

Chapter Four— Preparing for War

The Australian army had plenty of experience in transforming recruits into soldiers at home. It had experienced training and fighting both in the Middle East and Western Europe. However, it had no experience at all of what in 1940 was known as the Far East. In Australia, the training of the three battalions of the 22nd Brigade had been along what were then conventional lines, suited to the wide spaces of the desert or the fields of Western Europe. It had been anticipated that the posting to Malaya would require at the very least some alteration to the training regime. With time, it in fact precipitated a raft of changes in many facets of army life.

In Malaya the AIF faced two challenges from the outset. The soldiers needed to acclimatise to the different conditions that pertained in a new and unfamiliar environment—the climate, the terrain, the local foodstuffs and even their drinking water which had always to be boiled. They also had to deal with what were often inappropriate, inadequate or insufficient clothing, equipment, weapons and ammunition. The soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion had no more say in the suitability or quality of their equipment than they had had in the location of their posting. While they could expect to be paid, fed, clothed, equipped, trained and eventually taken to the war, they were justified in concluding that “the AIF in Malaya was...low on the priority list as far as food, clothes and equipment was concerned.”¹

They had no option but to put up with the chronic shortages that affected the various aspects of their daily life and work. They learned, by trial, error and experimentation, what they most needed to know, have and do. They recognised from the beginning that they were “guinea pigs” in a strange environment and that their immediate officers were no more able than they were themselves to rectify any particular situation.²

¹ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

² *Ibid.*

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Nevertheless, during almost twelve months in Malaya they generally surmounted the innumerable difficulties and obstacles that they encountered by initiating, co-operating, improvising or adapting, depending on the particular circumstances. When their enthusiasm flagged, they drew on either their discipline, their humour or even both in order to “get on with the job” and succeed in a given objective. The army initiated various programmes designed to encourage the troops, and it could at any time exact their obedience to its cause by enforcing discipline; but, in a final analysis, the 2/18th Battalion’s successes during its Malayan venture always depended on the general goodwill and co-operation of its members.

The AIF’s Malayan assignment was originally intended to be of short duration—the soldiers would continue training there only until their relief by Indian troops.³ The Australian Government, having realised the deficiencies of Singapore’s defence and consequently being concerned for Australia’s own security, was willing to contribute support for the British garrison in Malaya but as a stopgap only (See Chapter One - Introduction). It limited this contribution to “one Brigade Group, the necessary maintenance troops with a modified scale of equipment only.”⁴ As soon as the promised Indian replacements arrived, the Australian troops would move on to the Middle East.⁵ Australia’s reluctance to supply long-term garrison forces to Singapore had developed for various reasons over a number of years. Before the war, when her army comprised largely part-time militia forces, Australia had no units to send and preferred not to spend the money in rectifying the situation.⁶ Moreover, it was generally believed that garrison work was “somehow” beneath the dignity of Australian soldiers who were seen as “men of action”. Any decision to relegate Australian soldiers to a garrison post would have been

³ J. Robertson & J. McCarthy (eds), *Australian War Strategy 1939-1945: A Documentary History*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1985, War Cabinet Minute No. 632, Report of Singapore Defence Conference, 1940—Review by Chiefs of Staff of Singapore Defence Conference, Canberra, 26 November 1940, [AA:A2673, Vol 4], p.151.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ian Hamill, “An Expeditionary Force Mentality? The Despatch of Australian Troops to the Middle East, 1939-1940”, in *Australian Outlook*, Vol. 31, No. 2, August 1977, p.321.

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politically unpopular.⁷ Once the war began, the government erroneously assumed that the concentration of Australian forces under Australian command in a war theatre of significance that was outside south-east Asia would allow Australia some influence in British policy and conduct of the war.⁸ Having Australian troops in the Middle East was also in keeping with the importance that Australia attached to the Suez Canal, her traditional “life-line” with Britain.⁹ Finally, Australia believed that victory in Britain’s European war against the Axis countries would act as a brake on Japan’s imperialist ambitions: Japan was more likely to threaten British interests in the East if Britain were suffering reverses in the West.¹⁰

Since most of the Indian 9th Division would have arrived in Malaya by the end of April 1941, it was expected, at the end of 1940, that the Australian 8th Division would be relieved in May.¹¹ Percy Spender, the Minister for the Army, also helped to allay any subsequent anxieties the Australian Government might have felt as to equipping and generally providing for the Australian troops in Malaya. In his report to the Advisory War Council on 5 February 1941, he described the preparation undertaken by the authorities in Singapore for both accommodation and appropriate equipment for the Australians. The minute records his statement that “the force would also be adequately equipped for jungle warfare with light automatic guns...”.¹² Confident that the troops were adequately provided for, the Australian Government could leave to the army matters relating to the provisioning of the 8th Division for its Malayan sojourn.

However, even before the end of February 1941, the Australian Chiefs of Staff had recommended that the 8th Division not join the Australian Corps in the Middle East but be

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.322.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.327.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ J.Robertson & J.McCarthy (eds), *Australian War Strategy 1939-1945*, Churchill to Menzies, Cablegram 510, 23 December 1940, [AA: A 1608, AA 27/1/1], p.152.

¹² *Ibid.*, Advisory War Council Minute, No 126, 5 February 1941, Visit of Minister for the Army to Singapore, [AA: A 2682 Vol 1], p.154.

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retained for use in the Australian area and East Asia.¹³ The War Cabinet approved the recommendation. So, although the men of the 2/18th Battalion continued to expect their transfer from Malaya to the Middle East, the Australian authorities always intended otherwise. Their decision did not cause them to reconsider immediately the provisioning of the 8th Division—the 22nd Brigade had already departed Australian shores and would, no doubt, make do, at least for the moment. Malaya was not a war zone and certainly did not have priority. Equipment shortages were endemic across the whole of the Australian army at that time, with demand outstripping supply in all areas. Since the Fall of France in June 1940, Australia had possessed neither the imported materials nor the technological support needed to equip the forces.¹⁴ Although by the time Japan entered the war, Australia's own productivity was successfully reducing the shortfall, it was not in time to help the 8th Division.¹⁵ Therefore, when the first brigade of the 8th Division arrived in Singapore, its fate was all but sealed. Although they did not know it, the soldiers would remain in Malaya, relegated to garrison work in a country at peace. The men of the 2/18th Battalion settled down to everyday life in the army in Malaya.

Pay

In the army the pay scale was fixed but across the battalion the amounts that men received differed considerably. Single privates received 5s a day in Australia with an additional 2s deferred pay from when they left Australia. They also received 3s a day for their wives and 1s for each child. Privates could then assign as much as another 4s of their daily 5s to their wives or other dependents. However, even with this extra amount, those wives who were caring for small children struggled financially, while their husbands, for whom bed and board were assured, had difficulty in meeting even minor everyday costs.¹⁶ Had all married privates been in the same position, actual amounts might have been irrelevant. However,

¹³ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.59.

¹⁴ Joan Beaumont, *Australian Defence: Sources and Statistics*, The Australian Centenary History of Defence Volume VI, Oxford, 2001, p.450.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Barrett, *We Were There*, pp.103-104.

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while many struggled, other men had their pay “made up” by their former employers to the amount they had received in their civilian jobs.¹⁷ Such men, in receipt of as much as £10 a week and who thus might earn even more than their officers, were financially carefree. Not so the few men who had avoided making the allotments to their wives before their departure. Unfortunately for them, the army set in place regulations that allowed wives to claim support and the Pay Master was authorised to subtract the allotments from the soldier without his permission.¹⁸

The scale of pay rose with rank. For sergeants and lieutenants, the pay of 10s and 15s a day respectively was adequate. However, the “unfortunate anomalies” in the system resulted in hardship for some and ease of mind for others.¹⁹ Varley and his senior officers were always conscious of the discrepancies and, while they were mindful of the bitterness caused by the series of articles in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, they did what they could to ensure that the married men had opportunities to visit places of interest.

Food

An army has also to be fed and the 2/18th, a “country” battalion, had chosen its cooks from among those men who were formerly employed as shearers’ cooks. While shearing teams could keep their cooks in line, the troops had no such recourse. In Bathurst the food had been appalling and had occasioned rumblings, even a threatened strike. Matters had quickly improved when a number of officers felt that the complaints were justified. In Malaya, at the outset, the food served to the troops was execrable but the situation was not as easy to rectify. In the first place, those responsible were new to the environment, and therefore unused to the conditions. Some foods were strange to them. Private Mac Cottee remembered how he and his friends, on their arrival at Bagan Pinang, could not identify even the great green nuts growing on the palm trees. They knew that they were not

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.130. Barrett lists the major employers who were noted for making up pay—they included Woolworths, Sydney Water Board, Sydney Gas Company, Commonwealth Bank, NSW Public Service and Dalgety.

¹⁸ 2/18th Battalion War Diary, in Routine Orders, 21 January 1941, AWM 52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

¹⁹ Barrett, *We Were There*, p.104.

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coconuts because coconuts were “brown hairy things”!²⁰ Supply, too, was a problem. In Private Mullins’ words, “The cookhouse personnel could only work with the food allowed to them.”²¹ This might have been an explanation for the quality of the first meal in Malaya, described by Corporal Hopson as “one of the roughest meals up to date”.²² But it was also the harbinger of many meals to come. Men less charitable than Mullins laid responsibility squarely on the calibre of the cooks and on those who had appointed them. As one man said, “Anyone that was no good for anything else...they would put them in the cook house.”²³

The operating principle with regard to food, as far as the 2/18th Battalion was concerned, was safety first. Forewarned that hook worm was rife in the local Asian population, those in authority believed that all precautions were justified. In consequence, imported western food—frozen or tinned—was preferred to “native” food—that is, food produced by non-Europeans. “We are not allowed to buy and eat fruit or vegetables that may have come from the natives,” wrote Fuller. The battalion preferred its Australian cooks. When it arrived at the barracks at Port Dickson, it banished the Chinese cooks and the “coolies” who had always performed the menial tasks from the kitchens. “We are not taking any risks,” Fuller continued.²⁴ Henceforth the troops would prepare the vegetables, regardless that by so doing they might lower the prestige of the white man.

Despite lectures that underlined its importance, the men were not particularly concerned by the concept of “white man’s prestige”.²⁵ While it was impressed on them that failure to uphold it would result in damage to the battalion’s reputation, they remained generally unconcerned about notions of western superiority which they took for granted rather than denied. In fact, their letters suggest that they were proud of the democratic egalitarianism of their manner and the friendly ease with which they mixed with the

²⁰ Mac Cottée, interview, 19 June 2001.

²¹ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

²² Maxwell Hopson, diary entry, February 1941, undated, AWM PR82/013.

²³ Joe Forsyth, interview, 26 July 2000.

²⁴ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

²⁵ 2/18th Battalion War Diary entries, 13 February and 20 February 1941, AWM52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

different peoples of Malaya. Varley too wrote of his appreciation of their good relations.²⁶ (See Chapter Six). Nevertheless, when it came to the food they ate, the Australian authorities put Australian wellbeing ahead of all other considerations. The 2/18th Battalion prepared its own food regardless of any offence it might give or damage it might do. Consequently, it failed to investigate the possibilities of Malayan cuisine. Meals might be unappetising but they were recognisably western. Meat with boiled potato, spinach and a dash of tomato sauce occurred so regularly that it might have been the Australian Army's signature dish. Mac Cottee remembered:

It was grey greasy stew or boiled beef that wasn't even defrosted. A great lump of beef would come in, frozen solid. They would just throw it into a great cauldron of boiling water... With this were boiled potatoes, and spinach that was half filled with sand. The Army bought by weight...²⁷

An anecdote from Col Spence supports Cottee's description of Australian cooking methods. One afternoon Spence, seeking a "ride" back to Port Dickson in the meat truck, found a dozen others before him. The only seat left was that night's dinner, a still frozen carcass on which, he said, it was too cold to sit for any length of time.²⁸ Frozen meat for the AIF had arrived by ship from Australia and was sent to army cold storage depots. It was then trucked daily to the battalions. Because of the difficulties in obtaining fresh vegetables in Malaya, the Army also stocked the tinned variety at Army Department Depots and flour in air conditioned storage.²⁹ However, regardless of the quality of the food when it arrived at the distribution centres, what was served to the men during their first few months in Malaya was generally atrocious.

²⁶ Arthur Varley in *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.4, April 1941, unpaginated.

²⁷ Mac Cottee, interview, 19 June 2001.

²⁸ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 15 July 2004.

²⁹ From a summary entitled "Malaya Notes" in the papers of Alfred Derham ADMS 8th Division AIF, AWM54 553/2/1.

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It is likely that both the GOC AIF Malaya and authorities in Australia would also have demurred at the cavalier treatment to which the meat ration was subjected. Virtually as soon as the 8th Division arrived in Malaya, Bennett was forced to defend the Australian ration of 16 ounces of meat per man per day against Malaya Command's determination to reduce it to the scale allowed to British troops. Bennett argued that the meat was already in Malaya, that the troops would become discontented if it were reduced, and that the meat kept them fit and strong. Australian Headquarters approved Bennett's stance and the Australian meat ration scale was maintained throughout the year although Malaya Command persisted in trying to have it reduced. Bennett wrote in September, "Many attempts have been made in the past by the British Military Authorities here to have the Australian scale of rations reduced to the level of the British scale. All of these endeavours have been rejected by me and will continue to be opposed... The excuse on this occasion is that there is a shortage of shipping space...".³⁰ Given his efforts to safeguard the meat ration for his troops, it is extremely unlikely that Bennett would have appreciated the fact that, at least during the 8th Division's first months in Malaya, much of it was rejected.

