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Dedication

TO ALL THOSE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN
WHO TOOK PART IN THE CAMPAIGNS IN MALAYA AND BORNEO
AND TO THOSE WHO WAITED AT HOME
FOR THEIR RETURN

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDAMA



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Foreword

THE fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 was a great shock both to Britain and to her Allies. The shock was all the greater because the public generally had been led to believe that Singapore was impregnable. Accusations against our leaders, both military and civil, were made in our own country and abroad, and there were wild stories about the conduct of our fighting men and of the civil population. Many of the statements made and many of the opinions expressed were based on false or incomplete information. Some of them were founded on inadequate knowledge of Malayan conditions or of the factors which influenced decisions. Others were "last survivor" stories. I have hitherto made no effort to refute these accusations or to deny these stories. Some of my friends have wondered why. I felt that it would be better to concentrate on producing the true story and that it is due to all those who fought in Malaya and Borneo, and to the non-combatants who played their part and suffered equally with the fighting men, that I should record the knowledge which I alone possess. So that is why I have written this book.

It would have been easy for me, in the charged atmosphere which still surrounds the fall of Singapore, to have written a sensational story. It would have been equally easy to have written an apologia. I have tried to avoid both these pitfalls. I do not believe in apologies when there is no occasion for them and to descend to mere sensation would be to deprive the important events which took place in Malaya and Borneo both before and during the campaign of the serious study which they deserve. I have tried, therefore, in this book to give, as concisely as I can, a picture of those events as they are known to me and to explain why certain decisions were taken and the factors which influenced them. I have assumed that the great majority of my readers have little or no knowledge of the Far East, so I have tried to introduce



them to the conditions which prevailed there at the time of which I write. I hope I have not been unsuccessful.

The preparation of a book like this five years after the events took place has naturally entailed a great deal of research. I have been fortunate to have access to such official records as reached home. I have also been able to make use of a very detailed narrative of the operations compiled in the Changi Prisoner-of-War Camp by the late Lt.-Col. F. R. N. Cobley, the Loyal Regiment, a member of my staff. This narrative was successfully hidden from the Japanese and recovered at the end of the war. Without it it would have been almost impossible to piece together the various parts of the story.

I hope that readers of this book will be in a position to pass a fair and unbiased judgment on the events which led up to the fall of Singapore. I feel confident that I can with safety leave in their hands the honour of all those who gave of their best and most of whom suffered either death or long years of imprisonment.

A. E. P.

April 1947



Chapter 1

MALAYA IN PRE-WAR DAYS

I FIRST went to Malaya in the spring of 1936 as General Staff Officer 1st Grade, Headquarters, Malaya Command. Maj.-Gen. W. G. S. (now General Sir William) Dobbie had shortly before been appointed General Officer Commanding. The Headquarters Staff was being expanded to keep pace with the development of the Singapore defences and I was the first officer to hold a first-grade appointment on the General Staff. I had just completed a course at the Imperial Defence College where officers of all the fighting services meet together with representative of the Dominions and some civil servants to study jointly problems of Imperial Defence. My selection for this important appointment was, I believe, due chiefly to the late Field-Marshal Sir John Dill, who was at that time Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at the War Office and under whom I had served a few years previously as instructor at the Staff College, Camberley. Sir John Dill was always a firm believer in the necessity for close co-operation between the fighting services and civil governments and was anxious that the doctrines of the Imperial Defence College should be practised in Malaya where clashes of interests were already producing problems which required tactful handling.

I went to Malaya full of enthusiasm for the job, as those who are keen on their profession usually do when taking up a new appointment. I had studied the attack and defence of Singapore on more than one occasion at the Staff College and at the Imperial Defence College, and was anxious to see what the place was really like. I think I pictured the life there as rather resembling that of Malta, where I had served a few years previously and where everybody quickly gets to know everybody else. But I was quickly disillusioned. I had not realized, as in fact few people do until they go there, the size of Malaya or the vastness of the population of Singapore. As Chief of the General Staff of Malaya Command, I had

