

# Malay Regiment

by *Guay, Ee Ling*

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The Malay Regiment was an all-Malay military force formed at Port Dickson, Malaya, on 1 March 1933 under the command of British officers.<sup>1</sup> Also known as *Askar Melayu* in Malay, the regiment is best remembered for its soldiers' display of bravery and loyalty in the [Battle of Pasir Panjang](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_457_2005-01-04.html) during the Japanese invasion of Singapore in February 1942.<sup>2</sup>

## **Early history**

The Malay rulers of the Federated Malay States first proposed to the British government the idea of forming the Malay Regiment during the Federal Council meetings in 1913.<sup>3</sup> The Malay Regiment Bill was tabled on a Certificate of Urgency and passed by the Federal Council on 23 January 1933; recruitment commenced shortly after. On 1 March 1933, the Experimental Company of the Malay Regiment was formed with 25 men selected from over 1,000 applicants.<sup>4</sup> It was based at an old volunteer camp five miles from the town of Port Dickson in Negeri Sembilan. Major George McIlree Stanton Bruce of the Lincolnshire Regiment was the first commanding officer, and Captain K. G. Exham from the Duke of Wellington's Regiment was his adjutant.<sup>5</sup>

In order to instil pride and loyalty among the soldiers in the regiment as well as to recruit more men from the villages, Bruce came up with the idea of a regimental mufti that embodied elements of the Malay national dress.<sup>6</sup> Together with Exham, he also designed the regimental badge and insignia, which consisted of two tigers supporting a crown that rested atop a circle enclosing a crossed kris and scabbard and bearing the regimental Motto "Ta'at Setia" ("Loyal and True" in Jawi).<sup>7</sup> Three colours were selected for the regiment: green, the colour of Islam; yellow, to represent Malay royalty; and red, reflecting the influence of the British army.<sup>8</sup> The colours were incorporated into the regiment's walking-out dress, which consisted of a green velvet *songkok* (a type of traditional Malay headgear), white top and trousers, and a green and red silk *sarong*. During training, the men donned an outfit comprising the [Gurkha](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_623_2005-01-09.html) hat, khaki shirt with matching shorts, green putties and black boots.<sup>9</sup>

The Malay Regiment was originally conceived as an experiment to observe how the Malays would respond to military discipline, but the success of the first batch of soldiers after five months of training prompted the further recruitment of 30 men. In December 1933, another batch of 30 men was added. By June 1934, two more squads of 30 men each had been formed.<sup>10</sup> On 1 January 1935, the Experimental Company became officially known as the Malay Regiment.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1937, the Malay Regiment played an important role in maintaining order during a labour dispute at the Batu Arang Coal Mine in Selangor, Malaya, where 6,000 workers went on strike. This later earned the regiment a special commendation from the Malayan governor and general officer commanding.<sup>12</sup> The regiment had a reputation for marksmanship, and displayed this when four of its Malay cadet officers won the top four places in a Bren-gun course held in Singapore in October 1938. The regiment also participated in various training exercises in Singapore in 1937 and 1938.<sup>13</sup>

### **Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45)**

The continued increase in the number of recruits brought the Malay Regiment to battalion strength by October 1938, with three rifle companies, one Support Company equipped with Vickers machine guns, and a Headquarters Wing.<sup>14</sup> Upon the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, the Malay Regiment was mobilised and its training programme intensified. In 1940, the regiment was deployed to Singapore, where it later set up its headquarters at Normanton Camp in [Pasir Panjang](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2016-07-08\\_143420.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-07-08_143420.html)).<sup>15</sup>

On 1 December 1941, amidst the threat of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, the regiment's 2nd Battalion was officially formed, although it did not become a complete unit until later in the military campaign.<sup>16</sup> During the Battle of Malaya, the A and D companies of the 2nd Battalion were deployed in various operations in Malaya, such as a reconnaissance operation in Kelantan, before they withdrew to Singapore by the end of January 1942 to rejoin the rest of the troops at Normanton Camp. In the ensuing fight for Singapore, the Malay Regiment, together with the British 2nd Loyal Regiment and other attached troops, formed the 1st Malaya Infantry Brigade, which was tasked to defend the southwestern part the main island, where it fought its most famous battle, known as the Battle of Pasir Panjang.<sup>17</sup>

The Battle of Pasir Panjang, also known as the Battle of Opium Hill or the Battle at Bukit Chandu, lasted from 13 to 14 February 1942 and it was during this battle that the Malay Regiment gained its reputation for courage, heroism and loyalty, as many of its men were killed in their defence of the Pasir Panjang Ridge.<sup>18</sup> After Singapore was surrendered to the Japanese, the survivors of the regiment, numbering some 600 men, were reassembled in the Keppel Golf Links area on 15 and 16 February. They were later separated from the British officers, and made to join Indian prisoners-of-war at Farrer Park.<sup>19</sup>

