

Ceylon Command

Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka) is a large island just off the south-east coast of southern India. It was a British Crown Colony between 1796 and 4 February 1948, although the Kingdom of Kandy was not included until 1817. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to colonise the island, which was divided between the Portuguese Empire and the Kingdom of Kandy. The Sinhalese King invited the Dutch to gain control of the island from the Portuguese, and the Dutch then exerted control of the island. When the Netherlands were conquered by France during the Napoleonic Wars, the island of Ceylon was transferred to British rule.

Once the British had gained control of the European controlled parts of Ceylon, they wished to incorporate the independent Kingdom of Kandy as a Protectorate. The King of Kandy refused, which led to a short war, and a treaty was signed in 1815 and Kandy became a Protectorate. The British, however, accepted the retention of the Buddhist faith, and agreed not to impose Christianity onto the Sinhalese people. The British authority was soon being challenged, with a view that the British were failing to uphold and protect the Buddhist religion, and a rebellion broke out in the Uva region in 1817. This became a guerrilla war, which the British repressed ruthlessly, and this led to the Kingdom of Kandy being annexed by the United Kingdom in 1817.

Ceylon became an important trading location, with the spice cinnamon one of the main, and most lucrative, commodities exported from the island. Under the British, tea and coffee plantations were planted, a railway was built, and hospitals and schools opened as well. In 1871, the population of the island was about 2,400,000 million people, and this had risen to 5,300,000 million in 1931. The island retained some Portuguese and Dutch influences, and European settlers had also intermarried into the Sinhalese population. Coffee rust wiped out the coffee plantations, but tea thrived on the island, and some rubber trees were grown as well.

There were already some Tamils from southern India living on Ceylon when the British gained control, but additional Tamils, both Hindus and Muslims, were imported to Ceylon to work as labourers on the tea and rubber plantations. By 1911, Indian Tamils constituted about 13% of the population, with the Ceylon Tamils only slightly less.

The British ruled Ceylon as a Colony, until a commission in 1931 devised a new constitution to accommodate the demands for self-governance and the different communities on the island. In 1948, Ceylon became a Dominion of the British Empire, and it gained full independence in 1972.

Ceylon was an important location for the British to impose their control over the Indian Ocean, and the trading routes to India, South Africa, and Europe. A major Royal Navy base was established on the east coast at Trincomalee, and Colombo was the other important port on the island. A locally raised Militia was raised in 1881, which by 1910, had become the Ceylon Defence Force. There were no British troops stationed on the island, until the Second World War.

The Japanese attack on Malaya, the Philippines (under U.S. administration), and the Netherland East Indies on 7 December 1941, changed the balance of power in the region drastically. As the build-up to conflict occurred, Ceylon was taken under India Command with effect from 22 November 1941. With the rapid advance of the Japanese forces across South-East Asia, the threat of invasion of Ceylon, particularly the east coast around Trincomalee, meant that British forces on the island had to be strengthened significantly. With the loss of Malaya, Ceylon became the main source of rubber for the British Empire. Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey LAYTON, K.C.B., D.S.O., R.N., was appointed the Commander-in-Chief, Ceylon, in March 1942, and he began to reorganise the defences to face a probable attack. He was promoted to the rank of Acting Admiral for the duration of his appointment as Commander-in-Chief, Ceylon.

Geoffrey LAYTON was born on 20 April 1884, the son of a Liverpool solicitor. He joined the Royal Navy as a cadet in May 1899. He served in the First World War in submarines. In 1931, he was posted as Chief-of-Staff, China Fleet, and he flew his Flag in H.M.S. Hood from August 1938 until August 1939. He was appointed as Commander-in-Chief China Fleet in September 1940, with the rank of Vice Admiral. He was based in Singapore, and as early as May 1941, he was advised that in the event of naval force being deployed to the Far East, Admiral Sir Tom PHILIPS would be succeeding him as Commander-in-Chief. This occurred in December 1941, with the H.M.S. Prince of Wales and H.M.S. Repulse sailing for Singapore.

