

The Chinese of Singapore and their imperial Second World War 1939 – 1945

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Abstract

While much has been written on the experiences of the Chinese community in Singapore during the Japanese invasion and occupation of the colony, the war remains primarily cast as the first act of a story that culminates in sovereign nationhood. Yet this teleological narrative of social connection only presents one face of the island's Second World War history, one that is driven primarily by the need to forge a cohesive national story of the past. There is a need for historians to consider the plural experiences of the Second World War to break out of the ideology of the nation-state that encloses the historiography of Singapore in a way that structures historical thinking. This paper focuses on members of the Chinese community in Singapore who were oriented towards the notion of empire. It proposes to advance the historiographical discussion by using a body of unused sources to trace the contours of a very different political landscape. Using a combination of oral history interviews and archival sources, it examines the wartime lives of three individuals to consider absent frames of the conflict as experienced by members of the Chinese community.

Keywords: Overseas Chinese, Singapore history, imperial history, World War Two

Writing Singapore's Second World Wars

Historians of Singapore have produced a considerable body of literature on its wartime past. But the popularity of the subject is a relatively new development, only becoming a serious subject of study by scholars in the past two decades. This is, in part at least, a product of the Singapore state's incorporation of the Japanese occupation experience into the nation's creation myth in the lead-up to the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of Singapore by assigning the conflict a clearly defined role in shaping the former British colony into a sovereign nation-state. Academics and popular authors alike have since been swept up in the rising interest in the nation's war history.

In all of these studies, there is a focus on how ordinary residents of Singapore made sense of the occupation. This is not surprising, as such a focus allows for the most abundant quarry to mine for the origins of post-colonial nationalism. At the same time, more sophisticated works on commemoration and the deliberate forgetting of the heterogeneous, racialised occupation experience have provided a crucial dimension to understanding the nature of Singapore's war remembrance.¹ But there is a curious assumption in this body of writing that has remained unproblematised. Studies of the war have been limited to events and experiences within a specific time period and geography.

The story, as told in the national narrative, goes something like this: war comes to Malaya in December 1941, heralded by the landings at Kota Bahru and southern Thailand, and culminates in the siege and fall of the island of Singapore in February 1942. The focus then shifts from war to occupation, which ends in August 1945 with the

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¹ Diana Wong, "War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore: An Introduction", in Lim, Pui Huen and Wong, Diana (eds), *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 6; For an up-to-date and comprehensive examination of the forces shaping public and private war memories in Malaysia and Singapore, see Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack's excellent *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

Japanese surrender. December 1941 to August 1945 is the temporal span that has been marked by scholars and the Singapore state as the Second World War years. Before that, Malaya was not at war. There is a functional logic to this approach. War began when bombs were dropped, when shells were fired in anger, and when callously bored Japanese troops beheaded members of the occupied citizenry for sport. There was none of such brutalities in Malaya until December 1941. Until recently, much of the academic literature has overlooked the presence of volunteers from the colony serving in the Chinese army on the Burma Road. Their presence stemmed from a response to the Sino-Japanese War that began in 1937. Even more rarely mentioned is the presence of Chinese volunteers in Europe and the Atlantic fighting in a very different conflict against German and Italian forces. They were caught up in a war fought by Britain against its European enemies that began in 1939. It is this latter group that this paper is specifically interested in.

Overseas Chinese involvement, and their absence from histories of the wider Second World War outside of the traditional framing of the conflict raises questions as to just how they framed their experiences of the war, what their points of reference were, and how the emphases on space and post-colonial nationhood has led historians to understand Singapore's war history as the start of the attainment of post-colonial state sovereignty. One assumption in the existing historiography, as well as in popular histories, is that the war was a struggle between two empires that the people who resided in Malaya felt no ownership of, or even understood.² The actions of the Chinese community in service of the British Empire put this into question. Looking at imperial mobilisation, it becomes clear that the conflict challenged their belief in empire, and that their actions were geared toward preserving it.

By focusing on the experiences of members of the Chinese in Singapore who were oriented towards the notion of empire, I want to foreground the diverse loyalties of different groups of people, and push national narratives and nationalised spaces into the background so as to pluralise the conflict and the multiple ways through which the colonial citizenry understood the war. This ideological heterogeneity meant that different constituencies within the Chinese community were essentially living different sets of conflicts, not all of which resembled that of the national narrative - Singapore's national Second World War. Loyalties to political centres of the day, principally the British Empire or Nationalist China produced differing war experiences.³

This study traces the wartime lives of three individuals to consider absent frames of the conflict as experienced by members of the Chinese community which participated in Singapore's imperial Second World War. As members of a greater diaspora of British subjects who gravitated around the imperial metropole, they fought for the interests of empire. Theirs was certainly not a conflict that was understood through the frame of nascent post-colonial nationalism.⁴

Thinking about a separate imperial Second World War allows us to consider the global historical reality of Singapore's conflict, and to challenge its current geographical limitations. It also points to the power of memory politics in the post-war era, where the trans-national nature of the Chinese community's history is submerged by the needs of the post-colonial state, and offers possibilities for other modes of post-colonial war history. Just as Singapore's war historiography is geographically anchored

² Ahmad Iqbal Latif, "Singapore's Missing War", in Koh David Wee Hock (ed.), *Legacies of World War II in South and East Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Press, Singapore, 2007), pp. 92 – 93; see also Wang Gungwu, "Memories of War: World War II in Asia" in the same volume, pp. 11 - 22.

³ For an account of volunteers who were loyal to Nationalist China, see Ernest Koh, "A diaspora at war: national and transnational narratives of Singapore's Second World War", in Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun (eds), *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), pp. 242 – 254.

⁴ The Chinese were by no means the only participants in Singapore's imperial war. Members of the Malay and Indian communities also served in the British military, particularly in Malaya, and their stories parallel those covered in this paper in that they too found traction with the idea of empire, and their service in the British armed forces is one indicator of their loyalty to empire. There is a mobility and geographical expansiveness which characterised Singapore's war.

to Malaya, the primary sources that have been mined have also been limited to the region. Almost all of it is based on oral accounts by civilian survivors and British/Japanese war records of the campaign and occupation. By examining the primary sources located beyond the confines of Singapore and Malaya the writing of the experiences of war by the inhabitants of Singapore, it is possible to break the stereotypes created by national history. The experiences of the Chinese described in this article are drawn principally from two oral history accounts (one from an interview conducted by the author in Liverpool, England, and the other from a oral history recording held in the Imperial War Museum), as well as from flying logbooks and letters held by the family of one of the protagonists who currently live in the United States. Complementing these are archival documents held in the British National Archives, such as sea movement cards and squadron records.

The body of literature that has emerged on Singapore's war history particularly those in the English language, have traditionally looked past the possibility of constructing alternative frames of Singapore's wartime past. Stephen Leong's work in the late 1970s on the Malayan Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War is one of only a few that connects the war experiences of Singapore Chinese to the conflict in China.⁵ An English-language memoir that draws connections between the Sino-Japanese War and Singapore was published in 1982 by Yap Pheng Geck, a commanding officer in the Singapore Volunteer Corps.⁶ For a long time, both cut lonely figures in the historiography. However, there have been some indications that this is changing, at least in popular history and public remembrance. The publication of a popular Chinese language book, *The Price of Peace* in 1997, placed the Singapore Chinese volunteers on the Burma Road in the limelight.⁷ A two-part television documentary followed later that year. Since then, interest in the Singapore Chinese involvement in the Sino-Japanese War has increased substantially. Anthropologist Chan Chow Wah's *Light on the Lotus Hill*, a popular history documenting the significance of Singapore's Shuanglin Monastery as a training centre for drivers bound for south-western China during the Sino-Japanese War, generated much interest when it was published in 2009.⁸ Chan's work immediately helped inspire an exhibition mounted jointly by the National Archives of Singapore and the Yunnan Provincial Archives on the *Nanyang ji gong* (the Chinese term given to the volunteers from Southeast Asia). In 2012, a public call for a memorial was issued in the main Chinese newspaper in Singapore, *Lianhe Zaobao*, followed by pledges of government support. However, there continues to be a scarcity of scholarly work on Singapore Chinese in the British armed service, which this study addresses.

