

Malaysian Holiday & Pilgrimage

This is my report on the visit to Malaysia during which my wife Susan and I met up for part of the time with MVG's Rosemary Fell and Liz Moggie, and of which Rosemary gave her memories in April's edition of *Apa Khabar*.

Susan and I visited the Malaysian peninsular for nearly four weeks in February & March 2019, mostly as a holiday but partly as a pilgrimage to visit the places where my late father, Band Sergeant Bernard William Brown of 2nd Battalion The East Surrey Regiment, was based before the war, and then tracing some of his steps fighting the 470 mile length of the Malayan peninsular before continuing to resist the Japanese in Singapore, and ending up becoming a FEPOW on the surrender of Singapore on 15th February 1942. He subsequently worked on the Thai Burma Railway before finishing the war at Nakom Pathom in Thailand.



Colour Sergeant Bernard William Brown

Band Sergeant of 2nd Battalion East Surrey Regiment 7 Nov 1910 – 2 Nov 1983

Like many FEPOWs, my father never spoke of his experiences of either the battle for the defence of Malaya or of his three and a half years of captivity. However what happened to his regiment in Malaya and in captivity is well documented – 185 men (19%) died in action and 149 (16%) died as FEPOWs. In all only 622 out of 956 (65%) returned home.

I was keen to visit the sites of the first 3 battlefields where the East Surreys fought the Japanese – **Jitra** and **Gurun** in Kedah close to the Thai border, and **Kampar** in Perak, none of which are on the usual tourist trail.

There were just two British regiments based in the north of Malaya before the Japanese landed at Kota Baru on the east coast just after midnight local time on 8th November 1941 (just before the combined attacks on Pearl Harbour, Singapore, Hong Kong, Guam and Wake Island). These were my father's 2nd Battalion East Surrey Regiment and the 1st Battalion The Leicestershire Regiment. The East Surreys had been withdrawn to Singapore in August 1940 from their peacekeeping duties against the Japanese aggression towards the international settlement in Shanghai. In February 1941 the East Surreys moved to **Tanjong Pauh**, which was at that time a rubber plantation north of Alor Star (now renamed Alor Setar). The Leicester's had been brought from India to Penang and then, in June 1941, to Sungei Petani, also near Alor Star.

Both regiments became part of the 11th Indian Division under Major General David.M.Murray – Lyon, as part of 3rd Indian Corps led by Lieutenant General Lewis Heath. The 2nd Battalion East Surreys, led by Lieutenant Colonel George.E.Swinton, formed part of 6th Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier William Lay, along with 1/8 Punjabs and 2/16 Punjabs. The 1st Leicester's, under Lieutenant Colonel Charles Esmond Morrison, were in 15th Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier K.Garrett, along with 2/9 Jats, 1/14 Punjabs and 3/16 Punjabs.

The complacency amongst the British was such that **Winston Churchill**, First Lord of the Admiralty, said on 11th December 1939 *"It is not considered a possibility that the Japanese would embark on such a mad enterprise as an attack on Singapore"*

Reporting to Churchill after he had attended a conference in Singapore on 29th September 1941, **Duff Cooper**, Churchill's representative, said *"In the view of the brilliant array of military, naval, administrative and political talent at the conference, landings on the coast of Malaya seemed so unlikely as not to merit detailed discussion"*.

General Archibald Percival Wavell, 1st Earl Wavell, said in early November 1941 after visiting Malaya. *"The Japanese are little more than a mob of slant eyed riff-raff who haven't the faintest idea how to wage a war. I should think the Jap (sic) has a very poor chance of attacking Malaya and I don't think there is much prospect of his trying"*.

Major General Stanley Woodburn Kirby, General Staff Officer at the Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence at the War Office advised the Foreign Office in 1941: *"The IJA is not strong enough to go to war with the British Empire. On that account the threat to Singapore should be regarded as remote and measures to guard against it should not be allowed to interfere with the economic effort of Malaya"*.

However, despite this apparent complacency, a carefully planned British counter invasion plan, *Operation Matador*, had been arranged for November 1941 to move into neutral Thailand (then named Siam) to stop the Japanese invasion on the beaches. Sadly the Foreign Office was unwilling to upset the "so called" neutral Thais by entering their territory so Operation Matador was cancelled at the last moment giving the Japanese the opportunity to land in Thailand unopposed. Subsequently, of course, it was revealed that, far from being neutral, the Thai government had been in secret collusion with the Japanese, and had given them every support possible.

