# PROLOGUE

## The man with the black leather briefcase …

Central Station, Sydney
*17 June 1996*

It is a cold, drizzly, overcast day. Miserable, in fact. The cavernous roof over the country train platform offers only partial protection from the drifting rain, whipped along by a stiff southerly wind which tugs annoyingly at my damp trench coat. Hugging my arms to my chest for warmth, I peer through the gloom, willing the train from Canberra to be on time.

It is.

Despite the depressing weather, I am in high spirits, and aglow with anticipation. I have come to Central Station to meet Denis Emerson-Elliott, British Secret Service, a former and long-serving member of the organisation known popularly as MI6 and a wartime special agent. As an officer in the Royal Australian Navy from 1942–45, he served with the Department of Naval Intelligence and was also personal assistant and confidante of the Director, Commander R M Long. Denis Emerson-Elliott is a man who knows many secrets, some of which he is willing to share with me. In short, I am about to meet a latter-day spy.

The train, which is actually a rail motor, consists of only two carriages. Mr Emerson-Elliott, to whom I refer mentally as MI6, has supplied details of the seats he and his son Tony are occupying, so I have ascertained which end of their carriage to wait. I have no idea of what either man looks like but I do know that MI6 sounds terribly British, from the guarded conversations he has had with me over the phone.

The meeting he has arranged is quite unexpected. He called a few days ago to say that he is travelling to Perth by train and, as he has several hours to wait before the Indian Pacific departs, it would be an ideal opportunity for us to meet. He has matters to discuss which will be of interest to me and, because of what he has to say, it must be face to face. I have given him a brief physical description of myself. His response to this was to advise that he will be carrying a black leather briefcase.

The train glides to a stop. The carriage door opens and out steps a rather portly, middle-aged man – bespectacled, balding, and looking slightly rumpled. He is puffing a little as he manhandles two travel-worn, composite-cardboard suitcases through the narrow doorway.

*Denis Emerson-Elliott, retired secret service agent, 1995*

Plastered with old shipping labels and bound with strong leather straps, the dun-coloured bags look like props from a 1950s British film. As he plods across the platform, the stiff breeze ruffles his unruly greying hair, flicking strands across his shiny pate.

Right on his heels is an elderly gentleman, spare of build, his hair slicked back smoothly from an angular, somewhat aquiline face. In stark contrast to the younger man, he is immaculately dressed and looks exceedingly dapper, in spite of the long train journey. Highly polished brown brogues, neatly laced with a double bow, are topped by tailor-made sports trousers, the carefully pressed creases amazingly knife-edged. His upper body is clad in a well-cut Harris tweed jacket, long-sleeved shirt, fine wool vest and a woollen, Windsor-knotted tie. A high-quality wool overcoat is folded carefully over one arm. For identification purposes, the soft, black leather briefcase, clutched under the other arm is superfluous. This has to be MI6.

I step forward, hand extended, and say, 'Good morning. You must be the Emerson-Elliotts.'

To which the older man replies, in beautifully modulated tones, 'And you must be Lynette.'

The introductions over, MI6 asks me how I recognised them so quickly. Somehow managing to maintain a straight face, I whisper conspiratorially, 'It's the black leather briefcase – it's a dead giveaway.'

After locating the Left Luggage room, where a smiling but somewhat red-faced Tony gratefully divests himself of his burden, MI6 suggests that some refreshment might be in order. Chilled to the bone from my vigil on the platform, I readily agree and allow him to lead the way. To my surprise, he does not select one of the smaller, intimate cafes scattered along the concourse, which are quiet and cosily inviting. Instead he heads for one on the far side – filled with a chattering early lunch-time crowd. I doubt there will be a spare table, but MI6 spots one and makes a determined beeline for it. Left in his wake, Tony and I thread our way through the throng, to find he has successfully made claim by placing his briefcase and overcoat on one of the chairs.

Old habits die hard – especially if you have spent all your life in the Secret Service. The table Denis Emerson-Elliott has chosen is in the far corner of this busy, noisy cafe. The chair

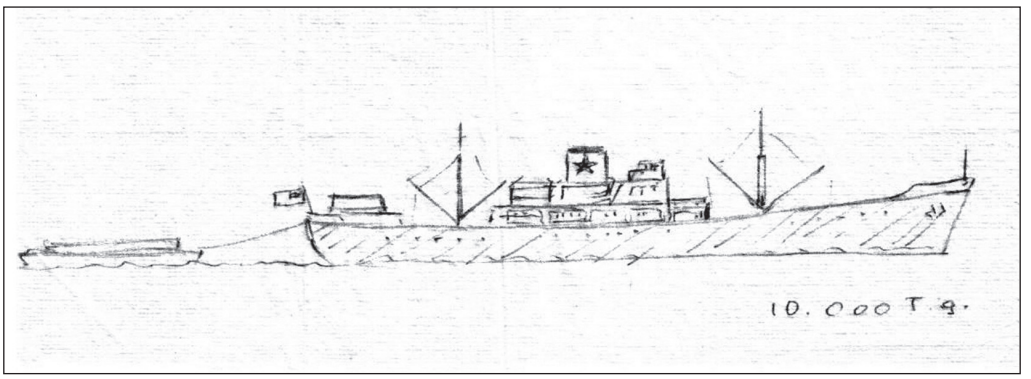
he has selected for himself allows him to have his back to the wall, at the same time affording a direct line of sight to the door. Mindful that MI6 was a spy for many years, I had worn my trench coat as a bit of a joke, but it now appears I am appropriately dressed for the occasion.

