

NOTES: THAILAND-MALAYA-SINGAPORE RADAR 1941-42.

(Prepared by Roger Madsen 27 November 2016).

In February 1939 the British government offered to share its knowledge of radar developments with Commonwealth countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada & South Africa) as there was great concern that Britain would have to fall back on the Commonwealth if she was overrun by the Germans, which was a distinct possibility. Concern in Australia about Japan had been growing during the 1930's & from approximately 1936 action to improve her manufacturing capability in steel production & Physical Standards of measurement were initiated.

In February 1941 an "all radar" shoot with 9.2 inch guns (2) & ShD equipment was held at North Head, Sydney. The demonstration was successful beyond all expectations so that army officers from Malaya who were present began making representations to have similar equipment sent to their theatre. In August 1941 Dr Piddington of RPL visited Malaya, Burma & Hong Kong to select sites suitable for ShD & Gun laying equipment, followed by a second officer, Mr Alexander, to arrange engineering details.

Singapore had two 15 inch batteries (Johore Battery 3X 15 inch with armour piercing shells only, Buona Vista Battery had 2X 15 inch guns controlling the Singapore Straits. These guns had a range of 24 miles to deal with battleships over 35,000 tons). Singapore also had 6 X 9.2 inch guns & 16 X 6 inch guns.

Hong Kong had 8 X 9.2 inch guns.

The Singapore Naval Base (HMS Sembawang) had been built in over 10 years & was completed in 1939 at a cost of 60 Mil pounds, consisting of 21 square miles of facilities including a very large dry dock (King George VI-1,000 feet) & 2 floating docks (50,000 ton concrete & 5,000 ton).

Penang & Rangoon gun batteries appear only to be small with 6 inch guns.

In February 1939 Japan took over without a struggle the island of Hainan owned by China (300 miles south of Hong Kong) & in June the Spratly Islands (775 miles northeast of Singapore) & seen by Admiralty & the Australians as stepping stones to the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies, the clear objective.

WW2 commenced on September 1, 1939 in Europe & France fell to Germany on 22 June 1940 whereby the French overseas colonies (including French Indo China) went to the Vichy French who were impecunious & under German control. The Battle of Britain was still to reach its peak around 15 September 1940 & it was a very close run thing as to what the outcome would be.

With the outbreak of war in Europe the RN was heavily committed to keeping its capital ships in Home waters so that there could no longer be any guarantee of getting a fleet to Singapore (let alone in less than 90 days). With Australia sending troops to the Middle East Churchill asked his Chiefs of Staff for a new assessment of the Singapore/Far East position & this was considered by the War Cabinet on 8 August 1940. (The report consisted of 87 detailed paragraphs stating flatly that Britain was not in a position to resort to war if Japan attacked either French Indo China or Siam & that Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore & the Dutch East Indies were all indefensible in the face of a Japanese attack). Churchill decided it was so pessimistic that copies would not be sent to Australia or New Zealand & that only a

copy should go to Brooke-Popham (CinC Far East) by sea from Liverpool in September (& not by flying boat with Shenton Thomas the Governor then in London).

The ship which the Chief of Staff report was sent on was the 7,500 ton Automedan which was intercepted and captured intact with a vast collection of other highly classified documents & codes by the German raider Atlantis on the 11 November 1940 near the Nicobar Islands off the west coast of Malaya. The Germans realising the significance of the documents made photographic selected copies for the Japanese on December 5, 1940 in Tokyo before sending the originals to Berlin, via Moscow by train. An enciphered shortened summary was sent by the Japanese Embassy back to Tokyo from Berlin on December 12, 1940 & was not until Spring of 1943 that the US decoded this message. This of course was a huge intelligence disaster.[The original report captured by the Germans was recovered from Berlin after the war & returned to England in December 1945].

It appears that the captured documents influenced Yamamoto in early 1941 to attack Pearl Harbour (along the same lines as Taranto) knowing that there would be no RN fleet in Singapore & that the Singapore fortress was indefensible.

Apparently it was not until after the Pearl Harbour attack that Sir Earle Page (a previous Aust.PM) in London (with access to Churchill's War Cabinet) that he accidentally learned about the Automedan affair and the loss of the Chiefs of Staff report and advised Canberra of the truth. Curtin (the new Aust. PM after Menzies) challenged Churchill about sending further Australian reinforcements from the Middle East to an island which he now suspected had long been abandoned by Churchill. British reinforcements were sent to Singapore instead, soon to go into Japanese POW camps .

