

# **BUFFALOES — OVER — SINGAPORE**

**RAF, RAAF, RNZAF AND DUTCH BREWSTER FIGHTERS IN  
ACTION OVER MALAYA AND THE EAST INDIES 1941-42**



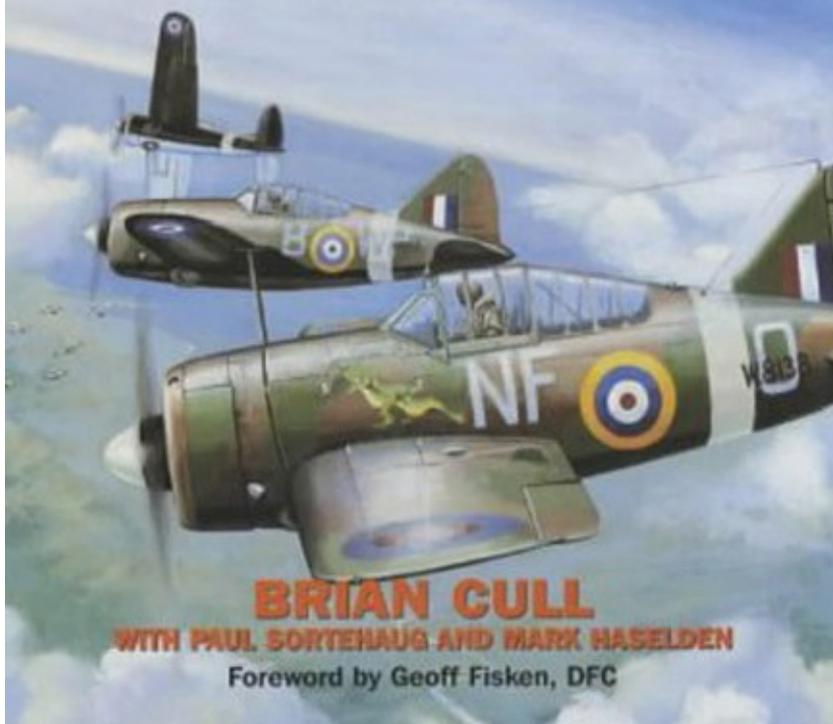
**BRIAN CULL**

**WITH PAUL SORTENHAUG AND MARK HASELDEN**

Foreword by Geoff Fiskin, DFC

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## FOREWARD

I left Wellington with three other pilots from various training camps in New Zealand, bound for the Far East. On reaching Australia we were embarked on a Dutch ship to finish our journey. Besides the four pilots, the only other passengers on board were two deported Japanese. After a leisurely trip through the islands we reached Singapore, where we were taken to Air Headquarters and then posted to 205 Squadron on Singapore III flying boats. After several weeks of being crowded into these overgrown walruses, I kept applying for postings at every opportunity and was eventually granted a transfer to a new fighter squadron being formed at Kallang, but first there was a three-week conversion course on Wirraways with the RAAF squadron at Sembawang.

On arriving at Kallang, my friend Vic Bargh and I found that we had no aircraft, and there were only six RAF officer pilots there. Vic and I were given the job of test flying all the Buffaloes as they came off the assembly line and by the time we had finished I had over 200 hours on the little plane. I really enjoyed their performance, though another three or four hundred horsepower under the bonnet would have made it a marvellous fighter. I thought it was a good little plane, certainly one that could have been improved a lot but also one that I have great affection for—and one I consider saved my life many times.

We soon found the Japanese outnumbered us by up to sixteen to one in the air, and discovered it was like committing suicide trying to dogfight with a Zero, so we devised a scheme of getting in and firing a three-to-five-second burst and getting out as fast as possible. This idea did save lives, as the Japanese never followed us down. However, my squadron lost six young fellows in a space of a few weeks—namely Butch Hesketh, Prof Rankin, Slim Newman, Russ Reynolds, Vin Arthur and Ginger Baldwin. These fellows I had been dining and drinking with for weeks. They will always remain in my thoughts.

