



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XXXVI No. 57

December 1986



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: AVM Horton. (1986). A Note on the British Retreat from Kuching 1941-1942. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XXXVI (57): 241-250

A NOTE ON THE BRITISH RETREAT FROM KUCHING 1941-1942

AVM Horton

INTRODUCTION

The Kawaguchi Detachment, the Japanese task force destined for north-west Borneo, proceeded from Canton via Camranh Bay in the first part of December 1941. General Seiken (or Kiyotaki) Kawaguchi decided that

"a landing would be made at Miri and Seria to capture and secure the oilfield district and airfields in that area. A large part of the force would then re-establish the Miri oilfield while the main body was to capture the Kuching airbase".¹

Following the virtually unopposed Japanese landing in the Miri-Seria oilfield on 16 December 1941, Brunei Town fell on 22 December, Labuan on 1 January 1942, Jesselton on the 6th and Sandakan on the 19th.

A force of approximately 1,100 largely British-officered Indian soldiers of the 2/15th Punjab Regiment had been stationed in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, to defend the airfield,² which afforded access to Dutch Borneo. The first Japanese air raid on Kuching took place on 19 December 1941 and the enemy landed in overwhelming numbers four days later. The town itself surrendered on 24 December without a real fight: little could be done beyond denying the airfield to the invaders and retreating into the interior. The 2/15th Punjab Regiment then fought a disastrous, if not entirely unheroic, rearguard action across Borneo, enduring much hardship and inflicting some casualties on the enemy. This campaign - if thus it may be dignified - is the subject of the present article.³

A NOTE ON THE BRITISH RETREAT FROM KUCHING 1941–1942

by

AVM Horton

INTRODUCTION

The Kawaguchi Detachment, the Japanese task force destined for north-west Borneo, proceeded from Canton *via* Camranh Bay in the first part of December 1941. General Seiken (or Kiyotaki) Kawaguchi decided that

“a landing would be made at Miri and Seria to capture and secure the oilfield district and airfields in that area. A large part of the force would then re-establish the Miri oilfield while the main body was to capture the Kūching airbase”.¹

Following the virtually unopposed Japanese landing in the Miri-Seria oilfield on 16 December 1941, Brunei Town fell on 22 December, Labuan on 1 January 1942, Jesselton on the 6th and Sandakan on the 19th.

A force of approximately 1,100 largely British-officered Indian soldiers of the 2/15th Punjab Regiment had been stationed in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, to defend the airfield,² which afforded access to Dutch Borneo. The first Japanese air raid on Kuching took place on 19 December 1941 and the enemy landed in overwhelming numbers four days later. The town itself surrendered on 24 December without a real fight: little could be done beyond denying the airfield to the invaders and retreating into the interior. The 2/15th Punjab Regiment then fought a disastrous, if not entirely unheroic, rearguard action across Borneo, enduring much hardship and inflicting some casualties on the enemy. This campaign — if thus it may be dignified — is the subject of the present article.³

THE GENERAL WAR SITUATION

In April 1940 the Germans occupied Denmark and Norway. The Netherlands, Belgium and France fell in quick succession soon afterwards, but the United Kingdom managed to hold out because the Nazis failed to secure air superiority. In 1941 the Germans turned eastwards instead, invading Yugoslavia and Greece in April of that year and attacking the Soviet Union on 22 June. Meanwhile, the Italians in North Africa were decisively defeated by British forces. With the Germans approaching the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, the scope of war in the Far East widened in December 1941 when Japan — which had already occupied Indo-China and large stretches of China itself — launched a bid for a more extensive South-East Asian Empire.