

WAR COMMENTARY by GENERAL SIR CLIVE LIDDELL, K.B.E.in the Home Service programme tonight, March 12, 1942

I am sorry that I am called upon to make my first commentary at a time when the war news generally, excepting on the Russian front, is so consistently gloomy. But I know you prefer to hear the truth, however depressing, rather than to have reverses and disasters dressed up as victories. The fact is, and we must face it, that the situation in the Far East is as critical as was the situation in Europe after Dunkirk. Then, however, we were fighting alone against the Axis, now we have powerful Allies, with unlimited resources on our side, in the Far East. The Japanese have continued to follow up one success with another. The fall of HONG KONG, the invasion of MALAYA and BURMA, the over-running of most of the important islands in the East Indian Archipelago, and the tragic collapse of SINGAPORE, and now JAVA, all taking place within the space of some three months, have come as a surprise, and a profound shock to the British peoples. They have also inspired our enemies with confidence and aroused the criticism of our Allies.

Not unnaturally, people are asking what it all means, how it has come about, and who is to blame.

To see why things have turned out as they have, we must go back some way into past history. In peace time, for various reasons, we did not provide garrisons for our overseas Colonies, on anything like the scale necessary to defend them against a full dress attack. In fact, our garrisons were little more than a "backing up" to our police forces, for the maintenance of law and order. The security of our Far Eastern Empire, as of the rest of the British Commonwealth of Nations, depended on our sea power. The real garrison of MALAYA was the British Fleet, wherever it might happen to be at any particular moment.

When the war with GERMANY started, it was impossible to reinforce the FAR EAST, except to a very limited extent. All available resources of men and equipment were needed for the struggle in Europe, and to give some protection against the imminent threat to our vital position in the MIDDLE EAST.

Then came the collapse of FRANCE. The effects of this catastrophe were almost as great in the FAR EAST as they were in Europe, and the chief of these was the Japanese occupation of FRENCH INDO-CHINA, which provided naval and air bases, almost on the door step of MALAYA.

In spite of our many preoccupations elsewhere we did send to the FAR EAST, between 1939 and the end of 1941, considerable Army reinforcements - British, Australian, Canadian and Indian. But it was the very things which a modern army most needs - that is, aircraft and tanks - which it was most difficult to provide. Our resources of these types of equipment simply were not enough to meet all claims and, as the Prime Minister has explained in the House of Commons, the Government had to decide last summer and autumn, whether to send supplies to the FAR EAST or to the MIDDLE EAST, and, later, to RUSSIA. It was decided to send them to the MIDDLE EAST and to RUSSIA. Remember that if a different decision had been made we might have lost the MIDDLE EAST, and remember, too, the contribution which our equipment has made to the magnificent successes of the Russians. It's easy to say that troops should never be sent into battle without adequate support from aircraft and tanks, but in MALAYA, it was a question of fighting without aircraft and tanks, or of not fighting at all.

The whole campaign in the FAR EAST has been dominated by the initial naval disasters at PEARL HARBOUR and in the South China Sea, which gave the Japanese command of those seas.

This, with their air supremacy, has enabled them to land and reinforce their expeditionary forces where and when they liked.

The greatest disaster of the campaign has been the fall of SINGAPORE, perhaps the biggest reverse which has been sustained in all our army's history. We are still very much in the dark as to what happened, and, until more information is forthcoming, we must reserve our opinion and our judgment. We should, however, remember one or two things. Many of our troops had fought a continuous rear-guard action down the length of MALAYA for nearly two months, while those who arrived during the campaign had spent long periods at sea, and had to be thrown direct into the battle as soon as they arrived, without any chance of becoming acclimatised, or getting to know the country.

Bitterly as we may feel about our disasters, think what it must mean to the Dutch, who have lost most of the East Indies. Think of their fighting to the last, waiting for the help which never came. The gallant part which they played throughout the campaign, at sea, on land, and in the air, has been beyond all praise. And never a word of recrimination.

I began by saying that the situation in the FAR EAST is as critical now as it was after DUNKIRK. The Japanese control the whole of the EAST INDIAN ARCHIPELAGO except for the small part of the island of LUZON, in the Philippines, so gallantly defended by General MacArthur.

The Japanese hold the main Naval base of SINGAPORE and SOURABAYA; they also hold many smaller bases and anchorages and any number of air fields. JAPAN has gained possession of the sources of many of the materials of war she needs, such as oil, rubber and tin, though how fast she can get the use of them is another matter. That depends on how successfully the demolitions have been carried out.

