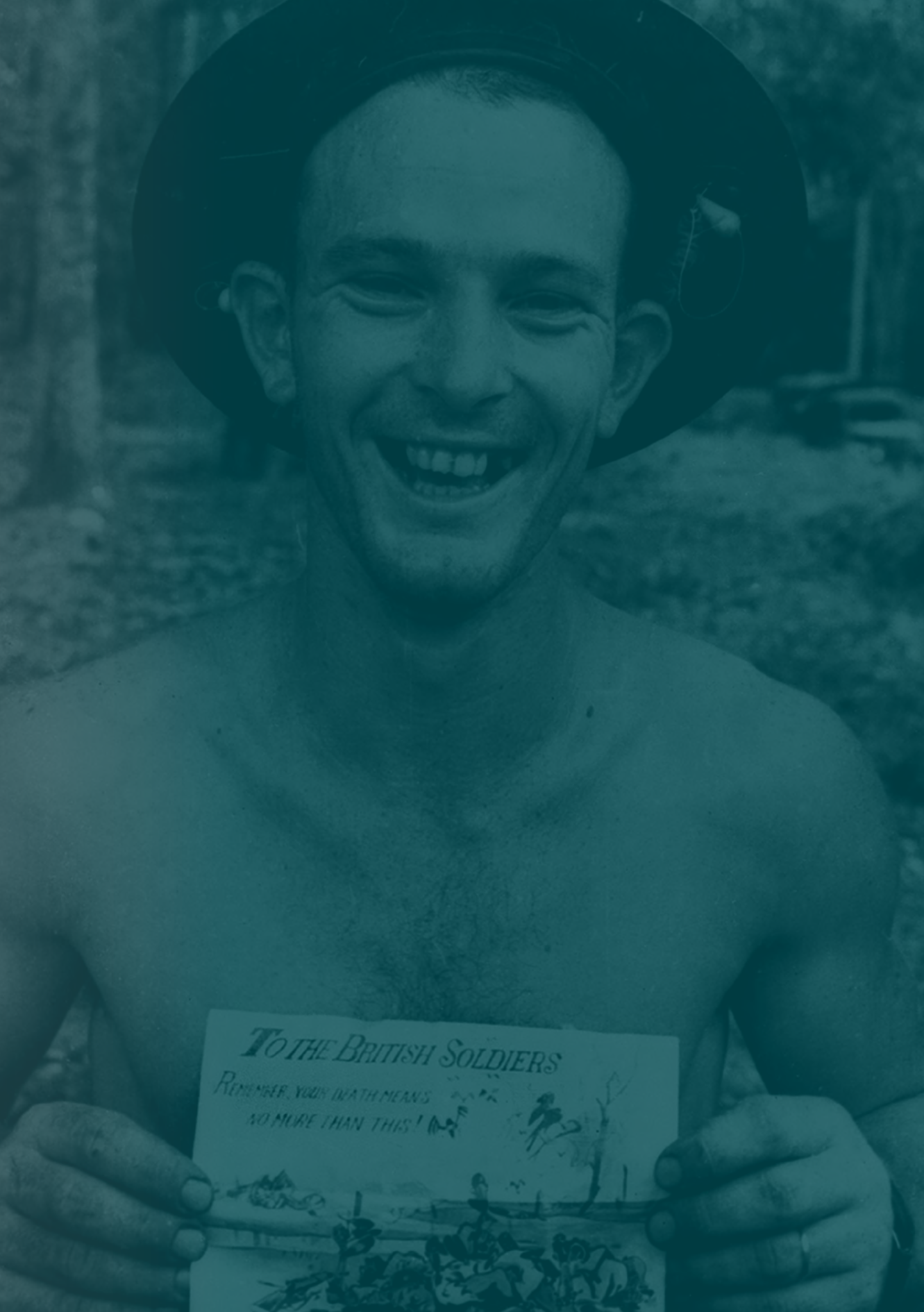
Consultant Historian: Dr Peter Stanley, Principal Historian, Australian War Memorial.

Map illustrations by Ian Skinner, Project Officer, Publications and Forms Unit, Department of Veterans' Affairs.

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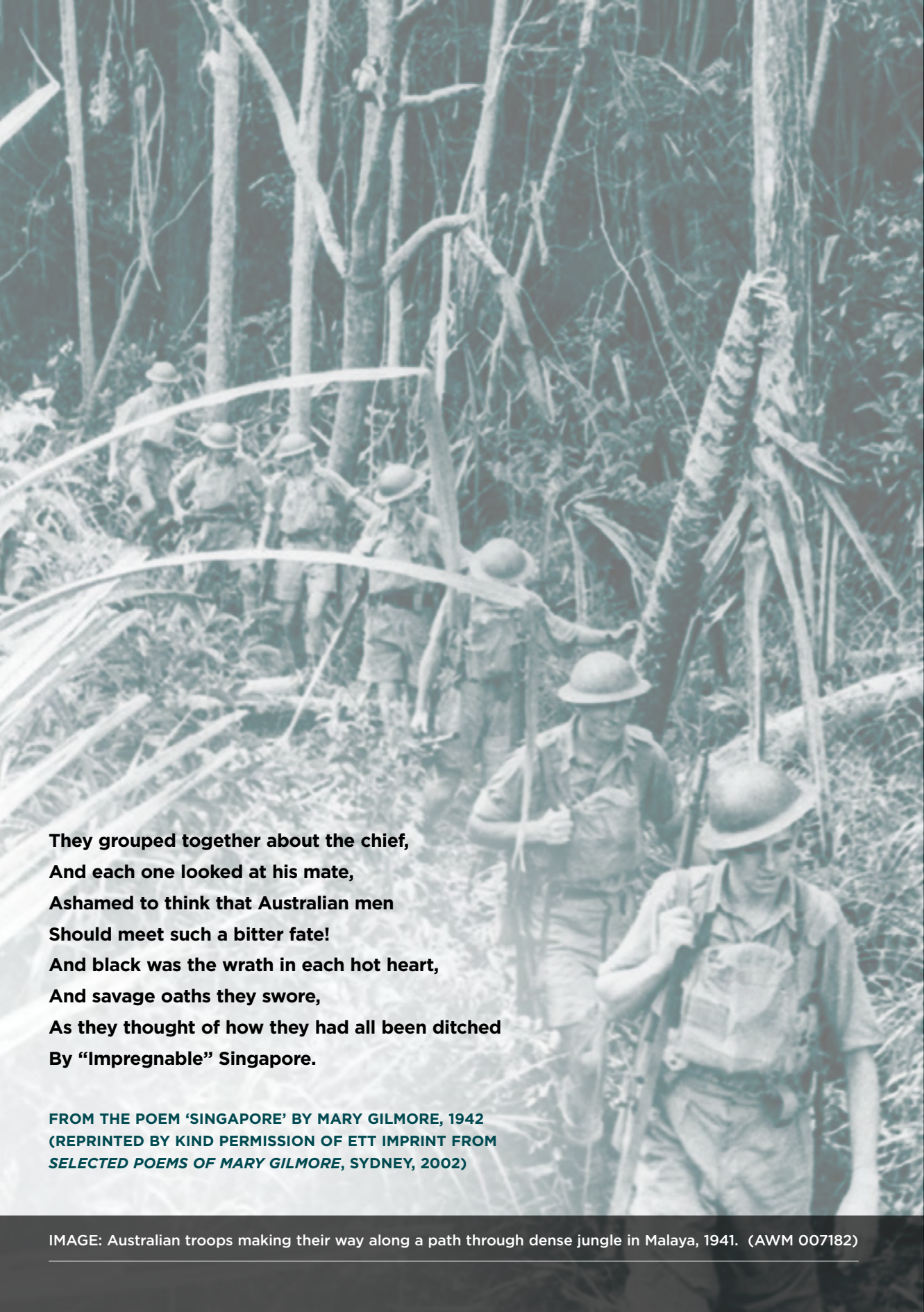
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*TO THE BRITISH SOLDIERS*

*REMEMBER, YOUR DEATH MEANS*

*NO MORE THAN THIS!*

A black and white photograph showing a line of Australian soldiers moving through a dense jungle. They are carrying supplies, including large bundles of fabric or equipment, and are dressed in military uniforms and pith helmets. The scene is filled with tall, thin trees and thick undergrowth, creating a sense of a challenging and isolated environment.

**They grouped together about the chief,  
And each one looked at his mate,  
Ashamed to think that Australian men  
Should meet such a bitter fate!  
And black was the wrath in each hot heart,  
And savage oaths they swore,  
As they thought of how they had all been ditched  
By “Impregnable” Singapore.**

**FROM THE POEM ‘SINGAPORE’ BY MARY GILMORE, 1942  
(REPRINTED BY KIND PERMISSION OF ETT IMPRINT FROM  
*SELECTED POEMS OF MARY GILMORE, SYDNEY, 2002*)**

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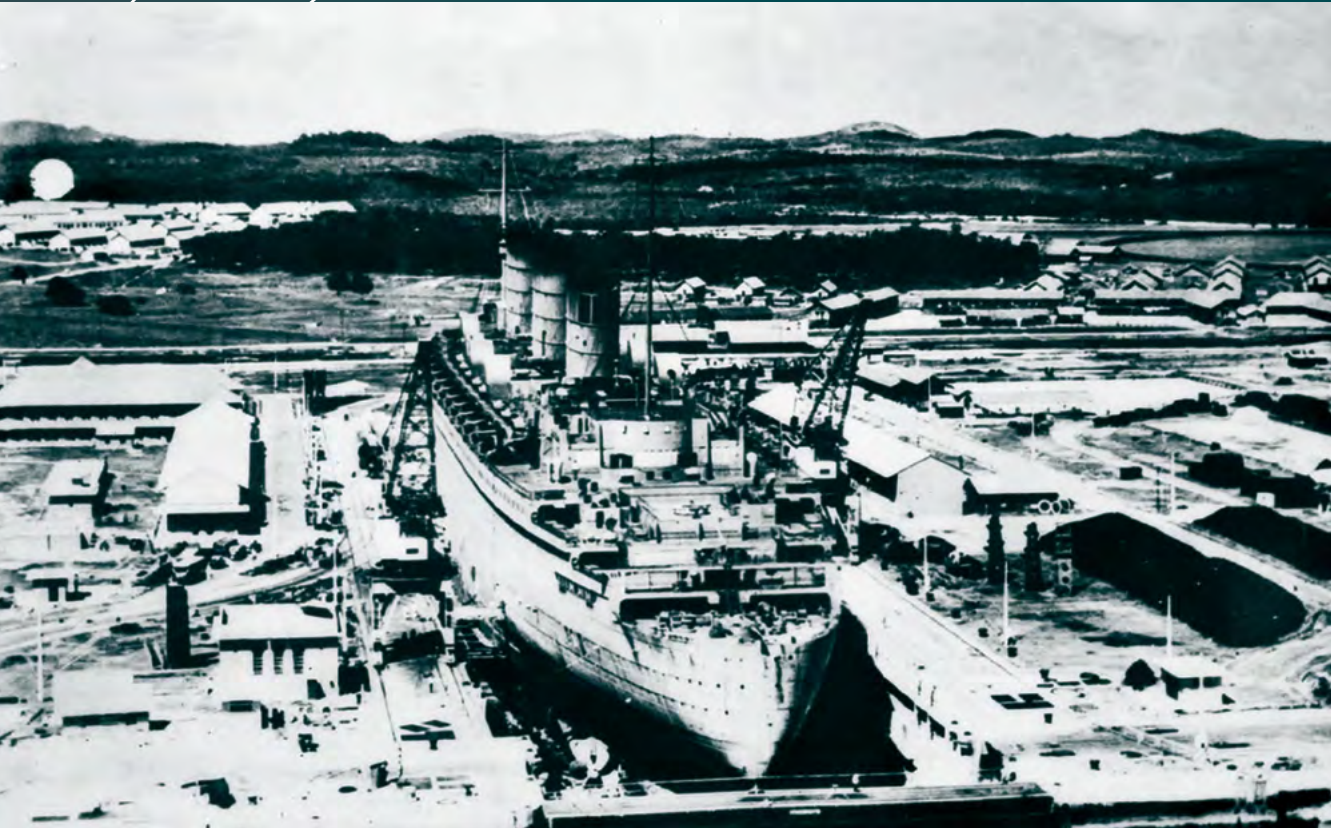
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# THE SINGAPORE 'FORTRESS'

'If Singapore were made impregnable as a base ... Australia would be reasonably safe.'

[Report on the Military Defence of Australia by a  
Conference of Senior Australian Officers  
of the Australian Military Forces, 1920]





## A BITTER FATE

**S**ingapore sat at the crossroads of the British Empire. Lodged between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, equidistant between the 'crown jewel' of India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south-east, and Hong Kong to the north, it was 'undoubtedly the naval key to the Far East'. In the early 1920s, Britain pledged to build a massive naval base at Singapore and to send a strong fleet to the Far East if its interests in the region, including Australia, were threatened. By the outbreak of war in 1939, Singapore had become, in the minds of many Australians, a potent symbol of imperial strength and security. Such was its perceived importance that when Australia sent forces to bolster Singapore's defences, many Australians felt that their men and women were defending the nation itself.

In the two decades before World War II, Australian defence policy was dominated by the 'Singapore strategy'. Defence planners readily identified Japan as the 'only potential and probable enemy' in the region. It had the world's third largest navy, after Britain's Royal Navy and the United States Navy, and in the 1930s its army gained operational experience against Chinese and Russian forces. Under the 'Singapore strategy', Australia and New Zealand reaffirmed their commitment to imperial defence and planned, if necessary, to again assist Britain in a time of war by sending forces to Europe or the Middle East; in exchange, Britain vowed to dispatch, if need be, warships from the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea to form a Far East Fleet based at Singapore. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was too small to engage the Imperial Japanese Navy unaided but it could contribute warships to this Far East Fleet and have others patrol Australia's sea lanes.

The British and Australian governments and their navies championed the 'Singapore strategy' but senior army officers argued that it was fundamentally flawed. The strategy assumed that the Royal Navy would have warships to spare for a Far East Fleet but, the army officers argued, if war erupted in Europe the Royal Navy would need to focus on protecting Britain's coast and sea lanes and thus could not divert a strong fleet to a far-flung outpost of the British Empire. In 1930, Colonel JD Lavarack, Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at Army Headquarters in Melbourne, declared: 'The issue is simple. Command of the Atlantic is of vital importance to the British people, command in the Far East is not'.<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER 1 THE SINGAPORE 'FORTRESS'

Irrespective of the 'Singapore strategy's' merits or shortcomings, the Australian people by and large believed it offered security to Australia. British and Australian politicians painted Singapore as an impregnable fortress and the promised Far East Fleet as a powerful deterrent to Japan. This popular faith in the 'fortress' became even more important in the late 1930s when many people feared that Japan was embarking on a path to war. One commentator declared: 'We can thank our lucky stars that we were all for Britain when she wished to build the Singapore base.'<sup>2</sup>



The naval and shipping facilities constructed at Singapore were impressive. The famous liner and troopship *Queen Mary* is pictured in the Graving Dock in August 1940. It later transported the first contingent of Australian troops to Singapore in February 1941. (AWM 128444)

After the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Australians clung to the Singapore 'fortress' for the hope it gave of deterring an opportunistic attack by Japan. Military officers, politicians and ordinary citizens feared that, with Britain preoccupied with the war in Europe, it was only a matter of time before Japan launched a southward offensive, and perhaps even an invasion of Australia. Australians continued to hope that the promised Far East Fleet would make up for the weaknesses in Australia's defences – particularly after the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was raised and the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions were dispatched to the Middle East.

## A BITTER FATE



A British warship undergoes a refit in the massive floating dock at Singapore Naval Base. (AWM 007748)

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Australian warships and thousands of airmen were also sent overseas to take part in the war against Germany and Italy.

On 28 June 1940, the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Lord Caldecote, conceded that Britain could no longer promise a Far East Fleet. The collapse of France meant that the Royal Navy had to contain the German fleet in the Atlantic and the Italian fleet in the Mediterranean without assistance. However, Caldecote argued that Singapore was still 'the key point in the Far East' and it was important to deny the naval base to the Japanese. He then produced an argument for bolstering the air and land defences throughout Singapore and Malaya:

***Owing to the increased range of aircraft and the development of aerodromes, particularly in Thailand, [which the Japanese could capture,] we can no longer concentrate on the defence of Singapore Island entirely, but must consider the defence of Malaya as a whole, particularly the security of up-country landing grounds. For this reason, and because we cannot spare a fleet for the Far East at present, it is all the more important that we should do what we can to improve our land and air defences in Malaya.***

[Lord Caldecote quoted in Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, Canberra, 1957, p. 19]

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## CHAPTER 1 THE SINGAPORE 'FORTRESS'

The Australian War Cabinet, under Prime Minister Robert Menzies, had already agreed to send a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadron of Lockheed Hudson bombers to Singapore to replace a Royal Air Force (RAF) squadron there. On 3 July 1940, after considering Lord Caldecote's message, the War Cabinet agreed to contribute a further two squadrons.

Later in the year, as concerns over the security of Singapore mounted, pressure to also contribute a ground force built. On 16 November 1940, the Australian Chiefs of Staff produced a report on a defence conference held at Singapore, concluding that 'the forces and equipment at present available ... for the defence of Malaya are totally inadequate to meet a major attack by Japan'. They recommended to the War Cabinet that a brigade of the 8th Division AIF be sent as a temporary measure until the Australian troops could be replaced by Indian garrison troops.



Prime Minister Robert Menzies committed Australian forces to the defence of Singapore and Malaya. (AWM 006127)

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The War Cabinet expressed 'grave concern' at 'the most serious position revealed in regard to the defence of Malaya and Singapore'. In December 1940, it offered the brigade group, which was gratefully accepted by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Over the following year, the Australian force deployed in defence of Singapore would more than double.<sup>3</sup>



'Stepping Stones?' cartoon by 'Wells' *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 20 February 1941

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Colonel JD Lavarack quoted in Brett Lodge, *Lavarack: Rival General*, Sydney, 1998, pp. 21-22
- 2 Ion L Idriess, *Must Australia Fight?*, Sydney, 1939, p. 22
- 3 Australian Chiefs of Staff and War Cabinet quoted in DM Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945*, Canberra/Sydney, 1982, pp. 52-53

# THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT

'I only wish I could get out of this country  
& over to the Middle East ... before this war ends. ...  
I really don't think the Japs will have a go.'

[Private AL Lever, 2/18th Battalion, letter to father, 13 October 1941,  
Australian War Memorial (AWM) PR01514]



## A BITTER FATE

**T**he Royal Australian Air Force, 2nd Australian Imperial Force and Royal Australian Navy all contributed units to the defence of Singapore and Malaya. Few of the men and women sent there relished garrisoning this outpost of the British Empire. Soldiers, in particular, reasoned that they had enlisted to fight, not traipse around jungles and rubber plantations.

The first Australian unit posted to Singapore was No. 1 Squadron RAAF. It was a general reconnaissance squadron but its Hudsons could also be used for bombing. Twelve aircraft departed a cold and windswept Laverton, Victoria, on 30 June 1940 and reached the hot and humid tropical island of Singapore on 4 July. It was the longest ferry flight undertaken by the RAAF up until that time. Ground staff and equipment followed by sea, and the squadron settled into RAF Station Sembawang.

The men had, of course, all heard of Singapore. Many had imagined 'the exotic East, the Far Eastern jewel of the far flung British Empire', but few knew what to expect. One man, who arrived in a later draft, recalled:

***Singapore was totally different from what I had imagined. I thought of it as thick jungle, thatched roof houses, snakes and wild animals everywhere. [But] as we left the wharf in the transport trucks we drove through streets teeming with people; there were push bikes, cars and rickshaws; coming out of the city we drove through hilly country fringed by rubber trees and vegetable gardens.***

[DG Scott, untitled memoir of service with No. 8 Squadron RAAF, 1984, AWM PR87/109]

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On 5 August 1940, another twelve Hudsons of No. 8 (General Reconnaissance) Squadron left Canberra, which was even colder and windier than Laverton. Despite wartime security, the aircrews were greeted at one stopover, Alice Springs, by a banner reading: 'Welcome to our Air Force heroes going to Singapore'. Ground staff boarded the troopship *Strathallan* at Sydney on 10 August. The ship called at Melbourne, where No. 21 (General Purpose) Squadron embarked, with its single-engine Wirraways dismantled for shipment to Singapore. In addition, forty-six administrative staff were posted to Singapore under Group Captain RJ Brownell, who was appointed to command RAAF Far East and also RAF Station Sembawang.

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT

The Australians commenced flying soon after arriving but had to challenge the 'working hours' set for other squadrons in Singapore. The British worked from 7.30 am to 12.30 pm, had lunch and rested for the afternoon, believing that white people who worked any longer in the tropics would suffer heat stress and tropical illnesses. RAAF commanding officers requested longer hours for the Australians, who were more used to heat, so that aircrews could become proficient at flying in the tropics, of which they had no previous experience; it would also help ground staff who had to inspect mechanical and electrical systems more frequently to combat mildew and corrosion brought on by frequent rain and high humidity. The officers reasoned that longer working hours would also help to uphold unit discipline and morale, as men sitting around all afternoon with nothing to do would become bored with the routine. The Australians were permitted to extend their working hours to 4.30 pm but RAF personnel at nearby Tengah and Seletar airfields viewed this development with disfavour.



Group Captain RJ Brownell, who commanded RAAF Far East and RAF Station Sembawang during 1940-41, was responsible for administration of RAAF units in Singapore and Malaya in this initial phase of deployment. He returned to Australia before the Malayan campaign began. (AWM 007599)

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Despite longer working hours, RAAF personnel still considered this posting 'the good life'. As Permanent Air Force personnel, who at this early stage of the war were mostly retained in Australia for home defence, they considered themselves lucky to be posted overseas. Although the standard of rations left much to be desired, accommodation blocks were comfortable and the men could play sport regularly and visit local attractions. Senior officers enjoyed fine hotels such as the famous Raffles and the company of local European women who were generally class - and rank - conscious.



## A BITTER FATE



Lockheed Hudson bombers of No. 1 Squadron on a training flight over Singapore Island, accompanied by a Wirraway of No. 21 Squadron. (AWM 006647)

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Junior officers, non-commissioned officers and other ranks found distractions in sightseeing, swimming, going to cinemas, shopping, dancing with Chinese women at the New World or Happy World dance pavilions, and, of course, the odd bout of rickshaw racing.

In February 1941, No. 8 Squadron left Singapore for northern Malaya. Their new airfield was about eight kilometres outside the town of Kota Bharu. Although 'the good life' continued, the new surroundings were not quite so comfortable. That month, the first fatal accident in Malaya occurred when a Hudson crashed into the sea, killing its crew of five.

On 4 February 1941, the first contingent of the 8th Division AIF to embark for overseas sailed through Sydney Heads on the famous liner and troopship *Queen Mary* - 'a grand way to go to war'. The 8th Division had been formed in July 1940 from troops who enlisted after the 'phoney war' ended with the invasion of France. The first contingent comprised the 22nd Brigade - 2/18th, 2/19th and 2/20th (New South Wales) Battalions - and supporting units, including a hospital. The men and women expected to serve in

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT

Europe or the Middle East but rumours about another destination began circulating after the troop convoy called at Fremantle and some soldiers prised open a case of booklets entitled 'Tactical Notes on Malaya'. Later, in the Indian Ocean, the *Queen Mary* suddenly left the convoy and headed north into the tropics alone.



A Hudson of No. 8 Squadron flounders in the surf after a forced landing due to a mechanical failure. The crew emerged unscathed. (Courtesy Rawdon 'Mick' Green)

The troops disembarked at Singapore on 18 February 1941. Most of the units were driven straight through the city and over the causeway linking Singapore Island with mainland Malaya. The Australians were allocated an area in the southern State of Johore in which to train. Outside of the large towns and villages, much of the area was clad in rubber plantations and jungles, so it was immediately obvious that it required training in 'jungle warfare'. Although their deployment to this area reflected the mounting concern that Japan would soon enter the war and attack Singapore, *The Daily Telegraph* was still able to report that 'Malaya is the last place in the world most of them expected to see'. Many feared they would be left out of the war altogether.

Major General H Gordon Bennett commanded the 8th Division. A prominent citizen soldier, he had proven himself in World War I to be a fierce fighter and leader, but he was also well known for his

## A BITTER FATE



Four members of the 2/19th Battalion watch from their train as it pulls out of Lawson, en route from Bathurst, where the 22nd Brigade had been training, on 2 February 1941. The men were headed to Sydney for embarkation. (From left) Privates Graham Bartley, Harry Gibbons, Gilbert Mant and Bill 'Shorty' Bridge all managed to survive the war – statistically against the odds. Mant, who at 38 was older than most of his fellow infantrymen, was returned to Australia in late 1941 on medical grounds and discharged. He went back to Malaya as a war correspondent, reporting from the forward areas, and after his escape from Singapore in the last days of the siege he published one of the first books on the AIF in Malaya, *Grim Glory*. So strong was the demand from families and friends of men and women missing in Malaya and Singapore for information about the campaign that *Grim Glory* was reprinted several times during the war. (AWM P00102.041)

prickly temperament, argumentative nature and proneness to quarrel. His relations with senior British commanders and staff in Malaya were, at times, strained, as he grappled to maintain control of the Australian troops. He was also frustrated that he never commanded a complete division. He had only the 22nd Brigade and supporting units in Malaya until August 1941 when the 27th Brigade – 2/26th (Queensland), 2/29th (Victoria) and 2/30th (NSW) Battalions – and its supporting units arrived. His third brigade, the 23rd, was split up and effectively lost to him, with one battalion posted to Rabaul and two to Darwin, and from there Ambon and Timor.

If there was one consolation for ending up in Malaya, rather than in the Middle East where the action was, it was that troops had a chance to tour places that few would have visited otherwise.

