

# No stopping the advancing Japanese

## Destroyed bridges fail to slow down invaders

In the second part of the series which began last week, SAGER AHMAD takes a look at events during the 1941 Japanese invasion that led to the retreat of British troops to Singapore



The Japanese army used incendiary bombs on targets in Singapore to soften resistance prior to their capture of the island not long after.



JOHOR BARU was like the end of a funnel down the Malayan peninsula, where all the retreating British troops converged in late January 1942 in their mad rush to cross the causeway into Singapore.

They were a motley bunch of Indian, Punjabi, Gurkha, Australian and British soldiers who were falling over one another in their haste to reach "salvation" across the causeway. That, however, proved to be a false hope.

Since the invasion began, the demoralised and exhausted troops were being relentlessly pursued and harassed by the Japanese forces.

From the time the 8th Indian Brigade fled Kota Baru on Dec 8, 1941, the mad scramble south caused them to steadily lose men and machines along the way.

The also blew up bridges in



the hope of slowing down the advancing Japanese forces.

Guillemard bridge in Machang, for instance, was blown up.

That, however, stopped only the trains but not the Japanese troops from getting across.

Similarly, Iskandar bridge over Sungai Perak in Kuala Kangsar was blown up but the Japanese repaired it within a week.

A bridge in Parit Sulong, Johor was blown up by the re-

treating troops but the Japanese rebuilt it in record time using coconut trunks that were available in abundance.

The bridge was strong enough for lorries and tanks to roll across.

The last battalion of the Allied forces, the Argyll and Southern Highlanders, crossed the Johor causeway at 7am on Jan 31.

Stories are told about how the Highlanders' commanding officer, Lt-Col Ian Smith, marched "ramrod straight" across the 1.5km causeway.

As soon as they were across, sappers set off charges and a 20-metre gap appeared.

The euphoria of having made it across soon turned to dismay as the Allied troops were bombarded non-stop by Japanese forces and their troops, crossing at low tide, later poured into Singapore.



Japanese one-man tanks crossing into Singapore from Johor Baru after their capture of the island.



The railway station and the Empire docks in Singapore were constantly bombarded by the Japanese army during the war.

## Bravery, stupidity and a defeat made by colonial efficiency

AFTER the war, many books were written about what happened during the Japanese invasion of Malaya.

There were many accounts of bravery and heroism among the retreating troops, most of whom did not give up their posts without a fight.

The Japanese encountered stiff resistance in Jitra, Grik, Kampar, Slim River, Muar,

Gemenceh, Parit Sulong, Kluang and Mersing.

At Kampar, the main Japanese force advancing from Ipoh was held back for four days by a combined British force.

The Japanese army had to pull back and the soldiers eventually went by boat from Lumut to Teluk Intan, outflanking Kampar and forcing

the British to withdraw south.

But there were less inspiring stories as well among the British military and civilians in general.

In his book *Volunteer*, Paul Gibbs Pancheri noted that there seemed to be some who were oblivious to the gravity of the situation and stuck to their pre-war lifestyle.

Notwithstanding the bombs

and flying bullets, they insisted on working 5½ days a week.

He recounted how a Bren gun carrier commander from the battlefield in Mersing arrived at the central depot in Johor Baru to get spare wheels for his carrier.

He was told: "Sorry sir, we are closed today. Please come back on Monday."

By Monday, however, it was

all over. Everyone had escaped to Singapore as the Japanese army was closing in fast.

But Britain's greatest "foe" when Malaya was invaded was, perhaps, its own efficiency in governing its colonies, if one is to believe Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, the chief planner of the invasion.

In his book *Singapore: The*

*Japanese version*, Tsuji said: "Thanks to (British Prime Minister Sir Winston) Churchill making good rail lines and motor roads, our troops could travel smoothly all the way to Singapore."

"When we captured the Alor Star and Ipoh aerodromes, we used Churchill's bombs and petrol to attack his troops."