

# War in the Pacific

## Defending Australia

### The First Six Months

Chapter 10

January 22 1942...  
The Attack on Rabaul



# Situation report 22nd January 1942

- **Rabaul**

- There have been extensive attacks by carrier aircraft on Rabaul and throughout New Guinea.
- The RAAF have had all their aircraft destroyed and are withdrawing.
- The government has failed to make any decision about evacuation of civilians and administration personnel
- Enemy ships have been sighted approaching Rabaul

- **Government**

- Curtin is recuperating at home in Perth.
- Australia has not achieved any acceptable role in the direction of the war.

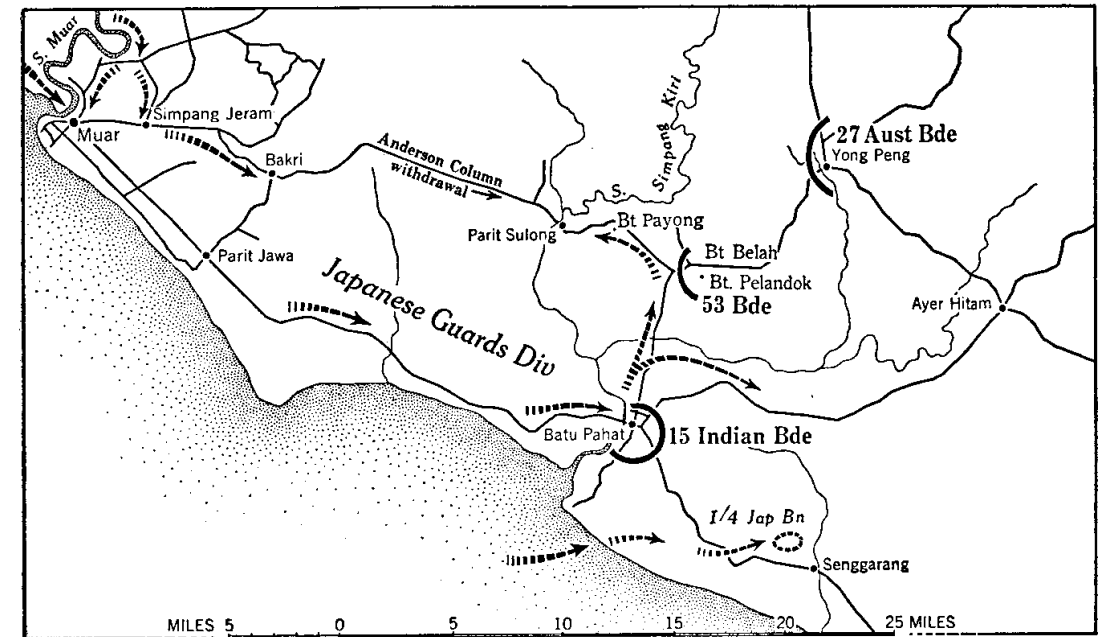
# Situation report 22nd January 1942

- **Malaya**

- The 8th Division AIF have inflicted heavy losses on the Japanese but have been unable to stop their advance. Two of the six infantry battalions have suffered very severe losses in the fighting at Muar.
- Despite destruction of bridges and boats during the withdrawal, the Japanese have been able to follow up quickly not only with infantry but with tanks and artillery as well and have been outflanking the allies by moving troops by sea down the west coast.
- Hurricanes are better than Buffaloes but are not superior to the zeros and there are too few of them.

- **NEI**

- The Japanese have taken Tarakan and Manado and an invasion force is approaching the Oil centre of Balikpapan in Eastern Borneo
- **General Wavell**, appointed Supreme Commander of ABDA, is trying to solve "the time problem between the rate of Japanese advance and the arrival of reinforcements".



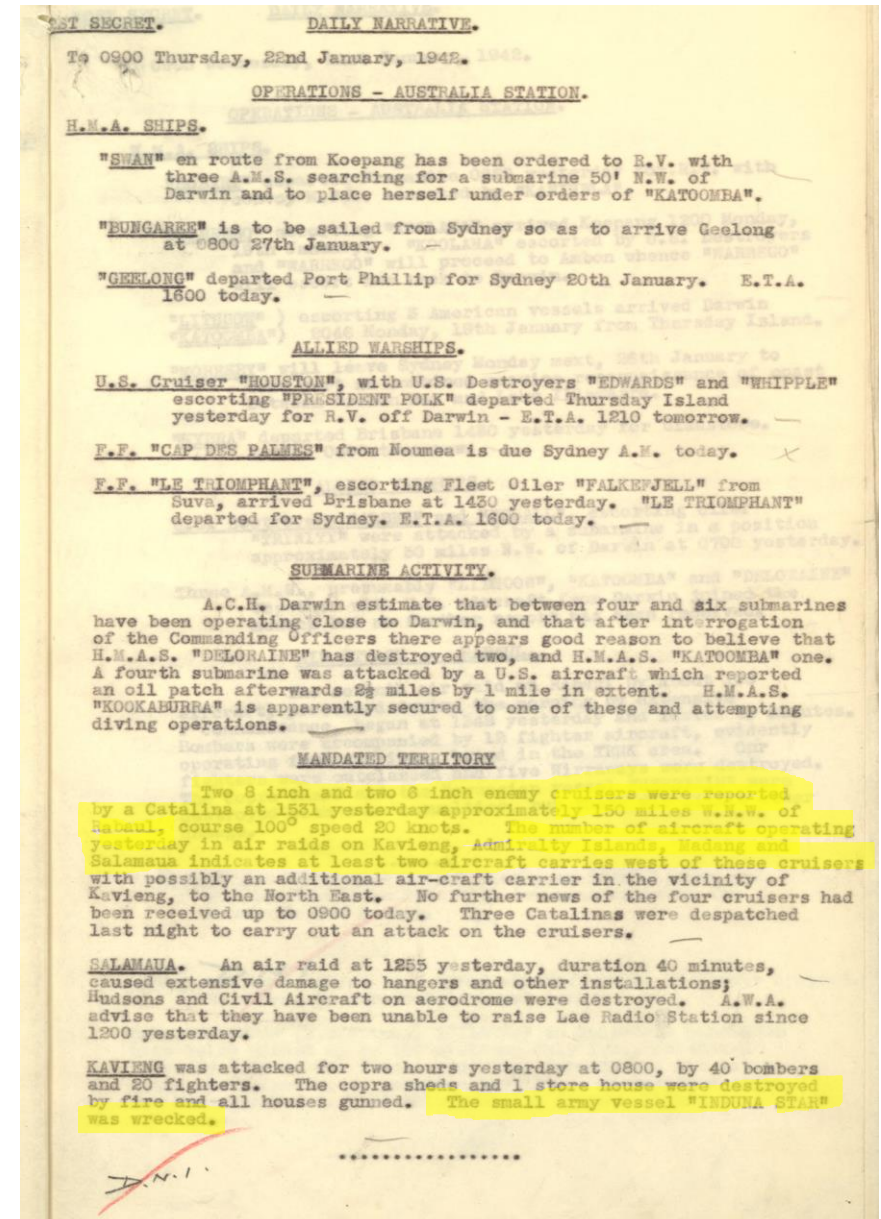
The withdrawal from Bakri

## Churchill

Is alternately giving firebreathing instructions to hold Singapore and musing about withdrawing to concentrate on defending Burma.

# 22nd January - Melbourne

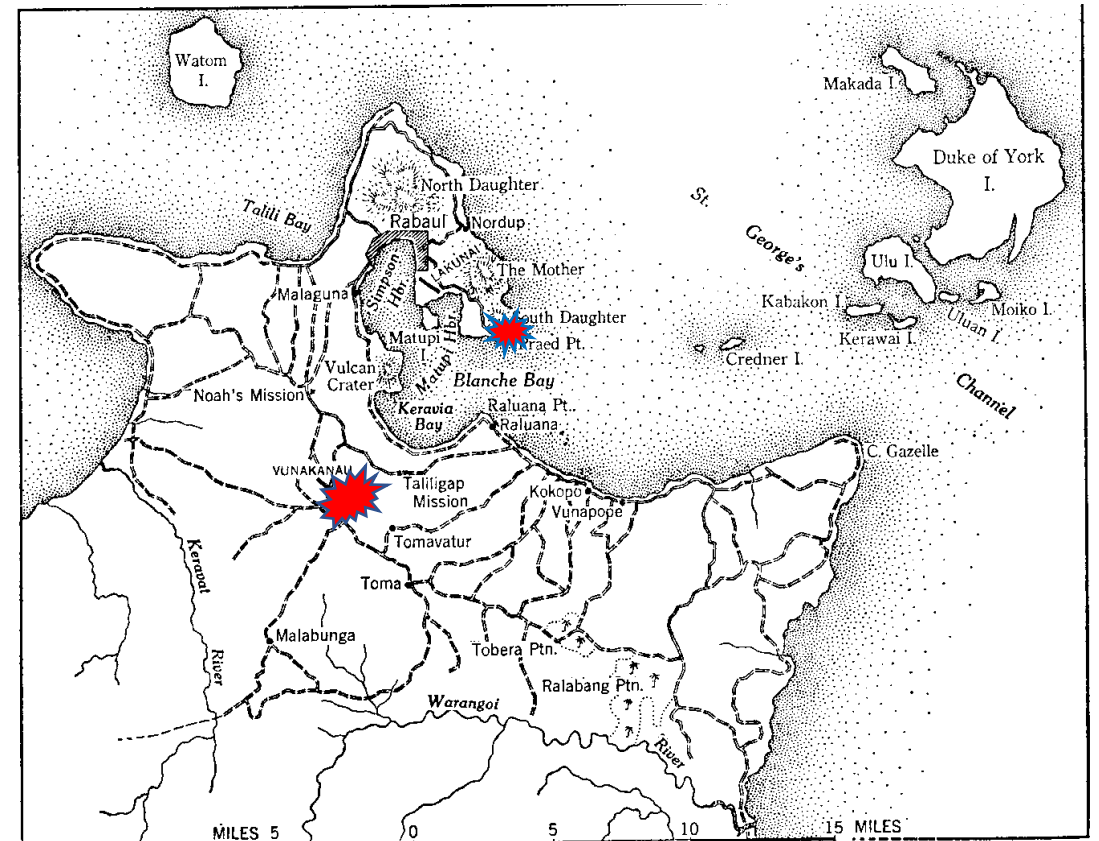
- The RAN were aware of the
  - air attacks on New Guinea and the
  - Sightings of approaching convoys
  - And they had deduced the presence of aircraft carriers.
- They reported the wrecking of the army vessel "Induna Star"
- There is no evidence in the record that assistance to the army was ever considered.
- There is no report of the army doing anything or communicating with New Guinea Force.





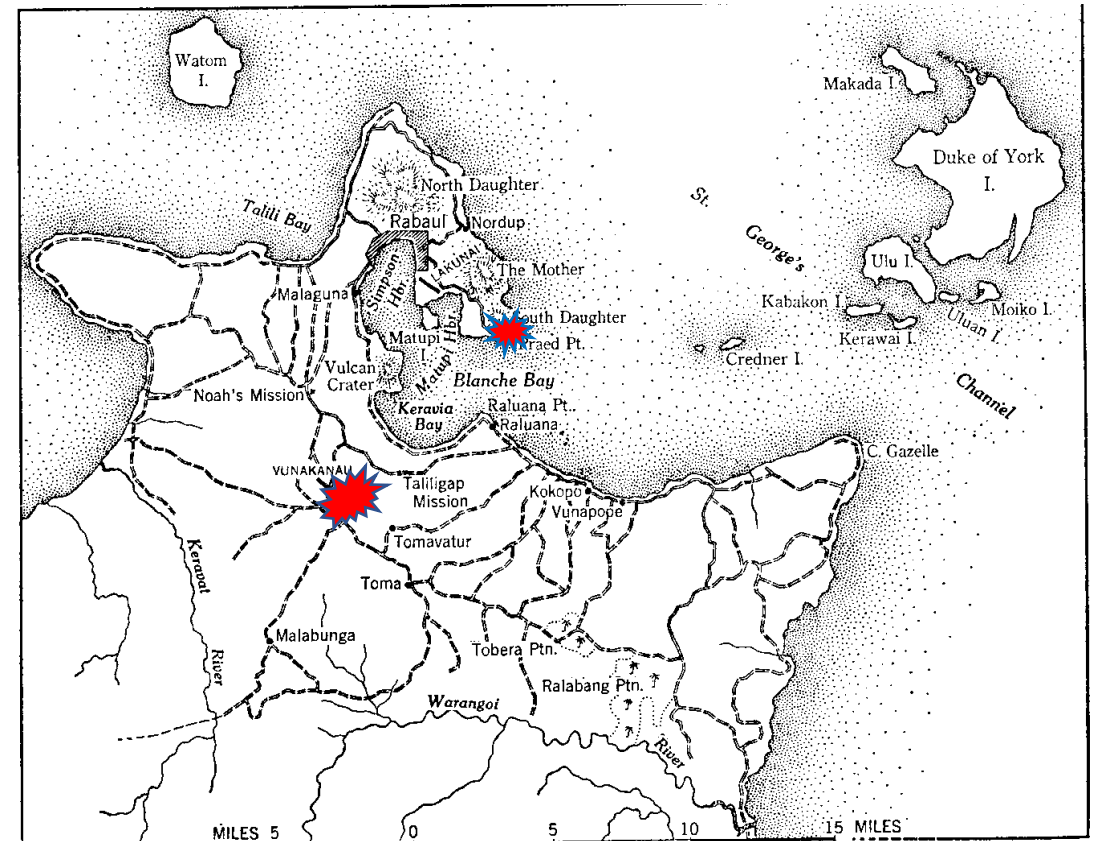
# 22<sup>nd</sup> January – Air, Rabaul

- At 3 a.m. on the 22nd Sharp, his Hudson filled with wounded men, took off from Vunakanau.
  - Two or three lights placed at the far end of the runway were his only guide.
  - Just after the Hudson became airborne one engine faltered, but it picked up again, and four hours later the overworked aircraft reached Port Moresby safely.
  - After refuelling Sharp set off for Townsville. When about half the distance had been covered the faulty engine stopped altogether.
  - All guns, ammunition and movable equipment were hurriedly jettisoned. For an hour and a half Sharp kept the Hudson flying on one engine until he was over Cooktown where he was able to make a safe landing.
  - A new engine cylinder was flown to Cooktown and the Hudson, which had flown for 100 hours without even an engine inspection, was able to complete the journey to Brisbane.
  - As the pilot of the last aircraft to leave Rabaul before the invasion, Sharp carried about 300 letters, some of them in envelopes, some without.



