

Last week, *Revisiting WWII* took a look at the Malayan campaign's fiercest clash along the Japanese invasion route: the Battle of Kampar that took place in December 1941. What happened when the fighting finally stopped? CHRISTINA KOH speaks to residents of Kampar, Ipoh and Taiping about tense times in the state of Perak under the victorious Japanese Army's rule.

KAMPAR resident and local war historian Chye Kooi Loong reflects that, as a child, he had learnt from books that the Japanese were a well-mannered people who came from the Land of the Rising Sun. "But when their soldiers came, we were shocked by how different they were."

He remembers seeing the Japanese beating people up on the streets, even slapping and kicking a fruit vendor because they disliked the taste of a pineapple, apparently.

The scariest memory he has, though, is of the public execution he witnessed at Kampar's padang.

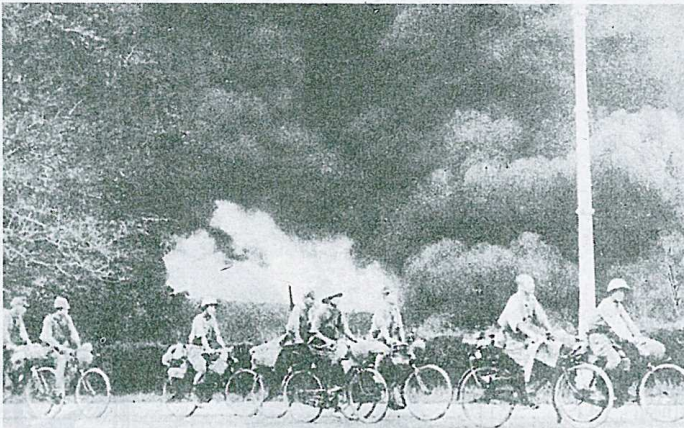
"I went because we (children) thought it was just a show – we were innocent at the time.

"But it was horrible. I saw the sword flashing in the sun just before it came down and decapitated the man. When the head dropped into a hole, I saw blood gushing out of the body like a fountain. It was a terrible thing for a child to see."

With such demonstrations, the Japanese maintained a fierce grip on the towns they occupied in Perak. There was no lawlessness, and certainly none of the looting that had greeted the townsfolk of Kampar when they returned home after the Battle of Kampar.

People had taken shelter in the hills during the battle, returning only when the fighting ended on Jan 3, 1942 – only to find that looters had broken into their houses.

## Getting on with life



While the Battle of Kampar was a matter of artillery and guns, it was bicycles that were the Japanese Army's real secret weapon: they could traverse proper roads as easily as jungle paths along which troops could move quickly and invisibly. – Photo from Arthur Swinson's *Defeat in Malaya: The Fall of Singapore* (McDonald & Co, 1970)

### Revisiting WWII 1939-1945

"Even our family altar was removed," recalls Chye.

He and his family didn't suffer in the first few months, as food sold at the market was very cheap – mainly because it had been stolen or looted from elsewhere. He remembers that a tin of sardines could cost as little as 10 sen, the equivalent of about RM2 today.

"Another interesting thing I noticed was

that everyone was selling something in the market. For the first two months, there was no work and hardly any employment for anyone. So people would do anything to earn some income, like selling vegetables or Chinese *kuih*. Housewives learnt to make cakes to sell at the market."

Chye clearly recalls that, in the beginning, the Japanese did not ill-treat the Chinese.

"They would only look for anti-Japanese elements among the people.

"One time, a group that had been going around collecting donations for China had their photograph published in the newspaper. The Japanese ended up using that as evidence to detain everyone in the photograph."

Like many local children who lived under the Occupation, Chye was taught

elementary Japanese. To entice students to attend school, the Japanese would give every child that came 10 katis of rice.

Girls, however, usually stayed away because their parents were afraid they would be raped, says Chye.

"Our teachers were Japanese soldiers, and the first day we turned up, they cut our hair short and gave us a Japanese cloth cap to wear.

"Every morning, we would line up, face east and bow low. We were taught Japanese songs before returning to our classrooms.

"Our teachers were quite friendly with us, but strict. Anyone who misbehaved got two tight slaps to the face, which could be quite painful."

Three months into the year, the soldiers closed the school down and bade farewell to the students, saying that they were going to fight in New Guinea.

"When the soldiers left, Kampar was run by the civil administration," says Chye.

