



A Glimpse into the Past

MEDICINE IN SINGAPORE (PART 10)

FEBRUARY 1942 TO SEPTEMBER 1945: THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION YEARS

This is the tenth instalment of a series on the history of medicine in Singapore

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Death of 11 medical and dental students

An incident that occurred on 14 February 1942 – the day before the British formally surrendered Singapore to the Japanese – has been memorialised in a bronze plaque.

The situation in Singapore around that time is vividly described by then medical student Abdul Wahab, a Penang Kapitan Kling Mosque Scholar.¹ His account is paraphrased below.

By 13 February 1942, the Japanese were only miles from the city centre. A

day earlier, the Malayan Broadcasting Station had been destroyed. The civilian population (around one million at that time) was experiencing artillery fire and air attacks, and water was running short. Governor and Lady Thomas had evacuated from Government House (the Istana) to the Singapore Club (in Fullerton Building). The General Hospital (GH) area was generally safe compared to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), where shell fragments were flying everywhere – no bombs had dropped around the GH except at around 4.15 am on 8 December

1941, when a few bombs fell near the Federated Malay States (FMS) hostel and the tennis court. At the College of Medicine Building (COMB), several hundreds of people (doctors, College staff, blood transfusion service workers, friends, relatives, medical auxiliary workers and students from Raffles College in Bukit Timah, where there was very fierce fighting going on) were sheltering from shelling, mainly on the ground floor. Although the COMB was spared damage, many of the buildings in the area had collapsed from the bombing and shelling, many dead remained amid the debris, and there was looting and disorder. The Japanese were concentrating their attack on Pasir Panjang Ridge because of its strategic importance – access to the Alexandra area where the British ammunition depots were. Some students were at the medical college and some were at TTSH.

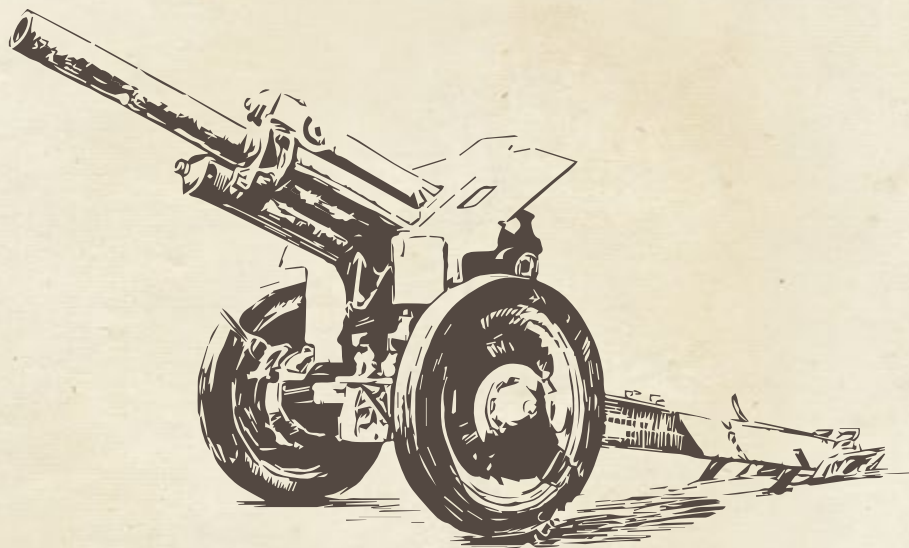
On 14 February 1942, at about 5.30 am, a shell exploded in the student dormitories at TTSH, injuring (and later killing) a clinical student from Malacca named Yoong Tatt Sin, who was honorary secretary general of the Medical College Union (MCU). On 15 February, while a group of about 50 medical and dental students, who were members of the MCU, gathered to bury Yoong in an air-raid trench behind COMB, there was intense shelling, and a group of ten students were killed. The students were Hera Singh Bul (pre-clinical student from Selangor and MCU cricket captain), Chan Kok Loon (pre-clinical student from Penang), Abdul Hamid Bin Mohd Yusoff (dental student from Telok Anson, Penang, and MCU hockey captain), Emile Baptist (clinical student from Penang), Teoh Tiaw Teong (pre-clinical student from Penang), Mabel Luther (pre-clinical student from Johor), Henry E Oorjithan (dental student from Penang), Chen Kok Kuang (pre-clinical student from Singapore), NP Sarathie (pre-clinical student from Kedah) and Ling Ding Ee (clinical student from Perak). On the morning of 16 February 1942, a brief ceremony