At 08.00 hours on 10 December 1941, Vice Admiral LAYTON handed over command to Admiral PHILIPS. By 13.20 hours, both ships had been sunk by Japanese aircraft, and Admiral PHILIPS was dead. LAYTON was then recalled as Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet. He left Singapore on 5 January 1942, sailing to Java with Rear Admiral PALLISER, whom he appointed as Senior Naval Officer in Java. By mid-January, LAYTON had sailed on to Ceylon, to establish a new headquarters.

Singapore surrendered on 15 February 1942, and with the two Royal Navy warships, H.M.S. Prince of Wales and H.M.S. Repulse having been sunk off the eastern coast of Malay by Japanese aircraft, Ceylon and Southern India were considered vulnerable to Japanese aggression.

On 9 March 1942, Java fell to the Japanese, and Admiral Sir James SOMERVILLE was appointed the Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet. This left Admiral LAYTON to concentrate on organising the defence of Ceylon, which was expected to be the next target for the Japanese in this region.

The first eight Hawker Hurricane fighters arrived on 23 February 1942, having been assembled in Karachi, and flown down to Ceylon. These formed No. 258 Squadron, which in April, was based at the newly opened airfield at Colombo Racecourse. Another sixty arrived on 6 and 7 March, having been flown off H.M.S. Indomitable, to form No. 30 and No. 261 Squadrons. The former was based at R.A.F. Ratmalana, and the latter at R.A.F. China Bay at Trincomalee. The Bristol Blenheims of No. 11 Squadron were also based at Colombo Racecourse. The Fleet Air Arm provided No. 803 and No. 806 Naval Air Squadrons, equipped with forty-four Fairey Fulmars.

Two Australian infantry brigades, the 16th and 17th, were diverted from their journey back to Australia from the Middle East, to provide an initial garrison for the island, pending the arrival of other troops. The 34th Indian Infantry Division had been raised at Jhansi in October 1941, and it was still not fully trained or equipped, but it was ordered to Ceylon in January 1942. It was stationed in and around Trincomalee, being responsible for coastal and airfield defence. Ceylon Army Command was formed with effect from 7 March 1942, based at Colombo, with Lieutenant General Sir Henry POWNALL, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*, as the first General Officer Commanding-in-Chief. Anti-Aircraft defences were built up rapidly, with the 1st Royal Marine Anti-Aircraft Brigade being responsible for the defence of Trincomalee, and the 23rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade responsible for Colombo and its environs, including the R.A.F. base at Ratmalana.

Commencing on 31 March 1942, the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a major operation against the British Eastern Fleet, based at Trincomalee. The Japanese occupied the Andaman Islands on 23 March 1942, adding to the concerns about an invasion of Ceylon. Fortunately for the British, the Imperial Japanese Army was unable to commit any troops to an invasion of Ceylon, so it fell to the Navy to carry out an offensive against the British in the Indian Ocean. Admiral Isoroku YAMAMOTO commanded what was known as Operation 'C', which commenced on 26 March 1942. The intention was to attack the British Eastern Fleet in port at Colombo on 5 April, and the Japanese were confident of being able to do so. The Japanese naval force comprised five aircraft carriers and four battleships, vastly out-numbering the small Royal Navy presence in the area. Vice-Admiral Sir James SOMERVILLE commanded three aircraft carriers, the modern H.M.S. Formidable and H.M.S. Indomitable, and the older H.M.S. Hermes. H.M.S. Warspite acted as the flagship of the Fleet, which also comprised four Revenge class battleships. SOMERVILLE's intention was to avoid direct contact, and to preserve his fleet in being.

By 4 April 1942, the R.A.F. and F.A.A. strength on Ceylon was sixty-seven Hawker Hurricanes, and forty-four Fairey Fulmer fighters. There were also seven long-range Catalinas for reconnaissance, fourteen Bristol Blenheims, and twelve Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers. The R.A.F. elements were part of No. 222 Group, commanded by Air Vice Marshal John D'ALBIAC.

