



The Japanese Advance *1941–1942*

Australians in the Pacific War

Front cover

Private James Madden and Lance-Corporal Alfred Blomfield of the 2/30th Battalion keep watch for enemy troops in a rubber plantation in Malaya in January 1942. For full caption see page 44. (Australian War Memorial [AWM] 011304/18)

Title page

Crew members of HMS Prince of Wales scramble into lifeboats as their ship sinks after an air attack on 10 December 1941. For full caption see page 40. (AWM P02018.055)

Back cover

Pilots of No. 453 Squadron RAAF run to their Brewster Buffalo aircraft in response to a scramble order in late 1941. For full caption see page 36. (AWM SUK14775)

Metric conversions of imperial measurements quoted in this text are approximate.

ISBN 1 920720 75 8

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Published by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, February 2007.

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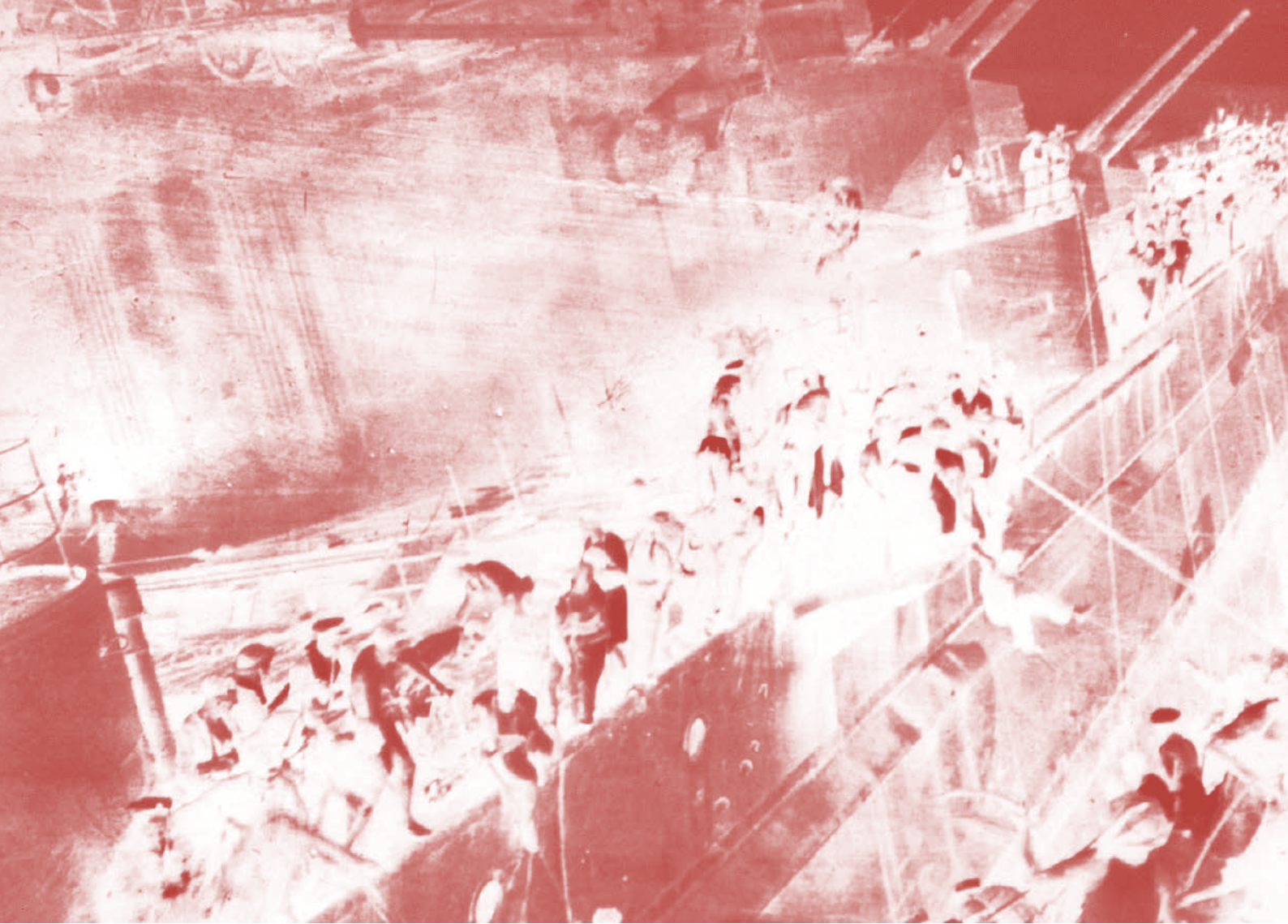
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Map by Keith Mitchell

Printed on New Silk Gloss 300gsm (cover) and Euro matt Art 155gsm (inside),

by National Capital Printing

P01034 2007



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The greatest defeats in Australian military history came in the first seventy days of 1942, when the Japanese armed forces defeated Australian and Allied forces in Malaya, Singapore and islands stretching from Java to New Britain. More Australians died in the fighting for this territory than in any other campaign except that in Papua from July 1942 to January 1943, and more Australians were captured in these campaigns than in all the other campaigns in Australian military history combined. A staggeringly high proportion of the men and women captured would die in imprisonment. Naturally these disasters have raised controversy, heightened by the fact that the fall of Singapore was a catastrophe for British as well as Australian arms, but the strategic errors and miscalculations that enabled the Japanese to win decisive victories in this period do not devalue the courage and self-sacrifice of the Australian soldiers, sailors and airmen who risked their lives trying to halt them.

The Japanese threat and the Singapore strategy

In 1920 a group of experienced Australian military commanders reported to the government that Japan was ‘the only potential and probable enemy’.¹ Australia recognised that it could not defend itself against Japan or any other major power without assistance from the British Empire, of which it was part.

Britain also recognised that Japan threatened peace in Asia, and it sought to minimise that danger by limiting the growth of the Japanese navy in the Washington Naval Agreement of 1922 and, with Australia’s strong support, by establishing a great naval base at Singapore. The British Admiral Lord Jellicoe suggested after visiting Australia in 1919 that a great Far Eastern Fleet be based at Singapore, but the British government faced more pressing economic and foreign policy demands and decided that it would send a fleet to Singapore only if a military threat developed in the Pacific. Yet as Jellicoe and the Australian commanders foresaw, if Japan attacked it would probably wait until Britain was preoccupied with a European war and thus unable to send her main fleet. Even if the fleet were sent, Singapore would have to hold out until it arrived.

In the interwar years the armed services were neglected in Australia. The reasons for this included an understandable antipathy to all things martial, the limitations imposed by the Great Depression, and complacency about potential threats and about the effectiveness of British assistance. Only from 1937, with war likely, did the Australian government significantly increase its expenditure on defence and its recruiting drive for the militia. When war broke out the navy and air force were too small to protect Australia and the expanding army was poorly equipped and had little prospect of receiving the equipment it needed from Britain. Little wonder that in November 1938 the British High Commissioner reported that the Australian Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, exhibited ‘a kind of desperate anxiety about the defence of Australia against Japan’.²

Japan attacks

Germany’s early successes in the European war that began in September 1939 disrupted British and Australian strategy in the Far East. By June 1940, with France lost, Britain acknowledged that it was so stretched fighting the German and Italian fleets that it would probably be unable to send naval reinforcements to the Far East. The defeat of France ensured that French possessions in the Far East were vulnerable, and in September 1940, the month Japan formed a military alliance with Germany and Italy, Japanese troops marched into northern French Indochina. Similarly, Germany’s conquest of the Netherlands weakened the administration of the Netherlands East Indies.

Britain was determined to hold Singapore, as was Australia. Successive Australian governments believed that a British or American fleet based there could prevent a Japanese invasion of Australia, despite the fact that the nearest Japanese island bases in the Pacific were more than 3200 kilometres from Singapore. By September 1940 it had sent three Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadrons—Nos 1, 8 and 21—to Malaya. A conference of British, Australian and New Zealand representatives at Singapore in October 1940 agreed that Malaya’s garrison was grossly inadequate and estimated that the eighty-eight aircraft available should be increased to 582. They believed that if these aircraft could be supplied, twenty-six army battalions would be needed to hold Singapore long enough to allow the great fleet’s arrival.

In the year after the conference, Australia and Britain worked to provide the forces needed. By December 1941 there were more than twenty-six Indian and British battalions in Malaya, but insufficient artillery and only 161 aircraft. Australia had baulked in 1940 at sending troops to Malaya but then agreed to send a brigade group of the 8th Division as a temporary measure. The divisional headquarters and 22nd Brigade group arrived in February, followed in August by the 27th Brigade. A fourth RAAF squadron, No. 453 Squadron, also arrived in August, bringing the RAAF's contribution to the Royal Air Force (RAF) Far East Command to 25 per cent. Australia's resources were stretched thin, as it already had three Australian Imperial Force (AIF) divisions and substantial naval and air forces in the Middle East and Europe.

The 8th Division had been formed in July 1940 and two months later was placed under the command of Major-General H Gordon Bennett, who during World War 1 had been such a meritorious officer that he became the youngest ever general in the Australian Army. Even then, however, his quarrelsome nature led his divisional commander to label him a pest, and his difficult temperament would have unfortunate repercussions in 1942.

Bennett's third brigade, the 23rd, was not sent to Malaya, but was allocated to territory closer to home. The Australian Chiefs of Staff wanted to establish air forces as far north as possible, in the islands of the Netherlands East Indies and the mandated territory of New Guinea. The Chief of the Air Staff (head of the RAAF) required army garrisons to protect these forces. Consequently the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Vernon Sturdee, reluctantly sent a force based on the 2/22nd Battalion to Rabaul, capital of the mandated territory, and entered an agreement with the Dutch to send two other battalion groups to Ambon and Timor, in the Dutch East Indies, should hostilities break out. From July, sections of the 1st Independent Company began moving to New Ireland, the Solomons and the Admiralties, while the 3rd Independent Company arrived in New Caledonia in December.

As a token of Britain's repeated assurances that it intended to send a fleet to Singapore, it sent the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*, which arrived on 2 December 1941. Several Australian navy ships were based there too, in early December: the destroyer HMAS *Vampire* and the corvettes HMA Ships *Bendigo*, *Burnie*, *Goulburn* and *Maryborough*, while the destroyer HMAS *Vendetta* was there for a refit.

Japan's relations with the United States soured in 1941 over Japan's refusal to end its invasion of China. In July the United States, Britain and the Netherlands East Indies froze Japanese assets and on 1 December Japan decided to put long-formed plans into operation and attack across a vast area stretching from Burma to the Kurile Islands. As Jellicoe and other experts had predicted, Japan did not attack in the Far East until Great Britain had become embroiled in a European war. Singapore was one of the main objects of its combined operations assaults, which began on 7–8 December.

Malaya

Some ninety minutes before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese battalions began landing at Kota Bharu, in north-eastern Malaya. There were no Australian troops to oppose them, as the 8th Division was stationed in the State of Johore, in southern Malaya. However, Indian troops opposed the landing and Australian airmen were present at this earliest stage. It was two Hudson aircraft of No. 1 Squadron RAAF, piloted by Flight Lieutenants Douglas and Lockwood, which had on 7 December first spotted and reported the Japanese vessels headed for Kota Bharu. Nos 1 and 8 Squadrons had been searching for an invasion fleet in monsoonal weather for days, and on 6 December Flight Lieutenant JC Ramshaw of No. 1 Squadron had seen the massive invasion fleet 500 kilometres from Malaya. When sighted, the Japanese vessels were not committing any incontrovertible act of hostility, though a Japanese cruiser fired at Lockwood's aircraft.

Naval gunfire also disturbed members of No. 1 Squadron at their base at Kota Bharu early on 8 December. Permission had to be obtained from General Headquarters in Singapore before the squadron could fight back, but at about 2 am its ten aircraft braved anti-aircraft fire from six enemy warships to attack three transports and their escorts from a height of just 15 metres. Lockwood was in the lead, followed by Ramshaw, who was killed on a second sortie later that morning. His observer, Flying Officer Don Dowie, who had seen the invasion fleet two days earlier, was the sole survivor of this and another Hudson crew shot down that morning, and he had the unenviable distinction of being the first Australian captured by the Japanese in Malaya. Despite these losses, the squadron sank one transport, damaged the others and sank or damaged numerous landing barges.

