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**THE HISTORIC FALL OF
SINGAPORE**

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THE HISTORIC FALL OF SINGAPORE

By NAOSADA TAKABATAKÉ

It was on the fifth night after our departure from a certain base in southern French Indo-China that our flotilla stopped, with lights extinguished, far off the coast where lights were glimmering. It was 1 a. m. on December 8, 1941. When told to land at once, we learned for the first time that this was Singora.

Landing in the face of the enemy ! This tension of mind was too soon banished by the success of our surprise landing. At dawn, when two hostile combat planes flew over for mere form's sake, we were speeding in a motor car, while our corps was advancing like raging billows toward the Malay frontier.

I was told afterwards that the operations of a storm unit had facilitated our speedy landing. This unit had made a simultaneous forced landing at Kota Bharu in northern Malaya, fifty kilometres away from us braving the fire from an enemy force of five thousand strong. As a decoy unit to cover the landing of the main force, it had fought a deadly and dauntless battle and for that reason, the unprecedented forced landing at Singora was as so successful. But behind it, we must not forget, there were also joint operations on the part of the Army and Navy their air forces.

According to the general rule of military operations, a small party of the vanguard lands first and under its cover follows the landing of the main body. Therefore, the staff officers formed a very bold plan of catching the enemy unaware by landing the main force all of a sudden. At first, following the orthodox

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strategy, they had planned to use a certain air base in the southern part of French Indo-China as a footing for our army's landing 800 kilometres away. On the other hand, the enemy had many well-equipped air bases all over the state of Kedah, which were at a short distance of only 200 kilometres from our intended landing place. Under these conditions, it was thought fruitless to attack the enemy. If a small party was, first of all, to be landed, the enemy would at once detect our intention and deal the main body of our army a heavier blow frustrating our attempt. It was a matter of greatest anxiety whether our large flotilla lying at a base in Hainan Island could safely proceed, exposed to the enemy's airplanes and submarines, to the destination across a sea-route of several thousand kilometres. But these great naval and military operations were resolutely carried out partly because of co-ordination between the commander-in-chief of the squadron convoying our attacking forces and Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, supreme commander of the Malay campaign, and partly because of the construction of two air bases in a small island near Cambodia so that the transports might be escorted by fighter planes.

Our ships, which we thought at first to be going southward, were now found to be steering northward. We had no idea where we were going, but suddenly our flotilla steered south and hurried straight toward its destination in the Bay of Thailand. It was feared that one third of the ships might perhaps be sunk by aerial or submarine operations of the enemy. Lieutenant-General Yamashita who was aboard a certain transport arranged that if he went down with his ship, the divisional commander should act in his stead, and that if the divisional commander fell before the enemy's attack, the commander should resume the post. We came to know of this arrangement at a subsequent date. Throughout the Malay campaign, commander-in-chief Yamashita always went with his soldiers with this resolution, and this tremendously encouraged the army to do its best.

After we had outwitted the British command by our land-

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ing tactics, we found it weak and unprepared to put up any stubborn resistance. On the night of the ninth, our corps, which had marched southward across the Thai territory without a break, for the first time exchanged fire with the enemy at a point only 500 metres from the Malay frontier, and the battle was on ; but its thrill was short-lived, for the enemy forces retired hastily, leaving several tanks and guns behind. In order to hamper our advance, they destroyed all bridges. The result was that we found it very difficult for our tanks to advance. The distance between the Thai frontier and Singapore is 1,100 kilometres, with several hundred bridges on the way between them. If all these bridges were to be demolished by the enemy, they must be, one by one, repaired or rebuilt—a task which would take much time, and it was feared that we might not be able to get to Singapore even in a year's time. Therefore, it became necessary for us to devise means to overcome this difficulty. Accordingly, it was planned to dispatch a small number of pickets to eliminate the hostile sentinels ; after which an engineer corps was to march under cover of the infantry and build bridges where the existing ones had been destroyed by the enemy. It was expected, of course, that on these occasions the enemy would come out and open fire. So these operations were to be done under cover of night. Such tasks completed, the tanks were first to cross, then the infantrymen on trucks followed by the artillery units. The infantry then would launch a night attack on the enemy positions. Taking advantage of the consequent confusions, all our units would cross the nearest bridges and make a furious dash at the enemy forces before they had time to blow up the unoccupied bridges. By this means our army made a dash to reach the Perak river line at a stretch, with the result that a severe battle was fought to break through the Jitra line.

