

# *COMFORT HOMES AND EARLIER YEARS*

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Malacca Lama  
No Port, No Rail, No Nothing  
The Rubber Teaser  
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Country's First School - Which?  
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s - Malacca's Saviour & Resident  
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Should be especially useful  
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closes a gap which, if not  
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many years before it  
is bridged.

... writes Chief Minister,  
Melaka  
in Foreword

**Wee Hock Chye, PJK**

# COMFORT HOMES AND EARLIER YEARS

*Another spicy mix,  
Another tangy reading meal!*



**Wee Hock Chye**  
Author of *Three Flags & More*

TO MY DEAR PARENTS WHO OFTEN  
DENIED THEMSELVES SO  
THAT THE OFFSPRING  
WOULD NOT  
WANT

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## KETUA MENTERI MELAKA

### Foreword



*I am indeed pleased to know that a Melakan, Mr. Wee Hock Chye, has taken to writing books and what is more is that the two books he has produced thus far are mainly about the State of Melaka.*

*There is certainly a need for more Malaysians to write about their own country and who can be better equipped to undertake this task than the Anak Tanahair. In view of the country's rapid development in the various areas it is important that the outside world is correctly informed of our aspirations and progress from time to time. Foreign writers tend to give a slant to the picture, either due to their bias or to the insufficient time they spend with us.*

*Comfort Homes & Earlier Years is an exceptional book in that it touches on the State's immediate past decades and I do not think there are many books available that relate to this period. The book should therefore be especially useful to school-children for its enlightening and informative contents. Others should find it entertaining and, in the course of going through it, bring back to them memories, sweet or sour, as the case might be. Comfort Homes & Earlier Years should also be useful and helpful to tourists as it closes a gap which, if not for Mr. Wee, might take many more years before it is bridged.*

*I understand Mr. Wee will be on to his third book soon. Certainly a commendable effort coming from one now in his twilight years. I wish him all the support and success he deserves.*

(RAHIM TAMBY CHIK)  
Chief Minister of Melaka.

## Acknowledgement

*I express my grateful thanks to the Chief Minister of Malacca, YAB Tan Sri Abdul Rahim bin Datuk Tamby Chik, for very kindly obliging me with the Foreword herein.*

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*And to those whose names have been inadvertently omitted, I tender them my very sincere apologies.*

## Preface

Capturing Malacca's past, its recent past, for the benefit of the present and future.

That, in short, is the purpose of this book.

The book, however, is not presented as an academic work on the Settlement's history but simply as a lay-man's compilation of some of the consequential and also inconsequential but interesting times and happenings of the period. If there is nothing to remember the years gone by, then tomorrow's society may never know what the Settlement was once like and how the people in those days lived.

The throw-back starts from the traumatic and painful Japanese occupation which is treated in some depth at the behest of readers of Three Flags & More. Was there any Comfort Home in smallish Malacca during the occupation? None at all or one? The answer is "Two". And a handful of the Comfort Women serving Japanese soldiers calling at the Homes came from faraway Korea.

There was a Chinese school teenager who, unable to absorb further tortures from the Kempetei (Military Police), jumped from the open roof of Meng Seng Association building and seriously injured himself. He was subsequently found guilty of the charge laid against him and was sentenced to death by hanging. Two days later, he paid the supreme price. Even after the surrender, the Japanese occupation authorities were still printing money and when it was used to meet the last pay of their staffs the money was still in a damp condition. Fresh from the Mint!

This review of Malacca's recent past takes us even further back and extends down to the year 1841 when a College was

established in the Settlement. So, is the Penang Free School the oldest educational institution in the country?

In 1896, a young and enterprising man in the Settlement ventured into unknown territory and went on to earn the distinction of becoming the first Malayan to plant rubber on a commercial scale. Expectedly, he became a very wealthy man. At an age when many would still be pleasure-bent, this Malacca pioneer was appointed a Justice of the Peace when only 24.