Other squadrons, including No. 8, joined the attack at daylight. By the afternoon enemy ground and air attacks made the Kota Bharu airfield untenable for No. 1 Squadron's five remaining Hudsons, which withdrew further south to Kuantan.

On 8 December, No. 21 Squadron RAAF received its blooding at Sungei Patani. It had recently become a fighter squadron, replacing its Wirraways with Buffaloes. Enemy aircraft destroyed and damaged five of them on the ground, and those that got airborne proved no match for the Japanese 'Zeroes'. Only four of its twelve aircraft remained serviceable by day's end, and the unit was withdrawn to Butterworth.

On 8 December, the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, declared in a broadcast that Australia now faced 'the gravest hour of our history'. As feared, Japan had attacked when Britain's fleet was unable to intervene. Moreover, her attack at Pearl Harbor had ensured that the other great Western power's fleet in the Pacific could not protect Australia.

The naval position was about to worsen. On 10 December a fleet based on the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* made a sortie to attack the Japanese landing forces. *Vampire* was part of the escort, but could do nothing to prevent enemy bombers and torpedo-bombers from sinking the two great emblems of British sea power. It did rescue 225 survivors, four of whom died. The ship's medical officer, Surgeon Lieutenant John Russell, reported that a particularly Australian skill helped compensate for the ship's lack of resuscitation equipment, which:

*... fortunately was offset by a remarkable and practical knowledge of resuscitation possessed by members of the ship's company, who are well versed in methods of surf life saving.*³

More than 840 officers and ratings in *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* lost their lives. Royal Australian Navy midshipman Robert Davies, on exchange with Britain's Royal Navy, was last seen firing an anti-aircraft gun as *Repulse* went down, and was posthumously mentioned in despatches for his gallantry.

Eleven Australian fighters of No. 453 Squadron arrived in time to witness the rescue, but not affect operations. They had taken off as soon as news of the attack reached them, but because of uncertainty in the fleet and at Singapore, no air cover had been sent in time. The sinking of the two great ships was shattering news in Britain and Australia. It signalled

the failure of the Singapore strategy and the fact that air and naval superiority in Malaya was now in Japanese hands. This also compromised British land operations. The Japanese forces that landed at Kota Bharu soon overcame Indian opposition and, together with forces that had landed in Thailand, pushed south rapidly. They never lost the initiative they had won in these first days.

Australia was determined to honour its commitment to the government of the Netherlands East Indies by reinforcing Ambon and Timor in the event of war. Thus, on 12 December the 2/40th Battalion group disembarked at Koepang in Timor, and on 17 December the 2/21st Battalion group arrived in Ambon. The latter date also saw the 2/2nd Independent Company arrive at Dili in Portuguese Timor. In addition, the RAAF had despatched Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron to Koepang and of No. 13 Squadron to Ambon, while No. 24 Squadron was sent to Rabaul with Wirraways and Hudsons.

By the end of 1941, Ambon and Timor were part of ABDA Command, named after the American, British, Dutch and Australian forces it comprised. Its commander was Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, who had been Commander in Chief of British Forces in the Middle East. Some of the Australians who had served in the Middle East were now to be moved to Wavell's new command, as the British and Australian governments agreed that I Australian Corps (including the 6th and 7th Divisions), then the largest available uncommitted formation in the Middle East, should be sent to the Netherlands East Indies. Wavell planned to send one of the two divisions to Sumatra, the other to Java. The convoys would not sail until late January. In the meantime, substantial Allied reinforcements were allotted to Malaya, including the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion and 1900 other Australian troops. The Australians would arrive in late January, others earlier.

The British and Indian troops facing the Japanese advance down the peninsula had no answer to the Japanese tanks, air superiority, amphibious landings and encircling tactics. At this early stage, the only Australian army units in the forward area were the 2/3rd Motor Ambulance Convoy and 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company that supported III Indian Corps during its long retreat. It was apparent that the advance would soon reach Johore, but Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, the General Officer Commanding Malaya, hoped that his new reinforcements would allow him to take the offensive. Wavell suspected that Percival and Lieutenant-General Lewis Heath were in part responsible for recent disasters, and decided on 8 January 1942 that Bennett, whom Wavell barely

knew, should take command in north-west Johore. Accordingly, Bennett's 8th Division headquarters, renamed 'Westforce' headquarters, took command of all British forces in that area, including the 9th Indian Division. Of his own division, Bennett had only his 27th Brigade, but he had been assured that the 22nd Brigade would be rushed to him from Mersing on the east coast, once relieved. When the brigade failed to arrive, Percival refused Bennett's requests to send it until he had suitable replacements. Brigadier Harold Taylor's 22nd Brigade was left to patrol and wait as part of 'Eastforce'.

In north-western Johore, Bennett placed most of Westforce's strength along the Trunk Road, hitherto the main axis of Japanese advance. Astride the road in the foremost position was Brigadier DS Maxwell's 27th Brigade, and at its head the 2/30th Battalion, under Lieutenant-Colonel Fred 'Black Jack' Gallegan. It was positioned about 5 km west of the important road and rail junction of Gemas. Another 5 km west, the battalion prepared an ambush position. Credit for conceiving this ambush has been claimed by Gallegan and by Brigadier Maxwell, whose brother managed a nearby rubber estate. Even Percival claimed to have contributed. Certainly Bennett valued ambushes as a potential antidote to the Japanese advance.

The Japanese needed to cross an unbroken bridge over the Gemencheh River before entering the ambush zone, and to disguise this unusual fact several bridges north of the area were also left undamaged as the 11th Indian Division retreated. Beyond the bridge the road wound through thick jungle for nearly 700 metres. The Australian ambush company deployed here. On the eve of this first action for the 8th Division, Bennett told his staff and commanders: 'The reputation not only of the A.I.F. in Malaya, but of Australia, is in the hands of this unit'.⁴ In the late afternoon of the following day, 14 January, the 2/30th Battalion upheld that reputation. The ambushing company allowed a party of 200–300 Japanese troops on bicycles to pass through their position and when, after an interval, another 700–800 cyclists appeared, sappers of the 2/12th Field Company blew charges they had laid on the bridge. Bodies, timber and bikes were thrown skyward. The Australians threw grenades and fired their small arms into the helpless enemy, of whom they later claimed to have killed 600.

The ambushing company then fell back through the jungle, with the Japanese main body close behind. Most of them got away, but they had not reached their supporting

company at a roadblock down the road by 9.15 the following morning, when a Japanese tank rumbled menacingly into view. Two anti-tank guns of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment were in position with the 2/30th Battalion here, although Galleghan had at first dismissed them as an unnecessary nuisance. Had they not been there, the tanks would have achieved the sort of breakthrough that had hitherto spearheaded the advance down the peninsula. Instead, the guns knocked out one tank and disabled another. When more tanks appeared, the gunners inflicted more casualties, but were themselves hit several times. Sergeant Ken Harrison, one of the gunners, called it:

A nerve-racking game if ever there was one, I thought as I slammed another shell into the breech, tapped Joe [Bull, the gun layer] on the shoulder, and then stood peering hopefully at the inferno up the road. Then there was a 'whoomp' and a flash from the cutting, and something screamed by like an express train. This was followed by a deafening roar as Joe fired back at where a red flash had momentarily appeared amid the drifting pall of smoke. The last shot was fired at us; Joe fired back and did not miss ... we were left in possession of the field. Our heads were ringing but unbowed, and we had exactly four shells.⁵

A further four Japanese tanks had been knocked out.

The Japanese survivors did not return that morning, and some were driven back by a 2/30th counter-attack, but in the afternoon the tank-led offensive resumed and the 2/30th withdrew. It had suffered eighty-one casualties, but believed it had inflicted several hundred. Of this action, Japanese Lieutenant-Colonel Tsuji later wrote: 'The 8th Australian Division ... fought with a bravery we had not previously seen'.⁶ It fell back beyond the main defensive line.

While Westforce's Australians entered battle on 14–15 January, patrols of the 22nd Brigade stationed on the Endau River clashed with Japanese. On 17 January the Japanese were massing around Endau, but Percival ordered that the 2/19th Battalion be sent to the Muar River, in Westforce's zone, where catastrophe was brewing.

Bennett had in his defensive dispositions for Johore placed the inexperienced 45th Indian Brigade on the coast near the Muar River. He spread them too thinly, inexplicably placed some north of the river, and gave them insufficient artillery support—just one

Australian battery, the 65th. On 16 January the Japanese Guards Division smashed into and scattered the novice Indians. On 17 January Percival sent forward British reinforcements and ordered that the 22nd Brigade's 2/19th Battalion be relieved and sent to Muar, where Bennett also sent the 2/29th Battalion.

The 2/29th, when it arrived at Bakri that afternoon, unexpectedly found that nothing lay between it and the enemy, and in a sharp clash wiped out a Japanese patrol in the darkness. On the morning of 18 January, five Japanese tanks approached the 2/29th frontally. All were soon disabled by two anti-tank guns of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, thanks largely to the cool courage of Sergeant Clarrie Thornton. Three more tanks arrived, only to be set alight. Enemy infantry came forward, but were checked by Australians, especially the universal carrier crews that bravely drove forward to silence enemy snipers.

The 2/19th, now arriving at Parit Sulong, was sent forward to support the hard-pressed 2/29th. It did so, clearing a path through Japanese forces behind the 2/29th. The 2/26th and 2/30th were also fighting hard on 17–18 January. Bennett, now anxious about being outflanked from the west, obtained permission to withdraw beyond the Segamat River, and on 19 January the 27th Brigade fell back to Segamat.

The 2/19th were trying to relieve an isolated Indian battalion on the road to Muar. They routed the opposing Japanese, but then found the road cut behind them. On 19 January Japanese aircraft hit the 45th Brigade Headquarters, which was in temporary command of the 2/19th and 2/29th, but which suffered such heavy casualties that Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Anderson of the 2/19th took charge. Anderson planned to pull back the 2/29th, but waited until the missing Indian battalion arrived. The Australian battalions became heavily engaged and the Indians suffered high casualties, but the following morning Anderson's Australian–Indian force began a desperate fighting withdrawal to Parit Sulong, 8 km away. After they set out, the Japanese occupied Parit Sulong.

Captain Victor Brand, Regimental Medical Officer of the 2/29th, decided to take the walking wounded with him rather than leave them to the Japanese. Part of his heart-rending account of this period reads:

I remember Pte C Mapleback coming up to me and it was with difficulty that I understood him to say 'Can I make a break with you, Doc?' He had been wounded in the

face and had a great hole in the cheek ... It was dim moonlight by this time ... Suddenly shots rang out immediately behind us, and every man splashed into the swamp and made for the shelter of the jungle. ... we found a small party of men together. Pte Cant, who had wounds in the tongue and shoulder [and] was a man of great ability and courage, said he could lead us by the stars ... The going was terribly hard, up to our knees in water and pushing through jungle so dense that we could barely see the sky ... After some distance we heard an outburst of yelling and screaming behind us. The Japanese must have been dealing with the wounded we had left.⁷

Anderson ordered one of the leading companies to attack while singing, which they did with 'Waltzing Matilda' on their lips. Anderson led a crucial charge which destroyed a Japanese roadblock. He personally destroyed two machine-gun posts with grenades and shot two Japanese with his pistol. He subsequently organised an attack which drove off the enemy at another roadblock. Anderson would be awarded a Victoria Cross for his inspiring leadership. Brand would receive a Military Cross, but Cant had been killed.

While Anderson pushed forward slowly under air and artillery attack, a much broader Japanese threat to the Australians in Malaya developed, with a landing at Batu Pahat that threatened Bennett's forces on the Trunk Road. Percival ordered Bennett to withdraw the 27th Brigade to Yong Peng.

Anderson's bloodied force approached Parit Sulong on 21 January, but when a British relief attack was abandoned on 22 January, their fate as an organised force was sealed. Anderson ordered the men to withdraw east in small parties. Only 130 men of the 2/29th and 271 of the 2/19th reached Yong Peng.

Percival now ordered the establishment of a new defence line, running from Jemaluang in the east to Batu Pahat in the west, but he had already outlined a contingency plan for a retreat to Singapore, and it would soon become apparent that the new line could not be stabilised.

