

BEFORE PEARL HARBOUR

THIS is the first of a series of background articles on the Far Eastern war, and on the present position in China and Japan, specially written for "The Listener" by JAMES BERTRAM

THE LISTENER was unkind enough to introduce me to its readers as a "prophet"—a word with unfortunate associations for all returned P.O.W.'s. How well we knew them, those Old Moores of the prison-camp, who would way-lay you behind the cookhouse with the latest bit of "griff" (what the friendly Korean storeman heard the Guard Commander tell his girl friend when she came to collect the Red Cross sugar) and his own interpretation of it—that the war would be over in just twenty-one days, and how we'd all be "back by Christmas."

The fact is, I suppose, that if you go on saying the same thing long enough, sooner or later you will be proved a true prophet. The walls of all public utilities in Japanese prison-camps were scrawled thick with bad guesses about the final date of our release: "Golden Gate in '48" was one of the less optimistic American forecasts. But I have yet to track down the telepathic genius who first circulated the buzz about August 15 some six weeks in advance. He was an outside winner at long odds.

Blackout Over Japan

To return to New Zealand, in those far-off days before Pearl Harbour. On the outbreak of war in Europe I had posted back from the remoter parts of China, and in 1940 I was still trying to fit myself into a very confused scheme of things. The first echelons of the N.Z.E.F. were already over-subscribed; and I put in unsuccessfully for the job of War Correspondent to accompany them (an unlucky appointment, as it proved, for its first holder, who was to spend the balance of the war after Greece in a German prison-camp). Then I had an urgent cable from Mme. Sun Yat-sen asking me to come back to China to help with her China Defence League which was the only relief organisation working for China's front-line fighters in the guerrilla and partisan areas. It was also one of the few active bodies in China promoting unity and democracy, which were as badly needed then as now.

All this may seem unimportant to anyone but myself; but I mention it here to feature the one moment when I may claim to have been a prophet in my own country. At first I had thought that I could be of most use during the war with my own people; now I wasn't quite so sure.

For I had already found, from anxious talks in Canberra and Wellington that our Australian and New Zealand Governments were running into World War II, with blinkers on, as far as Japan was concerned. Special censorship regulations (emanating, it is only fair to record, from Whitehall) were effectively preventing any frank discussion of the Japanese danger in the press or over the air. Mme. Chiang Kai-shek had been cut off in the middle of a broadcast from Chungking because she had ventured to

suggest that the Japanese might threaten Sydney. Commenting on the Far East on a National Australian hook-up, I had been able to say something relevant only by galloping my heavily blue-pencilled script and so leaving myself five minutes overtime, in which I improvised furiously to the great discomfort of the Talks Controller.

Prophet at Home

So now in Wellington I found myself, thanks to the good offices of the then Speaker of the House, the Hon. W. E. Barnard, pounding the table in the Speaker's Rooms before a select group of New Zealand Representatives. I did my best to make their flesh creep, and perhaps may have succeeded when I traced the line of Japanese southward advance on a big wall-map of the Pacific, and insisted not merely that their first major objective would be Singapore, but that Singapore as things were then was bound to fall.

Few people now would deny that our Pacific dominions, trained for years to believe in Singapore as the great bastion of their defence, were generally unprepared for the ignominious collapse of that vaunted stronghold. I have some reason to believe that our governments were not told the real facts: the public most certainly was not.

The one defence-line that stood between ourselves and Japan, I told the attentive M.P.'s was the U.S. Pacific Fleet. And that must have been cold comfort to them later, when it was learnt that not a single capital ship of that fleet

would be capable of action within an hour of Japan's actual entry into the war!

In recalling this episode, I should be doing an injustice to Mr. Fraser and Mr. Nash if I suggest that they were indifferent to the war cloud in the Pacific, already rather larger than a man's hand. Both were well-informed, and both listened sympathetically to my own version of the immediate situation. But in public their hands were tied and their lips were sealed, thanks to the extension of the Chamberlain appeasement policy to the Far East. New Zealand's commitments in the European war seemed paramount and were still uncertain; and the uncompromisingly pro-Japanese policy of Mr. Menzies in Australia at this time perhaps made it a little difficult for Wellington to protest too much.

I felt then, however, and still feel, that New Zealand has such a direct and obvious stake in Pacific affairs that, in our own vital interest, we are bound to insist on the fullest possible expression of our views both in Whitehall (where they are still too often taken for granted) and within the framework of any collective security organization. In foreign affairs, at least, we certainly can't afford to be "Old Colonialists" any longer.

Rabaul to Manila

So having said my piece, I found myself on my way back to China again, flying north from Sydney over the old Carpenter's air-line. It was with a somewhat jaundiced eye that I noted the primitive state of the airfields and the total lack of bases along the Queensland

coast. For Britain had just reached a new low in Far Eastern appeasement by closing the Burma Road to war supplies for China—a gesture of almost criminal folly that was of course a green light to Japanese southern-expansionists; and that could only have been justified if the "time gained" had been used (as it was not) for strengthening British defences in the Far East.

I was travelling with a number of Australian staff officers whose concern it was to look into the defences of New Guinea; and they certainly had no illusions about it. Half the tiny garrison of Moresby, troops fresh from the southern states of the Commonwealth, were in hospital with dysentery and malaria. As we circled round Salamaua in the wall of rain trying to make a landing, I thought then what a beastly place New Guinea would be to fight in. In Rabaul, local volunteers were camped round the cricket ground and had drunk all the pubs dry. But few of them at that time, strolling under the casuarina trees, had any premonition of the fate that was in store for their sleepy green-locked harbour. New Guinea is a savage land, for all its noble contours; and it has become a land of savage memories.

In the Philippines, uneasy beneath the shadow of the China war but fatally distracted by their own domestic politics, I was among friends. In an idyllic Swiss-chalet cottage in the hills of Baguio, Edgar Snow was taking time out from the Far Eastern fracas to finish his *Battle for Asia* (a book which could scarcely have been more timely, and which further established its author as one of the authentic prophets of our time. This is the sort of document that makes more important reading for statesmen than many official despatches; and Snow's

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REUNION IN BAGUIO: From left, Evans Carlson, Edgar Snow, Rewi Alley, Jerry Crouter and James Bertram.