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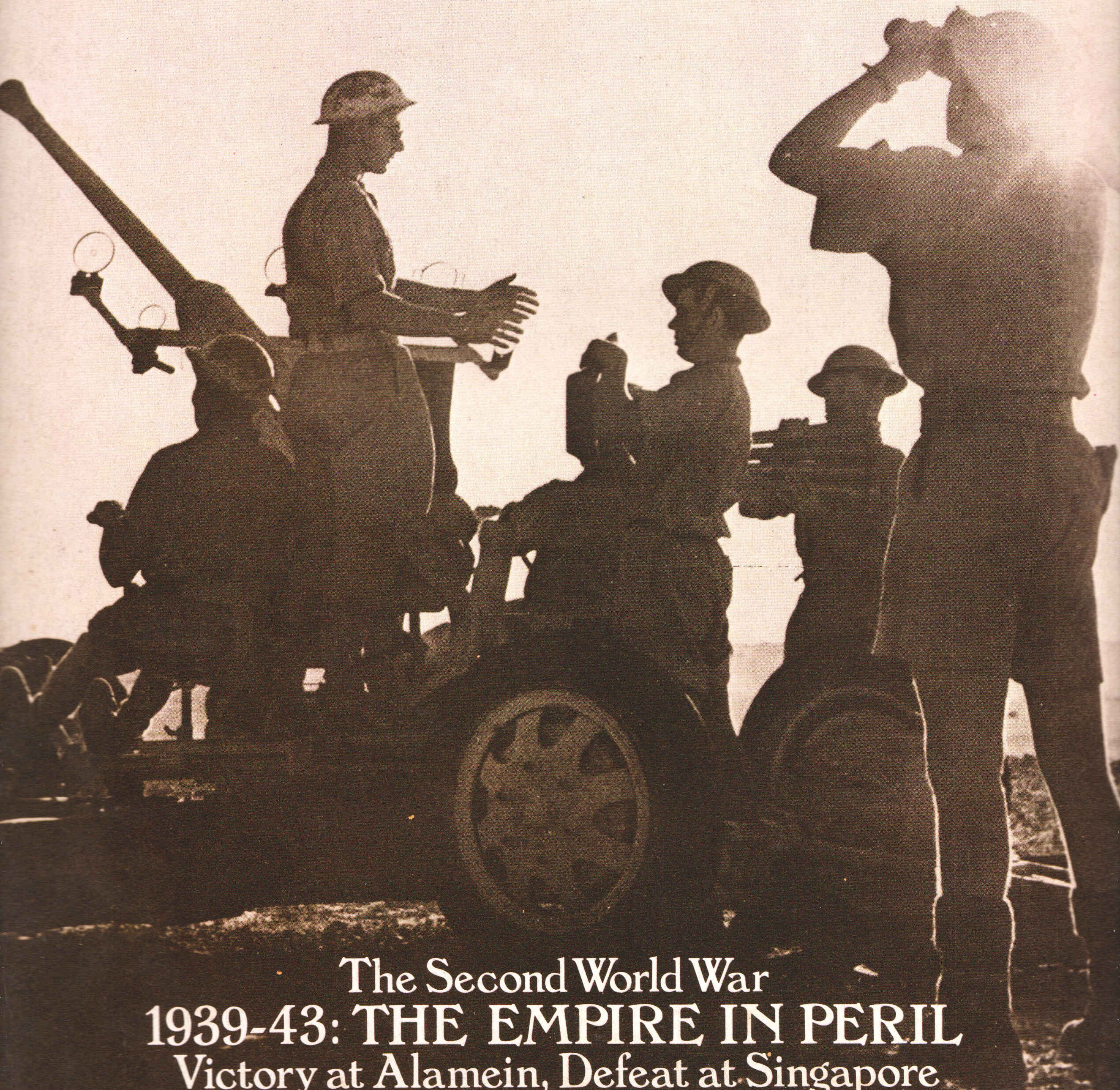

The Second World War

1939-43: THE EMPIRE IN PERIL

Victory at Alamein, Defeat at Singapore

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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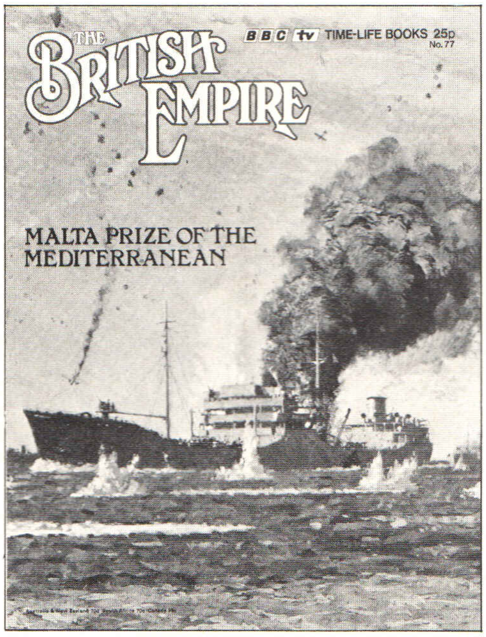
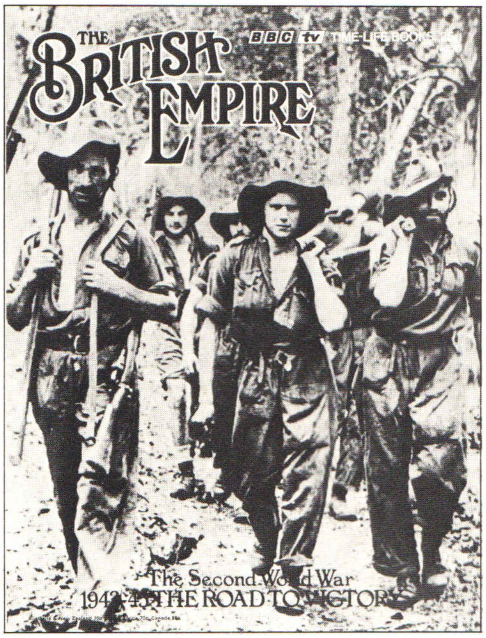




CONTENTS

2101. 1939-43: Empire in Peril
Britain goes to war with Nazi Germany and the overseas Dominions range themselves on the side of the mother country.

2104. Picture Essay: First of the Imperial Few
Pilots from all parts of the Empire show their skill and heroism during the desperate days of the Battle of Britain.

2108. An Appeal to the Empire
In the aftermath of Dunkirk, Winston Churchill urges the Empire to concentrate its energies and resources on securing victory in Europe.

2110. Picture Essay: The War in the Desert
British and Empire forces throw Rommel's Afrika Korps into retreat at El Alamein.

2118. Shadow of the Rising Sun
Preoccupied with Europe and the Middle East, British planners neglect the Japanese threat to Malaya and Singapore.

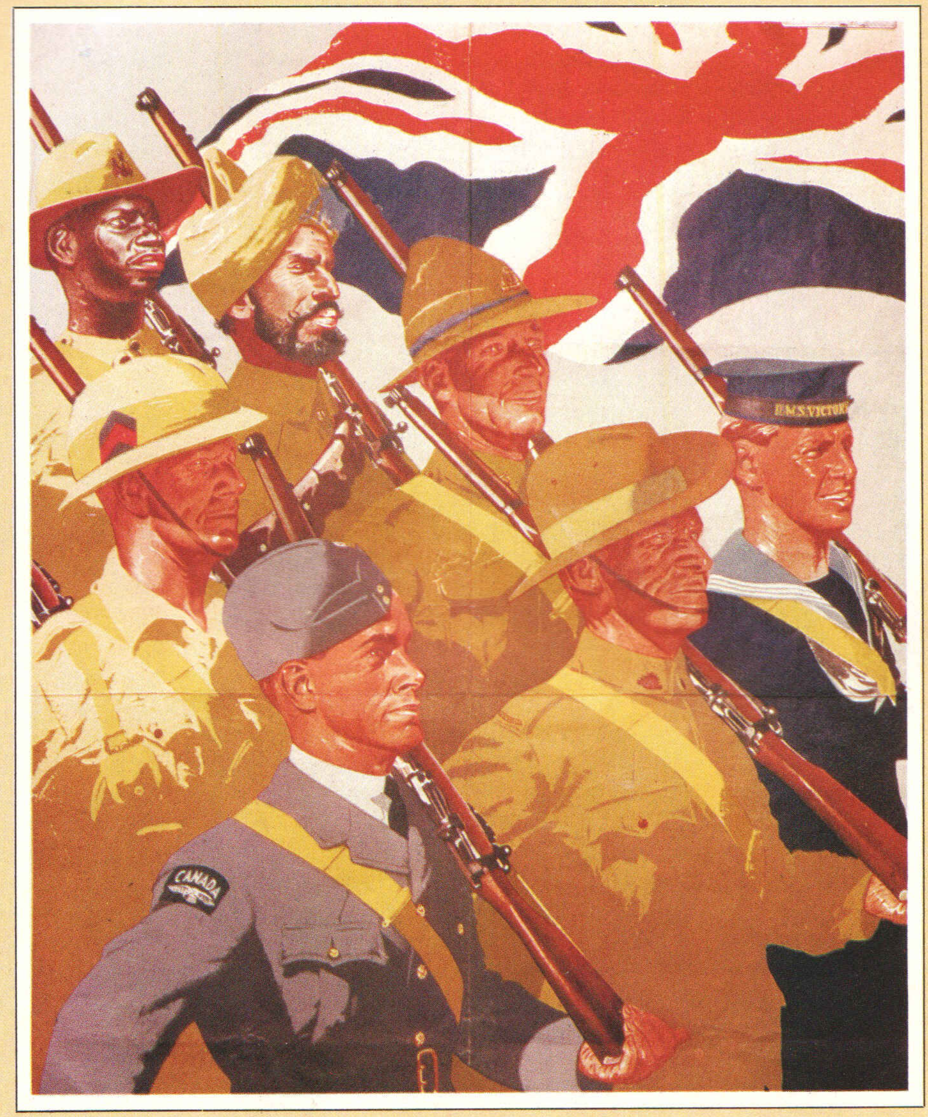
2124. Picture Essay: Disaster in the Far East
The Japanese occupy Singapore, inflicting on Britain one of the worst military and political disasters in her history.

Cover: The crew of a British anti-aircraft gun in the Western Desert prepares to repel an evening attack by German sky-raiders.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

1939-43

EMPIRE IN PERIL



This propaganda postcard shows Empire volunteers united in arms under the Flag.

When Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, her overseas Dominions – politically independent, but linked emotionally to the mother country by culture and kinship – did the same. Though their governments, facing no immediate or direct military threat, rejected conscription, volunteers came forward in thousands. This, the first of two chapters on the Empire at war in 1939–45, relates the course of events to the fall of Singapore – a disaster which placed Australia, New Zealand and India in the front line against Japan and thus, for the Empire, turned a European conflict into a world war

By Alan Clark

It is a truism of history that in war are the seeds of destruction of empires – just as, in their prime, empires wax and grow in war. And no clearer illustration of this can be shown than in the performance of the British Empire in the two world wars.

On August 1, 1914, King George V had declared war on behalf of the whole Empire. The threat from growing German sea-power and the specifically imperial ambitions of the Hohenzollerns was clear and menacing. And four years later the British Empire had emerged greatly enlarged, by mandate and annexation.

But in 1939, with the white Dominions and India much more independent than in 1914, the entry into war, like the policies which preceded it, was a much more ragged affair. The British ultimatum expired on September 3, and the declaration of war applied to the Crown Colonies as well. The governments of Australia and New Zealand followed the British example at once without consulting their Parliaments. In South Africa, General Hertzog, the Prime Minister, wished to remain neutral. The Governor refused Hertzog a dissolution; Smuts became Prime Minister and declared war on September 6. The Canadian government waited for their Parliament and declared war on September 10.

In Delhi, the Viceroy declared war on behalf of India. The nationalist Indian Congress was affronted. Constitutionally they were impotent, but a statement was issued: "If co-operation is desired in a worthy cause, this cannot be obtained by compulsion and imposition." Only Ireland managed to stand aside.

The lack of thoroughgoing imperial unity was reflected in several tentative assertions of Dominion independence. On September 8, 1939, the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr. MacKenzie King, declared that conscription for overseas service would not be necessary and repeated his pledge that it would not be introduced in Canada by his administration.

In Canberra, Mr. Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister, was equally categorical, stating on October 20, 1939: "It must be made clear that there is no obligation for service abroad, except in the case of a volunteer for such service."

In Cape Town, General Smuts, while pledging South African assistance, if need arose, to British colonies in southern Africa, restricted service outside the Union to volunteers. (It was not until March, 1940, that a voluntary oath was taken by the great majority of the members of the Union Defence Force to serve "anywhere in Africa.")

What was the Empire fighting for? Residual loyalties and memories of 1914 played their part (although, as will be seen, they were later to affect imperial strategy and dispositions in a less welcome manner). Also, the ties of blood and tradition made it politically impossible for the Dominion Parliaments to stay out.

But in strategic terms it was hard to identify any direct threat from Germany to imperial territories. Indeed, involvement in the European theatre was a positive weakener for Australia and New Zealand who were increasingly apprehensive of Japanese influence in the Far East. Even for Canada, to whom the war would bring obvious industrial benefits, it was not easy to resist the isolationist case when no military aircraft could fly the Atlantic non-stop, and when the German Navy possessed neither heavy battleships nor aircraft-carriers.

These uncertainties were reflected in the attitude and policies of the British Cabinet in London. There was, first of all, confusion over whether Russia or Germany was to be regarded as the main enemy. It took Germany's successes on the Continent to make Britain realize that it was Hitler who posed the real threat to the Western world and the Empire, that Britain's hopes of a purely European war were untenable and that the attempt should be made to rally Empire support for the mother country.

At first, however, the British leaders, deeply influenced by the experience of 1914–18, saw the struggle solely in European terms and on this basis faced the need to go to war.

But they did not know how. They confidently expected a repeat of the First World War, with Germany fighting on two fronts. As it was, the Germans attacked Poland, thus forcing both Britain and France into declarations of war, and demolished her in three weeks. Neither Britain nor France made the slightest attempt to draw German strength away from the east, either by land action or in the air, and by the end of September, the war on two fronts (to which Hitler had ascribed defeat in 1914–18 and to which he had vowed never to subject the Third Reich) was eliminated as a strategic possibility – Russia by the 1939 non-aggression pact, Poland and Czechoslovakia by their eclipse.

