

# *Dalforce at the Fall of Singapore in 1942: An Overseas Chinese Heroic Legend*

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*Dalforce, or the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army as it was more popularly known among the Chinese community, was a hastily formed volunteer army created just before the fall of Singapore in February 1942. It was made up of 1,000–3,000 Chinese volunteers from all walks of life and political persuasions. Dalforce companies, armed with limited weapons and ammunition, were sent to defend the different fronts of Singapore Island after only a short stint of training. The soldiers of Dalforce, alongside the Australian, Indian and British armies, fought the Japanese invasion during the Battle for Singapore. The Overseas Chinese community in Singapore saw Dalforce as a medium through which they could join in the struggle, together with their comrades in China, against an aggressive and belligerent Japan. This small army became a symbol of something their comrades in China failed to truly achieve — the ability to unite in one force against a common enemy. The exploits of this little army became an Overseas Chinese legend.*

WAR HISTORIES IN CHINESE POPULAR CULTURE of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) formed a distinctive style of writing and regularly contained exaggerated heroic endeavors of small bands of Chinese united as one, holding back superior numbers of what the literature called the “bestial enemy” (*shou di* 兽敌) the Japanese (Hung 1994: 151–220). These accounts celebrated Chinese nationalism and unity, which the resistance against Japan heightened among many Chinese particularly the poor masses who had been hitherto uninterested in a united China or nationalism before the war (Johnson 1962: 2). Chiang Kai-shek himself often stressed to his military cadets at the Whampoa Military Academy the military strategy of pitting one Chinese soldier fired up with nationalism against tens or hundreds of the enemy. Chiang took Sun Yat-sen’s words and turned them into the military doctrine: “to be a revolutionary army, each soldier has to be able to

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fight one hundred enemy soldiers” (Tien 1992: 171). Not surprisingly, war histories written in this atmosphere became “little heroic legends” that were passed down in Chinese popular culture. They were meant to arouse Chinese nationalism by exaggerating heroism.

The most famous of these heroic legends from the Second Sino-Japanese War was the story of the Eight Hundred Heroes (Babai Zhuangshi 八百壮士) of Shanghai. At the end of the 90-day siege of Shanghai (August–November 1937), 800 Nationalist soldiers under Lieutenant-Colonel Xie Junyuan (aged 33 and himself from the fourth batch of graduates of the Whampoa Military Academy) held up in a waterfront warehouse at Shanghai’s Zhabei district against several Japanese armies. These 800 heroes, despite their small numbers, supposedly inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and delayed the Japanese advance on Chiang’s retreating main army. Their heroics and sacrifices for the motherland (*zuguo* 祖国) were overblown and exaggerated into legend. Madam He Xiangning of the then Guomindang Central Executive Committee is said to have wept at their sacrifice with the words, “Each one of you has a revolutionary and sacrificial spirit. Because of you, the martyrs will become even greater, the soldiers at the front-line will fight more bravely, the Chinese people will become united and people in the world will become more just” (“Babai Zhuangshi” 1976; Lu Hanhua 1976).

This legend of Babai Zhuangshi, which was also made into a movie in 1938 of the same name, was an inspiration to the Overseas Chinese or *huaqiao* 华侨, according to Liu Kang 刘抗, the artist and cartoonist who helped lead the Overseas Chinese arts community in Singapore and Malaya in its resistance against Japan’s aggression in China. Liu argued that the local arts community admired the story of Babai Zhuangshi and sought to emulate its style in their own popular art forms aimed at stirring up resistance to the Japanese (Foong 1999a: 32–35). The work of historian Wang Gungwu suggests that the Overseas Chinese did follow the writing styles of the popular culture of the resistance movement against Japan in China. Wang identifies an emotional style of writing that emerged during the Second Sino-Japanese War and became prevalent in Singapore and Malaya. According to him:

They [the writers] were mainly concerned to arouse the Chinese in Malaya to patriotic efforts and much of their writing was aimed at linking the local Chinese to the brutal war in China. But in so doing, they often turned to local conditions to make the tragedy more real. They wrote angrily, bitterly, heroically about a distant war and spiced their work with local characters. They scorned the “traitors”, they scolded the timid, they lampooned the Japanese. They praised their heroes and called for support, unity, courage, violence and revenge befitting a nationalism at war (1992: 282).

This prompts a question: Did the Overseas Chinese create similar “little heroic legends” out of the exploits of small bands of Overseas Chinese fighting alongside

the British Empire's forces in the Malayan Campaign (8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942)? The first small band of Overseas Chinese to go into action against the Japanese in Southeast Asia was called Dalforce, which defended Singapore Island just before it fell. Dalforce, which also went by the more "patriotic" title of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army (Xinghua Yiyong Jun 星华义勇军), was a hastily formed Chinese volunteer army created just before the fall of Singapore in February 1942. It was made up of 1,000–3,000 Chinese volunteers from all walks of life and political persuasions. During the dramatic climax of the defense of Singapore several Dalforce companies, armed with limited weapons and ammunition, were sent to defend the different fronts of Singapore Island after only a short stint of training. The soldiers of Dalforce, alongside the Australian, Indian, and British armies, fought the Japanese invasion during the Battle for Singapore in February 1942. This force was reported to have inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese, and fought to the last man. According to the legend, Dalforce is even given credit for pushing back an overwhelming enemy far greater in numbers than its own small size. This was supposedly accomplished by being armed with little more than old hunting rifles and their bravery, while much larger Australian and Indian brigades were retreating.

The fall of Singapore has given rise to various heroic legends, stories of brave soldiers fighting against all odds opposing a superior enemy. It is no surprise to see that the Overseas Chinese also have their own heroic legend among these stories. The most notable national heroic legend is in Australian military history, that the Australian troops were much better fighters than the other soldiers of the British Empire and that they were let down by retreating British and Indian soldiers while they stood their ground against all odds. Historians such as Peter Elphick, Brian Farrell, Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn have revealed that there is much mythology in this image because the Australians, while fighting well in certain sectors, such as Gemas and Bakri in Malaya, were reluctant to keep fighting against the Japanese in a seemingly futile struggle toward the very end of the fall of Singapore. Many Australians, contrary to the image of the heroic soldier, laying down his life for his comrades, broke from their ranks at the front and were absent without leave when Singapore surrendered (Elphick 1995: 435–500; Farrell 1999: 341–64; Hack and Blackburn 2004: 153–62). However, the nationalist image of the Australian fighting man, the "digger," overglazes these incidents and plays up the heroic legend.

The Overseas Chinese community in Singapore, also looking through nationalist glasses, saw Dalforce as a medium through which they could join in the struggle with their comrades in China against an aggressive and belligerent Japan. This small army became a symbol of something their comrades in China failed to truly achieve — the ability to unite in one force against a common enemy. The exploits of this little army became an Overseas Chinese legend for many members of the

wartime generation of the Overseas Chinese in Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew (b. 1923) recalled in his published memoirs how to his generation of Chinese in Singapore, Dalforce was, to use his exact words, “a legend, a name synonymous with bravery” (Lee 1998: 57). For him and his generation, Dalforce was a symbol of Overseas Chinese unity because supposedly, as Lee Kuan Yew believed, its recruits were united coming “from all walks of life, supporters of Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) and of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP)” (Lee 1998: 57). He repeated the legend’s story that the Japanese massacred tens of thousands of Chinese after the fall of Singapore as revenge for the supposedly many casualties inflicted by this small band of heroes. Lee Kuan Yew’s Raffles College classmate of the early 1940s, Lee Kip Lee (b.1922), President of the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association and author of popular articles and books on the Japanese Occupation, has also expressed the belief that Dalforce was “kind of a legend” (Lee 1995, 2004). This image is found not only in the writings of Lee’s generation but in contemporary Overseas Chinese Singapore historiography on Dalforce (Cheah 2002: 97–100).