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT

Like their comrades in other parts of the world and the RAAF men who preceded them to Singapore, the men and women of the 8th Division went to places of entertainment and interest, and mixed with locals and service men and women from other parts of the British Empire. Sister Edith Howgate of the 2/10th Australian General Hospital (AGH) recorded her initial impressions of Malacca, where the hospital was established:



8th Division troops cheering for the camera in *Queen Mary's* main dining saloon on 14 February 1941. Statistically, between one-third and half of the men in this photograph would either have been killed in the campaign up to the Fall of Singapore or died later as prisoners of war. (AWM 006952)

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The 8th Division's commander, Major General H Gordon Bennett (right), with Lieutenant General AE Percival, General Officer Commanding Malaya. (AWM 134877)

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## A BITTER FATE



By February 1941, when the first contingent of the 8th Division AIF reached Singapore, there were ominous signs of Japanese intentions in the region. That month, General Tomoyuki Yamashita (left) was in Germany studying war strategy and presented a Samurai sword to Field Marshal Walter von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the German Army. Yamashita later commanded the Japanese XXV Army in its invasion of Malaya and Singapore. (AWM 073669)

***Queer sights everywhere to the unaccustomed eyes of we Australians. Animated Chinese dolls [children] watch from steps & mothers' arms. Beggars, no pavement, funny shops where a mixture of English & Malay is spoken. A good Kodak store, Post Office ... and big banks. ... In the evening we went to a cocktail party (called 'pahit' party here) given us by the English Hospital Nurses to officers of the AGH.***

[Howgate, diary entry, 20 February 1941, AWM PR91/045]

Sister Jessie Simons, who arrived later with the 2/13th AGH, at times 'felt more like a tourist than a member of an army unit'. But not all Australians were impressed by their new surroundings. Gunner WR Houlahan, 2/15th Field Regiment, felt that Singapore 'wasn't up to much, dirty, stinking, poverty, flies, houses falling down and I never did change my opinion'.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the combatant units and some supporting units found themselves in 'wild country' surrounded by rubber plantations and jungle. Bennett and the 22nd Brigade's commanding officer, Brigadier Harold Taylor, hoped that the force's deployment to Malaya might be temporary but they set about training their men for jungle warfare nevertheless. It was obvious that radical changes were required:

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT



Australian nurses, accompanied by a Scottish officer, stroll through a popular tourist attraction known as Haw Par Villa in September 1941. (AWM 009916)

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Australian officers rest in the Officers' Mess not long after arrival in Malaya. A popular pastime, at least until the troops had become acclimatised, was to seek refuge from the daytime heat and oppressive humidity. (AWM 005970)

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## A BITTER FATE

***Our textbooks, our tactical methods, our equipment, our clothing, had been designed for a European war. Recent desert fighting had modified methods to suit the desert. Jungle conditions were such that, while textbook principles were sound, the methods had to be varied fundamentally.***

[H Gordon Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, Sydney, 1944, p. 12]

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The first requirement was to make the troops 'jungle minded', which was not easy because most had been raised on terrifying tales of the jungles of 'Darkest Africa' and had seen frightening Hollywood depictions of the 'green hell'. Malays were hired to demonstrate 'jungle lore' and plantation owners assured the Australians that the only real terrors in the jungle were the seladang (a species of water buffalo) and hornets because 'all the rest will run away from you much faster than you can run away from them'. Even so, the men ventured into the murky jungle warily. Bennett recalled:

***They feared the eeriness, they dreaded the insects and the snakes, they hated not being able to see the dangers. They imagined that death lurked behind every tree; they could not move forward or backward except with great difficulty and they felt glued to a spot, with threats all round them.***

[Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 12]

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The new location required all motor transport to be repainted, covering over the desert camouflage originally applied for service in North Africa. (AWM 008503)

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Troops also trained in rubber plantations. Here, an Australian aims his rifle from behind a tree that has been tapped for rubber. (AWM 006377)

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## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT



Australian troops making their way along a path through dense jungle in May 1941. (AWM 007182)

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Private JA Roxburgh, 2/30th Battalion, which arrived with the second contingent, found it 'impossible to see the sun through the leaves high above, as the trees grew close together ... [and] we could not move off the track as the trees had vines growing over them'. On his second jungle trek:

***Everything went well till ... we entered marshy ground ... [and] found ourselves up to our thighs in mud, which took us all our time to get through. We all had a bit of the wind up as in these swamps are crocodiles, swamp snakes & leeches & we do not [yet] carry ammo. The leeches caused a lot of swearing, I can tell you.***

[Roxburgh, 2/30th Battalion, diary entry, 9 October 1941, AWM PR84/117]

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His platoon suffered its first casualty: a soldier concussed by a falling coconut!

Lance Corporal Erwin 'Curly' Heckendorf, 2/30th Battalion, wrote that 'some of the open country is worse than jungle', with hills covered by bracken about two metres high that the men found 'almost impossible to walk through ... without cutting a way ... [but] it gives when you hack at it so you just have to combine cutting & pushing to try & force a way through'.<sup>2</sup> Staff Sergeant S Mitchell wrote that one of his friends estimated he had 'walked about 5000 miles through jungle and rubber more or less' before he 'got fed [up] of walking all over Malaya ... and got himself a job in Divvy Intelligence'.<sup>3</sup>



## A BITTER FATE



One of the 'old soldiers' in the 8th Division was Private Raymond Coker. Born in 1900, he had put his age up to enlist in the 1st AIF in 1917 and served in the 2nd Light Railway Operating Company. He enlisted in the 2nd AIF in July 1940 and was posted to Malaya with the 2/4th Reserve Motor Transport Company. He died as a prisoner of war on 7 May 1945 at Sandakan, Borneo. (AWM P02143.002)

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This hard training kept medical staff of the 2/10th Australian General Hospital and later also the 2/13th AGH and 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station busy. Many troops suffered tropical diseases and eye, ear and skin infections that required days and sometimes weeks of hospital treatment. Sister Thelma Bell recalled that, in addition, 'The doctors were anxious to get going, and it seemed every man's tonsils came out, and every appendix'. Invariably, some men were injured in accidents or suffered sporting injuries and it turned out that others were just too old or unfit for service in the tropics. Like all of the divisions, the 8th Division included dozens of men who had served in World War I (and even two who had been in the Boer War) or had just missed out on account of their age. Most of these men served in supporting units, such as ordnance depots and motor transport companies, and during 1941 some had to be repatriated.

As the months passed, the routine of training in the hot, humid, jungle-clad country wore thin. When the Australians had first arrived, Acting Prime Minister Arthur Fadden predicted that 'like their mates in Libya, [they] will worthily uphold the traditions of the old AIF', but the troops grew sick of waiting. They came to despise the climate, terrain, vegetation and, worst of all, inaction.



## MATRON OLIVE PASCHKE RRC

2/10TH AUSTRALIAN  
GENERAL HOSPITAL AIF

Matron Olive Paschke RRC, photographed in 1941. (AWM P02426.001)

**O**live Dorothy Paschke was born on 19 July 1905 at Dimboola, Victoria. Educated at Dimboola State School, she was appointed a pupil-teacher in 1921 but later opted for a career in nursing. She trained at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital for Women and Children, gaining her nursing certificate in 1934. She also qualified for certificates in midwifery and infectious diseases.

Paschke returned to Dimboola, and was matron of Airlie Private Hospital for four years. She was then appointed assistant-matron of the Jessie McPherson Community Hospital, in Melbourne.

On 23 July 1940, Paschke enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service as a staff nurse. She was promoted to matron in January 1941 and posted to the 2/10th Australian General Hospital (AGH), which sailed early the following month. Paschke quickly won the respect and affection of her nursing staff with her boundless energy, intelligence, compassion, good humour and willingness to work long hours in the wards. She was popular with nurses, medical officers, orderlies and patients alike.

In October 1941, Paschke was recommended for the Royal Red Cross, 1st class, which was awarded in the New Year's Honours List. Major General Bennett signed off on her commendation:

*Matron Paschke has, by her enthusiasm and by her unfailing attention to duty given exceptionally good service to the AIF in Malaya. On the arrival of the first contingent of troops, a large number of cases of sickness had to be handled. She, with her nursing staff, facilitated the establishment of a hospital and provided the necessary comfort for the patients. Her work was well above average in its efficiency. Her unflagging zeal and cheerfulness and long hours of duty have been an inspiration to the nursing staff and have been particularly valuable under the difficult conditions of the tropics.*

## MATRON OLIVE PASCHKE RRC

When the 2/13th AGH and 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station arrived in Malaya, with more nurses, Paschke was made principal matron.

During the campaign, Paschke worked under taxing and traumatic conditions but maintained her bearing and demeanour. Perhaps her hardest decision was selecting the first nurses to be evacuated:

***Poor Matron! What a decision she had to make! In her usual calm manner she assembled as many of us as she could, then simply divided us into two groups - those on the one had to go, those on the other to stay. There was no time for anything else - and everyone wanted to stay and carry on.***

[Betty Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, Sydney, 1954, p. 2]

On 12 February 1942 Paschke, Matron Irene Drummond and the other 63 nurses still on Singapore were evacuated. Paschke and Drummond pleaded to stay, to no avail.

Paschke realised they had only a slim chance of reaching safety. On the *Vyner Brooke*, she ordered her nurses to prepare dressings and bandages, distributed life-jackets, and gave instruction in life-boat drill. A non-swimmer, she jokingly asked Sister Betty Jeffrey to help her swim if they had to abandon ship. Paschke's organisation paid off when the *Vyner Brooke* was sunk on 14 February. Sister Jessie Blanch recalled: 'There was no

trouble, no worry, because Matron had given us lifeboat drill. She was a marvellous woman, and we just knew where to get off.'<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey searched for Paschke in the water, finally spotting a raft:

***There was Matron, clinging to this crowded thing. She was terribly pleased with herself for having kept afloat for three hours, and as she was no swimmer I quite agreed with her. Never have I met such an amazing spirit in any person.***

[Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, p. 8]

Paschke climbed into the raft and assisted with rowing that afternoon and through the night, constantly offering encouragement. Three times they nearly reached shore but each time currents swept the raft out to sea. They floated into the midst of a Japanese fleet but were not rescued. In an attempt to lighten the raft, two nurses and two sailors began swimming alongside. They watched helplessly as the raft containing Paschke, five other nurses, four or five civilian women and two children was caught in a strong current and swept into the open sea. Jeffrey lamented: 'We didn't see Matron Paschke and those sisters again. They were wonderful.'<sup>2</sup>

## FOOTNOTE

- 1 Blanch quoted in Dorothy Angell, *The Sinking of the 'Vyner Brooke'* [www.angellpro.com.au/vynerbrooke.htm](http://www.angellpro.com.au/vynerbrooke.htm)
- 2 Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, p. 11

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT



Three nurses of the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station, happy to be serving overseas, photographed soon after their arrival in Malaya in late 1941. Of the three, only Sister Mavis Hannah (centre) survived the war, as a prisoner of war in Sumatra. Matron Irene Drummond (right) was killed in the massacre of nurses on Banka Island on 15 February 1942 and Sister Dora Gardam (left) died on 4 April 1945 as a prisoner of war. (AWM 120519)

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Gilbert Mant, who served in the 2/19th Battalion before becoming a war correspondent, observed men developing ‘a hatred of Malaya almost amounting to a phobia, and they loathed their standing as garrison troops’.<sup>4</sup> By late 1941, Private AL Lever, 2/18th Battalion, whose brother had been killed at Tobruk, detested ‘this land of jungle & heat’:

***I only wish I could get out of this country & over to the Middle East where those dirty damn Huns are. That’s my one and only wish now, to get a go at a Hun before this war ends. If this happens I will be satisfied to go back to good old ‘Aussie’ once again. Somehow ... I really don’t think the Japs will have a go.***

[Lever, letter to his father, 13 October 1941, AWM PR01514]

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Others worried that they would end up ‘going tropical’ if they remained in Malaya for too long. Scores of applications were made for transfers to units outside Malaya, but few were successful.

## A BITTER FATE



Australians take part in a funeral procession in August 1941 to pay their respects to a deceased Chinese man. Some men, in particular other ranks, developed friendships with Malays, Singaporeans and Chinese with whom they mixed on leave. (AWM 009350)

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An infantry patrol poses for war correspondents accompanying a field exercise. Infantry and other combatant troops, including artillerymen and field engineers, continued training in rubber plantations and jungle. (AWM 007179)

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In July 1941, some 40 men from the first contingent got out by volunteering for 'Mission 204', a special force sent to Burma and then China to train Chinese guerrillas.

The general mood of discontent was not helped by a series of articles published in *The Women's Weekly* not long after the first troops arrived. The journalist, Adele Shelton, showed men training hard but it seems that families and friends were more taken by her stories portraying 'the glamour of the East': 'They're having fun',

April 12, 1941

The Australian Women's Weekly

11

# THEY'RE KEEPING COOL: *Two kinds of bathing*



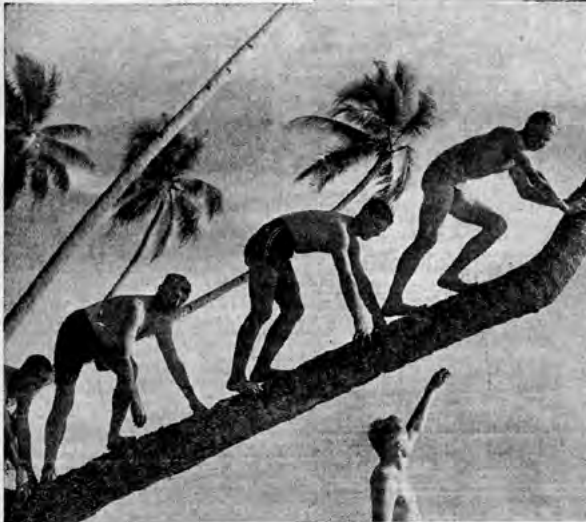
**SUNDAY** swimming party at seaside home of Mr. Chan, Chinese millionaire rubber planter, one of many wealthy Chinese hosts of A.I.F.



**PRIVATES R. MELLOR** and E. J. Hutchinson, of Victoria, chatting with one of their hosts. Cars go to camps to fetch troops to seaside.



**BATHING** Malayan fashion in Shanghai jar. Made of brown earthenware. It's glazed jade-green inside and decorated with native designs. Private Cecil Richardson likes it!



**LIVELY AS MONKEYS**, four A.I.F. lads climb a Malayan palm. In tropic heat frequent bathing is a lifesaver and residents see no soldier is without opportunity to swim on leave.



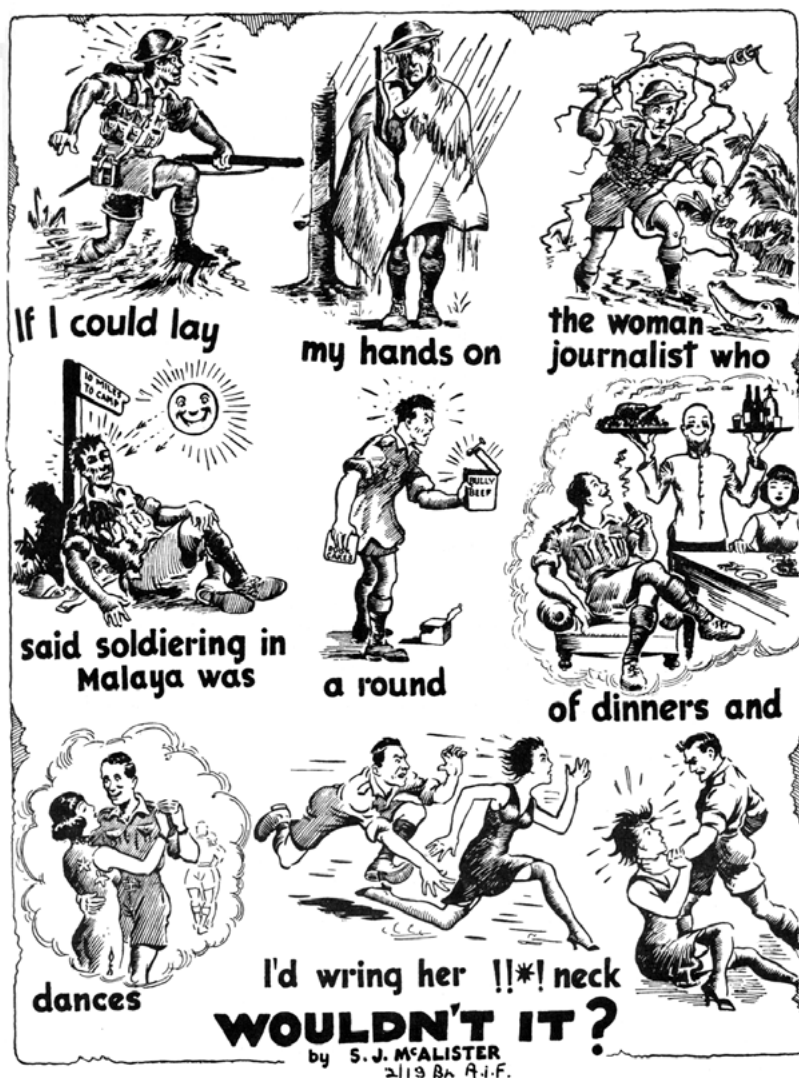
**JUST LIKE HOME**. It might be Palm Beach sands they're racing over. Training doesn't leave them short of energy.

Photographs by Wilfred ("Bill") Brindle, Australian Women's Weekly photographer.

Some aspects of service in Malaya highlighted by *The Women's Weekly*.  
(Courtesy Australian Consolidated Press and National Library of Australia)

## A BITTER FATE

'Sunday swimming party', 'Follow this AIF rickshaw race', 'Sarong siesta', and (of the nurses) 'They treat us like film stars'. A few months later, men began receiving letters from wives and girlfriends asking what the troops 'were doing towards the war effort' or remarking that they 'knew how to have a gay time also'. Lionel Wigmore, who worked in Malaya for the Australian Department of Information and later was Australia's official historian of the campaign, commented: 'Such remarks, made in ignorance of the toil, sweat and tedium of the men's lot, bit into the feelings of many.'<sup>5</sup>



The real nature of service in Malaya according to the troops. (Reprinted from RW Newton, *The Grim Glory of the 2/19 Battalion AIF*, Sydney, 1975, p. 106)

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT



A line-up of Brewster Buffalo fighters of No. 453 Squadron RAAF at Sembawang in November 1941. (AWM 100117)

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Fighter pilots appeared confident in publicity shots like this one, however the Australians of Nos 21 and 453 Squadrons were inexperienced and their aircraft were almost obsolete. They did not necessarily appreciate these facts at the time. (AWM 007312)

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Dissatisfaction began to show outwardly, with satirical notices tacked on the outside of tents and huts: MENZIES' GLAMOUR BOYS; WE CAME HERE FOR GLORY AND ALL WE GOT WAS GLAMOUR; WHEN DO WE FIGHT? These were not signs of low morale but rather a means of 'letting off steam'. Officers kept a close eye on the situation and pressed on with training.

In August 1941, No. 453 Squadron RAAF joined the garrison. It was nominally an RAF squadron but was made up of Australian pilots trained under the Empire Air Training Scheme with Australian ground staff, hence the RAAF designation. Ground staff had been assembled at Bankstown, New South Wales, and were told to sort



## A BITTER FATE

themselves into two groups, with fate taking those who stepped into one ring to Malaya and the others to England. The squadron was equipped with Brewster Buffalo fighters, obsolescent aircraft rejected for use in Europe, and No. 21 Squadron converted to Buffaloes so that the RAAF now boasted two fighter squadrons and two general reconnaissance/bomber squadrons in Malaya. By December 1941, No. 1 Squadron had moved north to Kota Bharu and No. 8 Squadron shifted to Kuantan; No. 21 Squadron was stationed at Sungei Patani in north-west Malaya; and No. 453 Squadron and part of No. 8 Squadron remained at Sembawang.



HMAS *Goulburn*, one of the first two RAN corvettes deployed to Singapore. The corvettes did not have camouflage applied at this time. (AWM 072854)

In addition, over 100 Australians were serving in Royal Air Force units in Malaya. Most were graduates of the Empire Air Training Scheme, with about half serving in Nos 36 or 100 Squadrons RAF as observers or wireless/air gunners, flying in Vickers Vildebeest biplane torpedo-bombers that had been declared obsolete in 1940. (They were due to be replaced by Australian-built Bristol Beauforts.) Others flew in Bristol Blenheim bombers in Nos 34, 60 or 62 Squadrons RAF, Blenheim night-fighters of No. 27 Squadron RAF, or in Catalina flying-boats of No. 205 Squadron RAF. Some technicians served in RAF signals, radar and radio maintenance units.



Men of the 2/19th Battalion's Intelligence Section pause to study a map during a reconnaissance patrol near Jemaluang in November 1941. From left: Private SJ McAlister, Private Murray, Sergeant WH Tozer, Private VPH (Vern) Benjamin, with Private Gordon Smith at rear. (AWM P00102.042)

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The RAN also contributed to Singapore's defences. In June 1941 two corvettes, HMA Ships *Burnie* and *Goulburn*, docked at the Naval Base, followed in August by HMAS *Bendigo* and in November by HMAS *Maryborough*. The corvettes formed the 21st Minesweeping Flotilla under Commander GL Cant, RAN, who was also *Maryborough's* captain. Cant had previously commanded the destroyer HMAS *Vendetta* as part of the 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' supplying Tobruk. The flotilla patrolled around Singapore and up Malaya's east coast. On 29 November 1941, the corvettes were given a special task:

***There was excitement mixed with apprehension when we learned that we were sweeping the Strait ahead of the battleship Prince of Wales and the [battle] cruiser Repulse. The dispatch of the capital ships to Singapore could only mean that war with Japan was imminent.***

[Brian Ogle, *The History of HMAS Maryborough*, Sydney, 1992, p. 24]

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The two capital ships and six destroyer escorts were all that the Royal Navy could spare for its promised Far East Fleet. One of the destroyers was HMAS *Vampire*, which had also served in the 'Scrap Iron Flotilla'. The fleet made an impressive sight as it sailed into Johore Strait and anchored off the Naval Base on 2 December 1941.

## A BITTER FATE



The British battleship *HMS Prince of Wales*, part of Force Z. It was photographed a few days after arriving at Singapore, preparing to leave harbour for battle. (AWM 041562)

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Most felt reassured by the presence of the fleet, which was designated Force Z.

By December, the Australian troops of the 22nd Brigade had been in Malaya for nearly seven months and those of the 27th Brigade for over two months. Their training had proceeded well and it was clear that they had surpassed most of the British and Indian units in Malaya; only the 2nd Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, which had been training for jungle warfare since late 1939, was able to better the Australians.

With the arrival of force Z and increased defence preparations, many troops began to believe, even hope, that they might end up fighting in Malaya. On 9 November 1941, Staff Sergeant Mitchell wrote to a friend:

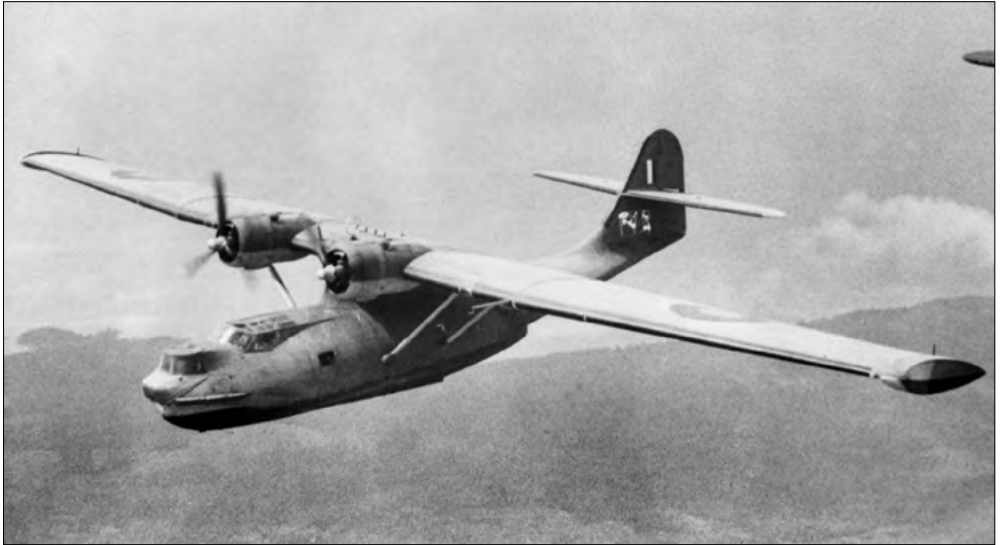
***There are times when we think that it might get a go on and advices from Aussie leads one to believe that over there you anticipate a little trouble in these parts any day now. ... Well if we have to fight them we'll give them a run for their money I'm sure and when all is said and done we joined up to fight.***

[Mitchell, letter to F Murphy, 9 November 1941 AWM 3DRL/6451]

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The threat of invasion developed rapidly. On 6 December 1941, a Hudson piloted by Flight Lieutenant JC Ramshaw, No. 1 Squadron, spotted a Japanese fleet comprising a battleship, five cruisers, seven destroyers and twenty-two transport ships about

## CHAPTER 2 THIS LAND OF JUNGLE AND HEAT



A Catalina flying-boat of No. 205 Squadron RAF on patrol over the coast of Malaya. Several RAAF men, including Sergeant Colin Treloar, the first Australian killed in action in Malaya, served in the squadron. (AWM 009453)

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425 kilometres off Kota Bharu. A floatplane was catapulted, so Ramshaw took cover in the clouds and his wireless operator, Sergeant LC Kennedy, signalled the news to base. Soon afterwards, another Hudson crew spotted a second fleet of comparable size. Monsoonal rain then hid both fleets and the British commanders and staff in the Combined Operations Room at Singapore could only guess as to their destination.

More aircraft were dispatched to try and locate and track the fleets. One of the aircraft was a Catalina of No. 205 Squadron RAF, in which Sergeant Colin (Ike) Treloar, RAAF, was the navigator. The Catalina left Singapore several hours before daybreak on 7 December but it failed to return from the mission and its crew of eight was reported missing. In fact, they had located one of the fleets but Japanese fighters shot down the Catalina, which crashed in flames into the ocean, with no survivors. Thus, one day before the Malayan campaign began, Treloar became the first Australian serviceman killed as a result of Japanese action.

The prospect of war against Japan worried senior commanders deeply. Although the Australians generally were confident of their ability to fight, few troops realised how inadequate the defences of Malaya really were. The naval Force Z was too small to defeat an invasion force and RAF Far East Command had just 164 first

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line aircraft and 88 in reserve, most of them second-rate or obsolete, which was far short of the 334 modern aircraft requested. General Arthur Percival, General Officer Commanding Malaya Command, had III Indian Corps (over two divisions of Indian and British troops) in northern Malaya, the two Australian brigades in southern Malaya, and three brigades and garrison troops in Singapore. However, few of the British and Indian units were well trained. The Australians and the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders were probably the only troops confident in their abilities.

After the Japanese fleets were detected, the Australian units received the codeword 'Raffles', putting them on alert. The men and women were reinvigorated by the prospect of action. Private Lever remarked soon afterwards:

***... it looks like I may get a smack at the dirty yellow cows ... we are expecting them so they will sure enough get a warm reception when they do attack here, if ever!***

[Lever, letter to his father, 14 December 1941, AWM PR01514]

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### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jessie Elizabeth Simons, *While History Passed: The story of the Australian nurses who were prisoners of the Japanese for three and a half years*, Melbourne, 1954, p. 1; Houlahan, transcribed diary and memoir of service, AWM PR88/052
- 2 Heckendorf, letter to his mother, 17 September 1941, AWM PR00686
- 3 Mitchell, letter to F Murphy, 9 November, 1941, AWM 3DRL/6451
- 4 Gilbert Mant, *The Grim Glory*, Sydney, 1942, p. 98
- 5 Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, Canberra, 1957, pp. 71-72

# THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES

'We have not seen any action yet,  
but I suppose we will, sooner or later;  
the sooner the better, that's what  
all the boys think.'