The Allies had now to consider how – if at all – the war was to be prosecuted. Germany was stronger, both numerically and (though this was not admitted even in Cabinet) in terms of quality. The British Chiefs of Staff had originally planned to fight the war on the assumption of stalemate in western Europe, where the twin fortified positions of the Maginot and Siegfried lines were assumed to balance each other, and to direct their surplus strength against Italy in the Mediterranean, scooping up the Italian African colonies at the same time as they made Suez and the route to India secure. This had led to a good deal of preparatory work which (as will be seen) was later to bear fruit. But in 1939, with Mussolini a cautious neutral, the plan was still-born.

There was very little that the Western Allies could do except sit still and hope that Hitler would make no further moves. Indeed, there is evidence that some members of the British Cabinet hoped that this would actually happen and that after a decent interval of time, in which memories might blur, a peace settlement could be patched up in the West.

Such a view was given expression in South Africa, where the two sections of Afrikaner Nationalists, led by General Hertzog and Dr. D. F. Malan, united to put the resolution in the House of Assembly that "the time has arrived that the war with Germany should be ended and that peace be restored."

In the debate which followed there were uncomfortable comparisons of South Africa with Ireland "which also was a British Dominion, but which has broken the fetters." (The resolution was defeated by 81 votes to 54.)

It took the enormously successful German advance and the heroic retreat from Dunkirk to galvanize Britain into demanding a deep imperial commitment.

The Germans again took Western intelligence completely by surprise with the opening of their spring campaign and invasion of Denmark and Norway in April, 1940. It was now apparent that German military technique and, in particular, the skill and vigour with which armour and air-power were combined, was many years ahead of Allied practice. But before these lessons could be absorbed in the thinking of the higher command, much less inculcated in the training of rank and file, the Germans struck again in May, through the Low Countries and into France.

The Allied plan – a "response" would be a better word, for detailed tactical planning was notably absent – entailed starting off at the same time as the Germans attacked, advancing in a broad line and assuming that the two armies would collide in the middle of Belgium.

But the Germans were pushing their broad front forward with infantry, and had concentrated all their armour in a narrow thrust through the Ardennes to cross the Meuse at Sedan.

This immensely powerful force – with the highest striking power of any army since the dawn of history – obliterated the seedy French territorials in its path and for several days clattered across the summer countryside of France in a deep and menacing arc, virtually without resistance. By May 17 it was clear that a gigantic right-wheel was going to cut off the whole of the Allied strength in Belgium to the north, into which all those units had blithely advanced a week before.

After a hard-fought British counter-attack at Arras had petered out, the German tanks were halted at Gravelines and the trapped Allied forces were "left to the Luftwaffe." As it happened, the Luftwaffe was not able to prevent the vast rescue operation at Dunkirk and the British gained time to rebuild their army.

Later, before he attacked Russia and when the stalemate in Europe seemed unbreakable, Hitler rationalized this decision to his confederates as arising from his desire to keep the British Empire in being, as a check on Japan and the United States. Annihilation of the British force, Hitler claimed, would have been a mortal blow at the heartland and could well have led to a peace settlement with a number of outsiders picking up the pieces from the British possessions.

The British, however, did not see it like this. They believed that it was their own valour that had extricated the B.E.F., and far from resigning themselves to imperial isolationism, even after this was forced on them by the French surrender in June, they proposed, instead, to concentrate the whole of the Empire's energies on securing a European victory.

On June 16, 1940, Churchill composed a message to all the Dominion Prime Ministers in the Cabinet room at Downing Street. He explained that Britain's resolve to continue to struggle alone "was not based upon mere obstinacy or desperation," but upon an assessment of "the real strength of our position."

Churchill's assertions of confidence and power got a mixed and generally unenthusiastic reception in the Empire. Canada, New Zealand and Australia made congratulatory responses – although the Pacific Dominions were now deeply uneasy at the naval implications of British strategy and of their own vulnerability.

South Africa's attitude was harsher. General Hertzog sponsored another motion in the House of Assembly advocating that South Africa conclude a separate peace with Germany and Italy. His own assessment of Britain's predicament differed radically from Churchill's: "England today stands within her own borders, a fugitive from the continent of Europe, defeated and threatened, with nearly all her armaments, munitions and other war material in the hands of the enemy . . . her population of some 50 million in a spirit strongly permeated by despair, facing 80 to 100 million victorious Germans." The motion was defeated by 83 votes to 65, but the figures reflected a substantial weakening of Smuts's and the Loyalists' position.

In India, Nehru was less brutal, but just as firmly set against involvement: "England's difficulty is not India's opportunity," he said, "but it is no use asking India to come to the rescue of a tottering Imperialism."

In the last days of June, 1940, Mussolini had brought Italy into the war so as to get in on the victory parade. This gave the British the opportunity they had planned for, and with amazing strategic *sang-froid* they immediately committed over half their remaining tank strength – including 80 of the "I" tanks – to the water, sending them in a fast convoy on the two-month journey round the Cape of Good Hope to Egypt.

Meanwhile, one of the most critical battles in the history of civilization was being fought out over the skies of the mother country, a battle that, despite the slow political response of imperial leaders, involved several pilots from imperial territories. The British had rejected Hitler's peace overtures, made after the French surrender, and the Führer was determined to invade. The German General Staff, exceedingly apprehensive, insisted on total air superiority over south-east England as a prerequisite to the movement of troops across the Channel. This was a major tactical miscalculation, for it committed the Luftwaffe to a prolonged series of daylight sorties over territory where their fighter escorts had a combat endurance of less than 20 minutes; a landing effort on the other hand, would have taxed the R.A.F. to its limits and could possibly have worn down Britain's air strength before the autumn.

Those few pilots and aircrew from the Dominions who had managed to get into the R.A.F. in time played a vital part in blunting the cutting-edge of the Luftwaffe. "Cobber" Kain, a New Zealander with 73 Squadron flying Hurricanes from the French airfield at Vassincourt, had scored one of the R.A.F.'s first victories.

During the hectic summer weeks of the Battle of France, 73 Squadron had been flying patrols up to eight hours a day and Kain had raised his score to nine before dying in a flying accident directly attributable to fatigue. South Africa's "Sailor" Malan commanded 74 Squadron, based at Manston during the Battle of Britain. The Squadron log for a typical day, August 11, shows its gruelling schedule: take off at 0749 hrs., second patrol: take off 0950, third patrol: take off 1145, fourth patrol: take off 1356.

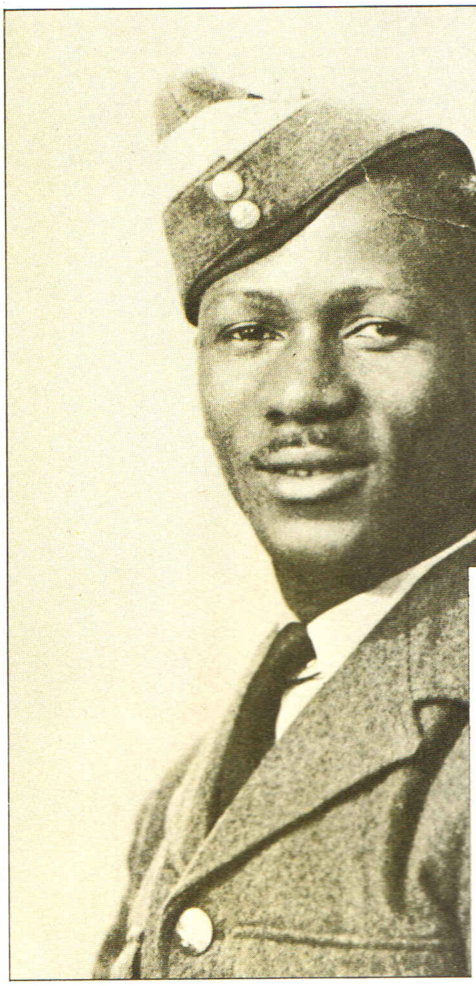
The Luftwaffe's advantage in numbers was nullified by the fact that its fighter escorts could only operate for half the time of the British defenders. In equipment there was parity. The Spitfire was slightly better than, the Hurricane slightly inferior to, the Messerschmitt 109. In morale, too, there was a direct collision between two rival indoctrinations – the short, intense and crude philosophy of the *Herrenvolk*, and the 200-year-old tradition of imperial education in the secondary public schools; the high-minded toughness, the conditioned certainty – strengthened by childhood reading of Kipling and Henty – that one must never give up, that Right was always on our side, that "Britain always won the last battle." And win it she did ✱

FIRST OF THE IMPERIAL FEW

Within days of the war's outbreak experienced pilots from all parts of the Empire were volunteering for the Royal Air Force. Raw recruits anxious to play their part were trained as aircrews at special schools in Canada and Rhodesia. The first test for these imperial flyers was the Battle of Britain, fought during the summer of 1940. Over the sparkling fields of Kent, men such as South Africa's "Sailor" Malan, who shot down 35 enemy aircraft, created legends of courage.

Squadron-Leader Karun Krishna Majumdur, Indian Air Force.

A Jamaican pilot poses jauntily on the engine cowling of his plane between sorties.


Officer Cadet A. K. Hyde, of Sierra Leone.

Warrant Officer C. P. White, of New Zealand.

South African Squadron-Leader "Sailor" Malan.

This Australian pilot took his koala mascot on every flight.

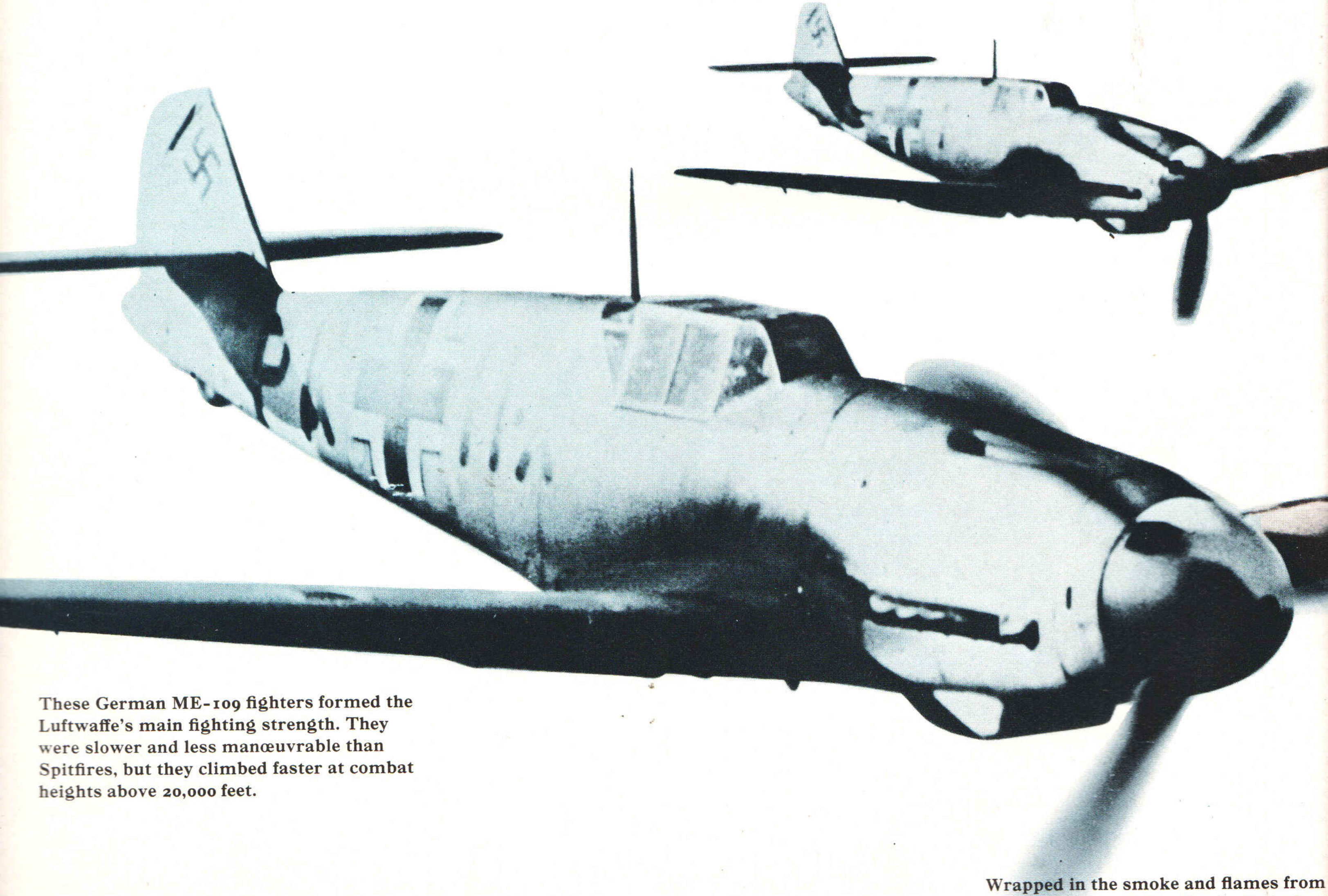
Flying Officer Harry Reid, Royal Canadian Air Force.

The Battle of Britain

Before he could hope to launch a successful invasion of England, Hitler had to gain air superiority and in August, 1940, he launched a massive onslaught against the R.A.F.'s fighter bases in the southern counties. To resist the Luftwaffe's 2,750 fighters and bombers, Fighter Command was able to send up only 884 Spitfires and Hurricanes. But the British planes took a heavy toll, roughly at the rate of two German aircraft for every one of their own. Of the 3,000 R.A.F. pilots who fought in those critical summer weeks, 256 were from the Dominions and Colonies.

