

TUAN TUAN DAN PUAN PUAN - SELAMAT PETANG

UNARMED UNESCORTED UNWANTED

I have taken this title for my talk this evening on the Malayan Volunteer Air Force, from an article by Roy Humphries in an edition of the 'FlyPast' magazine.

The MVAF may not have been in the front line of air defence – such as it was – in Malaya and Singapore between 1940 and 42, yet it filled an invaluable niche in the area of reconnaissance, communication, and transport of military personnel before and during the short Malayan Campaign, thus relieving the hard pressed Royal Air Force of these duties. However, just as other Volunteer Forces during the Campaign were undervalued and their expertise ignored until it was too late, so, too, was that of the MVAF.

How and when was the MVAF established? To find this out and to understand its background, and composition, one has to go back to the advent of the Flying Clubs.

In 1928, the Singapore Flying Club was established, using light seaplanes as there were no aerodromes or air strips. Later this evolved into the Royal Singapore Flying Club. In October 1930 the first airfield was constructed at Seletar, which was taken over by the RAF Far East Flight.

From 1936 onwards, as aerodromes were constructed on the mainland peninsular of Malaya, flying clubs were formed in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh (the Perak Club) and Penang. These clubs were subsidised by their respective Governments, but a condition of membership was that all members automatically became liable for active service in Malaya in a time of crisis. Thus the strong tradition of 'Volunteering', which had been first established in 1854 in Singapore, with the enrolment of the Singapore Volunteer Rifles, was to be maintained.

As well as these flying clubs becoming established in Malaya, in 1936 the Straits Settlements Volunteer Air Force (SSVAF) was set up in Singapore at Seletar, at a time when the Volunteering movement was again on the increase, as war clouds gathered in Europe. One condition of enrolment in the SSVAF was that all flying personnel had to have training up to civil "A" licence stage in a flying club before being allowed to join. Local Singapore accountant Mowbray Garden said, "My one aim was to get into the SSVAF with a commission. This I did, passing out in the final test in a Gypsy Moth equipped with floats instead of wheels." Flt. Lt. M. Garden went on to fly for the RAF during the Campaign, and had a very distinguished record.

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, all suitable personnel from the SSVAF were absorbed into the RAF and the SSVAF was disbanded. The remainder of the personnel was later absorbed into the Malayan Volunteer Air Force which was set up at Kallang in August 1940, as the result of an amendment made by the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, which had established the SSVAF. Other personnel for the MVAF were recruited from the Royal Singapore Flying Club, the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club, the Perak Flying Club, the Penang Flying Club and from a private airline known as Wearnes Air Services.

At the same time, in Singapore in 1940, a Government Flying Training School was initiated, with the newly formed MVAF supplying and maintaining training aircraft and one instructor. Three other instructors were supplied by the RAF. 110 younger men from the Malayan flying clubs, who joined this training school, having passed the RAF medical test and end of course exams, went on to advanced training schools in Canada, South Africa and elsewhere in the world, and became RAF pilots.

The older members of the flying clubs and commercial pilots, who for various reasons of age or slight physical defect were not eligible to join the RAF, became the backbone of the MVAF. Between them they had hundreds of hours of flying experience, but before they received their "wings" even they had to go through a course of training.

220 men served in the MVAF, including 40 pilots and their observers. As with the other Volunteer Forces in Malaya, the MVAF included men from all local races and creeds as well as Europeans. There were 42 Chinese, 5 Danes, 14 Malays, 14 Eurasians, 15 Indians/Singhalese. The MVAF was a self-contained force and independently administered - able to maintain its own aircraft with its own fully qualified engineers. Its Commanding Officer was Group Captain R.L. Nunn DSO who in civilian life was Director of the PWD. He was also appointed Director of Civil Aviation, Malaya.

Each of the flying clubs initially became a "Flight" of No: 1 Squadron MVAF, with the exception of the Royal Singapore Flying Club, which, by virtue of its size was divided into "A" and "B" Flights. Flight Commander of "A" Flight MVAF, based at Kallang, was Flt. Lt. John Caister-Cooke – a Senior Lecturer in Maths at Raffles College in civilian life. On 7th December 1941, he had 9 aircraft under his command – 3 Avro Cadets, 3 Tiger Moths, 1 Moth Minor, 1 Hornet Moth and 1 Whitney Straight. "B" Flight MVAF was under F/O Edgar Slight – a former commercial pilot with Wearne's Air Service. In this flight were 2 Dragon Rapides and 1 Dragonfly, also based at Kallang. The Kuala Lumpur Flying Club became "C" Flight MVAF. Flying Officer Stanley was Flight Commander with 2 Tiger Moths, 1 Leopard Moth, 1 Hawk Moth, and 1 Falcon under his command. "D" Flight MVAF based at Ipoh, was the original Perak Flying Club. Commanded by Flt. Lt. Henry Dane it consisted of 2 Avro Cadets and 1 Gypsy Avro. Henry Dane won a DSO posthumously. Pre-war, he was the General Manager of the Perak River Hydro-Electric Power Company. Captured in Java, he died as a POW in Tokyo Camp 3.

