

SECTION LXI.—BRITISH STRATEGY.

612. The evolution of British pre-war strategy in Malaya has been summarized in Section LVIII and it has been shown that the Army dispositions were dictated primarily by requirements of protection of the Naval Base and of the bases from which large Air Forces, when available, would operate. Looked at from the Army point of view alone these dispositions were faulty because the comparatively small force available had to be widely dispersed. How widely dispersed it can best be understood by comparing Singapore to the Isle of Wight, an island strongly defended against sea-borne and air attacks, and applying the problem of defending Singapore and the mainland of Malaya with the equivalent of $3\frac{1}{2}$ divisions but without an Armoured Component to that of defending England and Wales, a territory only very slightly larger in area, with a similar force against an attack from the east or from the north launched by an enemy with superior naval and air forces.

613. The project to move into South Thailand, risky though it was with the small forces available, was nevertheless attractive from the point of view of denying to the enemy the use of the two valuable aerodromes in that area. But it suffered from the danger always inherent in such projects, namely the difficulty of deciding when the time has come to enter neutral territory. It was due to this difficulty, combined with our inability to maintain contact with the Japanese convoys carrying their invasion forces during a vital period, that the project to move forward into South Thailand was not implemented. Had it been implemented, it would undoubtedly have eased the air situation but it might, if we had failed to hold the enemy on the Kroh-Patani road, have led to irreparable and early disaster.

614. When, after three days of hostilities, the enemy had succeeded in landing a strong force in South Thailand and North Malaya, intact, except for losses suffered in the attack on Kelantan, had by sinking the "Prince of Wales" and "Repulse" gained full control of the sea communications east of Malaya, and had also established air superiority over North Malaya, our initial dispositions became a source of great danger. It became clear that we had little hope of being able to achieve our object with the small force at that time available and that our best chance of achieving it was by ensuring, as far as lay in our power, the safe arrival of our land and air reinforcements. In order to do this it was necessary to impose the maximum delay on the enemy and to keep his air bases at the greatest possible distance from the vital Singapore area. The strategy adopted, therefore, aimed at a gradual fighting withdrawal with a view to an eventual concentration in South Malaya where it was hoped the main battle would be fought. Our aircraft were concentrated on the aerodromes in Central and South Malaya where they would be safer from enemy attack. Later the fighters were allotted as their primary tasks the defence of the Singapore area and, in co-operation with the other Services, the protection of the reinforcing convoys.

615. That our strategy was not successful was due primarily to a lack of strength in all three Services but particularly in the Navy and Air

Force. With the enemy in control of sea communications east of Malaya, we were prevented from sending more than very limited reinforcements to the northern and central areas of Malaya, and his sea-borne thrusts continually forced us to make detachments to meet them. This, combined with the lack of reserves, left our forces on the vital central front too weak, with the result that there was little relief for the front line troops who suffered from extreme exhaustion. This had a big influence on the course of the operations.

616. Penang was evacuated in accordance with a decision made by the Far East War Council. Although it had been decided in 1936 to fortify Penang it was in 1941 far from being a fortress. There was one 6 inch Coast Defence battery with searchlights, some beach defences and a very inadequate garrison. There was no anti-aircraft gun defence and practically no fighter defence. The situation on the mainland was critical. The Council was faced with the alternative of trying to restore the situation on the mainland and at the same time to hold Penang or of concentrating all available forces on the former. It chose the latter course which was, temporarily at any rate, successful.

617. Up to the 25th January, when we still had possession of the important chain of aerodromes and landing grounds and the lateral road in Central Johore, there was still a hope, though by then only a slender one, that our strategy might be successful. The loss of the Batu Pahat force, however, forced upon us the necessity of withdrawing into the Singapore Fortress area and of concentrating upon its defence. We had then failed in our object of protecting the Naval Base. Our task thereafter was to hold the Singapore Fortress area.

618. The policy for the defence of the Singapore Fortress area was to endeavour to prevent the enemy landing or, if he succeeded in landing, to stop him near the beaches and destroy or drive him out by counter-attack. As a result of the large area to be defended (Singapore Island alone, with Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani, has a perimeter of 72 miles), this necessitated weak forward defences and an inadequate reserve, but we were forced to adopt this policy by the nature of the country, by the lack of depth in the defence, and by the location of the Naval Base and of dumps, depots and other installations. The Japanese on the other hand were able to concentrate their forces for the attack on a selected portion of our defences. By doing so, they effected a landing and made a deep penetration in spite of severe losses. In the later stages exhaustion of the troops, accentuated by the moral effect of the loss of the Naval Base and the enemy's undisputed air supremacy following the withdrawal of our Air Force to the Netherlands East Indies, again influenced the operations. Ultimately the decisive factor was the imminent danger of a complete breakdown of the water supply as a result of the damage done to the distribution system by bombing and shelling.

SECTION LXII.—TACTICS.

619. The campaign in Malaya probably provided the first instance of operations between forces armed and equipped on modern lines being conducted in a country almost wholly covered with jungle or plantations of various