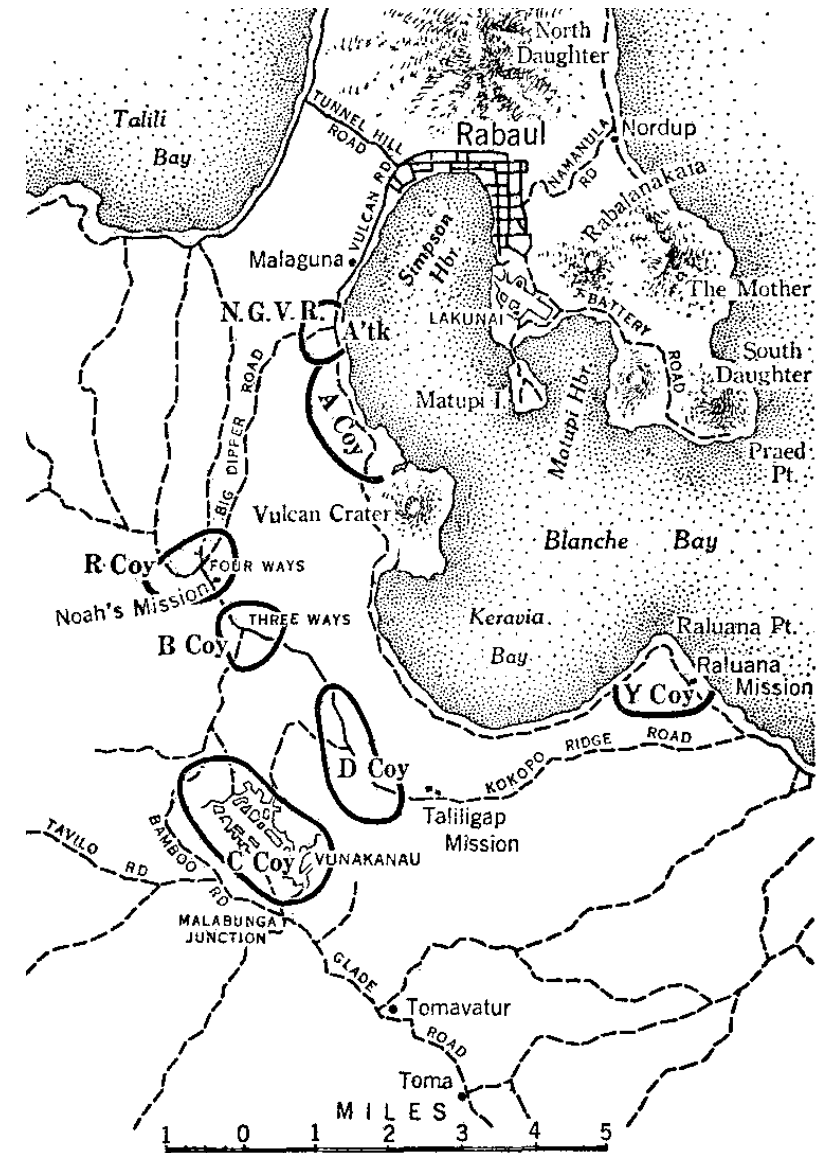
# 22<sup>nd</sup> January – Air, Rabaul

- At 8 am on 22nd, Rabaul was under attack again by 45 fighters and dive bombers. Vunakanau, was attacked despite small arms and machine-gun fire from the troops.
- The dive bombers then turned to the Praed Point coast defence battery, easily located from the air because during its construction all the palm trees and tropical undergrowth in the area had been removed, and a wide metalled road ran like a pointer to the emplacements.
  - The intense bombing blasted the top gun out of the ground on top of the lower one, destroying both.
  - Eleven men were killed, including some sheltering in a dugout who were buried alive when it collapsed.



# 22<sup>nd</sup> January - Rabaul

- With the silencing of the Praed Point battery, the evacuation of the air force, and the cratering of the airfields, Scanlan decided that the justification for the original role of the force no longer existed.
  - He ordered demolitions carried out and the township evacuated.
- At 3.30 p.m. an enemy convoy was seen approaching. It appeared to consist of destroyers, cruisers, transports and one aircraft carrier. About twenty vessels had been counted before the convoy disappeared to the south-east half an hour later.
- At 4 p.m. the engineers blew a bomb dump in the town. The blast shattered valves of wireless sets in Rabaul and put the radio transmitter at headquarters out of action. The only remaining means of communicating was by a radio, which had been established at Toma, fifteen miles south of Rabaul.

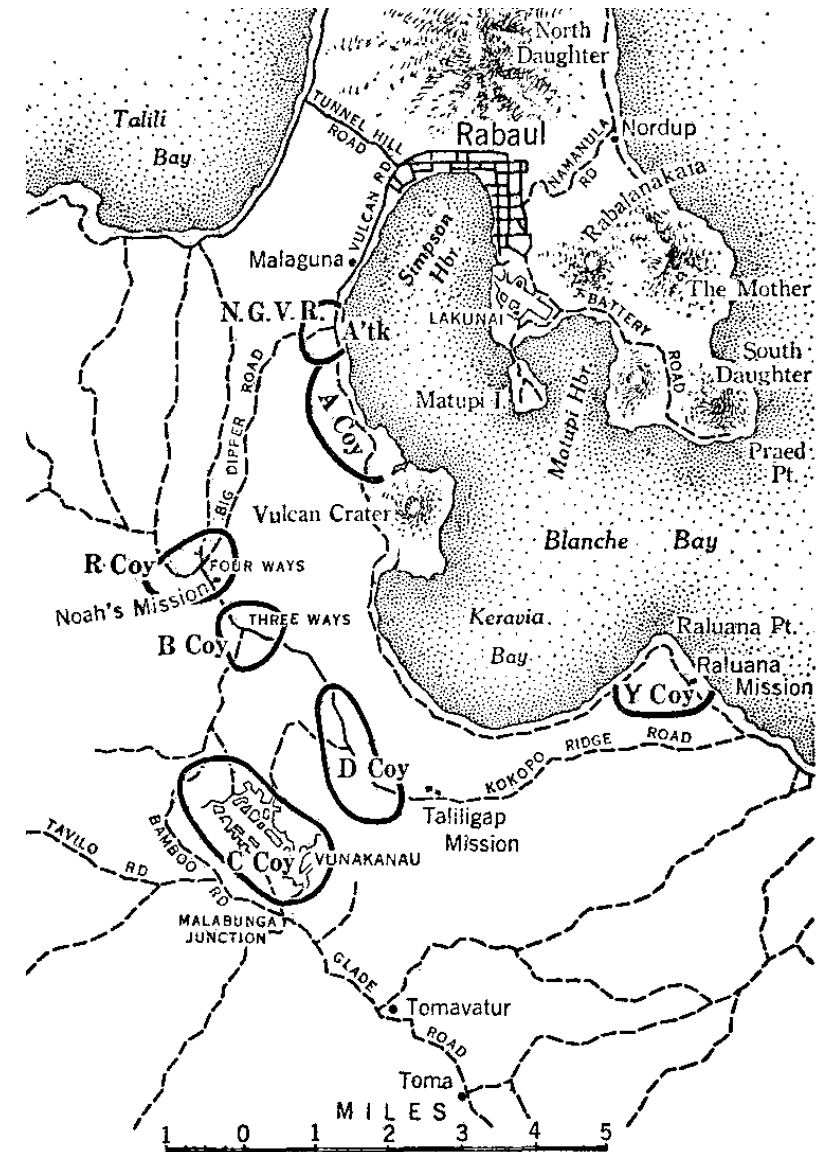


Dispositions, 2 a.m. 23rd January



# 22<sup>nd</sup> January - Rabaul

- Scanlan decided that the enemy's probable landing places would be inside the harbour. To avoid part of his force being cut off if the Japanese occupied the connecting isthmus, he moved his troops from the Matupi area and concentrated the force south of Blanche Bay.
- He ordered the anti-aircraft battery to destroy their guns.
  - A round was placed in the chamber and one in the muzzle of each gun.
  - The oil buffers were disconnected and lengths of telephone wire attached to the firing handles.
  - Everybody took cover.
  - The wires were pulled, there was a roar and pieces of metal whistled overhead. Both barrels had "opened out like a sliced radish" for a couple of feet from the muzzles.
  - It was found impracticable to destroy the ammunition, amounting to about 2,500 rounds. (about 35 tonnes)
- By 5 p.m. all were settled in their new positions and watching civilians making their way in trucks, cars and on foot along the road to Kokopo under a cloud of black smoke from the burning wharves and the demolitions in Rabaul township.



Dispositions, 2 a.m. 23rd January

# 22nd January – The Islands

- Against these Japanese forces naval defence was completely non existent.
- There was one force in the area which was now to come into action, and to a considerable and increasing extent to remain in action even in territory overrun by the Japanese. That was the Coastwatching Organisation, members of which were in position to be able to give warning of Japanese movements and impending attacks.
- The system had been set up in the first world war to detect German raiding ships which might approach the Australian coast.
- Commander Long, the D.N.I., had maintained and developed the service between the wars and when war broke out in 1939 Lt Cdr Eric Feldt, in peacetime the mining warden of the Wau goldfields, joined him to command the service and to extend its reach into Papua, New Guinea and the Islands.
- Long was evidently a good delegator, Feldt described him as being able to leave anything alone if it functioned properly, which he assessed as a rarer quality and a higher merit than is usually supposed.
- Most coastwatchers were civilians, either administration officers or planters. Feldt referred to them as Islanders and selected them because they knew how to live in the jungle, how to handle natives and how to fend for themselves.
- When Japan entered the war they were told that it was the policy of the Naval Board that, as civilians, they were to cease reporting in the event of an enemy occupying their area. They however elected to remain and to continue reporting by radio. Frequently providing intelligence of great value.
- After Japan entered the war, the civilian coastwatchers in the Territories were, after the delays usual when introducing new processes to an entrenched bureaucracy, given service rank to provide some protection in case of capture and some financial security for dependents.
- The first enemy sighting in the Bismarck Archipelago had been on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1941, when C.L. Page, a Coastwatcher on Tabar Island, about eighty miles east of Kavieng and on the direct air route from Truk to Rabaul saw and reported an aircraft headed towards Rabaul. Every subsequent reconnaissance and raid on Rabaul was also reported.

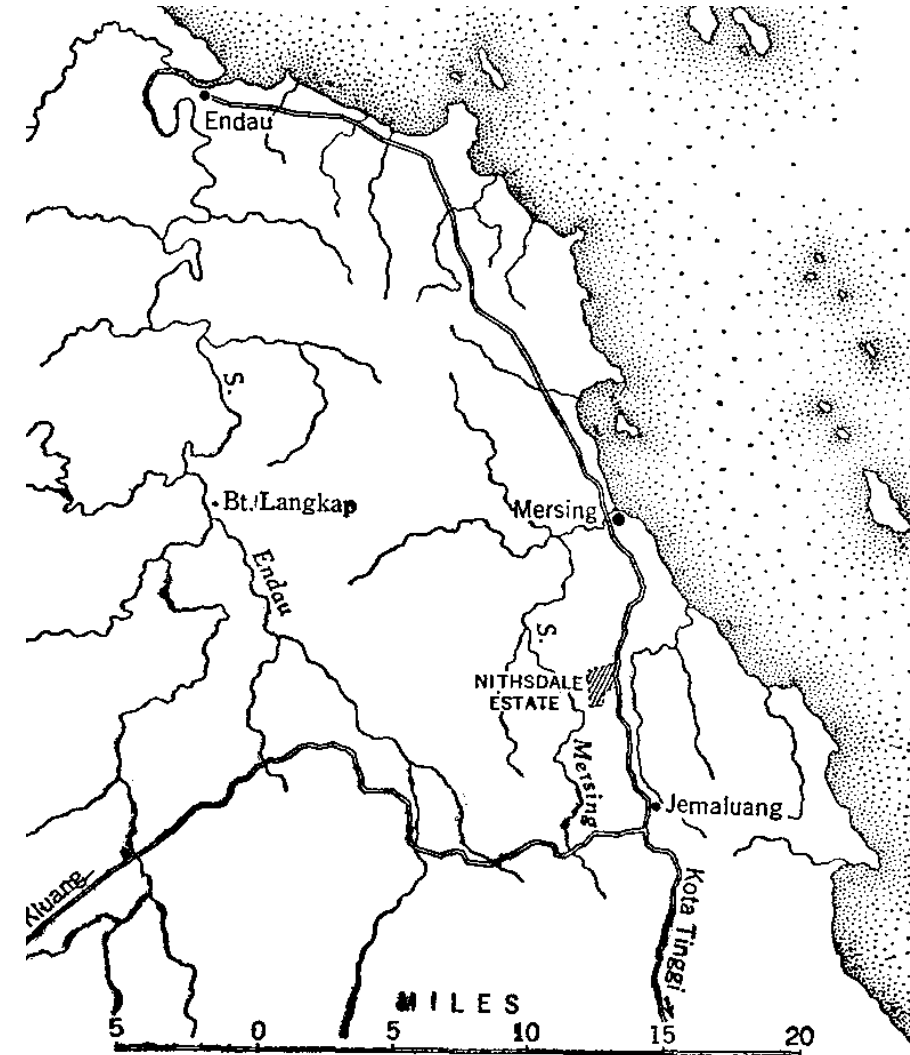
# 22<sup>nd</sup> January - Malaya

- **Mersing**

- An attempt was made early on 22nd January by a company of Japanese to capture the Mersing bridge.
- The bridge had been well wired, and the attackers wilted under concentrated mortar and machine - gun fire.
- A section of the 2/20th Battalion crossed the river and machine - gunned enemy posts, and houses in which the Japanese had hidden. Artillery completed the task, and the rest of the enemy force moved westward.
- Enemy posts and concentrations elsewhere in the Mersing area were pounded by the Australians' guns, for which good fields of fire had been provided as a result of the evacuation of civilians on the outbreak of war.
- In keeping with the withdrawal policy laid down, Taylor moved his headquarters and the 2/18<sup>th</sup> Battalion back towards Jemaluang. The 2/10th Field Regiment maintained effective fire throughout the day, and the move was completed without interference during the night.
- The 2/20th Battalion was left covering the approach to Mersing.

- **Singapore**

- The 44th Indian Brigade with attached troops and 7,000 Indian reinforcements, reached Singapore on 22nd January, but as Percival considered it as little fitted for battle as the 45rd Indian Brigade, he kept it on the island. The reinforcements, still less trained and with very few N.C.O's among them, were drafted sparingly to units.



# 22<sup>nd</sup> January - Air

- **New Guinea**

- The RAAF ground staff withdrew from Rabaul on 22<sup>nd</sup>, and trekked down to the south coast of New Britain from where they were evacuated by flying boat on 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of January.
- Four Hudsons from No. 6 Squadron at Richmond flew to Port Moresby on 22<sup>nd</sup> January as the first element of a new unit, No.32 General Reconnaissance Squadron to be based there. Wing Commander Lerew was posted to command it.
- Tulagi, headquarters of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, with its small force of about fifty R.A.A.F. and A.I.F. at the flying-boat base on Tanambogo Island, had its first air raid on 22<sup>nd</sup> January.