The "normal" Empire

Imperial historians have demonstrated that the British Empire was not a structure of global hegemony that held all whom it ruled under magical thrall. It is not difficult to see why. The empire was a global *mélange* of territories with different legal statuses and affiliations to the Crown. Apart from outright colonies such as India (politically a "sub-empire" in its own right), there were settlement colonies like Australia, mandates such as the one in Palestine, protectorates like the Un-federated Malay States, fortresses such as Gibraltar and Malta, treaty ports and concessions in China, condominiums like the Sudan, and "spheres of interference" in Central Asia. There was no master-plan to British expansion over the centuries. The result was that any at given time only parts of the empire appeared to be in line with the metropole and fit with imperial strategies and policies. For example, the West Indian colonies and the enclaves along the coast of

⁵ Stephen Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937 – 1941", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.10 (2), September 1979, pp. 293 – 320.

⁶ Pheng Geck Yap, *Scholar, Banker, Gentleman Soldier: The Reminiscences of Dr Yap Pheng Geck* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press, 1982).

⁷ Choon Hon Foong (ed.), *The Price of Peace: True Accounts of the Japanese Occupation* (Singapore: Asiapac Books, 1997).

⁸ See Chow Wah Chan, *Light on the Lotus Hill: Shuang Lin Monastery and the Burma Road* (Singapore: Khoon Chee Vihara, 2009).

West Africa were regarded as a troublesome burden by the mid-nineteenth century.⁹ The concession port of Canton fell out of favour in the distribution of economic and political resources as Hong Kong and Shanghai grew in importance.

Regardless of the haphazard nature of its expansion however, the British Empire was on the whole a global community. It embraced, not always warmly, hundreds of millions of people that had been brought into its system. And in places, it was a given in the lives of the inhabitants. Centuries of continued existence, expansion, and victory had created a sense of pride that was internalised as much by those on the empire's geographical peripheries as by those that lived in its centre. The sights and sounds of everyday life and popular culture reinforced how normal empire was. Stage productions and literature used it as a canvas upon which sprawling adventure epics and romantic liaisons were created. Songs such as "There'll always be an England", sung not just by expatriates but also by Anglophone locals across the world in imperial cities such as Sydney, Singapore, Bombay, Hong Kong, and Vancouver, paid homage to the idea of empire. Newspapers like *The Daily Mail* and *The Straits Times* bore the words "For King and Empire" prominently on their covering titles every day, while BBC radio programmes began with an announcement reminding listeners that the broadcast was going out to audiences across the British Empire. Children in schools across the colonies sang "God Save the King" at morning assembly, commemorated imperial holidays, learnt about how the sun never set on the empire, and understood that Britannia ruled the waves as the greatest maritime power in history.

The geographical sprawl of the imperial Second World War owed most of its shape to the British Empire. Britain's war would have been confined to a conflict only with Germany if not for its colonial possessions in North Africa, the Mediterranean and South, Southeast, and East Asia, such that Britain found itself confronting hostile and expansionist regimes in Italy and Japan. This war against two other powers with their own empire-building ambitions transformed all of Britain's overseas possessions. Some were wrought subtly through reflection and reform, while the rest were introduced much more forcefully when a new master brushed the old one aside, as was the case in the Far East.

Even before fighting began in the colonies of British Asia, the political, economic, and (in many cases) ideological cohesiveness of the British world system meant that the whole of the empire was at war against the Nazi state once Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's ultimatum to Germany over Poland expired on 3 September 1939. The breathtaking global mobilisation of labour and resources that followed swiftly underscored this fact. By the end of the Second World War more than half of British forces committed to war were in fact not British. Commonwealth aircrew made up half of Bomber Command's strength in Europe, while the Royal Indian Air Force had thirty thousand personnel and nine squadrons involved in the Pacific War.¹⁰

By the interwar period, a distinct Chinese community that identified strongly with the imperial system had formed in Malaya, centred on the Straits Settlements. Part of its emergence was due to opportunism. But there was a much stronger political dimension to this community by the eve of war in Europe. This phenomenon was being pushed along two fronts. First the idea that empire was normal was being entrenched by popular culture and schooling. British imperial history formed one of the core components of study in the curriculum in Christian mission schools as well as independent schools funded by Anglophone philanthropists. At the Raffles College, students in second year studied the history of the empire, while British political and constitutional history formed the third year syllabus.¹¹

The other front involved the concept of citizenship. A person born in the Straits Settlements (the only part of Malaya that was truly a colony in a legal sense; the Malay

⁹ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830 – 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1 – 2.

¹⁰ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), pp. 6 – 9.

¹¹ *Raffles College Calendar*, 1932 – 1933, pp. 26 – 29.

states were under British protection but technically sovereign sultanates), was granted British nationality, being born in British territory. One third of the Straits Settlements population were British nationals. Over time, a notion of citizenship was fostered that, in turn, introduced to the community notions of rights and duty. These duties included, Chua Ai Lin explains, an allegiance to the Crown and the system of British imperial rule in exchange for democratic participation as befitting their status as *citizens* (and not just subjects) of the British Empire.¹² In 1940, the Straits Chinese British Association petitioned the government of the Straits Settlements for the creation of a formal military regiment comprised of local-born Chinese troops. This was, in their words, a way of making “British subjectship and its privileges and responsibilities more real and vital to our people”.¹³ Letters in the press explained this rise in interest in the defence and running of the colony. “[I]t is our loyalty and sense of citizenship”, wrote one Chinese British subject to the *Malaya Tribune*, “which instils in our hearts a desire to take a greater share in and shoulder greater responsibilities of the administration of this Colony.”¹⁴ The Anglophone community thus did not take greater political rights to be a precursor to nationalism and independence. Rather, they viewed as natural the political relationship that existed between the imperial centre and the colonial periphery, but wanted it to be forged on the basis of equality, rights, and responsibilities to the system. Empire itself was, therefore, normal.

Like the Chinese diaspora after July 1937, the Anglophone Chinese in Malaya rallied to the defence of the empire when war became imminent. In 1934, the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements voted to donate 500,000 Straits Dollars as a gift “over and above the annual Defence Contribution of 4,000,000 Straits Dollars”. In 1935, the Council voted that the motion be repeated again.¹⁵ The Malayan Patriotic Fund for Britain was established just days after Chamberlain’s declaration of war in 1939. The Colonial Secretary for Chinese Affairs Arthur Goodman noted its success in collecting donations from the local community for Britain’s war. “Much might be written,” he commented, “on the way the community took this cause to heart, but it will suffice to record that subscriptions to this fund were received from rickshaw pullers, and the girls [even] undertook knitting garments for the troops.”¹⁶ More generous acts from the wealthier members of the imperial Chinese diaspora followed. At the height of the Battle of Britain in August 1940, *The Times* reported that a group wealthy “King’s Chinese merchants” raised 20,000 Straits Dollars towards the purchase of aircraft for the RAF.¹⁷

As a war tied into imperial networks across the globe, what is particularly striking is the geographical expansiveness of this Second World War. Some members of the Anglophone community travelled to serve. Others served whilst on their travels. Such was the case with RAF pilot Chew Teng Soon who, according to the few available archival documents dealing with his life and service, was in Britain when the war against Germany was declared. He was a pilot with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. On 5 September 1940, he was in action with No.17 Squadron over Debden, England. The combat report from Fighter Command of the incident reads as follows:

F/O Count Czernin led Yellow Section consisting of Sgt. Griffiths – Yellow 2 and Sgt. Chew – Yellow 3 to attack the rear vic formation of He.111’s. Yellow 1 and 2 delivered beam attacks on Nos 2 and 3 of the formation respectively, Yellow 3 keeping rear guard... Yellow 1 then attack (sic) remaining He.111 from abeam, and saw his under-carriage drop, and his starboard engine stop. Yellow 3 followed

¹² Ai Lin Chua, “Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in inter-war Singapore”. in Barr, Michael and Trocki, Carl (eds.). *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 21 – 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.26.

¹⁶ *Annual Report of Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Malaya, 1939*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 16 August 1940.

with similar attack, after which e/a burst into flames and went down with pieces falling away from it.¹⁸

Chew left no memoirs, nor was he lauded in service histories in post-war Singapore. But we can piece together some information about his life from records housed in the British National Archives and others in the Royal Air Force's holdings. We know he was born in Singapore and arrived in England for his studies in 1938. He volunteered for the RAF shortly after war broke out in September 1939, and indicated on his enlistment forms that he had "some flying experience with mono engine plane", which suggests private flying lessons. We know he flew with No.17 Squadron RAF between mid-1940 and late 1942, when he was shot down by German fighter aircraft over the English Channel and presumed to have died.¹⁹ That no other entries appear under his files seems to confirm this.