I appreciate the efforts of the author Brian Cull [together with Paul Sortehaug and Mark Haselden] in delving through the records of the squadrons and to produce this account of the usefulness of the Buffalo and tribute to those who flew them.

Geoff Fiskén DFC 243 Squadron, Singapore

## **THE BREWSTER B-339 BUFFALO**

The forerunner of the Brewster B-339 (the B-39) was designed to a 1935 US Navy specification that called for a carrier-based single-seat fighter, and was of light alloy construction throughout, with a flush-riveted stressed skin and metal-framed, fabric-covered control surfaces. The prototype B-139 flew for the first time in December 1937, and initial tests were disappointing, with a top speed of only 277.5mph. Following minor modifications, a speed of 304mph at 17,000 feet was obtained. On 11 June 1938, following simulated deck landings, Brewster received a contract to build 54 B-239s for the US Navy. Eleven of these were delivered promptly but the Navy requested that the final 43 aircraft be delivered with an uprated Wright Cyclone R1820-G105A engine and these were designated model B-339; the original B-239s were diverted to Finland, a country in desperate need of fighters to aid its war against the Russians.

In late 1939, Belgium ordered 40 of the improved B-339s, known as the B-339B (B for Belgium). The British Purchasing Commission followed with an order for 170 B-339Es (B-339E for England) while the Netherlands East Indies ordered 72 B-339Ds (B-339D for Dutch), and later still 20 further-improved B-439s. Finally, in May 1941, the Australian government ordered 243 aircraft, although the latter did not materialize. The US Navy also ordered 108 B-439s.

Following the collapse of Belgium in May 1940, Britain took over delivery of that country's 39 B-339s (one had been delivered, unassembled, and was believed captured, assembled and flown by the Germans). The RAF machines were allotted the serial numbers AS410-437, AX811-820 and BB450. Six of these later saw service with the Fleet Air Arm in Crete and the Middle East.

Britain's own Brewster B-339Es—named Buffalo Mk.I by the Air Ministry—began to leave the production line in late 1940, the first three (W8131-W8133) being shipped to England for handling and performance trials. Considered to be unsuitable for operations over Northern Europe, the remaining 167 aircraft (W8134-W8250, AN168-AN217) were diverted for delivery to the Far East (see Appendix V).

# **A FIGHTER PILOT'S RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BUFFALO IN COMBAT**

## **Plt Off (Flt Lt) Terry Marra RNZAF 243 Squadron Singapore 1942**

As a combat aircraft it was hopeless. As an aircraft to fly it was beautiful—it really was. When we first flew them there was no armour plating. After the Japs came they put a big lump of armour plating behind your head and down the back of the seat. The moment they did this it upset the centre of gravity. It was a totally different aircraft. You could put it into a dive and, if you didn't get hold of the trim tabs and start winding straight away, you had to be a real strong man to keep her there. You would have two hands on the stick, holding it in the dive, and if you had to make a grab for the trim tab, one hand wouldn't be strong enough and the stick would just flick back.

As for ceiling, 27,000-28,000 feet was the maximum and by that time you would be hanging onto your prop. One sharp turn and you would drop 5,000 feet. On a hot day, probably 22,000 feet would be as far as you could climb. The oil seals in the prop used to burst and you would get a shower of oil. It would stream back and you couldn't see where you were going. It was just hopeless. We had one aircraft on the Flight in which it wasn't the petrol that governed how long it could stay in the air—it was the oil. She used so much oil.

