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WHEN JAPAN INVADED SARAWAK

A vast collection of wartime memorabilia prompts **ALAN TEH LEAM SENG** to take a look at Sarawak's darkest hour eight decades ago, which began with the Japanese army's assault on Miri



An artist's rendition of a battle near a Sarawak oilfield in 1941. PIX COURTESY OF ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

THE arrival of an auction catalogue by post offers respite from a dreary afternoon punctuated by light showers. Published by a renowned London establishment, the colourful pages are filled to the brim with memorabilia related to Sarawak's tumultuous Japanese Occupation.

A well-preserved flyer, air-dropped during the closing days of the war warning people to steer clear of oilfields targeted for air raids, stands out prominently from among the photographs, medals, postal history and other historical items that are bound for the auctioneer's hammer.

The leaflet is certain to draw interest among collectors due to its choice condition and extreme rarity, which features word-for-word Jawi translation at the back. It also helps turn back the clock to a time when war raged in the Pacific.

WAR COMES TO SARAWAK

It was obvious that to war planners that Sarawak and the rest of Borneo offered many strategic and military advantages to Japan. Absolute dominance of Borneo would safeguard commu-

nications with Malaya and further Japanese aspirations for the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia today). But it was the rich oilfields that proved irresistible.

Equally eager to prevent the vital natural resource from falling into enemy hands, Sarawak Oilfields Ltd engineers in Miri and Lutong were ordered to set in motion predetermined scorched earth procedures when news broke of the audacious Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and landings at Padang Pak Amat beach, Kota Baru, on Dec 8, 1941.

Flaming gas well heads were blown off with gun cotton charges, while machinery were rendered useless by either explosives or oxy-acetylene torches.

Illumination was no longer necessary in the evenings that followed as countless oil storage tanks were ablaze. After distributing wages to local employees, European staff members boarded the *Lipis* together with 300 Punjabi soldiers and Sikh policemen. Loaded to the Plimsoll line, the cargo ship arrived in Kuching after braving aerial bombardments and severe weather.

Against the backdrop of the

worst storm on record, Japanese forces landed unopposed at dawn in Miri on Dec 16, 1941. Enemy troops marched into town soon after daybreak and took possession of the nearby refineries. The Miri airfield was quickly repaired to support bombers destined for Kuching. The fact that Miri was chosen as the first target over the Sarawak capital underscored Japanese impatience for getting their hands on the oil.

A taste of things to come in Kuching took place at about midday on Dec 19, 1941. As fighter planes created mayhem on the streets, cars with blood-soaked seats brought casualties to the General Hospital. The mortuary quickly overflowed and the dead were buried in haphazardly arranged mass graves.

EXODUS

As it was just a matter of time before enemy troops marched into Kuching, everyone began making a beeline for the perceived safety of the countryside. Roads leading out of Kuching were jammed for days. Cars jostled for space with bullock-carts, rickshaws, bicycles, handcarts and even perambulators loaded with personal possessions.

The inevitable came to pass when Dutch aircraft spotted a Japanese flotilla off Bintulu heading towards Kuching on the morning of Dec 23, 1941. That evening, Kuching airfield was destroyed with the detonation of condom-encased explosive charges planted months earlier in the drainage system. When scorched earth plans were being drawn up, Britain's Royal Air Force had to fly in additional condoms from Singapore when the Kuching bazaar's stocks of the item proved insufficient.

As panic ruled in Kuching, authorities found solace in the fact

that Vyner Brooke, the third and last of the White Rajahs, was away on holiday in Australia, and Ranee Sylvia had been in New York for two months negotiating with American filmmakers over the sale of her script about the life of first Rajah James Brooke. It would have been a major embarrassment had the couple been captured and interned as prisoners of war.

Many historians were of the

opinion that it was a blessing that Vyner, who inherited Sarawak from his father, Charles Vyner Brooke, was a reluctant ruler who preferred to spend time away from the land that was once part of the sprawling Brunei sultanate. It was this lack of interest that was said to have led Vyner to proclaim a constitution for Sarawak four months before the invasion.

A majority saw this unexpected



Nasihah Yang Berat

Kapal2 terbang kita sudah datang bermaksud membinasakan tempat2 minyak yang sekarang ada didalam tangan2 musuh.

Oleh kerana itu, jangan tinggal dekat tempat2 minyak yang tersebut, sebab bukan maksud kita membunuh sahabat2 kita.

CHOKA JAUHKAN DIRI DARI TEMPAT2 MINYAK DAN TIDAK BERKERJA AKAN LASHKAR2 JEPUN.

Kita mengetahui bahwa itu harus musuh gunakan minyak ini, buat kapal2 terbang dan kapal2 perang dia. Oleh kerana itu, kita akan membinasakan semua tempat2 minyak di jajahan ini.

Sahabat2 — ingat baik2 !!

Choka jauhkan diri dari tempat2 minyak, bukan sahaja laki2, akan tetapi perempuan2 dan anak2 juga.