The story of a mariner by the name of Lee Kim Hock, as told in oral history interviews as well as personal and shipping records is a similar example.

Lee Kim Hock

Lee was 17 years old when he signed up with the Ocean SS Co. in Singapore. Fourth in a family of seven children, by his teens Lee was working in the harbour ward as a dock coolie. His work on the docks put him in daily contact with sailors coming from overseas ports, and Lee made it a point to strike up a conversation with any Chinese seamen he came across. Over time, stories of exotic destinations and a life defined by travel built up an idea of an exciting world beyond Singapore. His household situation only fed his desire. His father had abandoned the family after his youngest sister was born, and the children who were old enough to find paid work helped sustain the family. Lee's frustration at the prospect of a monotonous life spent working on the docks increased as he watched ships leave the harbour each day, and soon the half-joking suggestions that sailors made to him about joining a merchant shipping company as a rating became a serious option. In 1935, with the assistance of a Boatswain's Mate on the SS *Nestor* whom he befriended, he managed to convince the captain of the vessel to take him on as a replacement for a crew member who had jumped ship in Singapore.

The *Nestor* was a coal-fired ship. With a displacement of around fifteen thousand tons, it needed a large crew of ratings dedicated to keeping its furnaces fed with coal at sea. Starting out as a deck boy, Lee soon found himself working in the engine room department as a trimmer after being trained on Mann Island in Liverpool, England:

The stokers were all big men, because you needed to be able to keep going for hours without much rest, and for every day... We took turns having weekends, you know! If we were not in port, then we were at work. My job as a trimmer was to make sure that the coal was distributed evenly in the ship's hold. If there was too much coal on one side, then there would be a list... Working on a ship or as a coolie, it was the same. You could not say that one was tougher. For me, what was important was that I was able to see the world. I have been to Havana, Cape Town, Adelaide, Liverpool, Halifax, New York. So many places, I cannot remember all of them. Some places we only saw once, for a few days, and other places we went back several times... they became like homes to me. Not many people those days even got out of Malaya, so I was happy with what I was doing.²⁰

One of those "homes" that Lee became attached to was the city of Liverpool, where the Ocean SS Co. was headquartered and where the *Nestor* often found itself at harbour. Lee struck up several friendships with members of the Chinese community in the city, and from them he came to learn about the culture and politics of Great Britain. In 1938,

¹⁸ Public Records Office AIR50/9.

¹⁹ Details obtained from Chew Teng Soon's service record as held by RAF Disclosures at RAF Cranwell, Sleaford.

²⁰ Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

he travelled by train to London for the first time, and was amazed at the sights in the capital of the British Empire. It was, in the young sailor's mind, awe-inspiring and drove home the grandeur and the appropriateness of imperial rule:

I became very pro-Britain after being in London. The grand buildings, the status of the city, the underground, and the way everything was ordered. But if you asked me if it was just because of this visit, I would say no. I had seen other parts of the UK before that, and I had visited many of the lands that the British had colonised, like Sierra Leone, India, and Australia. And of course Singapore... For me, Britain was doing a great job in developing these places.... Yes, they ruled other people against their will sometimes, but it was for their own good. I believed that.²¹

Not long after his visit to the English capital, Lee had the chance to affirm his support for the empire. The invasion of Poland by German troops in September 1939 brought war to Britain and France. While the British Expeditionary Force was dispatched to France as it was in the First World War, on land the shooting war did not begin for nine more months. At sea, however, it was a very different story, especially for merchant shipping flying under the British flag.

As a maritime power, Britain had for nearly two centuries relied on the size of its merchant fleet for the empire's economic health, and on the strength of its navy to ensure that sea lanes remained open to the Home Islands. War supplies for its armed forces and industries as well as imported food products for the civilian population needed to be delivered in sufficient quantities to ensure that the armed forces could remain effective, and that civilian morale did not collapse. In a war situation, all commercial shipping movements came under the jurisdiction of a section of the Naval Staff known as the Trade Division (which was later absorbed into the Ministry of War Transport). The Trade Division and the Ministry of War Transport liaised with private owners to form convoys protected by Royal Navy or Royal Canadian Navy ships. Many merchant vessels, however, made the trans-Atlantic passage independently.

Despite the fact that the Germans had successes in using submarines against merchant shipping in the First World War, the Admiralty underestimated the threat posed by "U-boats" (to use the anglicised abbreviation of the German word for submarine, *unterseeboot*). Much of the overconfidence stemmed from a misplaced faith in inter-war advances in anti-submarine technology, and so merchant losses to U-boat attacks in the first three years of the war in Europe were staggering. In 1940, 471 ships (totalling over two million tons) were sunk through submarine attacks; in 1941, 432 ships (approximately the same tonnage) were lost to U-boats; the following year, casualties mounted as a result of the United States' entry into the war and the lack of protection for US merchant shipping. In the first six months of 1942 alone, 526 Allied ships were sunk by submarines, and by the end of the year a total of 1,160 vessels had been destroyed (over six million tons in total).²² The losses to merchant shipping in the Atlantic led to growing recognition that organising merchant vessels into convoys was the most effective protection against the submarine threat. Statistically, it gave the vessels the best chance of surviving the trans-Atlantic crossing. Morale was also an important factor, as merchant crew were kept in positive spirits by the sight of convoy escorts.

Considering the damage that German surface raiders and submarines were inflicting on trans-Atlantic shipping, the *Nestor* led a charmed life as attacks seemed to occur in places where the ship was not present. Yet the hazardous conditions faced by the crew of the Royal Merchant Navy prompted Lee to consider if he would be better off returning to Singapore. After pondering his options for a week in Liverpool, he decided not to do so:

²¹ Ibid.

²² Brian Beetham Schofield, "The Defeat of the U-Boats during World War II", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 16 (1), 1981, pp. 123 – 124.

I thought that I would be abandoning the merchant navy when it needed people like me the most. We were civilians, but we were also important for the war effort... Without us, Britain would be defeated. If I could do something about it, then I had to. So I stayed.²³

In November 1940, Lee joined the Lamport and Holt Line, a large maritime merchant corporation based in Liverpool that helped manage and provide crew for ships acquired by the Ministry of War Transport. As fate would have it, Lee's eventual posting was one such vessel received by the company in June, the *Empire Mouflon*. The *Mouflon* belonged to the "Empire" class of merchantman, which were freight carriers in all respects but one – each vessel of the class was fitted with a rocket-propelled catapult, on top of which sat a Hawker Sea Hurricane, a single-engine fighter aircraft. A total of thirty-five Catapult Aircraft Merchantman (more commonly known as CAM ships) were purchased by the British government between 1941 and 1942, and all bore the part name "Empire" to designate their purpose in the convoy system.²⁴

The necessity of the CAM ship is easy to appreciate. From the outbreak of war, long-range German bombers were able to assail British merchantmen with impunity by launching attacks on ships in the middle of the Atlantic, where British and Canadian fighter aircraft were unable to reach due to their limited range. The urgent need to combat this problem was readily apparent to the Royal Navy within a year of the outbreak of war. German aircraft had sunk over 350,000 tons of shipping between June 1940 and February the following year.²⁵ In response, the Royal Navy placed an order for small escort carriers to offer aerial protection for merchant convoys in May 1941, but none would be ready for the better part of a year. CAM, therefore, emerged as an innovative, stop-gap solution that allowed convoys to launch fighters (with the pilot assigned by RAF Fighter Command) in the middle of the Atlantic if the convoy came under attack by German aircraft. Once the threat had been dealt with, the aircraft was ditched into the sea, and the pilot recovered by one of the escort craft.