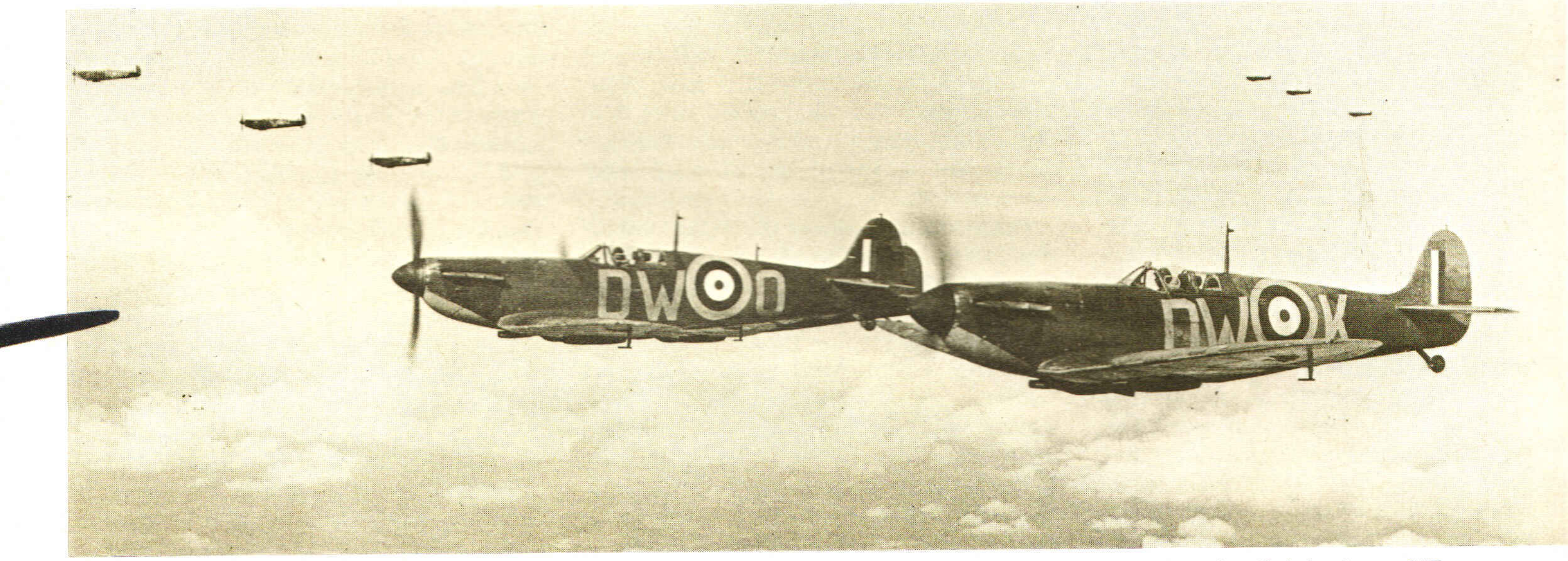
Typical were the odds faced one morning by a Squadron-Leader and his mainly Canadian crew. "I counted six blocks of aircraft – all bombers – with 30 [Messerschmitt] ME-110 fighters behind and above. There were nine of us. I sent the pilot from Calgary to take . . . three Hurricanes up to keep the 110s busy, while the remaining six of us tackled the bombers. . . . One pilot sent a Hun bomber crashing into a greenhouse. Another bomber went headlong onto a field. . . . A third went down into a reservoir. Apart from our bag of 12 a number probably never got home." In September the Luftwaffe suddenly switched its attention to another objective – London. The long ordeal of winter nights under the Blitz was about to begin.

It is summer, 1940, and R.A.F. pilots "scramble" from the dispersal hut to their waiting Spitfires and Hurricanes for an immediate take-off to intercept a squadron of enemy bombers.



These German ME-109 fighters formed the Luftwaffe's main fighting strength. They were slower and less manœuvrable than Spitfires, but they climbed faster at combat heights above 20,000 feet.

Wrapped in the smoke and flames from near-by buildings, St. Paul's Cathedral defies the German bombs. Terror raids on London began in the autumn of 1940 after the Luftwaffe's failure to destroy the R.A.F.



Battle of Britain Spitfires, powered by Rolls-Royce Merlin engines, fly into combat at over 370 m.p.h. against the slightly slower ME-109s.

II. An Appeal to the Empire

By October the Germans' attack had run down and they, too, had to accept stalemate in Europe, turning their attention to the south and east. Here the British were already busy fighting the Italians who had invaded Egypt from Libya in September. The arrival of an Australian and Indian division had given Britain's Middle East commander, General Sir Archibald Wavell, the extra strength he needed to face the Italian army in North Africa, which still outnumbered the imperial forces 6:1. The safe unloading of the great tank convoy assured him of an absolute technical superiority.

In December, imperial forces moved from Egypt into Cyrenaica, using the "I" tanks as an armoured wrench to prise open the Italian coastal fortresses in quick succession, while, inland, the fast cruiser tanks and highly trained Hussar regiments cut the Italian infantry to pieces.

Fourth Indian Division was the prime infantry unit in Wavell's army. He used this unit, fully up to strength and equipped with armoured carriers and artillery, as his assault force to storm the Italian front at Sidi Barrani. In 48 hours the Indians had smashed the entire Italian defence system and taken three times their own number in prisoners.

Wavell then ordered the division south, where it repeated its performance at Fort Gallabat in the Sudan and pursued the Italians deep into East Africa. Then the task was taken up by the Australian division which reduced in turn the vital fortified ports of Bardia and Tobruk.

During these engagements, the Australians made excellent use of "Bangalore Torpedoes," pole-shaped mines, highly dangerous to handle, which had to be slipped by hand under the enemy's barbed-wire entanglements. The invincible "I" tanks, dubbed "Matildas" by the Australians who marched alongside them to the tune of *Waltzing Matilda*, also played a major role.

In February, 1941, victory at Beda Fomm, the last battle of the campaign, raised the total number of prisoners taken by the imperial forces to nearly 250,000 and cleared the whole of Cyrenaica.

Over a thousand miles to the south-east, the South African divisions and the Indians were fast reducing the Duke of Aosta's armies in East Africa and opening the Red Sea to British shipping.

These victories in the early months of 1941 marked the final point of strategic balance for the British Empire in its old form. It was a balance established by a not wholly committed Empire, and the equilibrium was upset almost immediately by the extension of the war to the Balkans and by the emergence of differences in the Empire countries.

Winston Churchill was deeply influenced by his ancestor, Marlborough, who had secured Britain's safety by a European campaign, then by the example of William Pitt, who had enlarged the Empire while encouraging other countries to contain Britain's enemies in Europe. Churchill had, too, a private obsession with the Balkan theatre where (as he believed) his own plans for victory had been thwarted at Gallipoli in 1915. Now he welcomed the chance to move the victorious desert army into Greece, threatened in the spring of 1941 with German invasion.

German involvement in Greece, which was to have a most profound effect on the course and outcome of the war, was coincidental. Hitler had disapproved of Mussolini's attack on Greece in November, 1940; but the defeats which the Italians had suffered all through the winter and the impending campaign against Russia (scheduled to begin on May 15, 1941), made it essential to secure the Axis southern flank by succouring the Italians in Greece.

Tactically speaking, the result was a foregone conclusion. The Greeks were exhausted by their heroic battles of the winter, while the British who were sent in to support them were in unfamiliar terrain without proper air support or logistic backing. But strategically the outcome was equally catastrophic for both Britain and Germany.

For the Germans, it entailed the postponement by one month of their attack on Russia and imposed an extra burden of mechanical wear on their best Panzer divisions: both of these factors were to cost the Germans a terrible price in the coming winter. The British uncovered their African flank at the very moment when total victory there was within their grasp and at the very moment, too, when the German expeditionary force – the Afrika Korps – was being dispatched against them.

But the consequences of diverting imperial troops to Greece were equally serious. For, by committing Australian and New Zealand troops to a purely European venture that had no possible relevance to the Dominions' own security, and was anyway doomed to failure, the British brought to a head divisions and uncertainties over imperial strategic policy which were to plague them throughout 1942.

The British did, in fact, have one chance of snatching a consolation from the Greek campaign. After the fighting on the mainland ended in German victory, the issue remained undecided for the 100-mile-long island of Crete, from whose excellent airfields British planes could have dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Had the British properly fortified and garrisoned the island instead of committing themselves to the Greek mainland they would have greatly improved their strategic position and faced the Germans with a formidable problem.

As it was, the island's defences were totally neglected and the "garrison" consisted solely of battle-weary New Zealanders and Australians recently ejected from the mainland. Even so, the conditions of the attack, which had to be entirely from the air, placed the Germans at a serious disadvantage and the outcome of the ensuing campaign was in doubt for several days.

The key battles were fought in the western part of the island, round Maleme airfield, by New Zealand infantry, made up of men of British and Maori stock. Recruited from the ranges during the great agricultural depression of the early 1930s, the New Zealanders were almost the only physical match for the German parachute division, the very flower of the Wehrmacht. They were strong, tough – and often, of necessity, ruthless.

Captain Anderson of the engineer battalion, New Zealand Division, has described how "at one stage I stopped for a minute or two to see how things were going and a hun [parachutist] dropped not ten feet away. I had my pistol in my hand and without really knowing what I was doing I let him have it while he was still on the ground. I had hardly got over the shock when another came down almost on top of me and I plugged him, too, while he was untangling himself. Not cricket, I know, but there it is."

The Maoris were even rougher. A Major Dyer has recalled: "I ran to the Mill race and saw a German in the mouth of a filled-in well firing a tommy-gun. Told Jim Tuwahi to lie on the bank and shoot at him and called to a soldier to run out with me and we would rush the man from the other side. We did that. As we got up to him he crouched, shamming dead. I told the Maori to bayonet him.

"As he did so he turned his head away, not bearing the sight. Tuwahi had now joined us and we rushed out among the Germans scattered every 15 or 20 yards. . . . One, at about 15 yards, instead of firing his tommy-gun, started to lie down to fire. I took a snap shot with a German Mauser. It grazed his behind and missed between his legs. My back hair lifted, but the Maori got him (I had no bayonet).

"We rushed on . . . some tried to crawl away . . . a giant of a man jumped up with his hands up like a gorilla and shouting 'Hants oop.' I said: 'Shoot the bastard' and the Maori shot him."

At the end of the first day's battle, the Germans had been fought to a standstill. Goering told Hitler that the operation should be called off. But at the very moment when the Germans were faltering, the timidity of the senior New Zealand commanders led them to start withdrawing in the critical Maleme sector. As soon as the Germans detected this, they reinforced ruthlessly. At the two other dropping points of the island, Heraklion and Retimo, the Australians, although greatly inferior in equipment, had by sheer gallantry kept on top.

Captain Honner, a company commander, has described what happened when one Australian platoon broke into a German position and was cut off. "That left me only one thing to do – attack to help Roberts out of trouble or to complete the success he had started. I knew I'd have to lose men, but I couldn't lose time. A section . . . nine men, was ordered to move to a low stone wall 50 yards ahead round a well about 25 yards from the German front line, to cover with Bren fire our attack.

"They raced along the low hedge to the well. The leader, Corporal Tom Willoughby, was nearly there before he fell. The man carrying the Bren went down. Someone following picked it up and went on until he was killed, and so the gun was relayed until it almost reached the well in the hands of the last man, and he, too, was killed as he went down with it. Eight brave men died there. . . . The ninth man, Private Proud, was hit on the tin hat as he jumped up and fell back stunned into the ditch."

Although the Germans won the island, their airborne forces had been so severely mauled that they were never used again in this way. The price for the British had been even higher. Operating in brilliant sunshine and within ten minutes' flying time of the Stuka airfields, the Mediterranean fleet had suffered crippling losses. In three days the German dive-bombers sank two cruisers and four destroyers and damaged one battleship, two cruisers and four destroyers so severely that they had to be sent to American east coast ports for repair. The Mediterranean Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, reported that: "Sea control in the eastern Mediterranean could not be retained after another such experience."

It was not only in the eastern Mediterranean that British sea-power now stood in jeopardy. The 45,000-ton German battleship, *Bismarck*, had broken out into the North Atlantic and sunk the battle-cruiser, *Hood*, the finest ship in the Royal Navy. Far from being able to reinforce the Far East stations, it was becoming necessary to withdraw ships from there, stopping them at the shipyards of Aden to replace their white Pacific livery with grey camouflage paint.

On land, too, the position had worsened to such an extent that Churchill was trying to draw additional Dominion forces out of the Far East to North Africa. The Afrika Korps, commanded by General Erwin Rommel, who had been waiting to settle a score with the British tank crews for the mauling they gave his units at Arras, had advanced over 300 miles. He had isolated and by-passed the remaining Australian division in Tobruk and only halted when he reached Egypt.

But Tobruk had to be taken. The outer defences consisted of a far-flung perimeter built originally by the Italians to protect the port from direct shell-fire. This perimeter was made up of a double ring of concrete posts behind an anti-tank ditch and barbed-wire entanglements.

Rommel had made two attempts to rush the fortress on April 13 and 16, but these had been repulsed. The Australians had then set about building an inner defence ring, known as the "Blue Line," set back about two miles from the old Italian perimeter: the area between the two lines was filled with mines.

On April 27, before Blue Line was completed, the Germans had again attacked Tobruk. This assault was mounted by the newly arrived 15th Panzer Division, which took cruel punishment at the hands of the courageous and skilful marksmen of the 26th Australian Brigade. Here the Germans were taught a lesson that few of their crack units had yet learned, though they would soon receive a thorough and grisly schooling on the grim Russian Steppes: resolute infantrymen who hold their fire while the tanks pass through can then take their pick of the foot soldiers who follow behind.

Imperial strength in Africa and the Middle East continued to grow. The bulk of the Italian troops in East Africa were forced to surrender and the Red Sea coast was cleared. At Churchill's prompting, Wavell occupied the whole of Iraq, deposing the pro-German premier, Rashid Ali, and securing the country's oil reserves for the Allied cause. With a hastily assembled force of British and Free French, Wavell also attacked and, after stiff fighting, overcame the Vichy French colony in Syria.