Mac Cottee remembered:

It was compulsory to attend mess parades and the food was so poor, food just murdered by the worst cooks in the world.

In the end, chaps just collected their ration, walked through the mess and put it straight into the garbage bins...³¹

Corporal Bruce Munro, a grazier from Moree, commented acidly in a letter home, "The tucker is scarce and very bad. Someone is making something somewhere."³² Complaints about the quality of the meat ("it was all gristle") competed with complaints about the cooking. Nevertheless, its quality, on delivery, proved acceptable to the officers who inspected it.

³⁰ Bennett to Spender, September 1941, NAA MP729/6 13/401/402.

³¹ Mac Cottee, interview, 19 June 2001.

³² Bruce Munro, letter to his mother, 27 May 1941.

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Bennett not only sought to safeguard the meat ration for his troops, he also endeavoured to vary it. He envisaged a standard weekly menu which would include a variety of meats, fish and fresh vegetables.³³ As 1941 progressed, a greater variety of frozen meats and other foodstuffs arrived from Australia while more fresh vegetables did arrive from Indonesia.³⁴ By November, rabbit was occasionally served to the 2/18th Battalion but its reception was mixed. Captain George McLaughlin wrote: "We get rabbit periodically and the boys do not take too kindly to them, but I must say I eat them and like them."³⁵

Within a few weeks of the 2/18th Battalion's arrival in Malaya, skin complaints were rife. While the constant sweating and hard exercise in the hot, steamy conditions to which they had not yet acclimatised must have contributed to the problems, many men blamed their diet. Those who could afford to do so supplemented their meals with extras bought elsewhere. One man wrote: "They have been getting a bigger supply of fruit at the canteen now and the five in this room have a standing order for bananas and pineapples every day so are having plenty now."³⁶ Another wrote, "I am very fond of green vegetables now (when I can get them) and often have a feed at the Rest House, which although expensive is worthwhile and the vegetables are good. I am putting a fair bit of money into food, but it is a good investment as I am pretty good as far as skin complaints go."³⁷ Those without resources did without.

Matters apparently came to a head in June when the battalion was quartered in the King George V School at Seremban. Complaints about food had been building. Then, so the story goes, one night, late, a truck belonging to the battalion overturned in the main street. Out spilled C Company's rations—"A lot of the rations, the company's rations,

³³ Bennett, to Army HQ Melbourne, liaison letter dated 19 November 1941 (and signed by Brigadier Broadbent—Bennett left for the Middle East two days earlier), Item 18, NAA MP729/7 42/422/53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 20 November 1941.

³⁶ Roger McGee, letter to his parents, 27 February 1941.

³⁷ Bruce Munro, letter to his mother, 27 May 1941.

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which should have gone to the men but was instead being traded by the cooks to the local business people.”³⁸ The scandal escalated. Colonel Varley himself investigated the complaints about the quality and quantity of food in other companies:

He found that the tucker was scanty and rotten, that the cooks were loafing and hiving lots of the rations to some Tamil girl friends of theirs. The CO now comes round the mess every morning and looks about him, and the 2IC. Our fare changed immediately and all the cooks realised their good days had come to an end, and asked for transfers.³⁹

From this time on both the standard and quantity of the food lifted and men remarked in their letters that their meals were actually good. “The grub is very much improved recently—very good in the evenings especially.”⁴⁰

As the year progressed and despite the Army’s adherence to a western diet, the men of the 2/18th Battalion were demonstrably adapting to their environment and even to local foodstuffs that were readily available. With experience, they became selective. In August, Merton Short observed that, “The prickly heat rash is not so prevalent now we’ve given up eating pineapples. An English regimental MO told them that long ago and they wouldn’t believe him”;⁴¹ while from Mersing, where the coconut palm was everywhere and always accessible to them, Sergeant Alan Black wrote that, although they had learned not to eat much of the coconut flesh, coconut milk had become the troops’ main beverage: “All we do is knock them down, cut them open with a parang and drink the milk.”⁴² On Leave troops often ate Chinese and other Asian food, usually without dire effects. Mullins wrote, “We enjoyed the native cooked meals as they were a welcome change from our

³⁸ Frank Adams, interview, 20 August 2002.

³⁹ Bruce Munro, letter to his mother, 17 July 1941.

⁴⁰ Merton Short, letter to his family, 1 October 1941.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, letter to his family, 8 August 1941.

⁴² Alan Black, letter to his parents, 8 October 1941.

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regular Army meals.”⁴³ In their letters home men described in detail the dishes that they had eaten, revealing their fascination with the variety of tastes. And those men who spent time in hospital made another discovery:

An interesting point is the excellence of the Chinese cooks' work. They really can cook, as we found in the hospital. Yet when we landed here the first thing was to sack the Chinese cooks already here and put our own “cooks” in.⁴⁴

The Australian Army preferred to serve to its men imported potatoes rather than locally produced rice. In favouring a traditional western diet for the men, the Australians were doing as the British did, despite the complicated supply and transport system that maintaining it necessitated. “Diet varied according to the country of origin of the force,” wrote Mark Morrison, a civilian lawyer who had lived in Malaya for a number of years and who, upon his arrival in Sydney after the fall of Singapore, produced an unsolicited report for the Australian government on the prevailing conditions and recent events.⁴⁵

The months passed and by August, six months after its arrival in Malaya, the army had outgrown its teething problems and was experienced in provisioning its troops. Men who arrived in Malaya with the 3rd, 4th and 5th Reinforcement Companies during August did not complain about the meals provided for them. As one man said, “It was just good western tucker.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless the men generally continued to be troubled by a variety of skin complaints, some of the more minor of which, in the future, in the prison camps, quite often settled down. In retrospect, some survivors believed that the local food generally, suited to the climate and conditions of the land, would have been a better choice both in

⁴³ Mullins, *Birth of a battalion: History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁴⁴ Merton Short, letter to his family, 10 May 1941.

⁴⁵ Mark Morrison, manuscript, p.4, AWM MSS 1392.

⁴⁶ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

terms of health and supply. Keith Forsyth concluded that “The Asiatic tucker was better for us. In that climate European food seemed to be too rich.”⁴⁷

Clothing

As with food, the 2/18th Battalion’s priority with regard to clothing and equipment from the beginning was safety at the expense of comfort. “We are compelled to take precautions,” Fuller wrote.⁴⁸ By day, when training, men wore a shirt and shorts. After dark, although malaria was unlikely in Port Dickson itself, men wore long sleeves and shirts buttoned at the neck, rolled-down (goon) trousers tucked into socks and half-puttees over the ankle. Mosquito nets were compulsory: “It is a serious offence to sleep without a net—also to have a torn net.”⁴⁹ On manoeuvres, men wore battle dress that included a steel helmet over which was draped a green net that further protected against the Anopheles mosquito. So too did the elbow length material gloves. The helmet could alternate as a seat that guarded against hookworm, as a pillow, and as a “boong” bath.⁵⁰ The men carried a haversack on top of which was the hated gas mask that was made of canvas and unbearably hot to wear. After wearing it for an exercise, a man would pour the accumulated sweat out in a stream. In the haversack was his mess equipment, a towel, shaving gear and the vital groundsheet. “We had to choose whether we wanted to be wet from the wet spongy ground and risk hookworm, or be wet by the constant tropical rain from the heavens.”⁵¹ On Leave, men wore their slouch hats, shirts and trousers or shorts. Other items of dress included boots and belts. Boots were worn at all times outside to prevent hookworm. Alan Black, a boot maker in civilian life, compared the Australian boots (brown) unfavourably to those of the British. “The English wear the best military

⁴⁷ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

⁴⁸ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Boong” bath was the name by which Australian soldiers knew the Malayan community bathing facility, the “tong”, a concrete water reservoir which was about a metre square and usually fed by a well. Malayans, clad in sarongs, used a dipper or bucket to scoop water over themselves. Despite the racist slur inherent in the word, the Australian soldiers generally used it unconsciously to describe the method that they too adopted—scooping water with their helmets from a creek or drain and tipping it over themselves—when on “stunts” or exercises.

⁵¹ Mullins, *Birth of a battalion: History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

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boots in the world. They are black grain...and weft with a decent heel and horse-shoe. The soles have hob nails and are not filled up with slugs like ours are.”⁵² The Australian “army patented brown boot” was heavy, and, in the conditions of Malaya, often sodden. The Australian soldiers wore the British style belts, surplus from the 1914-1918 War. Wide and worn tightly, the belts rubbed, causing skin problems. Eventually these were replaced by narrow belts.

It was naturally impossible to present a smart appearance while training in the jungle and it was not attempted. However, within forty-eight hours of their arrival in Malaya, the men of the 2/18th Battalion were conscious that, on the parade ground, the British, Malayan and Indian regiments clearly outshone the Australians. At the first parade in Port Dickson, as he emphasised to his troops their responsibility in the matter of the white man’s prestige, Varley demanded that his troops lift their standards.⁵³ That night, Fuller wrote: “We have put the iron heel down on our lads and much stricter discipline is the order of the day. The CO is determined that we shall not suffer in comparison with the British and the coloured units.”⁵⁴ However, to a very large extent, Varley’s ambition for sartorial smartness on the parade ground was a forlorn hope. The Australian soldiers had enlisted to fight and they remained throughout the year in Malaya largely indifferent to spit and polish and niceties. On the other hand, they were at no stage undisciplined and they knew how to behave on the parade ground. Merton Short wrote of the British soldier who had come into the 2/18th Battalion “on exchange” and failed to understand the essential difference:

One “choom” gauged our discipline a little wrong. He walked out on parade one day with bits of his rifle in his pocket and when ensconced in the back line casually commenced to assemble his rifle. Fortunately the officer’s

⁵² Alan Black, letter to his family, 27 April 1941.

⁵³ 2/18th Battalion War Diary entry, 20 February 1941, AWM52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

⁵⁴ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

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back was turned and he missed the suppressed merriment of the flabbergasted diggers.⁵⁵

Individually, however, the men did take pride in their appearance when on leave, or at least they tried, with indifferent success. It was too hot to wear long trousers but their shorts were hardly presentable and their only hats were sweat stained. Mullins wrote that, next to the immaculately dressed British and Scottish troops, they looked like “bagmen”.⁵⁶ His own old and sweat-stained hat was, for him, a matter for regret. Unbeknownst to the members of his platoon, eight new slouch hats had arrived, earmarked for them. Sergeant James asked for volunteers to do axe work and persisted until eight men but not Mullins finally fell in. The sergeant then marched them to the Quartermaster store where they received the new hats.⁵⁷

On arrival at Port Dickson, the 2/18th Battalion contracted with a group of tailors who thereafter travelled with them. The tailors repaired clothing and boots, and sold ready-made shirts, socks and shoes at a fraction of what they would have cost in Australia—“A full drill uniform costs only \$7½ or about 25s compared with 5 guineas in Sydney.”⁵⁸ The service was extremely useful to those who could afford it. Local “dhobneys” provided laundry services.⁵⁹ The choice of which service to use was important as the dhobneys’ method of washing clothes by stamping on them with their feet was believed to cause “dhobneys itch”, a type of tinea. When it was quartered at the Malay Barracks in Port Dickson, the 2/18th Battalion employed a Hindu dhobey service that operated under strict government supervision, or so it was believed. The dhobneys collected the washing and returned it cleaned and pressed. For the service, which included all his washing, each

⁵⁵ Merton Short, letter to his family, December 1941.

⁵⁶ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 21 February 1941.

⁵⁹ The armed services used the Hindustani word “Dhobey” as a slang name for Laundry—they employed “Dhobey” firms to do the men’s laundry.

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soldier paid four dollars per month.⁶⁰ Until the Battalion's move from Seremban back to Port Dickson where they were quartered in the Haig Lines, "dhobey's itch" was not a major complaint but, from mid-June onwards, the number of severe cases ballooned. Cottee, who had visited the laundry, was not surprised:

All the underclothes, singlets and everything in great cement troughs. And they were washing them. Oh, Gawd! As I say, I never sent any underclothes again. Shorts and shirts were ironed. But I did my own washing after that.⁶¹

As the months passed, the men acclimatised and became experienced in the conditions generally in Malaya. They had quickly dispensed with the hated gas mask and the gloves. They learned not to mind wet clothes and boots. Fuller was to find that in the wet, muddy conditions of Mersing in the monsoon period, his football boots were effective spare military boots and "beautifully light". The soldiers reduced what they wore to a minimum. Fuller wrote to his mother, "Please don't send any more underclothes. I have a ton of them. I never wear them anyway. I find a shirt and a pair of shorts alone much more comfortable in the heat."⁶² Thus with time, and despite regulations, both men and officers contrived to rid themselves of some of the impractical clothing and accoutrements but to keep what they recognised to be of value without incurring the wrath of higher authority. By so doing the soldiers demonstrated an initiative that was based on practicality and commonsense, and instituted without grandstanding. It was accepted in the same spirit by those in charge. Generally, it was only when the men's health might be threatened that the authorities took measures to ensure the regulations with regard to clothing and personal gear were heeded. The men's discipline was always fundamentally sound and in fact they were proud of it. They never achieved the smartness and drilled precision of the Malayan and British soldiers but they did not number the attainment of these among their goals.