Allied intelligence knew of the Japanese force heading towards Ceylon, but underestimated the strength of it. At about 16.00 hours on 4 April, a Catalina from No. 413 Squadron, R.C.A.F., sighted the Japanese fleet south-east of Ceylon. A second Catalina, R/205 from No. 205 Squadron, R.A.F., was shot down on 5 April while shadowing the Japanese naval forces. Vice Admiral LAYTON ordered the ships in the harbours at Colombo and Trincomalee to put to sea, to avoid being attacked in harbour. This included the cruisers H.M.S. Cornwall and H.M.S. Dorsetshire which sailed from Colombo, and the small aircraft carrier, H.M.S. Hermes, which sailed from Trincomalee with orders to hide north-east of Ceylon.

On 5 April 1942, the Japanese launched an air strike on Colombo, and as they passed over the main R.A.F. base at Ratmalana, just south of Colombo, the British fighters were still on the ground. The Japanese attacked the remaining ships in the harbour, sinking the armed merchant cruiser, H.M.S. Hector, the destroyer H.M.S. Tenedos, and a Norwegian tanker. An air battle took place over Colombo, with the British losing twenty of the forty-one aircraft that had taken off, plus six Swordfish from No. 788 Squadron, F.A.A., which were airborne armed with torpedoes. The Japanese lost about seven aircraft.

At about 10.00 hours, a Japanese aircraft found H.M.S. Dorsetshire and H.M.S. Cornwall, and it began shadowing the two Royal Navy cruisers. The Japanese aircraft carriers rearmed their planes with torpedoes, and they started taking off at 11.45 hours. They homed in onto the two Royal Navy cruisers, which were attacked and sunk at about 14.00 hours. Four-hundred and twenty-four officers and men were lost from the two warships.

The British fleet were searching for the Japanese warships, and some elements were spotted by two Albacores, with one being shot down. The main body of the Japanese fleet was not sighted, as it had turned away from Ceylon to the south-west. The two fleets missed each other for various reasons, but on 6 April, two Japanese heavy cruisers sank five merchant ships. The Eastern Fleet then withdrew to refuel, now being aware of the size of the Japanese force in the Indian Ocean.

On 8 April, the Japanese fleet approached Trincomalee from the east, and they were detected by a Catalina aircraft at 15.17 hours. The harbour was cleared, with H.M.S. Hermes and H.M.A.S. Vampire beings sent to the south along the coast. This time, the Japanese strike group of one-hundred and thirty-two aircraft was detected prior to the attack. The defending fighters, seventeen Hurricanes and six Fulmars were airborne to meet the raid.

The Japanese attacked the harbour and the China Bay airbase, causing significant damage. The civilian population were badly alarmed, with many fleeing from the town. A merchant ship was hit and caught fire, and the monitor, H.M.S. Erebus was damaged. Eight Hurricanes and one Fulmer were shot down, for the loss of four Japanese aircraft. A Catalina from No. 413 Squadron, R.C.A.F., was also shot down while shadowing the Japanese fleet.

At about 10.25 hours, nine unescorted Bristol Blenheim aircraft from No. 11 Squadron located and attacked the Japanese carrier force. They dropped their bombs from 11,000 feet, and although some bombs fell close to one of the carriers, none were hit. Four Blenheims were shot down during the attack, with one later being shot down from aircraft returning from attacking H.M.S. Hermes.

Although leaving Trincomalee, H.M.S. Hermes and her escort, H.M.A.S. Vampire, were located shortly after the attack on Trincomalee, and they were attacked by about eighty Japanese bombers, near Batticaloa. Both warships were overwhelmed, with H.M.S. Hermes being hit by about forty 500 lb bombs. Three-hundred and seven men from H.M.S. Hermes, and eight from H.M.A.S. Vampire were lost. Other ships nearby were attacked, including the corvette, H.M.S. Hollyhock, a naval auxiliary, a tanker, and a cargo ship. The Japanese fleet withdrew after attacking Trincomalee, but the events had highlighted the British position of weakness in defending Ceylon and southern India. The Eastern Fleet withdrew its base to Kilindini in Kenya, ceding control of the eastern Indian Ocean to the Japanese. The British intelligence indicated that the Japanese were intending an invasion of Ceylon, so the defences were improved and strengthened. Three additional R.A.F. Squadrons arrived on Ceylon, including No. 222 Squadron equipped with Bristol Beaufort maritime strike aircraft.