By June 15, 1941, the bounds of the British Empire – that area of the globe which could legitimately be coloured red – were at the widest extent they ever attained. But that month occurred an event that altered the whole course of the war and, in a roundabout way, marked the beginning of the end of that Empire

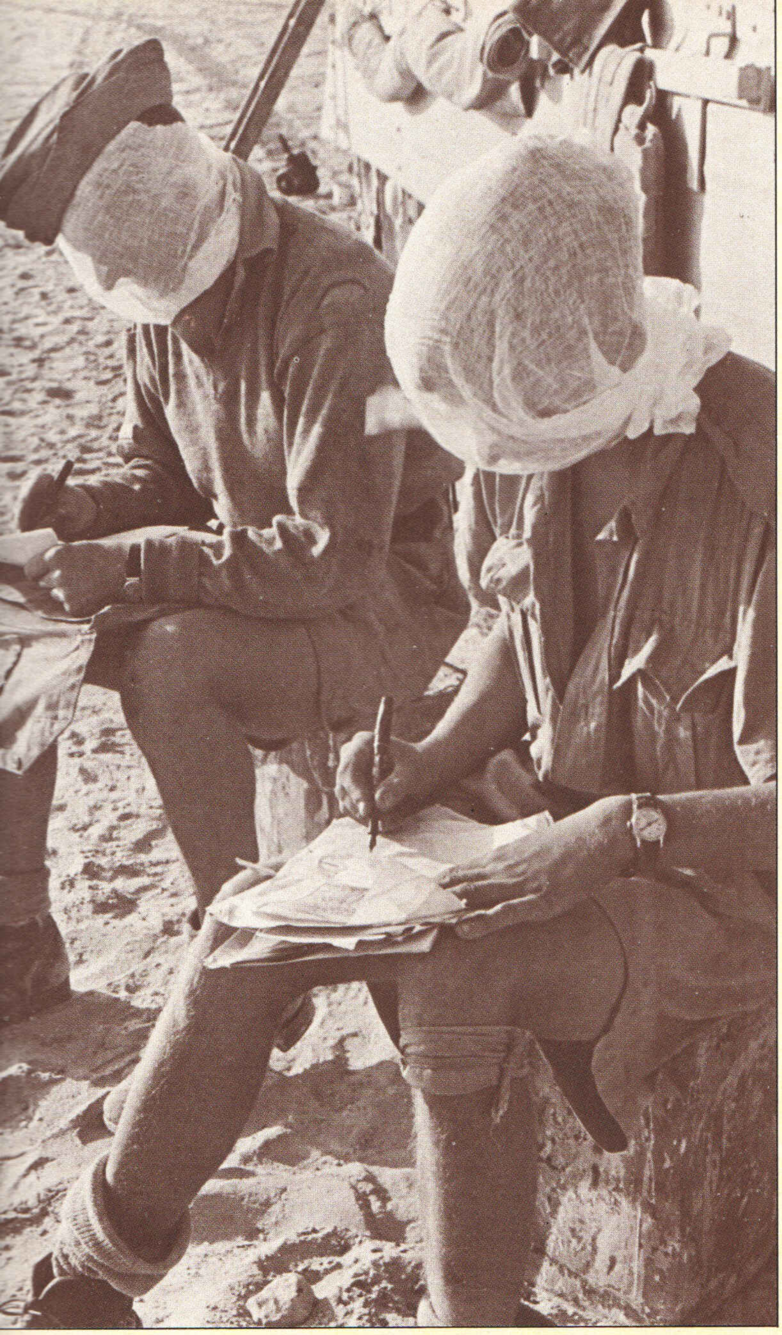
THE WAR IN THE DESERT

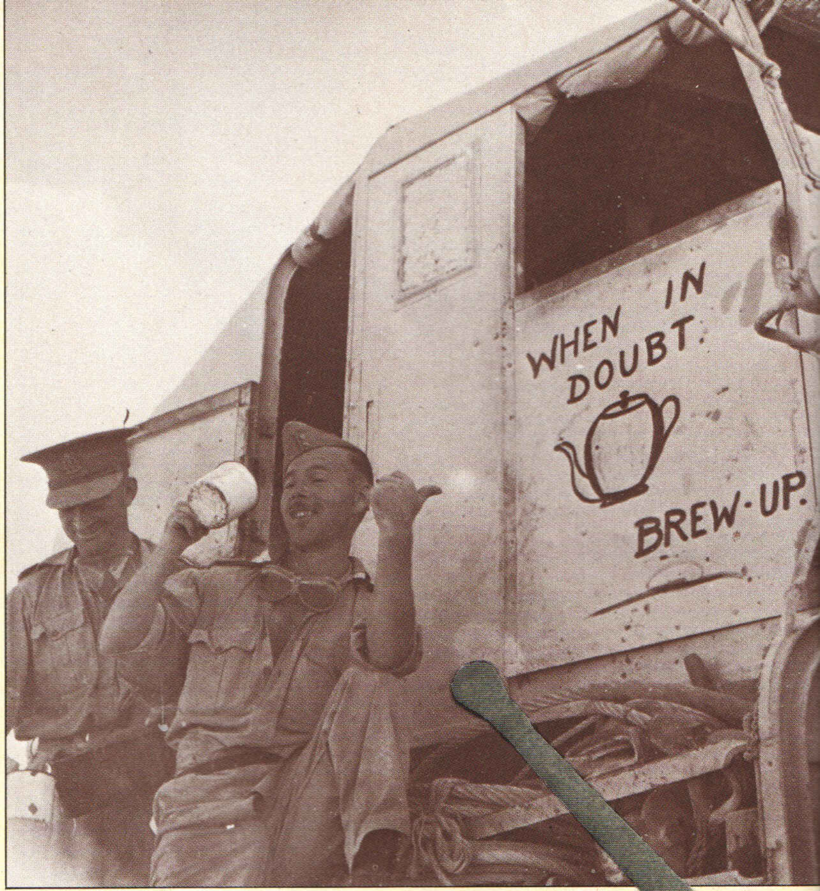
In June, 1940, Mussolini pushed Italy into the war, and in September launched an army of some 200,000 men, cream of the Fascist legions, upon Egypt, with the Suez Canal as their main objective. For Britain, it was a perilous time. With Germany and Italy victorious on the Continent, she stood alone. To oppose the Italians in North Africa, she had only the Western Desert Force of 30,000 British, Indians and, later, Australians. Yet in ten weeks they smashed the Italian armies and advanced 500 miles. It was a resounding but short-lived triumph. Early in 1941, General Rommel's Afrika Korps arrived: thereafter for 18 months the tide of battle ebbed and flowed across the desert sands until General Montgomery swept to victory at El Alamein in November, 1942.

Tanks of the British 7th Armoured Division lumber over the desert towards the Libyan coast during the successful offensive against the Italians in the winter of 1940–41.

Australian 6th Division troops in armoured carriers advance through the sand clouds to join the British 7th Armoured Division for a combined assault on Italian positions.

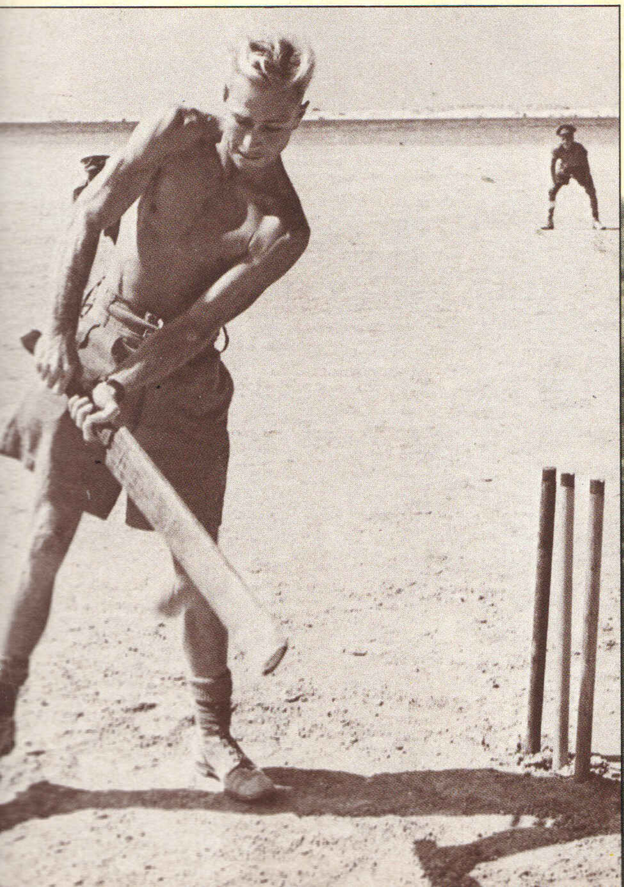
Two members of Rommel's Afrika Korps sprawl grotesquely by their desert car after having been gunned from the air by planes of the British Desert Air Force.





Tea became the desert soldier's usual drink, since beer was always warm or scarce.

Soldiers of the British Eighth Army, their faces heavily protected against incessant hordes of desert flies, write letters home.



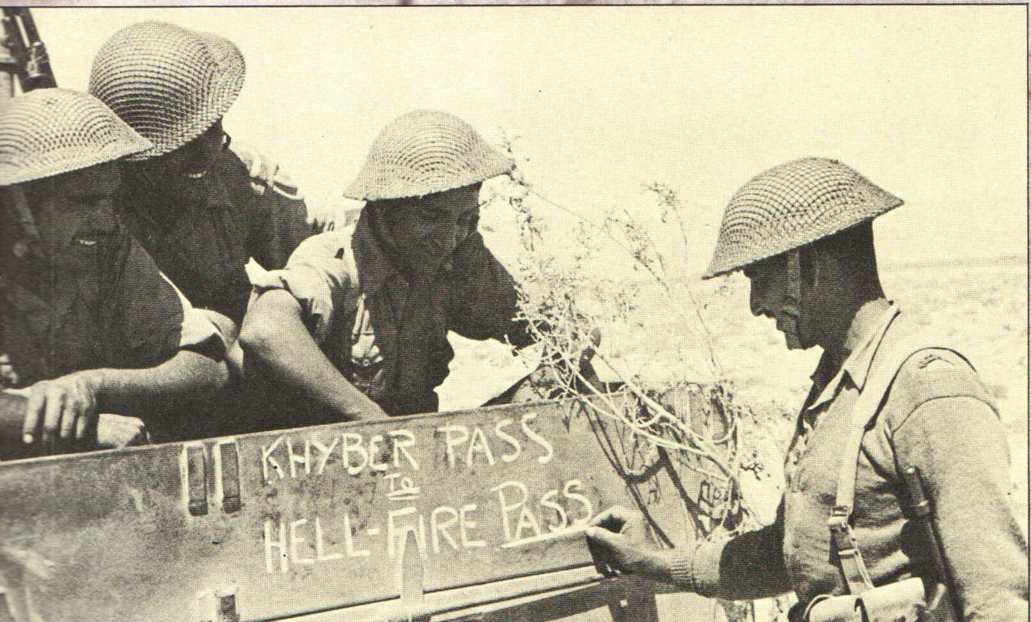
Off-duty Australians (left) pass the time with a game of cricket on the hard sand.

The End of the Duce's Dream

Faced in 1940 with overwhelming Italian superiority in manpower, General Sir Archibald Wavell, the British Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, decided to deploy his small Western Desert Force with the maximum of guile. Details were left to the Force commander, Major-General Richard O'Connor, an original and audacious tactician. The New Zealand author, Alan Morehead, who was there as a war correspondent, has described how O'Connor ordered his troops to "make one man appear to be a dozen and one tank look like a squadron. . . . This little Robin Hood force . . . attacked, not as a combined force, but in small units, swiftly, irregularly and by night. . . . It stayed an hour, a day, a week in position, then disappeared." Tricked into believing that they faced at least five armoured divisions, the enemy became rattled and seizing his opportunity, O'Connor attacked in force on December 8. By February 5 the whole of Italian Cyrenaica was in British hands together with 113,000 prisoners and 1,300 guns. Ten Italian divisions had been destroyed. The price of victory was 438 imperial soldiers killed, 355 of them Australians.

A Bofors anti-aircraft gun crew prepare for action while their commander scans the desert sky for hostile planes. These usually flew in from the west out of the evening sunset to make ground detection difficult.

This photograph, taken by a German cameraman from behind his own troops with a telephoto lens, shows British infantry advancing in lorries through shell-fire.


KHYBER PASS
To
HELL-FIRE PASS

Indian soldiers chalk up their dusty arrival at Egypt's Halfaya ("Hellfire") Pass.

Empire at El Alamein

By the summer of 1942 Rommel and his Afrika Korps had forced the British and Empire forces to abandon their spectacular winter gains from the Italians. Relying on speed and surprise and the fact that his tanks were more mobile and better armed than the British, Rommel overran Cyrenaica and pressed on into Egypt until, at the beginning of July, he came up against the strong defensive position at El Alamein, only 60 miles west of the Nile. Here the exhausted remnants of the British Eighth Army, now virtually without armour, managed to hold the Afrika Korps in stalemate. Fresh supplies and equipment were rushed to Egypt and in August General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery assumed command of the Eighth Army. He began immediately to prepare his forces – British, Australian, New Zealand, Indian and South African – for a decisive attack.

This opened on the night of October 23 with a crushing artillery barrage. After 12 days of heavy fighting, involving tanks and planes, the British armour thrust its way through the German lines and Rommel was forced to order a wholesale German retreat. Most of his troops managed to get away, but the Eighth Army took 30,000 prisoners, mainly Italian, destroyed most of the German tanks, and was set on the irresistible advance towards Italy.

South African engineers lay mines round their defence perimeter at Tobruk. The port fell into Rommel's hands on June 20, 1942, with 33,000 prisoners – mainly taken by South Africans – and a rich supply of stores.

A British Guardsman demands the surrender of the sole survivor of the crew of a German tank knocked out during an infantry advance in the prolonged Desert War.

III. Shadow of the Rising Sun

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, launched on June 22, 1941, immediately ended the European stalemate between Britain and Germany that had marked the first six months of the year. Of more importance for the Empire, the Japanese were freed from any possibility of a major land battle on their own eastern frontiers. They were now convinced that the time had come to strike in the Pacific – a chance as, one Japanese general observed "that may come only once in a thousand years."

For the first 18 months of the war Britain had drawn enormous benefits out of what was, effectively, a one-way traffic of material aid flowing in from the Colonies and Dominions. But from now on, Britain's imperial possessions were to be serious liabilities.

The Royal Air Force had become increasingly dependent for its expansion on the influx of aircrew pledged under the Empire training scheme; the land forces in the Middle East – the only theatre where Britain was actively engaged on land – were predominantly imperial. In addition, British investment had been highly effective in stimulating the manufacturing industries, both in the Dominions and India, thereby lightening the load on munitions factories at home.