The Penang Flying Club formed "E" Flight under the command of F/O Herbert Grant-Watson, who worked for the Asiatic Petroleum Company and the Hong Kong Bank. In this Flight were 5 Moth Majors, and 1 BA Eagle. All Flights in the MVAF came under the umbrella of the Royal Air Force, Far East Command – "A" & "B" Flights came under Singapore Command, while Flights "C", "D" and "E" were included in Central and Southern Malaya Command.

From September 1940 until mobilization on 1st December 1941, training sessions included experimenting with dive-bombing techniques amongst other things. 2 Avro Cadet aircraft of "A" Flight were fitted with bomb racks and, with Flt. Lt. John Caister-Cooke at the controls, tests were carried out – presumably with Caister-Cooke's mathematical expertise playing its part in the trials. Further trials using Tiger Moths and a Miles Magister aircraft demonstrated that these light airframes were not structurally robust enough for dive-bombing. Inevitably there were some pre-hostilities casualties with a few MVAF personnel being killed in flying accidents. Flt Lt. Tony Allen of ICI Malaya was killed in a flying accident in May 1941; Cadet George Day of Singapore YMCA fell out of a plane over Singapore because he had not done up his seat straps; and Pilot Officer Henry Doig of "D" Flight, was killed when he crashed in bad weather.

The MVAF may not have been in the front line of air defence with their light unarmed aircraft, yet the MVAF crews flew over 2,000 hours in hostile skies in the eleven weeks of the Malayan Campaign. Even before the Japanese invaded, the MVAF was busy operating a passenger service which covered the whole of Malaya, and their reconnaissance missions were invaluable to the Campaign. A frequent passenger was Lt. General Percival himself, who realizing how few aeroplanes he controlled, took advantage of this convenient 'airline'. Wearing goggles and a leather helmet, General Percival was flown over the jungle canopy in the open cockpit of a Tiger Moth to see for himself the conditions on the ground, although trips to view front line troop positions were usually made in either the Dragonfly or one of the Dragon Rapides. He admired the way these amateur pilots could get him around the country in their all too flimsy machines in a way in which the RAF could not do. He was not, however, a confident flyer and confessed to "a feeling of relief when they all arrived back safely". Major-General Gordon Bennett, Officer Commanding Australian Forces, was another frequent passenger of these MVAF flights.

Before the Japanese invasion, apart from flying military personnel around, the MVAF was also used for anti-aircraft height finding, and searchlight practice. Young Army officers keenly sought air experience via the MVAF to check the state of their camouflage nets during anti-aircraft exercises. Sadly both Australian and British Commanders in the field failed to recognize or take advantage of having camouflaged Moths at their disposal, for air reconnaissance and for checking their positions. Thus, the unique expertise and experience of the MVAF, where each Flight contained pilots who had flown over the surrounding countryside many times and knew the areas backwards, were not really used to full advantage – as with many of the other Volunteer units on the ground. For instance, local pilots knew where to look for signs of 5th column activity giving assistance to enemy bombers – as mentioned further on in my talk. It was an important opportunity lost by the Allied Forces, in the disastrous Malayan Campaign. It was, as one report put it, "...a perpetual mystery to MVAF pilots when confronted by sheer complacency".

A good example of this complacency was exemplified by an incident on the day following the Japanese invasion. Sergeant Pilots Maxey and Harsley of "A" Flight flew an operational sortie, and were ordered to assist the Australian Forces near Kahang in Johore. They were met by a Lt. Col. who viewed their Tiger Moths with scepticism and sent them on a useless 100 mile reconnaissance flight over the China Sea – unarmed, unescorted and unwanted!

On 1st December 1941, the MVAF was fully mobilized and placed at the disposal of the RAF with a liaison officer at A.H.Q. Far East. After hostilities began, the MVAF was used to transport medical supplies; engine and aircraft spares; carry out air and sea searches for lost pilots and military units; drop food supplies; rescue stranded pilots; and carry out coastal and river reconnaissance. Other operational sorties involved flying low over the dense jungle canopy, where they reported seeing primitive devices to assist the Japanese Pilots, such as arrowheads cut into the lallang ; tree branches laid out to form arrowheads; and even electric lights strung from trees at night, run by portable generators. Although their aircraft were unarmed and ill-equipped, nevertheless the MVAF filled this important niche in communications and reconnaissance, and ultimately their role came to be appreciated by some of the more astute military commanders.