[Driver Wally Dyer, Australian Army Service Corps,  
undated letter, AWM PR00711]



## A BITTER FATE

**T**he invasion of Malaya began shortly after midnight on 8 December 1941. Wing Commander RH Davis, commanding officer of No. 1 Squadron RAAF, was on duty in the operations room at RAF Station Kota Bharu when he answered a telephone call from the 8th Indian Brigade, positioned along the coast, reporting that three vessels were moving down the coast towards Kota Bharu. Davis was organising a reconnaissance flight at 12.30 am when he heard gunfire. Warships were shelling the beach defences and the Indians could see transport ships preparing to land troops.



A Lockheed Hudson of No. 1 Squadron RAAF on the airfield at Kota Bharu. The Hudsons were used to search for the Japanese fleets and then to attack the transport ships and barges landing troops at Kota Bharu. (P02266.005)

The British commander at Kota Bharu had to wait for permission from Air Headquarters in Singapore to launch an air strike. After a hurried conference, the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham, ordered bombing to begin.

Most of the men of No. 1 Squadron, along with those in British units nearby, were woken by the gunfire and began preparing for action. Davis had shrewdly placed six bombed-up Hudsons on standby and ordered that other serviceable aircraft be made ready. At 2.08 am, a Hudson piloted by Flight Lieutenant JAH Lockwood took off and six others followed at two and three minute intervals. Because of the nearness of the ships and the low cloud base that night, the pilots were ordered to make independent low-level attacks. Lockwood spotted three transport ships and dived to 50 feet (15 metres) to release his first two bombs, which missed their target, and in the face of anti-aircraft fire he made a second run and scored a hit.



Malayan campaign, 8 December 1941 – 31 January 1942



## A BITTER FATE

The other Hudsons also bombed the transport ships but one was shot down, with its four crewmen killed. Flying Officer Don Dowie, an observer in a Hudson, recalled:

***The entire mission must have taken only a few minutes as when we landed from that first run, I realised I was still smoking the same cigarette I had lit just before take off. We bombed up again and our crew led the second attack.***

[Dowie quoted in Christopher Shores and Brian Cull, *Bloody Shambles: The Drift to War to the Fall of Singapore*, London, 1992, p. 81]

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Dowie was shot down. His crewmates were killed but a Japanese vessel rescued Dowie, thus earning him the dubious distinction of the first Australian prisoner of war captured in Malaya. Flight Lieutenant JT O'Brien recalled one of his bombing runs:

***I encountered considerable light ack-ack fire ... but took violent avoiding action and dropped my stick of four 250-pounders across its bows, getting a direct hit. It is possible that my other bombs did considerable damage to the barges which were clustered round the sides of the vessel, but it was too dark to say definitely. There was considerable barge activity from the merchant vessel to the beach, and there was no scarcity of targets, which we machine-gunned as opportunity offered while returning to the aerodrome.***

[O'Brien quoted in Douglas Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, Canberra, 1962, pp. 210-11]

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All three transport ships were damaged in these attacks and at 4.30 am Flight Lieutenant KC Douglas scored a direct hit on one of the ships with a 'stick' of four bombs. The explosions lifted the ship out of the water, and it then burnt and later sank. By daylight, seventeen sorties had been flown, but the enemy had landed many troops and Indian strongpoints had fallen.

Singapore experienced its first air raid at 4.15 am. The city was 'lit up like a gin-palace' and the civilian population received no effective warning. Seventeen bombers targeted Keppel Harbour, the Naval Base and airfields at Seletar and Tengah, but many bombs landed in Chinatown where sixty-one civilians were killed and others were injured. HMAS *Bendigo* was anchored off the Naval Base:

### CHAPTER 3 THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES

*Most of us were sleeping in the cool of the upper deck ... we awoke to the dismal wail of sirens and, yawningly, watched the searchlight beams playing across the sky. Soon they picked up a formation of ... planes and suddenly the shore based anti-aircraft batteries opened up. Shells began bursting in scarlet flames among the oncoming aircraft. We were staggered! ... "Holy Smoke" yelled one of our signalmen, "It IS dinkum." We sprang up and scattered for cover. ... The shore batteries were now in full blast and had been joined by the Prince of Wales and Repulse which were throwing up barrages that seemed to rock the very island of Singapore.*

[Ley Jenkins quoted in Wally Eves (ed.), *HMAS Bendigo*, 1995, p. 17]

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On the morning after Singapore was bombed, these five sappers of Headquarters Royal Australian Engineers, 8th Division, marked the momentous occasion by posing in front of one of their lorries. All five survived the campaign but only one, Sapper Rae Brown, survived captivity. (AWM P00086.004)

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## A BITTER FATE

At Sembawang, which was not bombed, three Buffaloes of No. 453 Squadron were ready to fly but their pilots were refused permission to take off in case the anti-aircraft guns shot them down. The squadron's diarist wrote: 'So the war in the Far East has started. Well, they've asked for it!'

In Johore, AIF troops awoke to bombers droning overhead and later they heard the rumble of anti-aircraft fire and bombs exploding. At the 2/13th Australian General Hospital at Tampoi Hill, just across Johore Strait from Singapore Island, staff and patients gathered in groups for a grandstand view of the raid. Sister Simons recalled: 'We were rather glad that the suspense was over, but nobody dreamed how fast things were going to happen from then on.'<sup>1</sup>



Sisters of one of the Australian General Hospitals writing letters home before the start of the campaign. Life for the medical staff would be much more hectic – and dangerous – in the weeks leading up to the Fall of Singapore. (AWM 009921)

As the day dawned, there was excitement and enthusiasm. Few entertained the idea that Singapore might fall. Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, 2/13th AGH, wrote that 'the boys say we are no longer the militia of Malaya but the AIF. They are all terribly excited and you have no idea how hard it is to keep them in hospital.' The two Australian General Hospitals faced an increased workload immediately as hospitals in Singapore cleared wards to cope with expected air raid casualties. Such precautions delivered a sombre note. When a senior medical officer remarked to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hamilton, commanding officer of the 2/4th



Members of the Australian War Cabinet watch the Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, signing the declaration of war against Japan. (From left) FM Forde, Minister for the Army, John Curtin, Prime Minister, F Strahan, Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department (standing), and Lord Gowrie. (AWM 010690)

Casualty Clearing Station, that he might end up with a decoration, Hamilton replied: 'The only decoration I want is a returned soldier's badge in the lapel of a civilian coat when I reach home. I've got a wife and youngsters back there.'<sup>2</sup>

In combatant units, training and defence preparations were intensified. One soldier remarked: 'Our six bob a day tourist existence was brought to an abrupt end.' Men were placed on guard at key locations to prevent sabotage and spying by 'fifth columnists' (civilians or spies assisting the Japanese). Few doubted that spies were about. When the 2/10th Field Regiment was re-equipped in early January 1942, the radio announcer 'Tokyo Rose' apparently was heard to say: 'Hello to the 2/10th Field Regiment. How do you like your new 25-pounders? Enjoy them while you can, as you are not going to have them for very long.'

Two RAN corvettes were patrolling the seas around Singapore when the invasion started. That morning, they swept for mines and searched for Japanese civilian vessels attempting to escape from Singapore. About midday, HMAS *Maryborough* intercepted a fishing boat, the *Fukuyu Maru*, the first Japanese vessel captured by an Allied warship. British warships intercepted more fishing boats, and HMAS *Goulburn* escorted two back to Singapore. (One of

## A BITTER FATE

these boats, the *Kofuku Maru*, was later renamed *Krait* and used in the famous commando raid on Singapore in August 1943.)

That same day, the old destroyer HMAS *Vendetta* arrived at Singapore for a scheduled refit. Despite the outbreak of hostilities and the fact that a refit would leave the ship unserviceable for several weeks, work began almost immediately. Meanwhile, the armed merchant cruiser HMAS *Manoora*, which had been anchored at the Naval Base for a few days while refuelling and restocking, set sail for the open seas. Its sister ship, HMAS *Kanimbla*, was sailing down the west coast of Malaya from Penang and also called at Singapore before escorting a convoy out of Singapore and then heading for Australia.

In northern Malaya, all available fighters and bombers were made ready to support III Indian Corps, which bore the brunt of the invasion. At dawn, No. 8 Squadron at Kuantan dispatched three flights of Hudsons to attack shipping at Kota Bharu but the Japanese fleet had withdrawn, leaving only a burning troopship and barges. Flight Lieutenant CH 'Spud' Spurgeon was strafing barges when his Hudson was hit by ground fire:

***I can remember a considerable note of surprise, somebody was actually shooting back. It frightened me too, a hell of a bang. ... I suppose we ran around strafing barges for twenty minutes. Anyway I decided to belt my bombs ... and of course in my anxiety and haste forgot all about fusing. We let them go, and got the bloody lot back. ... The shrapnel came straight through the aeroplane. There were no hydraulics, all the gauges disappeared off the clock. The airfield was a mile and a half [2.5 kilometres] away. I flung the thing on the airfield ... on its guts.***

[Spurgeon quoted in Hank Nelson, *POW, Prisoners of War: Australians Under Nippon*, Sydney, 1985, p. 13]

The antiquated Vildebeest torpedo-bombers of Nos 36 and 100 Squadrons RAF also went into the attack, along with Blenheims of Nos 27, 34, 60 and 62 Squadrons RAF. All of these British squadrons contained Australians. Sergeant Keith Burrill, an air gunner in No. 34 Squadron, won the Distinguished Flying Medal on this day for his outstanding skill and coolness in shooting down a Japanese fighter that had 'bounced' his Blenheim and inflicted serious wounds to his face and jaw. Several men in the RAAF Hudson squadrons, including Spurgeon, would also be decorated for their part in this and other actions in Malaya.

### CHAPTER 3 THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES



The air and ground crew of a Hudson of No. 8 Squadron RAAF at Kuantan.  
(Courtesy Rawdon 'Mick' Green)

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Nurses of the 2/10th Australian General Hospital at Malacca. (Back row, from left)  
Sisters Joy Bell, Gwendoline 'Buddy' Elmes and Pat Gunther. (Front, from left)  
Sisters Beryl Woodbridge, Betty Pyman and Nell Keats. (AWM P01180.004)

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## A BITTER FATE

Soon after the landing at Kota Bharu, the Japanese XXV Army also landed forces in Thailand to seize ports and airfields. British senior commanders had planned to forestall the Japanese by sending a force into Thailand from the west coast, but the force was not authorised to move in time. The 11th Indian Division attempted to seize a key position inside Thailand but was beaten there by the Japanese.



A Bristol Blenheim Mk I bomber on an airfield in Malaya. This 'short-nose' version of the Blenheim had been declared obsolete in all other theatres of the war, but they continued to be flown in Malaya alongside some of the newer 'long-nose' Mk IV version. (AWM 007305)

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Flying Officer CH 'Spud' Spurgeon of No. 8 Squadron RAAF crash-landed his Hudson at Kota Bharu after strafing enemy barges and bombing a transport ship off Kota Bharu. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions in the campaign but towards the end of the campaign he was shot down and captured. (AWM P00301.001)

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### CHAPTER 3 THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES

Two sections of the 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company AIF, which had been specially raised to serve with III Indian Corps, became the first Australian troops to serve operationally against the Japanese when they transported the 3/16th Punjab Regiment into Thailand. The 2/3rd Motor Ambulance Convoy also took part in this action. Private William 'Wally' Webb, 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company, recalled that it was 'our one and only advance of the whole campaign. Everybody was jubilant. This was the real thing at last'. The Australians soon worked out that something was wrong because 'wounded Indians were coming back in ambulances with astonishing regularity'.<sup>3</sup>

On the west coast, No. 21 Squadron also found itself in the thick of action. The Japanese launched an air offensive from airfields in Thailand and, as General Percival remarked, 'The performance of Japanese aircraft of all types, and the accuracy of their bombing, came as an unpleasant surprise'. The first raid on Sungei Patani occurred early in the morning but Squadron Leader WH Allshorn was refused permission to 'scramble' his Buffalo fighters. During the raid, two RAF airmen and sixteen Chinese women on a working party were killed, and workshops and aircraft were destroyed. A few hours later, Flight Lieutenant JR Kinninmont and Sergeant NR Chapman were on patrol in their Buffaloes when they encountered twelve enemy fighters. Kinninmont recalled:

***The sky seemed full of red circles ... the Japs all tried to shoot us down at once. I pulled up to meet one as he dived down. ... I was in such a hurry to shoot something that I didn't use my gun-sight. I simply sprayed bullets in his general direction. Somebody was on my tail and tracers were whipping past my wings. Chapman was turning and shooting with four Japs. I decided to get out. I yelled to Chapman 'Return to base. Return to base.' ... and went into a vertical dive. ... Of the three Japs that followed me down ... one stuck ... like a leech. ... As I watched him, my neck screwed around, I saw his guns smoke and ... a burst of bullets splattered into the Buffalo. ... It was then that I felt the first real fear in my life.***

[Kinninmont quoted in Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, p. 222]

Kinninmont overcame panic to escape the pursuing fighter. Both of the Australians returned to base safely, lucky to have survived. After another devastating air raid that day, only four of No. 21 Squadron's Buffaloes and a few Blenheims of No. 27 Squadron RAF remained serviceable at Sungei Patani and so, that first evening of the campaign, both of the squadrons were evacuated.



## A BITTER FATE



A publicity shot taken a few weeks before the campaign erupted shows pilots of No. 453 Squadron RAAF running to their Buffaloes in response to a 'scramble' order. During the campaign, enemy bombing and strafing would have decimated aircraft lined up in this fashion. (AWM SUK14775)

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Flight Sergeant Jack Woodward, an Australian in No. 27 Squadron, recalled leaving 'rather shaken, realising that what we had been told about the inefficiency of the Japanese and their poor flying ability, and also the false information passed on to us regarding their aircraft, was all just so much hog-wash'.<sup>4</sup>

By nightfall, Kota Bharu had also been abandoned. The ground staff of No. 1 Squadron had worked feverishly to repair, refuel and bomb-up Hudsons after each sortie but by day's end the squadron was down to five serviceable aircraft. Enemy bombing, strafing and ground fire from advancing troops prevented attempts to repair two others. The five Hudsons were flown out and the ground staff were driven 75 kilometres in lorries to board a train headed south. All squadron equipment was lost.

On the evening of 9 December, Kuantan, where No. 8 Squadron was based, was also evacuated – but in less than glorious circumstances. The airfield had been bombed and strafed several times, so Air Headquarters decided to evacuate the aircraft to Singapore until aerial cover could be arranged. However, there was

### CHAPTER 3 THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES



RAAF and RAF personnel walking away from Kuantan. They were picked up by motor transport and boarded a train headed south. The evacuation of their airfield was not authorised. (Courtesy Rawdon 'Mick' Green)

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a report of a Japanese fleet sailing towards Kuantan, which fuelled rumours of a complete withdrawal. All of the Australian ground staff and most of the British ground staff fled. Flight Lieutenant Roy Bulcock, an Australian serving in the RAF, wrote that 'I looked out on a deserted station ... For the first and last time I felt ashamed of being an Australian'.<sup>5</sup> Rumours and panic undermined the British Empire forces on many other occasions.

In response to the invasion, Force Z, comprising HM Ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* and their four destroyer escorts, had sailed on the afternoon of 8 December with the objective of engaging the enemy fleet in the South China Sea. HMAS *Vampire* was one of the destroyers and in addition five young RAN midshipmen were serving in *Repulse*. On the following day, some enemy reconnaissance aircraft detected the fleet and the planned naval action was cancelled. On 10 December, as the fleet (minus one of the destroyers, which had turned back) steamed towards Kuantan to investigate reports of enemy warships, Japanese aircraft attacked. They targeted the two capital ships, their attacks made easier by the lack of fighter cover for the fleet. *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* evaded three high-level bombing attacks but then

## A BITTER FATE

torpedo bombers 'seemed to appear from several directions'. Both warships were hit and *Repulse* sank soon after midday. The only Australian casualty in this action was Midshipman Robert Davies, who had fired enthusiastically at the attacking aircraft and then ignored the order to abandon ship and stayed strapped into his Oerlikon gun and continued to fire at enemy aircraft as *Repulse* sank. For his gallantry, Davies was posthumously mentioned in despatches.



The British battle cruiser HMS *Repulse* leaving Singapore on the afternoon of 8 December 1941. The crew of *Repulse* included five Australian midshipmen. (AWM 041563)

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The British battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* on fire and sinking after being hit by Japanese bombs and torpedoes on 10 December 1941. (AWM P01101.001)

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## MIDSHIPMAN GUY GRIFFITHS, RAN

*HMS REPULSE*

Guy Griffiths in 1939 when he was a third year cadet midshipman. (AWM P02817.001)

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**G**uy Griffiths was born in Sydney on 1 March 1923 and spent his early years in the Old Rothbury/Pokolbin district of the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. In January 1937, at the age of 13, he entered the RAN Naval College, HMAS *Cerberus*, Jervis Bay.

On graduation in December 1940, Midshipmen Griffiths, John Austin, Robert Davies, Bruce Dowling and Peter Gyllies were posted to Britain to serve in the cruiser HMAS *Australia*, which was then operating in the North Atlantic. After crossing to New Zealand, the five young midshipmen sailed to Britain as passengers in the merchant ship MV *Karamea*, sailing via the Panama Canal and east coast of the United States of America before crossing the Atlantic. Their 'welcome to the war' came a couple of days out of Glasgow, Scotland, when two German bombers attacked the ship, unsuccessfully.

HMAS *Australia* had already sailed for home so, in early March 1941, the midshipmen were posted to the British battle cruiser HMS *Repulse*.

From March to mid May *Repulse* was employed on convoy duty with calls at Gibraltar and Freetown, and at the end of May it took part in the search for the German battleship *Bismarck*. After a short refit, *Repulse* escorted a convoy to the Indian Ocean and at Colombo in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) joined the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* for deployment to Singapore. The capital ships and their four destroyer escorts, which together comprised Force Z, arrived at Singapore on 2 December.

Griffiths' action station was in the forward 'computer' room which controlled the ship's anti-aircraft guns. He was at his station on 10 December when enemy aircraft attacked the two capital ships of Force Z in the South China Sea.

## MIDSHIPMAN GUY GRIFFITHS, RAN

The first high level bombing attack came at 11.00 am and *Repulse* was hit by a bomb midships. Griffiths could feel the ship manoeuvring but was only made aware of the first hit by telephone reports. Subsequently both *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were subjected to low-level attacks. *Repulse's* captain evaded 19 torpedoes dropped by the first wave of torpedo-bombers but luck did not hold out. Further attacks were made and the crucial one for *Repulse* came at 12.22 pm when, in the space of three minutes, the ship was hit by five torpedoes. Griffiths felt the explosions and instinctively knew that the ship was sinking:

***After the abandon ship order, it was a tense period but there was a rapid and orderly exit up ladders and so-on until one got to the mess deck ... where there were some portholes ... open. The ship was listing to port but we were still able to move up to the starboard side and get out of one of these portholes, slide down the ship's side and get into the water and swim.***

[Interview with Rear Admiral Guy Griffiths AO DSO DSC (Retd), 4 December 2001]

Griffiths swam towards the destroyer HMS *Electra* which, along with HMAS *Vampire* and HMS *Express*, picked up the survivors of the two sunken ships.

***I still had my shoes on, which made it a bit more difficult ... There were people in the water all around ... some were in oil, which was very nasty, some were on bits of debris, some on Carley floats, the sea was covered in people.***

Griffiths was hauled aboard *Electra*. The survivors were taken back to Singapore and disembarked that night, shocked and sombre. Next morning, after an issue of some clothing and kit, all surviving midshipmen from *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sent to HMS *Exeter*, which sailed for Colombo. After four days' survivor's leave, the four Australian midshipmen were posted to the battleship HMS *Revenge* – lucky, as it turned out, as *Revenge* remained in the Eastern Fleet in the Indian Ocean, whereas many of the British midshipmen were posted to warships that were sunk in Netherlands East Indies waters.

After returning to Britain for further training, Griffiths served in HMAS *Shropshire* from mid 1943 to the end of the war, seeing action in the south-west Pacific including the Leyte and Lingayen Gulf operations, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Battle of Suriago Strait.

As a gunnery specialist, he later saw service in the Korean war in the aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* and the destroyer HMAS *Anzac*. He commanded the frigate HMAS *Parramatta* (1961–63) and the guided missile destroyer HMAS *Hobart* (1965–67) in which he saw service in the Vietnam war, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His last command was the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* (1973–75).

In June 1976 Griffiths was promoted to rear admiral as Chief of Naval Personnel, and his final posting was as Flag Officer Naval Support Command. He was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (Military Division). Rear Admiral Guy Griffiths AO DSO DSC retired in January 1980 after 43 years' service.

### CHAPTER 3 THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES

Commander WTA Moran in HMAS *Vampire* was ordered to pick up survivors but as his ship approached the area where *Repulse* had sunk, another high-level bombing formation was observed. Initially, he thought the destroyers might now be targeted but the bombers attacked the damaged *Prince of Wales*. At least two hits were scored and the battleship began sinking. Buffaloes of No. 453 Squadron, which had been 'scrambled' too late to assist the fleet, arrived over the scene as the last enemy aircraft disappeared over the horizon. The three destroyers picked up over 2000 survivors from the two sunken ships but 840 men had been killed. The swift defeat of Force Z rocked the defenders of Singapore and the shock reverberated around the British Empire. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill recalled waking to the news:

***In all the war, I never received a more direct shock. ... As I turned over and twisted in bed the full horror of the news sank in upon me. There were no British or American capital ships in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific except the American survivors of Pearl Harbour. ... Over all this vast expanse of waters Japan was supreme, and we everywhere were weak and naked.***

[Winston S Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. III, *The Grand Alliance*, London, 1952, p. 551]

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The following day, the corvettes HMA Ships *Bendigo* and *Maryborough* were patrolling the approaches to Singapore when a torpedo raced across *Bendigo's* bow. Almost immediately, *Bendigo's* Asdic operator detected a submarine. Leading Signalman Danny Ingram described the attack:

***What a terrific noise and concussion and columns of spray enveloped the ship. We let go four Depth Charges and there on our starboard beam three patches of dark oil came to the surface! The lookout screamed that there was some debris floating on the surface ... but in the fading light we did not observe it.***

[Ingram, diary entry, 11 December 1941, AWM 3DRL/2883]

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The oil and debris may have been a ruse to make the attackers believe they had been successful, as no Japanese submarines were lost in the area.

## A BITTER FATE

In northern Malaya, the Japanese offensive gained momentum on both fronts. Determined attempts by III Indian Corps to block the enemy advances along the railways and roads led only to heavy losses. The Japanese usually attacked positions frontally, and often these frontal attacks were repelled, but other enemy troops worked their way around the flanks through seemingly impenetrable jungle. Most battles ended with British and Indian units encircled and fighting their way out.



Few Japanese prisoners were taken during the campaign. One of the first to arrive in Singapore was this wounded man. (AWM 012126)

The 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company and 2/3rd Motor Ambulance Convoy AIF worked continuously on the west coast delivering supplies, evacuating wounded and helping units withdraw. Drivers braved artillery fire and aerial attacks. Most of the men were aged over 35 and at least 60 per cent were World War I veterans. One observer had called them 'a lot of middle aged failures' but the units pulled together well. The motor transport company provided front line transport for an Indian battalion and the famed 2nd Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, picking up each battalion in turn and driving south to the next defensive position. It was hard and exhausting work. Men drove all night and then performed maintenance on their vehicles for most of the day, hiding in rubber plantations to avoid aerial attack, and averaging about two hours' sleep per day for over ten days. For their efforts, the men earned a 'genuine and heartfelt tribute' from the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders:

### CHAPTER 3 THE SKY SEEMED FULL OF RED CIRCLES



The 22nd and 27th Brigades had trained long and hard in Malaya and were confident. These infantrymen were photographed a few weeks before the campaign. (AWM 009287)

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***It is difficult to find words to express the excellence of their quality. They would take on any job, at any time, and under any conditions with a coolness and a quick practical efficiency that was indeed an inspiration to a weary unit coming out of battle.***

[1 MacA Stewart, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, 2nd Battalion (The thin red line)*, London, 1947, pp. 42-43]

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Spare drivers sometimes fought as infantry to help extricate trapped troops. Somehow, they avoided losing any men.

The two AIF brigades were held in reserve in Johore. Major General Bennett sent one of his best staff officers, Major CB Dawkins, to III Indian Corps headquarters to enquire into the cause of the retreat. Dawkins came away certain that further withdrawals were inevitable because Indian and British troops generally were not well trained and the Japanese were proving that virtually no terrain was impassable. However, he believed that the AIF was much better prepared.



## A BITTER FATE

While III Indian Corps retreated, No. 21 Squadron moved to Ipoh, near Kuala Lumpur, where pilots of No. 453 Squadron joined the campaign. The squadrons bore the brunt of aerial combat over the west coast. 'Dog-fighting' was fierce and brutal. For example, on 22 December, twelve Buffaloes engaged over twenty enemy fighters, a mix of older types with which the Buffaloes could compete as well as some of the feared Mitsubishi A6M 'Navy Os' (later known as the 'Zero'). The Australians shot down at least three fighters but four Buffalo pilots crash-landed with wounds (one died), two were shot down but survived (one burnt), and Sergeant Mac Read was killed when he rammed his badly damaged Buffalo into an enemy fighter.

When shot down, pilots often faced their victors again under repugnant circumstances. Flight Lieutenant Tim Vigors, an RAF Battle of Britain veteran serving with No. 453 Squadron, bailed out of his burning aircraft and found 'the whole bloody Japanese air force shooting at me, from 10,000 feet down to where I eventually hit the deck. ... The Japs continued to shoot at me until I made cover of some convenient jungle.' The pilots learnt to pull the rip-cord much closer to the ground.<sup>6</sup>

By 23 December, the Australians had shot down at least twenty-two aircraft plus others probably destroyed or damaged. But Buffalo losses mounted, and the squadrons had to be merged into a composite No. 21/453 Squadron. The physical and mental stress on pilots was great because they were not adequately trained for aerial combat and, when not flying, they were held on standby for hours at a time and often had to take cover during air raids. They were soon 'all very tired'. Ground staff also worked under trying conditions to repair and maintain the Buffaloes, their efforts hampered by dwindling reserves of spares and frequent interruptions from air raids. They struggled to lift the performance of the Buffaloes and to make their guns more reliable (the machine-guns often 'froze' in combat) so that they could compete with Japanese aircraft. It was a losing battle, and No. 21/453 Squadron was withdrawn to Singapore.

RAAF and RAF bomber squadrons also continued flying against the enemy with regular bombing and reconnaissance missions. The air effort was boosted by the arrival of Dutch bombers, which were based at Sembawang alongside the Australians. Such was the demand for air strikes that even the Vildebeest torpedo-bombers stayed in service, though the old biplanes were relegated to night bombing so that losses could be minimised.



