

# The attack that came before Pearl Harbour

Contrary to popular belief, the Pacific War during World War 2 did not begin with the attack on Pearl Harbour, but on the beaches of Kota Baru. SAGER AHMAD writes about some aspects of the Japanese invasion of Malaya in a four-part series beginning today

THE Japanese invaded Kota Baru at 12.25am on Dec 8, 1941, some 90 minutes before striking Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, the home of the United States Navy in the Pacific.

In the span of 15 hours, the Japanese juggernaut had not only invaded Malaya and bombed the US naval forces in Pearl Harbour almost out of existence, but also launched

large naval-borne forces into Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Takumi Detachment, under the command of Major-General Hiroshi Takumi, began the invasion in Kota Baru in the dead of the night when the sea was rough during the monsoon season.

The Japanese forces met with stiff resistance from the



The Japanese cycled down the length of the peninsula.

Indian Army's Dogra Battalion guarding the landing point at Kuala Pa' Amat close to Pengkalan Chepa aerodrome.

Their earlier plan was to land in the Tumpat lagoon which has a natural harbour but it would take them longer to capture the airfield.

The Eighth Indian Brigade in charge of defending Kota Baru, comprising the Baluch, Dogra, Hyderabad and Mysore battalions, was overwhelmed by the ferocity of the Japanese attack.

The Japanese soldiers came in small landing boats off ships anchored in the rough seas.

The first wave of Japanese soldiers met with withering machine gun fire from the shore pillboxes and some 300 were killed and 500 wounded.

The Indian soldiers manning the pillboxes at Kuala Pa' Amat defended the beach to the last man.

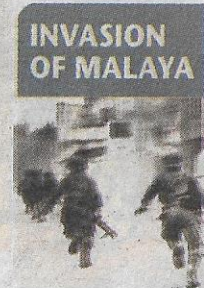
By sunrise, the Japanese had secured the beach and moved inland to capture the

aerodrome.

By afternoon of Dec 8, the Japanese secured the town and at 2pm hoisted the Japanese flag by the Kelantan river bank behind what is today the Grand River View Hotel.

Kelantan had three airfields then — Pengkalan Chepa, Gong Kedak and Machang.

Pengkalan Chepa airfield is now Sultan Ismail Petra Airport, the gateway to Kota Baru, while Gong Kedak airfield is now a Royal Malaysian



Air Force base.

About 10km off the coast of Kota Baru lies one of the first Japanese casualties of the war, the troop carrier *Awazisan Maru*, which was crippled by Royal Australian Air Force Hudson bombers based in Pengkalan Chepa.

The *Awazisan Maru* burned for two days before being sunk by a Dutch submarine.

The wreck now plays host to a myriad of marine life, making it a haven for anglers and divers.

# 'Pillboxes neglected'

MANNED by soldiers armed with machine guns, pillboxes were the first line of defence against an invasion from the sea.

Zafrani Ariffin, a history buff and researcher with Malaya Historical Group ([www.mhg.mymalaya.com.my](http://www.mhg.mymalaya.com.my)), has mapped out all the wartime pillboxes in Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore.

The pillboxes along the beaches in Kelantan are at Tumpat, Badang, Kundur and Melawi.

"In Kelantan, there are pillboxes inland.

"There is one on the banks of the Sungai Kelantan, close to the Grand River View Hotel and a pre-war building belonging to Lee Rubber company.

"The pillbox guarding the river was later used for processing chickens. Now it has been turned into a tourist attraction."

Zafrani said many pillboxes were located around Pengkalan Chepa, including two outside the aerodrome.

He said some older people remembered that the British troops set fire to their fuel dump and it burnt so bright that night became day around Pengkalan Chepa.

Zafrani Ariffin has mapped all the pillboxes in the peninsula



He lamented that not much had been done to preserve the things connected with World War 2 in Kelantan.

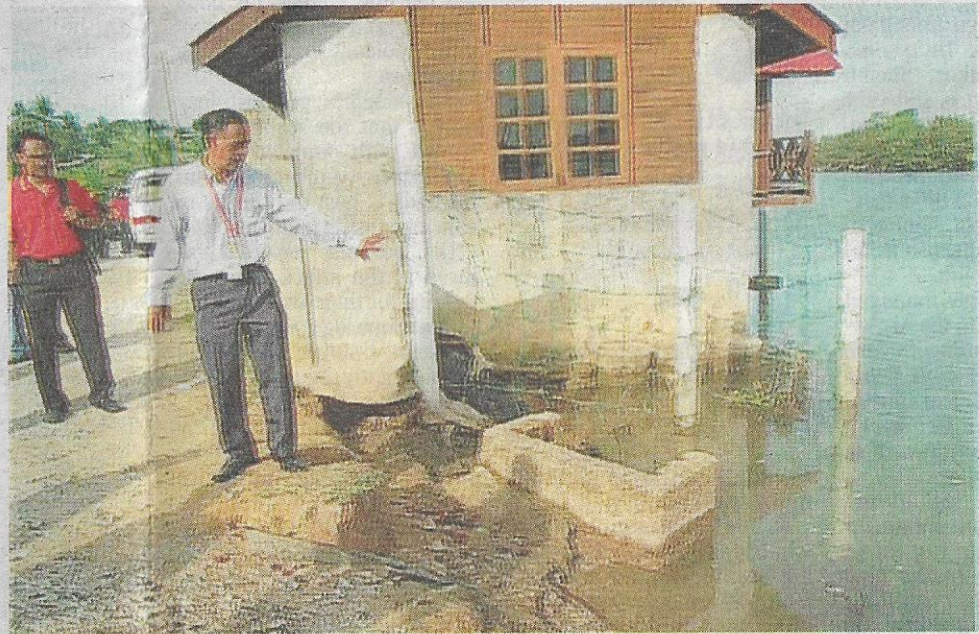
"The pillboxes which guarded Kuala Pa'Amat are now submerged about a kilometre from the shore."

Zafrani said war relics and artifacts are being found all the time in many places in Kelantan, especially at Kuala Pa'Amat.

"They included a strange metal piece which was actually a part of a gas mask."

Zafrani said he believes the find supports one story which said the Indian troops defending the beach had to use gas masks when the area was engulfed in thick smoke because of the heavy naval bombardment.

Other items he found included bullets, a British "dog tag" and old coins.



Mustapha Mohammad pointing to a culvert for irrigating padi fields in Kota Baru built by a Japanese man called Ayah Kawa.

## Japanese had planted spies in Kota Baru

THE Japanese had a spy network in Malaya long before the invasion.

They were well-placed and had complete information on goings-on here, according to Kelantan Tour Guides Association vice-president Mustapha Mohammad.

"They worked as barbers, pho-

tographers, pottery makers, cake vendors, miners and fishermen.

"Two of these spies in Kelantan were known as Ayah Kawa and Tok Kelepet.

"They were friendly with the locals and spoke the Kelantanese dialect fluently.

"Ayah Kawa made a culvert for irrigating the padi fields and this is still in use today at Kuala Pa'Amat."

Mustapha said Tok Kelepet used to bake and sell *kuih klepet* (love letters) on his bicycle around the village. He gave them away to children for free.