The most public expression of this Dalforce legend in recent times in the local Overseas Chinese historiography has been the immensely popular Chinese-language book, *Heping de daijia* 和平的代价, published in 1995 and translated as *The Price of Peace*. This tome contains several lengthy chapters on Dalforce and other local Overseas Chinese military units during the Japanese Occupation written by members of the Singapore Chinese war generation, such as the senior administrator of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Foong Choon Hon. The book inspired in 1997 a very popular Singapore Chinese television series of the same name, “Heping de Daijia,” which in turn led to other popular television war dramas, such as “In Pursuit of Peace” in Chinese (2001) and “A War Diary” in English (2001). These expressions of popular culture have drawn upon the representation of Dalforce in the Chinese-language literature, which has extolled the efforts of the Overseas Chinese in the defense of Singapore, and in particular, the heroism of the men of Dalforce.

### Writing the Dalforce Legend

Do the exploits of Dalforce constitute a legend for the Overseas Chinese in Singapore on par with that of Babai Zhuangshi in mainland China and Taiwan? Does the story of Dalforce meet the criteria of the traditional definitions of what constitute a legend? Is it a story which has “a basis of fact, but amplifies, abridges or modifies that basis,” and is it a story about the past that possesses “an exaggeration and a love of the wonderful” (Brewer 2001: 658)? What is the basis for the Dalforce Overseas Chinese legend and the historical reality behind it? Most of the literature on Dalforce has been written in the Chinese language

and tends to repeat and embellish the elements of the story originally provided in the book, *War History of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army (Xinghua yiyong jun zhandou shi 星华义勇军战斗史)*. This “official” battalion history of the unit was put together by the Deputy Commander of Dalforce, Hu Tiejun, and published in December 1945 (Hu 1945). Hu, an ardent Guomindang supporter, was himself a graduate of Chiang’s Whampoa Military Academy and later a journalist with the anti-Japanese Chinese press in Singapore before the Japanese attack. Hu edited the book and contributed the most substantial chapters to it. Other chapters consist of accounts by his fellow Dalforce veterans. Hu’s chapters in *Xinghua yiyong jun zhandou shi* were repeated verbatim in the subsequent Chinese-language accounts of Dalforce. The chapters are testimony to Chiang’s military doctrine of pitting one Chinese Nationalist soldier fired up with patriotism against an overwhelming enemy that Hu learnt at the Whampoa Military Academy. They also reflect Hu’s background as a journalist telling the story of the resistance to Japan through stories, such as Babai Zhuangshi, in the Chinese press of Singapore, mostly in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Foong 1995: 271). Parts of Hu’s December 1945 text were repeated in the long account of Dalforce provided in the 20 December 1946 public petition to the London War Office for back pay by the 600-strong Dalforce veterans’ association, headed by Mah Khong (Dalforce File 1945). In this petition, the achievements of Dalforce were exaggerated in order to attain the Dalforce veterans’ pressing objective of demanding back pay from the War Office in London and gaining the backing of the leaders of the Overseas Chinese community for this campaign. In January 1947, two chapters on Dalforce by veteran Chen Pingbo were also included in *The Second World War and the Southeast Asian Chinese (Dazhan yu nanqiao 大战于南侨)*, which was compiled by one of the organizations set up to help unite the Overseas Chinese in Malaya and Singapore against the Japanese attack on China, the Nanyang China Relief Fund (Nanyang Huaqiao Chouzhen Zuguo Nanmin Zonghui 南洋华侨筹赈祖国难民总会) (Chen 1947). This volume was an official commemorative tribute to the war effort of the Overseas Chinese in the fight against Japan and designed to play up the role of the Overseas Chinese of Malaya and Singapore in the anti-Japanese resistance. In *Dazhan yu nanqiao*, Dalforce was depicted as one of the symbols of Overseas Chinese unity.

The authors of the three early Chinese-language texts which told the story of Dalforce soon after the war appear to have had strong reasons for exaggerating the role of the unit. They were writing in the context of there being a fervent desire to represent an Overseas Chinese ethos of unity in the wartime struggle that was supposed to have motivated the Chinese community in Malaya and Singapore. In this context, a comparison of the writing style of the three texts may well show that very soon after the war there was a legend of Dalforce that accentuated the contributions of the volunteer army through the use of emotive Chinese phrases,

flowery language and an eloquent Chinese descriptive style. By making such a comparison, one can assess the historical reality behind the major themes in these texts on the Dalforce legend.

### **A Symbol of Overseas Chinese Resistance and Unity**

The Dalforce legend at the fall of Singapore begins with the military unit being described as a creation of Overseas Chinese unity, identity, and resistance. The military unit was portrayed in the three 1940s texts as being born out of *huaqiao*, or Overseas Chinese, patriotism for “the motherland” that manifested itself in the Singapore Overseas Chinese Anti-Enemy Mobilization Council (Xingzhou Huaqiao Kangdi Dongyuan Zonghui 星洲华侨抗敌动员总会), which was put together by Tan Kah Kee 陈嘉庚, and formed at a public meeting on the premises of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on Sunday, 28 December 1941 (*Straits Times* 30 December 1941; *Singapore Free Press* 30 December 1941). Tan Kah Kee had been asked by the British Governor Sir Shenton Thomas to mobilize the Chinese community behind the British war effort against Japan. This body galvanized the anti-Japanese feelings that had been manifested by the Overseas Chinese after Japan invaded China in 1937 in various organizations, such as the China Relief Fund, which had been formed in August 1937 under Tan Kah Kee, and the National Salvation Movement which both raised money for China and organized boycotts of Japanese goods and businesses (Yong 1990: 188–95; Akashi 1970).

The name of the key military unit that emerged from the Mobilization Council reflected the years of effort made by the China Relief Fund and the National Salvation Movement in seeking to unite the Overseas Chinese community behind China’s fight. In the Chinese-language texts, the military unit was never called Dalforce. This was the name that the British gave the force after the British commander, Lieutenant-Colonel John D. Dalley. The Overseas Chinese gave it another name, the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army. The 1940s Chinese-language accounts of who joined Dalforce upheld the idea of Overseas Chinese unity in the face of the attack by the “bestial enemy.” Hu described the cross section of Overseas Chinese who joined the force:

The members of Volunteer Army were complex. They included members of the Communist Party, Kuomintang members, clerks, general workers, dance hostesses, students, Raffles College students ... from the different political parties and the different echelons of society. We did not ask about their beliefs then, as long as they possessed the passion and bravery to resist the Japanese invasion, they were qualified to join (Hu 1945: 15).

Mah Khong was even more sanguine about Dalforce being representative of the cross-section of the Overseas Chinese community. In his December 1946 description of the story of Dalforce recorded in his public petition to the colonial government, he repeated much of what Hu had written of its origins, but also

included peasants, hawkers, old women, and both Communist and Guomintang party members. Mah openly stated the *huaqiao* patriotic line that he and his comrades joined to continue China's resistance against Japan, a "bestial enemy of all ages" (*kuanggu de shoudi* 旷古的兽敌) in their "second home" (*di'er guxiang* 第二故乡) of Malaya and Singapore:

... the members of our army ... that consisted of various elements — some having been the promoters of political causes, some having been the editors and reporters of news agencies, or managers, some having been students and co-eds of Raffles College, some having been young partners in shops, some having been the industrious labourers, peasants, hawkers, old women, young dancing girls ... although we differed in sexes, religious creeds, political ideas, yet since Malaya is our second home where we have been born and bred, we felt it necessary for us to resist the invasion of the bestial enemy of all ages. Moreover, the enemy that opened the line in the south to frustrate the efforts of our motherland should so much the more be resisted by those that have conscience (Dalforce File 1945).