But once the East was threatened by conflict this balance would be upset. For 100 years the imperial structure had rested on two pillars – the security and technical skills of the United Kingdom and the natural wealth and human resources of the Far Eastern possessions. If either was removed, the whole would collapse.

The British leaders, however, continued their attempts to focus imperial resources on achieving victory in the European theatre, despite the fact that, with the German attack on Russia, the threat to Britain had subsided altogether. The precious months when a redeployment of forces might have changed the balance in the Far East were allowed to slip by.

Indeed, so anxious were the British to conform to the wishes of the United States that they made no effort to restrain the American trade embargo which was imposed on Japan in July, 1941. In strategic terms, this measure could produce one of only two possible results: either the Japanese would withdraw immediately from China, which was what American diplomacy had been clumsily attempting to achieve; or the Japanese would break out to the south and secure for themselves the resources which the embargo denied them.

In August, 1941, Churchill and the American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had their first meeting at Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. The British were anxious to discuss joint strategy and, in particular, to gain American assurances of cover for their Far Eastern possessions.

But Roosevelt would not be drawn. In two respects the conference left the British worse off. Roosevelt was determined to send help to Russia. The result was that such spare items of military equipment as could be shaved off the lists which British and American exports provided, were all allocated to Russia (where the difference they made was marginal or negative) instead of going to the Far East where the difference they might have made was critical.

From the imperial point of view, the joint "Declaration of Principle" which came to be known as the "Atlantic Charter," was equally unfortunate. It contained a number of high-sounding references to "the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they live." This was in unfortunate contrast to the declaration made by Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, that "It is no part of our policy, I take it . . . gratuitously to hurry the handing over of controls to Indian hands at any pace faster than we regard as best calculated, on a long view, to hold India to the Empire." On his return from Newfoundland, Churchill, when questioned, was forced to declare that the Atlantic Charter in no way altered policy towards India, Burma, or "other parts" of the British Empire. It was, he said, "primarily intended to apply to Europe."

The British possessions in the Far East found themselves in double jeopardy. The strategy for their defence had been superseded by the march of events and their military resources neglected. In the last resort it was solely on British military power that their security rested.

The Australians and New Zealanders, being nearer the threat, saw these dangers more clearly than the British and throughout the second half of 1941 there were persistent but unavailing pleas to Churchill from the Dominion prime ministers urging a withdrawal of their troops from isolated positions (such as Tobruk) and their grouping in a unified force under the command of one of their fellow countrymen, a step which would have made their deployment under the direct orders of their own governments very much easier.

Churchill also failed to give the Far Eastern forces the technical reinforcement they required. He had become obsessed with the figure of Rommel and was determined to defeat him that summer. Enormous masses of material were sent through the Mediterranean at high cost to the Navy, and twice squandered in futile head-on attacks by incompetent local commanders against the German position.

By November, 1941, naval strength in the Mediterranean was at its lowest ebb. Reserves stolen from the Far Eastern fleet had been used up and material losses in the desert had made it impossible to send even a single "I" tank to Malaya.

It was not until later in the year that the weight and combination of intelligence reports convinced the British Cabinet, as it had, long before, the Australians and New Zealanders, that a Japanese attack was inevitable. Even then it was hoped that a "show of force" might deter the Japanese and four slow capital ships were earmarked for the purpose, to be escorted by a new aircraft-carrier, the *Indomitable*.

Almost immediately misfortune befell two of these ships, including, critically, the *Indomitable*, which went aground on the Jamaican coast and had to be repaired. The Admiralty, in common with other Western defence organizations at that time, held Japanese military efficiency in some contempt and concluded therefore that it would be safe to substitute two fast battleships, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and send them unescorted. The flotilla, commanded by the Vice-Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, arrived at Singapore on December 2.

In numerical terms, substantial imperial forces garrisoned Malaya and the

Singapore fortress, but their equipment was largely obsolete. And the attitudes of mind that pervaded the military hierarchy – a kind of mental arrogance, essential to the administrative pattern of Empire, that assumed the inferiority of the subject races – now led to a fatal complacency.

Within 24 hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the first landings in Malaya on December 7, 1941, Tom Phillips had weighed anchor and steamed north at 30 knots, his crews eager to get at the Japanese fleet whose gunnery, so they confidently believed, would be affected by the fact that "Japanese wear glasses."

They never sighted a Japanese vessel, but on December 10 sailed directly into an attack by 86 long-range torpedo-bombers which put both ships at the bottom of the sea within three hours, with the loss of a thousand men.

It was a portentous encounter. It meant that the whole of the Far East was now open to the aggressor (the U.S. Pacific fleet, shattered at Pearl Harbor, had withdrawn). It meant that the two white Dominions of Australia and New Zealand were without the protection of the Crown – an extremely significant development when contrasted with the old imperial tradition. But its deepest importance was this: for the first time an Asiatic race had shown itself technologically superior to a country of the West, and had defeated its élite military force.

From the fall of France until Pearl Harbor, the British Empire had conducted war against Germany and Italy on its own. But with the entry of Russia – which was to do most of the fighting – and the United States – which possessed the greatest material power – British influence over the course of the war gradually declined in proportion to its military contribution.

Britain found, paradoxically, that though she had acquired new allies, she could not both fight in Europe and fight to preserve the Empire.

Churchill, who as late as November, 1942, asserted that he had "not become the King's first minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire," tended, in fact, to neglect the preservation of the Empire and to concentrate both diplomacy and strategy on the immediate defeat of Hitler.

On December 11, 1941, he announced to the House of Commons the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and warned that it was "only reasonable to expect" that further disasters might follow.

The House listened in total silence. It was only when the Prime Minister turned to the Western Desert that his voice grew more confident. For here, after the most prodigious expenditure of material, the Eighth Army had succeeded in relieving Tobruk and forcing Rommel back.

The Eastern Empire was, it appeared, to be no more than "maintained." Churchill declared that "though we cannot afford to accept indefinite defeat from Japan, we are still bound to regard her as a secondary enemy in comparison with Germany." Since Japan's "chief value to the Axis," he said, lay "in her power to draw away to the Pacific the forces now accumulating in Europe and the Middle East . . . it is in our interest to resist that pull as much as possible."

As a result, the East received minimal support. It was planned to fly 18 light bombers by the air route from Burma to Malaya, although only two, in fact, arrived. Four fighter squadrons and one division of troops were also diverted, but their destination was India and they were not directly committed to the Far East.

Churchill and his advisers set off for the United States to devise a unified strategy. While they were at sea, they put the finishing touches to the memorandum on Grand Strategy for 1942–43. Despite the fact that American attention was focused almost exclusively on the Far East, this document dealt gently with the area. The sixth and last of the "Essential Features of Our Strategy" was listed as: "Maintaining only such positions in the Eastern theatre as will safeguard vital interests while we are concentrating on the defeat of Germany."

Yet, with every hour that passed, the state of the Allied forces in the Far East deteriorated. They had lost command of the sea and the air, and these critical handicaps were compounded by a divided command, a largely demoralized army and the difficulty of establishing communications among the various local commanders – the British in Malaya, the Americans in the Philippines, the Dutch in Java, and the Australians in Darwin.

Nor did these divisions arise solely because of different languages and Allied command structures: the existing imperial administrative machinery was practically unworkable.

In the words of a post-war report: "Within this changed and ever-changing world of the Pacific, the affairs of the British Empire were being conducted by machinery which had undergone no important change since the days of Queen Victoria. . . . Four different types of official reported to and received orders from four different Departments of State, and, save for the fact that the Ministers responsible for the Departments met weekly in Cabinet, no effort was made to co-ordinate the activities of the officials or the politics of the Departments."

Private rivalries and interests and the jealousies of ambitious local officials multiplied these difficulties a hundredfold at ground-level. The defence of Malaya as originally envisaged was primarily a matter for the Royal Air Force, with the Army providing garrison protection for the airfields. But, although new airfields had been built, their aircraft never arrived.

The minimum British air requirements for successful interception of an enemy attack had been set at 336 first-line aircraft, rising to 560 in 1942. Actual R.A.F. strength, however, amounted to only 148 planes, made up mainly of second-grade American machines. There were no Hurricanes or Spitfires, no torpedo-bombers, and no attack aircraft capable of carrying a bomb load heavier than 2,500 lb.

General A. E. Percival, the commander in Singapore, had, nevertheless, been forced to disperse his army according to the original plan – the airfields had been completed and the Japanese would probably make them their first objective – yet, the Army had no authority in the civilian field.

They could make no demolitions, dig no trenches, site no artillery without applying for permission through a maze of local officials. The ground forces operated and fought in isolation in a countryside and among a people complacent and inert.

But if the Malayan population was indifferent, that of Australia was deeply troubled. The political crises of 1941 had

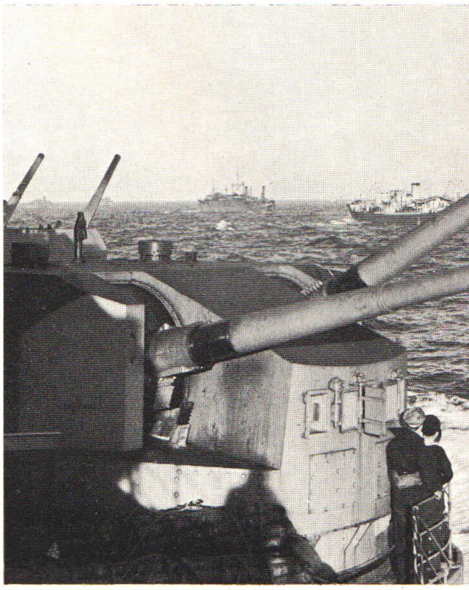
continued on p. 2121

The Battle of the Atlantic

When Hitler declared a total blockade of Britain in August, 1940, the entire Atlantic Ocean became a battleground. All ships – British, Allied and neutral – sailing to Britain with vital food-supplies were liable to attack on sight from German warships and U-boats.

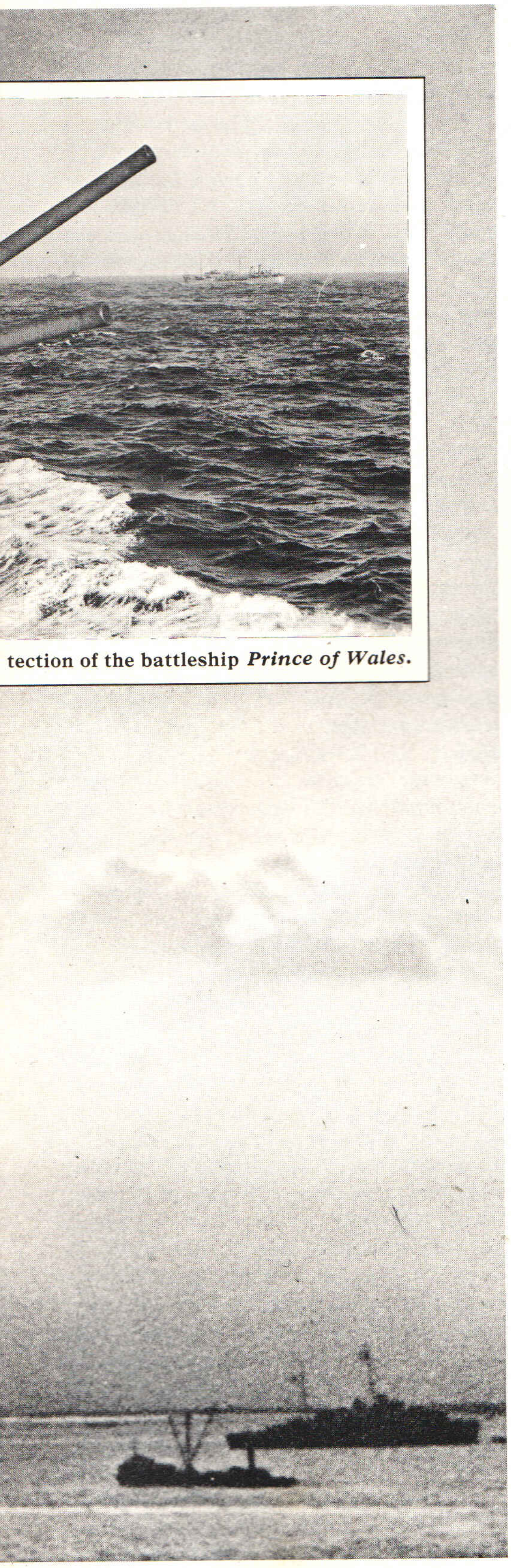
Losses mounted rapidly and alarmingly, from an average of less than 100,000 tons per month in the first nine months of the war to an average of 250,000 tons during the remainder of 1940. Imports, apart from oil, fell from 1·2 million tons in June, 1940, to only 800,000 tons in December. In February, 1941, Hitler ordered even more concentrated attacks on British shipping routes and aircraft from German bases on the European coastline joined in. In the single month of April, 700,000 tons of Atlantic shipping was sunk and by July losses were running at more than three times the total product of British and U.S. yards. If Britain was not to starve, an answer had to be found. Two vital factors helped to turn the tide. Although America was still neutral, her ships extended their patrols and in late 1941, she entered the war; and the R.A.F. and the Royal Navy began providing more effective cover.

Between March and May, 1943, a record number of 67 U-boats was sunk and Admiral Karl Doenitz was forced to call in his fleet for rest and refitting. He never regained the initiative. By December, 1943, with American industry fully mobilized for war, Allied launchings were once again greater than losses.



An Atlantic convoy steams under the pro-

British destroyers and corvettes, after having escorted an Atlantic convoy into the safety of a home port, anchor at sunset.



tection of the battleship *Prince of Wales.*

brought them three different prime ministers in two months. The strongly nationalist Prime Minister, John Curtin, now had occasion to reflect on the words of his immediate predecessor, Robert Menzies. Menzies had told his colleagues in the Australian War Cabinet and War Council, that Mr. Churchill had no conception of the Dominions as "separate entities" and that "the more distant the problem from the heart of the Empire the less the thought of it." Mr. Churchill was "a great European." But on questions in which Dominion interests were involved, Mr. Churchill's attitude was "unsatisfactory."

