

AWM52

Australian Military Forces, Army headquarters,
formation and unit diaries, 1939-1945

1/5/64
FORCES

Black Force (Java)

February - March 1942



1/5/64-0014

SECRET

BRIEF DIARY OF 'B' SQUADRON 3rd HUSSARS

14th February, 1942 - 9th March, 1942.

Feb. 14th.

After laying at anchor outside Oosthaven during the night 13th/14th Colonel Stevens (Movements) came on board at about 0700. He told me that the squadron was to move to Palembang as soon as possible. The tanks were to go by rail and the transport by road. At about 1100 we tied up alongside the quay, as soon as I disembarked Colonel Stevens told me that Japanese parachutists had landed at P1 (Aerodrome 12 miles north of Palembang) at 0900 and that he wanted us to start for PALEMBANG that night. I told him that it was impossible, since batteries had to be charged, machine guns de-greased, the bolts loaded, petrol tanks filled, transport re-loaded and organised, etc., but that we would be ready by 1800 on the 15th. Unloading commenced immediately, the tanks direct on to "flats" on the railway. There were no stevedores - 3rd Hussars did all the unloading.

I appreciated the situation as follows :-

1. Japanese parachutists landing was only the prelude to a more serious attack.
2. The only allied troops available in that area were
 - (a) Two batteries of heavy A/A (6 Regt.)
 - (b) One Battery Light A/A (35th Regt.)
 - (c) About two companies of Dutch troops.These were divided between P1 and P2 (Aerodrome 20 miles south of PALEMBANG).
3. Consequently Palembang was almost certain to fall before we could reach it, say on the evening of the 16th at the most optimistic, probably on the evening of the 17th.
4. Therefore our most useful roll would be to assist the two battalions Australians due to disembark on the evening 15th in holding South East Sumatra.
5. In any case our advance to Palembang could now only be made partially by rail, therefore our arrival at Palembang would not be until February 18th. Colonel Stevens agreed with me and he sent the information as guardedly as possible to G.H.Q. by the only available means, which was the public wireless telephone. The reply from G.H.Q. was that we were to move to Palembang as previously ordered.

Feb. 15th

Captain Lancaster started by train to P2 at dawn to contact a G. Staff Officer, who was expected to be arriving there by air from G.H.Q. Unloading was completed at 0200. Battery charging commenced immediately the first battery charging vehicle was landed and continued all night. About mid-day news came that the situation at Palembang had deteriorated and that Japanese forces had advanced up the river. No fresh instructions came from G.H.Q. Later Brigadier Steel arrived from Palembang and took over command from Colonel Stevens. He confirmed Colonel Stevens' and my appreciation of the situation and decided to concentrate the available forces in consolidating Southern Sumatra. He ordered me to take my tanks off the "flats" and to reconnoitre a position about 25 miles north of Oosthaven, where a branch road from the East Coast and a probable landing place for more Japanese troops joined the main road. I was to send a patrol down this road to cover an important bridge until such times as it might be necessary to blow it up.

I sent Lieut. Chadwick and eight men in trucks to picket this road junction for the night. The squadron was ready for action at 1700. I had organized it into five troops. Information came that Palembang was being evacuated and the P2 was to be held at all costs.

At 2100 I returned from reconnoitring the position in torrential rain and I was ordered to prepare to re-embark, since Sumatra was to be evacuated. I immediately told the Naval control officers to contact S.S. "Hermion" instantly, as I had heard the Captain say he meant to leave these dangerous waters for Christmas Island as soon as he was able. I was told that as the "Hermion" had received no permission from him to leave the Harbour, and that the ship would be there ready to embark the squadron. About midnight it was discovered that the "Hermion" had departed. Colonel Stevens told me he would arrange for the "Silver Larch" to carry the squadron. He thought the available space was sufficient and the derricks sufficiently powerful. She was to be alongside at 1000 hrs. February 16th. Various rumours now started coming in that the Japanese had landed at various points on the coast near by. Captain Lancaster rejoined.

Feb. 16th.

At 1000 the quay was vacant but there was no sign of movement from S.S. "Silver Larch" out in the harbour. The Dutch Harbour Master was unhelpful and would do nothing. He eventually disappeared with his staff.

Feb. 14th
(Contd.)