Mah in 1946 thus embellished Hu's earlier 1945 account with a greater emphasis on the Overseas Chinese joining Dalforce to directly participate in the struggle of the "motherland." Chen Pingbo in 1947 also emphasized Overseas Chinese nationalism as the reason why many joined. He wrote, "We were drunk with the idea of fighting and killing Japanese. We intended to open an external battle front for our motherland and to protect the lives and possessions of our overseas brethren" (Chen 1947: 58).

In the legend, Dalforce appears to have been created as an expression of *huaqiao* unity across the major political divides of Chinese politics voiced at the meeting of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Anti-Enemy Mobilization Council on 28 December 1941. The historical reality is different and more complex. In a confidential letter to Singapore's Acting Colonial Secretary, A.J. Gracie, on 30 September 1946, Lieutenant-Colonel Dalley wrote, "The recruiting was done personally by me, both as regards officers and men .... At no time did I deal officially with any Chinese Council as such .... The orders to raise the force were received by me personally from Malaya Command H.Q." (Dalforce File 1945). Ian Alexander MacDonald, a British officer in command of the Dalforce company situated at the mouth of the Serangoon River, supports Dalley's claims in his papers when he wrote, "He [Dalley] had obtained permission from Malayan Command to recruit Chinese Communists and train them as far as possible for defence of the mangroves around Singapore Island" (MacDonald Papers). Dalley had already been training Chinese (mainly Communists) in the SOE (Special Operations Executive) 101 Special Training School in Singapore, for anti-Japanese guerrilla work in Malaya in December 1941. Because it was no longer possible to send these units up to Malaya, many were incorporated into Dalforce. John Davis, one of the trainers at SOE 101 training school, recalled in an oral history interview, "I think that elements who come [sic] down for training and couldn't

be trained or had only been partially trained, were absorbed into Dalforce certainly” (Davis Interview 1982).

The discrepancy over how Dalforce was formed can be explained simply by examining Tan Kah Kee’s own account of the 28 December 1941 meeting written in his 1946 memoirs. What appears in Tan Kah Kee’s 1946 memoirs is not *huaqiao* unity but disunity. Although Dalforce has been portrayed in the legend as a symbol of Overseas Chinese unity, resistance and identity, there were cracks behind this appearance of *huaqiao* unity. The birth of Dalforce out of the 28 December 1941 meeting was not a result of a consensus among the various groups, clans, and associations that met. It was instead largely a creation of the Chinese Communists. In his memoirs, the Chairman of the Council, Tan Kah Kee, asserted that he had been against the idea of creating an armed unit of Chinese volunteers which had not been on the agenda of the meeting of 28 December 1941, held at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce that resulted in the formal creation of the Mobilization Council. According to Tan, it was a Communist by the name of Ng Ye Lu (Huang Yelu) who put forward a motion of arming the people. Although the motion was rejected by Tan, it was finally passed, wrote Tan, as many “young and inexperienced” Chinese men supported Ng (Huang). These were mostly Communists who had just been released by the British from prison to help fight the Japanese as future guerrillas and had attended the meeting in large numbers (Ward et al. 1994: 157). Hence, the decision to create Dalforce as a unit of the Arms Department of the Mobilization Council was not a unanimous one and it was largely a result of pressure from the Communists.

Tan Kah Kee whom the Governor of Singapore, Sir Shenton Thomas, believed was the only Chinese in Singapore who could have united the various factions within the Chinese community, proved not as capable as he was made out to be. Tan did nothing further to prevent the creation of Dalforce even though he expressed in his memoirs the opinion that Overseas Chinese military involvement “would be harmful and serve no good purpose” and the men were “being sent to their deaths” (Ward et al. 1994: 158). To express his disappointment at the colonial government for its “extremely cunning and ruthless” action of supporting and arming the volunteers of Dalforce, he left Singapore on 3 February 1942 for the Dutch East Indies (Ward et al. 1994: 158). The leadership of Dalforce then gravitated toward the Communists notably Lim Kang Sek, who had been since 28 December 1941 leader of the Arms Department of the Mobilization Council, and would later die in the struggle against the Japanese. With the departure of Tan, the Overseas Chinese community had lost hope of any possible unifying leadership, and Dalforce came to be hijacked by the Communists. When Dalley and his fellow British officers claimed that they recruited the members of Dalforce from mostly the ranks of just released Communist prisoners, they were right. The Communists were the political section of the community which most wanted the

force. It is not surprising that the Communists that Dalley and his fellow Malayan Civil Service police officers knew from the time when they were rounding them up and jailing them were the majority of the individuals recruited for the Dalforce. The unit was certainly not an expression of Overseas Chinese unity as the legend makes it out to be.

These cracks in Overseas Chinese unity become more visible when one realizes that there were in effect two small Chinese armies that emerged out of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Anti-Enemy Mobilization Council on 28 December 1941 resulting from the political divide between the Communists and the Guomintang. The Chinese volunteers who were ready to fight the Japanese at the front appear to have comprised two different sections, namely, the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army (Xinghua Yiyong Jun), which was mainly Communist, and the Guomintang Overseas Chinese Guard Force (Huaqiao Shoubei Jun 华侨守备军) (Hu Mai 1944). This unit was raised by the pro-Guomintang Tong De 同德 Press Association. Veteran Chang Teh Cheok, who served in the Huaqiao Shoubei Jun and later in the anti-Japanese British sponsored intelligence and insurgency unit in Malaya, Force 136, recalled later during an oral history interview that after the 28 December 1941 meeting, the Guomintang and the Communists were still divided, so they formed separate military units (Chang Interview 1982). The Communists formed the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army, which came directly under the command of Dalley, hence the name Dalforce. It included some Guomintang members, but most Guomintang supporters formed the smaller Overseas Chinese Guard Force. Chang also recalled that both sections comprised a total strength not exceeding 1,500 men, and the Overseas Chinese Guard Force was also trained by British officers. This figure more or less tallies with that given by Hu Tiejun in *Xinghua yiyong jun zhandou shi* (1945: 6).

Chang remembered that when he was stationed at the front in Woodlands on the East side of the Kranji River, he hanged up many Guomintang flags, an action which could be interpreted as an attempt to distinguish the Overseas Chinese Guard Force from the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army. Hanging up multiple Guomintang flags would not have been possible had there been any sizable number of Communists in the Overseas Chinese Guard Force. Therefore, it would be logical to conclude that the majority of the Overseas Chinese Guard Force members were Guomintang and other non-Communists. This desire to distinguish the largely non-Communist Overseas Chinese Guard Force from the probably largely Communist Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army weakens the idea of Overseas Chinese unity on the eve of the fall of Singapore. Chang recalled that his comrades and himself were separated from the Dalforce company attached to the Australian 27th Brigade defending the Causeway area near Woodlands.