The first Army formations sent to the island were the two Australian brigades, as detailed above, which were followed by the 34th Indian Infantry Division. The arrival of the Indian division allowed the two Australian brigades to continue their journey to Australia by late April.

In June 1942, the Imperial Japanese Army developed plans for a major offensive in the Indian Ocean, including an invasion of Ceylon. As the German and Italian forces were advancing in North Africa, thoughts were given to linking up Axis forces in the Middle East. The Imperial Japanese Navy was, even by this early date in the war, over-committed, with the main threat coming from the U.S. forces in the Pacific region. The Japanese limited themselves to submarines patrolling the Indian Ocean to attack shipping, but after the events of April 1942, no more major Japanese naval units were deployed to the Indian Ocean.

The build-up of Army forces on Ceylon continued through 1942. The 21st (East Africa) Infantry Brigade arrived on the island on 21 March 1942. The 20th Indian Infantry Division arrived in mid-1942, and in June 1943, with the threat reduced, the 34th Indian Infantry Division was disbanded, and the 20th Indian Infantry Division departed for North-West India and Burma. The other two Brigades of the 11th (East Africa) Infantry Division arrived in June 1943, consolidating the division on Ceylon, where it became the main garrison force. In respect of the anti-aircraft defences, the 1st Royal Marine Anti-Aircraft Brigade departed, and so the 24th Anti-Aircraft Brigade was formed to cover Trincomalee. In May 1944, the 11th (East Africa) Infantry Division departed for deployment in Burma, and the 23rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade also saw service in Burma. The 24th Anti-Aircraft Brigade remained on Ceylon until it was disbanded.

The other key role that Ceylon played in the Second World War was that it hosted the Headquarters, South-East Asia Command at Kandy, one of the four supreme Allied Headquarters during the war. This grew into a massive headquarters, which at one time comprised over two-thousand personnel, from which the campaign in Burma was overseen and directed.

In November 1944, the British Government was asked about the roles of Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Ceylon, as whether the appointment of a new Governor, there was a need for a change in the appointment of a Commander-in-Chief. Mr ATTLEE, the Deputy Prime Minister answered that it had been decided that the war situation made it necessary to continue the present arrangements for the co-ordination of the Defence measures in Ceylon.

With the end of hostilities with Japan in August 1945, the military presence on Ceylon was reduced, with Ceylon Command being wound-up in 1946.

Officer Commanding the Troops

22 July 1937 – 1941

Brigadier (Local) J. O. THURBURN, M.C., Retired Pay (Reserve of Officers)

Commander-in-Chief, Ceylon

March 1942 – 8 January 1945

Admiral (Acting) Sir Geoffrey LAYTON, K.C.B., D.S.O., R.N.

9 January 1945 – 1946

Lieutenant General (Temporary) Harry Edward de Robillard WETHERALL, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.¹

Chief of Staff to Commander-in-Chief

8 March 1942 – 7 November 1943

Major General Ian Stanley Ord PLAYFAIR, D.S.O., M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

8 November 1943 – January 1944

Not known currently

January 1944 – June 1944

Brigadier (Temporary) Thomas SCOTT, *p.s.c.*

General Officer Commanding

7 March 1942 – 7 February 1943

Lieutenant General (Temporary) Sir Henry Royds POWNALL, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O.* , M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

7 February 1943 (23 April 1943) – 8 January 1945

Lieutenant General (Acting) Harry Edward de Robillard WETHERALL, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.²

22 January 1945 – 14 July 1945

Lieutenant General (Acting) Francis Ivan Simms TUKER, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., *p.s.c.*, Indian Army

14 July 1945 – 1946

Major General (Temporary) Harry Pratt SPARKS, C.B.E., M.C.