The main thing that caused us concern were the guns. They were .5 Colts and they just wouldn't fire. The guns worked off a solenoid—especially the two firing through the prop—and a bit of piano wire, and things used to get out of function and now and again you would punch a hole in the prop. They would cock them all on the ground before we left and there were cocking handles in the cockpit—you could cock them yourself if you were strong enough. Two guns used to fire through the prop and two were in the wings. You would depress the button and there would be one shot out of each gun and that would be all. If you managed to cock them again, you might be able to get the two in front firing through the prop, because you could put your feet against something and pull, but I don't think you could ever cock the other two. They sent two American Navy pilots out, who flew with us for months and their job was to find out why they weren't working. When 67 Squadron moved off to Burma they didn't have their guns working either.

There was a New Zealand armament officer, Phillips, who turned out to be a perfectionist. He was quite learned and a hell of a nice guy. He found out what the trouble was and the first thing they did was send him up to Burma to sort 67 out, because they thought that they were more likely to be attacked than we were. He then came back to Singapore and put ours right. I had my own aircraft and when it was serviceable it was that one I flew. I thought so little of the Colts that when the Jap war

started, I asked Phillips if there was any way he could take the two out of the wings and replace them with .303 Brownings. Well, he did, and I had two Brownings. I don't know whether any of the other guys got them [they did]. I always had two guns that worked. But if the Japs had started on us a fortnight before they did, we would only have been able to fire four shots. And if you were strong enough and stayed alive long enough you could have probably fired another two. But that was it. These were faults that made you feel the aircraft hadn't been very well tested.

As I said, the Buffalo was a nice aircraft to fly but not to fight in.

## **AN AIRMAN'S IMPRESSION OF THE BUFFALO**

### **LAC James Home 242 (Hurricane) Squadron, Java 1942**

We found some Dutch Air Force groundstaff at the drome [Tjililitan, Java]. They had with them a couple of Buffaloes (best described as bullocks) parked near our service area. The engines had been started and run-up with no sign of any aircrew. I always said this aircraft was a disaster and now I was seeing further confirmation. It was short, fat and stunted like a beer barrel fitted with an engine, and when the engine started up it couldn't make up its mind whether to continue running or cough up its innards and report sick. The complete engine became enveloped in smoke as though attempting to hide away in shame from any onlookers. The noise from its Wright-Cyclone engine when taxiing did nothing to justify its very faltering power. Further, it reminded me of an over-affectionate bulldog loath to leave its kennel. I admit this anecdote of the Buffalo is biased, yet any groundstaff who had them thrust upon them as frontline aircraft would agree with these sentiments. I hated to think how any of our Buffalo pilots felt when they faced the Zero—one thing for sure, he needed to be brave.

Their Last Tenko by James Home

## **IN PRAISE OF THE BUFFALO**

### **Kapt Pieter Tideman DFC 3-V1G-V Sumatra & Java 1942**

Coming to an evaluation of the Brewster fighter, especially compared to the Zero by which it was opposed—I think that my views are not directly in line with what is generally said about the Brewster. Generally it is said that it was far inferior to the Zero. As far as speed and climb performance were concerned, the Zero might have been faster but the Japanese sacrificed everything to get a good climbing fighter. However, that meant that she was very vulnerable, even from the .303 machine-guns. On the contrary, the Brewster was a good, sturdy, fast fighter with two half-inch

armour-plates behind the seat. She would take a hell of a lot of beating. My view is that our drawback during the fighter actions was not an inferior aeroplane, but that we had too few of them and also our armament was too little and too light. Only two .303s and two .50s. If only that could have been six or eight wing-mounted .50s! However, I was happy to have the Brewster. Another thing we have to bear in mind is that we were up against the *crème de la crème* of the Japanese fighter pilots.