- **Malaya**

- On the 22<sup>nd</sup> January the road from Muar to Batu Pahat was attacked by 2 Albacores, 1 Shark and 6 Buffaloes.
- On 22<sup>nd</sup> January Kallang was heavily bombed. The station headquarters was wrecked and one of four Buffaloes that was taking off was destroyed; the pilot and two ground staff were killed.
- The *Kedah* reached Palembang safely on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the Hudson squadrons' ground staff parties promptly moved out to an aerodrome known as P.2.
- On that day the two Dutch Glenn Martin squadrons also withdrew from Singapore Island to Java where they reverted to Dutch control.

- **Burma**

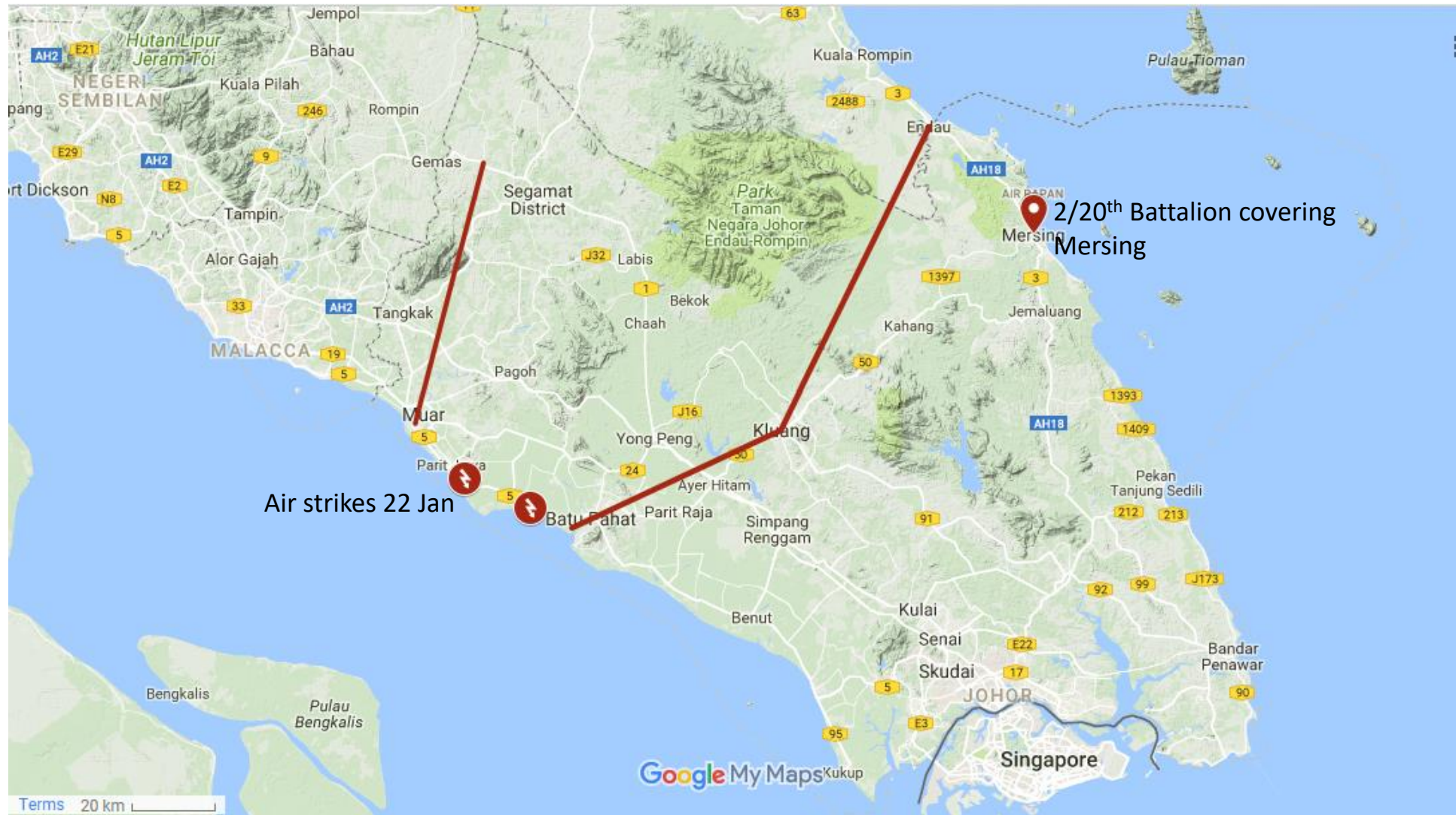
- The Blenheims had attacked Raheng and Mesarieng on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> January, dropping 6,000 pounds of bombs on each target. They also attacked enemy troops in the Kawkereik Pass and bombed the town itself.



Fairey Albacore (top) Blackburn Shark (bottom)



# Wavell's Lines from 10<sup>th</sup> January





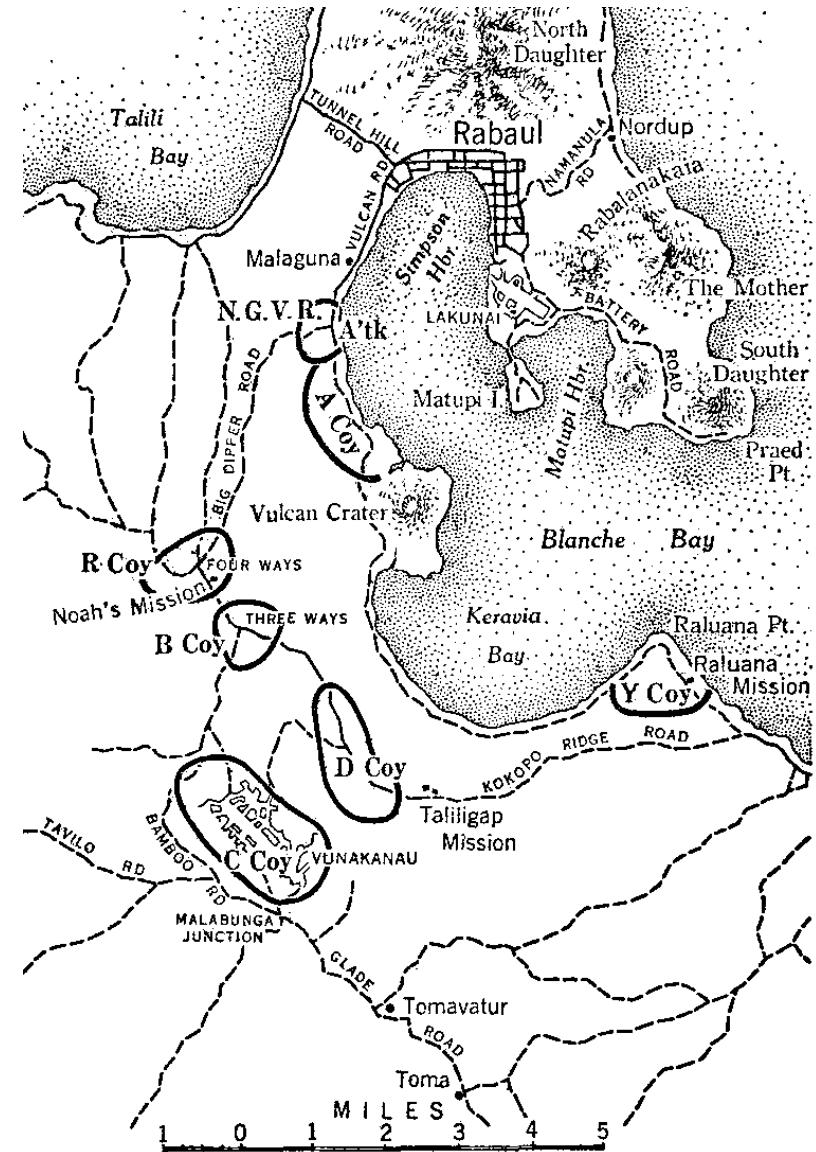


# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Melbourne

- **Government**
- On 23rd January after an emergency meeting of the War Cabinet, a direct message to Churchill, in Curtin's name, spoke of the public feeling of grave uneasiness in Australia at the Allied impotence to do anything to stem the Japanese advance.
  - The Australian Government, in realising its responsibility to prepare the public for the possibility of invasion, also had an obligation to explain why it might not be possible to prevent the enemy reaching Australian shores.
  - It referred to reports from London that the Defence Committee had been considering the evacuation of Malaya and Singapore.
  - After all the assurances that had been given, the evacuation of Singapore would be regarded in Australia and elsewhere as an "inexcusable betrayal".
  - It had been understood that this central fortress in the system of Empire and local defence was to be made impregnable and that, in any event, it was to be capable of holding out for a prolonged period until the arrival of the main fleet.
  - If reinforcements were to be diverted from Malaya in an emergency they should be sent to the Netherlands East Indies and not to Burma.
  - Curtin was actually on the train to Perth at the time, heading for a weeks recuperative leave at home in Fremantle. Forde as deputy prime minister would have chaired the meeting but Evatt is believed to have drafted the cable.
- Australia also requested fighter aircraft, asking that up to 250 modern American fighters be immediately allotted to the R.A.A.F.
- The same message was conveyed to Roosevelt by Casey. The President referred it to his Chiefs of Staff, made a number of personal comments and concluded that he appreciated the concern of Australia but, looking at the war picture as a whole, as he was obliged to do, and with the knowledge of what was in preparation, he had very little anxiety for the security of Australia itself.
- The information now received from Pearl Harbour showed that the losses there on 7th December had been more serious than at first thought, with a total loss of five battleships.

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January – Rabaul

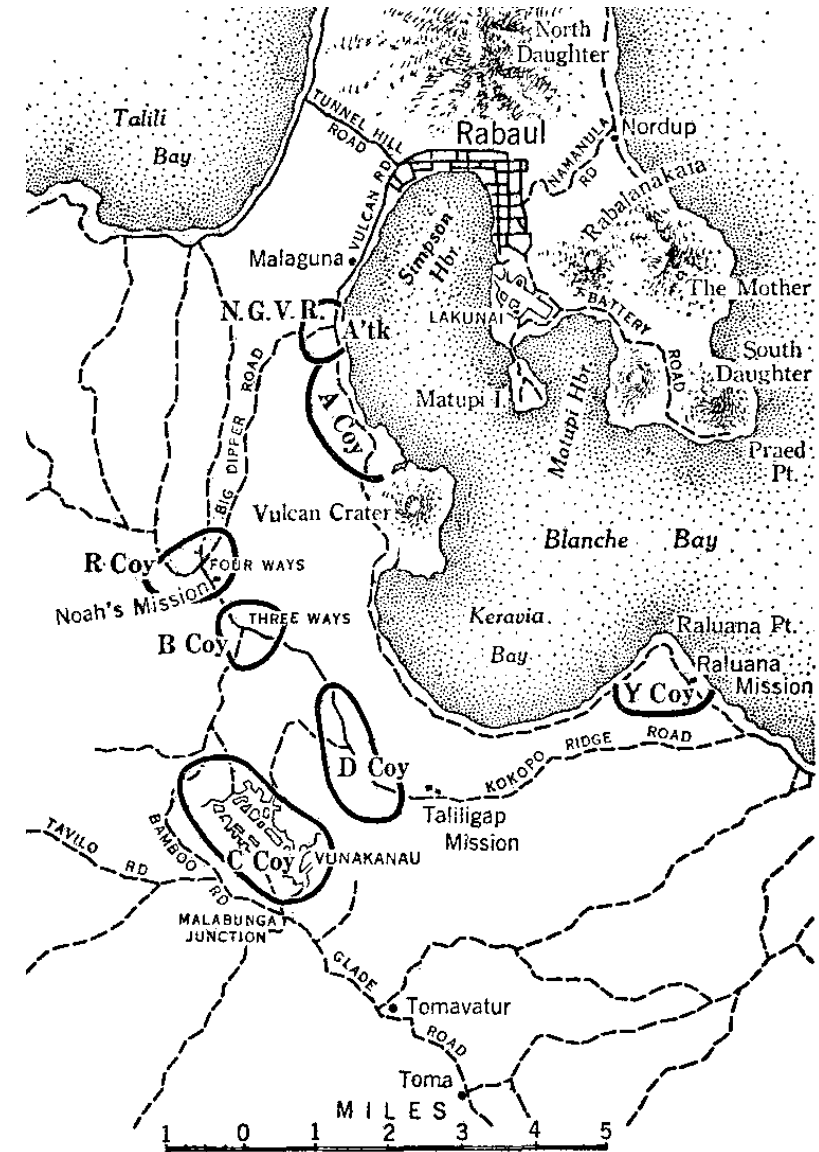
- Soon after midnight (on 23<sup>rd</sup>) a plane dropped a parachute flare illuminating the whole harbour.
- About 1 a.m. landing craft could be seen making in the direction of the causeway, and red Very lights in Matupi Harbour apparently signalled the success of Japanese landings.
- At 2.25 the men heard movement and voices from Simpson Harbour and landing craft were seen making towards the left platoon of A company. "We could see dimly the shapes of boats, and men getting out. As they landed the Japanese were laughing, talking and striking matches . . . one of them even shone a torch. . . . We allowed most of them to get out of the boats and then fired everything we had. In my section we had one Lewis gun, one Tommy gun, eight rifles. The Vickers guns also opened up with us. We gave the mortars the position . . . and in a matter of minutes they were sending their bombs over."
- The beach was wired forty yards ahead of the platoon's position and the mortars were landing their bombs just in front of the wire. Two attempts to rush the positions were defeated by the intense fire. The Japanese now began moving toward Vulcan, away from the wire which stretched across the company front.