At 1100 hrs. I procured a boat and boarded the "Silver Larch". The Captain told me he had received no orders, that he was short of fresh water; one boiler was completely empty (he had been demanding water for three days) one engine was in need of repair. Nevertheless he would have steam up and be alongside at 1600 hrs. The available space looked almost sufficient. It would be difficult to speak too highly of the behaviour, kindness and helpfulness of the Captain and Officers of the "Silver Larch" throughout the following operation.

At 1600 the quay was still occupied by a large auxiliary cruiser. Nevertheless the "Silver Larch" came in and waited in the immediate vicinity. At about 1700 by a masterly piece of manoeuvring the Captain brought the "Silver Larch" alongside without the aid of tugs or even a small boat to carry a line ashore. Loading commenced immediately that the derricks were prepared.

It was discovered that the derricks would not carry the heavy R.A.O.C. vehicles. These were left behind and destroyed. All the tanks except one were loaded earlier in the afternoon. Lieut. Williamson left for Batavia on a tug towing a lighter which carried eight tanks and two trucks. These arrived without incident, and 80% of the transport; but only about 25% of the ordinance vehicles were loaded. We were told that anything not loaded by 0200 was to be left behind. All available space for vehicles was filled, but we should have been able to carry more R.A.O.C. stores, had we been allowed more time. (It was discovered that by a mischance all the spare bogey wheels were left behind). Loading eventually ceased at about 0330 and we sailed at 0400. It was O.C. ship. Brig. Steel and his staff were on board. The ship was crowded with A/A; R.A.S.C., ourselves and other personnel.

Feb. 17th.

S.S. "Silver Larch" left Oosthaven at about 0400. The Captain wished to disembark as many troops as possible at the first opportunity, so we put in at Kerak at about 1000. All except 40 3rd Hussars under command Captain Lancaster, who remained on board to unload tanks, disembarked into a smaller K.P.M. steamer, whose shallow draft permitted her to go alongside the jetty. A meal for all the men was arranged immediately on this ship. Owing to the number of other ships waiting to unload, we were unable to go alongside that day, so we slept on board and dis-embarked next morning.

Feb. 18th.

Entrained at Merak, after a crowded but interesting journey during which we were refreshed with fruit, coffee and soup by kind Dutch women, we arrived at Batavia about mid-day. No T.O. met us. I ordered the squadron not to move until I had found out where we were to be accommodated. I contacted a newly appointed T.O. who took me to Movement Control. There I learned I was to come under the Dutch and telephoned the Dutch Divisional H.Q. in Batavia. In due course a Dutch Officer Staff called for me in his car and we went back to the station to find that the squadron had moved.

Since we were to be accommodated for the night in the Bicycle Barracks, first we went in search there. We finally found the squadron at Meester Cornelius Barracks. Another Dutch Officer had apparently called at this station and had ordered the squadron into trucks which had arrived. After much delay I collected the squadron intact, less the tank party at the Bicycle Barracks, where they were well fed and housed.

Feb. 19th.

After calling at Divisional Headquarters I was introduced to Captain (later Major) Wessel, Commander of the 2nd Cavalry Squadron, under whose command I came. He was a competent and understanding Commander. We went together to the docks to find Captain Lancaster busy unloading the tanks and Lieut. Williamson with his party already ashore.

Thence Captain Wessel took me to Villa Nuova, 15 kilos north of Batavia, where we were to be accommodated. I took Captain Bentley-Taylor there and arranged for transport. He moved the dismounted portion of the squadron during the afternoon. Feeding was arranged on the Dutch system. I drew cash from the Dutch Q. Officer and Captain Bentley-Taylor arranged the purchase of meat and vegetables, with the assistance of a Dutch Lieut. Josly de Jong, who was extremely able and helpful at all times.

On my return to the Docks to see how unloading was going on I found that all work had been suspended, since the Captain of the "Silver Larch" had just received orders to leave port immediately from this Naval Control Office. I went immediately with Captain Lancaster to the Senior British Naval Officer and had the order cancelled.

Feb. 20th.

Disembarkation of the tanks was completed and the squadron and R.A.O.C. attached installed at Villa Nuova. The movement was completed by 1800 hrs. I had further interviews at Divisional Headquarters and had the situation and Dutch intention explained to me by General Schilling. The 3rd Hussars

/ were

were to form a third company of a mechanized regiment to be commanded by Major Weszel. The other two companies being composed of :-

1. Mechanized Infantry in Blitzbuggies and trucks.
2. Dutch armoured cars.

Feb. 21st.