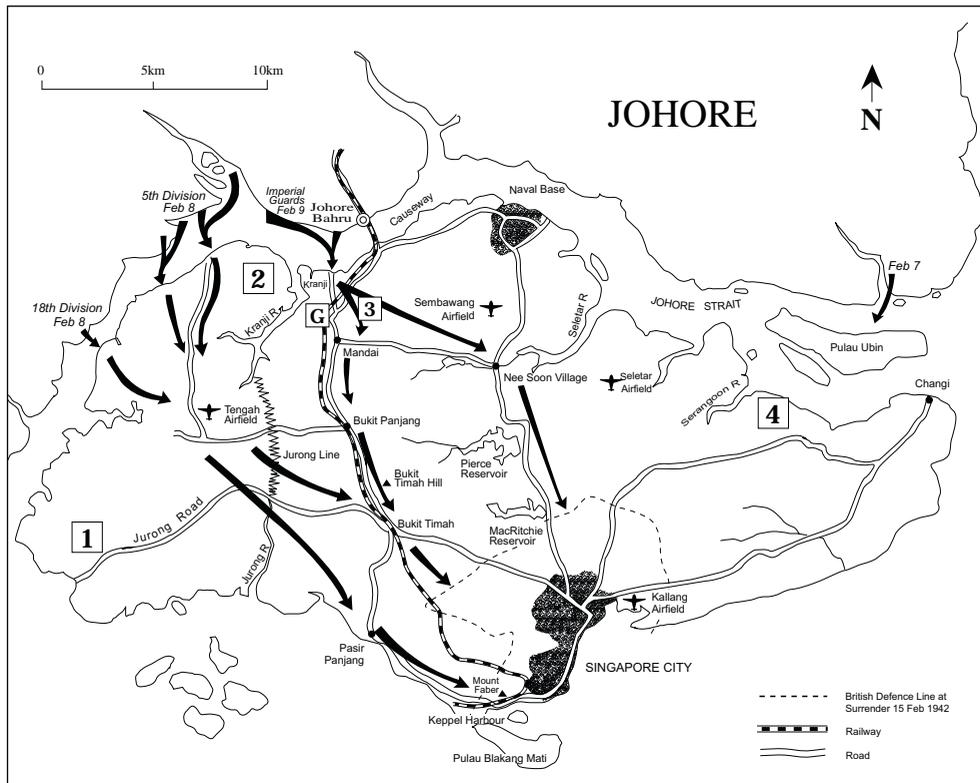
There were tensions among the Chinese volunteers from the different factions as was suggested by Dalforce veteran Choi Siew Hong (b. 1922) in an oral history interview with the authors. He was the Quartermaster Sergeant stationed at Dalforce Headquarters at Kim Yam Road in downtown Singapore. He and his two classmates from Raffles College joined Dalforce out of a sense of adventure rather than patriotism. He mentioned that neither he nor his classmates had joined to sacrifice their lives for China. All survived the Battle of Singapore, including his two classmates, who did see combat at the front. They joined the unit by simply answering an advertisement in the English newspaper, the *Straits Times*. Choi recalled:

I did hear that there were differences between the section of Dalforce, consisting of Guomintang supporters, which was headquartered nearer the city centre, and the section located in Kim Yam Road which consisted mainly of Communists sympathizers. One particular grouse was believed to be differences in the treatment accorded to each of the two sections (Choi Interview 2004).

Choi also remembered being viewed with a degree of suspicion by his Dalforce Communist comrades when he was handing out weapons because he was not a Communist like the majority of the Dalforce soldiers at the Kim Yam Road HQ, neither was he a member of the Guomintang. Ian Morrison, the Malayan correspondent for the London *Times* in 1942, also noted that the members of Dalforce were “trained, and placed in formations according to their political sympathies. There was one school where the Kuomintang adherents were trained, another where the Communists were trained” (Morrison 1942: 171). Thus, Dalforce was not an exemplification of the supposed consensus and unity of the Overseas Chinese community.

### **Glorifying Dalforce’s Military Achievements**

Another theme central to the Dalforce legend is that the companies of Dalforce “packed a lethal punch” against the Japanese soldiers invading Singapore. The numbers of men giving this “lethal punch” to the Japanese vary in the stories of the legend. Mah mentioned 10,000 Chinese joining Dalforce (Dalforce File 1945). Chen wrote that 3,000 joined, but only about 1,300 were trained (Chen 1947: 60). Hu reported that only 1,300 men reported for duty at the Nanyang Teachers’ Training School at Kim Yam Road (Hu 1945: 2). Hu wrote these 1,300 men essentially comprised a unit the size of a battalion which was organized into eight companies of about 150 men each. A Dalforce company was composed of three platoons. Chen repeated the exact same paragraph in Hu’s work to describe this organization of Dalforce (Hu 1945: 14; Chen 1947: 58). A figure of 3,000 in the process of joining Dalforce, with only 1,300 being organized into eight



**KEYS:**

- 1** Dalforce Company at Jurong 18th milestone.
- 2** Dalforce Company at Lim Chu Kang 19<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> milestone and attached to the 2/20 Battalion, Australian 22nd Brigade.
- 3** Dalforce Company at Causeway Sector.
- 4** Dalforce Company at area between Serangoon River and Pasir Ris. (Also referred to as the Company at Hougang by Hu Tiejun).
- G** Chang Teh Cheok's Overseas Chinese Guard Platoon.

**Map 1:** Dalforce Companies and the Battle of Singapore 8 February 1942

companies of 150 men seems credible. British officers in charge of Dalforce gave the total strength of Dalforce as 1,250 men organized into eight companies of 150 men, but with half the companies not fully formed at the time Dalforce was committed to the frontline (Dalforce File 1945). Only four companies were stationed at the front according to these British officers attached to Dalforce

because that was all that could be trained for combat in time (Dalforce File 1945). Ian Alexander MacDonald, who commanded one of these companies at the mouth of the Serangoon River, mentioned that there were four Dalforce companies at the front. Company No. 1 was stationed at the end of Jurong Road; Company No. 2 was at the Sungei Buloh area, west of the Kranji River; a third company was at Woodlands near the Causeway; and a fourth at the mouth of the Serangoon River (MacDonald Papers).