**JANGAN SHAK LAGI JEPUN
MESTI KALAH !!**

A flyer warning people to stay clear of oilfields in Sarawak as Allied forces closed in on the Japanese in 1945.

act as a precursor to cession to the British crown. The Japanese occupation only put the inevitable on hold as Vyner promptly returned to Kuching to make his desire official soon after hostilities came to an end.

FALLING UNDER JAPANESE RULE

A striking collection of Japanese leaflets highlighted in the catalogue gives an idea of the dire situation when Japanese troops arrived on Christmas Eve 1941.

Scattered over Kuching streets and coastal villages in the vicinity by Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, the notices warned civilians not to resist. Although there was hardly anyone around to read them, the messages bore images of severe German air raid devastation in London, and emphasised that Kuching could avoid a similar fate if everyone cooperated with the Japanese.

The early days of occupation saw the Japanese going out of their way to prove that their fight was with the British and not the locals. Food controls were put in place to ensure supplies for all and prices were restored to pre-invasion levels. Services and policies were enacted to govern Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei as a united entity. The name Borneo Kita was chosen with the hope of fostering close cooperation with the people.

Efforts to promote close ties could be seen through training programmes. Apart from ensuring local support and giving residents a sense of participation in governance, these initiatives also bolstered defences as administrators quickly realised that two



Crowds welcoming the arrival of Allied forces after the Japanese had surrendered.

battalions were insufficient to bringing order to such a large country like Sarawak.

With the help of interpreters, comprising Japanese who had been working in Sarawak for decades, candidates from major Bornean ethnic groups were given commando-style training on Japanese language and culture at Kuching's St Joseph's School. Upon graduation, they became part of an emerging Japanese-educated leadership that was loyal and disciplined.

THE HORRORS OF WAR

Inadvertently, the success of this training programme emboldened the Japanese in

Sarawak and significantly altered their administrative tone. By June 1942, the relatively easy going regime gave way to one that emphasised protocol and relied on force and intimidation to maintain order. At the forefront of this new approach was the Kempetai, considered as the Japanese equivalent of the Nazi Gestapo. The powerful military police struck fear everywhere they went.

Based in Jalan Jawa, the notorious law enforcers monitored anti-Japanese activities and crushed potential rebellion with the help of their vast multiracial informant network. Kempetai activities reached their height dur-

ing the last eighteen months of occupation.

Preparations for the Allied counter-attack were initiated in early 1944 after Americans began making headway in the Pacific. The Kempetai became almost paranoid in their pursuit of anti-Japanese elements, to the extent of preparing execution lists of educated Sarawakians who could help invading Allied forces.

It was a sign that the tide was turning against the Japanese when empty Kuching bazaars shelves were no longer replenished as regularly as before. Fears of trouble in the days ahead came with heightened troop activity

along the way would be shot. A similar fate awaited those left behind in the camp. There were plans to shoot the children and bedridden first before setting fire to huts with all the women locked inside. Strategically placed machine guns would cut down those attempting escape.

A PROMISING FUTURE

Fortunately, those plans never came to pass as the Japanese surrendered after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed in early August 1945. A little more than a month later, the Union Jack and Sarawak flag were hoisted at Fort Margherita as soon as the first Australian patrol boat came into sight on Sept 11, 1945.

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Women and children being evacuated from Sarawak in 1941 as war loomed.

and the frantic construction of an alternative airfield. Even stately government buildings were not spared as their precious belian or iron wood floorboards were scavenged to construct defensive barriers along the waterfront.

The atmosphere of uncertainty took a heavy toll on the people. The value of the Japanese-issued "banana notes" collapsed almost overnight as inflation spiralled out of control. The situation deteriorated to a point where people had to lug gunny sacks of banknotes even for the most modest of purchases. With essentials like eggs costing \$50 each, they could only pray hard for deliverance.

A glimmer of hope came with the appearance of Allied aircraft over Kuching on March 25, 1945. As the weeks dragged on, fear of widespread bombing began to overtake the initial euphoria of a possible speedy liberation. Emotions also ran high at the Batu Lintang PoW camp, as rumours spread of sinister plans.

It was said that the Japanese would force able-bodied internees to carry supplies some 25km into the interior when retreat became the only option for survival. Upon arrival, those who had not fallen out or bayoneted

sight on Sept 11, 1945.

The arrival of liberation forces at Ban Hock Wharf was, however, met by a rather subdued crowd. It was obvious that relief and joy were dampened by the possibility of Kempetai reprisals as much of Kuching was still under Japanese control.

It was not until Japanese area commander Major General Yamamura signed the surrender papers on board HMAS *Kapunda* later that afternoon that the locals heaved sighs of relief that the war was over.

Soon after the death and destruction in other parts of South-east Asia became common knowledge, and many people counted their blessings that Kuching was largely spared. There were no massacres like in Singapore and Malaya. In contrast to the destruction seen in Sandakan, Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu today) and Miri, Kuching was relatively unscathed.

Rebuilding quickly got under way with medicine and other vital goods pouring in once shipping links were re-established. Resumption of oil exports from Miri went a long way in helping to pave the way for Sarawak to face the post-war future.