expected to be a person of some consequence until I realized that defence was of very little interest to the great majority of the people of Malaya in those days. Malaya was a rich commercial country whose people lived mainly on the production of rubber and tin. Before the arrival of the British more than a hundred years before, its people had been of a warlike disposition, but under British rule they had gradually learnt ways of peace and for many years they had been left alone to develop their industries and enjoy the benefits of civilization. They had not been touched even by the First World War, which had brought them great riches, though it is true that in the years which followed they had suffered severely from slumps in world prices which had led to severe reduction of staffs and caused much hardship among people with slender means. And so it was not to be wondered at that the people as a whole were not interested in defence. War had not come to Malaya for over a hundred years, so why should it come in the future? If the British Government liked to build a great Naval Base at Singapore—well, that was their business. Similarly, it was not to be wondered at that few people, except those in official positions, realized for some time that a 1st Grade Staff Officer had been appointed to Headquarters, Malaya Command. After all, military officers were birds of passage while the majority of civilians were permanent residents. The latter have their own friends and it is perhaps natural that they should get a little tired of trying to get to know successive military officers and their families who are certain to leave as soon as they have really got to know them. This situation has, in the past, given rise to a great deal of criticism of the civilians in Malaya, and especially in Singapore, by Service people. I believe it is to a large extent inevitable, and that it will always happen in places where the population is so great that people naturally tend to form themselves into groups with common interests. Anyway, that was the situation which I found in Malaya and, for my part, I was not sorry to be free for a time from too many social functions, for it gave me time to get down to the mass of work which I found waiting for me.

We were a happy team at Headquarters Malaya Command. Dobbie was a delightful man to work for. Although the

directing hand was always there he never interfered unnecessarily in our work but was readily approachable whenever we needed a decision. There were some who wondered how his religious activities would be received by the people of Malaya, but they very soon got their answer. The straightforwardness and simplicity of his character, based on his strong religious beliefs, very soon won for him the respect and even affection of all right-thinking people, as indeed they always will. Moreover, he was tireless in his efforts to promote harmony and a co-operative spirit between those who were in any way responsible for the defence and security of the country.

At that time our work consisted chiefly in developing the defences of Singapore in accordance with a War Office plan. Approval had to be obtained for all major expenditure and, owing to the shortage of available funds, demands were often heavily cut. It will be readily understood, therefore, that the G.O.C. was strictly limited as to what he could do on his own initiative, while delays were occasioned by the necessity to get War Office approval first for a project, then for an estimate and finally for a contract. It was not until after the outbreak of war with Japan that the G.O.C. Malaya was given a free hand with regard to such expenditure.

There were few troops in Malaya at that time and the majority of what there were were concentrated on Singapore Island. Here there were two British battalions, reinforced in 1937 by a third, the personnel of the coast and anti-aircraft defences, some administrative units, and the Singapore Volunteers. On the mainland there was one Indian battalion at Taiping, the Malay Regiment at Port Dickson, the Federated Malay States Volunteers, and units of the Straits Settlements Volunteers at Malacca and Penang. This garrison seemed small enough, but the strength of our garrison in Malaya, as elsewhere overseas, was based on the thesis that the British main fleet would sail for Malayan waters as soon as danger threatened and that the role of the other Services was therefore only to hold the fort until the fleet arrived. This would be a matter of only a couple of months or so. The main problem, therefore, was the local defence of Singapore. Nevertheless, during my tour, I found opportunity to do a great deal of travelling on the mainland of Malaya in order

to visit the various regular and volunteer units. In the course of these visits I obtained a wide knowledge of the country and its defence problems and I also got to know a great many people. Wherever I went I received a warm welcome and, for reasons I have given, I found it easier to get to know the people on the mainland than those in Singapore. It was, I think, as a result of one of those visits that the phrase "The back door to Singapore", which has since received such prominence, was first used in public. I had been attending a week-end exercise of one of the volunteer units and at the final conference I had stressed the increasing importance of the role of the Federated Malay States Volunteers on the mainland as being the defenders of the back door to Singapore. A few days later, somewhat to my dismay, a summary of what I had said was reproduced in a newspaper in the United Kingdom. No permission had been asked for nor had I been given any idea that a representative of the Press was present. I recount this story because it was typical of many similar incidents which happened while I was in Malaya and which accounted, I think, to some extent for the cautious attitude which some commanders displayed in their dealings with the Press.

