



Left: General Dobbie: his warnings were ignored by the Government.
Above: Singapore volunteers prepare to go on training

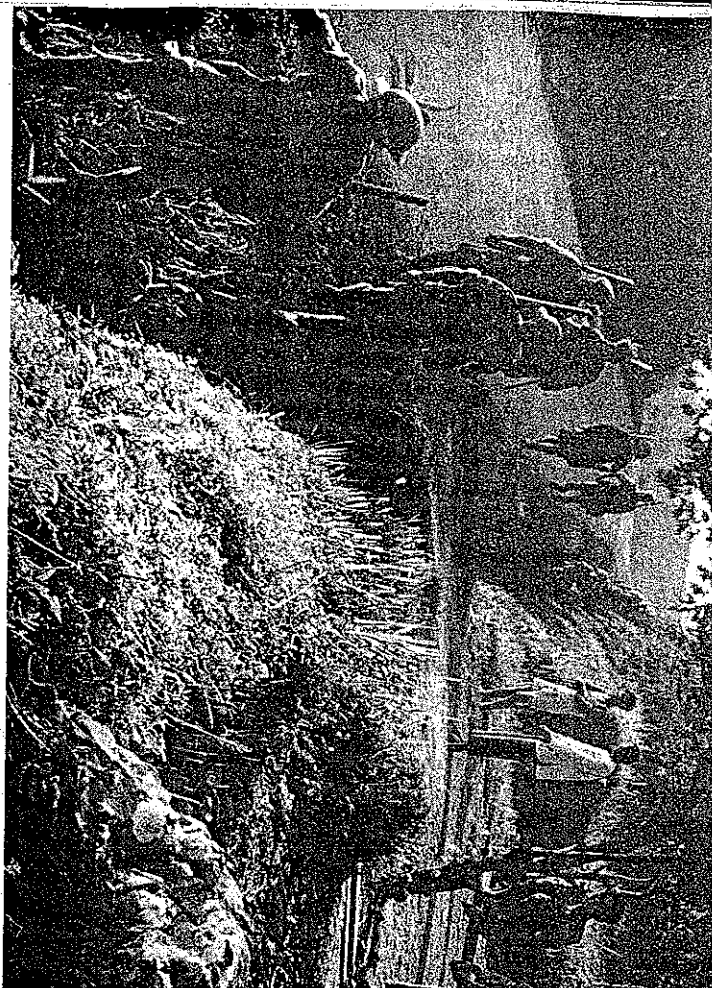
Meanwhile, as the Japanese triggered off the Peking incident in July 1937, which led to war in north China, and then the following year landed troops in Amoy, some 300 miles north-east of Hong Kong, the Chiefs of Staff kept reviewing the Far East defences, and were urged by New Zealand to send a fleet at once and before the outbreak of hostilities. But attention was increasingly focused on Europe where Hitler was making ugly threats, and the ludicrous figure of Mr Neville Chamberlain was scurrying to and fro between London and Germany. In February 1939, the Chiefs of Staff completed yet another appreciation, based on the promise that the main enemies would be Germany, Italy and Japan. By now it was accepted that a fleet must be sent to the Far East, though its strength would have to depend on our reserves and the state of the war in the European theatre. With the German situation fast dete-

riorating, no specific action was taken, however, and in May when the Committee of Imperial Defence held its session, though Japan was now rated a more serious enemy than Italy, the view was held that with so many unknown factors to be allowed for, it is not possible to state definitely how soon after Japanese intervention a Fleet could be despatched to the Far East. Nor could the Committee, on its own confession, state even yet how many ships could be spared. By July it was decided to investigate the possibility of building up food stocks in Malaya for both civilians and troops to cover a period of six months. And just before Hitler marched into Poland, an Indian Brigade Group, a mountain artillery regiment and two bomber squadrons were sent out from India.

What then was the total strength available to defend the country now that war had become a reality? Incredibly the defence of northern Malaya was left in the hands of the Federated Malay States Volunteers, and of Johore to its States forces. The newly arrived Indian brigade

was held as a reserve for the defence of Johore. And Singapore Island - which, it will be recalled, is over twenty miles in length - was entrusted to five regular battalions, two volunteer battalions, two coastal artillery regiments, three anti-aircraft regiments and four engineer fortress companies. There was an even smaller force at Penang. The six air force squadrons had a total of fifty-eight aircraft. If Japan attacked now only a token resistance could be offered.

