

evacuation back to Java of all R.A.F. units, and this was effected by road and rail on the evening of the 15th via Oesthaven. All flyable aircraft were flown to Java, the remainder destroyed. Aircraft of Nos. 84 and 211(B) Squadrons, which had borne the brunt of the attacks during the day, finished their last sorties too late to proceed that evening. They remained on the aerodrome, flying to Java on the morning of the 16th February.

474. Personnel at landing grounds in N. and Central Sumatra were instructed to proceed by road to west coast ports for evacuation in accordance with pre-arranged plans.

475. Special mention must be made here of the valuable services rendered by the General Manager, Sumatra Railways. Despite orders received from his superior authorities he delayed destruction of rail facilities and personally arranged for the trains required during the night 15th/16th February. He himself did not leave until after the departure of the last train conveying R.A.F. personnel.

Credit is also due to Group Captain A. G. Bishop for the part he played in Sumatra. He put our squadrons on their feet and organised the staff despite primitive circumstances. He contributed in no small degree to the success of the operations which were conducted in Sumatra, and finally he personally supervised the successful withdrawal of the force from the Palembang area when its position there was no longer tenable.

476. At Oesthaven on the 16th February, it was found that the Dutch had already fired the bazaar and destroyed all military property. At the docks the British Military Embarkation Commandant stated that he had been given orders that all personnel were to be clear by midnight; personnel only were to be evacuated, not M.T. or equipment. As a result, essential and vital aircraft equipment, including that brought from Palembang, was left behind. This was particularly unfortunate because spare engines and other urgent stores for the Hurricanes which had been landed at Oesthaven with No. 41 Air Stores Park, of No. 266(F) Wing, were left behind. No. 266(F) Wing's R.S.U. similarly lost valuable equipment. A.A. guns and ammunition which had been brought to the port from P.I. and P.II aerodromes had also to be abandoned. Section IV of this Report will show that the loss of this R.A.F. and A.A. equipment had serious results during operations conducted later in Java. Fortunately the light tanks were re-embarked, and all personnel, Army and R.A.F., were evacuated.

477. The evacuation of the port was covered by a screen of R.A.F. personnel from No. 84 (B) Squadron acting under the command of Group Captain G. E. Nicholetts, who had been appointed R.A.F. Base Control Officer about ten days previously.

478. It was unfortunate that Oesthaven was evacuated so hastily. Two days later Group Captain Nicholetts, with a party of 50 volunteers of No. 605(F) Squadron, returned from Batavia to Oesthaven by sea in H.M.S. "Ballarat" which was commanded by a Royal Australian Naval Reserve officer specially appointed for the voyage owing to his knowledge of Oesthaven Harbour. On arrival, early on the 18th, twelve hours were spent by the party

loading the ship to the gunwales with R.A.F. equipment and some Bofors ammunition. At the same time the railway track was damaged, loaded rolling stock and petrol dumps were fired, and the water by the dockside was obstructed by pushing into the sea abandoned heavy M.T. and other vehicles.

479. That this work of salvage and destruction proceeded unhampered by the enemy must not detract from the spirit shown by both the R.A.F. party and the crew of H.M.S. "Ballarat," who volunteered for the adventure with a full knowledge of the hazards involved.

As it happened, air reconnaissances from Java had made it clear that the casualties and disorganisation caused as a result of our air attacks on the convoy off Palembang during the 14th and 15th February had been so severe that the Japanese were in no state to run through from Palembang to Oesthaven at the speed which had been anticipated when the port was evacuated, but Group Captain Nicholetts and his party were unaware of this fact.

SECTION IV.

SUMMARY OF OPERATIONS BASED ON JAVA.

INTRODUCTION.

Early Days of War in the N.E.I.

480. Before hostilities had broken out in the Far East the Dutch considered that their best interests lay in co-operating with the British from the outset with the object of repelling a Japanese attack in its early stages. They felt confident that, by joint means, an attack could be halted in the north and that war would never reach Java itself.

481. Dutch air units, therefore, operated from the first day of war in Malaya, Borneo and the northern islands of the N.E.I. There they suffered considerable casualties. Dutch naval units also played an early part and suffered considerably.

482. Early reverses caused apprehension but acted as a spur to Dutch co-operation. Their will to help was most marked although their resources were very limited.

Formation of H.Q. S.W. Pacific Command (Abdacom) in Java.

483. On 15th January, 1942, Sir Archibald Wavell arrived in Java to take control of all Allied Forces in the S.W. Pacific and formed his H.Q. (Abdacom) near Bandoeng. Confidence was raised by this and by the news of expected reinforcements—British, Australian and American—and still further by the actual arrival, towards the end of January and early February, of the first of them. More were on the way.

484. Even when the British forces in Malaya were, by 31st January, invested on Singapore Island, it was believed that that fortress, the key of the Far East, would hold out for some while. This would provide the necessary time for adequate forces to be built up in the N.E.I. for the successful defence of the rest of the Far East.

Then came a series of unpleasant events.