The Air Force (RAF/RAAF) plan for the defence of Malaya & Singapore was to have airfields as far north as possible in Malaya to carry out a pre emptive strike against a Japanese invasion force expected from the direction of French Indo China. On the east coast of Malaya at Kota Bahru (on the southern side of the Kalantan River estuary at the Thai-Malayan border) at the rear of the town & adjacent to the river the RAAF No 1 Sqdn. was located with 24 Lockheed Hudson medium bombers (no ASV radar) .

Even though an RAAF Hudson from Kota Bahru had spotted the Japanese invasion fleet on the 6th December 1941 at the southern tip of French Indo China & reported this to Singapore no pre emptive strike was made for fear of being accused of starting the war. On the 7th December 1941 an RAF Catalina of No 205 Sqdn spotted the invasion force but was shot down before radioing the sighting.

The RAF had 4 operating radar stations in close proximity to Singapore on December 7, 1941:

TRU No. 243- Mersing (75 miles north of Singapore on Malayan east coast)[range 75-150 miles 42.5 Mc/S-a transportable equipment].

MRU No. 250-Tanah Merah Besar

COL No. 511-Bukit Chunang (Air Warning 200 Mc/S –range 150 miles).

COL No. 512-Tanjong Kupang.

The fighter squadrons (RAF/RAAF/RNZAF) in Singapore & Malaya were equipped mainly with obsolete Brewster Buffalos (basically surplus US naval aircraft at the start of WW2 that nobody else wanted which were heavy, under powered & lacked manoeuvrability ie. No match for Japanese Zero or other Japanese fighters). Some Hurricanes were available in mid January 1941 but also were no match.

At 0320 on December 8, 1941 No. 243 at Mersing detected a flight at approximately 75 miles flying south. Ten minutes later No. 250 at Tanah Merah Basir started the same plot at 18,000 feet & when about 30 miles off the south east tip of Johore turned towards Singapore. Plotting continued throughout the raid even to the extent of plotting them for 110 miles towards Saigon where the aircraft returned to base. This was 2 hours after the Pearl Harbour attack & the first bombs fell on Sembawang airstrip near Selatar at 0415- & although 55 minutes warning was given no air raid alarm was given. Aircraft were still on the ground & all city lights blazing.

Several (approximately 10) other radar installations had commenced being brought into service over the next 2-3 weeks before the end of December 1941 but by January 20, 1942 sets were being withdrawn destined for Sumatra & Java (SS Loch Ranza was sunk by the Japanese with over 1,000 tons of radar equipment). Most crew & other radar personnel appear to have escaped to Batavia. There appears to be no doubt that the Japanese captured British radar equipment & personnel for questioning at the fall of Singapore & shortly after, operating on frequencies in use with RPL sets ie. 200 MC/S.

The 3 pronged attack by Yamashita's 25th Army Group (from Hainan Island & Saigon) shortly after midnight of December 7-8 was aimed at Pattani & Songkhla on the east coast of the Kra isthmus in Thailand (to allow swift movement across & down into the west coast of Malaya) & at Kota Bahru in north east Malaya for its airfield controlling the Gulf of Siam, & then down the east coast of Malaya towards Kuantan & also to the mountainous interior.

There was virtually no resistance to the landings in Thailand but at Kota Bahru (against approx. 5,200 Japanese troops veterans of China) by 0200 RAAF Hudsons (24) were attacking landing craft & 3 transports in the face of heavy anti aircraft fire & 3 Indian Battalions manning concrete pillboxes (every 100 yards for some distance along a fairly narrow beach front with 3 Brens/ pillbox of 12 men), mine field & barbed wire. After a bombardment begun at 0300 local time 8th December 1941 (Pearl Harbour began at 0118 local time) 4 lines of landing craft headed for the beach at 0045 from about 1.5 miles. Despite the resistance the Japanese had 3 Battalions ashore by mid morning of December 8, 1941 & in a surprise air attack during a lull in fighting Japanese fighters appeared at tree level & destroyed 7 Hudsons (in addition to 2 lost during the night). The following day another 6 were lost & what remained withdrew to Kuantan to the south.