Early on 26 January two RAAF Hudson crews confirmed a report of an enemy naval convoy approaching Endau. There were by now just thirty-six bombers available to Far East Command, including nine Hudsons from Nos 1 and 8 RAAF Squadrons and twenty-one Vildebeests and three Albacores from Nos 36 and 100 (Torpedo Bomber) Squadrons, RAF.

In the words of the official RAAF history, 'it was a very gallant operation, but it was a forlorn one'. Flight Lieutenant O'Brien, pilot of one of the Hudsons, recalled afterwards:

We were no sooner in sight of the Japanese ships, when some 50 Jap Zeros jumped us from above. I was flying in the centre of the closely packed formation of nine aircraft and the first Zero attacked from above. With his first burst he killed my wireless operator ... My second pilot was killed by a bullet through the head, which afterwards struck me on the shoulder, knocking me over the controls, and lodging underneath my badges of rank on my shirt ... The Jap fighters ... would cruise around above the cloud waiting for the Hudsons to come out and then shoot them up. After several attempts I made my way from cloud to cloud and eventually got out of the area.⁸

Harder hit were the slow-moving Vildebeests and Albacores. These biplanes were sent out in two waves of twelve. Five in the first wave were shot down, and the survivors signalled 'thumbs down' as they passed the second wave heading for the target. Enemy fighters were circling the landing area and peeled off to attack. Seven aircraft in the second wave were shot down. These Australia Day attacks over Endau were the most costly for the RAAF in the Malayan campaign. Two members of a Hudson crew were killed; and of the thirty Australians in the Vildebeests and Albacores, eight were killed, four others shot down, two of whom were captured, and three landed with wounds. Australians also were flying in other British squadrons, including those sent with Hurricane fighters to try and wrest air superiority back from the Japanese. They were unable to do so.

At the same time, a land battle was brewing for the Australians of Eastforce. The 2/18th Battalion was disappointed to be ordered out of Mersing without a fight, but was placed in a good ambush position on the Nithsdale and Joo Lye estates on the road to Jemaluang. Japanese troops arrived sooner than expected, on the night of 26–27 January, and what a Japanese source called 'an appalling hand-to-hand battle' ensued. Private Col Spence distinguished himself. While taking cover during a fight with an enemy machine-gun position, he was slashed in the back by a Japanese officer's sword, but, in the words of his Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) recommendation:

Despite his severe wound, Spence regained his feet, killed the Officer, directed the fire and movement of his section repulsing the attack successfully, and inflicting heavy enemy casualties.⁹

Enemy casualties in the ambush were probably at least as many as the ninety-six they suffered themselves. Within the unit there was considerable anxiety that one of the ambush companies had effectively been abandoned in the withdrawal. The Japanese involved in this fight themselves fell back to Mersing afterwards, and sent reinforcements to Jemaluang.

On 27 January HMAS *Vampire* also sought to disrupt Japanese plans on the east coast. With HMS *Thanet*, it had sailed from Singapore, ordered to attack the heavily protected landing force at Endau. *Thanet* was sunk, and *Vampire* narrowly escaped.

On the day of the fight at the Nithsdale estate, Percival had decided on a general retreat to Singapore. Indian troops in the centre came under heavy attack, but the Australians on both flanks received little attention, apart from regular air attack. The rearguard crossed the causeway to Singapore Island at 8 am on 31 January. Some 35,000 Japanese had defeated 60,000 Indian, Australian and British troops on the Malayan mainland. The Australians won more credit than most in a campaign with few highpoints for the Allies. RAAF aircraft were too vulnerable to shellfire and air attack on the island and were progressively moved to Sumatra and Java.

New Britain

While Australians fought for their lives in Malaya, war had come to those on New Britain. The harbour of Rabaul was a key objective of the Japanese in late January. The main garrison of this vulnerable, isolated station was the 2/22nd Battalion, with two coast guns, two anti-aircraft guns, about eighty men of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, and other small detachments. Colonel John Scanlan was in command of these troops, while Wing Commander John Lerew commanded No. 24 Squadron, comprising Wirraways and Hudsons.

As early as 4 January, twenty-two Japanese bombers raided Lakunai airfield, and the Rabaul Anti-aircraft Battery's two outdated 3-inch guns fired at them. The aircraft flew beyond the guns' range, but these shots were probably the first fired by a militia unit on Australian territory. Two days later a Wirraway of No. 24 Squadron RAAF was the first Australian aircraft to engage in combat with Japanese aircraft in the Pacific, when it fired, also without effect, at nine Japanese flying boats that made a surprise raid on Vunakanau,

the main airfield at Rabaul.

A much fiercer threat materialised later that month. On 20 January more than a hundred aircraft attacked Rabaul, where the eight Australian Wirraways challenged them. Only one Wirraway survived undamaged, and then the Japanese bombed and strafed airfields and harbour at will. The following morning a message was received of a sighting of an enemy convoy, which comprised aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and transports. The sole surviving Hudson was ordered to attack this armada, but was unable to find it before nightfall. All aircraft and crew were ordered back to Port Moresby, but not all aircrew could fit in the three remaining craft. Ordered to help the army ‘in keeping aerodrome open’, Lerew expressed the pointlessness of his own position and that of the garrison when he signalled in Latin the gladiators’ saying: ‘We who are about to die, salute you!’ He and more than 400 other servicemen and civilians would be rescued by flying boats or boats on the north and south coasts in March and April.

On 22 January air attacks disabled the coastal guns at Praed Point and killed eleven men. Considering the loss of his coastal guns, the cratering of the airfield and the evacuation of his air force, Scanlan now decided that Lark Force’s original justification no longer existed. He ordered the evacuation of the township and the commencement of demolitions. That afternoon he received confirmation that an enemy invasion force was approaching. He repositioned his troops round the southern part of Blanche Bay, rather than round Rabaul town and Matupi volcano, where they could be cut off.

Soon after midnight on 22–23 January, Japanese landing craft entered the harbour. One of the waiting Australians later recalled:

We could see dimly the shapes of boats, and men getting out. As they landed the Japanese were laughing, talking and striking matches ... one of them even shone a torch ... We allowed most of them to get out of the boats and then fired everything we had.¹⁰

That ‘everything’ which included mortars and Vickers guns, frustrated several assaults on Major Owen’s company, round the Vulcan crater, but although the Australians were still in position at dawn, Japanese troops were moving on their flanks and they were under air attack. At 7 am they withdrew in good order, but lack of communications and overwhelming Japanese strength made the defence hopeless. By the afternoon all the

defenders were in danger of annihilation, and Scanlan ordered withdrawals to the west and south. Organised resistance was over, and a nightmare retreat followed. Exhaustion and lack of food and medicine led some to surrender, including Colonel Scanlan. About 160 of those who did were brutally massacred at Tol and Waitavalo plantations. Another 849 prisoners of war and more than 200 civilian internees would die in the sinking of the Japanese ship *Montevideo Maru* in July 1942. As mentioned, there were mass rescues, but malaria killed some fifty escapers.

Japanese forces landed on New Ireland on 23 January. The 1st Independent Company sought to escape the island by a schooner, but were bombed by Japanese aircraft and forced to Rabaul. Six of its members were killed in these operations.

Ambon

Ambon possessed the strongest garrison yet faced by the Japanese in the Indies. There were on the island also about 2600 Netherlands East Indies troops. Central to the Australian 'Gull Force' was the 2/21st Battalion, which had been formed in 1940 and had endured a long wait before being sent overseas in December 1941. On arrival, its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Leonard Roach, was perturbed by the lack of heavy weapons—artillery, mortars and machine-guns—available to defend the island. When he complained to Army Headquarters in Melbourne of these deficiencies, he was told that Gull Force's role was 'to put up the best defence possible': a sad commentary on the role of the island garrisons. Roach wrote soon afterwards that 'I find it difficult to overcome a feeling of disgust, and more than a little concern at the way in which we have seemingly been "dumped" at this outpost position'. He calculated that the garrison could not hold Ambon for more than a day or two against the huge Japanese force then operating in the Celebes. He recommended that the island be evacuated, as did Wavell's naval commander, US Admiral Thomas Hart. Roach was subsequently replaced by Major William Scott.

After some discussion with Lieutenant-Colonel JRL Kapitiz, the Dutch officer commanding all forces on Ambon, the Australians accepted the roles of defending Laha airfield and the south-western portion of the Laitimor Peninsula, in the island's south. Japanese aircraft from the carriers *Soryu* and *Hiryu* attacked the island in the latter half of January. The

defenders had no fighters with which to contest these raids and by 30 January No. 13 Squadron, which had lost seventeen of its Hudsons on the ground and in air combat, was evacuated. The previous day they had reported the approach of an enemy convoy of some twenty-two warships and transports.

Private James Armstrong, a member of the garrison, recalled this period when he wrote soon afterwards ‘... one day we heard there was a Jap convoy heading this way ... Most of the boys played cards to try and take their minds off it’.

On the night of 30–31 January a Japanese force more than 6000 strong landed in three locations. Armstrong recalled: ‘Daylight came and we wondered how long we had to live’.¹¹ The Dutch resistance at Paso was quickly broken. The Australians on the Laitimor Peninsula were pushed back and pinned at Eri by the end of the first day. The Japanese also attacked the two Australian companies at Laha that day, and had to fight hard to overcome them. A wartime Japanese article about the capture of Ambon called the Australians ‘impudent’ and ‘suicidal’, but acknowledged that the ‘desperate resistance of the Australians after the breakthrough was not to be despised’.

On 3 February Scott decided that further resistance by his depleted, exhausted and outnumbered force was pointless. He sent an envoy to the Japanese, and eventually surrendered. Only fifteen members of Gull Force died in the fighting, but a further 309 were massacred at Laha in February as reprisals for Japanese deaths that followed the sinking of a minesweeper by a Dutch mine in Ambon Bay.

Battle for Singapore

Partly because the Australians had fought well in Malaya, General Percival placed their depleted battalions, most of which were at half-strength, in the key north-western sector of the island. What followed is the greatest controversy in Australian military history.

Where the straits separate Singapore and the mainland, the Australians had excessively long frontages to defend: three miles for the 27th Brigade, nine for the 22nd Brigade. This meant that the Australians would be committed to action as soon as the landing occurred.

The defenders received reinforcements in late January and early February. Many of the Australian reinforcements were very recent recruits, not acclimatised to the army and to the tropics. HMAS *Yarra*, one of the Australian corvettes protecting the reinforcements' troopships, saved more than 1300 survivors from the troopship *Empress of Asia* when it was sunk.

After 10 pm on 8 February, following intense artillery and aerial bombardment, the Japanese landed on the 22nd Brigade's sector in 260 landing craft. The Australians directed machine-gun and mortar fire at the thirteen to sixteen enemy battalions involved, but failure of communication prevented effective use of artillery, so Japanese numbers and tactics prevailed. By the morning of 9 February, the Australians had fallen back to Tengah airfield. Percival committed reinforcements, but not troops capable of launching the desperately needed counter-attack. By 10 February a new defensive line was being formed between the headwaters of the Jurong and Kranji Rivers. The 22nd Brigade was in the centre, flanked by the 44th Indian and 12th Brigades.

At about 9 pm on 9 February, further Japanese landings had begun in the 27th Brigade sector near the causeway. After hand-to-hand fighting, the Australians fell back. Percival sought to stabilise a new perimeter on 10 February, with the AIF holding the west, but before this could be solidified, two brigades holding the western line were pushed back. Percival ordered Bennett to regain the perimeter with a counter-attack, but Japanese assaults cut communications and disrupted Bennett's plans. Two improvised Australian battalions, 'X' Battalion and Merrett Force, went forward to counter-attack, but the former was virtually annihilated and the latter savaged as they moved forward.

On 11 February the 22nd Brigade held its ground, but it was forced back the following day. The Australian and British nurses were evacuated on 10–12 February, while on 13 February 1800 soldiers and 1200 civilians were embarked on small boats in the hope that their skills could be used elsewhere. By 14 February, with the defence line on the outskirts of smoke-wreathed Singapore, the AIF were together in the Panglin area. The water supply to Singapore was compromised and unlikely to last another day. On 15 February, with surrender or slaughter the only options, Percival chose capitulation. Bennett was neither at the surrender ceremony, nor among the 15,000 Australians who went into captivity in Singapore. Convinced that it was his duty to escape, on 15 February he embarked in a sampan with two staff officers, reaching Java and then Australia. Though

promoted and given a corps in Western Australia, his controversial action ensured that he would never again receive an active command.