A harried waitress hands us a menu. We order tea and toasted sandwiches for three, with a rock cake, liberally sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon, for Tony. The waitress apologises and says that, owing to the crowd, there is a bit of a backlog and our order will not be ready for about twenty minutes. We don't mind, because we have plenty to talk about and a few hours to kill. I initiate the conversation by asking MI6 about his life in Singapore before the war, and his subsequent evacuation.

It is not surprising that we develop an instant rapport. I have spent years immersing myself in war-time events which he is now describing from first-hand experience. Tony regards us with astonishment. We are like two old friends, reliving the glorious days of the Empire and reminiscing about former colleagues, many of them secret agents, whom I also 'know' through my research.

While his father is chatting, Tony takes a ballpoint pen from his pocket and, on a spare paper napkin, makes a sketch for me of the evacuation ship which brought his family to Australia – Empire Star. Despite his being only a small boy at the time, the drawing is extraordinarily detailed.

Finally, our waitress appears. After passing out the sandwiches and carefully arranging the tea cups in front of him, MI6 picks up the steaming pot and, with a charming smile turns to me and says, 'Well, my dear, enough of Singapore for the time being. How about a spot of tea while we discuss Operations Jaywick and Rimau? I am sure you will find it most interesting, for what I am about to tell you, you will not find recorded anywhere else.'