The British army was under the impression that the Japanese advance toward Malaya was a feint to cross into Burma for the purpose of intercepting the Chang-aiding route. The British, therefore, presumed that if they built strong lines in the northern part of Malaya and offered a stubborn resistance, the Japanese

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would not venture further to invade that quarter. It was from this viewpoint that the British had spent six months in erecting strong fortifications chiefly around Chanlung, Jitra, Keparapa Star and Alor

Star and had massed one division of troops. The British Malay command had reckoned that, however strong the Japanese might be, it would take them at least three months to break through this four-fold ring. Fortunately or unfortunately only two days after they had landed, the Japanese forces were already facing these defensive positions. We had not time enough to ascertain the true character of these fortifications. The Sayéki volunteer unit was at once formed, consisting of a certain number of infantrymen, ten tanks, two field-guns and two battalions of engineers, a force of four hundred in all. By adopting the "close-fighting" method, this unit broke through Chanlung and, taking advantage of the disorder in the enemy rank and file, attacked the Jitra line. As for our tanks, one of them followed one of the enemy's tanks and made way for the others. Our forces made such a speedy drive that by the midnight of December 12, they were already facing the main Jitra stronghold.

The attack on the Jitra line began with a brave night assault by the Honda unit. It was started at 4 a.m. on December 13 and we found that the bridge spanning it had already been blown up. There were two or three rows of wireentanglements and a number of *tochkas* on the other side of the river. On crossing it, our soldiers cut the barbed wire entanglements and then jumped into the *tochkas*, but they were challenged by a withering fire. Unit Commander Honda was seriously wounded. Heavy shells fell as far as the headquarters of the Sayéki unit and knocked down a forest of rubber trees as though a hurricane had been blowing. The battle continued for four hours and by that time about half of our forces had been wounded and killed. Then the commander of the Sayéki unit declared: "Now is the time for us to die." And he was about to make a charge into the enemy's position together with his remaining men, when reinforcements fortunately arrived. Our army, thus bolstered, decided to make a night assault and fight a decisive battle that night.

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Soon afterwards, it became known that the enemy had begun to retreat. Greatly encouraged by this favourable turn the Sayéki unit, with the hard-fighting Honda company at the head of the column made a furious raid on the retreating enemy. Thus, as the proverb says that "a little leak will sink a great ship," the strongest fortification in the Malay peninsula, which the British had boasted of holding for at least three months, was reduced only in a day. Thereafter we had to fight only some minor engagements.

On December 23, fifteen days after the landing on the peninsula, we occupied the state of Perak. At the same time, we captured an air base in Kedah and an air unit, which had been impatiently waiting in the southern French Indo-China, came to use it shooting down at the outset fifteen hostile combat planes over Kuala Lumpur.

Our next objective was Kuala Lumpur, capital of the Federated Malay states. With the occupation of this city, an unprecedented surprise operation called "boat operation" by land troops proved very successful. The small boats which had been used to land our troops at Singora were taken across the peninsula by land to Penang. At that time the Straits of Malacca were still under British control. On New Year's eve fifty boats, which were fully loaded with troops, left Taiping and sailed southward along the coast. Mr. Miwa, my fellow-correspondent, and myself were among the troops. Fully realizing that half the boats might fall prey to enemy gun-boats, the commander left the regimental standard in charge of the headquarters and set out for the destination courageously. Without any

casualty, however, the boats proceeded on their voyage. By mistake they came to the rear of Kuala Lumpur, but this rather facilitated the fall of the city.

Soon afterwards, the annihilative battle of Slim took place, commencing in the early morning of January 7, 1942. Our side, comprising a small infantry force and the Tanaka tank corps, engaged two enemy brigades. Violently attacked by our forces, the enemy was completely annihilated by the evening of January

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8 ; and thus the way to Johore Bharu was opened for our central corps. On the other hand, our detachments operating in the east, central and west coasts together with the Minakami operative corps made a further advance, and assisted by the skillful continuous bombings on the part of our air corps, pressed southward. On January 31, they captured Johore Bharu, traversing distance of 1200 kilometres in fifty-five days. During this period 92 battles had been fought, and 250 bridges repaired or rebuilt. On the average, our troops had advanced at the rate of 20 kilometres and fought twice a day. During these fifty-five days they had kept on marching without taking even a day's rest. The feats they accomplished have added a new chapter to the annals of modern war.

