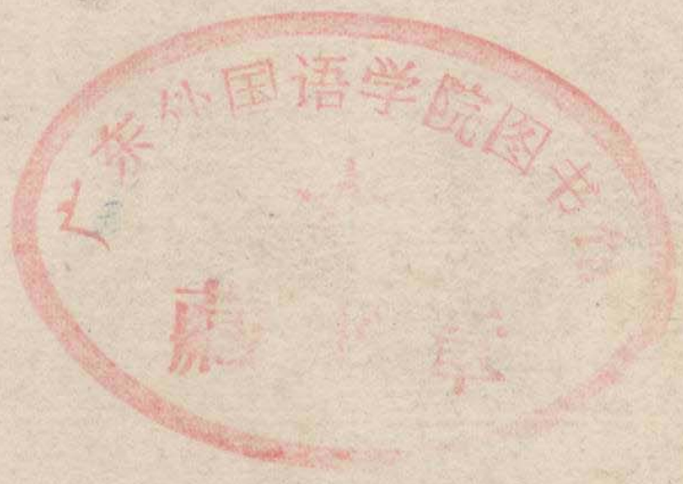
# THE CAMPAIGN IN MALAYA



BRIGADIER D. K. PALIT Vr. C.

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*by*

BRIGADIER D. K. PALIT, Vr. C

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# THE CAMPAIGN IN MALAYA

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# INTRODUCTION

FOR A GOOD many years after the war, the only two books available on the Malayan campaign were General Percival's *The War in Malaya*, and General Bennett's *Why Singapore Fell* The latter was published soon after the author escaped from Singapore ; he was therefore able to consult neither the colleagues he left behind in the enemy's hands nor Japanese battle records, which were not available till after the war's end. In any case the Australian Division came into the fighting at a very late stage in the campaign—after more than two-thirds of the country had been overrun His story of the campaign is therefore a limited and markedly subjective narration, unsuitable as source material or for the purposes of study.

General Percival's book, though it provides more objective reportage of the operations, is inadequate from the point of view of commentary. This may have been because he was writing a book in order to vindicate his conduct of operations, since he was subjected to a deal of criticism. At any rate he was not entirely unbiased in his judgements, and his book is not a suitable analysis for the purposes of study, Besides, it was published too soon after the war to obtain benefit from Japanese documents.

It was not until 1957 that Her Majesty's Stationery Office was able to add the Malayan campaign to its series *The History of the Second World War.** This present

* ***The War Against Japan, Volume I,*** **by Major General S. Woodburn-Kirby and others.**

volume is largely based on this official publication, which incorporates the despatches of the Commander-in-Chief, Far East (published 1948) as also personal diaries and narratives of prisoners of war, written in captivity. Since British battle records were mostly lost or destroyed before the surrender, even now many aspects of the campaign are lacking in details of fact, and some the reconstruction is necessarily conjectural.

The Malayan campaign is of the greatest interest to Indian Army students because of the large part played in it by Indian Army formations and units. Twenty four out of the thirty six infantry battalions present in Malaya on the outbreak of war were from India. All regiments of our Army, except the Grenadiers, the Maratha Light Infantry, the Rajputs and the Frontier Force Rifles were represented—and all were pre-war battalions. Subsequently, six more battalions from the Indian Army—of the 44th and 45th Indian Infantry Brigades—were sent as reinforcements, though these contained a very high proportion of war-raised units.

The Malayan campaign is considered to be the greatest military defeat in British history. Certainly for the Indian Army it was an unprecedented desaster, even without the dark chapter which followed—the harrowing ordeals in prisoner-of-war camps, and the abortive attempts to set up a national army from the wrecks of famous battalions. It is imperative that young leaders of today carefully study this campaign, for much went wrong with the training and the outlook before Malaya—and we must ensure that our present Army will never face a future war in the same frame of mind or under the same tactical misconceptions.

This book contains a certain amount of straightforward

criticism of the conduct of operations. In hindsight such analyses and commentaries are invidious, to say the least ; but they are necessary. The comments offered in the present work are in no way intended to belittle the fortitude, heroism and determination displayed by the commanders and troops who took part in the campaign. Their purpose, first and last, is to draw lessons from the past, in the hope of benefitting from them in the future.

Although regarded as one of the major episodes of the Second World War, the Malayan campaign was nevertheless fought on a very small scale Where batteles raged between armies and army groups in Northwest Europe, or between armies and army corps in Italy, in Malaya it was mostly a question of battalion or, at the most, of brigade battles. The major part of the campaign was fought virtually by a division on each side. It was only in Southern Johore and on the Island that more than one division was employed in the same operation at the same time—and even then there was never any question of divisional battles ; the higher commanders continued to handle individual brigades and battalions.

