



# Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

**RNZAF Air Power Development Centre Bulletin**

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## **No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron RNZAF**

***In the front line during the Battle of Singapore***

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**February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018** marks the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Singapore, and it is timely to commemorate the role played in this battle by one of the RNZAF's most unique units. Few people would be aware that an RNZAF ground-based unit was undertaking vitally important work on the front line at this time.



out any rough patches, and spread gravel laid for the surface of the runway. It was hard, physical work, especially when the heavy tropical rains turned the ground into thick mud, burying earthmoving machinery to the axles.

With war clouds looming in the Far East, Britain became concerned about the need to defend their strategic naval base at Singapore. The Malayan Peninsula was seen as a potential 'back door' area through which Singapore could be attacked, and therefore, more airfields were urgently required to strengthen its defences.

The RNZAF's No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron (1 ACS), or Unit 24 as it was also known, was the first of its kind in the Air Forces of the British Empire, and was formed in July 1941 from personnel and equipment drawn largely from the New Zealand Public Works Department.

The Squadron arrived in Malaya in October 1941, and wasted no time setting to work on their first big job – the construction of a bomber airfield for the RAF at Tebrau in Johore. The first stage in building the aerodrome was to uproot the rubber trees and clear them away with bulldozers. The ground was then levelled with carry-alls (large scoops) drawn by tractors, and finally, graders were used to smooth

At the end of November, a survey team was sent to mark out a site for another bomber airfield at Bekok, 90 miles north of Tebrau. A second construction party despatched to the strip found oil palms rather than rubber trees that needed clearing. The men soon discovered that these were home to some very large pythons, which slithered out of the undergrowth as the trees were cut down.

The tractor drivers were now racing against time to get the ground cleared and levelled before the monsoon rains arrived in December, which meant long hours of back-breaking labour in the searing heat and stifling humidity. They made rapid progress, astounding the British authorities with the speed and efficiency with which they cleared dense plantations and carved out runways.

Their work took on new urgency when Japan marked its entry into the war in December 1941 by bombing Singapore, almost simultaneously with the attack on Pearl Harbour, and invading northern Malaya. Now more than ever, airfields were

Te Matataua is pronounced: "Te mutta toe-wa"

desperately needed in southern Malaya, particularly fighter strips to accommodate the reinforcements which were on their way. In mid December, work at Tebrau was suspended and the unit was split up and tasked to convert the bomber strip at Bekok to a fighter strip; beginning two further strips at Sungei Buloh near Tengah on Singapore Island and on the site of the Johore Rifle Range.

Others went to Singapore to help repair bomb-damaged aerodromes, while a salvage party was sent north to recover equipment from abandoned airfields in the face of the Japanese advance. The salvage party recovered large quantities of valuable equipment, including trucks, cars, machinery and radios from "under the noses" of the Japanese.

Air raids were occurring both day and night, and news from the front line was growing increasingly grim. By 15 January 1942, the Japanese had made it to the northern border of Johore, and the order was given for Bekok Camp to be evacuated. Demolition charges were laid in the runway and blown the next day, leaving the air strip pitted with large craters to prevent it being used by the Japanese.

Work had resumed in earnest on the Tebrau strip in early January, but just as it was nearing final completion, the order came for it too to be abandoned and the unit to withdraw to Singapore. They dragged trees over the runway to prevent enemy aircraft from landing, and a small party was left behind to lay 24 mines in the runway, to be detonated soon after.

The Squadron withdrew to Singapore on 27 January and were the last Air Force unit to leave the Malayan Peninsula. They soon found themselves in the thick of the action in the siege of Singapore. Under almost constant attack from enemy bombers and artillery, they worked to repair the fighter aerodromes as long as they could, until the decision was made to evacuate to the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia).

On 1 February 1942, they assembled on the docks of Singapore with all their equipment and machinery, ready to embark on the SS *Talthebius*. Due to a shortage of local labour, it fell to the men to load their own equipment onto the ship. Despite being bombed several times that day, *Talthebius* remained unscathed and after 16 hours of work, the New Zealanders had loaded around 2,500 tons of equipment. All was just about ready, when disaster struck.

On the morning of 3 February, a working party was making the final adjustments to the cargo when *Talthebius* received two direct hits in a heavy air raid. The bombs exploded in the hold, killing the SNCO in charge of the working party and severely wounding seven others, two of whom later died in hospital. That afternoon, another air raid sunk the ship along with all of 1 ACS's prized machinery.

The Japanese made it to the Causeway, and were shelling and bombing relentlessly. On 6 February, 1 ACS was informed that it was to sail that evening. The unit was split in two, the first party embarking on the SS *City of Canterbury*, the other on the SS *Darvel*. *City of Canterbury* successfully made it to Java without mishap. For those aboard *Darvel*, however, they endured two failed attempts to leave the harbour, before finally escaping Singapore on 9 February, with the Japanese having already landed on the island. Wounded unit members were left behind in hospital and were later captured as prisoners of war.

*Darvel* was unescorted and presented an easy target for patrolling enemy aircraft as it attempted to 'run the gauntlet' from Singapore to Java. Two days out, the ship was spotted by a formation of Japanese bombers, and was attacked, killing one member of 1 ACS and wounding 17. The ship was severely damaged, and would have sunk had it not been for the New Zealanders exercising their 'Kiwi ingenuity' and going below decks to plug leaks with anything they could find. Others worked to repair lifeboats and clear the decks of debris. Narrowly averting disaster, *Darvel* limped into Batavia (now Jakarta) on 12 February.

The Squadron remained on Java for a week until, with enemy invasion once more imminent, it was decided to send the whole unit back to New Zealand to reform and re-equip. On 20 February 1942, the surviving members of 1 ACS sailed for Australia, ultimately reaching home soil on 24 March, so ending an action-packed 8-month tour of duty.

### Key Points

- Ensuring airfields remain available and useable in times of war requires significant manpower and equipment resources.
- Specialised manpower and equipment can be quickly drawn from civil companies and deployed in support of war efforts.