⁶⁰ Roger McGee, letter to his mother, 26 February 1941. Roger McGee wrote that the Straits Settlement dollar was worth 2s11d.

⁶¹ Mac Cottee, interview, 19 June 2001.

⁶² John Fuller, letter to his mother, 7 August 1941.

Their general attitude and belief in themselves was summed up by Fuller when he wrote: “They certainly have us beaten on the parade ground so far, but I don’t think they will do the things we will when the acid test eventually comes.”⁶³

Equipment

If personal gear was slow to appear in camp, so too were new and modern weapons and equipment. The light automatic guns—presumably the Bren guns—which were understood at the outset to be so necessary for jungle fighting and virtually promised by Spender in his report to the Advisory War Council in February 1941 were not immediately forthcoming. The Thompson machine gun was supplied only in strictly limited numbers. In the 2/18th Battalion, soldiers “made do” with what was available. In Malaya an infantry platoon was regarded as fully equipped when each section had one “Tommy” gun and a Bren gun to support its rifles. The soldiers arrived in Malaya with the long barrelled, bolt action Lee-Enfield .303s and bayonets that had been issued to them at Ingleburn. The rifles were World War One surplus and, in the men’s opinion, of better quality than those manufactured more recently. But they had not yet fired them. At Ingleburn and Bathurst they had used practice rifles. Nevertheless, their pride in and care for their untested weapons was clearly reflected in their condition on arrival in Malaya. Captain John Edgeley gave to Corporal Harry Noakes and Private Col Spence the task of “true-ing in” D Company’s rifles. Noakes and Spence spent two days testing the accuracy and adjusting the sights of perhaps 120 rifles and only found one that had rusted from neglect.⁶⁴ It belonged to one of D Company’s cooks!

The bayonet, when it was in fixed position, extended the Lee-Enfield .303 a further 22 inches. Despite the rifle’s reliability and rapid bolt action, the troops found it

⁶³ *Ibid.*, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

⁶⁴ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

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long and cumbersome when used in fast jungle patrol work and, later, in the fighting.⁶⁵

The bayonet also affected its accuracy, as it pulled the rifle up when firing.

As well as his rifle, after the war began in December 1941, each man carried a swag of grenades: the 4-inch variety was thrown and the 7-inch ones that, if inserted into special cartridges, could be fired from his rifle. To fire a grenade, the soldier simply set his rifle at an angle and pulled the trigger. The grenade would travel between 80 and 100 yards—the greater the angle at which the rifle lay, the further it would go. Before the war, the vast majority of men of the 2/18th Battalion never encountered live grenades in their training.⁶⁶ Those who did practised one day near Port Dickson. “We made some fine holes in the ground,” Corporal Bruce Munro observed.⁶⁷

The men added their own equipment to the standard issue. Munro asked his family to send him his own compass.⁶⁸ At least one man wore a straight edged stabbing knife in his sock. A number of men bought their own parangs, the Malayan curved knife that so easily sliced open a coconut or cut a path through jungle. Spence had his especially made by a craftsman but believed that the finished product was no better than those sold in the shops.⁶⁹ The men hung them in scabbards from their belts. No one objected. Officers, too, demonstrated the same initiative and practicality when they improved upon the standard equipment. Fuller levelled the “too big” criticism at his service revolver. In August he wrote asking his family to send him the family business’s office pistol with suitable ammunition. “I may be able to put it to very good use shortly. Our army weapons are too hard to conceal.”⁷⁰ The family posted the back-up pistol and requisite ammunition in an ordinary parcel.

In Australia the men had trained on the reliable but heavy—it weighed 27lbs (12.15kg)—Lewis gun, the earliest of the Light Machine guns. In Malaya, the lighter Bren

⁶⁵ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

⁶⁶ Mervyn Blyth, telephone conversation, 20 June 1941.

⁶⁷ Bruce Munro, letter to his sister, 7 July 1941.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 April 1941.

⁶⁹ Colin Spence, letter to his mother, 6 September 1941.

⁷⁰ John Fuller, letter to his father, 20 August 1941.

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gun gradually replaced the Lewis gun. The latter was then mounted on the back of a Bren gun carrier or, after the battalion moved to Mersing, placed in a fixed position. The Bren gun, weighing 22.12lbs (9.95 kg), was better than the Lewis gun for section and platoon mobile work generally. Like its predecessor, the Bren required two men, the gunner and his “Number Two”. The “Number Two” carried more ammunition as well as his own rifle and could take over the Bren gun if necessary. It was the general opinion of the men of the 2/18th Battalion that their Bren guns had come to them “second hand”—the flash eliminators were missing and unexplained thin metal rings were wrapped around the barrels. However, the gun proved reliable and stood up to hard use. It came with a spare barrel to replace the first when it ran hot but Bren Gunner Ginty Pearson regarded the spare barrel as “more to carry” and, demonstrating a soldier’s quiet but effective initiative, threw it away. As far as he was concerned, in Malaya it always rained and puddles of water were always handy. He could dip the hot barrel into a puddle to cool it if necessary.

Pearson questioned the Bren gun’s ultimate value in the Malayan terrain. A magazine held 30 rounds but only 27 were loaded so as not to weaken the spring. Spare magazines were carried in pouches but they were heavy: “If you carried 150, 200 rounds, it was as much as you could carry.”⁷¹ The Bren gun was extremely accurate but its very precision wasted ammunition while its range was unnecessary. “You could put five bullets in a one-inch group...It all came out in the one burst. And that would be at 200 yards. But 90 percent of your shooting wouldn’t be any further than here to across the road.”⁷²

A Thompson Sub Machine Gun was also issued in Malaya, one per section, and this did prove suitable during the fighting in the Malayan terrain, its effective range being limited to less than 100 yards. Mullins regarded it and the bayonet as “the ideal weapons”⁷³ even though, as Pearson observed, its bullets were heavy—they came in rounds of 20 and 50—and it always pulled to the right. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities,

⁷¹ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

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the men had only one practice shoot with the “tommy” gun, as it was called, using live ammunition.⁷⁴ However, their main complaint was that there were not enough of them.⁷⁵

Meeting demand was always a problem. When the war began in December, a group of 2/18th Battalion Reinforcement troops who had been training at Johore Bahru joined the battalion at Mersing. A number of them were formed into an extra platoon attached to C Company and known as 15A Platoon. Neither “tommy” nor Bren gun was available for 15A Platoon. Cliff Olsen passed in his rifle and he and George King, his No. 2, were issued with one of the old Lewis guns. Olsen was happy to take it because the position, in a trench, was fixed. Unfortunately for him, the battalion withdrew from its position. Olsen remembered:

I had to carry this heavy old Lewis with another big box with six drums of ammunition on one shoulder. And Georgie King, apart from his rifle and bayonet, had six big drums of ammunition that we had to carry. We were weighed down.⁷⁶

Olsen and King humped their gun and drums of ammunition six miles to Nithsdale. After the battle they turned the Lewis gun in and Olsen, gratefully, “went back on a rifle.”

Of all the guns issued to the 2/18th Battalion, only the Vickers machine gun was to earn Pearson’s unqualified approval. “The only guns that we had that were right were the Vickers guns. They had the Bren gun carriers for those.”⁷⁷ The Vickers machine gun was an automatic which fired the standard .303 calibre round of the Lee-Enfield rifle from a belt. Nevertheless, when the fighting began, it too proved problematic. Water, fed by a hose to the jacket over the barrel, prevented the gun from overheating but the hose itself would burst within twenty minutes of use. Private Nemo Dorph, a carrier driver, remembered how, during the fighting, the gunners, applying that talent for improvisation

⁷⁴ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 20 June 2005.

⁷⁵ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

⁷⁶ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

⁷⁷ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

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that Russel Ward attributed particularly to pioneering Australian bushmen and recognised again in the Australian soldier, quickly learned to adapt ordinary garden hoses and connections as replacements.⁷⁸ They had not known of the problem earlier—they had never had twenty minutes of continual firing practice.

The Universal Carriers, popularly known as “Bren gun carriers” which had been their original intended use, were open, steel-hulled, fully tracked, lightly armoured vehicles that were agile, fast for their time and good across country—although not in Malaya. There, the carriers were generally restricted to the roads because, in Malaya’s mud, they bogged. Twice, Dorph’s vehicle slewed off the road and the treads sank below the surface. “It had a winch on the back of it and you had to winch yourself back out,” he remembered.⁷⁹ The Australians mounted a Vickers Machine Gun at the front next to the driver and two Lewis guns at the back (although Lewis guns were never fitted to Dorph’s vehicle). The carriers were to prove capable of inflicting enormous damage on the enemy during the Malayan and Singapore campaigns but they were not tanks. The crews were unprotected and vulnerable to sniper fire, air attacks and shell splinters. This point was brought home to Lieutenant Fred Evans’ Carrier Platoon during an exercise manoeuvre. An infantry platoon, acting as the enemy, had positioned itself above a cutting. It happily rained clods of hard, damp earth—grenade substitutes—on the hapless men passing along the road below in their open vehicles.⁸⁰ It prompted the Carriers to experiment with all types of protective materials, even corrugated iron frames under which, in the Malayan heat, the crews baked.

The answer was not found until after the war began. It came by way of the bush telegraph that operated throughout Malaya—word permeated along the roads, carried by drivers and other personnel from the fighting in the north. The men of the 2/18th Battalion Carrier Platoon learned that when crews shrouded their vehicle under a “tent” of chicken

⁷⁸ Nemo Dorph, telephone conversation, 1 March 2004; Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp.81 & 214.

⁷⁹ Nemo Dorph, telephone conversation, 1 March 2004.

⁸⁰ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 15 July 2004.

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wire, grenades had nothing on which to grip and slid harmlessly off to explode on the road below. Dorph (who was promoted to Corporal during the fighting in Singapore) remembered, “We went to a poultry farm and got some wire of our own.”⁸¹

The three-inch mortar was another weapon in the battalion’s arsenal—at first there were four three-inch mortars, but this number was increased to six, each with its own section of about ten men, all of whom also carried their own rifles. For the mortars, the greatest frustration was the lack of practice with live ammunition. On one great occasion, in Australia, however, they had fired a live mortar bomb at a distant tree and their marksmanship was “spot on”—the tree was obliterated. In Malaya in August the Mortar Platoon held a practice with live ammunition over two days at the range at Asahan. For Fuller, frustrated at not having sole command of his platoon, the day was nevertheless rewarding:

The platoon did a very good job. My year’s work has not been wasted I am very gratified to know that it showed out so well, even though a lot of unnecessary interference on the part of people who know nothing about the job spoilt things a lot. Still, they did not succeed altogether in putting the boys off. I am pleased to say they shot wonderfully well.⁸²

One of the difficulties in practising with live ammunition was the empty space required for the bombs to explode. Mervyn Blyth remembered that “When they exploded, they just broke up into a lot of small pieces like shrapnel and spread out directly—not up, but sideways. They would do a lot of damage.”⁸³ Joe Forsyth recalled that, at the mortar shoot, an area with a 250 yard radius had been cleared although an anti-tank gun had been left