As already mentioned, the MVAF was made up of a variety of local races and European ex-pats – quite an exotic mix of businessmen, Cadets from well known local schools and wealthy men with their own aircraft. One of the latter was wealthy Chinese Businessman, Flt. Lt. Loke Yaik Foo who owned his own Tiger Moth which he brought with him when he joined the MVAF. A widower with 3 children, he had sent them to spend their school holidays with their grandmother in Kuala Lumpur when hostilities began and he was allowed to return to the MVAF from detachment to 36 Squadron in northern Malaya. He then made his way from Penang to Singapore, and escaped in his Tiger Moth by island hopping to the Dutch East Indies. From there he flew to Laverton, Victoria in Australia where he joined the RAAF. They flew him to Ceylon in a Catalina flying boat, where he then volunteered to join Force 136 but at 46 years old, he was considered too old to be dropped behind Japanese lines. So he took part in helping with training programmes of air drops and jungle survival. In all 12 members of the MVAF who reached Australia in early 1942 joined the RAAF and 1 joined the AIF.

Other members of "C" Flight in Kuala Lumpur were the 2 Talalla brothers and their cousin. "Jimmy" and "Henry" Talalla were the sons of Hewage Talalla of Fletcher Trading KL. Both brothers were educated at the Victoria Institution – a top boys' school in KL. In September 1940 they joined the MVAF and later transferred to the RAF. "Jimmy" achieved the rank of Flt. Lt. and flew with the RAF. Post war he flew for Malayan Airways, eventually becoming its Manager. Brother "Henry" was killed in action over France on 25th July 1944 aged 24. "Hector" Talalla was cousin to Jimmy and Henry. Also educated at the V.I., he joined the MVAF, attaining the rank of Sergeant, and survived the war.

There were several casualties of war amongst the members of the MVAF. F/O Patrick Beddel of "C" Flight was shot down by Japanese aircraft while flying a Catalina Flying Boat over the Gulf of Siam on 7th December 1941. Australian Sgt. Vernon Trevethan – formerly RAAF then Wearne Airways – and Flt. Sgt. Herbert Cleaverley of "B" Flight were victims of friendly fire and Japanese bombing, on 17th December, having landed in Ipoh from Singapore in their Dragon Rapide, carrying spare parts and ammunition. Sqn. Ldr. Richard "Cyp" Markham of the Malayan Education Department, who learned to fly with the SSVAF but took over RAF 36 Squadron on the 19th December 1941, was killed in action flying a Vildebeest, while attacking Japanese shipping near Endau in January 1942.

As always in a war situation, there were some amusing incidents; some unbelievably irritating ones; and some which had serious implications for the Allies in the whole calamitous campaign. Flt. Lt. Henry Nixon of "E" Flight, who landed his Wearne's Dragon Rapide in Penang on 9th December 1941, almost fell out of his plane in his excitement to tell everyone that Singapore had been bombed. Instead of this news being greeted with incredulity and horror, he was promptly shown the Penang Clubhouse, which had been machine gunned by the Japs 20 minutes earlier. P/O Geoffrey McCall later wrote "..... with regrettable indelicacy the Japs had concentrated their fire on the ladies' retiring room. The hangar received unwelcome attention, and the cars of 2 members were wrecked." Flt. Lt John Caister-Cooke of "A" Flight was refused permission to land his Tiger Moth at an airfield in Singapore by the Station Commander, despite the fact that he was under strict orders to carry out a dusk patrol. Formerly a local lecturer at Raffles College in Singapore, he knew the island well, so he took the only course open to him, and phoned Singapore HQ to get the ban lifted. Phoning was another hit or miss affair, by today's standards of instant communication and mobile phones. John Caister-Cooke wrote 40 years later "These phone calls were a rather tedious ritual. For all anyone knew, wireless might never have been invented." Even Gen. Percival found that he was often cut off in mid-sentence during a vital phone call of major importance, by a private subscriber ringing the local grocer or fixing a game of golf! In fact, the Australians became so exasperated with the hopelessly inefficient military lines of communication, which kept on breaking down, they resorted to using the ordinary Malayan Post and Telecommunications radio system, which was much more reliable, according to MVG's veteran Volunteer Member, Richard Yardley.