Dispositions, 2 a.m. 23rd January

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January – Rabaul

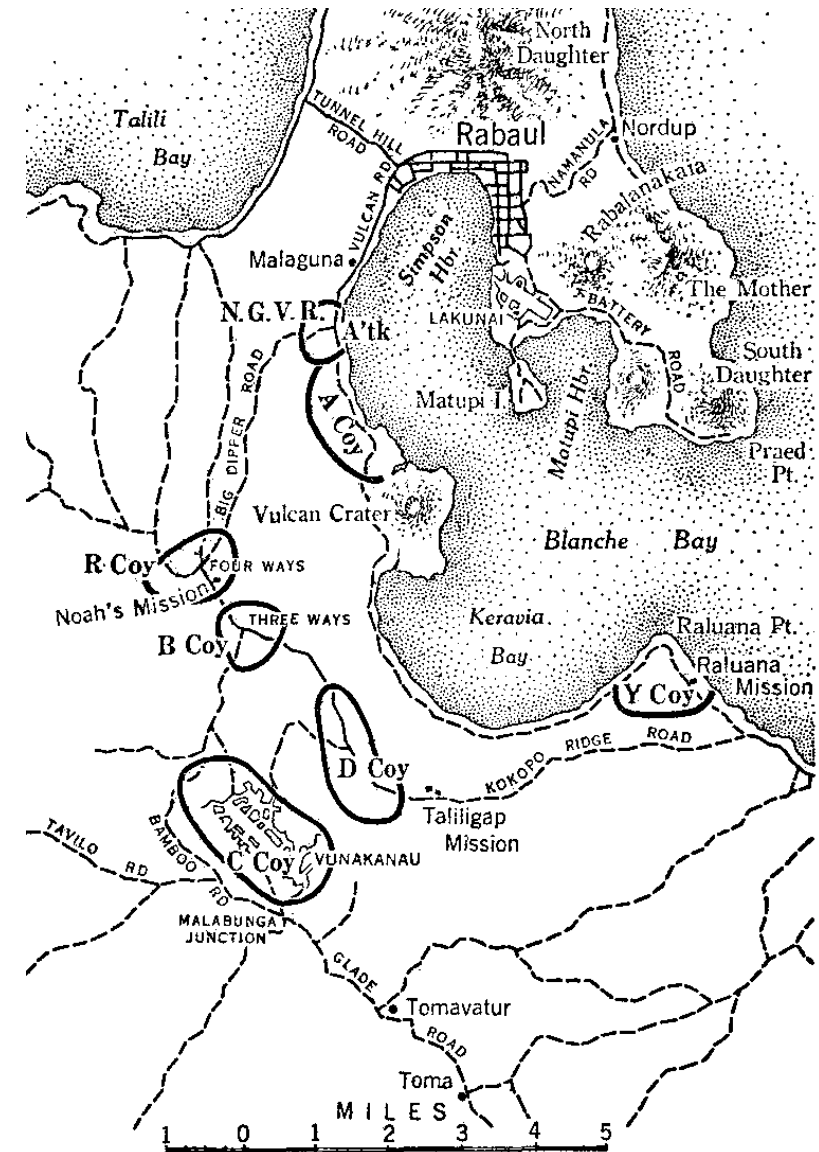
- Soon after 2.30 the right platoon reported that Japanese were moving up the ravines from Keravia Bay. A few minutes later the telephone line between company and battalion headquarters went dead.
- On Y company's position at Raluana, Japanese had landed at 2.45 between Tolmer's pioneers and Milne's platoon.
  - The enemy overran the forward sections of company headquarters and Captain Shier gave the order to withdraw.
  - The company fell back in stages, platoon by platoon, to transport waiting on the Vulcan Ridge road, and began embussing.
  - At 3.30 the Japanese began infiltrating through the position and were fired on by a rearguard section which remained.
  - At 3.50 the last of the company withdrew from Raluana, joining a procession of trucks moving slowly in the darkness up the steep winding track towards Taliligap.



Dispositions, 2 a.m. 23rd January

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Rabaul

- At 3 a.m., Scanlan had ordered Travers' (R) company to move from Four Ways to prepared positions at Taliligap covering the Kokopo Ridge road.
- By 3.10 Travers' company had arrived in its Taliligap position and was digging in. Half an hour later the survivors of Shier's company from Raluana began to arrive after a difficult trip without lights in the darkness. They were ordered to join Travers or continue to Four Ways and join the battalion reserve.
- At 4.00 am a string of transports, each about 2,000 tons, entered the harbour from the east and disgorged landing parties. Some landed troops at Vulcan, Raluana and other places on the Kokopo coast.
- The sun was rising when Grant, of the left hand platoon reported to A company's commander that he was out of ammunition. Two fast trips were made by Captain Field and Private Olney to replenish it.

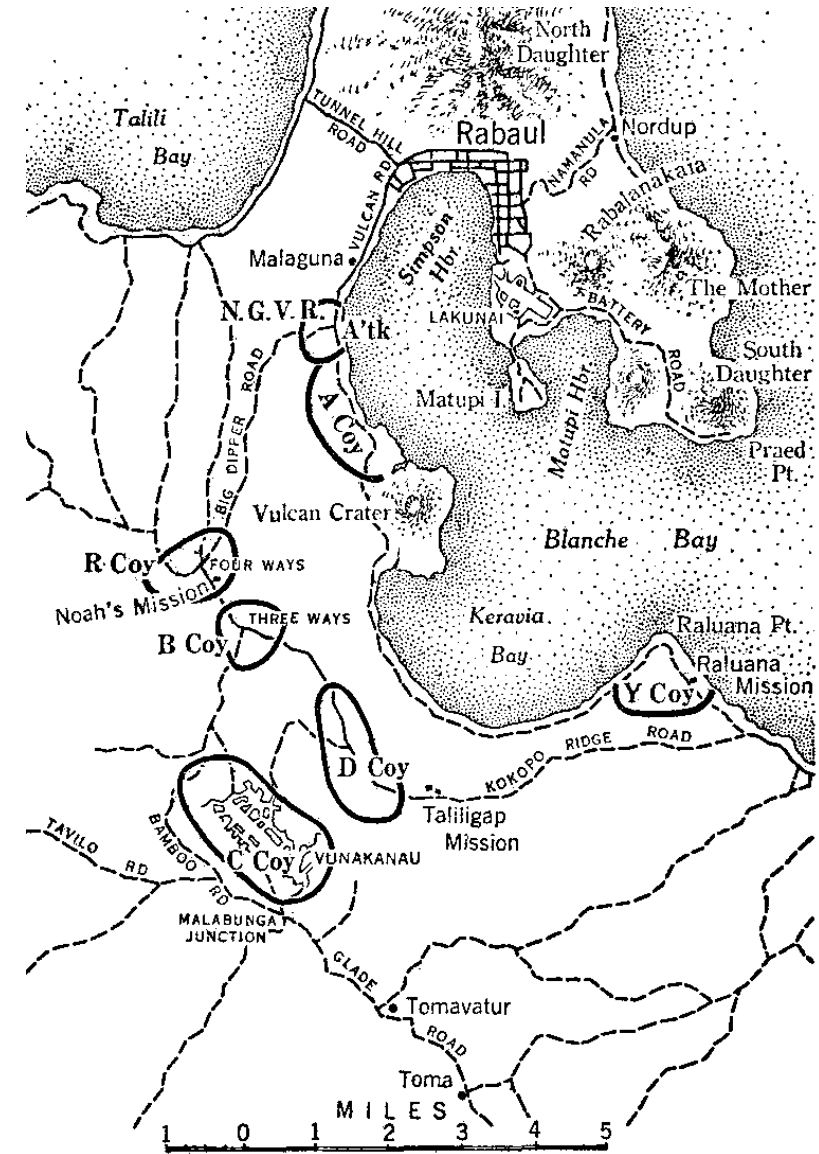


Dispositions, 2 a.m. 23rd January



# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Rabaul

- Soon afterwards A company's right platoon reported that enemy patrols were working wide round their right flank, attempting to encircle them.
  - Japanese were moving on the rearward slopes of Vulcan towards Four Ways.
  - Owen decided that his position was no longer tenable:
    - a prearranged attack by R' company from Four Ways had failed to eventuate,
    - the troops were being attacked by low-flying Japanese planes,
    - transports in the harbour were shelling his positions,
    - and his line of withdrawal along Big Dipper road was endangered.
    - At 7 a.m. he ordered Grant to withdraw his platoon, with the carriers, by road to Four Ways, while the remaining platoons provided covering fire.
- A further four or five landing craft moved towards the beach between Big Dipper road and A company's headquarters. At 7.30 Owen ordered the two platoons remaining to withdraw to Four Ways.
- McInnes and Appel at Three Ways and Vunakanau respectively, and the Reserve Company at Four Ways, had seen no enemy troops since the action began, although all areas had been attacked from the air.
- Soon after 8.30 Grant's platoon from the Vulcan position arrived at Three Ways.



Dispositions, 2 a.m. 23rd January

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Rabaul

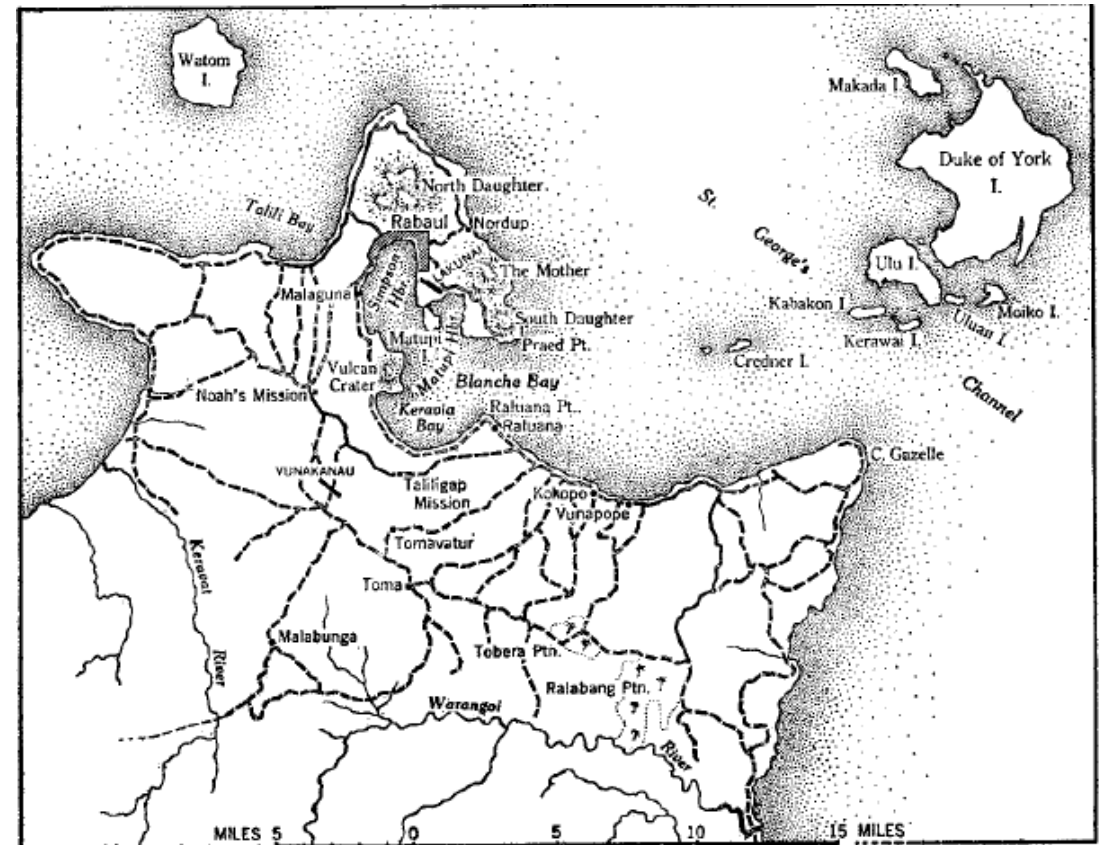
- The crews of two machine-guns posted along the Kokopo Ridge road to hold the line between McInnes' and Travers' companies now reported that they had been surrounded, and were forced to withdraw.
- Soon afterwards Three Ways came under rifle and automatic fire from a ridge about 800 yards distant.
- Major Mollard, who had been sent forward by Carr to coordinate the defence of the Kokopo Ridge road by the two companies there, concerned lest the line of withdrawal of "R" Company through Three Ways be cut, drove to Four Ways to order its evacuation.
- It was then about 9 a.m. All transport available was requisitioned and troops were bundled into the vehicles in whatever order they arrived.



Simpson Harbour fronting Rabaul, viewed from Taliligap on the Kokopo Ridge road.

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Rabaul

- Appel, from Vunakanau, sent a dispatch rider to battalion headquarters, the rider returned with a message that the battalion would move to the Keravat River and take up new positions. It was the last communication Appel had with his battalion headquarters.
- Soon after 9 o'clock rumours reached battalion headquarters that the Japanese were coming through "in thousands" and could not be held.
- As if to confirm the rumours, trucks now began to come through the fire and were seen speedily withdrawing along Glade road towards Toma.
- Enemy aircraft, flying low, were machine-gunning and shelling all roads, Vunakanau airfield and the battalion headquarters area.
- After a phone discussion between Carr and Scanlan, who were both out of touch with the progress of fighting, because of the breakdown in communications, Scanlan who had observed the trucks streaming down the road towards Toma—decided that it was useless to prolong the action.
- Carr suggested that the northern companies withdraw to the Keravat, the southern to the Warangoi, both to hold those positions as long as they could; and the centre companies to move back along the Malabunga road. Scanlan agreed, adding that it would now be "every man for himself", which Carr took to mean withdrawal in small parties. Carr gave these orders to his battalion signallers for transmission to all companies.



Travers' company on the Kokopo Ridge road, which had been out of touch with battalion headquarters since soon after 8 a.m. remained in its position. It came under attack at 11.30 and resisted, mounting effective counter attacks estimated to have inflicted at least 50 casualties on the enemy, until 3.10 pm when it withdrew on foot towards the Toma road and where it bivouacked for the night at 5 pm.

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Rabaul

- Colonel Scanlan, who took over command of "New Guinea Area" on 8th October 1941 had been mainly occupied since his arrival in preparing a plan for the defence of Rabaul by a force, to be reinforced to a brigade group and with a greatly expanded scale of equipment.
- Scanlan had fought throughout the 1st world war and had risen to command a battalion in 1918. In civilian life he was the deputy governor of Hobart jail.
- On New Year's Day Scanlan ordered his men to fight to the last and concluded with the words, underlined and in capitals: "There shall be no withdrawal."
- Other officers who saw the isolated and vulnerable condition of the force, had been sufficiently disturbed by the lack of a plan for withdrawal to ask Colonel Scanlan to define their functions in the event of the garrison being overwhelmed.
- The Army Service Corps officer to the force proposed a plan to hide a portion of the battalion's two years' food supply in the mountains, but this precaution, fundamental to continued resistance in the area, or even to survival, was ignored.
- Colonel Scanlan's orders had not been changed after the War Cabinet had decided on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1941 that the Rabaul garrison could not be reinforced or supported but would not be withdrawn.