It cannot be said that the situation greatly concerned the majority of people. In general the Malays were concerned only with events in their own *kampongs*, the Chinese attended to their business, and the Tamil labourers, mostly illiterate, were intent as always on survival. The British merchants and administrators remained blissfully unaware of the strategic situation and concentrated their energies chiefly on implementing government instructions to raise output of rubber and tin. These commodities were vital to the Allied war effort and demands would intensify with every month that

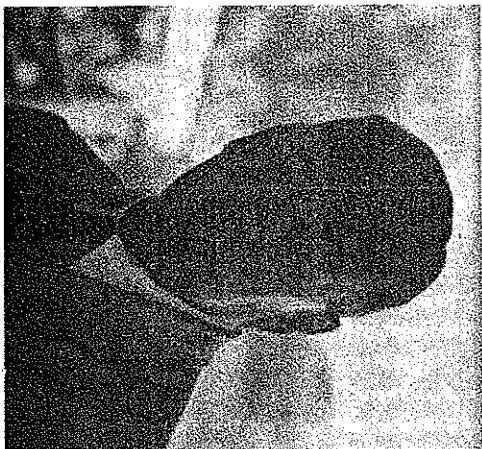


The last days of peace. Above: Indian troops on a training march. Below: Gurkhas move through thick jungle



Above: Reinforcements prepare to disembark at Singapore. Below: British, Australian and Dutch airmen on a forward airfield





Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor of the Straits Settlement



Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, C-in-C Far East



Major-General Gordon Bennett, commander Australian Forces

went by. Apart from marginal changes, it cannot be said that life in the European communities changed very much. There was still whisky at the club and the tennis courts and golf links remained as immaculately groomed as ever. Evening dress was *de rigueur* for even minor social occasions, and servants were cheap and plentiful. From Malaya, the war seemed very, very far away and the newsmen had an air of complete unreality. They would continue to do so, even when Poland fell, and then France, and when Hitler turned the full fury of the German army and air force against the people of Russia.

In 1940 the Governor of the Straits Settlement was Sir Shenton Thomas, the son of a Cambridge vicar, whose experience had been gained in the colonial service in Africa. In his sixties, he was finding the climate of Singapore somewhat of a trial and normally would have retired. Though not without ability, he was not the man for a crisis; he could not dominate events. Now he was in conflict with the recently arrived GOC, Lieutenant-General Bond, who was horrified at the absence of defences on Singapore and wanted to recruit a coolie labour force to get things moving. Thomas would not agree to this and reported to the government that: 'I conceive it to be our duty to

give absolute priority to the claims of industry.' The government, so far as one can tell, did not disabuse him and the Chinese, Tamils and Malays went on labouring in the mines and plantations. Thomas sometimes referred to Malaya as 'the dollar arsenal', pointing out that the USA bought twenty-five times the quantity of goods that she sold to Malaya, and in 1937 her purchases had totalled no less than 235 million Straits dollars. And, while his dispute with General Bond was going on, he could point out that during the quarter ended 30th November alone, 137,331 tons of rubber were shipped to the USA. It would be wrong to say that Sir Shenton was completely unaware of the danger of war. In his cables to London he often expressed the view that if only sufficient aircraft could be sent these would provide the best deterrent. The Air Officer Commanding Far East, Air-Marshal Babinington, was naturally in agreement with him.