Much planning went into our trip over several months and we were greatly helped in this by Liz Moggie and Rosemary Fell who joined us for a day in the Kuala Lumpur area and later for 5 days in the north of Malaya for the military element of our holiday. Others who helped with the planning were Jonathan Moffatt, Imogen Holmes and Andrew Hwang, all fellow members of the Malayan Volunteer Group. We also did much research and had a considerable amount of information about the Malayan Campaign from our good friends Ken Hewitt and Cec Lowry. Ken's father was with the 1st Leicester's (Ken is writing a book at present) and Cec's father was with mine in 2nd East Surreys. Cec's latest book *Last Post on the River Kwai – the 2nd Battalion East Surreys in the Malayan Campaign 1937 – 1945* has recently been published by Pen and Sword. Other major sources of information were the book *The British Battalion in the Malayan Campaign 1941 -1942* by Malaysian Chye Kooi Loong, and the War Diaries from The National Archive at Kew.

A Malaysian guide with knowledge of the Malayan Campaign, MVG member Zafrani Arifin, agreed to escort us around the battle sites.

Throughout our nearly four weeks in Malaysia we were delighted by the warmth of the welcome and the friendliness and helpfulness of everyone we met. Admittedly it was shock to find that even international hotels were not allowed to serve wine or pork in their restaurants but we obviously appreciated that Malaysia is largely a Muslim country. That said, we recommend giving the “beef bacon” and “chicken” sausages a miss!

Our journey started in **Kuala Lumpur** after hubbing through Dubai with Emirates Airlines (thoroughly recommended) where we saw the major sights including Merdeka (Independence) Square, a guided tour of the PETRONAS Towers and dining in the revolving Atmosphere 360 restaurant at the top of the Malaysian Tower (both of which are also recommended).

We visited the Tugu Negara National Monument commemorating those who died in Malaysia's struggle for freedom, principally against the Japanese occupation during World War II and the Malayan Emergency. We were impressed by statue based on the Marine Corps War Memorial of raising the US flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima, which had inspired Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, when he visited the USA.



Tugu Negara. Kuala Lumpur

All that is left of **Pudu Gaol** in Kuala Lumpur, where over 1,000 POWs were kept in the cramped Female Wing, is the gate, the rest having been demolished to build a shopping mall I squeezed through the hoardings to take a photo.



Pudu Gaol, Kuala Lumpur

We met up with Liz Moggie (who lives in KL) and Rosemary Fell to visit **Cheras Road Cemetery** to find the graves of Privates Benjamin Mansfield of 1st Battalion Leicester's and Henry Freeman of 2nd Battalion East Surreys, both of whom died before the war, and are therefore buried just outside the Commonwealth War Graves area in this huge cemetery.

We all went to **Batang Berjuntai**, now renamed **Bestari Jaya**, and on to **Kuala Selangor**, where Susan and I were dismayed to see that the plaque on the War memorial to the Malayan Volunteers who died in WW1 and WW2 had been stolen. Apparently any metal items such as plaques are regularly stolen for scrap in Malaysia. We were later told that even nuts and bolts from roadside barriers, and from radio masts, are regularly stolen. At the Royal Kampung Kuantan Golf Club, where we stopped for tea, there is a sign saying that the telephone is out of order because the telephone cable has been stolen.



Rosemary Fell, Susan Brown and Liz Moggie at Selangor River, Batang Berjuntai



Liz Moggie & Rosemary Fell at Kuala Selangor War Memorial

We looked for, found, and visited, the Sungai Rambai Palm Oil plantation (which we believe may have been where the British Battalion was based on 6th January 1942 when sent on a three day diversion en route to Kluang to seek out and slow the advance of a Japanese landing party which had landed). The acting manager of this plantation in 1942 was MVG member John Henville's father.

After Kuala Lumpur our journey took us, in this order, to **Fraser's Hill, the Cameron Highlands, Ipoh, Kampar, Taiping, Alor Star, Jitra, Gurun, Sungei Petani, Butterworth, Penang, Langkawi** and **Malacca**. So we were making our journey to visit those areas associated with my father's regiment, the 2nd East Surreys (subsequently The British Battalion), but not in the order they did. We went to Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding area first, then on to Ipoh, where we met our Malaysian historical and military guide, Zafrani Arifin who was to be with us for the next 5 days.

However to help with the military chronology, and hopefully make some sense of the sequence and timing of WW2 events, I am starting with the three battles, in date order.

Zafrani Arifin, and his local friend Hairil Anuar, took us to see the flat paddy field site held by the East Surreys at the **Battle of Jitra**, 11- 12 December 1941. This was the first battle against the Japanese and the defensive position was critical to the defence of Malaya because it was where the west coast railway line met the trunk road before running parallel for 48 miles to the road and rail bridges at Sungei Petani, but it was poorly, and hastily, prepared during the monsoon season because of the last minute cancellation of *Operation Matador*.



