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OPERATIONS IN EASTERN THEATRE, BASED ON INDIA, FROM MARCH 1942 TO DECEMBER 31, 1942

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on September 27th 1943, by FIELD-MARSHAL The VISCOUNT WAVELL, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., A.D.C., Commander-in-Chief, India.

1. This despatch deals with the arrangements for the defence of India against Japanese invasion, which became a serious threat after the fall of Rangoon early in March 1942, and with the preparations later in 1942 to undertake an offensive to recapture Burma. There was little fighting during the period, but the story of the events and of the measures taken is not without interest.

SITUATION IN MARCH 1942.

2. When Rangoon fell, in March 1942, it was obvious that the whole of Burma might be occupied by the Japanese and that India itself and Ceylon lay under imminent threat of invasion.

The forces available for defence at this time were dangerously weak. The Eastern Fleet had only one modernised battleship immediately available and the fleet as a whole was in no position to dispute with the Japanese fleet command of the Bay of Bengal or of the waters round Ceylon. There were only one British and six Indian divisions available for the defence of the whole of India and Ceylon, apart from forces for defence of the N.W. Frontier and for internal security, both of which were well below the strength estimated as necessary for these commitments. No single one of these divisions was complete in ancillary troops or fully equipped or adequately trained. Three of them had two brigades only.

The number of A.A. guns (heavy or light) to defend Calcutta (India's largest city), her most important war industries and other vital points, which were or were soon likely to be within effective bombing range, was less than 150, against an estimated total requirement of some 1,500.

The Air Force available for the commitments of defending India and Ceylon and of supporting the army in Burma was similarly inadequate, as was the number of airfields. For the defence of Calcutta one fighter squadron was available with eight serviceable Mohawks. Fifty Hurricanes were delivered to Ceylon in March, and the three fighter squadrons allotted to the defence of the island were equipped during March, just in time to meet the enemy air raids in April.

The remaining air force available (two fighter squadrons and one light bomber squadron) was allotted to Upper Burma, where the greater part of it was destroyed by enemy attack at Magwe on the 21st and 22nd March. The remnants were withdrawn to India to re-form for its defence.

The airfields in Eastern India were quite inadequate and the warning system was only in a rudimentary stage.

3. On the 7th March, just before the fall of Rangoon, I cabled to the Chiefs of Staff a short appreciation. I expressed grave doubts of my ability to hold Burma, and anticipated a subsequent attack by the Japanese on N.E. India. I considered at this time that an undue proportion of our very inadequate land and air resources in the East was being allocated to the defence of Ceylon. In particular the diversion to Ceylon of a brigade of the 70 British Division, the only British division available in India, caused me concern. Ceylon already had two Indian Brigades and two brigades of local troops; two Australian brigades were being lent to its defence and an East African brigade was on its way there. My view was that if we lost command of the sea and air around Ceylon an additional brigade would be of no avail to secure the naval bases at Trincomalee or Colombo, which the Japanese could destroy without landing, in the same manner as at Pearl Harbour or