## FLIGHT SERGEANT ALFRED CLARE

NO. 453 SQUADRON RAAF

Alf Clare in 1944, when he was a flight lieutenant with No. 5 Squadron RAAF, flying Boomerangs. (AWM NEA0373)

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**A**lfred Wattle Benjamin Clare was born at West Maitland, New South Wales, on 1 September 1910. He was married and working as a bus driver in Newcastle when he enlisted in the RAAF in 1940. After earning his 'wings' under the Empire Air Training Scheme, he was posted to No. 453 Squadron RAAF, arriving in Singapore on 15 August 1941. A friendly, affable rogue, Alf was nicknamed 'Sinbad' by his fellow pilots.

After the invasion of Malaya, Clare was one of the pilots sent to reinforce No. 21 Squadron RAAF on the north-west coast of Malaya. From 17 December 1941, he was in the thick of action over Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur. In his first dogfight, Clare's Buffalo was shot-up but he managed to damage a Japanese fighter. In the Australians' largest aerial combat action on 22 December, he was credited with one fighter shot down and two 'probables'.

Clare and his fellow pilots and ground staff also faced danger on the ground. During one air raid on Kuala Lumpur, Clare sheltered at the foot of an earth bank behind the airfield's clubhouse. A bomb exploded nearby and his comrades observed the result:

*... about three tons of red clay came rolling down on his venerable head, completely burying him. However he quickly burrowed his way out and emerged dirty and dishevelled, uttering horrible curses at the B--! B---!! sons of Nippon who had dealt him such a dastardly blow.*

[No. 453 Squadron diary, AWM 3DRL/6601]

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## FLIGHT SERGEANT ALFRED CLARE

After returning to Singapore, Clare continued flying defensive and offensive sorties. On 4 January 1942, he flew a convoy protection patrol and with another pilot chased a reconnaissance aircraft away. He later remarked that 'if he had seen what we were guarding [it] might have resulted in no convoy'. On 13 January, he went after dive-bombers over the Muar River and three days later 'three 21 Squadron pilots and self raid[ed] Muar and blitzed 2 barges, 2 sampans and 2 launches'. Hundreds of Japanese were caught in the barges and many were killed.<sup>1</sup>

On 17 January, Clare flew one of six Buffaloes that escorted Vildebeest torpedo-bombers in a raid on Malacca harbour. No enemy aircraft were encountered over the target area so Clare and another pilot strafed vessels. While escorting the 'Pigs' home, they spotted three Japanese fighters attempting to intercept the lumbering biplanes. Clare probably shot down two, but this could not be confirmed as the fighter pilots had to maintain cover over the Vildebeests.

Clare also flew tactical reconnaissance sorties that 'were very tense affairs' as the pilots had to fly far into enemy territory at low level. He also flew strafing missions and on 25 January was one of six pilots who strafed enemy motor transport near Batu Pahat. Most of the aircraft were damaged by ground fire.

By early February, most of the Buffaloes had been shot down, crashed or damaged. Surviving aircraft were flown to Palembang, Sumatra. Clare's first attempt to leave Singapore was foiled by engine trouble. He eventually got off the island and, after serving briefly in Java, was evacuated to Australia with the rest of his squadron.

Clare was then posted to No. 23 Squadron and a few weeks later to No. 76 Squadron, equipped with Kittyhawk fighters. However, the campaign had left him weary and he was soon given a 'rest' as a flying instructor. He was commissioned and in 1943-44 served in No. 5 Squadron in Queensland. After another period of instructing, in which he was promoted to flight lieutenant, he was again posted to No. 5 Squadron but arrived on Bougainville just as the war ended.

After the war, Alf Clare worked as a flying instructor for the Newcastle Aero Club and had other business interests. In the early 1960s, he became ill and was 'in and out of Concord [Hospital] like a Jack in the Box', though he still enjoyed unit reunions. He moved to Tasmania, where he died on 17 August 1965.

## FOOTNOTE

1 AIF Clare wrote several letters to a fellow pilot, John Shanahan, in the 1960s, from which quotes in this biography are drawn. The letters are in AWM 3DRL/6601.



Australian and Dutch airmen at Sembawang discuss a planned bombing mission with a Hudson of No. 8 Squadron as the backdrop. (AWM 011294)

A few Australian infantrymen saw action in late December when a special commando force, Roseforce, was formed to raid behind enemy lines. Commanded by Captain DT Lloyd, 2/30th Battalion, it drew fifty volunteers from among the six AIF battalions. Naval launches transported Roseforce up the west coast to the Trong River, where one platoon ambushed a staff car, three lorries and a utility, killing several Japanese. Roseforce was then disbanded and the men rejoined their units.

Around Singapore and to the south, the RAN also supported the defensive effort. The main operational task for the warships was to ensure, if possible, the safe arrival and departure of merchant ship convoys. It took four days for convoys to steam the 960 km from Sunda Strait, at the south-eastern end of Sumatra, to Singapore, and another four days for outgoing convoys to reach the open ocean. The escort fleet based at Singapore was progressively boosted to three cruisers, six destroyers, including HMAS *Vampire*, and two sloops, including HMAS *Yarra*, which arrived in late January.

## A BITTER FATE

The corvettes of the 21st Minesweeping Flotilla continued to sweep the sea lanes and conduct anti-submarine patrols. HMA Ships *Ballarat*, *Toowoomba* and *Wollongong* reinforced the original four corvettes. Their operations were challenging and hazardous, as Sub Lieutenant Bernard Barton, *Wollongong*, recalled:

***We were subject to intermittent air attacks ... by dive bombers and it was uncomfortably frustrating that the drag applied by the sweep wires, which we towed astern, prevented us from working up any speed or manoeuvre, so we weren't able to take effective evasive action. Remember that at this stage our only armament against dive bombers was three .303 Vickers machine guns. The Flotilla survived these attacks despite some near misses all round.***

[Bernard Barton, 'World War II, 1939 to 1945: Memories from the perspective of one of the participants', courtesy Bernard Barton.]

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HMAS *Ballarat* was one of the three corvettes dispatched from Australia to reinforce the 21st Minesweeping Flotilla. (AWM 101157)

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The corvettes were lightly armed when posted to Singapore but most soon acquired heavier anti-aircraft guns. Petty Officer Jack Trevor (left) and another crewman man one of the original Vickers guns fitted to HMAS *Wollongong*. The ship's captain later acquired a Bofors gun at Keppel Harbour to boost *Wollongong's* anti-aircraft defences. (Courtesy Bernard 'Bunny' Barton)

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Other Australians served in British warships and in merchant ships that arrived at Singapore, or served in shore establishments.

By mid-January 1942, III Indian Corps was pushed back to the edge of Johore. The 22nd Brigade and supporting units occupied positions on the east coast while the 27th Brigade and supporting units were deployed over towards the west coast. Staff officers from 8th Division headquarters toured the units to lecture on enemy tactics. An officer of the 2/26th Battalion recalled that the Japanese invariably were described as:

***... fanatical and tough but not very bright. They were armed with small calibre rifles, were not good shots because of defective eyesight, and rarely hit their targets. If by any chance you were shot, the bullet only made a small hole which healed quickly, making it unnecessary for the wounded man to leave his Unit. ... The general opinion of his audience was that it was a load of rubbish ...***

[Ron Magarry, *The Battalion Story: 2/26th Infantry Battalion, 8th Aust. Division - AIF*, Brisbane, 1995, p. 56]

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## A BITTER FATE

Given Japanese successes to the north, this scepticism by the men was warranted and wise. However, the troops still believed they would dominate the Japanese in jungle warfare. One idea that circulated was that the British commanders were 'letting him [the enemy] go easy over the first few furlongs and then turning the AIF on him'. Most of the men wanted only to get their introduction to battle over: 'the sooner the better, that's what all the boys think'.<sup>7</sup>

By early January 1942, it was clear that the enemy would soon reach Johore. The Indian and British troops had fought hard and suffered appalling casualties and morale was crumbling. One of the 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company drivers recalled:



Japanese propaganda leaflets dropped over the Australian lines before they went into action amused the men. The war correspondent Ian Morrison recalled that one leaflet addressed to the Australians 'showed a blonde floozy tossing restlessly on her bed and crying out, "Oh, Johnny, come back to me. I am so lonely without you."' Gunner Allan Lang of the 2/15th Field Regiment holds a different, but obviously equally amusing, leaflet. (AWM 011303/33)



In early January, Australian units began moving forward to take up fresh defensive positions and wait for the enemy to advance into Johore. These lorries are well spaced in case of aerial attack. (AWM 011303/01)

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***We were fed a bit of hooley about the withdrawals, to the effect that a stand would be made on such and such a line. 'They will never cross the Perak river', 'We'll hold 'em at the Bottle Neck at Taiping', 'A firm stand at the Slim River'. [But] we knew - we carted all sorts about - they all seemed to have the same obsession - to get to Singapore and be safe.***

[William B Webb, untitled memoirs, AWM PR87/183]

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On 11 January, III Indian Corps began retiring through the Australian lines at Ayer Hitam and Kluang. Lieutenant Gerald Veitch, 2/9th Field Ambulance, recorded in his diary that it was 'really a pathetic sight, every one of them were absolutely exhausted, the drivers going to sleep at the wheel, most of the officers having been killed'.



## A BITTER FATE

The Australian troops moving further forward to take up their new defensive positions found it a 'disturbing and alarming spectacle', as it took six or seven hours for the countless trucks, forming two rows of traffic, radiator to tailboard, to stream past. Veitch remarked that the troops who came last, those in the fighting arms, were 'utterly worn out and looking very dejected'. He later remarked that 'after I had been in action for some time I began to realise more or less how they felt'.<sup>8</sup>

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Simons, *While History Passed*, p. 4
- 2 Bullwinkel, letter to mother, 11 December 1941, AWM PR01216; Thomas Hamilton, *Soldier Surgeon in Malaya*, Sydney, 1957, p. 10
- 3 Wally Webb, unpublished memoir 'Life begins at Forty', AWM PR87/183
- 4 Jack K Woodward, *Three Times Lucky*, Brisbane, 1991, p. 58
- 5 Roy Bulcock, *Of Death But Once*, Melbourne, 1947, p. 249
- 6 Vigors quoted in Shores & Cull, *Bloody Shambles*, p. 133
- 7 Signaller Gordon Cruickshank, L Section Signals, 27th Brigade, letter to a friend, 3 January 1942, AWM PR00077; Driver Wally Dyer, Australian Army Service Corps, undated letter, AWM PR00711
- 8 Veitch, diary written up from notes, 11 January 1942, AWM PR89/178

# EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

'I have been in action & we had a pretty rough time. I was lucky to get out.'

[Corporal Tom Edwards, 2/19th Battalion,  
letter, 25 January 1942, AWM PR00034]



## A BITTER FATE

**M**ajor General Bennett had over a month to plan the combat debut of his brigades in Johore, and he intended to turn the campaign around with well-planned ambushes and decisive battles. However, before the Japanese reached Johore, Bennett lost control of the 22nd Brigade on the east coast when it was placed under the command of III Indian Corps. Bennett, who was placed in command of Westforce, retained the 27th Brigade and was also allocated the 45th Indian Brigade.

Bennett personally selected an ambush site near Gemas for the 8th Division to make its battle debut, giving the honour of the first battle to Lieutenant Colonel FG 'Black Jack' Galleghan's 2/30th Battalion. Galleghan's men, like men in other Australian units, were in 'fine physical condition and confident', well trained and braced for action. He declared in no uncertain terms that the 'reputation not only of the AIF in Malaya, but of Australia, is in the hands of this unit'. Galleghan also had a battery of the 2/15th Field Regiment and another of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment under his command. Sergeant Ken Harrison, 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, recalled:

***Our morale was high, and we were truly delighted ... with the prospect of action. This was much better than waiting for the little yellow men to come and dig us out. Along with the rest of the Eighth Division, I felt quite sure that the Japanese advance would be rudely checked now that these sons of convicts, the Australian rats, were emerging from their holes.***

[Kenneth Harrison, *The Brave Japanese*, Adelaide, 1966, p. 20]

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Three days of low cloud and rain masked the Australians' movement towards the front line. Trucks became bogged on the narrow roads in the rain, frustrating drivers and fraying tempers, but this was preferable to being bombed and strafed by the Japanese who now had control of the skies. A gunner of the 2/15th Field Regiment remarked: 'The way we pray for rain you'd reckon we were cow cockies!'

By 13 January 1942, the 2/30th Battalion was in position near Gemas. Its B Company, under Captain DJ Duffy, was five kilometres forward at the ambush site selected by Bennett, a cutting on a central road north of the Sungei Gemencheh River. The company was instructed to ambush a column of troops and then withdraw, with the main battle to be fought by the battalion at Gemas. Duffy's men and some supporting troops (about 150

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD



Two Bren gunners relax in a forward position a few days before going into action. (AWM 011304/16)

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men in all) were deployed in the jungle along the top of the cutting, with two sections covering the flanks. Engineers of the 2/12th Field Company packed explosives under a small bridge at the northern end of the cutting and an artillery officer and some gunners of the 2/15th Field Regiment prepared to direct an artillery barrage. Duffy described the ambush site in a letter he started writing while waiting for the enemy:

***Last night [13/14 January] was one of the most miserable nights that I have ever spent in my life as it rained all night long and our position where I eventually lay down [was] just a mass of sloppy oozy light fawn coloured sticky mud. I have had to smear the anti-malarial cream over my face several times but quite a lot of the mossies don't seem to mind it and are biting me just the same. Every time I moved I got this slimy mud all over me ...***

[Capt D J Duffy, transcript of letter, 14 February 1942, AWM67 3/111]

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## A BITTER FATE

Drenched by the incessant rain and caked in mud, the men could only sit and wait. They anticipated being there for another two to five days. It was important to stay concealed during this time in case fifth columnists or stragglers betrayed the ambush party. The men kept watch on the cutting through the jungle leaves, talked in whispers, dozed intermittently and nibbled on biscuits and bully beef, finding that 'it is amazing how good it can taste when you are wet and cold and hungry, and even if it falls in the mud you don't seem to mind'. Duffy looked around at his men and was confident: 'I have a good hard fighting lot under my command and have no fears about them giving a good account of themselves and reckon that the Japs will have cause to remember their first encounter with them.'



A platoon from one of the infantry battalions sets out on patrol, familiarising themselves with the defensive area and searching for signs of enemy incursions. (AWM 011303/32)

Meanwhile, over on the east coast, the Japanese had advanced to Endau. A small force, Endau Force, had been formed to secure and patrol the area. It comprised a company of the 2/19th Battalion and another from the 2/20th along with the 2/18th's anti-aircraft platoon. At 11.00 am on 14 January, a platoon from D Company of the 2/19th spotted 150 enemy troops resting near some huts. It was the moment the Australians had trained for. Lieutenant JA Varley sent one section around the enemy's flanks to open fire, and when the Japanese came out to return fire the

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rest of the platoon began firing. A number of casualties were inflicted on the Japanese but they responded with small arms fire and mortar shelling. Corporal WE Ferguson's right leg was shattered by a mortar blast and it was impossible to carry him to safety across boggy ground with the enemy in pursuit. Ferguson was killed when the Japanese reached him.

Several hours later, in the road cutting north of Gemas, Duffy's ambush party also spotted enemy troops. A gunner at the ambush site described the action:

***At about four o'clock ... the lookout announced: 'Large party of cyclists crossing the bridge.' We froze and my heart stepped into 'high' as on the roadway 15 feet [5 metres] below passed the first of the enemy. Oblivious of the fate in store for them, they cycled easily under our gaze, laughing and chattering while Aussie fingers tightened around triggers and Mills bomb pins. After some hundreds had crossed the river and entered the cutting the Captain gave the order. With a roar like the crack of doom, the bridge and the Japanese on it soared skywards on a dense column of smoke and fragments.***

***This was the signal for hellfire to break out. From each side of the road for a length of half a mile [800 metres] the Aussies poured into the congested, panic-stricken ranks of the Japanese cyclists a devastating fire with machine guns, sub-machine guns and rifles; while our men leisurely removed pins from Mills grenades and rolled them over the lip of the defile to further rend the enemy ranks with their ear-splitting bursts.***

[Unnamed gunner quoted in Cliff Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle: A Story of the 2/15 Field Regiment*, Sydney, 1983, p. 65]

It was over in 20 minutes. Duffy recalled that 'the entire 300 yards [270 metres] of road was thickly covered with dead and dying men'. The signal wire to Galleghan's headquarters had been cut, probably by an undetected enemy patrol, so the artillery barrage could not be called down. Nevertheless, the ambush was an unprecedented success. General Percival later remarked that it showed what could be achieved with 'fresh and reasonably trained troops ... [but] these in Malaya were seldom available'. When news of the action reached Australia, *The Argus* credited Bennett with having created 'from the raw material of the 8th Division the most deadly jungle fighters in the world' - boosting the confidence of the Australian public in their troops.

## A BITTER FATE



Murray Griffin, *The ambush at the bridge over the Sungei Gemencheh River, beyond Gemas, 14 January 1942* (AWM ART24500)

The Australian ambush party had to withdraw through five kilometres of jungle and rubber plantations to reach the battalion lines. Japanese patrols had already encircled the Australians. Duffy found that it was virtually impossible to control 150 men in the jungle with enemy troops all around. Splitting up, the platoons clashed with the enemy several times and at least one Australian was killed, six were reported missing (believed killed) and one was captured but escaped.

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD



Major General Bennett (seated) briefs Australian and British war correspondents on the successful ambush north of Gemas. At this stage, he was still confident of turning the tide of the campaign. (AWM 011303/04)

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The subsequent battle for Gemas raged that night and the following day. The Japanese were shocked by the tactical skill and determination of the Australians who, one senior Japanese staff officer recalled, fought 'with a bravery we had not previously seen'. But the Australians also were shocked by the tenacity and professionalism of the Japanese. Gunners of the 2/15th Field Regiment and 4th Anti-Tank Regiment had only been shelling enemy positions for an hour in support of the infantry, and somebody was joking that it was 'a great feeling to be belting it over and getting nothing back', when they heard a whistling noise and dived instinctively for their slit-trenches. Japanese counter-battery shelling was accurate and rapid which, one gunner recalled, 'was quite a shock to the system, [and] their barrage kept up for an hour. They had our position & range as every shell hit about & over No. 1 gun.'<sup>1</sup>

In daylight, the Japanese called in aircraft and tanks and the 2/30th's companies were pushed back. At one point, gunners were firing at tanks over open sights in support of the withdrawing infantry.

Three 25-pounder field guns and two anti-tank guns were lost in the battle. The 2/30th Battalion and supporting units inflicted many casualties but the battalion lost one officer and 17 other ranks killed and 55 wounded before it withdrew from the area late on 15 January.



## A BITTER FATE

Duffy and most of his men caught up with the battalion in the following days: 'It was funny coming back like we did as people looked at us as though we were returned from the dead.'<sup>2</sup>

The 2/26th Battalion fought the next action in this sector. Japanese aircraft searched for the Australians, and artillery and mortars swept the forward positions. Several clashes occurred but the Japanese quickly infiltrated the 2/26th's lines and began encircling the



Japanese troops advance on Australian positions during the battle for Gemas. (AWM 127894)

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A 25-pounder gun crew in a camouflaged position preparing to open fire on approaching Japanese troops. (AWM 011304/14)

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## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

battalion, which was ordered to withdraw rather than have to fight its way out. Though the battalions were pushed back, the Australian official historian of the campaign, Lionel Wigmore, concluded that the 'behaviour of the Australians under intense fire did great credit to them and to their training'.<sup>3</sup>

The blow to the enemy dealt at Gemas and the arrival of a reinforcement convoy at Singapore on 13 January revived confidence. A Singapore radio announcer declared that the citizens of Singapore now had good reason to believe that the tide of battle was turning, 'with the AIF as our seawall against the vicious flood'. Bennett was quoted in *The Singapore Times* as stating that his troops were confident of stopping the Japanese and putting them on the defensive. However, his self-assurance was short-lived.

Bennett, as commander of Westforce, had positioned two battalions of the 45th Indian Brigade on the southern side of the Muar River, protecting his western flank for a planned counter-attack by the 27th Brigade. British officers urged Bennett to prepare lines of retreat in case of failure but Bennett was adamant that there would be no retreat. At his request, RAAF and Dutch aircraft attacked Japanese positions, small craft and motor transport in and around the Muar River but by 15 January the enemy had crossed the river and the Indian battalions were in trouble. The 65th Battery of the 2/15th Field Regiment was attached to the 45th Indian Brigade and saw action at the Muar River. It lost several men – and the Indians many more – before withdrawing to Bakri.



Major General Bennett's advanced headquarters in a rubber plantation in Johore. The dense vegetation lent itself to concealment from enemy aerial reconnaissance and attacks. (AWM 128445)

## A BITTER FATE

The 2/29th Battalion was deployed some distance behind the Indians on the Muar-Bakri road. Gunners of the 13th Battery of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment covered the road and early on 18 January the gun crews achieved a stunning local victory. Five enemy tanks appeared and the gunners, positioned at each end of a road cutting, swung into action. Lance Sergeant Clarrie Thornton's forward gun crew opened fire with armour-piercing shells, damaging the first, third and fourth tanks. The tanks fired back and Thornton was badly wounded in the thigh but he had his crew turn the gun around and keep firing as the tanks passed. The rear gun crew under Sergeant Charles Parsons waited until three tanks were in their sites before firing, destroying all five tanks in turn. Thornton and his gun crew then destroyed three more tanks that came along the road. Parsons, who had also fought at Gemas, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Thornton was mentioned in despatches.

The Japanese began attacking the 2/29th Battalion later that day. Enemy patrols cut the road behind the battalion while other troops attacked frontally. Further back at Bakri, the 2/19th Battalion, which had been transported over from the east coast to join Westforce, was prevented from counter-attacking along the road because there was a strong chance that the Japanese would send another force from the coast to attack Bakri. The 2/29th could not yet withdraw to Bakri because Lieutenant Colonel John Robertson was waiting for a cut off Indian battalion, the 4/9th Jats, to fight its way out from Muar. Robertson was badly wounded when, as a pillion passenger on a despatch motorcycle, he ran into a roadblock while returning from a meeting at 45th Indian Brigade headquarters, which was controlling



The rear 2-pounder gun of the 13th Battery, 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, on the Muar-Bakri Road. The rear gun crew destroyed five Japanese tanks in the road cutting. (AWM O11302)

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Three Japanese light tanks destroyed by gunners of the 13th Battery, 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, on the Muar-Bakri Road. (AWM 011301)

the battle, at Bakri, and he died of his wounds. As night enveloped the rubber plantations and jungle, the 2/29th was attacked several more times. The Australians learnt their 'first bitter lesson' when six of the eight Australians wounded in the first night skirmish were victims of 'friendly fire' – thus they resolved to rely on grenades and bayonets for night fighting.

By the following morning, the 2/29th Battalion was coming under sustained ground and air attacks. About 200 survivors of the 4/9th Jats finally fought their way into the 2/29th's position but the Australians and Indians now had to fight their way out. The fighting was hard and losses were heavy, and about 150 men were cut-off completely. Gunner Ken Harrison was in one group that took refuge in a swamp where the men lay 'half submerged in the stinking water listening to the groans of our wounded, punctuated by the stutter of guns, and the hiss of bullets'. The men feared being hit because 'an injury at this stage was a virtual death sentence'. After several hours, the uninjured and lightly wounded men accepted that, in order to survive, they had to leave their badly wounded comrades and escape through the swamps.<sup>4</sup>

Overhead, Australian-built Wirraways were thrown into the fray. After No 21 Squadron RAAF had converted to fighters, several Wirraways were transferred to a training unit known as 'Y' Squadron RAF. On 18 January, five Wirraways, each armed with 20 anti-personnel bombs, took off from Singapore to bomb petrol dumps abandoned by the Indians near Muar and to strafe riverboats and vehicles. Buffaloes of

## A BITTER FATE

No. 21/453 Squadron flew 'top cover'. Sergeant John Victorsen, RAAF, was one of four Australian air gunners in the Wirraways:

***The Japanese troops we were bombing were mostly well hidden among the trees and they could see us better than we could see them. In my own case it was definitely ground fire that hit us, but I did not know we had been hit until after we had landed ... [nor] that I had been hit until a member of the ground crew drew attention to the blood running out of my flying boot.***

[Victorsen quoted in Shores & Cull, *Bloody Shambles*, p. 318]

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Sergeant Abe Moritz was less fortunate, copping shrapnel in the forehead and right cheek, and a Buffalo pilot, Flight Sergeant Henry Parsons, was shot down and killed.

At Bakri, the 2/19th Battalion also came under strong ground and air attacks. Driver Hamilton MacKenzie considered that 'the bombers were the worst, they gave us living hell'.<sup>5</sup> The 45th Indian Brigade's headquarters was hit, badly stunning the brigade commander, so the 2/19th's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Anderson, took charge of the force. Survivors of the 2/29th and 4/9th Jats Battalions reached Bakri late on 19 January but the Japanese had cut the escape route. The only option for the Australians and Indians was to fight their way out. On the morning of 20 January, Anderson led his force in a breakout from Bakri, taking all available weapons including 25-pounder field guns of the 2/15th Field Regiment towed



Australian-built Wirraways flew in action for the first time as dive-bombers with 'Y' Squadron RAF in Malaya. These aircraft are pictured in their former No. 21 Squadron RAAF markings. (AWM 006646)

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## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

behind lorries. The Australian infantry led the way, with one company singing 'Waltzing Matilda' as it led the charge, with the Indians as rearguard. Anderson's leadership was inspiring and at the first roadblock he personally put two machine-gun posts out of action with grenades. At the second roadblock, encountered about midday, the Australians pushed aside two companies of enemy troops:

***Every man was fighting mad. Mortar shells were directed on to targets by infantrymen a few yards from the target; gunners were fighting with rifles, bayonets and axes ... A gun crew pushed its 25-pounder round a cutting and blew out the first roadblocks [broken-down vehicles pushed into the centre of the road by the enemy] at 75 yards' [65 metres] range. Carriers pushed within 5 yards [4.5 metres] of Japanese machine-guns and blew them out ... Men went forward under heavy machine-gun fire and chopped road-blocks to pieces ...***

[2/19th Battalion war diary quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 239]

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The number of casualties climbed with each new attack. Badly wounded men were placed in lorries, which had been carrying shells and ammunition. Lieutenant Ben Hackney, 2/29th Battalion, was one of the wounded:

***During each halt more wounded fellows would be brought in and placed on the vehicles; sometimes lifeless-looking bundles being carried by their mates, others being helped along ... Very often a bullet or a shell splinter would find its way to our truck ... On one occasion a burst of machine-gun bullets tore a line of holes along the off side of the vehicle. I heard a peculiar grunt beside me, and looking round saw that the poor fellow sitting there, already badly wounded, had been killed.***

[Hackney quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 239-40]

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The column pushed on all night, taking only short rests, to avoid being caught on a stretch of open ground in the morning. The men in the vanguard fought hard to break through each roadblock while others fought on the flanks and in the rearguard. More and more men were killed or wounded. Anderson's great fear was that their efforts would be in vain if the bridge over the river at Parit Sulong was blocked – and it was. This meant that when the survivors reached the river on the morning of 21 January they could not get the vehicles carrying the wounded across. Anderson's force held its ground on the northern side of the river, with the enemy pressing in from all sides, while the British 53rd

## A BITTER FATE

Brigade attempted to break through the Japanese lines to effect a rescue. Captain Victor Brand, the 2/29th Battalion's regimental medical officer, recalled the carnage:

*Fighting was heavy; automatic fire seemed to come from all directions. Mortaring was constant and an artillery barrage began to open up. The area became a frightful shambles. Wounded and killed were lying everywhere. Wounded were being twice and thrice wounded in the trucks. It was like a heavily overdone battle scene in the movies. There were fearful sights. I can never forget one of our*



Murray Griffin, *Halt during the withdrawal from Bakri, January 1942*  
(AWM ART24490)

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

***men who was wounded in the neck. I found him pacing aimlessly along the road, his swollen tongue protruding from his mouth. I could do nothing but give him some morphia and beg him to sit down and rest. During this time messages were coming through by wireless encouraging us with news that relief was coming. But as time went on we lost hope.***

[Brand quoted in RW Christie (ed.), *A History of the 2/29th Battalion - 8th Division AIF*, Melbourne, 1983, p. 78]

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The British counter-attack failed and Anderson's force was trapped.