In 1936 and 1937 things were moving fast in the Far East. In Japan the struggle for power between the Army and those who stood for constitutional government was at its height. In February 1936 occurred the cold-blooded murder of a number of Japan's leading public men by a band of soldiers, followed a month later by the appointment as War Minister of Count Terauchi, one of the most autocratic of Japan's generals who was later, during the Far Eastern war, to become Commander-in-Chief in the West Pacific area. Early in 1937 the Japanese people, alarmed at the dominance which the Army was establishing, brought back the more moderate party at the elections, but this only sufficed to stir on the Army to further efforts. In July 1937, war, which was to continue for eight years, broke out between Japan and China, although it was at that time, as afterwards, always referred to by the Japanese as the "China Incident". In Singapore one of the leading Japanese residents committed suicide by taking poison to avoid arrest on a charge of spying.

We in Malaya watched these events with the keenest interest. It was clear that the Japanese military leaders had taken the bit between their teeth and that the situation which was developing in Europe was likely to provide a suitable opportunity for their ambitious designs. It was, as usual with the Japanese who are past-masters in the art of secrecy, difficult to get any very up-to-date information as to the efficiency of their fighting services, but we saw them carry out combined operations on the China coast with equipment which was far in advance of anything which we had at that time. They seemed to have no lack of special landing-craft which they used with great boldness, while we knew that ours at home had been limited by financial restrictions to what could be counted on the fingers of one hand. They also made use of special landing-craft carrying ships, the forerunners of those which played such an important part in the later phases of the war. Another matter which seemed to us of great importance was the fact that the Japanese were building a fleet of fast 18-knot merchant ships. We couldn't help feeling that they had some ulterior motive in this and that they might at some time be used for carrying troops instead of cargo.

In November 1937 I received orders to leave Malaya at the end of the year and return to the United Kingdom to take up an appointment as a Brigade Commander in the Aldershot Command. I felt so strongly that the tremendous change which had taken place in the whole problem of the defence of the Singapore Naval Base during the past year or so was not fully appreciated outside Malaya that I asked Dobbie for permission to draw up an appreciation and plan for an attack on Singapore from the point of view of the Japanese. To this he readily agreed. The document, when completed, received his approval and on his instructions I brought it home and handed it to the War Office. It will be discussed more fully in a later chapter. It is sufficient to say here that the plan recommended did not differ very materially from that adopted by the Japanese when they attacked Malaya four years later.

Another matter which caused me grave concern at that time was a lack of the necessary co-operative spirit between

the Services on the one hand and the civil governments on the other as regards preparations for defence. It is true that much had been done by social gatherings and other means to enable officials of the various departments to get to know each other better and to understand each other's problems, yet few problems of common interest were really tackled jointly by combined teams. The following extract from a memorandum which I wrote on the subject in July 1937 is of special interest:

During the past year we have succeeded in building up a system of close co-operation between the Services. This has been done by regular monthly Staff Conferences, by conferences of commanders to discuss specific subjects, and by visits to each other's offices whenever necessary.

Speaking broadly, and with reserve as regards the other Services, it cannot be claimed that the same is true as regards co-operation between the Services and the civil governments. There are, of course, constant discussions between the Governor and the Commanders, but there is not that combined examination of problems which is so necessary when a fortress like Singapore is under construction.

The memorandum went on to suggest various methods by which improvements might be effected and to plead that all concerned, both Service departments and civil governments, should strive to put into effect to the best of their ability and without delay the decisions of the Home Government as regards the defence of Malaya.

When I had been at the Imperial Defence College everything had seemed so easy. When difficulties arose between the representatives of military and civil interests they were almost invariably settled by a compromise. But it is one thing to compromise on paper and quite another thing to compromise when you have real interests to consider. This was the root of most of the difficulties which arose in Malaya. Never before had we attempted to build a fortress on the top of a rich and prosperous commercial centre. There were clashes of interests, and important ones too, at every turn, and the civil governments were constantly being called upon to protect the civil interests against military encroachments. That is a situation which is bound to arise in similar circumstances. In Malaya it was aggravated to some extent by

an erroneous but widespread idea that, while the role of the Service commanders was to carry out the instructions received from their respective ministries, the main duty of the civil governments was to ensure that the military activities did not interfere with civil interests. I believe the difficulties could have been largely overcome if all decisions of the Home Government or of the Committee of Imperial Defence as regards defence matters had been conveyed simultaneously to the civil governments and to the Service commanders concerned through their respective ministries, so that all would have felt a responsibility for seeing that these decisions were carried out. In modern times the same results may be achieved by integrated staffs.