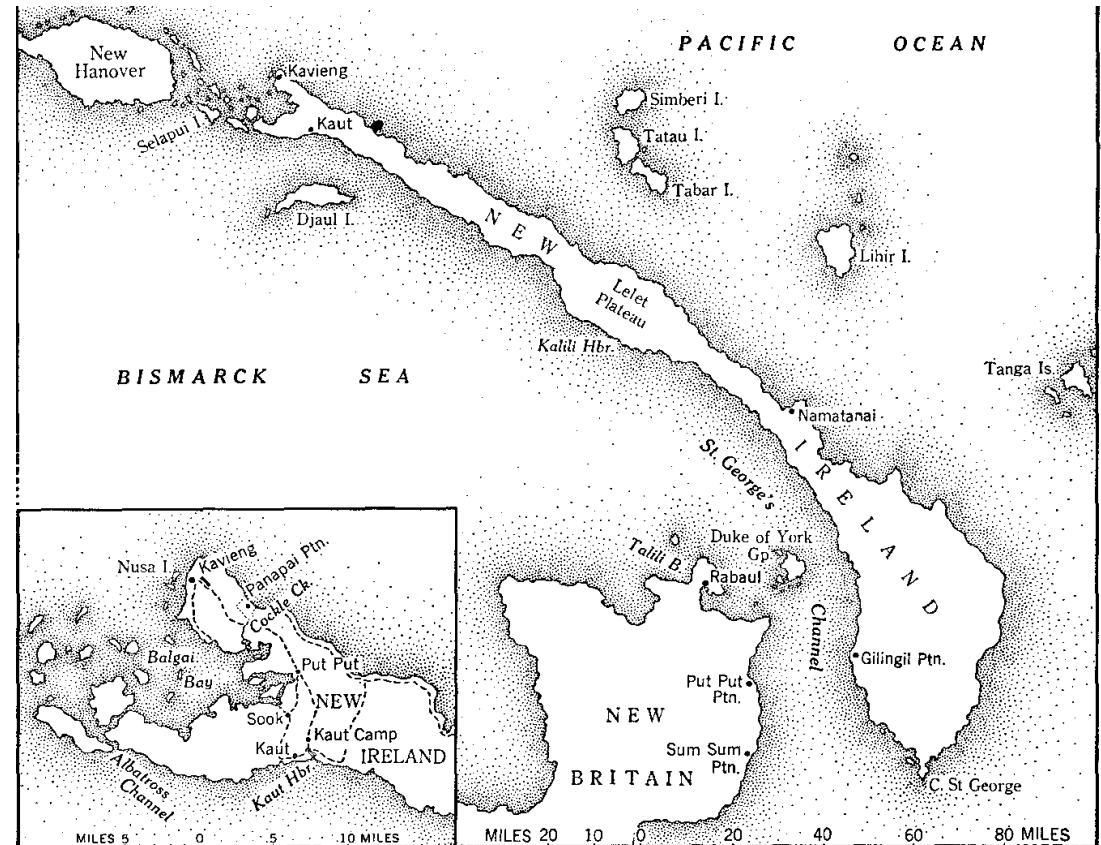
# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Rabaul

- No plans had been made for the situation which now arose. Orders such as "go bush", "break up into small parties" and "every man for himself" soon began to circulate.
- The only course open to the men was to escape in mechanical transport down the roads to the south so far as the roads ran. Soon trucks and carriers were transporting troops to the rear and being subjected to bombing and machine-gunning from the air.
- Lieutenant Selby and his group "walked at a brisk pace, only taking cover when diving planes roared down on us. Eventually a truck dashed by, then pulled up in answer to our hail and we climbed aboard. At frequent intervals planes would dive on us, their machine-guns blazing, and we would leap off the track and take cover by the roadside . .
- At Toma . . . we came to Rear Operational headquarters. I told the sergeant - major there that I wished to report to the Colonel. He went into the tent and returned, saying: "The Colonel's orders are that each man is to fend for himself."
- Less than a mile farther on the road petered out and the jungle began.
- Two main lines of retreat developed, westward to the Keravat River, and to the north coast; or south-east to the south coast. In both directions the country was mountainous, rugged, covered with dense growth, and intersected by fast-flowing streams in deep ravines.
- Development was limited to coconut plantations and native villages dotted around the coast. There were no roads and away from the coast barely a track. Natives and planters both moved around by boat.



# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Kavieng

- At 3.05 a.m Verey lights were being fired and there was much shouting and shooting as Japanese landing barges were reaching the western beaches.
- Wilson ordered Lieutenant Burns to blow up the airfield and the supply dumps, which was done at 3.18.
- Captain Goode received severe concussion, but withdrew with all members of his platoon in good order towards a pre-arranged rendezvous at Cockle Creek from there they headed towards Sook on foot through the jungle.



# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Sea

- **Balikpapan**
- The US destroyers pushed on through Sape Strait, and steered north to skirt the west coast of Celebes until, at 7.30 p.m. on 23<sup>rd</sup> January, they altered course in the darkness to head north-west across Macassar Strait to Balikpapan.
- The first attack was made on the convoy (at Balikpapan)(on 23<sup>rd</sup> January) by nine Dutch Glenn Martin bombers from Samarinda II, escorted by twenty Brewster Buffaloes, which sank a large transport and damaged a second.
- Columns of smoke from Balikpapan soon indicated that demolition of the oilfields was in progress.
- The Japanese convoy anchored off Balikpapan at 21.30 on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, silhouetted from seaward against the flare and glow from the burning oilfields on shore, and started debarking the occupation force.
- During the night of 23-24 January 1942 Japanese troops landed in Balikpapan and occupied the town and oil refineries. There was no opposition ashore, the Dutch garrison having withdrawn inland after damaging the oil installations.
- later the Dutch submarine *K 18* torpedoed and sank a second large transport.

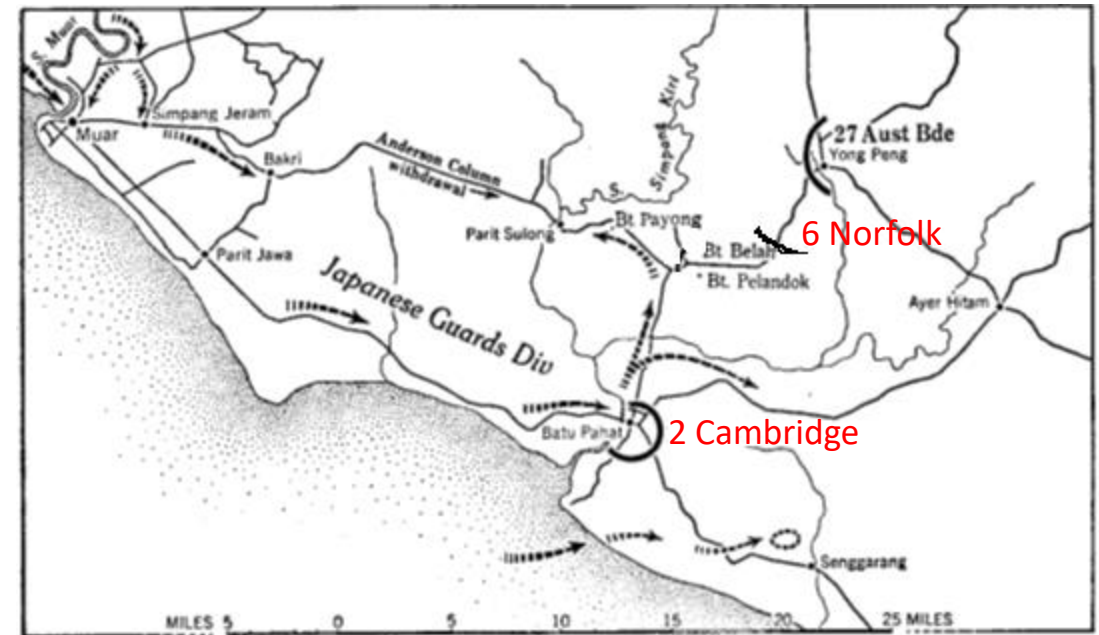


Dutch Glenn Martin WH3A bombers

**Pacific** The Marines were all ashore on Samoa on 23<sup>rd</sup> January. The Lexington taskforce was en route to deliver a bombing attack on Wake Island on 23<sup>rd</sup> January, when, 135 miles west of Pearl, its fleet oiler was torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine. The operation depended on refuelling at sea and there was no other tanker available so the operation had to be called off.

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Malaya

- The survivors of Anderson's column, after marching fifteen miles through jungle and swamp reached Yong Peng on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January.
  - Anderson had 271 left of his battalion, including fifty-two wounded who made their way back.
  - The 2/29th Battalion, which had first taken the weight of the main Japanese advance near Bakri, mustered only 130 men at Yong Peng. Its commander and most of its officers had been killed or were missing.
  - The 65th Battery numbered 98 at this stage, including 24 wounded.
  - Both battalions were ordered to be ready for battle again within a few days.
- On 23<sup>rd</sup> January General Percival gave orders that the general line Jemaluang-Kluang-Ayer Hitam-Batu Pahat was to be held, and there was to be no retraction from it without his permission.
  - He had in mind the pending arrival of the rest of the 18th British Division.
  - For this it was highly desirable that the enemy should be kept from the mainland airfields which lay behind the new defence line.



The withdrawal from Bakri

The defenders of Batu Pahat had been engaged in minor encounters with Japanese forces since 18<sup>th</sup> January. The road to Ayer Hitam had been blocked on the 21<sup>st</sup>, but the road block was temporarily cleared on the 22<sup>nd</sup> by forces moving from both ends. The road was blocked again on the 23<sup>rd</sup> but the garrison remained in defensive positions in Batu Pahat.

# 23<sup>rd</sup> January - Air

- **New Guinea**

- The two long-range Mark IV Hudsons were among the four aircraft, moved to Port Moresby. Yeoward in one of these aircraft was sent on a reconnaissance sortie to find out what enemy forces were in Rabaul Harbour.
  - He took off on the afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup>.
  - When the Hudson came out of the overcast over Rabaul he counted 14 transports lying in Simpson Harbour and, just outside, there was an aircraft carrier from which fighters were taking off.
  - A cruiser and a destroyer were escorting a large transport into port.
  - Having climbed to 17,000 feet, Yeoward was just drafting a sighting report for Port Moresby when the upper gunner, reported six Zeros closing on them from 3,000 feet above.
  - Yeoward, to gain speed and shake them off, dived into a storm cloud, emerging at 7,000 feet at a speed of about 300 knots.
  - He continued the dive until almost tree-top level and, for the next half hour, circled under a low cloud. Having thus evaded the Zeros he set course for home.
- Kitava, in the Trobriand Islands, received a minor air attack on 23<sup>rd</sup> January.

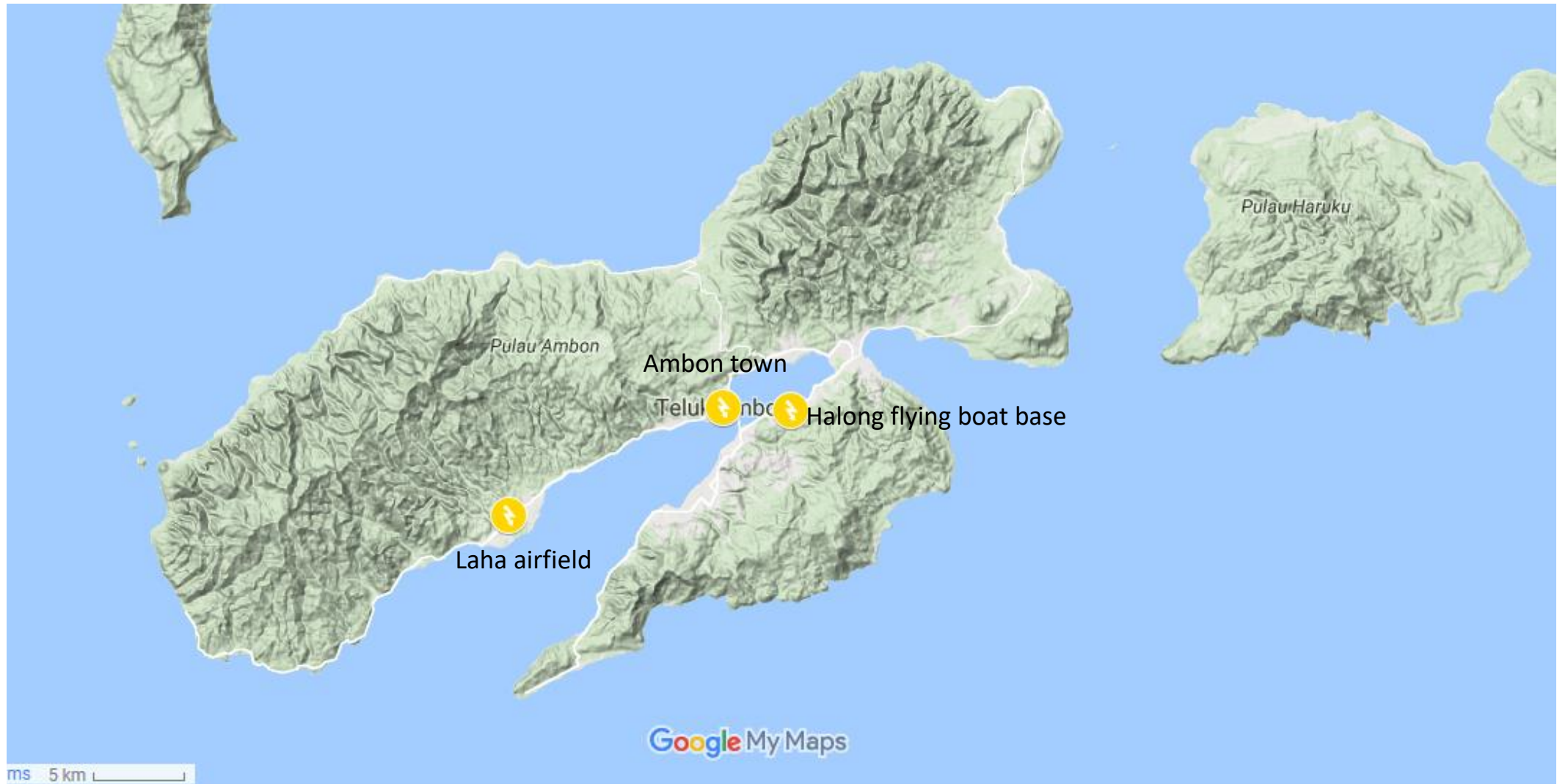
- **Ambon**

- On the 23<sup>rd</sup> 17 Japanese bombers and 18 fighters bombed and strafed Ambon, Halong and Laha. Damage to aircraft and runways was slight, but about 3,000 gallons of fuel were destroyed.