Lee's first Atlantic crossing aboard the *Empire Mouflon* was without incident. The ship departed Liverpool as part of convoy ON 35 on 9 November 1941, and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia just over two weeks later, after which it was kept in port with boiler issues, which restricted it to shorter trips around the eastern coast of North America. It only made the return voyage across the Atlantic on 24 March the following year, this time with the convoy SC 76, carrying a cargo of grain.²⁶ While there were no attacks on either leg of the Atlantic passage, fear and anxiety proved to be a greater enemy. The catapult, which was supposed to add protection to the group, gave the crew of the *Empire Mouflon* additional cause for concern:

You feel worse when you are allowed outside. While you're on watch, you are kept too busy to think about what might happen. But when you are off duty, the idle time creates a lot of tension and pressure... A lot of us did not like the CAM, because we thought the U-boats would single us out... Some of the new crew could not take the stress so well, and sometimes one of them became convinced that the ship was about to be attacked and leapt into the sea. They went crazy from fear... Some of them were picked up, the others we never heard of again... the convoy was too big and important to turn around for one man.²⁷

Lee's first experience of a U-boat attack came as the *Empire Mouflon* left New York for Liverpool on 3 October 1942 with the convoy SC 104. German submarines struck just over a week later. He was off-duty at the time and out on deck when the attack began in the dead of the night. He remembered its start vividly:

²³ Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

²⁴ See William Harry Mitchell and Leonard Arthur Sawyer, *The Empire Ships* (Lloyds of London Press Ltd: London, 1990).

²⁵ John Scutts, *The Fw200 Condor* (Manchester: Crecy Publishing, 2008), p. 26.

²⁶ Public Records Office BT389/10.

²⁷ Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

I was smoking outside during my break with a friend, who was an engine room storekeeper. It was probably around 1 am, the ocean was calm, and there was very little moonlight so it was very dark... There was a big explosion from the ship on our starboard (left). That ship was close enough to us that I felt the heat from the explosion and the force threw us backwards... I do not know what it was carrying, but it must have been ammunition because it was such a roar, and the ship seemed to leap out of the water. Its back was broken instantly, and it went down with the bow and stern in the air.... I did not even hear screaming, it was so loud and quick. I think it must have been two or three minutes [from the explosion to the ship sinking], and then there was just burning oil on the surface, and some debris... There was no time to help or do anything... I will never forget, at that moment I thought, "So that is how quick it can happen."²⁸

The vessel described by Lee would most likely have been the fuel tanker *Southern Empress*, which is described by the *Registry of Shipping and Seamen* as being part of SC 104, and was the victim of a torpedo (from U-221) just past midnight on 14 October. It was listed as carrying a load of 11,700 tons of fuel oil and a deck cargo of twenty-one landing craft, and sank with forty-eight crew dead, over two thirds of its ratings.²⁹ The attack by the submarine pack continued over four days, and by the time the surviving ships of the mauled convoy arrived in Liverpool on 21 October they had lost eight of their number, including – ominously for Lee and his fellow mariners – the CAM ship *Empire Mersey*.

Lee would go on to make several more Atlantic crossings and survive the war, aided by Allied advances in anti-submarine technology such as radar and sonar devices as well as the cracking of encrypted German naval codes. But the attack on convoy SC 104 would not be the last U-boat attack he would experience:

Most of the time I was below deck in the engine room, so I did not get to see what was happening. I just heard what people told me... But sometimes, when it was not my watch, I would go up for some air. There I would see all sorts of things. Wooden beams, shoes, sometimes a body. At other times, we would pass by a ship that was about to slip under the sea... After awhile, I learned either not to spend so much time outside, or if I was out, I would just look past all these things. For me, they became part of the background.³⁰

That the imperial war as fought by men like Lee was a global conflict is evidenced by even a cursory glance at the Merchant Shipping Movement Cards of the vessels that he served on. These detail every departure by a given vessel during its time of operation in the Royal Merchant Navy. Apart from Halifax, New York, and Liverpool, Lee called at a range of other ports from Reykjavik and Port Said to Haifa and Trinidad. The cargo of war was just as diverse, with the ships he served on carrying anything from cement and steel to salted fish and explosives.³¹

By February 1944, Lee Kim Hock had left Lamport and Holt Line. Working now for the shipping company Bibby Line Ltd on the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Derbyshire*, he found himself in the port of Naples in Italy, a world away from Singapore. He was allowed a brief spell of shore leave, and marvelled at the sights of the city as the ship unloaded its vital cargo of troops for the Allied offensive to the north. In an interview, he recalled that the pasta he had while on his first day on shore leave was the finest he had ever tasted in his life before or since. What also left a deep impression on him were the large crowds of men and women in military uniform milling about, and the seemingly endless drone of aircraft overhead. It would have been easy

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Public Records Office BT347/8; for a fully indexed list of merchant losses to German submarine attacks and the submarines credited with sinking them, see *Lloyd's War Losses: the Second World War* (Lloyds of London Press Ltd, Vol.1, 1989).

³⁰ Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

³¹ Public Records Office BT 389/9, BT 389/11, and BT 389/24.

for Lee to feel alone and alien in the mass of Allied personnel. But at the time, Lee could not have known that the war had brought another compatriot to southern Italy as well, in support of the same cause.

Tan Kay Hai

Tan Kay Hai was born in 1914 to a wealthy Chinese family that had made its fortune in Malaya through the rubber trade. During his formative years, there were clear signs too of a gradual but steady identification with the British system. As a boy, he attended a Chinese medium primary school, Tuan Mong, but by the time he was in his teens he had enrolled in the English-medium St. Andrew's School, and was a member of the Church of England. His religious view was a key pillar in shaping his belief in the importance of the imperial order in bringing modernity to the Chinese of colonial Singapore. In a speech to his alma mater in 1948, Tan highlighted that "Europeans, no matter which group of people, all believe in God, while Chinese nationals worship ancestors. If we could be like the Europeans and have the same belief in God, in addition to our tight Chinese connections, we will be stronger."³²

Apart from his belief in the strengthening benefits of the Church, there is little doubt that at least some of Tan's receptiveness to empire stemmed from the fact that his family had done well financially out of the colonial system. His family's wealth also enabled him to indulge in his passion for machinery, especially aircraft. By the time he was in his twenties, he was already a member of the Royal Singapore Flying Club and in his spare time had learnt to fly the de Havilland Tiger Moth, a single-engine biplane in service with the Royal Air Force. For most of the time that he was on the ground, Tan worked as a car salesman in Malayan Motors, where his familiarity with the internal combustion engine and his fluent English came in handy when dealing with customers.

After the fall of France in 1940 Tan began to consider enlisting in the RAF. His family tells of a genuine desire to serve the empire, to stand up for an order that was "right and good" and in opposition to destructive and expansionist powers, as he indicated to his son decades later.³³ There were a number of obstacles in the way, however. He was short - five feet and six inches – and at 26 he was older than most enlistees. Equally important was the fact that he was a husband and a father. In June the year before, Tan had married Lucy Chan Aw Sou, and in April 1940 she bore the couple's first son, Tan Thuan Kok. A second son was born in May the following year. Since the RAF traditionally preferred to enlist men without family responsibilities, it seemed for a time that his desire to defend the empire would go unfulfilled.

But in October 1941, Tan got the break he was hoping for. Along with over a hundred others in Singapore, he responded to a call for pilots to be trained for service in the war in Europe under a military aviation instruction program known as the British Empire Air Training Scheme (BEATS).³⁴ This was a scheme that was created to train aircrew at specially-opened bases in Canada, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Australia, and New Zealand. Its significance increased in importance after the fall of France. With RAF squadrons depleted from the disastrous campaign on the continent, Britain faced a desperate need for aircrew to stave off the coming aerial onslaughts. Guided by a potent mix of urgency on the part of its organisers and enthusiasm among the hundreds of thousands of volunteers it elicited, it grew to become the largest

³² *Tuan Mong Old Boys; Association 25th Anniversary Special Issue* (Singapore: Tuan Mong Association, 1948).

³³ Author's correspondence with Tan Thuan Seng, 7/2/2011.