## **PREAMBLE**

### **THE DRIFT TO WAR**

**“Unfortunately, it has come to this, that either Japan must stop her expansion, or England must willingly give up some of what she has or hopes to have. Therein lies a cause for war.”**

#### **Lt Cdr Tota Ishimaru, Imperial Japanese Navy<sup>1</sup>**

Singapore—an island off the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula roughly the same shape and size of the Isle of Wight—had been acquired for Britain by Sir Stamford Raffles, early in the 19th century, as a trading post for Britain’s eastern trade that would not unduly conflict with Dutch interests. By 1921, it housed a major city with a commercial port—Keppel Harbour. In 1925, work commenced on the construction of a naval base, incorporating a concrete dry dock 1,000 feet long by 132 feet wide, capable of housing the largest battleships. The fortification of Singapore Island alarmed many Japanese, who could not understand why Britain needed to show her military strength in the area particularly as Japan had been her ally in the Great War of 1914-18.

In the early 1920s the Japanese approached Britain for help with building a naval air service; the Japanese Navy proposed to build a number of aircraft carriers, and wished for expert guidance from the British, that would include training of its pilots. The Admiralty refused to help on the grounds that Japan might pose a threat to Britain’s control of the seas. The Foreign Office, however, could see many advantages, as could the Air Ministry and the Department of Trade. A compromise was reached in so far as an unofficial mission comprising former officers and men of the Royal Naval Air Service was sent to Japan in 1921, and was led by Colonel Lord Sempill AFC. Within two years, the Japanese Naval Air Service had begun to take shape; a naval air base was being constructed and a new training programme was beginning to produce results. The young pilots were quick learners and flew with dash and élan. By 1923, plans for Japan’s first aircraft carrier, the Hoshi, were well advanced, and some of the British team remained to give advice, but the anticipated orders for British aircraft with which to equip the new service did not materialize. Orders had been placed instead with Mitsubishi to produce the first naval aircraft designs, with British help, and eventually a former Sopwith test pilot carried out the first deck landing on a Japanese carrier. By 1930, the Japanese Navy possessed three carriers and in excess of 100 carrier aircraft.

During the next few years, as feared, relations between Britain and Japan became increasingly strained. Lt Cdr Tota Ishimaru of the Imperial Japanese Navy and author of a 1935 publication entitled *Japan Must Fight Britain*, outlined what he thought would be the likely conclusion of an Anglo-Japanese war:

“Countries when they go to war all too frequently think solely of victories, of winning battles; they do not stop to consider what they have to gain by them or what effects of the war may be. That is why so many vain and fruitless wars are recorded in history. An Anglo-Japanese war would turn to the advantage of America, of France, of Italy, of Russia, and of China, so much so that all of them would like to see it. For a war, which left these two champions exhausted, would leave the others in a stronger position than before without any effort on their part. The fall of England would be as a godsend to America, her chief competition for it would leave her mistress of the world at no expense to herself. In other words, such a war would have the twofold effect of eliminating both Japan and England from among the Great Powers and of raising the status of the others. Unfortunately, it has come to this, that either Japan must stop her expansion, or England must willingly give up some of what she has or hopes to have. Therein lies a cause for war. We Japanese are aware of our differences with America, but very few of us realise how much more serious are our relations with England and what an element of danger they contain. Serious and irreconcilable economic and political differences are involved.”<sup>2</sup>

## Singapore

The deteriorating world economic scene in the 1930s required large financial cuts to be made by the British at Singapore, and completion of the defences was put back by five years as part of these. Nonetheless, in October 1935, the first RAF squadron arrived at Seletar, where an airfield had been constructed. Britain was not on its own as a western power in the area, however, since military aviation had reached the Netherlands East Indies as early as 1915, while the French colony of Indo-China also possessed a small air force of less than 20 aircraft.