- **Malaya**

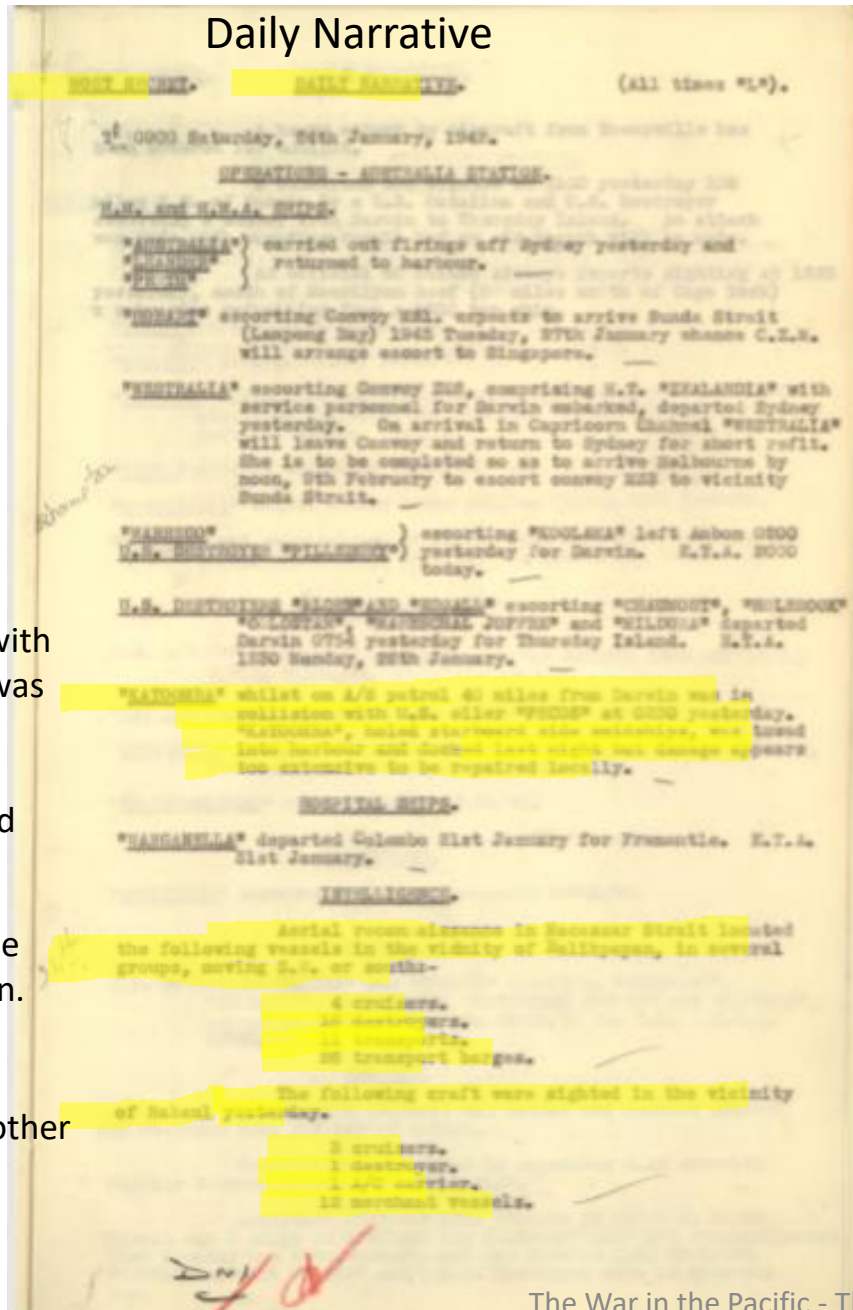
- The strength of No. 62 Bomber Squadron R.A.F. and No. 8 Squadron R.A.A.F. was now being built up piecemeal as Hudson Mark III aircraft began to arrive in the third week of January.
- Also arriving about this time—the first on the 23<sup>rd</sup>—were Blenheim Mark IV aircraft of two reinforcing R.A.F. bomber squadrons (Nos. 84 and 211) from the Middle East. These squadrons were diverted to Sumatra.
- Air Headquarters also received information that another 48 Hurricanes would be flown in to Singapore from the carrier *Indomitable* about the end of the month and that 39 more, crated, would be arriving by sea.

# Japanese air attacks on Ambon





## Daily Narrative

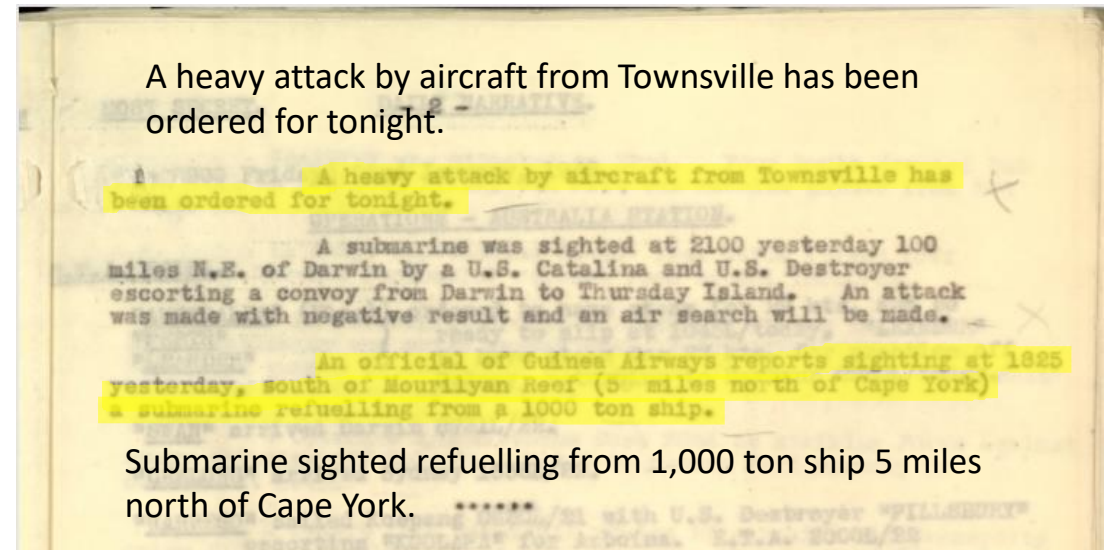


Katoomba collided with US Oiler Pecos and was holed. Towed into Darwin, damage too severe to be repaired there.

Convoy sighted in the vicinity of Balikpapan.

Aircraft carrier and other ships sighted in the vicinity of Rabaul.

## 24<sup>th</sup> January - Sea



A heavy attack by aircraft from Townsville has been ordered for tonight.

A heavy attack by aircraft from Townsville has been ordered for tonight.

A submarine was sighted at 2100 yesterday 100 miles N.E. of Darwin by a U.S. Catalina and U.S. Destroyer escorting a convoy from Darwin to Thursday Island. An attack was made with negative result and an air search will be made.

An official of Guinea Airways reports sighting at 1825 yesterday, south of Mourilyan Reef (5 miles north of Cape York) a submarine refuelling from a 1000 ton ship.

Submarine sighted refuelling from 1,000 ton ship 5 miles north of Cape York.

Highlighting not on the Original



# 24<sup>th</sup> January - Melbourne

- **Government**
- Australia was disappointed, in the response to some requests to the United Kingdom for the urgent allotment of Bofors guns, radar and aerial torpedoes from the United Kingdom.
- Apart from the diversion of 24 Bofors guns, all that Australia was to receive was a small percentage of current production." It appears to us," the Government said (on 24<sup>th</sup> January) in directing Page to approach the United Kingdom Government again,
  - "that we are in greater danger of early invasion than is the United Kingdom and that this consideration should induce some diversion of equipment at present retained for the defence of the United Kingdom.
  - In view of our extremely limited resources in aircraft it is imperative our means of interception and combating attack should be materially augmented by the provision of other equipment."
- When the war broke out in Europe the army had ordered Bofors guns from the UK.
  - After the fall of France supplies from the UK had no longer been available and
  - the army had ordered more guns from the Government Ordnance Factory at Marybyrnong in January 1941, but only 43 guns were ordered.
  - A further 500 guns were ordered in October 1941 but
  - in January 1942 the production rate was only the one gun per month required under the original order.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

138582

Melbourne, Vic. 1943-04-14. An Australian made 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun on display in Collins Street during a lunch hour Liberty Loan Rally.

# 24<sup>th</sup> January - Sea

- **Balikpapan**
- The four American destroyers making up at 27 knots from the south-east, evaded a challenging patrol, and arrived at Balikpapan anchorage and sighted their targets at 2.46 a.m. on the 24th.
  - Transports were their targets, and torpedoes the primary weapons, and for an hour and a quarter the four ships sped around and through the two lines of anchored transports attacking with torpedoes and, when these were expended, gun fire.
  - Considering the targets (there were twelve transports) and the opportunities, the results were disappointing. For the expenditure of forty eight torpedoes, the destroyers sank *three transports and a patrol boat and possibly damaged two other transports*.
  - The Japanese escorting destroyers failed to make any contact with the American ships, which withdrew successfully and, soon after 8 a.m., rejoined *Marblehead* and retired to Surabaya.
- This encounter off Balikpapan was the US Navy's first surface action since 1898.

# 24<sup>th</sup> January – Malaya, Reinforcements

- Admiral Layton, concerned at putting *Aquitania* within striking distance of Japanese aircraft, had suggested the use of smaller ships for MS2. *Aquitania* was, however, the only suitable ship available in Australia. It was decided to use her, but to trans-ship her troops at Ratai Bay, Sunda Strait, into smaller vessels which the Dutch provided, thus keeping her outside the range of Japanese aircraft.
  - Escorted by *Canberra*, and carrying 3,456, including 78 navy, 105 air force and 76 civilians, she had left Sydney on 10<sup>th</sup> January and had reached Ratai Bay on the 20<sup>th</sup>.
  - There, under cover of an Allied naval force, her troops were trans-shipped to seven small vessels and carried on to Singapore (reached on 24<sup>th</sup> January) in convoy "MS.2A", escorted by *Canberra*; *Vampire*; H.M.S. *Thanet*; H.M.I.S. *Jumna*; and the Dutch cruiser *Java*.
- MS.2A brought the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Australian Machine Gun Battalion, comprising 942 all ranks, and 1,907 largely untrained reinforcements for other units.
  - The machine-gunners were allotted accommodation in the Naval Base area and ordered to prepare machine-gun positions on the north coast of the island.
  - The battalion had sailed from Darwin on 31<sup>st</sup> December to Port Moresby where part of the unit was trans-shipped to the *Aquitania* and the remainder stayed in the *Marella*. These ships reached Sydney on 8<sup>th</sup> January and Fremantle on the 15<sup>th</sup>.
  - Fremantle was the machine-gunners' home port. No leave was granted but most of the unit became absent without leave, and 94 had not returned when the ships sailed for Singapore.
  - The practice had developed, in the AIF, of sending raw recruits to the Middle East where they received their basic training in the excellent training organisation established there.
  - There was no source of trained reinforcements in Australia in December. A shipload of reinforcements could have been sent from the Middle East where, in mid-December, there were 16,600 in the reinforcement pool including more than 5,000 with significant training.

# 24<sup>th</sup> January

- **NEI**
- Seaplane Tender USS Childs, flagship of the Asiatic Fleet aircraft, was getting underway from her anchorage in Kendari Bay at 05.32 January 24, when enemy vessels were sighted approaching.
  - By good fortune this sight was covered by a sudden rain squall into which Childs promptly steamed.
  - Six transports escorted by a cruiser and eight destroyers then anchored off Kendari.
  - Landings were effected at dawn in the face of weak resistance on shore, and
  - the airfield was occupied the same day.
- Childs also avoided more destroyers that appeared twenty minutes later and survived a strafing by six zeros two hours after that.
- **Philippines**
- The Japanese attacked the new Bataan line, but made no real progress against a line, which was well supported by tanks and artillery.



USS Childs

# Japanese landings 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> January





# 24<sup>th</sup> January - Washington

- **Command**
- As the result of continued Australian representations it was arranged from 24<sup>th</sup> January,
  - that part of northern Australia should be placed under Wavell's command in the A.B.D.A. Area, Australian forces being allocated to its defence, and
  - that a new naval area called the Anzac Area should be formed as "an adjunct of the Pacific area". The forces assigned to this area were to be under the command of a United States admiral directly responsible to the Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet, and
  - his tasks were to include the covering of the eastern and north-eastern approaches to Australia, and support for the defence of the islands in the area.
  - The initial assignment of ships to the area was: British, one aircraft carrier (*Hermes*); United States, one cruiser and two destroyers; New Zealand, two light cruisers and one armed merchant cruiser; Australia, two heavy cruisers (*Australia*, *Canberra*), one light cruiser (*Adelaide*), three armed merchant cruisers (*Kanimbla*, *Westralia*, *Manoora*), two destroyers (*Stuart*, *Voyager*), two anti-submarine patrol vessels, and six 600-ton anti-submarine vessels—corvettes.
  - The remainder of the Australian seagoing forces (*Hobart*, *Perth*, *Vampire*, *Vendetta*, *Yarra*, *Swan*, *Warrego*) were assigned to the ABDA command.
- Wavell's directive provided that none of the forces of 7th Military District in the area, numbering 14,050, was to be transferred from Australia without the consent of the Australian Government.





# 24<sup>th</sup> January - Malaya

- General Bennett had assigned the 2/30th Battalion the task of holding Yong Peng until first light on the 23rd, and of then covering Ayer Hitam from the north. Two of its companies were to remain at Yong Peng until the 53rd Brigade had completed its withdrawal.
- In the course of its withdrawal from the road between Yong Peng and Bukit Pelandok the 53rd Brigade was repeatedly attacked by enemy tanks and infantry.
  - Bridges on the causeway were blown before the movement had been completed.
  - Two companies of the Loyals were forced into swamp through which the causeway ran, and became isolated, for the time being, with the result that the battalion was badly depleted when, as had been arranged, it came under command of the 27th Brigade, and was posted to the rear of the 2/30th Battalion.
  - The 53rd Brigade reached Ayer Hitam on 24th January.
- Early on the 24th, when the last of the south bound units had passed through the 2/30th Battalion and the Loyals, the Yong Peng bridge was blown up and, Percival breathed again.
- The dangerous isolation of Westforce resulting from the collapse of resistance in the Muar area had been overcome, and the front was relatively straight from coast to coast.

# 24<sup>th</sup> January - Air

- **New Guinea**

- In a night attack on 24<sup>th</sup> January, five Catalinas bombed the ships in Rabaul Harbour. Cloud obscured the target for most of the time but the bombing was directed against the points from which the anti-aircraft fire came and the crews returned to report probable hits.

- **NEI**

- Following Scott and Ryland's visit to Bandung and conference with Brett. A signal from ABDA Command, dated 24th January, instructed Scott to retain only sufficient aircraft to undertake the needed reconnaissance patrols. Darwin might be used for aircraft maintenance and as a rest base for crews. If strong enemy attacks should make Laha and Namlea untenable, reconnaissance might still be operated from Koepang or Darwin. Scott was given authority to order such operations at his discretion.
- Namlea, which until now had been free from attacks, had its first raid on the 24th. A flying-boat spent 20 minutes over the base, dropped four bombs and did little damage.
- On the 24th January 35 carrier aircraft attacked Ambon.