East Surrey positions at Jitra Paddy Fields – a Kapok tree growing on top of a pillbox



Hairil Anuar, Richard Brown & Zafrani Arifin

It would have made defence of Jitra easier had the colonial authorities allowed the requested flooding of the paddy fields, but, as was usually the case, the economic considerations were deemed more important than the military ones. **Sir Shenton Thomas**, Governor of Singapore, declared that *“Economic considerations should outweigh strategical requirements in Singapore”* and, sadly, his view was supported by the Foreign Office. As Rosemary Fell said in the last edition, the pill boxes rather stood out like a sore thumb and consequently the Japanese took care to avoid them.

Another example of the priorities of the local authorities and of the Foreign Office was evident when Lieutenant General Lewis Heath, Commanding Officer, visited the British Battalion at **Kluang** on 15th January 1942. He told the men *“The Germans are being held in Europe. The lads are doing well in the Middle East, and I expect you to do the same. But please do not damage any rubber trees”*. You can imagine how that went down with men who had been fighting for their lives for over a month!

The Japanese attacked with tanks at **Jitra** (remember that the British had concluded that the geography of Malaya made the use of tanks impossible) and casualties for the Leicester's and East Surreys, as well as 2/16 Punjab and 2/9 Jat battalions, were high. Jitra was a major disaster for 6th Indian Infantry Brigade with 600 Japanese killing or capturing around 1,400 men and taking great quantities of weapons and equipment. 50 field guns, 50 heavy machine guns, and 300 trucks and armoured cars, along with ammunition and provisions for 3 months, fell into Japanese hands. Poor leadership (particularly the order to reposition rather than to retreat in an orderly fashion) and poor communications resulted in a position that could potentially have held out for 3 months falling in just 15 hours. The loss of confidence caused by the heavy defeat in this critical first battle was considerable.

As Rosemary Fell said in the April edition, a number of pill boxes still sit in the paddy fields of Jitra. (We saw lots of pill boxes of different shapes and sizes on our holiday – one was in a front garden surrounded by a picnic table and chairs!) We saw some of the pill boxes sited next to Alor Star airfield. It is perhaps indicative of the entire Malayan campaign that by the time the troops had reached this area, after the Battle of Jitra, the RAF had abandoned the airfield leaving most of their ammunition, fuel and 3 month supplies of food for the Japanese to use. Incredibly, at first the troops defending the airfield had not been told that the RAF had already left, in case it “*damaged morale*”.



Richard Brown at yet another pillbox

In his book *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Greatest Defeat*, IJA **Colonel Masanobi Tsuji** says that the RAF left in such a hurry that they even left cooked meals on the table. The Japanese referred to the supplies left behind, here and elsewhere, as *Churchill's Supplies*. Tsuji was the mastermind behind the invasion of Malaya and was subsequently the villain behind the Sook Ching (Purging by Cleansing) massacres on the mainland and, particularly in Singapore - where the latest estimate is that up to 90,000 Chinese were murdered - and the Bataan Death March.

Most of the pill boxes we visited had flooded floors with coconuts and other debris in them. However one, sited alongside the impressive **Merdeka Bridge** Kedah (*Jambatan Merdeka*) spanning the Sungei Muda, was completely dry and much to the delight of Zafrani and I, still had some of the original camouflage paint inside the entrance. Surprisingly Susan, Rosemary and Liz were quite unimpressed by our find!



Zafrani Arifin at Merdeka Bridge

Staying at the impressive Royal Signature Hotel in Alor Star for two nights, we visited the site of the second battlefield of the Malayan Campaign, the **Battle of Gurun** (14 – 15 December 1941) in the shadow of the jungle covered Kedah peak. In truth there is really nothing left to see of the site where the exhausted men of the East Surreys and Leicester's, with blistered feet after long treks following defeat at the Battle of Jitra, were in no real fit state to fight.

Gurun, at the foot of the 4,000 feet Kedah Peak, was in 1941 an untidy clutter of shacks, shops and Malay houses constructed on stilts over a swamp. It would have been one of the best natural defensive positions in Malaya if the necessary preparation work had been done in advance, but this was not the case when 2nd Battalion East Surreys arrived. There was to be no respite for the men, who were immediately ordered to start preparing defences. Trenches were dug in the thick mud, coils of barbed wire were laid out and the heavy jungle was cut down to clear paths of fire.