³⁴ The figure of 114 volunteers from Singapore appears twice, both in press reports: the first in the *Straits Times*, 10 October 1945, and the second in the *Singapore Free Press*, 24 September 1960. Unfortunately the PRO does not have any documents that might support or challenge the reliability of these reports. Nor has the author been able to identify any more than a handful of these individuals, and even then their records are fragmentary and only of very limited value to historians.

aviation training scheme in history, producing nearly 170,000 personnel, with nearly a third pilots.³⁵

The success of the program was a testament to the amount of loyalty to the imperial system present throughout the British Empire. It also opened the way for individuals from the colonies to be coached in military aviation. With Britain's war situation in Europe still bleak, RAF recruitment was happy to overlook Tan's age and family commitments, and allowed him to enlist as an airman. In November 1941 he left Singapore by ship for Canada, without the knowledge that war would come to Malaya before the year was out. If he had known that Singapore would be under Japanese occupation just months after his departure, and he would not hear from his family or know of their fate for the next four years, he would probably have felt worse about the fact that he had lied about the details of his enlistment with the RAF to his parents and his wife. Instead, he had told them that he was joining a program to be trained as a commercial pilot,³⁶ bending the truth as it were. Initially, he was not selected for combat flying. Rather he had been earmarked as a service pilot. His brief, if he successfully qualified for his flying badge, would be fairly mundane, mostly involving ferrying aircraft to and from frontline bases or towing targets for anti-aircraft artillery practice.

A close examination of Tan's personal flying log book reveals the expanse of his travels over the next four years. He arrived at Service Flying Training School Number 33 near the town of Carberry in Manitoba, Canada. Instruction in the Avro Anson, a twin-engine trainer, commenced on 8 December, just as news of Japanese aggression in the Pacific was breaking.³⁷ It was at Royal Canadian Air Force Station Carberry (the more widely-used name of the training school) that he became close friends with an English pilot trainee, Robert Stone, who provided the following description of their time together in Canada to Tan's granddaughter many decades later:

I first met him when we were training in Canada on a fairly long course at the end of which we were awarded our flying "wings"... There were about sixty of us on this course and as you may know, your Grandfather and I came in the first two places at the end of the course. Our training consisted of both flying aeroplanes and classroom work on a variety of subjects. Our positions on this course depended on adding up the results of our flying tests and the results of our classroom examinations. I always felt that your grandfather was a better pilot than I was, but not so successful in the classroom.³⁸

On 31 January 1942, Tan completed his last training flight in Carberry. Less than two months later he received his flying badge and was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in the General Duties Branch. He was then transferred to England for two months of advanced flight training at Leconfield, Yorkshire. September brought another move, this time to No.31 Operational Training Unit at Bicester, Oxfordshire. There, he learned how to pilot the Bristol Blenheim, a versatile light bomber that was the mainstay of the RAF's service arm. But by April 1943, Tan would be in North Africa with No.225 Squadron and flying a very different aircraft and performing duties that were the furthest thing from service flying. A slice of good fortune in the larger scheme of things provided the intervention that was necessary. Robert Stone takes up the story:

³⁵ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 39; see also John McCarthy, *A last call of empire: Australian aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1988).

³⁶ Author's interview with Li Er Hanson, 30/1/2011.

³⁷ The details of Tan's training and service in the RAF as described in this article come from records listed in his official pilot's flight logbooks, which are currently in the possession of his granddaughter Li-Er Hanson nee Tan.

³⁸ Letter from Robert P. Stone to Li Er Hanson, 20 August 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

Anyway for the three months in Canada we were fairly close but when we returned to England we went separate ways. I had no knowledge of what your Grandfather was doing and had no means of contacting him. In fact we were both being trained, at separate RAF stations, to fly light bombers (the Bisley, a version of the more famous Blenheim light bomber) and our destination, as it turned out, was the same. We were both bound for Algiers and the war in North Africa. Having arrived out there and being posted to a squadron at the front I was met with the position that the Bisley had been such a disaster in action, with very heavy losses, that it was decided to withdraw it from use. I was returned to a camp at Algiers which was full of aircrew with no specific jobs to do and it was there that I met your grandfather again. He had had a similar set of experiences as I had met.³⁹

The vulnerability of the Bisley against German fighters in North Africa meant that the aircraft was decommissioned by all but four RAF squadrons in the theatre by May 1943. This turn of events, coupled with aircrew losses that needed to be replaced expeditiously among the frontline squadrons of the RAF, meant that pilots like Tan and Stone, who had been trained for roles in an aircraft now considered obsolete, were quickly pressed into other flight duties. In Tan Kay Hai's case, he was transferred to a combat reconnaissance squadron, No. 225, and underwent retraining in the single-engine Supermarine Spitfire. He was a particularly suitable allocation for the squadron in particular, as its complement captured the global nature of the empire's outsourcing of war. Nicknamed "The Foreign Legion Squadron" by the Middle East armed services publication *Union Jack*, Tan was at home among pilots from a constellation of nationalities across the Commonwealth, Dominions, and the Colonies. Even so, he quickly stood out, and gained the endearing moniker "Charlie Chan", after the famous Chinese detective character of Hollywood movies.⁴⁰

"Charlie" found himself in action soon enough, starting with a reconnaissance flight over the Tunisian towns of Bizerte and Tebourba on 28 April. Six more sorties quickly followed over the next two days. As British and American troops launched a major offensive to destroy the remaining German forces in North Africa, Tan flew reconnaissance runs over Pon Du Fah and Mateur on 29 and 30 April with instructions to locate enemy artillery and observe the effect of Allied strikes on them. Some respite came in June after the surrender of German forces in the region, when the squadron was relocated to Bouficha, along the northern coast of the African continent. As the campaign came to a close, the new pilots had the opportunity to undertake further training with new aircraft, with emphasis on formation flying, air-to-ground firing, and aerobatics.

Having defeated the Axis armies in North Africa, Allied planners began turning their attention to the invasion of Europe. While there was some disagreement between the British and American camps on the advantages of an Allied thrust up the Italian peninsula and how much that might delay an invasion of France across the English Channel, by early 1943 the decision was made to open a new military front in Italy. After taking Sicily unopposed, British and American forces landed on 3 September as planned in Salerno, Calabria, and Taranto. The invasion of Italy had the immediate effect of toppling Mussolini's regime – an outcome predicted by the Allies since support among Italy's population and its military for Mussolini had wavered by the end of 1942. The new government headed by Pietro Badoglio announced an armistice, and all Italian military units were ordered to cease military action. But any hope for a quick resolution to the operation was dashed when German troops moved to take over the vacated defences.

In support of the Italian campaign, No. 225 Squadron found itself occupied with reconnaissance duties over southern Italy. On 1 October, Tan's Italian war began with a flight over Capua and Volturno, followed by seventy-eight sorties over Casino, Teano, Minturno, Sessa, Pontecovo, Mignano, and Formia as the US Fifth Army made its

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Union Jack (Tunisia Daily Edition): The Newspaper for the British Fighting Forces*, No. 60, July 1943.

painful way up the Italian peninsula from the port of Naples. By 27 December, his first tour of the Mediterranean was over, and he was allowed to go on leave for the New Year. However, it turned out that he did not have much time away after all. The squadron was called into action on 2 January as the Allies renewed their attempts to breach the Gustav Line, a chain of formidable and well-marshalled German defences that cut across the breadth of the Italian peninsula south of Rome. It would take four months of intense fighting before American and British forces were able to break through.

By his second tour, Tan seemed to have gained the confidence to begin flying in a more aggressive fashion. Most tactical reconnaissance pilots had to put themselves at great risk. Part of their job was to entice German anti-aircraft positions to give themselves away, which was done by flying at a low enough altitude to make enemy gunners believe that they had a good opportunity to shoot down the aircraft. Tan developed a reputation for having a cavalier attitude toward these assignments, as his squadron mate Parke F. Smith wrote while corresponding with Tan's granddaughter:

He was an inspiration to us all – cheerful-brave and amusing. He loved to count the anti-aircraft (flak) bursts and figure the cost to the Germans. He often said if they didn't hit him he would bankrupt them!!⁴¹

Smith was well-placed to observe Tan Kay Hai's flying habits. The Operation Records Books for the squadron reveal that they flew as a pair no less than twenty-four times over a three month period from January to March 1944, including on 13 January where Smith would have observed Tan "registering" (compelling the artillery crews to fire and reveal themselves) and then coming around and strafing two 88 mm Flak gun batteries at Minturno in southern Lazio.⁴² Both sets of guns were silenced, while Tan's aircraft was described in his logs as being "holed in rudder" during the attack. Six days later, on 19 January, Tan attacked two further artillery batteries of four guns each at Formia, midway between Rome and Naples. This time, he escaped without noteworthy damage to his aircraft, and a brief comment was appended to his flying log book: "One very successful Arty/R engaged two targets each of 4 guns firing. In both cases the guns were at least temporarily silenced."

