

368. By the 30th January, owing to the transfer of units to the N.E.I., the A.O.C. decided to make preparations for establishing of a rear A.H.Q., in the N.E.I. Air Commodore Silly was sent to Sumatra as Deputy A.O.C. in order to select its site and begin its organisation.

NARRATIVE—30TH JANUARY UNTIL THE FALL OF SINGAPORE.

*Situation of the Army.*

369. It will be remembered that the Army withdrew into Singapore Island on a programme to be completed on 31st January. This was successfully carried out.

Early in February a reinforcing convoy arrived in Singapore. It brought the few remaining units of the 18th Division.

370. But the position of the Army, now invested on the Island, was jeopardised by the presence of four aircraft landing strips which were being constructed to augment the airfields of the Island (para. 344). There was real danger that the Japanese might use them for establishing airborne troops behind the frontal defences of the Island in order to accelerate the reduction of the garrison, a danger which could only be averted so long as they remained serviceable, by means of large detachments of troops who could not be spared for the purpose. On 30th January it was therefore decided to blow them, and also to accelerate the obstruction of other open spaces.

*Reduction of the Fighter Force in Singapore.*

371. This action restricted our fighters to the four main aerodromes of the Island, and negated any possibility of their further dispersal. These aerodromes were under constant bombing, and considerable difficulty was being experienced in maintaining serviceable strips upon them. Further, three of them—Tengah, Sembawang and Seletar—were sited on the northern side of the Island and were therefore likely to be usable for a short time only (para. 360).

372. On the 30th January, therefore, Sir Archibald Wavell approved A.H.Q. plans to maintain in Singapore only a fighter strength of 8 Hurricanes reinforced by the remaining Buffaloes. It was agreed that the further reinforcing Hurricanes now arriving in H.M.S. "Indomitable" should be based on Sumatra, and from there not only maintain the strength at Singapore but also reinforce it as opportunity permitted.

373. To implement this policy A.H.Q.:—

(a) decided to retain in Singapore for the maintenance of the Fighter Force—an Air Stores Park, a Repair and Salvage Unit and an Ammunition Park.

(b) formed No. 226 (F) Group with H.Q. in Palembang and appointed Air Commodore Vincent the Group Commander. The staff for this Group H.Q. was to be provided partly from the reductions now possible in the Staff of the existing Fighter Group in Singapore and the remainder from H.Q. No. 266 (F) Wing, known to be arriving by sea in the N.E.I.

(c) issued orders for the move to Java of No. 151 M.U. less the repair and salvage party referred to in para. 358(a).

374. Concurrently with this reduction in strength, General Wavell approved the A.O.C.'s proposal that, consequent on the transfer of the bulk of the strength of the Command to the N.E.I., he should proceed himself with the main body of A.H.Q. to the N.E.I., whence it would be possible to control more effectively the conduct of further air operations. It was intended to leave in Singapore a small advanced A.H.Q. to maintain liaison with H.Q.M.C. H.Q. No. 224 (F) Group was also to remain to control fighter operations.

375. A.H.Q. was reduced in accordance with this plan, personnel being despatched to Palembang in Sumatra for attachment to H.Q. No. 225 (B) Group pending the decision about the site for the rear A.H.Q. which Air Commodore Silly had been instructed to find.

376. On 5th February Abdair expressed disapproval of the transfer of A.H.Q. to the N.E.I., being of opinion that A.H.Q. should remain in close contact with the G.O.C. Malaya, to ensure that future air operations were planned in relation to the best means for the defence of Singapore. The A.O.C., after an exchange of signals with Abdair on the subject, cancelled the transfer on 6th February. He decided to remain himself with A.H.Q. in Singapore, despite another signal he had received on 5th February which instructed him to proceed temporarily to Java when it was convenient for him to do so: he was badly in need of a rest. But circumstances moved fast, and he declined to go until the last of his subordinates had been evacuated (para. 394).

377. By the 5th February it had become clear that no suitable site for a Rear H.Q. existed in Sumatra, and so Air Commodore Silly was instructed to proceed to Batavia and take administrative charge there.

378. Not only were personnel and equipment from Singapore now arriving at that port, but also the ground personnel of the reinforcing squadrons. It was also anticipated that the site for a Rear A.H.Q. would best be located in the Batavia area.

*Dislocation at Singapore Docks.*

379. There was a scarcity of suitable shipping for conveying equipment, particularly M.T., to the N.E.I.: a difficulty aggravated because some vessels had to be loaded at their moorings by means of lighters. Those which did come alongside, of which there were many, deserve great credit. Owing to enemy air bombardment, ships had to be dispersed, which further delayed loading. Air bombardment also caused dock labour to disappear; its replacement by Service personnel could not be on a scale adequate to meet requirements. Conditions at the docks became confused as the scale and intensity of air attack increased. Plans made for the embarkation of personnel and stores were disorganised. Units became split up and personnel became separated from their equipment. Much equipment, urgently required by the Bomber Force in Sumatra, could not be loaded at all. In some instances, owing to air attack, ships sailed before being fully loaded.

Severe losses were inflicted by the Japanese air attacks on ships en route from Singapore