

Appendix 1: History of "B" Echelon, 2nd Bn. The East Surrey Regiment, later combined with 1st Bn. The Leicestershire Regiment, to form The British Battalion. 8th December 1941 - 18th February 1942

On 8th December 1942 Japan declared war on Great Britain and America. A large enemy force landed at Kota Bharu on the north east coast of Malaya., and launched an attack on our positions outside Jitra. Alor Star aerodrome was bombed on the mornings of the 8th and 9th December, causing considerable damage; the evacuation took place two days later.

The first withdrawal of the 2nd Battalion East Surrey Regiment took place on 12th December, when "B" Echelon moved out from Tan Jong Pau Camp at 1800 hrs to a harbour outside Alor Star on the main road leading to Gurun. "B" Echelon consisted of the Quartermaster and Staff (Bandmaster attached) and about 40 vehicles. It became necessary to move for the second time at 0230 hours 13th December to a harbour about 1 mile out of Gurun, where numerous battalion personnel rejoined after having been cut off or lost from their companies. All available personnel attached to "B" Echelon were moved up to the battalion as reinforcements. These included members known as "R" company, left behind for rear duties. The third move was on the 14th to a point 5 miles on, where it became necessary to employ Chinese and Malay labour to help build a suitable harbour entrance for transport use. The same evening a fourth move was made, to a point near Sungei Patani. The afternoon of the second day here became exciting for the Echelon. Shots were heard on the flank and all turned out, but no incident happened, although a thorough search was made of the whole area. The fifth move took place on the morning of the 15th, when the Echelon moved near Bukit Mertajam. Here some officers and men of the battalion arrived, mostly without arms or equipment, and suffering from very bad feet, due to the necessary withdrawal over rain-soaked paddy fields and long marches. The majority were re-equipped, and given medical attention, and taken on to Bukit Mertajam, with the Echelon's sixth move that same evening. The arrival was in bad weather, and the transport personnel were accommodated in a school for the night. The morning of the 16th saw flights of bombers over the town, and bombs were dropped, causing considerable damage to the town and railway. That night the Echelon moved into Taiping (seventh move) where the transport was parked, and personnel housed in the Convent School. Some officers and men of the battalion had already arrived and were later joined by others; the senior officer was Capt .C O'N Wallis, commanding "C" Company, who later took temporary command of the battalion.

Bombs were dropped on the town in the afternoon, and a few civilian casualties resulted. After a well-earned night's rest, the troops and a chance were moved on to Ipoh Convent School, (eighth move). During this move the transport column was bombed, causing considerable delay. At Ipoh the British Battalion was formed from the remnants of the East Surrey and Leicestershire regiments, Lt. Col. Morrison in command, with Major C.O'N. Wallis, who had since being promoted as Adjutant, R.S.M. Meredith, and four Companies.

On the morning of the 23rd December, the British Battalion and Echelons (ninth. move) moved to their new positions of defence outside Kampar. "B" Echelon continued to the 11th milestone, and

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spent Christmas Eve and Day quietly, a little turkey and beer helping considerably to enliven our spirits this Yuletide. The Echelon made its tenth move on the night of the 26th, between Kampar and Bidor, where it remained for a period of eight days. Recce. planes and dive bombers were very active daily in this area, always appearing to be after H.Q. and Div., and any transport visible. Great care and attention was given to camouflage by our Echelon, which proved of such great importance, consequently we were only attacked by aircraft on open roads when moving in daylight. Careless transport, columns and drivers of other units (particularly Indians) would park and dive for cover in the "rubber" instead of moving on, and so we would often be close to machine gun fire and bombing not intended for us. Fortunately we suffered but few casualties on these occasions. "B" Echelon, while at this harbour, was able to collect extra food and supplies for future use. With our transport well loaded, the order came on the morning of 2nd January for the 11th move, to Sungei Kulang, a small village with a large Malayan Temple, a huge rubber estate, and a club which had been mostly destroyed before evacuation. We continued our journey on the same night (twelfth move) to a point X miles North of the Slim River. A detachment of S.S.V.F. transport joined us here, and accompanied the Echelon until we reached the island, when they were dispatched to their own M.R.C. in Singapore. The next move, thirteenth, was a long journey, on X January, to the seventh milestone beyond Kuala Lumpur, where we remained for nearly one week, during which time much food and supplies were moved from evacuated large shops in the town, and carried by the Echelon for our troops benefit.

A number of cycles were required urgently by frontline troops, these being collected in Kuala Lumpur by a party from "B" Echelon, who were assisted by the police to take from the local inhabitants, mostly lawbreakers, those machines had been commandeered. On the 8th an urgent message was received for all loaded "B" Echelon transport to proceed to Seremban (fourteenth move), unloaded, and returned for troop-carrying from the line. This latter became necessary, and all transport of the Echelon eventually arrived at Seremban and reloaded. The unloading and reloading, which had to be conducted in relays, lasted over a period of two days and nights, which included stores and ammunition.

From Seremban the whole Echelon moved (fifteenth move) on 16th January to a rubber kampong before Tamlin. Having excess stores, supplies and kits etc, it became necessary here for a general check and reload. All the surplus was sent off to the main dump 80 miles South. Enemy recce planes and light bombers continued to harass transport on the roads, or anything of importance visible from the air; junctions being the main objectives. The sixteenth move on the 12th Jan, took us urgently about 20:00 hours to a spot near Tamliin, where we arrived early next morning. The dive bombers became very busy in this district, owing to a railway crossing nearby, and dropped 500 pound bombs near the bridge, which were meant for a convoy passing through. There were no casualties.