After Singapore fell, a British report on the battle blamed the Australians for the loss of the fortress, and some British writers have taken up this theme. There had been some very undisciplined Australian behaviour in the last days of the siege, probably attributable largely to the recently arrived reinforcements. However, it is noteworthy that just seven of the forty-two infantry battalions defending Singapore were Australian. Moreover, more than 800 Australians were killed in that defence. To blame the Australians for the loss of the island and the failure of the Singapore strategy was grossly unfair.

The Middle East convoys

Lieutenant-General John Lavarack, commander of I Australian Corps, had arrived in Java on 27 January, preparatory to the arrival of his formation in the Dutch East Indies. On 13 February, Lavarack wrote a report for Prime Minister Curtin in which he explained that Japanese forces would probably take Sumatra and Java before his 7th and 6th Divisions had arrived or prepared for action. He was acutely conscious of the value to Australia of these 'highly trained, equipped and experienced divisions'. Wavell saw this signal and seemed to concur. Nevertheless, he did insist against Lavarack's advice that two transports that had already arrived at Java carrying Australian troops, including the 2/3rd Machine Gun and 2/2nd Pioneer Battalions, disembark there in order to maintain good British relations with the Dutch.

The fate of the rest of the corps now became a matter of dispute. Lieutenant-General Sturdee, Chief of the General Staff, advised Curtin that the corps should return to Australia, and Curtin agreed. Wavell, however, wanted one Australian division to be sent to Burma. Churchill agreed and, with President Roosevelt's support, repeatedly urged Curtin to change his mind. Churchill even ordered the Admiralty to tell the leading convoy to head to Burma, and neglected to inform Curtin. When, on 22 February, Churchill informed an astonished Australian government of the change in direction, he also told them that the convoy no longer had enough fuel to reach Australia, and suggested that the Australian government

change its mind. Curtin stood firm again, and a disgruntled Churchill informed him that the convoy would refuel at Colombo and head for Australia. Had the 7th gone to Burma, it would certainly have been caught up in the defeat there.

Timor

After the fall of Ambon, the next Japanese target was Timor, which they considered a stepping stone to Java. After a convoy taking troops to reinforce Timor in February was attacked and turned back, the Australian and Dutch garrison was on its own. The 2/40th Battalion, under Lieutenant-Colonel William Leggatt, was deployed around Koepang, including one company at Penfui field where No. 2 Squadron RAAF was based. After its aircrew were flown out of Penfui on 19 February, Leggatt asked headquarters in Darwin what the purpose of Sparrow Force now was. There was no reply. Darwin was itself heavily bombed on 19 February, when waves of 188 and 54 Japanese aircraft (from aircraft carriers and Ambon, respectively) sank eight ships and killed at least 243 seamen, troops and civilians. Twenty-three Allied and about seven Japanese aircraft were destroyed.

The following day the Japanese invaded Timor. One group landed at an undefended area south of Koepang. This threatened the rear of the Australians at Koepang, while Japanese paratroopers landing that morning cut them off from their ammunition dumps and supplies at Champlong. Bombers destroyed the Australian coastal guns and the Australians were withdrawn from the beaches. Improvised Australian forces inflicted and suffered heavy losses in the village of Babau that morning, but were pushed out. The next day Leggatt decided to concentrate his forces to recapture Babau, before obtaining supplies with which to begin a guerrilla campaign. Captain Norman Roff's company flanked the Japanese, clearing paratroops from the adjacent maize fields, and recaptured Babau. The official historian writes:

In a building that seemed to be the enemy's headquarters Roff (who was wounded but carried on) and two men had killed 10 paratroops, including their commander. Corporal Armstrong advanced under heavy fire with a Lewis gun, established himself in a building from which he could enfilade an enemy group, and drive it off, killing five.¹²

Leggatt moved his force into Babau, where several Australians were found to have been tied to trees and bayoneted. He decided to push on to Champlong, but was confronted by dug-in Japanese at Usau Ridge. In a fierce fight, Roff was killed but the position captured. Ten Australians captured at Babau were held captive in a hut on the ridge. While three guards watched them, they saw Japanese casualties being carried in. Private Val Richards recalled that eventually the guards:

... took me and two other blokes to the back of the hut into this maize field, and the rest of the boys were taken to the other side. They lined us up and a squad of three Nips was placed several yards away. I suddenly thought 'God, they're going to shoot us', and with that they fired. Dave Purcell right next to me copped it right through the forehead. I don't know what happened then, but somehow I made a break through the maize field, and cleared a fence on the other side. A Jap soldier had a shot at me and then a machine-gun opened up and I fell into the grass and made out I'd been shot. Then I took off across another fence.¹³

Richards escaped into the jungle, only to be recaptured six weeks later.

The column of exhausted Australians pushing on towards Champlong was soon surrounded. When the Japanese demanded surrender on 23 February, Leggatt chose to yield, rather than face annihilation. The Australians had lost eighty-four killed and 132 wounded in the operation.

In the early hours of 20 February, Japanese troops landed in Portuguese Timor. They advanced towards the airfield at Dili, where the waiting 2/2nd Independent Company inflicted heavy casualties. At dawn the Australians withdrew after cratering the airfield. In March, when strong Japanese forces moved inland, the company retreated into the hills, where they were joined by some 250 Australians from Dutch Timor. From the hills this force waged a successful harassing campaign for almost another twelve months.

Java and Sumatra

The bombing of Darwin and loss of Timor ensured that Australia could send no

reinforcements to Java. On 25 February ABDA had been dissolved, at Wavell's suggestion, and control of forces in Java was handed to the Dutch. There were some 25,000 Dutch troops on the island, as well as about 2800 Australians, 3500 British and an American artillery unit. Before leaving Java on 21 February, Lavarack promoted Australian Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Blackburn VC to Brigadier and put him in charge of an improvised brigade that was placed in the Buitenzorg area in western Java, south of Batavia.

On 27 February, a combined Allied naval force of five cruisers, including HMAS *Perth*, and several destroyers, fought Japanese warships protecting a landing force. In this Battle of the Java Sea, the Allies lost five ships and the survivors were ordered to withdraw from the Dutch East Indies. As *Perth* and USS *Houston* sought to pass through the Sunda Straits on 1 March, they ran into a Japanese force of fifty-eight ships landing troops in Java. Able Seaman Fred Skeels was aboard *Perth* when the firing began:

... everyone was throwing star shells and tracers, bullets ... [we were hit and amazingly for] a ship as big as the Perth, it just lifted, it seemed to be about a foot, and I was left suspended, the deck dropped down, and then I dropped on top of it on my feet.¹⁴

The *Perth* sank. Captain Hec Waller and 351 crew were lost and a further 105 died in Japanese captivity.

Sumatra became an important RAF and RAAF base, as elements were withdrawn from Malaya. P2 base south-west of Palembang was commanded by a RAAF officer, Group Captain John McCauley, and included two RAAF squadrons, Nos 1 and 8, as well as British squadrons that included Australians. The RAAF Hudsons bombed Japanese airfields in Malaya and then, on 14 February, when an invasion fleet approached Sumatra, they flew through enemy fighters to attack. They recorded nine hits and saw one transport listing and on fire. Japanese paratroops landed near Palembang, and all Allied aircraft were concentrated at P2. The RAAF Hudsons kept flying bombing missions until their ammunition stocks were expended. Although they inflicted damage on enemy shipping, they were ordered to Java on 15 February. Also ordered out were the Australian corvettes that had been sent to Sumatra from Singapore, giving sterling service on escort duties.

On 28 February two Japanese divisions and part of a third landed in western, central and eastern Java and advanced rapidly. Sergeant Tom Young, a RAAF pilot flying Hurricane

aircraft almost non-stop with No. 232 Squadron RAF, was sent to attack the landing forces. He lost one aircraft while attacking a troop convoy that was almost 3 km long near Cheribon, but was rescued. He recalled:

Almost immediately I was back in the air, flying one of six Hurricanes en route to the site of the landings ... I was at about 7000 feet over Tandjong Priok east of Batavia when a Japanese Navy Type 95 'Dave' reconnaissance seaplane was sighted over the harbour. I engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with him, but the Japanese plane could outmanoeuvre my Hurricane. In the end, I virtually stood off and fired a burst from long range. Smoke poured from him, and the pilot turned and came at me head-on, no doubt hoping to take me with him.¹⁵

Young survived, but the landings continued unabated. At Blackburn's suggestion, 'Blackforce' set out to counter-attack the force attacking from the west. The blowing of a crucial bridge prevented the counter-attack, but Blackforce, now including some British tanks and American artillery, held its ground bravely against one-third of a division for three days. Eventually Blackburn was ordered to withdraw on Bandung.

Dutch capitulation on Java was imminent, but Blackburn hoped to continue resistance or be evacuated. However, with Dutch advice that the hostility of the Indonesians would make guerrilla warfare impractical, and with no communications with Australia and the prospect of a medical disaster, he chose to join the other Allies in surrendering on 12 March. Thirty-six Australian troops were killed and sixty wounded in the battle for Java. More than one-quarter of the 2796 captured would die as prisoners. No. 1 Squadron RAAF, which had done all it could to harass the enemy convoys, was caught up in the defeat. Its last three Hudsons were flown out on 5–6 March with all the crew they could carry, but 160 members went into captivity.

On 3 March, sixteen flying boats that were being used to rescue people from Java were sunk by nine Japanese Zeros at Broome in Western Australia; about seventy people were killed, including many Dutch women and children.

On 4 March, the corvette HMAS *Yarra* was escorting a convoy south of Java when it became caught in a hopelessly one-sided fight against three heavy cruisers and two

destroyers; all but thirteen of her crew died. Other vessels escaped to Australia, including the *Vendetta*, towed all the way from Singapore to Fremantle by HMAS *Ping Wo*. From the western Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean coasts of the Malay barrier, the Japanese controlled the sea.

Japan had thus, by the second week of March 1942, occupied the perimeter that had been the objective of its huge offensives launched in December 1941. It had achieved in three months what it had planned to do in six. It had suffered almost negligible losses; its navy for example, lost just thirty-eight transports and merchant ships, eight destroyers and seven submarines. One of those submarines, the *I-124*, had been sunk near Darwin on 20 January in an action in which the corvette HMAS *Deloraine* took a significant part. Such Allied triumphs were rare in the dark period of December 1941 to March 1942—a period which ended with Japan's armed forces perilously close to Australia.

End Notes

- ¹ Johnston and Nation, *Australia 1939*, p. 17
- ² Horner, *High Command*, p. 13
- ³ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939–42*, pp. 481–2
- ⁴ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p. 214
- ⁵ Harrison, *The Brave Japanese*, p. 32
- ⁶ Warren, *Singapore 1942*, p. 159
- ⁷ Christie, *A History of the 2/29th Battalion*, pp. 73–4
- ⁸ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, p. 345
- ⁹ Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 49
- ¹⁰ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p. 403
- ¹¹ Pte JF Armstrong, *2/21 Bn Diary*, AWM PR89/165
- ¹² *Ibid*, p. 485
- ¹³ Henning, *Doomed Battalion*, pp. 103–4
- ¹⁴ www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews
- ¹⁵ Turner, *The RAAF at War*, p. 26

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The 2/40th Battalion marches out of Brighton Camp on its way to Hobart in 1940. The mostly Tasmanian battalion waited many frustrating months before being sent from Darwin to Timor in December 1941. There, disaster awaited it. (*AWM P00080.008*)



Flying Officer Clarence 'Spud' Spurgeon of No. 8 Squadron RAAF in Singapore in 1940. Spurgeon had enlisted on 4 September 1939. While piloting a Hudson at Kota Bharu on 8 December 1941 he was forced to make a crash landing when his aircraft was damaged. In January 1942, his Hudson was shot down in the sea off Kuantan. Flight Lieutenant Spurgeon was the sole survivor of its four-man crew, but was captured. After the war he rose to the rank of Air Commodore. *(AWM P00301.001)*



Members of the Carrier Platoon, 2/26th Battalion, pose with one of their machine-gun carriers in Queensland in 1941. The carrier bears the words 'Galloping Batallons [sic] Roaring Bull 2/26'. The four men who can be identified were captured in Singapore. Private Evelyn Garner, third from left, would be promoted to the rank of sergeant in Malaya, but would die when the Japanese vessel in which he was being transported was sunk by a submarine in the South China Sea on 12 September 1944. (*AWM P01364.002*)



Graham Bartley; Harry Gibbons; Gilbert Mant; Bill (Shorty) Bridge; taken at Lawson Rail. Station 2 Feb. 1941 en route from Bathurst to embark on the Queen Mary in Sydney harbour.

