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**THE ROLE AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE PART PLAYED BY THE CIVILIAN
AUTHORITIES IN THE FALL OF SINGAPORE, FEBRUARY 1942.**

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Thesis submitted for the degree MPhil in History

2014

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ABSTRACT

The Japanese invasion of Malaya, and their later conquest of Singapore, was an event of significantly more political importance than was its strategic impact on the course of the war in the Far East. The defeat of a sizeable British Imperial Military Force and the speed and humiliation with which it was inflicted, destroyed forever the icon of British invincibility and prestige. Some historians claim that this momentous affair was the catalyst that presaged the end of the British Empire.

Following the costly First World War, Britain was stretched beyond its means, economically and militarily. Its diminishing ability to meet the diverse demands of a worldwide Empire were glaringly exposed. The failure to prepare Singapore for invasion was one manifestation of this bankruptcy. Moreover, when the Second World War erupted in Europe, the paucity of military support from London for the Far East theatre shrunk even more. The resultant loss of the 'Island Fortress' to an Asian military invader destroyed forever the cultivated, centuries old image of British infallibility.

The military failure of this campaign is a well-documented and closely examined episode. And while attention is often drawn to the role of the Colonial Governor and his staff during this period, the civil authorities participation has not been subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny. Quite evidently, they had a vital role to play in conjunction with the military to prepare the people and the country for a possible war. Their contribution to this task however, bordered on negligence.

In this dissertation I undertake a close examination of the role and the responsibilities of the colonial government both in the lead-up to the war and during it. I contend that the colonial government by pursuing different priorities, often demanded by Whitehall, needlessly created distraction and confusion. Moreover, the shamefully poor, even hostile, relations that developed between the local government and the British military hierarchy impeded a joint approach to the growing threat and affected the course of this campaign. Additionally, the tawdry management of civil defence matters led to unnecessary loss of civilian life.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABDA	American-British-Dutch-Australia Command
ADM	Admiralty [British]
AFHQ	Allied Forces Headquarters
AIR	Air Ministry [British]
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BAM	British Association of Malaya
BP	Bletchley Park
CAS	Chief of Air Staff
CIBM	Combined Intelligence Bureau, Malaya
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
C in C	Commander in Chief
CIGS	Chief of Imperial General Staff
CO	Colonial Office
COS	Chief of Staff
COIS	Chief of Intelligence Staff
CU	Cambridge University
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
DMO	Directorate of Military Operations
Enigma	German rotor cryptograph
FE	Far East
FECB	Far Eastern Combined Bureau, Singapore
FESS	Far Eastern Security Service, Singapore
FEW	Far East Weekly [Intelligence Summary]
FMS	Federated Malaya States
FO	Foreign Office
FORCE 136	SOE in the Far East
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
HK	Hong Kong
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IISS	International Institute of Strategic Studies
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
IIL	Indian Independence League
INA	Indian National Army
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JPS	Joint Planning Staff
KL	Kuala Lumpur [capital of FMS]
KMM	Kesatuan Muda Melayu [League of Malay Youth]
KMT	Kuomintang [Chinese Nationalist Party]
Magic	Decrypts of Japanese diplomatic material
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MCS	Malayan Civil Service
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
NUS	National University of Singapore
OAG	Officer Administering the Government

Purple	American name for the Japanese Type B cryptograph
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCS	Royal Commonwealth Society
RN	Royal Navy
SAC	Strategical Appreciation Committee
S E ASIA	South East Asia
SEAC	South East Asia Command
SOE	Special Operations Executive
S of S	Secretary of State
SS	Straits Settlements
Ultra	British classification for signals intelligence
UMS	Unfederated Malaya States
WO	War Office

INTRODUCTION

At 5.15 p.m. on 15 February 1942, at the Ford Motor Car Factory, sited on a prominent hill (Bukit Timah) in the centre of Singapore Island, the British and Japanese delegations met. They assembled in the relatively undamaged, bare and austere factory offices, to agree the terms of surrender of the British Forces. The tall, spare and unprepossessing figure of the British Commander, Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, led the delegation of senior staff officers, all looking disconsolate. The iconic photograph recording this event shows the group arriving, looking incongruous in steel helmets and shorts, towering over their Japanese captors. The triumphant, short, pugnacious Japanese army commander, Lieutenant General Yamashita, was waiting for them. The Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, refused to attend this ceremony. He regarded the loss of Singapore as an ignominious military disaster and the military alone, therefore, should face the indignity of laying down their arms. He was not surrendering the Crown Colony.¹ His resolve, to disassociate his government from the military failure was symptomatic of the poor civil-military relationship, which had so dominated the campaign and inhibited a united war effort. His pretentious stand however, was a mere technical statement of no political significance. Thomas was a colonial officer of the old school and of limited ability. He was on his final posting before retirement and had wanted a quiet and uneventful conclusion. His bailiwick included Peninsula Malaya as well as Singapore and some outlying islands. Throughout the campaign, he sought the least contentious solutions to serious issues of war preparations. He frequently ignored military advice, lacked resolve and equivocated. The demands of his colonial masters for ever-increasing production of the vital war commodities, rubber and tin, fixated him. He never seems to have thought to warn them of his quandary - that he could not simultaneously prepare the country for invasion and increase production.

The fall of Singapore was the end of an era; British authority would never be the same again. The effect on world opinion of the loss of Singapore however, proved to be more serious than its effect upon the course of the war.² Western power and authority was no longer secure and the relationship between the European and Asian peoples changed forever.

¹ Montgomery, Brian. *Shenton of Singapore*. Leo Cooper (in association with Secker & Warburg Ltd.) London.1984, p138. It is interesting to contrast this standpoint with that taken by the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Mark Young, who resisted military advice to surrender the Colony to the Japanese until it was clearly impossible to carry on and then insisted that he as Governor would surrender the Colony.

² Thompson, Virginia. *Postmortem on Malaya*. Macmillan NY, 1943. p vii.

In the minds of the indigenous peoples of Malaya and Singapore, for whose protection Britain was responsible, doubts arose. The first flaws appeared as early as ten days after the Japanese landings when the British hastily abandoned the island of Penang. Only the Europeans on the island had warning of the impending withdrawal and arrangements made for their departure. The Asian population were left to their own devices. The reaction from the local people was one of disbelief and astonishment. They were shocked at the apparent inability of the civilian administration to deal with the emergencies of war; of their display of racial selectivity and the failure to tell them honestly, what was happening.³ It also cast the European civilian population as a whole in a bewildering and damaging image, somewhat diminishing the existing relationship.

Many have claimed that the population of Malaya was neither psychologically nor physically prepared for the ordeal that descended upon them, and importantly, despite endless pleadings from the military authorities for support, Britain proved powerless to avert.⁴ The revisionist theory is that the Colonial power should have either sent adequate forces from outside to avoid the disaster, or else the governing authorities should have given the indigenous population enough of a stake in the colony to make it worth their while to help defend British rule. The contemporary journalist, Virginia Thompson, has claimed, ‘the root of the evil lay in the purely economic form of imperialism which developed and which failed to weld the peoples of the country into a Malayan nation.’⁵

It is true that the colonial governance of Malaya focused on the exploitation of the country’s natural resources rather than on preparing the nation for self-government. On the other hand, there was no compelling reason to change the *status quo*. The administration was working perfectly satisfactorily and created many benefits for the people. There was no predictable demand for change from a restless population and scant evidence of any strong nationalist desire. A little known Malay organisation *Kesatuan Muda Melayu* (League of Malay Youth) tried to arouse interest, but as will be discussed later, it had limited success.⁶ Moreover, at no point throughout the period of British rule had there been even a hint of an external threat to the country’s security, a condition, which might have forced the authorities to attempt to create a unified nation. Even so, in the light of subsequent events, it is doubtful that a united Malayan nation would have had any noticeable impact on the course of the

³ Chew, E & Lee, E (eds) *A History of Singapore*. Singapore 1991. p117.

⁴ See for example case made by Sir George Sansom in the Foreword to *Postmortem*.

⁵ Ibid. See also Bayly, Christopher & Harper, Tim.. *Forgotten Wars*. Allen Lane, London, 2007. p10.

⁶ Bastin, John & Winks, Robin W. *Malaysia, Selected Historical Reading's*. Oxford University Press, 1966. P.294, Silcock & Ungku Abdul Aziz. “Malay Nationalist Movements”.

campaign. Both the local inhabitants and the Colonial Office in London regarded this corner of South East Asia as a successful and peaceful backwater. That is not to say, however, that the question of self-determination did not arise. The authorities both in the country and in London debated the matter on a number of occasions, sometimes heatedly.

The matter of governance was complex in that Britain's piecemeal expansion into Peninsular Malaya meant that by the 1930's the country consisted of autonomous and semi-autonomous states. Before the late 19th century, Britain largely practised a non-interventionist policy; her primary interest was its trading posts along the west coast, known as the Straits Settlements (Penang, Province Wellesley, Malacca and Singapore). Thereafter, several factors persuaded the British to play a more active role on the mainland, such as fluctuating supplies of raw materials, the Straits Settlements becoming increasingly dependent on the economy of the Malay states, and more frequent requests for assistance from state rulers to either resolve disputes or help them suppress internecine troubles. The outcome was a plethora of different agreements and relationships with individual states. Over time, it became clear that some form of rationalisation was needed. However, each state ruler, while accepting British advice, protection, progress and economic growth, showed little enthusiasm for centralised control. By the end of the 19th century, however Britain persuaded four contiguous and most lucrative states on the west coast⁷ to combine into a federation (The Federated Malay States, (FMS)) with Kuala Lumpur as its capital. The remaining states were classified as unfederated (UMS). The important implication of this administrative medley was that the Governor in 1940 did not have the jurisdiction to impose nationwide commands. In the Straits Settlements he had absolute power, in the Federated States, limited authority and in the Unfederated States only an advisory role. This meant that if matters arose which would clearly be beneficial countrywide, they had to undergo lengthy consultative processes with each state.

Added to this administrative miscellany was the complex racial makeup of the peoples of Malaya. The Malays claimed they were the *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) the rightful indigenous natives of the country. The Chinese, made up of mainland Chinese and Malayan-born Chinese, together with Indians from southern India and local born, comprised the multi-national and segregated community. These different ethnic groups rarely inter-married, lived separate existences, spoke different languages and had different religions. They were also inclined to confine their employment to specific niches of the economy;

⁷ The states were Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Pahang.

Indians, for example, worked mostly as labourers on rubber estates and on the railways and those with some education gravitated towards clerical employment.⁸ The Chinese had strong commercial instincts and combined with their natural hard work ethic, meant they dominated the business world. Most of the big trading companies were Chinese owned and the tin industry was very dependent on Chinese labour. The Malays were easy-going, pleasant people, lacking political or national aspirations, content that their country should be run for them. 'A plural society was evolving which would inevitably place heavy emphasis on communal rather than "national" values.'⁹

A consequence of the evolving administrative arrangements, barely noticeable in peacetime, was the variety of government departments that mushroomed to deal with the increasing cultural, social, structural and commercial issues, in a materially rich developing multi-cultural country. Many of these departments were independent answering direct to their authorities in London. Soon after the outbreak of war in Europe, it became evident that:

The multiplicity of official organs in the Far East was hampering the conduct of affairs. The strain of emergencies revealed weakness in the governmental structure which not only prevented quick and concerted action but also had the serious disadvantage that, because the picture of events in the Far East was presented piecemeal by a variety of organs overseas to a variety of departments in London, the essential unity of the problem of the Far East tended to be obscured.¹⁰

Later, this autonomy would cause serious confusion and obstruct coordination of action, but even before the onset of war, the mass of uncoordinated data from Singapore to London was considered so confusing that attempts were made to deal with it. Special organs like the Eastern Group Supply Council were established in London and the Far Eastern Branch of the Ministry of Information and the Far East Mission of the Ministry of Economic Warfare were established in Singapore. There was also in Singapore the Far East Combined Bureau of Intelligence, which collected and collated naval, military and political information, principally for the use of the Commander-in-Chief. All these mediums provoked the major complaint, which became glaringly obvious, that of the lack of a single and authoritative voice in the Far East able to speak in convincing terms to the government in the United Kingdom.¹¹

⁸ Bastin, J & Winks, R. *Malaysia. Selected Historical Readings*. OUP 1966. p. 257. Jackson, R. 'Indian Immigration into Malaya.'

⁹ Ibid. P.272.

¹⁰ Thompson. *Postmortem on Malaya*. p.xv.

¹¹ *Report on lessons from the point of view of the Colonial administration in wartime from the experience of Hong Kong and Malaya*. CO 967/80. 4 Dec 42. NA.

In the military domain, the forces were catastrophically short of vital weapons and armaments of war, for which they had been pleading, literally, for years. However, this failure to deliver needs placing in the context of Britain's global obligations at that point. Churchill had decided that the needs of the Libyan and the Russian fronts must come first, and Britain was simply not in a position to provide and meet several worldwide demands for manpower and equipment at the same time. Anything given to Malaya would have been at the expense of the other theatres. In any case, as will be seen, because the strategic assumptions for the defence of Singapore were forever changing, there was not enough time to assemble the correct balance of men and equipment to defeat a determined Japanese attack.

The fall of France left Britain without an ally to protect the vital Mediterranean Sea route, a task that Britain now had to take on alone. In turn, this meant that one of the tenets of the defence of Malaya, a deterrent naval fleet sailing quickly to Singapore, was not available. Furthermore, France's capitulation left her Far East possession, Indo-China, virtually defenceless and enabled the Japanese to establish themselves there and in Thailand. Nor did any of the pre-war military 'Studies' envisage Japan attacking the USA at the same time as assaulting British and Dutch possessions. Indeed, Churchill believed that any thought Japan may have had of advancing down Asia's eastern seaboard would be deterred by the knowledge that her long exposed flank would be vulnerable to the power of America's mighty Pacific Fleet sailing from Hawaii.¹² Fundamentally, strategic military shortcomings can be attributed not so much to misjudgement, but to the compelling needs of global warfare.

The strategic concept upon which the Singapore Base was founded was that it was a protected naval harbour from which a powerful fleet could operate. In addition, at the time of its planning and the beginning of construction in the 1920's, the perceived threat was properly assessed to be from the sea because the hinterland of the Malay Peninsula, still covered in dense tropical forest and with a primitive communications network, was regarded as virtually impenetrable. At this stage, nearly all internal transportation was by river craft. The coastal defences were thus built, to protect Singapore from a sea approach. The primary task of the installed heavy artillery was to fire armour piercing and explosive shells at warships at sea; some of the guns however were capable of pointing at the mainland and were later actually so used. The claim, made by some, that Singapore was lost because the guns faced the wrong way is quite wrong. One who promoted this belief was a civilian government

¹² CAB 79/6. COS 317th Meeting. 19 Sep. 1940. NA.

official, C. A. Vlieland, who in his capacity as Secretary of Defence in the Singapore government (1939-41) should have known better. After the war, he claimed:

‘No one should have been fooled by the legend of the mighty fortress of Singapore. The place had none of the natural characteristics of an old time fortress like Gibraltar; nor was it ‘fortified’ in any way, though it had been armed with guns which were useless against anything but a sea-borne assault.’¹³

During the naval base’s twelve years of construction, weapons of war and armaments became more sophisticated and technologically, spectacularly advanced. Added to this many areas of mainland Malaya, particularly on the West coast, opened up with the building of roads and railways and the laying down of larger areas for rubber estates. The most important factor in developing the west coast was the tin industry. The first roads and railways were built to connect tin mines to the ports and towns.¹⁴ Plans for the defence of the naval base had to be constantly revised in the light of these developments and also as the strategic outlook in the Far East changed in the light of Japan’s restless aggressive behaviour. Then, with the outbreak of war in Europe, it became abundantly clear that the main strength of the Royal Navy was needed in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and there would be precious few warships available to rush to the aid of Singapore.

It was however, one thing to identify the changing threat and reassess the manpower and equipment needed to meet it, and quite another to be given the wherewithal for the task. After much debate and taking account of their meagre resources, the Services eventually agreed that the weight of responsibility for the defence of the Naval Base lay with the Air Force. Consequently the RAF asked for a substantial increase in numbers and quality of aircraft. The Chiefs of Staff in London promised them a significant enhancement, albeit short of their ideal, but a considerable improvement. On this premise deployment plans were drawn up and airfields constructed. Unfortunately, the choice of airfield locations was taken without consulting the Army whose task it was to protect them. The upshot was that a significant proportion of already under strength ground forces were dispersed to defend airfields in remote locations over a vast area, and because of the nature of the terrain, there was little chance of swiftly redeploying or reinforcing them. Some airfields were built on the

¹³ Vlieland papers. Kings College, London. LHCMA.

¹⁴ Siew Nim Chee. ‘The Tin Mining Industry in Malaya’ as quoted in Baskin & Robins ‘*Malaysia, Selected Historical Readings.*’ OUP 1966. P. 281.

exposed east coast, in places next to long and excellent sea beaches, which were difficult to defend, a fact of which the Japanese were to take full advantage.¹⁵

The promised modern aircraft never came and the Royal Navy's late and inconsequential contribution, without air support, meant that the inevitable outcome of the campaign was evident within days of the Japanese landings. After 48 hours of battle, the RAF had only ten serviceable, obsolete, aircraft remaining in the area. They were compelled to withdraw from northern Malaya. By serious miscalculation the Royal Navy's only two capital ships in the Far East were sunk. While no historian has argued that with the conditions existing at the time of the invasion Singapore could have been saved, there is nevertheless a strong case to be made that a more aggressive and determined defence could perhaps have created time to enable reinforcements to arrive, which might have turned the tide of events.¹⁶ Further, a more proactive administration could have helped the military install better defences to delay the enemy for longer. Unquestionably, a country forewarned of the ordeals ahead and told how its citizens could help and how they could contribute to preparations would have been invaluable.

The many diagnoses of the campaign have thus far not considered explicitly the place of the civilian administration in Singapore's failed defence. It is self-evident the Governor and his team of civil servants had a crucial part to play in this momentous historical event, but their role has not, to my knowledge, been subjected to the same close analysis as have the military. In this thesis, I set out to explore in depth that role and the consequences of the part played by the administration leading up to and during the war.

Severe criticism has been levelled at the government of Shenton Thomas for the tardy and casual approach it took about alerting the peoples of Malaya to the danger ahead, and its failure to put in place a properly organised civil defence infrastructure. Probably more important, Thomas and his staff had not compiled emergency plans for the evacuation of civilians or designed a system for the continued administration of the Malayan states during hostilities. A prime example was the lack of civil management during the loss of the island of Penang, which revealed serious weaknesses in local civil administration and military control. After it was heavily bombed on December 11 and for three days afterwards, casualties were terrible, nearly all the essential services broke down and most of the local

¹⁵ Richards & St. G. Saunders. *Royal Air Force 1939-1945 Vol II. The Fight Avails* HMSO 1954. P. 7.

¹⁶ The view of Colonel (later General) Jacob, a member of the War Cabinet Secretariat, was that with conditions existing at the time of the invasion Singapore was "hopeless from the start" and that the fall of Singapore and Malaya was a foregone conclusion from the time of the first landings at Singora and Patani. Quoted in Kinvig, Clifford. *Scapegoat. General Percival of Singapore*. Brassey's, London, 1996. p 223.

population fled to Penang Hill. The town was in flames, hundreds of corpses lay unburied in the streets, the native police had deserted, looters were rampant and there was no labour, apart from a few volunteers, to cope with firefighting, sanitation and burial of the dead. However, it was the hasty evacuation of the European population, on the misguided orders of a confused civil-military command, which caused the greatest offence. This evacuation became a *cause célèbre* and a huge embarrassment to the Government in Singapore because of its effect on Asian opinion.¹⁷ Had a number of British civil servants remained in place they might have been able to arrange for an orderly evacuation of the Asian population who, aware of the gratuitous cruelty of the Japanese forces, stood in particular danger from the invaders.

Governor Thomas had a strong belief, not wholly shared by the military, that the Japanese would not invade Malaya or if they did, would be driven back into the sea. The Colonial authorities who were urging general caution in any estimation of Japanese intentions may have heavily influenced his conviction.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he was privy to all the immediate regional military and political intelligence information, which increasingly and accurately predicted Japanese activities. He maintained that his major concern was to meet the directive from the Colonial Office, to increase the production of the vital war commodities. Determined that nothing should interfere with the task he objected to the military preparing overt defensive sites and would not release labour to help the army with this work. Thomas passionately believed that the construction of trenches and the laying of minefields were bad for the morale of the population. They would convey a defeatist image, which in turn would infect the motivation to work.¹⁹ It should be noted, that the GOC, Percival, was of a similar opinion about the effect on morale, (though specifically soldiers' morale), of rearward defences. It seems that the Governor's mind-set of also pervaded his control of information given to the country before and during the war. He imposed such severe restrictions on the release of truthful details of the progress of the invasion that many of the population were quite unaware of the advancing Imperial Japanese Army until it was upon them. Even when the Japanese were in Johore Bahru looking across the 1 kilometre causeway at Singapore

¹⁷Callahan, Raymond. *The Worst Disaster: The Fall of Singapore*. Associated University Presses, London, 1977. p 242.

¹⁸ See ODC Paper No: 19. 20 Mar 1940. NA. When Thomas attended a Joint Planning Sub-Committee in London during his 1940 leave, a committee member (Air Cdr Slessor) also informed him 'that at the present it was not intended that we should go to war with Japan even if they advanced into Indo-China or Thailand.' CO967/75. Also in the opinion of Churchill, as late as 28 Apr 41, Japan was unlikely to enter the war if they feared the United States would join the allied cause. PREM 3/156/6; reprinted in Sir James Butler, *Grand Strategy*, London HMSO, 1957. Vol. 2, p 577-578.

¹⁹Thompson, Peter. *The Battle for Singapore*. Portrait Books, London, 2005. p 42.

Island and preparing to attack, the scale of the imminent catastrophe was barely raised. A chaotic evacuation arrangement, for women and children, was under way but so ambiguous was the war news that others were still partying and dining in the hotels and clubs of Singapore city. The press were not allowed to use the word siege.²⁰

By late 1940, the British Government was sufficiently concerned by evident aggressive Japanese behaviour and the less than satisfactory politico-military arrangements in Singapore to meet the worrying development, that it introduced command changes. A new Commander-in-Chief and later, in 1941, a senior Government Minister were sent to Singapore to co-ordinate the military strategy and improve the relations between the military and the Administration. Neither appointment was entirely successful. The new elderly C-in-C, a retired air force officer, recalled to service, but with restricted powers, only added another layer to an already cumbersome structure. The minister, a failed cabinet officer recommended swingeing changes, after too brief a review: these included the sacking of senior civil servants and even a proposal to replace the Governor. Instead of being helpful, the new incumbents were not only resentful of the others authority but also disagreed with each other.

The warning indicators of Japan's desire for the lands of South East Asia were, in the light of Britain's later pitiful response, distressingly obvious. By the middle of 1941, Japan had greatly expanded its territorial possessions: it aggressively occupied Hainan, Formosa and took possession of Indo-China (Vietnam) and openly declared her intention of forming a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, by force if necessary.²¹ All this took place while Japan was engaged in a charade of participation in talks in Washington aimed at having the economic embargo removed and of resuming normal relations with the western powers. At the same time allied intelligence sources were reporting an increase in Japanese agents in southern Thailand and a build-up of military forces, resources and aircraft in southern Indo-China. Moreover, the British Ambassador to Tokyo, Sir Robert Craigie, was cabling his strong belief that the behaviour of the Japanese authorities and other information he acquired, indicated a pre-emptive southern assault.

It would be unsafe to assume too confidently that Japan does not want a campaign in the south....Should Washington conversations break down,

²⁰ Barber, Noel. *Sinister Twilight*. Collins, London.1969. p. 133.

²¹ Intelligence information from many sources was compiled by JIC London and sent to Singapore keeping them informed of Japanese movement. In addition, the FECB had regional agents providing information. Acting Consuls General were also important informers.

immediate move southwards cannot be excluded, despite weather conditions.²²

By this time, the numbers of Japanese armed forces had increased significantly. The great majority of them were well equipped and battle hardened from war with China. By 1941, in addition to its army in China, and with bases in the southern reaches of East Asia, Japan was poised to fulfil its brazenly declared expansionist designs. Malaya and in particular Singapore was a crucial objective in the Japanese strategic plan for the conquest of South East Asia.²³

Structure of the study

This study may be summarised as follows. In Chapter 1, I explain the background to the events, which led Japan, without warning, to attack the major Western Powers then resident in the Pacific region. In Chapter 2, I examine the historical development of Britain's interest and responsibility in Singapore and the extent of its involvement in the states of the Malay Peninsula and the form of Colonial Government designed for the governance of the country. In the subsequent chapter, I look at the imprecise development of the plans to defend the Singapore naval base. How this limited objective grew to embrace the defence of the whole of Malaya. I also examine the crucial role the civil administration was called upon to play in the gathering crises. Chapter 4 investigates the civil defence arrangements put in place by the administration and the glaring failings to anticipate obvious problems and subsequent confused arrangements. Chapters 5 and 6 follow the Government's response to the invasion. How it managed the affairs of state in the midst of war, and how it faced the final assault on Singapore Island. Chapter 7, 'The Consequences' will give an account of the impact the Japanese conquest had on British prestige and on the prominent figures involved. It will also look at its effect on the population of the country as a whole and the bearing it had on its trade and industry. The 'Conclusion' will draw together the lessons and the lasting legacy of the failure of British Arms and governmental mismanagement.

Sources

I have had access to a considerable quantity of primary source material both in this country and in Singapore and Malaysia to assist my research. I have focused my dissertation on the role of the civilian administration and drawn upon a number of rarely opened government documents in the National Archives in London, Singapore and Malaysia. Particularly valuable were the Records of Proceedings of the Legislative and Executive

²²FO Cable No. 2079. Craigie to FO 22 Oct 1941. Repeated to Singapore as No.367 on 23 Oct 1941. NA.

²³ Masanobu Tsuji. *Singapore the Japanese Version*. Ure Smith, Sydney, 1960. p 216.

Councils both of the Straits Settlements and the Federal Council. I also found the original correspondence in the colonial office files between London and Singapore invaluable. The CO 273, 825, 850 and CO 967 series were especially useful. Robert Heussler's seminal books and his papers in Rhodes House Library provided a mine of information on the development of the administration of Malaya and the leading personalities responsible for its governance.

Conversely, the military campaign has been exhaustively examined and my bibliography reflects the valuable information I found among the books of eminent authors, historians and scholars. The official history of the campaign, under the authorship of Maj. Gen. S. Woodburn Kirby and published over 55 years ago, has stood the test of time.²⁴ It is acknowledged by emeritus Professor Robin Higham, among others, as an accurate account of events leading up to the conflict and of the campaign itself.²⁵ I have not come across any other works of this period where the author has challenged Kirby's version, which is dry and factual. During its preparation, the only, and passionate critic, was Shenton Thomas. He felt that the disparagement of his government in the draft was unjust and that the account failed to mention the many civil defence measures he brought about. His *cri de coeur*, against the perceived injustice of the official record, labouredly expressed in his written appeal, was rejected.²⁶ The authorities considered Kirby's account balanced and a fair record of the situation and of the inter-service relations, both military and civil, existing at the time. In 1971, Kirby wrote a more judgemental account, free of official restraints, which was brutal in its condemnation of all the senior echelon and their petty squabbling, weak leadership and lack of tactical initiative.²⁷

The only attempt at an examination focusing solely on the performance of the administration was a private initiative by 'The Association of British Malaya' under the chairmanship of Sir George Maxwell. It is a narrative compiled in 1943 describing the 'Civil Defence of Malaya'²⁸ and the role and contribution of the civilians in this task. Maxwell who was then retired, was previously an eminent senior colonial administrator in Malaya, as was his father before him. The account relied on information received from persons in Malaya at the time who escaped the invasion. It is a dispassionate and factual description of conditions facing the civilian community and the civil defence preparations put in hand. However, the

²⁴ Kirby, Woodburn Stanley, Maj. Gen. et al. *The War Against Japan. Vol.1. The Loss of Singapore*. London, HMSO, 1957.

²⁵ Higham, Robin. *A Guide to the Sources of British Military History*. Routledge & Kegan. London, 1972. p 502.

²⁶ Thomas Papers Mss.Ind. Ocn.S 341. RHL

²⁷ Kirby, W S. *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*. Cassell, London, 1971

²⁸ Maxwell, George. *The Civil Defence of Malaya*. Hutchinson & Co. London, 1944.

study appears to have been written hurriedly to ensure no blame or scorn was directed at innocent civilians who only did what was asked of them. The book is frank about government failures in not warning the population of the danger, not making use of the many useful skills among the expatriate community and not keeping the people informed of the truthful progress of the war.

Recently available and of particular value, is a small number of books translated from Japanese, written by members of the Imperial Forces and Japanese civilian administrators about their experiences during the war. Also important are the records of lectures given by eminent Japanese academics at symposiums held in Singapore during the last few years. Their scholarly dissertations are compiled and published by the National University of Singapore. They have thrown fresh light on some controversial and contentious events and explained others from a new perspective. I also found Eric Robertson's book 'The Japanese File: Pre-War penetration in S E Asia' a valuable addition to the historiography of Malaysia.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

The Japanese attack on Malaya was only one phase of massive and co-ordinated surprise attacks around the Pacific Rim and the distant Hawaiian islands. Simultaneously Japanese Forces attacked the Philippines, Guam, Hong Kong, Wake Island and infamously Pearl Harbour. The date was 8th December 1941. Pearl Harbour however lies east of the International Date Line thus in Hawaii it was still the 7th December. It was a day that President Roosevelt of the United States said 'would live in infamy'. Seventy days after the first Japanese landings in north Malaya on February 15th 1942, Singapore surrendered. The Fall of Singapore compelled Churchill to declare 'it is the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history'.²⁹ The impact of this disaster was to have a profound and permanent effect on British prestige and authority not only in the Far East but also throughout the world. Never again could Britain command the respect and display the confidence of a benevolent power. But apart from the injurious effect on image there was at this critical time the tangible and hugely more important loss of valuable territory rich in minerals and natural resources that was essential for the economy and the conduct of war.

Despite much written evidence to the contrary, it is still commonly assumed that the Fall of Singapore came about because the Japanese invasion and assault on the island occurred unexpectedly and from an unforeseen direction. And because the invaders came not by sea as expected, the fortifications of the 'Impregnable Fortress', as Singapore was described, were so constructed that they faced the wrong way. However, the bald facts, are that not only was the direction of the Japanese attack correctly anticipated but also the beaches on the north east coast of the Malay Peninsula on which they landed were exactly predicted, and crucially even the date when they would invade. The failure of the defence of Singapore is not one of surprise and unpreparedness but instead a catalogue of civil and military mismanagement, procrastination, sinful lack of critical military equipment for all three services; untrained raw recruits euphemistically described and deployed as Infantry

²⁹ Churchill, W "The Hinge of Fate" pp 81.

Divisions; low grade military and civil leaders in the top echelons of command and defensive tactics bereft of determination and imagination.

Before the Japanese invaded and when menacing signs clearly indicated warlike intent there was not then, or indeed any time thereafter, an agreed common objective. The civil government had unambiguous instructions from the colonial authorities in London that the continued production of tin and rubber was paramount, while the military equally unequivocally, had instructions to defend 'Fortress Singapore'. The divergent and often conflicting priorities between the Armed Forces and the Colonial Government in Malaya unquestionably led to a serious breakdown of resolute and co-ordinated effort.

The Colonial Administration, with the Governor at its head, had an area of responsibility that also included the territories of Christmas Island and the Cocos and Keeling Islands in the Indian Ocean, and Labuan Island off the coast of North West Borneo. However, the activities in these places had no direct bearing on the planning and direction of the Malayan campaign. Hence I focus on the main areas of administration. My research is confined to the events, which occurred on the Malay Peninsula and the island of Singapore. First, it is necessary to examine how it came about that Japan undertook the suicidal step of a pre-emptive attack against the western powers.

Japan's Road to War

It was Japan's grand strategy for territorial expansion in East Asia, particularly after the First World War that forced Britain to re-examine its capability to defend its Eastern Dominions and colonial responsibilities. Japan had already won two important wars; against China in 1894 and Russia in 1905, when she had established rights in the Chinese Province of South Manchuria and claimed a right to Korea. She also fought on the side of the Western Allies against Germany in 1914-1918 and at the end of the war in return for this support, sought an extension of her rights on the Chinese mainland in what was the former German sphere of the Shantung peninsula, as well as in Manchuria and Fukien. The Versailles Conference in 1919 confirmed these gains and she emerged from this conference with an enhanced status and a place among the major world powers. Her success and authority in these adventures increased her desire for territorial supremacy,³⁰ added to which the Japanese people had for some time believed it was their natural destiny to control and lead the nations

³⁰ Keegan, John. *The Second World War*. Penguin Books, London, 1989. P. 240-245.

of East Asia. ‘The Japanese people came to believe that the extension of their control over this vast region was both natural and destined’³¹ Further, by 1936, there was the pragmatic and serious economic consideration of need for an accessible empire rich in natural wealth. At this point the Japanese nation was suffering a severe financial crises compounded by not having fully recovered from the world depression of 1929, and more than most she was heavily affected by the disintegration of the world trading markets. Japan was no longer self-sufficient in food. She relied heavily on imported raw material such as non-ferrous metals, rubber and above all oil to sustain her industry and manufacture armaments for her armed forces. The solution to the economic crises lay in the mineral and agriculturally rich lands of her East Asian neighbours.

There in the crumbling British, Dutch and French Empires lay the oil, rubber, bauxite and other vital resources Japan needed so badly.³²

A further significant and pressing problem was population growth and the demand for more food and basic commodities. In 1868, the population of Japan stood at 32 million, and the area under rice cultivation was 6 million acres with a total yield of 125 million bushels. The average consumption per head of population, per annum, was about 4 bushels, so at this time there was enough rice to feed the country. By 1940, however, the population was 73 million, while the cultivated area had risen only marginally to 8 million acres, yielding 325 million bushels. Consumption had risen to over 5 bushels per head, so there was a rice shortage of approximately 65 million bushels.³³ Anticipating the mounting problem an eminent Japanese banker, Hirozo Mori, stated in October 1937.

Our population is increasing, and this increase can be supported only by expansion of trade and industry, for which the nearest market is China and the Asiatic mainland. Herein lies our economic future. There is no gainsaying the fact. We want the world and the Chinese people to understand and recognise it.³⁴

During this time the Japanese military increasingly determined government policies. Since 1900, the government appointments of Minister of War and Navy Minister were by Imperial Ordinance, held only by serving Army and Navy officers. By 1918, the army was already showing a willingness to act independently of civil control, noticeably in operations against Soviet Russia in Siberia. By the mid 1930’s Japan’s political development and

³¹ Feis, Herbert. *The Road to Pearl Harbor*. Princeton University Press. 1971. p. 3.

³² Morton, Louis. Essay, “*Japan’s Decision for War*” US Naval Institute Proceedings, LXXX. Dec 1954.

³³ James, David. *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire*. Allen & Unwin, Ltd. London. 1951, p.16. See also Feis, Herbert. *The Road to Pearl Harbor*. Princeton University Press, 1971. p. 234, footnote.

³⁴ Morton, *Japan’s Decision for War*. loc.cit. p. 23.

strategy was dominated by senior officers of the armed forces. Its national policy shifted inexorably towards military power and imperial expansion.³⁵

By 1936, the Imperial Japanese Army in particular, had gained a predominant influence in the political life of the nation and openly proclaimed the need to establish a firm position on the Asian mainland, which was their way of saying that China must be conquered. The overture to establishing authority in the region was the promotion of a proposal that the nations on the Pacific Rim should form a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” under the direction and authority of Japan. The intention was that such a cooperative should first be attempted by peaceful and persuasive means. If that failed then military action in both China and Southeast Asia must follow. To prepare for that contingency the Japanese Government now turned its efforts to war production.

Japan approached first China with the Co-Prosperity Sphere proposal because she coveted China’s agricultural regions. However, with little regard for diplomatic refinement and displaying the disdain in which they held China the talks were unsuccessful. Under the leadership of Chiang Kai Shek, and actively supported by the United States, and other Powers with special interests in the region, such as Britain and France, China refused to acquiesce to Japan’s advances. The political atmosphere between the two countries became precarious and with Japan’s foreign policy blatantly and aggressively militaristic, even minor incidents between Chinese and Japanese troops became potentially explosive. In July 1937, skirmishes began near Peking and quickly erupted into full-scale war. The Chinese Army performed poorly and in December China’s capital, Nanking, was ravaged by the Japanese Army, Chiang’s government fled to the interior. Within the next year, Japan completed its conquest of eastern and central China and proclaimed a New Order in which the Western Powers were to be driven from eastern Asia.

The United States and the United Kingdom were affronted, particularly by Japan’s occupation of the southern Chinese seaboard, which prevented them from sending supplies direct to China by sea. In response, both countries resorted to sending aid overland through Burma on a highway, known as the ‘Burma Road’. It ran from Rangoon to Lashio, northeast Burma, and onto Chungking, the new centre of Chiang Kai Shek’s government. This vital support stiffened Chiang’s resolve not to capitulate. In reply, in February 1939, Japan occupied Hainan Island and five months later, blockaded British and French concessions in Tientsin. In a confrontational retaliation, the United States renounced its treaty of commerce

³⁵ Keegan, *The Second World War*. Penguin Books. 1989. p.242-243, and passim.

with Japan. This was a most serious commercial and economic setback. The Japanese government concluded that its destiny now depended on the acquisition of the natural resources (petroleum, bauxite and rubber) which were abundant in the Philippines, Burma, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. There was another motive behind this reasoning. At this time, 1939, a major war had erupted in the west between Nazi Germany and the nations of Western Europe and the allies urgently needed these very resources that Japan sought to control. Furthermore, Japan looked upon the outbreak of war in the west, and the overwhelming success of the German Blitzkrieg in Europe, as an opportunity to identify with the Axis Powers and persuade them to endorse its own expansionist plans in the East. Most importantly, Japan noted that Germany's defeat of France left the way open for the acquisition of the French possession of Indo-China. An important foothold from which to launch imperialist expansion and, as Japan claimed, a bulwark to protect its own national security.³⁶ In addition, it gave her the opportunity to consolidate her position in Peking and the treaty ports of Shanghai and Tientsin.

Japan demanded that the British withdraw their token forces from China's northern cities. Reflecting on the vulnerability of these small isolated garrisons, and the glaring fact they were of little military significance, Britain conceded and its troops were eventually withdrawn to bolster the forces in Singapore and Malaya. In September 1940, Japan also decided that the moment was right to join Germany and Italy to form a 'Western Tripartite Alliance'. Crucially, she secured the other's endorsement for its New Order in East Asia.

In 1940, with a population over 73 million, Japan's experienced Army consisted of 3 million men and a modern equipped Air force. By early 1941, adding the trained reserves under the age of 40, the total grew to reach 6 million under arms. The number of army Divisions rose from 20 to 50; air squadrons from 50 to 150 (5,300 aircraft). And significantly, the naval combat tonnage shot up to over 1 million tons which then gave Japan a navy more powerful than the combined fleets of America and Britain.³⁷

Early in 1941, Japan, on the pretext of intervening in a conflict, which arose between French Vichy forces and Thailand over a long running border dispute, established a military garrison in Indochina bringing the Japanese military into Southeast Asia for the first time.³⁸ The garrison later that year increased in number to 40,000 troops and the occupation extended to cover the whole of Indo-China. Vichy France, as Japan had anticipated, was in no

³⁶ Feis. *The Road*. P.104. Footnote 8.

³⁷ Morton. *Loc cit*, p.101

³⁸ Feis. *The Road*. *Passim*.

position to resist. Thus, by the middle of 1941, Japan had greatly expanded its territorial possessions: its armed forces had significantly increased and of these, the great majority were well equipped and battle experienced. In addition to its army in China, it had strategically located air and naval bases in the southern reaches of East Asia - Formosa, Hainan and now Indo-china - and was poised to fulfil its declared imperial expansionist designs in the region.

Even though Singapore was only one aspect in Japan's grand strategic design for the region, its location and thus its possession was a critical factor for the overall success of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Singapore lay at the junction of the Pacific and Indian oceans; from here, Japan could control the East-West Sea routes and dominate the movement of shipping. Possessing it would give added security to her line of communication to the south and deprive the allies of a base from which to launch counter-attacks. Moreover, Singapore had recently completed the construction of a modern naval base capable of harbouring and servicing most of the Japanese fleet, and additionally, the Malayan hinterland was rich in important minerals and rubber.

The Singapore Naval Base

The change in the balance of power after the end of the First World War and Japan's expansionist aspirations persuaded Britain to acknowledge the need to maintain a naval force in the Far East. In the light of these strategic changes, it became obvious that the British government had to look at ways to guard the nations trading sea routes to China and India. Furthermore, Britain had a responsibility for the maritime protection of Australia and New Zealand, both of whom were particularly alarmed about the growing Japanese naval strength and belligerent posturing.³⁹ The United States in particular was concerned at Japan's naval growth, and in an attempt to curtail an arms race in the Pacific region and at the same time contain Japanese expansionist designs, the United States convened an International Conference at Washington in 1921.

After much argument, the conference managed to impose universal limits and control on naval strength and naval bases relating to the maritime powers around the Pacific Rim. Following the 'Washington Naval Treaty Agreements' the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) London in 1922 sat to both reassess the effect of these changing political circumstances in the Far East and the proposed naval strengths in the region. The deliberations confirmed that a major naval base capable of accommodating and supporting a substantial part of the British Fleet was needed. 'This was particularly important because of

³⁹ Haggie, P. *Britannia at Bay: The Defence of the British Empire against Japan 1931-1941*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981. p.1.

the change-over of the Fleet from coal to oil-firing; for there were not enough oil tankers in the world to fuel the Fleet on a voyage to the East and maintain it there at sea⁴⁰. After an exhaustive study about possible locations, the Admiralty decided that Singapore was best suited both geographically and strategically as the location for the base. Until this point, Hong Kong was where Britain's China Fleet harboured, but it was both too small for the anticipated deployment and too close to the Japanese presence on mainland China.

In 1824 when the Sultan of Johore ceded Singapore to Sir Stamford Raffles, acting on behalf of the East India Company, it was almost uninhabited, now it was a prosperous city port but its only defences were a few guns protecting Keppel Harbour.⁴¹ The selection of Singapore was not universally popular, and before work could begin, lengthy and fiery government financial debates took place about whether the whole project was necessary.⁴² The uncertainty further exacerbated by a change of government, which imposed new parameters on the plan and indeed at one point considered abandoning it. In an effort to reduce the proposed budget a thorough examination of the intended facilities, its size, dockyard capacity, fuelling services, arsenal and the defensive arrangements were all subject to intense scrutiny. After a number of false starts and compromises, the project finally got under way in 1926.⁴³

There was nevertheless, still disagreement about the important matter of how to defend this expensive new base. The Admiralty and the Air Ministry had strongly divergent opinions about its protection. In the mid-1920s, the perceived threat was likely to be an approach from the sea; the Admiralty favoured 15-inch guns and the Air Force torpedo-bombers. At that time, there simply were not enough funds to have both. The dispute over which service, Air or Navy, should have predominance of responsibility for the defence of the base continued until 1931. A less than convincing case was that the Air Force should prevail, but with the qualification, that the aircraft and the entire infrastructure needed to support them should be permanent fixtures and not a transient group rushed there in time of tension.

The RAF maintained that in the prevailing conditions they needed to extend the radius of both their reconnaissance and offensive capability against seaborne enemy forces approaching from the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea. But the only airfields in

⁴⁰ Feis. *The Road*. p 278.

⁴¹ Allen, Louis. *Singapore 1941-1942*. Associated University Press. New Jersey. 1977. p 38.

⁴² The CID declared "in existing circumstances aggressive action against the British Empire on the part of Japan within the next ten years is not a contingency seriously to be apprehended". Butler *Grand Strategy* Quoted in Gibbs.N. Vol I *Rearmament Policy*. HMSO, London, 1976. p 51.

⁴³ Haggie. *Britannia at Bay*. p.3.

Malaya in early 1930 were commercial and on the west coast. The conclusion was that three new airfields were required on the east coast of Malaya. A government report (The Baldwin Committee),⁴⁴ however, recommended that the first stage of gun emplacements should go ahead, and take precedence. Moreover, before the second stage began the relative merits of both, naval guns or aircraft, must again be explored. In July 1935, the Government relented, having secured funding contributions from Malaya, Hong Kong and New Zealand, and authorised work to begin on additional heavy gun emplacements and two airfields, as part of the second stage.⁴⁵ Thus from the very outset there was no outright agreement on the necessity for a large naval base and there was certainly no consensus about how best to defend it.

The Defence Criterion.

The Naval Base was eventually completed and formally opened by the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, in February 1938 at a cost of £63 million. It was in the end endowed with five 15-inch naval guns, six 9.2-inch and eighteen 6-inch as well as secondary armament. In addition, work had begun on a group of three airfields on the east coast of Peninsular Malaya one near Kota Bharu in the State of Kelantan, one at Kuantan and a landing ground at Kahang in eastern Johore. The army were barely consulted during the defence discussions; not even about the site selection for the East coast airfields, and as later transpired, defending them would be their responsibility.

By the mid-1930s, it became apparent that the defensive measures needed for the protection of the Base called for a radical review. The scale of the likely threat had changed dramatically, not only had the terrain of mainland Malaya opened up and the transport network improved, but also the major advances in the weapons of war had given the attackers a greater range of options and locations for invasion. The capacity, range and power of evolving weaponry of the three armed services had changed the circumstances of defence and called for a fundamental and fresh assessment of the perceived threat. It was becoming apparent to both the Army and Air commanders that the defence of the naval base also meant preventing an assault from Peninsular Malaya. A year before the Base was completed in 1937, the then General Officer Commanding (GOC) Malaya, Major General W.G.S. Dobbie, instigated a fresh study of the likely changing dangers facing the Naval Base and the forces and deployment needed to defend it.

⁴⁴ CAB 27/407, CP173 (30), Enclosure No 2. NA.

⁴⁵ Haggie. *Britannia at Bay*. p 34.

His chief staff officer Colonel Percival, later ominously, promoted and appointed GOC at the time of the invasion, conducted the 'Appreciation'. The conclusions of the research were radical in that for the first time they unequivocally determined that the defence of the Naval Base involved the defence of the whole of the Malay Peninsula, enemy landings were quite feasible on the east coast of Malaya and indeed an enemy force could approach Singapore from the mainland. To reinforce his supposition the GOC tested the practicability of landings from the sea on the east coast during the monsoon period and not only were they perfectly possible but he also found that, conversely, poor visibility could seriously restrict allied air reconnaissance. He also prophetically identified Singora and Patani in Thailand and Kota Bharu in Malaya as highly suitable landing beaches.⁴⁶ The narrow Kra Isthmus joining Thailand to Malaya, like an 'umbilical cord' no more than 35 miles wide suddenly assumed significant importance because they were so close to these sites. In 1939, the British Ambassador to Thailand, Sir Josiah Crosby, was also reporting that the Thai government officers were asserting that if the Japanese decided to strike at Singapore they would first land their forces at Singora.⁴⁷

The Administration.

Until this point, the Government of Malaya was not directly involved in the defensive discussions, because talks were inconclusive and based on hypothetical conditions. However, the Governor was aware of these new developments and his administration negotiated the securing of land for the proposed east coast airfields. The governance of Singapore and Malaya before the Second World War, as mentioned, was complex and diverse. The Governor's authority and administration across the Malay states was variable, each state having its own distinctive arrangements. In turn, these arrangements differed from the authority he exercised in the Straits Settlements. His relationship with the Malay rulers was a subtle arrangement of guidance through his representative, the British Adviser. The sultans, while safeguarding their sovereignty accepted advice on how to improve and manage their parochial affairs. They did not however welcome interference in their direct authority or in religious matters. The inevitable outcome was that administrative proposals from central government followed a recognised oriental process of lengthy discussions and subtle persuasion. The part played by the Adviser was therefore critical. He had to be fluent in the

⁴⁶ Maj. Gen. Kirby, Stanley Woodburn. *History of the Second World War. Vol.I. The War Against Japan.* HMSO 1957. p.15.

⁴⁷ Crosby, Bangkok to FO, No. 28, 9 Apr 1939.

* Collectively known after 1867 as the Crown Colony of Straits Settlements when jurisdiction for them transferred from the government of India to the Colonial Office in London.

Malay language, and it was helpful if he had more than a passing understanding of Chinese and Tamil, but crucially he had to have the patience of Job. It is important to note, therefore, that with this labyrinth arrangement all countrywide government schemes had to be processed by way of this ponderous arrangement, even matters of national emergency.

Singapore on the other hand was, and had been since 1826, a British Colony and part of a union called the Straits Settlements. The union consisted of Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley and the town and territory of Malacca* There are nine Malaya States and in 1896, four of them combined and became a Federation, Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Pahang (The Federated Malay States (FMS)). The remaining five were The Unfederated Malay States (UMS), Johore, Trengganu, Kedah, Kelantan and Perlis. The Colonial Administration in Singapore therefore was responsible to the British government, through the Colonial Office, for the administration, foreign affairs and protection of the Straits Settlements and the FMS and the UMS. Shenton Thomas thus inherited a clutch of titles, Governor of the Straits Settlements, High Commissioner to the Federated and Unfederated States and Commander-in-Chief.

The Capital of the Federated States was Kuala Lumpur (KL) and the head civil servant the 'Federal Secretary', domiciled in KL, represented the High Commissioner in everyday affairs. The FMS had its own assembly (Federal Council), made up of a Legislative and Executive council and Finance Committee. The remaining states, the UMS, had less formal assemblies with the 'British Advisor' accountable to the Federal Secretary in Kuala Lumpur. In effect, there were eleven different authorities running the affairs of Malaya and Singapore, all of whom had to be consulted before the enactment of any major legislative edict. The High Commissioner could not give orders to any of the sultans. The "Protected" states were not possessions of the British Crown. The inhabitants were "protected" but were not British Subjects. Sovereign power rested with the Malay Rulers.⁴⁸

The British personnel running all these administrative affairs came from the Malayan Civil Service (MCS). The MCS, although not as well known as the Indian Civil Service, nevertheless regarded itself as an elite service, administering a very rich country with a complex multi-racial social structure.⁴⁹ In 1940, the population of Malaya was about 5 million, of which 2 million were Malays, 2 million Chinese and 1 million Indians (mostly

⁴⁸ Winstedt, Sir Richard. *Malaya and its History*. Hutchinson, London 1948. p.89. Also Montgomery, *Shenton* op. cit. p. 42.

⁴⁹ Callahan, Raymond. *The Worst Disaster*. Associated University Presses, 1977. p 63.

Tamils) and other races. At the southern tip of the Malay peninsula lies Singapore Island with the Naval Base and its city of half a million inhabitants.

Governor Thomas, was a long serving civil servant, a colonial governor of the 'old school' very much a man conscious of the dignity and the authority of his appointment. In 1941, he was 62 years of age and had by then held office for seven years. He had joined the colonial service in 1909 and after a quarter of a century in Africa, rose to the Governorship of Nyasaland and then of the Gold Coast (Ghana). He was surprised, in 1934, to be appointed to Singapore. He was regarded a competent peacetime administrator. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, he was close to retirement as he had reached the official retirement age of 60, in October of that year. However, the Colonial Office considered that a change was undesirable and asked Thomas to remain in post,⁵⁰ even though he had no military experience nor had ever served in the Armed Forces. It is worth noting that the staff of the Colonial Office London, were all Home Civil Servants, who themselves did not serve overseas. They had no experience of life in the colonies though they were solely responsible for the selection of officers for appointments throughout the British Empire.

During the First World War, Thomas was serving in Kenya. He asked to be released from his appointment to enlist in the Services but his request was refused on the grounds his government work was vital. Nonetheless, as Governor of Singapore, he held the honorific title of Commander-in-Chief, but until this point in his career, he had never been involved with or exposed to military affairs. To further compound his inexperience there was a scarcity of military understanding among his civil staff, very few of them had any experience of military service. Consequently, when danger threatened, none among them had any comprehension of the enormity of the menace, nor did they grasp the extent of planning and preparation needed to protect a country from the inevitable destruction and death that accompanied an armed invasion.

This lack of imagination and myopic view was later reflected in the administration's casual approach to civil defence measures. Their world, in what they regarded as a remote corner of South East Asia, seemed isolated and safe. In mitigation of this outlook, it should be remembered that unlike Western Europe there was no war on their doorstep. The nearest conflict was the Japanese war in China, nearly 3000 miles distant. The annual cycle of living in the comfort and well-ordered routine of a prosperous country, focused on expansion of trade and optimising the country's natural resources, was the epitome of their concern. Even

⁵⁰ Montgomery. *Shenton*. loc.cit. p 65.

so, it has been argued, that in matters of civil defence where the civil authorities lacked knowledge and energy, the military authorities had a responsibility to insist and galvanise the civil government, in a vigorous manner, both to educate the people in civil defence matters and to supervise the necessary preparations.⁵¹ This however, would have needed dedicated military personnel and they were simply not available. Besides, the Governor was against any overt measures, which he believed, would upset the population and importantly, hinder the incentive to increase the production of rubber and tin.

In early 1940, the Governor left Singapore for his due entitlement of home leave: indeed, when asked to extend his tour beyond retirement age he had secured an agreement with the Colonial Secretary to do so. In the meantime, the international situation had deteriorated dramatically with Western Europe under attack by a rampant Nazi Germany, and Japan's volatile behaviour in the East displaying all the symptoms of a nation set upon war. Thomas's departure at this moment has been harshly criticised as irresponsible.⁵² He left his post from April to December, and with all the uncertainty and danger attached to international travel, there was not, even then, any guarantee he would either arrive home, or indeed get back. In the event, 1940 proved to be a year when many major decisions about Malaya's defensive posture, and the inevitable implications these posed for her trade, industry and economy, had to be taken. Thomas's deputy, Stanley Jones, the Officer Administering the Government (OAG) in his absence, was not a man of strong character, and whenever possible avoided taking any controversial decisions, and was quite out of his depth in discussions of military strategy. To add uncertainty, it was a time of significant change among senior appointments, both civil and military. There was growing and anxious concern in London that the management of military and civil affairs in Singapore was dangerously astray. The War Office appointed a Commander-in-Chief, Brooke-Popham, while the Governor was on leave, and later the Home government appointed a Minister Resident, Duff Cooper.

The War Forum.

Shortly after the outbreak of war in the West, and before he went on leave, the Governor decided to form a Defence Committee, later called the War Committee of which Thomas was Chairman. Its every day affairs were handled by a Secretariat, created for the purpose, under a Defence Secretary, C. A. Vlieland, a Malayan Civil Servant, appointed by

⁵¹ Letter F M Archibald Wavell to Sir Shenton Thomas, 1 Jan 1948. Thomas private papers. Mss.Ind.Ocn. S341. RHL. Hereafter referred to as Thomas Papers.

⁵² BAM Collection. Correspondence Dickenson/Bryson. Jan 1969. CU. See also Montgomery, *Shenton of Singapore*, p.71.

Thomas himself. Vlieland had twenty-six years' service in Malaya, and like the Governor had no military experience at all. His task was primarily to co-ordinate the defence activities of all government departments. There was no written directive for the Committee, nor was there any precise agenda during its formative meetings. It would seem that Thomas thought it no more than a good idea to have some type of forum in which to air views about general war precautions, but without a clear idea of its purpose. It was, in other words, an amateur affair.

The Armed Forces were represented on this committee by their respective Service heads. The War Committee was empowered to discuss questions affecting the Services and the civil defence departments, but had no executive functions.⁵³ In matters relating to defence in the Malay states, Vlieland was authorised to deal directly with the British Resident or Advisor in each of the States who in turn, and taking account of Vlieland's guidance, had authority to make decisions on behalf of the State. But, as noted, the committee had no agenda and kept no minutes. When the new Commander-in-Chief, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, arrived in Singapore in October 1940, one of his first steps was to attend a meeting of the War Committee. Afterwards he wrote a letter to General Ismay then Chief of the General Staff (CIGS):

...as you may know there is a War committee in Singapore....I attended the only meeting that there has been since I arrived. I was surprised to find that not only do they not have an agenda but that no minutes are kept; individuals make notes on scraps of paper on any point in which they are particularly interested. On expressing my views I found to my surprise a certain amount of opposition on the part of the govt officials to keeping any record.⁵⁴

The date of this meeting was 4 December 1940, almost exactly a year later the country was invaded. While of course the officials assembled at that time had no way of knowing what the future held, there was, nevertheless, a growing concern at Japan's irrational behaviour. Certainly, there were enough sinister indications to have encouraged them to engage in serious and recorded discussion. In the absence of any such documentation there is scant evidence of the early functions of this committee, but passing reference to its deliberations conveys a gathering that seemed to feed mainly on personality clashes, and that hampered rather than improved Malaya's preparedness for war. Brooke-Popham had this to say in a letter to the CIGS:

....you have doubtless heard of Vlieland, the Secretary for Defence. I have seldom met anyone who is, so universally distrusted by government officials, by the Services and as far as I can judge by the civilian

⁵³ Kirby *The War Against Japan*, p.157. See also Montgomery *Shenton*, p. 64. .

⁵⁴ Sir Robert Brooke-Popham Papers, 6/2/3 of 5 Dec 40. IWM

community. He also seems to have established procrastination as a fine art... he is however trusted by the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas.⁵⁵

In spite of these disparaging remarks and there were similar from others Vlieland drew up, in July 1940, a most accurate and prescient 'Appreciation' for the defence of Malaya. He uncannily predicted almost exactly the Japanese strategic plan for their assault on the Peninsula. The Appreciation was his own unprompted initiative and the military hierarchy were grossly affronted that a civil servant, without military experience, should enter the realm of military strategy without even consulting them.