This speed dash on land, however, does not eclipse the sea battle off Malaya. Great numbers of hostile troops had been stationed on the east coast of Malaya for the purpose of preventing our army from landing there. Further, the British had dispatched the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, two of their most powerful battleships, to patrol the east coast. But these two "floating fortresses" were swiftly sent to the Davy Jones' locker by our intrepid naval air arm.

On the night of February 8 the first attack on Singapore was begun by a section of the unit which had succeeded in landing at Ubin Island. Bombardment was begun at about 2 p.m. The huge guns, for each of which a thousand shells were said to have been prepared, heavily pounded Singapore. This action on the part of our army gave the impression that the bombardment was for the purpose of supporting the operations of our troops which had landed on Ubin Island. This was, of course a *ruse de guerre*, and the enemy, not being aware of our real intention, fell into our trap and began to return the fire. Delighted that the time had come for opening major assaults, our main forces which were divided into two parties began their operations in the early morning of February 9. At midnight, one of the main parties bravely crossed the Johore channel, having the swampy ground on the west side of Singapore as its objective. At ten

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minutes past twelve one section of the other party crossed the eastern side of the channel and at twenty minutes past twelve the other section of it followed suit. Encouraged by the signals of blue and red lights which were given by the men who had first landed, I jumped into a boat with a number of soldiers and hurried across the channel.

The British forces concentrated their defence positions at Seletar, the Singapore-Johore causeway and Bukit Timah; they guarded Tengah in particular. The Japanese contingents found it difficult to

determine what means should be taken in order to break through Tengah. The enemy, who had attached much importance to our landing on Ubin Island, transferred the Australian army from the west to the east, with the result that the western part was rather thinly protected. Therefore, when one of our corps landed on this part of the island, the British forces were surprised and tried to turn back. But it was too late. On the morning of February 10, the headquarters of our army advanced near the Tengah air base. At the Tengah aerodrome, the soup and bread which the British forces had prepared were left as they were, indicating how panic-stricken they were as they fled. Amidst this confusion Tengah was occupied; but Bukit Timah, which we had expected to seize by February 11, offered stubborn resistance in defiance of our furious attacks. The commander of the Mudaguchi corps was wounded, and so was one of his staff officers. Gradually the battle scene became more ghastly than ever. At night the enemy poured oil into the Straits of Johore and set fire to it. In the teeth of this outrageous operation, our right-wing corps made a daring landing and, extending our fighting efficacy, pressed forward from the main point of Mandi up to the water reservoir. The central corps, which had already rushed on the way to Bukit Timah, was by that time gradually advancing toward the city. Late at night, the main point of Bukit Timah and its neighbourhood though strongly fortified and defended, were occupied at last.

The following morning our army dropped handbills from

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an airplane upon the enemy's camps, advising them to give up resistance and surrender. Evening came, but there was no answer. To awaken the British command from its last illusions our army began to bring its fighting capacity into full play. The enemy desperately resisted. Counter-attacks were repeated with bayonets ; and nearly 300 guns concentrated their firing upon Bukit Timah. Throughout the night there was furious fighting Everywhere hand-to-hand struggle was in progress. Even the war correspondents fought with their knives drawn.

Thus the subsequent three days, February 12, 13 and 14, passed with the raging of severe combats and bombardments, but the first line remained immovable. Amidst such suffocating rushes and counter-attacks great numbers of enemy troops fell, adding more ghastliness to the inferno of blood and fire. Then came February 15, and although the battle continued, no British airplane took to the air. Perhaps all the hostile planes were accounted for by our " wild eagles," which had already moved to the Tengah airfield. The truth is that on February 11 a number of enemy aircraft, already aware of their fate, attempted to escape to Palembang. The majority of the flying officers left the island by sea, but great many of their boats were discovered by our navy and "wild eagles," and so their plans to evacuate failed and their aircraft destroyed.

The left-wing corps, which had long been impatiently awaiting for an opportunity with impatience to make a spirited advance, now determined to make a death-defying dash toward Keppel Harbour, the last stronghold on which the enemy's fate depended. Toward the evening the time was drawing near to accomplish such an objective. Commander Mudaguchi of the Mudaguchi corps was then embarrassing his staff officers by insisting that he would go to the front line. On hearing this, one of the officers said : " All your men are firmly resolved to seize Keppel Harbour without fail tonight. If you go with them, it will unnecessarily make them uneasy, for they will think that Your Excellency had come to

encourage them. Please go tomorrow morning."