*Tony Emerson-Elliott's sketch of* Empire Star

# 1.
# War comes to Singapore

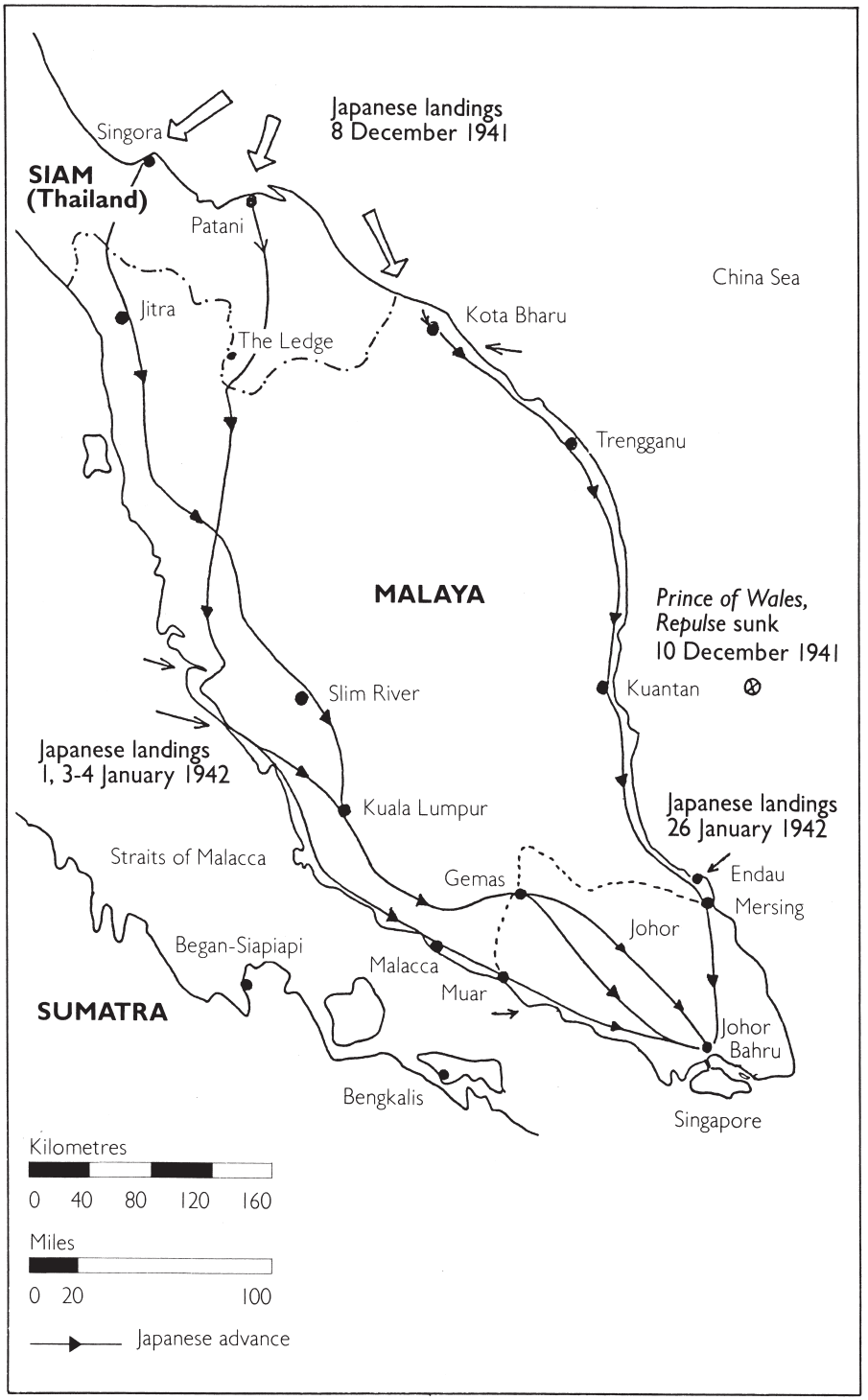
*February 1942*

From the cockpit of his Zero fighter plane, a lone Japanese pilot surveyed the coastal road ahead. Making its way towards the Changi-Singapore road was a solitary Singer sedan, looking for all the world like a small black beetle. It wasn't much of a target, but as a loyal servant of the Emperor it was the pilot's duty to eliminate all the enemies of Japan. Bringing the car carefully into the cross-wires of his machine-gun sights, he depressed the firing button. A stream of lead spurted instantly from the nose of the Zero, homing in remorselessly on the unsuspecting occupants.

The vehicle had set off a few minutes earlier from Whitelawns – a sprawling beachside bungalow with twin castle-like turrets linked by a broad verandah and set amidst lush and well-tended tropical gardens. At the wheel was Lieutenant Denis Emerson-Elliott, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. As always he appeared calm, due to his training and natural demeanour, but his mind was racing at a frenetic pace. His anxiety was well founded. On 8 February, less than twenty-four hours previously and despite all predictions to the contrary, vast numbers of Japanese troops had poured from Malaya across the narrow Straits of Johor, overwhelming the defenders to gain a firm foothold on Singapore Island – the brightest jewel in Britain's Far Eastern empire and a supposedly impregnable fortress.

Hostilities had broken out two months previously, on 8 December, when a Japanese invasion force had accomplished what all but a handful of military experts deemed to be impossible – storming ashore at Kota Bharu, on Malaya's far north-eastern coastline, at the height of the monsoon. This shock had barely been digested at Malaya Command Headquarters in Singapore when, two days later, news was received that HM battle cruiser *Repulse* and HM battleship *Prince of Wales* had been sunk by enemy aircraft in the Gulf of Siam.

Dispatched on the orders of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as a show of strength, the two warships had sallied forth with a small flotilla from the safety of Singapore, home to the world's most modern naval base and protected by batteries of huge guns. Left without air cover when their aircraft carrier escort had run aground in Jamaica, the two great grey goliaths, the pride of the Royal Navy, were sitting ducks for enemy planes. Attacked by




*The Japanese advance through Malaya*

four high-level bombers and 51 torpedo bombers, the vessels did not stand a chance. Five torpedoes struck *Repulse*, which sank shortly after midday. Less than an hour later *Prince of Wales* succumbed to torpedoes and a well-placed bomb. As 845 officers and men slid to a watery grave, the accompanying destroyers could do nothing but search for survivors.

Seemingly unstoppable, the Japanese had then consistently steamrolled their way south towards Singapore through Malaya's vast jungles and rubber plantations. In stark contrast to the Allied army, hampered by large amounts of personal and unnecessary military gear, the invaders carried only bare essentials. Living off the land with apparent ease, they had covered thousands of kilometres in a bare seven weeks, making excellent use of the well-paved British roads and often pedalling along on bicycles purloined from the locals.

The enemy's competence had come as a great surprise to the defending troops. During training they had been assured by senior officers that the short-statured Japanese – being myopic, equipped with inferior weapons and flying aeroplanes made from recycled pots and pans – were not a serious threat, especially since Singapore was protected by mountainous jungle-clad Malaya to the north and by massive gun emplacements on the seaward approaches. Although the Japanese had made threatening noises in the latter part of 1941, there was no cause at all for alarm, according to the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Air Vice-Marshall Brooke-Popham. In late October, just over three months before, he had issued a statement of reassurance, declaring:

> I bring you good news – there is no need to worry about the strength of the Air Force that will oppose the Japanese should they send their army and navy southward … the Air Force is on the spot, and is waiting for the enemy – clouds of bombers and fighters are hidden in the jungle, and are ready to move out on to camouflaged tarmacs of our secret landing fields and roar into action at the first move of the Japanese towards this part of the world … the planes are the most modern planes Britain, Australia and America are producing.

In the face of such official confidence, air-raid drills were deemed unnecessary and, since it was a widely known fact that Japanese pilots could not fly in the dark, no blackout precautions were taken. It was pure and utter propaganda. Not only was the Allied air force severely under strength, the aircraft that were available were for the most part obsolete.

It did not take long for Allied soldiers thrown into action to discover that their adversaries were well-equipped, well-trained, well-disciplined and extremely well-versed in the art of jungle warfare. And, as British and Australian air force personnel soon learned, the quality of the enemy aircraft, piloted by airmen who definitely had no problems flying in the dark, far outstripped anything available in Malaya.