It is an interesting phenomenon that more Australians know of the Japanese surprise attack on the Americans at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii than of the RAAF’s heroic defence of Kota Bharu on the Thai-Malay border in northeast Malaya, which commenced almost an hour earlier in real time. The Japanese offensive on that fateful day, 7 or 8 December (depending upon the International Date Line), actually involved seven coordinated attacks against British, American and Thai territory. Over the next 14 hours Malaya, Hawaii, Thailand, the Philippines, Guam Island, Hong Kong and Wake Island were attacked—in that order. The first commitment of Australian combat units against the forces of Imperial Japan occurred shortly after 0200 hr on Monday 8 December 1941 when seven Lockheed Hudson aircraft of No 1 Squadron RAAF attacked the Japanese Kota Bharu Invasion Force.

The Japanese air attacks against Hawaii were very much a surprise for the Americans, as no-one anticipated that the Japanese carrier fleet could avoid detection on its approach half way across the Pacific. In contrast, the attack against the British in Malaya was not a surprise at all. Considerable tension existed between the British and the Japanese empires during the 1930s but it increased alarmingly after the Tripartite Pact was signed in September 1940. RAAF units were deployed to Malaya in increasing numbers from mid-1940 in order to strengthen the British Imperial defences at Singapore and to deter Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia.

Over the following 18 months four RAAF squadrons, Nos 1 and 8 with Hudsons and Nos 21 and 453 with Brewster Buffalo fighters, conducted maritime patrols and exercises in preparation for the much anticipated Japanese offensive. In July 1941, Group Captain John McCauley was given operational command of the RAAF units under the British Far East Command. On taking up his appointment he developed a reconnaissance plan to guard against any Japanese moves by sea into the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam. In order to extend the coverage of the air reconnaissance, 1 Squadron was moved to Kota Bharu in August and 8 Squadron to Kuantan on 1 December 1941. McCauley’s plan was activated in the days leading up to the Japanese invasion of Malaya and as a result the Australians in Malaya were well informed of the Japanese fleet’s approach.

On 6 December 1941 two 1 Squadron Hudsons searching the South China Sea off Malaya independently sighted the Japanese force about 260 nautical miles from Kota Bharu. As it was unclear whether these vessels were heading for Thailand or Malaya the Commander-in-Chief British Far East Command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, decided he needed more accurate information of Japanese intentions before he could order any aircraft to engage. The Japanese split into three separate invasion task forces with the majority headed for Singora and Patani in southern Thailand. Three transports and eight escorting warships headed for Kota Bharu.

After the war, records confirmed that a Catalina flying boat from No 205 Squadron RAF managed to find the Japanese force on 7 December but was shot down before it could send a report—this was Japan’s first act of war. At dusk on the same day two Hudsons from 1 Squadron observed Japanese shipping approaching Patani and Kota Bharu.

After midnight on 8 December, 1 Squadron personnel were startled by the sound of naval gunfire coming from the direction of the Kota Bharu beaches. Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham was advised and he ordered all of 1 Squadron’s available Hudsons to launch an immediate offensive against the Japanese ships.

The first of six Hudsons took off at 0208 hr and a few minutes later released bombs over the Japanese transports.
Although the anti-aircraft fire was very heavy, the crew managed to score two hits. The other Hudsons conducted individual attacks and several 250 lb bomb hits were observed. However, one Hudson (A16-94) was lost without trace, with Flight Lieutenant John Jones, Flying Officer Ronald Siggins, Sergeant Graham Hedges and Sergeant David Walters onboard.

Over the next two hours 1 Squadron flew another ten sorties against the Japanese invasion force. Bombs were dropped, hits were observed and barges were machine gunned by the air gunners. Three Japanese transports were soon ablaze and one, the transport *Awagisan Maru*, exploded—it was the first Japanese ship of any type to be sunk in the war. Three of the crew of Hudson A16-19, Flight Lieutenant John Ramshaw, Sergeant Garet White and Sergeant Jeffery Coldrey, were lost but the aircraft’s navigator, Flying Officer Donald Dowie, was pulled from the sea by the Japanese—becoming the first Australian prisoner of war in the Pacific War.

No 1 Squadron continued to fly sorties throughout the day, mostly to interdict the Japanese ground forces and their barges. Soon after dawn Hudsons of No 8 Squadron RAAF and Blenheims of No 60 Squadron RAF, both based at Kuantan, achieved some success against the retiring Japanese shipping in the South China Sea but they were too late to help in the defence of Kota Bharu.

The Kota Bharu airfield was attacked by Japanese aircraft flying from their newly established base in Thailand, causing a number of casualties. Japanese ground troops, although unable to capture the airfield due to determined resistance by British Indian troops, did set up pockets of snipers who soon made any movement by airmen in the dispersal areas and barracks dangerous. The five serviceable Hudsons were ordered to evacuate and around 1700 hr they departed for Kuantan loaded with as many squadron personnel as they could carry.

Efforts were made to destroy the abandoned aircraft, ammunition, stores and facilities at the Kota Bharu airfield before the rest of the squadron departed, and a few hours later the remaining 1 Squadron personnel left by truck for Krai where they managed to board a train for Singapore.

After the fighting the RAAF received some criticism from Army elements over its perceived ‘flight’ from Kota Bharu, however it was clearly better to withdraw what remained of the squadron to fight another day than to order these airmen to fight-on as untrained infantry against experienced regular Japanese troops.

The landings at Kota Bharu were some of the most violent of the whole Malayan Campaign. The Japanese losses included 150 onboard the transports and 350 inflicted during the short journey to the shore, the majority of which were caused by 1 Squadron air strikes. Seven RAAF aircrew lost their lives in this action.

RCAF units were prepositioned in Malaya from mid-1940 to defend British Imperial interests and to deter Japanese aggression in the region.

No 1 Squadron RAAF was the first Australian combat unit to go into action in the Pacific War.

RAAF personnel, aircraft and support arrangements had to be prepared and ready to fight in the air with little, if any, notice. Preparedness and readiness remain just as important today.

Before long enemy planes in formations of two and three began to attack our transports, which soon became enveloped in flame and smoke.

Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, a staff officer with the Japanese 25th Army Headquarters

In 1976 Malaysian fishermen snared the remains of a Hudson aircraft engine in their nets off the coast of Kota Bharu. It was recovered and identified as the Pratt and Whitney radial engine from 1 Squadron aircraft A16-19 which crashed into the sea after attacking Japanese shipping on 8 December 1941. The engine is now on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

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