The day was spent in maintenance and organization of transport and tanks; Belt filling; Battery charging etc., Wireless tests. The preliminary tests with wireless were extremely unsatisfactory. One mile was the maximum that could be relied upon. Longer distances by key or speech were very uncertain.

Feb. 22nd

A Dutch Tank Officer from Bandoeng came and took officers and N.C.O's (Sergeants) on reconnaissance both morning and afternoon. The terrain was light jungle and paddy fields. The country could not have been more unsuitable for light tanks. The roads and a few of the main tracks between paddy fields were the only passage for tanks. With the prospects of no wireless inter-communication and grossly unsuitable country I found it difficult to foresee any useful roll for the squadron other than reconnaissance and advance and rearguard action. The Dutch seemed to expect us to act as "I" tanks through dense jungle and over paddy fields.

Feb. 23rd.

A.M. Further wireless experiments.

P.M. Reconnaissance again with the Dutch Lieutenant.

Feb. 24th

Major Grasse arrived from Bandoeng (G.Staff) to see that we were O.K. It seemed wise for me to go up to Bandoeng to G.H.Q. with him to obtain imprest money and to see General Playfair. At 2000 he called for me in his car and we arrived at G.H.Q. sometime after midnight. The Squadron practiced driving in the jungle, getting through it was easier than expected, but visibility was usually 10 yards.

Feb. 25th.

Interviews with General Playfair and General Fawell I was told nothing of the general plan though I gathered we were to be left behind. I collected imprest money and caught a mid-day train to Batavia, where I interviewed Major Weszel.

Feb. 26th

1800 I was summoned to a conference with Brig.-General Blackburn and told I was now transferred to "Blackforce", which consisted of 2 Bns. of Australians, plus one company, plus some R.A.S.C. One Battalion was composed of Pioneers, the other of Machine-gunners. The men were issued with Rifles and Bren Guns. They also collected a number of Bren Gun carriers. Considering their complete lack of training as Infantrymen and of practice

with the rifles, during the ensuing action they disported themselves gallantly and with effect. Organisation was extremely hurried and R.A.S.C. facilities very sketchy. All my second and third line ammunition, which in lieu of other orders, I had moved from the Docks to Villa Nuova, and was left behind in the move to Buitensorg.

Feb. 27th.

General Schuburg, Brigadier Blackburn and Brigadier Major and myself went on reconnaissance to Buitensorg, west to Rangkasbitung along the river

As a matter of fact the 2/2 Pioneer had fought as infantry in four or five actions in Syria.

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Feb. 28th.

Moved from Villa Nuova to a rendezvous eight kilos west of Buitensorg. The R.A.S.C. machine lorry had to be evacuated and destroyed, since it was unable to pass underneath the main road bridges. There was no other road possible.

March 1st.

Conference with General Blackburn at Debits Hotel in Buitensorg. Squadron was disposed in a Rubber Plantation; I moved "B" Echelon back to a position 8 kilos west of Buitensorg on the main road. All officers went on reconnaissance and had varying adventures.

March 2nd.

Further reconnaissance Australians main defences at Llewiliang Bridge. Japanese were reported 50 miles west on main road and the Dutch company, retreating from Tangarang blew Llewiliang Bridge before the Australians could stop them, thus making impossible one of Brigadier Blackburn's plans

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Feb. 27th.

General Schuburg, Brigadier Blackburn and Brigadier Major and myself went on reconnaissance to Buitenzorg, west to Rangkasbitung along the river and back by the main road to Batavia. General Schilling pointed out prepared positions along the road. These were well sited, but of very narrow frontage. There were a number of handy road blocks made of timber and propped up in such a way that by knocking one support away the block would fall into position. Each block I calculated would obstruct the road for about half-an-hour.

The two main bridges on the main roads over the river Tjicejoeng were to be blown up, but the very adequate bridge over the dam in the centre of the position was to be left intact. The excuse was the lack of explosive. It seemed to me that the Dutch considered the damage to the natives' crops would be too great to make the destruction worth while in view of their real intention. I suggested stationing two troops of tanks to block the dam temporarily. General Schilling refused saying keep them for the real fighting on the Bandoeng plains.