The wounded in the trucks were in a desperate state. Late on 21 January, the two regimental medical officers suggested asking the Japanese if they might let vehicles carrying wounded men through. Anderson considered it unlikely but agreed that it was worth a try. The Japanese allowed the leading vehicles to move onto the bridge at Parit Sulong and then blocked their way, demanding the surrender of Anderson's force in return for taking care of the casualties. After dark, two wounded men released the handbrakes on each vehicle and rolled them down the slope away from the bridge, so they could be driven back into the defensive perimeter.

Throughout that night and early next morning, the Australians and the few surviving Indians were shelled by artillery, attacked by tanks, machine-gunned, mortared, sniped at and bayonet-charged. They fought back with a fury and desperation, demonstrating 'a complete moral ascendancy of the enemy' but losing more and more men with each passing hour. One soldier wrote:

***... things looked pretty bleak. They had us surrounded on all sides & to cap it all their planes were bombing & machine-gunning us from above, while their tanks were trying to break through from the front & rear [and] in the midst of it all a padre who was with our infantry [said], 'Well boys, we've stuck it out this long & with God's help we'll get out of it yet' & then he prayed & all of us ... joined with him & prayed. ... [At] the completion of the prayers we picked up our arms & continued the fighting, [and] that padre fought side by side with us ...***

[Gunner KA McIlroy, 2/15th Field Regiment, letter written shortly after the battle, AWM PR00179]

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## A BITTER FATE



Murray Griffin, *Action at Parit Sulong, January 1942* (AWM ART24477)

At one point, Anderson was handed a message from Bennett reading 'Australia is proud of you', but it did nothing to relieve the plight of his men. Three RAF biplanes dropped supplies including food, dressings and morphine but this too was of little help (though better than Bennett's message). By the morning of 22 January, it was clear that the position was hopeless. Signallers, who had been working under constant shellfire in an open truck, and were later decorated for their efforts, confirmed that the 53rd Brigade had given up its attempt to break through. Anderson realised that his force faced annihilation if the troops continued fighting. He ordered the destruction of all vehicles and field guns and instructed every man who was able to walk to break out in groups and attempt to reach Allied lines.

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

For the badly wounded men in the trucks and others on the ground, another ordeal was about to begin. The medical officers went through the trucks urging every man who could walk to come with them. Captain Brand recalled one man, badly wounded in the face and mouth, struggling pathetically to ask: 'Can I make a break with you, Doc?' (He did, and survived.) Around the perimeter, men were prepared to assist their wounded mates, however few had the energy to carry a badly wounded man far. After those who could attempt the escape had scattered, the enemy moved in and killed most of the wounded men left strewn on the battlefield.



Murray Griffin, *Withdrawal from Parit Sulong* (AWM ART26529)

## A BITTER FATE

One survivor of the massacre recalled that the Japanese 'seemed to delight in kicking where a wound lay open, and so great was their satisfaction at any visible sign of pain that often the dose was repeated'. About 100 Australians and forty Indians were herded into a hut nearby but they got no medical treatment, were refused water and cigarettes, and at sunset on 22 January they were taken out and machine-gunned. Three men survived this last massacre but one died the next day and another died a couple of months later.

The tattered survivors of the battle struggled to reach safety. Traipsing through jungle and swamp, swimming rivers and streams, most pressed on for two or three days before reaching Allied lines near Yong Peng. One of the wounded, Private Jack Collins, 2/19th Battalion, recalled:

***Somehow I managed to struggle and be helped across a couple of rivers and creeks. I was very slow and was one of the last to get across the river and I remember a few of my mates did not make it across the water, for they were beyond asking for help ... I was helped along and encouraged by a number of chaps ... It was a case of the blind leading the blind with the large number of wounded we had with us. They kept falling over, as I did a lot of times for I was very weak and my arm was going gangrenous and really smelling. I did what one of the chaps told me and covered my bad arm with mud and at least it kept the insects out of the wound ... I recall the stretchers made from a couple of sticks and groundsheets. One of the chaps who had been carried for two days died only about half a mile from where we joined the main road, where the ambulance and trucks met us to take the wounded back to Singapore.***

[Collins quoted in *The Grim Glory of the 2/19 Battalion AIF*, p. 241]

The two battalions had lost over 75 per cent of their men killed, wounded or missing in action. At Yong Peng, Anderson could muster only 271 men of the 2/19th, including 52 wounded, and the 2/29th had only 130 men. Most carried no weapon or personal equipment. For his courage and leadership in the battle, Anderson was awarded the Victoria Cross. So ferocious was the fighting that one gunner who survived the battle believed the infantry had 'won a VC a dozen times over'.<sup>6</sup> The artillerymen had also fought hard. The gallant 65th Battery had fired 6519 rounds in the action from Muar to Parit Sulong, and suffered heavy casualties, as did the anti-tank battery.



## LIEUTENANT COLONEL CHARLES ANDERSON VC MC

2/19TH BATTALION AIF

John Barclay Godson, *Lieutenant Colonel Charles Anderson* (AWM ART31764)

**L**ieutenant Colonel Charles Grove Wright Anderson, commanding officer of the 2/19th Battalion AIF, won the only Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian serving in Malaya or Singapore.

Born at Cape Town, South Africa, on 12 February 1897, Anderson served in World War I as a lieutenant with the 3rd Battalion, King's African Rifles. He fought in East Africa, where much of the countryside was jungle-clad, and was awarded the Military Cross. After the war, he spent time in Kenya as a big-game hunter, gaining further experience in jungle, which would later stand him in good stead in Malaya.

In 1934 Anderson migrated to Australia after purchasing a grazing property near Crowther, New South Wales. He joined the militia in March 1939 and was appointed as a captain in the 56th Battalion (Riverina Regiment), gaining promotion to major by year's end.

Anderson enlisted in the AIF in July 1940 and was appointed second-in-command of the 2/19th Battalion, part of the 22nd Brigade. A respected and capable officer, his knowledge of jungle proved indispensable after the

brigade's arrival in Malaya in February 1941. He gave instruction in jungle fighting, assuring men that the jungle could become a 'friend' with sufficient training, and in August 1941 he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and took over command of the 2/19th Battalion.

After much hard training, Anderson was confident in his battalion's ability to meet the enemy in battle. At Bakri, his men were steeled for action and fought hard and well. When the Japanese encircled Bakri, Anderson, who had assumed command of the force, made the 'very grim decision' to break out: 'I had no doubt at all in my mind that [the decision] was the right one, our task was done, the 2/19th was still an effective force to build on, and the survivors of the 2/29th and 65th Battery were invaluable veterans.'<sup>1</sup>

## LIEUTENANT COLONEL CHARLES ANDERSON VC MC

Anderson's leadership in the Battle of Muar was inspiring and his actions gallant. At the first roadblock, he personally knocked out two Japanese machine-gun posts, which he described as 'the backbone of enemy resistance', with grenades: 'I had an affection for grenades from the 14-18 war and always carried two.'<sup>2</sup>

At Parit Sulong, Anderson was determined to hold the ground until the British 53rd Brigade could break through, rather than abandon his wounded, but when it became clear that relief would not come he had to issue the order 'each man for himself'. Major General Bennett personally recommended Anderson for the Victoria Cross, stating:

***Throughout the fighting, which lasted for four days, he set a magnificent example of brave leadership, determination and outstanding courage. He not only showed fighting qualities of very high order but throughout exposed himself to danger without any regard for his own personal safety.***

[Part of Anderson's VC citation quoted in Lionel Wigmore, *They Dared Mightily*, Canberra, 1963, p. 233]

Anderson was the only Australian unit commander in World War II to be awarded the British Empire's highest decoration for valour.

Back on Singapore, Anderson worked hard to rebuild his battalion but was admitted to hospital shortly before the invasion of the island. On 13 February, when the hospital was about to be overrun, he trekked back to the Australian lines and resumed command of his battalion, down to 180 men, for the final days of fighting.

Anderson led his men into captivity, intensely proud of their efforts during the campaign. He later led a large work party on the Thai-Burma Railway. He remained in Thailand until the end of the war, as senior officer of a prisoner of war camp.

After returning to Australia, Anderson returned to his property and then served as a Liberal Party Member of Parliament in the federal parliament between 1949-51 and 1955-61. He retired in Canberra and died on 11 November 1988.

## FOOTNOTE

- 1 Anderson to Lionel Wigmore, notes on draft of official history, early 1955, AWM67 3/9 Part 1
- 2 Anderson to Wigmore, 6 November 1954, AWM67 3/9 Part 1

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

Some men were cut off for longer periods, particularly those who had headed west for the coast, and reached Singapore in dribs and drabs. One group of six men traipsed through jungle and swamps for 11 days before finding a rowboat which they rowed south along the coast, finally being picked up by a British patrol boat. At least two groups bypassed Singapore and landed in Sumatra. A handful of men linked up with Chinese Communist guerrillas in the mountains, and some remained with them until the end of the war. Over 100 men were captured some distance from the battle area and were transported north to Pudu Gaol, at Kuala Lumpur, but others less fortunate were captured and executed. Some men simply died of wounds or of exhaustion deep in the jungle.

Over on the east coast, the 22nd Brigade and other units of Eastforce were ordered to withdraw from the Mersing area to stay in line with the retreat on the west coast. The Australian troops were bitterly disappointed. They had trained around Endau and Mersing for over six months and had prepared strong defensive positions, which they had been determined to hold.



A survivor of the battle from Bakri to Parit Sulong reads the news after making his way back to Allied lines. He had been cut off for five days. The battle is commonly referred to as the Battle of Muar, though the 2/19th and 2/29th Battalions did not move as far forward as the Muar River. (AWM 012457)

## A BITTER FATE

On 26 January an enemy fleet of four enemy cruisers, six destroyers, two transport ships and thirteen small craft was sighted unloading supplies and men at Endau. Several squadrons were ordered to make daylight attacks, and even the antiquated Vildebeest torpedo-bombers of Nos 36 and 100 Squadrons RAF were thrown into the fray. The crews of these biplanes, including several Australians, saw it as a suicide mission. The first wave of twelve Vildebeests lost five aircraft, and survivors signalled 'thumbs down' as they passed the second wave heading out. The cloud cover cleared before this second wave reached the target area and large numbers of fighters could be seen circling ominously over the beaches. They peeled off to intercept the lumbering biplanes, which had just four fighter escorts. Flight Lieutenant Tom Lamb, an RAF pilot whose gunner was an Australian, Sergeant Gil Sharp, recalled:

***We put our noses down & headed flat out for the beaches. It's a wonder the old crates didn't fall apart. Within seconds the sky was thick with aircraft ... it was disconcerting to see rows of [bullet] holes appearing all over the place in the fabric and hear the twang of parting wires. I could hear Sharp blazing away & I heard him shout that he had got a Zero. At one time I could see five parachutes in the sky & two aircraft going down in flames. Immediately I was over the beaches, which were seething with troops, I ... dropped my bombs ... [at] little more than tree top height ... [and] banked ... doing some vicious skids, whenever attacked. Suddenly Gil Sharp gave a shout ... a shell had got him right through the knee & the lower half of his leg was hanging off. [The observer, Sergeant] Wills ... took over the gun. The Japs continued to attack for a considerable distance but finally they gave me up as a bad job. ... My aircraft was in a sorry state & I prayed that she would hang together until we got back. Meanwhile Wills tried to stem the blood from Sharp's leg, by applying a tourniquet to his thigh. I breathed a great sigh of relief when I touched down at Seletar. It was a terrible job to get Sharp out of the aircraft into the ambulance ...***

[Lamb, letter written in 1962, AWM 3DRL/6066]

Sharp's right leg was amputated but he survived. Seven of the twelve aircraft in this second wave had been shot down. Of the thirty RAAF airmen who flew in the biplane attacks, eight were killed, two were shot down and captured, two others were shot down but reached British lines, and three landed with wounds. In addition, two air gunners in No. 1 Squadron RAAF were killed

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD



A Vickers Vildebeest, or 'Pig', of No. 36 Squadron RAF. The photograph was probably taken before the invasion of Malaya, as the obsolete torpedo-bombers of Nos 36 and 100 Squadrons RAF did not make any torpedo attacks during the campaign. Surprisingly successful at night bombing, they were decimated in the daylight raid on Endau on 26 January 1942. (Courtesy ER 'Bon' Hall and Michael Hyde)

when their Hudson was 'bounced' by a Japanese fighter. It was the single worst day of the campaign for the RAAF.

Back at base, ground staff struggled to repair damaged aircraft. Hangars had been bombed, supplies were lost and constant interruptions from air raids slowed their work and added to the strain. Several men were killed or wounded in air raids, however morale remained high. Flying Officer Terence O'Brien, an Australian serving in the RAF, landed at Sembawang after his Hudson was damaged over Endau. He was tired and filthy: 'When you spend five or six hours in a cockpit in the tropics your shorts and shirt are crumpled and wet with perspiration, your underpants are clammy, your socks stink.' He and his crew were taken to the mess, where each was handed a bottle of ice-cold beer – 'trust the Australians to have their beer supply organised!' O'Brien had only praise for the RAAF fitters who repaired the battle damage with skill and good humour.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the air attacks on Endau, two destroyers, HMS *Thanet* and HMAS *Vampire*, were dispatched from Singapore to attack the enemy fleet. On the night of 26–27 January they became involved in a running battle with three Japanese destroyers and two minesweepers. *Thanet* was sunk and *Vampire*,



## A BITTER FATE



HMAS *Vampire* saw more action in the Malayan campaign than any other Australian warship. It is pictured before the application of its wartime camouflage. (AWM 044791)

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which had laid down a smoke screen as it tried to assist *Thanet*, only narrowly escaped destruction when two of the enemy destroyers mistakenly began firing on each other. *Vampire* returned to Singapore and then two days later this old destroyer, which had seen the most action of any Australian warship in the campaign, escorted a convoy out of Singapore and continued on to Java.

On 27 January, the 2/18th Battalion had a hard 'bleeding' at Nithsdale Estate, near Jemaluang, with support from two batteries of the 2/10th Field Regiment. The battalion had deployed its companies along the main road and ambushed about 1000 enemy troops. In two days of hard, often hand-to-hand, fighting, the 2/18th held the Japanese but its D Company, which was out front, was almost wiped out, losing about eighty men killed and others wounded. The battle seriously weakened the Japanese 55th Infantry Regiment which was diverted inland to join the push against Westforce.

To the west, the Japanese continued advancing on three fronts. The 27th Brigade's two remaining battalions, the 2/26th and 2/30th, had waged a fighting withdrawal from Gemas and Batu Anam through Segamat, Tenang, Labis and Yong Peng. Reinforced by British units, they defended the road from Ayer Hitam to Skudai

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and Johore Bahru. On the coast, the 15th Indian Brigade and British 53rd Brigade attempted to block another enemy thrust while on the Australians' other flank the 8th and 22nd Indian Brigades were positioned along the central railway line from Kluang to Johore Bahru. Unfortunately, any withdrawal on any one of these fronts forced the units on other fronts to withdraw also to avoid being cut off.

The 27th Brigade defended Ayer Hitam from 23 to 25 January. The 2/30th Battalion found that their position, 'Hellfire Hill', 'afforded cheerless vistas of filthy black swamp and long abandoned padi (rice) fields, merging into jungle'.<sup>8</sup> The men hid from enemy aircraft under tree foliage and bracken but were tormented by mosquitoes in numbers they had never before experienced. The Australian and British troops fought hard before withdrawing, a difficult job at night through jungle and swamps with wounded to carry.

After meeting up with the motor transport for movement south, the 27th Brigade fought again at Simpang Rengam before withdrawing to Namazie Estate, a rubber plantation 65 kilometres north of Johore Bahru. The 2/26th Battalion and 2nd Battalion, Gordon Highlanders, dug in, with the 2/30th in support, but were again pushed back after some hard fighting. After making their way back through the jungle, the men had to re-enter the British lines cautiously, hearing numerous rifle bolts clicking after announcing, somewhat apprehensively, 'Australian troops here, don't fire'. It paid to be wary because the Japanese had previously tricked defending troops with similar claims.

There was rarely any respite during withdrawals because the Japanese enjoyed air superiority. Captain Duffy explained on one occasion:

***We came back just about 45 miles [70 kilometres] after messing about in the motor transport until almost dawn, and took up another defensive position in the rubber. Planes have been very active about our position and have been bombing and machine-gunning all around the area. We lie very low and quiet under the rubber trees when they are cruising around. We saw a few more of our planes for a while this morning, then the usual monotonous procession of Jap planes.***

[Duffy, 2/30th Battalion, letter, 24 January 1942, AWM67 3/111]

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## A BITTER FATE



Troops getting down from lorries to take up defensive positions. During the retreat, the troops spent many hours travelling in motor transport, mostly at night to avoid aerial attacks. (AWM 011303/29)

It was worst when men were caught in motor transport on a road, and could do little to combat the threat from above. Private Stan Chapman, 2/20th Battalion, wrote that dive-bombing and strafing 'sure puts a funny feeling up a man's spine ... and sometimes the air is blue with language'.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, drivers in all units, including the 2/2nd and 2/4th Reserve Motor Transport Companies (the latter based in Singapore) and the 2/2nd Motor Ambulance Convoy, worked long hours day and night to transport troops and supplies and evacuate casualties, sometimes encountering the two Australian transport units that had been attached to III Indian Corps before being allotted to Westforce. Mechanics and artificers of field workshops and light aid detachments were called upon to repair broken down or damaged vehicles, artillery and other equipment.

The arrival of 51 Hawker Hurricane fighters, as used in the Battle of Britain, in late January brought a cheer but made no real difference to the campaign. Several of the pilots were Australians and one of them, Pilot Officer Sandy McCulloch, took part in the first Hurricane 'scramble'. Hurricane pilots scored some victories against bombers over Singapore and also shot down some fighters and dive-bombers over Malaya, but they could not match the Japanese 'Navy O' fighters in 'dog-fights'. One casualty of the aerial fighting over Singapore was Pilot Officer John Gorton - later in his life, Prime Minister of Australia - who was badly injured on 30 January when he crash-landed his Hurricane after it was damaged in combat.

## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD



Artillerymen from either the 2/10th or 2/15th Field Regiment firing a 25-pounder field gun from a hastily prepared position beside a rubber plantation. (AWM 011303/30)

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On the ground, men cursed the lack of air cover but had no choice but to fight on. Troops became somewhat dulled to the heavy losses but sometimes a single death could hit a man or even a unit hard. Duffy wrote about one very distressing death:

***I lost one of my young corporals who has been with me ever since we formed. His father, who went to the last War, was also in this Battalion. He was with the CO when we got the bad news and he nearly went off his head. He cried, and he has always been regarded as one of the toughest men in the unit. Finally he fainted on the road.***

[Duffy, letter, 21 January 1942, AWM67 3/111]

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In the confusion of battle, men were often cut off for several hours or days at a time. On one occasion, Corporal Chas Mansfield, 2/12th Field Company, was preparing to blow a bridge when he found that the Japanese had advanced around his party. The sappers blew the bridge and attempted to drive south but were ambushed. They took to the jungle and narrowly evaded enemy patrols before reaching safety next day. The troops were always aware of this danger of being cut off. Duffy wrote: 'It is not a nice feeling being the rearguard and knowing that there is nothing behind you, and the enemy might whip in and cut you off from the main body.' They could be killed in clashes while trying to evade capture, or could be captured and (in most cases) summarily executed.

## A BITTER FATE

Some of the hardest-worked troops in the campaign were field ambulance personnel and hospital staff. The 2/9th and 2/10th Field Ambulance troops endeavoured to bring in as many casualties as possible. They had to retrieve wounded and drive ambulances many kilometres over roads subjected to aerial attacks to reach a casualty clearing station. Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton of the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station described the scene at one of his posts:

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

[Hamilton, *Soldier Surgeon in Malaya*, p. 91]

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Further back in the medical system, the hospitals had begun struggling to cope with the many casualties. Sister Betty Jeffrey of the 2/10th Australian General Hospital recalled:

***All the wounded just kept coming and coming, one ambulance after the other, day and night; it just didn't let up. We never had enough beds. When the hospital was full after a few days we had to start taking the houses down the street. ... So the hospital staff was very spread out. But somehow or other we just coped. No person went without care.***

[Jeffrey quoted in Nelson, *POW*, p. 71]

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An Australian wounded in battle is treated before his evacuation to a casualty clearing station and, from there, to hospital in Singapore. (AWM 011308)

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## CHAPTER 4 EVERY MAN WAS FIGHTING MAD

Sister Wilma Oram, 2/13th AGH, added:

***We had so many surgical casualties the mind just couldn't take it. We were operating round the clock in the theatre and we still had them lined up outside. We could not get through them fast enough.***

[Oram quoted in Nelson, *POW*, p. 72]

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Only a small number of wounded troops were evacuated from Singapore.



A wounded soldier who has arrived in Singapore by train is loaded into an ambulance by Chinese stretcher-bearers. British and Australian medical officers oversaw the reception of casualties. (AWM 011251)

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By 30 January 1942, the British Empire forces had been pushed back to Johore Strait. On the previous day, the 27th Brigade had a heavy day's fighting near Ayer Bemban, receiving excellent artillery support from 2/15th Field Regiment gunners, before being ordered to withdraw. To the east, the other Australian brigade, the 22nd, withdrew through Kota Tinggi to take up positions on the outer perimeter around Johore Bahru while the British Empire forces began withdrawing onto Singapore Island. Sappers of the 2/10th and 2/12th Field Companies, as well as Indian and British sappers, continued burning supply dumps and blowing bridges to hinder enemy forces. Headquarters staff worked tirelessly to coordinate the withdrawal, sometimes coming under fire and air attack in the forward areas.

## A BITTER FATE

Staff Sergeant David Wyllie, 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company, summed up the situation when he wrote to a friend:

***Our unit was on the border when war started & we are down as far as possible without falling into the water now ...***

[Wyllie, letter to a friend, 30 January 1942, AWM PR00371]

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By that stage, after over a fortnight of hard and constant fighting and withdrawing, the men of the 22nd and 27th Brigades were 'nearly "buggered", for lack of sleep and decent tucker'. It had been a shocking and pitiless introduction to battle.<sup>10</sup>

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Masanobu Tsuji, *Singapore: The Japanese Version*, Sydney, 1958, p. 193; Gunner Houlahan, diary, 13 January 1942, AWM PR88/052
- 2 Captain Duffy, transcript of letter, written shortly after the battle, AWM67 3/111
- 3 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 220
- 4 Harrison, *The Brave Japanese*, pp. 56-57
- 5 Driver MacKenzie, letter to 'Ollie', February 1942, AWM PR00208
- 6 Gunner McIlroy, 2/15th Field Regiment, letter written shortly after the battle, AWM PR00179
- 7 Terence O'Brien, *Chasing After Danger: A combat pilot's war over Europe and the Far East, 1939-42*, London, 1990, pp. 192-216
- 8 A W Penfold, W C Bayliss & K E Crispin, *Galleghan's Greyhounds: The story of the 2/30th Australian Infantry Battalion*, Sydney, 1949, p. 149
- 9 Private Chapman, letter to 'Mick', 19 January 1942, AWM PR00328
- 10 Private Heckendorf, letter to 'Ron', 4 February 1942, AWM PR00686

# A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

‘We were fighting for ... our bloody lives.’

[Douglas McLagan, *The Will to Survive: A private's view as a POW*, Sydney, 1995, p. 30]





## A BITTER FATE

**O**n Singapore Island, the night of 31 January 1942 was clear, with a full moon. A constant stream of weary soldiers of the British Empire traipsed across the causeway over Johore Strait to take up positions on Singapore Island. The Japanese XXV Army continued to push against the rearguard. Since their landing on 7–8 December 1941 at Kota Bharu, the Japanese had forced the combined British, Indian and Australian force back 800 kilometres on two fronts down the entire Malayan peninsula. The men who now trudged over the causeway had fought hard and lost many comrades and friends in desperate and, at times, ill-considered defensive actions. They were dismayed and bitter, blaming their generals for what many saw as ‘bloody murder and incompetence’.<sup>1</sup>

On the afternoon before the final withdrawal to Singapore, Major General Bennett, who had expected the 8th Division AIF to turn the tide of battle, drove through the town of Johore Bahru:

***I toured slowly ... past derelict cars and destroyed houses and the bomb holes that were everywhere. There was a deathly silence. There was not the usual crowd of chattering Malays and busy Chinese. The streets were deserted ... I have never felt so sad or upset. Words fail me. This defeat should not have been ... I always thought we would hold Johore.***

[Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 161]

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Near dawn on 1 February, the last Australian units made their way over the causeway. By 7.30 am, only the tattered remnants of the 2nd Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, remained on the northern shore. With just ninety men left, the Argylls had earned the honour of marching out of Malaya last. Captain John Wyett, an 8th Division staff officer, stood with them ‘in the quiet stillness of a rosy dawn, hoping against hope that the abandoned 22nd Indian Brigade would appear; but there was no sign of them and we never saw the brigade again’.<sup>2</sup> The Argylls turned their backs on Malaya and marched over the causeway. The Scottish journalist and novelist, Eric Linklater, described the scene:

***... their pipers played their own regiment out of Malaya. The morning sun was already hot when the still air was broken by ‘A Hundred Pipers’ and ‘Hielan’ Laddie’, and the ... Highlanders, with steady bearing and their heads high, marched from a lost campaign into a doomed island.***

[Linklater quoted in Stewart, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, 2nd Battalion*, p. 99]

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## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

Engineers then blew up a section of the causeway and thus Singapore became an island under siege.



