

*Relative Strength of Air Forces in Malaya.*

309. To carry out efficiently all these tasks was beyond the strength of the Air Forces available. On the afternoon of 18th January, the serviceability state of the Air Forces in Malaya showed 74 bomber and G.R. aircraft and 28 fighters, all based on Singapore with the exception of a small detachment at Kahang. Moreover, many of these aircraft were obsolete or obsolescent. Against these it was estimated that the Japanese were maintaining in Malaya at this time a force of 150 fighters and 250 bombers. Concentration was therefore made, in general, on one task at a time in the order of priority indicated in the directive, but influenced by the situation.

*Arrival of Further Convoys and of Air Reinforcements.*

310. Special attention, as the directive instructed, continued to be paid to the provision of protection for reinforcing convoys arriving at Singapore. Further convoys came in on 22nd, 24th and 28th January, bringing the remainder of the 18th Division, except for a few units, a Brigade Group from India, two to three thousand troops from Australia, and more anti-aircraft units.

311. Five Hudson sorties were made daily over wide areas around the convoys to detect the approach of Japanese naval forces. One Catalina was maintained on anti-submarine patrol, and during the final approach to Singapore a fighter escort of six aircraft was maintained. All other aircraft were kept at short call as the convoys approached, in case the enemy should attack them.

312. Three reinforcing Catalinas arrived on 7th January and were allotted to No. 205 (FB) Squadron.

313. During the third week in January, the 51 Hurricanes which had arrived on the 13th January (para. 276), were being assembled preparatory to joining Buffaloes in the defence of the Island. Spares were ample but tool kits were scarce.

314. On their arrival they were immediately unloaded, and the majority dispersed to previously selected concealed positions, where they were erected and wheeled to nearby airfields for test; the remainder proceeded direct to No. 151 M.U. for erection at other dispersed points. The speed with which these aircraft were erected was a very remarkable achievement (see Postscript).

315. Twenty-four pilots from Nos. 17, 135 and 136 (F) Squadrons had arrived with them: some had had experience in the Battle of Britain. When A.H.Q. first heard of their diversion to the Far East, it had been planned to give aircrews a spell before employing them in operations. This spell was obviously desirable, not only because of the length of their sea voyage, but also because of the need for acclimatising pilots to local conditions. However, events had moved too fast and the stake was too high for delay to be acceptable. The Hurricanes had to be used immediately they had been erected and tested. They were in action as a squadron by the 20th January, exactly a week after they had been landed in crates.

316. The aircraft were accompanied by some ground personnel of No. 232 (F) Squadron, deficiencies being made good by personnel from the transit camp. They were based at Seletar and Kallang, and the whole operated as No. 232 (F) Squadron.

317. Sixteen Hudson III's arrived in Singapore from the United Kingdom, the first of them during the third week of January. They were allotted to 62 (B) and No. 8 (GR) R.A.A.F. Squadrons. They came at somewhat scattered intervals, and as long as the air route to the Far East remained open, i.e., until mid-February. The balance of the 52 which had been expected were unable to get through before the enemy cut the air route from India.

318. Two reinforcing bomber squadrons, Nos. 84 (B) and 211 (B) Squadrons, began to arrive on 23rd January from the Middle East. They were diverted to Sumatra, for reasons which will be related in due course. They, too, arrived at scattered intervals and were far from complete when the enemy cut the air route. Their ground crews and equipment were to follow by sea (para. 417).

A.H.Q. was notified that a further 48 Hurricanes, over and above those mentioned in para. 313, would be flown into Singapore from H.M.S. Indomitable about the end of January, and that 39 more in crates were en route by sea.

*Further withdrawal of the Army—to Singapore Island.*

319. Despite the arrival of reinforcements the position on land continued to develop adversely during the second half of January.

320. On the west coast, the Japanese took full advantage of their command of the sea to land behind the Army positions. Between the 16th and 18th January there was a succession of landings on the Johore coast between Muar and Batu Pahat, which, combined with heavy frontal attacks, forced our troops to withdraw to the line Batu Pahat—Mersing.

321. On the East coast, the long expected landing in the Mersing—Endau area took place at Endau on 26th January. The lateral communications available in north Johore permitted a junction between the Japanese forces in the east and west of the peninsula, while a Japanese advance from the Endau area threatened the communications of the main British forces in the west.

322. Our losses in the west coast battle and the new threat from the East dictated a general withdrawal of our forces to Singapore Island itself, a decision which was taken on the 27th January. The withdrawal was achieved in good order. Nevertheless it had been hoped that the arrival of reinforcements would permit the holding of a bridgehead in Johore, but this now proved to be impossible.

*Air Action against the Japanese Advance: West Coast.*

323. The Japanese exploitation of their superiority at sea led, on the west coast as well as the east, to a number of air reconnaissances and sweeps being undertaken over the left flank of the Army. Attacks against Japanese-held aerodromes in Central Malaya were also carried out.