In Washington on Christmas Day, the British Prime Minister could proudly announce the capture of Benghazi and elaborate on his plans for a seizure of the whole North African coast. But the collapse of Malaya and the reaction in Australia was of far greater significance to the future of the British Empire.

Throughout the conference, Curtin was bombarding Churchill with telegrams urging decisive action – a joint Anglo-American fleet should be formed forthwith by taking vessels out of the Atlantic; 500 aircraft from Bomber Command in the United Kingdom should be dispatched immediately to Australia; Russia should be induced to declare war on Japan by the immediate acceptance of Soviet claims to the Baltic states.

On December 28, Curtin published a highly combative article in the *Melbourne Herald* in which he asserted that "Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional link or kinship with the United Kingdom."

By now the disintegration of Percival's front in Malaya was painfully apparent in London and a hideous possibility opened. Could it be the case that the fortress of Singapore, one of the very few strong points which had been maintained even through the years of depression and appeasement, was not in fact impregnable? General Sir Archibald Wavell, the newly appointed Commander of Allied Forces in the South-West Pacific, a brilliant but wary strategist, much given to understatement, was not encouraging in his despatches.

Once the idea took root, its unhappy corollary immediately followed. If there was a danger that the fortress would fall, then plainly it was madness to waste meagre resources by reinforcing it. Gloomily, the British Chiefs of Staff and Churchill himself began to adjust their view to the fact that Burma was "of greater importance than Singapore." Some rationalized it on the grounds that Singapore's real purpose had been as the gateway to the Indian Ocean. But now that India was menaced by land also, her security was best achieved, it was said, by defending Burma.

However the Pacific governments claimed that any weakening of resolve to hold Singapore would have immediate and catastrophic effects on imperial prestige and morale. These governments sent daily exhortations to London for extravagant action to save a potentially perilous situation.

Partly in response to these, partly from sheer inertia, the stream of reinforcements continued to flow into Singapore. The 45th Indian Brigade arrived on January 5, 1942, the 53rd British Brigade on January 13, the 44th Indian Brigade on January 22, an Australian machine-gun battalion and an additional 2,000 replacements on January 24, and the 54th and 55th British Brigades on January 29.

Yet, as early as January 8, the 9th and 11th Divisions had been smashed by the Japanese in the Battle of the Slim River and it was clear that the whole of the Malayan Peninsula, with the possible exception of its southern tip, was already lost; once the Japanese established their air force on the British-built airfields, they would be able to subdue Singapore.

By January 21, the question of evacuation was being openly discussed at meetings in London. Churchill suggested that "by muddling and hesitating to take an ugly decision, we might lose both Singapore *and* the Burma road" – as, in fact, actually happened.

The reaction from Australia and New Zealand to any possible withdrawal was immediate and violent. The Japanese fleet, which had been spreading south, had taken Rabaul and was threatening Port Moresby. Both Dominions insisted that reinforcements – if they were to be diverted from Singapore – should go to the Dutch Islands and not to Burma.

Although fresh troops were still disembarking less than three days before the final defeat, Allied morale had collapsed completely. Of higher leadership and inspiration, there was none. The Japanese were regarded by the people on the spot as invincible, and their treatment of prisoners and wounded made it desirable to put as much distance between oneself and the enemy as possible.

One eyewitness remembered seeing the Australians in retreat from the front line soon after the Japanese landed. "It is the most vivid memory I have of the Singapore campaign," he said. "They came moving at a half-trot, panic-stricken. I've never seen anything like it. It was pouring with rain and most of the men's feet were cut to ribbons – they'd come across rivers, through mangrove swamps, through the bush, then out along the Jurong Road. They'd scrapped everything that could hold them back. They'd thrown aside their rifles and ammunition.

"Some of our chaps gave them boots and we gave them what food we had. We asked what had happened and where they were going. 'We're off to the docks,' they said."

Without doubt, the surrender of Singapore was the worst disaster for British arms since the surrender of Cornwallis at York Town had ended British rule in the future United States. Nor was it less significant. In his subsequent campaign report, Wavell wrote that the trouble went "a long way back; climate, the atmosphere of the country (the whole of Malaya has been asleep for at least two hundred years), lack of vigour in our peacetime training, the cumbersomeness of our tactics and equipment, and the real difficulty of finding an answer to the very skilful and bold tactics of the Japanese in this jungle fighting. Also for the time being we have lost a good deal of our hardness and fighting spirit."

Wavell also contended, with less validity, that the immediate cause for the loss of Malaya was largely the loss of a race between the speed of Japanese penetration and the rate at which modern equipment and trained troops could be diverted to that theatre.

Yet the enemy was outnumbered at every stage and under tremendous strain. Less that 6,000 Japanese foot soldiers bore the brunt of the Malayan campaign, living off the land and driven ceaselessly to the point of exhaustion. The crews of the Japanese air force were making upwards of 16 sorties per day.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that one determined commander, choosing his ground and exploiting his numerical superiority, could have fought a battle that might have stemmed the tide, and have given time for the Allied reinforcements to superimpose their pattern on the still-existing framework of the old imperial possessions.

Nor were the losses entirely military and territorial – although in these spheres they were catastrophic enough. The prestige of the white man, his *ethos* of superiority which allowed one district commissioner to rule and administer enormous and populous regions, was shattered beyond repair.

After the catastrophic fall of Singapore, the British consigned the whole Pacific area – including Australia and New Zealand – to the protection of the United States. Unencumbered by Far Eastern commitments, they were then free to pursue an objective which was obsessing the Prime Minister, namely, the final defeat of Erwin Rommel in North Africa.

Yet even here the omens were not good. The great "Crusader" offensive of the previous November had been a clumsy and extravagant business. Half-way through, one senior general, Sir Alan Cunningham, had been sacked by the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, Sir Claude Auchinleck, and a member of Cunningham's staff, Neil Ritchie, had been promoted in his stead. Ritchie was unimaginative, pig-headed and unpopular. His opinion of himself was high. One of his corps commanders found him "a very confident fellow – thought he was the goods."

Rommel had withdrawn skilfully and conserved his strength and Ritchie had blundered after him, with dispersed and unco-ordinated forces. When Rommel turned and struck, Ritchie was forced back to the Gazala Line, ceding the Mechili airfields and forfeiting any chance of giving hard-pressed Malta sustenance or protection. Throughout the spring of 1942 Rommel continued to reinforce the Afrika Korps and widened still further the gap in quality which separated German from British equipment.

This new and disturbing element was now beginning to colour the whole quality of the desert fighting. The days when the Matilda tank, with its impenetrable armour, dominated the battlefield had gone. Still proof against the lighter anti-tank guns, the ponderous Matildas were easy targets for the deadly German 88 mm guns which, with a range of more than twice that of the British two-pounder, could penetrate three inches of armour-plating at 1,000 yards. Even the crews of the faster British Crusader and Valentine tanks had to endure murderous death-rides before they could close the range enough to use their own guns.

Inevitably, morale dropped and, as a result, unit tactics suffered. The dashing, adventurous spirit of the old Eighth Army, which had carved up 20 times their number of Italians in the early desert campaigns, had now faded. Wastage in Greece and Crete, the loss of the Australians (now being withdrawn to their own country to meet the Japanese threat) and a succession of raw replacements and indifferent senior commanders, had altered the character of the Eighth Army, making it wary, unimaginative and pessimistic. By Auchinleck's own assessment, the British needed a superiority of 2:1 in tanks if victory was to be guaranteed, and 3:2 to avoid defeat.

In any case, Auchinleck did not attribute the same importance to the Western Desert which his predecessor, Wavell (or, indeed, the War Cabinet in London), had done. He worried about the wider responsibilities of his command: about an attack on his northern flank through the Caucasus, about the security of Palestine, about a German drive through Turkey, about the security of Persia and Iraq and the land-route to India. But these threats were neither actual nor specific – for example, sheer distance and time scale would have given ample warning of the first two – and it cannot be doubted that Auchinleck's preoccupation with them reflected a subconscious reluctance to get to grips with Rommel again, as he was constantly being urged to do by London.

In essence, the strategic problem facing the British Empire in the spring of 1942 was not a land problem, but a maritime one; for the Empire itself depended on

Britain's maritime supremacy. At this stage of the war it could be expressed quite simply in terms of naval hardware. The Royal Navy had lost five capital ships in three months. Three others, having been at sea continuously since the outbreak of war, were under refit.

On December 18, 1941, the two remaining capital ships in the Mediterranean Fleet, the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Valiant*, had been holed while lying in Alexandria Harbour by time-bombs fixed to their hulls by Italian frogmen; and two days later the three cruisers and four destroyers of the gallant "K" Force, whose allies from Malta wrought such havoc on Afrika Korps supply-lines, sailed into a minefield and were sunk at a stroke. Almost overnight the Mediterranean Fleet had been reduced to a few light cruisers, and the link between Britain and her Asian possessions still further weakened.

In this same period, the Royal Navy's responsibilities had trebled. German submarine attacks had made convoy escort mandatory the whole way round the Cape and into the Indian Ocean; with the loss of Cyrenaica, supplying Malta had become more perilous; while the incursion of the U-boats to the Caribbean had drawn American escort flotillas back into their home waters and increased the burden on the Royal Navy in the North Atlantic.

This was the moment chosen by Hitler (overruling the advice of his admirals) to sail two of his battlecruisers – *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* – and the cruiser, *Prinz Eugen*, through the English Channel from Brest to Germany. The British Admiralty had received ample warning from their Intelligence and from spies in France, and had drawn up a plan for attacking the ships with aircraft and torpedo-boats in the Channel. They considered it "unwise" to send their heavy ships so close to the German-controlled airfields of Europe.

But an incredible sequence of muddle and incompetence prevented the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet in Dover from hearing that the German ships had broken out until they were literally steaming past his gaze in the narrowest part of the Channel at 10.30 a.m. on February 12. The only aircraft immediately available were six Swordfish of the same squadron that had surprised and crippled the Italian Fleet at Taranto in November, 1940.

These aircraft had a maximum attack speed of 87 m.p.h. To send them against a fully-armed German flotilla which had a running escort of nearly 200 ME-109s and FW-190s, was a certain sentence of death, yet one which the crews gladly accepted. In the event, all six were shot down without scoring a hit and by the time that the British bombers arrived, the Germans were already well into the North Sea under a low cloud cover.

Purely in terms of prestige, this week in February, 1942, was the nadir of the British Empire. Singapore, her greatest fortress, had surrendered; her Asiatic possessions were gone forever; 130,000 of her soldiers had passed into captivity; while at home an enemy fleet had swept the seas in a manner unprecedented since the Dutch won control of the Channel in the late 17th Century.

In the Far East the sequence of disaster, far from slackening with the fall of Singapore, accelerated. The Japanese overran Burma and cut the land-route to China. They penetrated deep into the Indian Ocean and forced the British Fleet to evacuate first Ceylon and then Bombay and to retire to the east coast of Africa. They attacked Darwin and in one day shot down 42 Spitfires.

Now a new and still more hideous peril threatened. Australia might be discontented and resentful – but she had no choice. She was committed irrevocably to Britain and the West. But India was another matter. Archibald Wavell, who had taken over as Commander-in-Chief, India, in 1941, had but two and a half divisions in the whole sub-continent. It was on these troops and the personal armies (of doubtful value) of the Indian princes that he had to rely, not only for defence against the Japanese, but for internal security.

The spectre of rebellion, dormant since the Mutiny of 1857, raised its head. The key to British domination had always been the skill with which they exploited the differences between the various races and religions of the sub-continent. Yet in the spring of 1942, it was this very element which threatened. For, as the British strategic predicament in South-East Asia worsened and Wavell tried to rally the support of all Indians for the defence of their country against a possible Japanese invasion, each rival community sought to turn the situation to its own advantage. It was the classic formula for the break-up of empires down the ages.

Sir Stafford Cripps, a left-wing Socialist who had long been friendly with the Indian nationalist leaders, was sent out from London in March, 1942, to try and coax them into co-operating. It was hoped that his "democratic" image – so different from that of the customary viceregal envoy – would impress the Indian nationalists. Furthermore, Cripps carried a draft declaration that the British government would grant full independence to India "if demanded" by a constituent assembly after the war. But while the war lasted, the British government insisted that control of India's defence must remain in its hands.