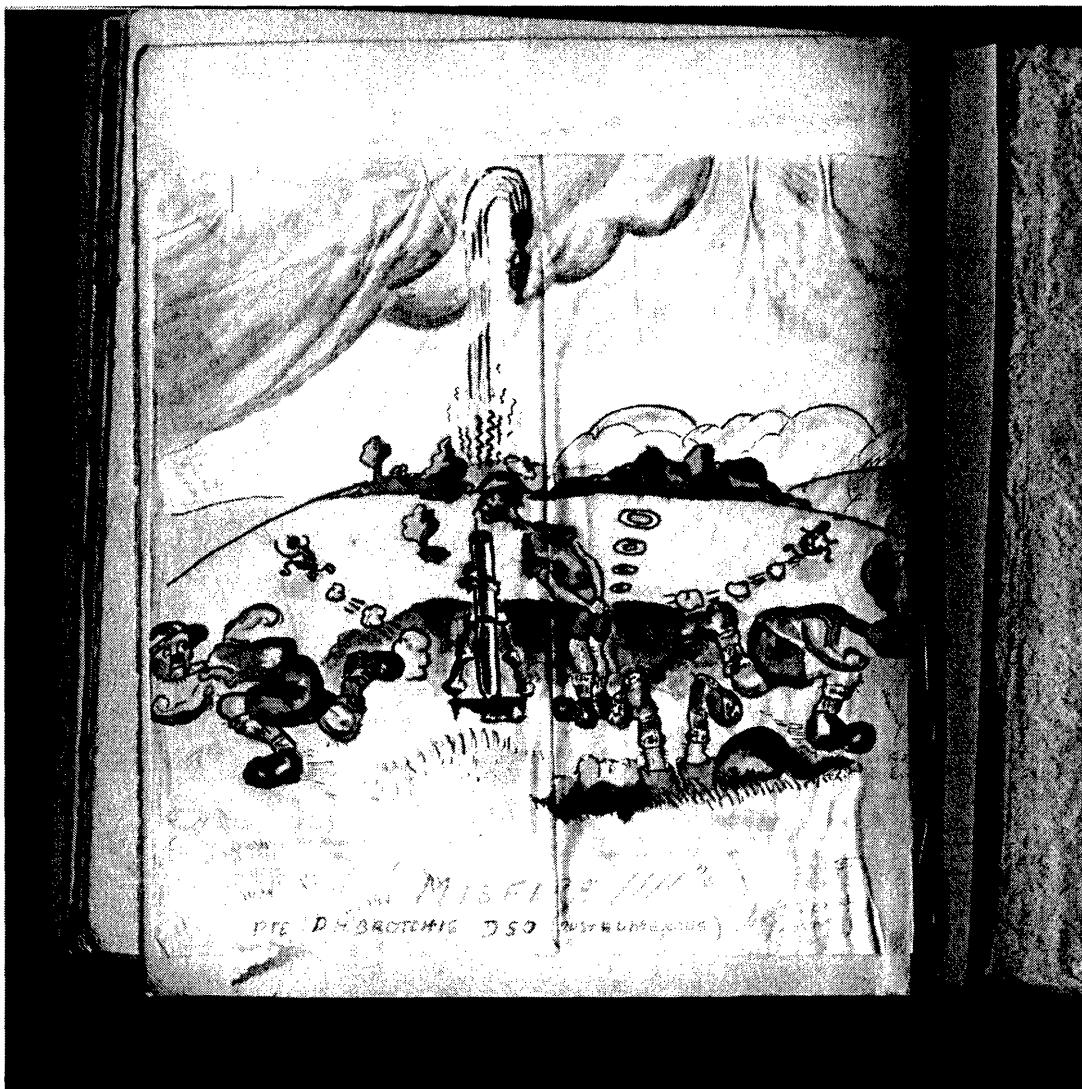
⁸¹ Nemo Dorph, telephone conversation, 1 March 2004.

⁸² John Fuller, letter to his mother, 20 August 1941.

⁸³ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

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MERTON SHORT'S CARTOON OF THE MORTAR SHOOT



Source: John Fuller's diarised photographic album Volume 3.

and was assumed to be safe on the perimeter of the cleared space. When the mortar exploded precisely on its intended target, shrapnel hit the anti-tank weapon.⁸⁴

Lack of equipment, ammunition and practice with live ammunition were hallmarks of the 2/18th Battalion's Malayan experience. The men nevertheless attended lectures and demonstrations, and trained assiduously. When it came to their own weapons, they showed initiative and inventiveness in surmounting design problems. Certainly, the lack of live ammunition practice affected their performance—for example, the results from rifle practice shoots at the various ranges, when they occurred, were poor. Brigadier Taylor wrote in his diary after watching an early rifle practice: "Saw Coy of 18 Bn on range. Men scoring about 60% hits at 100 yds, kneeling and standing with fixed bayonets. Not good enough—should get 90%."⁸⁵ There was little likelihood that the men's marksmanship would improve—Spence recalled that during the ten months before the war began each man fired a maximum of up to only 200 rounds altogether.⁸⁶ It also engendered a lack of caution—men forgot that their weapons could be lethal. One of Merton Short's cartoons preserved in Fuller's diarised photograph album records an incident at the mortar shoot in August. Fuller added an explanatory caption: "The Gun had just had a Misfire. The Gallant Doug Brotchie calmly pokes his head over the muzzle and has a look down the barrel. Fortunately, nothing happened."⁸⁷ Essentially, lack of live ammunition practice meant that men did not have enough practice in learning about and dealing with the idiosyncrasies of their weapons.

Training—Route marching

They did, however, always have plenty of training. In October 1940, Bennett had announced that he believed the men of the 8th Division were better trained than their First World War counterparts.⁸⁸ He gave credit to his senior officers with war experience. The

⁸⁴ Joe Forsyth, interview, 26 July 2000.

⁸⁵ Harold Taylor, diary entry, 26 March 1941, AWM PR 85/042.

⁸⁶ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 20 June 2005.

⁸⁷ John Fuller, diarized photograph album, Vol.2.

⁸⁸ Quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October, 1940. See Chapter Two.

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men of the 2/18th shared the compliment between Bennett himself and Varley who was not at all behind hand. As Mullins wrote:

We had a General who demanded ‘hard work’ and perfection. We were to carry out arduous training with limited time off for leave till the Colonel was satisfied... We were pushed to the hilt by our General through Colonel Varley who was not concerned how popular he was.⁸⁹

While Mullins modestly and generously gave credit to his commanding officers, the outlook of the men also contributed directly to their achievements. Certainly they grumbled but they also wanted to learn, to acquire the necessary skills so that they would be ready when they finally reached the battle front. That they were receptive to their training was not solely due to discipline.

In the first few days in Malaya, work was comparatively light while the battalion adjusted to its new environment. Route marching was the main activity and an afternoon siesta was instituted. One soldier remembered, “We were supposed to rest all afternoon. Most of us played cards instead. The little group I was with usually played Five Hundred.”⁹⁰ He outlined each day’s timetable in a letter to his parents:

Our hours here are as follows—rise at 6 am, breakfast at 7, training from 8.30 to 12.30, lunch, siesta from 2 to 4, parade 4 to 5 and lights out at 10.30. The break in the day is quite welcome.⁹¹

Meanwhile, if the men were slower to acclimatise than their commanding officer wished, they quickly learned what kind of weather to expect in their new environment. The men accepted that the army could do nothing to alter the constant humidity and the rain:

⁸⁹ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁹⁰ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

⁹¹ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 26 February 1941.

We would go on a route march...and it would rain. You could more or less set your clock. It would pour. We would have our ground sheets on to keep the rain off, but you sweated that much under the ground sheets that in the end we said, 'Oh, bugger it, we'll leave the ground sheets and just get wet.'⁹²

However, with regard to their meals, they did think that something should be done. In a revolt against the food served to them, D Company attempted a strike. Fred Harris remembered: "We wouldn't eat. The food was terrible...So John Edgeley [OC D Company] said, "OK, we're going on a route march."⁹³ When Headquarter Company also refused to eat, Varley used the route march to end the protest:

We just marched straight through the mess. And the next lot came in and they ate theirs and ours too...There wasn't a lot of it. Then Colonel Varley put on an eleven mile route march, full battle dress. When we came back, we were too exhausted to eat for a time. We weren't yet acclimatised. The doctors went through Varley over it.⁹⁴

No one believed that the eventual improvement in quality was the result of the soldiers' somewhat drastic strike action.⁹⁵ The battalion was to become very familiar with the route that Headquarter Company had followed that day. The roads joined each other in a loop that eventually wound its way back to the barracks at Port Dickson. The men christened the route "Varley's Racecourse" because, as one man wrote, "It's just a race from the time we leave camp."⁹⁶ The marches became faster. For a while, on the odd day that a company remained in camp, the siesta was maintained but such occasions became rarities. In

⁹² Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

⁹³ Fred Harris, interview, 12 December 2000.

⁹⁴ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

⁹⁵ Jack Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, p.91.

⁹⁶ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 13 April 1941.

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Barlow's words, "When we were on route marches, they never thought of siestas."⁹⁷ In the official history, Wigmore, quoting an unnamed source, asserted that the siesta was at first despised by the Australians but was later adopted due to their growing respect for the climate.⁹⁸ 2/18th Battalion testimony, written at the time, states unequivocally that the reverse was true. Within a few weeks and certainly before the men had fully acclimatised, the siesta had been permanently abandoned. "It was march all day on one quart bottle of water and a cup of tea at dinner."⁹⁹ From the early days in Bathurst, water was restricted during training exercises as preparation for the desert conditions of the Middle East. The men sucked pebbles to suppress their thirst. In Malaya water was plentiful but regulations decreed that it had to be boiled before it was drunk. Thirst added both to the discomfort of all route marches and to the general experience of fatigue. Nevertheless, by April, McLaughlin was writing, "We had another day in the bush today...about fourteen miles. It does not seem far now. We are getting used to the climate."¹⁰⁰

During a three hour route march the men covered a distance of approximately three miles every fifty minutes and then rested for ten. However, as the men became fitter they became aware that the distance they were expected to march in fifty minutes was increasing. Frank Adams testified that a number of soldiers had reservations—indeed, doubts—as to the value of such training: "It was something that was in my mind then. And a lot of other minds then."¹⁰¹ Adams believes that his own and another company commander had begun a route marching competition between the two companies—How far could the men march in a day? And how fast? The captain was a school teacher in civilian life. It seemed to Adams that he saw them as his erstwhile pupils: "We were men and we were eager to learn but he was treating us as kids."¹⁰² Adams estimated that as they marched along the jungle fringed roads and through the rubber plantations, burdened with

⁹⁷ Oregon Barlow, manuscript, AWM MSS1446, unpaginated.

⁹⁸ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.68.

⁹⁹ Oregon Barlow, manuscript, AWM MSS1446, unpaginated.

¹⁰⁰ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 20 April 1941.

¹⁰¹ Frank Adams, interview, 20 August 2002.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

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their packs and rifles, they were covering as much as four miles each hour. Enthusiasm for their increasing fitness gave way to fatigue. During each smoke-o, weary men collapsed onto the ground and some would even fall asleep. When the order came to fall in, they blundered back into line, and on one memorable occasion, Blyth, whose mortar detachment marched with Adams' company, only realised that his rifle still lay on the grass verge after he had begun to march.

The men's doubts as to the ultimate value of marching to the point of exhaustion were validated by an incident that occurred at Port Dickson. As they "lay about", sitting or lying on the ground at the side of the road, smoking, sleeping, entirely unprepared for any unusual event, they found themselves surrounded by "enemy" troops—an Indian regiment on a training exercise—who held them captive with the points of their bayonets. Adams, recounting the story, recalled his response. "I thought, 'That's the bloody training we should be doing, not this silly route marching. We should be training to sneak around behind the enemy and catching them when they were having lunch.'"¹⁰³

During the first few months that the battalion was stationed in Malaya, it is possible that a number of officers of the 2/18th Battalion did lose sight of the true purpose of route march training, which was to get the men fit so that they could acquitted themselves effectively in battle. Some officers appeared to have become embroiled in the peacetime activities of a regular army. Route marching was designed to get the men fit and acclimatised but, in the escalating competitive spirit manifested particularly in at least two of the company commanders, that purpose appears to have been at least temporarily forgotten. Regardless, those men who were concerned by the direction their training had taken were in this case powerless to alter the situation.

How long the route marches would have continued is debatable. When the battalion moved to Mersing, its commitment was to the building of defences and the preparation for manning them. The company route march became almost an activity of the

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

past. The battalion had a real job to do and, for the men, their training had become purposeful. Much has been written about the change in the Australians' attitude upon their allocation to a specific sphere of operation, about how much happier they were.¹⁰⁴ This was, at least in part, also due to their being released from a training regime that at least some men judged to have little value or relevance to their ultimate purpose.