As the fraught 1930s drew to a close, and war clouds gathered over Europe, four squadrons of RAF Blenheim light bombers were sent to Singapore, but two of these were soon redirected to Aden. By mid-1940, with war now raging in Europe, and in response to a plea to Australia for assistance, two squadrons of RAAF Hudsons arrived at Singapore, closely followed by 18 crated Wirraway<sup>3</sup> advanced trainers. The pilots for the latter, members of 21RAAF Squadron, followed shortly thereafter, and were commanded by Sqn Ldr F.N. Wright RAAF, who reported:

“On arrival in Singapore in August 1940, as Commanding Officer 21RAAF Squadron, it was plainly evident to me that there existed a state of affairs which was far out of line with the reports which had been received and accepted in Australia regarding the defence of Singapore. In addition to obvious shortage of aircraft and equipment, there was also an acute shortage of trained personnel. There appeared to be no prospect of

obtaining additional aircraft or personnel, and neither did there appear to be any great effort made with a view to improving the efficiency of the RAF personnel who were there. Right up until hostilities broke out RAF units, with the exception of one maintenance unit, worked only from 0730 to 1230 each day, with 15 minutes break during the morning and, although RAAF units proved that working an additional two hours per day was not detrimental but beneficial, so far as efficiency was concerned, the RAF units made no effort to follow suit, and there can be no doubt that the standard of efficiency of RAAF units was far above that obtained by any RAF unit in Malaya.

“Although it is realised that there is always a tendency for units and stations to criticise higher command, it was certain that, in the majority of cases, the criticism levelled at high command in the Far East was justified. In many instances it was clear that the attitude of those responsible resulted from a general tiredness and lack of interest or determination to get on with the job. In other instances sheer stupidity and rigid adherence to Air Ministry Orders (despite obvious misapplication) prevented an improvement in efficiency.

“It is certain that the shortage of personnel in the higher command possessing up-to-date practical knowledge of the tasks allotted to them contributed to the ill-defined and half-baked schemes sent out to units and stations from time to time, and this fact, when connected with the evident lack of control exercised by senior officers at stations and units, in my opinion, resulted in the disinterested attitude which permeated the whole of the RAF in Malaya. It can be stated that the RAF pilots were very willing to carry out tasks allotted to them but they were carried out under conditions and in accordance with instructions which could only result in inefficiency.”

Four airfields had been constructed on Singapore Island, at Seletar, Kallang, Tengah and Sembawang, the latter for use by the RAAF. A local unit, the Malayan Volunteer Air Force (MVAF) was formed at Kallang, which absorbed the Straits Settlements Volunteer Air Force, most of the pilots of which had been transferred to the RAF; many of them had served initially with 4 Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit (4AACU), which had been established with a variety of biplane types of various vintage to tow targets for the island's anti-aircraft gunners. The MVAF was formed with personnel recruited from the various civilian flying clubs. Most of the pilots qualifying were men who, on account of their age, were ineligible for operational flying duty with the RAF. In addition, the MVAF ran the Elementary Flying Training School, financed by the Malayan Government as its contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme. Courses for 16 cadets at a time lasted ten weeks, air and ground instructors being provided by the MVAF and RAF.

The Japanese, meanwhile, gained a valuable insight as to how the Royal Air Force operated from on-the-spot observers based in London during the Battle of Britain in 1940; these included Yukio Nakano, Assistant Attaché in the Military Attaché's office in London:

“If Japan was going to fight, we had to determine what were the conditions necessary for victory. When war should be begun, or whether war should be avoided. We had to clarify the situation. Located at the very site of the battle between Britain and Germany and attacked by Germany in the very capital of Britain, we were naturally sending information that had a different perspective from the information available from the Germans who were attacking. Thus our information should be the most valuable.”<sup>4</sup>

Another keen observer was Lt Cdr Minoru Genda, Assistant Naval Attaché and Special Air Attaché, who later returned to Japan to formulate the plan for the air attack on the US Navy base at Pearl Harbor:

