

Brave Norfolks sacrificed and



LEGION OF THE DOOMED: Men of the 5th Royal Norfolks – one of the units sacrificed for political ends 70 years ago.

Two decisions in the space of 48 hours, one close to home and another on a distant battlefield, shaped Norfolk's experience of the second world war. In the second of two articles, **STEVE SNELLING** tells how thousands of local men were sacrificed for political ends 70 years ago today.

OF ALL THE DARK DAYS ENDURED

DURING THE second world war none was blacker than Sunday, February 15, 1942. Weeks of retreats and defeats had prepared politicians and generals for the worst in Singapore, but even so the scale and the speed of the Japanese victory was breathtaking.

In 70 days an army of about 30,000 men had swept down the length of the Malayan peninsula and seized the 'fortress' island of Singapore together with a haul of prisoners that numbered more than 100,000 men.

And just as the RAF's directive to adopt an 'area bombing' strategy would have terrible repercussions for the citizens of Norwich, so the decision taken 24 hours later to surrender the empire's greatest base in the Far East was to have tragic consequences for thousands of Norfolk families.

With three Royal Norfolk territorial battalions and numerous locally-raised ancillary units among the belatedly swollen garrison, there was scarcely a family in the county that was not touched in some way by a calamity that consigned thousands to three and a half years of duration vile on starvation rations in disease-ridden prison camps presided over by a brutal Japanese regime.

During the four weeks that units from the 18th (East Anglian) Division were engaged in fighting on the Malayan mainland, and then on the island of Singapore, the casualty rate had been surprisingly heavy, but it was as nothing compared with that in captivity.

In slave labour camps along the notorious Thai-Burma railway, where it was said a man died for every sleeper laid along its 250-mile jungle course,

amid the mines of Formosa and the factories of Japan, the death rate rose astronomically.

Plunged too late into a campaign many considered already lost, the abandoned men of the 18th Division faced an inglorious battle for survival that was made all the harder to bear by the realisation that their sacrifice had been little more than a futile gesture.

Decades later the resentment had hardly subsided. Fred Eva, a great campaigner for prisoner of war welfare, summed it up to me when he wrote: "At the end of the campaign, I and many of my comrades were made to feel humiliated, betrayed and angered. What a bloody waste!"

And the feeling wasn't restricted to ordinary soldiers. Many officers felt similarly let down. Charles Brereton wrote of the 18th Division being "sacrificed in the shambles of political stupidity".

Robert Hamond, a company commander in the 5th Royal Norfolks, was even more outspoken.

Writing 50 years after the war, he described the mood in Singapore on the day of surrender: "Apart from relief at not having been killed, we felt very critical of our superiors, our government and our country for having put us in such a bloody awful position to no avail as far as anyone could see."

Few prisoners, however, were as accurate in their condemnation as Ronald Horner, an officer in one of the 18th Division's Royal Army Service Corps units.

"One cannot help a feeling of bitterness when you see a complete division like the 18th out of the war... simply because of 'world politics'," he wrote. "The fear of



upsetting public opinion in America and Australia made it necessary for the British government to sacrifice, and there is no other word for it, a complete division..."

His withering indictment, made all the more powerful and remarkable for having been written as a prisoner without the benefit of hindsight, encapsulated the sense of betrayal felt by so many East Anglian servicemen and which became one of the war's saddest legacies.

For if Singapore was, in Churchill's own words, "the worst disaster... in British history", it was also, so far as the 18th Division was concerned, a disaster that could and, perhaps more pertinently, should have been avoided or at least mitigated.

This is not to be wise after the event. Almost to the very end, Churchill knew there was a chance to save the bulk of the division.

So, too, did his senior generals. The reason they chose not to do so remains a subject of contention and controversy to this day.

On a more prosaic level, the roots of this particular tragedy of war were bound up in timing and geography. For when Japan launched its blitzkrieg against British and American territories in December 1941, it was the 18th Division's accidental misfortune to be the nearest possible reinforcements.

They were approaching Capetown en route to the Middle East where they were expected to acclimatise by guarding the strategically-important oilfields of Iraq before joining the offensive against Rommel's Afrika Korps.

Their journey thus far had been an epic one. After months spent guarding the

east coast against an invasion that never came and more months training for a desert war they would never fight, they had voyaged thousands of miles as the best-equipped division to leave our shores on a secret course that was about to become yet more circuitous.

Just four days after the first Japanese landings in northern Malaya, the course of their convoy and their war was irrevocably changed. At Churchill's behest, the 18th Division was instructed to head not for Basra but for Bombay. Originally, he had thought of using them to attack the Japanese across the narrow isthmus linking Burma to Malaya, but had been persuaded by his chiefs of staff to leave the decision of how best to employ them to the commander on the spot, Field Marshal Lord Wavell.

That way, they could keep their options open in case of a German attempt to seize the oilfields in Iraq.

Events in the east, however, were moving fast.

Within a week, thoughts were turning to Malaya and the need to shore up the crumbling defence. Within two weeks, one of the 18th Division's three infantry brigades, including two Norfolk battalions, was ordered to Singapore. And within a month, they were fighting an enemy about whom they knew little in conditions for which they were singularly ill prepared.

Yet despite all of that, and in spite of the growing appreciation that more infantry were of little help against an enemy that dominated the sea and the sky, there was still in late December and early January an outside chance, albeit a very remote one, that the Japanese advance might be delayed long enough to bring more forces to bear.