These bombs were believed to have been left behind by the R.A.F. as the Japanese had so far only

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used light bombs which had terrific explosions and caused little damage. On the evening of the 13th (seventeenth move) a move was made at 1700 hours on a long journey to the Coronation Rubber Plantation and Kampong at Kluang, which was reached at 0830 hours the next morning. Heavy rains had fallen, which made the going on low-lying ground very slow and heavy. Much transport was seen lying ditched and abandoned due to floods and the waterlogged roads. Our Echelon arrived intact, but delayed. The camouflage in the rubber trees afforded safety, but entrances to harbours were watched and attacked. One incident of attack on our entrance was when Australian lorries were entering, when three dive-bombers dropped bombs. Bandsman Gadd, on gate duty, received slight wounds on this occasion. He received medical attention from a nearby Australian C.C.S., and remained with the Echelon. This harbour had originally been an Australian Camp, which had accommodated a large contingent of the troops and transport before they moved up into the line.

The British Battalion arrived here from the line, out for rest, and were housed in the Malayan kampong about 2 miles away; this being the first rest period since Ipoh 23rd December. The battalion was called out twice here, which curtailed their rest period considerably. However, they had yet worse to come, and were by this time quite prepared for anything. Air activity was prominent in this area, particularly on the Kluang aerodrome which was repeatedly attacked. Fortunately, although the battalion was billeted in the open, no air attacks were made on their kampong. On the 18th the Battalion moved out for the second time to take up a position at or near that Batu Pahat. On the 19th "B" Echelon arrived for the eighteenth time to about 40 miles South of Kluang, and remained for the night. At noon the next day, the 20th, we moved (nineteenth) to a spot beyond the crossroads off Simpang Rengam. One lorry at only at a time was allowed to proceed by daylight to the new harbour, air activity becoming more persistent. The crossroads near this point were visited quite frequently by enemy aircraft; bombs were also dropped near our lines, but there were no casualties. The twentieth move was a long run to a point between the main road and Pontiang Ketchel, where we arrived at about 20:00 hours and parked on a long path for the night owing to heavy rains. The next morning it was possible to arrange suitable accommodation. Aircraft continued to visit the area, but concentrated more on the main and West Coast roads leading to Johor Bahru and Singapore, where large flights were seen to pass over to bomb the town. Exciting incidents happened here, due to the spreading of false rumours. This caused personnel to "stand to" once or twice, as it was believed that the Japanese had almost surrounded the Echelon. However, this was not true, and on the 1st Feb. the twenty first and last move on the mainland was made to Singapore. Harbour was left at 09:00 hours, and at 11:00 hours the Causeway was crossed, where large working parties were wiring and mining the bridge, and endless traffic streamed slowly North and South. The Japanese bombers certainly missed a harvest of destruction by their absence at this time. Eventually the Echelon arrived at Bidadari Camp on the island, about 5 miles from Singapore to the East, and camped in attap huts, originally erected for refugees. The transport split up and was put under cover.

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The Battalion arrived the following day, and together with “B” Echelon, occupied about a dozen huts. So began the siege of Singapore. The first few days here were spent in re-equipping and reclothing the battalion once again. They had been unfortunately cut off in their last battle engagement at Batu Pahat, and had to be taken off by gun boats, together with other units of their brigade. After a few days rest and reorganisation they were off again to take up position on the island for the final battle. The Echelon remained, and carried on with rations and supplies. Apart from the daily bombers, who incessantly bombed all objectives, there was not too much excitement, merely preparation, but after a few days the Japanese had completed their plans, landed on the island, and forcing us to again withdraw. Singapore Island being about fifteen miles by twenty miles across there was not much further to go however, and after our camp had been shelled, with fortunately only a few casualties, events became hotter and very unsafe in this area. The Echelon moved on the 12th (twenty second move) out to Beach Road on the S.E. Coast of Singapore. Considerable difficulty was experienced here for parking, but it was overcome and the final move could but now be awaited.

On the night of the 13th, the Quartermaster of the 2nd Bn. East Surrey Regiment, and 25 personnel of “B” Echelon secretly left, and it was later learned that they had embarked together with selected heads of command, and personnel of other units and departments, to an unknown destination. Many stories have since been told about them and the truth may not be known until release. It is hoped, however, that they got through safely. After their departure, the Quartermaster of the 1st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment took command of the Echelon with a smaller personnel, but Echelon was always up to, or over, strength, and there was no difficulty in finding reserves as drivers etc. Many exciting incidents happened around and about this area, such as air bombing and shelling, together with machine-gunning, and many distressing rumours of attack were current. At 09:00 hours on the 14th the Echelon moved for the twenty third time to the open road between St Andrews Church and the Union Jack Club, which were being used as hospitals. Echelon was soon removed from this position to the sidings nearby, where it was impossible to camouflage. Hundreds of vehicles were in this area, including our light artillery in action, and so Echelon became exposed to air attack. The last load of bombs were dropped between and near the two hospitals causing many casualties and difficulties. The Union Jack Club had to be cleared of all patients, as it was not possible for them to remain. Many awful sights were witnessed at this period, and everyone wondered what might happen before the end. Many stories have and will be told of the many atrocities that happened during the last few days before the capitulation on the 16th February and, as badly as we were humiliated by laying down our weapons, it was a happy release to realise that the bombing and killing had ceased. The whole Echelon moved out to the Battalion at Mount Echo, about 3 miles north, at 0900 hours on the 16th, the twenty fourth and final move since hostilities began. The remnants of the British Battalion 167 strong were met. “B” Echelon was 87 strong, being kept almost intact, and sustained few casualties from the retreat.