The view from the north coast of Singapore Island looking over Johore Strait in early February 1942. In the centre can be seen the 70 metre gap in the causeway blown by British engineers. In the background is the Johore administration building, from which General Tomoyuki Yamashita directed the Japanese invasion of Singapore. (AWM 012467)

Singapore was still ill-prepared for invasion. British defence plans had been founded on defeating or holding invading forces well up the peninsula and not enough had been done to ready the island and its population for attack. The Japanese advance from northern Malaya had been so stunning that many held grave fears that the garrison could not hold out. There was also a suspicion that the British Government was no longer committed to saving the 'fortress'. At a meeting of the Far Eastern War Council on 26 January, when it was obvious that the defending forces would be pushed off the peninsula, Mr Vivian Bowden, the Australian Government's official

## A BITTER FATE



Smoke rising from fires at the Naval Base at Singapore on 1 February 1942. (AWM 012468)

representative in Singapore, had asked when it might become necessary to demolish the Naval Base. That, he was told, would have to happen when the enemy reached Johore Strait. Bowden responded:

***My deduction from that is that Singapore will not be held, for with the naval base and all the natural resources of Malaya gone, Singapore will have nothing more than sentimental value.***

[Bowden quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 288]

No-one on the Council disagreed, although the Governor of Singapore assured Bowden that the island would be held. It would have come as a profound shock to Australians, brought up to believe that Singapore was the nation's assurance against invasion, that it was now being described as possessing nothing more than 'sentimental value'.

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

Demolition of the Naval Base was already underway by late January, and was seen first-hand by Australian sailors. Before dawn on 1 February, the cruiser HMAS *Hobart* berthed at the Naval Base after escorting a convoy across the Indian Ocean and then helping to defend the merchant ships against repeated air attacks from the Sunda Strait onwards. Captain Harry Howden was given permission to commandeer any stores or equipment *Hobart* needed. A member of the shore party recalled:

***The oil jetties had been blown up ... and the big floating dock had been brought close in shore and sunk, resting firmly on the bottom. There was plenty of evidence the base had received attention from the air but not the damage one was led to expect. On arrival we immediately dived into things, having to get what stores the ship wanted.***

[‘Wombat’ Sutton quoted in LJ Lind & MA Payne, *HMAS Hobart: The story of the 6 inch cruiser, HMAS Hobart, 1938-1962*, Sydney, 1971, p. 28]

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Men also helped themselves to personal equipment, clothing, food and other sundries. Howden ordered them to also remove the brass Royal Coat of Arms on the base’s front gates ‘so it won’t fall into the hands of the enemy’.

*Hobart* sailed at dusk on 2 February in company with a British destroyer. That night, they passed the destroyer HMAS *Vendetta*, which was being towed because it had been undergoing a major refit at the Naval Base and could not sail under its own steam. The corvette HMAS *Maryborough* also sailed that night; it was the third corvette to leave, as *Goulburn* and *Burnie* had left for Java in late January. Next night, the corvettes *Ballarat* and *Toowoomba* sailed for Sumatra. The naval exodus was underway.

During the first week of February, Singapore’s troops and citizens prepared for invasion. Many of the troops who had retreated from the mainland were shocked at the state of the island’s defences:

***I thought I was going back to a fortress and I got the shock of my life ... when I found what we had to defend. It was only a stone’s throw across the Straits. No, I couldn’t believe it, no defences, none whatsoever. Not even barbed wire.***

[Lieutenant George McLoughlin, 2/18th Battalion, quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 58]

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## A BITTER FATE



The destroyer HMAS *Vendetta*, which was undergoing a refit in Singapore, had to be towed from Singapore to Java by a British destroyer. Two tug-boats took over the towing to Australia. (AWM 301613)

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The garrison's commander, General Percival, had under his command about 85,000 troops. Of these, 15,000 were engaged in administrative and other non-combatant duties and many of the remaining 70,000 were in second line combatant units such as engineers and artillery. In all, he had forty-five battalions of infantry (twenty-one Indian, thirteen British, six Australian, two Malay and three Straits Settlements Volunteer Force) and three machine-gun battalions (two British and one Australian). Most of the first line troops were tired and depleted after weeks of fighting and withdrawing in Malaya, and Percival therefore placed great hope in the fresh British 18th Division whose brigades arrived in late January and early February.

For the two brigades of the 8th Division AIF, the first week in Singapore was a time for rebuilding units and preparing defences. When the numbers were tallied back in Singapore, staff found that the AIF had lost over 800 troops killed or missing in Malaya since 14 January 1942, with many hundreds of others badly wounded or sick and evacuated to hospital. It later transpired that 649 Australian troops had lost their lives between the start of the campaign and the withdrawal onto Singapore Island, with the vast majority of them battle casualties. In addition, the four RAAF squadrons had lost a total of nineteen men killed while another ten Australians serving in RAF squadrons had been killed; others had been wounded or captured. The RAN had lost one man in action in HMS *Repulse*.

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

All six of the Australian infantry battalions had seen action and suffered significant losses. Worst affected were the 2/19th and 2/29th Battalions, which had come out of Bakri-Parit Sulong with less than 25 per cent of their men. The Australian Government and Army Headquarters had responded to Bennett's call for reinforcements by sending his 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion, which had been stationed at Darwin, and was the last trained AIF battalion in Australia, along with 1907 general reinforcements from training depots.



Murray Griffin, *Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Pond* (AWM ART 26440)

The 2/29th Battalion received 500 of the general reinforcements, but this by no means brought the battalion to battle readiness. Officers discovered that some of the men had been in the AIF only a week before being handed a defective rifle and incomplete equipment and shunted overseas; some had never fired a rifle. The 2/29th's new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Pond, was deeply concerned about the state of his unit:

***... the lot of the reinforcements was a very hard one. They were largely inadequately trained ... were not in good condition after a sea voyage ... did not know the country ... had not been taught the need for dispersion and concealment from the air [and] they had not, many of them, even seen some modern weapons ... I asked to see General Bennett and told him that ... in my view the unit was not a fighting force at all.***

[Pond quoted in Christie, *A History of the 2/29th Battalion - 8th Division AIF*, p. 99]

The 2/19th was in a similar situation after absorbing 370 men who had 'never seen a Bren gun or a sub-machine-gun or an anti-tank rifle or fired [at] a small arms course, nor had [they] ever heard anything of such a thing as bayonet fighting'. The other battalions took in about ninety reinforcements each. A company commander, Captain Charles O'Brien, 2/18th Battalion, recalled with bitterness that 'the condition of those reinforcements was a scandal ... they were not only almost useless but actually a positive menace to anyone near them, and to any commander who expected his

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orders to be carried out'. Few believed that these men could fight well, however the battalions had no choice but to accept them.<sup>3</sup>

The air war over Singapore had continued unabated. As the Japanese had captured more airfields, aerial bombing intensified but the number of fighters defending Singapore dwindled. Fighter pilots braved Japanese-controlled skies to intercept enemy bombers, provide cover over convoys, escort bombers over southern Malaya, and fly low-level strafing and tactical reconnaissance sorties. Even at this stage, as the ground forces steeled for invasion, reinforcement pilots, including Australians, were arriving to fly Hurricanes. Hudsons of No. 1 Squadron RAAF ferried some of the pilots from Sumatra:

***Approaching Singapore the future did not look bright. Thick palls of smoke hung in the air fed by burning oil tanks and various ships. It looked like pictures we had seen of Dunkirk.***

[Flight Sergeant Ian Newlands, Royal New Zealand Air Force, quoted in Shores & Cull, *Bloody Shambles*, p. 364]

At Sembawang, ground staff found it extremely hard to maintain the Buffaloes of No. 21/453 Squadron, as the airfield was bombed on many occasions, with hangars damaged, spares lost and work constantly interrupted. Several members of the ground staff were injured in air raids. When the Japanese moved their artillery onto the northern shore of Johore Strait, they were also able to shell the airfield. The danger was illustrated on 5 February when Flying Officer John Hastwell, No. 21/453 Squadron, was landing his Buffalo and a shell exploded right beside it; the aircraft was blown over and caught fire, badly burning Hastwell on the face and head before he was pulled free.

The Hudson squadrons had also suffered repeated air raids but by the time Singapore was besieged most of their men had been flown or shipped out. No. 8 Squadron had departed on 20 January and No. 1 Squadron followed a few days later. They were now based in Sumatra alongside RAF squadrons that also contained some Australians and continued supporting the campaign by bombing Japanese positions in Johore and lines of communication. The Australian squadrons were led by Group Captain John McCauley, the exceptionally capable commander of RAAF Far East. Some British and Australian air force work parties remained on Singapore to repair aircraft that were unserviceable when the squadrons were evacuated or that made emergency landings after

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

being damaged over Malaya. Some medical staff also stayed to treat casualties.

At the end of January, General Sir Archibald Wavell, the British commander of the joint American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Command, formed to coordinate the defence of Burma, Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines, visited Singapore to discuss defence preparations. He suggested that the most likely area of Japanese attack would be the north-west of the island, where Johore Strait was narrowest and a series of river mouths on the north bank provided cover for launching amphibious craft. He recommended deploying the fresh British 18th Division at this north-west point and allocating the next most likely area to be attacked, the north-east, to the Australians. However, Percival decided to deploy the Australians at the most vulnerable point and retain the 18th Division as a mobile reserve.

Along the north-western shoreline, Bennett had his weary 22nd and 27th Brigades, which had been reduced to about half-strength, and also the 44th Indian Brigade, which had arrived in



Major General Bennett giving war correspondents a briefing on the situation in Singapore. (AWM P01182.009)

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## A BITTER FATE

January but stayed on Singapore because it was deemed unprepared for battle. Bennett placed the Indians on the south-western flank, which was least likely to be attacked. He gave Brigadier Duncan Maxwell's 27th Brigade (2/26th, 2/29th and 2/30th Battalions) responsibility for the Causeway sector on the eastern flank, with a water frontage of approximately four kilometres, and Brigadier Taylor's 22nd Brigade (2/18th, 2/19th and 2/20th Battalions) took on almost 15 kilometres of coastline in the centre, where Johore Strait was narrowest and where a Japanese attack was almost certain to come. The 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion provided gun teams to Australian and Indian infantry battalions, while the 2/10th and 2/15th Field Regiments and 4th Anti-Tank Regiment provided fire support. The machine-gunners, 'johnny come latelys' to the campaign, were probably the only troops under Bennett's command who were still brimming with confidence.



Australian anti-tank gunners manning a position overlooking Johore Strait and the blown causeway on 1 February 1942. (AWM 012449)

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

It was Percival's intention to prevent the Japanese landing in this sector but, if they did manage to get ashore, to defeat them on the beaches with a rapid counter-attack. However, the Australians found that they occupied a dense wasteland of mangrove swamp and mud flats rather than open beaches, which made rapid reinforcement during a battle virtually impossible. An officer of the 2/19th Battalion wrote that the unit was:

***... dumped in a scraggy waste of stunted rubber and tangled undergrowth, apparently miles from anywhere, our vision limited to the next rise in the undulating ground and our means of movement confined to a few native foot-tracks winding through the wilderness.***

[Unnamed officer quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 302]

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Battalion posts were sometimes hundreds of metres apart. This was ideal for the infiltration tactics that the Japanese had used so effectively in Malaya.

The enemy's advance to Singapore had brought many non-combatant units within range of danger. Staff Sergeant Alec Hodgson, an old soldier in the 2/6th Field Park Company, Royal Australian Engineers, was surprised to find how jittery many of the base troops had become, with some men in his unit inclined to stay snugly in their trenches unless he booted them out. Hospitals were also within range of shelling. On 7 February, Sister Edith Howgate recorded in her diary:

***A taste of plain Hell this [morning] when our Hospital received a barrage of shells from the enemy. ... I had just gone upstairs from the tents and had finished a patient when a terrific crash like a lightning strike burst near us. I went for my helmet and just got back in time to help a few patients downstairs and settle them under furniture - beds & tables - a few rugs down on the floor and they were put everywhere. Then having cleared the way to the theatre, I put on the sterilisers and got gloves on ... Horrible casualties - thank God I'm used to the sight of blood. Then a cup of tea and more or less return to normal ...***

[Howgate, diary entry, 7 February 1942, AWM PR91/045]

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## A BITTER FATE

Civilians were also suffering from increased raids on all parts of the city. Many were treated in the military hospitals.



First-aid being given to civilians after a Japanese air raid on Singapore on 3 February 1942. (AWM 011529/10)

The crews of warships and merchant ships anchored around Singapore also endured air raids. The dispersed vessels made less inviting targets than large military bases and other facilities on the island, however they were sometimes targeted and most of the Australian ships suffered some damage from shrapnel or strafing. Leading Signalman Danny Ingram, HMAS *Bendigo*, wrote of a near miss:

***We were lying at anchor amongst a large number of merchant ships [when] 27 enemy a/c [aircraft] flew over us dropping a bunch of at least 8 bombs on shipping ... and the rest on Keppel Harbour Docks. The 8 fell all round the 'Bendigo' completely straddling her. It was a lucky escape, the Ship's company being thoroughly scared for the first time, and the ship bears a number of shrapnel scars to tell the tale.***

[Ingram, diary entry, AWM 3DRL/2883]

As the siege developed, Japanese aircraft roamed freely over the shipping routes leading into and out of Singapore, making the four day passage increasingly dangerous, to the extent that Sunda Strait was dubbed 'Bomb Alley' and, by some, 'Suicide Lane'. Anti-aircraft gunners in warships and merchant ships endeavoured to drive off

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

the aircraft but, as a crewman of HMAS *Yarra* recalled: 'The Japanese kept their attacks up from the Sunda Strait until we arrived at Singapore. We used to pray for night to come along, because we knew that in the silent darkness there was protection.'<sup>4</sup>

The last relief convoy reached the stricken island on 5 February. One of the merchant ships had developed engine trouble and the convoy missed slipping into port under the cover of darkness. Shortly after the ships anchored, Japanese aircraft attacked and the troopship *Empress of Asia* was bombed and caught fire. It was carrying a British brigade and its weapons and equipment. *Yarra*, which had escorted the convoy, suffered minor damage in the raid but in return its gunners shot down a dive-bomber. Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin ordered his crew to lower all boats to rescue men in the water and then took *Yarra* alongside the stricken troopship and took off 1334 men directly. The corvettes *Bendigo* and *Wollongong* rescued other men from the ship and in the water.

Most of the large merchant ships sent to Singapore were Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) fitted with a modest array of guns including a 4.5-inch naval gun and several Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns and Lewis or Vickers machine-guns. Gun crews were made up of sailors from the various British Empire navies. An Australian DEMS gunner, Able Seaman Harry Worrall, was killed in the *Empress of Asia*. At least two other DEMS gunners were in ships sunk during the campaign but were rescued.



The troopship *Empress of Asia* on fire after Japanese dive-bombers attacked the ship. Most of the troops and crew onboard were rescued by the sloop HMAS *Yarra* and the corvettes HMA Ships *Bendigo* and *Wollongong*. (AWM P01604.001)

## A BITTER FATE



Crew of the corvette HMAS *Wollongong* lower boats to rescue survivors of the *Empress of Asia*, some of whom had jumped into the water to escape the intense flames on the burning troopship. (Courtesy Bernard 'Bunny' Barton)

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Crewmen of HMAS *Wollongong* assist survivors taken off the *Empress of Asia*. Some had been wounded and many were suffering from shock. (Courtesy Bernard 'Bunny' Barton)

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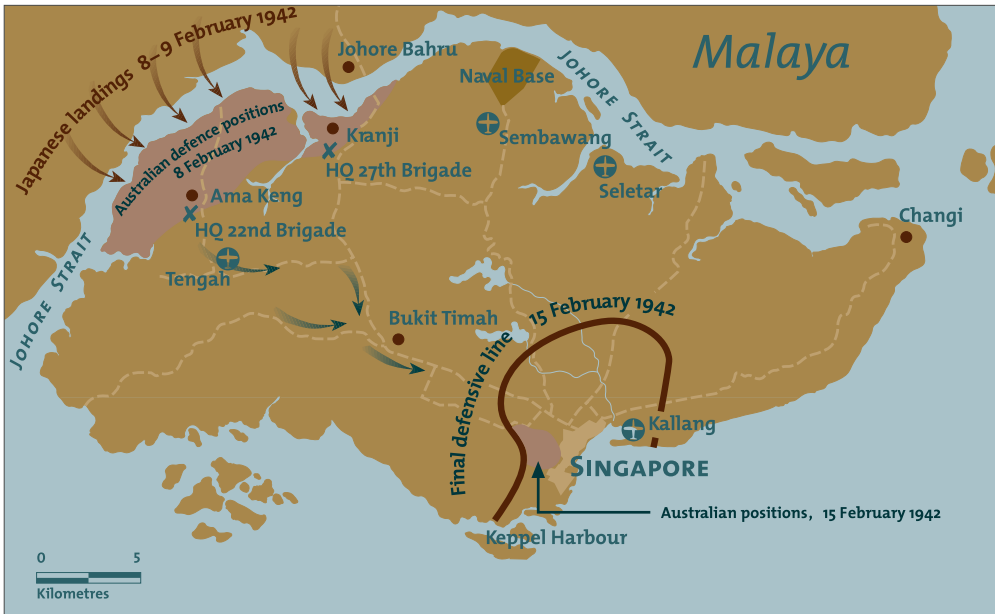
## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

As this was the last incoming convoy, the naval exodus was completed over the following days. *Yarra* ended its involvement in the campaign by escorting a convoy to Java. The last two Australian warships in Singapore departed on the night of 7 February when *Bendigo* escorted a convoy out of the harbour, leaving *Wollongong* as the last Australian warship to leave Singapore. The corvettes now had better anti-aircraft defences after their crews acquired Bofors or Oerlikon guns, often by surreptitious means. The captain of *Wollongong* purchased a Bofors gun from troops of an anti-aircraft battery at Keppel Harbour for a case of gin! Another case secured 200 rounds of ammunition and a spare barrel.

At dawn on 8 February, a severe Japanese bombardment of Singapore began. As well as air raids, intense artillery fire fell on the 22nd and 27th Brigades' areas. There were relatively few casualties but vital communication lines were cut. By evening, the bombardment had reached drumfire intensity. The commanding officer of the 2/18th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Varley, who had endured the German shelling of Pozières in 1916, remarked: 'During my four years of service [in] 1914–1918 I never experienced such concentrated shell fire over such a period.' The men hunched in slit-trenches, many shaking with fear and praying, expecting the Japanese to attack. The 2/20th Battalion's historian recalled: 'Everyone endeavoured not to show the man next to him the extent he was frightened ... Men who were shocked were left alone, [as] there was no point in endeavouring to reason with a shocked man under strained conditions.'<sup>5</sup>

Soon after 10.30 pm, the Japanese struck. Amphibious landings were made against the 2/18th and 2/20th Battalions' positions. The brunt fell against the 2/20th, in particular its D Company, where Lieutenant Eric Wankey of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion had a gun team positioned. Hearing approaching motorboats, he raced to a Vickers machine-gun and waited until the boats were close to shore to open fire. His platoon sergeant, Sergeant Harold Jacobs, recalled:

## A BITTER FATE

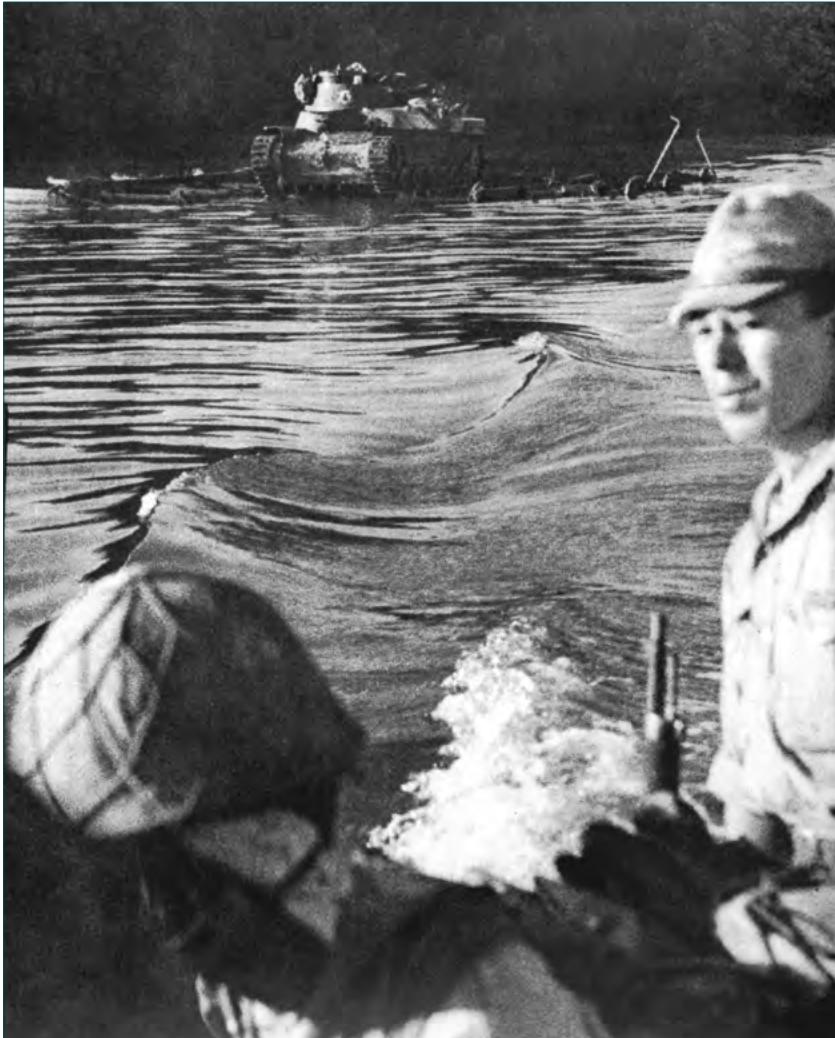


Defence of Singapore, 8-15 February 1942, indicating Australian positions and lines of retreat

*I could see them coming. They were right in. I could see these shapes and I thought 'Christ we're in trouble here' but the Vickers slowed them down. They were so close we were lobbing hand grenades into them. The first one we knocked out was a steel barge but they were towing all sorts of boats and I think rafts. ... The hand grenades did a hell'uva job for us, we had buckets of them lined up along the front and it was possible to lob them into the barges both from the sea wall and from the jetty which extended out into the strait.*

[Harold Jacobs quoted in Les Cody, *Ghosts in Khaki: The History of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion, 8th Australian Division AIF*, Perth, 1997, p. 114]

However, the Japanese were able to get troops ashore elsewhere, and also brought barges close to shore which carried mortars that added to the shelling of Australian positions. The Japanese then pressed in from the flanks and began pushing back the defending troops. Captain RJD Richardson, who commanded the 2/20th's D Company, recalled:



Japanese force heading for Singapore Island across Johore Strait. (AWM 129751)

*By midnight it was obvious that the Japs were getting ashore through the undefended sectors between the companies, and were pressing on our flanks and the situation was becoming increasingly desperate. At about 1.00 am I ordered all Platoons to withdraw ... about 400 yards [360 metres] to our rear. ... This was accomplished in good order [and] I was able to contact Battalion Headquarters and at last got some artillery fire brought down on the waterfront, we could hear the Japs screaming as it fell among them. For the previous three hours I had been asking for artillery but to no avail ...*

[Richardson quoted in Don Wall, *Singapore & Beyond: The story of the men of the 2/20 Battalion*, Sydney, 1985, pp. 69-70]



## A BITTER FATE

The 2/20th was pushed back, suffering dozens of casualties; by daylight, it would lose over 400 men. Even in this time of intense fighting, laconic Australian humour could come through. Private Claude 'Bluey' Jones was mortally wounded early in the battle but cracked a smile and, thinking back to the pre-war sale of bulk scrap iron to Japan, remarked to his mates: 'I shouldn't have sold the bastards that old bedstead!' This theme riddled the Australians' sense of humour over the following days. On another occasion, when a Japanese shell landed near some troops of the 2/10th Field Ambulance but failed to explode, a countryman was heard to retort: 'I bet that was made from the plough we had - it was never any good anyway.'<sup>6</sup>

Further west, the 2/18th Battalion was also pushed back. Sergeant Frank Adams was in charge of a section near the water's edge when he first spotted vessels carrying enemy troops. The Australians stood their ground and 'there wasn't one Japanese got past us between our two slit trenches'. Private Les Pitts, one of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion gunners in support, recalled: 'I don't know how many of the Japs we accounted for but with Vickers against boat loads of Japs at about 50 yards [45 metres] or less, the total must have been considerable.' As with the other attack, the Japanese were able to land troops away from the Vickers guns and began encircling the Australians. Lieutenant Alan Loxton, 2/18th Battalion, spotted troops moving at the rear of his position 'but I wasn't certain that they weren't our own ... there was a fair bit of chaos that night'. His platoon, like most others, soon had to fight their way out, losing several men before getting clear.<sup>7</sup>

The Japanese had allocated 16 battalions for the attack against the 22nd Brigade's positions. Throughout that night and the next day, Taylor's brigade was pushed back and the Japanese secured their main objective of the landing, Tengah airfield. In the official history, Lionel Wigmore concluded: 'In retrospect, Taylor's front, with its excessive dispersal of units, had been about as capable of withstanding a concentrated assault as a sieve is of holding water.' The brigade's problems were made much worse by the failure of senior commanders, including Major General Bennett, to respond well to the attack and to dispatch adequate reinforcements.<sup>8</sup>

Positions in the rear also received attention from enemy aircraft and artillery, as the Japanese endeavoured to cut communications and delay reinforcement of the Australian positions. Bombing and strafing was often intense and unnerving. Staff Sergeant Hodgson, 2/6th Field Park Company, which was several kilometres to the

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL



Murray Griffin, *Captain John Vernon*. Vernon was a lieutenant in the 2/18th Battalion when the Japanese attacked. His platoon fought against the initial landing in his sector and Vernon then worked hard to ensure his platoon was able to withdraw with its wounded. He was later promoted and was awarded the Military Cross. (AWM ART 24496)

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rear, wrote in his diary that he and his men 'cowered like rats in holes all day'.

About 9.00 pm on 9 February, a second Japanese landing force struck at the 27th Brigade between the causeway and the mouth of the Kranji River. Here, however, Brigadier Maxwell had permission to pull his battalions back as soon as the huge oil storage tanks near the causeway had been blown up. This was done, and over nine million litres of burning oil poured out across the creeks and into Johore Strait. The Japanese commander of the Imperial Guards Division panicked when he first observed the sheet of flame seeming to engulf his men and requested that his force be landed further east where the first Japanese attack had taken place, however he quickly realised that the Australians had pulled back and his division continued its landing.