This didn't mean any lessening of discipline in the town, though.

When Chye's family grew maize but lost some of their crop to thieves and complained, the Japanese took swift action: Somehow, the thieves were identified, tried and then beheaded in the padang.

Their heads were placed on plates and displayed in the market next to posters warning people what would happen if they committed crimes.

Says Chye: "After that, no one stole our maize anymore. We could even sleep with the doors unlocked."

Though that sleep must have been troubled by dreams of flashing swords and gushing blood...

■ Next week, *Revisiting World War II* heads into the central region of Malaya as we continue tracing the Japanese invasion route.

We urge readers who have firsthand memories of life in Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah during World War II, or know of friends and relatives who lived through those years, to share the information and help preserve the memories for posterity. Mementoes, artefacts, documents and photographs – which we will return – will also be most welcome. Please include a contact phone number and/or address.

Mark all material "Revisiting WWII" and send to: *The Star*, Menara Star, No. 15, Jalan 16/11, 46350 Petaling Jaya, Selangor; fax: 03-7955 4039; e-mail: [ww2@thestar.com.my](mailto:ww2@thestar.com.my).

BEING children the first time they ever saw Japanese warplanes dropping bombs on their town, Kuan Toh Kee and his sister thought, in all innocence, that the planes were "shitting"!

Then they heard the explosions. Kuan, 71, a cheerful soul with a wry sense of humour, recalls that two days after he saw the planes that December in 1941, the Japanese army arrived to take over Taiping, Perak. By then, the British had left town. He was seven years old then.

While life under the Japanese was difficult, with all the deprivations and humiliations associated with an occupation by an invading power, it was the "hooded man" that was, perhaps, the most troubling aspect.

The Japanese would round up groups of up to several hundred people and gather them in a field where they were made to line up. Then a man wearing a hood would be brought forward. He was obviously a local collaborator – he wore the hood to conceal his face from townsfolk who knew him, of course. Silently, he would walk down the line, peering into faces, then identifying those supposedly harbouring anti-Japanese sentiments.

Anyone singled out was taken away and executed.

"I was taken to that field once with my sister, two younger broth-

## Of hooded men and torture



Kuan Toh Kee showing how the 'hooded man' would point out townsfolk harbouring anti-Japanese feelings. Those singled out were executed.

ers, parents and grandparents," recalls Kuan. "I only had a shirt on and wasn't even wearing any pants! We were that poor.

"For two hours, until noon, my family and I were made to stand there under the hot sun. I was too young to be scared of the Japanese back then, though," he says.

But he learnt to fear them soon enough when he saw people being hit with gun butts when they forgot

to get off their bicycles and bow as a mark of respect towards a bayonet that was fixed on a bridge guarded by soldiers.

Kuan says his father – who worked as a mechanic at army headquarters in the Peking Hotel – also told him fearful stories about seeing the Japanese torture people by forcing water down their throats using a hose and then stamping on their bloated stomachs.



Taiping's Matang Historical Complex exhibits Japanese Army equipment, including a Japanese sword.

He remembers his father pointing out four decapitated heads that had been placed on a bench near a restaurant as a warning. He had been too scared to approach for a closer look, especially since flies were crawling all over the heads.

"I don't think anyone dared eat at that restaurant either," he adds.

Visitors looking to trace the Japanese army's influence in Taiping during World War II can visit the

Hokkien Association cemetery were a monument to remember those killed during the Occupation has been set up.

The Matang Historical Complex, located about 2km from the Simpang/Taiping junction of the Ipoh-Butterworth trunk road, also has a section on the war.

During the Occupation, the complex – which had once been the official residence of anti-colonial resistance fighter Ngah Ibrahim – was turned into the Japanese army's military base as well as a tin and farm produce administration centre.

Outside the museum, there are two rectangular blocks on display, one of marble and the other of granite and etched with Japanese writings; they had been discovered near the homes of residents in the late 1980s.

According to museum assistant Ahmad Sazli Sabu, the writing on the blocks describe a furious battle during which 200 Japanese soldiers fought and defeated a force of 1,500 British soldiers on a hill near Kroh in Upper Perak in the middle of a thunderstorm.

"Japanese tourists who once visited here told us that a commander named Tazuo Matui had died during that battle, and so the memorials had been made to honour him," he says. – **By C.K.**