As the Japanese penetrated further south from their landings in Kota Bahru, they pushed the allied forces back all the time, helped by their almost unopposed air superiority. The RAF, with its Brewster Buffaloes, Hudsons, Vildebeests and Blenheims, was no match for the Zero fighters which escorted the long range Japanese bombers. Least of all was the MVAF able to fend off the overwhelming air power of the enemy. Airfield after airfield in the north of Malaya fell to Japanese bombers – Alor Star, Sungai Patani, Butterworth and Bayan Lepas on Penang Island fell in close succession, and were captured by the Japanese on the ground. On Saturday 13th December 1941, with only one serviceable aircraft, which had already left for Ipoh, MVAF personnel of "E" Flight were ordered to check their armaments – which amounted to 12 rifles and 4 pistols, but not one tin hat! – and take their place with the garrison troops in preparation for an anticipated invasion by paratroopers. Later, under cover of darkness, with other troops in the military evacuation of the island, "E" Flight personnel drove southwards to Singapore in a convoy of 10 cars.

After this a very confusing picture emerges as units were evacuated to save as many of the remaining aircraft and pilots as possible. "D" Flight was to evacuate Ipoh, and move to Kahang in Johore, where on 14th December, it first became attached to A.I.F. for river and coastal reconnaissance and other flying duties. At this time the unit was officially designated 'Detached Flight, MVAF' under the command of Flt. Lt. Henry Dane. It comprised the 3 Cadets of "D" Flight, the surviving Penang Tiger Moth of "E" Flight, and 3 Moths from K.L. "C" Flight. The rest of "C" Flight moved to Singapore. By Christmas Day 1941, the majority of RAF and RAAF units had been withdrawn from the mainland of Malaya, along with the remnants of the MVAF, which now came under the RAF for administration and operations. At Kallang, only "A" Flight remained, having absorbed "B" Flight, and was under the command of Flt. Lt. Caister-Cooke, with 12 aircraft at its disposal, while Flt. Lt. Henry Dane was still in command of "Detached Flight, MVAF" at Kahang, Johore, with 4 Moths and 3 Cadets. When the A.I. F. moved, 'Detached Flight' was seconded to 3rd (Indian) Corps in Johore, before finally being recalled to Bukit Timah racecourse airstrip in Singapore, on 28th January, where "A" Flight was also based, following intensive bombing of Kallang. However, this area was not suitable for night landings (as required by 3rd Corps), and so some land between Paya Lebar and Macpherson Roads was chosen as more suitable – the only drawback being a cow-shed as accommodation for the flight personnel, until a more fragrant bungalow was found!

In the book, "Bloody Shambles" by Shores, Cull and Izawa, there are various incidents mentioned where the MVAF was called upon for reconnaissance work, usually at dusk, and landing after dark by the light of hurricane lamps. They rescued downed RAF pilots who had been forced to ditch their damaged aircraft; and on a dawn mission on 27th January, 2 MVAF Moths were sent out to reconnoitre the Senggarang area to find out what had happened to the 6/15th Indian Brigade. Near the Batu Pahat airstrip, Flt. Lt. Dane in the second Moth, saw a number of Jap troops cycling along the road. This mission resulted in locating nearly 3,000 men cut off west of Rengit so that they could be rescued by gunboats *Dragonfly* and *Scorpion* south of Batu Pahat.

On 31st January 1942, 6 aircraft of MVAF "A" Flight, under Flt. Lt. Cooke withdrew to Palembang, Sumatra. 'Detached Flight' with 4 Moths and 2 Cadets with Flt. Lt. Dane remained at Macpherson Road to maintain communications and search for missing aircraft. On the 10th February Flt. Lt. Dane and Sgt Nathan in Tiger Moths, carried out their last sorties from Singapore, bombing the Japs with 20lb fragmentation bombs. They were seen by a journalist who wrote: "The Japanese are not completely alone in the skies this morning, for I have just seen 2 biplanes fly low over the enemy positions where they unloaded their bombs what chance do those lads have of getting back in their antiquated machines...." The next day, 11th February 1942, aircraft of 'Detached' Flight were among the last to leave Singapore, flying to Pakan Baroe in Sumatra, where they joined '2 Detached Flight' under Flt. Lt. Nixon. Shortly before Singapore fell, the remaining MVAF personnel, aircraft and spares still there, were shipped to Batavia, Java, to re-establish the unit under the RAF administration. But, before this could happen, Sumatra fell and eventually all MVAF personnel were evacuated from Java at different times and to various destinations. The final group left with 2,000 RAF personnel on the **SS Kota Gede** on 27th February, reaching Colombo on 6th March. 3 MVAF officers elected to stay with the few remaining serviceable aircraft in Java. They were, Sqn. Ldr. Herbert Chattaway MVAF Admin Officer; Flt. Lt. Henry Dane and Flt. Lt. Geoffrey Harvey, who were captured by the Japanese and became POWs.

This forgotten air force may have been **UNARMED, UNESCORTED & UNWANTED** but they "worked night and day for weeks, stood firm when others wavered, saw clearly the odds against them but faced them courageously and cheerfully." If ever brave men earned undying glory, the men of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force certainly rate high in the scale of things.