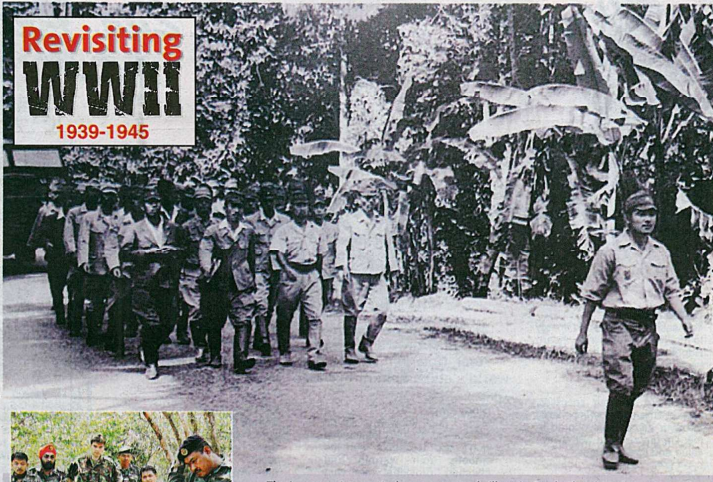


# Valiant defiance in Kampar

Revisiting WWII gets back on the Japanese invasion trail and examines the fiercest clash of the Malayan campaign: the Battle of Kampar. CHRISTINA KOH speaks to a historian about the furious fighting on ridges above the tin-mining town.

CHRISTMAS Eve, 1941, brought little joy to the battle-weary men of the British battalion at Kampar, Perak. They did, however, enjoy a brief respite and the unexpected miracle of a traditional Christmas Eve dinner. Although they knew the Japanese were advancing inexorably with each passing hour, the men managed to celebrate the season with turkey, poultry from the Kampar market, fresh bread from a Chinese bakery, chocolate, and even wine and beer.

As the soldiers gathered for a quiet Christmas morning church service, few realised that in just five days, many would take part in what would be their fiercest battle with the Japanese in the entire Malayan campaign. The Battle of Kampar lasted four bloody days, according to local historian Chye Kooi Loong, author of *The History of the British Battalion - Malayan Campaign: 1941-42*. Chye, who spent seven years researching the battle, relates that the British were in desperate straits after suffering disastrous defeats at Jitra and Gurun in Kedah. Lieutenant-General Arthur E. Percival, commander-in-chief of the British forces in Malaya, chose Kampar to make his stand because of the 1,206m-high Gunung Bujang Melaka ridge overlooking the tin-rich town. On Dec 23, 1941, Percival's battalion took up positions on three low ridges north of Kampar: Green Ridge, Thompson Ridge and Cemetery Ridge dominated the main road and railway, and the flat tin mining terrain to the west of Kampar was also ideal for the defenders' artillery - the British had artillery superiority over the Japanese. For seven days, the 2,000 troops laboured feverishly from dawn to dusk, digging firing



Revisiting WWII 1939-1945

The Japanese Army entering an unnamed village in Perak. The photo is courtesy of the Matang Historical Complex in Taiping, Perak, where it is on display.



Chye Kooi Loong (in white hat) sitting in an old machine gun nest on Green Ridge and lecturing army officers from the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College on the Battle of Kampar.

trenches, machine gun pits and artillery observation posts. To this day, some of the trenches can still be seen on Green Ridge. On the dawn of Dec 30, two days after the Japanese took Ipoh, their artillery began firing on the Kampar ridges from the Malim Nawar road. The British guns replied. "The bombardment from both sides shook the ground and the pounding could be heard by people as far as Ipoh, Gopeng and Batu Gajah to the north, and in Tapah and Bidor to the south. Giant flashes lit up the night sky. This was the beginning of the Battle of Kampar," says Chye. Although the Japanese numbered 9,000 men, and had some 200 tanks and 100 artillery guns, they were beaten back at first by strategically placed mines, dense barbed wire, and machine-gun fire - "It's interesting to note that the British had only seven

