

The Malay Regiment History

Malay Regiment Badge



The official birth of the Malay Regiment was March 1, 1933. The Malays had expressed a desire to share the responsibility of military defense for their land. Before that, the British had hesitated in arming and training Malays. There had been widespread trouble between feuding states in Perak, Negri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang in the 1870s. Malaya was gradually pacified, but British reluctance to arm Malays remained until the 1930s. The reason for forming a Malay regiment was financial- it was proving increasingly expensive to hire the Burma Rifles from India. With the Great Depression of 1928-1932, it became desirable to recruit a local force to trim costs. On September 13, 1932, the Colonial and War Offices approved in principle the formation of the Malay Regiment.

Ever-cautious, the Regiment was called "*The Experimental Company*". The first batch of 25 was selected from over a thousand applicants who responded to calls by the district officers and advertisements in the Malay press. Subsequent recruiting was made via district officers with the help of the penghulus (headmen). Enlistment was originally confined to the Federated Malay States which bore the cost. But since the regiment was supposed to be Malayan, later recruiting covered the rest of the country except Johore which had its own military. The best quality recruits came from Perak, with the first four Malay officers coming from that state.

The first batch occupied an old volunteer camp near the sea, five miles from Port Dickson. The camp had four sleeping huts, an office building, a parade ground and some training area. The first Commanding Officer was Major G. S. Bruce of the Lincolnshire Regiment.

The squad was to be trained for five months with the intention of producing non-commissioned officers to train the next batch. All military commands were to be given in English, and all instruction, as far as possible, in Malay. The staff concentrated on high standards of discipline, skill at arms, drill, ceremonial and sports. But it was the high quality of food which was the main recruiting draw. Villagers noticed how smart and well-fed recruits were when they returned to their kampungs on leave. Bruce encouraged the public to visit the camp to watch the Sunday parades. After a visit by the High Commissioner, Sir Shenton Thomas, in July, 1933, the Federal Council announced that the Regiment was to expand to 150 men, with batches of 30 recruited every two months.

Page 111 (B)

Bruce and his adjutant, Captain A.G. Exham, had designed the Regimental Badge with the motto: *Ta'at Setia* (Loyal and True). Three colours were chosen- green (the Muslim colour), yellow (for Malay royalty) and red (for the British Army influence).

By 1934, the aim was to have 229 Malay soldiers in the regiment. The Malay Regiment provided a 50-man Guard of Honour for the opening of the Federal Council's budget meeting on October 22, 1934. Two hundred and thirty new men joined the Regiment in February 1935. In January 1935, "*The Experimental Company*" became **The Malay Regiment**.

At the end of 1938, 261 families of married soldiers moved into married quarters. With the regiment 380-strong, it adopted battalion organisation, made up of two rifle companies, "A" and "B", a Headquarters wing which included a machine-gun platoon, a Signalling Section and a Corps of Drums.

Move to Singapore

The Malay Regiment did not come down to Singapore till 1937, when it arrived for advanced training and took part in a large combined operation. The Straits Times gave a favorable account of the Regiment's parade skills. The Regiment had to also control a strike at the Malayan Colliery's coalfield at Baru Arang, where 6,000 workers went on strike. Other notable activities that year included sending a small contingent to King George's Coronation and the regiment's participation in a Military Searchlight Tattoo at Farrer Park in Singapore.

In 1938, the Regiment came down to Singapore again for training. A party of 50 attended the opening of King George VI's Graving Dock at the Naval Base. One of the best achievements of the Regiment occurred when four Malay cadet officers attending a Bren-gun course in Singapore, along with British personnel, won the first four places out of a class of 15. The biggest occasion that year, however, was the departure of Bruce, who left Malaya to join his old regiment.

After the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, the Regiment was mobilised and its training intensified. One additional company, "W" Company, was recruited in February, 1940. By April, an attap hut camp was built at the Normanton Oil Depot, Singapore, to be used by one Malay Regiment company. However, **the Regiment, which had been merged with the 2nd Loyal Brigade, came down to Singapore in July, 1940 as the First Malaya Infantry Brigade and took over "W" sector in Pasir Panjang**, including Labrador sub-sector and Jurong Boom from the 2nd Dogra Regiment.