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At these words the commander was extremely moved and replied : " It is very kind of you to say so, but our men are now going to make their last dash with the standard flying. If the regimental commander is killed in battle, the battalion commander is to command the whole corps ; and if the battalion commander dies, the company commander is to command instead. We are fighting a hard battle. In making this last dash many of our men will surely die. Before they go, I should like to shake hands with them and bid them farewell. I am sure all the men will be glad to see me. Let me go now."

The staff officer was overcome by emotion and dared not dissuade him from going any more. But before long a white flag was seen hoisted in the enemy's headquarters. This sight made commander Mudaguchi so happy that he led the three cheers for victory, and then he shook hands with his subordinate officers in utter abandonment of joy.

As the fateful morning of February 15 advanced, the intensity of enemy bombardments became more and more feeble. And it was rumoured that the enemy had raised a white flag, but nobody could tell from where this report came. All the newspaper correspondents hurriedly went about to ascertain whether it was true or not. At half past one in the afternoon three British officers including Major Willde came to the Japanese side bearing a white flag of truce to solicit terms for their surrender.

There is a small tableland on the highest pass of a hill which forms a part of the main road leading from Johore Bharu to Singapore. Here is a Ford automobile factory. From one of the office rooms on that momentous occasion one could see the island city burning dreadfully. The huge guns of our army, which were laid on a hill behind this factory, were shaking this room with their thundering roar. In the centre of the room was a coarse table, on the north side of which were seated Lieutenant-General A. E. Percival, commander-in-chief of the British forces, and his three staff officers. On the opposite side sat Lieutenant-General Yamashita, commander-in-chief of the Japanese forces, and some of his staff officers. Pitiable was the

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figure of Lieutenant-General Percival, whose eyes were bloodshot and swollen. Lieutenant-General Yamashita was, on contrary, composed and dignified.

"I ask you to answer very briefly," said the Japanese commander-in-chief.

"Very well," replied Lieutenant-General Percival.

"Are you ready to surrender unconditionally ?"

"I will reply tomorrow."

" What ? Tomorrow ? The Japanese army is going make a night attack tonight."

"Let me answer at ten tonight."

"The Japanese army will at once continue attacking. Is it all right ? Answer me yes or no."

"Yes, I will surrender unconditionally."

" If you break your promise, our army will at once make general attack on the city of Singapore."

"I ask you to protect the British troops, women and children upon your honour."

"From the viewpoint of *bushido* it is a matter of course that we will do so ; it is unnecessary to make it a condition. Now, sign your name on this."

"All right, sir."

The interview was over. The British commander-in-chief's car, on which a white flag and the Union Jack were set up, wheeled away sadly toward the city of Singapore.

Our army's bombardment was continued until ten at night, which was the time for truce. The Imperial Headquarters announced at ten minutes past ten the same night that our fore had forced the enemy in the Singapore fortresses to capitulate unconditionally. The Japanese army in the Malay peninsula also published the same information at fifty minutes past ten the same night. On the seventieth day after the start of the Malay campaign all British forces succumbed to the brave and furious assaults of the Japanese troops.

On February 21, the Imperial Headquarters published the results obtained by our forces in Malaya as follows :

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(1) 73,000 captives including officers and men.

(2) Booties : 300 powerful heavy guns and guns of various other kinds; more than 2,000 machine-guns; 50,000 rifles and 200 tanks (including armoured cars); 10,000 motor cars of various kinds and 200 motorcycles; a huge quantity of ammunition and innumerable shells for powerful heavy guns ; numberless munitions; one steamer, of 10,000 tons, three tankers, each of the 5,000 ton class, and great numbers of large and small ships.

At noon, February 17, Singapore island was named Shohnan-to, and thus its British character was eliminated. All the hills on or near which severe battles had been fought were given new Japanese names. On the height of Bukit Timah, monuments in memory of our army's great victory and the unknown fallen warriors of the British forces will be erected in the near future. One monument has already been put up in the place where the Mudaguchi corps fought bravely. At present, not only Singapore, but the whole of Malaya is being reconstructed on the basis of co-existence and co-prosperity in greater East Asia.