Members of the 2/19th Battalion look from the windows of a train as it departs Lawson railway station en route from Bathurst to Sydney in February 1941. There they would embark on HMT *Queen Mary* for Malaya. All four of the pictured men would survive the war. Second from right is Private Gilbert Mant, who had enlisted at age 37, and who in September would be discharged and become Reuter's War Correspondent in Malaya. His 1942 work *Grim Glory* was one of the first books on the Malayan campaign. (AWM P00102.041)



In February 1941, members of the 2/18th Battalion 'ham it up' for the camera on board a Sydney ferry bound for their assigned ship, which would transport them to Malaya.

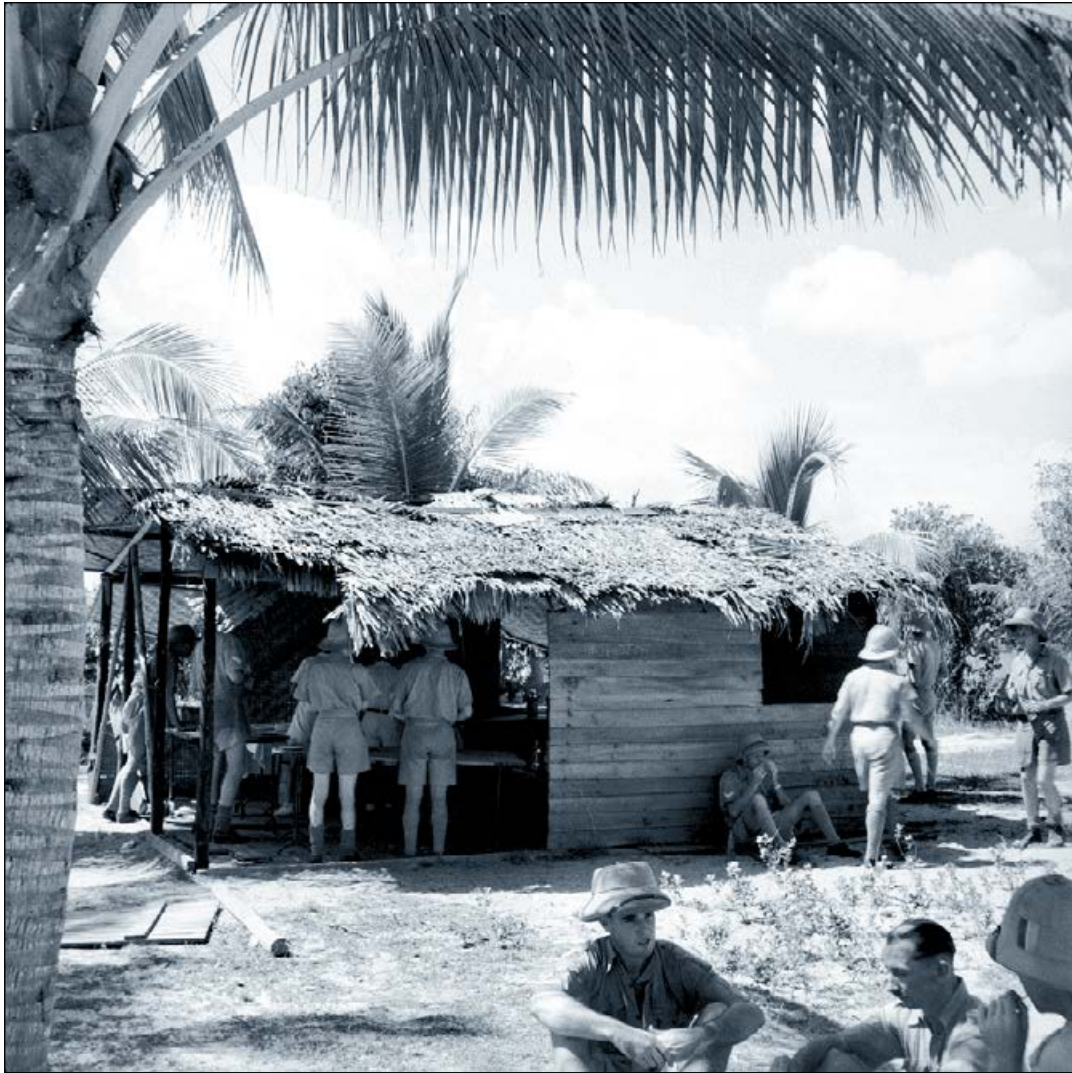
(AWM 005461)



Hudson bomber aircraft of No. 1 Squadron RAAF in formation on a training flight over Singapore in April 1941, seen from a CAC Wirraway aircraft of No. 21 Squadron RAAF. Another Wirraway aircraft, code name GA-B, can be seen leading the bomber formation (lower centre). Both squadrons were based at Sembawang in the north-western sector of Singapore and would be heavily involved in the fighting for Malaya and Java. *(AWM 006647)*



Australian infantry on training exercises in May 1941. They seem to be practising an ambush, which was precisely the tactic that brought the AIF relative success in the campaign of January 1942. Characteristically, they are wearing ammunition pouches of an older pattern than that used by Australians in the Middle East. (*AWM 007173*)



At Kota Bharu, members of No. 8 Squadron RAAF take a coffee break, June 1941. They are wearing tropical uniform, including pith helmets, and are sitting and walking around an open-ended hut with an attap roof (palm leaves woven together) in a clearing among palm trees. The RAAF had two general reconnaissance squadrons flying Lockheed Hudson aircraft in Malaya. No. 1 Squadron was stationed at RAF station Kota Bharu, and No. 8 Squadron at RAF station Kuantan. By the afternoon of 8 December 1941, the Kota Bharu airfield was untenable. *(AWM P02266.013)*



Officers of the 2/19th Battalion on reconnaissance near Seramban, Malaya, in August 1941. At far right is Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Anderson, Commanding Officer. For his inspiring leadership in the Malayan campaign, Anderson would be awarded the Victoria Cross. Major EHJ 'Bert' Bradley, at far left, would be killed in the fighting in Singapore, as second-in-command of 'X' Battalion. Major Tom Vincent, second from left, was, in Anderson's words, 'a first-class officer', and received a Military Cross for 'gallant and distinguished' conduct. He too was killed in Singapore. Third from left is Lieutenant-Colonel Roland Oakes, who would command 2/26th Battalion in Singapore. *(AWM P00102.045)*

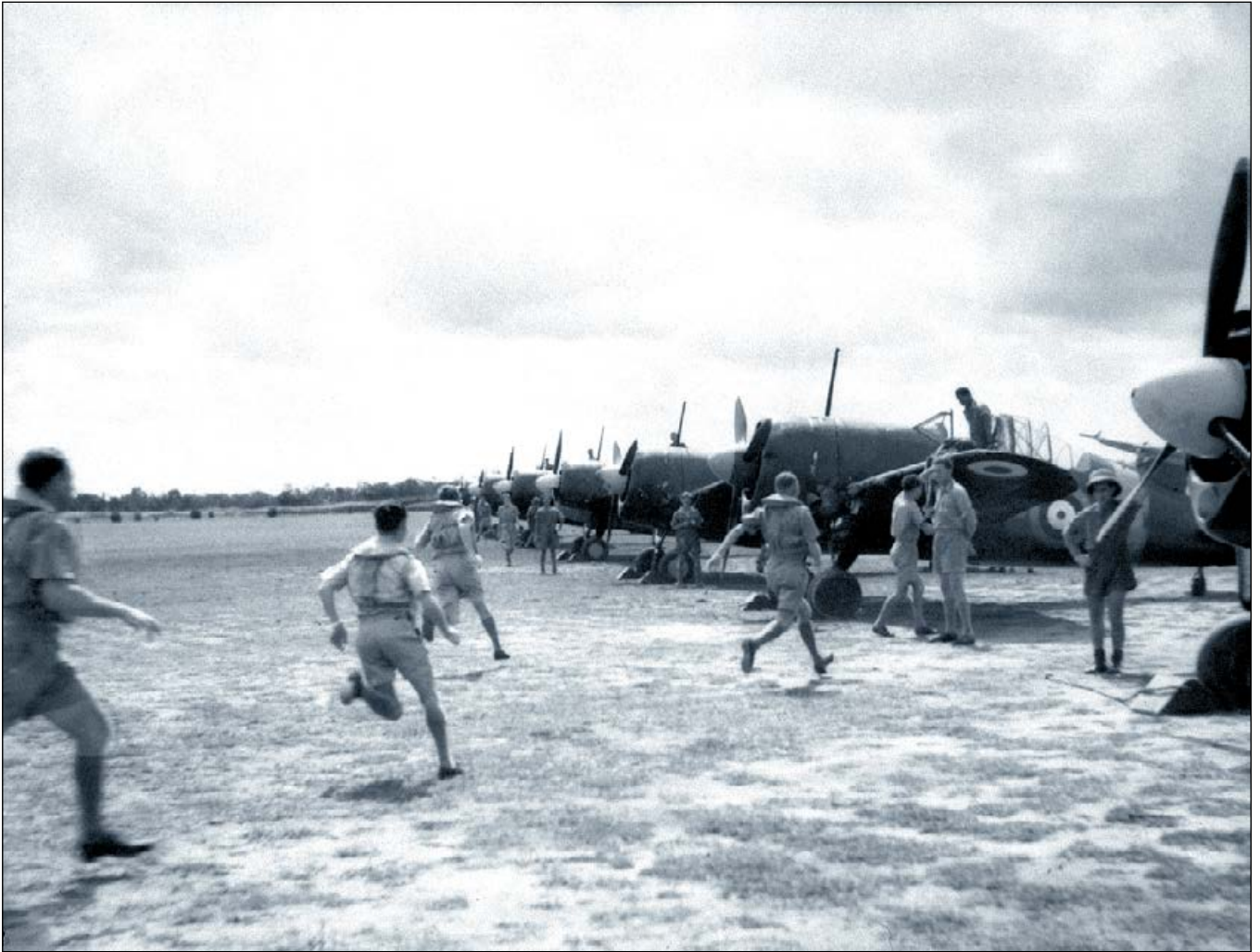


Officers of No. 1 Squadron RAAF pose at Kota Bharu in September 1941. On 6 December, Flight Lieutenants Ramshaw (front row, far left) and Emerton (centre row, second from left) spotted the enemy invasion fleet headed for Malaya, but their reports were ignored. Ramshaw was killed attacking the enemy invasion fleet on 8 December. On 7 December, Flight Lieutenant James Douglas (front row, third from right) also reported the Japanese invasion fleet headed for Malaya. He would receive a Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts attacking the enemy that day and a posthumous mention in despatches for his courage attacking the Japanese invasion force at Sumatra on 14 February 1942.

(AWM P00688.002)



Sisters and staff nurses of the 2/13th Australian General Hospital pose outside one of the wards in St Patrick's School, on the south coast of Singapore, in September 1941. In February 1942, all available space at the school would be occupied by casualties. Sixty-five nurses escaped on the *Vyner Brook* just before Singapore fell. Those not drowned when the ship was sunk landed on Banka Island, where a number were executed by the Japanese; the remainder were taken into captivity. Only twenty-four of the original group survived to return home in 1945. Of the twenty women identified in this photograph, one drowned in the sinking of the *Vyner Brook*, one died in captivity, and eight were machine-gunned at Banka Island. Only one of those eight, Sister Vivian Bullwinkel (sixth from left, standing), survived. (AWM P01344.001)



Pilots of No. 453 Squadron RAAF run to their Brewster Buffalo aircraft in response to a scramble order in late 1941. These aircraft were outclassed by the Japanese 'Zero', but their pilots flew with great courage, trying to provide air cover and attack enemy ground forces. Nearly all of this squadron's aircraft were destroyed in the air or on the ground in Malaya and Singapore and the unit was disbanded in March 1942. It reformed in England in June 1942.