Around this time, a teenaged youth left for Singapore for his secondary education and got through his Senior Cambridge with several distinctions. He narrowly missed a Queen's scholarship. Knowing him to be a bright scholar and that he had an intense love for English language and literature, his headmaster offered him a teaching post. When he returned to Malacca six years later, his reputation as an English scholar began spreading. This was at a time when not many Asians could even speak and write simple English.

Even the Colonial masters were impressed and they went on to encourage him to participate in public affairs. This signalled his entry into the political arena and despite Colonial patronage he remained true to his own roots and background. In no time, he had established himself as a thorn at the side of the Colonial government, despite being outnumbered at every turn.

Sir Gerald Templer, the country's High Commissioner (1952 - 1954) who took office at the height of the emergency made this intriguing observation of him, "After speaking to him for three hours, I would need a three-month holiday to recuperate from the ordeal."

It may seem incredible but true that at one time the Colonial government operated opium-smoking dens besides enjoying the

monopoly of the sale of the drug to the public. How many can still remember that the Malayan government had on two occasions to devise a scheme to restrain rubber estate-owners from tapping their trees at random because the world had virtually no use for rubber during those times?

Then what about the sea lapping the road skirting the former Malacca Club which is now the Declaration of Independence Memorial. In those days a 400-feet long pier stood in the sea, the pier-entrance not far away from the former Municipal Council building. Who today can recall the Chinese religious festival extraordinaire or *Wangkang* to the community? Unbelievable but true - the pageant was a seven-month long affair from start to finish.

It is now nearly two decades since the State's last 'Mandi Safar', an observance not practised by the Malay community elsewhere in the country. Like something out of Ripley's *Believe It Or Not* a Chinese club formed to promote soccer among the community proceeded to promote a version of stage-acting that is today known as *Wayang Peranakan Cina*. I could not help not including Raffles in the book for I was flabbergasted that I was never taught in school that he had helped to save Malacca from reverting to a fishing village.

Raffles rendered this invaluable help at a time when he had even yet to acquire Singapore and add the 600 sq. kilometre island of tropical jungle to the British Empire. I hope the materials I have managed and have been fortunate to obtain are a good mix. I also hope they are sufficiently spicy and enlightening to tot up a second tangy reading meal from me.



The reminiscences I have touched on definitely deserve better treatment than offered in this book, but I offer them in the hope that they will stir other memories and perhaps other memoirs. It is hoped that whosoever is interested in writing a similar book will not take too long to get going.

Reason is . . . . .

Time is not on his or her side.

Needless to say, 'Time and Tide wait for no man.'

*Wee Hock Chye,*  
*Melaka*  
*Oct. 1993*

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## Chapter 1

### *Cowering Under The Samurai Sword*

If the war clouds hovering over Europe in the mid-30s and the subsequent outbreak of war in the continent in 1939 were both a blessing for Malaya or the Malay Peninsula, as the country was also known then, they were also a catastrophe to the country and people not long after.

The war threats from Nazi Germany, led by the power-drunk and tempestous Hitler, and then the outbreak of war certainly helped to revive demand for Malaya's rubber and tin, the demand coming at a time when the country was still reeling from an unprecedented world-wide trade depression. The various business houses were therefore glad to be back to their money-making ways and the people thankful to have money again to spend.

But this happy state of affairs unfortunately did not last long. In October 1941, Tojo Hedeki, a warlord had become Prime Minister of sabre-rattling Japan and almost immediately the world began to ask, "When will Premier Tojo throw down the gauntlet to the West?"

In Europe, Hitler's mighty war machine, not long after the fighting began, had sliced through Holland, Belgium and France. Now comes the \$64,000 question. Why did Hitler not cross the 20-mile or so wide English Channel and try to add the British Isles to his already impressive list of countries his army had smothered?