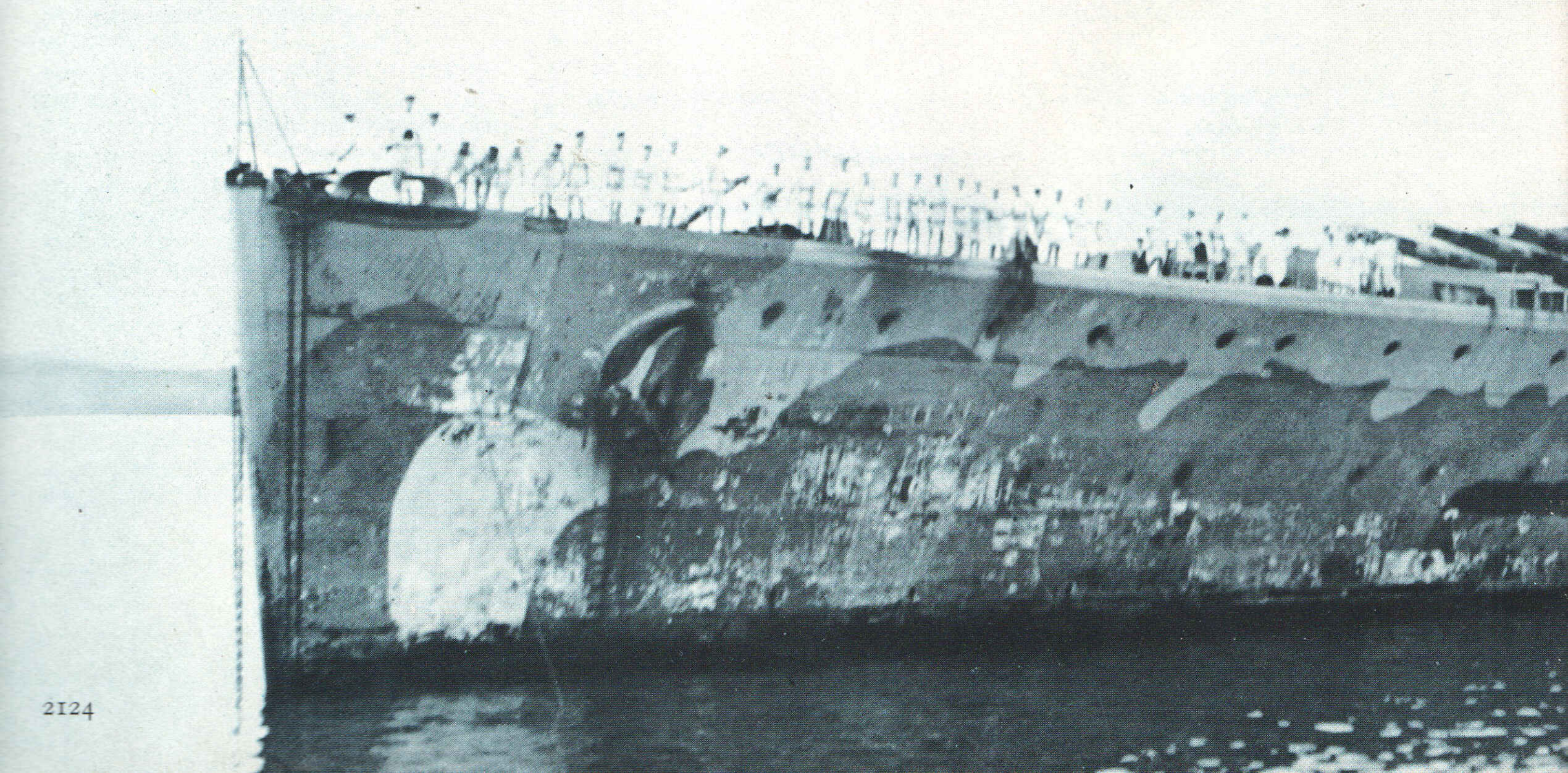
The Indians were unconvinced. Gandhi refused to accept a "post-dated cheque drawn on a crashing bank." Instead, Congress demanded immediate self-government with a Minister of Defence in full independent control. The Muslim League, apprehensive about the position of the Muslim community in an independent India, also rejected the British proposals. After less than three weeks, the talks broke down. The Indian Congress then launched a campaign of civil disobedience against the British authorities, and its leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, were promptly imprisoned.

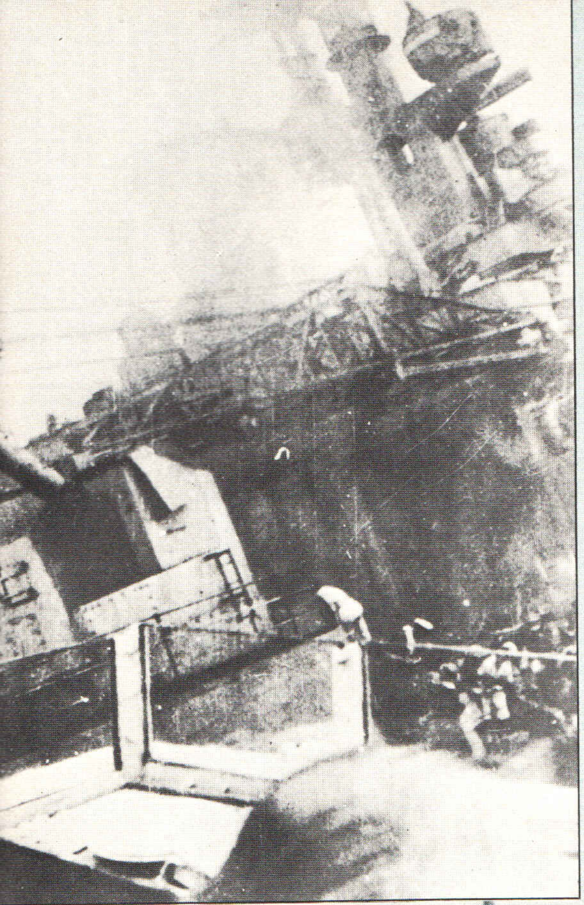
Cripps may well not have been the right man for the job. It is not impossible that Cripps's mission was motivated by domestic political considerations: had the Churchill government fallen (after the loss of Singapore this seemed quite likely), the most obvious alternative Prime Minister – who could not be a Conservative – was Stafford Cripps. Churchill might have welcomed Stafford Cripps's departure for distant climes on a mission in whose success Churchill himself had little confidence. Certainly, Cripps's failure to gain an agreement weakened his standing on the Left.

In the early spring of 1942, then, the British Empire did seem physically to be on the point of disintegration. And yet it was to be saved, not by its own exertions or those of its allies, but by a combination of luck and of mistakes by its enemies

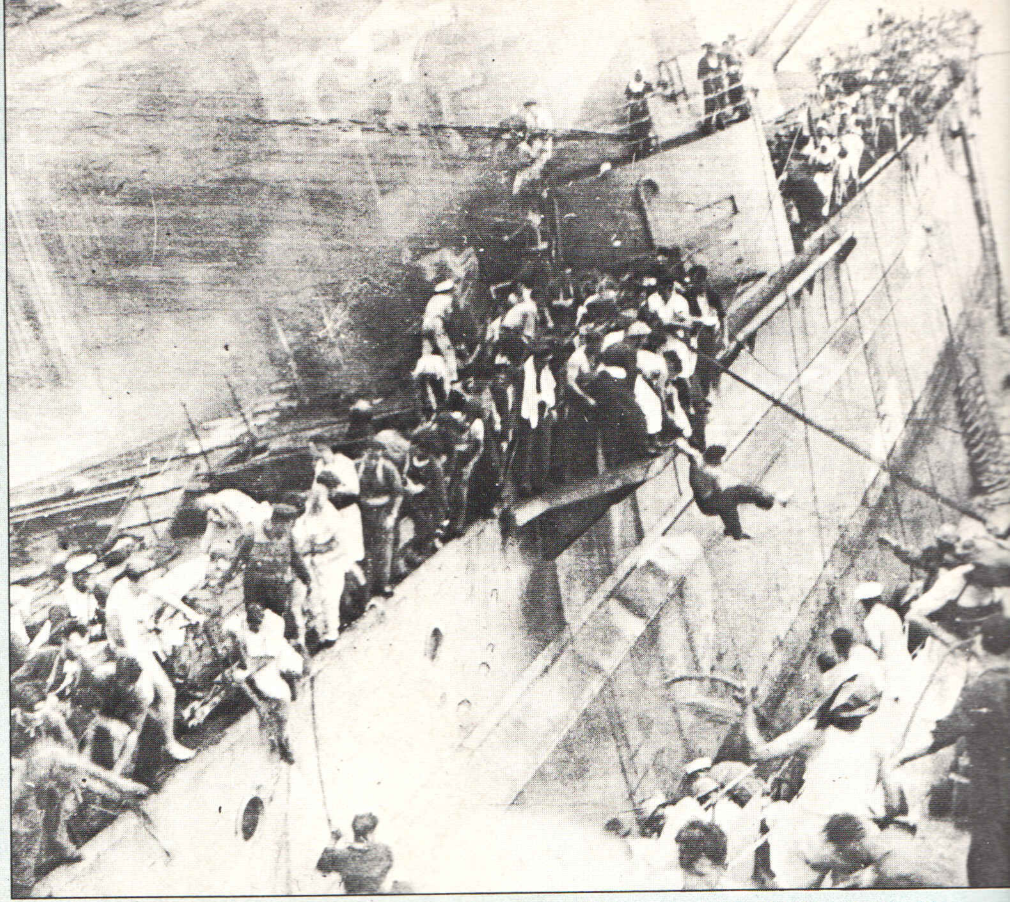
DISASTER IN THE FAR EAST

On December 10, 1941, three days after Japan had attacked Malaya and Pearl Harbor, her 22nd Air Flotilla sank Britain's two most formidable warships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. It was a shattering blow to imperial strategy, for there were no British ships left in either the Indian Ocean or the Pacific. "The full horror of the news sank in upon me," Churchill wrote. "Over all this vast expanse of waters Japan was everywhere supreme." But, at least, it was thought, Britain's land empire was safe: Singapore, the key to imperial defence in the Far East, would always act as a base from which imperial warships would one day regain control of the Far Eastern sea-lanes. But, incredibly, its batteries of 15-inch guns defended it against attack from the sea only – they could not swing round to confront any hostile land forces advancing from the north. The Japanese took exactly that route. A month later, on January 9, they crossed the Johore Strait into Singapore with little resistance – a prelude to one of the greatest disasters in the history of the British Empire.

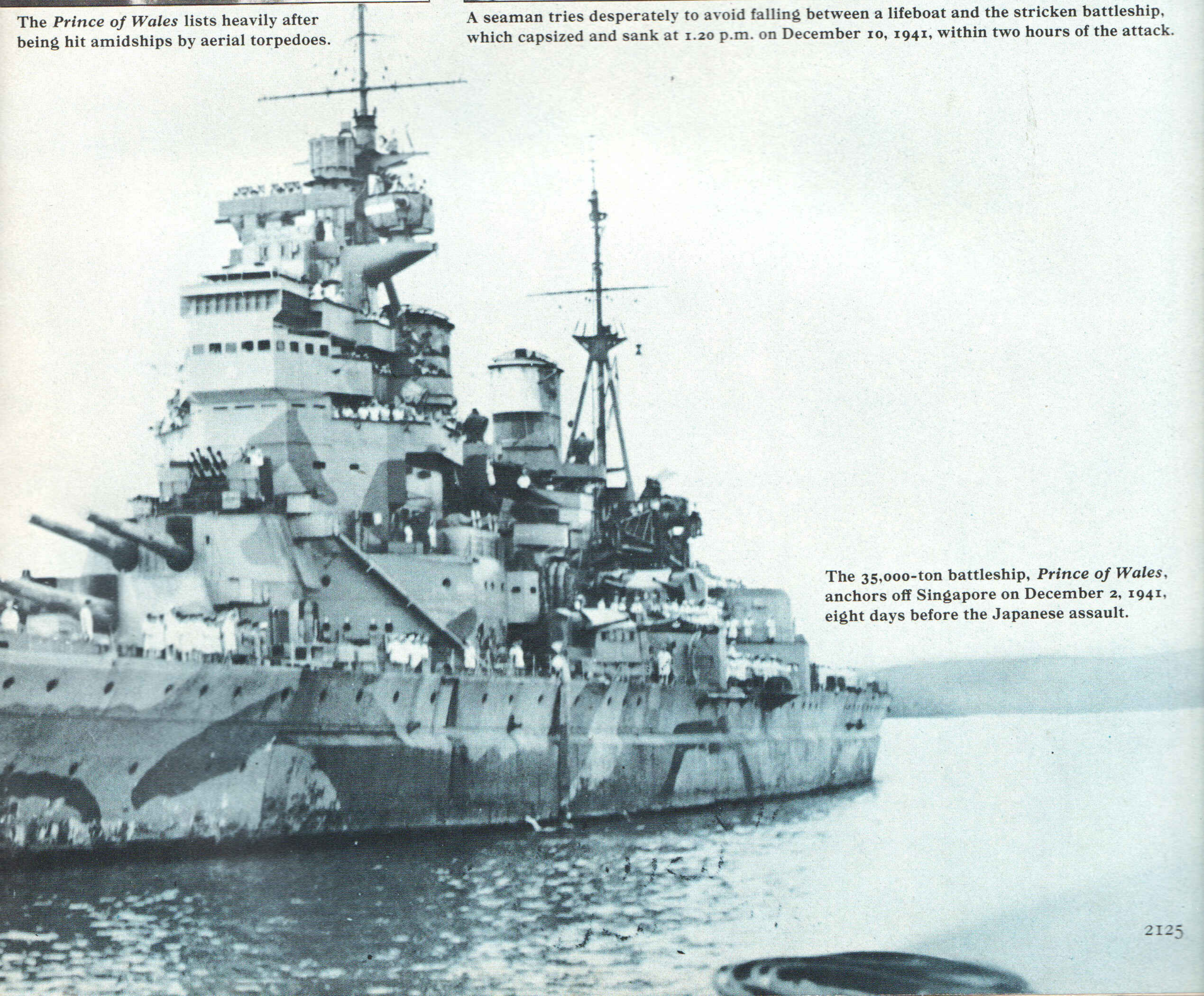




The *Prince of Wales* lists heavily after being hit amidships by aerial torpedoes.



A seaman tries desperately to avoid falling between a lifeboat and the stricken battleship, which capsized and sank at 1.20 p.m. on December 10, 1941, within two hours of the attack.



The 35,000-ton battleship, *Prince of Wales*, anchors off Singapore on December 2, 1941, eight days before the Japanese assault.

The Fall of Singapore

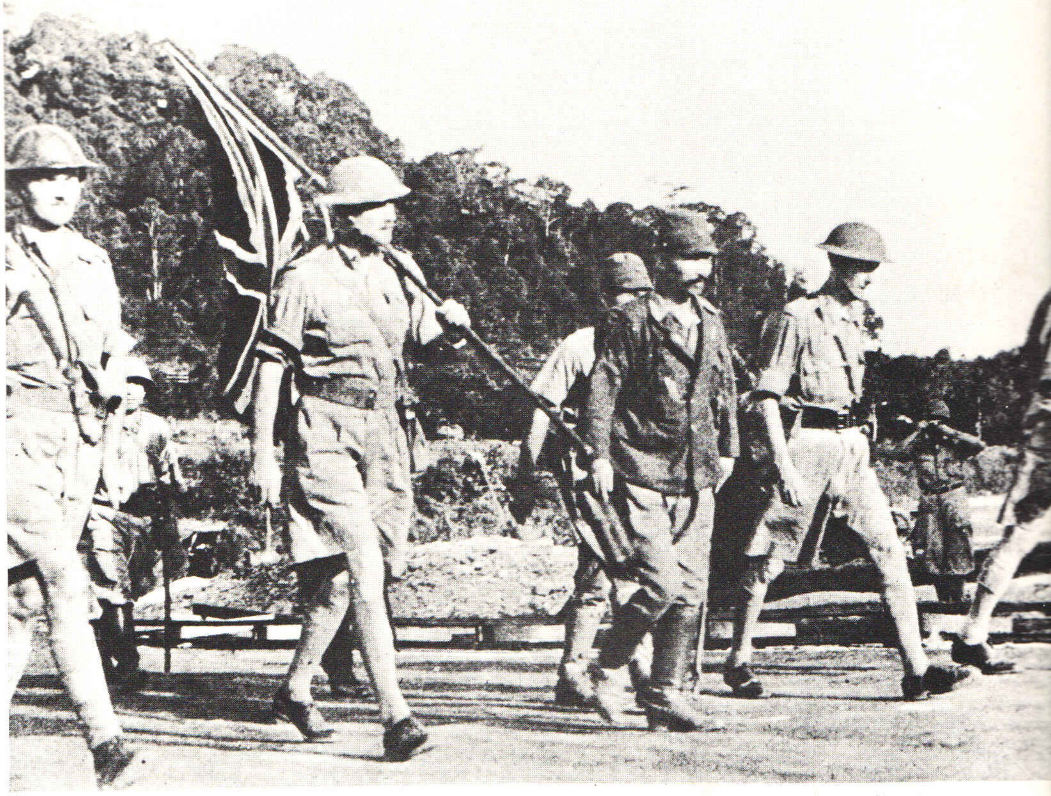
Singapore, supposedly the "bastion of Empire" in the East, was totally unprepared when the Japanese launched their assault on Malaya. Complacency, bred of an assumed superiority over Asian peoples, had led to a fatal disregard of basic military needs.

