

1940 (*see para. 42 (b) above*). The Chiefs of Staff agreed that 582 aircraft was an ideal, but considered that 336 should give a very fair degree of security. The figure of 566 aircraft given in the appreciation was stated by the Air Ministry to be far beyond the bounds of practical possibility in the light of total resources and vital requirements in active theatres at home and in the Middle East.

The strength of the Air Forces in Malaya in November, 1940, is as shown in Appendix I, that in Hong Kong and Ceylon was negligible. Of the total of 88 first-line aircraft, only 48, i.e., the Blenheims and Hudsons, could be counted as modern, and the former suffered from lack of range. The Vildebeestes which we had at the beginning of the war with Japan were considered by the Chiefs of Staff in August, 1940, as having become an obsolete type.

The replacement for the Vildebeeste was to be the Beaufort. Manufacture of these had started in Australia and we were to get the first 90. Much of the raw material and certain complete parts of these aeroplanes had to come from England and from the United States, and there was considerable delay in supplying many of the items. The urgency of the matter was represented several times from Australia, and particularly at the beginning of August, when the Prime Minister of Australia sent a special telegram to the Australian High Commissioner in London. In spite, however, of every effort on the part of Australia, Vildebeestes were still in use in December, 1941 (*see para. 86 below*).

The flying boats were not only obsolete, but badly in need of complete overhaul, and the Wirraways could only be considered as training aircraft.

But the great weaknesses were the absence of any fighters and the small size of the reserves. This latter even necessitated restrictions on the number of flying hours in squadrons towards the end of 1940, and the first months of 1941. The importance of remedying these weaknesses was emphasised very shortly after my arrival at Singapore, and the aircraft situation was elaborated in a telegram three months later. In this latter telegram I estimated that, at the end of 1941, we should be able to reckon, as an absolute maximum, on a total of only 215 aircraft, including anticipated reinforcements of 39 Dutch aircraft, or 176 exclusive of the Dutch.

80. The general deficiencies in aircraft were also emphasised in many other telegrams.

The following are extracts:—

“This means bluntly that at present not only is our ability to attack shipping deplorably weak, but we have not the staying-power to sustain even what we could now do. As our air effort dwindles (as it would if war came now) so will the enemy's chance of landing increase”;

and:—

“Nor do I know whether troops or aircraft will be the easier to provide but I have no doubt what our first requirement here is. We want to increase our hitting power against ships, and our capacity to go on hitting.”

The need for more aircraft for the attack of shipping had also been emphasised in a previous telegram of the 23rd July, 1941.

81. The Chiefs of Staff fully appreciated my anxiety about the smallness of the air forces at my disposal, but pointed out that they had had to face disappointments in production, had to reinforce the Middle East still further to meet the probable scale of attack in the Spring, and that the necessity for supporting Russia was likely to impose a further strain on British and American resources. Further, that in these circumstances it was clear that neither could the target programme for the Far East be completed, nor, indeed, could any substantial reinforcements be sent before the end of 1941.

82. This Chiefs of Staff's figure of 336 first line aircraft referred to in para. 79 above, was based on the assumption that Borneo would be defended, but took no account of the defence of Burma. Whilst the latter was a greater commitment than the former, I accepted the figure of 336 as the target at which to aim in view of two telegrams from the Chiefs of Staff, in both of which the figure of 336 was confirmed.

#### Fighters.

83. Single-seater fighter aircraft, known as the Brewster Buffalo, began to arrive in Singapore in cases from the United States in February, 1941, and permission was given by the Air Ministry to form two squadrons in the first instance. These were formed mainly with pilots taken from existing squadrons, who had a good deal of flying experience, and so got up to the operational standard much quicker than the two new squadrons formed later; though not up to establishment, the first two squadrons would have been able to fight by the middle of April, 1941. A total of 167 Buffaloes in all were received in Singapore, and on the 30th May, 1941, permission was given by the Air Ministry to form two further fighter squadrons.

These new squadrons took a long time to become operationally efficient. The majority of the pilots had to be brought from Australia and New Zealand. They all came straight from the Flying Training Schools, and some from New Zealand had never flown anything beyond a Hart, and had no experience of retractable undercarriages, variable-pitch propellers, or flaps. Under these conditions it took over four months from the time that the pilots arrived in Malaya before the squadrons could be considered fit for operations; in fact, they had not been passed as fit when war with Japan broke out. It would have helped a great deal if we could have formed a proper operational training unit in Malaya, but I was informed that neither personnel nor aircraft could be spared for the purpose, and that all the training of pilots would have to be done in the squadrons. As this would have seriously hindered the operational training of squadrons, the nucleus of an O.T.U. was formed from our own resources.

After the formation of the third and fourth Buffalo squadrons had been started, it was found that the re-equipment of the R.A.A.F. Wirraway Squadron was going to be delayed indefinitely, and I was requested by Australia to take any possible steps I could to ensure that this Australian squadron was re-equipped with some form of more modern machine than the Wirraway. The only possible course of action was to re-equip it with Buffaloes. This