No trace left of the battlefield at Gurun

Liz Moggie, Rosemary Fell, Susan and Richard Brown alongside where it was

In the early hours of 14th December 1941 the Japanese came probing down the road with tanks, artillery and the equivalent of two brigades of infantry, having repaired the demolished railway bridge at Alor Star, and encircling to the west across the Surreys' front reached the shoulder of Kedah Peak. The Surreys did not have the necessary Boyes anti tank guns to stop them and the result was disastrous. The way to the East Surrey's Battalion Headquarters was now clear and the enemy thrust down the road and surrounded both Battalion and Brigade Headquarters. In the close quarter fighting, the majority of 6th Brigade Headquarters staff were killed, though the Brigade Commander Brigadier Lay escaped the massacre and set off to communicate the dire situation to the nearby 28th Brigade HQ.

After the mauling at **Gurun** the Divisional Commander decided to withdraw to the area of **Taiping**. What was left of the Battalion embussed for a long slow journey in heavy rain. The roads were full of transport and there was no adequate traffic control. Gurun was the last battle fought by 2nd Battalion The East Surrey Regiment and 1st Battalion The Leicestershire Regiment under their regimental names.

We looked for the rubber plantation at **Tanjung Pauh**, north of Alor Star, where the East Surreys had been based before the invasion, but it no longer exists. Just about all of the Malaysian rubber plantations have been replaced by either palm tree oil plantations or housing developments. At the **Sultan Abdul Hamid College** in Alor Star we were allowed, as kindly arranged by Liz Moggie, to walk on the football pitch where my father played before the invasion in 1941.

Zafrani showed us the remains of the original stone bridge across Sungai Kedah in **Alor Star**, underneath the current one, and we were amused to watch the rather poor attempts being made to restore the Japanese memorial next to them. Lumps of cement were being stuck on to the base by hand and they were mostly falling off again! Later, as reported in the last edition of Apa Khabar, on our return to the UK, we learned that the restored statue had caused controversy after the state Tourism Department had put up three giant billboards, hailing 3 Japanese soldiers who died attempting to blow up the bridge as heroes.



The attempt to repair the Japanese monument



How it looked at the unveiling

Kedah Chinese Assembly Hall president Datuk Cheng Lai Hock said that it was not appropriate for the state government to allow the Japanese Consulate to erect a monument commemorating the three soldiers who were killed during the Japanese invasion. He said it showed a lack of sensitivity towards the victims and soldiers who had fought against the Japanese Occupation."They are trying to portray the three soldiers who were killed during the war as heroes. They might be considered as heroes in the eyes of the Japanese but not in the eyes of Malaysians at that time, as we were fighting against them. This is not

appropriate and the state government must rectify its mistake," Cheng said at a press conference on Sunday 24 March, adding that the monument should not have been built in the first place.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/03/24/outrage-over-monument-to-remember-fallen-japanese-soldiers-in-alor-setar/>

In **Taiping** we visited the moving Commonwealth War Graves cemetery where there are headstones for 26 East Surreys, 32 Leicester's, 6 FMSVF (Lieutenant A.Crosbie-Hill, Sergeant J.N.Milne, Corporal Chan Kam Weng, and Privates H.M.G.McCracken, N.L.Vuilleumier, and I.H.De Witt), and Captain D.P.T.P.S. Hayne of Dogra. Rosemary Fell and Liz Moggie also visited the grave of RAF Squadron Leader Arthur Stewart King "Pongo" Scarf V.C. who was awarded a posthumous VC for his attack from Butterworth on the Japanese base at Singora in Thailand which was being used to support the landings. Scarf's Blenheim was the only aircraft that got off the ground undamaged at Butterworth on 9th December 1941 as the Japanese attacked the airfield but he pressed ahead with the attack and caused considerable damage to the enemy. Despite being mortally wounded he still managed to land at Alor Star. Confirming what Rosemary said in her report, I took photos of all of these graves which I can send if anyone would like them.

Despite the presence of our guide, and having GPS in the hire car, it proved difficult to find the Christian cemetery in Taiping where Private Percival Pargiter of the Leicester's is buried. Not for the first time on our trip (local people had been so helpful to us), a local lady explained that the cemetery was close but hard to find so she kindly led us there on her moped and we eventually found the grave. Percival Pargiter was the driver for the Leicester's Medical Officer Doctor Alfred Roy, for whom my father became Chief Medical Orderly through the Malaya Campaign, at Changi camp in Singapore, and then on the Thai Burma Railway. As a child of about age 12, I met Dr.Alfie Roy at his home in Gartness near Loch Lomond in Scotland. It is difficult to understand why Private Pargiter's grave, which was marked by the usual CWG headstone, and is well looked after, unlike some others in the cemetery, is still in this civilian Christian cemetery and was not moved to Taiping Commonwealth War Greaves cemetery. Perhaps his family did not want his grave to be moved.

