

Manila: whereas a complete British division in North-East India would have been a most valuable reserve and would have done something to restore shaken public morale.

The War Cabinet ruled, however, that the defence of the naval bases in Ceylon must have priority, and confirmed the diversion thither of the 16th Brigade of the 70th division.

4. The War Cabinet took immediate steps to reinforce India, ordering the 5th and 2nd British Divisions there. The 5th Division arrived in May and the 2nd Division in June. They also arranged to send such aircraft as could be spared; but the position in the Middle East was tense at the time and it was not easy to meet our requirements. In a telegram sent on the 27th March I estimated our air requirements as—

- 9 Fighter squadrons for the defence of Bengal.
- 3 Fighter squadrons for Madras and the east coast ports.
- 6 Fighter squadrons for Ceylon.
- 4 Fighter/Reconnaissance squadrons for support of the army in Burma.
- 4 Fighter/Bomber squadrons for support of the army in Burma.
- 11 Light Bomber squadrons.
- 4 Medium Bomber squadrons.
- 2 Heavy Bomber squadrons.
- 7 General Reconnaissance squadrons.
- 4 Flying-boat squadrons.
- 6 T.B. squadrons.
- 4 B.T. squadrons.
- a total of 64 squadrons.

Our actual strength at the time was:—

- 1 Fighter squadron (Mohawks) at Calcutta.
- 1 Fighter squadron (Audax)* at Dinjan.
- 1 Fighter squadron (Hurricanes) at Akyab.
- 3 Fighter squadrons (Hurricanes) in Ceylon.
- 1 Light Bomber squadron (Blenheims) in Ceylon.
- 1 G.R. squadron (Hudsons) at Calcutta.
- 2 Flying-boat squadrons (Catalinas) in Ceylon.

There was, on paper, a Light Bomber Squadron at Calcutta, but it had no serviceable aircraft.

There were also four Army Co-operation squadrons in India with obsolete types of aircraft suitable only for North-West Frontier.

Reinforcements of fighter and bomber aircraft in considerable numbers were on their way at this date, but our operational strength could not be materially increased before the middle of April.

There were some American heavy bombers in India which could assist in the defence of India in emergency, but they were birds of passage, intended for use in China and not under my control. I could not reckon on them in any plan of defence.

Thus the only portion of my command which had any scale of air protection at all was Ceylon.

* The Audax was not designed as a fighter and had been obsolete as an Army Co-operation machine before the war; its maximum speed was 150 m.p.h.

JAPANESE NAVAL RAID.

5. It was, as it turned out, fortunate that such defence as was available was mainly in Ceylon, since a Japanese naval raid into Indian waters took place in the early days of April, in the course of which Colombo was attacked by carrier-borne aircraft on the 5th April and Trincomalee on the 9th April. Our defending fighters inflicted considerable losses on the enemy aircraft, which did little damage on land; but they suffered some losses themselves; and the Blenheim squadron, which was sent to attack the Japanese aircraft-carriers, was practically destroyed without accomplishing anything. Had the attack been renewed it would have been difficult to meet. Though little damage had been caused on land, two 8-inch cruisers, Dorsetshire and Cornwall, and aircraft-carrier (Hermes) and some smaller naval vessels had been sunk by Japanese aircraft in the waters around Ceylon.

In the Bay of Bengal Japanese light forces and aircraft, sank just on 100,000 tons of merchant shipping, dropped a few bombs on Vizagapatam—the first on Indian soil, and caused a panic there and elsewhere on the Eastern Coasts of India, which, in the absence of naval and air forces, were practically defenceless.

This was India's most dangerous hour; our Eastern fleet was powerless to protect Ceylon or Eastern India; our air strength was negligible; and it was becoming increasingly obvious that our small tired force in Burma was unlikely to be able to hold the enemy, while the absence of communications between Assam and Upper Burma made it impossible to reinforce it.

Fortunately the enemy naval force withdrew, and no Japanese surface warships have since appeared in Indian waters. It is conceivable that the Japanese raid was made with the object of securing Indian rejection of the proposals brought out by the Cripps Mission, which were then under discussion at Delhi.

6. On the 13th and 14th April I met Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet, at Bombay and discussed with him the defence of India. He confirmed that with his present force he could do nothing to prevent the invasion of Southern India or Ceylon, and could not send naval forces into the Bay of Bengal to protect shipping or the east coast of India. He also informed me that practically the whole of the Eastern Fleet would be engaged in operations against Madagascar and would not be available in Indian waters.

An appreciation from the Chiefs of Staff in London was received on the 23rd April. It confirmed my general appreciation of the danger to India, i.e., that an invasion of N.E. India by sea, land and air was the most probable threat, while an attack on Ceylon was possible; it recognised the powerlessness of the Eastern Fleet to offer effective opposition; accepted that the land forces in India were inadequate by at least one Armoured Division, one Army Tank Brigade and four infantry divisions, which deficiencies could not be met till late in 1942; and gave the air squadrons required as 66 (there were in India at this time 15 operational squadrons, rising to a total of 25 by the end of June).