“What I most wanted to see in Britain were the real capabilities of the British air force. To do this required study of British units, but under these conditions that was beyond my capability. The only way I could really grasp the air-fighting capability of the British Fighter Command was by driving in the suburbs, or playing golf and observing combat planes flying from nearby fields. By watching how they operated their fighter planes during training, I could estimate roughly how much ability their pilots possessed. In a sense this was extremely difficult, just watching in this manner, trying to estimate the whole capability of an entire air force, but with repetition it was possible to form an overall assessment of their abilities. I could roughly appraise the results of air combats between British fighters and German fighters. Using these observations I was able to estimate that the capabilities of the British Fighter Command were much lower than that of the Imperial Japanese Navy, while those of the German Luftwaffe fighters were even lower than the British. My conclusion was quite self-righteous and was criticised, but I was confident in it. And, when I observed the early combat engagements of the Pacific war, the results of Malaya, Burma, and the Indian Ocean actions bore out my assessment.”<sup>5</sup>

While Nakano and Genda were in Britain, another senior Japanese officer, Colonel Tanikawa, Planning Chief of the Imperial Japanese Army HQ, was in Singapore, where he arrived incognito with Major Kunitake, Staff Officer of the 25th Japanese Army. On arrival, on 10 September 1940, they were met by Mamoru Shinozaki, Press Officer at the Japanese Consulate, with whom they toured Singapore City and elsewhere on the island before driving to Johore Bahru, visiting Tinggi, Mersing and Endau. Mission completed, they returned to Tokyo four days later, where they reported that Singapore could only be attacked from the direction of Johore, from the Malayan Peninsula.

As tension mounted in the region following the outbreak of the European war, the French in Indo-China clashed with their neighbours, the Thais. With the increase in Japanese aggression, and the completion of the Singapore Naval Base and airfields on Singapore Island and construction of others on the Malayan Peninsula underway, it was decided by the Air Ministry in London that the time was right to provide a fighter force for the area, even though few could be spared from the defence of Britain and her offensive in the Middle East. Hurricanes or preferably Spitfires should have been

sent, but it was not to be. However, a threat to British and American possessions in the area was not considered to be imminent, as revealed in a letter from Prime Minister Churchill to US President Roosevelt, dated 15 February 1941:

“I do not myself think that the Japanese would be likely to send the large military expedition necessary to lay siege to Singapore. The Japanese would no doubt occupy whatever strategic points and oilfields in the Dutch East Indies and thereabouts that they covet, and thus get a far better position for a full-scale attack on Singapore later on. They would also raid Australian and New Zealand ports and coasts, causing deep anxiety in those Dominions, which had already sent all their best trained fighting men to the Far East.”

The new GOC Malaya, Lt General Arthur Percival DSO MC, who had previously served on the Malaya General Staff and was considered the best man available to take command now that tension was mounting in the area, wrote:

“Since I left Malaya three and a half years before, some considerable changes had taken place in the defence organisation. In the first place a Commander-in-Chief Far East (Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham DSO AFC) had been appointed with headquarters at the Naval Base on Singapore Island. He was responsible directly to the Chiefs of Staff for the operational control and general direction of training of all British land and air forces in Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong, and for the co-ordination of plans for the defence of those territories.

“Another important change which had taken place in the Far East since I had last been there was that the China Fleet, such as it was, was now based on Singapore instead of being based on Hong Kong, and the Commander-in-Chief China, Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, flew his flag ashore at the Naval Base. Most of the more powerful units of the China Fleet had by that time been removed to take part in the war in the West. Of more importance for the time being than the strength of the Fleet, which was almost negligible as far as major operations were concerned, was our strength in the air, and I made anxious inquiries about that.

“There were certainly more aircraft than when I had left Malaya but I was not encouraged when I was told that the same old Vildebeest torpedo-bombers as before were still there, for I knew full well that, though they might have been reconditioned and fitted with new engines, their age must run into double figures and that they could not be considered of much account in modern war. It is true also that there were fighters where there had been none before but, having seen the paramount importance of the modern up-to-date fighter in the Battle of Britain, I was far from feeling happy when I was told that our fighters were a type which I had not heard of as being in action elsewhere, i.e. the American-built Brewster Buffalo. However, a fighter was a fighter and we were in no position to pick and choose at that time. I was more disturbed to find that there were no heavy bombers, no dive-bombers, no transport and no army cooperation aircraft in Malaya.”<sup>6</sup>

It was, therefore, to be the Brewster Buffalo that was to offer initial defence for Malaya and Singapore when war eventually came to the area.