Whilst in Taiping we looked at the forbidding exterior of **Taiping Gaol**, where the men of 1st Leicester Regiment spent the night of 17th December 1941 during the retreat after the **Battle of Gurun**. It was subsequently used by the Japanese for FEPOWs, and still in use today.



Taiping Gaol

Liz Moggie had managed to arrange visits to all 3 of the schools where my father had been billeted during the retreat through Malaya. I had expected a quick handshake and the chance to take a photo or two, but the welcome and hospitality from all 3 schools was exceptional and, to Susan and I, extraordinary and very moving.

We visited **King Edward V11 School** in Taiping, where the 2nd Battalion East Surrey Regiment slept on 17th December 1941 after the Battle of Gurun. We enjoyed a warm reception, and a tour of the school. We were told that the occupying Japanese had taken over the school, and of severed heads regularly being displayed on the rugby posts. I was surprised to learn that the school was unaware that they had hosted my father's regiment and they will now be updating their school history records from the information I gave them.



Liz Moggie, Susan Brown, Rosemary Fell, Richard Brown and King Edward V11 School. Taiping Principal Mohamad Hazawawi b Yusof

The name of the rather quirky hotel where we stayed in **Ipoh**, *Sarong Paloh*, is apparently a tribute to the town and its people because Ipoh used to be known as *Paloh* after the dams that were constructed along the Kinta River for fishing purposes. These dams were called

Pa-Lo in Cantonese. I'm told that *Sarong* means *nest* in Bahasa Malaysia, symbolising a place of rest.

As Rosemary described in the last edition of *Apa Khabar*, we had an enjoyable, if rather different, dinner at the **Royal Ipoh Club**, overlooking the green playing fields of the Padang with barrister and local historian James Devadason and his wife Melanie. The service and menu were “interesting” and we still chuckle about the extensive wine list (the choice was simply *red* or *white*) and finding, after studying the dessert menu, and taking into account James and Melanie’s recommendations, that the only choice was which flavour of ice cream to order! James gave us excellent information about the occupation and how the Japanese had ruined the Padang grass by parking trucks on it.



Royal Ipoh Club, Ipoh

The school that I had most wanted to visit was **St. Michael’s Institution** in **Ipoh** because it was where the **British Battalion** was formed. In 1941 the Brother Director was Brother Ultan Paul, an Anglo – Burmese from the De La Salle Brothers, who spoke with a beguiling and incongruous Irish accent because most of the De La Salle Brothers over the years had been Irish. At St. Michael’s the remnants of 2nd Battalion East Surreys and the 1st Battalion Leicester’s rested and regrouped on 18th December 1941 after fighting and retreating for 10 days at and from **Jitra** and **Gurun** in the monsoon rain. 11th Indian Division has taken a battering and the decision was made that 6th and 15th Infantry Brigades should merge, and within that brigade, the East Surreys and Leicester’s should also be merged into a new one called the **British Battalion**. This took place on 20th December 1941 and it was unprecedented, being the first, and the only, time in the history of the British Army that two regiments have been merged in the field.



St. Michael's Institution, Ipoh



St. Michael's had two other notable plaques, one commemorating a visit of "General Yamashita Tomoyuki" (**Tomoyuki Yamashita**, commander of the IJA in Malaya) and another marking the Kempeitai Interrogation Room where Malayan heroine **Sybil Kathigesu** was tortured but refused to speak. She later died of her treatment.

Later we briefly visited the two bomb shelters in the grounds of the **Darul Ridzuan Museum**, one above and the other below ground.



Air raid shelter at *Darul Ridzuan Museum, Ipoh*

The next day guide Zafrani's two friends, Shaharom Ahmad and Hisham Muhd's, both members of the Malaya Historical Group, <http://mhg.mymalaya.com>, and both dressed in full British uniforms of the day, spent the morning hacking through the jungle at **Green Ridge** in **Kampar**, clearing a path through the jungle so that we could climb up to see the British Battalion's defensive positions for the **Battle of Kampar**, (23rd December 1941 - 2nd January 1942).

Chinese labour from the tin mines, and members of 1st Battalion Perak Volunteers Force helped prepare the defence positions at Kampar, digging the slit trenches, wiring and laying barbed wire and clearing lines of fire through the jungle.