During the [Malayan Campaign](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2013-07-19\\_162143.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-19_162143.html)) and the [Battle of Singapore](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2013-07-19\\_113523.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-19_113523.html)), the Malay Regiment lost a total of 159 men, including six British officers, seven Malay officers and 146 soldiers of other ranks, mainly in the fighting that took place from 12 to 14 February 1942.<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant [Adnan Saidi](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_456\\_2005-01-18.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_456_2005-01-18.html)), commander of Platoon No. 7 of C Company, 1st Battalion, was one of those who perished during the Battle of Pasir Panjang. Although he was seriously wounded during the attack, Adnan and his troops refused to surrender, and fought the Japanese to the very end. When he was captured by the Japanese, Adnan was shot, bayoneted and his body hung by his legs from a tree.<sup>21</sup>

In March 1942, the Japanese released most of the men from the Malay Regiment and sent them back to Malaya, with the exception of seven Malay officers who were executed for refusing to choose between serving under the Japanese or donning civilian clothing and accepting release.<sup>22</sup>

### **Postwar history and commemoration**

On 5 September 1945, a month after the British reoccupation of Malaya, the Malay Regiment was revived, with its members consisting of veterans from the 1941/1942 military campaign. The regiment continued to expand and played a major role in fighting against the communists during the Malayan Emergency. By 1955 the Malay Regiment comprised seven battalions.<sup>23</sup> On 9 April 1958, it became officially known as the Royal Malay Regiment.<sup>24</sup> The Royal Malay Regiment is today one of two infantry regiments in the Malaysian Army.<sup>25</sup>

In 1992, the year of the 50th anniversary of Singapore's fall to Japan, letters were sent to [The Straits Times](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2016-02-29\\_133820.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-02-29_133820.html)) calling on Singaporeans and the government to remember and memorialise the valour and courage of the Malay Regiment in their defence of Opium Hill (Bukit Chandu).<sup>26</sup>

A number of Malay Singaporeans asked for a colonial bungalow at the top of the hill to be turned into a museum to commemorate the men's bravery. The bungalow at 31K Pepys Road was subsequently refurbished and converted into a World War II interpretive centre by the [National Archives of Singapore](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_52_2005-02-02.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_52\\_2005-02-02.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_52_2005-02-02.html)), and the [National Heritage Board](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_94_2005-01-27.html) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_94\\_2005-01-27.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_94_2005-01-27.html)).<sup>27</sup>

Known as Reflections at Bukit Chandu, the centre was officially opened on 15 February 2002, the 60th anniversary of Singapore's surrender to the Japanese. The centre cost S\$4.8 million to redevelop, and contains multimedia exhibits that narrate the Battle of Pasir Panjang. Artefacts sourced from private collectors as well as those loaned from the relatives of former soldiers, such as uniforms, cast-iron helmets and even a Vickers machine gun, are also on display at the centre.<sup>28</sup>

### Author

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World War, 1939-1945--Regimental histories--Malaysia--Malaya ([./search.aspx?q=World War, 1939-1945--Regimental histories--Malaysia--Malaya&type=articles](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19920222.2.50.1.aspx))

Law and government>>Security>>Army ([./search.aspx?q=Law and government>>Security>>Army&type=articles](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19920222.2.50.1.aspx))

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## People



[Adnan Saidi](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/linkedata/entity_new.html?uri=http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/ID/NLBDM/vocab/N2RQaPKPphM&label=Adnan%20Saidi) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/linkedata/entity\\_new.html?uri=http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/ID/NLBDM/vocab/N2RQaPKPphM&label=Adnan%20Saidi](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/linkedata/entity_new.html?uri=http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/ID/NLBDM/vocab/N2RQaPKPphM&label=Adnan%20Saidi)).

## ~ Recommendations ~

[Japanese Cemetery Park](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1879_2012-04-19.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1879\\_2012-04-19.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1879_2012-04-19.html))

The Japanese Cemetery Park at 22 Chuan Hoe Avenue was established in 1891 to serve the burial needs of Japanese residents ...

[Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1172_2009-10-30.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1172\\_2009-10-30.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1172_2009-10-30.html))

The Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was founded in November 1877 to research and document information relating ...

[Operation Sook Ching](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_40_2005-01-24.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_40\\_2005-01-24.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_40_2005-01-24.html))

Operation Sook Ching was a Japanese military operation aimed at purging or eliminating anti-Japanese elements from the ...

[Richard James Wilkinson](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1681_2010-07-16.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1681\\_2010-07-16.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1681_2010-07-16.html))

Richard James Wilkinson (b. 29 May 1867, Salonika, Greece–d. 5 December 1941, Izmir, Turkey) was a colonial administrator ...

[River Valley Road/Havelock Road Camp](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1772_2011-03-21.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1772\\_2011-03-21.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1772_2011-03-21.html))

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, two prisoner-of-war camps were located in the area bounded ...

[Thio Chan Bee](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-12-17_145850.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2014-12-17\\_145850.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-12-17_145850.html))

Thio Chan Bee (b. 5 April 1904, Medan, Sumatra, Indonesia–d. 13 December 1978, location unknown) was an educationist ...

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