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Ronald Horner, an officer in one of the 18th Division's Royal Army Service Corps units.

betrayed for lost cause

Pictures: SUPPLIED



SLAVE LABOUR: Left, an emaciated army of PoWs weakened by starvation and disease were worked to death by the Japanese.
ROAD TO RUIN: Above, wrecked 18th Division transport in Malaya reflects Surrender
WORST DISASTER: Below, the Singapore surrender was the heaviest blow suffered by the people of Norfolk during the second world war.



But if the decision to send the 53rd Brigade to Singapore was just about excusable in the circumstances where a measure of hope prevailed, there was no military reason to justify ordering the remaining two-thirds of the 18th Division from the security of India to the

hopelessness of Singapore at a moment when it was clear the struggle was as good as over.

So, why, when he knew that Singapore could not long survive the loss of the mainland, did Churchill countenance such a pointless sacrifice?

CONSEQUENCES OF DEFEAT: Above, Singapore prisoners faced a long struggle for survival.

The answer lay in growing Australian alarm that defeat in Malaya could open the door to a Japanese invasion of their country. Unrealistic though the threat appeared to the British high command, it was enough to panic the Australian government. In heated exchanges, the Australians demanded assurances that Britain's commitment to making Singapore "impregnable" would be honoured, even when it was clear no such prospect existed.

For all his bluster about defending the island to the last, Churchill was a realist enough to recognise a disaster when he saw one. But he was torn between keeping his promise to do all within his power to hold the island and the knowledge that by pouring in more troops he was merely reinforcing defeat.

By the end of January, even as the rest of the 18th Division had embarked on its fateful journey from Bombay to Singapore, he had begun to have reservations about the decision. With Malaya all but lost, Burma had become his priority. Wavell had wanted to keep the division back to help in its defence rather than see it frittered away for political ends.

For days their fate hung in the balance as convoys carried them towards Singapore and disaster. They could, as Churchill put it, be "doomed or diverted". "There was still ample time," he wrote, "to turn their prowess northwards to Rangoon."

He urged his Defence Committee to reconsider their decision. Instead they hesitated and, as they dithered, the Australian government made it plain that any evacuation of Singapore would "be regarded here and elsewhere as an inexcusable betrayal".

And so, contrary to all military logic and fully aware of the betrayal of their own men, the British, "by general agreement or acquiescence", agreed to continue with the reinforcement of a lost cause rather than risk accusations of reneging on their responsibilities with an unseemly "scuttle".

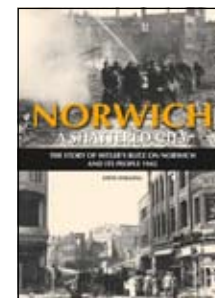
The last units of the 18th Division reached Singapore on February 5, by which time a full-scale evacuation of civilians and non-essential staff was already in full swing.

Ten days later, with the Japanese fighting in the suburbs of Singapore city and all supplies of water cut off, beleaguered British commanders took the only decision open to them - to surrender in order to spare further useless loss of life.

It marked the end of the most portentous 48 hours of the war for the people of Norfolk. Just how significant those decisions taken during two days in February 70 years ago actually were would be realised within 10 weeks.

For as the first bombs heralded the beginning of the Baedeker blitz on Norwich at the end of April, the prison camp cemeteries on Singapore island had already begun to fill and by the war's end the fearful death toll among the Army's unluckiest division would constitute the single-most devastating blow suffered by Norfolk during six years of war.

■ **Steve Snelling is the author of Norwich: A Shattered City, a new study of the 1942 Baedeker assault, which is due to be published by Halsgrove later this month.**



REX HANCY
IN THE
COUNTRYSIDE



Taverham,
February 14

This sighting of a drone fly creates a bit of a buzz

Flowers blooming well out of season and insects appearing before regular sustenance was available has again been a topic of conversation.

We had almost become used to out-of-sequence events due to the long succession of mild winters. Last year and the year before put a stop to all that, at least for the time being. This year the same old story has been repeated time and again. Then the weather changed!

One event did not follow this course. Malcolm Metcalf saw a large black fly resting head towards the ground on his drying apparatus when he went out with the washing. At first thinking he was seeing one of our common April flies he soon realised this was different. Some kind of hoverfly seemed to be the answer, but surely not within a few days from the beginning of the year.

Two days later and I was able to see for myself. In fact he had correctly identified the insect as a hoverfly though it was not really typical of the one it turned out to be which clearly made identification more difficult.

The species concerned was one of the unusual ones which are found in every month of the year. Rare in that one respect though individuals are frequently seen though almost as often incorrectly named. These large hoverflies are from a small group known as drone flies because they mimic the appearance of male bees. Reports of swarms of bees behaving oddly are nearly always down to such flies. The bee-like buzzing noise they make when handled adds to the effect.

Not that many people wish to handle them. One reason to do so is to count the number of wings they possess. Bees always have two pairs of wings, flies just the one. To compensate for the lack, a clever balancing system has evolved. A tiny mini-lollipop is in constant motion, rather like the long pole we associate with a high-wire circus act.

Apart from the business of reproduction, the most important period of a fly's life is the larval stage, how to find the large quantities of food necessary and how to be protected as well as possible. Drone fly larvae have an ingenious device which resembles an extensible siphon so it is able to live comfortably and safely in all kinds of rotten material, including sludge at the bottom of a garden pond. Brief excursions to the surface to gulp air are all that is needed. The siphon results in the label 'rat-tailed maggot' being applied.

WHERE TO JOIN

- **Norfolk Wildlife Trust:** 01603 625540
- **Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society:** 01603 457270
- **RSPB (East Anglia):** 01603 661662
- **Norfolk Ornithologists' Association:** 01485 525406
- **British Trust for Ornithology:** 01842 750050