The three Armed Services had their own separate command arrangements and had three separate headquarters locations on the island of Singapore. The overall Naval Commander of the Far East, Admiral Layton, C-in-C China Station, had recently transferred his Flag from Hong Kong to the Naval Base in the northeast corner of the island, he had under his command a Rear Admiral Spooner directly responsible for the seas around Malaya. The Army was under the command of a Lieutenant General, General Officer Commanding (GOC) Malaya, whose headquarters was located at Fort Canning in south west of Singapore. The Air Officer Commanding (AOC), an Air Vice Marshal, was based at the RAF Airfield, Seletar, in the north of the island. The Governor and his staff conducted its business from Government House, on the outskirts of the city; the other civil authorities and government departments were in various locations dispersed around Singapore. It is self-evident that when the three services established their command arrangements on the island there was no reason or compulsion, in early 20th century, to co-locate. Nor indeed would the civil authorities have considered it necessary to be near the heads of services. It is interesting to note though, that even when the military outlook was worsening, the idea of a joint headquarters did not arise. Throughout the campaign, there was no combined headquarters. Commanders got together periodically in the War Committee but their staffs worked from separate locations across the island.

In October 1940, the new appointment of Commander-in-Chief for the Far East region took effect. Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was given the directive of co-ordinating the activities of the air and land forces, and his area of responsibility stretched from Hong Kong to Singapore including Borneo, Burma, the Bay of Bengal and the operations of the British air forces in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). This was an absurdly large remit and area to cover, especially as tele-communications in this region were notoriously poor and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

travel was fraught with danger. Moreover, a commander to have any impact on strategic planning would need an intimate knowledge of the countries in his domain. Brooke-Popham had no practical knowledge of this region.

Before his arrival, there had been no overall commander of the three Services. The Directive instructed Brooke-Popham that the GOC's, Land and Air Forces, would be subordinate to him, but control of naval operations was to remain directly under Commander-in-Chief, China. In practice, his task was to deal primarily with matters of major military policy and strategy. He was enjoined not to relieve his subordinate commanders of any of their administrative, financial or other normal command functions. By this untidy arrangement the Army and Air Commanders' continued to correspond and be instructed by their respective Branches in the War Office London, and the Navy remained quite independent of the other two.⁵⁶ It was obviously a command arrangement intended to mollify the vanity of commanders than improve inter service collaboration. Thus a confusing and disjointed chain of command was set up that would prove incapable of meeting the challenges ahead.

The character of Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was nevertheless to have considerable influence on affairs from this point. He had retired from active service in 1937, after a distinguished career. He then accepted the appointment of Governor of Kenya from 1937 to 1939. Incidentally, a country and appointment well known to Thomas who served the then Governor for nearly 10 years. When war broke out in Europe, he was recalled to active service. Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister, who met Brooke Popham, wrote that he had borne the "white man's burden in many places and this had left his shoulders a little stooped."⁵⁷ Raymond Callahan also described him, in his highly critical account of these events, as being 'like his aircraft, Sir Robert was something less than modern'.⁵⁸ Brooke-Popham established his General Headquarters (GHQ) after a period of uncertainty, in the Naval Base close to the Naval C-in-C. As Stanley Woodburn Kirby, in his official history, commented 'The appointment of a Commander-in-Chief Far East, although it was designed to solve the problem of co-ordinating the defence of that area, did little more than add another cog to an already somewhat complex machine.'⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Kirby, *War Against Japan*. loc cit, p 50

⁵⁷ Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador*, Times Academic Press, 1997. Quoted p 128.

⁵⁸ Callahan, *Worst Disaster* loc cit, p 134

⁵⁹ Kirby, *War Against Japan*. loc cit, p 51

In consequence, the military structure in place by the end of 1940 meant there were two Commanders-in-Chief, answering to two different authorities in London. This was patently an illogical arrangement. To add further complications, the important intelligence analysis division called the Far East Combined Bureau (FECB), reported directly to the Naval C-in-C, was under the charge of a naval captain, and located in the Naval Base. The FECB was responsible for the compilation and dissemination of significant intelligence information, not only for the military but also for the clandestine civilian world. Recruited local agents, political staff in embassies and Consuls General and many others contributed invaluable information to the FECB. Located in the naval base, however, it was remote from the other services and the naval C-in-C was seen as regarding it almost as his personal preserve.

A Minister Resident.

In September 1941, Alfred Duff Cooper, a Minister of Cabinet rank, took up his appointment as Minister Resident Singapore. The British Government, as noted, was increasingly concerned about the management and co-ordination of government and military relations in Singapore. Duff Cooper was commissioned with appraising and advising on this state of affairs. At that time, he held the appointment of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a sinecure, and was seen as a suitable and available candidate. A month after his arrival, he filed his first report. Among a number of recommendations, he highlighted the anomalous situation: -

... two Commanders-in-Chief, one for the Far East and one for China, live side by side at the Naval Base at Singapore, [this] does not appear to be a sound one in theory and in practice led to considerable inconvenience. There are also a General Officer Commanding, Malaya, and an Air Officer Commanding, Far East, at the other end of the island.
60

His most disapproving comments, however, were reserved for the colonial administration. He was taken aback by the pedestrian and lengthy processes of consultation among the various colonial government departments in Singapore and between these departments and their ministries in London over the most urgent affairs of state. The laborious peacetime procedure of seeking departmental agreement on all affairs was distressing, he maintained, but on matters of grave importance, the process was bordering on a dereliction of duty.⁶¹

What becomes clear from this brief description of the higher direction of government affairs, is that a country which had never faced a threat more serious than occasional piracy in

⁶⁰ CAB/66/20/9 para 58. Sir Alfred Duff Cooper, "*Report by Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster*", NA,

⁶¹ *Ibid* para 28.

the Straits of Malacca, had descended into a torpor from which only a persistent visionary could arouse it. Such a leader did not exist in Malaya or Singapore, neither among Colonial officers nor Military Leaders. The organisation and proposals for Civil Defence lacked urgency and decisiveness; there was much general talk in Legislative Council meetings but little action. The incentive for planning Civil Defence was in any case undermined by a Governor, who on his return from leave, insisted that no visible defence precautions should be constructed because it would undermine morale and distress the population. Furthermore he would not agree to civil labour being redirected from industries and estates to help the army build defences and new bases for the air force. In his defence, it should be said, that his masters in London compelled him to maintain a high level of industrial productivity to assist the war effort and the economy on the grounds of 'absolute priority.'⁶²

The outbreak of war in Europe, and the salutary lessons from the blitz of Britain, prompted some members of the Legislature to press the authorities to consider the question of protection against air raids. In Council, proposals for an air raid warning system and air raid shelters were tabled and considered. However, the protective measures proposed, applied officially only to the Straits Settlements. The FMS and the UMS were advised to consider similar arrangements. Not surprisingly, this caused an outcry from expatriates. How was it possible, they questioned, to protect some and not others, particularly if such protection had direct consequences for the safety of the tin and rubber industries and the important employees who maintained these industries?⁶³ The furore generated by this subject brought up the more fundamental issue of the best way of organising Civil Defence. Most of the state authorities believed that control of civil defence measures should be in the hands of the armed forces. The colonial authorities in Singapore disagreed. However, they did concur that the whole of Malaya should be included in all future civil defence measures, and although they were unable to insist that the FMS and UMS comply, the latter were strongly encouraged to do so.

The Utilities of War.

By the autumn of 1941, the total military forces in Malaya had increased to approximately 88,600. They consisted predominantly of Indian troops but with a sizeable

⁶² Montgomery. *Shenton of Singapore*. p. 68. Montgomery quotes from a Thomas despatch to the CO of 27 Jan 1940.

⁶³ Kirby. *War Against Japan*. P 159. According to Kirby the FMS Chamber of Mines and the United Planters Assoc. strongly condemned the government for failing to take adequate measures for the defence and safety of the civil population of the Malay States and the security of the tin and rubber industries.

minority of British, Australian, and Malay troops. The breakdown by nationality was 19,600 British, 15,200 Australian, 37,000 Indian and about 16,800 locally enlisted Asians. These numbers were well below the fighting strength previously asked for and approved by the War Office. In terms of fighting infantry units, they constituted 31 infantry battalions and their supporting elements. The units were organised into one Australian and two Indian Divisions, with some in reserve. Singapore had its own garrison, two brigades, dedicated to the defence of the 'Fortress'. In addition, Penang had a garrison of one battalion plus some support units. There were also fixed coastal defence and anti-aircraft batteries for Singapore, some airfield defence battalions and local volunteer units. There were however, no armoured forces.⁶⁴ Many of the troops had received only basic training and some had not been long enough in station to get used to the enervating climate before hostilities began. Of the 37,000 Indian troops, many were scarcely better than raw recruits and a number were only 17 years of age. Importantly, they were bereft of trained officers and non-commissioned officers. With the urgent expansion of the Indian army, many quality units were 'milked' of experienced officer and senior NCO's who were sent to form new battalions. It was a euphemism to classify those arriving in Singapore as infantry 'combat' Divisions. The 15,200 Australians also lacked experienced leaders and although slightly better trained had no knowledge of jungle warfare. The same applied to the British element. The remaining 16,800 local forces were equivalent to a militia, or in modern parlance, a Territorial Army. The members of these units were part-time soldiers whose primary employment covered the spectrum of Malayan business and industry; they had only rudimentary military skills acquired in brief periods of weekend training. However, they had valuable local knowledge of terrain and spoke native languages, Malay, Tamil and Chinese.

There were no British Divisions in Malaya at the beginning of the campaign. Later, and much too late to have any impact on the outcome of the battle, the British 18th Division, then at sea en-route to Persia [Iran], was redirected to Singapore. Of the six British infantry battalions, three were in Singapore and the others assigned to the Indian Brigades. Indian units while a separate force within the British Military system, were trained and organised along the same lines as the British Army. Equipment, however, tended to be somewhat lighter, there was less artillery, and fewer anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. Officers were

⁶⁴ Falk, Stanley, *Seventy Days to Singapore*, Robert Hale, London.1975. p.54. See also Kirby. *War Against Japan*, p.163.

both British and Indian. Incredibly, some young Indian soldiers arriving in Malaya had never seen a tank.⁶⁵

The Commander of the Army from May 1941 was Lieutenant General Arthur Percival (GOC Malaya). He was described as the ‘eternal staff officer’; an opinion reinforced by his appearance and personal manner. He was tall, angular, raw-boned, somewhat stooped and had protruding front teeth. His manner was low-key and he was a poor public speaker with the suspicion of a lisp. He was, however, unquestionably brave, remarkably fit and active and, by general agreement, very bright, determined and quite unflappable.⁶⁶

The only non-Indian division in Malaya at this time was the Australian 8th Division. While subject to Percival’s operational control, it occupied a unique position. Its Commander, Major General Gordon Bennett, was under instructions from his government to ensure the division remained a unified force and was not split or used piecemeal by Malaya Command without his approval. Moreover, if Bennett was unhappy with any tactical deployment that infringed this arrangement, he was authorised to have direct communication with Australia. In effect, it gave him a right to go over Percival’s head on tactical matters or indeed on any other reason. This autonomy, in the pressure of combat, severely restricted Percival’s tactical options. Outspoken to the point of rudeness, sarcastic and impatient, he did not get along well with British regular officers and for that matter with anyone else with whom he disagreed, including many of his own staff. His rasping personality did nothing to improve command relationships, and under the test of battle his leadership was found wanting.⁶⁷ An official report compiled after the war commented:

It was well known in Malaya before the operations and it was amply borne out during operations, that the Australian GOC was incapable of subordinating himself to Malaya Command or of co-operating wholeheartedly with other commanders.⁶⁸

A point of importance worth repeating, because it imposed additional problems on command and control, is that the composition of the Allied forces came from places as far apart as the United Kingdom, Australia, Malaya, Burma and British India; and they fought under leaders divided by differences of nationality, outlook, background, political allegiance

⁶⁵ Kirby *War Against Japan*. p 164 and passim.

⁶⁶ Farrell, Brian & Hunter, Sandy. *A Great Betrayal*, p 199. See also Clifford Kinvig *Scapegoat: General Percival of Singapore*, Brassey’s, London. 1996. Passim, for very balanced judgement of Percival as GOC. Kinvig concedes that while Percival was very capable and intelligent he was not a dynamic leader.

⁶⁷ Falk. loc cit, p. 55. Also, Lodge, B. *Fall of General Gordon Bennett*, Allen & Unwin. Sydney 1986.p 6-20 and passim.

⁶⁸ CAB 106/162. Report on Operations of 8th Australian Division in Malaya. NA.

and language. As a force, they were neither equipped nor trained for operations in the close country of Malaya. It was overburdened with a road bound logistics tail: endless columns of motor transport moved men, equipment and stores. A glaring omission in the military organization however was the failure to enlist the local community for their language skills and knowledge of the terrain and above all to assist the combat troops prepare military sites and defensive positions. Two reasons for this omission; one was the civil government's insistence that the local workforce was more urgently needed to keep the country's major industries functioning and second, the War Office, London, would in any case, only pay a derisory labourer's daily rate for those so enlisted.

The Harbingers of War.

From mid-1930, Japan's increasingly erratic and aggressive behaviour in the Far East created apprehension among the western powers, and gave Britain's Pacific Dominions serious cause for concern.⁶⁹ Every political move or direct action by Japan, already closely monitored, came under more intense scrutiny from this point. Of particular interest was the expansion and deployment of her armed forces. Japan's war with China was closely observed and battlefield skills in this campaign were studied and analysed. Japan's undisguised intention to extend her empire now gave the West's intelligence agencies the weighty challenge of determining the direction from which Japan would strike, and when.

During 1940, when a growing number of intelligence precursors were detected indicating an unusual pattern of movement by Japanese military and naval forces throughout South East Asia - reports substantiated by a variety of diplomatic and civilian sources - raised serious concern at the War Office, London. Adding impetus to their fears, on 1 August 1940, the Japanese government proclaimed the "construction of a new order in Greater Asia". The Chiefs of Staff (COS) called for a comprehensive review of Singapore's defence plans. The three Service Commanders then in post, C-in-C China (Layton) AOC (Babington) and GOC (Bond) compiled an Appreciation. On 16 October 1940, they presented their findings to a Defence Conference in Singapore.⁷⁰ The discussions and conclusions of this conference confirmed, and added substance, to the growing awareness of Japan's intentions, the weakness of the allied preparations, and the serious shortage of vital war *materiel*. Among its major conclusions was that the arrival of a relieving fleet would only partially safeguard

⁶⁹ Feis. *The Road to Pearl Harbor*. Pp 3-5. Also Keegan. *Second World War*. Pp 241-243.

⁷⁰ The three commanders were joined by the GOC Burma, the COS of the Dutch East Indies Station, the DMO [Director Military Operations] India, and the Secretary for Defence in Malaya (Vlieland). In attendance were DCOS [Deputy Chief of Staff] Australia, COS New Zealand and Commander A. Thomas USN attaché Bangkok, as an observer. CAB/80/24. NA.

against a Japanese overland threat to Malaya through Thailand. Second, it was necessary to hold all Malaya rather than concentrate on the defence of Singapore Island. Third, it would now be the responsibility of the air and land forces to prevent the Japanese from establishing advanced air bases on the mainland and to stop any overland advance. Overall, they assumed that the Japanese had unhindered use of the ports and air bases in Indo-China and the railways of Thailand, that the Thais would maintain 'forced neutrality' and that 'before the opening of hostilities the Japanese would have established themselves in South Thailand'.⁷¹

The tactical Appreciation also concluded that the Japanese had sufficient forces for simultaneously launching an overland attack from Thailand and a seaborne attack on Malaya. These invading forces would be strongly supported by shore-based Japanese aircraft. Singapore was within range of heavy bombers operating from Thailand. Further, northern Malaya was within range of heavy bombers and reconnaissance aircraft operating from Indo-China, and from light bombers and fighters operating from Thailand.

Facing the urgent realities of the situation, the conference moved on to consider that the Japanese were likely to attack Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, British Borneo, Netherlands East Indies, Timor and communications in Pacific and Indian Oceans, either separately or all at the same time. There could also be attacks on American bases in the Philippines and Guam.⁷²

Our first immediate consideration must be to ensure the security of Malaya against direct attack. The Tactical Appreciation shows that the army and air forces in Malaya (including reinforcements now being provided) are, both in numbers and equipment, far below those required in view of the inadequacy of the naval forces available. *This deficiency must obviously be remedied immediately* and we recommend that the further co-operation of India, Australia and New Zealand be sought without delay.⁷³

The conference considered that a minimum of 566 aircraft was needed for the defence of Malaya and Burma.⁷⁴ The harsh reality was that there were then only 88 aircraft in the area, of which 40 were obsolete - therefore, there should be a reinforcement of 534 modern aircraft. In terms of army strength, Malaya was deficient by 12 regular battalions, 6 field artillery regiments, 8 anti-tank batteries, 6 anti-tank companies, 3 light tank companies and other units.

⁷¹ Tarling, Nicholas, *A Sudden Rampage: The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, 1941-1945*, Hurst & Company. London. 2001. pp 82-85.

⁷² Ong Chit Chung, *Matador*, loc cit, p 123.

⁷³ Ibid p 125, with original emphasis.

⁷⁴ Richards, D. & St. G. Saunders, H. *Royal Air Force 1939-1945. Vol II The Fight Avails*. HMSO. London. 1954.p.4. Tactical Appreciation 16 Oct 1940.

These important and prescient findings went to the Chiefs of Staff in London. The COS replied that they hoped to accelerate the dispatch of land reinforcements to Malaya and pledged to send 170 Buffalo aircraft, 40 Glen Martin aircraft, one squadron of flying boats and one squadron of Beauforts by June 1941. They also approved the expansion of air base facilities in the north to allow for a concentration of two-thirds of the aircraft in either the north or south of Malaya.⁷⁵

At this same time (October 1940) by the direction of the C-in-C's the FECB compiled a weekly intelligence summary 'The Far East Weekly' or 'FEW'. It was sent to the Admiralty, the Australian Naval Board, New Zealand Naval Board, Naval Intelligence at Ottawa, New Delhi, British Commands in East Asia and British representatives at Washington, Tokyo and Chungking and of course to the Governor's office in Singapore. Thus, every important department, national and international, concerned with the worrying developments in the Far East region, received it. By the time Brooke-Popham took up his appointment in October 1940, therefore, there was in place sound arrangements to disseminate a steady flow of intelligence information from a variety of sources to western allies. All the main diplomatic posts and trained military officials throughout East Asia were watching and reporting important intelligence clues. However, as always in the case of intelligence gathering processes, there was inevitably, some conflicting or inaccurate information leading sometimes to incorrect conclusions, but taken altogether, there was unmistakable and mounting evidence of Japan's preparation for imminent action. A most obvious indicator of Japanese intentions was the level of mobilisation and distribution of its forces; these movements were closely monitored by FECB and other British agencies.

On 2 July 1941, at an Imperial Conference in Tokyo, at which the Emperor himself attended, government ministers put before him their combined agreement that the nation's future lay in the dominance of the mineral-rich southern states of South East Asia.⁷⁶ Japan had already decided it needed to extend its empire, and the country had to be prepared for war. However, even at this point, intense debate, mainly between the army and navy, oscillated between whether to focus expansion north against Russia or south against the Western Powers. Hitler was pressing Japan to follow his lead and to strike north, taking advantage of Russia's dilemma. Certainly, this scheme appealed to a number of senior army officers but the more pragmatic among them felt such a move would do little to assuage

⁷⁵ COS Paper No: 33, 24 Dec 1940.para 6. NA

⁷⁶ Ford, Douglas. *The Pacific War*, Continuum Int. Pub. Group. London. 2012. p 43.

Japan's economic problems.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, regardless of the north-south outcome, military preparations for either contingency were well underway and had been since 1940. Even while she was conducting torturous political negotiations - with America in particular - over the harsh economic embargo, the Japanese Army and Navy were actively preparing for a general war.⁷⁸

The political dialogue between Japan's Embassy in Washington and the government in Tokyo had for a number of years been intercepted and deciphered, as had the diplomatic telegrams sent from its embassy in Berlin.⁷⁹ Both the United States and Britain were fully aware of the convoluted procrastinating negotiations that Japan was conducting. The purpose, they realized, was to enable Japan to strengthen its hold on her recent territorial acquisitions in East Asia as well as gain time to enlarge its military arsenal. The aid to China by the two western powers, via the Burma Road, was in part a response to these manoeuvrings and it was an effective irritant to the Japanese; indeed a concern they continuously raised during the negotiations. From the point of view of both the USA and Britain, supplying China with armaments to enable her to continue the war with Japan meant that a significant part of the Imperial Japanese Army was committed to the Chinese campaign and unavailable for other military adventures. The United States Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, recognising the harmful effect these important supplies to China were having on Japan, declared, "in order to deter Japan and place obstacles in the way of Japan's programme of conquest" [he] proposed giving large credits to China to aid their resistance to the Japanese.⁸⁰

Even though the interceptions via the US decipher system called 'Magic' revealed the declarations of the Japanese government that 'the Japanese Empire, to save its very life, must take measures to secure the raw materials of the South Seas'⁸¹ inter-service rivalries within Japan still prevented a final decision on whether Japan's next move would be north or south. What was not in question was her determination to continue acquiring Asian territory. Military intelligence estimates in the final months before her assault on Malaya highlighted

⁷⁷ Best, Antony. *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor: Avoiding war in East Asia, 1936 -41*. LSE /Routledge London. 1995. Brooke-Popham in his post war despatch (*No: 38183 of Jan. 48*) declared "As the Japanese spread south into Cambodia and Cochin China, the potential danger to Burma, Malaya, the South China Sea and even the Philippines increased; this danger had been realised from the start..."

⁷⁸ Robertson, E. *The Japanese File: Pre-War Japanese penetration in Southeast Asia*. Heinemann, Asia 1979. P1-8 and passim. Also Feis. *The Road*. p. 215.

⁷⁹ The United States decipher facility was known as "Magic" and the Japanese cipher system was called "Purple". Bletchley Park in England was also successfully reading the Japanese signals traffic and both nations exchanged important information. See Marshall. J. *To Have and Have Not: Southeast Asian Raw Materials and the Origins of the Pacific War*. Berkley: University of California Press. 1995, passim. And Best. A. *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor.*, passim.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Marshal, *To Have and Have Not*. p131.

⁸¹ *Ibid*. p. 133.

the continuing preparations for further conquests to the south, especially against Thailand, the loss of which would clearly undermine the position of Malaya and Singapore.⁸² However, there were other interpretations of these same indicators. Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in Washington, learnt that the Americans believed the likely attack would indeed be southwards but judged the Japanese aim was to cut the Burma Road. By the end of October, Whitehall had also adopted this analysis; it had further support from Chiang Kai Shek, and Brook Popham both of whom, separately, believed the Burma Road was the likely target.⁸³ One of the factors mentioned in support of the move south was that the flat country of Cambodia /central Thailand, which baked hard during the dry season, meant that runways there could be easily improvised. Shenton Thomas who travelled through this area in February 1939 confirmed this in a telegram to the CO in November 1941.⁸⁴

The stockpiling of vital war materials was also well underway, and in late October, a 'Total War Research Institute' was established with the task of drawing up a comprehensive plan for the intended deployments. Three divisions from south China were ordered to begin training for operations in tropical regions. They were despatched to Indo-China (where, as mentioned, Japan had already established a sizeable garrison). Special studies began of the geography, terrain and climate of Malaya, Netherlands East Indies, Thailand and Burma. By early 1941, Japanese pilots were flying reconnaissance missions and taking illegal photographs over the Malayan coast and the Philippines. At the same time, the Ministry of War and Foreign Office were printing military currency for use in the southern area.⁸⁵ It was at this time, signifying his Service's autonomy and disregard of government restraint, that Admiral Yamamoto Commander of the Combined Fleet conceived the idea of a carrier-based air attack on Pearl Harbour and ordered his staff to work out the problems posed by such an operation.⁸⁶

In mid-September 1941, E. W. Meiklereid, the acting Consul-General at Saigon reported that there were 25,000 Japanese troops and 70 aircraft in Indo-China, while Ambassador Crosby reported from Bangkok that his information gave the numbers as 23,000 troops and 51 aircraft. By the end of September, Brooke-Popham was able to declare that his sources gave slightly different figures; 25,000 troops and 50 aircraft. These were not significant discrepancies although strangely from these figures he remained convinced that

⁸² Ibid. p. 135.

⁸³ FO 371/27986 and CAB 96/2. NA.

⁸⁴ FO 371/28126 of 3 Nov.41. and WO 208/1898.

⁸⁵ Tsjuji *Singapore* passim.

⁸⁶ Ong, *Matador* loc cit, p 216.

the Japanese were not yet ready to launch an attack on Thailand or Malaya.⁸⁷ To add some conviction to his premise he said there were no signs of the up grading of facilities at the air bases or the presence of long-range fighters or heavy bombers, which he considered essential for such an attack.⁸⁸ In any case, he announced, he remained of the opinion that any Japanese excursion would be northwards.

On 22 October 1941, the British Ambassador at Tokyo, Sir Robert Craigie, sent a very stiff critique to the Foreign Office in London, of Brooke-Popham's assertion of 30 September. Craigie was by now most suspicious of Japanese intentions and placed more emphasis on a Japanese move to the south. In a pointed criticism of Brooke-Popham's theory of 'northern attack', Craigie, referring to the talks then underway between Japan and Washington about the economic embargo, said: -

.....should Washington conversations [between Japan and USA about the economic sanctions] break down, [an] immediate move southwards cannot be excluded despite weather conditions... Much of course depends on the outcome of the Washington talks, but even now, with tension as high as it is, and increasing economic distress caused by freezing measures it would take very little further pressure to drive Japan to rash enterprise.⁸⁹

During the latter period of 1941, the number of intelligence reports grew in volume and detail. Many reliable sources noted the increased movement of Japanese troops, shipping and aircraft. By the end of October, it was believed that the number of troops in Indo-China had reached 50,000 and that considerable quantities of equipment and stores were also being landed in both northern and southern areas of the country, including tanks (estimated at 100), transport vehicles, oil tankers, railway equipment and ammunition. The Japanese had also taken over another two air bases in Cambodia and were giving top priority to the extension of air facilities at Saigon, Phnom Penh and two other air bases in southern Indo-China.⁹⁰

On 17 October 1941, Captain D. Tufnell, the British Naval Attaché at Tokyo, reported that all units of the Japanese navy had been mobilised and were now on a complete war footing. The Chinese Ambassador to Singapore subsequently confirmed this. In addition, significantly, in the early months of 1941 the average number of Japanese merchant ships outside Japanese-controlled waters had stood at 162. This rapidly declined from 79 in September to 50 at the end of the month, dropping to 25 by late October. It was obvious that

⁸⁷ Brooke-Popham to WO for COS No, 492/4, 2 Sep 1941. And GHQ Far East Report. "Possibilities of the Japanese Attacking in the South." 8 Sep 1941. NA.

⁸⁸Ibid. p 220

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 222. See also Note 74, p. 242. Craigie, Tokyo, to FO. No: 2079, 22 Oct 41. Repeated by FO to Singapore as No. 367 on 23 Oct 1941.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 221

there was some haste in getting Japanese shipping back to Japanese territories. Craigie again reported from Tokyo that there were indications that more reservists were being mobilised.⁹¹

In this feverish pre-war period, diplomatic relations between Japan and the western powers, particularly the USA, were at breaking point. The Imperial Japanese Armed Forces were displaying unambiguous signs of war and indicating preparation for a pre-emptive assault. In Singapore however, even these alarms did not dispel the reservations in the minds of both the military and civil authorities that Singapore was a Japanese objective and that danger was imminent. Life continued at a leisurely pace, while no senior figure urged haste or proposed that the country be made aware and ready for war. Nothing was to deflect the Governor from his commercial Whitehall directive to increase the supply of rubber and tin.

⁹¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

A COLONIAL CIVIL ADMINISTRATION

The governance of the Straits Settlements and individual States in Peninsula Malaya, which Sir Shenton Thomas inherited on appointment, was a system developed through trial and error, during the 150 years of Colonial rule. The varied provisions for guiding the affairs of each group was labyrinthine but workable. By careful control, and under the direction of experienced British civil servants, sensitive to the ethnic distinctions of the multicultural population, it worked perfectly well. However, as soon became obvious, the consultative and management procedures that worked in a measured, indeed leisurely, manner were unsuited to a crisis. Had the Governor the foresight to put the country on a war footing at the first signs of a crisis, he would undoubtedly have met resistance from a number of the Malay rulers. It was a country that never experienced any greater conflict than occasional piracy in the Straits of Malacca. Thomas' first obstacle would have been to convince the rulers that there was a threat. Certainly, the remoter and poorer parts of east Malaya (where fatefully the actual landings took place) would not have understood the alarm. At this stage in its progress, Malaya was not a unified nation, communications were embryonic and the British while seen as benevolent colonial masters were nevertheless formidable masters. If the Japanese came, most people would consider their arrival, as simply a matter of one ruler replacing another. In addition, they would invariably have objected to the disruption and cost, entailed in preparations for defence. Under these conditions, galvanising the country and demanding war measures would have been a huge challenge for even the most determined of leaders.

The manner by which administrative controls developed also meant that many government departments acted independently of central authority. For example, the forestry commission, the health department, the education department and others answered direct to their authorities in London. Furthermore, their head-offices in Singapore and Malaya were separate and autonomous and often located some way apart from each other. Inevitably, this led to poor coordination and even poorer inter department communications.

The Governor residing in Singapore was President of the Straits Settlements Council, which sat in Singapore and President of the FMS Federal Council that sat in KL. The FMS assembly met about six times a year. Apart from this bi-monthly commute to KL for meetings, there is no mention of Thomas visiting the countryside outside the capital or

meeting with the sultans of the Unfederated Malay States (UMS). The existence of two Legislative Councils inevitably meant there was duplication of many administrative issues, not to mention the expense of running two similar large legislative chambers.

The Emergence of a Colonial Administration

Both the Colonial Office in London and a succession of Governor's recognised the untidy, fragmented, and unsatisfactory governance in this area. What they did not agree upon was a solution to the problem. There were those who favoured tighter central control and those who championed decentralisation-passing governmental responsibility to the indigenous inhabitants. The issue was unresolved when Shenton Thomas took up his appointment as Governor; indeed his predecessor had been removed from the post because of the indignation he provoked by promoting the idea of devolvement.⁹² Thomas was told to defuse the furore, play down the whole debate about governance, and live with the *status quo*. It meant of course, that when war loomed, he was technically unable to insist that the nine Malay States conform to coordinated and countrywide preparations for a conflict. He simply did not have the legal power to do so. It also placed him on a collision course with the military when their intended plans ran roughshod across state boundaries. The military failed to understand the subtleties of dissimilar state governments, or the constraints this imposed on Thomas's power, nor did they grasp the delicate sensibilities of the separate state rulers. It is worth remembering that until 1909 the northern part of the Peninsula was claimed by Siam (Thailand). Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu whose populations are predominantly Malay and Muslim, were governed by hereditary Malay rulers who sent tribute to Bangkok triennially in the form of *Bunga Mas* (gold and silver flowers). Their foreign relations were handled by Bangkok and their rulers had to be confirmed in office by the Siamese authorities. In return, these vassal states were entitled to Siamese protection and were allowed to live separately under their own laws, customs and rulers.

To not only integrate these states within Malaya but also require them to surrender their authoritarianism, called for lengthy and torturous diplomacy. Asking them, in addition, to accept British governance entailed compromise and measureable persuasion. While the military saw their task in simple unequivocal countrywide terms, the civilian officials, on the other hand, had to manage the affairs of the country according to existing fragile rules. In any case, in 1940, it was hard for them to conceive of any such grave and immediate threat to

⁹² Heussler, Robert. *British Rule in Malaya. 1867-1942*. Clio Press, Oxford. 1981. p 265. Also Jones, *Public Administration in Malaya*. P 83-90.

the colony's existence that would call for highhanded disregard of well-rehearsed regulations. Besides, there was the country's welfare and economy to consider.

The political and military conditions that prevailed in Malaya and Singapore in 1940, were quite different from those of in other parts of the British Empire. After many years of directing and guiding the country's development, the administration had taken on a patriarchal, as opposed to an autocratic, approach to governing. The colony was an acknowledged success enjoying a healthy economy, the development and expansion of trade, the introduction of a modern communications infrastructure, and significant improvement in the health and education. Importantly, however, what the British failed to address and what was later to prove a serious shortcoming, was the creation of national unity – in other words a short-sighted acceptance of the local rulers various autonomies. As already mentioned Malaya was a country of different nationalities, on the surface living a contented existence. However, as the war later exposed, it was a country with little loyalty to its British masters. What also unfolded was that the majority of the working class people regarded this latest invader quite simply as a replacement for the existing master. Even when the danger was obvious, there was little display of either panic or an urge to rush to arms to protect their legacy of security and quality of life. Pragmatists say that this behaviour was a clear manifestation of the significant failure to foster loyalty and national identity. 'There was no personal friendliness, no sympathy or understanding, no participation in common ideas or purposes. On the surface there was complete indifference toward one another'.⁹³

This situation is typified by events in Penang. It was the earliest British foothold in the area, first occupied in 1786 and remained the sole British enterprise in the Peninsula until the end of the 1800's. By the early 19th century, however, the major islands of South East Asia, collectively then known as the East Indies, were within the "sphere of influence" of either the Dutch or the British. At the time, the British used this concept to limit the commercial or political ambitions of rival powers while avoiding the expense of establishing additional outposts of empire.⁹⁴ In 1824, in a move to prevent other western powers - (notably the French) - from establishing commercial links in the Malay Archipelago, an Anglo-Dutch Treaty was negotiated with the Netherlands. Britain now had exclusive influence in the Peninsula and relinquished all interests in the islands south of Singapore,

⁹³ Andaya. Barbara & Leonard. *A History of Malaysia*. MacMillan Press. London. 1982. p176 & passim. Also Jones. *Public Administration in Malaya*. p 99, who explains "There was no personal friendliness, no sympathy or understanding, no participation in common ideas or purposes. On the surface there was complete indifference toward one another."

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p.125. See also Isabella Bird. *The Golden Chersonese*, Monsoon Books Ltd. Singapore republished 2010. p147- 152 and passim.

notably Java and Sumatra. To consolidate further its own commercial dominance over the important west coast trading ports, in 1826 Britain decided to create a single administrative unit out of Singapore, Malacca, Penang, and Province Wellesley - known as the Straits Settlements. It remained under the control of the British authorities in India until 1867, when it was transferred to the Colonial Office in London. It was to become the base from whence the British influence was gradually extended throughout the Peninsula.

Relations with the remaining nine Malay States evolved gradually in a different manner. How, in each case, was determined by the commercial value of each state's natural resources. At this stage, London was reluctant to absorb further territorial responsibility within the archipelago if there was little profit to be gained, even though some of the Malay States actively sought protection. Persistent internecine disputes among a number of the Malay Rulers sometimes led to open warfare. Conflicting Chinese factions threatened to involve the Straits Settlements forcing Britain into some restraining action.⁹⁵ In 1874, when the State of Perak asked help to secure the shaky authority of its sultan, the Governor of the Straits Settlements signed The Pangkor Treaty in return for British protection. The sultan had to accept a British Resident whose advice had to be sought and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay custom and religion.⁹⁶

The Pangkor Treaty was a turning point in political and commercial relations with the remaining states. Malay rulers began to recognise the potential benefits of such an agreement: there was security, prospective economic development, and in a number of particular cases, the likely curtailment of aggressive Chinese commercial exploitation, chiefly in tin mining. Following the example of Perak, three other states, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang signed agreements with the British authorities seeking 'Protected' status and accepted the installation of a 'Resident'. In 1896, these four Protected States were unified as the Federated Malay States (FMS), with its capital in Kuala Lumpur, the heart of the tin mining region. A secretariat was established in Kuala Lumpur with a Resident-General at its head. It had jurisdiction over the residents in the four FMS and authority to represent the Federation's interests to the Singapore governor, who also became High Commissioner of the Federation. Departments of Police, Public Works, Posts and Telegraph, Railways and Agriculture were now under a single director; a unified civil service was set up and proposals

⁹⁵ Gullick. J.M. *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*. London : Athlone Press, 1988. p 11-18. and passim. See also, Swettenham Sir F. *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya*. John Lane. London. 1929, passim. Cowan. C.D. *Nineteenth Century Malaya: The Origins of British Political Control*. O.U.P.London. 1961.pp 169-75.

⁹⁶ Andaya *History of Malaysia*. p.158.

were made for a common treasury. To assure uniformity, all laws except those of a purely local nature, and all financial measures were decreed in Kuala Lumpur.⁹⁷ Over the next ten years, further moves were made towards uniformity and centralisation and by 1909, a Federal Council was created with the Governor at its head and with the title of 'High Commissioner of the FMS'. The role of 'Resident-General' was renamed 'Chief Secretary'. In the process, the four FMS sultans lost their power of veto and the council was enlarged to include senior and influential businessmen from the tin and rubber industries, both European and Chinese. The Chief Secretary became subordinate to the High Commissioner rather than an independent defender of the Federated States rights, which he previously exercised in his role as Resident-General.⁹⁸

By 1909, Thailand agreed to transfer responsibility for the four northern states (Terengganu, Kedah, Kelantan and Perlis) to Britain.⁹⁹ The state of Johore was acquired in 1914. Thus, direct and indirect control, of all the Malay States and Singapore was in the hands of the British Government. British authority, either in the form of a Governor, High Commissioner, agent, resident or adviser exercised control throughout Malaya and Singapore - now labelled British Malaya. It was a political arrangement that would remain almost unchanged until the Japanese invasion of 1941. However, the four states above, and Johore remained un-federated; their sultans refused to join the FMS because they would not accept any erosion of their traditional royal powers. They had observed this decline in the sultans within the FMS. Peninsular Malaya was therefore made up administratively of Straits Settlements (Crown Colony), the FMS and the UMS.

In practice these development meant that the political, economic and administrative control of the three categories of suzerainty within Malaya and Singapore was in the hands of ten different authorities. This arrangement was the source of heated debate between the colonial office and officials in post. In the 1920's and 1930's the situation led to a long running political argument about whether power should be centralized or decentralized.¹⁰⁰ Within the establishment indirect rule was long regarded as indispensable to maintaining authority over the Malay population. The colonial authorities felt a large degree of centralised direction was necessary in a peninsula of such ill-defined state boundaries, uneven geographical distribution of natural wealth and growing ethnic immigrant conurbations.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p 186

⁹⁸ Jones. *Public Administration*, p.87.

⁹⁹ Bastin, & Winks. *Malaysia Selected Historical Readings*. Thio, E "The British Forward Movement in Malaya, 1880-9." p 227.

¹⁰⁰ Jones. *Public Administration*. p 78-80, 83-90. Also, Swettenham, *British Malaya*, p 273-5 and passim.

Some officials worried that central control would lead to a lessening of respect for the rulers in certain circles; even so, until the outbreak of war, it was still evident that the prestige of sultans within their own states and their hold over rural Malays was still strong.¹⁰¹

In theory, the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements and the Federal Council of the FMS were independent of each other although much of the legislation enacted by the Straits Settlements was endorsed by the FMS. The UMS on the other hand could and did resist rulings from the High Commissioner. The colonial goal of creating an administrative unity for British Malaya was still unfulfilled by 1941.¹⁰² Despite general agreement that a union for Malaya was ultimately desirable, established political and commercial interests distrusted any change.¹⁰³ With a system of consultative dialogue rather than pronouncements from the centre, even important matters such as the deployment of military units needed the agreement of the state into whose area they planned to move. In his book, *Speaking Generally*, written after the war, General (later Field Marshal) Wavell gave an example of this cumbersome process ...

‘about a week after war had broken out an important movement of troops was delayed by the police enforcing the customs barrier between two states and insisting on taking particulars of each lorry as it passed..’¹⁰⁴

On average, the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements met in Singapore nine times a year and the Federal Council in Kuala Lumpur six times a year. Additionally there were six Residents Conferences each followed by a Durbar. These meetings were the forums for discussion and approval of major acts of legislation and the ratification of government expenditure. Sub-committees undertook preparatory and investigative stages of important legislation before presentation to the Council for endorsement. The General Officer Commanding Malaya was *ex officio* a member of both the Executive and Legislative Councils of the Straits Settlements. A reading of the Council Proceedings suggests a ponderous and pedantic process with procedural dialogue heavy in Victorian preciseness and spoken with laboured careful etiquette. Business was not conducted swiftly and purposefully.

British civil servants following a well-trodden and well-defined path forged in the growth of an empire were determining the management of the country’s affairs. ‘By the late thirties their instrument of rule – the MCS – was one of the most seasoned and self-confident

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Andaya.. *A History of Malaya*. p.252.

¹⁰⁴ Wavell, *Speaking Generally* MacMillan & Co Ltd, London.1946. p114.

in the empire, secure in its local acceptance and in its reputation at home.’¹⁰⁵ In the later stages the Malayan Civil Service attained an image as an elite service. During the inter-war years, however, it had suffered a drop in the quality of recruitment and was regarded as less desirable than entry into the Indian Civil Service (ICS). Only a conscious recruiting effort and redesigned selection procedure restored the quality of entrants.¹⁰⁶ Thus by 1940 the MCS was a highly efficient service comprising able, intelligent and dedicated officers skilled in their respective fields of administration. The arrangement of government departments and distribution of powers among the officers of the MCS followed closely the successful pattern practised in India.

Sir George Maxwell a retired Chief Secretary, FMS, informed a London newspaper (Daily Telegraph, April 1942),

I could not have wished to have a finer body of men under me. The district officer made a point of establishing that direct personal contact which means everything in any difficulty or emergency, and the understanding and sympathy on the one side met with confidence and respect from the other. Not only in the administrative branches, but in all the professional departments, the men were devoted, heart and soul, to their work for the country, and all were deeply attached to the peoples of Malaya. In mutual understanding between the people of the country and the administration, Malaya has been unsurpassed in the Colonial Empire.¹⁰⁷

Their training and preparation was just as thorough as that of their Indian counterparts. All of them had to learn the Malay language and many also had a working knowledge of either Chinese or Tamil.¹⁰⁸ In general, everyone served at one time or another in both the secretariat and rural posts, the intention being that every officer should understand both the central processes of administration and at a distance its impact on the community. Inevitably, there were those who preferred to retain the freedom and responsibilities of remote districts than return to the oppressive routine of the central bureaucracy.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Heussler, Robert. *British Rule in Malaya. The Malayan Civil Service and its Predecessors, 1867-1942*, Clio Press, Oxford.1981.p 280.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p 263-267

¹⁰⁷ Heussler Papers. Mss.Brit.EMP. s.480.8/1.RHL. Quoted in a letter (2 Jul 1982) from Paul. Kratoska to Heussler in which he added “As a resident in the FMS at the time he speaks of, and not being a civil servant myself but the editor of a newspaper whose motto was certainly not one of uncritical subservience to authority local or otherwise, and furthermore having lived and worked in other tropical Colonies so that I am well able to draw the necessary comparisons, I can testify to the accuracy of the tribute.”

¹⁰⁸ Kirk-Greene, Anthony. *Britain’s Imperial Administrators, 1858-1966*. MacMillan Press in association with St. Antony’s College. Basingstoke, UK. 2000. P 129-131. From the early 1930’s the Colonial Administrative Service (CAS) became a single Colonial Service and recruits were allocated to various overseas territories according to demand and ability.

¹⁰⁹ Heussler. *British Rule in Malaya*. p 271.

To support the civil servants, a Malay Administrative Service was created in 1910 in order to staff junior posts in district administration. A separate clerical service open to all nationalities born and educated in the FMS, (with preference for Malays), was also formed. The system worked perfectly well, but with one unforeseen weakness. On the outbreak of war in December 1941, the affairs of this important region were being conducted by a corps of proficient officers abiding by a diplomatic process which had changed little from the days of Queen Victoria. As noted earlier, the impracticability of the system was that many different Malayan government departments answered independently to their separate authorities in London. During an emergency, this revealed a serious flaw in the management of information. These independent departments sent, without consultation or verification, their view of events to their London bosses. Inevitably, this led to a serious loss of co-ordinated endeavour and presented the London authorities with a confused and fragmented picture of events, sometimes even conflicting data. Shortly after he arrived in post, Duff Cooper remarked on this duplication of effort “I was distressed to learn that the representative of my former Department, the Ministry of Information, was engaged on precisely similar work to that of a representative of the Ministry of Economic Warfare. Two officials in fact engaged on the same task were reporting to two different departments in London”.¹¹⁰

The Governor, appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, governed the Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements. An Executive and a Legislative Council advised him. The majority of the members of the Executive Council were MCS officials, while the Legislative Council, since 1924, consisted of equal numbers of official and unofficial members. The Governor as President of both possessed an ordinary and a casting vote to ensure an official majority.¹¹¹ The 13 unofficial members of the Legislature were elected civilians made up of seven Europeans, three Chinese, one Indian, one Malay and one Eurasian. The disconcerting use of ‘unofficial’ meant only that they were not government servants. All members of the Councils were addressed as ‘honourable’.

The FMS had a Federal Council as the central authority and each state had its own State Council. In addition, they also had two further forums for political debate. A Residents Conference, held as frequently as the meetings of the Federal Council, comprised the High Commissioner and the four Residents. There was a Durbar, following each federal meeting, at which the High Commissioner presided over the four Rulers together with their Residents and the Federal Secretary. The remaining five Unfederated States arranged their affairs

¹¹⁰ Duff Cooper A. *Old Men Forget*, Rupert Hart-Davis. London. 1953. p 293.

¹¹¹ Jones. *Public Administration*. p 79

differently, not only from the Colony and the FMS but also to a degree different from each other. The state of Johore provided an Executive and State Council and the Sultan himself presided over the Executive Council. The others had one Council only which combined the functions of legislative and financial controls and was led by a Prime Minister, in the case of Trengganu, otherwise by Malay Chiefs and senior Malay officials. All of the UMS had British Advisers on their Councils.

The Economy and the People.

One of the major tasks of the colonial administration was to keep the economy growing and running efficiently. The two major commodities that gave Malaya its prominence in South East Asia in the early twentieth century were the rich and extensive deposits of high-grade tin ore and an abundance of cultivated rubber. Rice was also a major crop grown mainly in north Malaya, as was palm oil throughout the peninsula. The First World War generated a huge demand for tin and rubber and, by 1920, Malaya was exporting more than half of the world's total rubber production (196,000 tons). The demand for both commodities fell off during the economic slump of the 1920s but afterwards picked up again, with the emergent American car industry being a major consumer. On the eve of the Second World War, European companies owned 74 per cent of the rubber estates in Malaya. Of the remainder, 17 per cent by Chinese, 5 per cent by Indians and 4 per cent by other Asians, mainly Japanese.¹¹² British companies owned the majority of the European estates.

The tin mining industry came to be dominated by the Europeans who in the inter-war years acquired abandoned mines from the Chinese. With revolutionary new methods of dredging, these ore deposits still yielded high-grade tin. European capital was heavily invested in the industry and in time control passed from the Chinese to the British. Chinese men continued to be the industry's labour force. Production of tin in the years preceding the war was about 90,000 tons per year. In 1941, it was 82,188 tons. Rubber cultivation covered some 3,250,000 acres and in 1940 produced 505,749 tons and in 1941 to 31st October, 500,982 tons. The sales of these commodities, mainly to the USA, were invaluable in terms of foreign exchange particularly at this critical period. In 1939, Malayan sales to the USA stood at 235 million Straits dollars and exceeded the country's import expenditure by more than 12 million American dollars a month. No other colony matched these figures.¹¹³

¹¹² Drabble, J. *An Economic History of Malaysia, c. 1800-1990*. Macmillan Press Ltd. Basingstoke, England. Pp. 121-132. See also, Thompson, V *Postmortem on Malaya*. p 89. and Winstedt. *Malaya and its History*. Hutchinson's University Library. London. 1948. p117.

¹¹³ Thomas, Sir Shenton. Unpublished private paper "What Malaya Did". Mss.Ind.Ocn.S34. RHL. Hereafter referred to as Thomas Papers.

The colonial civil administration had to contend with the demographic changes encouraged by a thriving colonial economy. A major concern of indigenous Malays was the high proportion and distribution of non-Malays in the country. By 1931, the population of 4.5 million in Malaya included 1.7 million Chinese, 1.6 million Malays, the remainder including Indians and others.¹¹⁴ The 1931 Census Report also showed that geographical factors were an important feature in the distribution of Malaya's varied population. The indigenous Malays were predominantly concentrated in areas of agricultural smallholdings; there were also a number of mainly Malay fishing communities along the east and west littoral coasts. The northern states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu were almost wholly Malay.

The great variety of the population would produce its own negative consequences in the final events of the region. Some understanding of their differences is an essential part of an understanding of the outcome. Different races and peoples worked in distinct industries but had no motive or desire to enter into a multi-faceted society. The Chinese community in Malaya, arriving mainly as traders from southern mainland China and settling along the western seaboard, were long established. The Chinese were largely an urban society, and in time, whole communities moved into the hinterland where they came to dominate the lucrative tin industry. Chinese immigration further swelled in the early 20th century, drawn by the economic opportunities of the increasing world demand for this commodity. However, the varied Chinese factions were accompanied by Chinese secret societies and criminal organisations, which thrived and took control of important industries like the large import/export trading houses. In particular, the secret societies tended to dominate the labourers who worked in the tin mines with great ruthlessness, even when control of the business moved to western management. The bulk of the Indian population on the other hand, worked on the rubber and tea estates where there were only a few Chinese and almost no Malays. The Indians, mainly Tamils from southern India, were imported in increasing numbers to meet the needs of the expanding rubber industry, in large part.¹¹⁵ The Tamils were also attracted to the growing railways network and the ancillary work associated with it.

At first the Chinese and Indians were seen as a transient population, but by the 1930s, significant numbers had either decided to settle or lacked the ability to return to their homelands. Over time the three populations, Chinese, Malay and Indian, retreated into their

¹¹⁴ 'Report on 1931 Singapore & Malaya Census.' C, Vlieland. Govt. Printing Office, Singapore. Feb 1932.

¹¹⁵ Bastin & Winks. *Selected Readings*. p. 257- 266. Jackson N, "Immigrant Labour and the Development of Malaya."

own communities. Their ethnic and cultural differences, were deepened by British perceptions and policies. Stereotyped attitudes meant that the Malays were effectively excluded from the modernising economy, as lacking the requisite drive and work ethic. Their upper class was encouraged to think about an English public school-style education and a career within the branch of government, which administered the Malays.¹¹⁶ The indigenous Malays were regarded as rice farmers and fisher-folk, and their vernacular education was tailored to such modest aspirations. The growing towns and cities of British Malaya, predominantly populated by Chinese, became unfamiliar places to most Malays. The Chinese were now a mixture of Straits-born Chinese, who took pride in calling themselves ‘the King’s Chinese’ and immigrants from mainland China. They differed from each other not only in language but also in their diverse ethnic groupings. Nevertheless, all had a traditional inclination to organise themselves into fraternal societies or triads to which they gave their primary loyalty. Administering this diverse Chinese population required a separate department of government, known as the ‘Chinese Protectorate’. The head of this department, ‘Secretary for Chinese Affairs’, an MCS official, sat on the Executive and Legislative Councils of both the Colony and the Federal Council. At first the Chinese were allowed to manage their own educational systems, in Chinese Languages or English, but this came to be seen to be a flawed policy enabling the Chinese leaders to control the content of the curriculum for their own propaganda.¹¹⁷ Much later it was realised that some of these schools had become breeding grounds for the promotion of communist ideology. The Chinese Protectorate department claimed that it ‘needed every scrap of advice and assistance it could get, for not only did Chinese affairs frequently assume all aspects of an empire within an empire but also of anarchy within that empire’.¹¹⁸ Conversely, most Indians were effectively subjects of the rubber estates on which they laboured; their children received Indian language education untainted by any such political motives.

Thus with most Malays in villages, Chinese in towns and Indians on plantations, the various ethnic groups basically lived in their own neighbourhoods, followed different occupations, practiced their own religions, spoke their own languages, and operated their own schools. Such separation of the communities made the emergence of nationalism, in the sense of a pan-ethnic movement highly unlikely. The racial divisions, intentional or not, almost

¹¹⁶ Heussler. *British Rule in Malaya*. In 1921 the Administration began to recruit Malay candidates direct from leading Colleges in Malaya. p 278.

¹¹⁷ Jones, S. *Public Administration in Malaya*. p103.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*.

entirely avoided the rise of a united anti-colonial sentiment which many other Western colonies in Asia endured before the Second World War.¹¹⁹

In summary, most Malays tended to be loyal to their particular state and sultan. Clan, dialect, and a growing commitment to either the Kuomintang or the communists of China divided the Chinese. The Indians maintained their allegiance with their homeland and saw their existence in Malaya purely in terms of work opportunity. Nevertheless, relations between the races were generally good. The Malays welcomed the protecting presence of the British partly because they had a concealed but increasing anxiety about the growing Chinese presence. However, this multinational arrangement while superficially satisfactory had a fundamental and important flaw. There was no common bond of love of country uniting these disparate communities.

A Colonial Situation

On the eve of the Second World War, Malaya was rich both financially and in mineral wealth, a colony efficiently run and with the brightest prospects. The profits from its successful exports were reinvested in the country's infrastructure. Malaya had a better road network than any other country in the Empire, and a railway system that was extensive and expanding.¹²⁰ All the services necessary for the country's health and efficient management were in place, hospitals, schools, telecommunications, banking, post, transport, judiciary, police, agricultural, fisheries and forestry commissions. During the pre-war period, the administration of British Malaya allied with the healthy economy made for a contented people with no discernable evidence of dissatisfaction with the existing form of government. The British authorities were confident in declaring that in Malaya 'good government was preferred to self-government.'¹²¹ Even so, the nature of the colonial economy and its mixed society meant the administration always had to be alert for potential domestic strife. Strikes by workers for better working conditions and higher wages were not unusual. More worrying however, the rise of discontented Chinese believing that communism was a better form of government than democracy. There was also the problem of their engaging in habitual gang wars. While not unduly threatening, these activities caused occasional disturbances that disrupted the country's economy.

¹¹⁹ Maxwell. *Civil Defence of Malaya*. Pp 83-87.

¹²⁰ By 1941 Malaya had 6500 to 8000 kilometres of metalled roads, "generally admitted to be among the best in the world", and 1600 kilometres of railway which linked Malaya with Siam. The causeway linking Singapore with Johore, was built in 1923. *China Station Colonial Intelligence Report*, June 1941, Vol, 3, p 11-12. Also WO 33/1834. NA

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p 78-80.

Labour unrest had existed in varying degrees since the Depression of the early 1930s. Beforehand, from 1911 to 1931, the government encouraged unrestricted immigration from India, China and the Netherlands East Indies to provide much-needed workers for the booming tin and rubber industries. When world prices in these commodities fell during the depression of the early 1930's, the government favoured the repatriation of alien labour. A restricted immigration law came into force from 1931. The new law left them vulnerable to the corruption of ruthless Chinese gang bosses able to prey not only on their desperation for work, but also to avoid returning to the starvation and population pressure in the provinces of Kwangtung, Fukien, and Kwangsi from which many labourers came. These same provinces however, were also the stronghold of the Kuomintang and the scene of anti-British boycotts and the immigrants brought their political values with them to Malaya. So concerned was the government that in 1927 it was forced to introduce an ordinance which provided for the deportation of undesirables. Later in 1931, while officially declaring the Kuomintang party illegal, in fact its curbed behaviour was tolerated during most of the 1930's.¹²²

The first disturbances occurred among the Chinese labourers as the depression began to recede commodity prices began to rise and they felt they were not sharing in the returning prosperity. In 1936, there was a serious strike among the tin-miners from the 'Hong Fatt' mine in Selangor, which prevented operations for several days. Then both the Indian and Chinese employees of the Singapore Traction Company struck for higher wages and shorter working hours. This event turned out to be the longest and most serious strike in Malaya's history. In 1937, the largest known strikes in Malaya involving thousands of Chinese rubber tappers took place in Selangor; and in 1938 and 1939 a further series of serious strikes occurred. In late 1940, the Indian rubber tappers demonstrated their sympathy for the Chinese labourers and also came out on strike, even though they were better paid and had considerably better working conditions.¹²³

British officials in Malaya were becoming increasingly concerned at the growth of radical ideas, especially those that threatened the socioeconomic framework on which the colonial government rested. Their primary focus was on the Chinese community where the government's abandonment of responsibility for the education of the Chinese labour force was a major contribution to the propagation of left wing ideas. These developments, strikes and anti-colonial May Day rallies in 1940, provoked a strong reaction from the authorities, and in July more than 200 communist leaders in Singapore and Malaya were arrested. The

¹²² Purcell. *The Chinese in Malaya*. p 216-217.

¹²³ Ibid.

colonial authorities in London were so concerned at the effect of the strikes on the vital production of rubber and tin that they suggested sending out a trained union official to examine the situation and advise on the introduction of the procedures of negotiation and arbitration. Perhaps inevitably, the ‘Government shied off this radical experiment and unwisely rejected this suggestion from the Colonial Office...’¹²⁴

An important aspect of this period of civil and industrial unrest was the successful employment of the Police force to meet and contain many of the more violent demonstrations. The ordinary police officers were mainly Malays and Sikhs; the detective branch was largely Chinese with a few Indians. They were well trained and led by predominantly European officers. The containment of some volatile and potentially explosive incidents earned them general admiration from not only the public but also the approval of the strikers themselves. In the process, they accumulated considerable intelligence about the subversive elements, mainly among the Chinese community, who were using the industrial disputes to foment and spread communist doctrine. In summary, the internal industrial unrest and the nascent attempt to spread communist doctrine were no more than symptoms of disaffection; they did not indicate an attempt to create a subversive fifth column. They were however a worrying and inconvenient distraction at this time.

