

A very successful exercise based on this second one was held in Burma in July, 1941, and Hong Kong carried out two or three on similar lines.

Defensive Preparations.

48. The question of the best method of defending the important sectors of the East Coast of Malaya gave rise to much discussion. One school of thought argued that, as there were insufficient numbers to defend any great length of beach, the enemy would be able to land outside the defended portion, thus outflanking the defenders and possibly cutting them off. The best course of action was, therefore, to fight on a prepared position in rear where the road leading into the interior could be defended. This school also argued that attempts to hold the beaches would result in a purely linear defence with insufficient troops in hand for counter-attack.

The view of General Headquarters, Far East, was that it was essential to hold the beaches, because it was during the period of landing that the enemy would be most vulnerable, and if the beaches were given up he would be fighting on equality with us. Again, it was during this process of landing that our most effective co-operation between the Army and Air, and possibly the Navy as well, could be effected. Admittedly there was a danger of having a purely linear defence, but this was primarily a question of adjustment between the forces retained in reserve and those detailed for holding the beaches themselves.

Another point was that of all-round defence. It was difficult with the forces available to have units in a group of perimeter posts and at the same time to protect an adequate length of beach. Further, the defenders must be prepared to hold on for a period to be reckoned by weeks rather than by days, even if surrounded by the enemy and cut off. There was but little object in this unless adequate reserves were available in rear to attack the enemy and restore the situation. The 22nd Australian Brigade at Mersing found a satisfactory solution to the problem in that they had perimeter defences for units, mutually supporting each other and primarily defending the beaches. But in their case the 27th Australian Brigade was available in Johore for counter-attack on a large scale. The problem was more difficult at Kuantan and Kota Bharu for the reasons indicated above. (See para. 12.)

Although it was my policy to allow the General Officers-in-Command as much freedom as possible, I found it necessary in the case of Malaya to issue orders that the first line of our defence was to be the beaches. Previously, except on Singapore Island and Penang, beaches were going to be occupied only by watching posts, and the first lines of defence were sited inland. This change involved a considerable amount of work and preparation of obstacles and defence posts at Mersing, Kuantan and Kota Bharu.

It was found at one period that the work of preparing positions and putting up obstacles was taking up so much time that the training of the troops was being hampered and, in addition, the wire generally required renewing after about six months. Also, I was always on guard against too much reliance upon water obstacles, barbed wire and pill-boxes, in case this should lead to a Maginot Line complex to the detriment of the offensive spirit. Consequently, a division of

available hours was drawn up, allowing a proportion for training, a proportion for renewals, and the balance for new work. As far as practicable, troops constructed the actual defences in which they would normally fight. New works carried out included not only defensive preparations, but facilities for making counter-attacks, e.g., preparation of hidden paths fit for Bren Carriers.

Looking back in the light of what actually happened, it is easy to point out that a lot of the preparation was wasted, and that the energy so taken up should have been expended elsewhere; for instance, a great deal of time was spent on the Mersing area, which was never heavily attacked. Mersing, however, was a very important place, and, had the Japanese established themselves here instead of at Kota Bharu, they would have been at once within a short distance of Singapore; and it is possible that, had these defences been less strong, they might have attacked the Mersing area at an early stage in the operations. I feel, however, that steps should have been taken before war broke out to strengthen the defences on the Northern and North-Western sides of Singapore Island.

49. We also had to be prepared for the possibility of a break-through in the Mersing area, which would have isolated Southern and Northern Malaya from Singapore, and this consideration affected the siting of depots for stores and ammunition. Therefore, preparations were made to enable a force to be supplied, if necessary, by a line of communication running through Kuala Lumpur to Penang, so that they would be able to operate quite independently of Singapore.

Another possibility that had to be considered was that of a sudden descent without warning on a part of Singapore Island with the object either of destroying some important place, such as the main wireless station, or of establishing a footing, awaiting subsequent reinforcements. This possibility was met by having a portion of the Singapore garrison ready to come into action and move at very short notice.

Operation "Matador."

50. The importance of the Southern end of the Kra Isthmus, especially the neighbourhood of Singora, has already been referred to (see paragraph 12 above). The possibility of an advance into this Isthmus, in order to hold a position North of Haad Yai Junction, was considered soon after the formation of General Headquarters, Far East. Detailed plans for carrying out this operation were prepared, and the code word "Matador" was eventually given to it. It was from the start realised that the essential feature of this operation was forestalling the Japanese on a position near Singora; see, for instance my telegram to the Chiefs of Staff through the War Office, in which it is stated: "The success of this plan would depend on rapidity of execution in order to forestall the Japanese on the Songhla line"; also my telegram from which the following is an extract: "I wish to emphasise the fact that the forestalling of the Japanese in Singora area is essential to the success of 'Matador.'"

This necessitated at least twenty-four hours' start before the Japanese landed, and rapid movement of our force once the order was given. It was realised all along that, if these conditions could not be fulfilled, then the Matador operation would be impracticable. The psychological