(AWM SUK14775)



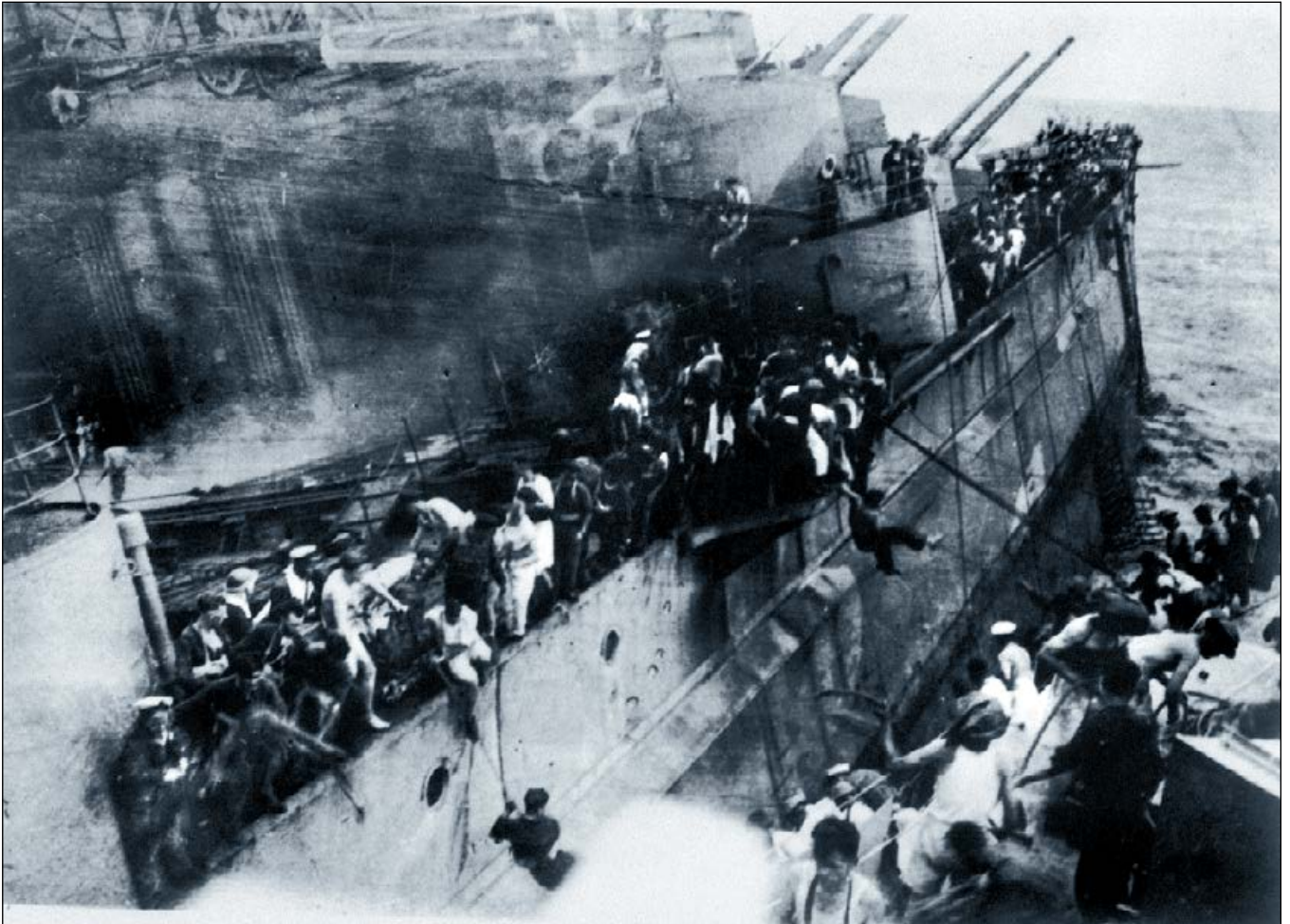
Brewster Buffalo aircraft of No. 21 Squadron RAAF fly over a Malayan airfield in late 1941. The unit had become a fighter squadron after arriving in Malaya early that year. By Christmas Day, its losses were so heavy that it had to merge with No. 453 Squadron for the following month. In the period covered by this book, the squadron's inadequate aircraft probably accounted for at least six enemy fighters. *(AWM 100121)*



Members of the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) pose for a portrait at Tampoi, Malaya, in about November 1941: (left to right) Kathleen Kinsella, Matron of the 2/4th CCS; Sister Peggy Farmaner; Major Adrian Farmer, Commanding Officer of the 2/4th CCS; Sister Bessie Wilmott; Sister Ellen Mavis Hannah; Sister Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy. All were captured at the fall of Singapore and all but Farmer and Hannah would die in captivity. (*AWM P01701.005*)



British Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, General Officer Commanding Malaya, and Major-General Gordon Bennett, General Officer Commanding 8th Australian Division, pose for a photograph in 1941. Bennett's expression, rather than Percival's, is indicative of the nature of their relationship. (*AWM 134877*)



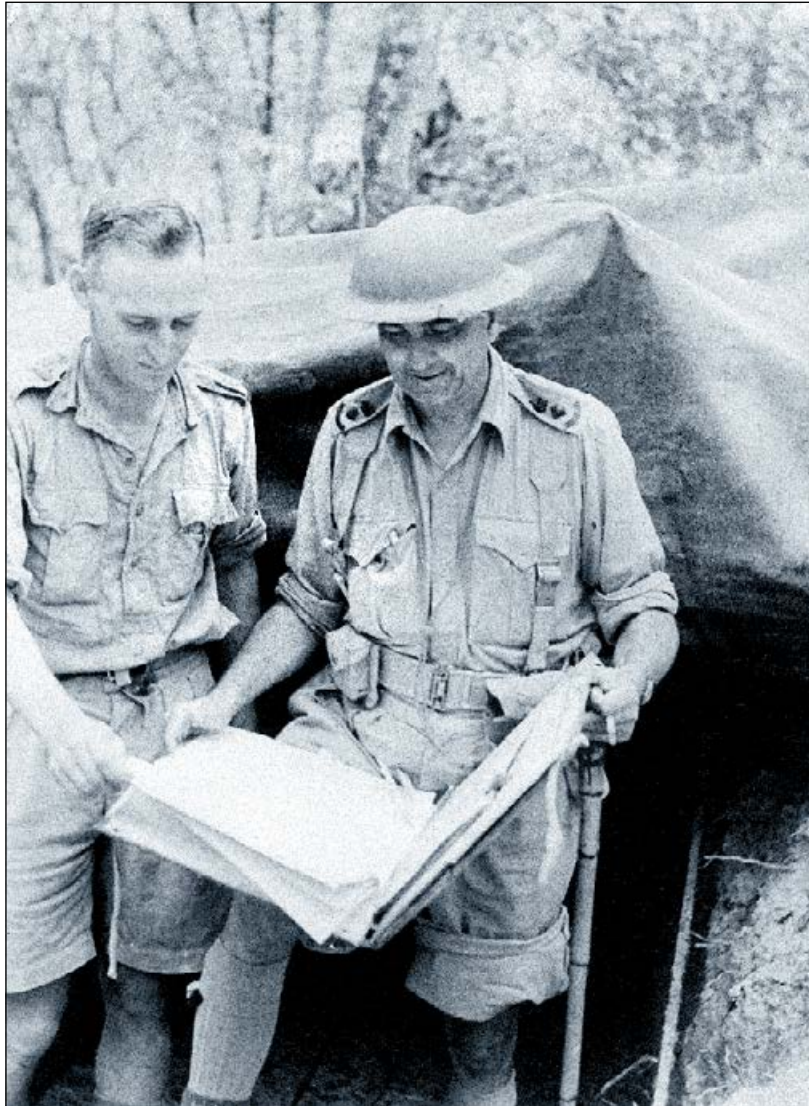
Crew members of HMS *Prince of Wales* scramble into lifeboats as their ship sinks after an air attack on 10 December 1941. The loss of *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* was a staggering blow to British and Australian faith in a strategy based on the Singapore naval base. (AWM P02018.055)



Crew members of HM Ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* try desperately to stay afloat after their ships had been sunk. A destroyer moves in to rescue them. More than 2300 men from both ships were saved, 225 by HMAS *Vampire*. (AWM P02018.058)



AIF infantry on patrol at the edge of the jungle in Johore, Malaya, in January 1942.
(AWM 011303/32)



Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick 'Black Jack' Galleghan, Commanding Officer of the 2/30th Battalion (right), examines a map with Sergeant Erwin Heckendorf outside the battalion command post at Gemas, January 1942. Galleghan led the battalion in successful actions at Gemencheh and Ayer Hitam, but his finest hour was as the senior officer at Changi after the surrender. *(AWM 011304/04)*



Private James Madden and Lance-Corporal Alfred Blomfield of the 2/30th Battalion keep watch for enemy troops in a rubber plantation in Malaya in January 1942. Blomfield was wounded in the campaign, but both men survived imprisonment. ([AWM 011304/18](#))



The bridge over the Gemenchuh River where members of the 2/30th Battalion, supported by the 2/15th Field Regiment and 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, ambushed a Japanese column on 14 January 1942, killing several hundred. (*AWM 117484*)



A 2-pounder anti-tank gun of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, directed by Sergeant Charles Parsons, in action at a road block at Bakri, Malaya, on 18 January 1942. In the background is a destroyed Japanese Type 95 Ha-Go Medium Tank. Behind that lies a tree felled as a roadblock, and beyond that are disabled tanks. Parsons was later awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his and his crew's part in this engagement. (*AWM 011302*)



Medical personnel attend to Australian wounded in a rubber plantation in Malaya in January 1942. Australia suffered more killed and wounded in the Malaya–Singapore campaign than in any other World War II operation except the Papuan campaign. (AWM 011305)



The Australian crew of a 25-pounder anti-tank gun prepares to fire from its camouflaged position in Johore, Malaya, in January 1942. Although their forces tended to be dispersed, Australian gunners of the 2/10th and 2/15th Field Regiments performed well in Malaya. The 2/15th alone fired 45,110 rounds in a four-week campaign; it also suffered a relatively high number of casualties—nearly 100 men. *(AWM 011304/14)*



Australian troops alight from a truck in January 1942, during the retreat to Singapore. Men of the motor transport companies and unit drivers braved air attacks on congested roads to transport troops and supplies. (*AWM 011303/29*)



Private Leslie Walker of the 2/19th Battalion was one of 145 wounded men captured by the Japanese at Parit Sulong and then beaten, tormented, denied food, water and medical attention, and finally shot in groups on the night of 22 January 1942. Only two men survived, after feigning death. Walker, aged 27 at the time of his death, was married and lived in Wagga Wagga before enlisting. (*AWM P02784.037*)



Gunner Allen Lang of the 2/15th Field Regiment appears singularly unimpressed by a Japanese propaganda pamphlet dropped from the air in January 1942. Within a month, Lang would be a prisoner of war, facing more than three years of brutal captivity.