Tan's successes spurred him to further engagements with German ground forces. On 21 January he attacked a pair of artillery batteries as well as an unrecorded number of enemy tanks and half-track transports at Formia. On 27 January he made life miserable for more German troops at Minturno, and followed that up the next day by strafing a column of approximately eighty tanks at Anzio, where Allied forces were attempting an amphibious landing to bypass the Gustav Line.

It was not long before Tan's daring and accomplishments were noted by his superiors. In light of his exploits in southern Italy, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, recommended that Tan receive the Distinguished Flying Cross. In particular, he was singled out for his actions on two sorties flown on 7 and 8 February. The squadron received the following dispatch from Rear HQ Desert Air Force: "On the recommendation of the A.O.C. in C. Mediterranean Allied Air Force His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award immediate Distinguished Flying Cross to Flying Officer K. H. Tan 225 Squadron."⁴³ It was followed three hours later by a congratulatory message from his superior, Captain George Millington, which read: "For Flying Officer Tan from Group Captain Millington. Hearty congratulations on a well deserved award. Your work and courage are an inspiration to your comrades. Have got some ribbon for you and will fly it over on first fine day."⁴⁴ The full text of the

⁴¹ Letter from Parke F. Smith to Li Er Hanson, 28 March 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

⁴² Public Records Office AIR27/20.

⁴³ OSN 365, Rear HQ Desert Air Force to No 225 Squadron, 16 February 1944 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

⁴⁴ OSN 371, No. 285 Wing to No 225 Squadron, 16 February 1944 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

recommendation form details the events that transpired on the 7th and 8th, and is worth quoting in full:

On February 7th 1944, F/O Tan set out on a combined vertical photographic and visual reconnaissance in the LITTORIA-CORI area. They arrived during a bombing attack on the beach-head, and 20+ bandits were reported. F/O Tan and his weaver were intercepted by 5. 190's (sic), and they became separated.

On his own, in the face of intense A.A. fire, and knowing that bandits were in the vicinity, F/O Tan successfully completed his mission. In addition to the five pinpoints which he had been briefed to photograph, he photographed two artillery positions, which he pinpointed South of Rome.

One on the following day, he was briefed to do an artillery shoot in the AUSONIA area. He was given the positions of five enemy batteries, and was told to engage three. Nevertheless, he successfully engaged all five of these, then registered a further battery which he had located, and finally successfully engaged a concentration of enemy H.T. (Half-Track transports)

This Officer has now completed 146 hours operational flying with this Squadron, having joined 225 in April 1943. Since then he has served with distinction in N. Africa, Sicily, and Italy. His exceptional keenness, initiative and total disregard of danger, have been an inspiration to his fellow pilots, and the above two examples of his work are in keeping with the high standard he has set during the last few months.⁴⁵

The praise that came with his commendation was not just perfunctory. The ground attacks that Tan undertook in southern Italy were perilous even at the best of times. This was a theatre where German anti-aircraft artillery inflicted abnormally high casualty rates among the four thousand Allied aircraft deployed in the campaign, with an estimated seven hundred shot down or otherwise damaged beyond repair by flak, and over five thousand aircrew losing their lives by VE (Victory in Europe) Day. Tan certainly had his close calls during his time in Italy, though ultimately it was not ground fire that ended his war. On 25 January his aircraft suffered serious damage flying over Rome on a reconnaissance mission; two months later, on 24 March he was holed in the fuselage near the Italian capital; and on 6 and 9 April his Spitfire took several hits from flak at Ausonia and Priverno respectively. Each time, he was fortunate enough that the damage was not so significant that he could not return to base, although the incident on 6 April did force him to land instead of completing his mission. The level of risk that Tan was prepared to accept in his undertakings in Italy give us a hint into the level of devotion he felt to the empire. It would be prudent, of course to accept that some of his desire for adventure was one of the possible reasons for his cavalier approach towards flying. Yet as he revealed to his son after the war, Tan's belief in the righteousness of his defence of the imperial system was an unshakeable source of strength and motivation in those perilous moments.⁴⁶

When he was not being shot at in the skies over Lazio and Rome, Tan appeared to take delight in learning more about the settings and cultures that war had brought him in contact with, and anecdotal evidence suggests that he was thoroughly enjoying himself in an almost boyish manner despite the worry he must have felt not knowing the fate of his parents, his wife, and his children back in occupied Singapore. Photographs of his time in North Africa reveal a man constantly beaming, even when caught on camera at awkward moments such as when one of his comrades playfully surprised him with a camera and took a snap of him showering. His squadron mate Parke Smith provided further insight about Tan's ability to adapt to new environments:

⁴⁵ Public Records Office AIR2/9259.

⁴⁶ Author's correspondence with Tan Thuan Seng, 7/2/2011.

... remembered he was quite a linguist and recalled the astonished looks on the faces of those Italians when they saw him, a man from China, speaking Italian with a broad English accent.⁴⁷

In May 1944, Tan's time with No.225 Squadron came to an end. As the Allies prepared for the invasion of France, Italy became a sideshow in the European war and he was reassigned to a new squadron, RAF No.2, at Gatwick on 2 May. As a result, he joined the hundreds of thousands of personnel being assembled for the landings at Normandy. Twelve thousand aircraft, seven thousand ships, and nearly two hundred thousand soldiers would be used to establish a beachhead in northern France, from which a drive towards Paris, the Low Countries, and Germany could be staged. The logistics and coordination for such an enormous endeavour was nothing short of staggering, and each unit and every soldier, pilot, and seaman would have had their own preparations to make as fighting formations and as individuals. Tan's was to undertake training in a new aircraft. Unlike No.225 Squadron, his new posting operated US-made North American Aviation P-51 Mustangs, and so from 16 May to 4 June Tan was put through his paces learning its characteristics. He seemed to have found the aircraft trickier to handle, for on 19 May he suffered his first and only recorded accident when he crashed on take-off. He evidently walked away unscathed. The next day he was well enough to fly two more practice sorties, this time without incident.

On D-Day, 6 June, RAF No.2 was moved to the Royal Naval Air Station *Daedalus*, just outside the erstwhile sleepy seaside town of Lee-on-the-Solent in the south of England. The airbase was a staging point for much of the Allied aerial armada flying in support of the invasion force, and so was a hive of activity. Tan's first mission that morning was a spotting operation for naval artillery over the section of the Normandy coast where British troops were coming ashore, designated by the Allies as "Sword Beach". A second sortie later that day saw Tan dispatched to Montdidier and Beauvais, near the city of Amiens. On the evening of 7 June, he was sent to inspect a set of bridges over the River Seine. True to form, in his report, he noted that he had taken a brief opportunity to fire on German ground forces he had come across under cover:

Bridge M.1011 down A.L.S. Bridge at R.1199 down. At Fremcuse M.1701 8 barges lying in pairs on S. Bank. Bridge at R.2200 down. One barge at R.2200. Every bridge from Elbouee to Bonnières completely or partly demolished. Shot up two covered m.e.t. 15/30 outside Boisemont R.4596 strikes seen, transport stopped. Four soldiers ran from one. Rounds fell among them. Results unobserved.⁴⁸

As dawn broke on 13 June, Tan carried out another flight over the Seine. This time, he came across a tank "with a large gun", headed west. He strafed it, but in his report noted that was unsure if he had successfully destroyed it. The rest of the month continued without much incident, except for when he (his plane?) was damaged by light flak over Pontoise, northwest of Paris, on 19 June. Eight days later, he flew a sortie that took him over Tourouvre, before transferring with the rest of No.2 Squadron to an airfield outside the Hampshire village of Odiham on 27 June. It was to be the last combat sortie that Tan would complete. An account of his final mission over France two days later follows.⁴⁹

On Thursday, 29 June, Tan was sent as the second aircraft of a brace to reconnoitre an area near Paris. There had been little sign of *Luftwaffe* fighters over the past few days, and the anti-aircraft artillery was so sparsely spread across ground they were covering that the pilots were hardly threatened. It was to be an uneventful mission, or so it seemed. Just as the pair began their homeward leg, Tan noticed eight aircraft

⁴⁷ Letter from Parke F. Smith to Li Er Hanson, 28 March 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

⁴⁸ Public Records Office AIR2/9259.