days to prepare the defences. They did a marvellous job, considering they had only bare hands and shovels," points out Chye. The Japanese suffered heavy casualties when they probed the defences, but on New Year's Day, 1942, they decided to mount an all-out assault on the eastern flank of Thompson Ridge. The attackers managed to overrun some British positions because the defenders' guns had seized when the barrels became red hot and there were no spares, according to Chye. Hours later, the British were able to recapture some of the positions, albeit at great cost, and only after a failed first charge. "Many people could not know that the Japanese replaced their frontline soldiers

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## Pushing across Perak

PERAK fell to the Japanese in just 35 days. The Japanese Army, pushing its way south from Thailand towards Singapore, initially encountered little resistance. The soldiers made a two-pronged advance towards Perak, arriving at its boundaries on Dec 13, 1941. The first wave marched along the main road from Alor Star to the border town of Parit Buntar. From there, the soldiers were to make their way through Taiping, Ipoh, Tapah, Trolak, Slim River, and, finally, Tanjung Malim and into Selangor. The second thrust had the Japanese breaching the north-east border of Perak from Betong, Thailand, into Kroh, from where they forged their way through Klian Intan, Grik, Sumpitan, Lenggong and Kuala Kangsar. Both advancing forces, which met up at Kuala Kangsar, comprised 9,000 men supported by 200 tanks and 100 artillery pieces. Local historian Chye Kooi Loong says it was a highly mobile army that moved on foot and in armoured cars, or other military transport, and even on bicycles. The mobility allowed the Japanese to traverse the countryside quickly and carry out outflanking manoeuvres. Days earlier, the British had given up Jitra and Gurun in Kedah after they were routed by the Japanese. To add to their misery, Japanese warplanes bombed and machine-gunned them all along the retreat to Perak. "Ipoh, which was considered too open to defend, suffered three days of bombing, until Dec 17 - the Japanese took it without a fight on Dec 28," says Chye. Some serious fighting did take place in Sungai Siput North, Chemor, Gopeng and Kuala Dipang, but the heaviest fighting took place in what historians call the Battle of Kampar. (See story above.) After that fierce battle, during which the defenders held off an enemy four times their number, the British were forced to withdraw on Jan 2, 1942, when the Japanese captured Teluk Intan and outflanked the defenders from the south-west. - BY CHRISTINA KOH



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Back in Alor Star, things were tense, too. TUNKU ISMAIL JEWFA, grandson of the Sultan of Kedah at the time the Japanese advanced into the town, shares his memories of those troubled times.

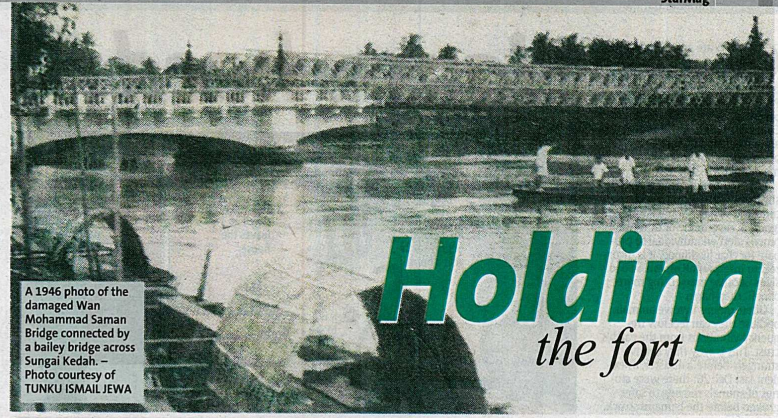
THE first indication the people of Alor Star had that war had broken out was when Japanese planes bombed the Alor Star aerodrome on the morning of Dec 8, 1941. After the bombing, civil and military authorities in Kedah began to step up air raid precautions and people in town were advised to seek shelter in rural areas.

