

I now foresaw that, if the Japanese advanced into Perak, their communications would become very vulnerable to raids from the sea coast. I therefore arranged for a small force of about 50 picked Australians to be organized for sea-borne raids on the enemy's communications, using Port Swettenham as a base.

SECTION XXIII.—THE STRATEGICAL SITUATION,
17TH-23RD DECEMBER, 1941.

195. *Naval*.—Following the loss of the "Prince of Wales" and "Repulse" the seagoing naval forces based on Singapore consisted only of a few light cruisers and half a dozen destroyers and sloops. Most of these were employed on escort work, leaving only three destroyers and a number of auxiliary vessels and small craft for local defence.

On the 17th December the Perak Flotilla, which consisted of H.M.S. "Scout" and some light craft, was formed to deny to all enemy craft the approaches to the West Coast between the River Krian and the River Bernam (south of Telok Anson).

The submarines of the Royal Dutch Navy, which during the first few days had operated successfully in the waters east of Malaya, had had losses and only a very few now remained.

The Japanese Navy had so far confined its activities to protection of its convoys. Although it held undisputed control of the waters east of Malaya it had as yet made no attempt to interfere with our communications south or west of Malaya either by naval or air action.

196. *Air*.—The main concern of the Japanese Air Force was obviously to confirm and extend the superiority which it had already established. Apart therefore from the heavy attacks on Penang and a few attacks on targets in the battle area, its activities continued to be directed against our aerodromes.

The strength of our Air Force, including the Dutch reinforcements, was now a little over 100—probably about one quarter of the Japanese strength.

In accordance with the agreed policy, the bulk of the fighters were retained on the Singapore aerodromes for defence of the Singapore Base and for convoy protection work. The balance were under command of Norgroup for operations in the 3 Corps area.

The Dutch bombers were, for reasons already given, being used principally for reconnaissance work. The torpedo-bombers, with their limited radius of action, were retained for attack on any naval force which might approach Singapore or the east coast of Johore. As regards the possibility of reinforcements, the Japanese had cut the established air route between Singapore and India. It now became necessary to use the Dutch aerodrome at Sabang, an island off the northern tip of Sumatra, as a link in the air route, but this could only be used by the longer range type of aircraft. Fighters could only be brought by sea.

In order to provide accommodation for the large number of aircraft which it was hoped would shortly concentrate in the Singapore area, the construction of new aerodrome strips was put in hand, both in South Johore and on Singapore Island.

I felt that the recovery of air superiority was so vital that I agreed to give priority to the Air Force so far as labour was concerned for the construction of these new air strips and for the maintenance of the existing aerodromes.

There was no way of regaining air superiority unless and until a sufficient number of modern fighters, superior to the Japanese fighters, could be brought to Malaya and until their pilots could have time to develop full fighting efficiency in conditions that would be strange to them. The first of these fighter aircraft could not be expected to reach Malaya in much under four weeks.

197. *Army*.—Our troops who had been in contact with the enemy had suffered severe losses both in men and material. Our strength on the west coast, apart from the Volunteer units, was now barely one division, including the 12 Indian Brigade Group and 1st Line Reinforcements. Against this the Japanese probably had in the front line one division moving on the axis of the main road and one division on the Grik road. Behind these we estimated that they had in reserve and already landed further forces at least equal to those in the front line.

On the east coast the enemy had landed one division in the Kelantan area.

In Indo-China he undoubtedly held reserves, which he could either use to reinforce those formations which had already landed or for fresh enterprises.

The striking power of his field force was greatly increased by the inclusion of a component of modern tanks of which we had none.

198. On our side we knew that every endeavour would be made to send reinforcements to Malaya, but we also knew that no reinforcements could arrive before some time in the first half of January. The comparison of forces as above showed clearly that we must make every endeavour to ensure the safe arrival of these reinforcements, for it was only with their assistance that we could hope to turn the scales on land. One of the chief dangers to which convoys bringing reinforcements would be exposed was from attack by Japanese aircraft as they were approaching Singapore. If the Japanese could establish their fighters on the aerodromes in Central Malaya they would be able to give their bombers much more effective support and thus render their attacks more dangerous. It was clear therefore that we should make every endeavour to deny these aerodromes to them for as long as possible.

199. On the west coast the terrain in the State of Perak was, generally speaking, more suitable for delaying action than was that in the States of Selangor and Negri Sembilan further south. In the latter States were many more roads to facilitate the enemy's movements, while the vast rubber estates rendered movement off the roads easy for infantry and at the same time provided good cover for the attacker. The States of Perak and Selangor also were the centre of the tin-mining industry which was at that time of such vital importance to the Allied war effort. There were also vast rubber estates in this area.

The weakness of the Perak area from the defence point of view lay in the fact that the long road and rail communications lay roughly parallel to the River Perak. Consequently if enemy detachments could get a footing on the left bank of that river they would be able to harass and temporarily to interrupt our communications.