## A BITTER FATE



Murray Griffin, *Advanced dressing station near Tengah, February 1942*  
(AWM ART24478)

By the morning of 10 February, the Japanese were ashore in force and most of north-west Singapore was in their hands. The 2/26th Battalion, and most likely all of the battalions, found that Japanese artillery, mortar, machine-gun and rifle fire was coming from all directions and was so intense that it was 'as if a tremendous scythe was being used. The trees and vines were falling around us.' The men had to withdraw through this fire and on both fronts hundreds were killed, wounded or missing. A gunner of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment commented that it was 'hell on earth out there'. Even in daylight it was dark and confusing, as the thick, acrid smoke from the burning oil wells was now hanging over the island. Captain Brand, the 2/29th Battalion's regimental medical officer, recalled: 'we found that the soot ... had been falling on us. We were all covered with this black oil soot - clothes, equipment and faces - and we looked like black troops.'<sup>9</sup>

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

In the face of seemingly relentless Japanese attacks, supported by aircraft and tanks, the Australian, Indian and British troops tried several times to hold the enemy at various defensive lines. By the end of the first two days, however, the battalions had lost so many men that most had to be reorganised into composite units. On the night of 10-11 February, a counter-attack forward of Bukit Timah was organised in an attempt to buy time for hard-pressed forces in other areas. The attack was to be led by the 6th/15th Indian Brigade and involved three of the scratch Australian units - 'X' Battalion, which was a composite of base troops, reinforcements and a company of the 2/18th Battalion under the command of Major Charles O'Brien; Merret Force, commanded by Major RO Merret, consisting of a company of the 2/19th Battalion and about 60 men from the 2/20th; and the Special Reserve Battalion, a mixture of service corps and ordnance troops with 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion reinforcements, under Major AE Saggars.

That evening, after dark, 'X' Battalion advanced past dead Indian troops illuminated by the flames of the burning village of Bukit Timah. Despite their apprehension and the obvious danger, the men made camp and had fallen asleep by 1.00 am to await the orders to attack. At 3.00 am, Japanese troops attacked and overran the battalion. Private Jim Toose, 2/18th Battalion, recalled what happened to him that night:

***Everybody was so tired ... Everybody lay down and slept ... Next thing they opened up on us. That's when Major O'Brien gave the order 'Every man for himself'. They [the enemy] pounded in and a group of us got out and we ended up in Singapore next morning ... Alan McIntyre who never went to the range because he couldn't see the damned targets - they sent him out in 'X' Battalion! Couldn't see where he was going, so I had a bandolier over my shoulder of bullets [and] he hung on to that.***

[Toose quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, pp. 79-80]

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Many of the Australians were killed in their sleep, and others in desperate hand-to-hand combat. An enemy mortar shell hit a petrol dump nearby and lit up the scene. An 'X' Battalion soldier recalled:

## A BITTER FATE

***It was like a macabre dance straight from hell with the struggling figures silhouetted against the leaping flames from the oil dump. The crashing explosions of mortar bombs, and grenades and the rattle of small arms fire providing a sickening orchestration to add to the screams and the cries of the wounded and dying.***

[Unnamed soldier quoted in Cody, *Ghosts in Khaki*, p. 142]

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At dawn on 11 February, the counter-attack was cancelled and the combined British, Australian and Indian force fell back. The Special Reserve Battalion helped to cover the withdrawal and its commander, Major Sagers, recalled the tactics of the Japanese soldiers:

***The Japs pushed up to our line firing around and dodging behind trees, crawling along drains and using every fold in the ground. Many had cut a bush and used this to push in front of them as they crawled forward, while others smeared mud and clay over their faces and clothing.***

[Sagers quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 349]

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Throughout this confused withdrawal, there were many acts of individual bravery as men tried to stem the onslaught and to cover their retreating comrades. Lieutenant Victor Warhurst, a 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion officer in the Special Reserve Battalion, led a bayonet charge with a company of British troops



The corvette HMAS *Wollongong* had the distinction of being the last Australian warship to leave Singapore. It had camouflage applied only after it reached Sumatra. (Courtesy Bernard 'Bunny' Barton)

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## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

which momentarily halted the enemy. Warhurst was killed in action later that same day. Lieutenant Victor Mentiplay, Special Reserve Battalion, was so incensed by the sight of a Japanese soldier bayoneting wounded Australians that he charged the enemy soldier but was himself bayoneted in the throat, fortunately missing key arteries. Mentiplay fell back but then pulled out his revolver and shot the enemy soldier, rushed on and killed another five Japanese, then threw his empty revolver at a Japanese machine-gun position and the gun's crew, thinking the revolver was a grenade, fled. Mentiplay then hid in a pond and after nightfall made his way back to the British lines.

In spite of the hard fighting, it began to dawn on many men that no relief was on its way and that the Japanese had the island at their mercy. Moreover, the Japanese had complete control of the skies and any ships that did manage to leave Singapore ran a very great risk of being sunk. Unlike with the British Army on the beaches of Dunkirk in northern France in June 1940, there would be no last-minute rescue. Only a few army units were evacuated, including the 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company, which was shipped to Java as a complete unit to drive lorries in defence of that island. Other transport units continued driving supplies and casualties along fire-swept roads.

On 10 February, six nurses accompanied 300 wounded Australian, British and Indian troops who were evacuated on a small merchant ship, the *Wah Sui* – they were among the lucky few casualties to get off the island. Sister Mona Wilton, who was later killed when being evacuated from Singapore, handed a scribbled note to one of the men to deliver to her parents:

***In a terrific hurry to get the boys on a ship – to home & safety. Goodness knows when we will follow. Don't worry – will you? We can dodge bombs with the best of them.***

[Wilton, note to parents, AWM PR89/92]

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The six nurses on the *Wah Sui* were fortunate to leave the island but they were 'broken-hearted that we had to go'. The doctors, nurses and orderlies in hospitals were hard-pressed coping with hundreds of casualties, with more arriving by the minute, and the nurses felt they could do more good by staying. The hospitals displayed Red Cross banners but stray shells and bombs caused disruptions and some casualties within hospital grounds. Sister Jeffrey recalled one makeshift hospital:

## A BITTER FATE

***Never had I seen such a sight. There were wounded men everywhere - in beds, on stretchers on the floor, on verandas, in garages, tents, and dug-outs.***

[Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, p. 2]

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Bennett had resisted calls to evacuate the nurses - he realised their worth - but many now feared for the women's safety. One British officer even suggested that the women should be shot rather than be allowed to fall into Japanese hands! On 11 February, the nurses were told that half of the 130-strong nursing staff of the 2/10th and 2/13th Australian General Hospitals and 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station would leave that day. Sister Simons recalled:



This portrait of Sisters Ellen Keats (left) and Elizabeth Pyman, 2/10th Australian General Hospital, taken before the start of the campaign, illustrates the vastly different fates of the nursing staff, depending on which ship they were evacuated on. Pyman left with the first draft in the *Empire Star* on 12 February and reached Australia safely. Keats boarded the *Vyner Brooke* the following day and was killed in the Banka Island massacre. (AWM P00824.005)

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## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

***That was a bolt from the blue. It was common knowledge that no real ships were available, certainly not any suitable for hospital ships, and the suggestion that we pull out and abandon our patients sent up our blood pressure. When the call was made for volunteers from among the nurses to stay behind, we all volunteered.***

[Simons, *While History Passed*, p. 6]

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Matrons Paschke and Drummond selected those who were to be evacuated. Those selected were bitterly disappointed to be leaving at this hour of greatest need.

On 12 February, Bennett, sensing that the end was not far away, began moving all 8th Division units into an Australian perimeter around Tanglin Barracks, a few kilometres out of the city. The Japanese continued advancing against British, Indian and Malay units to the north and south of the Australian positions. By the following day, enemy units had approached to within five kilometres of the Singapore waterfront and the whole city was in range of their artillery. Many men began looking for ways off the island, and a number of good launches were taken that day by troops who had decided that Singapore could not be saved.

The remaining sixty-five Australian nurses were informed that they would be evacuated. Sister Jeffrey was working with five other nurses at the small Manor House hospital. Early in the afternoon, a car arrived and the nurses were ordered to leave at that moment.

***We all flatly refused to go. There was so much to be done. Wounded were arriving constantly; no hospital ships were in Singapore to relieve the congestion. ... But our refusal was useless. We were ordered to leave and had to walk out on those superb fellows. All needed attention; not one complained - doctors, too, who needed our help so badly. I have never felt worse about anything. This was the work we had gone overseas to do. We sat in the car quite dazed by the suddenness of it all.***

[Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, p. 3]

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## A BITTER FATE



Two Chinese women mourn the death of a child killed in a raid. The civilian population of Singapore suffered horrendously during air raids, with little or no hope of escape. (AWM 011529/22)

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Ambulances carried the women to Keppel Harbour, though they had to walk the last portion of the journey 'through indescribable ruin, blazing buildings, acrid smoke and abandoned or wrecked cars'. They boarded a small merchant ship, the *Vyner Brooke*.

Many troops now realised that the garrison could not hold out – though rumours of imminent relief continued to sweep through the ranks. On 13 February, Staff Sergeant Hodgson recorded in his diary:

***Heard a very persistent rumour that Yanks & British have landed at every port from Penang downwards. Don't believe that and don't believe the Jap has anywhere near the number of troops we have actually on the island. Reckon if we were all sent to it we could chase him off.***

[Hodgson, diary entry, 13 February 1942, AWM PR91/141]

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Captain Brand heard the same rumour and urged men to fight on.



## SERGEANT WALTER BROWN VC DCM

2/15TH FIELD REGIMENT AIF

John Longstaff, *Sergeant Walter "Wally" Brown VC* (AWM ART 094490)

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**W**alter Ernest Brown was one of 'the old and the bold' – like dozens of others in the 8th Division, he had fought in World War I. Born on 3 July 1885, Brown enlisted in 1915 and served with the 20th Battalion during 1917–18. He won the Distinguished Conduct Medal at Passchendaele in September–October 1917 and the Victoria Cross at Villers-Bretonneux on 6 July 1918. However, when he enlisted again in 1940 he insisted that he was like any other soldier.

At the outbreak of World War II, Brown was living at Leeton with his wife, son and daughter, working as a water bailiff for the New South Wales Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission. He enlisted in the 2nd AIF in June 1940, giving his age as 40 though in fact he was 55. He explained to a friend:

***I could not resist the temptation of enlisting again when I saw the boys and many of the Old Diggers going away. And, although I have a wife and two lovely kiddies to think about, I came to the conclusion that my duty was to serve my country and my family both.***

[Brown quoted in Wigmore, *They Dared Mightily*, p. 132]

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Brown's real age and military record were discovered. He was promoted to lance sergeant and posted to the 2/15th Field Regiment, serving in the Regimental Headquarters. He reverted to gunner at his own request but later was promoted to sergeant. He was well liked and an inspiration to younger soldiers.

The 2/15th reached Malaya in August 1941. During the campaign, the gunners worked hard to deliver fire support for the 27th Brigade in Malaya and Singapore. On 15 February 1942, they were ordered to make a last ditch effort. Brown and his comrades moved to the front line, coming under strong fire, however the surrender came into effect.

## SERGEANT WALTER BROWN VC DCM

A legend has developed in which Brown is supposed to have grabbed grenades and walked towards the Japanese lines, uttering 'No surrender for me'. However, it seems he was determined to escape. Brown sought the permission of his commanding officer and with several others spent the evening searching for a way off the island. They were stopped at the docks by British military police and nearly ran into a Japanese patrol. In desperation, the would-be escapers approached an Australian military police officer, hoping he might know of a boat and could tell them about the minefields. Gunner G W Fletcher wrote:

***Wally ... told us afterwards he did something that he had never done before and he hoped he would never have to do again, and that was to make use of his VC, but Australia seemed so far away at that moment and we all wanted to get there so badly. He told Captain Mens that he was a VC and [asked] could he assist us in any way. Mens said that if he knew where there was a little boat he would not be there at that time, and as for ... the mines, he did not know any more than we did ... He said he didn't like our chances of getting out as they were about one hundred against.***

[Fletcher, transcript of diary, 15 February 1942, AWM 3DRL/0366]

They expected to be strafed or captured at any time, and indeed got a fright when they landed at a village on the coast of Sumatra and spotted armed troops dressed in 'jungle green', however the troops turned out to be Dutch. The party hired a local vessel and sailed along the coast and then up the Inderagiri River to Rengat, near the centre of Sumatra. There they joined hundreds of other escapers, mostly British, and plans were made to transport them overland to the south-west coast for evacuation.

The escapers began boarding buses and trucks but Brown's party was split up. Brown was last seen waiting with other troops in a rubber plantation for his turn to be transported overland. He was caught behind enemy lines when the Japanese invaded. Escapers who reached Padang heard rumours that Brown had been killed. He is officially presumed to have died on or about 28 February 1942.

The escape party discovered a rowboat. Using palings as oars and helmets to bail water, the six gunners and three English soldiers set off for Sumatra after midnight. It took an hour to disentangle the boat from barbed wire defences, but they got clear. Next day, they found oars and a sail on an island and made good time from then on.

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

With the infantry exhausted, officers began organising any remaining men from non-combatant units to take up the fight. Hodgson was placed in charge of an engineering workshop but recorded that three of its men 'were terrified at the idea of becoming front line troops'. Private Douglas McLagan, one of the recently arrived reinforcements, was convalescing from wounds when a call went out for volunteers for a new composite unit. Of the 350 men in the convalescent depot, only forty volunteered. Elsewhere, men in hospitals were given an option to rejoin the fight and among those who answered the call in the last days of the battle were Lieutenant Colonel Anderson VC and Gallegan. The men who volunteered realised:

***... we were fighting for ... our bloody lives. I was given a rifle and 100 rounds of ammunition and sent forward, coming up against the Japs and sniper fire at night. There was a general air of despondency everywhere, aggravated by the statement by a Major Hunt that for us the war was over. But we were not beaten yet and though we were surrounded we thought it quite false that we would all be prisoners of war.***

[McLagan, *The Will to Survive*, p. 30]

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The men were saved from making a last ditch, suicidal counter-attack by a decision by senior officers on 14 February to cease such futile actions. Percival had called his senior commanders, including Bennett, to a conference and they agreed that, in the absence of any reserves, a counter-attack had no prospect of success. Basically, their soldiers were exhausted after too many days and nights of continually fighting and withdrawing, with nobody to relieve them and no respite from bombing and shelling. In addition, the civilian population was suffering terribly as the Japanese stepped up the bombardment of the city. Returning from the conference, the plight of Singapore's civilians was impressed upon Bennett:

***... there was devastation everywhere. There were holes in the road, churned-up rubble lying in great clods all round ... A group of Chinese, Malays, Europeans and Australian soldiers were already at work shovelling the debris away. Soon there emerged from the shelter a Chinese boy, scratched and bleeding, who immediately turned to help in the rescue work. He said 'My sister is under there'.***

## A BITTER FATE

***The rescuers dug furiously among the fallen masonry ... At last the top of the shelter was uncovered. Beneath was a crushed mass of old men, women, young and old and young children, some still living - the rest dead.***

[Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, pp. 186–87]

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The Japanese had also captured Singapore's reservoirs and pumping stations. If the water supply was shut off, the garrison was doomed.

The sun rose over Singapore Island on 15 February. Bennett recalled the day in his memoir of the campaign:

***Today opened with a hopeless dawn of despair. There is no hope in the horizon. The tropical sun is sending its steamy heat on to the dying city, which is writhing in its agony.***

[Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 191]

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Rumours of a ceasefire were sweeping through the ranks, but most refused to believe it was possible. Many swore they would never surrender. Some troops encountered British military police who were:

***... looking for an individual in an English Major's uniform who had gone amongst the troops ordering them to cease fire at 4pm. They informed us that there was definitely not going to be any capitulation or surrender.***

[Private Patrick Higham, Australian Army Ordnance Corps, unpublished memoir, 'Escape from Singapore', AWM PR01231]

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The heavy shelling, bombing and fighting continued during the day. Hundreds of British, Indian and Australian troops who had been cut off or separated from their units wandered aimlessly through streets or sought shelter in abandoned houses. Some had been wounded and others had broken down physically or psychologically. When the water supply began giving out, many men concluded that it was 'no use kidding ourselves any longer'. More began looking for ways to get off the island. Australia's official representative on Singapore, Mr Vivian Bowden, who had been denied permission to leave on 9 February, sent his last cryptic message to Australia: 'Our work completed. We will telegraph from another place at present unknown.'<sup>10</sup>

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

Some of the worst scenes imaginable were in the crowded and overflowing hospitals. Mr IR Hanger, the senior Australian YMCA representative with the 8th Division, wandered into the Cathedral Hospital, the converted St Andrew's Cathedral, to see what help was needed:

***Inside, the Cathedral presented a sight never to be forgotten. Hundreds of sick [and wounded] men were lying about in every available space; in a small vestry-like room, improvised as an operating theatre, doctors were performing remarkable feats of medical skill; civilians here and there were administering to the wounded soldiers and civilians.***

[I R Hanger, '2nd Report of work of YMCA with the AIF in Malaya', AWM 3DRL/1836]



Murray Griffin, *St Andrew's Cathedral, Singapore* (AWM ART26531)

## A BITTER FATE

Shells and bombing caused further chaos in the wards. Corporal Chas Mansfield, 2/12th Field Company, was bedridden with a fever. Shells were exploding nearby and shrapnel was coming through the windows 'and skidding all over the place', wounding men for a second or third or fourth time. In the afternoon, a shell came through the roof and exploded, killing 16 men outright and another eight would die of their wounds. One of Mansfield's friends was carried out in pieces.<sup>11</sup>

During this last day, Staff Sergeant Hodgson, and many others, realised that 'we have a very forlorn hope now'. Hodgson was ordered to move his sappers up to the line for a bayonet charge: 'Apparently the idea is to let our chaps ... do a death or glory stunt'. His men, all rear area troops steeled by rum found in a nearby house, were 'ready for anything'. Many infantrymen saw no reason to give up now, after losing so many friends and comrades, so 'we just fought on - we had a fatalistic bloody view'.<sup>12</sup> Gunner Fletcher, 2/15th Field Regiment, moved up for a final counter-attack:

***Talk about fire works! The Japs let go everything they had [including] shells, bombs, mortars, machine gun and rifle fire. The noise was simply deafening. Machine gun bullets from a plane were chopping the earth around where [we] were lying, near a stack of clay sewerage pipes. Just then a few rounds of rapid rifle fire broke out almost in front of us, only about 300 yards [270 metres] down the valley, we strained our eyes and waited, and again more puffs of smoke, and bullets splatted all around us. We thought it was about time we answered back, and we let go whatever we had, and for a time that portion of the valley was quiet, but not for long, and by the sound all around us it seemed as if the end was very near. Machine gun bullets from Jap planes were knocking chips off a tiled roof of a house about 20 feet [6 metres] to the right of me. Then suddenly all was quiet. Not a gun, a bomb or even a rifle was heard. We wondered what could have happened.***

[Fletcher, transcript of diary, 15 February 1942, AWM 3DRL/0366]

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A ceasefire had been called. General Percival made the decision to surrender because the water supply had virtually dried up, military supplies were running low, petrol was virtually exhausted, and the pounding of the city was causing horrendous civilian casualties. Having already decided that a counter-attack had little or no chance of success, his only option was to surrender or fight needlessly to the death. During the day, he arranged the ceasefire

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL



A lithographic print of a painting by an unknown Japanese artist showing the signing of the surrender documents at the Ford Factory, Bukit Timah (AWM 135867)

and personally signed the surrender document that evening at the Ford Factory on the Bukit Timah Road. All British Empire soldiers were required to lay down their arms at 8.30 pm that night.

Gunner Ronald Houlahan, 2/15th Field Regiment, wrote down his impressions of that fateful day:

***1130 hours we have heard that Pommies have ceased fire [but we] don't know why and that the Indians have laid down arms [so it] looks as [if] the AIF are going to fight it out on their own. At 1530 hours we get cease fire orders [and] believe that peace negotiations are going on. Just after dark we are moving, we are told, into a smaller perimeter near Tanglin Barracks. A lot of ammo is left behind. Along the road we hear lots of rumours that the Japs have retired and we are going forward. The CO's driver told me the peace terms have been signed between Britain & Japan. But soon we learn the truth. We have to line all the guns & trucks up at the gardens. All called together by our T C [Troop Commander] and were told we were prisoners of war.***

[Houlahan, diary entry, 15 February 1942]



## A BITTER FATE



Harold Abbot, *Defeat, Singapore* (AWM22927)

## CHAPTER 5 A TASTE OF PLAIN HELL

How did ordinary Australian soldiers react? The men in Cathedral Hospital heard whispers of a capitulation and noticed that 'the din of war began to die away. As evening came on a unique silence settled on the city'. Men were shocked, angry, disappointed, exhausted, disillusioned, anxious, relieved. Staff Sergeant Hodgson felt 'utter disgust and shame' because, like many other rear area troops, he had 'never [seen] a Jap, never fired a shot'. Private John McGrory, 2/18th Battalion, who had been in the thick of action, remembered a 'terrible feeling of depression, of down. I guess maybe there was some relief. ... And anger, very much anger'. But after days of desperate fighting and of being shelled, bombed, strafed, machine-gunned, sniped at, and engaging in hand-to-hand fighting, the men were also plain weary, hungry, tired and sore. Gunner Houlahan made a simple yet practical statement in his diary: 'Anyway we could go to sleep without worry from shells'.<sup>13</sup>

The defence of Singapore was over.



British troops surrendering on Singapore on 15 February 1942. (AWM 127902)

# A BITTER FATE

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Staff Sergeant David Wyllie, 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company, letter, 30 January 1942, AWM PRO0371
- 2 John Wyett, *Staff Wallah: At the Fall of Singapore*, Sydney, 1996, p. 82
- 3 Colonel Jim Thyer quoted in Newton, *The Grim Glory of the 2/19 Battalion AIF*, p. 256; O'Brien, quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 59
- 4 Unnamed sailor from HMAS *Yarra* quoted in *HMAS Canberra*, 1942, p. 153
- 5 Varley quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 308; Don Wall, *Singapore & Beyond: The story of the men of the 2/20 Battalion*, Sydney, 1985, p. 63
- 6 Private Claude Jones quoted in Wall, *Singapore & Beyond*, p. 75; Bob Wilson quoted in Ray Connolly & Bob Wilson (eds.), *Medical Soldiers: 2/10 Australian Field Ambulance 8 Div. 1940-45*, Kingsgrove, 1985, p. 63
- 7 Private Adams and Lieutenant Loxton quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, pp. 63-65; Private Pitts quoted in Cody, *Ghosts in Khaki*, p. 119
- 8 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 326
- 9 Magarry, *The Battalion Story*, p. 139; 'The War Diary of Gunner F W Christie, 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, 8th April 1941 to 18th October 1945', AWM PR89/173; Brand quoted in Christie, *A History of the 2/29th Battalion*, pp. 86-87
- 10 Bowden to Department of External Affairs, signal sent at 11.00 am on 14 February 1942, in W J Hudson & H J W Stokes (eds.), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, Vol V, *July 1941-June 1942*, Canberra, 1982, *document 333*, p. 150
- 11 Corporal Chas Mansfield, 2/12th Field Company, diary entry, 15 February 1942, AWM PRO0111
- 12 Hodgson, diary entry, 15 February 1942; Noel Johnston, 'Experimental taping made with idea of adding to 2/30th Bn History', 18 & 22 August 1983, AWM PRO0686
- 13 Hanger, YMCA report; Hodgson, diary entry, 16 February 1942; McGrory quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 89; Houlahan, diary entry, 15 February 1942

# LEFT TO OUR FATE

'There is to be no Dunkirk at Singapore!'

[Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 190]



## A BITTER FATE

**T**he final defence of Singapore had cost Australia dearly. After the fighting ended and losses could be tallied, the defeated garrison's staff found that over 15,000 Australians were now prisoners of war. Over 1100 Australian troops were either confirmed dead or missing in action and hundreds of others remained unaccounted for, most having escaped shortly before or after the surrender. The fate of others evacuated in the last days of fighting, such as the nurses, was not yet known.

Official evacuations began in late January and continued almost until the surrender. All RAAF squadrons were evacuated before the invasion, the last being No. 453 Squadron on 6 February. The last RAN warships had cleared out a week later. Some work parties had stayed to destroy supplies and equipment and to repair a few remaining aircraft and vessels, but most of the men were evacuated by 12 February. A RAAF medical detachment remained on the island for another two days. By then, the passage out of Singapore was extremely dangerous, as Sergeant Matt O'Mara, No. 21/453 Squadron, discovered when the *SS Derrymore* was torpedoed. He spent nineteen hours in the water before the corvette HMAS *Ballarat* rescued survivors.

Other men escaped of their own initiative. For instance, Flight Sergeant Harry Griffiths, a pilot in No. 21/453 Squadron, was recovering from injuries and sickness when his hospital was overrun



The city was a shambles by the time many personnel were evacuated or decided to escape. They had to make their way through bombed-out streets to reach Keppel Harbour, often enduring more air raids along the way. (AWM 011529/14)



Most of the RAAF personnel who had served in Malaya and Singapore were evacuated to Australia, though over 200 were captured in various locations, most on Java. One group of RAAF men arrives in Melbourne in late March 1942. (AWM 011893)

and escaped into the city where, on 11 February, he found refuge in a near-deserted hotel. Tired, hungry, feverish and possibly hallucinating, he was sitting alone in the bar sipping a glass of water (there was no alcohol) when he felt a tap on the shoulder and heard a voice tell him to go to the docks as there was a ship leaving. Griffiths turned to speak to the gentleman but nobody was there. Concluding that it must have been a ghost, he figured he had nothing to lose so walked to Keppel Harbour and found a ship preparing to depart. Griffiths grabbed its gang-plank just as the crew began raising it, and was hauled aboard the *Empire Star*.

The *Empire Star* was crowded with over 2000 evacuees including sixty-three nurses and three physiotherapists from the 2/10th and 2/13th Australian General Hospitals and the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station. The women were allotted an area in the hold and settled in as best they could for a dangerous voyage. The night-buoys marking the minefields around Singapore had disappeared so the captain moved his ship out into the harbour and waited until dawn on 12 February to set off. A few hours into the journey, enemy aircraft attacked. Sister Howgate heard the alarm:

## A BITTER FATE

*We had just eaten our biscuits & cheese when 'Take cover!' - 'Get right inside & keep away from doorways!' - 'Keep down!' - and we got our faces down on the deck. ... Then we heard the machine guns coming closer with their 'rat-tat' and our bodies went flatter than ever - I remember my eyes were screwed shut & my hands clenched white fists. Several goes of machine gun fire & then we felt a hit from a bomb.*

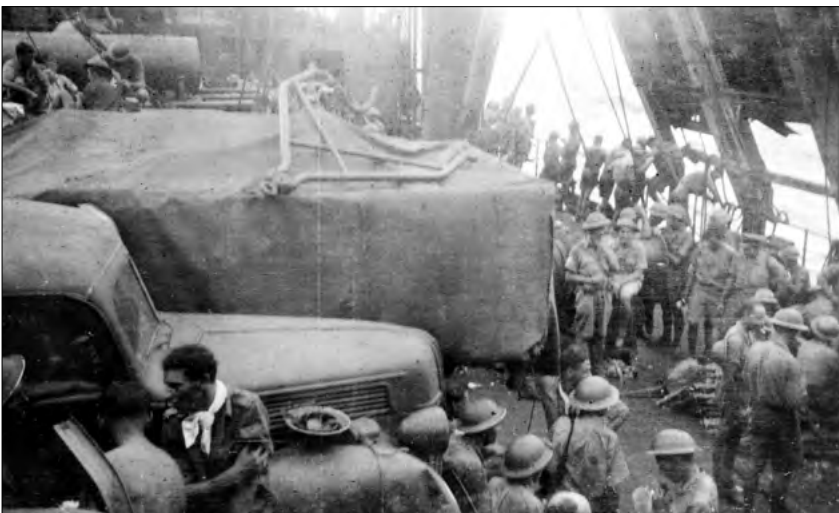
[Howgate, diary entry, 12 February 1942, AWMP91/045]

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Australian nurses in the cargo hold of the *Empire Star* during the voyage from Singapore. (AWM P01117.005)

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Troops and motor transport crowded onto the *Empire Star*. The lorries were being shipped to Java to assist in the defence of that island. The 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Convoy AIF was on another ship that left in the same convoy. (AWM P01117.007)

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## CHAPTER 6 LEFT TO OUR FATE

Some Australian troops manned the anti-aircraft guns as the captain, who had survived attacks off Crete, skillfully manoeuvred his ship. Several attacks were made and three bombs struck, killing thirteen men and wounding thirty-seven. Sisters Margaret Anderson and Veronica Torney threw themselves across wounded men to protect them from strafing and were decorated for their bravery.