Brigadier General Staff

7 April 1942 – 23 January 1943

Brigadier (Acting) Tom Hardy ANGUS, D.S.O., 11 Sikh R., *p.s.c.*

24 January 1943 – December 1943

Brigadier (Temporary) George Neville WOOD, O.B.E., M.C., Dorset.R., *p.s.c.*

¹ Regranted the rank of Acting Lieutenant General on 23 April 1943, therefore it is assumed that he was appointed with effect from 7 February 1943 in the rank of Major General, but that he was promoted w.e.f. 23 April 1943 whilst in post.

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Chief Administration Officer

14 March 1942 – 8 April 1942

Brigadier (Temporary) Cyril Elliott DAVIS, C.B.E.

Brigadier i/c Admin

13 October 1943 – 13 July 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Harry Pratt SPARKS, M.C., *p.s.c.*

Commander Royal Artillery

1939 – ??

Lieutenant Colonel G. L. KAYE

5 January 1942 – 13 March 1942

Brigadier (Temporary) William SWINTON, M.C.**

Brigadier Royal Artillery

14 March 1942 – 5 May 1943

Brigadier (Temporary) William SWINTON, M.C.**

Instructor in Gunnery

@ September 1939

Major N. A. BRAMWELL,

Commander Royal Engineers

1 September 1939 – 13 December 1941

Colonel (Local) Robert Hugh Fagan DUCKWORTH, M.C., R.E.

Engineer-in-Chief

7 May 1943 – 1945

Brigadier (Acting) Robert Hugh Fagan DUCKWORTH, M.C.

Chief Engineer – (C.Eng.)

14 December 1941 – 13 March 1942

Colonel (Acting) Robert Hugh Fagan DUCKWORTH, M.C., R.E.

14 March 1942 – 7 May 1943

Brigadier (Temporary) Harold Gustave Francis GREENWOOD, M.C.

8 May 1943 – 1944

Colonel (Acting) J. H. DYER, M.C., A.M.I.Mech.E., R.E., *p.s.c.*

Deputy Chief Engineer – (Dep. C.Eng.)

14 March 1942 – 7 May 1943

Colonel (Temporary) Robert Hugh Fagan DUCKWORTH, M.C., R.E.

Officer Commanding Royal Army Service Corps

@ September 1939

Major B. L. PEARSON, R.A.S.C.

Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport – (D.D.S.T.)

14 March 1942 – 7 April 1942

Brigadier (Acting) Ernest DYNES, O.B.E., A.M.I.Mech.E, R.A.S.C.

9 April 1942 – 18 March 1944

Brigadier (Temporary) Cyril Elliott DAVIS, C.B.E.

Unknown dates

Brigadier (Temporary) John Thorpe RECKITT, M.C.

11 December 1944 – 15 December 1945

Brigadier (Acting) Murray Farquharson FARQUHARSON-ROBERTS, R.A.S.C.

Deputy Director of Transportation

1 September 1943 – 4 April 1944

Colonel (Acting) John Chrysostom Barnabas WAKEFORD, A.M.I.Mech.E., R.E.

Senior Medical Officer

1939 – 6 December 1941

Lieutenant Colonel Oriel John O'Brien O'HANLON, M.B., F.R.C.S.(I.), R.A.M.C.

7 December 1941 – 13 March 1942

Colonel (Temporary) Oriel John O'Brien O'HANLON, M.B., F.R.C.S.(I.), R.A.M.C.

Deputy Director of Medical Services – (D.D.M.S.)

14 March 1942 – 17 June 1942

Brigadier (Acting) Oriel John O'Brien O'HANLON, M.B., F.C.R.S. (I), R.A.M.C.

Deputy Assistant Director of Ordnance Services

@ September 1939

Captain C. W. PHILPOTTS,

Command Paymaster

@ September 1939

H. W. T. MARDEN,

Commanding Officer, Trincomalee Fortress.8 May 1943 – 25 November 1943Major General Richard Lawrence BOND, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*26 November 1943 – 22 December 1943

Major General (Acting) Gilbert Daly HOLMES, M.B.E. G.