⁴⁹ For the description of Tan's misadventures on 29 June, I am indebted to Ian Mackersey. See Ian Mackersey, *Into the Silk: True Stories of the Caterpillar Club* (London: Robert Hale Ltd, 1956).

approaching them. At first, he thought that they were Allied airplanes. But a closer examination revealed that they were, in fact, German ME109s. The Germans broke into two groups, four of them headed for Tan, while the remainder sought out the other Allied plane.

Tan turned his plane around to face his attackers, but as he came around he was hit by cannon fire from one of the ME109s. His right wing was destroyed, and his aircraft went into a terminal spin. He had been flying at low level when the German scored the fatal hits on his plane, and by the time he was able to leap clear from the stricken aircraft he was just a few hundred feet above the ground – a hair's breadth in flying terms, considering that he would have been falling at a rate of around eighty to one hundred feet per second. He was successful in deploying his parachute, but because it had been borrowed from a squadron mate that morning it did not fit snugly around Tan's tiny frame. The end result was that he hung out of his harness face-down, rather than upright as he was supposed to. It was at this awkward angle that he crashed into the ground. As Tan later revealed:

For a moment, I felt dazed, then I heard something moving. I looked up and saw some cows gazing down at me. My first instinct was to hide the parachute. I tried to get up but felt a sharp pain on my left side and lay down again. Blood was dripping from my nose and mouth. I suddenly felt my heart thumping hard and was frightened. Frantically I looked for injuries but found none. How relieved I was when I realized (sic) that the blood from my nose and mouth was not from an internal haemorrhage but from the parting blow my oxygen mask had given me when I was thrown clear.⁵⁰

Tan had deployed the parachute so close to the ground that there was just barely enough time for it to slow his rate of descent. But even though it saved his life, he was in bad shape. He had three broken ribs on his left side, a broken right foot, and a dislocated shoulder from the upward force exerted on his body by the parachute's opening. After taking a few moments to collect his senses, he staggered across the pasture and onto a road that ran alongside it with his parachute bundled under his good arm. From his last moments in the air, he had a sense that he was just north of Paris, and hence still in German-occupied France. His instinct drove him to see if he could get assistance from the locals.

If he had hoped that he would gain some sympathy, even protection, from French civilians on account of the fact that his uniform would have denoted him to be a pilot with the Allied forces currently liberating their country, then he would have been sorely disappointed with the reception at the first farmhouse he came to. The farmer who answered Tan's knocking slammed the door in the pilot's face after just one look to see who it was. He received a better response from the occupants of the next house he came across. A young couple helped arrange for Tan to be put up in a nearby house, hid his uniform and equipment, and provided him with a change of clothes. Unfortunately, his presence was eventually revealed to the local German authorities. He was arrested just a few days after being shot down, and sent to the aircrew prisoner-of-war camp Stalag Luft III, in Lower Silesia on the Polish-German border. There he remained until sometime in early 1945. Amid the confusion in the relocation of prisoners as Soviet armies advanced towards the camp, several Allied prisoners-of-war were able to slip away. Tan apparently was one of them. We know that he probably escaped because the prisoners who were transferred to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg, Bavaria were only liberated by US forces on 29 April.⁵¹ Yet his flying logs show that by 16 May 1945 he was already flying training missions once again in England, at RAF Fair Oaks.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 80 – 81.

⁵¹ See Albert Clark, *33 Months as a POW in Stalag Luft III: A World War II Airman tells his story* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2005).

Regardless of how and when he was able to leave Stalag Luft III, it is clear that Tan was eager to get back to flying. Germany had been defeated, and several Allied units were being transferred to Burma or the Pacific. The British harboured hopes of re-taking occupied Southeast Asia and avenging the humiliation inflicted on the empire by Japan's conquest of its colonies there. There was also the matter of the invasion of Japan, with the first stage planned for October 1945. Tan spent the European summer familiarising himself with the latest variant of the Spitfire (the Mk. IX), with his logs indicating that he was undergoing further training in air-to-air combat and dive-bombing. In all likelihood, it would appear that he was set to be transferred out of reconnaissance duties and into an attack squadron. He would never find out. Just before he received his new posting, the war came to a sudden end with the dropping of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. Like so many others recruited through the Empire Air Training Scheme, Tan was enlisted in the RAF with a temporary commission, which meant that at the end of hostilities he was discharged of his duties and sent home to Singapore, with the King's gratitude.

Tan's dedication to the empire did not end with the conclusion of the war. In 1948, after completing a Diploma in Social Work in the University of London, he returned to Singapore, intending to embark on a career in social welfare. Within two years, he was flying in service of the empire once again. Tan was instrumental in the creation of the forerunner of the Malaysian and Singapore Air Forces, the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force (MAAF). A decorated pilot, he was asked to train new pilots drawn from the colonial population for the MAAF in his capacity as Wing Commander. He was aide-de-camp to the Governor of Singapore Sir Ronald Black, and took part in government events either in ceremonies and parades or flying with other pilots of the MAAF, such as a fly past to mark the opening of Singapore's new airport in 1955.⁵² His motivations over the years, he revealed to his son, had never wavered. British rule had made him what he was, and it was the imperial project that he believed in over all others, including Malaysian nationalism, especially amid the uncertainty of a Communist insurgency and Cold War politics.⁵³

Jimmy Chew

Not all who felt the pull of serving the empire went overseas. As the cornerstone of imperial defence strategy for the Far East, Singapore was also one of the key nodes of the British Empire. As a maritime power, it was appropriate that the centrepiece of Britain's prized colony was a naval base, HMS *Sembawang*. It was the home of British Far East Command, which oversaw all naval defence matters in the colonies east of India, and had been completed in 1939 at a staggering cost of £60 million. It was designed to be fit for the most renowned navy in the world, containing the largest dry dock ever built, and stored enough fuel and ammunition to keep the whole of the Royal Navy supplied for six months. Even though the base would never see the great maritime fleet for which it was built, it served as a potent symbol of imperial power and prestige.

To protect the naval base, a string of coastal batteries that covered the approaches to the Straits of Johor north of the island as well as the colony's southern coastline were constructed, along with two airbases nearby – RAF Sembawang, and RAF Seletar, the latter being the headquarters of Air Force Far East Command. The makeup of the ground forces that were assembled to defend Singapore and its hinterland reflected the ability of the empire to draw on its human capital from across the world to secure its interests. Nearly one hundred and fifty thousand military

⁵² *Straits Times*, 21 August 1955

⁵³ Author's correspondence with Tan Thuan Seng, 7/2/2011.

personnel from India, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Canada, and England were based in Malaya by the end of 1941.⁵⁴

As was the case throughout the colonies, matters related to local defence were often outsourced to the resident non-white population when there were not enough Britons. In Malaya, the Compulsory Service (Volunteer Force) Ordinance was passed in June 1940 which empowered the colonial authorities to draft all men between the ages of 19 and 55 for defence training, creating a formal channel through which loyalty to the Crown could be demonstrated. Although in practice usually only European expatriates residing in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States (both Federated and Unfederated) were compelled to volunteer,⁵⁵ non-Europeans often did so as well. A civil defence organisation that was modelled on the British Home Guard was established on the eve of the Pacific War, employing around six thousand Air Raid Precautions (ARP) wardens recruited from the local Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities. A Malayan contingent of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve of around four hundred European, Malay, and Chinese personnel was raised to crew minesweepers and patrol boats, and four Straits Settlements Volunteer Force infantry regiments were eventually created with a total strength of 2,841 men and women.⁵⁶

The willingness to volunteer for the defence of the empire was a striking display of faith in the benefits, actual or perceived, that stemmed from continuous British colonial rule. Others saw formal service as the way forward, since it allowed one to wed an imperial calling with financial benefit, as the story of Jimmy Chew illustrates. Chew was born into a *peranakan* family in 1920, the second of eight children. As was often the case in Straits Chinese families, the household language was English and *Baba Malay*, rather than Chinese. The entire family conscientiously attended Anglican Church services at St Andrew's Cathedral. Chew was brought up to think of himself as a British subject, and even as an adult he sang *God Save the King* at empire events with the utmost conviction. For him, there was no system or way of life that compared with British imperial rule and its ideals:

That time, Britain is the best in the world. And we are lucky to be part of them. That is what my father taught me... At the time I was growing up, all I wanted to do is to see England myself. I was saving money so I can go [before war broke out]. But even many years later, I still feel then, I want to live in the UK or in Australia. These places feel more like they suit me.⁵⁷

Jimmy Chew enlisted with the Royal Air Force as a technician in October 1940, and was posted to No. 151 Maintenance Unit at RAF Seletar upon the completion of his training. He was one of around eight hundred locals employed by the RAF for ground duties across Malaya's various air force stations.⁵⁸ For 51 Straits dollars a month, accommodation, and meals provided on camp, Chew performed a variety of repair and upkeep duties on Consolidated Aircraft PBY Catalina Flying Boats. His command of English was sufficient for him to communicate with British officers and other ranks, although he recalled that on more than one occasion he was told to "speak like an Englishman, or find work elsewhere." While he often felt frustrated by the treatment he received, Chew recognised that the pecuniary benefits of his employment were just as important:

In Seletar there is a distinction. We are considered second-class servicemen. For example, for me, and one of my friend, in the weekend we thought we can go for a

⁵⁴ See Brian Farrell, "Too Little, Too late: Preparing for War 1941 – 1942", in Malcolm Murfett, John Miksic, Brian Farrell, and Ming Shun Chiang. *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 1999), pp. 175 – 197.