## CHAPTER I

### BUFFALOES ARE GOOD ENOUGH FOR SINGAPORE

1941

**“I was far from feeling happy when I was told that our fighters were a type which I had not heard of as being in action elsewhere ... However, a fighter was a fighter and we were in no position to pick and choose at that time.”<sup>7</sup>**

#### **Lt Gen Arthur Percival, GOC Malaya**

The possibility of despatching substantial quantities of urgently needed fighters to Singapore from the United Kingdom—where the Battle of Britain had only just ended and a renewed offensive by the Luftwaffe was still anticipated—was remote. In any event the demands of the new fronts in the Middle East took priority. The answer was found by requesting that deliveries of American Brewster B-339E Buffalo fighters—originally destined for Britain, which had been ordered by the British Purchasing Commission during 1939 and 1940—be diverted to the Far East. These aircraft had been found unsuitable for operations in the European war zone owing to their lack of high altitude performance capabilities, but were deemed to be good enough to deal with anything the Japanese might field.

Early in 1941, command of the RAF Far East Command passed to Air Vice-Marshal C.W.H Pulford CB OBE AFC, who replaced Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Babington KCB CBE DSO. Shortly before his departure, the outgoing AOC had sent the Air Ministry a memorandum, which stressed that he was in no doubt that, should the Japanese gain a foothold in Malaya, the fate of Singapore would be sealed. Consequently, he recommended not only the strengthening of the air forces, but he went further and said that the defences should include the whole of Malaya and should be based primarily on the use of air power. The day after Pulford’s arrival, at a Chiefs of Staff meeting in London, the Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff advocated the despatch of Hurricanes to Malaya, but his opposite number on the Air Staff insisted that “Buffalo fighters would be more than a match for the Japanese aircraft that were not of the latest type.” How the Allies could delude themselves in this manner remains a mystery. It seems that the appearance of fixed-undercarriage A5Ms of the JNAF and JAAF Ki-27s in the skies over China and Manchuria blinded the powers-that-be to the truth. Quite apart from the excellent showing of the existing Japanese fighters, a unit

of the new Mitsubishi A6M Zero-Zen fighters of the JNAF had reached China as early as July 1940, where in a brief period they had virtually destroyed the remaining Chinese air strength.<sup>8</sup>

What Singapore needed were supplies of modern fighters—Spitfires and Hurricanes, or even P-40 Tomahawks which were on order from the United States. However, the Spitfire had not even made its appearance outside the UK at this stage, although Hurricanes were available in large numbers. At the end of August, Prime Minister Churchill rather flamboyantly offered Soviet Premier Stalin a further 200 Hurricanes in addition to the 40 already supplied, with 200 Tomahawks promised from deliveries due from the United States. As a consequence of this undertaking, Singapore was refused further proposed reinforcements when the Chief of Staff advised Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, C-in-C Far East, that the plan to accommodate an air strength of 336 aircraft in the Far East by the end of 1941 could no longer be met, much less a recently proposed higher figure. The greater priority of both Russia and the Middle East, together with shortfalls in production in both the United Kingdom and the United States, were cited as the causes.

The Straits Times heralded the arrival of the Buffaloes in glowing terms, under the heading ‘American Fighters in Malaya’:

“Squadrons of Brewster Buffaloes, 300 mile-an-hour American made planes which are proving to be first class fighters are among new RAF reinforcements in Malaya. Malaya is the first country in the British Empire east of Suez equipped with these American fighters. They are capable of turning more quickly than any other fighter yet designed. The Buffaloes are flown by specially selected personnel, among whom are crack fighter pilots who have fought the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain and have been credited with destroying a large number of Heinkels and Messerschmitts. These pilots, who only a few months ago, handled Britain’s marvel planes, the Spitfire and Hurricane—are taking to the Buffaloes like ducks to water. They declare that the Buffalo is a delight to handle. ‘There’s nothing like it for really close-quarter combat,’ one of them said, ‘It can turn on a cent.’ The planes, which are now in service with RAF squadrons in Singapore can be assembled and take the air 24 hours after the crates have been unloaded in Singapore.

