

Reserves.

667. Reserves of aircrews and aircraft were inadequate; even the first casualties could not be fully replaced. Spare parts, for engines, airframes, armament, and M.T. in particular were short. Squadron strengths consequently became abnormally low at the outset and remained so.

The need for adequate reserves in a theatre of war cannot be over-emphasised. Unfortunately it had been impossible to build up reserves in Malaya because supplies had been absorbed in supplying critical theatres in Europe, particularly in the Middle East and Russia.

Morale.

668. As perhaps is liable to happen when a force is confronted by an unexpectedly superior enemy, there was a loss of morale by a small section of the Command in the early days of the war. Trials had been severe, and had come before those concerned had had time to adjust themselves to their unpleasant and unforeseen circumstances. Lack of sufficient experienced officers undoubtedly contributed to the trouble, many of whom were newly commissioned and were not versed in their responsibilities.

Such incidents were few, and should not be exaggerated. But they serve to emphasise the need for giving all ranks that vital training which alone enables inexperienced troops to withstand their first novel shock of war. Such incidents also serve to enhance the credit of those who did maintain their morale, and who did their duty as was expected of them, and they comprised the great bulk of the force.

Mobility.

669. Few units were properly organised for mobile warfare. M.T. was very scarce and there were no transport aircraft. Each move involved appreciable interruption in operations, caused loss of valuable equipment and subsequent reduction of efficiency. The lack of transport aircraft was particularly felt when squadrons had to be transferred from Malaya to Sumatra, and thence later to Java: they suffered considerable loss and disorganisation during the enforced sea passage in the face of the enemy and without naval cover, the provision of which was quite impossible at the time.

670. The lesson was demonstrated that ability to take part in mobile operations, without loss of operational efficiency, is dependent on correct organisation and provision of suitable transport. A liberal scale of air transport is essential in those cases where long distances, sea crossings or other natural obstacles are involved.

INCIDENTS DURING THE CAMPAIGN.

Air Reconnaissance of approaching Japanese Convoy, 7th/8th December.

671. Contact with the Japanese expedition at sea was lost on 6th December and was not regained, except for a few ships sighted on the afternoon of 7th December. Admittedly weather conditions were bad in the Gulf of Siam during this vital period. Nevertheless only a small air reconnaissance effort was made for re-establishing contact. No. 8 (R.A.A.F.)

Squadron at Kuantan had to be directed to continue its initial rôle of searching in an area far to the south and eastward of the probable position of the lost Japanese expedition for fear of a still more dangerous but possible attack, namely one directed against southern Malaya where a successful landing, particularly on the Endau/Mersing beaches, would have been very dangerous indeed. It is impossible to resist the inference that reconnaissance dispositions were strongly influenced by a conclusion at the time that the lost Japanese expedition might be proceeding against the Bangkok area of Siam. It is easy to be wise after the event, but the reconnaissance effort which was directed into the Gulf of Siam appears to have been small, bearing in mind its great area and the possible courses open to the Japanese convoys which were known to be in it.

Initial Action at Kota Bahru.

672. Only those who have given insufficient thought to the matter could venture to criticise the station commander at Kota Bahru for not having launched his aircraft to the attack on receipt of the news, at 0030 hours on 8th December, 1941, that ships were lying off the coast. It is equally easy to criticise the A.O.C. for ordering away only a reconnaissance to clear up the situation. But that both were correct in doing as they did, in the circumstances which existed at that particular moment, is beyond doubt. War had not broken out: Pearl Harbour had not been attacked and the U.S.A. was still neutral: there was grave risk that the Japanese might stage a bait in order to induce us to strike the first blow, and by doing so reinforce that section of the American Public which was then strongly opposed to America entering the war, a danger against which all in Malaya had been warned emphatically by G.H.Q. Admittedly 45 minutes were lost before the first air action was taken, but it is merely academic to conjecture what might have happened if it had been taken at once.

Main Japanese Landing at Singora not attacked.

673. It may fairly be asked why the initial Japanese landing at Singora was not attacked on 8th December, as this was the best target for our air striking force. The answer is that it was not realised, until too late, that it was in fact the enemy's main effort, although Singora had long been recognised as the area in which a Japanese expedition against Malaya was likely to be landed. The enemy, moreover, achieved a tactical surprise because our air reconnaissance failed to maintain contact with the main Japanese convoy, which was not found again until landings at Singora were well under way. By the time that the situation was fully realised, all our available aircraft had been launched against the Kota Bahru subsidiary attack. Before their objective could be changed to Singora, our own aerodromes in Northern Malaya were undergoing so heavy a scale of air attack that another effective force for opposing the Singora landing could not be launched from them.

Attempt to Neutralise Enemy Air Bases.

674. As soon as our Squadrons had been driven out of the aerodromes in Northern Malaya, our army was in turn subjected to