With the Japanese occupation of north Indo-China in September 1940, threat of war to Malaya was closer. The actual strike on Malaya and Singapore was unpleasantly fast, with Japan showing greater superiority. Its "blitz" tactics proved successful. The Malay Regiment fought bravely all the way down Malaya, represented by "A" and "D" companies.

By the time the Regiment had retreated to Singapore, it had 1,400 men together with the 2nd Loyal Regiment and attached troops, forming the 1st Malaya Infantry Brigade. Its task was to defend the western part of the island. The 1st Battalion, Malay Regiment focused on beach defence in "W" sector, while the 2nd Battalion occupied positions on the line of the Jurong River.

Battle for Pasir Panjang

Page 111 (C)

The Japanese invaded Singapore on February 8. On February 9 "B" Company, 2nd Battalion, Malay Regiment came under fire at Pasir Laba. It retreated under heavy fire, with covering fire given by "A" Company, reaching the Normanton Depot in the early morning of February 10. Enemy pressure punched holes in the defence line of the 44th Indian Brigade and the Malay troops had to withdraw to fresh but thin positions behind the Pandan River on West Coat Road. The Japanese were advancing on all fronts by the 11th, and the Malay Regiment faced an enemy also approaching from the rear and fanning out towards the sea.

In day and night combat, platoons and sections found themselves isolated. On the 13th, heavy aerial bombing and accurate artillery and mortar fire caused heavy casualties among officers and other ranks. Elements of the Japanese 18th Division launched a heavy attack with tank and air support along the Pasir Panjang Ridge. The front, consisting of the 2nd Battalion, "A" and "C" Company, 1st Battalion and Loyals, fell back. An exhausted 2nd Battalion, withdrew to the Alexandra Brickworks area and the depleted "A" Company spread itself among remaining companies. "C" Company held the Pasir Panjang Village end of Reformatory Road and engaged the enemy stubbornly. In this engagement, Private Yaacob Bin Bidin won a Military Medal for stalking an enemy mortar position through burning undergrowth and silencing it with Bren-gun fire. After midnight, a battered but resilient "C" Company evacuated to a low hill west of the Government Opium Factory, some 55 yards inland off the 4 1/2 milestone, Pasir Panjang Road.

On the morning of the 14th saw the 1st Battalion engaged, with "B" Company eventually retreating from Buona Vista Village to Labrador. Enemy attack advanced down Pasir Panjang Road isolating "C" Company. It was at this point, that the Japanese tried a ruse - disguising as Punjabi troops and advancing. But the Japanese advanced in fours, whereas the British method was in threes. This plan was foiled, but the Japanese mounted a determined attack a few hours later. Although the defenders, among them Lt. Adnan b. Saidi, fought bitterly with grenades and automatic weapons, they were unable to hold the hill. Many officers and men were killed in close hand-to-hand combat. Some captured survivors were massacred, including the now legendary Lt. Adnan who was hung upside down from a tree and bayoneted. Lt. Abbas b. Abdul Manan, the only surviving officer, led four surviving men, fighting their way through an oil blaze, eventually reaching Battalion Headquarters.

The Regiment's final clash near Alexandra Brickworks, had "D" Company killing 94 Japanese troops. But surrender was at hand that day, the 15th. The survivors of the Regiment reassembled on the 15th and 16th in the Keppel Golf Links area and on the morning of the 17th, 8 officers and 600 men were separated from British officers and marched off to join Indian prisoners-of-war at Farrer Park. The British personnel were eventually taken to Changi and interned.

Within a fortnight of the surrender, five Malay officer-internees were executed for refusing to serve under the Japanese or to put on civilian clothes and accept release. Men who escaped to Malaya were arrested and imprisoned within a year. Some of the other-ranks soldiers were sent as forced labour to Thailand and Indonesia. The majority were eventually released from prison camps in Singapore. Some 98 Malay personnel serving

Page 111 (D)

under the Imperial forces were taken by the Japanese military police and machine-gunned at the Gap, Pasir Panjang. During the defence of Singapore, the Regiment lost 159 men - six British officers, seven Malay officers, 146 other ranks.

One month after the re-occupation of Malaya, the Malay Regiment was revived on 5 September, 1945, its members being veterans of the 1941/42 campaign.

Researched and compiled by George Tullis