⁵⁵ CO820/50

⁵⁶ CO820/67

⁵⁷ Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

⁵⁸ See Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941 – 1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), pp. 60 – 69.

swim [in the base's public pool]. Before we could enter the water, a Service Policeman came along and said, hey, you cannot swim here. This is for British people only. We were so disciplined, and this is so normal those days, we didn't ask why. We just go away that's all... When I was in the service, I get this kind of distinction, I say to myself, what the heck did (?) I join the air force for? Huh? Why they treat me like this? So, but then, it's all forgotten [with time] A few days, I'm ok. Go back to work, it's a better life than many people have. How many people in Singapore earn \$51 a month?⁵⁹

Jimmy Chew's world of permanence, and the financial benefit that stemmed from it, began to unravel in December 1941. The Japanese 25th Army's landing in southern Thailand and the town of Kota Bahru was followed by a swift and unrelenting advance down the Malay Peninsula. British, Indian, and Australian troops alike were left confounded as the Japanese circumnavigated fortifications and strongpoints by heading through the jungle (thought impassable by the defenders) and emerged behind them, threatening encirclement. A messy, panicked, and most-un-British retreat followed each time. Astute readers of Malayan dailies of the day would have picked up on the disjuncture between news of heroic British victories with reports that indicated that a new battle was taking place further south than the previous one. On 10th December, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the last capital ships in the Pacific, were sunk by Japanese bombers off the east coast of the peninsula, having inflicted a loss of just three aircraft on their attackers. The sinking of the two vessels was a naval calamity of the greatest proportions not just for the Royal Navy's defence plans but also for British prestige, tied as the latter was historically to the navy's performance. The ease with which the Royal Navy's main strength in the Pacific had been sunk was redolent with political meaning, for even to contemporaries it heralded the end of an imperial system of defence that pledged its ability to defend Asia and Australia against threats to the empire's interests.⁶⁰

On 31 January, the last British and Commonwealth troops retreated across the Straits of Johor to Singapore, and in doing so conceded the Malay Peninsula to the invaders. This had been a scenario envisaged in pre-war planning. But the colony was supposed to have been able to hold out for at least six months while the Royal Navy put together a relief force to break the siege.⁶¹ However, there was to be no reprieve for the defenders.

In preparation for their main assault, the Japanese began a week-long artillery and aerial bombardment of the island on 1 February, causing a breakdown in military and public order. Jimmy Chew and his comrades were dismissed from their duties at RAF Seletar by their superiors and told to fend for themselves. At such a bleak moment, there was still an expectation that even if Singapore fell, it would shortly be under British rule again. Servicemen like Chew were therefore told to use the faith that ordinary civilians were presumed to still have in the empire's durability and longevity as collateral for rendering assistance:

We had to beg for advance pay when the Japanese surrounded Singapore! The British officers told us [before they left], look, you take care of yourselves. If you need food or help, go to any one of the shops or any family, tell them that you are British soldiers and that the government will thank them and pay them later on. And they will feed you and habilitate you. Wah! Singapore families is not like other countries. Even if they want, they just managed to cater for their own family. They don't have accommodation available to cater to us, or food, or medicine. So luckily, we can manage to sleep on the roadside.⁶²

⁵⁹ Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

⁶⁰ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 424.

⁶¹ See Malcolm Murfett, John Miksic, Brian Farrell, and Ming Shun Chiang. *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶² Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

On 10 February, Chew and a group of stragglers from Seletar were making their way to the harbour ward on the southern end of the island when they were picked up by military police and sent to a staging area not far from the docks. The area was full of civilians and soldiers alike, all desperate to secure a place on the few remaining transports scheduled to depart. As trained aircraft technicians, the men from RAF Seletar were seen to have valuable skills that could be put to use elsewhere in the war. And so the group was approached by two British officers who asked for volunteers to travel by ship to Australia where they would be assigned to Royal Australian Air Force squadrons. It was not a difficult decision:

So I volunteered to join the draft to go to Australia. That's how I ended up in the Harbour Ward, and I left Singapore on the SS *Darbel*. Halfway, we left the evening of 13 February, and then in the morning, the early morning, about ten bombers overhead, they dropped bombs on us. They damaged the main steam pipe and then a few of us got killed. But however, we managed to reach Tanjung Priok the next day.⁶³

The evacuees on the *Darbel* were fortunate in that it was one of the last ships to escape the doomed colony, but their respite was only temporary. Japan had already seized parts of the Dutch East Indies, and a general advance on Java was imminent. The defence of the island was haphazard at best, and suffered from the idiosyncrasies and politicking of a multinational coalition that had never been properly planned. An assortment of Dutch, American, British, and Australian formations were stitched together from everything ranging from professional Royal Netherlands Indies soldiers and civilian militia to the ragtag survivors of the Malayan campaign. But without a sufficient Allied maritime presence to defend the Indonesian archipelago, the outcome of the campaign was a foregone conclusion.

A week after arriving in Tanjung Priok, Chew and the other RAF technicians were each given a rifle, some ammunition, and told that they were to be pressed into infantry duties against the advancing Japanese. But the haste in which they were needed also meant that there was not enough time to teach the technicians how to use the rifles. Even loading the ammunition into the weapon appeared to be difficult for Chew, let alone using it effectively. It did not matter. There was hardly a fight as the Japanese swept over their positions and captured the group on 8 March. They were sent to the main prisoner-of-war camp on the outskirts of Batavia, the General Dispatch Camp. There, and along with other colonial army enlistees, he found that from time-to-time he was singled out for beatings by camp guards for “betraying the skin” and actively supporting a system of imperial domination by whites over the population of Asia.⁶⁴

Conclusion

When viewed through the prism of imperial diaspora and mobilisation, it is apparent that a war that was very different from the one that has been enshrined in the post-colonial nation's story began in Malaya in September 1939. The empire was at the centre, while in the national narrative it is the post-colonial nation. And while the experiences detailed in this chapter have their limitations in that they are exceptional in regard to the experiences of the majority, the presence of Malayan Chinese serving in imperial colours opens the door for historians to consider the implications of their choices.

Consideration of Malaya's involvement in the European war of 1939 provides us with historical insight into life at the periphery of the British Empire for colonials who believed in, and were committed to, the imperial order. The empire was in a position to

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

bring into play a vast array of resources from dominions and colonies that spanned the globe, and Malaya was a part of that mobilisation effort. Although the theatres of conflict were thousands of miles away, the imperial war was not at all foreign to a constituency of Chinese in Malaya for whom the British Empire was at the heart of their lives and ideological beliefs. These were certainly not bystanders to a conflict to which they had no connection, as the colonial view of the war has often claimed. The prestige, stability, and opportunity offered by the system formed the cornerstone of their existence, and they were part of a global community that responded when the empire was threatened.

In contrast to the way this war is cast in national history, it was not the first act of a national creation story. Instead, it was fought in the interests of empire by those who had total belief in what empire stood for, and were willing to lay down their lives in its defence. Not everyone shared in the desire to seek war out, and both chance and adventurism played an undeniable part in driving those who did to battlefields overseas. But that was equally the case in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and other places across the empire where young men and women signed up, and so it should not dilute the significance of imperial ideology among the colonial citizenry in Malaya – a reality that has been marginalised in historical narratives of the post-colonial nation.

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