(AWM 011303/33)



According to the original caption, this exhausted-looking Australian soldier 'made his way back to the depot after being cut off from his unit for five days'. The newspaper headline suggests that he was involved in the fighting around Muar, Malaya. He may have been a member of the 2/19th or 2/29th Battalion, which suffered a terrible ordeal in that battle. The headline's reference to Singapore reflects the threat now on everyone's mind. (AWM 012457)



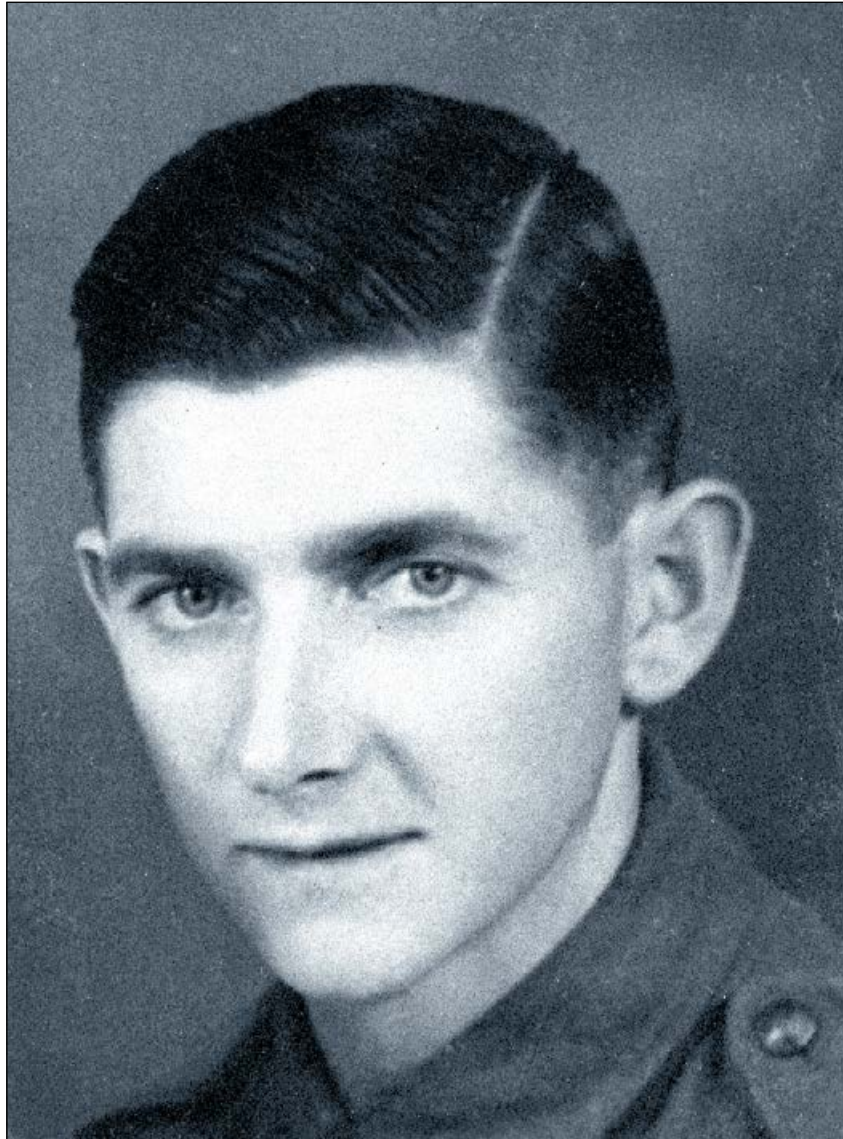
Japanese troops look over captured territory on the day of their landing at Kavieng, New Ireland, on 23 January 1942. Similar scenes were enacted on New Britain, Ambon, Timor and Java. (AWM 127910)



Australian anti-tank gunners, probably of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, watch the Johore Strait in January 1942. The causeway connecting Johore and Singapore was demolished on 31 January. (*AWM 012449*)



AIF nurses and patients at a military hospital in Singapore in late January or early February 1942. Debris from a recent air raid lies at their feet. (*AWM 012451*)



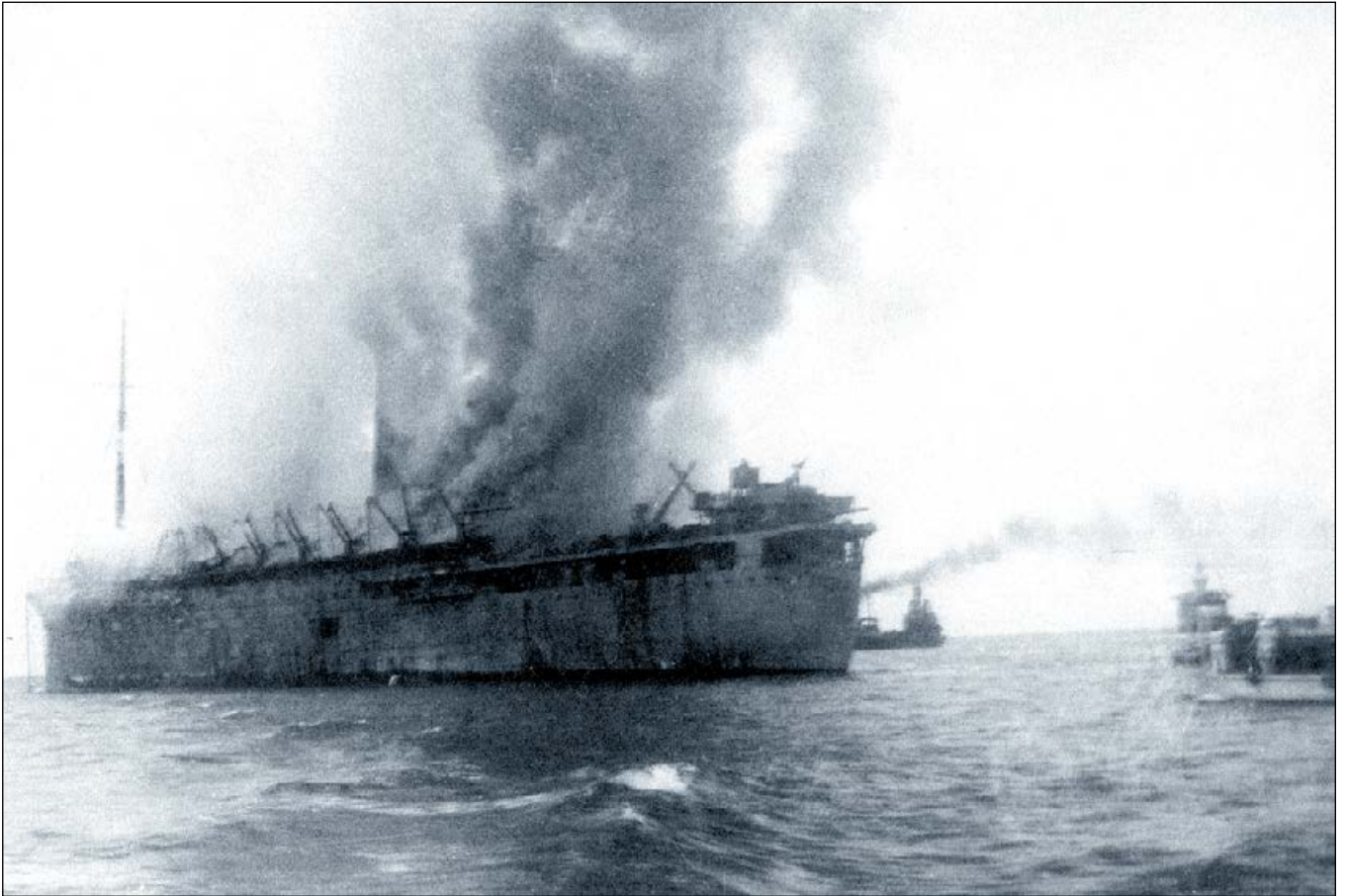
Driver WT 'Tom' Doolan, 2/21st Battalion. On 1 February 1942, after the Japanese landing at Ambon on 28 January, Doolan volunteered to go on a patrol and then to remain behind to cover the withdrawal of the party. Although firing was heard, nothing was known of his fate until his bullet-riddled body was found some days later. His single-handed action is perpetuated in a song by the Ambonese. *(AMW 133887)*



The site where Driver Tom Doolan, 2/21st Battalion, was killed while strongly defending a machine-gun post at Kudamati on 1 February 1942. His machine-gun was set up behind the tree in the foreground to cover the road behind. He was responsible for inflicting heavy casualties on the advancing Japanese before he was surrounded and attacked. (*AWM 124976*)



On 3 February 1942, HMAS *Hobart* rescued the passengers and crew of the British ship *Norah Moller*, which had been attacked and set alight by three Japanese aircraft in the Java Sea. Here, the bodies of those who died of wounds are laid out on the deck of *Hobart*, ready for burial at sea. (AWM 304581)



Navy rescue vessels approach the British transport *Empress of Asia*, bombed and set alight by Japanese aircraft, Singapore, 5 February 1942. The transport had been carrying reinforcements for Singapore, most of whom were rescued—1300 by HMAS *Yarra*—but nearly all their weapons and equipment were lost. (AWM P01604.001)



Private William Cook of the 2/10th Field Ambulance was captured with seven others on a track near the Tol Plantation at Rabaul, New Britain, on 4 February 1942. Their Japanese captors took them to Tol Plantation, where about 160 Australians were tied up and executed in the jungle. Private Cook's group of three were asked in sign language if they preferred to be shot or bayoneted. They asked to be shot, but were all bayoneted in the back repeatedly. Cook received five wounds and was presumed dead, but unable to hold his breath he was heard to be alive and was bayoneted a further six times. Still alive, he managed eventually to untie his hands and make his way to the beach. Next morning he found a small party of Australians. Cook survived, but lost his voice as a result of a bayonet wound to his throat. (AWM P01395.003)



Three members of the anti-aircraft battery at Rabaul return to Malaguna camp after a pig shooting expedition in the back of the battery's Ford utility truck: (left to right) Gunner Tom Gordon, Bombardier Jim Heriot and Gunner Peter Biden. Of the fifty-three officers and other ranks in the battery, only seven survived. Most, including the three men in this photograph, were lost at sea in July 1942 when the *Montevideo Maru*, carrying 1050 prisoners of war and civilians from Rabaul, was sunk off Luzon in the South China Sea by an American submarine. Others were massacred by the Japanese at Tol Plantation in February 1942. (AWM P02312.003)



Servicemen, mostly Royal Air Force, on the deck of the cargo vessel *Empire Star*, which evacuated them from Singapore to Batavia in February 1942. Among the 2514 people on board there were about sixty nurses of the 10th and 13th Australian General Hospitals and 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station. In this photo, dated 12 February 1942, some are looking anxiously to the skies, as well they might. The ship was bombed at intervals throughout that day and was hit two or three times, causing seventeen fatalities. The ship eventually reached Australia, after picking up refugees. She was later sunk off the Azores by a U-Boat, in October 1942. (AWM P01117.008)



A life boat floats in the South China Sea, crowded with Australian servicemen who had been evacuated from Singapore aboard the Chinese gun boat *Shu Kwong*. Japanese forces bombed and sank the boat off the coast of Sumatra and Malaysia on 14 February 1942. Of the thirty-two technicians who embarked, only a dozen survived to return to Australia.

(AWM P02100.001)



Officers of the 2/21st Battalion relax under a tree in Darwin prior to their departure to Ambon in December 1941. Seated, left to right: Lieutenant RC 'Rod' Gabriel; Captain Charles Patmore, Chaplain, who was accidentally killed as a prisoner of war in Ambon in 1943; Major Mark Newbury, who was executed in a massacre at Laha, Ambon, in 1942 after surrendering to the Japanese; Lieutenant John Davis, also executed at Laha; Lieutenant Noel Thomas, who died of injuries in Australia in 1944; Lieutenant W 'Bill' Aitken, Regimental Medical Officer; and Lieutenant-Colonel LN 'Len' Roach, commanding officer. *(AWM P03156.003)*



A mass grave of Australian and Dutch servicemen executed by the Japanese on 15 February 1942, after the fall of Ambon, south-west of Tawiri Village, in the Laha area. This grave was found on 7 December 1945. After excavating to a depth of only 15 centimetres a Japanese working party under the supervision of the 63rd Australian Infantry Battalion and directed by a Japanese NCO uncovered the tip of a boot, as shown in this photograph. This grave, which became known as Mass Grave No. 4, contained the remains of 135 servicemen.