Civil Servants and the Administration of Defence under Shenton Thomas, 1934-1942

Sir Shenton Thomas was the senior government official during this time ¹²⁵ and his arrival in the appointment was generally greeted as a welcome antidote to his predecessor Sir Cecil Clementi, a notable sinologist and previously Governor of Hong Kong. Clementi had not been popular because of his reforming zeal. He was of the school that advocated devolution of power from Kuala Lumpur, aiming to unify the country with Malays taking greater responsibility for government. He proposed a Pan-Malayan Union. ‘Opposition was vehement. The Colony objected strongly to a proposal which swept away its foundation of free trade; the Unfederated refused to lie down with the Federated States’.¹²⁶ His consistent and inflexible promotion of this ideal was to be his downfall and in 1934, after only four

¹²⁴ CO 273/662/10. See also Jones, S. *Public Administration in Malaya*. p 72. It is of interest to note that this proposal in 1940 was made at the time when the author Stanley Jones was the Acting Governor (AOG) and presumably had some influence on the decision to refuse. The matter of Labour Unrest was also raised with Shenton Thomas when he visited the Colonial Office during his leave and in a file note of his visit it records “S Thomas expressed himself as very much in favour of Trade Union experts visiting Malaya unofficially and informally” CO/273/662/10. NA

¹²⁵To give him his full title; His Excellency Sir Thomas Shenton Whitelegge Thomas KCMG, Governor and Commander in Chief of the Straits Settlements and their Dependencies, His Majesty’s High Commissioner for the Malay States and Brunei, and British Agency for Sarawak and the States of North Borneo.

¹²⁶ Jones. *Public Administration in Malaya*. p.89.

years in post, he was replaced by Thomas. The Colonial Office 'confident of their ability to rule well, they also felt that self-government for a society so obviously divided on ethnic lines would be a disservice to the Malayan peoples'.¹²⁷

Thoroughly briefed by the Colonial Office Thomas stayed well away from questions of self-government and the initial impression he gave was that he was there to learn and that he would take his time before making any comment. The business community found him approachable, friendly and sound.¹²⁸ When he assumed the appointment in 1934, he was 55 years old and supposed it to be his last career appointment before retiring at 60. However, he was surprised and pleased when asked in 1939 to extend his service. Britain then at war with Nazi Germany the Colonial Office decided a change at that point was not desirable. When Japan invaded Malaya in late 1941, Thomas was nearly 63 years of age. Many observers have described him as an affable, sociable person, solid, imperturbable and unimaginative who rose to the position he held not through outstanding ability but because of long and conscientious service.¹²⁹ Later, however, Thomas drew opprobrium for what was described as less than total commitment to the country. He showed little apparent personal incentive to plant deep roots for himself in Malaya or to gain a profound understanding of the local terrain. Early in the job, he made a visible effort to visit and acquaint himself with the region, the country its peoples and their rulers, albeit he travelled in great style and comfort, but he never took the trouble to learn Malay, recognisably not a difficult language. He thus lost some of his standing with senior Malays by always having to rely on interpreters and perhaps, in a way, indicating that he had no more than a superficial and temporary commitment to the country. It was also noticed that after his initial foray, he rarely made the effort to visit outlying rulers. He was, however, comfortable with his staff of Civil Servants who held the many senior administrative appointments.

However, in a little known and rarely mentioned episode, he showed a disconcerting lack of judgement, which exposed a surprising lack of integrity. In 1938, he was confronted with a serious accusation of corruption within the Magistracy of the FMS. One of his colleagues, Sir Roger Hall, after a brief time in the position of Chief Justice to the Federated Malay States, asked to resign because he could not serve as the head of a legal system that was so venal, incompetent, and extensively corrupt. Thomas persuaded him not to resign but

¹²⁷ Stockwell, Anthony. *British Imperial Policy and Decolonisation in Malaya 1942-52*. Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History Vol. XIII Oct 1984.

¹²⁸ Heussler. *British Rule in Malaya*. p 252-253.

¹²⁹ Morrison, Ian. *Malayan Postscript*. Faber & Faber, London. 1942. p 157. Morrison was the accredited London Times reporter in Singapore throughout the campaign.

instead to examine and report on the whole system of justice in the FMS. Hall's account "Report of the Chief Justice into Allegations of Incompetency and Corruption in the Magistracy of the FMS"¹³⁰ was a damning indictment of a legal system not only riddled with corruption but also presided over by many unqualified magistrates. So shocking was the report, Thomas suppressed it. A year later, the Colonial Office heard of its existence because Hall - who had anyway resigned from Malaya - brought up the subject while visiting London in a conversation with the Legal department at the CO. Sir Grattan Bushe, the head Legal Adviser, then challenged Thomas about the existence of the report. The Governor disparaged the document and claimed that in any case "it was a secret report for the Governor's information and was strictly confidential".¹³¹ Bushe was astonished at this comment and rebuked Thomas reminding him that nothing in Colonial Territories should be withheld from the CO. Further, in an internal memo Bushe said '...in my view a Governor who hides from the Secretary of State such grave events as these, is doing the Colonial Office a gross disservice.'¹³² Thomas's withholding information and dismissing bad news was a character defect that was to manifest itself again in the more serious circumstances of wartime Malaya.

As noted, the business of administration in Malaya was a slow and indirect process that characterized Thomas' administration even after the outbreak of war in Europe. At a meeting of the Legislative Council in Singapore on 16 October 1939, Shenton Thomas made a lengthy address to the chamber and among other things said :-

When I addressed you at the Budget Meeting of last year I was able to give expression to the relief we all felt at being spared the horrors of war and the hope that we might be blessed with real enduring peace. That hope has not been fulfilled. Great Britain is once again at war, fighting for the freedom of the world from Nazi domination. In this, she has the full support of the British Empire which, as in 1914, has placed its whole resources at the disposal of the Mother Country in her hour of need. We know that victory will be ours...

Here in Malaya our duty is clear. Last year this country set an example to the Colonial Empire in its contributions to Imperial defence. The Colony of the Straits Settlements alone made a free-will offering of one million pounds, and decided to increase its annual contribution by \$2 million for a period of five years. Most of the Malay States gave according to their means and I felt very proud that I should be [the] channel through which these voluntary tokens of loyalty were communicated to the Secretary of State...¹³³

¹³⁰ CO 967/73. NA

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Proceedings of Legislative Council meeting 16 Oct 1939. Govt Printing Office, Singapore, 1940

This comment and others throughout his speech underlines the difference between his authority over the Straits Settlements and his lesser influence in the Malay States. In the same address, he took the opportunity to raise a number of civil defence matters and warn about likely future food controls and the possibility of increased training for military volunteers. Further demonstrating the separation of thought and deed between the administrations, he explained that a system of broadcasts had been arranged for keeping the people informed by means of loud speakers. They would be placed in the most thickly populated areas of Singapore. Pointedly he spoke only of Singapore, not even the other members of the Straits Settlements let alone the FMS and the UMS.¹³⁴

All military matters and particularly those relating to the defence of Singapore and Malaya during the inter-war years was the domain of the Armed Services. Although the government was not involved in the minutiae of tactical details, the Governor was fully informed of the detailed strategy and military intentions. Until the possibility of war loomed larger, the civil authorities were content to leave in place the conventional arrangements for frequent scrutiny of the nation's defensive plans, to the GOC. He controlled these reviews through a number of sub-committees, which assumed responsibility for various aspects of the scheme. Representatives of the other two Services and civil servants were appointed there where it was appropriate. One body dealt with the supply of food for the population of Malaya during war. In August 1938, taking note of the changing international scene, Thomas, prompted by his staff, decided that emergency food supplies should be the subject of a separate study. He nominated a senior civil servant, C. A. Vlieland a man with twenty-six years' service in Malaya, to undertake this task. Vlieland had never served in the armed forces but had a keen interest in military affairs and military strategy. Quite rightly, as part of his investigation, he examined the extant defensive plan. He concluded first that the defence plan was deficient in its scope and second, that the existing Defence Committee should be reconstituted to include greater civilian representation. In a Memoir he wrote after he left Singapore, he recorded: -

Up to the end of 1938 the defence organisation in Malaya consisted of a Defence Committee with a set of sub-committees for various aspects of planning preparedness – food supply, transport, medical, A.R.P. Man-power etc. The Army was overwhelmingly represented on all of these and exercised practically the sole initiative. The GSO 3 at Fort Canning was the secretary of the Committee and a member of most of the sub-committees and his office was the only centre resembling a defence secretariat. No one with experience of committee organisations will need telling how such an

¹³⁴ Ibid.

organisation would work. It would I think not be unfair to say that the naval representatives were not much interested, the RAF was disgusted with the whole setup and busy civilian administrators, engineers, doctors and policemen regarded their duties on the various committees as a tiresome and time wasting chore.¹³⁵

In response to Vlieland's report, at the end of 1938, Thomas brought together a number of the uncoordinated sub-committees, under the direction and control of the Secretary for Defence, Malaya, a new office to which Vlieland was appointed. As Thomas described it, the job 'was, in effect, the defence branch of the Colonial and Federal Secretariats and the High Commissioners Office, and focused and co-ordinated civil defence policy and practice throughout Malaya.'¹³⁶ The Governor, as Commander-in-Chief, decided it was appropriate that he should be Chairman of this new Defence Committee and defined his task as that of considering questions affecting the fighting Services and the civil defence departments, although, as noted, nothing in his previous career had prepared him to preside over such a committee. The heads of the three Services were all now members, which was a sensible adaptation; previously the Navy and RAF Commanders relied on briefings from their subordinate representatives on the various sub-committees. In the case of the Air Commander, he positively welcomed the change as it gave him and his Service a much greater say in the formulation of policy. In due course, the Committee was increased to include three unofficial members of the Legislative and Federal Councils. The Commander-in-Chief, Far East, and the Commander-in-Chief Far East Fleet, at their own request, were not substantive members but had an open invitation to attend, which they invariably did. When war broke out in Europe, the Governor changed the title 'Defence' to 'War Committee'. It met at irregular intervals at the discretion of the Chairman when he believed or was persuaded that there were enough serious matters calling for attention. However, while the committee was empowered to discuss questions affecting the Services and the civil defence departments, it had no executive function. In matters relating to defence in the Malay states, the Defence Secretary was authorized to deal direct with the British Resident or Advisor in each of the states who in turn, and taking account of Vlieland's guidance, had authority to make decisions on behalf of the state. The War Committee had no agenda and kept no minutes.

As noted previously (Chapter 1), this unusual and un-professional arrangement astonished Brooke-Popham and provoked him to insist that records be kept, much to the

¹³⁵ Vlieland unpublished Memoir *Disaster in the Far East*. Vlieland 3.2.5.LHCMA.

¹³⁶ Thomas Papers.

irritation of the civil servants. Because earlier meetings were not documented there is no record of matters discussed or decisions taken. The gatherings were fractious and unproductive. To add to Brooke-Popham's exasperation he found Vlieland's unhurried response to implementing committee decisions maddening 'He [Vlieland] seems to have established procrastination as a fine art...' ¹³⁷

In April 1940, Thomas left Singapore for England for his due entitlement of home leave. This decision was at the time and subsequently, strongly criticised as bordering on irresponsible in view of the escalating war in the West and the growing Japanese threat in East Asia. He left the affairs of government in the hands of his deputy Stanley Jones, the Colonial Secretary, who became *in situ* the 'Officer Administering the Government' (OAG). Jones, a long serving officer in the MCS, has been described by a colleague, Hugh Bryson, as 'a dour type who found it hard to admit himself wrong; blunt and plain spoken.... Jones was either complacent at best or defeatist at worst'. ¹³⁸ In the event, 1940 proved to be a critical year both on the domestic scene and in terms of military and civil defence preparations. Decisions made during this period had far-reaching effects on later events and resolutions, that subsequent commanders could only change with great difficulty. In general, those in charge had to live with.

The senior figures in both the civil and military organizations (the military commanders at this time were Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Lionel Bond, Air Vice-Marshal Babington and Admiral Sir Percy Noble), were ill-assorted, frequently disagreeing with each other and on a number of major issues quite incompatible. Vlieland's relationship with the military was especially abrasive. It is claimed by some that his elevation to the appointment of Secretary for Defence with direct and unfiltered access to the Governor bred in Vlieland a touch of megalomania. ¹³⁹ He treated most senior military officers with disdain and believed that he was their intellectual superior. On his departure Thomas did not help matters by saying to his Secretary for Defence "Remember Vlieland, I rely on you to hold the fort while I am away and not let Bond get away with it. Jones knows very little of the defence side, and you'll have to keep him straight". ¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Brooke-Popham Papers, 6/2/3 of 5 Dec 1940. IWM.

¹³⁸ Bryson, Hugh, private papers. Royal Commonwealth Society Library. Cambridge University Library

¹³⁹ Allen, L. *Singapore 1941-1942*, Associated University Presses, Inc. N. J. USA 1977. pp. 225-246. See also Kirby *Chain of Disaster* p. 52. and *passim*.

¹⁴⁰ Vlieland *Disaster* *op. cit.* p.26. [Jones by virtue of his appointment as OAG was chairman of the War Committee arguably a position requiring an intimate knowledge of the military situation]

Not long after Thomas left, Vlieland took it upon himself to compose an ‘Appreciation of the Defence of Malaya’, in July 1940.¹⁴¹ It was a well-presented, prescient and accurate forecast of how he anticipated the Japanese would invade Malaya even to the extent of identifying the very beaches on which they in fact landed and how he saw the campaign developing. It was intensely resented by the GOC as a gross intrusion into military affairs that were not his concern. Moreover, as the new GOC had only recently taken up his appointment and had fresh in his mind the War Office briefings that did not accord with the Vlieland appreciation, he was extremely offended by this interference. Their professional relationship started badly and did not recover. In addition, what soon became apparent to Bond, was that the ‘Appreciation’ was supportive of the Air Commander’s views of the defence of Malaya and this in turn led to the most fundamental disagreement between the two Commanders over the core concept of the defence plan. In his Memoir Vlieland records ¹⁴²: -

“It was clear from the first that General Bond’s briefing by the War Office, no less than his own point of view, were going to make things very difficult.....He clearly thought that my functions should be strictly confined to “civil defence” and that defence policy and military strategy were no concern of mine, or even the Governor. But worse than all this was that he told me specifically, at his first interview with me, that his orders were to defend Singapore and did not permit him to concern himself with the peninsula. All this was more than tiresome. ...Until Sir Shenton went on leave in April 1940 the balance of power in defence councils was secure. The Naval C-in-C was still in Hong Kong and the senior naval officer in Singapore gave no trouble. The Air C-in-C was wholeheartedly on the side of the Governor and myself, and determined upon the defence of all Malaya; and I had Sir Shenton behind and with me all the way”

This outburst written in 1944, when Vlieland had been removed from his appointment and was back in England, conveys the passion and conviction with which he saw his role as Secretary for Defence. It is a greatly inflated image of the task that he had described in the *Straits Times* newspaper of 30 December 1938 announcing his appointment. He detailed his duties as -

- Wartime censorship arrangements.
- Passive Air Raid precautions.
- Maintenance of Food Supplies.

¹⁴¹ Vlieland Papers. 3.3. LHCMA. It is in fact so accurate in its predictions that Ong Chit Chung in his book *Matador* disputes the validity of it being an original document. Ong considers it has the appearance of having been amended after the event and before he passed his personal papers to the Liddell Hart Centre at Kings College, London.

¹⁴² Ibid.

- Emergency transport organisations.
- Mobilisation of manpower for maintenance of essential services.
- Other social, economic and administrative readjustments, which are necessary in time of war.¹⁴³

The decisions of the War Committee applied unconditionally to the Straits Settlements but were offered as advice and guidance to the FMS and the UMS. In the case of the Federated States, it was safe to assume the decisions would be steered through the Federal Council by the Federal Secretary, Hugh Fraser. However, with the five Unfederated States, the British Adviser of each put the matter before the State Council for consideration and authorization. The process of gaining unison patently took time, but there was no alternative. To change the various constitutional arrangements would have required major legislation, endorsed by the Colonial Office, and then fought fiercely through the layers of administrative State resistance. There was a great reluctance to declare Martial Law in 1940, when the authorities were concerned to portray an image of confidence and reassure the nation there was no threat, (which most of them firmly believed it to be so, or certainly not a threat that could be dealt with), this was clearly not an option. Even later, when the country was on the verge of being overwhelmed, the British authorities could not agree among themselves to impose Martial Law.¹⁴⁴

The scattering and distance of the three Services Headquarters from each other and these in turn from central government almost certainly inhibited the growth of unity and integration. Government House was a very grand residence within its own generous park. It included a nine-hole golf course, was outside the city area and quite separate from other government departments, which were in a variety of buildings within Singapore city.

A Third Commander-in-Chief and a Minister Resident.

Sir Robert Brooke-Popham's mandate, as noted, was to co-ordinate the activities of the air and land forces. His area of responsibility stretched from Hong Kong to Singapore and included Burma. He was in post by the time Shenton Thomas returned from leave. Previously there was no overall commander of the three Services. The Directive given to Brooke-Popham was that only the General Officers Commanding Land and Air Forces, would be subordinate to him. Control of naval operations was to remain directly under the

¹⁴³ "The Straits Times" Friday 30th Dec 1938.

¹⁴⁴ It was the opinion of Percival that Martial Law should only be introduced when the government was no longer capable of maintaining law and order and had to turn to the military to restore it. And as this did not apply in Malaya it was unnecessary. Moreover he had no suitable senior officer available to take on the appointment of Military Governor. *The War in Malaya*. P. 180.

Commander-in-Chief, China Fleet. His task was primarily concerned with matters of major military policy and strategy. He was not to relieve his subordinate commanders of any of their administrative, financial or other normal command functions.¹⁴⁵

A year later it was becoming apparent in London that even with Brooke-Popham in place the conduct and co-ordination of government-military affairs in Singapore were not running smoothly, and an additional senior government official was needed. The authorities in London decided that a Minister of cabinet rank should go to Singapore and give advice on the situation. Duff Cooper was chosen. At that time he held the sinecure appointment of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Previously he had been Minister for Information in Churchill's wartime cabinet, a post from which he was removed. He arrived in Singapore in September 1941, and filed his first report the following month. As mentioned earlier, he was astonished that two Commanders-in-Chief, one for the Far East and one for China, lived side by side at the Naval Base at Singapore, which he considered neither practical nor convenient: and he was particularly vituperative about the pedantic, leisurely, lack of urgency that permeated government business.¹⁴⁶

Thomas resented the arrival of Duff Cooper and was offended the London authorities felt it necessary to appoint a 'Cabinet Minister Resident, Singapore'¹⁴⁷ He wrote:

"The news of Duff Cooper's appointment to the Far East had been received with little enthusiasm. He had not been successful as a Minister of Information and had been demoted to be Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. We felt we were being landed with a failure. We remembered Sir Stafford Cripps' description of him as a "petulant little pipsqueak"¹⁴⁸

It is probably fair to say, based on many written comments, that Duff Cooper did not relish his time in Singapore. He resented being away from London, by then the centre of international attention, and felt remote from his friends and his colleague Churchill. By his own admission, he missed the social scene in which he was acknowledged as a serial philanderer.¹⁴⁹ He was not in a frame of mind to confront the parochial, insular and to his mind petty bureaucracy clogging the machinery of government. Nevertheless, at this time of serious concern about Japanese aggressive expansionist behaviour, brutally frank honesty was called for together with major political surgery to jolt the inertia of the colonial government. Duff Cooper did not get on with Thomas, thought Brooke-Popham too old, and

¹⁴⁵ Kirby, *War with Japan*, pp 50

¹⁴⁶ NA, CAB/66/20/9 para 58. Duff Cooper, "Report by Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster."

¹⁴⁷ Churchill *Second World War* – Vol.III p 544.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Montgomery. *Shenton of Singapore*. p.77.

¹⁴⁹ Duff Cooper *Old Men Forget* passim.

out of his depth for the growing military threat facing Singapore and Malaya. His first report to London after a month of observation and regional visits was comprehensive and perceptive. His major observation was that the complex and varied London Offices of State administering British interests in S. E. Asia led to confusion and territorial conflict. He pointed out that the diplomatic or consular representatives at Tokyo, Chungking, Bangkok, Manila, Saigon, and Batavia reported to the Foreign Office, while the Governors of the Straits Settlements and Hong Kong, to the Colonial Office. Further the Governor of Burma referred to the Burma Office, while High Commissioners in Australia and New Zealand represented the Dominions Office but usually had a diplomatic officer on their staff who was appointed by the Foreign Office. To add to the complexity he added,

The Governor of the Straits Settlements was also High Commissioner for Malaya, and Malaya was composed of a Crown Colony, of a Federation of Malay States and of group of Unfederated States, each of these three elements differing from the others in method of government and in other important respects. Here existed a system under which four different types of official reported to and received orders from four different departments of State....and no effort was made to co-ordinate the activities of the officials or the policies of the departments concerned.¹⁵⁰

Looking at the future of the region, he foresaw it developing into a major world producer of industrial goods and an important provider of natural resources. To co-ordinate Britain's interests he recommended the creation of a Secretary of State for the Far East. In a separate private letter to Churchill, he suggested the former prime minister of Australia Sir Robert Menzies for this role. Churchill minuted at the bottom of the letter 'I am against Menzies; I think DC should be told to stay there and do it himself.'¹⁵¹ Duff Cooper's wife, Diana, who was with him in Singapore, anticipated this response believing that 'Winston will think Duff comfortably out of the way and offer him the post.'¹⁵² In the event, the proposal was made redundant by the Japanese invasion. Nevertheless, when the war began, he nevertheless volunteered to perform the co-ordinating duties suggested in his report 'pending the appointment of a successor'. In a reply from London, he was appointed 'Resident Minister at Singapore for Far Eastern Affairs'.¹⁵³

In addition to pointing out the anomaly of having two C-in-C's, Duff Cooper remarked on the unsatisfactory intelligence gathering and dissemination arrangements. The Far Eastern Combined Intelligence Bureau (FECB) which while performing most useful

¹⁵⁰ CAB/66/20/0. 29 Oct 1941. Duff Cooper Report

¹⁵¹ Prem. 3/155. fol.94 WSC note, 29 Nov 41 NA.

¹⁵² Charmley, John. *Duff Cooper*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. London 1986. p.159

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

work, had a serious flaw in that it lacked a civilian branch, there was a danger of the political, diplomatic and economic value of information not being correctly estimated. Moreover, because the Bureau had individuals reporting to different government departments ‘working independently of one another and sometimes in ignorance of each other’s action, [it] could not be expected to produce entirely satisfactory results’. Further, on duplication of effort, Duff Cooper reported, ‘I was distressed to learn that the representative of my former Department, the Ministry of Information, was engaged on precisely similar work to that of a representative of the Ministry of Economic Warfare. Two officials in fact engaged on the same task were reporting to two different departments in London.’¹⁵⁴

He was also scornful that a useful and important Services Public Relations Office, which was sensibly set up at the behest of Brooke-Popham, was placed in the hands of a retired Naval Commander who had spent the previous twenty years as a Magistrate in Fiji. The press correspondents found him obstinate and quite out of his depth. One of his female staff, Anne Kennaway, remarked in her book *Journey by Candlelight*. ‘The Commander was right when he said he had no experience of Public Relations ... He was totally unsuited to the job, knowing little of the press world and the correspondents were indignant at his lack of understanding.’¹⁵⁵ They complained of the severe censorship of their reports and of information being withheld from them. They were also contemptuous of material issued from GHQ dismissing it as propaganda.

To allay fears among senior figures, Duff Cooper explained that the purpose of his new appointment was to give the Commanders-in-Chief political guidance and relieve them as far as possible of extraneous responsibilities so that they could give their full attention to the conduct of the campaign. Importantly, he was given the power to settle emergency matters on the spot when there was no time to refer to London and he could delegate to departmental officers authority to incur expenditure when he believed urgent action was necessary. In this role, he assumed Chairmanship of a newly formed ‘War Council’ replacing Shenton Thomas’s local ‘War Committee’, and while it was ostensibly a forum for the whole of the Far East Theatre, the majority of its agenda addressed only the immediate local problems. He also took control of the affairs of civil defence forming a Civil Defence Committee. Membership of the new War Council was extended to include Sir George Sansom (Director of Publicity) and Mr V. G. Bowden representing the Australian

¹⁵⁴ CAB/66/20/0.29 Oct 1941. NA.

¹⁵⁵ Kennaway. Anne...*Journey by Candlelight*. Pentland Press Ltd. London 1999. p.48.

government and, if he wished to attend, Major General Gordon Bennett, the commander of the 8th Australian Division.

The formation of the new War Council was not unanimously welcomed, Brooke-Popham fought hard against its creation. In a secret and personal letter to Prime Minister Churchill, Duff Cooper said; -

The Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, is one of those people who find it quite impossible to adjust their minds to war conditions. He is also the mouthpiece of the last person he speaks to. When I informed him of my appointment he professed himself delighted, welcomed the idea of a War Council and was most helpful at the first meeting which we held the same afternoon. That evening he dined with Sir Robert Brooke-Popham and at the meeting next morning he supported the latter's attitude in contesting the need for a War Council, and produced stronger arguments against it than Sir R. Brooke-Popham could produce himself.¹⁵⁶

In this same letter, Duff Cooper took the opportunity to give vent to his personal jaundiced opinions of the leading figures in Singapore; he claimed that Brooke-Popham 'is a very much older man than his years warrant and sometimes seems on the verge of collapse'. Regarding Thomas, 'the Governor is very much influenced by his Colonial Secretary, a sinister figure called Stanley Jones who is universally detested in the Colony, where he is accused of having been defeatist since the beginning of the war'. Regarding General Percival, the GOC, 'is a nice good man who began life as a schoolmaster. I am sometimes tempted to wish he had remained one'.¹⁵⁷ He then asked for Churchill's permission to sack Stanley Jones and replace him with the 'admirable' Federal Secretary from Kuala Lumpur, Hugh Fraser.

In the critical period leading to the outbreak of war, there was not only a cumbersome bureaucratic system of governance but also serious dissension, and debilitating jealousy among and between both the leading civil and military figures responsible for the safety of the country. The discord inexorably led to a fundamental dispute about preparations, both civil and military, to meet the growing and increasingly obvious conflict ahead. By December 1940, there was a Secretary for Defence, Vlieland, disagreeing to the point of obstruction with the Army commander about the basic concept of the defensive plans. The Air Commander agreeing with Vlieland and barely on speaking terms with the Army Commander. An Acting head of Government, Jones (OAG), quite remote and almost

¹⁵⁶.CAB 967/77. 18 Dec 41. NA.

¹⁵⁷ Percival was never a schoolmaster. Before Joining the army in WW I he worked in the city of London. However Shenton Thomas was a school master before joining the Colonial Service. See Montgomery "*Shenton of Singapore*" p 18.

disinterested in military affairs. An elderly Commander-in-Chief, (Brooke-Popham), burdened with an impossibly large parish, and an old-fashioned unsure touch towards its military problems. An ethnically divided population, not fully aware of the threat to its existence and quite unprepared for the rigours of war.

By the middle of 1941, Vlieland, the Army Commander (Bond), and the Air Commander (Babington) had all been replaced; a Resident Minister for Singapore had been appointed and the Commander-in-Chief had been told he was to be relieved of his appointment. In addition, on Duff Cooper's recommendation, Stanley Jones, had been removed from the important and senior appointment of Colonial Secretary. Hugh Fraser the Federal Secretary from Kuala Lumpur replaced him.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IMPRECISE BATTLE PLAN.

The naval base at Singapore became the focus of British strategic military planning in the Far East even before its completion in 1938. What is often overlooked but of no less significance, was the fact that the island was also the seat of the Governor and centre of British power in the area. Together these two criteria made the island's protection of paramount importance. It is surprising therefore, that both the civil and military authorities in London did not, from the beginning, work together on formulating a common *modus operandi* that would have made the formulation of joint plans a lot easier. As it was, there were rudimentary differences between the government and the military in Singapore on the basic question of how serious was the threat to their region. Each had a different perception of the Japanese threat, which in turn determined what they considered priorities. As we know, in early 1940, the Governor was instructed, unequivocally, to direct all of Malaya's civil energy to the production of rubber and tin: not only because they were vital commodities of war, but also for the foreign exchange these products generated. The military, on the other hand, were there to defend the naval base against a possible Japanese attack, and to this end needed not only all practical civil support possible, but also the country to be made fully aware both of the lurking danger and be put on a war footing - with all the manpower, preparations and training this entailed. The Governor saw such a course as alarmist, and certainly counterproductive, because he believed it would affect the morale of the people, which in turn would prejudice the country's industrial effort.

This was the background to the defensive plan, which the military staff attempted to draw up. These complex deliberations were made more difficult by the serious shortage of vital military manpower and equipment.

The Strategic Importance of Singapore.

Singapore rose to strategic prominence when Great Britain examined its global commitments in relation to its military capabilities in the wake of the First World War. A significant factor when considering the Far East was that Britain was not comfortable with Japan's post-war expansionist behaviour. Even though Japan had been an ally of the west during the war, indeed Britain had signed an Anglo-Japanese Agreement with Japan in 1902, senior British military Chiefs concluded that Japan's aggressive tendencies posed a threat to its eastern trade routes and her Dominions in the southern Pacific. The chief purpose of which was to 'maintain the status quo in the extreme East and that the two governments were

entirely uninfluenced by any aggressive tendencies.’¹⁵⁸ However, in succeeding decades, Japan’s behaviour appeared to ignore the principle of this covenant. Most noticeable was the significant increase in the size of its navy and an obvious intent upon an expansionist policy. A perceptible change in the international balance of naval power had taken place; the United Kingdom had ceased to be the supreme global naval force. The United States now matched the tonnage of Britain’s High Seas fleet and Japan was not far behind. After its devastating wartime expenditure, Britain was in no position to embark on a shipbuilding programme in order to retain her naval supremacy. In any case, America was concerned about Britain’s continuing desire for naval dominance and were also strongly opposed to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance still in existence. Furthermore, Japanese naval power was clearly on the increase particularly in the Pacific region. To address these concerns the United States called a conference in November 1921 in Washington. The result was the Washington Naval Treaty, signed in February 1922 by Great Britain, the United States, Japan, France and Italy. Its main feature was a restriction on the size of the three major powers capital ships (United States, Britain and Japan). The proposal was for a 5:5:3 ratio with a total tonnage of 500,000 each for America and Britain and 300,000 for Japan. Italy and France agreed to 175,000 tons each. Also incorporated in the Treaty was the agreement that the three major powers’ would not build any new fortifications or naval bases in the Pacific area east of longitude 110 degrees, thus excluding Singapore. In addition under United States pressure Britain undertook not to renew its Alliance with Japan when the agreement ran out in 1923. Churchill noted: “It is with great sorrow that in 1920 I became party to the ending of our alliance with Japan from which we had both derived strength and advantage. But as we had to choose between Japanese and American friendship I had no doubt what our course should be.”¹⁵⁹

In the light of the limitations of the Washington Treaty and of the changing political Far East scene, Britain sought to strengthen its position in the region. In 1922, the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) came to the conclusion that ideally Britain required a sizeable naval deterrent in Pacific waters. However, the country’s financial impoverishment made it impossible to maintain a fleet in both Home Waters and the Far East. The CID’s answer was to establish a naval base in South East Asia to which the fleet could sail and harbour if the need arose. At this point, the CID lacked anyone with a vision to foresee what might happen if there were simultaneous threats at home and abroad. Following an exhaustive and wide study about possible locations for such a base, the Admiralty decided

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in Leason, J. *Singapore the Battle that Changed the World*, House of Stratus, London, 1968. p.62

¹⁵⁹ Churchill *History of the Second World War* Vol IV p 580.

that Singapore was best suited both geographically and strategically. After a number of false starts, due mainly to the anticipated cost's and the vacillating opinion of changing UK governments, the project did not finally get under way until 1926. A portent of future civil/military relations arose in 1927, when a War Office Committee visited the site and learnt that the Government of The Straits Settlements was unwilling to make land available for military purposes without an assurance that no part of the cost would fall on the civil community.¹⁶⁰

How to defend the base was a major factor in the plans for its construction. When considering the lengthy, acrimonious and opposing strategic views, which erupted, it is well to remember that ultimately the sole objective then was to protect the Naval Base in Singapore from any attack. In turn, this meant defending Singapore Island. The base could not be defended, like some ancient citadel. If Singapore fell, the base fell: the debate revolved around how best to defend it. The earliest plans of the 1920s concluded that the most likely danger would be an assault from the seas and to counter such an attempt large, expensive guns were installed that could engage an enemy fleet at a range of 20 miles. However, over the following decade the changing face of battle altered the scenario. Giant technological advances in all the paraphernalia of war, weapons, tanks, aircraft, ships, landing craft, changed the ground rules. A reappraisal of the defensive plan was essential. The topography (and climate) of the Malay Peninsula now featured prominently in all planning. These features were also to have a significant bearing on both the changing emphasis of the defensive plan and the likely conduct of a campaign.

The Topography¹⁶¹

It is essential to have the lie of the land in the Malay Peninsula in order to understand the military's options, and the obstacles that presented themselves. The long, narrow and rugged Malay Peninsula is nearly 500 miles long, north to south, and across the bulge in the middle, it is about 250 miles wide. It is some 50,000 square miles in area and often compared in size to England and Wales with the Isle of Wight equating to Singapore at its southern end. In 1940, the east coast was underdeveloped and sparsely populated except in the extreme north, and there was no continuous road along its length. But there was, for example, a road from Johore Bahru, the most southern town, along the southeast coast to Endau a distance of 104 miles, but here the road ended. And while there were vehicular tracks which in the dry

¹⁶⁰ Kirby, S. *The War Against Japan*, HMSO, p8

¹⁶¹ I have consulted the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Kirby, *Official History*. Chapter X. The Thomas Papers. RHL. Bird, *Golden Chersonese*, passim. Bastin & Winks, *Malaysia Selected Historical Readings*, passim and personal knowledge.

season could be used to continue north it was not until Kuala Terengganu, two thirds up the east coast, that another road was laid running 103 miles northwards to the most north-eastern town of Kota Bahru capital of the state of Kelantan. The only unbroken communications between Johore Bahru and Kelantan was the railway, which wound its way through the central massif.

On the west coast, which as predicted was strategically more significant, lay the major road communications, there were 585 miles of good vehicular roads running from Johore Bahru to the Thai frontier in northwest Malaya, and this western strip was intensely developed both agriculturally and commercially. There was also a good railway network on the western plain that ran all the way to Bangkok. In addition, a network of feeder roads covered the area. The road surfaces were of first-class tar-macadam and the network of roads altogether covered several thousand miles.¹⁶² The railways were efficient and sophisticated with restaurant cars and air-conditioned coaches. British engineers built the system, initially for the haulage of heavy mining material and the transport of tin ore to cargo ships for export.¹⁶³

Central Malaya consists of a mountainous range of densely covered jungle rising at its highest to over 7000 ft. Lateral communication was confined to three roads across this range. Rivers abound in Malaya but they are usually short and rapid and since the introduction of intensive tin mining, many of them have silted up. However, they were still an important means of travel, for local people living in the interior. Many of the west coast rivers are navigable to small steamers and their waters run into the Straits of Malacca. On the long open east coast, sandbanks bar the mouth of every river and the heavy breakers from the northeast monsoon are an obstacle for those approaching the beaches from the sea. It is these conditions, which persuaded early military planners that a sea assault here would be at best very hazardous.

Malaya's climate, as described by the Europeans who lived there, is enervating by its monotony rather than actually unhealthy. The weather is consistently hot, between 30 and 33 degrees centigrade, and all times of the year is rainy. While seasonal variations in the rest of the country are negligible, the east coast differs from the centre and the west with a monsoon season from November to March. The absence of bracing winds and the prevalence of great humidity tend to have a depressing effect, especially on Europeans.¹⁶⁴ In the days before air-

¹⁶² Thomas Papers. "*Malay's War Effort*". Mss.Ind.Ocn. s. 341.3/4. RHL.

¹⁶³ Ibid. See Also Maxwell *Civil Defence of Malaya*. p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ Thompson, V. *Postmortem*. Passim.

conditioning, this is an important factor. Major General Playfair, who became Chief of Staff to the C-in-C remarked

“I have been to Malaya twice before and knew it to be a place where, for various reasons, the tempers of busy people become easily frayed; where it seemed more natural to take offence than ‘to laugh it off’, and where criticism was more common than discretion.”¹⁶⁵

Apart from the coastal strips, which have been cleared and cultivated with rubber and rice, and the swamp areas and open tin mines, the remainder of the terrain is dense jungle. While the jungle is penetrable, physical endurance and exceptional navigational skills are needed. Movement is painstakingly slow and in military terms, only small compact parties can get through. The invading Japanese forces fully recognized the difficulties of jungle movement and confined their manoeuvres to rubber estate tracks, railway lines and accessible roads. Although the east coast consists almost entirely of open beaches with limited communications, early studies, nonetheless, recognised that the real danger spots were Singora, Patani, in Thailand, the Kelantan coast, Kuantan and Mersing: they had aerodromes. If the Japanese captured them it would greatly accelerate their operations.

Singapore Island itself consisted mostly of mangrove swamps and rubber plantations. The impressive Naval Base was on the northern shore facing the Straits of Johore. In the south lay the huge teeming metropolis, the City of Singapore. In 1941, the city was a mixture of old and new, of baroque beauty and uncontrolled squalor. Stately white Western buildings along broad avenues contrasted sharply with the low native houses in filthy crowded back streets. Three quarters of a million people lived in the city. Nearly 600,000 were Chinese, with Malays, Indians, Europeans and a broad mixture of other races making up a varied minority. The naval base built for £63,000,000 (1937 prices) covered an area of 21 square miles and had the capacity to shelter the entire British Fleet. There were two massive 50,000-ton graving docks and a huge floating dock, which by an outstanding feat of seamanship was towed out from England.

The dense tropical rain forests of the Peninsula were to have a defining effect on the course of the war in Malaya. Not only did the vegetation limit military manoeuvre, but also restricted the civilian refugees. The central massif further hindered the movement of people and supplies from one coast to the other. Military reinforcements had little time to acclimatise, to the debilitating tropical climate.

¹⁶⁵ WO 106/2620 Apr 1943. Playfair.Maj.Gen. “*Some Personal Reflections on Malayan Campaign.*” NA.

The Plan of Defence.

The earliest discussions on defending the Naval Base revealed strong disagreement between the Admiralty and the Air Ministry. In the early days, both Services agreed with the existing conviction that any attack on the base would come from the sea. The Admiralty favoured 15-inch guns and the Air Force torpedo-bombers. There were simply not enough funds to have both. The Air Force argued that air power was more efficient than traditional fixed defences and were also cheaper since air squadrons designated for Singapore could be used elsewhere until they were needed in the Far East. The Navy's response was that the planes might be busy elsewhere at the critical time and that it was much too risky not to have permanent protection in place. The debate continued until 1931 when, in the light of the worrying international scene, the Admiralty admitted it could not keep a deterrent size force in the area. It was suggested that in the event of a threat a 'relieving fleet' would sail from Home, but this would take time and without a permanent RAF presence on the island, there was a need for permanent fixed defences.

A 'period before relief', was the term used to describe the time estimated for the Navy to arrive. At first, this was calculated at 42 days. Based on this estimate, a less than convincing compromise was reached. The RAF would have primary responsibility for the defence of the Base until the fleet arrived, but with the qualification, that the aircraft and the infrastructure to support them should be permanent features and not transient groups rushed there in time of tension.¹⁶⁶ However, the only airfields in Malaya in the early 1930's were on the west coast and commercial. On Singapore Island, three RAF stations were under construction at Seletar, Sembawang and Tengah. To fulfil this new task, the RAF needed to extend the radius of both their reconnaissance and offensive capability against seaborne enemy forces approaching from the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea. This led to the requirement for three new airfields on the east coast of Malaya. A British government report (The Baldwin Committee Report)¹⁶⁷ stated that Air Ministry's logic was unconvincing and suggested that the relative merits of both Services defensive plans should be explored further. In the meantime, the Baldwin Committee recommended that the first stage of gun emplacements should go ahead.¹⁶⁸ In July 1935, following a further review, the Government relented and authorized work to begin on additional heavy gun emplacements and two airfields as part of the next phase of the construction. The Base was completed in February

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p15

¹⁶⁷ Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence presided over by Mr Stanley Baldwin.

¹⁶⁸ CAB 23/75 Cabinet Minutes 27(33) 5, 12 Apr 1933..NA.

1938 protected with five 15-inch guns, six 9.2-inch guns and eighteen 6-inch guns as well as secondary armament¹⁶⁹, all the guns were to be manned by the army. The gun emplacements were not in the Base itself but covered all the sea approaches to the island east and west including some located on neighbouring islets. Two 6-inch guns on the tip of southern Johore at Penggerang. All the fixed defences had armour-piercing shell, for use against ships, although a small proportion of shells, suitable for use against land targets were provided for the 9.2-inch and some of the 6-inch batteries. Many of the latter, however, had limited fields of fire.¹⁷⁰

In 1938, on completion of the Base there was still no definitive and unambiguous agreement among the Services about the best means of protecting it. The heated debate that began when construction was first underway continued. As time passed, the initial views about an invasion force approaching from the seas around Singapore was beginning to look less probable. In addition, even though in the growing debates there was an element of self-serving promotion of their own arm, both Navy and Air Force recognised that until a Fleet arrived, the RAF would need to hold the fort.

From Close Defence to Forward Defence

The plan that eventually evolved and was in place by 1941 went through a torturous metamorphosis. At its birth the predicted threat, in relative terms, was an uncomplicated sea assault on the island itself. As the threat matured, it became a hugely complex dispersal against sea born landings on scattered beaches. And some of these beaches were located in neighbouring and uncertain Thailand. The essential amendments to the plan were dictated largely by the technical advances in projecting military force over greater distances with enhanced military hardware to support them. The effect on defensive thinking was momentous. It meant transforming from close defence of Singapore Island to the vastly more challenging task of defending the base by deploying to the northern extremities of Malaya. The Governor and his Defence Secretary were involved in this debate because it affected their relations with the Malay states. The deployment of large numbers of military personnel in rural areas, even for civil defence measures, such as the selection and guarding of reserve food stores, still called for sensitive negotiations.

As commented previously, early discussions firmly dismissed the idea that a ground force could approach Singapore from the north through peninsula Malaya. The hostile terrain

¹⁶⁹ Kirby *The War Against Japan* p.374

¹⁷⁰ Kirby S. *Chain of Disaster*, p29.

and the undeveloped transport network was considered an intractable handicap.¹⁷¹ But during the lengthy gestation period of construction of the base (12 years) the rail and road infrastructure within Malaya improved remarkably and now there was the additional dimension of major advances in military technology and hardware. The British authorities vigilantly monitored the noticeably improving capabilities and military strength of Japan and concluded that while the threat remained the modus was changing. In 1937 fresh minds believed a sea borne invasion on the East coast of Malaya must not be discounted.¹⁷² The officer who challenged the entrenched perceptions and revolutionised thinking about the defence of the naval base was Major General Dobbie. In 1937, Dobbie became GOC Malaya. He was an officer with experience of combat and senior command. Commissioned into the Royal Engineers he served with great gallantry during the 1914-1918 war earning, among other decorations, a DSO. He was very religious, a devout Plymouth Brethren, and to the consternation of his staff would often call upon the Lord to endorse his military plans. After serving in Malaya he became Governor of Malta, an appointment he held with great distinction throughout its wartime siege.

Shortly after taking up his post he pointed out to the Air Officer Commanding that with the small peacetime army garrison at his disposal he was not in a position to protect the airfields the RAF were constructing on the east coast. Moreover, their location made them highly vulnerable to enemy landings, as they were so close to the seaboard. Dobbie decided a total reappraisal of the defence issues was essential, taking into account the restricted role intended for the army and importantly the Imperial Defence Committee recently declaring that it would now take 70 days for a Fleet to arrive after the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁷³ He also felt not enough notice was taken of the major advances in military technology and the increased range of aircraft. More than any of his predecessors, he demonstrated a keen awareness of emerging military technology and the fresh opportunities these developments created. To convince the doubters he arranged testing exercises to prove the validity of his beliefs: he assessed the practicability of landings from the sea on the east coast during the monsoon period, which the sceptics claimed was a most serious handicap for a beach assault.

¹⁷¹ Strabolgi, Lord. *Singapore and After: A study of the Pacific Campaign*. Hutchinson, London. 1942. p.50. Writing with hindsight Strabolgi (a naval officer) thought otherwise, "...the utterly false statement that the jungle country on the mainland to the north of the island was impenetrable. How intelligent men could have accepted this argument is a mystery."

¹⁷² WO 106/2441 8 Feb 1937. NA.

¹⁷³ COS Paper No.596, 14 Jun 1937 "*Far East Appreciation*". Prepared for the Imperial Conference. The COS nevertheless cautioned, even at this point, that 90 days was probably more realistic. COS Paper No. 848, 27 Feb 1939. By July 1939, the CO was warning the Governor that 180 days was more practical. CO to Governor of SS 22 July 1939. NA

He found not only was it perfectly possible to do so, but also that poor visibility could prove a major restriction for allied air reconnaissance, with the added difficulty that it would also reduce the efficiency of air attack on the enemy fleet.¹⁷⁴

In view of the fluctuating estimates from London about the length of the ‘period before relief’, Dobbie was convinced that the figures were hypothetical and that no sensible plan should be founded on this uncertainty.¹⁷⁵ It would be better to start from an assumption that the period could be indefinite and that consequently the Japanese would have a much better chance of success with a landward attack. Added to this was the noticeably impressive quality of Japanese military hardware and the possibility of Japanese air attacks from advanced air bases. Furthermore, there was the ambiguity about Thailand’s political position. In Dobbie’s judgment, the mixture of these key elements led him to the inescapable conclusion that the defence of Singapore meant the defence of the whole of Malaya.

This fundamental change of strategy meant, quite evidently, that additional troops were required on the mainland. Additionally, Dobbie made it very clear that Britain needed not only a large increase in air and ground forces but also stockpiles of stores, equipment and food to meet this contingency. His important and prophetic conclusions identified almost exactly the eventual course of the campaign. In his view the Japanese would first secure advanced air bases in Siam (sic) or Indo-China and would probably then land in Singora and Patani in southern Siam and at Kota Bahru in Malaya, although additional landings might subsequently be made at Kuantan and Mersing. The Japanese troops would then cross from east to west across the Isthmus of Kra and advance along the main roads and railways on the western side of Malaya to attack Singapore Island from the north. In his opinion, the defence of Singapore needed to extend to the defence of Johore and particular areas of northern Malaya.

This radical reassessment was endorsed by the other two Services, without much resistance.¹⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that Dobbie’s chief staff officer conducted this fresh ‘Appreciation’, Colonel Percival, who was later to be appointed GOC. The latter made an interesting comment on return to UK later in 1937 to take up a new appointment. General Sir John Dill, a future Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), asked Percival if Singapore was impregnable. He replied, “in my opinion, far from being impregnable it would be in

¹⁷⁴ Kirby, S. *The War Against Japan*, p15.

¹⁷⁵ Dobbie to Dill, DMO, letter CRMC 32845/G 16 Nov 1937. WO106/2441. NA.

¹⁷⁶ COS Paper No 596. 14 June 1937 “*Far East Appreciation*”, and CAB 16/182. NA

imminent danger if war broke out in the Far East unless there was an early realization in high places of the complete change in the problem of its defence which was then taking place.”¹⁷⁷

With this fresh view of the defence of the Naval Base, now supported by others, a series of probing assessments were initiated. These concluded that to meet this new focus of threat, and taking account of the terrain, the primary aim was how to prevent the enemy landing at all. Unquestionably, this required superior air and naval power. The army had the supporting yet considerable role of defending the airfields, the islands of Singapore and Penang, dealing with airborne landings, driving out any incursions, protecting the food resources, the rice growing areas and the main lines of communications. Once again, the conclusion was drawn that the main responsibility for the defence of Malaya would be in the hands of the Air Force.¹⁷⁸ Several obvious essentials emerged from this assessment. Primarily, a considerable increase in front line aircraft was vital; that the overall taskforce commander should be an Air Force officer; that a powerful fleet should sail for the area at the first signs of belligerence, and that the existing army garrison needed substantial enlargement to perform its new extensive and widely dispersed tasks. In response, General Dobbie started to organise defences in the southern area of Johore. Regrettably, this work soon had to stop because there were insufficient funds. He was authorised by London the modest sum of £60,000, for the construction of a series of machine gun blockhouses, which he had in mind. However, the British government was at least stimulated to authorize an increase of supplies for the Island to withstand - in a worst-case scenario - a siege of 180 days (6 months).

Before Dobbie's period as GOC ended in August 1939, he attended an Anglo-French senior military commander's conference in Singapore in June of that year. It was convened at the request of both governments. In February 1939 Japan had occupied Hainan Island and in March the Spratly Islands. For the first time, Thailand's political stance in the unfolding turmoil was openly discussed, with the group acknowledging that country's crucial geographical position in South East Asia. Dobbie pointed out the dangers if Japan gained control or even had Thai agreement to the use of the Isthmus of Kra. Besides their operations in Indo-China and Burma, the Japanese would be able to launch air attacks against Singapore from air bases within Thailand. They could threaten Malaya by land operations against Penang, on one side, and against the east coast of Malaya in the neighbourhood of Kota Bahru on the other. The delegation declared 'Every attempt, therefore, by Japan to increase her influence in Thailand must be countered ...any positive action by Japan in peace, such as

¹⁷⁷ Leasor, James. *Singapore, The Battle that Changed the World*. House of Stratus, 1968. p.129.

¹⁷⁸ Kirby. *War Against Japan*. p 29.

the dispatch of armed forces and military aircraft to Thailand, could only be regarded as an act of war against the Allies.¹⁷⁹ In addition, to ensure the security of Singapore the conference further endorsed the recommendation that British forces in Malaya should be quantified and increased— ‘by two infantry brigades and other units’. Thus, for the first time an international warning was sounded about the danger to northern Malaya of attack via the vulnerable region of the Kra isthmus. Now the theory of forward defence was considered as a counter to this threat. The three Service Heads jointly acknowledged this proposition and continued to debate the best means of meeting it. It is noteworthy that the defensive protection proposed concentrated almost exclusively, on whether the navy or the air force would be the most potent force to deal with the threat. The army had a peripheral role.

Refinements of the concept of ‘forward defence’ continued throughout the 1930’s and into 1940. During which time, Japan had become heavily embroiled in a war in China and her poor performance against the inferior Chinese forces became another factor in defence calculations. The Dominions of Australia and New Zealand concerned for their own safety followed closely the vacillating defence debate because Britain had long assured both nations that the Royal Navy would guard the seas around them. They did not become involved in the details of the protective measures; their concern was more that the naval base in time would harbour a fleet big enough to guard the southern Pacific.

Finally at this crucial stage all three service commanders agreed that more emphasis be placed on the prevention of an invading force ever reaching the coast of Malaya. Succeeding commanders during this period took up the debate refining and developing it. In the critical 1940 period, when Britain was at war with Nazi Germany, the Royal Navy knew emphatically that it would not be able to send any deterrent-sized fleet to the Far East. In any case, whatever the size of force, they would not be able to send it with any speed (a judgement that alarmed the Dominions). The responsibility for the security of the naval base and the defence of Malaya now lay firmly with the RAF. Discussions now concentrated on the question of the increased numbers of airplanes required, the particulars of forward airfields from which to fly, and the ground forces needed to defend those airfields. All of this assumed that the RAF appeal for additional aircraft would in due course, be fulfilled.

The GOC, who succeeded Dobbie in August 1939, was Major General Bond. He has been described as a man who, ‘..although of sterling worth and character ... lacking in personality, kept himself aloof and was inclined to exercise control from his office chair. He

¹⁷⁹ COS Paper No. 941. 11 Jul 1939. para 25. and CAB 53/52. Franco-British Conference, Singapore 1939. NA

seldom, if ever, studied his problems on the spot.¹⁸⁰ Immediately on his arrival, he reviewed and endorsed the findings of the Dobbie Appreciation and added further refinements of his own. Earlier that same year the Admiralty had again raised the official ‘Period before Relief’ from 70 to 90 days and more worryingly, in June 1939, before the outbreak of war in the west, also claimed that it was unlikely to be in a position to spare more than two capital ships for this task.¹⁸¹ Like his predecessor, Bond concluded that as the period before relief was becoming much longer than initial estimates and that the army was under pressure to extend its area of operations on a large scale he would need a substantial increase in the army garrison. Thus, he submitted a request to the War Office for his existing force to be significantly increased.¹⁸² He also took the opportunity to underline the signs from his intelligence sources indicating unusual Japanese interest in the area of the Kra Isthmus. The paucity of fighting forces to meet the possible new scenario also prompted the planning staff secretly to consider the firmly prohibited idea of pre-emptive action into southern Thailand. Bond calculated that such action, to forestall a Japanese move onto Malaya’s northern frontier, would require at least an additional two divisions.¹⁸³ He noted that there were some under strength local volunteer forces, but their training and equipment suited them only for static roles such as guarding installations. At this time the RAF strength was eight squadrons (four bomber, two torpedo-bomber and two flying-boat squadrons) a total of ninety aircraft. Crucially, there were no fighter aircraft and the torpedo-bombers were obsolescent. In February 1941, this number was augmented by a squadron from India, bringing the total to 158.¹⁸⁴ It was an insignificant improvement given the situation. The Air Officer Commanding assessed that these new circumstances required at least 566 aircraft, more than three times the number now in station.

The Government’s Role

Throughout this period of growing international tension and increasing concern, the Governor was fully aware about the level and uncertainty of defence preparations. Indeed, now that the defence of the naval base in Singapore entailed deploying sizeable military formations throughout peninsular Malaya, it was imperative that he know and assess the impact it would have on the community. However he was susceptible to the persuasions of Vlieland, his defence secretary, who openly agreed with Babington’s view; that the safety of

¹⁸⁰ Kirby, S, *Chain of Disaster*. p41.

¹⁸¹ SAC Paper No 4, 28 Feb 1939 “*The Despatch of a Fleet to the Far East*”. and CAB 16/209. NA

¹⁸² To at least three divisions, two tank battalions, two machine gun battalions and a pool of 20 per cent replacements. Bond to WO, letter WO 106/2440 and CRMC 37406/G 13 Apr 1940. NA.

¹⁸³ Ibid. In terms of battalions, the basic demand was an increase from the existing nine to thirty two battalions.

¹⁸⁴ Kirby. *War Against Japan* p.41

the country was almost entirely dependent on the air force and *per se* the army's task was to protect the airfields. On this matter, Thomas clashed with Bond in September 1939 when the army commander justly claimed that with the existing shortage of soldiers he simply did not have the military strength to defend Singapore and the airfields - in remote locations throughout the peninsula. To reinforce his point and in an attempt to relieve some of the immediate manpower shortage, Bond urged the Governor to consider mobilizing the Volunteer Forces and Thomas agreed. When Vlieland heard of this decision, he tried to persuade the Governor to change his mind. Vlieland's objection was that this proposal indicated premature panic and would adversely affect the country's morale. Besides the government had a clear economic instruction from London against such a move.¹⁸⁵

Such was Thomas's quandary and reluctance to give decisive leadership that he referred the matter to the Colonial Office. His despatch of January 1940¹⁸⁶ was not a balanced argument but made the case that while the GOC advocated conscription Thomas felt that such measures would adversely affect the production of rubber and tin which was his first priority. 'I conceive it to be our duty to give absolute priority to the claims of industry' he stated. In any case, the very organisation of the Volunteer Forces was unsound. Many of its members would need to be exempted from duties such as civil defence. Their essential role was protection of the nation's economy. Thomas added that in the absence of a fleet stationed at Singapore, a successful defence depended on the action of the RAF aided by any submarines and other naval vessels that might be on station. Therefore he advocated a large increase in the RAF garrison even if this was to be at the expense of the army garrison.¹⁸⁷ His views exactly mirrored those of Vlieland and Babington.

The Overseas Defence Committee (ODC), considered the Governor's despatch in March 1940 and they ruled that the economic contribution of Malaya was of the first importance. Any volunteer training should be of brief duration and training restricted to two periods, each of three weeks' duration. Thus no more than one third of the volunteers would be enlisted at any one time.¹⁸⁸ In addition, concerning Thomas's request for more aircraft, they replied '... there was in fact no immediate possibility of affecting such an increase that the governor had requested, or even of bringing the existing squadrons up to their wartime establishment.' Then added, incongruously, that they recognised the security of Singapore

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Papers. Vlieland correspondence. RHL

¹⁸⁶ Governor's despatch of 27 Jan 1940 included as Annex in "*Singapore: Defence Policy*" ODC Paper No.13, 28 Feb 1940. Also CAB 94/3. See also Kirby *Chain* pp 42-45.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ CAB 94/3. 8 Mar 1940. NA

was vital to the safety of the British Commonwealth in the Far East. Their decisions clearly do not reflect any grave concern.

The reply was heavily influenced by the Foreign Office, which also emphasised that the Governor's priority was trade. In their opinion, Japan had been at war for some three years and was in no position to embark upon adventures against distant British bases. In any case, Japan was in the throes of an internal political crisis.¹⁸⁹ Today it seems surprising that the military members of this committee who would certainly have been privy to the accumulating classified information indicating clearly Japanese expansionist intentions, allowed these comments to pass. It was the British Government's policy to avoid war with Japan at any cost, despite the latter's irrational behaviour. In the spring of 1940, Britain's forces were heavily engaged in a desperate struggle in Europe and in the Atlantic. France was showing all the signs of capitulation to the invading Germans and Italy was volatily openly courting Nazi Germany. Early British strategy assumed the support of France, particularly in containing the Italians in the Mediterranean, but as the clouds darkened, it was becoming obvious that Britain was likely to end up alone. It followed that another war in the Far East would be disastrous. The Chiefs of Staff gave a bleak appraisal about the situation, 'Our own commitments in Europe are so great that our policy must be directed towards the avoidance of open clash with Japan.'¹⁹⁰

The ODC's ruling added fuel to Bond's wrath. He decided to make his case direct to the War Office. In April 1940, he submitted to the Chiefs of Staff Committee his full Appreciation of the situation. Far from dismissing Japan's debilitating war with China, he saw it as providing the Japanese with invaluable experience in all the demands of war. He called attention to the fact there were now Japanese forces in Hainan, and that they had also made economic penetration into Thailand. It was now unanimously acknowledged that the Japanese could land at any time of the year on the east coast of Malaya. To add to this worrying scenario, the 'Period before Relief' was now officially lengthened to 180 days. Bond had to reiterate that the defence of Singapore now meant the defence of the whole of Malaya and that called for a substantial increase in ground forces. However, he charitably accepted that with war raging in Europe, military manpower would be a near impossibility. In the short-term the answer was to increase the size and striking power of the air force. It was clear that with the air force bearing the burden of responsibility, the commander in overall charge of the situation should be a senior RAF officer.