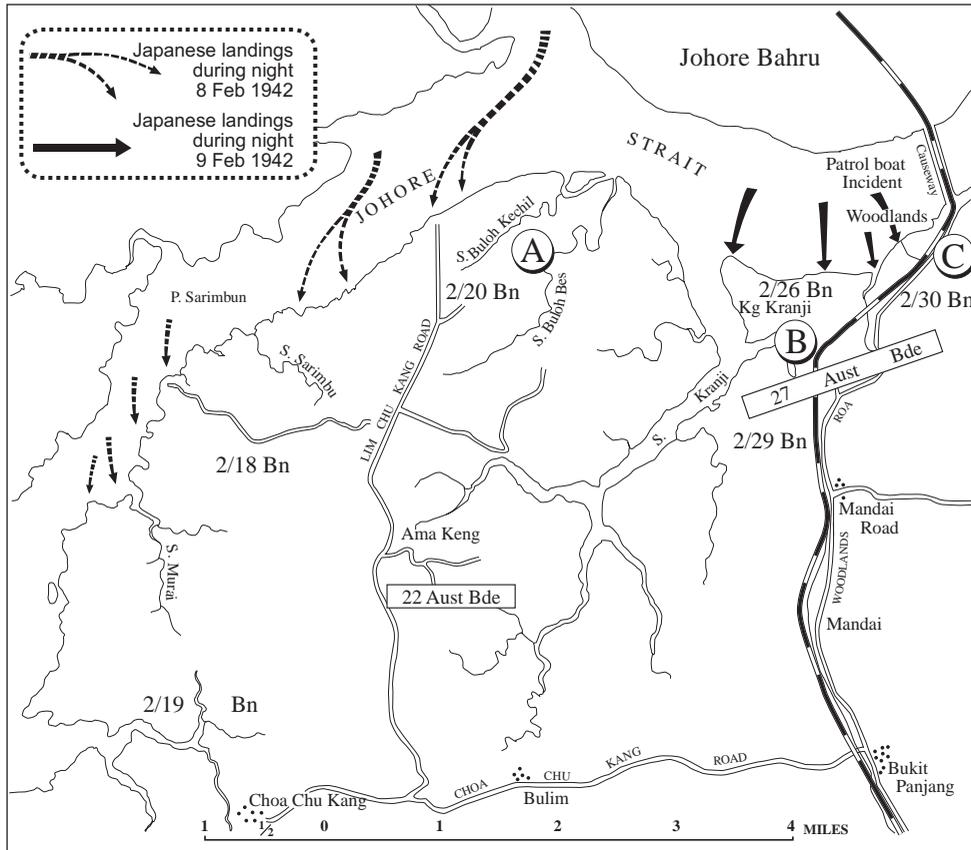
The Dalforce legend presents the volunteers as poorly equipped and receiving minimal military training. All the Chinese-language texts repeat, using the exact same words, that the members of Dalforce did not have proper uniforms for combat but had to come up with their own designs instead. “Our uniform was blue, on the right arm was a triangular piece of red cloth and there was a yellow one wrapped around the head, because there were no tin helmets or other military headgear to be found in Singapore then” (Chen 1947: 58). This uniform was designed to reflect the unity of the Overseas Chinese wearing colors associated with the Republic of China and Chinese traditions. There was indeed such a unique Dalforce uniform, but it appears not to have been issued to everyone. Choi Siew Hong described how khaki was issued at the quartermaster’s store (Choi Interview 2004). It seems that there was a lack of uniformity in what the individuals in Dalforce received. The legend also says that the volunteers received outdated weapons with limited ammunition. Hu, Mah, and Chen clearly stated that the members of Dalforce were given only nineteenth-century hunting rifles and a few rounds of ammunition while some received only long knives called parangs.

Once again there seems to have been variations in what Dalforce members were issued with. Frank Brewer, who was training members of Dalforce, recalled, “There weren’t enough ordinary rifles to be handed out to them” and added, “I know one company had as many as three different types of sporting guns,” and “this made it very difficult to try and teach [the men] how these things operate in a very short time.” According to Frank Brewer, the standard issue for each soldier would have been a shotgun, seven rounds of ammunition and two grenades (Brewer Interview 1982). The Chinese texts are further confirmed by Captain R. J.D. Richardson of ‘D’ Company, 2/20th Battalion, of the 22nd Australian Brigade, who described the Dalforce soldiers attached to his unit, Dalforce Company No. 2, as “not uniformed but dressed in an assortment of native garb and armed with parangs, shot guns and a variety of firearms” (Wall 1985: 61). Choo Kim Seng (Zhu Jinsheng 朱金生), a 76-year-old Dalforce veteran recalled when interviewed in 1999, that he was issued with an outdated hunting rifle, 24 rounds of ammunition, a bayonet, and carried with him a water bottle and towel around his waist. He was not issued with any grenades or a machine gun (Foong 1999b: 78).

There is evidence to suggest, however, that some units of Chinese volunteers were comparatively better equipped than others. Chang Teh Cheok of the Guomintang Overseas Chinese Guard Force recalled that he was issued with a machine gun, most probably a Bren, with five boxes of ammunition. Other members of his squad received around 30–50 rounds of ammunition and one grenade each (Chang Interview 1982). This was significantly more than the average of seven rounds each volunteer received from the Communist dominated Dalforce. Hence based on the oral history testimony of Choo and Chang, it is plausible that there was differential treatment of the Communist and Guomintang Chinese volunteers, as Choi Siew Hong mentioned to the authors (Choi Interview 2004).

A theme in the legend that is certainly true is that Dalforce members received very little training. The volunteers would have had at the maximum about a month of training before they were sent to the front in the first week of February 1942. Even then, this would have been highly unlikely due to logistical reasons, as time would have been needed to register the volunteers, organize them and transport them to the training grounds. Between the 28 December 1941 Mobilization Council meeting and the 31 January 1942 British withdrawal to Singapore to take up the final defenses of the island, not much training could be expected to have taken place. The Dalforce veterans themselves confirmed the limited training they had received. Choo, who fought the Japanese at the Causeway, recalled that he received only three to four days of training and was taught only basic military skills: “The military training focused on learning how to fire a gun, how to avoid being a target for the enemy, how to charge the enemy line, hand to hand combat and bayonet fighting etc.” (Foong 1999b: 78). He also recalled that the women received even less training as their duties were mainly to care for the wounded, cook and to relay messages. Chang recalled going through a longer training period of two weeks, where he was taught similar skills to what Choo was instructed in. He mentioned, “Training involved two things — aiming and shooting with a rifle,” and “as long as you hit the target, you passed. Then they [the trainers] also explained to us the terrain of the front and how the Japanese were likely to invade” (Chang Interview 1982).

On 5 February, the Dalforce volunteers began to be sent out to the frontline (Morrison 1942: 171). What then were the military achievements of the various Dalforce companies? The volunteers of Dalforce have been portrayed as exceedingly brave and because of their courage and indomitable spirit, they were able to overcome the odds stacked against them and deal a significant blow to the enemy. By the time of the Japanese invasion on 8 February 1942, two companies of Dalforce had been stationed in areas that would face the immediate Japanese attack. These were Company No. 2 at the Sungei Buloh area at the end of Lim Chu Kang Road, and the company stationed in the Woodlands area near the



**KEYS:**

- (A) Dalforce Company attached to 2/20th Australian Battalion.
- (B) The Overseas Chinese Guard Force Platoon.
- (C) Dalforce Company near the Causeway.

**Map 2:** Dalforce and the Australian Battalions

Causeway. Both these companies were surrounded by much larger Australian battalions.

However, the Dalforce legend as told in the Chinese-language texts written by Hu, Mah, and Chen in the 1940s suggests that Dalforce Company No. 1 at the end of the Jurong Road was involved in action even before the invasion, beating back a large Japanese force. The authors recorded that this company was able to achieve a significant military victory when it was able to repulse two waves of

Japanese patrol boats. According to Hu, in the first incident, a few of the enemy were killed and the enemy retreated. On the next day, the night of 6 February 1942, 30 enemy rubber rafts (each carrying one soldier) were sunk and all the enemy soldiers were killed (Hu 1945: 2–3). Hu’s account glorifies the actions of the Dalforce men, describing the Japanese as “dogs” and “beasts.” The viciousness of the enemy is emphasized and the Japanese soldiers repeatedly described as animals, the implication being that they lacked the human ability for compassion. References to the Japanese soldiers as bestial animals were also very common in the Chinese war histories written during and shortly after the Second Sino-Japanese War, according to Hung Chang-tai, author of *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945*. They reflected a strongly patriotic style of writing that attempted to arouse the masses to defend the “motherland” from an inhuman and overwhelming enemy (Hung 1994: 101). Despite daunting opposition, Dalforce was able to triumph and destroy much of the enemy. Hence, these two incidents have been described as a significant victory for Dalforce. Mah described the above incidents in similar detail while Chen reported that this company dealt a heavy blow to the enemy (Chen 1947: 60).