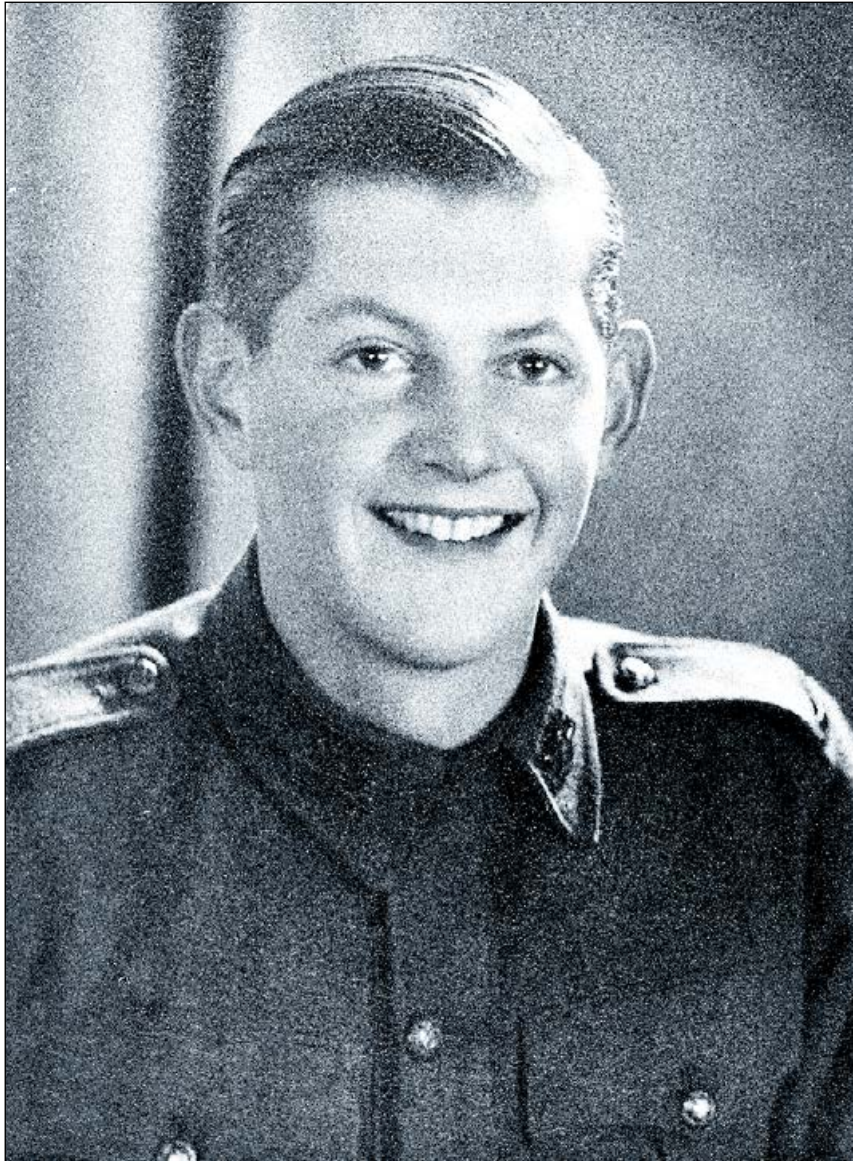
(AWM 030388/01)



The 2/20th Battalion band in Malaya. Of the twenty-eight men identified, at least ten died in the fight for Singapore and a further thirteen were taken prisoner of war, three of whom died in captivity. *(AWM P04692.001)*



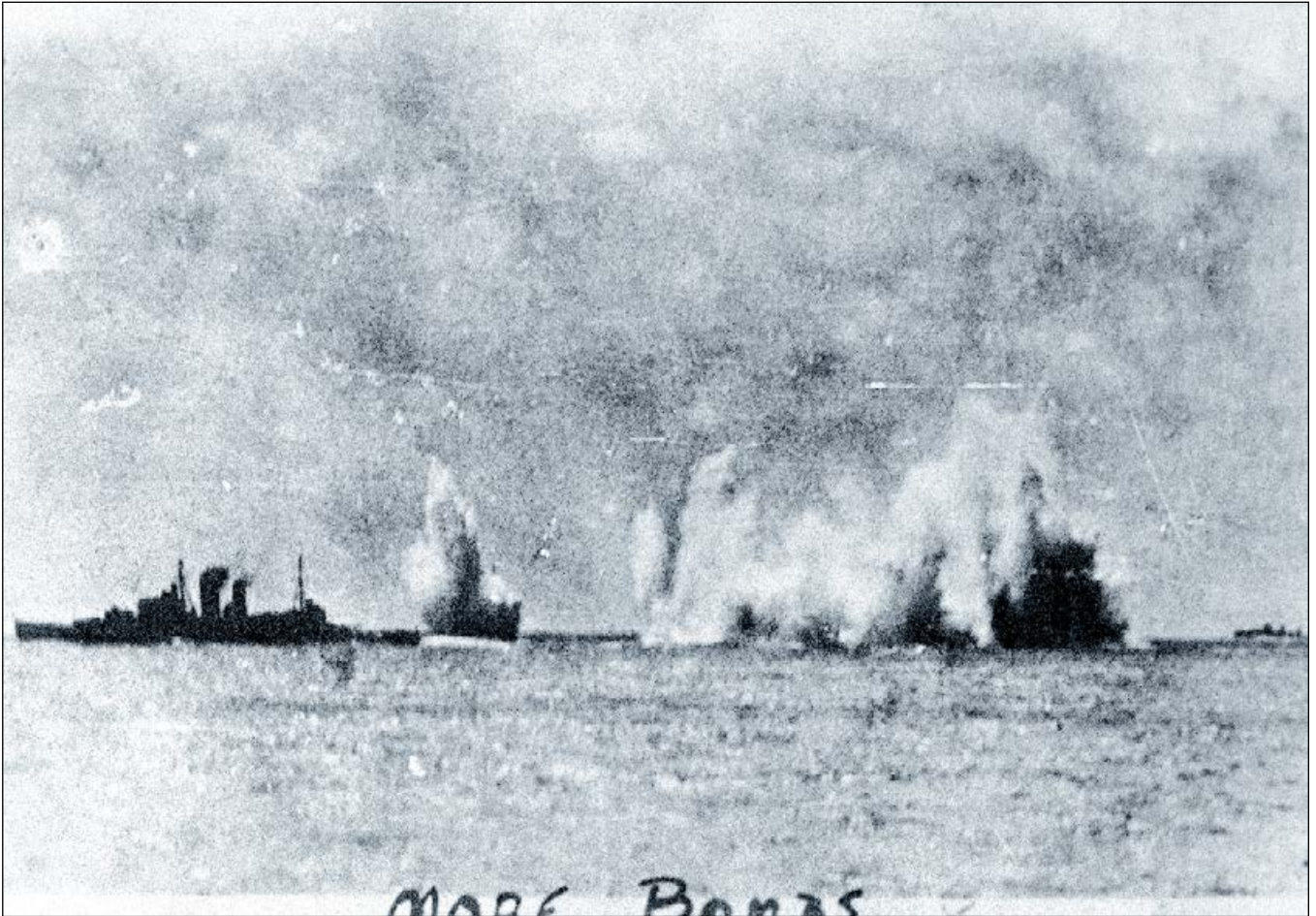
British troops surrender to Japanese soldiers in the city area of Singapore on 15 February 1942. On this day, some 15,000 Australian soldiers went into captivity. ([AWM 127902](#))



Bruce Pendleton Stewart enlisted under age and served under the name Gunner Roy McNab in the 2/15th Field Regiment, and his service epitomises the tragedy of the period covered in this book. After fighting in Malaya he was captured in Singapore and sent to north Borneo. He died on the Sandakan death march on 29 January 1945. *(AWM P02590.001)*



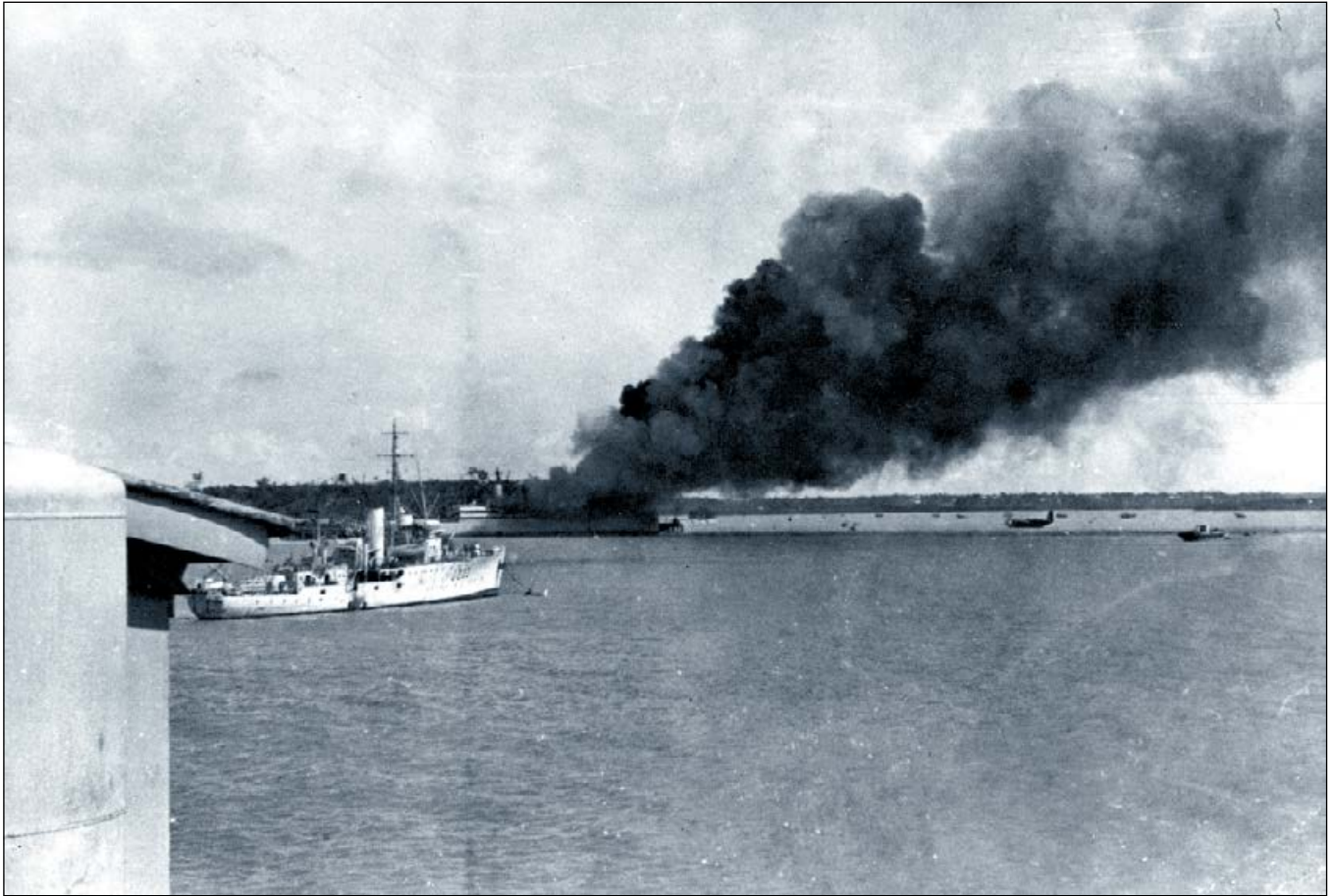
Private Jack Street, 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion. The 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion arrived in Singapore on 24 January 1942 as a well-trained but inexperienced unit. Street, like most of the battalion's recruits, was a Western Australian. He was killed in action on 15 February 1942, the day Singapore fell. *(AWM P04790.001)*



The British cruiser HMS *Exeter* and Australian cruiser HMAS *Hobart* manoeuvre during a Japanese air attack on 15 February 1942. *Exeter* survived this attack, only to be later sunk in the Java Sea. *Hobart* had arrived in Malayan waters from the Mediterranean in January 1942. It was possibly of the pictured bombing that *Hobart's* commanding officer, Captain Harry Howden, wrote 'the bombs fell close enough for me to see the red flash of their burst and to feel the heat of their explosions across my face'. While fuelling at Tandjong Priok on 25 February 1942, *Hobart* was attacked by twenty-seven bombers. The sixty bombs that landed around her caused sufficient damage to prevent her fuelling, and thereby prevented her from participating in the Battle of the Java Sea. (AWM P02620.006)



Japanese aircraft bomb Port Moresby, New Guinea, in 1942. The target of this attack was a convoy of ships that had transported troops and supplies to the port. *(AWM P02018.068)*



At Darwin, during the air raid of 19 February 1942, smoke rises from the burning American transport *Mauna Loa*. The corvette HMAS *Deloraine* is at centre left. The *Deloraine* had on 20 January been involved in a rare naval reverse for the Japanese in this period, when it played a leading role in sinking the Japanese submarine *I-124* —the first vessel of the Japanese navy to be sunk by the RAN. (AWM 304984/01)

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