I left Malaya with mixed feelings. I felt that, in spite of all our efforts, we had not yet succeeded in securing for the Army its rightful place in the Malayan community. One would have thought that people who were dependent upon the natural wealth of Malaya for their livelihood would have welcomed in their midst the representatives of a Service which was there for their protection. No doubt the great majority of people were glad in their heart of hearts that we were there. But there were certainly others, who were prone to make their views known freely through the Press and other mediums, who would have much preferred to remain free altogether of any military occupation. They fondly imagined that, so long as there were no troops in Malaya, they would be left alone to conduct their business in comfort and with much profit. The following extract from the leading article in one of Malaya's daily newspapers when the decision to fortify Penang was first announced well illustrates their point of view:

Although it has been hinted for some time that Penang would sooner or later become a fortified town, the definite announcement contained in last Friday's Government Gazette, of the acquisition of land for military barracks and defence purposes has been received in the town with mixed feelings. While there can be no doubt that the advent of a military population will bring prosperity to the traders and amusement places and, through them, to the town in general, there are not a few who view with some concern the disturbance of the restful and placid atmosphere of Penang that will result from the military invasion. Still the matter admits of discussion.

After admitting that there was something to be said for the construction of defences in the northern part of Malaya in view of the changed strategical situation, the article went on:

As regards the military barracks to be established at Tanjong Bungah on the rubber land on the other side of the road facing the Penang Swimming Club, the authorities are to be congratulated on the decision to place them thus well away from the town. A military population in the close vicinity of the town would not have been a pleasant experience for, without meaning any offence, we all know what soldiers are.

In point of fact, the military barracks were not built eventually at Tanjong Bungah but on a site south of, but at an equal distance from, Georgetown.

Nevertheless, during my stay in Malaya, I had grown really fond of the country and its people, as also had my wife. The work, though exacting, was of absorbing interest—partly because it was so very different to the ordinary life of the peace-time soldier. One felt that one was really doing something that mattered—building fortifications that might very soon be wanted in repelling an enemy's attack, dealing with the thousand and one problems which have to receive attention in the preparation of a country for war, and training such troops as we had for an actual war role. I think we were the first to start actual training in the jungles and plantations of Malaya and to discover that they were not quite so impassable as had been thought. We also proved that the British soldier, if properly trained, is just as capable of standing up to extended operations in that type of country as are Asiatic troops. The standard of living was high, though one did not live at all luxuriously. One just lived an ordinary decent life much the same as one does at home, but with a little additional comfort added by an excellent Chinese house staff. And that was the type of life lived by most of the people with whom I came in contact. Malaya has become notorious for its "whisky-swilling" planters and the gaiety of its night life. While admitting that the consumption of alcohol is higher in a country like Malaya than it is at home, yet this is equally true of all hot countries, and there are many, among whom I am one, who believe that in those climates a whisky and soda in the evening is no bad tonic after a hard day's work. And as

regards the gaiety of night life—well, why shouldn't people enjoy themselves in moderation provided they have the means to do it and don't carry it to excess? The fact remains that there were very few "drunks" in Malaya.

My wife and I made many friends in Malaya both among Europeans and Asiatics. Naturally we came in contact mostly with Service people, but we found most of the civilians also both friendly and hospitable when we got to know them. In a big place like Singapore it is very easy to misjudge people because one does not know them or has only a passing acquaintance. Later one finds that they are much like oneself with just the same ideals and the same outlook on life. I particularly got to know well in the course of my duties a number of Volunteers of all ranks. By them I was always most hospitably received and for them I formed a great admiration. Many of them had fought in the First World War and were now giving up part of their hard-won leisure from a sense of self-preservation or of national duty to fit themselves to take part in the defence of the country which they had temporarily made their home. I am proud to say that most of these men have remained my friends through the troubles of succeeding years.

Finally, being a lifelong sportsman myself, with a fair but not great ability at most ball games, I enjoyed to the full the unrivalled opportunities for sports and games of all sorts which existed at Singapore. The Padang, with its lovely Australian turf, the golf courses, the tennis and squash courts at the clubs, the many excellent private tennis courts, the swimming baths and many other places of recreation, were of equal attraction. Everywhere games were played with great keenness and with a high all-round standard of efficiency and, what is more important still, always in the right spirit.

And so I left Singapore in December 1937 with many regrets, though with keen anticipation of the new and important work which lay ahead.