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March 2nd.
(contd.)

of a counter attack across the river. As far as we could gather they did not let down any road blocks. About mid-day I was called in to Brigade Headquarters and given the information that all the Dutch were retiring from that area and that Blackforce could do as it pleased; stay and fight, or accompany the Dutch to Bandoeng. Brigadier Blackburn decided that there was no useful purpose to be served in remaining in this area isolated and that "Blackforce" was to retire to Bandoeng area, or possible to Soekaboemi. The retreat was to be out of touch with the enemy. 3rd Hussars were to move off at 1500 hrs. I made the necessary arrangements. At 1445, when we were 'standing to' ready to move off, in tropical rain, the intelligence officer came to me cancelling the orders and telling me to stand by for further instructions. At 2000 I was summoned to a conference at Debbits Hotel. A fairly complicated plan of a counter attack against the Japanese pivoting around Dewilliang Bridge was explained and orders given. A Dutch Regiment was to co-operate. I gave the necessary orders.

Night of
March 2/3rd.

At 0100 I was summoned to a conference at Debbits Hotel. Information was given to Brigadier Blackburn that all the Dutch had evacuated, that neighbourhood; that Blackforce again was to make its own arrangements. Orders for a withdrawal were given. 3rd Hussars, one company Australians and one section A.R.E's under command Major William-Powlett were to form Rearguard. I had to contact the commanders of these forces, make all arrangements and pass the start line at 0600 hrs. It was a night of torrential rain.

March 3rd.

At 0545 hrs. I was giving orders to the Commander of the Australian company, when the intelligence officer drove up in his car and cancelled the instructions. We were to revert to the plan of defending Dewilliang Bridge. The Australians, who were in their lorries ready to move off, returned to Dewilliang Bridge and manned the position. Almost at the same moment that Japanese advance guard reached the bridge, 3rd Hussars were in support of Australians, stretching back down the road. About mid-day 3rd Hussars were ordered to picket road from Buitenzorg running west, North of the river. Squadron Headquarters moved to Dutch Barracks near aerodrome at Semplak. I sent patrol 10 miles West down the road. Australians asked me to send patrol 20 miles down the road to

I asked them to use the

/ armoured

March 3rd
(contd.)

armoured cars which were available. Major also asked me to patrol road Buitenzorg - Batavia by running tanks up and down it. I again requested armoured cars.

March 4th.

Headquarters Barracks. Dutch patrol at fork roads with American guns in support. 2nd.Lieut.Dallas' troop was sent to support Australians left flank. Two Japanese tanks had been destroyed on bridge, but the Japanese were now working around flanks.

P.M. Orders came that all troops were retiring from Batavia - Buitenzorg area to Bandoeng. Blackforce, less 3rd Hussars and one company Australians, were to move at 1600. Rearguard under command Major William-Powlett were to take up a position west of Buitenzorg and retire 1200 March 5th.

March 5th.

Australian company disposed in position west of Buitenzorg. Tanks in support with one troop of tanks (Lieut.Froe) three miles further west on road. First contact with Japanese 1030. As no relieving force had come I sent liaison officer (Lieut.Branfoot) to General Schilling suggesting that we stayed until 1330. At 1130 a Dutch lorried Regiment came up. At 1245 they were still in their lorries. I started moving the Australians out of position at 1300 and informed the Dutch that unless they occupied the line it would be left undefended. The Dutch infantry then moved into position. The Japanese, although surrounding the tank troop on the road made no impression on it and did not pass it. At 1320 the Colonel of the Dutch Regiment came and asked me to leave some tanks behind, if I could, although he realised my orders were to withdraw to Blackforce; also that General Schilling knew nothing of his request. In view of General Blackburn's orders and the unconvincing appearance of the Dutch troops I did not feel justified in acceding to his request and continued the withdrawal, which was completed at 1335. Soekabosing wash reached without incident at about 2000.

March 6th.

After about 4 hrs rest and tank maintenance the withdrawal to Bandoeng was continued. The mechanist staff worked magnificently, yet one tank had to be left behind and rendered unserviceable. Bandoeng was reached about 1200. I went immediately to a conference with Brigadier Blackburn, and dispatched squadron under the guidance of Lieut.Branfoot to harbour in a rubber plantation. East of Bandoeng. At the conference it was evident that the Dutch were on the point of capitulation. Plans for further

/ withdrawal

withdrawal to the mountains to the South were discussed.

March 7th.

Squadron harboured in rubber plantation. All possible lorries were made available for carrying food from dumps near Bandoeng south to At another conference further withdrawal plans were discussed. It was learned that General Sitwell now intended to collect all the British forces in the area chosen by Brigadier Blackburn - Leles. Towards evening the Australians set fire to a big food dump in a Godown immediately north of the squadron harbour.