Throughout 1940 there were conferences, meetings, appreciations and a steady flow of paper but not a great deal was done. And with the worsening situation in Europe, in Russia and the Middle East, Far Eastern affairs took last priority. However, in October the Chiefs of Staff recommended a unified system of defence for the Far East under a commander-in-chief. The man selected for this vital post was Air-Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, formerly Governor of Kenya, who had been recalled to the service on the outbreak of war. The appointment did not fill many people with great enthusiasm. 'Brooke-Popham', as the Air-Marshal was known throughout the RAF, was a tall, gangling character with a red moustache and a shy, boyish manner, and he had come to this mammoth task too late. However, he had courage and was no fool and as soon as his headquarters were in operation he informed the Chiefs of Staff that Singapore could not be held for the Fleet unless the whole of Malaya were held also. To ensure security, the army would have to work closely with the RAF, and at the moment there was a grave shortage both of troops and aircraft. Against the Chiefs of Staff's own estimate of 336 aircraft, only forty-eight were available. To this the reply was that the figure would be achieved by the end of 1941, but Brooke-Popham remained sceptical and with good cause. One of the main obstacles to despatching reinforcements to the Far East at this time was Winston Churchill, who on 13th January 1941, wrote to the Chiefs of Staff: 'The political situation in the Far East does not seem to require, and the strength of

the Air Force by no means permits, the maintenance of such large forces in the Far East at this time.' Brooke-Popham therefore never received the reinforcements he needed but at the same time it must be said that he seemed to respond to the 'never-never land' atmosphere of Singapore. His frequent optimistic statements, designed to deceive the Japanese, only added to the sense of unreality. The Japanese, of course, with their excellent intelligence service, were never deceived for one moment.

However, reinforcements did come on an inadequate scale. In February Major-General Gordon Bennett brought the 8th Australian Division and more troops were said to be on the way. Meanwhile Babinington was replaced by Air Vice-Marshal Conway Pulford and Bond by Lieutenant-General A E Percival. One of the major figures in the drama to come, Percival was a colourless character, more a staff officer than a commander and certainly not a natural leader. He played everything by the rules, however ludicrous these might be, and if he did not lack urgency, he certainly lacked passion. He was not the man for a crisis and certainly not the man for a desperate campaign. How then, one might ask, had he achieved his high rank? To begin with he had shown great personal bravery in the First World War, winning the DSO and bar, the MC, and the French *Croix de Guerre*. Starting the war as a private soldier - he was twenty-seven years of age on enlistment - he had risen to command a battalion before it was over. His work during the troubles in Ireland in 1921 impressed both Churchill, then War Minister, and Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, and it was the latter who recommended him for a course at the Staff College, Camberley although he was over the normal age. Showing a remarkable aptitude for paper-work, he passed out well from the Staff College and went on to the Imperial Defence College. 1936 saw him in Malaya as Chief of Staff to General Dobie, and here too his gift for turning out neatly phrased, crisp memoranda on any subject stood him in good stead. In fact, he was excellent in any job which did



Australian troops parade for lunch: their meat consumption rivalled that of the Americans

not involve contact with troops. Finishing his tour he returned to England but, with the outbreak of war, agitated for a more active appointment and someone in the War Office remembered that he had done well in Malaya. So the fateful decision was taken. He was appointed GOC in March 1941, and asked to fly out at three days' notice.

From the first he was dogged by ill luck. The flying boat detailed to take him broke down and it was five weeks before the necessary spares could be collected. On arrival at Singapore he found that very little had been done since he had left several years earlier. There was not a single aircraft available to help the army and the RAF requested him not to use any of their

aircraft 'except on special occasions'. He found himself carrying out a tour of the peninsula in civilian airlines, or in small DH Moth aircraft, piloted by Volunteer Air Force men. It was now that he discovered that the northern airstrips had been sited in indefensible positions. Also that they were unused, as the RAF had not sufficient men or aircraft to occupy them. (Ample fuel supplies were laid on, however, which would in due course help the Japanese). Work on defence installations, both on the peninsula and on Singapore Island was almost at a standstill. The armed services were not permitted to pay coolies a high enough rate to attract them from the tin mines and rubber plantations. Altogether the result was that defence work, laid down as urgent by Dobbie in 1937, was still at the planning stage. And, of the fighter aircraft the government had


promised to send, there was no sign.

As it happened the despatch of Hurricanes was being discussed at this time in London by the Chiefs of Staff. The RAF representative argued that American Buffalo fighters would be a match for any Japanese aircraft likely to be encountered and this view was accepted. Being advised, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham remarked, 'We can get on alright with Buffaloes out here . . . Let England have the Super-Spifires and Hyper-Hurricanes'. His Intelligence regarding Japanese aircraft was not only faulty, it was lacking altogether and the best one can say of him is that he was whistling to keep up his courage.