In the meanwhile, events in Europe had encouraged Japan to cast covetous eyes on the French and Dutch colonies in the Far East. Then Berlin sprung Japan a big favour by pressuring the puppet Vichy government in France to agree to Japan moving

troops into Indo China (now North & South Vietnam). On 23 July, 1941, Japanese troops gladly rolled into Indo-China. Once inside the country Japan went even one better, taking over control of the land not long after going in.

This grave turn of events stung Britain to think of how to better protect the £63 million naval base in Singapore which Japan would dearly want to call it its own. Whatever, Japanese troops were now sitting on the fringe of South East Asia. The United States retaliated by banning all trade with Japan and also freezing all Japanese assets in the U.S.A. The British and Dutch governments immediately followed suit.

The effect of this retaliatory action was that Japan had lost all sources of supply of raw materials and oil and without these vital supplies the country could not survive. Britain rushed troop reinforcements to Malaya and also despatched a newly-launched battleship, the 35,000-ton *Prince of Wales*, and World War One veteran cruiser, the 25,000-ton *Repulse*, and also four destroyers, the *Express*, *Electra*, *Tenedos* and the Australian Navy's *Vampire*, the fleet arriving in Singapore on December 2.

Britain had hoped that Japan would rethink about going to war with the arrival of this imposing fleet in the Far East. On the contrary, Premier Tojo and company were not ruffled in the least and only six days later took their country to war.

On December 10, Japan's foraging air force, completely unopposed in the air, triumphantly obliterated the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* from the waters off Kuantan. A total of 85 planes comprising 34 high-level bombers and 51 torpedo-bombers destroyed the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. The British government committed an immeasurable blunder by omitting to provide air cover for the two dreadnoughts when they moved into action.

This debacle stunned the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, into commenting, "As I turned over and twisted in bed, the full horror of the news sank in upon me. Many efforts, hopes and plans floundered with these two ships."

In the months prior to the war outbreak, the Colonial government through public statements had assured the people time and again that the country's defence would not be found wanting in the event of war breaking out. The statements at the same time ridiculed the fighting qualities of the Japanese. The people were also told that Japanese pilots were myopic and that their aircraft not air-worthy. Therefore, war was unlikely, at least not for sometime yet. Meanwhile, Japanese troops after their first landing in Kelantan began to press south, doing so without any tangible hindrance from the enemy.

Incidentally, the first shots of the Pacific war were fired on the beaches of Kelantan, some 90 minutes before the Japanese planes had wreaked havoc on Pearl Harbour. In their thrust down the Peninsula, they avoided the deep jungle and instead used roadside rubber estates of which they were equipped with well laid-out maps. These invaluable maps were more than likely the work of those thousands of Japanese who had lived in the country in the years before the war, engaged in operating boarding-houses, general stores and photo-studios. There were even Japanese itinerant foot-hawkers selling home-made biscuits and sweets and children's playthings.

The country had also a handful of Japanese doctors and dentists. One of the Japanese living in Malacca by the name of Bata was a leading tennis player in the Settlement in the late 30s. In 1923, another Japanese living in Tampin even played cricket. Whenever his side was fielding, he was the wicket-keeper. He was a professional photographer. In his team was a Sikh bowler who needed about 100 yards for his run-up. Naturally, he often struck terror into the opposing eleven.

Toward the end of 1940, the government began preparing the people for war, just in case. Air-raid wardens were appointed to advise the public on the necessary and proper precautions to take prior to and after an air raid. An auxiliary fire-fighting unit was formed to assist the town's small fire brigade which was manned by a small Sikh detachment from the Police force. There was also an auxiliary medical unit. The newly-formed Local Defence Corps was intended to help in internal security. The LDC was also to help in the various denial schemes which were aimed at preventing valuable assets like boats falling into enemy hands.