At 1800 we were informed that the Dutch had capitulated at mid-day and that the Japanese had entered Bandoeng in the early afternoon. Orders came to move at 2000 to Leles area.

March 8th.

On the road to Garoet another day of conflicting orders. I was officially rearguard, but I had orders not to fire my guns. At about 1400 hrs. I had orders to destroy my tanks, but in face of other conflicting orders I sent Lieut. Branfoot to obtain this order in writing from General Sitwell. When I received the order in writing I destroyed the tanks by extracting and destroying the vital parts of the guns and engines and rolling the tanks over a steep deep embankment into a river. The squadron collected at "The Grand Hotel" Tisocroopan where 'B' Rachelon had been taken by Captain Bentley-Taylor. I paraded the squadron, informed them of the situation; explained the difficulties of escape and advised the safer course. At 1900 hrs. I attended a conference at General Sitwell's Headquarters. He explained that he had been given orders by the Dutch General under whose orders he came to lay down arms. He expressed anxiety as to the attitude of the natives; his belief in the impossibility of escape from the island; his anxiety about having destroyed our weapons etc. On my return to the squadron I found that a few men had already taken some vehicles and departed under cover of darkness. I called a conference of officers and senior NCO's and passed on General Sitwell's view of the impossibility and foolishness of escape. However, all the officers and most of the men wished to make the attempt. The officers drew lots as to which one was to stay to look after the men who remained.

March 10th.

During the night 60% of the squadron started to walk home! At 0500 I also started with Captain Lancaster

SECRET

REPORT BY MAJOR P. WILLIAM-POWLETT, M.C.,
C.O. 'B' SQUADRON 3rd HUSSARS ON THE REAR
GUARD ACTION WEST OF BUITENZORG MARCH 4th
- 5th 1942 REFERRED TO IN MAJOR GENERAL
SITWELL'S NARRATIVE

On March 4th 1942 Brigadier Blackburn, C.O. Blackforce, ordered as follows. The Dutch and Australian forces were withdrawing to Bandeng. Blackforce, less 'B' Squadron 3rd Hussars and one Company Australian Pioneers, were to withdraw at 1800 hrs March 4th. 'B' Squadron 3rd Hussars and one Company Australian Pioneers were to act as rear guard, under command of Major P. William-Powlett 3rd Hussars; to take up a position about 5 miles west of Buitenzorg at 1600 hrs and to retire at 1200 hrs on March 5th. Brigadier Blackburn stressed that we were to retire at 1200 hrs and expressed concern lest we should become tied up by the Dutch.

The position was occupied as ordered. The Dutch anti-tank guns were added to the rear guard. At dawn on the 5th I sent a patrol about 5 miles down the road which made no contact. I posted one troop of tanks about 5 miles in front of the main position.

At 1030 hrs (approx) this troop fired at and killed a number of Japanese bicycling along the road. At 1115, since I had no instructions from General Schilling, with whom I was keeping in touch by means of my own liaison officer, I sent this officer (Lt. Branfoot, 3rd Hussars) to inform him of the position and to say that we would stay there until 1530 if he wished it. Lt. Branfoot brought back the message that he would be grateful if we would do so.

At 1145 (approx) a Dutch Lorried Regiment drove up to our main position on the road, but did not dismount, although two or three times I asked them to take over the position from the Australian Pioneers. At last I told him that, unless they took over the position at 1530, it would be left undefended.

Meanwhile the Japanese had exerted no great pressure on my forward troops. They surrounded it and brought up a mortar and shelled it. There was no sign of a flanking movement.

At 1520 when the Dutch had taken over from the Australian Pioneers, a Dutch Colonel, whom I presumed to be the Colonel of the Regiment, came and asked me to leave a "few" tanks behind to help him. I asked him if General Schilling knew of this request. He replied that General Schilling did not know of it. I formed the opinion that either all this squadron would have to stay or none of it. Administratively with the transport available it was not possible to provide petrol for two columns, also I feared that one or two troops might find it even more difficult to extricate themselves and rejoin. There was no pressure by the Japanese. We estimated it would take three quarters of an hour for the Japanese even to reach the position now taken up by the Dutch. In view of my orders and the lack of pressure by the Japanese I ordered the withdrawal to proceed.