A lifeboat, crowded with survivors of a Chinese gun-boat, the *Shu Kwong*, drifts in the South China Sea shortly before their rescue on 14 February 1942. The *Shu Kwong* had left Singapore the day before carrying official evacuees, including thirty-two AIF technicians. Of the Australians, about twelve survived the sinking and were rescued and taken to Java. They eventually arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia, on 10 March 1942. (AWM P02100.001)



Nursing staff of the 2/10th Australian General Hospital (AGH) photographed at Fremantle in March 1942. They had escaped with nurses of the 2/13th AGH and 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station. Another sixty-five nurses were evacuated on the *Vyner Brooke*, which was sunk. (AWM P01117.011)



## A BITTER FATE

The *Empire Star* reached Java four days later. Only one other ship of the twelve that left Singapore on 12 February made it through. The nurses and many other evacuees eventually reached safety but the 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company, which was on the other ship, was off-loaded at Java because it had been evacuated with its trucks to support the defence of the island.

General Percival had also authorised the evacuation of key technicians and some combatant soldiers who could pass on the lessons of the campaign. He allocated 100 positions in the official escape plan to the AIF. Bennett sent administrative staff and technicians, and some postal staff with orders to deliver the last mail from 8th Division troops. Of the 100 men selected, just thirty-nine reached Australia.

Some RAN personnel were still on Singapore, and at least ten Australian sailors were lost on the island or on the passage out. Able Seaman Robert Mason was in hospital when his ship, HMAS *Yarra*, sailed and it is believed that he died on 15 February 1942. Leading Signaller Danny Ingram and Able Seaman Duncan Horner were caught in an air raid and missed the departure of their ship, HMAS *Bendigo*. They realised they were in a bind because 'everyone could now see the end was near' but a couple of days later they were allotted as crewmen in ships. Ingram was posted to a British destroyer, HMS *Scorpion*, and was killed when it was sunk on 13 February. Horner was posted to a merchant ship, the SS *Bulan*, which was berthed at Keppel Harbour with soldiers 'milling around everywhere and saying, "Don't leave without us"'. The *Bulan* carried civilian refugees and survived an aerial attack to escape.<sup>1</sup>

On 12 February, the last sixty-five Australian nurses were ordered out, against their wishes. Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton watched them leave: 'Smiling wistfully, they fluttered tiny handkerchiefs to us from the open doors of the ambulances, as orderlies and doctors lined the drive to cheer them on their way.' Braving an air raid to reach the docks, the nurses boarded the *Vyner Brooke*, which was crowded with evacuees, mostly women and children. Matrons Paschke and Drummond told their nurses they had a slim chance of making it through 'Bomb Alley'. The ship survived until about 2.00 pm on 14 February, when it was caught in Banka Strait.



Sister Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy, 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station, was among the party of Australian nurses who were evacuated from Singapore on the *Vyner Brooke*. After the sinking of the ship by enemy aircraft on 14 February 1942, Balfour-Ogilvy made it to shore on Banka Island. She was among the twenty-two Australian nurses machine-gunned on a beach on the island.  
(AWM P01021.001)

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Sister Wilma Oram recalled:

***The Japanese planes came over and bombed us. ... We'd already gone down to take shelter below decks ... we were lying flat on our faces, and the side was blown out of the ship. There was broken glass sprayed all over us. I thought my legs had been cut off, but when I had a look they were only just cut by flying glass. But one of our girls ... had a very bad wound in her buttocks. We carried her up this ladder onto the deck and put a field dressing on it. Then we had to abandon ship.***

[Oram quoted in 'The sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*,'  
[www.angellpro.com.au/oram.htm](http://www.angellpro.com.au/oram.htm)]

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Twelve nurses were either killed in the attack, drowned or drifted in life rafts until they died; the remainder, along with other survivors, reached Banka Island. One group of twenty-two nurses gathered on a beach with about fifty British soldiers until Japanese troops arrived on the morning of 15 February.

## A BITTER FATE

The prisoners were separated into two groups and the men were taken away and killed. Sister Bullwinkel recalled what happened next:

***[They] lined us up and signed for us to march into the sea. Then they started machine-gunning from behind. Matron Drummond, Sister Casson and Sister Wright were killed before they reached the water's edge. The rest of us got quite a distance out to sea, nearly up to our waists, before any of the bullets hit us. I was just towards the end of the line, and the bullet that hit me struck at the waist line and just went straight through ... They all knew what was going to happen to them, but no-one panicked: they just marched ahead with their chins up.***

[Bullwinkel quoted in Richard Reid, *'Just wanted to be there' - Australian Service Nurses, 1899-1999*, Canberra, 1999, p. 63]

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Bullwinkel was the sole survivor of the massacre. After hiding out for several days, she surrendered again and joined the other thirty-one surviving nurses in captivity. Eight more would die as prisoners of war. Another Australian killed on Banka Island was Mr Vivian Bowden, Australia's former official representative on Singapore. Bowden left Singapore on 15 February but his vessel, the *Mary Rose*, was captured and escorted to Muntok. He argued with Japanese guards over his diplomatic status and was punched and threatened, and later he objected to a guard trying to steal his watch; two guards took the elderly, white-haired Bowden outside, where he was kicked and beaten, made to dig his own grave and shot.



In the last days of the battle for Singapore, Keppel Harbour was often crowded with people hoping to get off the island. Vehicles and belongings were left strewn around the docks. (Courtesy Bernard 'Bunny' Barton)

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## MR VIVIAN BOWDEN CBE

### DIPLOMAT

Vivian Bowden CBE (Courtesy Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)

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In mid-August 1941, as the likelihood of war with Japan increased, the Commonwealth Government decided to have diplomatic representation at Singapore. Prime Minister Robert Menzies informed the British Government that Singapore, as a growing centre of political and commercial importance, and a 'focal point of Imperial communications', had 'great significance for Australia'. Moreover, the presence of the AIF and RAAF units made it imperative that Australia have first-hand contact with local British Imperial administrators and military commanders. On 29 September 1941, Vivian Gordon Bowden became the official Australian representative in Singapore.

Bowden, aged 57, had had a varied career as a silk inspector, soldier and businessman. Although Australian-born, he saw service during World War I with the British Army in the Army Service Corps and with the Royal Engineers on the Western Front. In 1935, Bowden became Australian Trade Commissioner in China at Shanghai, one of the first postings in the new service. Described as 'cultured, practical and effective', Bowden was also the author of two novels, *The Skipper* and *Rumfy*.

During December 1941 and January 1942, as the Japanese pushed British Empire forces down the Malayan peninsula, Bowden kept his government informed of the alarming situation. As early as mid December 1941, he reported that the Singapore police Special Branch felt that the city would shortly be in a 'virtual state of siege'. Consequently, he recommended to Singapore's Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, that martial law be imposed. In general, Bowden's official communications to Canberra struck a pessimistic note. On 23 December 1941, he wrote that the deterioration of the air position in Malaya had assumed 'landslide proportions'. Attempts at reinforcement of Malaya were, in his opinion, little more than a token gesture. Only the immediate dispatch of large numbers of aircraft and divisions of troops could save the situation and the need for action was 'a matter of hours not days'. A few days later, on 31 December, he described the British air strength at Singapore as 'pathetic'.

## VIVIAN BOWDEN CBE

In many ways, Bowden's position at Singapore was a difficult one. Although he was Australia's 'official representative', the Prime Minister's Department, unused to the presence of an Australian diplomat, regularly communicated with Imperial officials over Bowden's head. This left him in the dark on many matters and he wrote feelingly to the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, that he (Bowden) should be the 'sole channel for all official communications'. Evatt, to his credit, and doubtless aware of the pressures of the situation at Singapore, cabled Bowden praising him for his efforts.

By the end of January 1942, Bowden felt the game was up. Ian Fitchett, the official British war correspondent, gave his impression that the situation was now 'desperate and perhaps irretrievable'. Bowden felt this assessment justified and passed it on to Canberra. He also passed on General Percival's opinion that the Japanese had been able to get down the Malayan peninsula so quickly because being rice eaters they were able to live off the country and move through areas where there were no metal roads.

As the situation deteriorated on Singapore Island during February, Bowden sought permission from the Department of External Affairs to leave Singapore along with his staff. This was refused on 10 February 1942 in the following words:

***We appreciate your difficulties but think you should stick to your post.***

[Department of External Affairs signal in WJ Hudson & H J W Stokes (eds), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937-1949*, Vol. V: July 1941-June 1942, Canberra, 1982, p. 503]

On the next day Bowden sent a dramatic cable in which he described the final hours of Singapore before the surrender:

***Full programme of demolition and denial is now being carried out including destruction of all money not in private hands. Except as a fortress and battle field Singapore has ceased to function.***

[Bowden to Department of External Affairs, 12 February 1942, in Hudson & Stokes (eds), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937-1949*, p. 518]

Bowden's last cable – the last official message he ever sent – went out on 14 February saying 'our work completed' and that he would telegraph 'from another place at present unknown'. He and his staff left Singapore on the *Mary Rose* and two days later they were captured near Banka Island and taken to Muntok. Bowden's insistence on recognition of his diplomatic status was of little avail and, after objecting to his treatment, he was shot by his captors after being made to dig his own grave.

News of Bowden's death was never conveyed to Australian authorities and only after the war was his fate revealed. Vivian Gordon Bowden deserves to be remembered as one who 'stuck to his post' and as the only Australian diplomat executed in the line of duty.

## CHAPTER 6 LEFT TO OUR FATE

Back on Singapore, within the tightening defensive cordon around the city in the last days of fighting, more and more men had accepted that the fortress would fall. None relished the idea of surrender as rumours of massacres swept through the ranks, and some men had actually seen or heard Japanese troops killing captured British, Indian or Australian troops. Some steeled themselves for a final stand and others plotted escapes.

On 12 February, some officers and men of the 2/15th Field Regiment went looking for boats to keep the regiment intact 'in the event of a Dunkirk'. They sailed a seaworthy vessel out into the harbour to keep it safe, but one man was killed by machine-gun fire. When the would-be escapers returned to shore, a Royal Navy officer told them that the Japanese were 'just around the corner', so the group of twenty men set sail for Sumatra. They were later captured.

Another party of early escapers comprised five 2/19th Battalion men who were recovering from wounds in the 2/13th Australian General Hospital on 13 February when patients were told that the hospital would soon fall into enemy hands. Captains Reg Thomas and Clem Hunt, Lieutenants Jim Howard and Stewart Burt and Corporal Bill Wright were given permission to escape by Brigadier Taylor and Lieutenant Colonel Anderson VC, who were also patients. All five were veterans of Bakri-Parit Sulong, where Burt had won the Military Medal before he was commissioned, and open wounds prevented their return to battle. Warned that their wounds might turn gangrenous if left unattended, they had dressings applied one last time and gathered pistols, ammunition, food and drink before leaving. They stole a sampan and sailed to Samba Island, about ten miles off Singapore, where they commandeered a motorboat and after surviving a fierce storm at sea landed in Sumatra with some other escapers picked up along the way. They travelled overland to Padang and were shipped to Tjilatjap, in southern Java, and finally boarded a merchant ship which made it to Australia.

For most, escape was a pipe dream, though some were still able to try. On 13 February, in another hospital, Flight Sergeant CF 'Aussie' Powell, No. 243 Squadron RAF, met another wounded Australian, Sergeant John Smith, No. 100 Squadron RAF, 'and suggested we do a bunk. I [Smith] got all my belongings and off we went. At that stage I had my dog tags, Mae West and a pair of pyjama trousers!' They boarded a Chinese river boat that made it to Java: 'We saw lots of wreckage and one night two destroyers

## A BITTER FATE

belted past us; they couldn't have seen us. Another day a floatplane circled us a couple of times and then flew off.' They had escaped just in time. Two other wounded airmen, Sergeants Charles MacDonald and Gil Sharp, an amputee, both of No. 100 Squadron, tried escaping next day but could not get through to Keppel Harbour.<sup>2</sup>

Others who got off the island at this time were not formally 'out of the battle', as hospital patients generally were, nor did they have permission to leave. Every nationality on Singapore had men who consciously deserted, however the vast majority stayed on to fight.<sup>3</sup> Some of the men who left merely saw the writing on the wall and chose to save themselves; others were hardened veterans who broke down physically or mentally, often having been wounded; some were recent reinforcements who did not have the basic training and discipline for combat; some were rear area troops thrown into a battle for which they had not been trained; and others simply seemed to be swept away by the turmoil. Signaller Colin Merchant, 8th Division Signals, became separated from his unit late in the battle:

***Everywhere there was total confusion, no one seemed to know what to do or where to go. As we were completely lost by this time we decided to follow the crowd. It was made up of all kinds of troops, Indian, Scottish, English, and Australian, mixed in with ... [civilian] Asians, Indians and Europeans ... Finally the exodus reached the waterfront. People were arriving at the wharves in their cars and just leaving them or pushing them into the water. Troops and civilians were boarding the Ships at the wharf being taken out to ships at anchor. Everyone was talking about evacuation.***

[Merchant, untitled memoir, AWM PR01608]

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Merchant and several other troops boarded a small vessel. Most were sent back ashore but Merchant was allowed to stay on account of his signalling and some seafaring experience. He was captured later.



For many escapees, getting off Singapore only delayed their capture. Private Victor Hudson, 22nd Brigade Headquarters, left Singapore one hour before the capitulation on a Chinese junk headed for Sumatra. His escape party missed the organised evacuation of escapees from the south coast of Sumatra, so bought a boat and set sail for India. They were blown off course by a storm and landed in Burma, where they were captured. Hudson was held at Moulmein and Rangoon Gaols. When the Japanese withdrew from Rangoon in early 1945, he escaped from a column of prisoners evacuated by the Japanese and reached British lines on 5 May 1945. He is pictured with his family after his return to Australia in June 1945. (AWM 110131)

Back on Singapore, after the surrender was confirmed on the evening of 15 February, troops were told that 'anyone wanting to make a break had better do it tonight'. Private Norman Higham was serving in a small ordnance unit near Keppel Harbour when rumours of surrender 'started like mad' and men began agitating to 'make a break for it'. After nightfall, his acting commanding officer, Lieutenant Ken King, issued the order 'every man for himself'. Most of the unit got away to Sumatra and reached Australia, via Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).



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The most famous, if not infamous, escaper was the 8th Division's commander, Major General Bennett. On the afternoon of 15 February, he called his commanders and senior staff together and informed them of Percival's intention to capitulate. They decided not to permit any mass escape or breakout in case the Japanese ran amok and began massacring troops and civilians. Bennett's orders were for Australian troops to stay at their posts, with water bottles filled and two days' rations to tide them over in the transition to captivity. Many officers and other ranks who had contemplated escaping stayed because these orders had been issued. But Bennett did not intend to become a prisoner of war himself. He had already planned a path of escape, an action he later justified in these words:

***My decision was fortified by the resolve that I must at all costs return to Australia to tell our people the story of our conflict with the Japanese, to warn them of the danger to Australia, and to advise them of the best means of defeating Japanese tactics.***

[Bennett quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 381]

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He received a frosty welcome in Australia. Most believed he had abandoned his men to their fate. He was sent to Western Australia to command III Australian Corps and, when the threat to Australia had receded, he was denied another command appointment in a battle area. Bennett resigned his commission in 1944.

Lieutenant Colonel JW Wright, 2/15th Field Regiment, probably summed up the thoughts of most commanding officers when he told would-be escapers:

***... he wouldn't go as he felt it was his duty to stay with his men, but he also said that if we were determined to go he wouldn't stop us, but thought the chances were very much against us getting out. The Colonel said you know the consequences, you will probably be shot if you are caught, and the odds are very much against you.***

[Gunner Fletcher, diary entry, 15 February 1942, AWM 3DRL/0366]

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Nevertheless, many hundreds of men, from all units, searched for boats to get off the island. For most the search was futile. Among the men who escaped were Sergeant Wally Brown VC DCM (both decorations won in World War I) and Gunner GW Fletcher. They had resolved on the second last day of fighting that 'we are definitely not going to surrender to these yellow B---s,



Prisoners of war sit at an assembly point waiting for instructions from the Japanese. (AWM P01443.052)

they can shoot us first'. A few hours after the surrender, Brown, Fletcher and four other men from the 2/15th Field Regiment and three English soldiers set off in a leaky boat using palings as oars and tin hats to bail water. One of the Englishmen had been at Dunkirk and later reflected how 'at Dunkirk they felt the whole of England was trying to help them out, but at Singapore ... we were just left to our fate'.

Brown's party spent some hours hiding on an island, where they found oars and a sail, before setting sail again. They caught up with a group of five small boats containing 'all Aussies ... anxious to know what happened at the end in Singapore, as they couldn't wait to see for themselves'. Another escaper who encountered Australians who had left early recalled them expressing their determination 'never to see Malaya again'. Some escapers did not reach Sumatra, as Japanese aircraft strafed some vessels and others were unseaworthy and sank, however hundreds of others of all nationalities did reach the island and most headed for Rengat, in central Sumatra, where British and Dutch officers

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organised their movement south. Brown's group became separated at Rengat and their individual fates highlight the mixed fortunes of escapers: one man contracted malaria and was left at a hospital, where he was captured but survived the war; Brown and two others were trapped behind enemy lines and disappeared; and just two of the escapers in this party reached Australia, via Java.

Back at Singapore, the men still on the island slowly came to terms with their new status as prisoners of war. Most were disappointed and angry, believing that they should have fought on. Staff Sergeant Hodgson wrote in his diary of his 'utter disgust and shame' and Captain Ken Mosher, 2/18th Battalion, recalled that 'they were bitter times, bitter hours ... resentment against everyone and everything'. Many cried on hearing news of the surrender, tears releasing pent-up frustration and long-suppressed fears of death.<sup>4</sup>

It was only later, when the Australians moved through the bombed-out city to prisoner of war compounds and later on work parties, that they saw how much the civilian population had been suffering from bombing and shelling. They came to accept that surrender had been necessary.

While some had quickly turned their thoughts to escape, others were too shocked or tired to think of anything but finding a place to rest and some food and drink. Captain Brand, the 2/29th Battalion's medical officer, had found a dugout and set about providing himself with creature comforts from nearby houses: 'Ranged along the wall was a bottle of Canadian Club, a bottle of Medoc, two liqueurs, and a bottle of champagne. In a recess just above were a few good crystal glasses.'<sup>5</sup> The following morning, Staff Sergeant Hodgson wrote:

***Am writing this in luxurious surroundings, with a cigar, glass of beer and wireless going in the next room. As soon as we heard it was all off Paddy & I got outside half a water bottle of Bundaberg [rum] and made ourselves comfortable in [an] empty house ... and had [our] first night's sleep for about a fortnight. Then this morning went back to our old crowd in [another] house ... Grabbed a truck first thing and went down to try and spy out chances of a getaway, but pretty hopeless. Jap patrols, planes & motor boats everywhere, so dived into sheds & wharves & loaded up with tucker and Cascade [beer].***

[Hodgson, diary entry, 16 February 1942]

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For many men, and especially infantrymen, the campaign had delivered only suffering and death, and the survivors faced more of the same as prisoners of war. This portrait of three 2/29th Battalion men was taken shortly after they arrived in Malaya in August 1941. Private Sydney Riley (left) was presumed killed in action on 22 January 1942 at Parit Sulong. His two friends survived the battle but Private Allan Clinch (right) was later reported missing in action, presumed killed in action on 10 February 1942 in the defence of Singapore. Private Robert Towers (centre) survived the campaign and went into captivity on Singapore Island; after labouring on work parties around the island, he was sent as a labourer to Japan, where he died of illness on 8 November 1943. (AWM P02846.001)

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The first Japanese they encountered were friendly, probably combatant troops, and they had a beer with the Australians. Such friendliness was neither common nor long-lasting.

Morale was low and the mood uncertain. Men gathered in groups, sometimes trying to joke about their situation but at the same time, deep down, worrying about their uncertain future. The surviving men of the 2/10th Field Regiment were like any other British Empire

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troops in Singapore on the first day of captivity, subdued and finding little to smile about, when they heard bagpipes:

***Very soon around the bend of the road a few hundred yards away, marching proudly with 2 pipers out in front, a Scottish unit came into view. They marched as though they were in a city parade and as they swung along below everybody along the hillside burst out cheering and continued to do so until they had marched out of sight. They were the remnants of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders ...***

[Bob Goodwin, *Mates and Memories: Recollections of the 2/10th Field Regiment*, Brisbane, 1995, pp. 59–61]

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British troops had been ordered to move to their designated prisoner of war compound at Changi Gaol. The Australians were instructed to move to Selarang Barracks, near Changi, which they would take over later in the war. With around 85,000 men now prisoners of war and also European civilians to intern, it was a long and slow procession. It took all day and most of the night for the column of troops to finish trekking to Selarang Barracks, and some did not arrive until several days later. Much of the way, they were jeered by Japanese but encouraged by Singaporeans, some of whom risked harsh punishment by pushing food or cups of water into the troops' hands. One infantryman recalled of the Japanese: 'Talk about humiliating when we lined up. These little squirts! And we thought, fancy these blokes beating us.' Many never accepted that they had been beaten – they had, after all, been prepared to fight on but were *ordered* to surrender. A few retained pistols or grenades in case they had to fight for their lives one last time, as prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

Rumours circulated of a massacre at Alexandra Hospital, overrun on 14 February. Japanese troops had pursued some Indian troops who kept firing as they withdrew through the hospital grounds. Incensed, the Japanese bayoneted several members of staff and patients, including a patient lying on an operating table and the doctor attending to him, and herded 150 men into a bungalow where they were executed next day. Other groups of British, Australian, Indian, Malay and Singaporean servicemen and civilians were killed elsewhere.

Most of the Australians survived their first months as prisoners of war with nothing more than an occasional bashing. Some, however, were far less fortunate. A group of fifteen Australians from the 2/18th Battalion and 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion were taken aside before the move to Selarang Barracks and were

## CHAPTER 6 LEFT TO OUR FATE

imprisoned in a Japanese headquarters. Regimental Sergeant-Major Fred Airey, 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion, was interrogated, and he and his men stayed locked up for several days. On 19 February, they were taken outside, had their hands tied behind their backs and were ordered to march in single file, with Japanese lining the roadside and windows overhead jeering. Airey recalled:

***The Japanese officer halted, pointed across the stream and called an order. The men immediately turned right to see how to cross the stream when the first volley was fired. I saw two men fall forward into the stream, others crumpled as they stood. A bullet whizzed past my head and I somersaulted into the bed of the stream. After dropping everyone the Japanese proceeded to make certain by giving us all an extra round. I heard the strike of the bullets in the body next to me and awaited mine. When it came the bullet grazed the left of my forehead, taking skin only and covering my face with gravel, water and blood.***

[Airey quoted in Cody, *Ghosts in Khaki*, p. 192]

Private Les McCann, 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion, also survived. He fell into the creek with another man falling over him who continued shouting angrily at the Japanese until he was shot again. Sometime later, McCann recovered his senses and wandered in a dazed state for nine days before collapsing in Chinatown; he was taken to a British hospital and later to Changi, finally rejoining his countrymen at Selarang Barracks eight months later. Airey also wandered in the area for several days but found a boat and escaped to Sumatra, where he was recaptured.

The Australians remaining on Singapore settled into captivity. Discipline continued to be enforced by British and Australian officers, who saw it as a key to survival as prisoners of war under the Japanese. Inside the crowded Selarang Barracks, men cleared debris and constructed beds and dug latrines and began experimenting with cooking rice – the standard ration for Japanese troops and their prisoners. Work parties were sent out to begin cleaning up Singapore, however many prisoners were unable to work because they remained in hospital, in some cases for the duration of the war.

Other Australians were killed in action or captured in the other opening campaigns against the Japanese on New Britain, Ambon, Timor, Sumatra and Java, where 3000 men of the 7th Division AIF landed for a futile attempt to hold the island. Over 200 Australian airmen, including 160 from No. 1 Squadron RAAF, who had served

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in Malaya and Singapore, were also captured in Java. Of the RAN warships that had been involved in the campaign, most reached Australia or Ceylon but HMAS *Yarra* was sunk south of Java with only thirteen crewmen rescued, and HMAS *Vampire* was sunk in the Bay of Bengal. Another significant naval loss at this time was the cruiser HMAS *Perth*, which was sunk in the Battle of the Java Sea with all of its crew either killed or taken prisoner. Many of the men captured in Timor, Sumatra or Java later ended up in Singapore. One-third of the Australian prisoners of war would die in captivity over the following three-and-a-half years.

A bitter fate indeed – but they had fought hard and valiantly.



Murray Griffin, *An incident on the Burma Railway*. The men taken prisoner by the Japanese at the Fall of Singapore or elsewhere endured a brutal captivity on top of a horrendous campaign. (AWM ART26525)

## CHAPTER 6 LEFT TO OUR FATE



Nothing was heard of the last group of nurses evacuated from Singapore until the survivors were found in Sumatra in September 1945. Only 24 of the 65 women survived the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* and captivity. (AWM 044480)

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Australians attend the funeral of a mate who died during construction of the Thai-Burma Railway in 1943. One-third of the Australians who became prisoners of war under the Japanese died in captivity, most under shocking slave labour conditions. (AWM P0406.031)

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# A BITTER FATE

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Horner, 'A lucky escape', in *HMAS Bendigo*, p. 23
- 2 Smith quoted in Shores & Cull, *Bloody Shambles*, p. 381
- 3 Australia's official historian of the campaign, Lionel Wigmore, concluded that escapers from Singapore were broadly in three categories: 'those who had deserted or had become detached from their units during hostilities; those officially evacuated; and those who escaped after Singapore fell. ... The dividing line between desertions and escapes was in some instances indefinite ...' Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 387
- 4 Mosher quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 89
- 5 Brand quoted in Christie, *A History of the 2/29th Battalion*, p. 94
- 6 Merv Blyth quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 92



Australian Government  
Department of Veterans' Affairs