¹⁸⁹ ODC Paper No: 19.20 Mar 1940. NA

¹⁹⁰ CAB 66/10/33. 31 Jul 1940. NA

In June 1940, the Chiefs of Staff in London met to consider the Appreciation. For the first time they formally acknowledged ‘Owing to the increased range of aircraft and development of aerodromes, particularly in Thailand, we can no longer concentrate on defence of Singapore Island alone but must consider defence of Malaya as a whole, particularly security of up-country landing grounds’.¹⁹¹

It is important to remember that at the end of May and beginning of June 1940, the British Expeditionary Force was in the throes of its crucial withdrawal from the beaches of Dunkirk, and attention was concentrated on problems at the Home Front. Even so, information and intelligence from not only Malaya but also Hong Kong, Burma and growing concern expressed by Australia and New Zealand about conditions in the region, prompted the COS to call for a fresh review of the strategic situation in the Far East. An added factor was that London was asking the two Dominions for additional military forces. The COS’ conclusions were frank but discouraging. They recognised that the rise of Nazi Germany and war in the West changed all their calculations dramatically.¹⁹² With particular reference to Malaya, they recognised that new military factors in the Far East radically changed the concept of the defence of the base and it was ‘more likely that they [Japanese] would attempt a landing up-country in Malaya and then operate southwards, under cover of shore-based aircraft, than that they would risk a direct assault on Singapore Island’. In the light of this and the precarious sea communications, they considered, it is necessary to establish food reserves for the garrison and the civil population of Malaya for as long a period as possible. And finally,

These factors all point to the necessity for the holding the whole of Malaya rather than concentrating on the defence of Singapore Island. This clearly involves larger land and air forces than when the problem was one of defending Singapore Island.¹⁹³

With this clear recognition of the situation, the Chiefs of Staff offered the best practical support that current resources would allow. They undertook to provide 336 first line aircraft, but warned that they would not arrive before the end of 1941,* and also increase the army garrison to the equivalent of six brigades and ancillary troops. However, the Chiefs of Staff having recognised the need for this level of manpower and equipment confessed they

¹⁹¹ COS. (40) 493. Paper to War Cabinet. 25 June 1940. NA.

¹⁹² “*Far East Appreciation 1937*” COS Paper No.557, 14 June 1937 and CAB16/182. NA.

¹⁹³ CAB /66/10/33, 5 Aug 40. NA.

* In August 1940 when this Paper was discussed the Battle of Britain was at its height, France had surrendered and Italy entered the war on the side of Germany.

were not then in a position to provide even one division, (three brigades) from existing resources. They would turn to the Commonwealth Governments and ask them to provide ‘the rough equivalent of one division and to equip it as far as possible.’¹⁹⁴ From this point forward all *modus operandi* and discussion of the defence of Singapore was inseparably allied to the defence of Malaya.

At this critical time, Shenton Thomas was on leave in England. The Acting Governor Stanley Jones was the government figure at the centre of the maelstrom of military reports and information now arriving and was uneasy addressing them. However, back in the UK, Thomas sensibly took the opportunity to meet with the Joint Planning Sub-Committee in August (1940) to reinforce the case he made in his despatch in February. His despatch, it will be recalled, endorsed the Babington/Vlieland scheme of consigning the army to guarding airfields and vital installations while seeking a substantial increase in fighter aircraft. As he later admitted, while they found themselves ‘generally in full agreement’ with his views they were unable to make any practicable change to the COS policy. The Joint Planning Sub-Committee was no more than an advisory body to the COS. However, its measured opinions carried weight; clearly, they did not place the demands of the Far East Commanders very high. Singapore was not a priority and would have to wait.¹⁹⁵

In June 1940, prompted by the Colonial Office, Jones tabled and passed a Compulsory Service (Local Forces) Bill. It was a regulation that was to prove the source of ceaseless disagreement between the civil and military authorities. This legislation directed that every European British subject of the prescribed age in the ‘Colony’ was liable to compulsory service. However, the criteria that conscription was confined to only European British subjects dismayed and angered the military. Jones gave the excuse that this was as much as his staff could handle.¹⁹⁶ At the same time, causing further consternation, he introduced an exemption clause. The exemption stated that ‘Exemption would be granted on the grounds of conscience, unusual hardship or that the subject would be more usefully employed in the civilian capacity.’ Bond and the other commanders protested against the exemption because it was to be monitored only by the civil authorities and the military had no right of appeal against the grant of an exemption certificate. This led to hostility between the two so that finally, Jones agreed an amendment to include a right of appeal against exemption to be exercised by both authorities. Even so, civil – military differences about exemption

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Montgomery. *Shenton*, p.72.

¹⁹⁶ Proceedings of Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements dated 10 Jun 40.

persisted. When Percival arrived in May 1941, he was immediately embroiled in the dispute. He saw the issue as a dreadful waste of time and energy but recognised ‘there was always potential friction in these claims for exemption as the military authorities wanted all they could get while the government and business managers were equally disinclined to risk cutting their staff too much.’¹⁹⁷ The situation continued well into 1941 causing endless, pointless bickering among senior officials, even as international relations around them were seriously deteriorating.¹⁹⁸

At the same time, Jones was now inescapably embroiled in the differing views of defence strategy between Bond and Babington. Unlike Vlieland however, his support was more inclined to the Bond concept. General Bond now categorically asserted that the defence of Singapore, with the limited forces available to him, had to be concentrated in the south, in Johore. He was adamant that he had no force available for the defence of airfields in up-country Malaya except for a small unit for the protection of the major airfield at Alor Star in North West Malaya.¹⁹⁹ Air-Vice Marshal Babington was entirely opposed to this plan and insisted that the security of the airfields was paramount. Any assault on the invaders would be launched from these bases: furthermore, the protection of Alor Star in particular, was vital: reinforcing air squadrons from India would land at this airfield. The two commanders failed to resolve this fundamental matter effectively ruining all attempts at serious joint defence planning during their time in command. Jones was simply out of his depth in trying to settle this difference. To avoid making a decision, he referred the whole issue to the Chiefs of Staff London. He got a less than helpful reply from London to his plea for guidance. The authorities justified the differences of opinion between the two commanders as being due principally to a lack of resources. In the meantime, he was ordered to place the defences of Malaya in a state of readiness at five days warning.

Relations between the two commanders remained hostile and Bond in particular was enraged with Jones inability to arbitrate. After the war, Bond wrote a letter to Thomas, declaring, ‘The trouble between Babington and me...was that he would never tell us what he was doing or could do; he forbade his staff to collaborate with mine, as they were anxious to do.’²⁰⁰ In time, their irreconcilable differences led to both of them being relieved of their appointments. The naval C-in-C, Sir Percy Noble, an astute man with a keen judgement of

¹⁹⁷ Percival, A. *War in Malaya*. Eyre & Spottiswood. London. 1949. p.83.

¹⁹⁸ *The Straits Times* 8 Oct 1941

¹⁹⁹ He stressed that without major reinforcements he would not deploy regular forces outside Singapore, Johore, Penang and approaches to Alor Star. Bond to WO, No 10566, 18 May 1940. NA

²⁰⁰ Thomas. Mss. Ind. Ocn. S341. F.96. 29.10.1954. RHL.

character, whose HQ was in Hong Kong until late in 1940, attended War Committee meetings when he was in Singapore. He became very aware of the antagonism between Bond and Babington, the disruption this imposed on proper co-operation between the Services, and the deleterious effect on the civil administration. He saw that this state of affairs was replicated at all levels between the military and the civilians. Noble also expressed serious doubts about the effectiveness the defence plans. After the war, he declared that although there were faults on both sides, the blame for the situation lay mainly with Air Vice-Marshal Babington.

Noble was also aware that a number of unofficial members of the Legislative Council were dissatisfied with the civil administration's handling of the defence issue. There were strong feelings that the Governor should be replaced. He also expressed surprise that even after the fall of France, the Governor did not return quickly to his post from leave. Thomas had obviously failed to grasp the grave implications of this event for the security in Malaya. When Noble returned to England in September 1940 to start another job he took the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Lloyd. He recommended that in the long term both Bond and Babington should be replaced, but while feelings against the Governor were running high, a senior military officer should be placed in supreme authority, over the head of both the Governor and the Service commanders.²⁰¹ Had Noble's advice been followed, with the choice of a man such as Wavell to be in overall charge, there might have been a very different outcome. Lord Lloyd agreed with Noble's plan, but succumbed to a terminal illness before it could be implemented.

The substance of the difference between Bond and Babington was that the latter's demand for airfield protection was founded on the hypothesis that the additional aircraft he requested would need the landing space at these east coast bases. Bond refused simply because he did not have the forces to meet the demand. Furthermore the War Office had made it clear that they could not supply extra soldiers. The whole defence plan designed to protect a naval base in Singapore, yet it had no battle fleet, - merely a few elderly ships - and according to the Admiralty was unlikely to receive any substantial naval aid. In the words of a later historian 'It was a sentry box without a sentry.'²⁰²

Food Reserves

While the military commanders were barely on speaking terms another important matter arose causing further hostility. When Jones received the instruction to put the country

²⁰¹ Kirby. *Chain of Disaster*. Op cit

²⁰² Neidpath. *The Singapore Naval Base*. P. 117.

on a five days' alert, the Colonial Office also asked him for information on reserve rice stocks. A few days later Jones was instructed that all possible steps should be taken to increase food stocks to the utmost extent. The War Office advised that rice storage and milling capacity should be dispersed throughout the country. Jones had to make all the arrangements in close liaison with Bond. The matter of food reserves, rice storage and milling developed into a major altercation between the administration and the military. Jones replied to the Colonial Office that, on the advice of his Secretary for Defence (Vlieland), the reserves of rice amounted to two months' supply and that to disperse them would be very difficult, and cost a lot of money, and man hours, and that the present arrangements were quite satisfactory. Bond only heard of Jones's reply through the War Office who reported this answer to him. He retorted that it was fallacious and that he had not been consulted by Jones. Moreover, he objected strongly to the building of rice storage facilities in the vulnerable northern region of Malaya and was incensed to hear that, in spite of his objections, Vlieland had authorised the construction of a second 50,000-ton rice store in this same area.²⁰³

After the war, General Bond replied to an enquiry from Thomas about this matter, (the incident arose while Thomas was still on leave). In his later account, Bond included an extract from his 1940 diary. It clearly discloses the extent of confrontation and depth of animosity, which existed at that time. He told Thomas that he had been talking with Jones and putting in writing his recommendations about building up food reserves. Bond also warned Jones of the danger of accepting Vlieland's advice at face value. Jones should satisfy himself personally on these important arrangements. Jones expressed every confidence in Vlieland even when Bond informed him that Vlieland had been making decisions on both the level of food reserves and the location of the storage facilities without consulting him. In itself, this was bad enough, but to compound the problem Vlieland was not even discussing it with his civilian colleagues directly concerned in the matter. Vlieland openly asserted that 'the military reinforcements arriving were causing food problems' and that 'it would be better to have no reinforcements and so avoid the difficulty of feeding them.'²⁰⁴

The matter became notoriously controversial. It was further aggravated when Bond suggested at a War Committee meeting, (at which no minutes were taken), that the Joint Victualing Board should be able to submit their views about food storage in writing to the War Committee. That way matters were transparent, discussed and resolved. He noted in his diary that 'the AOC (Babington) and the Secretary for Defence contested this.' When the

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Thomas papers. Extracts from Gen. Bond's diary (unpublished) Mss..Ind..Ocn..s. 341 RHL.

new naval C-in-C, Admiral Layton was drawn into these arguments he telegraphed the Admiralty pointing out that Jones had failed to consult either him or Bond about this important matter, that he disagreed with the views expressed, and it was strategically unsound to hold reserve food stocks near a possible front line. The Colonial Office then instructed Jones to reconsider the position, particularly the advisability of locating the largest food store near the important Alor Star airfield. In a hand written footnote in Bond's diary, Shenton Thomas has remarked, 'It seems clear from these extracts from Gen. Bond's diary that between May and November 1940 there has been, to say the least, differences of opinion between Jones (prompted by Vlieland) and the Service Heads on the question of food supplies.'²⁰⁵

It was into this divisive, hostile and potentially dangerous civil-military milieu that the Chiefs of Staff, with Churchill's agreement, in 1940 sent Brooke-Popham as the Far East Commander-in-Chief. Regrettably, they did not follow Admiral Noble proposal and give the new Commander supreme power. They arrived at what was clearly seen as an unsatisfactory compromise. His charter was responsibility for the operational control and training only of all British land and air forces in the Far East and did not include naval forces. In an attempt not to offend the sensitivities and independent authority of the three services and the civil administration they ended with a hotchpotch arrangement. Brooke-Popham had no power over the civilian authorities neither in Malaya or any other territory in his area of responsibility. In fact, Brooke-Popham had no power to enforce decisions necessary for the defence of any country in his region and effectively became another cog in an already unwieldy organisation. In keeping with the situation, he was regularly reminded in his London briefings before departure, that British policy was to avoid war with Japan. The COS also ordered a trawl of suitable candidates to replace both Bond and Babington.²⁰⁶

Matador

The idea of a pre-emptive advance into Thailand to secure and deny likely Japanese landing beaches at Singora and Patani matured as the patently inadequate resources severely limited normal defensive plans. In April 1940, General Bond first articulated this idea in a memo accompanying his Appreciation, 'Can the idea of offensive action against the Japanese Forces established in Thailand be excluded?'²⁰⁷ Increasing intelligence information and other

²⁰⁵ Ibid

²⁰⁶ Brooke-Popham letter to Ismay, 16 May 1941. V/1/12, Brooke-Popham papers. LHCMA.

²⁰⁷ Bond to WO. CRMC 37406/G, 13 Apr 1940.NA. See also Kirby *Chain* pp 28-30 and Neidpath *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire 1919-1942*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981. pp 168-169.

obvious indicators such as the growing number of Japanese in the region, (ostensibly as businessmen but manifestly military personnel on reconnaissance missions), identified the area as a highly likely invasion zone. Dobbie's study of the region had already revealed its eminent suitability as a beachhead. Any force landing in the area would have not only excellent road and rail facilities for a quick breakout from the bridgehead, but importantly, airfields nearby for air support and a harbour facility at Singora.²⁰⁸ Moreover, the enemy had various assault options from this site, either crossing the Isthmus of Kra at its narrowest point and or dividing its forces to advance on several axes - including going directly south to the nearest Malayan border crossing at Kota Bahru. The clear conclusion was that containment at the landing zones and indeed the possibility of preventing them landing at all was the evident solution. However, the forces opposing the landings would need to be at least a division size, in place at selected locations, with enough time for preparations and ready to fight an aggressive and determined foe. The embryonic plan was given the name 'Operation Matador'.

This idea became an increasingly favoured solution and a best option - reinforced by senior commanders predicting, '...if we allow the Japanese to gain a foothold in Malaya, the battle is lost.'²⁰⁹ However, it had a number of serious difficulties. Above all, the British governments' insistence that war with Japan must be avoided at all costs, and that to violate neutral territory in this highly sensitive region would provide their enemy with a *casus belli*. The British Ambassador in Thailand, Sir Joshia Crosby, was adamant that Thailand was a friend, and with a little nurturing, could prove a useful protagonist against Japan. To invade Thai territory would be a gross affront and offer Japan an excuse to come to the aid of an Asian neighbour.²¹⁰ Then there was the question of how to provide a dedicated division size force for the task, together with the very considerable volume of defensive stores and equipment required. Men and equipment would need to move by rail and road across the Isthmus and it could not be assumed, if this was an unprovoked invasion of neutral territory, there would be no resistance. The need to judge precisely when to launch Matador was crucial. The force, for obvious reasons, could not cross into Thailand too early, nor conversely, arrive late at the landing beaches. A careful time appraisal to take account of all likely circumstances was fundamental.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Kirby. *War Against Japan*. Babington Report to Air Ministry. Jan 1940. p.26

²¹⁰ Crosby cable, Bangkok to FO, No. 154, 2 Mar 1941. NA.

²¹¹ Brooke-Popham to WO, No. 146/5, 21 Sep 1941. NA. Also Gilchrist *Malaya* p 164-168 and Hack, Karl & Blackburn, Kevin. *Did Singapore have to Fall*, p 41-48.

Brooke-Popham, learnt about Matador early in his appointment. He gave it his full support and asked that it be researched in thorough detail. He then put the proposal before the Chiefs of Staff in December 1940.²¹² It was given cautious support. As always, while recognising the benefits of pre-emptive action, the COS refused to allocate additional forces for the task. Moreover, as the danger of provoking Japan was so great they would retain authority to launch such a sensitive operation – if indeed it went ahead. The Chiefs of Staff asked about the tactical implications of using some of the existing forces in Malaya for ‘Matador’. In addition, they wanted to know, how much notice is required to despatch men and *materiel* in time.²¹³ The planning staff in Singapore arrived at an unsatisfactory compromise. They nominated a division already allocated a defensive task in north Malaya, thereby giving them a confusing dual role of ‘perhaps’ defending territory near the north west border or ‘possibly’ launching a thrust across the Isthmus of Kra into eastern Thailand. Moreover, they estimated only thirty-six hours warning for the embarkation. Later this was judged to be totally inadequate for such a complex operation.²¹⁴

The Governor’s Return

When Shenton Thomas returned from leave in December 1940, he found a quite different environment from that which had existed in April. Some personnel close to the centre of government were feeling frustrated and insecure about the lack of preparation. There was general dissatisfaction at the lack of urgent practical support from the military authorities in London. Whether or not Thomas recognised it, there was a sense of unreality in the administration where officials appeared unable or unwilling to recognise the gravity of the growing threat from Japan. He also found in station a new C-in-C, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, who had assumed command on 18th November 1940. He also found a modest increase in the military garrison with the arrival of two British battalions withdrawn from Shanghai and a divisional headquarters (11th Indian HQ) and two infantry brigade groups, without artillery. Less satisfactory was the promise of additional aircraft.

One of the first tasks he had to perform was to dismiss Vlieland. There is no written evidence describing the grounds for the decision but credible speculation suggests that before Thomas returned to duty, he was made aware that both Bond and Babington were to go as well as Vlieland, a catalyst for the disunity. Vlieland described Thomas’s first War Committee meeting on 13 December 1940, the event signalling his demise.

²¹² CAB 106/40 5 Dec 1940. NA.

²¹³ COS to Brooke-Popham No. COS 33, 24 Dec 1940. See also CAB 79/8.NA

²¹⁴ WO No.202/7. 6 Aug 1941. NA. See also Kirby: *Chain of Disaster* p. 110 for realistic estimate of time necessary to launch Matador.

When I entered the council chamber and took my old seat at his right hand, Sir Shenton did not greet me, or even look at me. He opened the proceedings by inviting B.P. (Brooke-Popham) to speak. The C-in-C then made a savage attack on me....No one said a word. Bond and Layton nodded their approval and my friend the AOC could not rally to my support in defiance of his Air Chief Marshal. Sir Shenton remained silent with bowed head.²¹⁵

Brooke-Popham charged Vlieland with consistently refusing to co-operate with Bond and deliberately using delaying tactics over the initiation of measures necessary for the defence of the civilian population.²¹⁶ The following day, Vlieland tendered his resignation and asked that he be allowed to leave the MCS. Although he did not leave Singapore until February 1941, he took no further part in the administrative affairs of the government. The current British Adviser to the State of Perlis, Mr C. W. Dawson, replaced him.

The Governor's early impressions of the new C-in-C were very favourable and in his hand written letter to the CO about how he found conditions generally after the dismissals he said, 'B-P is an immense tower of strength and knows the difficulties of a civil government as the result of his years in Kenya.' However, his further comments disclosed his rising frustration with the military and their endless petty grievances. Nevertheless, he added, that Brooke-Popham was someone to whom he could express his difficulties with the Army and the Air Force, which had improved little while he was in the UK. He found Bond pleasant enough, but a man of one idea and his staff of little help. The idea was that the army should have what it wanted and everyone else should scramble for what is left. For example, the army wanted 1000 beds reserved in civil hospitals in Singapore. Thomas rejected the idea and spoke to Brooke-Popham about it: 'One word from B-P and they have come down to 500'. He also noted that they were in discussions with the WO, without telling him, about senior staff appointments, which would have affected his immediate associates. However, as he observed in a tone of defeat, 'I don't worry, I just decline and all goes well.'²¹⁷

By the end of 1940, Bond had two Brigades in Singapore and a further Brigade (12th Indian Bde.) in the area of Mersing on the east coast. In north Malaya in place to protect the

²¹⁵ Vlieland (unpublished) Memoir "*Disaster in the Far East*" GB99, 3.3.1. LHCMA. In a report Thomas wrote to the CO shortly after returning from leave he said "I found a very unhappy family on my arrival here. Jones has been worked to death and in addition had to contend with a lot of friction. Vlieland, who as Secretary for Defence had done such excellent work in 1939 and had been welcomed by every Resident had let his ego mania get completely out of hand and was quite impossible, obstruction and offensive criticism was his line. He was really the cause of the telegram from some of the ex- Service men to the S of S and the Prime Minister." CO 967/75. NA.

²¹⁶ Callahan. *Worst Disaster*. p. 110. Also Allen.L. *Singapore 1941-1942*.p 225-246.

²¹⁷ Letter Thomas to Parkinson [US of S for the Colonies] 16 Mar 1941. CO 967/75. NA.

important airfield of Alor Star he had 11th Indian Division, although it consisted of only two Brigades (6th and 8th). Lastly, two independent battalions were stationed on the island of Penang and in Taiping. In February 1941 an Australian divisional headquarters, 8th Australian Division HQ, with one brigade under command (22nd Australian Bde.) arrived in Malaya. Major General Gordon Bennett was in command. On 9 April 1941, the Indian Division, (less its artillery), arrived. Now that the Indian contingent constituted a large part of the ground forces, a Corps Headquarters arrived from India with Lieutenant General Sir Lewis Heath in charge. Thus by the end of April, Bond would have 26 battalions, the minimum he calculated was needed, if and only if, the RAF had it first line strength. On 24 April, Air Vice-Marshal C.W. H. Pulford succeeded Babington and on 14 May, Lieutenant General A.E. Percival replaced Bond. Both officers were chosen primarily because they had shown an ability to work successfully in a joint services environment. However, it is also a fact there was little choice, the demands of the western war exhausted the supply of able leaders. Percival was promoted for the appointment; acknowledged as an outstanding staff officer, his leadership had never been tested in the echelons of high command. On the other hand, his subordinate (Heath), was a soldier with huge campaign experience having served throughout his military life in the Indian Army and before moving to Malaya had commanded a division in the east African campaign. As Kinvig noted in his book '...their appointment to serve together in the circumstances of 1941 was singularly ill-advised. All seemed well in the relations of GOC and Corps Commander until the Japanese struck. They rapidly deteriorated thereafter.'²¹⁸ Percival and Pulford, in contrast, got on well together and from the beginning insisted on the closest cooperation between their respective Services.

In April, before Bond left, he made a rather curious remark; later it was regarded as dangerously irresponsible. While visiting Singapore, the British Military Attaché in Tokyo (Colonel G.T. Ward) gave a lecture to a selected senior audience about the Japanese army, a subject about which he was clearly competent to talk. Without any exaggeration, he expounded on the impressive qualities of the Japanese soldier, their superb physical fitness, their ability to move long distances both day and night with a minimum of personal effects, and with their spirit in overcoming all obstacles. Furthermore he declared they were well led by junior sub-unit commanders, possessed a fanatical patriotism, esprit de corps, and would never surrender. The senior officers of the General Staff were highly trained and dedicated men. In essence, Ward tried to dispel the dangerous and entrenched opinion that the

²¹⁸ Kinvig, *Scapegoat*. P.126.

Japanese army was a poorly motivated, weak, badly led organisation, with poor mechanics, drivers and air pilots who never operated at night. He had seen them fight against the Chinese with astonishing aggression and fierce courage. They should not to be underestimated, and they would prove a formidable foe. After Ward had finished, Bond rose to his feet and made a fateful pronouncement:

...while the lecturer has told you that the Japanese army is very efficient and that the Japanese know all about us in Singapore, this is far from the truth...What the lecturer has told you is his own opinion and is in no way a correct appreciation of the situation. I will now tell you that every morning the telegrams which the Japanese Consul-General sends to his government in Tokyo are placed on my office table and from these I know what the Japanese are up to and just how much or how little they know about us. If this is the best the Japanese can do, I do not think much of them and you can take it from me that we have nothing to fear from them.²¹⁹

If Bond genuinely believed his own words, why did he persist in his tenacious struggle throughout his period in command for more men and equipment? It would seem a pointless, costly exercise. If he was trying to play down any fears that the Attaché's talk may have generated, he went too far. The enemy was dangerously underrated – a classic military error.

During this period of growing tension and undeniable indications that the Japanese were close to committing an act of war against Britain, there was disharmony both within the government and between it and the military. It was a grave error not to embark on serious planning for civil emergencies; only a confused policy on the location and storage of rice reserves was put in hand. The lethargy and tempo of the administration in dealing with crucial civil defence matters reflected its scepticism on the threat of war. The military were disunited, and had still not agreed a plan for the defence of Singapore. Although the army received some reinforcements - albeit untrained -, the additional aircraft that were essential to its ill-conceived plan had not arrived. In the words of the historian, S. Woodburn Kirby, it was 'a chain of disaster.'

²¹⁹ Quoted in Kirby *Chain of Disaster* p75. The earliest intercepted message from the Japanese Consul-General at Singapore to Foreign Ministry at Tokyo is dated 9 Jan 1935. WO 106/5504. NA. Regardless of the exclusive audience, this was nevertheless a very rash public disclosure to make.

CHAPTER FOUR

CIVIL DEFENCE IN DISARRAY.

In the post-war Despatches written by each of the senior Service Commanders²²⁰ and in the many academic analyses of the disastrous Malayan Campaign, legitimate claims have been laid against the inadequate and ineffective arrangements made for civil defence and the poor coordination between the military and civil authorities. Civil defence was barely considered before the outbreak of war, even when Japan was aggressively expanding in South East Asia. Perhaps more surprisingly, following the outbreak of war in Europe, there were still only vacuous verbal declarations of intent.²²¹ In the Extraordinary meeting of the Legislative Council called on 26 September 1939, when the Governor addressed the gathering with a prepared statement about Britain's declaration of war against Nazi Germany, he failed to warn the Council and the people of the possible knock-on effect this could have for Malaya. Expressions of loyalty and support for the King Emperor and the Empire at this time of peril, which were endorsed by all, and assurances of further financial support for the Imperial war effort were made. Yet even at this critical time other routine business took priority in the formal proceedings. Thomas, having little personal experience of the ravages of war, failed to express concern about possible regional consequences. He may have thought that a war many thousands of miles away to the west was of little immediate concern. It is nevertheless surprising, in the light of this cataclysmic event and Japan's outrageous behaviour, that he did not at least attempt a prediction of the political and commercial impact of an attack on the region. By virtue of his appointment, General Bond the GOC Malaya, also attended these Council Meetings but there is no record in the minutes of any comment from him either.²²² At succeeding Council meetings during 1939 and early 1940, not even a plan for civil defence was mooted. It is not until after Thomas went on leave that members of both councils become concerned about the government's *laissez-faire* attitude. The public became

²²⁰ Supplements to London Gazette 38183 20 Jan 1948

²²¹ Proceedings of Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements. 1939

²²² Ibid

aware of the danger when Britain suffered military setbacks in Europe and Japan embarked on aggressive expansion in the east. It should be remembered that the criticisms levelled at Thomas and his administration over the issue of civil defence rarely mention the exceptional circumstances that existed in Malaya. To make a fair assessment of his role in later events, we have to remember the broader picture at this time.

The war in Malaya was unlike any other war that Britain had fought. Thomas pointed this out, in his post-war notes.²²³ Not only was the climate and terrain inhospitable, but it was a war of defence in a country that had never endured major conflict. Local people had no comprehension of what war meant. Malaya was a country governed by a foreign power who had assumed responsibility for its protection. The country was a mosaic of social and cultural values.²²⁴ It would have been a mammoth task to equip and train several thousands of Malays, Indians and Chinese for the civil defence services. For a start, the majority spoke only their own language, a somewhat more basic issue than a lack of arms and equipment. Nothing of this kind had ever been undertaken in any British Colony. Moreover, most of the British civil who had to galvanise the population had no experience of preparations or of military affairs in general. Neither the Governor nor any of his senior civil officers had served in the Forces during the First World War. (Astonishingly, during post-war recriminations it was claimed that of the 224 officers in the MCS on January 1940, 61 of them had in fact served in the Forces in the Great War.)²²⁵ There was no grasp of the enormity of the civil defence task or the knowledge or skill to put the state on a war footing. Given the lack of comprehension among the civil authorities of the dangers ahead, senior military officers had undoubtedly a duty to exercise their knowledge, take responsibility for preparations, and insist that the administration listen and follow their advice. It was an obvious military responsibility, which they failed to acknowledge until it was too late.

Adding to the ordeal, there was the matter of different forms of governance. Without imposing martial law, the Governor had limited direct authority over the Malay states. Instead, as happened, he had to accept at face value, the various civil authorities' claim that they were addressing civil defence procedures. He was reluctant to press matters further as he felt that insisting on civil defence measures could prejudice the economic directive imposed on him by the Colonial Office. After the war, in 1947, on his return to England Thomas wrote an early report about Malaya's war effort. He wanted the authors of the official history to

²²³ Thomas Papers. Foreword "*What Malaya Did*". Mss. Ind. S. 341. RHL.

²²⁴ Collection. Correspondence Dickinson /Bryson. Jan 1969. RCS/BAM. 103/5/7. CU.

²²⁵ Callahan. *The Worst Disaster*. p 115

take account of what he believed was the very considerable contribution of the civil administration during the conflict. He also included a comprehensive list of what he saw as the duties of the civil government about civil defence. It was indeed all-inclusive and covered just about every issue of civil defence. However, there is no known record of this list being officially published before or during the campaign. The existence of such a document would have unquestionably helped all parties to know the scale of civil defence duties, and would have avoided later accusations of who was responsible for what. Conspicuously, however, even in this list there is no reference to passive defence measures such as the construction of air-raid shelters, ARP (Air Raid Protection) Wardens, warning systems, protective precautions, rescue teams and auxiliary fire services.

In 1954, following the publication of the *Official History*²²⁶, and in spite of Thomas's attempted intervention, the civil authorities were heavily criticized, for their inadequate and belated civil defence arrangements. In response, Thomas wrote a further personal report which he was unable to get published. It was to be one of many attempts to vindicate the Colonial Governments' war preparations and was entitled 'What Malaya Did'.²²⁷ He points out that as early as 1938, a Defence Committee existed and sub-committees of this organisation 'were responsible for planning the several aspects of civil defence'.²²⁸ He adds, that later in the year it became apparent that this arrangement was unsuitable and the functions were taken over by departments of the ordinary type whose executive heads were responsible to the Government, not to the Defence Committee. In effect, it meant that during this period there was no central authority coordinating the various elements of civil defence. For example, those government departments concerned with agriculture became, responsible for rice production and the storage of reserves - at least in theory. However, even this arrangement was unsatisfactory and by October 1939, it was replaced by a set of civil defence departments that were linked to the Government through a new office of Secretary for Defence, with Vlieland in charge. Effectively this office was the defence branch of the Colonial and Federal Secretariats and the High Commissioner's Office. The intention was to focus and coordinate civil defence policy and practice throughout Malaya, with the exception the Unfederated States. On the outbreak of the European war the Defence Committee, renamed the War Committee, was still chaired by the Governor. The heads of the three services were members and in due course, the Committee was enlarged to include three

²²⁶ Kirby S. *War Against Japan*. passim. See also CAB 101/148

²²⁷ Thomas Papers. Mss. Ind.s.341.RHL

²²⁸ Ibid

unofficial members of the Legislative and Federal Councils.²²⁹ On the ground, these new arrangements made no difference to the existing lassitude, characterised by the fact that no written minutes of the meetings were compiled.

Thomas *prima facie* assertion in his unpublished reports and his ceaseless *post facto exculpate* correspondence implies the inauguration, development and expansion of appropriate responsible authorities to meet the growing defence challenges. These assertions are entirely without substance. Most of the schemes did not start until late in 1940, when Thomas returned from leave, thus precious induction time was lost. There was no urgency or clarity in the written instructions to those in charge of these matters, day to day. There was no co-ordination of effort, no written record of decisions agreed.²³⁰ Moreover, any such decisions would have applied technically only to the Straits Settlements, although the FMS would almost certainly have fallen into line. However, the UMS frequently balked at and occasionally refused to comply with civil defence directives, particularly if they involved expenditure or manpower. In reality, very few of the civil defence measures agreed at War Committee level filtered down to subordinate authorities particularly in the FMS. If they did they were either ignored, given only perfunctory attention, or attempted in an amateurish manner. The War Committee may have assumed their proposals were undertaken, but without a system of physical checks and written instructions, they were quite ignorant of the outcome. In many instances, instructions were passed by word of mouth to the parties concerned, and left at that. At the same time, the War Committee itself was in turmoil with the Army and Air Commanders disagreeing with each other,²³¹ and Vlieland adding to the dissention. The OAG, Jones was confused and unable to assert his authority. All in all, civil defence matters were a low priority and given scant attention.²³² However, the issue of rice reserves did receive attention. As noted in the previous chapter, it was raised and discussed before the Governor's departed in April 1940. It arose again during his absence and became a source of venomous dispute.

In early 1939, the Commissioner of Customs was appointed 'Food Controller'. To assist him a Food Stocks Reserves Committee was formed, consisting of experts with knowledge of the preservation of essential commodities. Its primary aim was to anticipate the possible restrictions on the import of these essentials in the event of war in the West. Rice was naturally the most important article of food; the annual consumption was about

²²⁹ Ibid

²³⁰ Vide Brooke-Popham Papers, 6/2/3 of 5 Dec 40. IWM.

²³¹ See Chapter 3

²³² Ibid

900,000 tons of which two-thirds were imported. The committee set about arranging to purchase enough supplies from external sources to last for at least six months and preparing storage facilities. One problem was that milled rice would not keep sweet for six months so be un-milled padi (rice in the husk) had to be procured - which was bulkier needing greater storage space and milling close at hand. (Later, it was found by experiment that if milled rice was stored after mixing with powdered lime it would remain sweet for much longer).²³³ It is clear from government memoranda that the authorities failed to consult the military authorities on the choice of storage sites.²³⁴ As protection of the rice was to be the army's responsibility, it was clearly essential that it was involved in the choice of location of the facilities. Vlieland had already decided on his own account that the largest and most important storage depot would be near Alor Star in the very north of Malaya. Later in his unpublished memoir, he stated:

...the Alor Star granary scheme was a purely civil undertaking which was never mentioned still less debated in the War Committee....The civil authorities that is to say the Governor, the Food Controller and I decided upon the storage of padi...The Alor Star scheme was worked out largely by Sir Shenton himself without consulting the military who were in any case resolutely disinterested in anything we did in the Malay States. That particular stupidity was only forced on us by the military, by manoeuvre of dubious propriety, in November 1940.²³⁵

This statement contradicts General Bond's assertions in his diary entries throughout most of 1940. He writes of his exasperation with the OAG because the latter failed to curb the excesses of Vlieland whose independent decisions regarding storage, reserves and locations were taken without even consulting the government Food Controller let alone the military.²³⁶ Bond's key point was that the Alor Star granary was too far north for security and that the reserves should be either relocated or greatly reduced. In spite of Bond's warnings, Vlieland went ahead with plans to increase the storage capacity at Alor Star. Later, Vlieland felt his decision was justified when Babington decided on the airfield at Alor Star as a vital forward air base, needing sizeable army protection. Moreover, with the arrival in theatre of two reinforcement Indian Brigades, Vlieland persuaded the OAG to telegram the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, to confirm that with a sizeable military presence in the area of Alor Star, the granaries would be secure and reorganisation of the rice stocks was unnecessary.

²³³ Thomas Papers. Mss.Ind. Ocn. S.341. Oct 1954. RHL

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Vlieland Papers 3.3.1 LHCMA

²³⁶ Thomas Papers loc cit.

When Bond learnt of this exchange, which had occurred without his knowledge, he enlisted the support of Admiral Layton. Jointly they informed the War Office that Vineland's comments had not been discussed with them, and in any case, they disagreed with his views. Bond noted in his diary, 'Layton spoke to the AOC (Babington) who had reluctantly agreed to [the] undesirability of keeping food reserves in the front line. Vlieland was very upset at C-in-C's action which he regards as military interference.'²³⁷ At the same time, much to Vlieland's irritation, similar arguments arose about other food essentials with the military intervening when they learnt indirectly of a policy that would have a bearing on their own plans.

Passive Defence

The matter of Passive Defence measures during 1940 was a topic that was of increasing concern to the population or more correctly that element of the population aware of the growing danger. With the deteriorating international situation, the predominantly European community, became more restless about the *laissez faire* approach of the government and began to question its commitment to the issue. The subject was raised regularly both in Legislative Council meetings and in local newspapers. Many felt that few visible precautions were being put in place and urged the government not only to do something about it, but also to be seen doing something about it.²³⁸ An unofficial member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, F. D. Bisseker was a particular and conscientious campaigner about passive defence. In November 1940, he challenged the government's lack of energy or any dedication to what he considered essential preparations. In the Council Chamber, he made a lengthy and impassioned speech:

We are not at concert pitch yet though, and much effort at organisation is necessary still in passive defence measures before they can grow into a state of efficiency which will permit of the units concerned rendering full service in the case of need. St John's Ambulance and the Auxiliary Fire Service are not equipped even yet. A.R.P. communications are inadequate and I doubt very much if there are stirrup pumps and self-organised rescue squads in even half a dozen houses and big blocks of buildings in the whole Colony. I know of no air-raid shelters and there is yet no evidence of that protection which effective sand-bagging can provide. I commend these deficiencies to the notice of the Secretary of Defence. The stressing of difficulties in providing these essential measures or the cry "it cannot be done" smack to me of defeatism. The sooner we realise they have got to be done the better will be our welfare.²³⁹

²³⁷ Ibid

²³⁸ *Straits Times*. 25 Nov 1940.

²³⁹ Proceedings of Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements 6 Nov 1940.

He went on to catalogue the deficiencies in equipment, the lack of practical support or indeed gratitude shown to the many volunteers. Furthermore, the absence of instruction, supervision and guidance had resulted in disillusioned advocates resigning. He then pointedly blamed the authorities for the inadequacies and, in particular, the Secretary for Defence (Vlieland). Bisseker believed Vlieland should personally be directing this task and making his presence visible throughout the nation, encouraging and inspecting the few schemes established. His address ranged over many related matters that he claimed were topics of great interest to the public. Why, he wanted to know, had the government not resolved the ‘question of taxation for the purpose of raising funds for the prosecution of the war – we are lamentably behind our time in our effort.’ And, he noted, that a joint (Straits Settlements and FMS) committee had been formed in September (1940) to examine civil defence matters and it was not until the end of October before they held their first meeting. When he enquired of a member why it had taken so long, he was told that there was not much enthusiasm for the task. The OAG replied that passive defence was now receiving his consideration and although he could not express himself positively, many of the matters mentioned were being ‘considered’ and he was able to give this assurance. Moreover, regarding Bisseker’s view of the functions of the Secretary for Defence, he felt that it was much more important that the Secretary for Defence should be in Singapore co-ordinating the defence measures.²⁴⁰

The next meeting of the Legislative Council took place in December 1940, by which time the Governor had returned from leave and was in the Chair, Bisseker revisited the subject of passive defence and made another lengthy and heated address expressing profound disappointment that nothing appeared to have improved. There was, he said,

No indication given that even an investigation would be made into some of my claims regarding lack of organisation and co-ordination, and much less was there any promise that if what I maintained to be the existing state of affairs was found to be correct, action taken to rectify would be taken.²⁴¹

He was particularly incensed at the idea that ‘a case had to be made in each and every instance before further expenditure was embarked upon.’

Bisseker drew attention to the poor comparison between Malaya’s efforts and those in UK, citing newspaper reports that London alone had provided public shelters for 1.4 million people and the government had ordered the provincial authorities throughout Great Britain to

²⁴⁰ Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 6 Nov 1940.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 9 Dec 1940

do likewise. Bisseker wanted to know why in these seriously worrying times the local government of Singapore could not also order the entire nation to begin vital and urgent preparations. The Governor's laconic reply encapsulates his apathy to the gathering storm. He doubted that

... the public should themselves accept the responsibility of looking after themselves as we do at Home. It may be interesting to hon. Members to know in that part of East Kent in which I lived [on leave], save in one town, I do not think I saw a single public shelter within 10 miles of our village. Any shelters that we had were put up by ourselves and used by ourselves....and in any case the matter is not easy, in fact, it is very complicated, and what we might do in Singapore would, I feel, not necessarily be suitable for Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and so on.²⁴²

In the formal procedure of Council meetings the Governor made his remark in the form of a closing address, so that it was impossible for members to refute his remarks. He is unkindly dismissive of Bisseker's obsession with Passive Defence. The following day's newspaper noted, however, 'that comparisons with UK were dissimilar and entirely inappropriate.'²⁴³ No mention was made about his irritation with Bisseker and his almost dismissive contempt for the petty details of civil defence. It is also surprising to find, according to the minutes, that the GOC (who invariably attended these meetings), made no comment nor offered any advice. A forum like the formal Council meeting would seem to have offered an unrivalled opportunity for a professional military comment about civil defence.

The reason for the lack of air-raid shelters in Singapore was actually known as early as 1937. The newly formed Defence Committee had in fact discussed the question. They concluded that owing to the high water table in Singapore, shelters could not be sited underground, and the higher ground was mostly utilized as Chinese cemeteries and thus was inviolable. However, earthed-up large concrete cylinders was proposed as a sensible and workable substitute. The Government rejected this idea and decided to follow a plan similar to that employed by the Dutch authorities in Netherland East Indies (NEI), which was to disperse the population on warning of an air raid to 'Dispersal Camps'. In Singapore, such camps with a capacity to house 350,000 people were built later, some miles out of the city, at a cost of over one million (local) dollars. Light, water, communal kitchens, stores of food, trained commandants and wardens were provided. Significantly it was pointed out at the time that shelters miles out of town were impractical in an emergency, most air raids, of course, were emergencies. Another proposal was to give protection for vital workers and others, with

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ *Straits Times*, 10 Dec. 1940. Leader.

shelters above ground along some the great wharves. The Singapore Harbour Board, an independent authority, decided against it.²⁴⁴ A decision that would be deeply regretted.

Before this war Bisseker had been General Manager of a tin smelting works in Penang, where he also resided. He was elected to the Legislative Council as an Unofficial Member in February 1940. From the very beginning of his tenure, he pursued the authorities relentlessly over what he considered their apathetic approach to civil defence. His persistence made him most unpopular with senior government figures. Governor Thomas later wrote 'Bisseker constituted himself the critic of everything that had been done. He himself had done nothing to help in defence preparations and was not even a member of any Passive Defence Unit.'²⁴⁵ This remark is not entirely true; Bisseker's offer to help was never taken up, though he was involved unofficially in several passive activities in Penang. Later, during the last days of Singapore, he played a major role in the civil defence arrangements as second-in-command to the Director General Civil Defence, Brigadier Ivan Simson. However, even after Thomas' period in captivity, he still harboured a dislike for Bisseker. In correspondence to Sir John Shuckburgh (Under Secretary of State at the Colonial Office) on 14 November 1945, said 'I hope you will sift most carefully any statement made by Bisseker of Penang. He is quite untrustworthy, and his war effort was confined to making opportunities for himself and others to escape.'²⁴⁶

There was clearly a debilitating and acrimonious relationship between the Governor and this member of his Legislative Council, who from other documentary evidence was primarily concerned to spur the authorities into constructive civil defence action. At a time when the authorities needed all the help they could muster, such hostility was disgraceful. As will be seen, Bisseker became an energetic and dominant figure in the final days of Singapore's descent. He continued to badger the government about civil defence throughout 1941, while at the same time giving credit when obvious advances in certain areas were achieved. But he was far from satisfied with overall results. He was not the only member of the Legislative Council who expressed concern about civil defence matters. There were others, but he was undoubtedly the most voluble and persistent. The refrain of civil defence lethargy was also taken up by Kuala Lumpur. The minutes of a Federal Council meeting held in October 1940, show that a council member, one W.G. Blunn, expressed similar dismay at

²⁴⁴ Maxwell, *The Civil Defence of Malaya*. p.31.

²⁴⁵ Letter. Thomas to S of S, 8 Feb 1942. CO 967/78. NA

²⁴⁶ Letter Thomas to Shuckburgh, Colonial Office, 14 Nov 1945. CO 967/75. NA.

the lack of tangible evidence of progress, or indeed the matter being taken seriously. He said that since a Secretary for Defence was appointed in January 1939:

Very many minute papers must have been exchanged in the last twenty-two months between that officer in Singapore and the various officers concerned in the Federated Malay States. But as honourable members will agree, minute papers are rather like the music in the circular bass. In the words of the song, “they go round and around” until eventually something emerges. In the meantime however, people who may feel their lives are at stake, are inclined to become rather impatient, waiting for the outward and visible sign.....everybody should know exactly where to go, what to do and how to do it....they should be instructed as to the signals which would be given in the event of an attack from the air and how to behave in such circumstances...and enlightened as to the kind of shelter they should seek.²⁴⁷

A number of other members at this meeting endorsing the same view as the colony raised supplementary questions on passive defence matters. The President of the Federal Council is the High Commissioner but on this occasion, it was the OAG (Jones) who stood in, as Thomas was on leave. It must have been glaringly apparent to Jones that civil defence was now a countrywide concern and at the front of everyone’s mind. It is difficult therefore to understand the Governor’s argument, that allowing the military to be seen preparing defensive positions would harm the morale of the Colony. People needed reassuring and it would certainly have been a comfort to see that at least the Services were taking the possible dangers seriously and taking appropriate action.

Two particular issues concerned Bisseker; the dissemination of information to the public, to counter propaganda being broadcast by foreign radios; and the conflict in demand for labour between the military and local businesses. The military were unable to offer a pay scale comparable with the civilian sector, because of the fiscal restraints imposed on them by the War Office. As a result, they were unable to recruit badly needed labour. Bisseker believed the local government had a financial obligation to assist in the effort.²⁴⁸

On the matter of keeping the people informed, the Governor had strong feelings on being selective with official government information, particularly those statements he judged to be alarmist. He took a close interest in what particulars were released into the public domain. Within the government machinery, there was already in place, before the war, a sponsored ‘Department of Information’. Until this point, there was little for it to do and it met infrequently, and in any case, its military related content was heavily censored. After the

²⁴⁷ Minutes of Federal Council Meeting, October 1940. Arkib Negara, Malaysia.

²⁴⁸ Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 9 Dec 1940.

outbreak of war, London appointed a Director of Propaganda, Sir George Sansom, a distinguished diplomat and Japanophile, and the department thereafter assumed a more prominent and important role. At the same time the military authorities set up a 'Services Public Relations Office' but as noted in Chapter 2, it was under the control of a long retired and disastrously incompetent naval officer. It caused more anguish among journalists than it did to provide a service. (See also Chapter 6).

Among the list of civil defence duties of the civil government, which Thomas catalogued, was the vital matter of the preparation and execution of various denial schemes. This list, as noted, was compiled after the war and as became embarrassingly evident during the campaign, little planning went into this important task. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that this particular issue was a *post facto addendum*. In the middle of December 1941, when the Japanese were already well down peninsula Malaya, London became alarmed at the failure to impose a delay on the Japanese advance through denying them important resources. In panic they gave the quite impractical instruction of an unrestricted scorched-earth policy. From the Colonial Government's point of view, this would have been seriously damaging to the indigenous Asians who remained behind, however uncomfortable survival might be. Following a series of exchanges between Singapore and London, it was agreed that certain essentials such as public utilities, power plants, water supply and food produce would not be touched.²⁴⁹ Businesses, estates and mines, owned by Asians, were also to be avoided unless they were obviously of particular value to the Japanese. Everything else of importance was to be destroyed. This urgent exchange of communications at this point in the war validates the fact that no plans had been prepared beforehand to deal with such a contingency. However, the speed of the retreat was so great, it was almost impossible to apply a scorched-earth policy, except in a few cases. Decisions on this matter had to be delegated to the military commanders on the ground. In the case of large and important installations such as the coalmines in Selangor, the destruction of which would be complex and take some time, it was left to the owners to comply. Not surprisingly, they turned to the army for assistance. Military sappers already under pressure had to be diverted from other essential tasks to attend to these demolitions.²⁵⁰

The Volunteers

²⁴⁹ The 'scorched earth' policy became a contentious subject. Thomas deemed that a sweeping application, as imposed by the Russians in their war with Germany, was impracticable and inappropriate to Malaya. He pointed out in his comments on the draft history that a comprehensive policy would have deprived the indigenous people of their means of survival. Besides, even in the worst case of defeat, it was expected that the British would soon return. See 'Thomas Papers' and Kirby *Chain of Disaster*, p 159.

²⁵⁰ Kirby. *Chain of Disaster*. P. 189.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, was a small body of military volunteers in Malaya. In the main, they were full-time civilian employees but at regular periods they volunteered for brief training where they learnt basic military skills. In the event of an emergency they would be inducted to full time service. The total number of volunteers was not large. In December 1939, there were 514 officers, 9,604 men in total; of this number 298 officers, and 1,819 men were British.²⁵¹ By June 1940, the numbers of the latter had dropped to 269 and 5,488 because they had returned to UK to enlist in Britain's Armed Forces. Of those remaining the Straits Settlements Volunteer Forces (SSVF) comprise the largest force; with four infantry battalions, (two in Singapore, and one in Malacca and one in Penang) in addition to some supporting units; a Light Artillery Battery, an Engineer unit and some radio Signallers, all in Singapore. There was also a small number of naval and air force volunteers. Each of the four FMS states had an infantry battalion and a small number of signallers and gunners. Three of the five states of the UMS (less Perlis and Terengganu) had between them one infantry battalion, and a very small number of others trained in miscellaneous military skills - in addition to the volunteers, there was one regular Malay Regiment, an infantry battalion - a second of which was raised in April 1941. Regular British army officers commanded these forces while the NCOs' were both British and Malays.

These numbers should be set against the total number of British civilians of suitable age available for enlistment. In 1939, there were only 9,000 British males in Malaya. So worrying was the rush of young able-bodied men to return to UK to enlist, that the government had to impose a ban on further departures because these men held vital management jobs in crucial industries. From that point, only a few with special circumstances were allowed to go. Of those who did not join the Volunteers, a high proportion worked in one of the various civil defence organisations. It was calculated that after compulsory service was introduced in June 1940 and all the exemptions had been scrutinised only 11 per cent of Malaya's European male population was exempt from war service for reasons other than health. Such decisions were invariably connected with the vital tin and rubber industries. In his 1947 Report, 'Malaya's War Effort', Thomas gives examples of the consequences: a mining company with 88 European staff of which 59 were mobilised was left with 29 men to run fifteen tin dredges, six hydraulic mines and a head office. Of those not mobilised the majority joined the civil defence organisation as air-raid wardens or the auxiliary fire service. A commercial firm with government contracts in engineering and electrical installations that

²⁵¹ "Local Forces Malaya, Strengths 1939". WO 193/914. NA

employed 53 European technical specialists, had 26 mobilised. The remainder were engaged in vital military contracts and could not be released, but they also joined the civil defence. Thomas noted that European women also played their part in the defence effort, in one district where 35 British women were resident, 15 served in the Medical Auxiliary Service and many of them travelled 10 or 15 miles to attend training and practice sessions. Thomas adds that large numbers of Asians also participated in such initiatives and that the civil defence units ‘...represented an excellent cross-section of the population as a whole, operating in every district and made up of people of every race.....during the campaign most of them did their work well and stuck to their posts.’²⁵² It is important to note that the Asian male population was not included in the compulsory service order.

It is noteworthy that the Thomas Report uses the term ‘districts’ which is a reference to the municipal zones of Singapore. Most attention is given to the Island’s efforts; the remainder of the Straits Settlements - Malacca, Penang and Province Wellesley – closely followed closely the Singapore pattern. However, there is little mention of civil defence efforts in the FMS and the UMS. The former did make similar though less extensive efforts as the Straits Settlements. The UMS on the other hand paid little attention to such preparations. The counter argument put forward²⁵³ was that a nationwide comprehensive civil defence scheme would have taken years and endless time to prepare and maintain. Not only was this impracticable, but it conflicted with Thomas’s wish to present an image of confidence:

‘It was the governor’s wish that civil morale had to be maintained and confidence in the immediate future. Hence the Japanese threat was minimised and their ability to invade Malaya was belittled.’²⁵⁴

Such comments contributed to the growing strained relationship between the military and the civilians. In the many accounts of the fall of Singapore, there is a recurring refrain of general and mutual disdain. The soldiers arriving in Singapore from war-torn Britain had practically no understanding of the colonial environment. In particular, they had no knowledge of the delicate governmental relationship between the British administration and the Malay Rulers. And they were taken aback by the detached, almost surreal view of the threat, and the affluent undisturbed lifestyle of the people:

²⁵² Thomas Papers, MSS. Ind. Ocn. S 341. RHL. The figures Thomas quotes here are identical to those given in Maxwell’s book *Civil Defence of Malaya*. Maxwell’s book was published during Thomas time in captivity. It is probably safe to assume he turned to this source for his facts.

²⁵³ Maxwell. *Civil Defence* p. 84 and passim.

²⁵⁴ Sir W Goode assistant secretary for civil defence in Singapore quoted in Callahan *Worst Disaster* p.243 and see Note 58.

‘The European population were possessed of a supreme confidence born of complete complacency. With a few notable exceptions, their attitude to the war in general and the chances of it coming to Malaya was one of complete indifference. I have heard it said by civilians that it would be better if the army were not in Malaya – they would attract the Japanese, whereas without them it would be possible to make satisfactory terms with the Japanese! That was in the summer of 1941.’²⁵⁵

Even at the very senior levels a civil servant in a position to know better was reported by Brooke-Popham to have said to him in relation to air-raid precautions, ‘My dear Air Marshal, I’m convinced that the possibilities of war against Japan are at least 500 to 1 against.’²⁵⁶

To the military, intent upon preparing defences, what seemed to be obstructionism by civil servants, was often no more than concern by the administration for the susceptibilities of the Asian population that they governed, and of the rights of the Malay States, which were not British colonies but protected states with considerable internal autonomy. A senior civil servant later wrote:

Co-operation was difficult. The Services and the civilians were working to conflicting directives, the first to get ready for war should it come; the second to maintain maximum production of tin and rubber and their swift despatch to Europe and America. This led to innumerable clashes of interest: priority for labour, for transport, for interference with normal business or damage to rubber estates or interruption of supplies and so on. Added to this was some irritation to the civilians to be ordered about somewhat peremptorily on occasions and to find their clubs and cinemas over-run by hordes of newcomers who seemed to have far more spare time and money than we did! Don’t forget that the civilian population was generally working extremely hard; full blast at peacetime production and all that went with it plus mounting war work, usually at evenings and over weekends.²⁵⁷

A further irritant was that British service personnel in Singapore paid income tax at the very high wartime rates pertaining in Britain, while the local civilians did not; a point the military resented and pointed out. The British expatriates and civil servants in Singapore were probably more resentful of the disruption to their well-regulated and comfortable lives caused by the influx of the military, than was the case in up-country Malaya. In Singapore,

²⁵⁵ Ashmore. Lt. Col. B.H. “*Some Personal Observations on the Malayan Campaign*” Jul ’42. Percival Papers. Box 5. IWM.

²⁵⁶ Brooke-Popham Papers. 9/34. LHCMA

²⁵⁷ Goode. Sir W. Letter to R Callahan quoted in his book *Worst Disaster* p.114

the European civilians saw the military quite simply as brutal and licentious soldiery. A revealing incident is recounted in Russell Braddon's memoir *'The Naked Island'*. After enlisting in the Australian Artillery, he was posted to Singapore in August 1941, and had with him a letter of introduction to an elderly lady socialite who was a friend of his grandmother. He was told she could always be found in Raffles Hotel at Sunday lunch. He went to Raffles and was asked to leave almost immediately by one of the staff because a lady guest objected, and that anyway, the hotel was 'out of bounds' to soldiers. The lady, who had objected to his presence, without knowing him at all, was none other than his grandmother's friend.²⁵⁸

In peninsular Malaya, many Europeans lived a different life style with a large number of them settled in remote areas. Of course, in major towns such as Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Taiping there were significant numbers of such residents. For many of the up-country group, the arrival of the military brought a welcome variety to their often-monotonous lives. Nevertheless, there were still remarkable incidents in the northern predominantly Malay states where they were still heedless of the danger. For instance during vital deployment British troops were asked to move further away because they were too near a Malay kampong (village). While it was difficult for the military to understand this prejudice, since they saw being in Malaya 'to defend these people', it was equally hard for the administration to contend with the clash of cultures, and persuade the Malays to accept these unusual circumstances. Many of the Malay kampongs were remote and lacked communication. Thus the arrival of military forces without warning or reason, was bewildering for them.

In an interview with General Percival after the war, the writer James Leasor, in his study 'Singapore' recorded Percival as saying:

On the civil side, far too little attention had been paid to the people who did not regard themselves as British, but as Malays and Chinese. The civil side did not seem to realise the complications of fighting in their own country. The civilian population were naturally saying to themselves, Who's coming out top dog here? And they were waiting to see who *was* going to be top dog, so there wasn't very much help from them.

"To start with, it took a very long time to get any overall decisions from the rulers out there, because in the end you had to go to about a dozen different people to get a decision. This occurred time and time again.