It was therefore difficult to decide at which level the campaign should be written up. At battalion level the narrative becomes bogged down with detail, and soon the reader cannot see the wood for trees. Also, in order to confine the length of the work to reasonable proportions, it was necessary to base the history on brigade battles. No battalions have therefore been mentioned in this book.

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# Chapter I

## DEFENCE POLICY IN MALAYA

PLANS for the defence of Malaya were begun in 1922, when the siting of the proposed base in Singapore was first discussed. The project passed through a series of indecisive and fluctuating stages and it was many years before a firm policy emerged. The main difficulties encountered in these early stages were financial stringency after World War I, considerations of international disarmament proposals and inter-service disagreements.

**SINGAPORE NAVAL BASE**

The first inter-service difficulty was raised by the Air Ministry who disagreed with the excessive expenditure envisaged in installing a large number of fixed heavy guns for the defence of the base, claiming that aircraft would be a cheaper and more flexible means of defence. This controversy lasted for more than ten years, during which period little was done regarding construction of the base itself. Then, after the Naval Disarmament Conference of 1930, the newly installed Labour Government of Britain deemed it advisable, as a gesture of good faith, to suspend further work on the base for the time being.

In 1932, when plans for the base were resumed, an Imperial Defence Sub-Committee, presided over by Mr Stanley Baldwin, sought to resolve the differences between the Services by ruling that the defence of Singapore base should be organised on a basis of co-operation between the three Services. The heavy gun was to be the main deterrent ; but the air forces

were to be considered as a valuable and essential adjunct to ground defences. The Army was to ensure the safety of airfields, which were now planned to be expanded along the west coast and in north-east Malaya for reconnaissance and offensive operations against a possible enemy airforce approaching from the South China Sea area. (Japan was already considered as a possible enemy after her change-over to an aggressive expansionist policy which was heralded by the Mukden incident of 1931). Groups of airfields were planned in the Kota Bharu, Kuantan and Kahang regions on the east coast and in Alor Star and Sungei Patani on the west. The first stage of the defences was to be completed by 1937 at the latest.

From this stage, the inter-service tussle was mainly between the Army and the Airforce, for the siting of the airfields was not carried out in consultation with the Army, who would, of course, have to defend them in case of outbreak of hostilities. As a result, the airfields were eventually located in areas where their defence, against an enemy who had succeeded in making a landing on the mainland, would be well nigh impossible with the resources then planned. However, at this stage it was still the assumption that an attack on Singapore would develop from the seaward side, though air attacks would be mainly from carrier-borne squadrons or by aircraft based on Indo-China and Siam. The defence plan, it must be remembered, still contemplated holding only Singapore and part of Johore.

It was only in July 1938 that the G.O.C. Malaya first informed War Office in London that the main land threat in the event of war would be in the form of enemy landings on the Isthmus of Kra on the east coast

of Malaya, supported by aircraft based in Indo-China or Siam. In such circumstances, the Army pointed out, the security of the naval base would be dependent on the defence of Northern Malaya and Johore, and for this both land and air reinforcements would be necessary.

By the middle of 1940, when the commitments of the Royal Navy in Continental waters and in the Mediterranean made it obvious that the projected despatch of the Main Fleet to Singapore in the event of war with Japan was no longer feasible, the Army and the Air Force recommended the extension of the defences to include the whole of Malaya, stipulating a corresponding increase in the air and land forces. The minimum land requirements were stated as three divisions, three machine-gun battalions and two tank battalions of the R.T.C., backed by a 20 per cent local pool of trained reinforcements. In the air, the minimum requirements were stated as twenty-two squadrons (including two photo-reconnaissance squadrons)—a total of 336 first-line aircraft. (This requirement would be increased to 31 squadrons—566 aircraft—if the Japanese established themselves in Camranh Bay in Indo-China, or in Siam.)

The total forces in Malaya at that time were eight infantry battalions and 88 obsolete aircraft. But the urgency of the problem was appreciated at last, and in November 1940, 11th Indian Division (of two brigades) was sent to Malaya, followed by 9th Indian Division (also two brigades and with no artillery) in April 1941. From Australia, 8th Australian Division (with only one brigade) was sent in February 1941. As for the Air Force, only one squadron was sent as reinforcement from India by November 1940.

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**REGIONAL COMMAND AND PLANNING**

In November 1940, a unified system of command was established under Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, a distinguished RAF officer who had been recalled from the retired list and reinstated on the active list on the outbreak of war in Europe. GHQ Far East was established in Singapore and was made responsible for the operational control and general direction and training of all British land and air forces in Malaya, Burma, Borneo and Hong Kong, and for the co-ordination of plans for the defence of all these territories. The control of naval operations, however, was to continue to remain directly under the C-in-C China. Shortly before the outbreak of war, it was decided that the China Fleet would be based at Singapore instead of Hong Kong, though most of its powerful units had by then been transferred to European waters. Furthermore, the G. Os. C. Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong, and the A. O. C. Far East, were to retain their administrative and financial functions and were empowered to correspond direct with their Service Ministries in the U. K.

