

existing organization, strengthening it as necessary by the introduction of men of character and experience.

#### SECTION XXX.—LABOUR.

246. War experience soon showed that, while the organized military labour units worked on the whole satisfactorily, this was far from being the case with civil labour. Trouble first broke out in Kedah, where civil labour disappeared as soon as the operations started. At Penang, during the heavy air raids, the majority of the Asiatic municipal employees disappeared leaving the troops to carry on their functions, an experience which was to be repeated later in Singapore. On the railway, after the spasmodic enemy air attacks on the stations, many of the non-European officials and labourers absented themselves. These included such key men as engine-drivers, stokers, signalmen, plate-layers etc. As a result there was a real danger that railway traffic would come to a standstill. The danger was averted, firstly by the Volunteer Railway Unit and secondly by seconding for work on the railways military personnel with previous railway experience. The conduct of the senior railway officials throughout was, however, exemplary.

247. In the Singapore area the trouble first appeared on the aerodromes. It had from the first become obvious that a secure base from which our aircraft, and especially our fighter aircraft, could operate was essential for the successful development of the campaign. I therefore agreed to the maintenance of the existing Singapore aerodromes and the construction of new air strips taking priority over other military work. Large labour gangs were required to fill in the craters caused by enemy bombing and for work on the new air strips. After each raid, however, the greater part of these gangs disappeared and after a time it became difficult to get labourers to work on the aerodromes at all. To ease the situation I had to arrange for working parties to be found, whenever available, from the Army Reinforcement Camps for work on the aerodromes, even though this meant that little or no labour was available for work on the beach defences of Singapore Island. The trouble soon spread to the Naval Dockyard where, after one or two air attacks, many of the permanent civil staff absented themselves, with the result that the repair of local naval craft and other work was seriously delayed. Later the Dock workers, employed by the Singapore Harbour Board, similarly disappeared when the Docks became the main target for enemy air attacks. Here also military personnel had to be called in to unload the ships.

248. In the Army, War Office authority had been received shortly before war broke out to form up to six labour companies, but for some time the War Office refused to agree to increase the fixed rate of 45 cents per day for coolies. As the current rate in Singapore at that time was in the region of one dollar per day plus free rations and accommodation, it was not surprising that, in spite of strenuous recruiting efforts, these companies could not be formed. By the 7th January only one additional company had been formed.

249. Early in January efforts were made to solve the grave labour problem. Mr. Bisserker

was appointed Director of Labour under the Director-General of Civil Defence. He worked through the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and through influential representatives of the other communities. The Services applied to him for their requirements.

250. On the 8th January a Director of Army Labour was appointed. He took over control both of the existing labour companies and of the labour supplied by contractors. Many of the latter were of a very poor quality and it had become apparent that the only satisfactory solution was to recruit as many labourers as possible into the labour companies; also that it was essential that they should be handled by officers and N.C.Os. who understood them and that accommodation should be provided as near as possible to their work. By arrangement the Governor cabled to the Colonial Office requesting that the Services should be given authority to accept decisions by the D.G.C.D. as regards conditions of service reached after consultation with interested departments. No authority was received, but the War Office was informed that in view of the urgency the labour scheme agreed upon locally was accepted.

251. We continued to be hampered by the lack of centralized leadership among the Chinese in Singapore, from whom the bulk of the labourers were drawn. The coolies understood little of the war and many of them were quite content to hide in their villages unpaid. There were few who would go among them and lead them. The situation was to some extent aggravated by the distribution of rice to each Asiatic household to be held as a reserve, a measure taken by the Government in order to disperse food reserves but which had the effect of making it unnecessary for the labourers to earn their subsistence.

252. There were those who urged that compulsion should be applied but those best acquainted with the Asiatics, and especially with the Chinese, were opposed to it. They considered that better results would be obtained by trying to find, and get the co-operation of, Asiatic leaders. I supported this view. It was only when this had failed to produce the required results that a measure was passed on the 20th January to introduce compulsion, but it came too late for its value to be disclosed.

253. The shortage of civil labour remained a great source of weakness throughout the campaign. It is right to add, however, that many of the senior officials, both European and Asiatic, performed their duties loyally and well. This was particularly the case in the Railway and in the Posts and Telegraphs Departments which were kept working in spite of very great difficulties.

#### SECTION XXXI.—THE STRATEGICAL SITUATION, 30TH DECEMBER, 1941—2ND JANUARY, 1942.

254. Our object remained as before, i.e. the Defence of the Naval Base.

There had been no change recently in the Naval situation.

The Air situation has been described in Section XXIV. The safe arrival of 50 Hurricane Fighters, due to reach Singapore by sea about the 13th-15th January, appeared to be of paramount importance as this was still the only