Before going to the battle field we visited the **Anglo – Chinese School** in Kampar where the East Surreys stayed before the battle, Again we were warmly welcomed by all of the school officials and children and, once again we had the red carpet treatment, a presentation, a guided tour, lunch, and even a performance by the school band. The school is now split either side of the main road with the infant/junior school housed in the original building that was there in 1941. Once again I was surprised to learn that the staff knew of the Japanese occupation of their school, but they did not know that they had played such an important part in the preparation for the Battle of Kampar by hosting the British Battalion.

At all three schools we visited we were very impressed by the courtesy, manners and interest from staff members and, particularly, the children, who all wanted to say hello and shake hands.



Rosemary Fell, Liz Moggie, Richard & Susan Brown at the Anglo – Chinese School, Kampar

The Japanese closed all of the schools to use as military buildings, as were many of the old colonial buildings in other towns we visited.

There is not much left to see at **Green Ridge** in Kampar – just some foxholes, defensive trenches and the location of the B Company HQ. Nonetheless it was moving to be at the place where my father had been so long ago. Unfortunately the other two ridges, Cemetery and Thompson's, have long since been sold to developers and are now under concrete. We were told that Green Ridge had also been sold to developers and the Malaya Historical Group had been campaigning for the site to be maintained as being of historical interest.



Green Ridge, Kampar

Shaharom Ahmad, Zafrani Arifin, Hisham Muhd's, Rosemary Fell, Susan Brown



British Battalion B Company foxhole

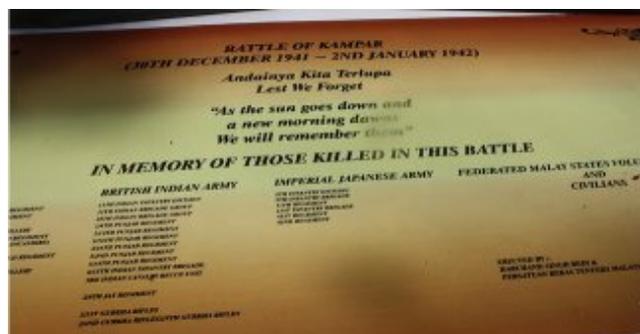
We were delighted to read in the *Malay Mail* on 6th May 2019 that, after a campaign of more than a decade, the **Kampar Green Ridge** battleground will be finally gazetted as a historical site. Kampar MP Thomas Su said the National Heritage Department and the federal government have agreed to this. "A committee has been set up to oversee the process. We are now seeking the state government's consent, which should not be a problem." "We need to have it gazetted according to the National Heritage Act 2015," he told *Malay Mail*.

Local historians and former army officers living in Kampar have been working to have the location gazetted as a historical site for years. Su also said the war memorial project to honour the British and Indian soldiers during World War II is also expected to be continued in the area. "However, this will only come after the area has been gazetted as a heritage site.

Historians credit the Allied soldiers' valorous efforts with critically delaying the Japanese advance southwards.

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/06/kampar-green-ridge-site-of-ww2-clash-to-finally-be-gazetted-as-historical-s/1750210>

Sadly we found that half way up the hill at Green Ridge, just as Andrew Hwang had warned us, the memorial to the British Battalion was badly neglected and the lovely brass plaque had been stolen.



The British Battalion Memorial at Green Ridge as it was before being neglected and before the plaque was stolen



and the sad state of the British Battalion memorial today.

Susan Brown, Shaharom Ahmad, Hisham Muhd's and Liz Moggie

The Battle of Kampar was a valiant effort with 700 British Battalion troops, helped by a platoon of **FMSVF** led by **John Mackie**, holding off 6,000 Japanese of the crack, battle hardened in Manchuria, 41st Infantry Battalion, denying General **Tomoyuki Yamashita** the prize of capturing **Kampar** as a New Year present for the Emperor. Considerable losses were suffered by the Japanese in attempting to overcome the resistance put up by allied forces at Kampar. A fine reputation was earned by the British Battalion, a reputation which it maintained throughout the remainder of the campaign. A number of their men had earned military honours for their brave actions in the determined defence of their positions at **Kampar**. In the following months and years many tributes were paid to the British Battalion in the way it stood firm during the defence of **Kampar** and the battle honours at Kampar were added to the regimental colours.

