

A.O.C. decided, therefore, to send the aircraft and pilots of No. 453 (F) Squadron from Singapore to Ipoh where they would be serviced by the ground crews of No. 21 Squadron. It was intended to return them to Singapore when the rest of No. 21 Squadron had been re-equipped.

240 No. 453 (F) Squadron arrived at Ipoh on the morning of the 13th and began operating from there, using Butterworth as an advanced landing ground. Connection was established with the Observer Corps Operations Room at Kuala Lumpur in the hope of obtaining at least a short warning of attacks upon the station.

241. Operations were vigorously undertaken from Ipoh between the 13th and the 15th December. Japanese convoys were attacked on the road Simpang—Alor Star—Kepala Bantas. Tactical reconnaissances were carried out, and enemy bombers and reconnaissance aircraft in the area were engaged with some success, notably on the 13th when five enemy aircraft attacking Penang were claimed by the squadron. As a result, it was reported that the morale of our troops sharply appreciated

242. On the 15th December No. 21 (F) Squadron, R.A.A.F., left Singapore to reinforce Ipoh, but owing to bad weather five aircraft force-landed and crashed and only six aircraft got through.

243. Operations in support of the Army seriously reduced the serviceability of No. 453 (F) Squadron, and further losses were caused by the intensive bombing of Ipoh aerodrome, which now started. In consequence, on the 15th December, G.H.Q. issued an instruction that the role of the Ipoh fighter force was primarily reconnaissance for IIIrd Corps: it was not to be used against ground targets, and wastage was not to be made good at the expense of the squadrons allotted to the defence of Singapore. In practice, the squadrons in the north functioned mainly in the defence of the Ipoh area, carrying out such tactical reconnaissance as was required by IIIrd Corps. They continued in this role at Kuala Lumpur, to which enemy air attacks drove them on the 19th December.

Demolition of Aerodromes.

244. The salvage of equipment from aerodromes in north-west Malaya continued. Sungei Patani, Butterworth and Taiping were successively cleared, and all stores and personnel sent back to Kuala Lumpur by road and rail for sorting.

245. Experience was to show that the demolition of aerodrome surfaces had little more than nuisance value, and only slightly retarded the Japanese efforts to bring them into service for their own forces. Speedy repairs were possible because:—

(a) large stocks of road-metal had been accumulated on each aerodrome for repairs, and it proved too bulky for removal and denial to the enemy (para. 30);

(b) occupation by the Japanese followed demolition so quickly that the heavy rains had no time to take effect;

(c) the abundant native labour was forcibly impressed by the enemy for repair work.

Air Forces driven out of North-West Malaya.

246. As early as the 20th December Japanese bombers and fighters were using aerodromes in the north-west, particularly Sungei Patani, and the scale of attack in the Kuala Lumpur area correspondingly increased. By the afternoon of 22nd December these attacks had reduced the combined strength of Nos. 21 (F) R.A.A.F. and 453 (F) Squadrons to four operationally serviceable aircraft.

247. In view of the enemy's great numerical superiority, further attempts to reinforce these squadrons only meant dissipating aircraft from their main role—the defence of Singapore. It was decided, therefore, to withdraw the force to Singapore, and this was done on 23rd December. It meant that operations in support of the Army in the north-west could be undertaken only by using Kuala Lumpur and other airfields to the south of that place as advanced landing grounds.

248. These two fighter squadrons had been forced to operate under very difficult conditions. Maintenance and servicing facilities had been necessarily primitive, whilst the warning system gave little, if any, notice of attack.

249. However, the unexpectedly high calibre of Japanese aircraft and pilots, and the superior numbers of the enemy, had proved too much for them.

250. Nevertheless, the work of these squadrons had had a good effect on the attitude of our troops to the air, although the number of enemy aircraft shot down was only small.

251. With the withdrawal of the R.A.F. from the north-west, Norgroup was disbanded, and a Liaison Officer was left at H.Q. IIIrd Corps.

Army Situation.

252. While these operations and moves of air forces had been taking place the Army had been compelled to give more ground. On 15th December the Japanese forced the 11th (Indian) Division to evacuate the Gurun position, and threatened to push through the gap between the division and Krohcol. A big withdrawal had therefore to be made out of Kedah province to the Krian river. Penang was thus left isolated and was evacuated on the night of 16th/17th December.

253. Between the 17th and 26th December our forces fought for the Taiping—Ipoh area, preparatory to taking up positions in the Kampar district, which offered the best possibilities for prolonged defence in this part of Malaya.

254. The prospects of stabilising the situation, however, were not good; and as early as 16th December the sole Command reserve, consisting of a Brigade Group, had been committed to the fighting in the north-west.

255. In the rest of Malaya were:—

(i) A Brigade Group which was in process of being withdrawn from the State of Kelantan.

(ii) A Brigade Group at Kuantan which was already threatened by Japanese infiltration down the Trengganu coast.

(iii) A Division (2 Brigades) of the Australian Imperial Forces in Johore, whose