It caused great delays because a lot of these people were pretty dilatory in replying. It took weeks or months to get a decision on general policy regarding the building of fortifications and so on....²⁵⁹

Security and Intelligence.

²⁵⁸ Braddon. R. *The Naked Island*. Pan Books Ltd. London. 1954. p 42.

²⁵⁹ Leasor. J. *Singapore*. p 189.

In Malaya, a Political Intelligence and Security Branch was in place. Until the declaration of war in the West, it was a small but efficient organisation, concerned mainly with 'Malayan Security' as reflected in its local title. After September 1939, it comprehensively extended its task beyond its parochial interests and increased its responsibilities. It consisted of a number of intelligence organisations, all of which were concerned with the local political scene. They also took an interest in the political affairs of neighbouring countries, especially those which affected them. The Inspector General of Police SS (Straits Settlements) A. H. Dickinson was in overall charge, organising its activities through a number of subsidiary bodies. Malayan Security co-ordinated the activities of all the Malayan Police Forces: the SS, FMS and the UMS, in the collection and collation of all political matters affecting security. Malayan Security worked most closely with the Far East Combined Bureau (FECB).

The FECB in turn maintained a close working liaison with intelligence officers and Service Attachés in Tokyo, Shanghai, Tientsin, Chungking, Bangkok and Hong Kong from whom they received reports.²⁶⁰ Besides the naval, army, and air intelligence sections, the FECB consisted of other specialised units: the Far Eastern Security Section; the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or MI6 Section; the shipping section; and the signals intelligence section. The Far Eastern Security Section was responsible for surveillance on persons or organisations working against British security in East Asia, particularly enemy agents engaged in subversion, espionage or sabotage. The SIS had agents spread throughout East Asia, focusing mainly on Japanese activities and intentions. The shipping section traced and studied the movements of foreign shipping.²⁶¹

The signal intelligence section concentrated on interception, deciphering, direction finding, and traffic analysis of Japanese wireless messages. This work included the top secret "Y" or "Ultra" deciphering of Japanese military and diplomatic codes. Thus from its wide network and sources, the FECB was able to interpret the trends in East Asia and provide C-in-C China and Brooke-Popham, with up to date analysis of Japanese intentions. In addition, the Land and Air Commanders had their own small intelligence gathering cells and provided the C-in-C's with situation reports. Furthermore there were daily and bi-weekly intelligence summaries from London that covered the whole world and occasional parochial reports compiled by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). Furthermore, the Naval Headquarters at

²⁶⁰ "Intelligence Organisation in the Far East" 4 Apr 1940. WO 208/2049A. and WO193/920 Feb 41. NA

²⁶¹ Reports were based on direction finding and traffic analysis. See for example COIS Singapore to Admiralty, FEW 8. 12 Dec 1940. NA.

Ottawa kept Singapore informed of changes in Japanese shipping patterns. There was also an exchange of information with Dutch and American service authorities in East Asia. A Defence Security Officer was responsible for military security and counter-intelligence within the Forces, while the Malayan Security Service concentrated on internal security and Japanese infiltration in Malaya.

It is banal to say that intelligence gathering is an essential activity at all times, but is particularly vital in periods of uncertainty. What is less certain is the value attached to such information and the use made of it. The interpretation of unusual behaviour only becomes significant when there is a heightened sense of alertness. If the prevailing view is that conditions and relations are more or less normal, important precursors are sometimes overlooked. The general feeling of security evident in Malaya in early 1941 was based on the opinion, expressed officially by specialists that Japan was most unlikely to risk hostilities with Britain and the United States simultaneously, and this led to an air of some complacency. Although there were some specialists who distrusted this attitude, it is no exaggeration to say that from the Governor downwards, among civil servants and soldiers alike, there was a belief that, at best, there would be probably no war with Japan; at worst they would make no move until February 1942.²⁶² When the regional Commander in Chief, General Archibald Wavell, visited the area in late 1941, he reported ‘My impressions were that the whole atmosphere in Singapore was completely unwarlike, they did not expect a Japanese attack ...and were very far from being keyed up to war pitch.’²⁶³ Yet the governor and his senior staff were kept fully informed on intelligence developments by the military. In addition, there were reports from London and despatches from the neighbouring British Ambassadors and Consul’s General.

One incident caused some uneasiness among the intelligence community and raised concern about the security of sensitive information passed to the Governor. During a dinner party in Government House, at which several senior officers were present, a cipher telegram from London arrived for the Governor. Thomas summoned the Eurasian clerk in charge of his office to decode the cable. Next morning, one of the officers informed the IG Police (Dickinson) of the incident and commented that ‘horrified by the fact of entrusting a Eurasian subordinate, in wartime especially, [with] the decoding of secret cipher messages’. The other military guests also complained separately to London. The result was a demand from the highest levels, for an explanation from the governor, which he gave sufficient to the situation.

²⁶² Wavell “*Operations in Malaya and Singapore*” Official Report. CAB/66/26/44. Jul. 1942. NA.

²⁶³ Ibid.

However as Dickinson commented ‘the feeling of suspicion and lack of confidence in the Governor to which the incident gave rise was never completely erased.’²⁶⁴

The policing arrangements in Malaya reflected the disparate governmental administration that were in place. The Colony of Straits Settlements had its own Force with an Inspector General at its head. The Federated Malay States also had its own Inspector-General. The Unfederated States had their own Police Forces quite separate from each other and separate from the SS and FMS. Neither of the Inspector-General’s had any authority in the UMS and could only enter in an official capacity by invitation of the Sultan. In late 1940, after considerable debate this agreement was changed: the introduction of the ‘Malayan Security Intelligence Committee’ meant that the IGP of the SS had the right of entry in respect of security matters. It then became possible to co-ordinate intelligence information across the whole of Malaya, and to some extent, across the region. The intelligence authorities proclaimed that this move was ‘...the answer to the co-ordination of all police executive action and policy in the excessively complicated (from the police point of view) lay-out of the Peninsula.’²⁶⁵ By the time war came, it was still an immature organisation. In its embryonic period, there were incidents of poor co-ordination by inexperienced officials, particularly in the UMS.

The internal matters, which were of most concern to the security committee, ranged from determining the extent of Japanese penetration in Malaya, and effectiveness of any attempts at subversion. The behaviour of the Chinese was scrutinised as well as their reaction to the growing danger. Similarly, the activities and conduct of the indigenous Malays, and the other nationalities was closely monitored. Of these groups, the Japanese living and working in Malaya were the focus of close surveillance. At the time and after the war, opinion was divided about the impact and value their presence made on events.²⁶⁶ Nearly every village throughout Malaya had a Japanese barber’s shop, nearly all photographers, providing both a photographic service and development facilities were run by Japanese, and they had a large fishing fleet, with bases in Singapore and Batavia, trawling the seas around Malaya and Netherlands East Indies.²⁶⁷ In addition, there were a number of Japanese owned tin mines and rubber estates. The traders had been in location long before international relations deteriorated, and almost certainly most had arrived in Malaya genuinely seeking work.

²⁶⁴ Elphick. *The Pregnable Fortress*. p.152.

²⁶⁵ Thomas Papers. Enclosure. Dickinson. “*Memorandum on the organisation for the control of political intelligence in Malaya*” Jan. 1946. . Mss.Ind.Ocn.S. 341 RHL

²⁶⁶ CO 273/671/9. 1943.

²⁶⁷ Robertson. *Japanese File*, passim. Also Shennan. *Out in the Middy Sun*. John Murray, London. 2000. p 213.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that their established presence and intimate knowledge of the country, and the peoples, was of value to the Japanese intelligence authorities. Out of loyalty, these traders would observe and report on matters they were asked to target. Doubtless, there were ‘sleeper’ agents among them and indeed, they probably helped organise subversive activities. However, some British civil servants clung to the assumption that most were law-abiding citizens merely following their trade, and doubted the aspersions cast upon them, as expressed by Colonel Grimsdale in his unpublished account of his time as the senior army intelligence officer in F.E.C.B.:

I remember being shown a police report on a certain Japanese [that] the Special Branch believed to be an important link in their intelligence organisation. Funds did not permit the thorough investigation which the case clearly merited, and the report concluded with a request for a comparatively small additional sum. The paper was annotated in the margin by the Governor himself. His comments included “this is pure alarmism”. Further down I read “more alarmism”; at the end was the terrifying remark “there is no Japanese menace in Malaya.” In the face of such official discouragement from the highest quarters, it is remarkable how much success the police had in tracking down some of the highly organised Japanese fifth column. But the lack of reasonable financial resources forced them to drop many promising lines of investigation and enabled the Japanese to develop their subversive activities largely unmolested.²⁶⁸

The Japanese Consul General in Singapore, Toyoda, was a known conduit for the transfer of intelligence information to Tokyo, and his encrypted signals, as noted, were monitored and decoded. Much of his intelligence material was of poor quality, often inaccurate, and sometimes misleading.²⁶⁹ By the law of averages, there were also times when he gained useful material.

In a lengthy note written by Dickinson after the war, in response to Thomas’s ceaseless search for rebuttals of the charge of failure of his Administration, he said:

In the early days of the campaign there was a good deal of loose talk of a native Fifth Column. There is no evidence that any such thing existed as an organised entity... The absence of an organised Fifth Column does not postulate the absence of a Japanese Intelligence – cum- Espionage organisation. The police for years had maintained as close a watch as circumstances permitted on the Japanese Community and its contacts. Intimate liaison was maintained with the Dutch Authorities in all Japanese affairs. But for the (UK Govt.), policy of ‘appeasement’ more action could have been taken on the evidence available than was in fact ever permitted. For thirty years, the Japanese community in Malaya had been permitted to pursue with complete immunity, the collection of intelligence and the mapping of the bye-ways of the countryside. Much of this “intelligence” information was routine and available to anybody who wanted it, with common sense and a pair of eyes in his head... The Japanese Community of Malaya, some three thousand five hundred strong, was as a “security” [risk] but not a local political problem.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Grimsdale. Unpublished manuscript. Con Shelf. 8521. IWM

²⁶⁹ Dickinson Papers. Mss. Ind. Ocn. S123. RHL

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

The loyalty and activities of the Chinese population were also under close surveillance. The Chinese was broadly divided into two main persuasions: those confessed communists, members of the Malayan Communist Party and supported the communist regime in mainland China; and those who sympathised with the government of Chiang Kai Shek, the Kuomintang. In addition, there was a small group, pro- Wang Ching Wei; their sympathy lay with that group of Chinese in China, tolerant of Japanese occupation. (Wang Ching Wei was briefly leader of the Kuomintang after the death of Sun Yat Sen in 1924). The security committee claimed that the pro – Kuomintang was probably the most powerful group, but the communists were the more active and vocal. The Wang Ching Wei party proved to be no great danger to the authorities, and in any case, on the outbreak of war, all known members were arrested and placed in detention. There was no evidence that they ever engaged in fifth column activity. The other important group of Chinese were, of course, those who were second and third generation citizens, and described themselves as ‘King’s Chinese’. They were genuine loyal adherents of the British Empire, but as danger drew near, they became susceptible to pressure to declare an affiliation to either one of the other two main groups. The Kuomintang and the Communists of Malaya, following an uneasy truce between these two major parties in China, formed a “United Front” which on the outbreak of the Malayan war absorbed all Chinese with the exception of the Wang Ching Wei party. According to Dickinson, in his report to the Governor, ‘the Chinese as a race were anti-Japanese and genuinely pro-British’; but he qualified this remark by adding; ‘only providing the administration’s sentiment coincided with their local interests, and did not clash directly with the dictates of Chungking.’²⁷¹ The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), an almost entirely Chinese organisation, similarly followed any lead given by the communist party of China.²⁷² In 1940, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the MCP planned and directed a number of violent strikes, seriously affecting the production of rubber and affecting the allied war effort. It needed strong police action to restore the situation. It was noticeable, however, that following Germany’s attack on Russia in June 1941, the MCP offered wholehearted co-operation with the authorities in Malaya, against ‘our common enemy’.²⁷³ Nevertheless, the fervent loyalty of the Malaya born Chinese was never in doubt and later criticism disparaged the failure to enlist them as an irregular force to fight their most hated enemy. The government’s reluctance to do so was because of the fear raised by the Malays that they could

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Purcell, V. *The Chinese in Malaya*. Oxford University Press. 1948. p. 218.

²⁷³ Ibid

not countenance an armed Chinese people in their midst. Once again, the lack of cohesion in this historically heterogenous population was a crucial factor.

The indigenous Malays, as assessed by the security authorities, considered themselves superior to all other Asian races. Although there was no serious nationalist movement among the Malays in general, their local press had for many years expounded on Malay racial pride and general superiority.²⁷⁴ The Malay *Intelligentsia* showed signs of some movement towards nationalism, activated to some extent by influences from the Netherlands East Indies where nationalism was running strong, and by the local Malay Press. Malay youth, cultivated by their more advanced and politically sensitive type of teacher, was beginning to stir. The Japanese administration, seeing possibilities in this Youth Movement (*Kesatuan Muda Melayu*) attempted to advance it by persuading a known Malay agitator, Ibrahim Yaacob, to purchase a prominent Malay newspaper, with Japanese capital. The scheme was brought to an abrupt end and Ibrahim arrested. It was generally acknowledged that the purely Malay political undercurrents were embryonic and of little cause for concern; most Malays were apathetic to politics. What was of more concern was their reliability under duress. It was thought that in general they would be loyal to the British interest but that no great reliance could be placed on them. It was expected that among the younger men there would be a certain amount of co-operation with the Japanese army. Although pleasant, the male population were thoroughly unstable, did what was expected of them, and took the easiest path to their own greater comfort.²⁷⁵

The Indian element of the population consisted mainly of Hindus, although there were also a significant number of Sikhs and Muslims. Their normal behaviour was generally peaceful, and the labour classes were graded as ‘an ignorant section of the population, interested only in the quiet pursuit of their livelihood’. They were nevertheless susceptible to the powerful persuasion of fervent Indian Nationalists, embodied in the comparatively well educated class of lawyers and teachers. This Nationalist group, set up by well organised local Indian Associations answering to a Central Indian Association of Malaya, bid for complete control of the Indian population of the country on a strongly Nationalist basis. While such associations were few in number, in 1940, their movement was seen as potentially powerful and dangerous.

²⁷⁴ Testimony by Inspector General of Police (S.S.) A. H. Dickinson., in report called for by Thomas after the war. "Memorandum on the Organisation for the Control of Political Intelligence in Malaya." 12 Jan 1946. Thomas Papers.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

The Sikh community came in for the most damning security assessment. Their group was strongly organised within itself, through the influence of the Gurudwaras, (temples). Further, it was susceptible to the anti-British propaganda emanating from the many districts of the Punjab and, curiously, from America. According to IGP Dickinson's report, it was a community that – 'contributed nothing to the welfare of Malaya, and could only be considered parasitic, stupid and likely to be openly anti-British in the event of disaster overtaking British arms.'²⁷⁶ In his post war comments to Thomas, Dickinson remarked that, as it turned out,

'...the Sikh community are reported to have behaved badly, co-operating fully with the Japanese in the more brutal aspects of their treatment of the civilian population. 'It must be added however that instances of great loyalty and devotion on the part of some individuals, have been recorded.'²⁷⁷

It is evident, from the documentary evidence, that the civil administration simply did not see a need for urgency in the introduction and preparation of civil defence measures.²⁷⁸ The population, as represented by people like Bisseker on the Legislative Council, made their demands for action, volubly and forcibly, but met with resistance and were regarded as alarmist. The government was at pains to project an image of calm and restraint. Even at this time, little effort was made to alert the populace to the potential risks, or to inform them of the simple and basic protective precautions every household and business premise could organise, at no great expense. In spite of the mounting evidence from diverse but highly reliable sources of Japan's irrational behaviour, the governor was still reluctant to acknowledge in public that there might be danger ahead. He even refused to authorise the building of shelters. Furthermore, his administration failed to demand concerted action from the Malay states, in summary there was no unity of purpose. Even the possible evacuation of civilians was never even confidentially discussed. Senior government officials in the Malay states were given no briefing whatsoever about their responsibilities in the event of an emergency. In this dismissive atmosphere, the authorities inevitably disregarded the possibility of a scorched earth policy.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ In particular, as noted, in the records of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council S.S. and of the Federal Council 1940 and 1941.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESPONDING TO THE CAMPAIGN.

By late 1941, the effects of the economic and trade freeze imposed on Japan by the United States, Britain and other Allies, were having a crippling impact on the Japanese economy.²⁷⁹ In an attempt to lift the imposition and break the deadlock Japan engaged in an endless round of diplomatic discussions, with America. These talks took place in Washington. While these daily meetings were underway, United States intelligence intercepted the Japanese delegation's reports to Tokyo.²⁸⁰ The reports disclosed that Japan was intransigent and had already made up its mind that the only solution to their problems lay in acquiring their own independent supply of vital resources, by force if necessary, and not depend on Western munificence.

Governor Thomas in Singapore was aware, through British diplomatic channels, of the dangerous impasse reached in Washington. In addition, from his military colleagues, he was fully aware of the continuing build up and deployment of Japanese Forces in South East Asia.²⁸¹ In the twelve months, since returning from leave, both his administration and the military hierarchy had undergone considerable change and as a result were in continuing turmoil. Thomas had been obliged to replace Vlieland, (Chapter 4). Now, with claims reaching London of lack of co-ordination and disagreement between the civil and military authorities, he had imposed on his administration, to his chagrin, the appointment of a Minister Resident. Duff Cooper, a minister of cabinet rank, arrived to investigate and report on these allegations. In addition, both the Army and Air Commanders were replaced. Lieutenant General Arthur Percival now commanded the Army and Air Vice-Marshal Walter Pulford commanded the Air Force. The C-in-C Far East, Brooke-Popham, also warned (on

²⁷⁹ Tarling.. *A Sudden Rampage*. p. 46

²⁸⁰ Decryption by "Magic", US decrypt of message from Tokyo to Berlin 8 Jul 1941. Quoted in Feis.. *The Road to Pearl Harbor*. p.219.

²⁸¹ CAB 79/12 *Japanese Intentions*, 4 Jul 1941. NA.

Nov. 5) that he was to be replaced. Churchill endorsing these changes, and in an attempt to soften the blow to Brooke-Popham's prestige, explained that the military emphasis had changed. The Army, he rationalised, were now bearing the bigger responsibility 'the defence of Singapore should be entrusted to an army officer with up-to-date experience.'²⁸² This was a smokescreen; there had been no change in the defensive plans, the central tenet of which still rested on the ability of the air force to destroy an approaching invasion fleet at sea. The officer chosen to replace Brooke-Popham was Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownell.

From early 1941, the military authorities became increasingly alarmed at Japanese unrestrained aggression and now regarded an invasion as a serious possibility. Defence preparations, within the *materiel* limits imposed upon them, became injected with new vigour. New arrivals, including senior commanders, had to learn hurriedly the detail of their areas of responsibility and busy people had to surrender valuable time to brief and instruct them. The civil administration, on the other hand, did not appear to be infected by the sense of urgency visibly mounting among the ranks of the military. On 1 December, the colony was placed on a state of alert and a 'Proclamation' issued, calling up all the Naval, Army and Air Force Volunteers, but even this did not appear to alarm the civilian authorities. Thomas noted in his diary that he received a telephone call from the Colonial Office, '7.00 am tel: [sic] from CO saying position getting worse' and 'Meeting with Brooke-Popham, Percival and Jones [Colonial Secretary]. Called out the Volunteers.'²⁸³ The pace and tempo of government affairs did not change. Matters relating to war preparations continued ponderously, and were beset by bureaucratic evasion of responsibility. The passing of memoranda seeking urgent decisions on defence matters still moved leisurely between departments. It even continued after the outbreak of war, until Thomas, on 15 January 1942, belatedly declared that the time for passing inter departmental memos was over, people had to take decisions.²⁸⁴ This twilight period, just before the deluge, has been described variously by historians as surreal.

On 24 July 1941, the Vichy government announced that it had agreed to the 'temporary occupation' by Japan of strategic bases and airfields in Indo-China as a 'temporary measure undertaken to protect Indo-China.' In the House of Commons the next

²⁸² Brooke-Popham papers. V/5/1. 5 Nov. 1941. LHCMA

²⁸³ Thomas Diary. This diary is small, leather bound and pocket-size. It contains condensed notes of the more substantial "My War Diary" Dec. 8. 41. – Feb.14. 42. which was sent to the Colonial Office and stamped as received by them on 13 April 1942. No satisfactory explanation has been forthcoming for this unusual practice of keeping two diaries. The small diary accompanied him into captivity and he faithfully recorded his daily occurrences. Mss.Ind. Ocn.341. RHL

²⁸⁴ Montgomery, *Shenton* p.124..

day, Mr Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, described that the Japanese Government had presented demands to Vichy for the occupation of naval and air bases in southern Indo-China. Moreover, it was quite evident the conclusion of a definite agreement was imminent, and it had been clear for some time that this aggression was premeditated by Japan. Perhaps an attempt to alleviate concern, he added that certain defence measures had been enforced in Malaya ‘in view of the plain threat to our territories which the Japanese action implies.’²⁸⁵ On the 26 July, *The Straits Settlements Government Gazette* announced that Japanese assets in Malaya were frozen. On the 28 July, Hanoi officially announced that the Vichy Government had permitted the Japanese to utilize eight aerodromes in southern Indo-China, including some on the Thai border, and that Japanese troops had begun disembarkation.²⁸⁶ Later in the year, 26 November, the American Consul at Hanoi had learnt through the French secret agency in Indo-China that the Japanese would attack the Kra Isthmus on 1 December, without previous warning, from the sea and by land from Indochina. This message was repeated to Singapore the following day.²⁸⁷ Even this clear warning did not rouse the government to issue a general alert. Thomas broadcast to the country that there was little to fear and if anything untoward should arise, arrangements were in place to deal with it.²⁸⁸ As late as 6 December, when an invasion fleet had been seen in the China Sea, he still failed to recognise the reality of the situation. An interesting note recorded in the unpublished diary of Mrs Muriel Reilly ²⁸⁹, one of his cipher clerks working in Government House, seems to confirm his state of denial: -

6th December 1941. He (Shenton Thomas) came into my room and sat down on the edge of my table and very solemnly said “well Mrs Reilly I have got bad news for you. We are at war!” I put down my pencil and said “well we’ve been expecting it for a long time now – let’s be thankful it didn’t happen a year ago when we had that scare” He looked at me over the top of his glasses and replied “oh! You didn’t ask me with whom we are at war” - I answered “But of course you mean Japan” at which he laughed and said “Ha! I thought I would catch you – no, we are at war with Finland.” As he walked away laughing, I called after him “Oh! I thought you were going to prepare me to expect a Jap bomb on my head at any moment” – at that he returned and said “what did you say! Japanese bombs in Singapore! You can take it from me there will never be a Japanese bomb dropped in Singapore – there will never be a Japanese set foot in Malaya.”

²⁸⁵ Hansard Report, quoted in Maxwell *Civil Defence of Malaya* p 92.

²⁸⁶ Maxwell op cit.

²⁸⁷ Crosby, Bangkok to FO No. 861 repeated to Singapore 27 Nov.1941. FO 371/27767. Also WO 106/2514. N.A

²⁸⁸ *Straits Times* report 1 Dec 1941.

²⁸⁹ Reilly. Mrs M. Diary. 91/14/1. IWM.

Singapore was now the focal point for international journalists, positioning themselves for the coming struggle; they also observed and reported the unreal normality determinedly followed by its citizens.²⁹⁰

In this same period, leading to war, army manpower had been increased by reinforcements of young recently trained recruits from India, and an Australian Division, though this division in early 1941 was only one Brigade strong. It was later reinforced by another brigade, and was commanded by a colourful but prickly Australian, Major General Gordon Bennett. However, vital military equipment had not been forthcoming; there was still no armour, a serious shortage of artillery, heavy anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank weapons. The promised modern attack aircraft, Spitfires, Hurricanes and torpedo bombers to replace the dated and ancient Brewster Buffaloes, Hudson's and Vildebeeste, had not arrived;. The British Ground Forces in Malaya in December 1941 totalled 88,600.²⁹¹ This number was still short of the desired figure Percival and his predecessor had calculated was essential for the defence of Malaya. Their calculations concluded that the number required was 100,000. In terms of combat troops, they were short of seventeen infantry battalions and two tank regiments.

At the outbreak of war, there was a government in some disarray and in a state of lethargy. It was not only quarrelling among itself but also disagreeing with the military about war preparations and led by a Governor apparently in denial about a possible war. The country was neither psychologically prepared for conflict nor on a proper war footing. The military, under an array of new commanders, short of manpower and the many *materiel* essentials, which for years they had appealed. In particular, it was without the modern aircraft, a vital factor above all, for the execution of the defensive plan.

The Opening Moves

The invasion of Malaya began in the early morning of 8 December 1941. Timed to coincide with Japanese assaults on the Philippines, Guam, Hong Kong, Wake Island and Pearl Harbour. In the case of Pearl Harbour, which lies east of the International Date Line, it was still 7 December. The invasion began with sea-borne landings at three places in the northeast region of the Malay Peninsula. The main assault group landed unopposed at Singora and Patani two coastal towns in Thailand on the eastern seaboard of the Isthmus of Kra and the third at Kota Bahru in Kelantan, close to the Thai border. Two days previously, the 6 December 1941, at 13.40 hrs, the approach of the Japanese invasion force was detected

²⁹⁰ Barber, N *Sinister Twilight*. p. 20.

²⁹¹ .Ibid p.163.

at sea, southeast of Cape Cambodia, 300 miles from and heading towards north Malaya. It was observed to be a Force of considerable size, at least 26 Transports, in two groups, with an accompanying armada for protection, of cruisers and destroyers. A lone Hudson aircraft from Kota Bahru, which was then flying a reconnaissance mission in the area, reported its presence.²⁹² The sighting was communicated immediately to GHQ Singapore and more than an hour later at 15.00 hrs, the information was passed to Percival who was in Kuala Lumpur visiting III Corps Headquarters. Percival and Heath, the Corps Commander, consulted a map and both concluded that on its present course the convoy was heading for Singora.²⁹³ After the war, Percival wrote in his 'Despatches', his 'Command was at the fullest degree of readiness, but there was no undue alarm, owing to the view that the Japanese expedition was directed towards Siam (Thailand).'²⁹⁴ In the light of his prescient appreciation of 1937, when he predicted that this was the very strategy Japan would use to approach west Malaya, it is a surprising statement. In apparent contradiction he added that they (he and Heath) believed that this sighting of an approaching invasion force would trigger an order [from the C-in-C] to proceed with 'Matador'. If he believed the 'expedition' caused 'no undue alarm', why consider that 'Matador' should be set in motion?²⁹⁵

The 11th Indian Division, in the Alor Star area, nominated for Operation Matador was already on standby and at short notice to move. Heath now instructed the Divisional Commander, Murray-Lyon, to reduce the warning time to "instant readiness" and to move trains and road transport to the start position. Percival caught the late afternoon civil flight back to Singapore, and was in his HQ, at Fort Canning, by about 6.30 p.m. Percival makes the comment, in his book, that on arriving at his office 'I was a little surprised to find out that Matador had not been ordered.'²⁹⁶ This is also a curious statement for two reasons. First, it reflects poorly on the relationship between himself and the C-in-C, in that he did not immediately telephone Brooke-Popham from Kuala Lumpur to discuss the sighting, even if it was half-expected. It was after all an event of momentous portent. Second, a large portion of his meagre forces was to be despatched into neutral Thailand. It would have been perfectly understandable, indeed expected, that a GOC seek clarification before despatching a major unit on a hazardous expedition. A further indication of the curious relationship is that Brooke-Popham turned to his naval colleague, Layton, to discuss the implications of the

²⁹² Kirby, *The War Against Japan* p.180.

²⁹³ Percival. *War in Malaya*. P. 106

²⁹⁴ Supplement to London Gazette 38215. 26 Feb 1948

²⁹⁵ Ibid

²⁹⁶ Percival. *War in Malaya*. P. 108

sighting. While it was perfectly reasonable to seek a nautical assessment of the navigational course of the flotilla, it was odd not to include both the ground and air commanders in these important deliberations. At that point, both C-in-C's agreed a decision on Matador should be delayed to make quite certain the convoy was, without doubt, heading for Thailand. There is no record of Percival, on his return, attempting to contact his C-in-C, after learning that Matador had not been authorised. It was not until late evening (9.00 p.m.) the following day, 7th December, when Brooke-Popham had confirmation of the direction and intention of the invasion force that Percival went personally to see him to explain that it was now too late to undertake 'Matador.'²⁹⁷ Brooke-Popham officially cancelled it at 10.30 pm. that evening.²⁹⁸

The Governor was aware of the deliberations taking place regarding Matador. On 7 December, he received a copy of an urgent cable sent to London by Sir Josiah Crosby, the British Ambassador in Thailand. It said that on learning about the sighting he visited the Thai Foreign Minister: 'I have just seen Thai Minister and we send you the following message from us both. For God's sake do not allow British Forces to occupy one inch of Thai territory unless and until Japan has struck the first blow at Thailand.'²⁹⁹ Undoubtedly, such a strong plea did little to help Brooke-Popham make a dispassionate and purely military, decision. This was not Crosby's first entreaty about not violating Thai territory. His lengthy time serving in Bangkok (37 years) and obvious affection for the Thais, some claim, made him blind to their scheming dialogue with the Japanese.³⁰⁰ Moreover, his diplomatic telegrams expounding the Thai allegiance to the west and to Britain in particular, were dangerously misleading. Sir Andrew Gilchrist, who at the time was a junior diplomat working for Crosby in Bangkok, notes that 'rumours of a 'Matador' type operation by British forces were now (Dec.1941) in general circulation.'³⁰¹ Moreover, a 'Magic'³⁰² decrypt of a Japanese diplomatic telegram reported a suggestion by a pro-Japanese member of the Thai cabinet that the Japanese Forces should provoke a British invasion of southern Thailand enabling 'Thailand to declare war on Britain as the aggressor'.³⁰³ It would seem that Crosby either ignored these distasteful indicators or simply did not want to believe them.

²⁹⁷ Gilchrist, A. *Malaya 1941*. Robert Hale, London, 1992. P116. Also, Percival Despatch etc para.124.

²⁹⁸ Percival Despatch.

²⁹⁹ NA. FO 371/28163. 7 Dec 1941.

³⁰⁰ See for example Gilchrist *Malaya 1941* p.28 quoting a briefing note for the CIGS in Nov. 1941, which describes the concern of military commanders about Crosby's relationship and charitable view of the Thai authorities' behaviour. Also Aldrich, *The Key to the South*.

³⁰¹ Ibid. p.115.

³⁰² The Americans called their decryption machine "Magic".

³⁰³ Elphick., *The Pregnable Fortress* p. 103

Thomas learnt of the Japanese landings at Kota Bahru, according to his diary, when Percival telephoned him at 1.15 am on the 8th December. He then ordered, as prearranged with the police, the arrest of all Japanese in Singapore and the seizure of Japanese powerboats in harbour. Nearly every secondary source describing this event differs, both about the time Thomas heard of the invasion, and his reaction. According to Noel Barber, he is alleged to have said, on hearing the news from Percival, ‘Well I suppose you will shove the little men off!’³⁰⁴ A comment repeated in several books on the campaign. Thomas, however, says that at the time of the call he was working on a cipher telegram and that later, at 4.00 am, he received a call from Pulford warning him of approaching hostile aircraft. He then phoned Rodgers of the Harbour Board and Jeans (head of A.R.P.) to alert them. However, by the time the Japanese aircraft arrived over Singapore, all the city lights were fully illuminated; there was no blackout. The official history states that the civil defence organisation did not respond because the headquarters of the Air Raid Precautions was not manned³⁰⁵, this version obviously calls into question the veracity of Thomas’s diary entries. When this event, the matter of the unpreparedness of civil defence of Singapore, was investigated after the war, Thomas defended his position by claiming that he was not forewarned of the likelihood of an air raid. In addition, to support his case, he had a letter from the officer in charge of civil defence who wrote “the point is that ‘brown-out’ [precautionary dimming of lights] was not ordered for the night of the 7/8 December, and my recollection is that it was not given on Service advice. Therefore, the A.R.P. was not manned, nor was the municipal services alerted in any way. They were in their beds as on any other night in peace-time.”³⁰⁶

Brian Montgomery in his book ‘Shenton of Singapore’ claims to have irrefutable evidence, both a written account and a verbal record by a naval officer that Thomas was in fact at a vital conference at the Naval Base at 2.30 am on 8 December.³⁰⁷ While there an ‘Air Raid Warning Red’ was declared, during which they all took shelter. At this conference, in addition to Thomas, were Brooke-Popham, Admiral Phillips (the new C-in-C Far East Fleet), Pulford, and senior army officers, but not Percival; additionally there were a number of staff officers in attendance. It is claimed that at this conference, called by Phillips, the decision was taken to put to sea the two capital ships and their destroyer escort (Force Z) to meet the Japanese invasion in north Malaya; and that Thomas’s endorsement of the mission was pivotal. This decisive conference is also mentioned in Marder’s book ‘Old Friends New

³⁰⁴ Barber, *Sinister Twilight*. p28.

³⁰⁵ Kirby. *War Against Japan* P183

³⁰⁶ Thomas papers. “*Comments on the Draft History of the War Against Japan*” para 95 (j). RHL

³⁰⁷ Montgomery *Shenton* p. 5.

Enemies’.³⁰⁸ However, there does not appear to be any documentary evidence to support the claim that such a conference took place. According to Montgomery, no official minutes were kept for security reasons, but he gives a very full account of the entire event, related to him by the naval officer, Lieutenant Commander J. W. McClelland. He explains that this naval officer was not part of the proceedings, but deliberately slipped into the room at the request of Layton, who had not been invited to attend. McClelland wrote a full account of the meeting and after the war was interviewed by Montgomery to corroborate his record. What is strange is that Thomas makes no mention of this critical meeting, even in the privacy of his diary. The Naval Base was about 20 miles from Government House and at that hour it would have taken about 30 minutes to drive there. If the meeting did indeed take place, it is hard to imagine that Thomas was back at Government House by 4.00 am, to receive Pulford’s warning of an air raid, which by then, in any case, would have been superfluous. This mysterious meeting is also given prominence by Sir Andrew Gilchrist in his book ‘Malaya 1941’, he believes this gathering did in fact take place, and is credibly reported. Both Brooke-Popham and Thomas were people with whom he was personally well acquainted, and the remarks attributed to them during the meeting are, he believes, entirely in character.³⁰⁹ Gilchrist’s endorsement only serves to make Thomas’s failure to reveal this conference, in any record, extraordinary, and further, raises further misgivings about the accuracy of his diary entries. What is not in contention, is that Singapore was bombed at 4.15 am on 8 December, there was no air-raid warning, the city was fully illuminated, and the Civil Defence organisation was unprepared.

Commanders-in-Chief, Brooke-Popham and Layton, later that day, 8 December, issued an ‘Order of the Day’ stating confidently:

“We are ready. We have had plenty of warning and our preparations are made and tested.....We are confident. Our defences are strong and our weapons efficient....Japan has made a grievous mistake....We see before us a Japan drained for years by the exhausting claims of her wanton onslaught of China.”³¹⁰

Ten weeks later these prophetic words were to ring hollow. Hardened members of the press corps, on receiving a copy of the ‘Order’, gave vent to cynicism. George Hammond, editor of

³⁰⁸ Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies*. Oxford University Press. 1981

³⁰⁹ Gilchrist. *Malaya 1941*.p.126.

³¹⁰ Brooke-Popham papers, 6/5/33. 8 Dec 1941. LHCMA

a local newspaper the 'Tribune' said "I can't believe anybody could deliberately tell so many lies."³¹¹

The unit selected for 'Matador', 11th Indian Division, consisted of two Brigades only, under command of Major General Murray-Lyon. The Division was deployed in north Malaya in the state of Kedah. As noted earlier, it was given dual and conflicting roles. Either prepare for deployment to a defensive position near Jitra, eighteen miles south of the Thai border, with the task of covering the important airfield at Alor Star. Alternatively, remain on alert in anticipation of the Matador operation, an offensive advance. "The two possible roles, which were in no way compatible, increased immensely his [Murray-Lyon] difficulties"³¹² In these circumstances, the Divisional Commander had little option but to have his command on continuous alert ready to move at short notice. Indeed, he had already moved two of his battalions to the railway station at Anak Bukit ready to entrain³¹³. This high state of readiness meant that little time could be devoted to the construction of the defensive position. In any case, they needed to have ready loaded on transport; quantities of stores for the rapid construction of defensive positions at the destination and the possible repair of bridges en-route. These same materials were needed for the defensive site at Jitra. His plan envisaged the division departing from ten Assembly points many miles apart and as time was going to be of the essence, he could make a quicker move from his deployment area if his forces were at instant readiness and not confined to trenches. During this waiting period, there was the additional handicap of appalling and incessant monsoon rain without protection or relief. "It was raining...it hadn't stopped for days...there was the devil's own deluge. I had never seen such a storm. You couldn't see more than twenty yards"³¹⁴ On 6 December 1941, the Division first learnt of the sighting of the Japanese convoy in the Gulf of Thailand and ordered to the highest state of readiness.³¹⁵ To add a further testing element to the Divisional Commanders mission, he had responsibility for a small force ("Krohcol", two battalions) tasked with advancing along the Kroh – Patani road to ambush any Japanese, which might approach from that direction. Kroh, where the column was assembling, was a 100 miles away from Murray-Lyon's Headquarters, and communications were very unreliable.

Neither of these pre-emptive opening moves was successful. In the case of Matador, the lengthy period awaiting confirmation of the invasion fleet's destination left it too late to

³¹¹ Barber. *Sinister Twilight*. p.39.

³¹² Ibid p. 170.

³¹³ Percival, *War in Malaya*. p 114 -115.

³¹⁴ MacKenzie C *Eastern Epic*, Quoted from diary of Lt. Greer. Chatto & Windus London, 1951. p 247

³¹⁵ Kirby. *War Against Japan*. p. 180.

deploy the Division. And, in the case of Krohcol, again, a late decision to order this move was followed by a less than determined advance by the Column against some opposition, identified initially as Thai Police but later suspected as Japanese in Thai police uniforms,³¹⁶ prevented them from getting anywhere near their objective. With the cancellation of Matador, 11th Division now turned at this late point to the alternative task and deployed to defend the Jitra area. They returned, dejected, to poorly and partially prepared defensive positions; trenches now flooded with rain water. They had to erect barbed-wire barriers, lay anti-tank mines and fresh telephone cables.³¹⁷ These exhausted, wet, and raw troops, some of whom had never seen a tank now confronted a rapidly advancing battle trained Japanese force supported by tanks. The ensuing battle was swift and brutal. The Jitra position was quickly overrun with the Japanese employing a tactic that was to be a feature of their remorseless advance down peninsula Malaya. Attacking the main defensive position frontally, while at the same time sending supporting column's around the flanks to encircle the position, cutting the lines of communication and withdrawal routes, then falling upon the defenders from the rear.

This early engagement of the war in Malaya was disastrous and set a pattern and standard for subsequent actions in the campaign. The official history explained that the 'action at Jitra was a major disaster for the British forces in Malaya...and the deployment of 11th Division at Jitra led to defeat in detail'.³¹⁸ Errors of command and control, lack of clarity of purpose, poor communications and inexperienced, demoralised troops facing a cohesive, trained and resolute enemy were the main ingredients of failure. The British forces were in disarray following the defeat at Jitra.

A most serious flaw revealed during this action was the poor radio communications, between all formations, upwards and downwards; primarily because there were simply not enough radio sets available, but also because the signal ranges between existing sets in close country was very poor.³¹⁹ The civil telegraph and telephone systems or a despatch rider, in many instances, provided the sole means of communicating.³²⁰ An example of this problem was when Brooke-Popham and Percival were speaking to each other on a trunk call; the

³¹⁶ Ibid. p.186

³¹⁷ Allen. *Singapore 1941-1942*. p 124

³¹⁸ Kirby *War Against Japan* p. 210.

³¹⁹ WO/172/176. NA.

³²⁰ Ibid

operator interrupted to say, “Your three minutes have expired, sir”, and cut the connection. They were discussing an extremely vital military matter.³²¹

It could not have helped that Corps Headquarters was located in Kuala Lumpur some 260 miles behind the forward units and the GOC in Singapore a further 230 miles away, and bizarrely, Percival even found time on 8 December, the morning of the invasion, to attend a meeting of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Thomas opened the Council proceedings with what was either a show of British phlegm, or another example of his failure to grasp the significance of the outbreak of war with Japan.

Before we proceed with the orders of the day I wish to make just a short statement. At 1 o'clock this morning a Japanese force attacked the beaches of Kota Bahru. The Force consisted of a cruiser, four destroyers, two armed merchantmen and some transports. They were engaged by our forces and the last news is that all the surface forces appear to be retiring and that the ships are sailing north. There were a certain number of Japanese left on the beaches. They have been roped in and those that are making off in boats are being machine-gunned. (Applause).

We are informed that the main landing is now taking place at Singora in Thailand, so that Thailand as well as the British Empire has been attacked without provocation and without cause...The Council will now proceed with its business.³²²

There is no record in the minutes, of Percival contributing to the proceedings.³²³ However, Hugh Bryson, who was Clerk to the Legislative Council, wrote after the war, that ‘Percival came in about half way through the meeting and, the public having withdrawn, gave members a survey of the position in Kedah and the Kroh – Betong area; he appeared confident that he could hold, if not repel, the Japs’ (sic).³²⁴

The distances between commanders and the opening battle have been compared with fighting taking place on the borders of Scotland and Corps HQ in Crewe with the G.O.C. in the Isle of Wight. Senior commanders did not have the benefit of personal aircraft to cover these huge distances. When Percival needed to meet the Corps Commander in Kuala Lumpur, he had to fly from Singapore by civil airline on an early morning flight. However, even this facility was suspended as the Japanese drew closer to the capital of the FMS and enemy aircraft dominated the skies over Malaya. Even the most senior commanders did not have their own air transport.³²⁵

On the East coast, at Kota Bahru the primary Japanese assault took place. The first shot in the Malayan campaign was fired by the Indian 3rd Dogra Regt. 18-pounder gun at enemy landing craft just after midnight on the 8th December 1941. By 12.25 a.m. Japanese

³²¹ Brown, Cecil. *From Suez to Singapore*. Random House, New York. 1942. p 364.

³²² Proceedings of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council Meeting, 8 Dec 1941.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Bryson Papers. BAM Collection. RCS/RCMS 103/5/7. CU.

³²⁵ Callahan. *Worst Disaster*. P.219

troops were ashore and by 1.00 a.m. they had captured the pillboxes in the area of Badang. Savage fighting then took place for a number of hours with several of the other pillboxes resisting to the last man but by 4.00 a.m., the Japanese had a firm beachhead.³²⁶

Most of the RAF's strength were by now deployed in North Malaya. Of the 158 aircraft available to the Air Commander, 110 were in the north by dawn on 8 December. At 12.30 a.m. when Singapore heard the news of the landings, a few aircraft from Kota Bahru attacked the landing craft and succeeded in hitting all three Japanese transports, two of which sank. This notable success by a small number of Hudson's and old Wildebeests aircraft, has been seized upon by adherents of air power, as an example of what could have been achieved, if the RAF had been reinforced by the 336 aircraft promised by the C.O.S.³²⁷

At daylight, the Japanese Air Force took to the air and demonstrated their superiority in both flying ability and the quality of their aircraft. They attacked the major aerodromes on both coasts. British aircraft returning to the aerodromes on the West coast to refuel and rearm were attacked on the ground and their numbers fatally reduced. At Alor Star, a squadron of eight Blenheims caught on the ground were reduced to two aircraft. At Sungei Patani, south of Alor Star, two fighter squadrons similarly caught, were reduced to four aircraft in each squadron. The remaining aircraft at Sungei Patani withdrew and repositioned at nearby Butterworth and inexplicably the ground staff hastily withdrew leaving over a 150,000 gallons of aviation fuel as well as the bomb stores and the runways intact. At the time, there were no Japanese ground forces anywhere near Sungei Patani.

On the East coast, the three airfields had been under continual bombing and strafing throughout the day but the Japanese were careful to use only anti-personal and fragmentation bombs to avoid damaging the runways. Pulford ordered the remaining aircraft, to withdraw to Kuantan. Again, the RAF Station staff, in panic, deserted the aerodromes and while they set fire to the buildings, they left the fuel, stores, runways and 550 tons of bombs intact. Fortunately, units of 8th Indian Brigade managed at least to set fire to the abandoned fuel stores. Without instructions to the contrary, the Brigade remained responsible for the defence of these abandoned aerodromes.³²⁸ At the end of the day, only fifty operational aircraft were remaining in the North.

On 9 December, the second day of the war, the air situation deteriorated even more. Early that day, Pulford decided to reduce the concentration of aircraft at Kuantan.

³²⁶ Percival. *War in Malaya*. Pp 118-120.

³²⁷ Allen. *Singapore*. p. 118

³²⁸ Farrell, *The Defence and Fall*, p. 146.

Unfortunately however, the Japanese got there first (they flew 120 sorties a day for the first three days of the war)³²⁹ and destroyed seven aircraft on the ground. The remainder were ordered back to Singapore. Attempts to strike back at the Japanese led to further losses. Six Blenheims left Singapore that morning to attack the Singora area, they were to be joined by a fighter escort from North Malaya but the only two remaining fighters in the North were at that time heavily engaged in other tasks supporting the army. The Blenheims pressed on unescorted and were attacked by thirty enemy fighters and lost half their number. A second strike was planned comprising the remnants from Singapore and the only remaining Blenheims in the North, but they were attacked on the ground at Butterworth before they could take off; all but one was destroyed. The Governor recorded in his diary:

December 9.

Enemy reinforcing in Kelantan and State Government move to Kuala Krai. Aerodromes in Kelantan, Alor Star, Sungei Patani and Kuantan badly bombed. More machines gone. Singapore quite composed and all first aid posts fully moved [sic]. All very reassuring.

In reality there was no plan drawn up for the evacuation of either the State Government or the civil population from the state of Kelantan, an Unfederated State. When firing was plainly heard on 8 December at about 1.00 am, the British Adviser, Mr A. C. Baker, rang around the British community warning them that women and children should be ready to leave the area as soon as possible. At 4.30 am, the military commander ordered them to leave immediately, which they did in their private cars to Kuala Krai, a railway town some distance in the interior. Some Europeans from the adjoining state of Terengganu, also an Unfederated state, heard of this instruction through friends, and also left. However, they all believed that this was only a temporary arrangement, and when the 'incursion' was suppressed, they would then return home, so in the event they took only the minimum of belongings with them.³³⁰

Key's 8th Brigade finally abandoned the two remaining airfields on the East coast on the night of the 10th/11th, destroying as much as they could. However, as the runways were grass there was little they could do about the landing surfaces, and in any case, the RAF had positioned dumps of material for repairing craters nearby. By the end of the day, British aircraft losses were crippling and the Japanese had secured total air supremacy across North Malaya, a lone Buffalo photo-reconnaissance aircraft remained at Butterworth. By the

³²⁹ Richards & Saunders. *Royal Air Force 1939–1945. Vol. II. The Fight Avails.* HMSO, London 1954. p.30

³³⁰ Shennan. *Out in the Midday Sun.* p.233 and passim.

evening of the 10th December and before the ground battle for the west-coast trunk road had begun in earnest, British airpower in Malaya had been virtually destroyed.³³¹

The 10 December turned out to be an even blacker and more disastrous day for the British Forces. Now without airpower, and adding to the unremitting despair, the two prestigious capital ships, *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* were sunk. Admiral Phillips the Fleet Commander had, after intense deliberations (mentioned above), decided to take the risk of attacking the Japanese naval forces still offshore and gathered opposite Singora. Phillips set sail from Singapore on the afternoon of 8 December at a time when the air situation in the North was critical but not hopeless. His Force Z consisted of the two capital ships and an escort of H.M. destroyers *Electra*, *Empress*, *Vampire* and *Tenedos*. The Force was spotted late afternoon the 9 December by enemy reconnaissance aircraft, whose presence was noted by the Fleet. Unknown to Phillips, however, a Japanese submarine had earlier that afternoon also sighted his squadron.³³² By then he was aware that the RAF could not provide air cover over Singora, so he decided it would be sensible to return Singapore. En-route, however, he picked up an allied signal suggesting there was an attempted enemy landing at Kuantan and as this was not far off his return course, decided to investigate. His squadron was again spotted by Japanese air reconnaissance and both capital ships were attacked and sunk. The majority of the three thousand crew, (from the two ships), were rescued by the destroyers. Admiral Phillips and his flag captain, John Leach, both died. The reported landing at Kuantan, for which Z Force diverted, proved false. Admiral Layton, who was about to depart Singapore for his new command, was ordered to remain and reassume the appointment as C-in-C Eastern Fleet.³³³ His first decision was to order the remaining cruisers and destroyers away from Singapore to the safety of Java and Ceylon. The naval base was now empty. Layton, on 5th January 1942, then removed himself and the FECSB to Java. Later, in mid-January, he was appointed C-in-C, Ceylon [Sri Lanka].³³⁴

After less than a week of war, the RAF had effectively been destroyed and the Royal Navy chased from the seas of East Asia. Only the Army remained to fight. The effect on the morale of the people of Malaya was immediate and devastating. A number of historians, examining closely the loss of the capital ships, consider that Pulford, in spite of radio silence imposed by Phillips on his Task Force, should have at least sent a reconnaissance aircraft to Kuantan to investigate the rumour of a landing. In which event he would have been able to

³³¹ Richards & Saunders. *The Fight Avails*. P.22.

³³² Kirby. *War Against Japan*. p 196.

³³³ Kirby. *Official History*. p 199.

³³⁴ *Ibid*. p 253.

disprove it, and most certainly found the ships and sent assistance. Instead, he is reputed to have said to Palliser the naval chief-of staff in Singapore, “My God, I hope you don’t blame me for this. We didn’t even know where you were.”³³⁵

On this same day, 10 December, Duff Cooper took over as chairman of the recently re-named War Council. Now appointed by Churchill as ‘Resident Cabinet Minister’ at Singapore for Far Eastern Affairs, and given the authority to form a War Council. It was not an auspicious meeting. Both Brooke-Popham and Thomas told Duff Cooper that they intended to take their orders from their respective masters in London (the Chiefs of Staff and the Colonial Office) and saw little need for a War Council. Moreover, when Duff Cooper asked Brooke-Popham to let him have a list of his urgent military requirements, he was told that such a list had already been sent to the War Office and turned down. Duff Cooper then said he would now raise this with Churchill; at which Brooke-Popham told him he should not do so as he could not be disloyal to the Chiefs of Staff. Duff Cooper recorded in his diary:

I told him that if he thought loyalty to the Chiefs of Staff was of greater importance than winning the war I could not agree with him, and that if he really believed that the supply of certain weapons was essential there were no methods which he should not adopt to secure those weapons.³³⁶

The disastrous events during the first few days of the campaign, the crushing defeat at Jitra, the loss of the 2 capital ships and the destruction of most of the RAF, were so momentous, the outcome of the war was virtually determined at that point. The speed, momentum and pressure with which the Imperial Japanese Army launched and maintained their dogged drive south, stunned the defenders. Without air or sea power, the beleaguered and ragged army reeled backwards, pausing periodically for half-hearted, but ineffective, stands against a relentless blitz.³³⁷

The Japanese forces, commanded by Lieutenant General Yamashita, advanced simultaneously on three axes, each a division strong, supported by light tanks, additional units, and air support. Two divisions traversed, in parallel, the Isthmus of Kra, to the west coast of Malaya - which was to be their main thrust - towards Alor Star, Kroh and Grik on the Perak River. The third division began its advance down the east coast, from Kota Bahru, following the line of the East Coast Railway, towards Kuantan. The two advancing west coast columns converged or separated according to the terrain, roads and rivers along their

³³⁵ Leason *Singapore*. p197.

³³⁶ Duff Cooper Papers. DUFC/3/7 Churchill College Archives. CU

³³⁷ Kinvig. *Scapegoat*. Passim

routes. On both coasts, they additionally employed amphibious “leap-frogging” manoeuvres, inserting forces at points along the coast in the rear of the British positions.³³⁸

From Jitra, the army fell back on Gurung, about thirty miles further south, but their stand here was no more successful than the attempt at Jitra and as the pressure mounted Murray-Lyon ordered an immediate withdrawal some seven miles further south to put the river Muda between his forces and the Japanese. By the morning of the 16th December his division, sorely depleted and exhausted, was behind the river, which he hoped would prove a formidable tank obstacle. In so doing, however, he left exposed the island of Penang.

The written records of the European civilians caught up in the early days of the fighting in north Malaya almost unanimously affirm the lack of information about the devastating events taking place around them.³³⁹ In a particular memoir, Harvey Ryves, a British police officer working in north Kedah, deplored the complete absence of official communication about the military developments engulfing them, especially regrettable, he felt, in view of his appointment. In the end, he relied on people passing through his area, the beginning of the flood of refugees, to let him know what was going on so he in turn could warn others and make decisions. He mentions an incident when a Mrs Scott the wife of a rubber estate manager went to find the British Resident to get advice and help: “A couple of hours later she returned to say that the British Resident had issued orders that no women and children were to leave the state (Kedah) without permission. I was so amazed at hearing this report that I promptly phoned Jomaron, the District Officer, to ask if he had heard similar information. He hummed and hawed and made the extraordinary reply that women and children could leave, but the government could accept no responsibility if anything happened to them on the journey!”³⁴⁰

The Penang Debacle.

The episode of the loss of Penang to the advancing Japanese was the first significant challenge to the administration’s management of passive defence matters. It was, distressingly, to uncover evident inadequacies, which caused international opprobrium and haunted the image of Thomas and his government. Penang was bombed on 11 December. It was a heavy raid, which, in spite of the previous day’s air raid on Butterworth’s RAF airfield, on the mainland opposite, came as a surprise to the people of the island. They rushed

³³⁸ Kirby. *Official History*. Passim

³³⁹ Shennan. *Out in the Midday Sun*. p. 233.

³⁴⁰ Memoir of Harvey Ryves. Policeman in north Malaya. 84/301 1941. IWM

into the streets to watch the approaching formations, and too late, realised the danger. Hundreds were killed and thousands injured. It set in motion a saga, which highlighted the inadequacy of the civil defence and passive defence measures on the island, and brought into sharp focus the poor planning for managing such an eventuality.³⁴¹

The raid was unopposed because by this time there were no fighter aircraft in northern Malaya, and there were no anti-aircraft defences on the island and the only regular battalion had been withdrawn to form part of Krohcol.³⁴² Air raids continued over three consecutive days, the casualties were terrible from bombing and machine gunning in the crowded streets of Georgetown. All essential services broke down, the town was in flames, hundreds of corpses lay unburied and looting became endemic. Most of the native population fled to the relative safety of Penang Hill and disconcertingly the labour force and the local police disappeared. The place was in utter confusion and panic, which in turn led to hasty and misguided decisions that were later the source of much recrimination and reflected badly on the entire administration. Subsequent enquiries, nevertheless, acknowledged the valuable part played by a number of Europeans, particularly women, working alongside Asian women, in treating injured and providing succour to homeless and about half of the ARP Corps and the Medical Auxiliary Services remained at their posts.

Nevertheless, overall, in this first test of passive defence measures, there were glaring defects. Most of the important facilities, such as the Fire Service, Ambulances and Police either failed to function or deserted, and there were no air-raid shelters. On 15 December, the military garrison commander, Brigadier C.A. Lyon (not to be confused with Maj. Gen. Murray-Lyon, the Divisional Commander) received instructions from General Heath that he was to make secret preparations for the evacuation of the garrison, including the Europeans. Moreover, he claimed afterwards, the evacuation orders were to be given verbally at 12.00 pm on 16 December, and passed onto only those who had to apply them.

He informed the Resident Councillor, Leslie Forbes, of the plan, who until that moment maintains he had no hint of the intended secret evacuation, which was fixed for that night 16/17 December. From the Inquiry, after the war, it is clear that the two did not get on. When asked about co-operation with the civil authorities at this time Brigadier Lyon replied:

Good co-operation was maintained with the naval staff, although the Commander felt obliged at the start to arrange for the removal of the pre-war SNO (senior naval officer). Airfields were demolished early and co-operation did not arise. Co-operation with the civil

³⁴¹ Barber.A. *Penang at War* AB&B. Malaysia 2010. p.66 and passim.

³⁴² Kirby *War Against Japan* p 218.

authorities was imperfect partly because senior civil officials did not get on with the Commander, nor had he a high estimation of the Chief Police Officer. In the crises, however, the Commander took charge and maintained close contact with the Resident Councillor.³⁴³

Fierce criticism, which followed this first ordered evacuation, was directed at the underhand way in which it was arranged and the discriminatory selection of those to be evacuated - the message was for the European society only. Without warning, the white women were told to prepare to leave that night and that it was a military order, which they had to obey. It was determined that the evacuation of Asian civilians was not possible, since there was insufficient transport for large numbers, and to avoid an unmanageable stampede they would not be told. The evacuation that night, considering the haste imposed and the brevity of instructions went relatively smoothly; the ferry taking them across to the mainland had to be manned by Royal Navy ratings, survivors from the recently sunk capital ships, because the Asian crew, Malay, Chinese and Indian, had deserted.