was held to bury the killed students, with prayers said by a Catholic priest, a Buddhist monk and a Malay imam.

A very moving personal description of the event was written by Dr Frank Dourado in a 1993 issue of the SMA newsletter:

“Three days before the fall of Singapore, we the medical students of King Edward VII College of Medicine were ousted from our quarters in the TTSH, a three-storey student building. ... We were all dumped in Professor GA Ransome’s Neurological Ward which was built on the highest terrain of Tan Tock Seng Medical Wards. ... The Japanese guns were within earshot of TTSH which was scheduled to be their next target as we found out to our cost. ... At about 5.30 am in the morning, a shell burst through our roof and exploded just above our steel bed. The deafening noise woke me up and I noticed Yoong Tatt Sin on my left groaning with pain as he had splinters into his abdomen, and Emile Baptist to my right had a huge cut on his forehead from a splinter and was bleeding profusely. ... I gave a hand and Mr Young, Professor Ransome’s Chinese attendant who was in charge of the ward ... came to help and then only bandaged Emile Baptist’s forehead which he refused to attend to until Yoong Tatt Sin’s abdominal wound was bandaged. Strange as it may sound, all the medical students under the bed did not come to give a helping hand as they must have been frightened out of their wits by the blast. Professor Eric McKie who was in charge then came up to the damaged ward and shouted to the students to help. ... We carried Yoong Tatt Sin to the main dressing station down the road and he was sent to GH Sepoy Lines. ... In Tan Tock Seng mortuary ... I notice[d] two mortuary attendants quarrelling about a purse recovered from a corpse. Up comes the medical officer – the pathologist – who solved the problem by the simple expedient of taking away the purse. ... Being a medical student, Yoong Tatt Sin was

given priority and was operated on (*Author’s note: by Mr JK Monro, the Professor of Surgery*) at about lunch, despite hundreds of casualty cases and the corridors were all chock-full of beds. The splinters had entered his liver and despite being removed he died shortly after the operation. ... [W]e brought the corpse back to the Medical College. ... We took the corpse on a trolley up to Professor Young’s house above the hill prior to burying him in the cool of the evening. At about 3 pm, Kuldip Singh, Hu Chee Tong and myself obtained *changkols* and proceeded to the top of the Golf Links near the road under the trees and started digging a grave. The terrain was very firm and solid and despite digging for more than an hour, the three of us could make no headway and managed only to dig less than a foot deep. Fortunately for us, we thought then, the rank and file Indian soldiers decided to leave their encampment in front of the College and went towards Kampong Bahru. As they had ready-made trenches we decided to use the first trench to bury Yoong Tatt Sin. The corpse in a make-shift wooden coffin covered with a Union Jack Flag was brought to the side of the trench. I decided to wheel the steel trolley back to the Hospital where it was badly needed. Halfway en route, Poon Wai Leng joined me to push it. Near the fence surrounding the tennis courts we hear the whistle of a shell coming close. Both of us jumped instantaneously into the big drain at the side of the road and I could hear the fragments of the shell whisking off the foliage on the side of the road. If we had been there we would have the shrapnel into our bodies. This shell hit the top of the Biology building and a couple of minutes later, when we were in the Hospital the next shell exploded on the area where the students were burying Yoong Tatt Sin’s body, killing 11 [10] of them and injuring several others. (According to an account by medical student Abdul Wahab, one of the shells exploded on Yoong’s coffin, partially dislodging