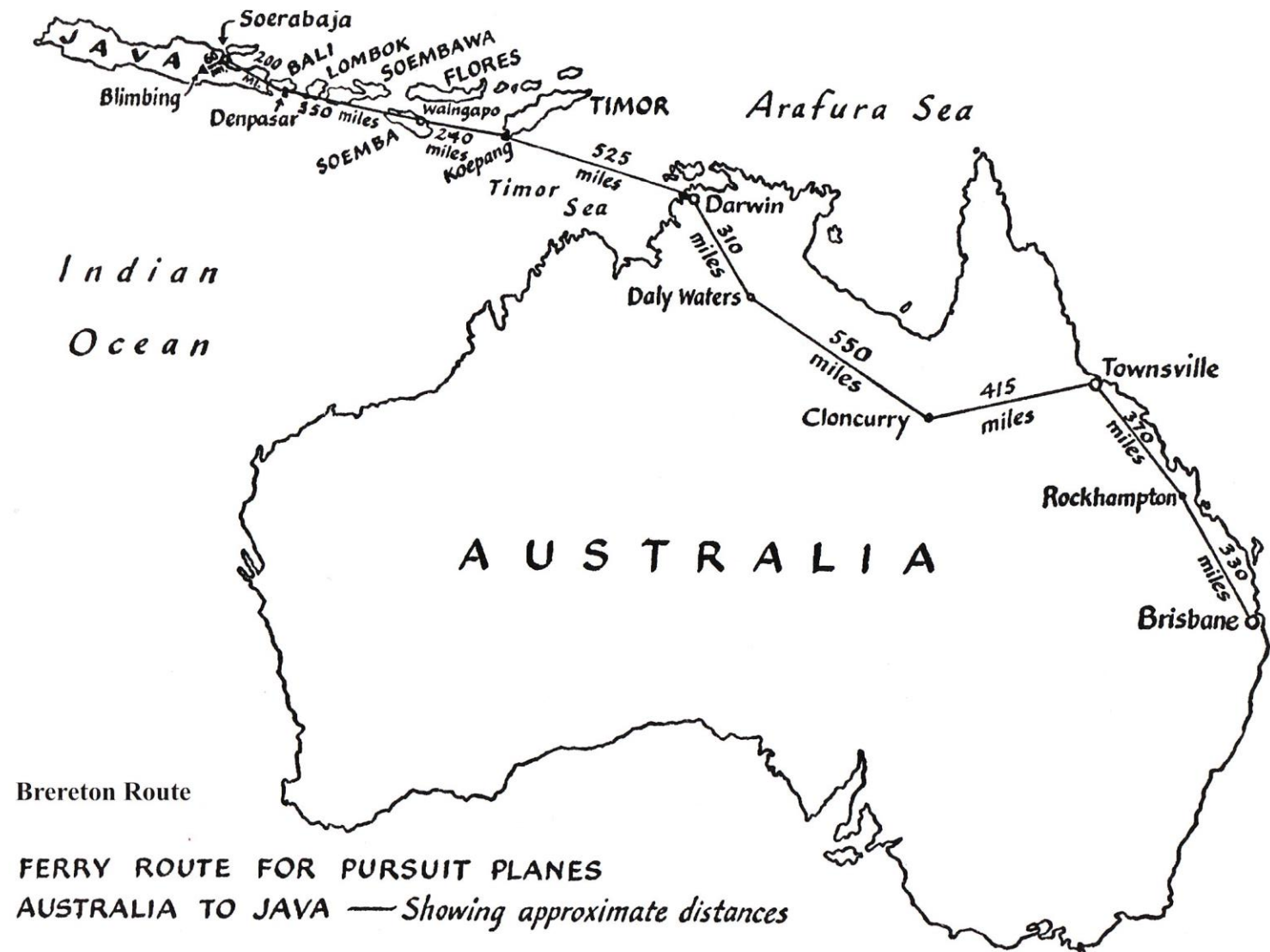
- **Malaya**

- On the morning of 24th January two No. 8 Squadron Hudsons were about 20 miles east of Kuantan on their way back to Sembawang, when 4 Zeros intercepted them and shot both down.
  - Flight Lieutenant Spurgeon's aircraft was forced down into the sea.
  - Only Spurgeon and his second pilot, Flying Officer Chesterman, escaped from the sinking aircraft.
  - Supported by their lifejackets, they drifted, carried southward by the current.
  - During the night Chesterman drowned.
  - Spurgeon drifted on until he was washed ashore on the island of Pulo Tioman.
  - Members of the Chinese community cared for him and, when he had recovered sufficiently, took him in a dug-out canoe to the mainland close to Mersing.
  - Spurgeon then set out to tramp southward, but encountered a Japanese patrol which took him prisoner.
- Flight Lieutenant Plenty's aircraft also went into the sea but all its crew got free and after five hours in the water they, too, got ashore on Pulo Tioman.
  - Friendly Chinese took them to the mainland where, after tramping south along the beach for 24 hours, they found a native boat in which they sailed safely to Singapore.

# 24<sup>th</sup> January - Air

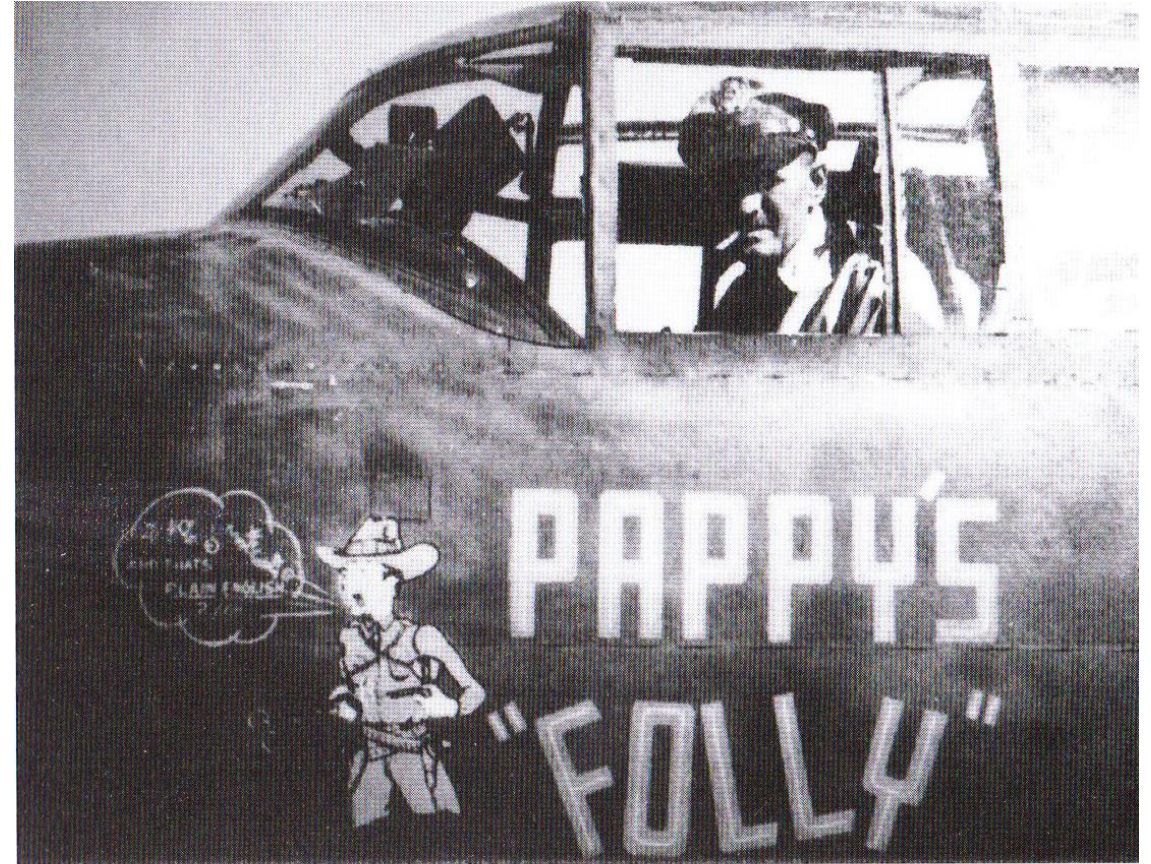
Major Sprague lead the 17<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) into Soerabaja on the 24<sup>th</sup> January after an eight day flight from Brisbane

- via Rockhampton, Townsville, Cloncurry, Daly Waters, Darwin, Koepang, Soemba and Denpasar.
- Their new airfield, Ngoro, near Blimbing, was excellently camouflaged and had revetments to protect 12 fighters and 3 bombers.
- On 26<sup>th</sup> January two RAAF C47s brought in 22 ground staff for the squadron.



## 24<sup>th</sup> January - Air

- Captain Paul “Pappy” Gunn navigated the 17<sup>th</sup> Pursuit’s fighters in an old twin engine Beechcraft.
- While managing Philippine Airlines Gunn had improvised a landing strip in the Manila cemetery to continue operations from a base not subject to Japanese attacks.
- In the end he had been intercepted by Japanese fighters and forced to crash land.
- Gunn had flown most of the squadron’s pilots out of the Philippines in the Philippine Airlines’ Beechcraft.
- Now Pappy and the Beechcraft were both in the Army.



Capt. Paul “Pappy” **Gunn** navigated the 17PS P-40s to Java flying an old twin-engine Beechcraft. (AFAA)



# 24<sup>th</sup> January

- The route to Java flew over what the USAAF described as “the desolate Australian terrain with few landmarks and poor communications.”



Cloncurry Airfield

# 25<sup>th</sup> January - Australia

- While on his trip to Perth, Curtin met with state premiers, spoke to the press and attended functions, but his interventions in national affairs were mostly limited to Industrial Relations issues.
- There was only one day, Sunday the 25<sup>th</sup> January, when his diary showed him at home with the family and recorded no public or political events.



John and Elsie Curtin with daughter Elsie and son John,  
Cottesloe 25 January 1942.



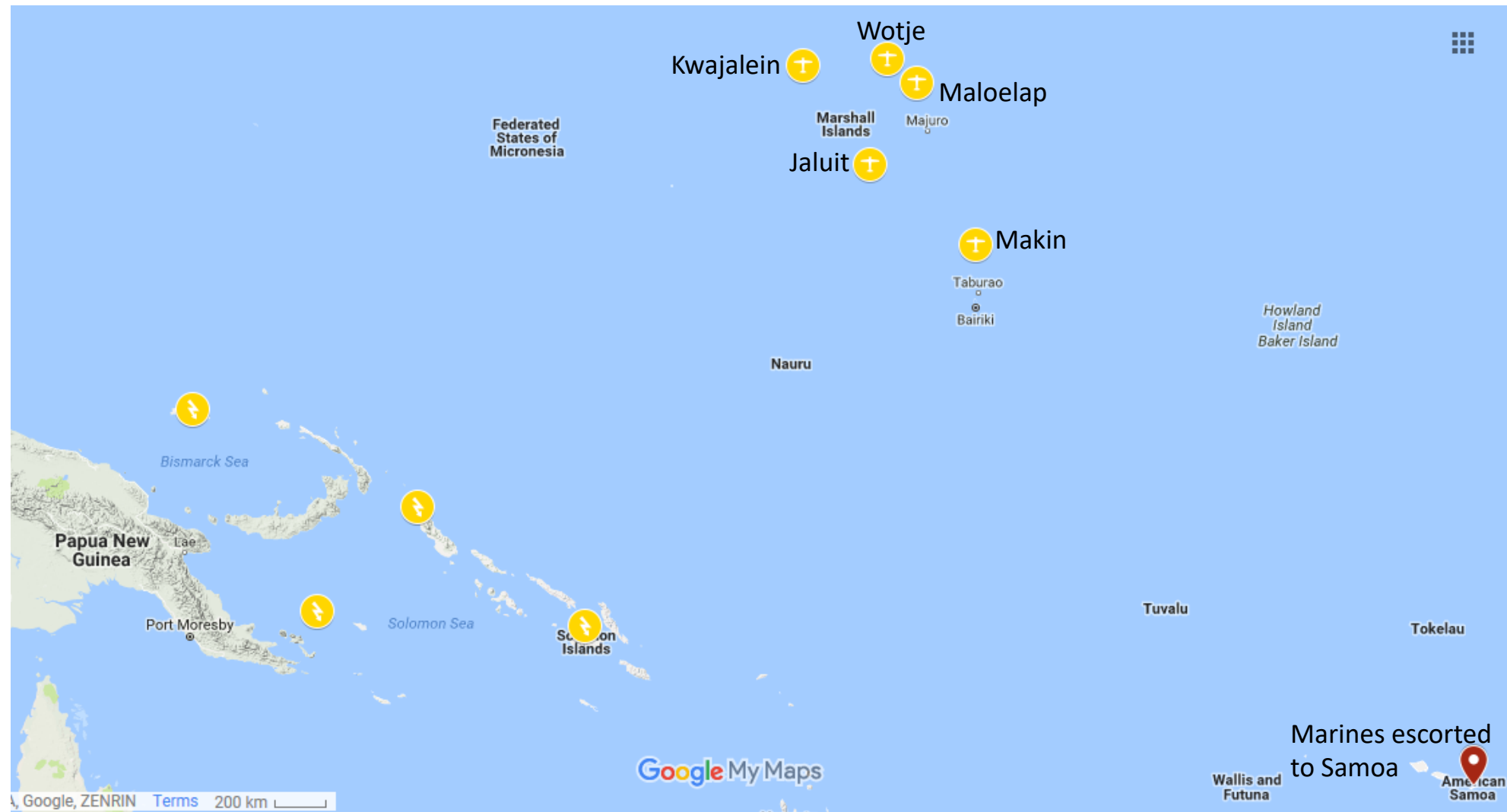
# 25<sup>th</sup> January - Sea

- **Ambon**
- There was a further raid on Ambon by carrier-type aircraft on 25th January. Again little damage, was caused.
- **Pacific**
- After escorting the marines to Samoa the Enterprise and Yorktown taskforces were ordered, on 25<sup>th</sup> January, to make a carrier plane strike on Japanese bases in the Marshall and Gilbert Islands.
- Enterprise would attack the Kwajalein, Maloelap and Wotje atolls, Yorktown would attack Jaluit, Mili and Makin.