A few Europeans, notably the Medical Superintendent, Doctor Evans, refused to leave and insisted in remaining to look after the injured. An attempt was made to destroy everything of use to the invaders: defences, ammunition, quantities of petrol and oil were destroyed, as well as equipment and machinery, the power station, the civil airport buildings and the Penlaga Cable station, which was the terminal for the important telecommunications cable to India and UK. However, some important omissions occurred, which the Japanese later used to inestimable advantage. The broadcasting station and a fleet of small boats and craft in the harbour were untouched as were 3000 tons of tin in the form of ingots. In the harbour, the Japanese found twenty-four self-propelled craft and many large junks and barges, all deserted by their crews and left in working order. The radio station was operated by the Japanese to broadcast propaganda throughout the remainder of the campaign. Indeed, almost right away, according to the written stories of survivors, Radio Penang was taunting, 'Hello, Singapore, how do you like our bombing?'³⁴⁴

Previously, on the 13 December, the Governor had sent a cipher cable to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London:

Penang has been raided several times by daylight and damage to Asiatic quarters has been extensive. So far as known, fatal casualties 200, wounded about 1000, all Asiatics. Owing to destruction of aerodromes in the North air defence has been impossible and the Asiatic morale in consequence bad. Military authorities in collaboration with the Resident Counsellor arranging to control the town. European women and children will be evacuated as soon as possible.³⁴⁵

³⁴³.WO 106/2552. "Report on sequence of events Penang Fortress 8th Dec. 1941". N.A

³⁴⁴ Shennan, M. *Out in the Midday Sun*. p 236.

³⁴⁵.CO 967/74. Cipher No.627. Govt.House.1609. 13 Dec. 1941. N.A

It should be noted that in this cable he made specific mention of European women and children. In his diary entry that day, Thomas wrote that at the War Council, after some prevaricating remarks from Percival about the uncertainty of defending Penang. ‘...it was decided that I should advise European women and children to leave and other Europeans who wanted to.’ [he then added] – ‘that was the Council minute, but my own note at the meeting was that European women and children should be allowed to go if they wish. Policy is to defend Penang. Difficulties great but that is the fixed decision. European men also should be allowed to go if they wish, but any who desire to stay and help – let them.’³⁴⁶ His addendum reads like an afterthought in the light of later accusations.

Percival had circulated a memo to the War Council before this meeting, outlining the pros and cons of withdrawal from Penang. However, as the members noted, it contained no firm conclusion or recommendation.³⁴⁷ Presumably Percival believed, that following a discussion he would have a consensus on a favoured solution, or hearing other opinions would help him arrive at a decision. Either way, it did not convey an image of decisive leadership. In the end, the decision was left to Heath. Duff Cooper, on the other hand, at what was described as a depressing meeting, considered that the situation was so serious he proposed a radical change of strategy:

We should now ask ourselves is it possible with barely four divisions (mainly Indian), with only three squadrons of fighter aircraft not all properly trained, without command of the sea, to defend a country the size of England? The Japanese can reinforce quicker, land anywhere. If not possible, then we should consider change of plan. Real question is defence of the Naval Base by holding Johore....There is a need to withdraw to Johore and hold the island to the last.³⁴⁸

Both Thomas and Duff Cooper were now, not only directly concerned with the course of the battle, but also appear to have become assertive enough, to impose their opinion on the strategic direction of the campaign. Thomas did not agree with the major withdrawal proposed by Duff Cooper nor did he agree with Percival about withdrawing from Penang, but his logic suggests a concern more for his government’s image than military judgment. He believed the proposals would be very bad for public morale and he did not want his administration associated with them. Thomas’s diary and the War Council minutes, reveal a growing gap between him and Percival and increasing animosity towards Duff Cooper. In his diary, he explains, as an example, that his idea of ‘defend to the last man’ differs from Percival, who qualifies such a stance with ‘but only to the best of our ability.’ Equally,

³⁴⁶ Thomas Papers.

³⁴⁷ Montgomery. *Shenton*. p .94.

³⁴⁸ .WO106/2568. “*Minutes of War Council 13 Dec 1941*”. N.A

Percival had little faith in Thomas sticking to decisions reached between them, so much so, that he took to having a stenographer accompany him to meetings with the Governor recording the discussions. Percival would not leave the building until he had Thomas's signature to them.³⁴⁹

On 19 December, Penang was eventually abandoned and a week later Ipoh was hastily evacuated. In the space of sixteen days, the British forces were behind the Perak River with its left flank on the coast. North Malaya was effectively lost. With the capitulation of Penang and the planned withdrawal of his forces to a position further south, behind the Perak River, Heath (instructed by Percival), ordered all the European women and children to leave Perak State. Thomas learned of this instruction from Fraser [Federal Secretary] in a telephone call from Kuala Lumpur. Following so soon after the Penang fiasco, Thomas immediately ordered that this instruction be cancelled as he considered it invalid. Moreover, he said, it should not have been made without reference to him. He sent telegram's to officials in Perak: -

The evacuation of Perak is entirely unofficial and unnecessary, and liable to cause a panic amongst the Asiatics. Singapore is already overcrowded, and no one may go there.³⁵⁰

His orders to Fraser included some draconian measures. Trains travelling south were forbidden to carry passengers who appeared to be evacuees, and first class carriages were removed from trains in order to prevent Europeans from travelling. Motor cars travelling south were to be turned back, that petrol should not be supplied to private individuals and that they should not be allowed to telephone long distance calls.³⁵¹ Thomas then noted in his diary, that after his interjection, a 'big row broke out' in the War Council. Duff Cooper told Thomas that he made Heath's position impossible if he countermanded his orders. A most unpleasant and lengthy altercation followed with Thomas eventually conceding that in future 'the civil government will not order the compulsory evacuation of civilians from any area, but if a military commander considers the military situation justifies it, he may order compulsory evacuation by the civilian population.'³⁵² In his letter to Churchill, describing this confrontation Duff Cooper said that Percival who was there said nothing 'until I suggested that it was the first time in the history of the British Empire when it had been our policy to evacuate the troops first and leave the women and children to the tender mercies of a

³⁴⁹ Kirby. *Chain of Disaster*. p 195.

³⁵⁰ Maxwell, *Civil Defence of Malaya*. p 111.

³⁵¹ .CO 967/77 Duff Cooper secret and personal letter to Churchill, 18 Dec 1941. N.A

³⁵² .CO. 967/75. Thomas War Diary. N.A

particularly cruel foe.³⁵³ Shortly after this episode, the Governor had to meet a delegation of Asians, led by Bisseker, who asked to see him for an explanation of the racial discrimination during the Penang evacuation. He confesses to his diary that ‘it was one of the most difficult speeches he ever had to make’, but he clearly attempted to divert the blame by adding that it was a decision taken without his knowledge. He added that he had given orders that in future European government officers will stay with the people to look after their needs regardless of the consequences.³⁵⁴

The Penang evacuation was a further serious blow to everyone’s morale, following as it did, and so soon, after the loss of the ‘Prince of Wales’ and the ‘Repulse’. In an attempt to explain the calamity and play down the tactical impact of the loss, Duff Cooper, on the 22 December, decided to broadcast by radio to the population. Instead of assuaging the people, his message compounded the problem by trying to reassure everyone that all civilians were evacuated safely. This was patently untrue, because of course, only the Europeans were evacuated. The statement caused general uproar and from the minutes of the War Council meetings and Thomas’s diary entries, the topic then absorbed an unprecedented amount of valuable time. It led to the drafting and re-drafting of a directive that was to be adhered to, by all parties, in the event of similar occurrences.

The GOC, like the others, became distracted in this bureaucratic detail, and at a time when the army in northern Malaya was fighting for its life. After the war, in early 1948, reading of the Penang episode in the draft Official History, Thomas wrote a note to the author, Maj. Gen. Woodburn Kirby:

The bad thing about Penang was its hasty evacuation by the whole of the European population with the exception of two or three who refused to move. The order was given by the military, and the civil government in Singapore knew nothing about it and would not have approved. This was made quite clear. We should have been able to point out the disastrous effect on morale of such a move. We stood for no racial discrimination (this should also be made clear) and my final telegram to the Resident Councillor dated the 16th read: ‘In any evacuation, preference should be given to those who are essential to the war effort, without racial discrimination.’ This order to the Resident Councillor came from me, and not Percival, as stated in the last paragraph of page 331. Duff Cooper was not in favour of the words underlined, but gave way. On December 23rd I received instructions from the Colonial Office supporting this policy: no other was of course possible if we were to retain any sort of respect.³⁵⁵

On the east coast, the Japanese made even more rapid progress because of the scarcity of forces to resist them. The British forces withdrew from Kuantan on the 31 December, though they remained in position defending the airfield, which was nine miles from Kuantan

³⁵³ CO 967/77 Duff Cooper. Ibid. N.A.

³⁵⁴ Newspaper “*Straits Budget*” 25 Dec 1941.

³⁵⁵ Thomas papers. Entry undated.

itself. At various points, on both coasts, the Japanese momentum was, checked temporarily and heavy fighting took its toll in casualties on both sides. However, the Japanese were able to replace their losses with fresh, trained units and maintained pressure at every contact. Fighting went on day and night, there was no release and they were able to rotate their front line troops with rested units from the rear. They were determined and courageous, forcing their way through swamp and jungle and using every means of transport - trucks, buses, carts, horses and thousands of bicycles. The bicycles enabled a silent approach and were also used to carry rations and reserves of small arms ammunition. The Japanese army was a highly disciplined force based on absolute despotism. It was inseparably linked with state religion and education. Powerful spiritual leaders exercising control over people and throne directed it. The Shinto religion demanded a spirit of self-sacrifice and disregard for loss of life. It was without parallel in any country in the world.³⁵⁶

The British Army under General Percival, on the other the hand, comprised an international medley coming from places as far apart as the United Kingdom, Australia, Malaya, Burma and British India; and they fought under leaders divided by differences of nationality, outlook, background and political allegiance, added to which was their dietary differences. They were armed and equipped as for a campaign in Western Europe or the Desert; relied on wheeled transport for administrative support, which in turn restricted them to roads and tracks and dependent on supplies of fuel and oil; all combining to create a logistical nightmare.³⁵⁷ The main roads became vital supply routes. Inevitably, they became choked with endless columns of slow moving trucks, obstructed by abandoned equipment and columns of refugees.

Military analysts, almost unanimously agree that at this point in the campaign a forceful field commander would have acknowledged the limited capability of his ill-trained forces and the grievous handicap of a shortage of appropriate equipment, and crucially, no air support. He should, they maintain, have recognised that a major strategic adjustment was called for. A clean break from contact with the enemy and a lengthy withdrawal to well-prepared defensive positions much further to the rear. Heath was proposing this very idea: that it was better to cut their losses and pullback over three hundred miles to northern Johore into a properly sited, constructed, and defendable location. This proposal was very much in line with that suggested earlier by Duff Cooper in the War Council meeting of 13

³⁵⁶ James. *Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire*. p. 108.

³⁵⁷ Kirby. *Official History*. Pp 163-168.

December.³⁵⁸ Percival refused to countenance such an idea. He maintained that it would mean giving up, without a fight, valuable territory, enabling the Japanese to use airfields closer to Singapore and make it easier for them to attack allied shipping bringing desperately needed reinforcements, supplies and equipment. Moreover, it would leave exposed and undefended the long East Coast.

On 18 December, what was to be the last formal Allied War Conference was held in Singapore, under the chairmanship of Duff Cooper. British, American, Dutch, Australian and New Zealand representatives attended these infrequent gatherings. The meetings, while intended to make recommendations for common allied action, did little more than discuss the situation throughout the Far East and keep each other abreast of developments and concerns in their respective regions. There was little more they could do, and their pronouncements stated the obvious. The situation was bleak; more manpower and equipment was needed, but importantly in this instance, they endorsed Percival's plan to hold the Japanese as far north in Malaya as possible to give time for reinforcements to arrive unmolested. Final communiqués went to each authority, and in the case of Duff Cooper, his went to the Chiefs of Staff in London and he added a passionate request for vital and urgent support.³⁵⁹

Feelings in the local War Council meetings were running high and becoming increasingly acrimonious. The senior civil members seemed less concerned with the direction of the war than with the trivia of bureaucracy, and personal power. Duff Cooper, at this same point, took it upon himself to write confidentially, direct to Churchill. His letter was delivered by hand of Captain Tennant, who until he lost his ship was the captain of HMS Repulse. The letter conveyed his contempt for nearly every senior figure in both the Government and the Services; in his judgment, the Governor was a weak character whose opinions were a reflection of the last person he spoke with. In addition, he was served by a 'sinister figure called Stanley Jones [Colonial Secretary] who is universally detested in the Colony, where he is accused of having been defeatist since the beginning of the war. His record in the way of preparations is certainly a black one – there are no air raid shelters, no trenches even, no tin hats or gas masks for the civilian population. No preparations have been made for a system of food rationing, no registration of the inhabitants nor identity cards.' He added, that he may later ask for empowerment to get rid of Jones and replace him with an 'admirable man now in Kuala Lumpur called Hugh Fraser [Federal Secretary].' Then in a dismissive manner, he thought Percival 'is not a leader, he cannot take a large view; it is all a field day at Aldershot

³⁵⁸ See page 141.

³⁵⁹ CAB 66/22/22

to him. He knows the rules so well and follows them so closely and is always waiting for the umpires whistle to signal the cease fire and hopes that when such a moment comes his military dispositions will be such as to receive approval.³⁶⁰

His letter³⁶¹ leaves the clear impression that, in his opinion, senior figures in Singapore, running the affairs of government and war, were inferior people, supported by equally unimpressive subordinates, and that the management of the country during the hostilities and the conduct of the campaign was incompetent. Conversely, though unspoken, reflects the state of the relationships. Top officials seemed unable to discuss and resolve the most basic issues, were hypersensitive to perceived challenges to their dignity and were unable to put aside personal animosities and acrimony for the common good. By this stage, the danger facing the country was ominous and getting worse by the day, but still the petty bickering and inconsequential disputes dominated the agenda.

Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham handed over his portfolio of command to Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Pownall on the 23 December; and in a final gesture of authority before departing, wrote an edict to senior Air Force Commanders expressing his dismay at the lack of determination and resolve shown by RAF personnel in the face of the enemy:

During the last fortnight it has been necessary to order the evacuation of several aerodromes. It has come to my notice that in some cases the process has been carried out badly....while there have been cases of gallantry ...there have also been instances where the air force appear to have abandoned aerodromes in a state approaching panic. Stores that will assist the enemy in his further advance have been left behind, material that is urgently required has been abandoned and a general state of chaos has been evident.³⁶²

In practically every instance involving the northern aerodromes, the station staff withdrew without warning the army, who had the task of defending the airfields, and in the majority of cases left so hurriedly that valuable stores, equipment and even prepared food, were lying unattended at their sudden departure.

On 26 December, the people of Singapore learnt that Hong Kong had surrendered the previous day, Christmas Day. On 27 December, Thomas called an extraordinary meeting of the Legislative Council.³⁶³ The purpose was primarily to ratify the enactment of Martial Law. Martial Law had, for some time, been the subject of impassioned discussion at the daily War Council meetings, but its introduction was strenuously resisted by Percival on the grounds that he felt it both unnecessary and he could not, in any case, release a senior officer solely dedicated to fulfilling the role. Duff Cooper had throughout supported the idea, because he

³⁶⁰.CO 967/77 Duff Cooper secret and personal letter to Churchill, 18 Dec 1941 N.A

³⁶¹ Ibid

³⁶². Brooke-Popham papers 6/5/50. 24 Dec 41. LHCMA

³⁶³ Minutes of Legislative Council Proceedings, 27 Dec. 1941.

felt the situation needed a Supremo with absolute authority who would, through dictatorial powers, demand instant reaction and response from everyone.

During this Legislative meeting, which as it turned out was the last one to be held, Bisseker grasped the opportunity to raise again civil defence issues, on what he claimed had now become matters of national survival. He demanded that the authorities start telling the people the truth, good or bad, about what was happening in the war. It was, he said, an endless series of shocks to learn, after the event, of Japanese progress down Malaya, while at the same time being reassured by the government that everything was all right and our Forces were containing the Japanese advance. Moreover, he wanted to know, what are the lessons from Penang? ‘Had we learnt anything from the chaotic evacuation and if so, is it being promulgated to those who can prevent it happening again?’ He then catalogued civil defence measures which needed improving, including compiling a list of qualified and skilled officials now in Singapore from up-country, because of evacuation, who could be called upon to help. Moreover, he believed, a central body was needed, with plenary powers solely concerned with co-ordinating passive and civil defence measures. Particularly, he felt, the country was not unified, not acting as a cohesive nation and importantly, the energy and desire of the Chinese to play a major role in the current emergency was being ignored. The Governor, without apparent conviction, tried to reassure Bisseker that these matters were in hand.³⁶⁴

On 29 December, Thomas left by car for Kuala Lumpur, accompanied by his wife. He wanted to inform himself how the FMS Administration was managing with the crisis. It was a brave and noble gesture at this time of danger and recognised as such by most people. Shortly after his return, he chose to broadcast and give his impressions of conditions in up-country Malaya including how the people were coping. His account, however, seemed to reinforce the opinion of many, that he still had not recognised the gravity of the situation, and he avoided mentioning, what everyone wanted to hear, an honest summary of the military situation. According to Cecil Brown, an American journalist with Columbia Broadcasting:

He made an incredible broadcast. He spoke for about forty five minutes about his tour up-country, but for almost the entire time he told about seeing a steam roller which got out of control, rolling backwards, and how the Indian driver finally saved it. The broadcast was also printed in the paper and took more than two columns....He was not referring to any armed force, just talking about a steam roller.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Brown. C. *From Suez to Singapore*. p 388.

In his book, Brown has described the Governor,

as an uninformed individual. A slave to service clichés, bromides and banalities. He lives in a dream world where reality seldom enters and where the main effort is to restrict the entrance of anything disturbing.³⁶⁶

Brown's acerbic comments in his own broadcasts to America about the state of affairs in Malaya, often prophetic, were considered too dangerous for the morale of the Asian population. His accreditation papers were withdrawn in January 1942 and he had to leave the country.³⁶⁷

Earlier in the month, on 15 December, Duff Cooper, with the consent of the War Committee, formed a separate Civil Defence advisory committee of which he was chairman and which included, among others, the Inspector-General of Police, Dickinson, and the Fortress Commander Maj. Gen. Keith Simmons. This committee met every day. While Thomas was visiting Kuala Lumpur, Duff Cooper decided that civil defence needed urgently a dedicated, energetic professional, to co-ordinate the whole range of civil defence issues. For this task, he identified Brigadier Simson, who was Percival's Chief Engineer. Percival was not enthusiastic about the idea (nor indeed, initially, was Simson) but later accepted a compromise arrangement whereby Simson remained his Chief Engineer but had the additional role of Director General Civil Defence (DGCD). Simson had for some time been critical of the absence of almost any form of proper defensive fortifications and efficient civil defences measures, but believed, albeit reluctantly, the appointment might give him a late opportunity to correct this grave flaw. Duff Cooper then appointed Bisseker as Simson's deputy. Thomas, on his return, was affronted that such a major governmental arrangement had been put in place without his consent. He recorded in his diary on the 31 December:

There is serious political trouble. Duff Cooper, being led by the nose by Bisseker and Seabridge [editor of Straits Times newspaper], demands a kind of Dictator for Civil Defence...Duff Cooper has officially appointed Bisseker, and War Council has officially appointed Simson, all in my absence and without my knowledge, though neither has any authority to make any appointments under the civil government. I cannot agree to Bisseker; everyone would think I have gone mad, or had surrendered to DC [Duff Cooper].³⁶⁸

In the end, though most begrudgingly, he approved the appointments of Simson and Bisseker. Nevertheless, to demonstrate that he retained some power, enforced strictures to Simson's authority. He limited his activities to Singapore Island only, and further, insisted if anybody

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid p 70

³⁶⁸ Thomas Diary.

challenged any of his (Simson's) orders he must refer the matter to the Malayan Legal Department, and await their decision. Explicitly, he must not extend his area of responsibility into Johore, because Johore was an Unfederated State and was not under the jurisdiction of the Governor:³⁶⁹ To impose such a curb, on these grounds, when all around was remorseless military retreat, fast approaching Johore, reveals a renunciation of reality. It was a decision, which would later prove fateful.³⁷⁰

The unpleasantness was further compounded when Simson and Bisseker approached Jones for help with finding a suitable office close to the civil authorities; they were rudely refused any help. 'I was soon to discover that no civil servant would help Mr. Bisseker or anyone associated with him.'³⁷¹ Simson and Bisseker eventually occupied the offices vacated by Duff Cooper after his departure.³⁷²

This trivia was acted out in Singapore while the British forces were engaged in a desperate struggle in central Malaya. The Governor was in bad humour, concerned more about the apparent usurping of his authority than the gravity of the danger. He broadcast a New Year's Day message to the people of Malaya and his remarks, in attempting to minimize the concern some people had about the introduction of Martial Law, caused more concern than they quelled. He repeated the statement he made to the Legislative Council on the 27 December:

During the last few days Martial Law has been imposed in Singapore, but there is no need for anyone to worry about that. I signed the Proclamation because it was necessary to make certain that evil-doers against the State shall be punished quickly and it seemed to us that this could be best secured by the promulgation of Martial Law. I know you will agree that men who conspire against the State, which means their fellow countrymen in time of war, should be dealt with properly and quickly.³⁷³

The implication of this statement, interpreted by many, both within the country and outside it, was that there were Fifth columnists and conspirators at work. Whereas, - and proved conclusively afterwards - there was no such organised element, nor any fear of it. Thomas was intending to reassure the people that the new legislation intended solely as a means of dealing expeditiously with a variety of circumstances that had arisen during a state of emergency. Instead, he caused much alarm and newspaper conjecture about enemies within the country.³⁷⁴

³⁶⁹ Simson.. *Singapore: too little, too late*. Leo Cooper, London. 1970. p.84

³⁷⁰ In a note in his papers Thomas has written "The Sultan of Johore would not for a moment have agreed to a military officer exercising full powers in his State in respect of civil affairs." Thomas Papers.

³⁷¹ Simson. *Singapore*. p. 84

³⁷² . Ibid.

³⁷³ Legislative Council Proceedings 27 Dec 1941. Also Maxwell Op cit p. 89.

³⁷⁴ *Straits Times*. 28 Dec 1941.

At about this point his authorities in London were beginning to sense that Thomas was in danger of losing touch with his responsibilities because of both the escalating pace of developments and his concern with administrative trivialities. The Secretary of State for the Colonies had to remind Thomas of the need to let Whitehall know what was happening,

I regret to have to trouble you with enquiries at this time but I feel that I must ask to be kept informed of current developments affecting civil administration in the territories under your jurisdiction. For example where are the various Malaya Rulers? Is active cooperation of the Chinese community being organised in any particular forms either by government or spontaneously?³⁷⁵

There is no record in the colonial office files of a reply to this enquiry.

By 3 January 1942, the Allies had fallen back to the Slim River, about fifty miles north of Kuala Lumpur, having been forced to abandon Kampar, which was acknowledged as the best, and probably only defensible site in west Malaya. Simson recognising the defence potential of the Kampar position - and with the Corps Commander's agreement- had proposed to Percival that he be allowed to construct heavy fortifications at Kampar for the forces to fall back on. Percival adamantly refused to allow any action, on the grounds 'that building of defences in rearward areas was bad for the morale of troops and civilians alike.'³⁷⁶ Even without proper preparations, Kampar still managed to hold out for 34 days. The Japanese eventually outflanked the Kampar position by coming down both the Perak River, in shallow draught boats, and made coastal landings using, among others, the flotilla of small craft left behind at Penang.

The Slim River position was the next stage in the withdrawal, and was attacked in force on 7 January by infantry preceded by tanks. Mines and obstructions impeded their progress for a while but in due course the Japanese breached the obstacles and a force of twenty tanks broke out and penetrated the British lines for 15 miles inflicting heavy losses on the defenders. During the battle, seven British Commanding Officers were killed on one day alone and 11th Division lost virtually all of its artillery and transport. The position became untenable and Percival decided to give up central Malaya and make a substantial withdrawal to northern Johore. The Japanese entered an undefended and deserted Kuala Lumpur on the 11 January and found vast stores of food, maps and ordinance. Petrol and oil stocks had been set on fire. On Percival's instructions, the whole apparatus of civil government, European

³⁷⁵ CO 967/74. S of S to Governor, 2 Jan 42. NA

³⁷⁶ Kirby *Singapore: The chain of Disaster* p.168

officials and residents, were ordered to abandon Kuala Lumpur; the last of them departed on the 10 January.³⁷⁷

General Wavell arrived in Singapore on the 8 January on his way to Java to take up the new appointment of Supreme Commander of a newly formed allied organisation, an American initiative. ABDA Command, (American, British, Dutch, and Australia, Command). He selected Lembang, in Java, as the location of his HQ. After calling on the Governor he hurriedly departed by aircraft to visit Heath in Kuala Lumpur for a briefing and assessment of the military situation, and where possible visit some units. On his return to Singapore, he presented Percival with his own plan for the defence of north Johore, which he drew up without consulting Percival. As it turned out, the plan was quite different to what Percival had intended, and he was taken aback at the peremptory manner in which it was presented. What was clear was that such imperious behaviour indicated that Wavell had lost confidence in Percival. He had been impressed by the energy and confidence the Australian General Bennett radiated, and thought the Australians should play a greater role in the Johore defence plan.³⁷⁸ Moreover, he put Bennett in charge of the forward areas on this briefest of acquaintances, upsetting the predetermined command arrangements and adding friction to the already strained relations between Bennett and Heath, the Corps Commander. Percival had no option but to redesign his plans in accordance with Wavell's wishes, which included withdrawing 9th Division from its defensive duties on the East coast. In the end, however, the defence of northern Johore followed a predictable pattern, except for one notable, proactive, action by the Australians, which seemed to justify Wavell's confidence in them. In their first engagement in the campaign so far, on 14 January, they laid a successful ambush near Gemas (Gemencheh), a position forward of the main defensive line, allowing a vanguard of bicycle-borne Japanese infantry to pass over a bridge, before demolishing it. The trapped unit of nearly 600 were either killed or wounded.³⁷⁹

During the War Council meeting in Singapore that day, Duff Cooper announced the termination of his appointment as Minister Resident. He explained that with the appointment of Wavell as Regional Supreme Commander, the role he filled was absorbed into the new arrangement (see Chapter 2). In his diary, Thomas noted:

In War Council Duff Cooper announced that Wavell's appointment had made his own unnecessary and he was leaving. ...I said I thought his presence had been very useful...Actually Duff Cooper's departure will be hailed with shouts of joy! He is suspect by most people; partly for his broadcast reference to evacuation of the "majority"

³⁷⁷ Percival Official Despatch.

³⁷⁸ Ibid. p 185.

³⁷⁹ AWM 73 Series. Official History 1939-1945.

of the population of Penang (well knowing it could only refer to the Europeans) and partly for the Simson-Bisseker-Seabridge racket. I shall see him out with a sigh of relief. A rotten judge of men, arrogant, obstinate, vain; how he could have crept into [Cabinet] Office is beyond me....³⁸⁰

In the same diary entry, Thomas also mentions that Wavell had spoken with him about the military situation, and said that the 'Japanese breakthrough at Slim River should not have happened if proper dispositions had been made. It was Paris's 11th Division. Poor wretched troops.'³⁸¹

What Thomas did not know was that Duff Cooper, on 11 January before departing, sent a final 'Secret and Personal' cable to Churchill, which he copied to the Secretary of State for Colonies and to Wavell:

Before leaving Singapore I think it right to tell you that I believe certain changes in the local Administration are of first importance. A breakdown on civil side may well paralyse fighting services. There exists a widespread and profound lack of confidence in Administration.

I believe simplest solution would be to declare a state of siege and appoint a military governor for the duration of the emergency. The obvious selection for appointment would be Fortress Commander, Major General Keith Simmons.

I had already arranged appointment of Director General of Civil Defence, Brigadier Simson, who has done very well but whose hands are tied by Civil Authorities and who is not allowed by Governor to dismiss incompetent officials. He would continue to act under Military Governor.

If these measures are considered too drastic, I would urge that Colonial Secretary should be replaced by Mr. Hugh Fraser who has done extremely well. I would also urge with equal candour that Mr. Jordan, Secretary for Chinese Affairs, should go. The Chinese who form the majority of the population of Singapore are behaving splendidly, have made up their internal quarrels and are united in their resolve to withstand the enemy. Mr. Jordan is unfortunately most unpopular with them he is tactless and rude and cannot assimilate the idea that some of those who gave the most trouble in the past and even the tougher communist element may prove most useful at present. The necessity for a Secretary for Chinese Affairs no longer exists....³⁸²

Churchill's response to this damning cable was, first, one of dismay that conditions among the Administration should have reached such a state without him being alerted. Second, that Duff Cooper had not done something about it much earlier; and third, the Governor must go.³⁸³ His advisers consulted Wavell, who thought that such a change at that point would do more harm than good, persuaded Churchill that replacing the Colonial Secretary with Fraser [Federal Secretary, ex-Kuala Lumpur], could help resolve much of the trouble. Thomas was informed of this decision by cipher cable, and because of the confidential contents, he was advised to decipher himself. His first reaction was to fear for his personal

³⁸⁰ Thomas Diary.

³⁸¹ Brigadier A.C.M. Paris had taken over from Maj. Gen. Murray-Lyon who had been relieved of his command.

³⁸² F.O. 371/31825. Secret and Personal cable to Churchill. 18 Jan 42. NA

³⁸³ Prem.3, 161/2. PM to Colonial Office 12 Jan 1942. NA

position. He thought he was dealing with an instruction for his own recall.³⁸⁴ In reply, he defended Jones vigorously and believed Duff Cooper's time in Singapore was too brief for his judgement to be of value. The Colonial Office was adamant and Jones left Singapore shortly afterwards. The fearful reaction of Thomas for his own position on reading the first few lines of the cable exposes a confused state of mind, certainly insecurity and arguably a loss of confidence. However, he had the honesty to disclose his insecurity to his diary.

The Loss of Malaya.

The retreat of the British Forces down the length of Malaya was relentless. At the daily War Council meetings the war's progress was discussed at length but little honest information was passed to the public. The majority of the population were ignorant of the real state of affairs. Most people relied on the arriving refugees, in their increasing numbers, for details of the fighting and the locality of the Japanese army.

At the same time as the Gemas encounter, a serious threat was developing to the British left flank position at Muar. The Japanese had closed right up to the northern bank of the 600-yard wide Muar River posing a dangerous threat to one of the British main lines of communication south of the river, the Muar – Yong Peng road. On 16 January, they forced a crossing of the river and blocked the road. This part of the British front line was the responsibility of a newly arrived Indian Brigade, 45th Brigade, made up of young hastily trained recruits. Against them, the Japanese deployed their crack Imperial Guards Division. Adding to the Brigade's ordeal, the battalions of this unit were given impossibly long frontages of river line to defend. The Japanese following their standard outflanking manoeuvre, in another amphibious hook, landed behind the position, with additional landings much further behind, in the area of Batu Pahat. The 45th Brigade came under attack from the front, the West and rear; the fighting was confused and intense, but the predictable outcome was the almost total elimination of 45th Brigade.

After the collapse of the Muar front, it was becoming obvious to Percival, as well as Wavell, that the strategy from this point must be based on fighting delaying actions in Johore to give time for reinforcements to arrive, and that the final action would be the defence of Singapore. Wavell, on the 19 January, instructed that plans for this eventuality be developed in full, as soon as possible, but kept entirely secret and that they should include the preparations of defences on the north side of the Island.

³⁸⁴ Thomas Diary.

The trauma of battle and the confused, ferocious and devastating fighting was taking its toll on leaders at all levels through loss of commanding officers in battle and stress on the diminishing number of leaders remaining. Added to which, the almost non-existent communications between major formations resulted in senior commanders accusing each other of not resolutely sticking to their defensive tasks and making insidious accusations of poor fighting qualities of troops under their command. For the next eight days, the fighting was almost unremitting retreat with periodic pauses to turn and face the enemy. There were no longer any natural obstacles to help the defenders. The Official British History was to record, most harshly:

During this period of eight days, from the 16 to 24 January, the Japanese out-generalled, out-maneuvred and decisively defeated the British forces in Muar-Yong Peng-Batu Pahat triangle and won the battle for Johore.³⁸⁵

And the Governor wrote in his diary on 21 January: ‘The behaviour of the military ever since the retreat began has been disgraceful...if Singapore falls it will be the army’s fault; they have been incredibly inefficient.’³⁸⁶ Percival issued orders on 26 January for the withdrawal of his forces onto Singapore Island; the move was to be complete by the night of 31 January. Thus at the end of January 1942, Malaya was lost to the Empire and in the hands of the Japanese. It is not clear from Thomas’s diary when he learnt officially that Malaya was to be finally abandoned.

In a separate diary, kept by Meg (Megan) Spooner, who was the wife of Rear Admiral Jack Spooner. He was commander of the Naval Base, which at this point had no ships, but he was also in charge of the residue of British naval and civil personnel at the base. Meg Spooner’s diary sheds quite unintentionally, more light on the relationship between Percival and Thomas. While it is heavily flavoured with gossip and is indiscreet, it shrewdly catches the atmosphere and urgency of events and the mounting tension at this time. In an entry on the 27 January she wrote:

....Jack told War Council that soldiers were retiring onto the Island on the 30 January. H.E. [His Excellency] nearly passed out. Asked if it was true P[ercival] said “there is a possibility”. J[ack] said “Possibility be damned your orders are out.”³⁸⁷

This exchange reflects the nadir now reached in affairs between the military and the administration. Peninsula Malaya was to be abandoned and the Governor, responsible for its governance and protection, had not been informed. Percival either did not trust Thomas to keep secret this information, or thought it pointless informing him.

³⁸⁵ Kirby. *War Against Japan*. p.467.

³⁸⁶ CO 967/75. Quoted in Montgomery *Shenton* p.124

³⁸⁷ “*Megan Spooner diary*” LHCMA

Spooner himself was also guilty of arbitrary decisions. No doubt spurred by the imminent surrender of Malaya and mindful of the Admiralty instruction, not to allow skilled personnel and vital equipment to fall into enemy hands, evacuated the Naval Base without informing anyone. On 31 January, he ordered the whole of the European naval and civilian staff to leave the Base and transferred most of them to Ceylon.³⁸⁸ Thus, even before the last soldiers had crossed the causeway, the object of all the planning, striving and death was deserted and left untouched for the victor. The following week, on 5 February, Thomas wrote in his diary:

Brought up Naval Base evacuation at War Council with Percival and Spooner. Spooner said the military told him they wanted no navy personnel in operational area, so he took them all away. Percival said he had never been consulted in the matter at all. I said I could not understand how a great Base could be handed over by the Navy at the request of anyone but the G.O.C. Bretheron [friend of Thomas] says the whole place looks as if the staff left for lunch and never returned. Maps and plans left on office tables and so on. A dreadful thing.³⁸⁹

The Imperial Japanese Army assembled in Johore Bahru, waiting to launch their final assault, with only the 1000-yard stretch of water, Straits of Johore, between them and Singapore. What remained of the British Forces was in complete disorder. They were exhausted, dispirited and in many cases without weapons and equipment, which had been abandoned in the hurried and harried retreat. The army found no prepared fortifications on the much-vaunted Island Fortress to offer them protection and behind which they could recover. There was no respite from the unforgiving foe. Their Commander had lost the confidence of his Supreme Commander and the leading British Generals could not agree among themselves.³⁹⁰ The Governor was barely consulted about the momentous events bearing down on his province and he had lost the confidence of his Colonial masters in London. In addition, the civilian government in Singapore was in confusion. The Island was overwhelmed with refugees from up-country, and the public services, under increased demand and constant bombing, were struggling to provide a minimum service. The government had also lost the confidence of the people and was paying the price for their less than honest propaganda. The fact that the Japanese were so close astonished nearly everyone because no warning was given.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Kirby. *Official History*. p. 365

³⁸⁹ Montgomery *Shenton* p.130.

³⁹⁰ Allen. *Singapore*. p. 188-201.

³⁹¹ Barber. *Sinister Twilight*. p. 158.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES DURING THE SIEGE OF SINGAPORE.

When the last British battalion had crossed onto Singapore and the causeway connecting the island with the mainland was breached, an optimistic section of the civilian population of Singapore believed this final move would in fact be their saviour. The reasoning was that with all the British troops now concentrated in a single garrison, it would present a formidable barrier against any attempt by the Japanese to invade the island. However, they were unaware there were no prepared defences anywhere on the island, and in particular none

along the northern shoreline. It was an area rarely visited by civilians because access was restricted to the military, and in any case it was covered in thick mangrove swamp. The population of Singapore, with the arrival of the troops and the fleeing refugees from up-country, had escalated from its pre-war 750,000 to about 1,400,000,³⁹² which placed, not only the already stretched public services and food supplies under severe strain, but caused acute problems of accommodation. There are corroborated reports that the European population, even at this point, appeared to show little regard, or illusory lack of concern, for the destruction around them, and the drama unfolding on their doorstep. They continued to revel and socialise, visiting restaurants and hotels for dances, and even the Corps Commander, General Heath, is reported in Meg Spooner's diary, of 4 February, attending a dinner party at their house, together with 'his young wife.'³⁹³ Meanwhile, the urgent question now facing the government was the matter of evacuating people, particularly European expatriates, and above all, wives and children, (referred to in official correspondence as *bouches inutiles*)*. In view of the Penang calamity, equal account had to be given to any members of the ethnic community also wishing to leave. An immediate difficulty, on the matter of evacuating the ethnic races, was the strict and very modest pre-war quota of immigrants that countries such as Australia and Netherlands East Indies continued to impose. Departments of government, without instructions to the contrary, attempted to continue business as usual and some MCS officials evacuated from up-country sought office space so they could feel gainfully employed even though in most cases there was nothing for them to do.³⁹⁴ The War Council continued to meet daily but its deliberations were little more than listening to reports of Japanese progress. They were bereft of ideas and even in these critical times, there were still arguments and disagreements. The meetings also disclosed startling ignorance, among senior government officers, about the basic infrastructure and public utilities of their island.

The Japanese army, meanwhile, between 1 and 7 February, gathered their amphibious landing craft, including tank landing craft, assault teams and supporting units in various assembly areas around Johore Bahru, ready for the attack. The Japanese had complete air and

³⁹² The last decadal census was in December 1941. There are no precise numbers for Jan 1942, but govt. estimates arrived at the figure of 1.4 million. Thomas Papers.

* Lit. Useless mouths. In everyday jargon, the expatriate community were classified as either 'effectives' or 'non-effectives'.

³⁹³ Spooner Diary. IWM

³⁹⁴ W.P. (42) 177, .Apr. 42. "Report to War Cabinet on the Fall of Singapore" by G. W. Seabridge. NA.

naval supremacy and total freedom of action. Apart from occasional allied shelling their preparations were relatively undisturbed.³⁹⁵

Evacuation.

There was confusion in the minds of most British expatriates about government regulations regarding evacuation. As early as September 1939, on the outbreak of war in Europe, the government imposed a blanket ban on travel to ensure nobody could either leave or enter Malaya without an authorised permit. This control was introduced to prevent the departure of young European males anxious to enlist in the fight against Nazi Germany; many of these same young men held key appointments in the trade and industry of Malaya, which, at this critical time, could ill afford to lose them. This regulation later amended in March 1940, to allow free entry and departure to all women and children. Then in June of the same year, to clarify some doubt, it confirmed that exit would be refused to all males over the age of eighteen years, that is, of an age when they were liable for service with the Volunteers or the Local Defence Force. In October, it was allowed that all wives and children could come and go provided they were related to a resident European. Thus, the position at the end of 1940 was that no male European could leave Malaya, except in very special circumstances, but their wives and children could freely enter and leave the country.³⁹⁶ There are no records however, to indicate that the authorities took the matter of travel controls to the next stage, that is, of discussing what organisation, preparations and instructions need to be made ready for an emergency evacuation if it became necessary. It is important to remember that, at this time in 1940, the Governor was on home leave, and these regulations were introduced under the authority of the OAG, Stanley Jones.³⁹⁷

As noted in the previous chapter, in July 1941, Japan occupied Indo-China and the British Government declared, in Parliament, its concern that this action posed a threat to the region, and in particular to Malaya. Historians analysing the events of the final days of Singapore identify the Japanese move into Indo-China in 1941, as the pivotal point at which the civil authorities should have acknowledged the gravity of the regional threat and begun their planning, probably secretly, for the possible emergency evacuation of civilians.³⁹⁸ In Singapore, no such contingency plan was ever discussed. The reason for this neglect is

³⁹⁵ Kinvig . C. *General Percival and the Fall of Singapore*. Paper at NUS Symposium “A Great Betrayal? The Fall of Singapore Revisited. Singapore 2002. NUS.

³⁹⁶ Maxwell *Civil Defence* p 91. See also CO 273/664/1 and CO 273/669/6

³⁹⁷ See Chapter 2.

³⁹⁸ See Maxwell *Civil Defence of Malaya* p. 92 and Fedorowich, F. Paper “The Evacuation of Civilians from Hong Kong and Malaya/Singapore 1939-42” given at Symposium *The Fall of Singapore Revisited*. NUS 2010

thought to be that it was incompatible with the Governor's conviction that the Japanese would not invade Malaya. Moreover, in Thomas's opinion, if such plans became known, it would not validate prudent government planning, but on the contrary, it would exhibit a defeatist attitude. It must also be said that the military authorities, with their misplaced optimism on Singapore's impregnability, did not stress the urgent necessity to incorporate such a scheme. The exception was Simson, who shortly after becoming Director General Civil Defence, did urge the Governor to evacuate the *bouches inutiles* as soon as possible. The Governor's approach was in stark contrast to that taken by the authorities in Hong Kong, which, even before the outbreak of war in the west, had identified the evacuation of British women, and children in an emergency as a major operation for which contingency plans were essential. Hong Kong was vulnerable, with the Japanese already resting against its border with China, nor was it judged a defensible fortress. In August 1940, the situation was assessed serious enough to order the compulsory evacuation of non-service British women and children. It was certainly not a universally popular decision, resisted by many, and considered premature, it nevertheless took place and 3,474 evacuees were transferred faultlessly and safely to a staging destination in the Philippines.³⁹⁹

The Malayan exodus of evacuees, without sanction, had begun as early as 1 December, gathered momentum down through the Peninsula, bringing to Singapore many European expatriates, from both the business community and government civil servants. The event, which alarmed the expatriate community and prompted the early passage, was the announcement of compulsory enlistment for the Volunteers, followed, a few days later, by the enlistment of various Local Defence Forces. While the government continued to reassure people that this was no more than an elementary precaution, many nevertheless, saw it as a danger signal. Women and children began to leave their homes in Malaya and head for Singapore in order to secure a passage home to Europe. The influx increased weekly and began to overwhelm the shaky reception arrangements hurriedly put in place to receive them.⁴⁰⁰ The Government set up a Billeting Committee to find accommodation for them in private houses, in hostels, and in any school or club building where it was possible to arrange bed and board. Similar assistance was given to the rest of the community, including the Eurasians, though in most cases, each race was inclined to look after its own.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ Ibid Fedorowich *The Evacuation of Civilians*.

⁴⁰⁰ Shennan.. *Out in the Midday Sun*. p.248.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid

The clamour for passages on ships leaving Singapore became a major administrative challenge. In response, the Government created a committee headed by a High Court Judge to decide the priority of requests. Mr Justice J. Aitken, (Aitken Committee), chaired it. According to Duff Cooper, this committee never sat because the Governor 'had been endeavouring to settle the whole matter without allowing the committee to meet, and behind their backs.'⁴⁰² The selection criteria was to be absolute impartiality, with the provision that husbands who were required for national duty could not accompany their wives. The committee when it eventually sat only resolved the question of whether a person and family were eligible to leave, it was then up to the individual to find a shipping line to take them. Not surprisingly, there were few requests from local nationals to leave, whose only home, after all, was Malaya. However, the authorities by failing to control the essential element of allocation of berths on available ships caused great confusion and distress for many wives.⁴⁰³

The administration by insisting on retaining peacetime bureaucratic regulations added untold complications and disorder. When the women registered with the shipping lines for a passage, they were asked for payment, or proof that payment was forthcoming. And in the majority of instances these women had hurriedly left their homes in Malaya without money and now could not contact their husbands for support, because their spouses were still up-country either on essential work, or conscripted for military duty. Adding to the turmoil was the demand that all passports must be in order and correct visas attached. This was an absurd request because many of the ships could not confirm with any confidence their likely destination. Passengers were also told that UK regulations forbade them taking out of the Colony any currency greater than ten pounds sterling in value, and that all cash had to be reported to the Exchange Control. All personal jewellery had to be catalogued, and no one might take with them a diamond larger than half a carat.⁴⁰⁴ Imposing these petty bureaucratic rules dogmatically, added untold distress and chaos to a procedure already failing to meet the urgency of the situation.

The ships, which had brought supplies and reinforcements to Singapore, were loaded with civilian evacuees and wounded service personnel for the return journey. On 21 January, Percival was able to cable London that 5,200 women and children had been evacuated. However, there was still nearly that number remaining and awaiting passage. So chaotic were

⁴⁰² Fedorowich.. *The Evacuation of Civilians*.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Maxwell, op cit.

the departure arrangements in the last week of December that several large transports left the port either empty or only half-full.⁴⁰⁵

Air raids on Singapore, which had been heavy during January, continued unabated, and to which was now added the incessant artillery bombardment from the Japanese batteries in southern Johore. It was at about this time that Mrs Reilly, the Governor's Cipher clerk, in a diary entry undated, wrote that about twenty shells landed near Government House with one hitting the grass bank outside, near her office. Thomas was at the daily War Council meeting during the bombardment. When he returned, she told him of the event, to which he retorted, "Shelled – rubbish – whoever said that!" He was taken to see the damage and was assured by the military officers present, that it was indeed caused by 4-inch artillery shells.⁴⁰⁶ The damage to the public utilities caused by these barrages was severe and continuous repairs to gas, electricity and water supplies barely completed before they were again damaged. Control on consumption had to be imposed. Water gave the greatest concern. There were two large reservoirs on the Island, 'MacRitchie' and 'Pierce' together could provide 14,500,000 gallons daily. However, the greatest volume of water, over 15,000,000 gallons daily, came from Johore Bahru. It was pumped from the station at Gunong Pulai via the causeway, where the pipe carrying it was above ground; indeed the pipe was laid above ground for most of its journey across the Island. When the causeway was breached on 31 January, after the final withdrawal, the water pipe was also destroyed leaving the island dependent on its reservoirs. The Governor who learnt of this eventuality expressed surprise, as he noted in his diary on 30 January:

Discovered in War Council that when the Johore causeway goes up, after our troops are across, the water mains supply to the Island will go too. I confess I did not realize the latter, and, as a number of taps have to be fitted to stand pipes which will have to come into use when house supplies are cut off, there is need for great haste. Curfew is being imposed from tonight from 9 pm to 5 am. More raids this morning and damage to godowns [warehouse] in the harbour area and in the coolie lines. Probably aimed at ships, such as the *Empress of Japan* which are taking away a lot of women.....Wavell for half-an-hour at 2.00 pm.⁴⁰⁷

That the Governor did not know the Island's main water supply came from Johore is a shocking admission. In the daily War Council meetings, discussions on the possibility of the Island eventually being besieged would, almost surely, have included the important matter of the supply of reserves of food and water. His ignorance of the source of water begs the question; if he did not know where the Island's most vital resource came from, why did he not ask?

⁴⁰⁵ Fedorowich, F. *The Evacuation of Civilians*. op cit.

⁴⁰⁶ Diary of Mrs M Reilly.

⁴⁰⁷ Thomas Diary.

The food situation for the military garrison was satisfactory. There was meat for three months, flour and tinned vegetables for four months, and enough other items for five months. The stocks of food for the civil population were enough for four months, with flour for six months and meat for nine months (a large proportion of meat were live animals under government control), which could also be used to supplement army stocks.⁴⁰⁸

As noted in the previous chapter, General Wavell instructed Percival, on 18 January, during his visit to the stricken army, to prepare a plan for the defence of Singapore. The Island is no more than about 27 miles east to west and about 15 miles north to south. Percival's plan for the defence of the Island has been the subject of endless debate by historians and military theorists, and the predominating consensus is that his plan was wrong.⁴⁰⁹ The glaring omission in his preparations, and the issue most debated, is his failure to permit properly constructed fortifications on the north shore of the island. His military philosophy, as previously noted, and with which the Governor concurred, was not to engender a rearward mentality by early defensive preparations. Even though he must have recognised that his relentless retreat would lead inexorably to a final defence of Singapore, he still did not permit defensive works to begin. His senior engineer, Brigadier Simson, records a passionate appeal to Percival, on 26 December, when the retreating Army was still north of Kuala Lumpur. He succeeded in meeting alone with Percival late at night, to make his case for work to begin on defensive sites both in north Johore, a proposal supported by Heath, and on the north shore of Singapore. Simson has described in his book, this crucial dialogue between two tired, exhausted men, one of whom – Percival – resented, not so much the midnight intrusion of his Chief Engineer, but of having to face, yet again, the distasteful subject of rearward defensive sites. Simson with all the passion and conviction he could muster told the General that he had still time, materials and manpower to erect formidable obstacles. He could prepare defensive positions on the main Japanese thrust route and the likely assault beaches on the north of the Island, but that he must begin right away because as the Japanese got closer civilian labour would disappear. After hours of impassioned pleading, Percival still refused and when Simson asked why, he got what he described as the 'frankly horrifying' answer "I believe that defences of the sort you want to throw up are bad for morale of troops and civilians."⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ Thomas Papers. In the Minutes of the War Council on 12 Dec, 41 it was recorded that there was sufficient rice for 200 days. WO 106/2568. And Percival reported to Wavell in January 1942 that there was a four month supply of food for the population. See CAB 106/144. NA

⁴⁰⁹ See for example Kirby *Chain of Disaster* p 222.

⁴¹⁰ Simson, *Too Little Too Late*. p 69.

Wavell in his new appointment as Commander of A.B.D.A. followed personally the progress of the battle in Malaya and Singapore. When, on 19 January, he instructed Percival to prepare secret plans for withdrawal onto the island he had added in his cable ‘...Under cover of selecting positions for garrison of island ...you can work out scheme for large force and undertake some preparations such as obstacles or clearances...’ He was referring to the northern shore of Singapore and as he had earlier made clear, with the Japanese approaching from Malaya it would not be much use holding troops on the southern beaches if the attack is coming from the north.⁴¹¹

Governor Thomas, post-war, claims to have been taken aback on learning very late, there were no defensive positions and obstacles prepared on the north shore of the Island. This statement is hard to believe, for it is safe to assume it would most certainly have been one of the major topics, if not the main one, at the daily War Council meetings when all talk was then of the impending attack. He wrote to Wavell at the end of 1947 explaining that soon after returning home in 1945 he contacted Bond (Percival’s predecessor) asking why no defences had been prepared either in south Johore or north of Singapore Island. He got an unsatisfactory answer and passed this onto Wavell who replied:

I do not know of course what secret reasons given to you for not constructing a defence line on the north of Singapore island were: but I do distinctly recollect that when I landed at Singapore on the morning of Jan 7th 1942 the first thing I asked to do was to inspect such defences. When I found that there were none I spoke with some asperity and I do remember Percival giving as a reason – I think the main one – for his neglect was that it would have a bad effect on civilian morale. My retort was that it would have a much worse effect on everyone’s morale if its troops were driven into the island, as it seemed quite possible even then, and there were no defences. He also complained I remember of labour difficulties, which I said I found difficult to accept with such a large population in Singapore.⁴¹²

On discovering the paucity of defence preparations on the northern shores, during this visit, Wavell warned London of this glaring omission and later Churchill when learning of it wrote: ‘The possibility of Singapore having no landward defences no more entered my mind than that of a battleship being launched without a bottom.’⁴¹³ To answer Thomas’s question of no defences in south Johore, Bond was certainly in a position to do this because he (Bond) stopped the erection of a string of pillboxes across this area. Bond’s predecessor Dobbie ordered the building of a line of concrete machine-gun posts. He was authorised a sum of £60,000 by London, to construct these measures. With £30,000 only of this sum spent and the project half completed, Bond on arrival personally cancelled the scheme, for no clear reason. On defences ‘north of Singapore Island’, it is uncertain if Thomas means northern Singapore

⁴¹¹ Kirby *War Against Japan* p 316.

⁴¹² Thomas Papers.

⁴¹³ Churchill. *History of the Second World War* Vol. IV. p 43.

or across the causeway in Johore, which, as he pointed out to Simson, was an Unfederated State and he personally refused Simson permission to prepare any military defences in that location. Wavell certainly seems to think Thomas is referring to the northern shore of Singapore. In this same letter to Wavell, he (Thomas) says:

I think I may say that from the day when the Japs (sic) entered Indo-China the average British civilian foresaw a land attack on Malaya but I am quite sure that none of us expected the route that took place and no one ever suggested it to me.

This is blatantly untrue. Every military Appreciation since 1937 pointed to a landing in the North East followed by a crossing of the Kra Isthmus to the west coast.⁴¹⁴ The main thrust south would be on this side of the country, parallel to the coast. This region of Peninsular Malaya offered not only the best terrain for the movement of large military formations, and a continuous road and rail network, but it was also a mixture of open and cultivated areas with a network of tracks and secondary roads which permitted the option of changes of axes. No discussion of the defence of Malaya after 1939 considered any other option a practical possibility. Furthermore, Thomas in the paper he submitted to the Overseas Defence Committee in March 1940,⁴¹⁵ in which he was making a case for an increase in frontline aircraft, explained that all the storage facilities for reserves of food were *per se* on the west coast:

In the present state of Malayan defence the Japanese can land in the Peninsula from the sea or enter it from Thailand... [T]his means... in most of the country on the western side of the central range of mountains, in Penang, and in Singapore. Supplies so stored would be at the mercy of the invader.⁴¹⁶

Most analysts agree with Percival's claim, that in general terms, with the forces at his disposal, there were only two options open to him. He could either disperse his resources around the island's coastal perimeter to prevent landings anywhere, or alternatively, have likely landing sites thinly covered, and concentrate his reserves ready for immediate counter attack at the point of landing. His final dispositions were an untidy compromise of the two. He dispersed valuable units to cover possible approaches from both the Malacca Straits on west side and from Mersing on the east side; additionally, he thinly deployed others along the southern coastline. He nevertheless believed the main attack would develop on the north coast, to the east of the causeway. Wavell agreed that the main assault would be directed at the

⁴¹⁴ See for example. ODC Paper No.15 of Mar 1940 NA. And Vlieland Appreciation. Personal papers 3.3.1. LHCMA

⁴¹⁵ CO 967/75. Comments on O.D.C. Memo (40) 19 dated 20 Mar 1940. NA.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

north coast. However, he strongly maintained that west of the causeway was the more likely objective.

The Governor continued to Chair the daily meetings of the War Council and received increasingly depressing reports of destruction, damage and death. His diary also documents reports of drunken misconduct by British and Australian troops around Singapore to the point that he tells Rear Admiral Spooner and the Army's Provost Marshal to see that this behaviour stops immediately 'We cannot allow our men to riot, and refuse it to Asiatics' (sic).⁴¹⁷ He also heard first hand from civil service colleagues, arriving with the retreating army, some depressing accounts of military actions in Malaya. In his diary, on 2 February, where he catalogued the raids on the Naval Base oil tanks, godowns, railway station and oil barges, added:

Leslie Davies [previously his Private Secretary] turned up, having got through Johore with troops who were cut off, and then rescued by the navy. He said the Australian Air Force at Kuantan were dreadful. Panicked out at first bombing. I have heard the RAF panicked in exactly the same way at Alor Star.⁴¹⁸

Until this point, Chinese labour had been reliable and essential for sustaining basic public services around the Island and just as vitally, providing the manual support at the docks. However, with mounting aerial bombing in the dock area, and loss of life increasing daily, the Chinese Dockers were beginning to desert. Thomas visited the Harbour area to see for himself the destruction and assess the problem. So concerned were both he and Percival, because of the interruption it was having on evacuating families and on unloading vital military stores that Thomas summoned the Chinese Mobilisation Council and 'told them plainly that unless they could prevent labour from running away they might find themselves doing coolie work for Japs (sic) at the point of a bayonet.'⁴¹⁹ Two Chinese, Lim Bo Seng and his brother, acted as Liaison Officers with the Mobilisation Council, and even during the worst conditions, still managed to organise a daily workforce of 12,000 labourers. It was about this time that Thomas mentions meeting a deputation of Chinese communists, on the advice of the senior Police officer, some of whom had been released from goal, but all of whom had the common desire to fight the Japanese and agreed to suppress their differences and join with Kuomintang supporters to do so. 'They wished to form a united front with the sole purpose of resisting the invader'⁴²⁰ Thomas gave his approval for the formation of a military unit under the command

⁴¹⁷ Thomas Diary.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. Passim

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ *Straits Times* 25 Dec 1941.

of Chinese speaking John Dalley, a British special branch police officer. The unit was known as DALFORCE. In a broadcast, the next day Thomas declared:

You can realise the immense contribution which the Chinese can, and will, render to the war effort by mobilising themselves in this way, by helping to preserve the peace, by preventing panic, by assisting in the distribution of food, by producing labour, by joining the defence forces, and in a multitude of other ways. I have had similar assurances of unstinted co-operation from leaders of the Indian community, and I have, of course, accepted them with equal gratitude.⁴²¹

Unfortunately, it was too late to take advantage of this initiative. I consider that such a formidable grouping, with its passionate hatred of the Japanese, should have been conceived long before this point. However as noted the indigenous Malays were strongly against the training and arming of the Chinese. There was now no time to train them, nor were there sufficient spare weapons to arm them all properly. In spite of these handicaps, however, they acquitted themselves bravely and ferociously and after capitulation took to the Jungles of Malaya, where they later formed important resistance groups, ambushing convoys, destroying supplies, and causing endless trouble to the Japanese occupation forces.