—Jungle training

Within a few days of their arrival in Malaya, the troops were introduced to the jungle. Bennett certainly believed in the maxim laid down by the observer, Mark Morrison, that "the best [jungle] training is actual acquaintanceship."¹⁰⁵ Familiarity with the jungle was essential if soldiers were to be effective in the Malayan terrain. Bennett's method was, metaphorically speaking, to drop the men in at the deep end, or, in his own words, "to accustom the men to jungle conditions and teach them to find their way about, using the magnetic compass as a guide."¹⁰⁶ Their introduction to the jungle was, in Loxton's words, "pretty severe training". Officers with prismatic compasses led their platoons one thousand yards from the road into thick, swampy jungle before returning on a different bearing. In this way the men learned about the jungle from their own experience. They quickly found that to reach their objective, method had to be applied. One man would go forward perhaps ten yards—any further and he would be lost to view in the thick vegetation—on the compass bearing; then the rest of the platoon would move up to him. By repeating this

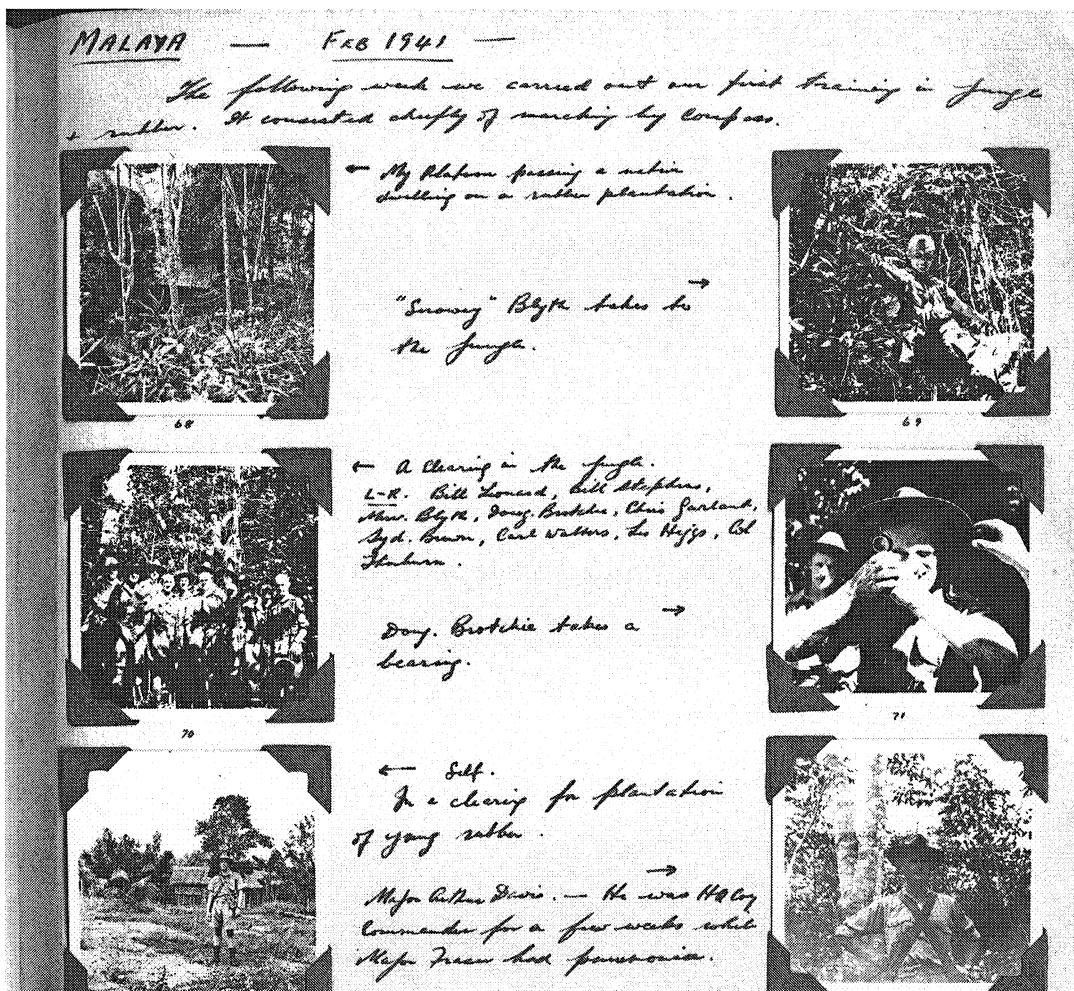
¹⁰⁴ Bennett, letter to Spender, 9 September 1941, NAA MP 729/6 13/401/402; Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p.34; *Men May Smoke*, Vol. 1, No 7, October 1941, unpaginated.

¹⁰⁵ Mark Morrison, manuscript, AWM MSS 1392, p.6.

¹⁰⁶ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p.12.

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THE MORTAR PLATOON TRAINING IN THE JUNGLE



Source: John Fuller's diarised photographic album Volume 1.

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slow movement time and time again, they proceeded in a more or less straight line. The conditions were unpleasant. Pearson remembered: "It didn't matter where you went. One minute you would be on dry ground, next minute you would be in mud up to your knees, and then you might go ten yards and you would be up to your waist in mangrove swamps. Then you're back on to dry ground."¹⁰⁷ They were covered with mud, dripping with sweat and soaked by rain that dripped through the foliage from above as they struggled through the thick, still, silent gloom of the jungle. Their introduction to the jungle was daunting. It was of little comfort to be told that while their ignorance might be "a prolific source of discomfort and danger, most of the terrors are imaginary."¹⁰⁸ Discomforts and dangers lurked in every stretch of jungle. During my interview with him, Pearson indicated two scars on his hand:

I was cutting with a parang...through the jungle. I got two thorns in my hand and inside of about ten minutes that hand was right up. Griffin sent me back to the RAP to Sandy Barrett. [He] gave me some injection for the poison. About a week later it was still up...and I gave it a press, and this bloody great thorn about an inch long flew out. It was buried, it was down in between the sinews...That was the type of thing that happened in the jungle.¹⁰⁹

Lieutenant Vern Schwenke wrote of his platoon's encounter with danger in the jungle:

We had an unfortunate...experience when out in the jungle on a patrol. About forty of us disturbed a nest of "jungle wasps", and even though we did about three hundred yards in record time, we couldn't shake them off until we made fires and smoked them away. Looking back, it seems funny. Men

¹⁰⁷ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Morrison, manuscript, AWM MSS 1392, p.6.

¹⁰⁹ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

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with arms waving wildly, running in all directions, trying to shake off what must surely be the most persistent, most vicious, and most ferocious insects the Lord ever invented.

There was another side of the picture, too. Two men in hospital from the effects of stings....¹¹⁰

Much later Dorph encountered an equally persistent, vicious and ferocious insect. A small tree was the right size to supply the timber for some defence works. Dorph's offer to use his carrier to bring down the tree was eagerly accepted by the tree fellers. The carrier easily uprooted the tree from the soft earth. It fell across the carrier and showered Dorph with a nest of red ants. Dorph said succinctly: "Those ants are worse than our bull ants."¹¹¹

After their first ventures into the jungle, neither the men nor their officers were particularly enthusiastic about the prospects of conducting military operations of any sort in such conditions. On 24 February, Fuller wrote that he had taken his platoon on a compass march through dense jungle: "Some of it was so thick that, seeing we had no bell hooks for cutting the vines, it was impossible to get through." Ten days after the battalion arrived in Malaya, Brigadier Taylor noted in his diary that, for the most part, 2/18th platoon commanders seemed to think that jungle operations required new principles instead of the adaptation of old ones learned from their previous training.¹¹² But a week later he recorded that he had spent a "more pleasing day" with the battalion and that a number of the platoon commanders were very enthusiastic.¹¹³ Actual jungle experience, while at first disheartening, had already dispelled much of their ignorance. Now the men could see the possibilities for action in the jungle that the old hands in Malaya had always recognised. The jungle provided cover from aerial view. It was not usually difficult, with the aid of a parang, to cut a pathway through it as much of its vegetation was slender and, in fact, Malaya's jungles were already usefully criss-crossed with thousands of paths

¹¹⁰ Verne Schwenke, letter to Mrs Imelda Mosher, 24 April 1941.

¹¹¹ Nemo Dorph, telephone interview, 1 March 2004.

¹¹² Harold Taylor, diary entry, 28 February 1941, AWM PR 85/042.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 6 March 1941.

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**A SECTION OF A COMPANY MOVING ALONG
A PATH THROUGH JUNGLE IN MAY 1941**



Source: AWM photograph 007182.

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leading from roads, rivers, mines and estates. If war came to Malaya they would be able to use the jungle to their advantage. It provided cover for patrols in transit and for ambushes on the roads.

In July about thirty men from each of the 22nd Brigade battalions were chosen to go on an elephant hunt—they were to act as beaters and drive the wild elephants into an enclosure—in the northern Jelibu district. Fuller was the “official cameraman”. During the course of the expedition Malay game wardens and tribesmen would teach the men junglecraft which would enable them to survive, should it ever be necessary, in the jungle. They would nevertheless carry with them not only their weapons but all the other accoutrements of the western soldier including his meals, in tins. Fuller wrote: “The weight that we will have to carry is very solid indeed. Owing to the risk of malaria mosquitoes we are taking nets and anti-mosquito cream. I am taking the movie camera with me, also my own camera... When I have all my gear on I look like a Christmas tree.”¹¹⁴

The expedition followed the Houghkin River into the Jelibu Mountains. The thick jungle and state of the track necessitated regular crossings. During the course of their journey, the tribesmen taught the Australians to make rafts, beds, shelters and even cooking utensils from bamboo and vines. Fuller reported:

Their cooking utensils and methods fascinated everybody.

Sections of bamboo open at one end are filled with water and are laid obliquely against the fire. It does not take them long to boil their rice or whatever else they want to cook in them wrapped up in a large jungle leaf very similar to a young banana leaf and the whole is placed in the bamboo "saucepans". In about 30 minutes the rice is cooked. The natives also make very good water bottles out of bamboo.

¹¹⁴ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 26 June 1941.

complete segment has a small hole bored in it at one end.

You will see one amongst the photographs I am sending home.¹¹⁵

The hunt failed to catch the elephants which had moved beyond reach but the exercise was deemed worthy by the participating soldiers, who recognised that they might have to fight and survive in the jungle. Another jungle exercise, however, designed by senior officers of the 2/18th Battalion, roused the men involved to fury. In their opinion it bore no relationship to what might happen during actual fighting, but, as with "Varley's Racecourse", the purpose seemed to be the gratification of the officers in charge. The exercise had included a section of the mortar platoon. They were forced to carry their mortar, as well as their rifles, some nine miles through a swamp. Given the precarious footing, the mortar, which weighed about 50 pounds, proved an awkward burden as it had to be held high, above water. For the men who humped it, the exercise was without point and, the next day, they took their complaint to Varley. Keith Forsyth recalled:

There was a hell to pay about it. The officer said, "You can't speak like that to officers." I said, "Well I can." I told them what I thought. I told Varley—Our argument was this: We would have been better off dumping the mortar before we started. Then at least we could fight as infantry when we got there. We had our rifles and the mortar. We had no ammunition for the mortar. You couldn't cart ammunition. Each fellow would have had to carry 60 pounds over what we already had. We won the day. Varley agreed with us. We never did another swamp exercise afterwards.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 July 1941. Photographs that could not be sent home were those that showed details of military defences or equipment.

¹¹⁶ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

—*Training in the rubber, exercises, “stunts” and demonstrations*

The soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion now spent more time training among the rubber trees, learning the peculiarities of such terrain and finding solutions to the problems it created:

The trees were all in rows and you can see for a hundred yards there, 45 degrees at right angles, the same this side.

But we learnt in training, if you walk round the trees like that, you've got no chance of hitting a fellow advancing towards you. Because he is in the dead ground, between the clear avenues...¹¹⁷

Much time was spent learning such concepts as “Dead Ground” and “Cover” in the Malayan terrain, and surviving members of the 2/18th Battalion, whatever their feelings then, appreciate the value of this training today:

I don't know if you got better at the jungle but I do believe that...we would never have lived if we had not been trained with the infantry, because you learned so much about Out of Sight—they used to spruik to us that there's Cover From Fire which is an obstacle that would stop anything from hitting you. And there's Cover From View. And there is How To Take Cover. I tell you what, I learned How To Take Cover.¹¹⁸

Their training was put into practice in a combined exercise over several days in March involving British, Indian and Australian troops and, regularly and far less grandly, on intercompany or platoon “stunts” during which time they often camped in the rubber or the jungle. While never getting enough weapons practice with live ammunition, they viewed countless demonstrations on everything from camouflage to the making of a Molotov

¹¹⁷ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

¹¹⁸ Stan O'Grady, interview with Stan O'Grady and Fred Harris, 14 July 2000.

PREPARING FOR WAR

Cocktail. Malaya, especially during the 2/18th Battalion's first half year of residence, continued to seem far removed from the reality of war. While the men marched, trained, paraded and prepared, often to the point of exhaustion, they continued to refer to themselves, ironically, as "Menzies' Glamour Boys". Variations of the sentence, "Here I am, nothing but a Glamour Boy in Malaya," recur regularly in men's letters. That they themselves felt they were not pulling their weight to the extent of their fellow countrymen in the Middle East and Greece was endlessly galling. George McLaughlin wrote in June:

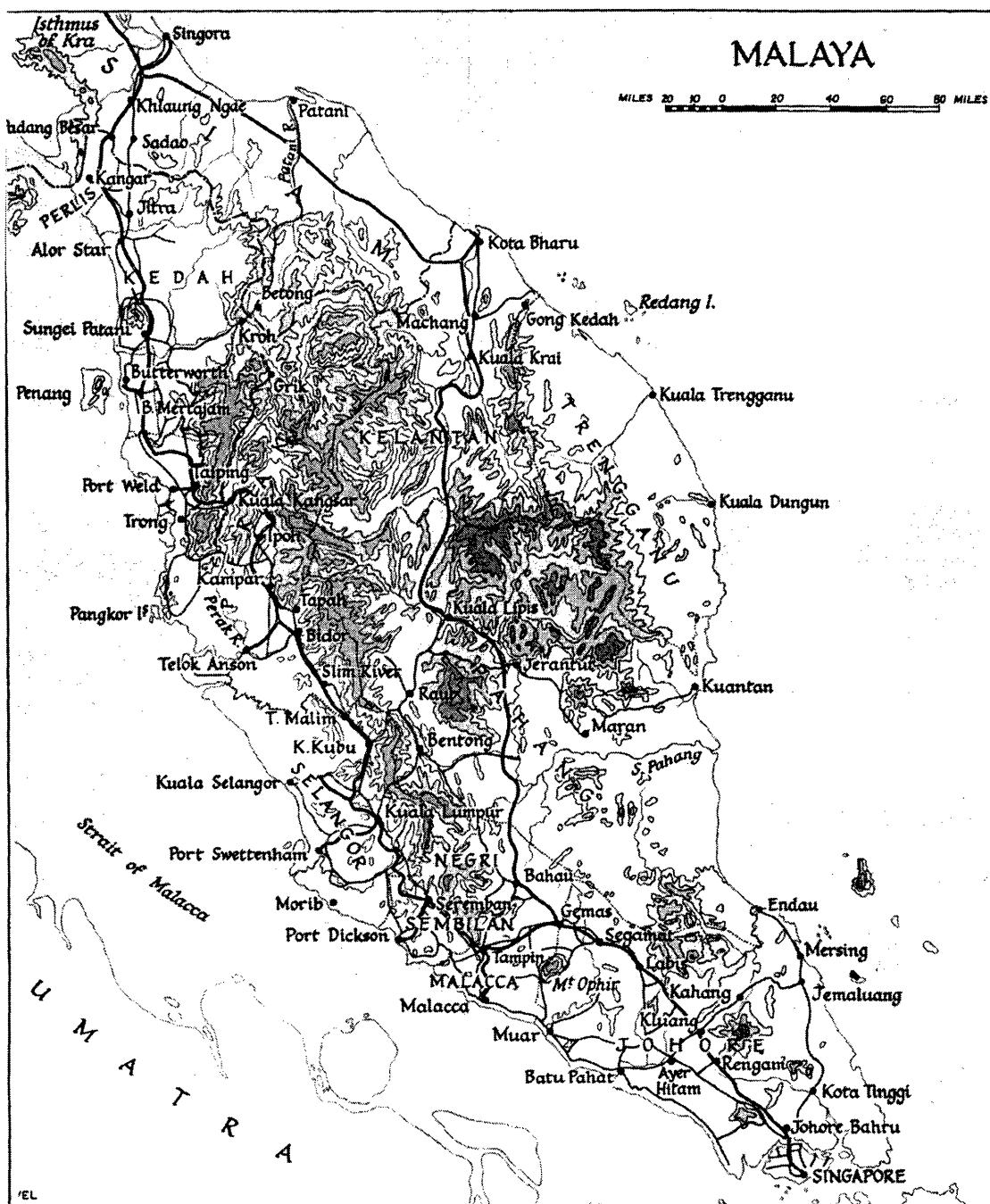
We went out by transport on Friday and watched a demonstration—landmines, tank mines etc—Rather amusing that after so long in the Army we are still watching demonstrations and have not yet seen anything of the real thing don't you think? After the show we went on to the beach and had lunch, most of the lads had a swim and enjoyed it.¹¹⁹

In May the battalion moved to Seremban where they were housed in the King George V School, right in the town itself. Now the troops only marched on the parade ground and the skills they practised were only in the "bull ring". Their six week stay in Seremban was, in comparative terms, almost a holiday. Fred Harris remembered that, "We had a ball there. Every night you could just walk out, down the street. It was just open leave there. We didn't do much army things there at all."¹²⁰ This pleasant period was all too short—on 16 June, the battalion moved again, back to Port Dickson but now they were quartered in the Haig Lines which were "less comfortable than before." Over the next six weeks the troops were involved in rigorous five-day company exercises in the rubber and jungle near Port Dickson. During the periods of respite, they went on leave or played sport. In their letters home, they continued to complain about being delayed in Malaya. Their life

¹¹⁹ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 1 June 1941.

¹²⁰ Fred Harris, interview, 12 December 2000.

THE MALAY PENINSULA



Source: Kirby, S. Woodburn, *The War Against Japan*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957-1969.

as garrison soldiers had become regular, even predictable. After six months, they had acclimatised, physically, to the tropical environment but they were generally impatient to leave. On 1 August the battalion celebrated its first birthday by spending a day on the beach at Port Dickson—to the troops, it was incongruous that they had joined up to fight in the war against Germany. The weeks passed. Now Japan effectively controlled Indochina and 100,000 Japanese troops were massed on the border with Thailand. A second brigade of the 8th Division AIF, the 27th Brigade, arrived in Malaya on 15 August. Its purpose was not to replace but to reinforce the Australian contingent in Malaya. Bennett now commanded a large enough force to undertake the defence of a specific area. General Percival allocated the defence of Northern Johore to the Australians.

Transfer to the east coast

Consequently, on 27th August 1941 the 2/18th Battalion transferred from the Haig Lines at Port Dickson to the east coast. The 22nd Brigade's responsibility was the Mersing-Endau area. The 2/18th Battalion was responsible for the strip of coastline and the adjacent hinterland south of the Mersing River, while the 2/20th Battalion guarded the town and the area north of the Mersing River. The 2/19th Battalion, at Jemaluang, secured the approach from the west.

The 2/18th Battalion travelled by road and rail on the journey from the western coast of Malaya to the east. The road party travelled in 120 vehicles—in Singapore and Malaya the chronic equipment shortages did not extend to military transport. One man remarked that, “It was wicked how much transport there was.”¹²¹ The trucks followed the major trunk road south before turning east at its junction with the east-west highway. They crossed the country, passing through Kluang, site of one RAF airfield, and then Kahang, site of another, before their journey ended at Jemaluang. Jemaluang was only a small town a few miles inland from the east coast but it was strategically placed at the junction

¹²¹ Dr Frank Mills of the 2/9th Field Ambulance, interview, 1996.

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between the east-west road and the north-south road that began at Endau thirty-five miles further north, and extended south along the coast to Mersing before it turned inland and continued south through Jemaluang, Kota Tinggi, Johore Bahru and eventually the causeway to Singapore Island. The rail party detrained at Kluang—no rail line extended to the east coast—and it too finished the journey by motor transport.

The 2/18th Battalion remained at Jemaluang for a week. While Allied Command had undertaken to build new accommodation for the troops, the huts were not yet ready. The men camped in tents in a rubber plantation outside the town. Since it was a break camp, duties were largely limited to camp routines. Any training was minimal but the relaxed schedule did little to mitigate the oppressive conditions—the heat was intense and the air “absolutely breathless”. Dress regulations, rigidly enforced after dark in a bid to prevent malaria, added to the discomfort. Despite the regular downpours, lack of water added to the testing conditions. Men did what they could to make themselves more comfortable:

Living conditions are not so good at the moment. It is very hot just now and I am sweating like the proverbial pig. It is always hot as blazes. Water is very scarce. At the moment I am sitting in my tent waiting for it to rain so that I can get out in it with a cake of soap and so get clean. I am sharing a tent...we have done all we can do to make ourselves comfortable. We have bought some native mats for the floor and they are a great success.¹²²

The move to Mersing was greeted with relief. Sea breezes gave respite from the unremitting heat, as did daily swims. “We’ve got the sea at our back door now and have a dip first thing each morning,” wrote Short.¹²³ The camp’s setting was idyllic. Coconut

¹²² John Fuller, letter to his mother, 31 August 1941.

¹²³ Merton Short, letter to his family, 17 September 1941.

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palms fringed the white beach—it was called Palm Grove—two miles south of Mersing.

Behind the camp was a wide expanse of luxurious, tall grass which covered a recently drained swamp. Beyond this was a strip of jungle through which wound cleared paths, and then a rubber plantation and the road to Jemaluang. The new huts were simple, made of attap with sand floors, and spacious. However, it was not the improved conditions, the pleasant surroundings or the spacious accommodation that added zest to the men's morale but the fact that the battalion, finally, had a real job to do. The 2/18th Battalion's brief was to build and man defences against an enemy landing on the beaches south of Mersing.

Mersing, by virtue of its glorious beaches and the direct road to Singapore, was seen as the likely landing place for an invading force. As John Waterford observed, "It seemed to be...the only place, where a large scale landing was possible."¹²⁴ A brigade stationed in the area previously had constructed little in the way of defence works, so the 2/18th Battalion set to work.

Constructing the defences at Mersing

The battalion diarist, with a gush of sentimentality, recorded in the October edition of *Men May Smoke*:

The men, finding they had a definite job to do, became more contented than they had been before. Knowing that, in the event of war coming to Malaya, they were occupying a position of great strategic importance, the troops bent their back to their toil and, despite blistered hands and sunburnt shoulders, became a particularly happy band.¹²⁵

The troops, while more prosaic, also remarked on the change in their outlook in their letters home, as have survivors, contemporary observers and historians ever since. "We have made our move to what might be termed our battle station. All day, now, we dig with

¹²⁴ Waterford, *Footprints*, p.15.

¹²⁵ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated.

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pick and shovel, constructing our defences. It's hard work but gets us occupied and in good fighting condition," wrote Sergeant Alan Black.¹²⁶ In a subsequent letter he observed: "I don't think anywhere in the world today would you find a body of men as fit as our Battalion. They are bronzed and tough and ready to give an account of themselves whosoever comes to cross our path."¹²⁷

While glad to serve a possibly useful purpose, the troops remained unconvinced that war would eventuate. Nevertheless, they were under no illusions as to the identity of the enemy even if, officially, they had not been so informed. International tension had flared in July and August (when the Japanese forces massed on the IndoChina-Thai border) and subsided again. "I was reading Churchill's speech tonight...In a few well chosen words he told the Japs where they stood. I don't think the Japs are in a position to give much cheek," wrote McLaughlin.¹²⁸ In September, Fuller wrote: "We have been working pretty hard lately getting ready for the Japs. Personally I think we are wasting our time. I don't think they will come now. They missed their opportunity."¹²⁹ He enclosed in that letter a song that summed up the continuing sense of frustration:

We're armed to teeth with bloody guns,

No bloody Japs, no bloody Huns,

We're sitting here on bloody bums,

Oh, bloody, bloody, bloody.

Oh take us from this bloody land,

Across to the bloody desert sand,

¹²⁶ Alan Black, letter to his nephew, 8 October 1941.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, letter to his parents, 24 November 1941.

¹²⁸ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 24 August 1941. McLaughlin's reference was to Churchill's 24 August "Atlantic Charter" speech in which Churchill declared that Japan's imperialist activities "must stop". He said that while America was endeavouring to arrive at an amicable settlement satisfactory to Japan, in the event of the failure of these negotiations, the British would "range themselves unhesitatingly on the side of the United States". <http://www.earthstation1.com/pgs/churchill/dos-wc410824.wav.html>, [accessed 10 October 2004].

¹²⁹ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 11 September 1941.

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To give our bloody mates a hand,

Oh, bloody, bloody, bloody.¹³⁰

He was disgruntled and his frustration was shared generally. “I am afraid we’re rather fed up with being parked here. Like fiddling while Rome burns, with the difference that Nero didn’t care,” Short had written.¹³¹ An officer remarked bitterly that, “Everything here is wrong at present,”¹³² while a private also vented his feelings: “I’m very fed up with this country and things in general. It’s not my idea of soldiering to be stuck in this country, so far from the nearest scene of action.”¹³³ Months of waiting took a toll. The relentless training schedule of the early months had been largely replaced by physically hard construction work—but all contributed to times of individual weariness and dissatisfaction. Then in October Fuller reported that “the Japs seem to be talking again,”¹³⁴ while Waterford remembered, “We could feel the added tension and our night sentries were doubled.”¹³⁵ During the following weeks, that sense of tension mounted steadily. But even as late as 24 November, Black was writing, “There is not a thing to tell you about. News is scarce. Here we are, Aussies in a frontline position without any enemy. As I said to you all along, the Japs would not fight the British.”¹³⁶

Despite Black’s prognostication, the battalion was not taken by surprise when the war with Japan began on 7 December 1941. Ammunition was issued at last.¹³⁷ The battalion moved into its battle positions—men lived in their dugouts but apart from this, life went on pretty much as before. “We’re all in our trenches now just waiting and we all hope we don’t have to wait long,” Private Les Stanton wrote gallantly in a Christmas letter to his sister.¹³⁸ The fighting was in the north of the country; the Australians were in the

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Merton Short, letter to his family, 26 June 1941.

¹³² Ken Mosher, letter to his wife, 20 November 1941.

¹³³ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 15 September 1941.

¹³⁴ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 9 October 1941.

¹³⁵ Waterford, *Footprints*, p.15.

¹³⁶ Alan Black, letter to his parents, 24 November 1941.

¹³⁷ John Fuller, letter to his brother, 8 December 1941. Fuller wrote, “We are absolutely lousy...with guns and ammo...of all kinds.”

¹³⁸ Les Stanton, letter to his sister, undated, probably December 1941.