There were no food reserves. Army chiefs had to work their way through a bureaucratic maze for permission even to dig gun emplacements. Whitehall decreed that "production and labour management" should take precedence over military requirements. So, instead of being given military training or digging fortifications, local labourers were kept at work in mines and rubber plantations. In 55 days the Japanese swept through Malaya and began shelling Singapore. Its inability to hold out was by now apparent and Churchill contemplated a complete withdrawal, but the Australian government insisted that an attempt must be made to hold the island and a fresh British division was thrown in.

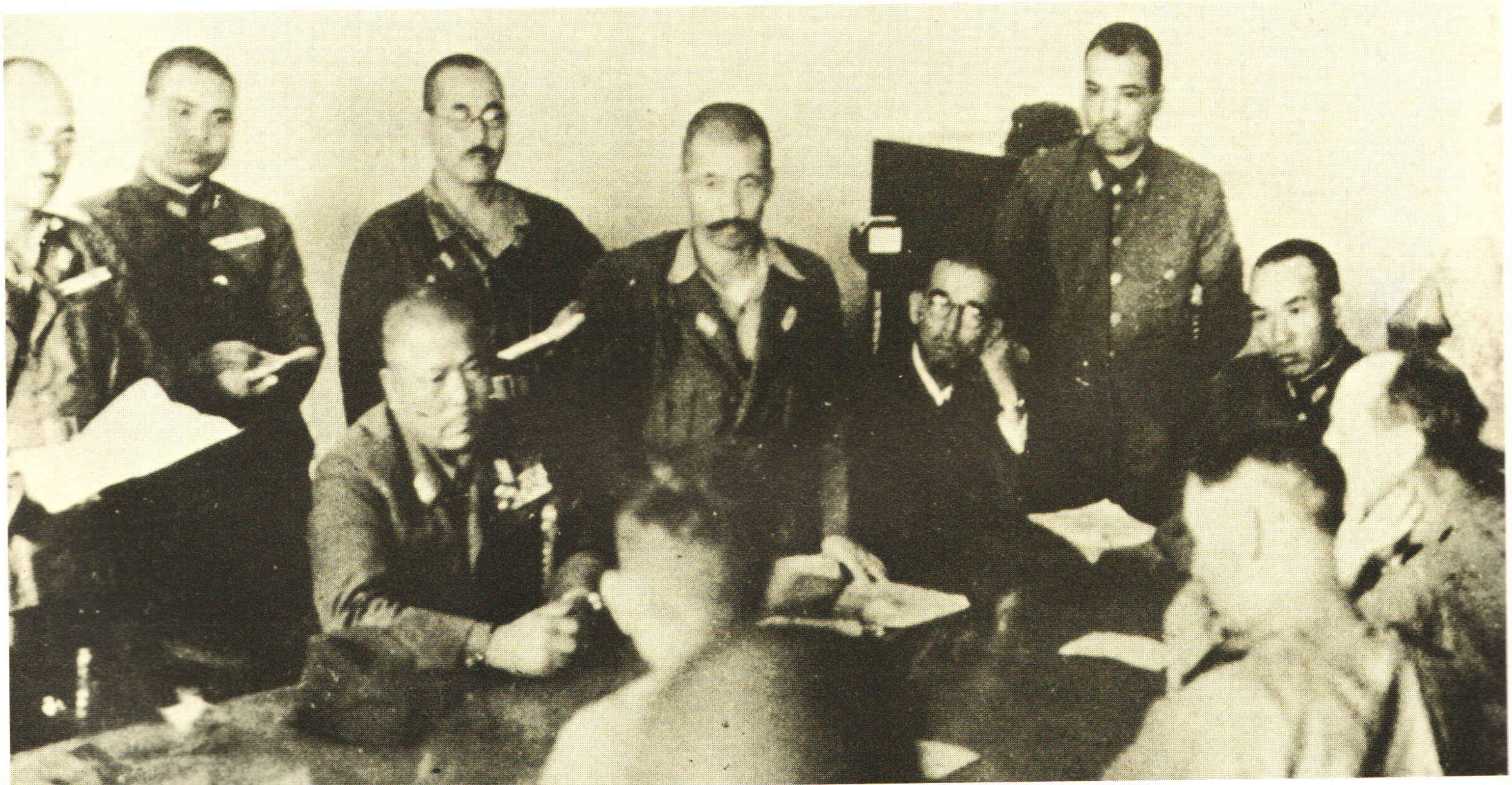
Lacking food, water, artillery ammunition and petrol reserves, the town surrendered after only 15 days – "the worst disaster," said Churchill, "and the largest capitulation in British history."

Amid the debris of a Singapore street a Malayan mother weeps beside the body of her child, killed in a Japanese air-raid only hours before the colony's surrender.

Singapore racing enthusiasts display the insouciance that was a prime cause of disaster.



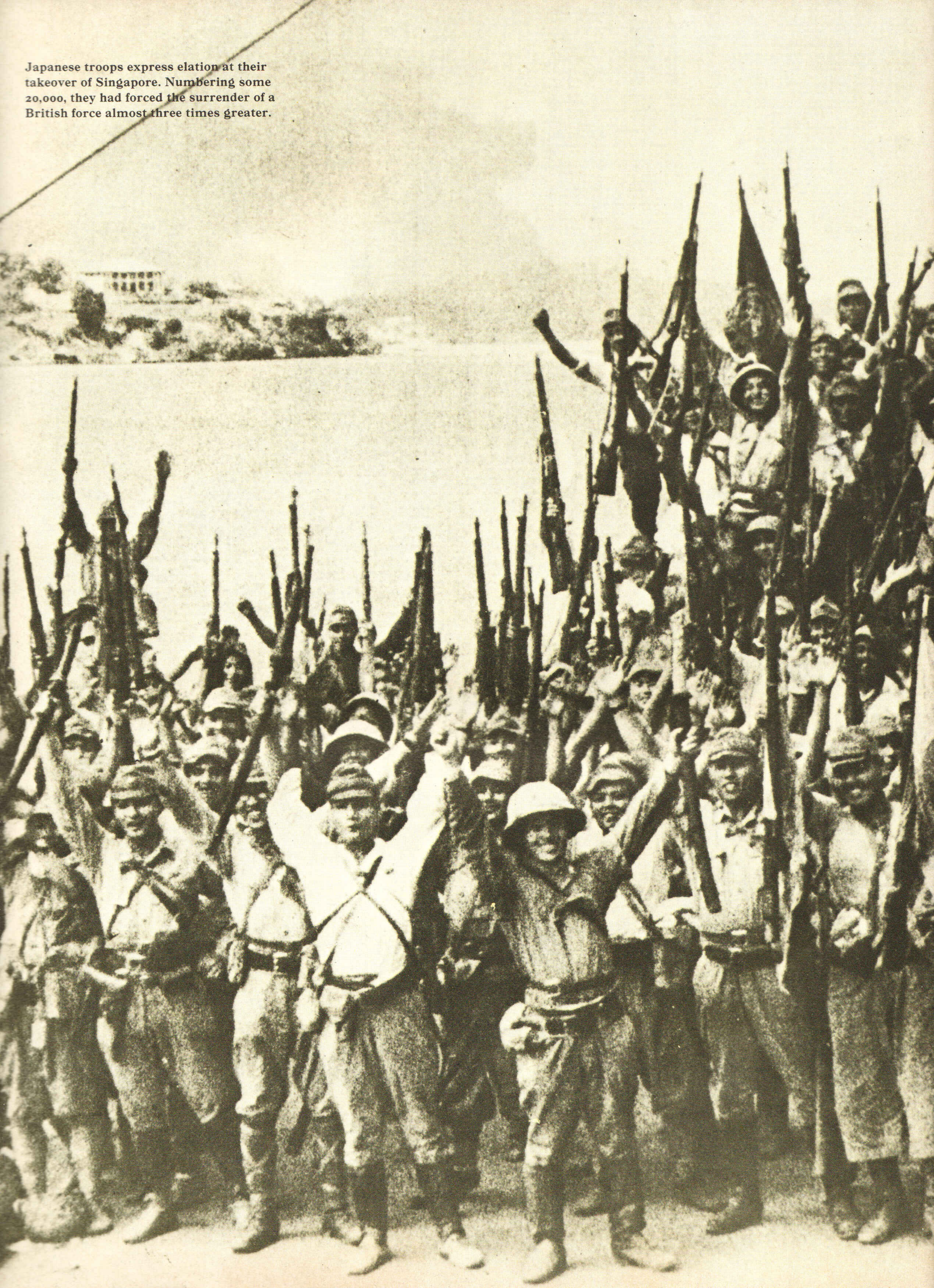
Lieutenant-General A. E. Percival (far right), Singapore's commander, and his colleagues, are escorted by Japanese officers to General Yamashita for the colony's formal surrender.

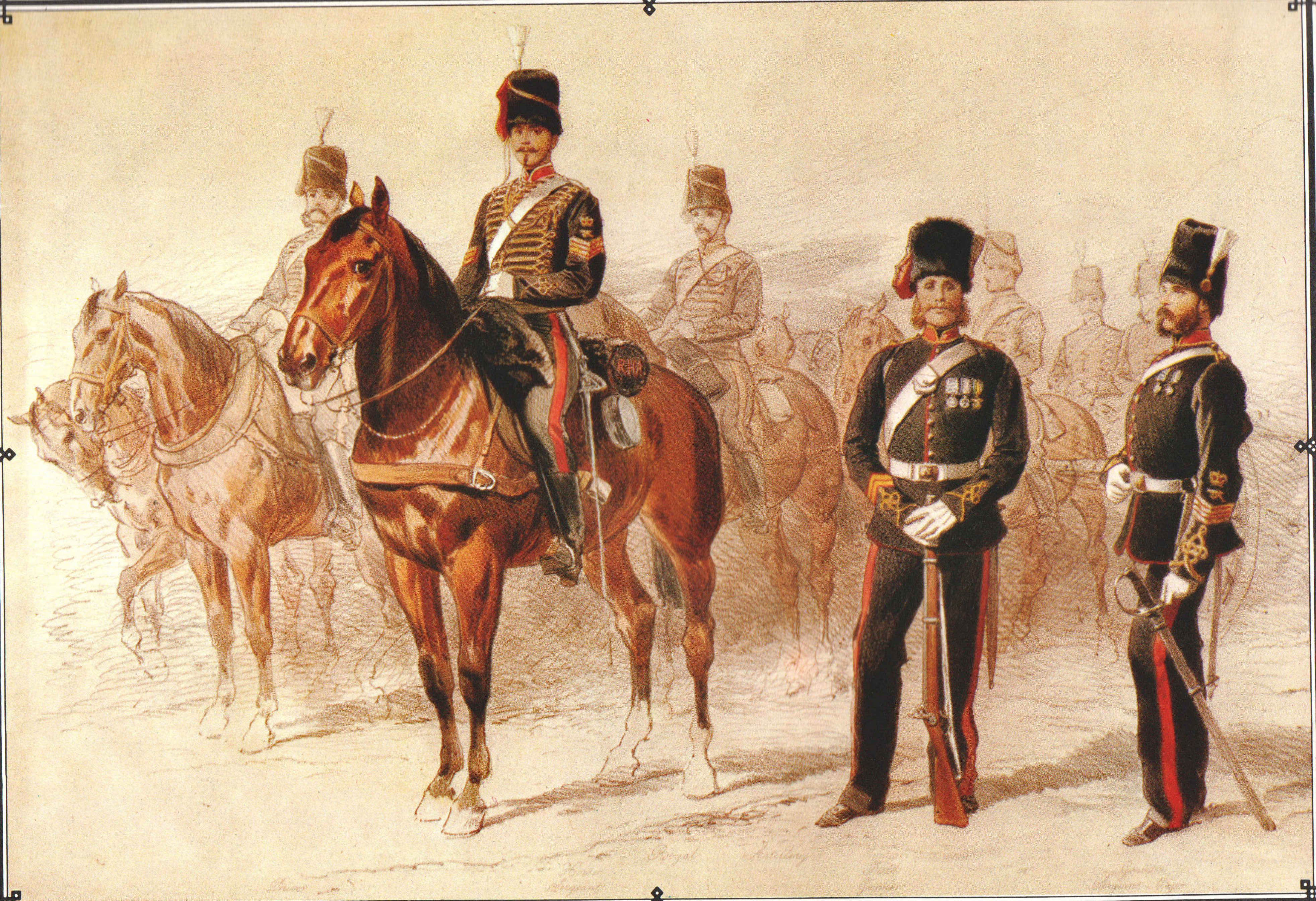


Flanked by senior officers of his staff, General Yamashita accepts General Percival's surrender at 7 p.m. on February 15, 1942.

Women and children smile and wave as they are evacuated from Singapore to Australia before the Japanese onslaught.

Japanese troops express elation at their takeover of Singapore. Numbering some 20,000, they had forced the surrender of a British force almost three times greater.




Driver
Horse Sergeant
Royal Artillery
Field Gunner
Garrison Sergeant Major

Royal Artillery, 1861