Propaganda

A major complaint mentioned interminably in nearly every personal post war account of this period was the lack of accurate information about the progress of the war. Indeed, there are insinuations of disingenuous communiqués from the Government Information Office. People were ceaselessly bewildered by events overtaking them of which they had had no warning. Moreover, in some cases, alleged they had been deceived by the government into believing occurrences were less serious than they actually were.⁴²² The newspapers complained loudest and continuously, demanding to know the truth. In their frustration with the authorities, they filled their columns with reports of developments in the international war scene. In examples of national newspapers seeking to fill the void created by lack of local war news, according to Cecil Brown, the Columbia Broadcasting System war correspondent, they filed articles with headlines such as ‘...Russians Pursue Nazis in Crimea’, ‘...Fresh Blows at Rommel’s Forces’,...’British Air and Sea Successes.’ They resorted to picking up any titbit from outside the country or from international news agencies, such as Reuters. In many cases, the information was out of date by the time it was printed. A notable example of withholding bad news was the report of the loss of the Airfield at Kelantan. The Japanese captured this

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Brown. *Suez to Singapore*. p 415 et seq.

important aerodrome not long after they landed at Kota Bahru at the outbreak of hostilities, 8 December, but no news of this was disclosed until the 22 December when the military authorities issued the following communiqué:

Owing the loss of aerodrome facilities in Northern Kelantan, and the vulnerability of the communications, it was decided some days ago to withdraw from the area north of Kuala Krai. This operation, involving a series of carefully co-ordinated movements by night, has been successfully carried out by the military commander concerned. During the last few days, the enemy's land and air forces have attempted to interfere with the operation. In spite of this, the greater part of the force and the majority of the stores and equipment have been brought out.⁴²³

The Kota Bahru aerodrome was one of the air bases hastily evacuated by the Air Force on the night of 10/11 December. By then they had lost most of their aircraft and were now vulnerable to continuous attack from Japanese planes flying from southern Thailand. The runways were grass and the RAF had left dumps of material close at hand for repairs. (See Chapter 5). Moreover, by the 22 December, when the communiqué was released, the Japanese were unquestionably winning the war, Kedah and Perlis had been lost, Penang had been evacuated and the Japanese Army on the west coast was at the Perak River. On the east coast, they were approaching Kuala Trengganu.

The new Director General Propaganda, (Sir George Sansom) at the War Council meeting on 18 December according to the minutes, drew attention to the fact that:

Foreign Correspondents profoundly disturbed at the situation reports, which hide the true picture, and are not believed by white or Asiatic communities in the war areas. Situation is known to be bad up country; news seeping through to Singapore is causing loss of civilian morale.⁴²⁴

The Cabinet Minister, Duff Cooper, who was Chairman at that time, replied that the first rule was to say nothing to help the enemy. Sansom, while agreeing that security was paramount and quite properly, it was the military who decided which fighting details to disclose. They (Propaganda Dept.) were the final authority, which vetted the journalists copy before dispatch. Moreover, it was with his department that the press had fierce and daily disputes and it was therefore vital that the extant situation should be disclosed. It is not clear from the records whether incorrect or inaccurate information given to journalists' was by design or blunder.

⁴²³ Maxwell. *Civil Defence of Malaya*. p 78.

⁴²⁴ . WO 106/2568. War Council Minutes 18th Dec 1941. N.A

Military Headquarters in Singapore suffered equally from scant information since communications with the forward formations were appalling. Their image was not helped, however, by the choice of retired Naval Officer, Commander Burroughs, (Chapter 2), as Head of Public Relations. A man who readily admitted he had no experience for the job. The clash, between press and censor, began from the very outset of the campaign. One of the earliest communiqués was misleading; it was also the source used for the Governor's mistaken statement to the Legislative Council on the 8 December (Chapter 5). It implied that the first landing at Kota Bahru was successfully repelled and the few enemy troops who had succeeded in getting ashore were rounded up and their surface craft had withdrawn at high speed. This statement was quite inaccurate but never corrected. The Japanese, as described, successfully landed a sizeable force, after a fierce but brief fight secured the beachhead, and later took possession of the airfield. The departing craft were only returning to their base after effectively completing their part of the operation.

The *Straits Times*, like other newspapers, resorted to using outside sources for pithy amounts of information, and made clear that its copy was reliant on external informants. For example on 15 January they printed:

A British United Press correspondent, quoted by the B.B.C., says that the slaughter of the Japanese in some areas of the Malayan front is unbelievable. Our concentrated fire has mown down wave after wave of them and whole detachments have been blown to bits.

And on 21 January:

It is learned in London, said the B.B.C. last night that in spite of the enemy's claims, there are no Japanese troops within 76 miles of Singapore.

And on 29 January:

A B.B.C. broadcast this morning says that Ipoh is suffering incessant bombardment from the air.⁴²⁵

Each of these reports is wrong; there was at no time anything that could be described as wholesale slaughter of the Japanese forces, and on the 15 January, the British were desperately struggling in central Malaya around the town of Gemas. On 21 January, the Japanese were indeed within 76 miles of Singapore. In addition, on the 29 January, they were within a few miles of Singapore and Ipoh had been in Japanese hands for nearly six weeks. The Japanese, meanwhile, were broadcasting daily from the captured station at Penang giving reports of their progress, often exaggerated, but as it was the only available source of current campaign news, the populace listened and were confused. Government communiqués were composed of bland and vague adjectives "heavy and confused fighting", "enemy attacks in strength" and "local

⁴²⁵ *Straits Times*. Jan 1942

penetrations". The press correspondents continued their own daily battle with the censors. There were at that time twenty war correspondents in Singapore, all demanding they be told the truth about the conflict and more importantly, be allowed to print it. Brown, described by his colleagues as something of a maverick, endlessly challenged the censor about the content of his reports for CBS. He mentions in his book a number of examples of his broadcast notes being rejected. On 29 December, he wanted to say, within the context of his address, 'the British administration seems to have disappeared in these towns in the threatened areas' instead he was told he could say 'people have to shift for themselves as there is no European authority to turn to.'

In another, later broadcast, he wanted to explain the effect on the United States, of losing to the Japanese important tin producing areas in central Malaya.

'...Fifty per cent of the tin-ore production of Malaya is now in Japanese hands....The United States has been taking seventy per cent of this country's output. This means that the Japanese, by occupying the territory they have, are denying the United States thirty thousand tons of tin ore a year...'⁴²⁶

The censor cut most of this material and would not let Brown say that fifty per cent of the tin-ore production was now in Japanese hands; instead, he could say, 'a large area, from which tin ore comes, is divided with the Japanese.'⁴²⁷ Brown's loss of accreditation and dismissal from Singapore on 23 January was because his broadcasts to America, the British authorities claimed, could be picked up in Malaya and were having a depressing effect on local morale. The editor of the *Straits Times*, G.W. Seabridge, on 5 January summed up the situation in a passionate and reasoned leader article:

Malaya has now been in the front line for a month. The Northern Settlement [Penang] is in enemy hands, and fighting is taking place within 200 miles of Singapore. This island has been bombed on several occasions with 'slight damage to civilian property' and 'a few civilian casualties.' That is a reasonably accurate summary of all the people of this country have been told of the fighting that is going around them. Vague 'lines' have been mentioned and there have been sundry 'strategic withdrawals.' Such generalities provide a very flimsy basis indeed for detailed comment – so flimsy that we do not propose to attempt a task which is very nearly impossible of achievement...The view we propose to put forward here is the view of the middle-class Asiatic who has been asked to help in maintaining morale but finds himself quite unable to do so...If the newspapers and the newspaper reading public are to be any help in combating rumour, they must be supplied with the only things which are of the slightest value in carrying out the task. And those things are facts.⁴²⁸

The Governor took offence at many of the reports and remarks in the national newspapers, but specifically, those in the *Straits Times*, which persistently and pointedly accused the Administration, and in particular the Governor, of failing to prepare and galvanise

⁴²⁶ Brown. *Suez to Singapore*. P.382. and passim.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ *Straits Times* 5 January 1942. As reported in Maxwell *Civil Defence of Malaya*. p 80.

the country for war and now failed to tell them what was happening. This same newspaper and editor had in pre-war years warmly applauded Thomas; 'He did well from the start. The business community found him approachable, friendly and sound.'⁴²⁹ Thomas now made it perfectly clear he did not like Seabridge. The antagonism between them had rumbled on since well before the invasion and reached its nadir when Seabridge strongly endorsed Duff Cooper's appointment of Simson as Director General Civil Defence, thereby, claimed the Governor, making his (Thomas) position untenable.

No convincing reason can be found for the reluctance by the authorities, both the administration and the military, to keep the public truthfully informed of the real state of the war. Indeed there is the argument put forward by Elphick, that had the real picture been disclosed, a more measured and orderly evacuation could have been underway earlier, avoiding the late chaotic and perilous rush.⁴³⁰

Duff Cooper's early decree of not announcing anything, which may be helpful to the enemy, seems to have assumed the authority of a rigid canon. With people having to rely on second-hand information, enemy propaganda and Japanese leaflets dropped by plane, all confidence was lost. The press pointed out that bad news was better than no news. When the truth is eventually known, which inevitability it would be, the authorities would lose all credibility and had little chance of restoring loyalty. The ethnic, Malays, Chinese and Indians, speaking only their own language and living in remote areas were solely reliant on rumours that inevitably eroded all respect for their departing European bosses. Public confidence was further shaken when the Governor issued his fallacious memorandum in mid-January intending to infuse a sense of urgency in his civil servants. In allowing his directive to be made public, he hoped to reassure everyone that he was galvanising his staff; instead it shocked them to learn that even at that late date such bureaucracy still existed:

The day of minute papers has gone. There must be no more passing of files from one department to the other, and from one office in a department to another. It is the duty of every officer to act, and if he feels the decision is beyond him he must go and get it. Similarly, the day of letters and reports is over.Every officer must accept his responsibility to the full in the taking of decisions.... The essential thing is speed in action. Nothing matters which is not directly concerned with defence, and no one should be troubled with it.⁴³¹

Thomas had this instruction published in full in the newspapers on the 17 January, and broadcast it himself later. By this date, not only were Penang and Malacca in Japanese hands,

⁴²⁹ Heussler. *British Rule in Malaya*. p. 252.

⁴³⁰ Elphick. *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*. p.275.

⁴³¹ *Straits Times*, 17 Jan. 1942.

but eight Malay States were also conquered, and in the final State, Johore, a desperate fight was underway. The public reaction was one of incredulity, with the *Straits Times* declaring, that it was an appalling revelation and it was two and quarter years late.⁴³² The statement, while causing dismay and despondency, only confirmed what many had suspected for some time.

The Nadir

The Japanese assault on the island began on the night of 8 February 1942, and the Governor learned of it in a phone call from Percival. In turn, he passed a warning to Simson (DGCD) and the police, noting in his diary that shelling was disturbingly close to Government House, and now with an experienced ear, able to add, ‘that it was the same 4-inch gun.’ At the War Council meeting in the morning (9 Feb), he learnt about the poor performance of the Australian contingent, and records in his diary ‘...the Australians are not fighting well. They have been heavily shelled and many found wandering about the roads.’ He then privately unburdens his frustration with the military hierarchy:

Not easy to proceed with denial schemes when we are given no progress reports. Absence of personality in High Command most unfortunate. Percival doubtless good on paper but not a leader and his staff are small men. Simmons [Fortress Commander] is excellent and Bennett and Key are staunch fighters, but there is no one to whom the troops can look to. RAF much worse – Pulford nice but no more.

He also claims to have suggested to Percival that Simmons or Bennett become GOC Fortress with himself as GOC in C[hief] but as Percival explained, the Fortress was now the only area they had, it therefore did not make sense, and in any case, they were both junior in seniority to Heath who would have to be first choice. Thomas added that Heath was a tired man who had retreated over 400 miles in a few weeks, and no one had any confidence in him. He then confessed to his diary ‘we need someone really big here.’⁴³³ In spite of claiming difficulty over introducing denial schemes, Thomas nevertheless ordered, on 9 February, the implementation of the civil denial scheme and controversially, on the 10 February, without informing either Percival or Simson, the withdrawal of all European technical staff from the Singapore Harbour Board installations. This latter order caused untold problems and virtually brought the one organisation still working efficiently, to a halt. The hard-pressed army had to find manpower from its dwindling resources to keep the docks working. Defending this decision after the war,

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Thomas Diaries. Op cit.

Thomas said that he was ordered by telegram, on 27 January, that all such men (and others) were needed in India. 'I see no reason why the military should have been consulted.'⁴³⁴

Simson, not long after assuming his appointment as DGCD, had recommended to the governor that a phased scorched earth policy be prepared. Thomas prevaricated and it was not until late January - by which time Simson had been appointed onto the War Council - that he got a decision. The plan was that the public utilities would remain untouched, and the civil administration would organise the demolition of rubber and tin stocks, radio stations, currency and importantly alcohol. Simson had also requested the destruction of forty Chinese owned engineering works but Thomas refused saying such action would crush Chinese morale, but he agreed the destruction of forty-seven British owned engineering plants. The demolitions were eventually carried out by the military but in the face of strong and active opposition from owners and/or agents. By this point there was little effective government authority and the military had to assist with the destruction of the other facilities which the Administration had previously agreed were their responsibility.⁴³⁵

After only two days of fighting, the battle situation was quite desperate. Percival informed the Governor 'the Japanese had progressed more quickly than expected. 300 RAF ground staff ran away from Tengah aerodrome last night.'⁴³⁶ The Japanese had landed on the North West coast of the Island, which Wavell had predicted, an area held by the Australian 22nd Brigade (Brig. H. B. Taylor). The reports from this formation were sparse and confused but it was clear the Australians had offered little resistance. General Bennett, their Commander, says in his diary:

Word came through from a few men who escaped that 2/18th and the 2/20th battalions had been overrun. No word had been received from the 2/19th. All battalions were out of touch with [22nd] brigade. The enemy bombardment had destroyed all beach lights and beach guns and machine-guns and caused heavy casualties among gunnersduring the afternoon General Percival called and seemed very worried.⁴³⁷

The island consisted largely of plantation, jungle and mangrove, but was flat, with very little high ground. Good roads radiated out from the city in every direction. In addition to the four airbases and the naval base in the north, the only urban zone was the city, which sprawled along the central area of the south coast.⁴³⁸ The terrain in the important North West region of Singapore Island was thick mangrove swamp with limited visibility, appalling conditions underfoot and affording little chance to construct any form of protection. In these conditions

⁴³⁴ Thomas Papers.

⁴³⁵ Simson. *Too Little too Late*. p 97-99.

⁴³⁶ Thomas Diary.10 Feb 1942.

⁴³⁷ Mackenzie. *Eastern Epic*. p.384.

⁴³⁸ Farrell, Brian. *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940 -42* Tempus 2005. p.314.

and the confused, fluid battle, control of units and sub-units in the front line was chaotic, and in some cases non-existent, with subordinate commanders taking decisions without consulting, or unable to consult, their formation headquarters. The result was the abandonment of critical blocking positions for no clear reason and in some cases without firing a shot. The most inexplicable was the retreat of the Australian 27th Brigade, which had been deployed to cover the causeway, alongside and to the east, of their compatriot 22nd Brigade. Without waiting for instructions, the Brigade Commander (Brig. D. S. Maxwell), after learning of the plight of 22nd Brigade, decided the battle was already lost and ordered his brigade to pull back leaving an alarming 4000-yard gap in the forward defensive line.⁴³⁹ When Wavell, together with Percival, visited General Bennett early on 10 February, they found Bennett had little information about the units under his command in the Western Area and did not even know that his 27th Australian Brigade had withdrawn in the night. Counter attacks were ordered, but such was the confusion, they never materialised.

Later, on 11 February, Wavell flew out of Singapore after what turned out to be his final visit. Afterwards he recorded in his Despatches:

I ordered Percival to stage a counter-attack with all troops possible, but I left Singapore on the morning of February 11th without much confidence in any prolonged resistance.⁴⁴⁰

Before departing, he called on Thomas and in their final talks, and in a rare display of emotion, said repeatedly, 'It shouldn't have happened.' He believed the rot started with the poor deployment and defence, first at Slim River and later at Muar. He confessed that on his previous visit (30 January) he had considered whether to relieve Percival, "but", he said, "it's not easy to get leaders nowadays."⁴⁴¹

Thomas now decided that the all-important ciphers, less one, be removed right away to the safety of the British Consul General in Batavia. His cipher clerk, Mrs Reilly, was ordered to leave Singapore because, if captured, the nature of her work would have made her the object of unpleasant interrogation. When she informed the Governor of this order, according to her diary, he did not believe that events were so serious for such an early hurried departure. When she explained that the Japanese had reached the area of the golf course (about five miles from Government House), he thought this was incorrect and that they were still many miles away (the Japanese arrived outside her house that afternoon). Reilly recorded

⁴³⁹ Kirby *War Against Japan*. p 383.

⁴⁴⁰ Wavell Gen. Sir A. "Despatch by Supreme Commander ABDA on Operations in South-East Pacific. 15 Jan 42 to 25 Feb 42". HMSO, 1948. para.27.

⁴⁴¹ Montgomery *Shenton* p. 131.

that he acknowledged ‘the Japanese had broken through the Australians, but that a small party of A&SH [Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders] had been rushed to the breach and they together with the Indians on the left and right flanks, had pushed the Japs (sic) back two miles.’⁴⁴² Thomas then added, ‘The Australians certainly have let us down – right from the beginning when they panicked from Kuantan Aerodrome and left all their planes on the ground intact for the Japs to seize.’⁴⁴³ In a later entry in the diary, Reilly writes:

...the Air Vice Marshal [Pulford] came into the room. I was shocked at his appearance. He was obviously in a state of nervous tension – almost mental it appeared to me – and he kept walking up and down the room muttering to himself and thumping tables and chairs as he passed and every now and then stopping in front of me and saying “this is a dreadful state of affairs – the whole show is damnable. An Air Force with no planes and no aerodrome – what the hell can we do. What can we do!”⁴⁴⁴

On 30 January, Pulford had been ordered to reposition the few fighter aircraft, less one squadron, to the relative safety of the Netherlands East Indies. On 11 February, Wavell ordered the transfer of the remaining aircraft: and by the time of Reilly’s diary entry there were no RAF aircraft remaining on the island and only limited sorties were being flown from airfields in Palembang, Sumatra.

The night of 10/11, February was disastrous. The Japanese, with tank support, broke through the weak and poorly defended positions guarding the main north-south arterial road and onto the Bukit Timah heights (177 meters). Then oddly, they halted. It is generally agreed that had they continued, the way was open to them to enter the city area on the morning of 11 February. After the war, it was learnt that the Japanese at this point were in danger of out-running their administrative support; they were particularly short of artillery shells and small arms ammunition and had to pause for resupply.⁴⁴⁵ Within the allied camp, confusion and recriminations reigned. In attempts to move units and sub-units from one sector to another, either in support of hard pressed troops, to fill gaps, or endeavour a counter-attack, co-ordination and communication was almost non-existent. Many subordinate commanders, at any one time, were not sure under whose command they belonged. Radio communications were almost non-existent and orders were reliant upon dispatch riders and liaison officers.⁴⁴⁶

The British tactics during the Island fight were little different from the pattern followed during the retreat down Malaya. There were no innovative responses to the relentless Japanese thrusts: when a position was breached, units fell back to a mythical line drawn on a

⁴⁴² Reilly diary.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Tsuji. M. *Singapore: the Japanese version..* p. 260.

⁴⁴⁶ CAB/66/26/44. “Report on Operations in Malay and Singapore. 27 Jul 1942”. NA

map and from there to another until the final perimeter, extending around, and a few miles beyond the city limits, was reached. With the garrison holding this shrinking perimeter, the administrative situation was becoming desperate. About a million Asians were confined in a semi-circle with a radius of roughly four and a half miles from the waterfront (approximately an area of thirty square miles) and because of their proximity with the military were clearly regarded by the Japanese as a legitimate target for aircraft and artillery fire. The area was a dense mass of military transport, mostly abandoned, and confused troops wandering without direction. The streets were littered with putrefying corpses, the numbers overwhelming the auxiliary removal services. Bomb damaged and collapsed buildings, entombing more dead bodies, and cratered roads completed the grim picture. Both the main water reservoirs were now in Japanese hands, though they had not cut the supply: it was thought they allowed a continued supply for fear of inheriting a typhoid epidemic. The garrison's food reserves were down to seven days, due to the loss of the Bukit Timah depots and petrol was scarce, but reserves of ammunition were adequate.⁴⁴⁷ A failure of pre-war civil defence planning, regarding food reserves, now manifested itself. Sixty-four godowns in the dock area had been used to store thousands of tons of flour, rice, and other commodities. This was a serious planning error, because the docks were an obvious and legitimate military target. Simson, too late, tried in January to rescue the situation, but by then a lack of labour, transport and alternative storage facilities prevented but little being rescued. Forty-six of the godowns were destroyed including all their contents; the remainder were seriously damaged and much of the contents were irrecoverably ruined.⁴⁴⁸

The government no longer functioned as a governing body. I have not found any record or reference to the possibility of establishing a government in exile, as was the case in Burma where the Governor, Dorman-Smith, withdrew with a number of his staff to Simla, in India.⁴⁴⁹ However, in fairness and with hindsight, finding a suitable island or other location in the region outside the Japanese reach would have been almost impossible. Added to which Thomas, and his wife, had made clear they were not going to leave Singapore.⁴⁵⁰ They refused an offer from Wavell, during their farewell meeting, to go with him to Java. Even so, it is odd that such a possibility does not appear to have been even discussed.

Civil servants handling the evacuation and those trying to maintain public utilities, continued to work and provide as much help as conditions permitted. The major offices of

⁴⁴⁷ Kirby *Chain of Disaster*. p. 245.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Lattimer, J. *Burma: The Forgotten War*. John Murray, London. 2004. p 321 and passim.

⁴⁵⁰ Montgomery. *Shenton*. p 138.

state and the municipal departments no longer existed. The Governor alone, with his immediate staff, worked from Government House because it was nigh impossible to travel with certainty around Singapore. Government House also provided refuge for a number of evacuees and itself became the target of incessant bombing and shelling. It was hit several times resulting in the death of loyal servants and members of the military guard. Governor Thomas had refused several requests to move to a safer area of town; however his wife, Daisy, was now ill with dysentery, and by 13 February, even Thomas agreed the building was uninhabitable. He moved that day into two rooms in the Singapore Club, which was located in the Fullerton Building on the waterfront. The War Council had ceased to exist having held its final meeting on the 10 February. Percival kept him informed of the military activity by personal visits, as the public telephone system no longer worked. On 14 February (the day before final surrender), he told Thomas that the position was no worse and that therefore they would carry on.⁴⁵¹ On the vital matter of the water supply, Percival warned Thomas that such was the damage the supply had to be severely restricted and might last no more than forty-eight hours. Thomas in turn informed the Colonial Office:

General Officer Commanding informs me that Singapore City now closely invested.Water supplies very badly damaged and unlikely to last more than twenty-four hours. Many dead lying in the streets and burial impossible. We are faced with total deprivation of water, which must result in pestilence. I felt it my duty to bring this to the notice of the General Officer Commanding.⁴⁵²

On 13 February, the frenzied evacuation of civilians continued, it was to be the last day of officially controlled evacuation and was labelled 'Black Friday.'⁴⁵³ Japanese aircraft attempted unremittingly to prevent the departure of ships, by bombing and machine-gunning and then pursuing them at sea. Some harrowing attacks sank a number, which had cleared Singapore and made it to the open sea, with huge loss of life. In the bureaucratic bedlam, which reined throughout this time, an unpleasant accusation was levelled against Simson. He was allocated 300 places out of the final 1200 evacuees and agreed they should be reserved primarily for young technical staff from the Malayan Civil Service, especially the PWD (public works department) whose experiences and expertise it was judged, would be invaluable elsewhere. Out of the odd assortment of 40 vessels remaining for the final departure, Simson was assigned thirteen of them. His major problem, however, was to get the message to the selected names. With no communications and people being forced to move frequently to avoid bombing and because of the ever-changing military front, many of those selected could not be

⁴⁵¹ Thomas Diary.

⁴⁵² Quoted in Barber..*Sinister Twilight* .p 229.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

contacted. Rather than waste these valuable places Simson, together with Bisseker, decided to issue their own permits to those most desperate, even if they did not meet the PWD criteria. Without consulting the Governor or the Aitken committee, they issued permits to the old, and to women and children. Some 320 passes in all, signed by Simson, were given to others to distribute, but with first call to as many DGCD staff as possible. Simson refutes the allegation made later by the Governor, that Bisseker took care to make sure he was one of the fortunate. Simson states categorically, in his book, that he expressly ordered Bisseker to leave, and what is more, did so with Thomas's agreement.⁴⁵⁴ Among those with permits to evacuate were both Rear Admiral Spooner and Air Vice Marshal Pulford.

This episode and similar badly managed arrangements, all caused by shocking indifference to contingency planning, left the way open to all sorts of acrimony and accusations of favouritism. All of Simson's thirteen vessels which departed Singapore on the 13 February were sunk with a heavy loss of life; both Spooner and Pulford later perished, after being forced to make for an uninhabited island. Bisseker survived and eventually returned to England.⁴⁵⁵

Until the very end, there were astonishing incidents of staggering incompetence and intransigent bureaucracy: the Chief Officer of the *SS Empire Star* ordered off his ship a number of wives (about 40) together with their children, when it was discovered they did not have the correct permits.⁴⁵⁶ By 15 February, when Singapore surrendered, over 10,000 women and children had been evacuated: 7,174 Europeans, 2305 Indian and 1,250 Chinese. About 200 European women and children were left behind, most of whom ended up in captivity.⁴⁵⁷

Throughout the fighting on the Island, Percival was continuously implored by Wavell to fight to the last and that there should be no thought of surrender while there were soldiers to fight and ammunition to fight with. Wavell in turn had been subjected to Churchillian pressure cajoling him to ensure that Percival not be allowed to consider capitulation: that he should only finally succumb at the end of a tenacious siege, which embodied all the doggedness and resourcefulness of British Arms. It was mid-January 1942, that Churchill claims to have first become aware of the lack of prepared defences in north Singapore. He cabled Wavell on the 14 January and enquired '...what are defences and obstructions on landward side?'⁴⁵⁸ To which Wavell replied 'Until recently all plans based on repulsing

⁴⁵⁴ Simson. *Too little Too late*. p.85.

⁴⁵⁵ . Simson Papers. Correspondence Simson/Bisseker 1957. LHCMA.

⁴⁵⁶ Fedorowich. . op cit.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid

⁴⁵⁸ . PREM. 3. 169/2. 15 Jan 1942. NA

seaborne attack on island, and holding land attack in Johore or further north, and little or nothing was done to construct defences on north side of island to prevent crossing of Johore Strait...⁴⁵⁹ Churchill sent a minute to General Ismay to be brought up at the COS. Committee:

I confess to being staggered by Wavell's telegram...merely to have seaward defences and no forts or fixed defences to protect their rear is not to be excused on any grounds....I warn you this will be one of the biggest scandals that could possibly be exposed...⁴⁶⁰

He then listed ten measures needed for defending the northern shore. Seven of the ten points he listed quite clearly came from an earlier report by Simson, sent to London, recommending these same preparations.⁴⁶¹ In a cable on the 20 January to Wavell to ensure there was no ambiguity, he said:

I want to make it absolutely clear that I expect every inch of ground to be defended, every scrap of material or defences to be blown to pieces to prevent capture by the enemy and no question of surrender to be entertained until after protracted fighting in the ruins of Singapore City.⁴⁶²

With these imperatives ringing in his ears, Percival must have been confused by the contradiction between the scorched earth policy demanded by his authorities, with all this implied regarding the destruction of all military materiel, and on the other hand the demand that he continue fighting to the end.⁴⁶³

Wavell on his return to Java after his final visit, 11 February, recognising that the end in Singapore could not be far off, cabled the Prime Minister:

Battle for Singapore is not going well. Japanese with their usual infiltration tactics are getting on much more rapidly than they should in the west of the island. I ordered Percival to stage counter-attack with all troops possible on that front. ...everything possible is being done to produce more offensive spirit and optimistic outlook. But I cannot pretend that these efforts have been entirely successful up to date. I have given the most categorical orders that there is to be no thought of surrender, and that all troops are to continue fighting to the end.⁴⁶⁴

From the many eyewitness accounts, made known later, there was a serious and noticeable deterioration in the morale of the troops engaged in the final struggle. Scarcely trained soldiers of the reinforcing 18th Indian Division, and other units, which had been arriving during January were committed to battle against a seasoned enemy without, in some cases, essential equipment, and certainly no chance to adjust to a tropical environment. Many of these reinforcements had been at sea destined for other theatres, primarily the Middle East or Burma, arrived in Singapore very bewildered and disoriented and were deployed straight

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Churchill.. *Second World War Vol.IV.* p 44.

⁴⁶¹ CO967/77. The Simson list was compiled for Duff Cooper who sent it to Churchill. NA. Also quoted in Barber *Sinister Twilight.* p 105.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ See for example Kinvig. *Scapegoat*, Chapter 18. Loc.Cit.

⁴⁶⁴ Kirby *War Against Japan.* p 388.

away into the front line. The reports of the shameful behaviour of Australian troops in particular, caused serious concern; they were reported to have run away from the fighting, seen wandering half-dressed, unarmed and drunk around the city precincts.⁴⁶⁵ They commandeered private cars to get them to the quayside to board ships, pushing aside women and children in the process. They were, it is claimed, out of control. In a letter to his relative in Australia, J Brash, a government servant, after escaping, wrote from Bangalore:

...the one man who could tell the truth but instead has told a pack of lies is Gordon Bennett. The one and only reason for the sudden collapse of the Singapore defences was the Australian troops. That Singapore might have fallen in any event after a long struggle may be true, but if on Monday night, Tuesday morning [9/10 Feb] the Australian troops who were allotted the task of holding the Bukit Timah Road had not just thrown down their arms and run into Singapore it may have been a very different story.....It really was disgusting performance. Why they were given the Bukit Timah god knows after the pitiful performance at Batu Pahat where they just collapsed. Anyway they broke into all the houses on the way into Singapore and those that came into ours, we asked if they would like tea or breakfast and they said no! no! we don't want to wait all we want is ships to take us away. I have never seen men such cowards and so thoroughly frightened.⁴⁶⁶

Mrs Reilly avows an example of the complete breakdown of leadership, poor communications and misinformation. In her last journey from home to Government House to decipher an urgent telegram from London, she wrote later of 'seeing hundreds and hundreds of Aussies straggling along the Johore – Singapore main road – others sitting on the sidewalks - most of them clad only in shorts – no arms – no equipment.' They stopped and gave a lift to two soldiers who asked Reilly's husband, who was driving the car, if it was true that the British forces were going to surrender when the Japanese reached the Botanical Gardens? And if this was true, they explained, there was little point in continuing to fight and lose more lives. After strongly rebuffing such nonsense, Mr Reilly asked them to speak to their officers to put an end to such rumours to be told that most officers had already left.⁴⁶⁷

On 13 February, with the garrison now within the final crowded perimeter and Bukit Timah and the main reservoirs in Japanese hands, Percival called a meeting of his senior commanders and principal staff officers to discuss the situation.⁴⁶⁸ The Governor was not included in these talks. Percival first debated the possibility of a last, all-out counter attack to attempt to retake Bukit Timah. No one was in favour; it was felt there was little chance of success, the troops were exhausted and their morale was rock bottom. Both Heath and Bennett advocated capitulation. Both argued that if the Japanese troops entered the city area they

⁴⁶⁵ Report given by Percival at War Council and recorded in Thomas Diary, 9 Feb 1942.

⁴⁶⁶ W.O.106/2550B. Letter Brash to Brash 3 Mar 1942. NA.

⁴⁶⁷ Reilly Diary.91/14/1. op cit.

⁴⁶⁸ CAB/66/26/44. Report "Operations in Malaya and Singapore" drawn up by Maj. Thomas, on instructions of Wavell.

would run amok and the population will be subjected to the same havoc suffered by Nanking. Nevertheless, with Wavell's strictures in the forefront of his mind, and despite the gravity of the situation, Percival decided to continue the struggle. He had in fact the day before warned Wavell of the dire position and asked for discretionary powers to decide whether to surrender. Wavell clearly not wanting to be the architect of such an important decision urged him to continue to inflict maximum damage on the enemy, if necessary in house-to-house fighting:

Where water supply exists for troops they must repeat must go on fighting. Your gallant stand is serving its purpose and must be continued to the limit of endurance.⁴⁶⁹

Percival visited the Governor at the Singapore Club, at about 10.30 a.m., to brief him on the latest state of affairs. It is safe to assume that the grave military situation was discussed and even the question of possible surrender, but in his diary Thomas alludes only to his worrying concern about the danger from epidemic if the water was suddenly cut off.⁴⁷⁰ Certainly, the dwindling volume of available drinking water was a serious concern, but as mentioned, it was the result of damage to the pipes carrying the water rather than the supply being disconnected. Percival spent much valuable time in these final hours dealing with the potential water crises, including calling a meeting at the offices of the Chairman of the Municipality. While I do not minimize the gravity of this issue – it begs the question, whether this was not a matter best left to the Chief Engineer and his team, leaving him free to deal with vital battle matters.

At 9.30 a.m. on 15 February, Percival again held a conference of the senior commanders and principal staff officers at his headquarters at Fort Canning, the only member of the civil government present was the Inspector General of Police, Dickinson. He began by listening to a battle situation report, which described how little enemy activity there had been during the night. On the administrative side, he learned that while there were enough reserves of food to last for several days and ammunition though short, was not by any means exhausted: the greatest danger was the failing water supply. He returned to the options: either go onto the offensive in a last effort, or surrender. The formation commanders unanimously agreed that a counter-attack was impracticable. Percival then agreed that he would capitulate. A vignette, described by a staff officer, Major Cyril Wilde, taking notes at this final meeting, was his description of Bennett, after the surrender decision had been agreed and the discussion had moved onto the practicalities, saying quite unconvincingly and quite out of context at that point, "Maybe we should try one last counter-attack". It was received in silence, and most

⁴⁶⁹ Kirby. *War Against Japan* p 411.

⁴⁷⁰ Thomas diary. Op cit.

believed he said it purely for the historical record.⁴⁷¹ By 11.45 a.m., Percival was at the Singapore Club where he informed Thomas of the decision. Afterwards he sent a final signal to Wavell, following which all communication with Singapore ceased:

Owing to losses from enemy action, water, petrol, food and ammunition practically finished. Unable therefore to continue the fight any longer. All ranks have done their best and grateful for your help.⁴⁷²

In the last hectic hours before the agreed time of ceasefire, this was to be at 8.30 p.m. that evening, 15 February, Thomas and his few staff spent the time trying to put in place arrangements for their incarceration, making final administrative decisions and cabling London before communications ended. He also drafted a statement, with the agreement of the Japanese. It was to be published in the newspapers and broadcast by him, explaining to people the implications of the surrender and what the Japanese now expected of them. On the question of political protocol, he was determined, unlike Sir Mark Young the Governor of Hong Kong who surrendered unconditionally the Crown Colony, that it should be understood by the Japanese that it was the British Military Forces which surrendered. It was not the Crown Colony of Straits Settlements, and that he as Governor would not sign any instrument of surrender. He did however send a representative to the meeting, Hugh Fraser, the Colonial Secretary.⁴⁷³

Not everyone seems to have been aware of imminent surrender. John Forrester, a Volunteer, who previously worked for the trading firm Harrison & Crosfield, recorded:

We were sitting in a compound owned by a Chinese millionaire with our Bren carriers all around us and thinking what a peaceful time it was when somebody said "Oh, we've surrendered." We just couldn't believe it, because there was plenty of water, and our Bren carriers were full of petrol. We thought the man who'd brought the news about the surrender was some fifth columnist and somebody even suggested shooting him. We were particularly amazed and dumbfounded because, although we had been to various corners of Singapore Island, we had never actually seen a Japanese or fired a shot in anger. We had done nothing worthwhile to stop the capture of Singapore. We had done nothing.⁴⁷⁴

As I have discussed in this chapter, the relations between the civil and military authorities, at this critical time, had reached their nadir. Neither side trusted the other. The civil authorities raged against the incompetence of the military and the military in turn, had no respect for a government that had lost control of the most basic functions of civil administration and furthermore had lost the confidence of the people. Seventy days exactly,

⁴⁷¹ Wilde, C. "Note on the capitulation of Singapore". Quoted in Allen *Singapore* p.178.

⁴⁷² Kirby *War Against Japan*. p 415.

⁴⁷³ Montgomery. *Shenton*. p.143.

⁴⁷⁴ Allen, C. *Tales from the South China Seas*. Abacus, London. 1990. p 263.

after landing in northeast Malaya, one of Britain's most important overseas possessions was in the hands of the Japanese enemy. A pitiful, badly managed campaign ended. The Japanese in their pre-war planning had calculated the operation would take one hundred days; they had achieved their objective, to even their great surprise, in considerably less than their estimate. Their staggering success was achieved partly by maintaining a ceaseless momentum with unremitting pressure. The Japanese soldier was highly motivated and his opponents were poorly trained and inadequately prepared troops. In addition, to a significant degree, a British administration divided amongst itself, unable to prioritise its responses to Japanese aggression and unable to coordinate both the civil tasks of protecting a country, the people and its resources, with the military aim of defending a Naval Base.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CONSEQUENCES

The loss of the “Impregnable Fortress” so swiftly, and as seen from Britain, so easily, was unprecedented in the annals of British history. In spite of the increasingly ominous portent throughout the campaign, the end stunned the British nation and the watching world. Conversely, Japan’s swift success brought with it the considerable challenge of both protecting what it had gained and rebuilding the damaged countrywide infrastructure to provide the resources they so badly needed to sustain their war effort. Moreover, they needed urgently to restore the agriculture and manufacturing base of the country to provide both work and food for the people that were now their responsibility. It was a challenge for which the Japanese temperament; their inherent arrogance, disdain for the other Asian nations, hatred of the Chinese and lack of previous experience, ill-suited them. The expansion of Japan’s Far Eastern Empire, achieved sometimes under the pretext of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but mostly by force, meant she had no experience, or indeed understanding, of benevolent rule. What it had gained by the sword, it had to administer by oppression. Masanobu Tsuji⁴⁷⁵ admits, ‘...no plans had been discussed for the administration of the occupied territories. This question should have been settled in advance.’ Following an acrimonious navy/army debate, it was decided that it was to be an Army responsibility with the Minister for War in overall charge.

Immediately following the ceasefire, surviving British senior officials, in both the military and civil organisations, took upon themselves the task of trying to re-establish a semblance of authority in the war torn island. The most serious worries were an outbreak of disease, burial of the dead, and looting, not just by the civilian residents, but also service personnel. They also set about trying to restore, where possible, the more vital public services and utilities and impose some order on a suddenly leaderless people.⁴⁷⁶ In nearly every post-war account of the day of surrender, the return of silence, following the cessation of bombing

⁴⁷⁵ Tsuji, M. *The Japanese Version*. p 23.

⁴⁷⁶ Montgomery, *Shenton*, p 143.

and shelling, is the first and most common recorded sensation. The bomb damaged city and its precincts were eerily quiet and empty.⁴⁷⁷ Slowly and timidly, the inhabitants emerged from their refuge to examine their devastated surroundings and experience the first taste of Japanese authority. Initially, there was little evidence of the victor's presence, the Japanese combat troops, under a strict injunction from their commander, Yamashita, were restrained from entering the city for fear of causing mayhem and to prevent them indulging in a drunken rampage.⁴⁷⁸ He also insisted that they would later make only a modest triumphal entry into the city, because, he pointed out... 'this battle is no more than a prelude...and immediately after a commemoration service we will begin operations in Sumatra.'⁴⁷⁹ The first few Japanese figures who appeared publicly were concerned, just as much as were the British, to get functioning the infrastructure and restore essential facilities for basic living.

The Governor and his wife remained in Fullerton Building during the day of surrender, learning the details of the day's events from visitors, including Fraser, the Colonial Secretary, and Percival. The day after the surrender, he was taken to Fort Canning to meet the Japanese and agreed the setting up of various committees to deal with critical matters concerning restoration of basic public utilities and administration. Afterwards he was allowed the use of an official car to go to Government House to collect some belongings. In this early period, a large number of military personnel and civilian specialists were ordered to repair and rebuild vital elements of the infrastructure, such as bridges, restore power and light supplies and repair communication lines. An incongruous occurrence was that Thomas had to discuss most of these matters with the Japanese ex- Consul General to Singapore, Toyoda, whom he had arrested and imprisoned with another 40 Japanese nationals, on the outbreak of war.⁴⁸⁰ Toyoda, in fact, proved to be very helpful and accommodating, including getting passes and transport for Thomas and others so they could attend to the business of restoration.

The total number of Allied POWs taken at the fall of Singapore is estimated at 100,000. No precise figure was possible because of the uncounted wounded, injured and those who attempted to escape. Later official figures list total British, Australian, Indian and volunteer forces lost because of battle casualties and by the surrender as 138,708.⁴⁸¹ Categorized Japanese records show that captured British, Australian, New Zealand, and

⁴⁷⁷ Every personal account of the surrender records this impression.. See also Frei..*The Island Battle*, Paper given at symposium 'Fall of Singapore revisited'.NUS.2002.

⁴⁷⁸ Tsuji., *Singapore the Japanese Version*. p 274.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid

⁴⁸⁰ Montgonery *Shenton* p.143.

⁴⁸¹ Kirby *Chain of Disaster*. p 250.

Dutch troops in Singapore amounted to more than 40,000 and nearly 3000 civilians.⁴⁸² What is often overlooked is that in the fighting down through Peninsula Malaya and before the battle reached Singapore, the Japanese already took more than 11,000 POWs. They included over 10,000 Indian officers and men and approximately 1,200 officers and men of other nationalities.⁴⁸³

At the time the decision to surrender was agreed, Percival had debated with the others the possibility of the military attempting to escape from Singapore to avoid becoming Prisoners of War.⁴⁸⁴ Curiously, Gen. Heath, perhaps concerned for his pregnant wife, asked Percival at the end of January, and before the Japanese had even attacked the island, if he could leave Malaya, but Percival refused.⁴⁸⁵ It was implicit that until the official hour of surrender, the armed forces would remain under arms and thereby under the jurisdiction of the military authorities. An exception was granted for those whose military skills would be valuable for the continuance of the war and those whose recent employment would leave them vulnerable to severe interrogation: they were permitted, right away, to make an escape attempt. After the surrender hour, those who wished could attempt to escape. What was not specifically brought up, but by the terms of military doctrine generally assumed, was that normal military responsibilities would exist; senior commanders would remain with their men as long as possible, to supervise arrangements for their imprisonment and see that some form of command structure remained in place.

General Bennett, the commander of the Australian Imperial Forces, appearing to ignore this implicit responsibility, hastily left his command in what was later determined as curious circumstances. He escaped together with two of his junior staff officers. The events surrounding his departure and his explanation afterwards were considered most unusual the Australian military authorities decided to call for an official enquiry. Investigations uncovered the fact that Bennett had been considering escape for some time before the end of the fighting.⁴⁸⁶ In itself, this revelation throws into doubt the strength of Bennett's determination to fight the Japanese tenaciously and to the end. Moreover, the account of his escape, his boorish behaviour and total selfish disregard for others during the flight, caused many, particularly within the Australian High Command, to question the quality of his

⁴⁸² Farrell. B. *The Defence and Fall of Singapore* p.385.

⁴⁸³ Flower. J. "Allied Prisoners of War: *The Malayan Campaign*". Paper given at conference "Fall of Singapore Revisited". NUS Singapore. 2002.

⁴⁸⁴ Kirby, *War Against Japan*. p 410. And see Percival *War in Malaya* p.286..

⁴⁸⁵ Kinvig.C. *Scapegoat*. p.227.

⁴⁸⁶ Lodge. A. *The Fall of General Gordon Bennett*. Allen & Unwin. Australia. 1986. p 197.

leadership and reassess his performance as the leader of the Australian military in Malaya.⁴⁸⁷ The official military Court of Inquiry and a later Royal Commission into the whole event highlighted, but never satisfactorily resolved, three questionable issues: whether Bennett departed before the official deadline, whether he should rightfully have left his men at this crucial time and whether he properly appointed a successor. What was not in dispute was that he failed to tell his Commander, Percival, of his intentions or even give a hint of the plot. Bennett's defence was that he had acquired valuable experience and knowledge fighting the Japanese and it was important that this information be brought home to meet the continuing Japanese threat in the region, particularly the threat to Australia. He was also publicly scathing about the fighting ability of the Indian and British troops and their commanders.⁴⁸⁸ His later career never fully recovered from the stigma attached to his controversial and premature escape. He was never again allowed to command combat troops.⁴⁸⁹

There were too many military POW's for Changi jail to house, and in any case the jail was scheduled to hold civilian prisoners. At the eastern end of the island there was the Changi military garrison complex with several large barracks, including Selarang Barracks which was to be the site for enclosure. Percival, when he learned of the destination asked to speak with the Japanese commander. In time, a Lt. Col. Sugita arrived, and Governor Thomas joined the meeting, together they explained that the area selected could hold no more than a few thousand soldiers not the 50,000 proposed. Their appeal was to no avail, Sugita informed them that Yamashita himself had selected the Changi area and they were to start marching there right away.⁴⁹⁰ As it turned out, the British military commanders were left to themselves to allocate accommodation and arrange administration, including catering and medical facilities for the injured. Senior officers were put initially into military houses within the barrack compounds together with their immediate staff. Soldiers, though crowded, lodged throughout the available barrack rooms and in tents erected within the barracks. In fact during this interregnum, before the Japanese themselves got organised, they were content to leave the POW's to run their own affairs, and in comparison with the later hardships the prisoners were to endure, this proved to be a time of relative ease.

Prisoners, regardless of rank, were nevertheless subject to abuse, ill treatment and periods of solitary confinement for what the guards considered disrespect or non-compliance. Percival was no exception and underwent solitary confinement for refusing to enforce orders

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 212.

⁴⁸⁹ Lodge. *Passim*.

⁴⁹⁰ James. *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire*. p .239.

his captors wanted imposed on the POW's and he considered unacceptable. Conditions in the hot and humid climate deteriorated, and as more prisoners were added to the enclosures, accommodation became crowded, there was no electricity, limited food and water and no sanitation.⁴⁹¹ In mid-1942, the most senior officers were moved, in the cramped hold of cargo ships, to Formosa and two years later transferred to Manchuria. The state of affairs in both these places was little better than Singapore. Constantly deprived of all the necessities of life, it was a harrowing time for all of them. Also in mid-1942, many of those held in Singapore, including civilians, were transferred to build the infamous Burma-Thailand railway. In addition, a great number went to camps in Saigon, Taiwan, Korea and Japan to perform forced labour under brutal conditions.⁴⁹²

Civilian prisoners fared little better. Indeed, Governor Thomas having made several complaints about the behaviour of the guards and living conditions in Changi goal, and refusing to cooperate in propaganda films, which were intended to depict how well he and the other civilian prisoners were being cared for, was given fourteen days solitary confinement in a tiny concrete cell, the first three days without food.⁴⁹³ On another occasion, he was locked alone in a separate lavatory for twenty-four hours for saying something that annoyed his captors.⁴⁹⁴ The Governor, like the other senior figures, was transferred first to Formosa and later to Manchuria. His wife was imprisoned in Changi Gaol in a separate female area, as was the heavily pregnant wife of General Heath. There were 430 women and children imprisoned at the start, but by 1943 this had risen to 700.⁴⁹⁵ Prison cells designed for one person had between 3 and 5 women and children confined in them. When Heath's wife came to give birth, she was taken to a hospital in Singapore city. Afterwards she returned with child to her cell in the prison; both survived the war, as did Lady Thomas.

An early political casualty of the Fall of Singapore was the impact on relations between Australian and UK. Most Australians looked upon the affair as a British disaster in which the Australian armed forces, as victims caught up in the debacle and paid a heavy penalty for British failure. Prime Minister Curtin of Australia believed that Churchill betrayed Australia. He had appealed to London when cables from his representative in London, Sir Earle Page, were indicating that the British Government, at a very late stage, was beginning to recognise

⁴⁹¹ Kinvig. *Scapegoat*. p 231

⁴⁹² Michiko. N. Paper "*The Civilian Women's Internment Camp in Singapore*" given at Forum "*New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore 1941-1945*". Singapore 2008. NUS Press, Singapore 2008. p.186.

⁴⁹³ Thomas Papers.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Michiko. "*New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation.*" p 186.

the possibility that Singapore might be lost.⁴⁹⁶ Churchill in discussing the implications of such likelihood and of the equally ominous success the Japanese were making in Corregidor in the Philippines feared for the safety of India, which he felt, could only be ensured by a successful defence in Burma. On learning of this speculation, Curtin cabled Churchill saying:

... he had heard that the Defence Committee had been considering the evacuation of Malaya and Singapore. After all the assurances we have been given the evacuation of Singapore would be regarded here and elsewhere as an inexcusable betrayal. Singapore is a central fortress in the system of the Empire and local defence. As stated in my telegram, we understood that it was to be made impregnable, and in any event it was to be capable of holding out for a prolonged period until the arrival of the main fleet.⁴⁹⁷

Though Churchill denies that Australia's anguished appeal had any effect on the overall strategic plan for South East Asia, because, he believed, their parochial view failed to take account of the wider strategic threat. He nevertheless agreed that a reinforcing British 18th Division would proceed to Singapore and not as intended, to Persia. The Division arrived too late, was in any case quite unprepared for jungle warfare and lost a large proportion of its equipment when the ship *Empress of Asia* carrying its stores was sunk by Japanese aircraft as it approached Singapore on 5 February. The loss of Singapore was a pivotal point in Anglo - Australian relations. Australia became more assertive and displayed greater self-interest. Curtin's scepticism about future British intentions in S.E. Asia was soon reflected in his adamant refusal to agree to the C.O.S. London planned redeployment of the Australian division from North Africa to Burma. Instead, he insisted they should return to Australia to fight in New Guinea.⁴⁹⁸ He claimed the loss of Singapore left his country vulnerable and his protection now lay in the hands of General MacArthur of the United States who was then doggedly fighting his way in the Philippines. Curtin offered MacArthur the use of the Australian forces. In the event, the Japanese threat to Australia did not amount to much. MacArthur while acknowledging the additional Australian force deployed in New Guinea, did not call upon them for direct employment in his battle plan. Effectively, from that point, Australian contribution to the continuing war in the Far East was circumscribed.⁴⁹⁹

The Indian National Army.

Another event, while having little influence on the course of the campaign, is nevertheless important. It was the extent of dissatisfaction, which surfaced, among the Indian contingent, with British imperial rule. During the retreat, as noted above, as many as 10.000 Indian officers and soldiers, captured or deserted, were persuaded to switch sides and join the

⁴⁹⁶ Churchill. *The Second World War*. Vol IV. Hinge of Fate. p 51.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid. p 136-46.

⁴⁹⁹ Hastings, M. *Nemesis*. Harper Press, London. 2007. p 363-372.

recently formed Indian National Army (INA). This number increased dramatically when a further 40,000, after capitulation, joined them.

The INA, an unofficial armed force, was formed by a group of Indian political dissidents belonging to the Indian Independence League (IIL), a militant offshoot of the Indian Congress Party. Their objective was to rid India of British rule. As a fighting force they proved of little use to the Japanese because of the caveats their leaders imposed on their employment, such as, they were not to be used to fight against other Indian soldiers. They were however, successfully engaged in anti-British propaganda, intelligence, and sabotage work not only in the region but also in India and Ceylon.

The Japanese Administration.

The future administration of Malaya and Singapore was to be in the hands of a military garrison, supported by Japanese government officials in key administrative appointments and qualified civilians in major posts in the private and commercial sector. Known as “The Military Administrative Department” (*Gunseibu*) it was to last for three years and eight months. From the few Japanese documents released in the 1960’s which survived destruction,⁵⁰⁰ and now translated into English by Japanese scholars, it is clear that Japanese planning for the administration of conquered territories was at best sketchy, and in many instances improvised *ad hoc*.⁵⁰¹ It certainly did not match the thoroughness of the planning and execution of its military strategy. It was not, for example, until February 1941, at the initiative of the Military General Staff, that a study group formed to consider the administration of occupied areas. Their sketchy draft conclusions, incorporated into the “Principles for the Administration of the Occupied Southern Regions” gave only general objectives such as:

1. Acquisition of vital materials as rapidly as possible for national defence.
2. Restoration of law and order.
3. Self sufficiency for troops in the occupied territories.

And in the specific case of Malaya:

1. Because the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca, and Penang were important military administrative centres, they were to be controlled by the Japanese Army.

⁵⁰⁰ In 1945 with the prospect of the Allies returning and invading Malaya the Japanese burnt most of their official documents. Akashi. “Japanese Research Activities in Occupied Malaya 1943-1945.” *New Perspectives* . p. 158.

⁵⁰¹ Yoji & Mako. .Forum Singapore 2008. *New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, 1941 – 1945*. Passim.

2. The four Federated states (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang) were to be supervised and recognised under their respective Sultans.
3. The four “Unfederated states” that were former Thai territories – Trengganu, Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis – were ‘expected’ to revert to Thailand in the future.⁵⁰²

It is noticeable that military requirements dominated the planning. There was no visionary policy for economic restoration and security. Directly after the surrender, and before an established administration was in place, Yamashita addressed the people:

We hope that we sweep away the arrogant and unrighteous British elements and share pain and rejoicing with all concerned people in a spirit of “give and take”, and also hope to promote the social development by establishing the East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere on which the New Order of justice has to be attained under the “Great Spirit of Cosmocracy” giving all content to the respective race and individual according to their talents and faculties.

Nippon armies wish Malayan people to understand the real intention of Nippon and to cooperate with Nippon Army toward the prompt establishment of the New Order and the Co-prosperity sphere.

Judged by the behaviour of the military authorities at the time of the statement, and their subsequent pre-planned ruthlessness, the substance of his pronouncement was baseless. Early arrangements for control and administration called for certain national reorganisation. The FMS and the UMS were dissolved and Peninsula Malaya was divided into ten provinces, *shu*. Eight were made up of the nine Malay states, Perlis the smallest state, was absorbed into Kedah. The other two were Penang and Malacca. Singapore was renamed *Syonan* (shining south) and was a separate municipality under a Japanese mayor. Malaya was later renamed Malai. In June 1943 Imperial Headquarters, Tokyo, decided to transfer Kedah/Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu back to Thai control. These states had been acquired by Treaty by the British from Thailand in 1909, (see Chapter 2).

The officer given the responsibility for the military administration (*Gunsei*) of Singapore and Malaya was the 25th Army’s deputy Chief-of-Staff, Maj. Gen. Manaki Takanobu. His assistant and the more dominant figure was Col. Watanabe Wataru.

Ethnic Cleansing.

Very shortly after the capitulation the Japanese authorities in Singapore entered upon, in modern terms, ethnic cleansing. They had in place before the final surrender a secret plan to exterminate dissident Chinese, who the Japanese believed would be a source of trouble, and whom in any case they saw as the traditional enemy, particularly the mainland

⁵⁰²Ibid. p.4.

Chinese.⁵⁰³ The programme called *sook chin*, (purification by elimination) was indiscriminately and ruthlessly imposed. In the scale of horror and atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese, it has been ranked third, after Nanking and Manila.⁵⁰⁴ Calculations, after the war, by the Singapore authorities estimate that 50,000 were massacred.⁵⁰⁵ The Japanese scholar, Akashi Yoji, considers this particular incident and a later demand that the Chinese should make a 'gift' to the Japanese government of ¥ 50,000,000 left an indelible stain on the Japanese administration in Malaya. He claims that these measures had an irreversible effect on Japanese efforts to gain the cooperation of the Chinese community.⁵⁰⁶ It also provided the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Party (MPAJA) with a propaganda windfall, contributing to their anti-Japanese solidarity and legitimising their resistance.⁵⁰⁷

Aftermath.

The Japanese authorities while starting to impose their system of administration needed, initially, the help of experienced British civil servants languishing in Changi gaol. The Japanese were obliged to restore former municipal departments, and reinstate local staffs and retain about a hundred British civilian internees, to assist until replacements could arrive from Japan. The captives taken from gaol to assist in re-establishing and restoring the utilities and infrastructure of Singapore, remained out of prison for days, sometimes weeks, overseeing and assisting work. The replacements from Japan, when they arrived, were unavoidably poor quality and ill-educated, because the more able were in the Armed Forces, or seconded to appointments that are more important. The result was inefficiency and corruption.⁵⁰⁸ The Director of Fisheries, William Birtwistle, with his unrivalled knowledge of the fishermen, who provided so much food for the city's population, and was ordered by the Governor to remain at his post, was kept out of gaol. In addition, many prisoners, seen as convenient and available labour, were quite illegally and in contravention of the Geneva Convention, (to which Japan was a signatory) used as labourers in a massive cleaning and rehabilitation operation.

Engaging the help of these members of the Malayan Civil Service gave rise to some curious incidents, one of which occurred directly after the surrender. On 17 February, the Assistant Director of the Gardens Department of the Straits Settlements, John Corner,

⁵⁰³ Hirofumi, H. *Massacre of Chinese in Singapore and its Coverage in Post-war Japan*. Paper presented in Forum "Malaya and Singapore during the Japanese Occupation".

⁵⁰⁴ Frei, . *Guns of February*. p. xxvii.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 153.

⁵⁰⁶ Akashi .Y. *New Perspectives*. p. 40/41.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 42.