Lieutenant General Arthur Percival paid tribute to the British Battalion in his book *The War in Malaya*: “*The enemy attacks were made with all the well known bravery and disregard of danger of the Japanese soldier. There was dogged resistance, in spite of heavy losses, by the men of the British Battalion and their supporting artillery. The Battle of Kampar had proved that our trained troops, whether they were British or Indian, were superior man for man to the Japanese troops.*”

The official history of the 11th Indian Division also praised the British Battalion’s brave stand at Kampar: “*Throughout the two days of fighting every effort of the enemy to force a passage had been frustrated with heavy loss. The battle had been marked by many deeds of outstanding gallantry. The whole brunt of the enemy’s attacks had been borne by the British Battalion. In the short time between this Battalion’s organisation and its first battle, Lt.Col.Morrison had permeated it with an esprit de corps second to none. The Battalion’s spirit may perhaps be discerned from the answer to a questioner who asked a man whether he belonged to the Leicester’s or the Surreys. “Neither” he replied, “I belong to the British Battalion”.*



Dipang Bridge, Kampar

Hisham Muhd's, Richard Brown, Shaharom Ahmad and Zafrani Arifin

Our next stop was **George Town** on the island of **Penang** where Zafrani showed us the British searchlight posts and the lookout tower at **Tanjong Tokong**. It was there that we said farewell to our invaluable guide Zafrani, who by now had become a friend.



Observation Tower at Tanjong Tokong, Penang

We stayed at the historic and impressive **Eastern and Oriental Hotel**, and there met up with Liz and Rosemary again to head for dinner with MVG member Richard Parry and his wife Terry. They live in **Tanjung Bungah**, on the east coast north of George Town. From their lovely condominium we looked down on very same white sandy beach where both the East Surreys and the Leicester's had enjoyed their rest and recreation leave in 1941 as a break from their jungle training on the mainland.



Tanjung Bungah beach today

I carried a photograph of some of the Leicester's on the beach in 1941, in the unlikely hope of Richard Parry being able to identify the stretch of beach where the R & R camp had been. To my great surprise, Richard was able to confirm that the photo was of the beach we were looking at because the Penang Swimming Club building could clearly be seen in the background.



Colour Sergeant John.T.Hewitt of 1st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment (left) on Tanjung Bungah beach in 1941

We visited **St. George the Martyr Church**, where my father would have worshipped each Sunday whilst on Rest & Recuperation. The church was damaged by Japanese bombing on 9th December 1941, as was much of the surrounding area. We were told that there had been considerable loss of life caused by the unnecessary Japanese strafing of civilians.

We tried to find the burial place of **Private John Bennett**, the last 1st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment man who had hidden in the hills behind Balik Pulau from 1941 until 1944, protected and fed by Chinese families. There were originally 50 Leicester's and a number of East Surreys that reached the island of Penang after the Battles of Jitra and Gurun. Some of these escaped by sampan manned by Chinese crew to Kuala Kurau on the mainland. Others were recaptured, but 18 British and 1 Punjabi escaped into the hills of Penang, some of whom subsequently tried to escape the island but were captured. That left 6 Leicester's and 1 Punjabi in the hills. 4 subsequently died in the hills without being captured.

Reports from the Japanese say that Bennett died of natural causes but Chye Kooi Loong, says in his book *The British Battalion in the Malayan Campaign 1941 -1942* that he was tortured and murdered in George Town Gaol by the Kempeitai. The Japanese said that he was cremated and his remains were buried in the Japanese cemetery but local historian, and expert on the Japanese, Clement Chiang, dispelled this idea when he kindly met up with Susan and I.

In **George Town** we visited the tourist sites including **Fort Cornwallis**, and the spectacular nature reserve that is the **Habitat Project** at the top of Penang Hill. The Langur Way Canopy Walk and the Curtis Crest Tree Top walk are highly recommended, offering superb views across the rain forest and island, giving us some idea of what the island would have looked like in 1941, before all of the recent high rise developments.



Langur Way Canopy Walk



Curtis Crest Tree Top Walk

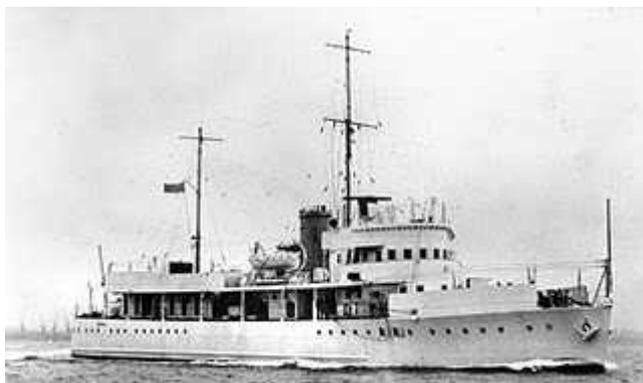
My father's East Surrey/British Battalion Regiment defended, fought and retreated the length of Malaya, from Jitra, Sungei Petani, Gurun, Kepala Batas, Alor Star, Ipoh, Kampong Lasah, Taiping, Kampar, to Tanjong Malim, Batung Berjuntai, Bidor, Tapah, Sungkai, Batu Arang, Sungei Buluh, Seremban, Kuala Lumpur, Labu, Alor Gajah, the north of Malacca and Tankak, before arriving at Kluang on 14th January 1942.