Did this small Dalforce company at Jurong repel Japanese patrol boats, sinking all 30 with hunting rifles and parangs, days before the main invasion? There is little evidence apart from the Chinese-language sources that suggests that this company was involved in any significant military engagement in the Jurong area. The official Indian military history of the fall of Singapore gives an account of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, which Dalforce Company No. 1 was attached to and stationed among, but does not mention such a military victory. The only mention of this Dalforce Company being involved in action in the Jurong area is a small skirmish that occurred between it and part of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade when each mistook the other for the Japanese and fired on the other as they were retreating along the lower areas of the Jurong River (Prasad 1960: 322–23). Most likely the rubber boat incident is an exaggeration, and what actually happened was less momentous. Japanese spies were coming across the Johore Strait and infiltrating the coastal defenses of the island before the invasion (Magarry 1994: 134). The rubber boat incident could have been a distorted account of an encounter with some of these Japanese infiltrators.

The glorification of the military achievements of Dalforce are best illustrated by the action attributed to Dalforce Company No. 2 located among the Australian Battalions near the end of Lim Chu Kang Road in the Sungei Buloh area. According to the Chinese-language texts of the 1940s, Dalforce Company No. 2’s first military engagement occurred on the night of 6 February 1942. The company’s first and second platoons were able to repulse an approaching group of Japanese rubber boats. Hu wrote, “On the night of the 6th, while the first and second platoons were on duty, five rubber rafts approached our positions. Our

company and the Australians opened fire together, sinking three rafts while the remaining two beat a hasty retreat” (Hu 1945: 4). Chen repeated in his account what Hu said, “As the enemy’s motorized rubber rafts were attempting to cross the Straits of Johore stealthily, they were discovered by Dalforce and attacked, and were forced to retreat” (Chen 1947: 60). The full Japanese assault on the area came on the night of 8 February 1942. The bravery of the volunteers was highlighted in Hu’s description of Company No. 2 when he wrote that “despite the enemy’s artillery bombardment and attacks from low flying Japanese aircraft, the volunteers were undeterred in the defense of their positions and continued to have the determination to resist the enemy and exact revenge on them” (Hu 1945: 5). A further example of the glorification of Dalforce can be seen in the following description of Dalforce Company No. 2 in action in the early morning of 9 February 1942:

After that more Japanese soldiers surrounded and attacked our position in waves. Although our comrades continued to resist the Japanese stubbornly, we knew that there was a change in the situation on the left flank where the Australian soldiers were. After our commanding officer gave the direction and assembly point, the different platoons attempted to break out of the encirclement and both sides suffered rather heavy casualties (Hu 1945: 6).

Hu’s description made much of the bravery of the Dalforce volunteers, asserting that they continued to fight the overwhelming odds and were forced to retreat only because the Australians had abandoned their positions to the left and their British officer had given the instruction. Even then, they were able to inflict heavy casualties on the Japanese.

Mah further made the claim that Dalforce Company No. 2 was able to repulse the enemy at Lim Chu Kang 12th milestone and advance five miles. That, to him, was a very significant victory for that small company of 150 men against the near 10,000-men strong Japanese 5th Division that had just routed three Australian battalions, each of about 1,000 men. The legend describes the men of Dalforce as exceedingly courageous and able to achieve military accomplishments that would normally be beyond the ability of such a small-sized force. Also, even though they were forced to retreat at times, they did that only because they had been “let down” by the Australian and Indian soldiers. Furthermore, despite their poor equipment, they were able to chalk up significant victories against the enemy. The legend also asserts that for their successes, Dalforce and the Overseas Chinese community of Singapore would ultimately pay the price.

The Dalforce legend goes on to say that because Dalforce inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese Army in its assault across the Johore Strait, the Japanese commanders decided to take revenge on the Overseas Chinese in Singapore by massacring thousands of them in the “mopping-up” operation known as Sook Ching. Mah writes how Dalforce’s attempts “to frustrate at least for a time the

attempt of the Imperial army to have a smooth journey into the center of the island” was “the grounds for their extreme hatred of our army and for their laying nets to snare us” (Dalforce File 1945). This idea of Dalforce being largely the cause for the Sook Ching massacre was put forward by several Overseas Chinese authors soon after the war. In *Malaya Upside Down*, first published in 1946, Chin Kee Onn attributed the origins of the Japanese Sook Ching operations to the bravery shown by the Overseas Chinese in Dalforce. He wrote that these men had “given them [the Japanese] the most trouble, killed the greatest number of their men, checked their progress and built up the fighting morale of the whole Chinese nation” (Chin 1946: 95). In 1947, N.I. Low and H.M. Cheng published the book, *This Singapore: Our City of Dreadful Night*, in which they gave an even more emphatic account, “The desperadoes of the Dalforce were the last straw for Yamashita. He made up his mind that the Chinese community should be cauterized” (Cheng and Low 1947: 15). Thus, in the heroic legend of Dalforce, Lieutenant-General Yamashita Tomoyuki, commander of the Japanese army, massacred a large number of the Chinese population as retribution because Dalforce had inflicted heavy casualties on his forces.

### **Dalforce’s Military Record Re-assessed**

The bold assertions made by Hu, Mah, and Chen of the military achievements of Dalforce Company No. 2 and the retaliation that the Japanese supposedly meted out as a result of its success call for methodical cross checking with other sources in order to establish the historical reality behind this crucial part of the Dalforce story. To corroborate or contradict these stories of the legend there are additional records besides the Chinese-language texts of the 1940s. The war diaries and battalion histories of the Australian battalions surrounding Dalforce Company No. 2 give tremendous detail of the assault of the Japanese on Singapore in the first wave of attack on the night of 8 February and then the second on the night of 9 February. If Dalforce Company No. 2 was repulsing five Japanese patrol boats and driving back the enemy five miles while the other troops were retreating, then perhaps these sources can be examined to verify such claims.

According to the Dalforce legend, Company No. 2 together with the Australian soldiers opened fire on five enemy rubber rafts on the night of 6 February 1942, sinking three and forcing the other two to retreat. The point to be noted here is that the repelling of five enemy rubber rafts could easily be considered a significant battle success, especially so prior to the main invasion, and if the Australian units were involved, as alleged in the legend, one would expect that it would be recorded in their battalion histories. The nearest units patrolling the same coastline besides Dalforce would have been the Australian ‘D’ Company, 2/20th Battalion and 13th Platoon of the 2/4th Machine Gunners. Both units

made no mention of this incident in their battalion histories (Wall 1985: 56–57; Cody 1997: 101–10; Ewen 2003: 542–44). The 2/20th Battalion history recorded the sending out of a scout patrol across the Straits of Johore to the mainland comprising only five people on the night of 6 February. The patrol was recorded to have returned on the same night at 2300 hours without incident (War Diaries, 2/20 Battalion). In view of the fact that the records of the Australian units closest to Dalforce Company No. 2 do not corroborate the account of the military achievements of Dalforce on the night of 6 February 1942, one cannot rule out the possibility that the incident did not take place.

Even if the incident actually took place, Dalforce would logically have played a minor role in repelling and sinking the rubber rafts as the Australian units nearby, in particular the platoon from the 2/4th Machine Gunners, were in possession of heavier firepower in the form of Bren guns and Vickers guns. For example, Vickers machine guns had a rate of fire of 450–500 rounds per minute and a muzzle velocity of 744 meters per second (Chant 1996: 61). These would have been highly effective against close formations of approaching Japanese rubber boats. In contrast, the Dalforce soldiers had limited ammunition and the effective range of their shotguns would have been much less compared to the weapons in the possession of the Australian soldiers. As such, the Australians would have made a more significant and decisive contribution to the sinking of the rubber rafts.