USS Yorktown early 1942

# Planned strikes by Enterprise and Yorktown



# 25<sup>th</sup> January - Air

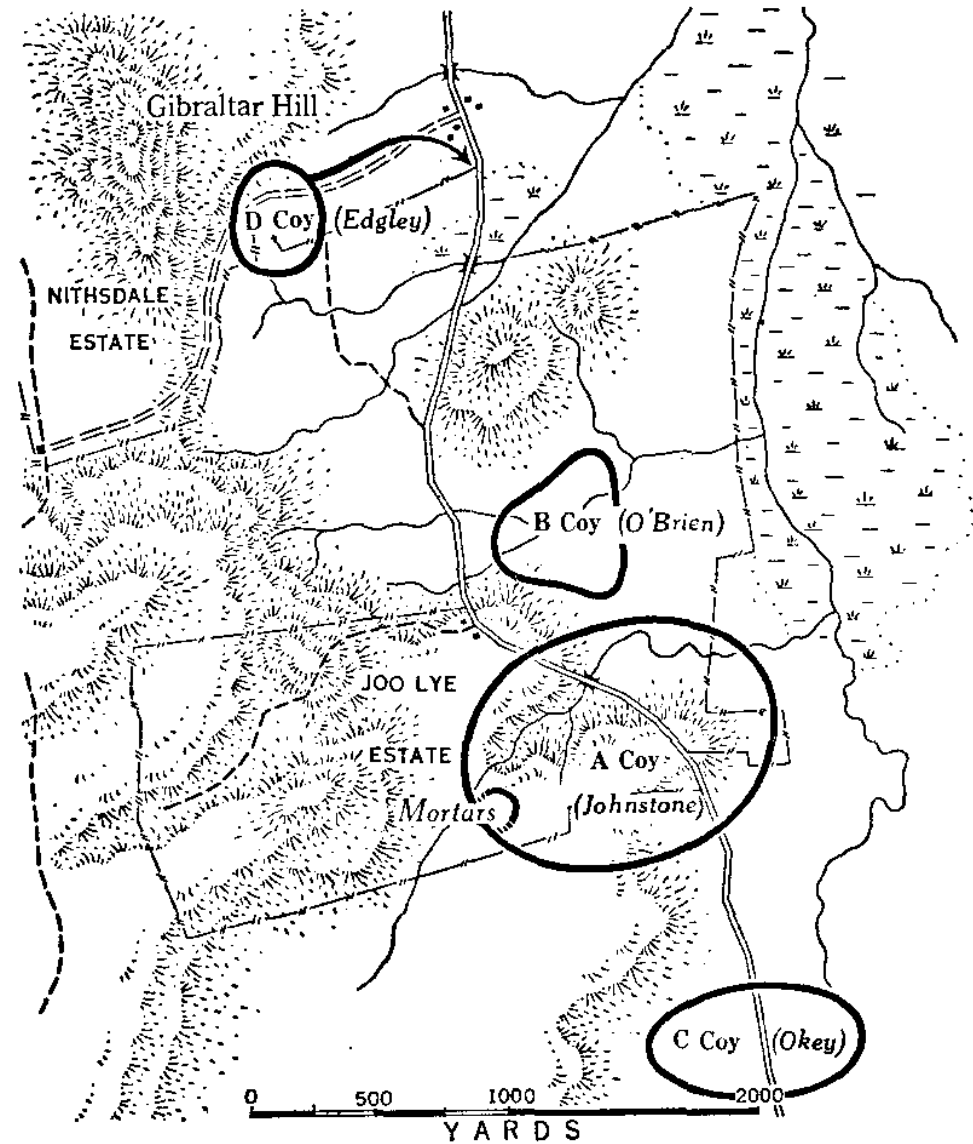
- **Solomons**
- Buka Passage was first bombed on 25th January.
- **Australia**
- The total number of P40s reaching Australia from the United States had increased to 112 by 25 January.
- On the 25th Manus Island base reported an air raid—"Lorengau all demolished. All safe. In smoke."
- **NEI**
- Concerned at the vulnerability of the advanced base at Babo in west New Guinea, the Dutch command, on 25th January, ordered the destruction of supplies of aviation fuel stored there. That day Babo, which had not been used to the extent expected, was evacuated by the R.A.A.F., the last aircraft to leave carrying 11 members of the ground staff to Darwin.
- The day after the discovery of Namlea by the enemy (25<sup>th</sup> ) another flyingboat appeared over the airfield.
- All Hudsons took off. About 30 minutes later 16 twin-engined bombers in two equal formations passed overhead at high altitude.
- One returned at 15,000 feet, descended to 10,000 feet, bombed, and then came down and made a strafing attack. Little damage resulted.
- The second formation flew over Halong where 60,000 gallons of aviation fuel were destroyed and two Catalinas damaged in the attack.
- **Malaya**
- On 25th January, in addition to the customary Buffalo, Vildebeeste, Albacore, Hudson and Blenheim sorties, Sungei Patani was bombed by five USA Fortresses from Java under Abdair direction. Using Palembang as an advanced base, the Fortresses flew 1,500 miles to make the attack.
- On the same day (25<sup>th</sup> January) there was news that the airfields at Kahang, Kluang and Batu Pahat had become untenable and so had been "demolished", as had new airstrips specially prepared in southern Johore to accommodate the Hurricanes.
- On the night of the 25th the crew of a Catalina reported sighting enemy ships off the east coast and moving south.
- **Burma**
- One Blenheim, with an all-Australian crew, struck a crater when taking off for a raid on Bangkok on the night of 24th-25th January.
- The bomber was wrecked, the pilot and the navigator were killed and the gunner was severely injured.
- In the attack on Bangkok the power station was severely damaged and fires started were still visible long after the crews had left the target.

# Japanese air strikes New Guinea and the Solomons



# 25<sup>th</sup> January - Malaya

- On the west coast on the 25<sup>th</sup> the 15<sup>th</sup> brigade at Batu Pahat was under increasing Japanese pressure in the town and the Japanese had blocked the Batu Pahat – Ayer Hitam road. An attempt to reinforce them with the 53<sup>rd</sup> brigade from Benut had got no further than Sengarang when the Japanese got a roadblock across the road in the middle of the column.
- In the central sector heavy air attacks on the crossroads at Ayer Hitam, where the 2/30<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalion and the 2/Loyals were stationed, indicated an attack in the near future.
- Percival decided, after his conference in the afternoon of 25<sup>th</sup> January that
  - the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade should immediately link with the 53<sup>rd</sup> Brigade in the Sengarang area;
  - Westforce to withdraw at night to the general line Sungei Sayong Halt-Sungei Benut on the railway and trunk road respectively.
  - This line was to be held at least until the night of 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> January.
  - Eastforce and the 11<sup>th</sup> Division were to move in conformity with Westforce.
- At Mersing in the East on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the 2/20<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to withdraw from its strong position to Jemaluang crossroads that night.
- The 2/18<sup>th</sup> Battalion then planned a large-scale ambush.
- Bombing of Mersing during the day was heavy, but the 2/20<sup>th</sup> made its withdrawal, and the 2/18<sup>th</sup> took up its ambush positions.

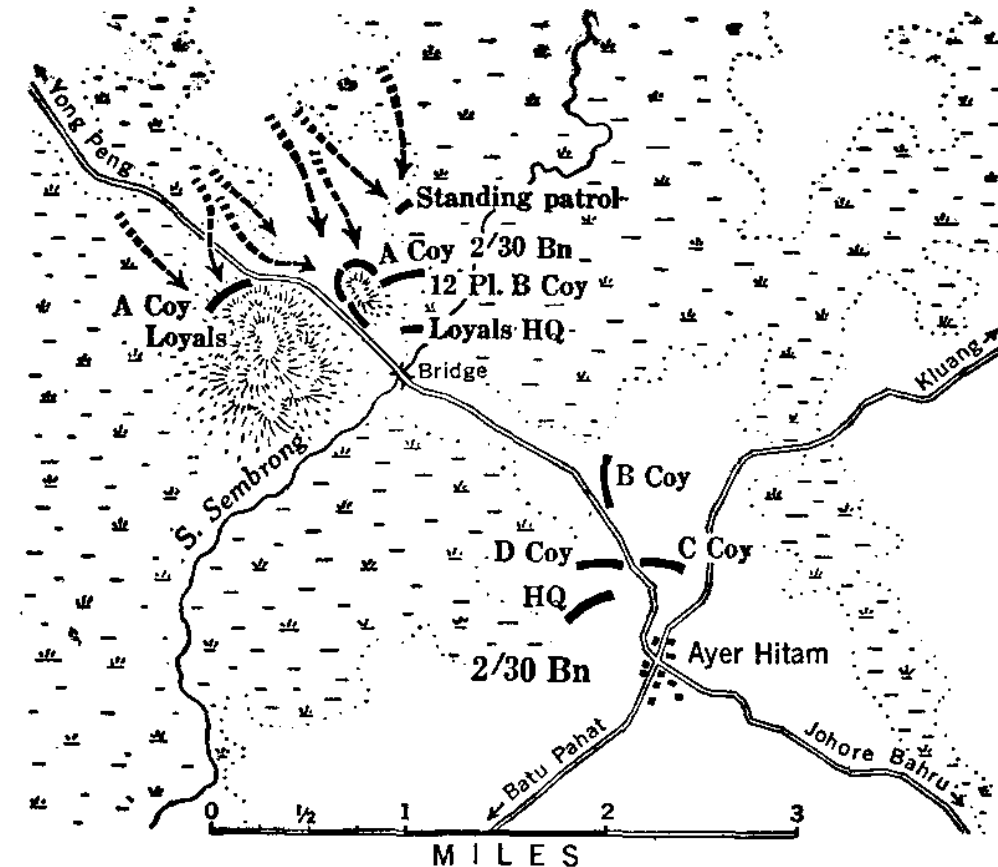


Nithsdale Estate, 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> January

2/18<sup>th</sup> Battalion's ambush positions

# 25<sup>th</sup> January - Malaya

- At Ayer Hitam heavy tropical rain added to the discomfort of the troops on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Japanese aircraft were overhead trying to locate them and destroy the bridge over the river.
  - Patrol actions, in which Sergeant Russell of the 2/30th was outstanding, commenced at dawn and gradually developed into general fighting in the forward area, with heavy fire against the defenders and the bridge.
  - Near mid-afternoon attacking troops were led by an officer bearing a large Japanese flag.
    - He was shot down, and
    - so were a second and a third who attempted to carry it forward.
    - Beaten back by Australian small arms and mortar fire, the Japanese abandoned their emblem.
  - In the latter part of the afternoon the Japanese made a two-company attack on the right flank of Anderson's company but were repulsed by the Australians and the Loyals, and left many casualties lying on the ground.
  - A second attack in greater strength became bogged down in swamp and under mortar fire. Then, as light was failing, the enemy heavily attacked a company of Loyals west of the road.
  - The Loyals held on until some of them were in hand-to-hand combat, but were outnumbered, and after suffering heavily were forced from their positions.

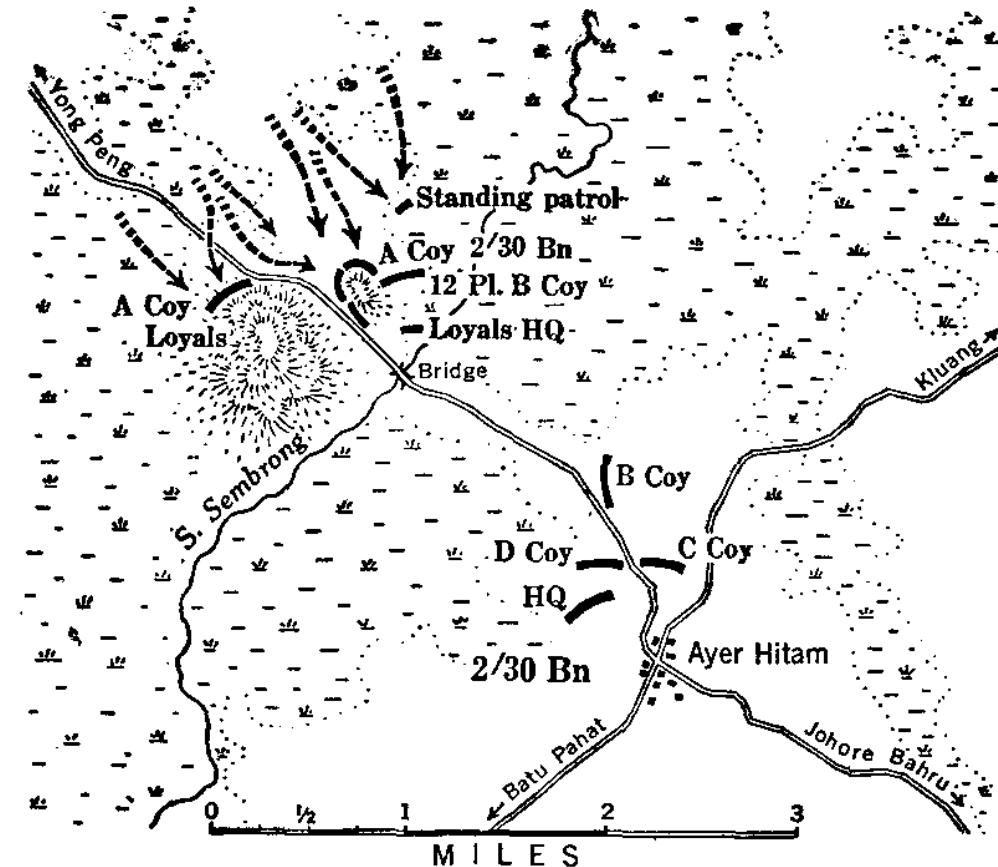


Ayer Hitam, 24th-25th January



# 25<sup>th</sup> January - Malaya

- As the Japanese came on to the road and could be dimly seen by a platoon under Lieutenant Brown, which occupied the top of a cutting, the platoon's fire forced them to ground.
- The rest of the battalion, however, and the artillery positions behind Ayer Hitam, were now under intensive shelling and bombing.
- As the brigade was due to withdraw that night, the battalion was pulled back.
  - The battalion took up during the night a position it had been assigned at the 41-mile post, five miles south of Simpang Rengam.
  - The Loyals were withdrawn to Singapore Island and replaced by the Gordons, who occupied a position at Sungei Benut (milestone 48)
  - with the 2/26th Battalion at milestone 44.
- Although the Japanese had been made to pay heavily, the casualties of the 2/30th Battalion were only four killed and twelve wounded or missing.



Ayer Hitam, 24th-25th January

# 26<sup>th</sup> January

- **Singapore**
- Reporting on the 26th to the Minister for External Affairs, Mr Bowden said he had begun to doubt whether it really was the firm intention to hold the island.
- After a War Council meeting that day, when a rapid collapse of British defence seemed to him probable, he had asked Rear-Admiral Spooner at what stage he would demolish the naval base.
- The Admiral replied that he would have to begin as soon as the Japanese reached the Strait of Johore.
- "My deduction from that is that Singapore will not be held, for with the naval base and all natural resources of Malaya gone, Singapore will have nothing more than sentimental value."
- Bowden reported that the Admiral concurred.
- **NEI**
- An advanced party of 1 Australian Corps arrived at Batavia by air on the 26th January. It included the commander, General Lavarack and nine other officers.



Admiral Spooner