There news was beginning to filter through about the new **Mersing – Muar** defence line and the units that would defend it. Long awaited reinforcements, or perhaps more hopefully 'relief forces', were also beginning to arrive by sea in Singapore. They included the British 53rd Infantry Brigade, comprising two Norfolk Regiment battalions and the 2nd Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment, two anti- aircraft artillery regiments and fifty Hurricane fighter aircraft. For a short time it was hoped that this might possibly be a turning point in the Malaya Campaign. It was not to be.

With little or no air support available to the allied land forces, the Japanese had enjoyed the advantage and freedom to land troops by sea at any point they wished. It was a tactic that they had continually adopted in their advance down Malaya and it was greatly helped by the failure of the evacuating British to destroy any boats before abandoning Penang. Amazingly, they also left the George Town radio station intact so that the Japanese could immediately start broadcasting demoralising propaganda. Once again, this ridiculous action was apparently to "avoid loss of morale" amongst the locals. Obviously it had the opposite effect and some of the people we met in Penang were still mystified why the British had evacuated British and Europeans only, had not stayed to fight, and had finally withdrawn without a fight and abandoned them to their fate under the Japanese.

The Japanese tactics resulted in the allied forces having to retreat from their forward positions for fear of their supply lines from the south being cut off by the invading Japanese troops. On the night of 15th January 1942 yet another landing of Japanese troops at **Muar** and **Batu Pahat** gave cause for concern. Although some allied troops were already located at those points they were in no numbers that could successfully repel any landing or even stop their advance.

The British Battalion retreated to **Batu Pahat**, where, after losing another 11 killed (5 Leicester's and 6 East Surrey's) at the **Battle of Batu Pahat**, and then to **Senggarang**, **Rengit** and, finally, **Ponggor** from where they were evacuated to **Singapore** by sea on 28th & 29th January 1941 in the Royal Navy ships HMS Dragonfly and HMS Scorpion – a sort of mini Dunkirk which saved around 2,000 men.



HMS Dragonfly (subsequently sunk off Rusul Buaja Island in the Banka Straits on 14th February 1942)



HMS Scorpion (subsequently sunk off Berhala Island in the Banka Straights on 13th February 1942)

We had planned to drive south to **Batu Pahat, Rengit** and **Ponggor**. However we were advised that the mangrove swamps in which the men has hidden no longer existed and that the beach at Ponggor was lined by luxury hotels and flats, so we decided against making the journey.

158 British Battalion men fought and died defending Singapore (78 Leicester's and 80 East Surreys) on the north of the island just east of the naval base, then defending the Jurong Road, then Bukit Timah and finally Mount Echo.

As mentioned earlier, of the 956 men of the 2nd Battalion East Surrey Regiment, 185 (19%) died in action and 149 (16%) died as FEPOWs. In all only 622 out of 956 (65%) returned home. My father died aged 73 on 2nd November 1983.

The 1st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment suffered even greater losses. Of their 935 men, 196 (21%) died in action and 156 (17%) died as FEPOWs. Only 583 (62%) returned home.

Our trip was memorable and at times, very moving. It was greatly enhanced by having Liz and Rosemary with us for most of the pilgrimage elements of it, by Zafrani Arafin's knowledge and company, by Hisham Muhd's and Shaharom Ahmad at Kampar, by Hairil Anuar at Jitra, by Richard and Terry Parry's hospitality at Tanjung Bungah, by James and Melanie Davadason's knowledge of Ipoh, by Clement Chiang's knowledge of the Japanese in George Town and for all those who had helped us with the research and planning.

My thanks also go to the staff of the King Edward V11 School in Taiping, the Anglo - Chinese School in Kampar, and St.Michael's Institution in Ipoh. As a final example of the helpfulness and friendliness of those we met in Malaysia it was Su Li, our George Town guide from Discovery Travel, who took the trouble to put us in touch with Clement Chiang, and even arranged the meeting.

If anyone would like more information about any of the battles, or the places we visited, or any of my many photos, please let me know at richardbbrown@hotmail.com.

Richard Brown

June 2019