It was not only aircraft which were lacking in Malaya. When Percival had finished his initial tour he was to discover that there was not a single tank in the whole area.

But a facile optimism still pre-

valled in high quarters. On 9th September, Duff Cooper, a former diplomat and friend of Winston Churchill, arrived in Singapore with instructions 'to examine the existing arrangements for consultation and communication between the various British authorities in the area . . . and report how these could be made more effective'. On the 29th he held his first conference, and the brilliant array of military, naval, administrative and political talent accepted the view that Japan was concentrating her forces against Russia. She would be very unlikely, it was thought, to risk war with America. Britain and Holland simultaneously seemed so unlikely as not to merit detailed discussion. This conference, of course, was held four years after General Dobbie's report had shown quite clearly that such landings were



quite feasible and nine months after Japanese preparations for the landings had begun on Hainan Island.

Despite the fall of the Konoye government on 16th October and its replacement by the extremist military administration of General Tojo, optimism still persisted. Even on 26th October, Churchill was telegraphing the Australian Prime Minister that Japan would not risk war until Russia was broken by the Germans. As an added deterrent, however, two of Britain's most powerful warships, HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* would be moving to the Far East. What he did not mention was that the aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable* designated to accompany them had been damaged at Kingston, Jamaica, and as no replacement was available the capital ships would be going alone.

The defence build-up on land was not impressive. To defend northern Malaya there was only 11th Indian Division (at present with only two brigades of partly trained troops, 6th and 15th Brigades), while on the east coast were 8th Brigade and 22nd Brigade of 9th Indian Division. With 28th Independent Infantry Brigade and some airfield defence troops, these weak formations formed General Heath's III Corps. They were fairly strong in artillery but had no tanks whatsoever - there was still not a single tank on the Malayan Peninsula or on Singapore Island. The Singapore Fortress troops consisted of Gordon Bennett's 8th Australian Division (two brigades only), 12th Independent Brigade and two Malay Infantry Brigades. Apart from a few British battalions like the Leicesters and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, these troops were of mediocre or low quality, under-trained and indifferently led. The reinforcements still on their way were no better. And none had any idea of operating in jungle.

So the last days of peace slid by, aided by General Heath, Percival tried to intensify training among his troops, tried unsuccessfully to prise money from the government to carry

Too few and too slow: Brewster Buffalos on Sembawang airfield, November 1941



Above: The arrival of Lady Diana and Duff Cooper.
Right: Indian troops practise creek crossing

out defence works, tried to construct large defensive positions at Jitra on the trunk road, forty miles south of the Siam border, and at Gurun twenty miles below it. But the businessmen still held sway in Malaya and did not want the troops near their plantations or their property. Any encroachment brought an immediate protest to the governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, which usually was upheld. Civilian life went on the same as ever. Anyone talking of war was accused of 'flapping'. For Brooke-Popham, for Percival and for Duff Cooper, and indeed for any service commander or even regimental officer to achieve anything in this atmosphere seemed almost impossible. It was like trying to swim through treacle.

Nothing illustrates their dilemma more than the muddle over 'Matador'. This was the plan to rush forward and seize Singora in Siam at the outbreak of hostilities, and hold it against any seaborne invasion. The troops detailed for this difficult task were Major-General Murray-Lyon's 11th Indian Division - who also had been detailed to hold the Jitra posi-

tion. How they could fulfil two completely conflicting roles was never settled. Nor was it settled exactly when the order to rush forward would be given. The government's policy was to refrain from any act of provocation, but the soldiers naturally wanted to reach Singora well before the Japanese to give themselves time to prepare their defence. The arguments went on until 5th December - the day after Yamashita and his army had sailed from Samah, and even then Brooke-Popham was told he must wait until the territory of Siam had been violated. The only concession was that he could order his troops forward without reference to London.

But this concession, like everything else, had come too late. Soon the bombs would be falling and the jungles would echo to the sound of machine guns and mortars. The Japanese menace, which, to borrow Winston Churchill's phrase had lain 'in a sinister twilight' was now launching its fury across the whole of the Western Pacific. The date was 8th December 1941.