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extreme south. The 2/18th Battalion continued as it had been, training and perfecting its defences, endlessly preparing as 1941 drew to a close. Major Charles O'Brien, Commanding Officer of B Company, assessed the effort: "Until the outbreak of war and during the first few weeks the men worked like slaves preparing the positions. The final result was an extremely strong defensive area."¹³⁹

In his last letter, written from Singapore Island, Fuller described the work that the battalion had undertaken since the beginning of September to achieve this result:

In that time the banks had become a veritable rabbit warren.
The dug trenches, dugouts, weapon pits all of which had to be timbered. The timber had to be cut in the jungle and carted out in trucks and then carried up to the trenches. It was a big job and it absolutely amazed me to see the earthworks take shape so quickly. In addition every position was surrounded by barbed wire and plenty of it. We had twenty-five pounder guns supporting us, Anti-tank guns, Vickers machine guns, Bren guns, mortars, etc and on top of that practically all the ground outside our lines was covered with Anti-tank and Anti-personnel mines. It was certainly a wonderfully well prepared defence. Our fire power was enormous.¹⁴⁰

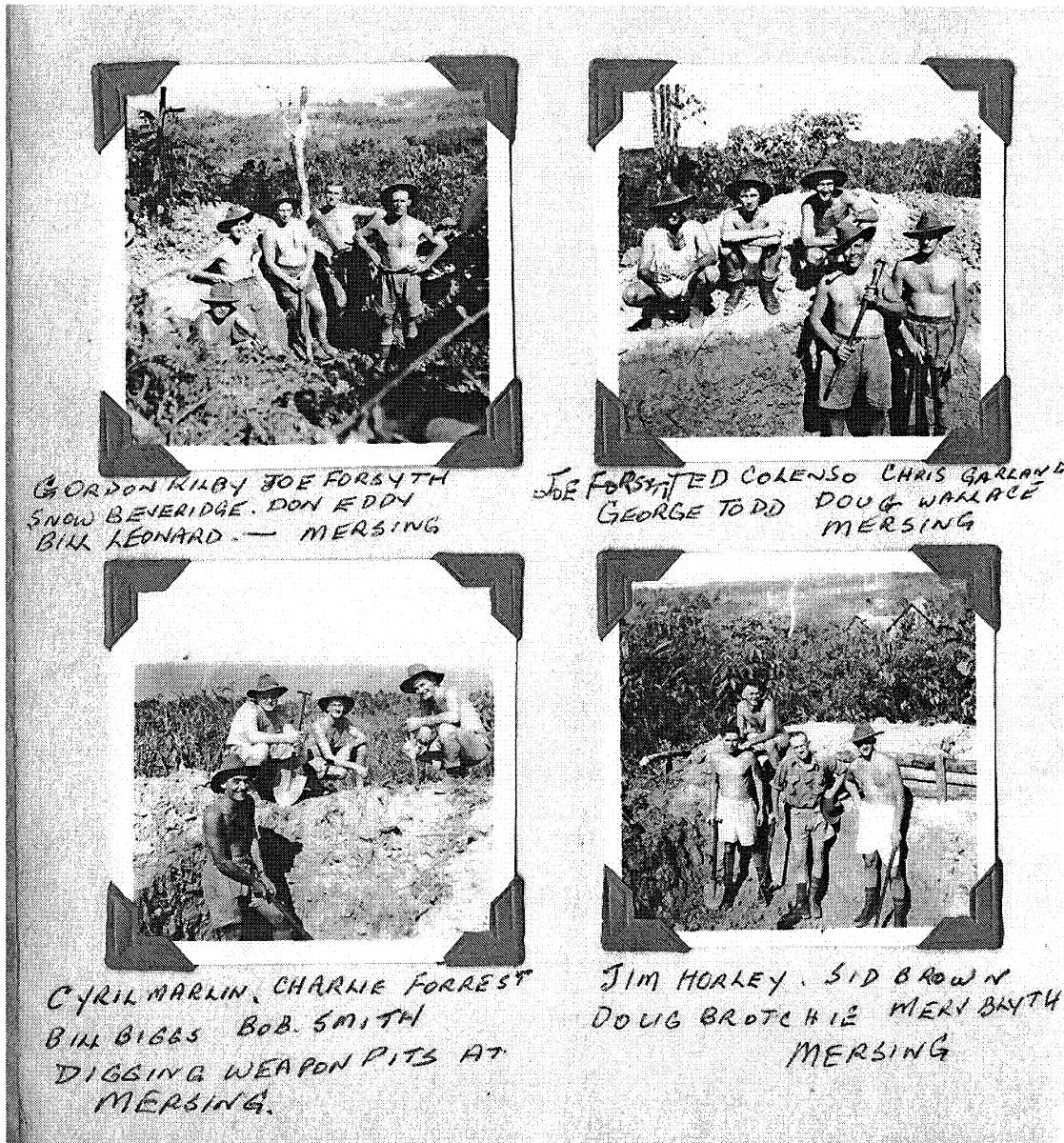
The first job had been the digging—no doubt resulting in the “blistered hands” alluded to in *Men May Smoke*. The digging recalled memories of the trench system that the battalion had excavated at Bathurst a year earlier. “Our mind goes back to Ingleburn and Bathurst, when we thrashed out the problems of defensive works. It is quite apparent that those

¹³⁹ Charles O'Brien, interview by Captain G.H.Nicholson at the Nakom Paton Camp, 23 September 1945, copy of the transcript in the possession of the author.

¹⁴⁰ John Fuller, letter to his parents, written from Singapore Island, February 1942, undated.

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DIGGING WEAPONS PITS AT MERSING



Source: John Fuller's diarised photographic album Volume 3.

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lessons were faithfully learnt,” wrote Varley.¹⁴¹ The digging was arduous and long. As one soldier complained in a letter home, “We are digging trenches so that must account for my fed up feeling. I don’t mind digging in a garden, but pick and shovel work is certainly not my forte. Besides we work at it all day.”¹⁴² The speed and effectiveness of the work depended more upon the active and co-operative will of the soldiers engaged in it than on army discipline. As Loxton explained:

You have got to have the respect. The Australian army depends upon that mutual respect. If the men were doing the work, if they were achieving the object of the job—You had to always bear in mind that a lot of those blokes were very experienced in the type of work were doing at Mersing. A lot more experienced than their officers.¹⁴³

Not all officers understood this. At a grassroots level, there were rifts in the “happy band” and the frustrations and resentments occasionally rippled the surface:

We were digging trenches. It was a hell of a hard job. And we’d work like hell. The lieutenant knew we were doing the job. He *knew*. If he was there, he’d pitch in and help. If he said, “You do the job,” we did it. Then we would knock off and just sit down and might have a game of cards or something like that or might have a cup of tea. Then the captain would come round and *he would blow the tripe out of us!* He was so officious.¹⁴⁴

The work forged ahead. The trenches began in the hills above and at the northern end of “Palm Beach” and ran round them back towards Mersing to join up with the 2/20th

¹⁴¹ Arthur Varley in *Men May Smoke*, Vol. 1, No. 7, October 1941, unpaginated..

¹⁴² Colin Spence, letter to his mother, 15 September 1941.

¹⁴³ Alan Loxton, interview, 27 August 1999.

¹⁴⁴ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

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Battalion's area of responsibility. Palm Grove beckoned as the best place for an enemy to land its tanks—the beach and its hinterland were flat and the road nearby. Therefore, on the flat, behind the beach, the troops dug a great trench, a tank trap that extended the full length of the beach. Moreover, three double apron and dannert fences surrounded each platoon post, strategically placed Vickers guns covered the defensive and tactical wiring at all the possible landing sites, and each company laid over five hundred anti tank and anti personnel mines in its own area as well as additional mine fields between.

The scale of the fortifications, undertaken by a single but dedicated battalion, was immense. Because it was impossible to camouflage such extensive positions, the carriers were used to smash through the undergrowth, thereby constructing "dummy" roads that led to "dummy" positions. These were to prove effective during bombing raids after the war began. "We had the satisfaction of seeing these dummy positions (when use was made of clothes apparently hanging out to dry in the areas) bombed with no effect on us."¹⁴⁵

When timber was needed to line the trenches, traps and weapons pits, the soldiers cut down tall trees in the forests and jungles south of Mersing. Loxton greatly appreciated a lesson in the use of an adze given him by a corporal in his platoon on one such excursion. "He taught me how to use an axe and an adze. I am quite proud of that."¹⁴⁶ But, like the digging, tree felling was also extraordinarily hard work. Keith Forsyth remembered:

I used to get sent out to the jungle with a couple of fellows, cutting poles. What was the problem with the poles—the trees were that close together, you could cut the damn' thing off, a pole that wide and probably 20 or 30 feet high—and then you had to drag it out through. The thing wouldn't fall.

¹⁴⁵ Charles O'Brien, interview by Captain G.H.Nicholson at the Nakom Paton Camp, 23 September 1945, copy of the transcript in the possession of the author.

¹⁴⁶ Alan Loxton, interview, 27 August 1999.

You had to drop the branches with the stump. It was hard work.¹⁴⁷

Despite the concerted effort of the battalion in constructing the defences, training was not abandoned but it had changed in character. Now, what was possible for the most part was active, small patrol work. Such a patrol captured the first Japanese prisoners, airmen who had escaped from a downed plane shortly after hostilities commenced. “The jungle provided perfect conditions for small, aggressive, and mobile units to operate”.¹⁴⁸ Such operations, also used effectively by the Japanese, proved in the Malayan campaign to be far more effective than the concentration of force and firepower in fixed positions.

The troops of the 2/18th Battalion laboured on the defences, trained in the rubber and jungle and on the roads, and carried out guard duties. After the war began, sentries were doubled. Only infantrymen acted as guards—grateful specialist platoons were exempt from that particular duty. The tension brought about by imminent war (with occasional reprieves when it looked like war would not happen) that had steadily built since the battalion arrived on the east coast increased after the war began so that, at least for one man, it became unbearable. On guard duty one night he loosed off shots at what he believed was the approaching enemy. The enemy proved to have been a now dead water buffalo.¹⁴⁹ Other fears added to the tension for the guards on dark nights. A man in a nearby battalion was found dead at his post. A tiger had come by—its paw prints were in evidence—and he had had a heart attack. Usually, however, guard duty was another mundane job imposed on a man who had already spent the day digging soil or hauling logs. The 2/18th Battalion had waited a long time for action but that time was always occupied.

During the weeks after the war began the work did not slacken. A sense of urgency underpinned every task and both officers and men laboured industriously to

¹⁴⁷ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

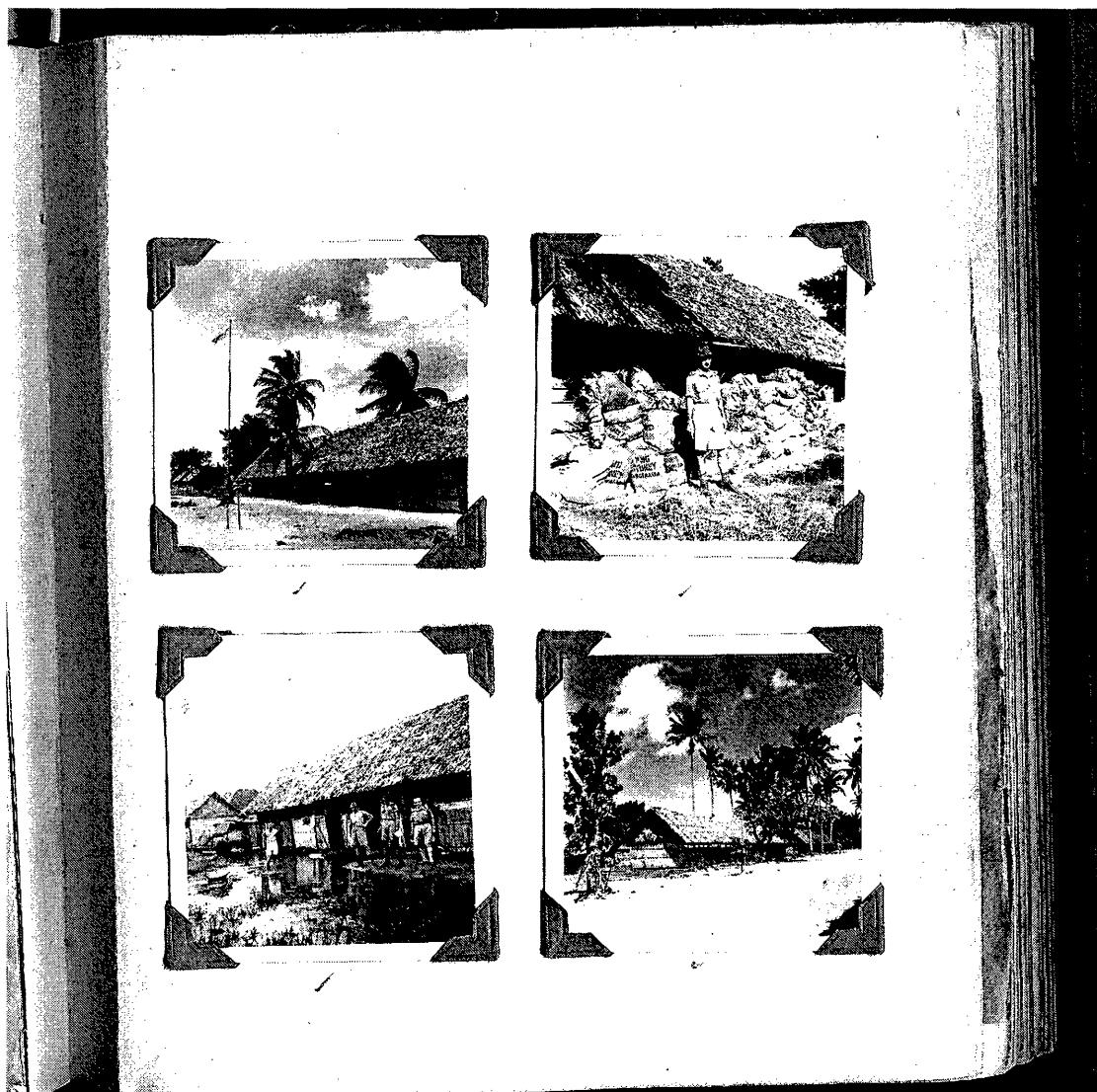
¹⁴⁸ Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, p.94.