The appointment of the C-in-C Far East, therefore, did not really solve the problem of co-ordinating the Services and the civilian authorities for the defence of this region. Since control of the naval forces was excluded, there were two Cs-in-C in Singapore, each responsible to a different authority in London—the C-in-C Far East to the Chiefs of Staff, the C-in-C China to the Admiralty. To make matters worse, the Governors of the Straits Settlements, Hong Kong and Burma received their policy directives directly from the Colonial Office.

Since one of the functions of GHQ Far East was to co-ordinate defence plans with the United States, the

Dutch and the Free French, the C-in-C called a conference in February 1941 to negotiate for a combined Anglo-Dutch-Australian agreement for the defence of their common interests in the Far East. This resulted in what is known as the A. D. A. Agreement, which contained a definite plan for mutual air reinforcements. The Dutch undertook to provide submarines to operate in the South China Sea and the Australians to reinforce Dutch bases in Amboina and Timor.

The next attempt at co-ordinating Allied planning was made in April 1941, when an inter-service conference of American, Dutch and British Commanders was held at Singapore to reach agreement on a combined plan for the conduct of military operations in the Far East. This achieved partial success only, resulting in the A. D. B. Agreement, which—besides confirming the A. D. A. Agreement—concerned itself mainly with the deployment of naval forces in the China Seas and in the West Pacific. The U. S. Government, however, did not accept the A. D. B. Report, and thus the conference did not really bring about a joint plan for the Associated Powers in the event of war.

The first war clouds appeared on the horizon when at the end of July 1941 the Japanese, by a series of threats, made the Vichy Government of France submit to her demands regarding the Japanese occupation of Camranh Bay (north-east of Saigon) and Saigon in French Indo-China. The Associated Powers retaliated by freezing all Japanese assets in their countries and by terminating all commercial treaties, a measure which cut off all Japan's oil supplies from America and the Netherlands East Indies. Japan's own production, it must be remembered, fulfilled less than 10 per cent of her require-

ments ; and even though she held stocks amounting to 12 months reserves (on a war footing), this measure more than any other immediate factor decided her on her policy of conquest in South East Asia.

In August 1941, the C-in-C Far East submitted to the Chiefs of Staff a plan which he had been advocating since his arrival in Singapore—the prior occupation of the Isthmus of Kra by an advance into the Singora Patani area (later to be called Operation "Matador"). The geographical position of Singora made its capture by the Japanese very probable, the C-in-C's appreciation being that in the event of an attempted invasion of Malaya the scale of attack would be an advance by one division from Bangkok (via the railway) and a sea-borne attack by two divisions on the coast line between Singora and Kota Bharu. The Japanese would then develop over-land operations for the capture of airfields in North Malaya and futher sea-borne attacks for airfields on the east coast.

Lieut-General Percival, who had taken over as G.O.C. Malaya in April, now formed his new estimate of the forces required for the defence of Malaya. His minimum requirements were : one division for the defence of Perlis-Kedah area ; two battalions for Penang ; one division for the north east zone Kelantan-Trengganu-Pahang ; one division, one tank regiment and certain corps troops for corps reserve in Northern Malaya ; one division of two brigades and a machine gun battalion for the defence of Johore ; one division and one tank regiment for Singapore Island (which would also provide a reserve for Southern Malaya) ; and one infantry brigade for Borneo. This came to a total of 48 battalions, and also stipulated the necessary complement of field, anti-

tank and anti-aircraft artillery, engineer and ancillary units which would be essential for the conduct of operations.

The C-in-C supported the G.O.C's request for an increase in the strength of land forces so that the latter could have sufficient troops both for the defence of airfields on the east coast and for a full scale Matador operation. He also again stressed the need for increased air power.

On September 17th, the Chiefs of Staff informed the C-in-C that since their policy was as far as possible to avoid war with Japan, they could not agree to his plan of entering Siam before the prior violation of her territory by Japan, since such an act might provide just the excuse to set off a war against Japan. But they agreed in principle to Matador, which, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham told them, could be implemented within 36 hours of the receipt of orders. The Chiefs of Staff accepted General Percival's estimate of land forces required in Malaya, but added that in the circumstances they were unable to meet these requirements in the forseeable future.

As regards naval forces, it had been suggested by Mr Churchill in mid-October that one of the latest capital ships and one aircraft carrier be sent to Singapore to join the *Repulse*. After some preliminary opposition from the Admiralty, the proposal was finally agreed to, and the *Prince of Wales* sailed from home waters at the end of the month, flying the flag of Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, C-in-C (designate) of the Far Eastern Fleet. The new aircraft carrier the *Indomitable*, earmarked for Singapore, unfortunately ran aground in the entrance to Kingston harbour in Jamaica, on 3 November, and had to be docked. The proposal to despatch a carrier was, therefore, indefinitely postponed.