On Dec 11, news reached Alor Star that Japanese troops had attacked troops stationed at Changloun, near the Kedah/Thai border. By then, most Government officers in the north, including the Chief Secretary to the Government, Haji Mohammad Shariff, had left Alor Star to seek refuge in Kulim District in south-east Kedah. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra was the District Officer in this area at that time.

Meanwhile, the ailing Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Hamid, and the Regent, Tunku Badlishah, had already been accommodated in Kulim by Tunku Abdul Rahman when they arrived the previous day.

However, my father, Tunku Mohammad Jewfa, also of the Kedah royal family, refused to leave Alor Star as he believed strongly that he should remain with the people. I remember well the day the Japanese Army entered the town: it was on Dec 13, and my parents and other members of my family were stranded on the southern side of Sungai Kedah at Simpang Kuala.

My father got up early as usual that morning and pretended nothing had happened although he knew that the Japanese Army had already entered Alor Star. He decided to go for a walk in the coconut plantation with Pai Rat, an ex-captive of Punjabi and Thai parentage who had earlier asked my father for asylum after all the prisoners from Alor Star prison were released ahead of the Japanese Army's advance into Alor Star. During the walk, my father and



A 1946 photo of the damaged Wan Mohammad Saman Bridge connected by a bailey bridge across Sungai Kedah. Photo courtesy of TUNKU ISMAIL JEWFA

## Holding the fort

Pai Rat was suddenly confronted by two Punjabi soldiers and one of them levelled his rifle at my father. Luckily for my father, Pai Rat intervened and told the soldier in Punjabi that my father was the son of the Sultan of Kedah. The soldier apologised before he and his colleagues left to join British troops in Gurun.

After that frightening incident, my father decided that we should leave Simpang Kuala for his mansion at Bakar Bata in northern Alor Star. After we heard that the Wan Mohammad Saman Bridge across Sungai Kedah had been blown up by the retreating troops - and when our driver, Pak Man, did not turn up for work - my father decided that we should all walk to Bakar Bata.

When we arrived on Sungai

Kedah's bank near the present Sultan Badlishah Bridge on the Seberang Perak side, my father had to pay several people to ferry us across to Jalan Pekan Melayu (now renamed Persiaran Sultan Mohammad Jiwa) in their sampan. As we reached the street, I saw many people running helter-skelter carrying bales of cloth and other items they had looted from shops. Apparently, they had been frightened by the sight of Japanese soldiers aiming rifles at them from the road.

From Jalan Pekan Melayu, we detoured to Jalan Raja where I saw a British soldier in his khaki uniform lying dead on the five-foot way outside a toy shop near the former Royal theatre. He had been bayoneted to death. On the other side of the street, at Jalan Nagor,

which was then an open space, I saw a young Chinese man lying dead on the ground. Gruesome sights, indeed. When Japanese military leaders arrived in Alor Star on Dec 13, they found conditions chaotic as there was no law and order. There was widespread looting of shops, private homes and offices by both civilians and Japanese soldiers.

The next day, my father received a visit from Maji-Gen Manaki, commander of the battalion that first entered Kedah; Major Iwachi Fujiwara, head of the Japanese Intelligence Corps; and K. Shiba, the manager of a toy shop in town and also a secret agent of the Fujiwara Kikan or Intelligence Unit. They had come to seek his co-operation to restore law and order in Alor Star. My father took the opportunity to complain to the Japanese leaders that his home had been ransacked by their soldiers and expressed shock at the barbarous behaviour of the soldiers.