¹⁴⁹ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

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THE PALM GROVE CAMP AT MERSING

John Fuller's third diarised photograph album has very few captions. The photographs on this page were taken in late November when the monsoons brought wind and as well as rain. The camp at Palm Grove was constantly sodden and the mail was always welcome.



Source: John Fuller's diarised photograph album Volume 3.

complete their preparations. The monsoon season was now at its height: gales and torrential rain occurred daily. The men splashed about in the mud which in normal circumstances would have been depressing. The army attempted to improve conditions by bringing in mobile bath units. Each man could now have a hot shower at least twice a week. “I am at least three shades lighter in colour now than I was beforehand. There is no limitation on time and consequently I stayed in for half an hour. It was really an absolute treat,” Fuller wrote ecstatically.¹⁵⁰

Christmas too was not ignored. The officers served their men a traditional hot turkey dinner while the sergeants took over guard duty. The war news was not encouraging but the men assumed that that would alter. “It is hard to express an opinion on the Far East situation at the moment. So much is going on behind the scenes that we know nothing about. All we can do is await events. But there is no doubt that something is on the way to the Japs,” Fuller wrote.¹⁵¹ Japanese planes flew over them but then went away. On 7 January Brigadier Taylor formed “Endau Force” to patrol the area between Endau and Mersing—it comprised a company each from the 2/19th and 2/20th Battalions and the 2/18th Battalion’s “Ack Ack platoon.”¹⁵² The following day, Bennett, his division now divided, took command of “Westforce”, a group that included the 27th Brigade AIF, for operations on the western side of the country, while the 22nd Brigade remained at Mersing under Taylor’s command. The 2/18th Battalion continued to wait for the war to come to it. Fuller wrote: “We are still in our battle stations and all we have to do is to wait for them. They must hit us before they can take Singapore.”¹⁵³ It now seemed that they would do so.

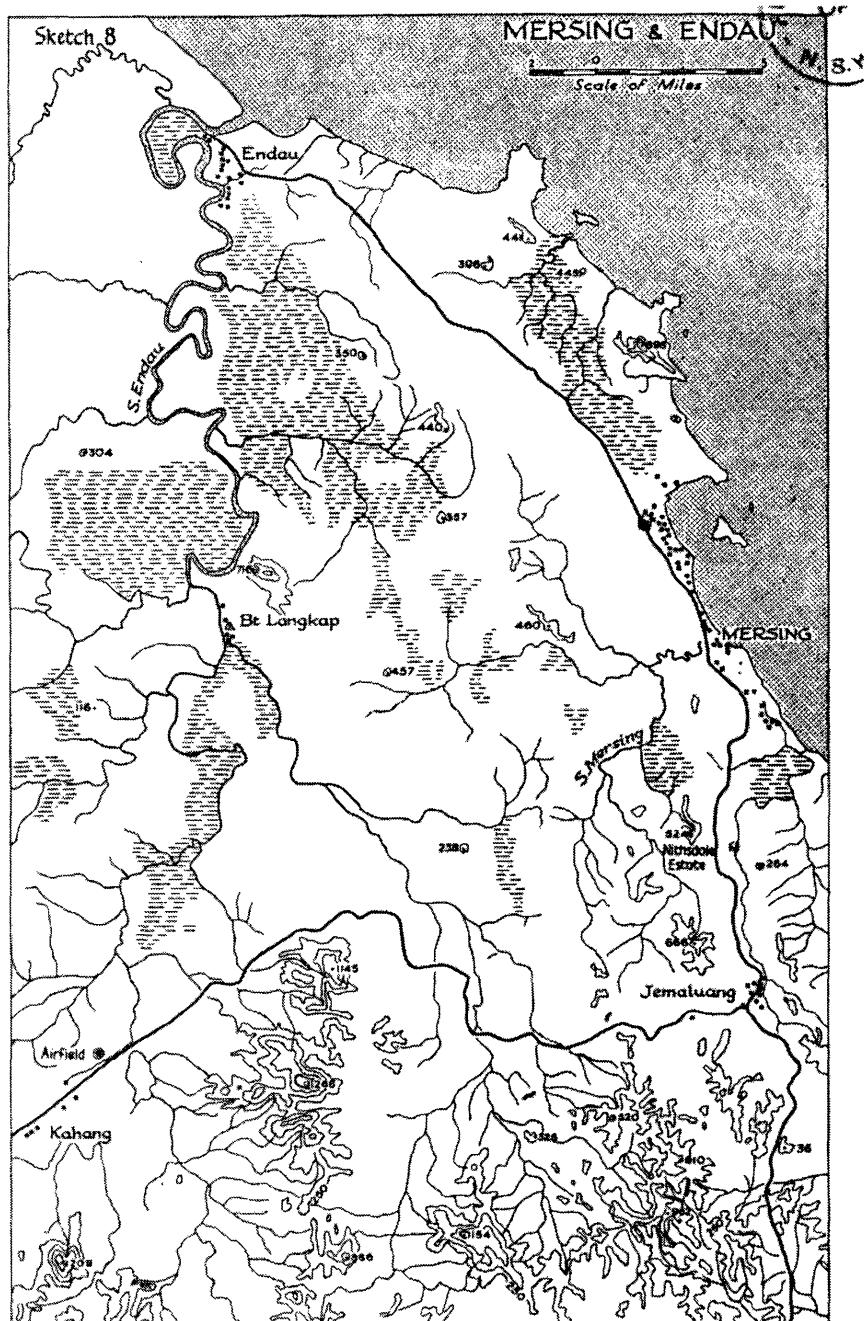
¹⁵⁰ John Fuller, letter to his parents, December 1941.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, letter to his mother, 1 January 1942.

¹⁵² Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.250.

¹⁵³ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 7 January 1942.

ENDAU MERSING AREA



Source: Kirby, S. Woodburn, *The War Against Japan*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957-1969.

Japanese planes bombed the 2/18th positions and those of other units in the area for the first time on 13 January 1942.¹⁵⁴ From 15 January air raids at Mersing occurred daily.¹⁵⁵ During raids the men of the 2/18th Battalion sheltered in their slit trenches and, in all the raids, only one man, Private Bill Jolly, was killed when, on 20 January, he was caught in the open.¹⁵⁶ The Australians north of the Mersing River—both Endau Force and the 2/10th Field Regiment—were now also encountering the enemy on the ground. Colonel Koba's detachment of the 18th Division had made its way south from Kuantan (see Chapter One), and was infiltrating the area. The Australians vigorously engaged the Japanese when they met them in a series of skirmishes but as the enemy appeared to be gathering in strength, Brigadier Taylor ordered Endau Force to withdraw back south of the Mersing River on 16 January.¹⁵⁷ Two days later the 2/19th Battalion was moved from its position at Jemaluang to the west coast of Malaya where it would see action in the Muar sector. Koba's forces moved towards Mersing. On 21 January the 2/20th Battalion “dealt with” a Japanese patrol near the mouth of the Mersing River and the next day a section of the 2/20th Battalion and the 2/10th Field Regiment artillery beat off an attack by a full company on the Mersing Bridge. At any time, it seemed, the 2/18th Battalion, south of the river, would be in the front line.

Instead, shockingly, orders came the next day (22 January) to pull out immediately. On 18 January a conference between General Heath and Brigadier Taylor had established a new command structure, to be known as “Eastforce” and effective from the next morning, which comprised all Allied troops in the eastern sector commanded by Taylor under Heath's control.¹⁵⁸ At this conference Heath and Taylor also decided that,

¹⁵⁴ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.251. Units in the area (Eastforce) were Australian: 2/18th and 2/20th Battalions, 2/10th Field Regiment, the 2/10th Field Company, 2/9th Field Ambulance; Indian: 2/17 Dogras, the Jat Battalion (amalgamated 2nd Jats-1/8th Punjabs), Malay: two companies of the Johore Military Forces and the Johore Volunteer Engineers.

¹⁵⁵ 2/18th Battalion AIF War Diary entries, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 January 1942, AWM 52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20 January 1942.

¹⁵⁷ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.251.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

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because of the deteriorating situation in the west, the defence of the Mersing road south of Jemaluang now had more point than the defence of the Mersing area.¹⁵⁹ Should Kluang and Kahang and their airfields be lost, as was increasingly likely, the road from the west would be open to the enemy at Jemaluang. Eastforce, positioned north of the junction, would be trapped. The threat of an invasion from the sea at Mersing was no longer the primary concern.

Indeed, it was only two days later that Percival drafted contingency plans to abandon Malaya altogether. Once these plans were produced, the possibility of a retreat to Singapore became, in Wigmore's words, an "insistent probability".¹⁶⁰ Percival's plans required that Eastforce withdraw to Johore Bahru along the Mersing-Kota Tinggi road in line with the Allied forces withdrawing in the west. However, even before Percival gave the orders that implemented the first stage of the withdrawal, Eastforce was on the move.¹⁶¹ The 2/18th Battalion received its instructions from Taylor and withdrew, in pouring rain so that they were unobserved by enemy planes, to the Nithsdale Estate, a rubber plantation six miles south of Mersing, on the afternoon of 22 January.¹⁶² C Company proceeded further south to occupy the 2/19th Battalion's old position at Jemaluang. In a letter to his younger brother, Fuller gave an account of the conditions at Nithsdale:

The luxuries of life are now a thing of the past. It rained like the devil all day yesterday and I was out in it all the time. It was not until about 8 p.m. that I got a chance to change. On top of that I slept the night on a slab of concrete on a groundsheet. Fortunately the hardness of the bed did not

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p.261.

¹⁶¹ Percival implemented the first stage of the plan for withdrawal to Singapore Island on the morning of 23rd January 1942. The 2/18th Battalion had abandoned its Palm Grove camp the evening before and the 2/20th Battalion was already scheduled to leave its camp on the afternoon of 23 January.

¹⁶² 2/18th War Diary entry 22 January 1942, AWM 52 8/3/18,
<http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

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affect my sleep, so no discomfort resulted. I am satisfied that I can sleep anywhere now. It's a great life especially once you learn to be at home in any surroundings under any conditions.¹⁶³

Only now did the troops who had built and guarded their own defences for so long understand the enemy's strategy. Harry Harris remembered how they felt: "All of a sudden we realised the Japs were all going down the west coast... We were so disappointed that we pulled out of there without even trying."¹⁶⁴ However, a week later, from Singapore Island, Jack Amos was to write: "We got some consolation out of the fact that they bombed and gunned our old positions the day after we moved."¹⁶⁵ The enemy did not know that the 2/18th Battalion had departed.

The following day, 23 January, Varley submitted a proposal to Taylor "for an offensive operation against the enemy force in this area", an ambush on the road to Jemaluang beside which the battalion was presently camped.¹⁶⁶ The 2/20th Battalion was to depart Mersing through the 2/18th's old position that evening after which it would continue down the road to take up a position south of the Jemaluang road junction. This would give the enemy the impression of a general withdrawal from the Mersing area and allow the companies of the 2/18th Battalion to move, unseen, into their ambush positions. The plan assumed that the Japanese—Koba's forces—who were now massing north of the Mersing River, would lose no time in following the Australians down the road and would thus move into the trap. Taylor approved the plan. After eighteen months of continuous training and preparation the 2/18th Battalion was at last to go into battle.

The men of the 2/18th Battalion were as ready for battle as their equipment, training and discipline could make them, despite their having abandoned their fixed

¹⁶³ John Fuller, letter to his brother, 23 January 1942.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p.45.

¹⁶⁵ Jack Amos, letter to his father, 3 February 1942.

¹⁶⁶ 2/18th Battalion War Diary, entry 23 January 1942, AWM 52, 8/3/18,
<http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

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defences. During twelve months in Malaya they had practised with their weapons (although never often enough or for long enough with live ammunition) and, to the extent that it was possible, they had adapted their gear to suit the conditions. As they had moved from post to post in Malaya, they had become experienced in the Malayan terrain and had practised mock battles in rubber plantations, ambushes on the roads and warfare in the jungle. Their discipline, enforced through the application of routines, rules and regulations, was impressive. As one man wrote, “We could not be labelled as untrained, ill equipped or unprepared for any eventuality.”¹⁶⁷ The battle on the Nithsdale Estate represented, for the men of the 2/18th Battalion, the culmination of eighteen months of individual and concerted effort. The men were prepared and now it was apparently a matter of applying what they had learned. However, battle experience would teach one more lesson—that in battle, there are no certainties: “War is the province of uncertainty; three-fourths of the things on which action in war is based lie hidden in the fog of greater or less uncertainty.”¹⁶⁸ In battle, chaos reigns and the original planning is always likely to be either discarded or changed. Only the unexpected can be relied on. In this regard the battle on the Nithsdale Estate would be no different from any other.

¹⁶⁷ Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, p.94.

¹⁶⁸ Karl von Clausewitz, quoted in Dyer, *War*, p.133.