“The Buffalo started its career as a fleet fighter of the US Navy’s air arm and was designed to land on aircraft carriers. Its unusually thick, barrel-like fuselage—its appearance on the ground thoroughly warrants the name ‘Buffalo’—makes it an unmistakable type in the air. Its speed with the 800hp Wright Cyclone engine fitted is comparatively speaking not very great—not much more than 310mph—but speed, although ranking high among the qualities of the modern fighter, is proving by no means the only important factor in aerial fighting.”

It was planned to establish two new squadrons immediately at Kallang aerodrome, the first of which was 67 Squadron, formed from a draft of five officers and 111 airmen who had arrived aboard SS Aquitania on 11 March. By the end of May the unit had its

full complement of Buffaloes assembled and tested, and Sqn Ldr R.A. Milward DFC arrived from the Middle East to command; his flight commanders were Flt Lt D.J.C. Pinckney, a Battle of Britain veteran, and Flt Lt Jack Brandt. The rest of the pilots were predominantly members of the RNZAF sent direct from New Zealand, although Flg Off P.M. Bingham-Wallis joined the unit at Singapore when he transferred from 4AACU. One of the groundcrew, LAC J. Helsdon Thomas, wrote:

“The Squadron was equipped with Buffalo aircraft, also known as flying barrels. Maintaining these machines was a constant headache. Spot welds would break on the box section undercarriage. Rivets were discovered in the fuel lines, fuel pumps and carburettors. Big-end bearings had a habit of cracking up and depositing white metal into the scavenge filters.”<sup>9</sup>

However, 67 Squadron’s stay at Singapore was to be brief and a few months later, in October, it would be despatched to Burma. The second Buffalo unit, also formed at Kallang on 12 March, was 243 Squadron. Sqn Ldr G.B.M. Bell, who had been acting as ADC to the AOC, was offered the post of squadron commander:

“We were equipped with Brewster Buffaloes, an American aircraft designed for use on carriers and at that time discarded by the US Navy as obsolete. However, we were proud to be flying the Buffalo which was, despite its obsolescence, modern when compared to the other aircraft with which the Command was equipped.”

Two more Battle of Britain pilots—Flt Lt Tim Vigors DFC and Flg Off John Mansel-Lewis<sup>10</sup>—arrived from the United Kingdom as flight commanders, and were accompanied by Wg Cdr R.A. Chignall, who was to take command of RAF Kallang. Tim Vigors, credited with eight victories while serving in the UK, recalled:

“John Mansel-Lewis came out on the boat with me. In fact we shared a cabin the whole way. He was, I suppose, my closest surviving friend at that time. There were six other fighter pilots who came out with us on the boat to Singapore and the only one I can remember was Colin Pinckney, who had been at school with me. As far as I can remember the remaining five of these pilots were all killed in the subsequent Japanese action.”

With Vigors in charge of A Flight and Mansel-Lewis B Flight, a handful of senior pilots were transferred from resident units to assist with the training of the mainly inexperienced RNZAF pilots who began arriving. Flg Off Mowbray Garden was posted to 243 Squadron from 4AACU, while Flg Off Maurice Holder, known as Blondie due to his shock of blond hair, transferred from 36 (Vildebeest) Squadron. During his travels Holder had acquired a black flying suit, which he continued to wear once hostilities had begun, and at a time when his companions had been issued with white flying suits to assist with detection should they find themselves forced down into the jungle.

Prior to his posting to 243 Squadron, 27-year-old Garden had never flown a