Apart from these material advantages you should realise what a very formidable and ruthless enemy JAPAN is. Her army is well trained, seasoned and tough, and its morale is very high, especially after its recent successes. And they have shown fanatical courage and self-sacrifice. We must recognise that.

The dreadful atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers against our Troops and civilians in HONGKONG have filled us with horror, but should not have caused us surprise. The Japanese have merely repeated the savagery which they have practised on previous occasions in China; which their partners the Germans have practised in Poland and Russia, and which we may be quite certain the Germans will repeat, if ever they succeed in getting a footing in this country. It should steel us in our determination to go all out to defeat these Barbarians, and to redouble our efforts to provide, equip and train the necessary Forces.

The resources of the United Nations are immense, but don't let's delude ourselves by expecting that victory will be quick, cheap or easy, or that we shall be able to defeat the Japanese without putting into the struggle the last ounce of our own skill, courage, energy and self-sacrifice.

Now, a word about Burma.

The attack on BURMA began by the seizing of VICTORIA POINT on 12th December. Then followed a lull, during which the Japanese improved communications, and established aerodromes. The attack reopened in mid-January, and by the end of January we had to give up MOULMEIN. The Japanese were always able to bring greater strength, and fresh troops into action, but we inflicted considerable punishment, in hard-fought actions on the main River lines East of RANGOON. In these operations our Air Force, including the American Volunteer Group, were able to fight back effectively and provide direct support to our Troops.

But our difficulties were increased by Fifth Column activities, and also by BURMESE traitors who joined with the Japanese.

In the fierce fighting during the past few days, we were assisted by the timely arrival of tanks, a few British Battalions, and Indian reinforcements. But, infiltration westwards from PEGU has obliged us to extricate our force from RANGOON and PEGU.

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As a set off against the serious reverses suffered by the Allies at the hands of Japan in the Far East, we have the splendid news from Russia that their Armies continue to make progress, and are keeping up a relentless pressure against the Germans.

These continual Russian attacks with consequent German losses must have a slowing-up effect on Hitler's Spring offensive by preventing him from resting and refitting his formations.

Although we are taking no direct part in operations on the Eastern Front, we, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that we are providing the Russians with some of the tanks and aeroplanes. And by reinforcing the MIDDLE EAST, rather than the FAR EAST, we have undoubtedly succeeded in drawing off to the Mediterranean a considerable force of the enemy's aircraft.

That's all I propose to say tonight about the fighting, but I should like to make some remarks about the criticism which the Army has been receiving.

Now, a certain amount of healthy criticism is good for us all, and some of it is no doubt deserved. What large organization can claim to be so perfect as to be beyond criticism?

But, much of the criticism is quite undeserved. Moreover, it doesn't help the Army, nor does it help to win the war. In fact it may do a great deal of harm, in undermining the confidence of the Army in itself.

This war is a different one for the Army from the last. In '14-'18 the soldier, after a short training at home - normally 16 weeks only - was sent abroad, where he could usually complete his training and become accustomed to battle conditions, close behind the line or in a quiet sector of the front - before being sent over the top.

In this war, a large part of our Army has to stay in this country, and the soldier has to carry out his training under conditions more like peace than war, and when he goes abroad he may have to go straight into battle, in a strange climate, against seasoned Troops, as many have had to do.

So that the soldier must not only be trained for the vital day but must acquire full confidence in himself and in his leaders - Master of his job and infused with the aggressive spirit, he will not fail when the time comes.

There's been a good deal of discussion lately about square pegs in round holes, and in view of the difficulties under which our Army has had to be organised, and expanded, it would be surprising if there were not some misfits. But, in considering this problem, the most important tradesman of all is, invariably, overlooked. I refer to the fighting soldier. It takes a long time to make an efficient fighting soldier, with all the weapons he has to master in modern war - far longer than it takes to make other tradesmen. It also calls for qualities which are not so essential in most other trades, such as physical fitness, stamina, determination, initiative and, above all, courage. So, an efficient fighting soldier who is not employed at his trade, which is fighting, is just as much a square peg in a round hole, as any other tradesman not employed at his trade.

Important as are the men who make, and maintain, the weapons, still more important is the man who has to use them, as it is on his skill, mainly, that the battle will be won or lost.

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