

Remembering the Battle of Kampar :

The Forgotten Heroes of The British Battalion.

It was indeed a pleasant surprise when recently in Malaysia I came across a series of recently published articles from the Malaysian national press that I think will be of great interest to Leicester folk. Particularly those who had relatives that served in the 1st battalion of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment during the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941-42.

In September 1999 The New Straits Times and the Malay Star announced that the Malaysian Government was to gazette a long forgotten war site at Kampar, Perak as being of historical significance. This particular site was where members of the British battalion; made up of the remnants of the Royal Leicestershire Regt, The East Surrey Regt, and the Indian Army, brought a superior Japanese Army division to a stand still.

This was all thanks to the dedicated work of a 70-year-old retired Malaysian school teacher and amateur war historian Chye Kooi Loong whose local knowledge and interest in this particular battle site and his years of pestering of authority finally brought national recognition. As a eleven year old child at the time when the war came to Kampar the impact and local stories of the heroism remained fixed in his memory and caused him to research the battle thoroughly. Following Chye's article in the New Straits Times of Malaysia came an official visit by state and federal ministers to the site of the battle. This resulted in plans by the Malaysian Government to restore the area has a commemorative site with the construction of a plaque to the fallen. The figure quoted was that 1 million Malaysian Ringgit (£170,000).

The site overlooking Kampar is set on what is now called Green Ridge. That ridge, together with the nearby Thompson and Kennedy Ridges overlook the main road to the south from Ipoh, Perak, and were of great strategical value. It consists of machine gun emplacements, mortar pits, artillery observation posts and communication trenches. Surprisingly, despite the years they can easily be found in the tropical undergrowth.

Prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War the 1st Battalion of the Royal Leicestershire Regt were moved from India to Malaya as a preparation for an expected Japanese

invasion. Immediately before hostilities broke out they were rushed to Jitra, on the Thai-Malay border.

With the beginning of the Japanese advance there were a series of costly retreats southwards, the result of being outgunned, out maneuvered and faced by a battle hardened and ruthless Japanese Army. The outcome of these costly retreats ordered by high command was a badly mauled and decimated British infantry whose remaining manpower was sufficient only to Battalion strength. These survivors of the Royal Leicesters and the East Surreys were then amalgamated into the British Battalion. Together with a composite Jat-Punjab Regiment of the 11th Indian Division the entire force, totaling 1,300 men then gave the Japanese Army's crack 4000 strong 41st Infantry Regiment a beating at Kampar over a four day period from Dec 30 1941 until Jan 2nd 1942. Such were the Japanese losses that the 41st Infantry Regiment was unable to participate in the later invasion of Singapore. Japanese newspapers at the time claimed 500 Japanese casualties against an Allied loss of 150. It was the first serious defeat the Japanese had experienced in the Malayan campaign.

Shocked at such resistance the Japanese chief planning officer, Col. Masonubu Tsuji, later devoted an entire chapter of his memoirs entitled 'The Battle of Kampar Fortress' which appeared in his book, 'Singapore-The Japanese Version'. It seems that in adversity the Japanese were ever ready to exaggerate the strength of their opponents by calling it a fortress when in fact the defences at Kampar had been hurriedly prepared in only seven days.

According to Chye, who in 1984 published his work 'The history of the British battalion', the commanding officer of the Japanese Army, General Yamashita, wanted to conquer Kampar before January 1st as a birthday gift to Emperor Hirohito. Having had his advance brought to an halt by the British Battalion on the ridge he resorted to infiltration tactics, snipers and banzai charges. However he had not reckoned on the courage of people like Capt. Graham of the Punjab Regiment who was among those who led three bayonet charges and who continued to command his men while standing on what remained of his legs after being hit by grenade fragments. Another source, Chipperton, then a subaltern in the Leicesters, confirms the latter in his book, 'Singapore, the Inexcusable Betrayal'.

The knowledge of this important historical battle site is apparently known only in the veteran circles of the warring nations of that time. The occasional tourist bus brings Japanese, Indian and British veterans and their relatives. The former bow towards the ridge where once stood three totem like posts, memorials to the fallen erected by the Japanese.

That these memorials were torn down in 1945 by British Army on their return is understandable in the climate of hatred of all things Japanese existing then. However there still remains the question why, in view of the sacrifice that had occurred, a British Memorial was not erected at the spot. Perhaps the answer lies in the reason why, despite promises at the time, there was never an official enquiry into the fall of Singapore. The truth being that such a defeat was, at the time and now, looked upon as a national embarrassment. Unlike Dunkirk, which could not be swept underneath the carpet so easily, the episode was hushed up to cloak governmental plunders and the bad leadership.

Chye, has an unofficial guide and expert, often volunteers to take parties of veterans through the housing estates that have sprung up in Kampar and up by little known paths through the undergrowth to the site.

In 1984 after the completion of his book Chye came to England where he visited the regimental chapels of First Leicesters and the Second Surreys. He was overwhelmed to find the names of Kampar and Malaya mounted on a memorial.

It seems ironic but gratifying to know that the government of Malaysia, a country now suffering from economic recession, are to invest funds to honour the dead of that war when former FEPOW's, the living who were there, still strive for adequate compensation for the suffering they endured at the hands of the Japanese.

Ken Orrill (Written in 1999)