After the Japanese landings had begun in force, Hu recorded that Company No. 2 retreated further down Lim Chu Kang Road to the 16th milestone and met up with the Australian brigade (Hu 1945: 5). This account is corroborated by the Australian sources. The war diaries of the 2/20th Battalion record that on 9 February 1942 at 0315 hours, 7th Platoon 'A' Company reported to Battalion Headquarters with a party of Dalforce. The position of 7th Platoon between 12 midnight and 9.15 am on 9 February 1942 was in line with Lim Chu Kang Road 16th milestone. This party, under the command of Lieutenant Cornforth, took up position west of Lim Chu Kang Road. In addition, another 60 men from Dalforce arrived at Battalion Headquarters later at 0345 hours and joined the above party (War Diaries, 2/20 Battalion). These Dalforce volunteers together with 7th platoon retreated along a line running parallel to the west of Lim Chu Kang Road, and swam across the tributaries of the Kranji River in order to escape the Japanese (Wall 1985: 86–87).

Therefore, based on the evidence above, over 60 men from Company No. 2 (with an initial strength of 150) managed to survive the initial onslaught of the Japanese landings on the night of 8th of February by retreating down Lim Chu Kang Road and then swimming across the tributaries of the Kranji River to make it to Choa Chu Kang Road. Assuming that the rest of the men were killed in action, this would have meant that Company No. 2 had incurred a casualty rate of about 60 percent. Ian Alexander MacDonald, a Dalforce British officer, also

espoused the view that two-thirds of the men were killed in action (MacDonald Papers). Therefore, Dalforce Company No. 2 did experience an extremely high casualty rate of about 60 percent. However, it should be noted that some Australian units also suffered similarly heavy losses. For example, the 2/20th had 400 casualties (killed or wounded) in only the first 12 hours of fighting, a casualty rate of about 53 percent (Wall 1985: 81). Therefore, although the casualty rate for Dalforce Company No. 2 was extremely high, it was not totally annihilated as the legend would have one believe. Hence, the contention that there were no Chinese survivors is an exaggeration. Although the soldiers of the Dalforce Company No. 2 did engage the enemy, they were not the superhuman, legendary heroes as portrayed in the legend. Instead, they did what was tactically sound and that was to retreat in the face of an overwhelming enemy.

Although the Chinese-language sources do not record a Dalforce company at the Causeway sector, there is evidence to prove that there was one deployed there (Dalforce File 1945; MacDonald Papers). Choo Kim Seng was one of those with this company, as he recalled that he was sent to Woodlands where the Causeway was. He remembered having fired on the approaching Japanese along with the Australian and Indian forces as the Japanese boats attempted to land on Singapore Island during the night of 9 February 1942, but he did not give any accounts of heroics. Choo mentioned that the Japanese boats were stopped not by Dalforce but by a raging inferno that erupted when oil was released into the Johore Strait and caught on fire around the Japanese boats (Foong 1999b).

A small unit of the Guomindang Overseas Chinese Guard Force was deployed in a swamp area at Bukit Timah Road 14th milestone near Woodlands. Chang Teh Cheok was part of this unit, which was most probably a platoon, as he recalled his unit strength to be about 50 men (Chang Interview 1982). Chang's unit was in the vicinity of the 2/26th Battalion, 27th Australian Brigade. Chang's platoon did not engage the enemy except for two incidents in the first week of February prior to the main invasion of 8–9 February 1942. According to Chang, "They came twice in a week. When we saw those small crafts, we opened fire with the machine guns, we had more than one machine gun, but we did not know if we inflicted any casualties on the Japanese" (Chang Interview 1982). Based on Chang's comments, some units of Chinese volunteers were equipped with more than one machine gun and this would definitely have made them more effective in fighting the Japanese.

The incidents, if they took place, would have been on such a small scale that they escaped the notice of the neighboring Australian units. The battalion history of the 2/26th Battalion does not mention the presence of any Chinese unit in the area that it was deployed in. Neither it nor the battalion history of the 2/4th Machine Gunners records any encounter with the Japanese trying to come across the Johore Strait. In the battalion histories and war diaries of the Australians there

is only mention of a minor skirmish by members of the Australian 2/30th Battalion with a Japanese patrol boat which was very close to the Causeway on the night of 8 February 1942. This minor incident was heard up and down the Johore Strait (War Diaries 2/26 Battalion; Cody 1997: 102, 134–36; Magarry 1994: 124–39; Ewen 2003: 545–59). It seems implausible that the Overseas Chinese Guard Force's engagements with Japanese patrol boats were not mentioned in the war diaries of the Australian battalions in the vicinity, whereas the minor encounter with a Japanese patrol boat near the Causeway was recorded as being heard even by the companies of the 2/26th Battalion which were far away from the encounter.

The legend describes the Chinese volunteers as exceedingly brave and one such example of their bravery was that they held fast to their positions despite the incessant artillery bombardment. However, Chang Teh Cheok's recollection diluted the bravado of this description when he admitted that there was a significant number of desertions within the ranks of the Overseas Chinese Guard Force:

My platoon had not been hit by artillery ... there were few dead but more who ran away, because they were just common folk who did not know how to fight the Japanese. This could have been a result of psychological or emotional fears and so many more ran away.

That many deserted even though they did not receive any direct artillery hits but simply heard the shells landing on the surrounding area, is a clear indication that a significant portion of the Chinese volunteer forces, like the Australians, British and Indian soldiers, were not superhuman, but just ordinary people who succumb to their own psychological fears.

When fighting reached Bukit Timah, the situation became extremely chaotic. Although it is known that elements of Dalforce fought in the Bukit Timah area on 11–13 February 1942, it remains a difficult task to ascertain where these elements actually fought. According to Hu, Company No. 1 was able to retreat from Jurong to make a final stand at Bukit Timah Road 6th milestone. This is corroborated by the oral testimony of one of the Dalforce trainers, Frank Brewer, who recalled that at least a “company crept back and got involved along Bukit Timah somewhere” (Brewer Interview 1982). Chen Qingxie, a Chinese resident in the area at the time, recalled that Dalforce fought in an area near the present day Chinese High School, which is near the old Bukit Timah Road 6th milestone (*Lianhe Zaobao* 26 June 1995). At the Battle of Bukit Timah one feature of the Dalforce legend is substantiated. The legendary *Passionaria of Malaya*, the female fighter named after the *passionaria* of the Spanish Civil War, Madam Cheng Seang Ho, fought alongside her husband (Bayly and Harper 2004: 136). Both were over 60 years of age when they joined Dalforce, and “made the last stand at Bukit Timah heights” shooting at the Japanese from behind trees and receiving fire from them (*Straits Times* 25 July 1948). In 1948, Madam Cheng and her husband's heroics

at Bukit Timah earned them a certificate of recognition signed by the Commander Lieutenant-Colonel Dalley himself (Dalforce File 1945). Some of the remaining Dalforce members of Company No. 2 were most probably incorporated into a force that comprised the remnants of many badly mauled units in the final days of Singapore, called 'X' Battalion that fought in the Battle of Bukit Timah. Captain Richardson's 'D' Company became part of 'X' Battalion, and moved on to Bukit Timah where the battalion was ambushed (Wall 1985: 92). The remnants of Dalforce's Company No. 2 would have followed as they were attached to Lieutenant Cornforth's unit, which was part of the 2/20th 'D' Company.