the lid, and caused post mortem wounds to the chest of the corpse). I remembered Chee Phui Heng coming to the Hospital. I examined and found he had a splinter in his gluteal area and he was sent to have it removed. ... At about dusk I went back to the College and straightaway looked for my friend Emile Baptist whom I had given strict instructions not to join the funeral party because of his injuries. Imagine what I felt when I was told that he was out there in the trenches. Despite it being pitch dark, I was heading for the trenches with a torchlight as I wanted to be sure he was dead. I was held back physically by Cheah Chong Ching and his uncle Cheah Chong Sin, a police officer who was evacuated from Singapore and deterred from doing so as the army had occupied the area and I might have been shot. In the morning when I turned his corpse over in the trench, his wallet which I had given him the day before which was loaded with money was missing. ... With a heavy heart I went back to the safety of the Medical College building. The next day Singapore surrendered."

A Memorial Fund was started by the MCU, in memory of the 11 students. A total of \$4,551.10 was collected. A bronze memorial plaque measuring 66 cm by 114 cm was erected at the

entrance of Harrower Hall in October 1948. The plaque reads: "In memory of the students of King Edward VII School of Medicine who died on 14 February 1942", followed by their names, followed by the following four lines "They shall not grow old / As we that are left grow old / Age shall not weary them / Nor the years condemn". After deducting the cost of the plaque, a balance of \$3,374.10 was invested to make annual awards for the best performances at oratorical and literary contests, but with the founding of the University of Malaya, the balance of the Memorial Fund was transferred to the King Edward VII Medical Society. At the unveiling of the plaque, the address was delivered by Dr Gwee Ah Leng, as chairman of the first Memorial Subcommittee. This plaque was moved to the King Edward VII Hall in September 1957 and subsequently to the COMB in August 1987, where it now sits next to the central doorway.

Professor J Gordon Harrower, MB, ChB, DSc, ChM, FRCS, FRSR, was the Professor of Anatomy for 14 years at the College. The teaching of anatomy was essentially a part-time function of government medical officers until the creation of a Chair in 1922. Professor Colonel J Holt was the first incumbent of the Chair in Anatomy and he was also Lecturer

in Biology. He was succeeded by Prof Harrower on 19 April 1922, who in turn carried on until his death in 1935 (and was then succeeded by Prof WA Fell). Prof Harrower was said to have been an excellent research worker. More than being an excellent research worker, Prof Harrower was said to have been a very inspiring teacher, who identified himself with students and a student's life to a marked degree. In recognition of this, the Student's Lounge or Student's Club House in the Medical College was named as Harrower Hall. It is not known exactly when the Club House was built, but is thought to have been around 1931, by the conversion of an L-shaped portion of the GH used for isolation cases. Its converted use was for dining and recreation, and for a kitchen. Part of the reason for the conversion was because Beaconsfield House, part of the nearby FMS Hostel containing student's dining and recreation rooms, and janitor's rooms, went into disrepair. There was a covered walkway between the Club House and the Hostel. FMS Hostel was the predecessor of King Edward VII Hall at that site, and was built in 1916 at the expense of the Governor Sir Arthur Henderson Young (Governor, 2 September 1911 to 17 February 1920). It was an imposing four-storey building overlooking the GH. It housed 72 male students and before the Club House was built, its only social life was said to have been a billiards table. A second hostel, SS Mandalay hostel, which could house 100 students, was built a few years later, again at the expense of the Governor. The playing field behind the FMS hostel was opened on 14 December 1932 by Sir Cecil Clementi (Governor, 5 February 1930 to 9 November 1934). A pre-cast sports pavilion was erected on the field in 1934 (it is not clear what happened to this pavilion). ♦

References

1. Wahab A. *Medical students during the Japanese invasion of Singapore, 1941-1942. At the Dawn of the Millennium: 75 Years of Our Alumni.* Alumni Association/Singapore University Press, 2000:36-45.