On December 2, 1941 HMS Prince of Wales & the older HMS Repulse arrived at Singapore but with no aircraft carrier support (ie. No HMS Indomitable). The Prince of Wales had Type 281 Air Warning radar (3.5 mtr), Type 282 & Type 285 (50 cm) ranging radar for Bofors anti-aircraft & Type 271 (10cm-lantern aerial housing) surface warning radar (capable of detecting submarine periscopes). On 10 December 1941 Prince Of Wales & Repulse were off the east coast of Malaya near Kuantan having left Singapore in search of the Japanese invasion fleet were attacked by a Japanese naval air group from Saigon & Thudomot, French Indo China with torpedoes & bombs. The only air cover available to the 2 RN ships were the obsolete Buffaloes which Admiral Tom Phillips

declined. Both ships were sunk very quickly & that meant the Japanese could reinforce Malaya unopposed. Within 3 days of starting the Pacific war there was virtually no air cover for the British/Australian forces in Malaya–Singapore & the Japanese had shown themselves to be better trained & better equipped than the Europeans who were now being put to the sword.

Apparently Japanese planning & intelligence gathering was co-ordinated by the Japanese Military Affairs Bureau Unit 82 in Taiwan. An extensive network had been built up providing maps, allied unit positions & strengths & local guides to provide directions .

The first Brigade of the Australian 8th Division disembarked from Sydney in February 1941 in Singapore & were positioned in the southern part of Malaya (approx.. 100 miles) north of Singapore training for tropical conditions & were seen as the seawall against the vicious flood. Another Brigade of Australians arrived in August 1941 for a total of approximately 17,000 Australians.

Indian & British units (80,000 men) were positioned up to 500 miles further north on the west coast of Malaya to the Thai border near Jitra & over 5 weeks these units were forced to retreat or be captured despite Royal Engineers blowing over 100 bridges causing the Japanese little delay who outflanked all resistance. (Australian army units appear to have first become involved on January 14,1942 at Gemas-Gemencheh Bridge & Muar River ,15 th January 1942 & Bakri).

[[Young Uncle Harry Edwardes (1915-1943) embarked on HMT Queen Mary in Sydney on February 2nd 1942. On 18th January 1942 suffered a gun shot to the head & admitted to hospital in Singapore & on 30 November 1942 was sent to the Thai Burma railway & died Sunday 24 October 1943. Harry's unit, the 2/19th Bn from the Riverina –Monaro was commanded by Lt Col Charles Anderson VC at the Battle of Muar January 14-22nd 1942. On arrival in Malaya Harry's unit moved to Seremban & rotated with Port Dickson on the coast. Most of September around the airfield at Kluang & on October 3rd 1941 moved to the east coast at Jemaluang a vital road junction. Stood to arms on 6 December 1941 but a month passed without any action.]]

Fighting in Singapore began on February 8, 1942 & lasted till February 15, 1942. (80,000 British, Indian & Australian troops became POWs in addition to the 50,000 in the Malayan campaign). Churchill's ultimatum on February 10, 1942 to fight to the last man & for the 18th Division to make history had no effect & the defeat at Singapore became the worst in British military history.

On 16 September 1941 from London JPVM wrote to David Rivett (CSIRO Chief, Melbourne) that he had finally run down an Interservices & Dominions committee on RDF (then chaired by Sir Henry Tizard) to get answers as to what responsibility Australia would have in the case of Japan coming into the picture, particularly in regard to equipment of ships, aircraft & defended areas in Singapore, Malaya & the Dutch East Indies. JPVM expected that Australia could give great service in these areas provided we are given sufficient warning.

On 31 October 1941 writing to the Chancellor at Sydney University he mentioned that he was looking forward to having a discussion with Bruce & Page (both former Aust. PMs) very soon in London regard to Australian associations with Singapore & the Dutch East Indies.

JPVM did mention that he would have liked to have met Churchill (presumably to talk about the Far East) but did not want to waste his time. I don't think JPVM had any prior inkling of the way Japan attacked both Pearl Harbour & Singapore simultaneously but was obviously very concerned as to

what needed to be done if Japan “came into the picture”. JPVM’s plans to go up to Singapore from Sydney on approx.. December 15, 1941 after his return to Sydney on Tuesday December 9, 1941 from the US & UK were cancelled as at that stage nothing would be gained.