The Government also appealed for volunteers for the Auxiliary Transport Unit. The Settlement Volunteer Corps, numbering between 500 and 600 men from the various communities, had been mobilised for about two weeks and during this time were drilled to some state of preparedness. When the British Army began retreating to Singapore these volunteers were ordered to tag long. When Singapore surrendered, they were left high and dry in the island. The bombing and incessant shelling of the island by the Japanese, aimed at forcing the British defenders to surrender, took their toll of these volunteers too, resulting in over 100 killed.

The Chinese company sustained the highest number of casualties with 46 killed. The rest were a mix of Europeans, Malays, Indians and Eurasians. Earlier in Malacca, the Senior Cambridge examination was in progress when news of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* calamity broke on the people. Among the several hundred candidates sitting for the examination was Una Ebdon, the 16-year old daughter of the Settlement Resident Councillor, Mr. W. S. Ebdon.

The dumping of these two giant naval vessels by the Japanese only on the third day of the war and the equally spectacular victories scored by Japan in the other theatres had led Una and a couple of her friends to claim that they would never get their examination results.

## PANIC STATIONS

On 9 Jan. 1942, Japanese planes flew over Malacca town and dropped pamphlets forewarning the people that an aerial attack was imminent. This sparked off the British authorities to issue secret orders the next day to the score or so of expatriate heads of departments. One of the orders was to prepare to evacuate to Singapore. However, they were to leave only after they had, in conjunction with the Army demolition personnel, destroyed all installations and materials that could be of military value to the enemy.

The Customs were required to destroy all liquors in the warehouse. As the store was by the river, it was not difficult for the staff to break the bottles and dump the contents into the river. The government godowns and the Sime Darby godown adjoining the Customs ware-house were thrown open to the public and so it was free rice, padi, wheat flour, sugar and various tinned provisions for the people. The strong and able returned again and again with many using bicycles to cart away the free supply. There were others who shared transport, using hand-carts and rickshaws.

On 10 January morning, Japanese planes flew over the town but there was no bombing. The 'friendly' visitation was, however, enough to panic the public. When the 'all clear' was sounded, hundreds thronged the banks, the post office and provision-shops for possibly their last business at these places. To those who had yet to evacuate, they realised that the time had come to do so. While the civilians were busying themselves with buying more food and searching for transport to evacuate, senior government officers were busy with gathering valuable documents to take with them to Singapore. Those documents left behind were destroyed or ordered to be destroyed. But before they left, the senior officials paid each subordinate three months' salary followed by a hurried and sorrowful farewell. In some instances tears were shed,



too. At 1 p. m., news filtered out that the government would cease to function from 3 p. m. The town would thereafter be in the charge of the armed units in charge of destroying installations of military value. If this news was chilling, it was also demoralising to the people. What would be their fate hereafter, the people asked themselves time and again?

At 4 p. m., the Japanese planes returned and this time bombs were dropped over Newcome Road (now Jalan Munshi Abdullah), Bona Vista Road (Jalan Hang Tuah), Mata Kucing Road (Jalan Taming Sari) and Fort Road (Jalan Kota) close to The Hongkong & Shanghai Bank.

It was during this air raid that a squad of Indian soldiers charged with demolishing Tan Kim Seng bridge suffered serious injuries and eventually all died. The soldiers were in the midst of laying charges when the Japanese planes arrived. During the raid they were hiding in the roofed but open-sided disembarkation-shed close to the bridge. There they were hit by flying splinters from the bombs dropped in the vicinity.

There being no government at the time, their bodies were not removed for a few days. They were in a hideously bloated condition when the newly-arrived Japanese troops rounded up pedestrians to remove them.

## THE LUCKY FEW WHO ESCAPED

Following the invasion, the rich and influential Chinese, especially those who had been community leaders, were concerned with their safety and wanted to flee the country if they could. But in the end, only a few managed to do so. They included the Honourable Mr. Tan Cheng Lock, a long acknowledged public leader. Cheng Lock and his family left Singapore at the eleventh hour and took refuge in India throughout the war years. As a