Fujiwara ordered an immediate investigation, which resulted in the arrest of three soldiers. They were ordered by Fujiwara to commit hara-kiri (ritual suicide) in front of my father. Their bodies were later buried in a plot of land on which the Holiday Villa now stands. As an initial step towards maintaining law and order, Manaki appointed my elder brother, Tunku Nong Jiwa - then 23 years old and a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and a Kedah civil service officer - as Commissioner of Police. Later, when Lt Gen Tomayuki Yamashita, the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese forces

arrived in Alor Star, he appointed my father as Officer Administering the State during the absence of the Sultan, the Regent and the Chief Secretary to the Government from the State capital. By Dec 14, all troops under British command had left Alor Star and the Japanese forces were in full control of the urban centre.

After his appointment, my father addressed a large gathering of people near the Zahir mosque. He appealed to the people not to leave their homes, to remain calm, and to carry on with their normal duties.

A new State Council was formed with my father as its President. The other members of the council were Tunku Kasmim, Tunku Abdullah, Tunku Alzuiddin, Syed Omar Shahabuddin and Syed Ali. Colonel Ohyanwa was appointed the Japanese Occupation Governor.

When conditions began to improve towards the end of December, my father requested Tunku Abdul Rahman to bring back the Sultan from Kulim.

Once the Sultan was back in Alor Star, my father formally handed back the administration of the state to the Regent, Tunku Badlishah, before resuming his position as Superintendent of Monopolies and Customs. Alor Star did not suffer much damage during the Japanese invasion. Except for the destruction of the beautiful Wan Mohammad Saman bridge and a couple of shophouses along Titi Batu, opposite the Central Police Station, as well as the disappearance of all the cannons displayed at the Balai Besar, everything remained intact



Tunku Ismail Jewfa points to what is believed to be remnants of the concrete structure of the Wan Mohammad Saman Bridge, which was blown up by retreating British troops. In the background is the present bridge.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE after every 48 hours of fighting, whereas the British and Indian troops had hardly any replacements.

On Jan 2, the Japanese massed their troops to penetrate the weakened defences on the eastern side of Thompson Ridge.

In the afternoon, the British decided to send the 1st Punjabi Regiment under the command of Capt John Graham and his second-in-command, Lieutenant T. Lamb, to charge the lines and clear the Japanese.

"Each man was given a mug of rum and some ammunition, had their bayonets fixed, then followed Capt Graham's lead. As they charged the rearward slope of the ridge, the soldiers shouted 'Sat, Sin Akal,' the Punjabi war cry meaning 'Glory to God'.

## Rum, and fixed bayonets

"According to the records of British historian Sir Compton Mackenzie, the Japanese moved down many of the soldiers but the survivors pushed on. Lt Lamb was killed in the second line of the charge.

"When they finally reached the last line, Capt Graham had both legs blasted off by a Japanese mortar bomb. In spite of his wounds, he stood on his stumps and shouted encouragement to his remaining men.

"They succeeded in clearing the trenches of Japanese and carried their leader back to the army first aid post to be attended to. Graham died a day later at the Tanjung

Malim army hospital. In the end, though, the British were forced to withdraw to Trolak to avoid being cut off by a flanking movement from Teluk Intan to the south-west.

Today, says Chye, the Battle of Kampar is studied in military colleges worldwide as an interesting example of why the British were able to do so well there despite the earlier disasters in Kedah.

"To the Japanese, the British Battalion and other Indian units of the 6th and 15th Brigades had given them a bloody mauling for the first time in the Malayan campaign."

Next week, Revisiting WWII shares some personal accounts of how Kampong's famous statue of La Salle was saved, and how people learnt to eat maize.

We urge readers who have firsthand memories of life in Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah during World War II, or know of friends and relatives who lived through those years, to share the information and help preserve the memories for posterity.

Mementoes, artefacts, documents and photographs - which we will return - will also be most welcome. Please include a contact phone number and/or address.

Mark all material "Revisiting WWII" and send to: The Star, Menara Star, No. 15, Jalan 16/11, 46350 Petaling Jaya, Selangor; fax: 03-7955 4039; e-mail: www2@thestar.com.my.