⁵⁰⁸ Corner. E.J.H. *The Marquis – a tale of Syonan-to*, Heinemann, Asia, 1981. p.132.

approached Thomas whom he knew well. Corner, a dedicated but friendless botanist, who appeared to have a myopic academic concern for the preservation of the many botanical records he and others accumulated during their work in Malaya asked Thomas to write a note to the Japanese authorities. He pleaded that he should not be imprisoned but allowed to continue his research and compilation of extensive records and oversee the preservation of the ‘scientific treasure houses of knowledge.’ In the confusion and rush of the moment Thomas scribbled in pencil a note, we are told by Corner, in line with his appeal. The note which did not survive the war, eventually ended up with the Japanese Professor Tanakadate, an official assigned to be in charge of scientific affairs.⁵⁰⁹ The Japanese agreed to the arrangement and Corner subsequently spent the entire period of occupation in comfort and gainfully employed and even at times had use of an official car to move freely around both Malaya and Singapore. His behaviour was branded by most as collaboration. Consumed by his own myopic naturalist world he failed to recognise the implications of his fraternisation and the insignificance of botanical records, precious though they were, compared with the scale of death and destruction in South East Asia. Certainly, his comfortable lifestyle was in stark contrast to those incarcerated in Changi jail. In his book, published in 1981,⁵¹⁰ describing this period (mainly justifying his co-operation with the Japanese), he unashamedly recorded his ‘good fortune’ and admiration for the Japanese he worked with. At one point, at the end of 1942, Tanakadate decided to give a public lecture in English about Japanese culture, and asked Corner to draft a speech for him, and in it he wrote: -

The present war started with self-sacrifice on the part of some young *Nippon-zin*. And I refer to the gallant attack by our submarines on Pearl Harbour where those young men courageously sacrificed their lives at the altar of national necessity.⁵¹¹

If Corner believed this he was either unaware of the unprovoked attack of noted ‘infamy’, or was less troubled with exactitude and more concerned to gratify his captors. In another deed, which may be generously described as misguided loyalty, Corner, on hearing of the imminent trial of Yamashita in Manila at the end of the war, wrote to the military court. He pleaded for Yamashita’s life on the grounds that he had only performed his duty ‘...in all

⁵⁰⁹ The note was crucial as evidence to support Corner’s claim that the Governor agreed his proposal. However in his book he said the note was either lost or destroyed. In June 2001, *The Straits Times* in an article claimed that in fact its existence was confirmed because Tanakadate had published the Governor’s note in a Japanese newspaper in June 1942.

⁵¹⁰ Corner. *The Marquis*.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid* p. 174.

fairness he only carried out the instructions of General Tojo and had conserved scientific and historical institutes in Singapore and Malaya.⁵¹²

The Natural Resources.

The core of the Malayan economy, rubber and tin, now isolated from their overseas markets, and thus the major source of national income disappeared almost overnight. Earlier, Japan had in any case decided that the production of rubber and tin in Malaya exceeded the demands of the domestic industries in Japan and that the production of these commodities was to be reduced, (in the 1930s, Malaya produced over half of the world's rubber and about a third of the world's tin). However, anticipating a great demand for these products in the post-war world, the production systems were to be preserved in readiness to meet the need of not only the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but also of global demand.⁵¹³ In the meantime, estates and mines either reduced or stopped operations altogether. In turn, this meant that not only were labourers out of work but all the associated industries, which serviced the production of these resources, also suffered. It was not long before people, out of work, were reduced to poverty and living on the bread line. The Japanese labour inspector for Kelantan was compelled to write to the authorities in Singapore:

A major portion of the unemployed labourers, Indians and Chinese, are almost starving.....and some of these people have slowly drifted into towns and are maintaining themselves by begging on the streets and diseases are taking a heavy toll on them due to the absence of medical aid.⁵¹⁴

Additionally, Malaya had never been self-sufficient in rice production, importing almost 60 per cent annually, and now her neighbours who previously provided this staple product, were themselves caught up in war and unable to produce and export rice. Moreover, merchant shipping carrying these cargos were susceptible to, and suffered, attack by Allied submarines.

With a declining food situation, the general health of the people deteriorated. Simple basic foods became unavailable or prohibitively expensive on the black market. Children particularly, suffered through lack of vitamins and previously contained diseases, such as beriberi, reappeared and took a heavy toll. Medical stocks soon ran down and as there was little chance of replenishment, even common diseases and simple illnesses became difficult to treat. Malaria reappeared as breeding grounds of the *Aedes* mosquito were left untreated because the oil-based liquid remedy (crude oil and kerosene) could no longer be produced.

⁵¹² Corner, p. 72.

⁵¹³ Akashi Y "New Perspectives". p.115.

⁵¹⁴ Kratoska. P.ed. "Asian labour in the Wartime Japanese Empire" NUS Singapore 2006.p.239.

The demand for labour rose in 1943 when the Japanese, suffering from increasingly successful allied attacks on merchant shipping, decided the solution to the transport of essential goods, especially military necessities, was by rail. Several major rail projects were initiated – a Trans Sumatran railway, a line across the Kra Isthmus and the notorious Thailand-Burma railway – they also needed labour for an airfield to be constructed in Borneo as well as a number of local projects. Wages were poor and working conditions appalling. At many sites, the labourers themselves, outside official working hours, had to build their own accommodation and dig fresh water wells. ‘On one project that employed 2,500 labourers in 1942 and 1943 to build a landing ground at Port Swettenham [Malaya] the state Medical Department reported that three to four workers died of malaria or malnutrition each day.’⁵¹⁵ The conditions and death of many of the 62,000 European POWs sent to work on the Thailand – Burma railway is well documented (where 12,399 died), but rarely is the tale of suffering and death of the 182,496 Malayan and Burmese and other Asians sent to work on this same railway mentioned. Of this number, the Japanese officially acknowledge the death of 42,214 but it is known that 92,220 labourers are unaccounted for and the explanation offered is that they deserted to escape the endemic cholera epidemic. As they were never again seen, and the chances of survival in the jungle in their emaciated condition were negligible, it is safe to assume they also perished. Other allied estimates put the Asian workforce as high as 269,948 and the number of deaths as 72,996; but it is accepted that the figures are unreliable, particularly for Burma.⁵¹⁶

Renaissance.

Percival and Thomas survived their imprisonment and both in time returned safely home. While in various internment camps, Percival began writing an account of his part in the catastrophe. He knew that if he returned to England an official dispatch would be required from him and these notes written on a variety of scraps of paper were his aide memoire. However, on his final and hurried move from a camp in Moksak, Formosa [Taiwan] to Manchuria he had to destroy the notes to avoid them being discovered in the inevitable pre-move search. As he recalled, ‘The work of eight months was burned in eight seconds.’⁵¹⁷ The war ended while he was in the Manchurian camp. In a generous gesture, savouring of *schadenfreude*, General MacArthur arranged for Percival to be flown first to

⁵¹⁵ Ibid. p. 241.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid

⁵¹⁷ Kinvig. *Scapegoat*. p.234.

Tokyo, to attend the Japanese surrender ceremony on the battleship *Missouri* and then afterwards to Manila, to witness his nemesis Yamashita sign the surrender there. He recalled,

As Yamashita entered the room I saw one eyebrow lifted and a look of surprise cross his face – but only for a moment. His face quickly resumed that sphinx-like mask common to all Japanese, and he showed no further interest.⁵¹⁸

In fact, Yamashita later confided, that he saw Percival's presence as an act of humiliation and revenge. So unbearable was the humiliation that he considered then to commit suicide.⁵¹⁹

Thomas also started compiling notes, and at one stage while in the same camp as Brigadier Ivan Simson, in Formosa, showed his written version of the final civilian evacuation arrangements to Simson. It was an event which clearly troubled him, and was sure it would be the source of heated recrimination. His recollection and description of the last hurried mass departures of the 13 February from Singapore was quite different from those of Simson. In particular, he strongly denied the claim by Simson that he had agreed that Bisseker be allowed to leave along with Nunn, the Head of the P.W.D. Simson, in 1970, in his book *'Singapore: Too Little Too Late'* returned to this issue and stuck firmly to his conviction that while it was he, who authorised the evacuation of Bisseker and Nunn, he did so only after clearing it with Thomas. Throughout the remainder of his life, Thomas restlessly and relentlessly sought to explain and defend his government's position before and during the campaign. When given a preview of the draft military dispatches, he was incensed at not being able to refute the disparaging remarks made in them. His reply to Gen. Kirby, after seeing the draft of the Official History, stretched to fifty A4 pages of closely argued justification and clarifications. He wrote copious comments on every perceived slight and added his own version of events entitled 'What Malaya Did'⁵²⁰ He examined scrupulously, every book, document, official or otherwise and obscure works, written about the Malayan Campaign. He digested every comment made about the performance of the civil government, and tenaciously defended the civil position in pages of painstaking script, often in his own hand. In 1954, he wrote another lengthy document 'Malaya's War Effort' which he asked the Colonial Office to publish. They refused on the grounds it would prolong the painful dispute, and would in any case only serve to confirm in many people's minds the continuing wide differences between the military and the civilians.

⁵¹⁸ Percival.. *War in Malaya*. p.326.

⁵¹⁹ Akashi Yoji. Paper "General Yamashita Tomoyuki: Commander of the Twenty Fifth Army:" presented at Conference "A Great Betrayal" p. 146. Singapore 2002.

⁵²⁰ . Thomas Papers.

Yamashita was hailed a national hero in Japan following his successful capture of Malaya and Singapore. Not long afterwards however, he caused the displeasure of the Prime Minister, General Tojo. While addressing the community leaders in Singapore, on the Emperor's birthday, he carelessly informed them that they had now become citizens of Imperial Japan. It brought a swift rebuke from Tokyo enlightening him that he could not make political statements of this nature and that only the Imperial authorities in Tokyo could take such decisions. On 12 July, he left Singapore for Manchukuo and had the indignity of being ordered to go directly there without the customary honour of an audience with the Emperor in Tokyo, an etiquette reserved for successful commanders to present their 'memorials.'⁵²¹ He remained in Manchukuo until October 1944, and then sent to the Philippines to take command of the Fourteenth Army in the last stages of the hopeless defensive war against MacArthur. After Japan surrendered, Yamashita was indicted as a war criminal on charges of serious negligence of the rules of war and allowing his troops to commit atrocities. Found guilty, he was hanged.

The Imperial Japanese authorities' intentions for the future of Malaya did not include independence, but instead, that the country should become a permanent colony of Japan, a decision reaffirmed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 1945.⁵²² This decision was a purely pragmatic one, lacking any visionary prediction for the future. The Japanese needed the natural resources available in Malaya and were determined that their enemies, and the West in general, should not have access to them. And while they controlled the country they controlled its resources. This policy ignored their assertion of seeking a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere; and as far as Malaya was concerned, it simply replaced one master with another. The Military Administration therefore, devoid of an incentive, showed little sense of purpose apart from supporting the war effort. During the period of Japanese rule, even these limited objectives were not met; there was little in any case, the people of Malaya could do to assist the war effort, and the Japanese were unable to overcome the shortages of food, clothing, and other necessities.

Japan did not manage to make its colonies serve its economic needs. A brief phase of constructive imperialism in 1942 soon gave way to the politics of scarcity and plunder. Japan's military ascendancy was short lived, and the resurgence of Allied naval power after the battle of Midway in mid 1942 meant that strategic goods from South East Asia could not be shipped back to Japan in any meaningful quantity. The great rubber estates of Malaya became virtual wastelands in which the remaining labourers scraped a subsistence by growing food on roughly cleared ground.⁵²³

⁵²¹ Akashi, Y. *General Yamashita Tomoyuki: Commander of the Twenty-Fifth Army*.

⁵²² Akashi Y "New Perspectives etc" p 115.

⁵²³ Bayly & Harper. *Forgotten Wars*. p.11

With the departure of the Europeans, the economy of *Syonan* became virtually a Chinese one.⁵²⁴ The Japanese therefore faced the quandary of relying economically on the Chinese but not trusting them. The solution they concluded was to allow the Chinese to retain their economic position but have all business activity under Japanese domination and force the Chinese businessmen to co-operate with the *Gunsei* or force them politically to identify with the Wang Ching Wei faction.⁵²⁵

The majority of Chinese were inherently anti-Japanese, an aversion which surfaced in 1931 with the infamous Manchurian incident; a staged pretext Japan used for invading Manchuria, and further aggravated by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war of 1937. As recounted by Lee Ting Hui the Japanese ‘...crude Chinese policy was a failure. Collaborators there were; but on the whole ‘outwardly there was compliance...inwardly there was an ever growing hatred,’ The anti-Japanese movement at the end of the occupation was stronger than ever.’⁵²⁶

No Japanese figure of stature emerges to promote ruling fairly, firmly and efficiently, to take advantage of the country’s talent and natural resources. I can find no reference to any Japanese assessment of how to govern successfully the people of Malaya and Singapore; or of how to gain their respect and possibly their loyalty. The Japanese, throughout their history, had no experience of ruling a foreign country benevolently. Their brutal repression and ceaseless demands aggravated a highly precarious situation and all the descriptions about their period of occupation leaves a distinct impression of an insecure conqueror, which saw its occupation as a time of temporary supremacy.

From the British Government’s point of view the Japanese invasion and occupation, though of relatively short duration, produced great changes throughout the whole of South East Asia.⁵²⁷ While it is undoubtedly true that the peoples of Malaya were genuinely glad to see the Japanese depart and the British return, conditions and relations between the colonial power and the Malayan people were never to be the same.⁵²⁸ There were many now determined that the return of the British should be of short duration only. A genuine Malayan nationalism gave rise to an independence movement, which reached its culmination on

⁵²⁴ Lee Ting Hui “Singapore under the Japanese 1942-1945” *Journal of the South Seas Society*. xvii,1, 1961-1962, p 55-56.

⁵²⁵ Lee, T H. “Japanese Racial Policies in Singapore”. *Journal of South Seas Society*, xvii, 1. 1961-1962. p 55-65.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Tarling. *Fall of Imperial Britain in South East Asia*. Oxford University Press, Singapore.1993. p 144.

⁵²⁸ Wang Gungwu. *Malayan Nationalism*. Royal Central Asian Society Journal. XLIX, 1962.

Merdeka (Freedom) Day, 31 August 1957. In 1946, the Straits Settlements ceased to exist, Singapore became a separate Colony, and by 1959, it was a separate State with a large measure of self-government. Penang and Malacca merged with the nine Malay States. In 1946, the British attempted to restore their pre-war constitutional powers in the Peninsula through a short-lived Malayan Union, which was seen as a clumsy attempt to break away from the long tradition of indirect rule and bring the Unfederated Malay States under more direct rule. The Malays saw this as a threat to their survival as the dominant community and reacted in an uncharacteristically aggressive manner and indirectly it boosted Malay nationalism. The Federation of Malaya, an agreement that included special guarantees of the rights for Malays, including the position of sultans, and the establishment of a colonial government, soon replaced the Malayan Union, in 1948.⁵²⁹ These developments marginalised the Malayan Communist Party which reacted by embarking upon guerrilla insurgency, later described as an ‘emergency.’ The ‘Emergency’ lasted twelve years.

In an interesting footnote to history, HM High Commissioner to Singapore, twenty-eight years after the event wrote in his valedictory despatch.

...no Singaporean has ever mentioned February 1942 to me in criticism or reproach. [however] I am reminded of the shame ... not only an appalling military disaster but the most shameful disgrace in Britain’s imperial history. ...One may not regret the passing of empire but no loyal British subject living in Singapore can forget that it was here that the hollowness of the imperial ethos was so cruelly and so shamefully exposed. And it does not relieve me to recall that the military pomp and ostentation – not to say arrogance – with which we reoccupied Singapore was a sham and a fraud, for we reoccupied it not by our own efforts, but by an American atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima....⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ Winstedt. *Malaya and its History* .pp 140-2.

⁵³⁰ Valedictory Despatch, Sir Arthur De La Mare, HM High Commissioner to Singapore, Oct 1972. Quoted in Parris, Matthew, & Bryson, A. *Parting Shots*. Penguin Books, London, 2011.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

The seeds of failure in British civil/military cooperation, in this pivotal campaign, are identified in the early inability of the leading figures to work together in pursuit of a common objective. The disunity, I maintain, originated in London with the Colonial Office and the War Office failing, first, to agree early enough that Japanese behaviour in the Far East posed a serious threat to British interests and then later, when it became obvious, to jointly instruct the civil/military authorities what to do. Instead, we had the Colonial Office independently telling the Governor to focus his attention on the production of important war materials and the War Office ordering the military to protect the Naval Base on Singapore Island. This conflict of concern inexorably led each side to see solutions to the danger from different parochial points of view. The glaring solution, acknowledged too late, was the insertion of an overall Supremo, a person with total authority to impose directives on all parties. It was an important lesson later used to valuable effect in other places such as Ceylon (Sri Lanka). However, this disastrous campaign was not lost on poor civil/military relations alone; other overarching factors determined the outcome before the war even began.

An impoverished and debilitated Imperial Power was no longer in a position to meet the widespread demands, particularly military demands, of its far-flung Empire. Indeed the

signs of overstretch were obvious even before then, but the huge burden of the Great War accentuated this failing. A dispassionate examination of its responsibilities, at that point, weighed against the resources needed to manage and protect the Empire's assets would have exposed the near impossibility of coping with simultaneous international unrest. The human race had changed as never before, and the British Empire, the largest in the history of the world, far outstripped its ability to safeguard its territories [it was] 'A global Empire without the resources to match its commitments.'⁵³¹ One manifestation of this weakness was later exposed by Britain's inability to provide the resources; armed forces, armaments and equipment, for an endangered Singapore to guard itself against the looming threat. The very decision to build a naval base in Singapore was itself recognition that Britain simply could not sustain a two ocean navy. The base built in the Far East was big enough to harbour the entire British fleet should it need to rush there to meet a threat to its Possessions and Dominions.

Governing this important and exposed possession was an administration little changed in substance and procedure from Victorian colonial days. The untidy, but workable, administration looking after the affairs of the Straits Settlements and the states of Malaya was the result of governmental evolution over a period of one hundred and fifty years. The administration had successfully overseen the development and growth of the country's natural resources, its economy, the infrastructure and the well-being of the people. It was a system, which had evolved piecemeal as British authority extended throughout the Peninsular. Its success was evident to the extent that Malaya became a leading world producer of rubber and tin and the people enjoyed the benefits of a thriving economy, which in turn enhanced their quality of life. Competent, dedicated and loyal staff, mainly officers from the prestigious Malayan Civil Service, staffed it. However, it was not a service that had ever faced international hostilities, in any form, and therefore had no comprehension of the scale and danger an invasion would bring, nor the planning and preparations entailed to meet such a calamity.

The undisturbed years of tranquillity and peaceful development, bred a narrow parochial outlook towards growing international unrest. Moreover, the civil authorities seriously believed the regions problems would not reach their quiet corner of Southeast Asia. This gave rise to a *laisser-faire* attitude and encouraged the conviction that danger was

⁵³¹ Callahan. *Worst Disaster*. p.5.

remote perhaps even non-existent. This viewpoint largely influenced the administration's early relations with the military authorities.

My research has led me to classify this civil/military relationship into three phases, relative to the fall of Singapore in 1942. The first period was before war broke out in Europe when there was marked resentment at the growing military presence in the area and the attendant material demands and inconvenience this imposed. The second followed the outbreak of the Nazi war in 1939 when either side had different objectives. The civil authorities strongly charged by the Colonial Office to increase production of rubber and tin: a demand, which called for additional and dedicated work force. Meanwhile, the military were told there was no immediate solution to their shortage of *materiel*, nor were there any reinforcements and they had to make do with local resources and local manpower. It led to a serious clash and was an issue of such import it should have been resolved in London. I can find no record of the Colonial Office and the War Office discussing this critical conflict of priorities.

The third phase came in 1941 when a number of very senior personnel changes took place. The Secretary for Defence was removed, a Minister Resident was added to the hierarchy and the C-in-C Far East was under notice to be replaced. Moreover, at the last minute, even this decision was changed when the selected replacement, Lieutenant General Bernard Paget, was withdrawn on Churchill's orders and substituted by Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall. These striking changes amid the gathering storm soured relations across the senior echelons of both civil and military services leading to apathetic cooperation, resentment and disagreement. Throughout this time, there was never a period of harmonious, constructive and united effort.

Added to the command disunity was the plethora of branches of the Home Government e.g. the Ministry of Economic Warfare, Ministry of Information and the intelligence services. 'Each of these many organisations corresponded separately with their own headquarters in Britain. As a result of these complications in the administrative machine there was, at all levels, too often uncertainty and delay in reaching decisions.'⁵³² In Hong Kong, which suffered the same fate as Singapore, there was a simpler administrative machine and a less complicated hierarchy among the fighting services and in consequence, there was no evidence of discord in the direction of the Colony's defence. The solution, in Singapore, as noted above, was obvious – an overall Supremo, but the authority to install such an officer

⁵³² CO 967/80 'Lessons from the disasters in HK and Malaya.' NA.

came too late. Other more pressing matters at this time claimed Whitehall's attention. Difficulties of a comparable order were identified in the Middle East and West Africa. Partly to meet them a Minister of State was appointed to the Middle East and a Minister Resident to West Africa. The lesson, as noted, was introduced successfully in Ceylon (Sri Lanka).⁵³³

The *raison d'être* for all the military/civil endeavour was the defence of the Naval Base in Singapore. It was also the focus of ever changing tactical plans. Before the outbreak of war with Nazi Germany it was assumed that a sizeable British naval force would assemble in Singapore either as a deterrent against any possible aggressor or from there sail forth to battle the antagonist. The safety of this vital base was therefore paramount to the protection of Britain's Far East assets. The early assumption was that an attack on the base could only be come from the sea and the fortifications were designed to meet such a threat. At the same time though, the RAF could clearly make an important contribution with the development of the torpedo bomber and thus the air force became an integral part of the defence equation. However, as weaponry advanced and the Malayan hinterland opened up to allow easier movement, so the plan for defence had to change. The changes all pointed to a need for more aircraft, warships and soldiers, none of which were immediately available, and they were warned, the likelihood of them becoming available later, was slim. In the event no additional aircraft came, a token and vulnerable naval force arrived to be destroyed in the opening moves of the campaign, and the meagre army units were late, inadequate, untrained and adolescent. This failure to provide the tools to save the island was a direct consequence of an Empire too big to manage. The finger of accusation has been pointed at Churchill; not for ignoring the pleas for help from Singapore, but for giving others, he considered more deserving, the limited tools at his disposal.

The loss of Singapore, preceded by the surrender of Hong Kong and the hasty retreat from Burma cast a harsh unflattering light on British power. These calamitous failures were the catalyst that heralded the beginning of the end of the British Empire. The fragility of British authority was now exposed. 'What it led to was the demise of Britain as a world power, and her reduction to an American satellite.'⁵³⁴ In India, it gave a new impetus to the

⁵³³ .As mentioned earlier this authority was established, though much too late, in the person of Wavell and ABDA Command. See Kirby *War Against Japan* pp 263-268. In Ceylon Admiral Layton, lately of Singapore, was superimposed over the civil government as well as over the three Fighting Services. See also "*Lessons to be learnt from the experiences of Hong Kong and Malaya from the point of view of the Colonial Administration in war time.*" and correspondence. CO 967/80. NA

⁵³⁴ Callahan. *Worst Disaster*. p.271.

nationalist rumblings, which already existed before the war. An Indian officer of the Baluch Regiment recorded his reaction to the news from Singapore:

Firstly, it had a tremendous effect on our people – we felt the shame that they had surrendered. Secondly, the fact of the tremendous defeat inflicted on the – till then omnipotent – British had an underlay of feeling that the white races weren't all that superior...The news had tremendous effect on those Indian soldiers who had always felt that the British were supermen.⁵³⁵

The Governor of the Crown Colony and High Commissioner to the Malay states before and during the Japanese invasion was Sir Shenton Thomas. He has been portrayed by nearly every historian and scholar I have studied as, at best, incompetent, and less kindly, as obstructionist. My conclusion is that he was neither of these and his biographer, Brian Montgomery, in his book “Shenton of Singapore” while treating his subject with perhaps undue sensitivity, got closest to the truth when defining him as: -

not a great man...but he was an admirable man, determined to do his best for the people under his charge, completely dedicated to the public service, not a prig in anyway, but a strong and upright character with a deep sense of duty....not devious in any way.⁵³⁶

The progression of his Colonial education and previous Africa only experience meant that Thomas knew very little about the regular armed forces or military matters in general. As a member of the Colonial Service, not the Malayan Civil Service, he was seen in Malaya as ‘... something of an interloper by what was, quite literally, the freemasonry of the Malayan Civil Service establishment.’⁵³⁷ His failure to learn the Malay language was a further irritant to those who worked closely with him,

...how could a Governor who knew not a word of the local language impress his views on people? You can't really be impressive if you have to pause at the end of every sentence while your words are translated by a very bored interpreter (who probably hasn't your faith in any case) paraphrase your appeal.⁵³⁸

He appears however, not to have noticed these hurdles, certainly none of his diary entries or later writings mention them. He either was oblivious to them or did not consider such hindrances worthy of mention. The result, however, was that in times of tension he appeared to lack the confidence to state his own unequivocal views and inclined to the person making the more forceful case, believing they had the experience and background for doing so. He would later confess in his diary important but publicly undeclared opinions, *vide* the Penang civilian evacuation calamity (Chapter 4). Had he the courage to declare in open forum these suppressed judgments, we may guess, that his standing and image, if nothing else, would have risen significantly.

⁵³⁵ Royle.T. *The Last Days of the Raj*. Michael Joseph. London 1989. p.77.

⁵³⁶ Montgomery.. *Shenton*. p 203.

⁵³⁷ Bayly & Harper. *Forgotten Armies*. p 109.

⁵³⁸ Correspondence Dickinson /Bryson. Jan 1970. BAM Collection . RCS/RCMS 103/4/2/15. CU

The momentous world events preceding and portending the fall of Singapore needed a leader of vision and herculean demeanour, Thomas was none of these. He was a competent colonial civil servant; nowhere was he even described as a ‘good’ one, and thus was quite the wrong person to face the mammoth task of arousing and preparing a nation for war. Even if the forthcoming drama could have been foreseen, the London authorities were, in any case, in no position to replace him. His character, personality and myopic view of his administrative responsibilities, made him the wrong person in the wrong place, at the wrong time. In early 1942, after the fall of Singapore, Lord Cranborne –Thomas’s chief at the Colonial Office – wrote:

From the Governor downwards they seem to have been incapable of dealing with an abnormal situation. This, more than any inherent rigidity in the system, seems to be the real cause for criticism. Clearly the Governor should have been replaced earlier.⁵³⁹

Nor did Thomas have around him staff of conspicuous ability with perhaps the exception of Hugh Fraser, the Federal Secretary, who resided in Kuala Lumpur until called to Singapore to replace Stanley Jones, the Colonial Secretary, sacked at the behest of Duff Cooper. A senior member of his staff, who played a controversial role in the mounting unhappy relations between the civil and the military administrations, was C.A. Vlieland, a man described by many as clever but abrasive, arrogant and delusionary. In 1938, Thomas appointed him to the post of Defence Secretary. Vlieland was dismissive of the military and their tactical planning, believing he knew better. He wrote, without consulting anyone, a prescient forecast of likely Japanese tactics in their fight for Singapore.⁵⁴⁰

Thomas chaired the Defence Committee, of which Vlieland was secretary, and clearly had high regard for him: high enough to authorise Vlieland not to accept any interference from the acting Governor and others on the committee while he, in 1940, was on leave. This instruction Vlieland saw as licence to feed his authoritarianism, *vide* his arbitrary selection of sites in north Malaya for storage of rice reserves.⁵⁴¹ Not only was this instruction illustrative of Thomas’s limited grasp of the importance of defence affairs, but also a reflection of his poor judgement of the professional contribution other members had to offer. As Raymond Callahan points out in his seminal study *The Worst Disaster*, ‘Nothing in Sir Shenton’s previous experience had prepared him to preside over such a committee.’⁵⁴² Leaving Vlieland in charge during his lengthy absence, and at a time of menacing developments,

⁵³⁹ Charmley. *J.Duff Cooper*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. London. 1986. p 160.

⁵⁴⁰ Appendix to Vlieland Memoir. Vlieland papers. LHCMA.

⁵⁴¹ See Chapter 4.

⁵⁴² Callahan.. *Worst Disaster*. p 64.

according to one of his principal subordinates, made him appear more complacent about the situation than he in fact was.⁵⁴³ On his return from leave Thomas was required to seek Vlieland's resignation, so strong was the antagonism against the latter. It is my contention that Thomas was not so much complacent as he was a sceptic. In spite of all the mounting evidence, he simply did not believe, or more accurately did not want to believe, that the Japanese would invade Malaya. When they did, he seemed unconcerned. Learning of their initial landings, as we have heard, he is reputed to have said to Percival "well I expect you'll shove them off again."⁵⁴⁴

Returning to Singapore at the end of 1940, he was dismissive of the need to construct air-raid shelters drawing a comparison with the hardihood of the people in wartime Kent, where he had spent his leave. His reply, at his first Legislative Council Meeting on return, to a question about shelters, conveys a picture of disdain for such measures or worse, facetious rejection. Whether he intended this standpoint as a show of confidence and consciously made an effort to portray a picture of composure and aplomb, or genuinely considered the possibility of war so remote, as to be worth only a minimum of his time and effort is an unanswered question. From my research, I have formed the image of a man of limited imagination who, in spite of his honorific title, Commander-in-Chief, was very reluctant to address military matters. In any case, it was a subject, he knew little about and would have preferred not to confront. He had, until this unwelcome disruption, been running the affairs of his province successfully, overseeing the expansion of its manufacturing and industrial base and leading Malaya to become the world's major producer of tin and rubber. He had passed retirement age and after seven years in Singapore, following a comfortable well ordered routine was almost oblivious to the enormity of the danger ahead.

He seems to have been initially opposed to any defence build-up in Malaya, was ill-disposed to upsetting his bureaucratic routine which war preparations required and ill-prepared for the hard decisions which war itself brought....Shenton Thomas was not the man for the tempest that broke on all their heads. He and his officials seemed wedded to the pace and routine of peace. Even Percival, who seldom offered public criticism of his superiors, was forced to admit....that Thomas's seven years in Singapore were "a long time in that trying climate."⁵⁴⁵

While the evidence exposing Thomas's ineffectual and half-hearted preparations for the onslaught and his indecisive management of civil affairs during the campaign is conclusive, it also reflects badly on the military. There was no strong, determined military leader with foresight or imagination to describe to the civil authorities the mayhem and

⁵⁴³ Ibid. p 65.

⁵⁴⁴ See Chapter 5.

⁵⁴⁵ Kinvig. *Scapegoat* . p 125.

destruction which could be expected. Neither the civil population nor the government had any experience or understanding of war and its consequences; they needed educating and rudely awakening to the reality of the situation. In a letter Thomas received after the war from Wavell, then Field Marshal, Wavell said, rather pedantically,

It was the duty of the chief military authorities in the Far Eastern Command to accentuate or accelerate the civilian effort if it did not meet adequately the possibilities attendant on a Japanese landing.⁵⁴⁶

In spite of Thomas's blinkered desire to meet the instructions of his colonial authorities for more tin and rubber, which he believed required calm and reassurance, he more than anyone needed to be ruthlessly and relentlessly harassed, together with his administration, into confronting the reality of the circumstances. In mitigation, it should be remembered that during his leave in 1940 he found time to attend a meeting in London of the Sub-Committee of the Joint Planning Committee, during which he made a spirited defence of his Memorandum. This he had submitted in February, asking that the air force in Singapore be reinforced to compensate for the missing fleet. A formal reply came, not from this committee, but from the Overseas Defence Committee, dominated by Foreign Office officials, telling him there were no forces to spare for areas not under immediate threat and that Malaya's prime duty was to produce as much rubber and tin as possible.⁵⁴⁷

Later in the year, when Thomas returned from leave, he faced the question of putting the local forces on a higher state of alert and increasing their hours of training. As Brooke-Popham noted in his post-war despatch: -

The view held in the Colonial Office was that rubber and tin was of greater importance than the training of local forces; for instance a telegram dated 31 December 1940 to the Governor, states "The ultimate criterion for exemption [from training] should not be what the GOC considers practicable, but what you consider essential to maintain the necessary production and efficient labour management."⁵⁴⁸

Clearly Thomas faced two conflicting demands, that from his masters in the Colonial Office and the other from the Military Commanders in Singapore. He does not appear to have attempted to negotiate compromise arrangements. The military demands were concerned with work force issues, manual labour and the release of volunteer forces for training. Making the case for the military was the new C-in-C, Brooke-Popham; an elderly person passed his prime, and not a man of dynamic energy and decisiveness, which the circumstances clearly needed. A study of the debates relating to these matters, as recorded in the minutes of the war

⁵⁴⁶ Letter dated 1 Jan 48. Quoted in Thomas private papers.

⁵⁴⁷ See Chapter 3.

⁵⁴⁸ Supplement to London Gazette 22 Jan 48. Brooke-Popham Despatch. Para. 68

committee meetings, convey no sense of urgency or passion; all the senior figures seemed more concerned with simply making their point than forcing the issue to an unpopular conclusion. It was this lack of rigorous and concerted effort for agreement between the administration and the military, which forced the British Government to send a Minister, Duff Cooper, to Singapore.

In the event, most historians agree, that the contribution made by Duff Cooper was at best minimal, at worst damaging.⁵⁴⁹ After only three months in post, during which period he was away from Singapore for some weeks travelling extensively around his 'parish' of South East Asia, Duff Cooper wrote a formal damning indictment of Thomas's administration. He also corresponded privately with Churchill and though some of his observations about the poor relations between military and civilians were perceptive, his judgement on Malayan administrative affairs showed little understanding of the complicated governance in place.⁵⁵⁰ He also broadcast an embarrassing statement about the rescue of all the civilians from Penang during the Japanese aerial attack on the island, when in fact the only civilians rescued were Europeans. The insensitive broadcast highlighted his ignorance of the complexities of Malayan society. The selective evacuation in Penang was to cast a shameful shadow on the behaviour of the administration.

His appointment to Minister Resident in the Far East was a convenient means of finding Duff Cooper what appeared gainful employment while removing his intrusive presence from the London scene. He had failed as Minister of Information in Churchill's wartime cabinet and moved to the sinecure of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. In his book 'Old Men Forget', he openly represents himself as a licentious and frustrated figure. On arriving back in London, having left Singapore at the height of the trouble, his first remark on hearing that the Island had surrendered was not one of despondency or statesmanlike reflection on the impact of the loss, but rather what bearing it would have on his career.

In politics it is damaging to be associated, however distantly, with failure. Singapore signified failure, and I had been out on a special mission to Singapore. The surrender which took place there coincided with my return. The most malevolent of critics, knowing the facts, could not with justice have accused me of any responsibility for what happened. It was primarily a naval and military disaster and I had no connection whatever with naval or military affairs.⁵⁵¹

On 10 December 1941, Duff Cooper took over the Chairmanship of the War Council in Singapore, the meetings, from this point on, were almost entirely concerned with the progress

⁵⁴⁹ See for example an assessment in Callahan's *The Worst Disaster* p. 247-250. Also, Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*. p 26. Hack & Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall*. p 85.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Duff Cooper. A. *Old Men Forget*. R Hart-Davis, London. 1953. p.310.

of the Japanese invasion, and the military tactics deployed to meet it. And, notably, following the early British reverses at the hands of the Japanese, suggested at one of these meetings (13 December) that he considered the situation so serious he proposed a radical change of strategy to the Military Commanders.⁵⁵² This is not, 'having no connection with military affairs.' He was dismissive of nearly everyone and everything in Malaya, he did not get on with either Brooke-Popham or Thomas, had a low regard for Percival and was instrumental in the dismissal of the Colonial Secretary. In early January, he cabled the Colonial Office that, in his opinion, the Malayan Civil Service had failed lamentably in making adequate preparations for war. This judgement was made after nearly five weeks of war; none of his pre-war reports made mention of any inadequacies.⁵⁵³

Duff Cooper's contribution in Singapore to government administration and promoting closer relations between the civil and military authorities was negligible. Indeed a number of analysts go so far as to suggest that his intervention was counterproductive, he added yet another level to an already over-heavy command structure, 'was a failed politician, exiled to Singapore with great responsibilities of the vaguest kind, no precise terms of reference and no authority.'⁵⁵⁴ Shenton Thomas considered his behaviour was nothing more than an attempt to ingratiate himself with Churchill by magnifying the responsibilities entrusted to him.⁵⁵⁵ His brief tenure left no memorable legacy with the exception that he recognised the fundamental need for a Supreme Commander with total authority over all affairs, both civil and military.

Directly after his release from prison at the end of the war Thomas launched into a defence of his personal role and that of his administration before and during the war. Public accusations of incompetence had been levelled at both the civil and military authorities for the gross mismanagement of the whole affair. The accusations began before the surrender and continued unabated until well after the war. Churchill had rejected the call for an Inquiry on the grounds that it was inappropriate while the nation's energies were consumed with a major war; and in any case, he claimed, the key personalities could not be spared from their vital tasks.⁵⁵⁶ In Parliament, he admitted: -

I will, however, say this: Singapore was, of course, a naval base rather than a fortress. It depended upon command of the sea, which again depends upon command of the air. Its permanent fortifications and batteries were constructed from a naval point of view. The various defence lines which had been constructed in Johore were not successfully held. The

⁵⁵² See Chapter 5.

⁵⁵³ Duff Cooper reports and correspondence, except his private letters to Churchill, are filed in the CAB 66 series. He makes no mention of poor pre-war preparations.

⁵⁵⁴ Callahan. *Worst Disaster*. p 248.

⁵⁵⁵ Thomas Papers.

⁵⁵⁶ Churchill. *History of Second World War*. Vol.IV. p.81.

field works constructed upon the island itself to defend the fortress were not upon a sufficiently large scale.⁵⁵⁷

Thomas set about putting the record straight and spent the rest of his life in this unrewarded mission. He wrote three major works, 'What Malaya Did', 'Malaya's War Effort' and a lengthy 'Comment on the draft History of the War against Japan.'⁵⁵⁸ None of these papers was formally published. He argued passionately that the role played by the Singapore Government was distorted to accommodate the military failings and went to great trouble to retrieve retrospective records supporting his assertion that he fulfilled his obligations, both to the Colonial Office, and within the restrictions this imposed on him, met the demands of the military. He does not however say that many of his responses were tardy and only because of persistent demands, by not only the military, but also the civilian population when the situation was already serious.

His civil servants in up-country Malaya had no clear instructions about what to do as the Japanese approached. In nearly every case, senior government officials had to make up their own minds whether to remain at their posts or abandon their responsibilities. It has been said that it was the inherent capability of the British to improvise that resulted in many of the problems arising from the invasion being solved locally. District Commissioners, officers of the PWD, the FMS Railways and the Post and Telegraph services kept the civil administration in being in the various States under circumstances of the greatest difficulty.⁵⁵⁹ In a report after the war, the British Government decided to make sure that in future, civil servants were quite clear about their responsibility in such events:

European officers of the civil government in areas of military operations should remain at their posts as long as they can serve a useful purpose and assist the military; but that, if and when they can no longer render such service and enemy occupation of their districts is imminent, they should (after completing the duties allotted to them) withdraw by arrangement with the military commander...⁵⁶⁰

There was total confusion about the policy of evacuation and the management of refugees. Passive defence measures on the other hand, after initial muddle, responded well to the call. However, in essence, Thomas did not give clear, strong leadership, to either the populace or his Government. He had the misguided belief that military setbacks and bad news generally should not be made public. Inevitably, this led to a serious breakdown of trust between the people and the authorities.

⁵⁵⁷ Hansard 1941 – 42 Vol 377, cols 1674, 1676.

⁵⁵⁸ All documents are held by RHL, Oxford. Vide, Shenton Thomas private papers.

⁵⁵⁹ Kirby. *Chain of Disaster*. p 188.

⁵⁶⁰ CAB/68/9/17 dated 25 Mar 1942. NA

In April 1942, the editor of the Straits Times, G.W. Seabridge, compiled a secret report for the War Cabinet in London. He had been editor of this newspaper since 1928 until his escape to Batavia on 11 February 1942, so he wrote with some authority and experience of Singapore's affairs. He had been highly critical of Thomas and the Singapore Government throughout the campaign. In his report, among many harsh comments, he said,

Singapore itself was in a state of almost complete chaos from the end of December. Civil Servants who had evacuated from the Malay States sought to set up temporary departments in Singapore for no other apparent reason than the preservation of their jobs. Even the FMS Income Tax Department set itself up in Singapore after the last Federated State had fallen into Japanese hands. The Civil administration cracked badly and broke completely at some points. There was little co-operation with the Services, and many indications of jealousy and fear that outsiders might poach on the preserves of the Civil Servant...The extent to which obstructionists flourished was staggering.⁵⁶¹

As an example of Thomas's vacillation, Seabridge described the passing of a War Courts Ordinance to expedite the trial of persons charged with treachery; an ordinance the Governor felt was forced upon him and with which he was not comfortable. However, before anyone had been brought to trial the Chief Justice, 'who also disliked the idea intensely, discovered a statement by James I or II that the whole procedure was unconstitutional – and the War Court was stillborn.'⁵⁶²

From the military point of view, I endorse the findings of most eminent military historians, which is that it would almost certainly have made no difference to the outcome of the campaign had there been a change of Commanders at the very top, both military and civilian. Without the vital tools, the task was impossible. A more energetic and ruthless military leader might have delayed the Japanese advance for longer than they took, and perhaps created time for more reinforcements to arrive. However, unless those reinforcements included essential aircraft, ships, tanks, and other vital equipment, there was little hope of preventing an eventual collapse. At the end of the first week of the campaign, the Army were without any effective air support and remained unprotected for the remainder of the battle. The seas around Malaya were unguarded and clear for the Japanese to use as supplementary resupply routes for their advancing forces and to insert troops behind the retreating British. Denuded of the support of the other two Services the Army, in effect, fought a solitary campaign.

The Army Commander, Percival, taking up his post in May 1941, inherited a defensive strategy compiled and refined over many years, but based upon mythical forces and equipment. The planners encouraged in the belief that their demands for a garrison of the size

⁵⁶¹ War Cabinet Paper W.P. (42) 177, 25 Apr 42. "Report on the Fall of Singapore" by G.W. Seabridge. NA

⁵⁶² Ibid.

needed for the task would in time be forthcoming, designed tactics based on this assumption, which inexorably led to the wrong conclusions. The RAF made itself responsible for the defence of Malaya. Moreover, the Air Commander, without consulting the other Services, designed airfields on the exposed east coast of Malaya ready for the fabled modern fighter aircraft to fly from to assault the approaching armada. The Army was told it had to defend these and existing airfields. The disagreement between the Army and the RAF on this fundamental issue of protecting airfields, while simultaneously deploying the same meagre ground forces to defensive positions on the anticipated axes of enemy advance, led to open hostility between the two Services. It blighted the formulation of a sensible and practicable solution. The upshot was thinly dispersed army units in isolated locations unable to support each other, and because of the terrain, unable to be quickly reinforced.

In an attempt to compensate for the paucity of soldiers, a plan 'Operation Matador' was prepared. A division size force would pre-empt a landing in south east Thailand by rushing to the assumed landing beaches before the Imperial Japanese Army stepped ashore. Again, it was a plan, which Percival inherited, but the authority to launch it was so tightly controlled by London, for fear of upsetting the sensibilities of the Thais, that permission when it came, was too late for it to be carried out. In any case, it was a plan, which also assumed that the RAF would have created havoc on the approaching flotilla before its attempted landing. Historians generally agree that with the conditions imposed on its implementation, Matador could not have succeeded.⁵⁶³ A thorough time appreciation would have revealed that the calculated 36 hours warning to launch an operation of this complexity was quite inadequate.⁵⁶⁴ The consequence was a serious diversion of resources and energy from the main aim of defending the Jitra area, which in turn led to this vital position being ill prepared and over-run before any determined resistance could be offered.

Percival's command and tactics of his retreat down the Malay Peninsula and defence of Singapore, has been the subject of intense and endless scrutiny. Nearly all the authorities agree, that even taking account of the scandalous conditions under which he was forced operate, his conduct of the operation was poor, without imagination and conviction. He lacked firmness and authority in managing his subordinates when it was a time for a ruthless assertion of leadership.

There is no evidence that he ever directed his commanders' minds towards any plan that might regain the initiative, or to any area in which a decisive battle might be fought. Instead the only plan in their minds was to hold on as long as possible....In the record Percival gives of his

⁵⁶³ See for example Gilchrist.. *Malaya 1941*. passim, for clear analysis.

⁵⁶⁴ Kirby. *Chain of Disaster*. p 110.

conversations with his subordinate commanders it is noticeable that the suggestions always came from them. It was never that he told them what to do but that they told him what they must do.⁵⁶⁵

However, of all his questionable judgments, the one that draws the most opprobrium was his failure, indeed refusal, to have defensive fortifications erected on the north shore of the Island. He refused to countenance the construction of such preparations on the extraordinary grounds that they would have been bad for morale. His Chief Engineer, Brigadier Simson, pleaded passionately and ceaselessly, for permission to do so and drew up a list of ten most important things, both civil and military, which should be done in preparation for the defence of Singapore. The list eventually came before Churchill who claimed it was the first document to reveal to him the total lack of defence installations on the northern coast of Singapore Island. The historians, Moore, D & J, put it succinctly:

Every military shortcoming in the fight for Malaya and Singapore is explicable in rational terms but this. The deplorable absence of intelligence, the catastrophic notions of superiority and security, the chronic shortage of equipment, the lack of forward planning, the breakdown of confidence, and every aspect of the retreat itself – the confusion, the failure of leadership, the inefficiency – all these things can be explained, if not excused. But Gen. Percival's refusal to fortify the northern shore of the Island opposite the advancing Japanese army until it was far too late is explicable only in terms of irrationality.⁵⁶⁶

It is interesting to compare the reluctance of Percival and Thomas to prepare defences with that of the Japanese in 1945, when in similar circumstances they are expecting the Allies to return and invade Malaya. They were ordered to resist the enemy fully, even under the worst conditions. Artillery and close combat trenches were to be prepared; infantry positions, tunnel-type communication trenches, and dummy positions – constructed using local labour - working parties were taken by the hundreds across the causeway to Johore and made to build tunnels for weeks on end. They also drove bunkers four meters (13 ft.) high into the hills to protect Japanese troops and provide ambush positions.⁵⁶⁷

The attitudes toward the war by the predominant native population of Malaya and Singapore; the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians, differed. What is firmly established is that there was no effective Fifth Column at work during the war. There were isolated incidents of local people helping the advancing Japanese by giving directions and confirming the location of allied forces, but practically no formed and directed Fifth Column. There were, nevertheless, some instances of behind the lines espionage but they were few and of little significance. What was uncovered was that Japanese dressed in local costume and speaking

⁵⁶⁵ Sixsmith. Maj. Gen. *British Generalship in the Twentieth Century*. Arms and Armour Press. London 1970.

⁵⁶⁶ Moore, D & J. *The First 150 Years of Singapore*. Donald Moore Press. Singapore. 1969. p. 607.

⁵⁶⁷ Yoji & Mako. "New perspectives on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya". p. 220. Frei. Paper "Surrendering Syonan"

Malay attempted to infiltrate British lines. The unfortunate outcome was that British soldiers, with little knowledge of the country and its peoples, took no risk and on occasion shot any Asian approaching their positions. This is a fundamental problem for a Colonial Force in its early deployment, to be unaware of local nuance. At the final conference in Singapore before the surrender, the Inspector General of Police, Straits Settlements, A.H. Dickinson, asked all the senior officers present, to what extent, had Fifth Column activity contributed to the military defeat. All senior commanders reassured him that they experienced no Fifth Column activity at all.⁵⁶⁸ This assessment was later confirmed by Major Fujiwara, when he was interrogated after the war about his *Kikan* (Agency), whose task was to organise sabotage and pro-Japanese propaganda admitted [Fifth Column activity] had been ‘militarily of no use whatever before and during the actual fighting.’⁵⁶⁹

The indigenous Malay suffered least at the hands of the Japanese and as noted by Sjovald Cunyngham-Brown, a senior MCS with over twenty years service in Malaya, in a rather jaundiced summation declared,

..the Malays were not taking any great interest and can you blame them. It was their country that was being rolled over by two vast overseas giants...smashing and destroying everything. The Malays had benefitted by joining western Civilisation and now they realised with horror that they were about to pay for it: this was what happened if you joined the west – so they stood by. The Indians were mostly rubber estate workers who had no contact with what was going on. They lay doggo, hearing nothing, saying nothing and doing nothing – and I don’t blame them either. The Chinese on the other hand were already at war with Japan. Their mother country was fighting Japan, therefore so were they, and the more virile of them were busy getting arms to go into the jungle to die fighting against the Japanese – as indeed they did.⁵⁷⁰

Another senior government servant, Hugh Bryson, who had for many years been clerk to the Councils (Legislative and Federal), also believed that calling on the Asians of Malaya to fight for the survival of the British was pointless and impractical. He wrote, ‘..had we been able to show clearly that our rule was ideal, and that an invading power would bring the place down in ruins without firm local support, we might have succeeded.’⁵⁷¹ Malaysians, Bryson was convinced, were not particularly interested in maintaining British prestige. In any case, he noted, how was the message to be promulgated,

Could we expect Residents and Advisors to stump their territories preaching all out preparations for war against another ‘foreign’ power? Malaya was so divided with Malays, Chinese and Indians all with their own axes to grind, and no common loyalty to bind them together that a unity of purpose would have been almost impossible to develop. The Sultans too would have been of little avail. Malaya was either a country where men were seeking

⁵⁶⁸ Thomas Papers *op cit.* Letter Dickinson to Thomas 5 Jun 47.

⁵⁶⁹ Allen.L. *Singapore 1941-1942.* p.254.

⁵⁷⁰ Allen.C. *Tales form the South China Seas* p.255

⁵⁷¹ BAM Collection. Correspondence Dickinson /Bryson. Jan 1969. CU

employment and security (Europeans, Chinese, and Indians) or looking for a life of comparative ease and comfort (Malays).⁵⁷²

Moreover, he pointed out, it was official British policy to advocate procedures that kept down any [internal] movements that might have bred a local loyalty. This was because those movements were in part from outside subversives. However, inflexible adherence to this rule was in the end more divisive. In addition, before the war the British authorities looked upon the Japanese as no more than another group of potential developers who would invest capital that would ultimately benefit the Malayan Government. In 1928, in Trengganu when the Japanese wanted a licence to open a big iron mine at Dungun, the local British Adviser, with Singapore's encouragement, agreed to grant it.⁵⁷³ Even then, some Malays pointed out the danger of allowing them this foothold. However, Trengganu needed money, and no British company was prepared to invest in the Dungun mine, there seemed no alternative.⁵⁷⁴

After an extensive and detailed study of the loss of Singapore in 1942, a pivotal event in the history of the British Empire, I am persuaded - considering all the circumstances prevailing at that time - there is no particular issue, or particular person, or crucial activity, had it been avoided or changed, would have altered the course of history. As many eminent scholars have concluded, Singapore was a lost cause from the day the construction of the naval base was complete. If such a large, comprehensive, modern facility, positioned on a strategic naval crossroads, was judged vital, it required a dedicated resident fleet with modern fighter aircraft protection, and a large ground force in properly constructed fortifications to ensure its security. None of these needs could be met by a bankrupt and exhausted nation, as Britain was in the 1930's.

The naval base was barely used throughout its pre-war life, certainly not nearly to the capacity for which it was designed. The region, in any case, was regarded less volatile than other areas of the world. Indeed the people of Malaya and Singapore regarded their territory as a peaceful backwater and with commercial transport still in its infancy, it was a long way from the contamination of western excesses. The benevolent rule of 150 years of British administration had bred complacency and an unjustified belief in immunity from danger. Both the populace and its government were so suffused with their peaceful existence that even when

⁵⁷² Ibid

⁵⁷³ ODC Paper No. 353, 18 Jan. 1929 "*Japanese Interests in Malaya, with specific regard to the Vicinity of Singapore*". NA.

⁵⁷⁴ CAB 5/7. 31 Jul. 1930. "*Malaya: Application by Japanese for Prospecting Licences in Southeast Johore*". NA. See Also Robertson, *Japanese File*, p 26-28.

the harbingers of war came knocking, they were unable first, to believe there was serious danger, and later incapable of galvanising themselves for the struggle; they remained inert.

A British Government insisting that every effort be made to avoid offending or provoking Japan reinforced Thomas's early belief that there would be no confrontation with Japan. He did not want people frightened by overt military defensive constructions, and in the person of Percival he had an Army Commander who was willing to oblige, as he too thought building defences was not good for the morale of his troops. As I have shown, Thomas carried his obsession of preserving an air of composure, to the point of negligence. He failed to alert his staff in Malaya, of the dangers ahead, nor did he advise them to prepare contingency plans, initiate precautions, or instruct them about their role in relation to their administrative responsibilities in a crisis. No advice was given about evacuation, no plans prepared. In addition, he controlled the release of truthful information about the war so that people were in total ignorance of the true state of affairs. In summary, he displayed a lack of leadership and was indecisive; he failed to co-ordinate the activities of vital government departments and failed to prioritise civil defence and refugee activities.

His early lack of knowledge of military matters is perfectly understandable. A colonial career in Africa did not prepare him for this arena. However, he does not appear to have made any great or urgent effort to come to grips with the essentials of military knowledge. Some of his pronouncements at critical times convey either disinterest, or lack of realism, or as he sometimes claimed, he was not told what was happening. At one point, he planned to replace the British Resident in Ipoh, Marcus Rex, with another of his staff, H. Weisberg, only to be told that Ipoh had already fallen to the Japanese.⁵⁷⁵

My research has reinforced the legitimacy of the many highly critical censures, directed at the British Administration in Singapore before and during the campaign. The role, in simplistic terms, which the government of Shenton Thomas had to play in this fateful event, was first to warn the peoples of the country of the serious danger which could come their way. Then having spread this message, introduce measures to minimise the threat to life and give assurance that the authorities were being proactive. Also, importantly, provide the military with the practical support they dearly needed to prepare for the onslaught. As it turned out the Government made minimum effort, until late, to put in place basic civil defence and passive defence measures. Nor did it attempt to place the country on a war footing. On the contrary, the Governor avoided such measures.

⁵⁷⁵ BAM Collection. Correspondence Dickinson/Bryson. Jan. 1969. CU.

It is tempting to speculate that had Thomas and his administration acknowledged earlier the Japanese threat, and followed the advice and met the demands of the military authorities, what local effect it might have had on the course of the campaign. With early accord, it would surely have become obvious that a combined civil/military authority with a Supremo in charge of all planning and preparations was essential. Certainly, it is reasonable to assume that many more civilian non-combatants would have been evacuated safely and in time, and many less would have ended up incarcerated in Changi jail. More air raid shelters would have saved many lives. Efficient and practised emergency services would have dealt with the injured and coped with the damaged infrastructure. A co-ordinated and properly directed scorched earth policy would have deprived the Japanese Army of valuable supplies, transport and propaganda facilities. Releasing work force from industry would have enabled the preparation of properly constructed fortifications, of course at the expense of tin and rubber production, but it would almost certainly have disrupted the momentum of the Japanese advance.

Conceivably, and most significant: the Japanese Army, as we now know, arriving at Johore Bahru was dangerously short of battle supplies particularly artillery and small arms ammunition.⁵⁷⁶ Its administrative tail stretched back up the Malayan peninsula for several hundred miles and the forward troops had outrun this supply chain. Had the Governor allowed Simson to build the defences, he proposed in January 1942 in South Johore, instead of refusing because Johore was an UMS, it would almost certainly have imposed a delay of some consequence on the Japanese advance. Arguably, it might have had a significant effect on the course of the battle.

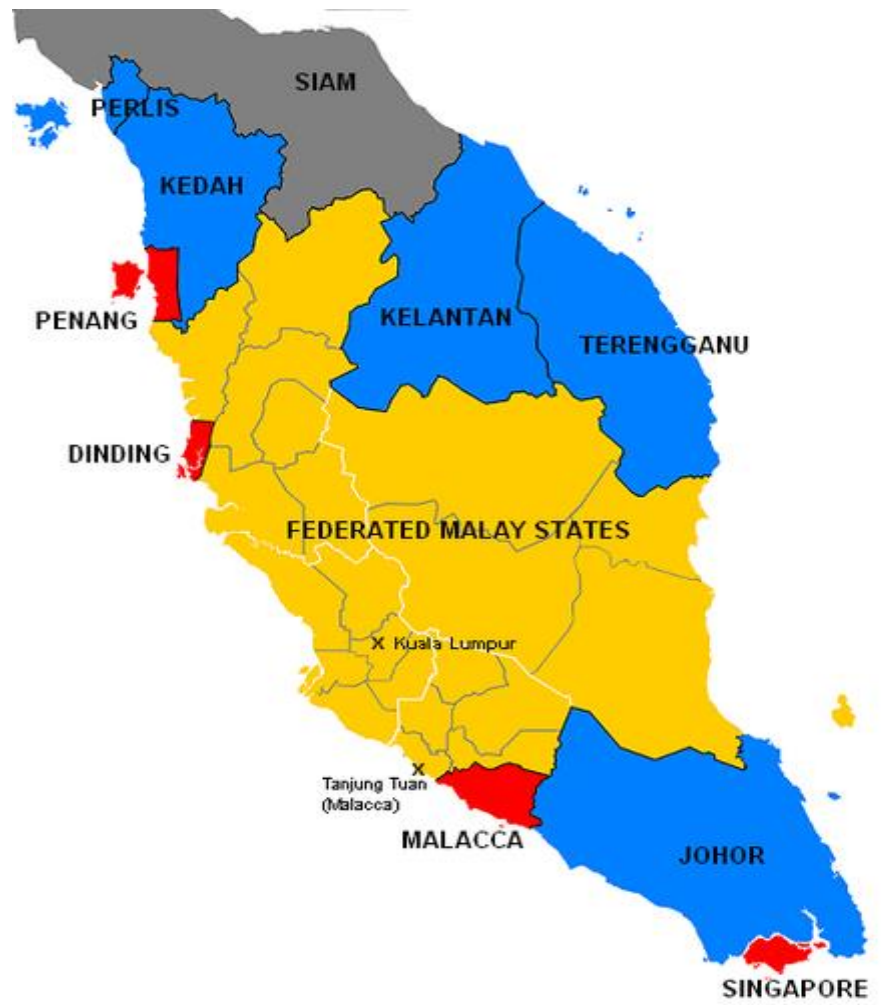
Crucially, the effect on the morale of the people and on the image of British Administration, of a proactive, realistic, honest Government, clearly in charge of the situation and acting with determination and authority, would have been immeasurable.

⁵⁷⁶ Frei. H. "*The Island Battle: Japanese Soldiers Remember the Conquest of Singapore*". Paper given at Conference "*A Great Betrayal*" NUS 2002. Some Japanese soldiers, when they learnt a white surrender flag had been raised, thought it must be theirs because they had run out of ammunition.

ANNEX A



ANNEX B



ANNEX C.

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