By examining Dalforce's military records, it can be seen that the element of the legend that says Dalforce inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy is exaggerated. The Japanese official military history of the fall of Singapore does not cite Dalforce inflicting considerable casualties on the Japanese either. Indeed, amongst the local units described in the official Japanese War History Series, Dalforce is not mentioned (*Senshi Sōsho* 1966: 540–43, 637).

The idea that the Japanese retaliated against the Overseas Chinese of Singapore because of the resistance put up by Dalforce was flatly rejected in the 1947 war crimes trial relating to the massacres of the Chinese. Evidence given suggested that the massacres had been planned well in advance by Lieutenant-Colonel Tsuji Masanobu and Major Hayashi Tadahiko of Yamashita's staff headquarters to purge the Chinese population of its anti-Japanese elements which had been strong in Malaya and Singapore even before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 (War Crimes Trial 1947; Ward 1992). At the trial, Lieutenant-Colonel Sugita Ichiji, the staff officer at Yamashita's headquarters in charge of intelligence, cited the Chinese volunteers as evidence of anti-Japanese feelings, but he stopped well short of suggesting that Dalforce had inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese Army and that the Sook Ching massacre was launched as retaliation. Later Japanese officials involved in the administration of Singapore and the military police at the time of the Sook Ching massacre would seek to rationalize the massacre as a response to Dalforce in their memoirs (Onishi 1977; Shinozaki 1975). The Chinese volunteers were certainly one of the groups of people that the Japanese wanted to eliminate in the Sook Ching, but so too were Communists, looters, people possessing arms, "elements obstructing Japanese operations" and generally anyone who could be called "anti-Japanese." Works authored by historians — Japanese or otherwise — such as Hayashi Hirofumi, suggest that Sook Ching was not launched as a retaliation against the Chinese volunteers as the latter had inflicted very few casualties on the Japanese army due to their numbers being so small (Hayashi 1992, 2005; Frei 2004: 141–57).

What of the casualties that Dalforce sustained? Did the men fight to the end as legend has it? The casualty rate for Dalforce Company No. 2 deployed at the Sungei Buloh area was very high, but the men did retreat when they needed to

rather than fight to the last man. The first company that was deployed at Jurong Road 18th milestone would probably have suffered significant numbers of casualties if it had also fought in the Battle of Bukit Timah. See Chew Kong, a Dalforce veteran who was at the Bukit Timah area, recalled seeing many Chinese corpses with bayonet wounds, which suggests that hand to hand combat had occurred (See Interview 1982). It should be noted, however, that only three Dalforce companies (Sungei Buloh, Jurong, and the Causeway area) actually saw combat. Ian Alexander MacDonald wrote that his company at Hougang (area between the Serangoon River and Pasir Ris) returned to Dalforce Headquarters on 12 February 1942 without encountering any Japanese (MacDonald Papers). There may have been another Chinese volunteer unit that was sent out. According to a Chinese volunteer veteran, Teo Choon Hong, what he called “his company at Pasir Panjang” saw no action either and was recalled to Headquarters after three days (Teo Interview 1982).

Since the majority of Dalforce companies did not engage the enemy, it is no surprise that the number of surviving Dalforce veterans in the postwar years was large, and these figures do not support the legend that most fought to the last man in combat. Mah Khong’s association of veterans that was formed in early 1946 had over 600 members within a few months, as many enrolled in the campaign for back pay (a demand which the British War Office only partially met). British officers estimated that Dalforce sustained possibly 300 casualties (Dalforce File 1945). Quite a number of veterans had even escaped to India from Singapore after it fell (Lim Bo Seng Diary 1942:10; Chang Interview 1982). Others joined the Communist-led guerrilla force, the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army during the Japanese Occupation (Dalforce File 1945). Most lay low and remained in Singapore and Malaya and survived the Occupation. In January 1946, one Dalforce member, Yeo Kay Wah, was even able to take to court, unsuccessfully, one of his neighbors who informed on him to the Japanese military police (*Straits Times* 11 January 1946). The Imperial War Graves Commission’s casualty figures for Dalforce compiled after the war record 134 known war dead for the unit, although there are likely to have been some unrecorded cases (Imperial War Graves Commission 1956).

Thus, many members of Dalforce, such as Hu, Mah, and Chen, were around after the end of the war to fashion their experiences into a style of writing found in stories of heroic little bands of nationalistic Chinese holding back a bestial and overwhelming enemy from the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The exaggerations of the Dalforce legend have, like all legends, a basis in truth, although that truth was adapted to the needs of Overseas Chinese nationalism. Thus it is no surprise that the undoubted bravery of the members of Dalforce would be exaggerated in the same way that the bravery of the Babai Zhuangshi had also been embellished into a legend. The heroic legend of Dalforce was formed

soon after 1945 in the war literature of the Overseas Chinese, as veterans emphasized their achievements when they agitated for back pay from the British War Office and sought to mobilize Overseas Chinese public opinion behind them. This was a time of a heightened sense of Overseas Chinese identity and intense Chinese nationalism which had emerged since the Second Sino-Japanese War (Wang 2000; Hara 2003).

The Dalforce legend therefore was a product of the time when it was first written down into a narrative form by Singapore Chinese writers. The strong relationship between Dalforce and Overseas Chinese nationalism became evident in the late 1940s, when Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival, the former commander of the British Empire's forces at the fall of Singapore, wrote his account of the event. In his official dispatches published by the British government in February 1948, Percival did not mention Dalforce at all, and disparaged the Chinese community for not assisting the British enough in the struggle against Japan. Percival wrote that "many of the Asiatics were of a type unsuitable for training as soldiers," and that there was "great difficulty in filling the Chinese sub-units in the existing Volunteer organisation." He declared that this unwillingness of the Chinese to join in the defense of Malaya and Singapore "was in no way due to lack of available material or to lack of effort on the part of the military authorities," but "due chiefly to the lack of unity and of forceful leadership which existed among the Chinese population." Percival concluded that "the Chinese population taken as a whole lacked homogeneity and centralised leadership." He questioned the loyalty of the local population when he wrote that "the sense of citizenship was not strong nor, when it came to the test, [was there] the feeling that this was a war for home and country." He argued that the "Asiatic population were enjoying the benefits which British occupation had brought to Malaya," but showed no sense of "service to the State in return for the benefits received from membership of the British Empire." Percival also thoughtlessly remarked that, out of self interest, "Asiatics tend to take the side of the more powerful," and that this was why there was only a limited amount of demolition of facilities that might be useful to the Japanese. He feared that "the sight of destruction being carried out well behind our lines would induce them to help the enemy rather than ourselves" (Percival 1948: Section X, paragraphs 82, 86, 87, 90, and Section XXVII, paragraph 235).

When Percival's dispatches were circulated in Singapore there was an outcry as many Overseas Chinese saw the anti-Japanese resistance of the community as an important part of Overseas Chinese unity and identity in Singapore, and this Dalforce as a symbol of their resistance. Tan Kah Kee wrote a letter of protest to the British Secretary of War in London, citing the Overseas Chinese Mobilization Committee of 28 December 1941, and the arming of Dalforce (General Percival's Despatch on the Malayan Campaign 1948; *Morning Tribune* 5 March 1948).

Sir Franklin Gimson, the Governor of Singapore, felt compelled to apologize in the wake of a strong Overseas Chinese nationalistic response (*Straits Times* 24 March 1948). Chastened by this experience, Percival did an about face in his own private book published in 1949, *The War in Malaya*, and praised the Overseas Chinese community's effort and Dalforce: "The members of Dalforce, as it was called, were exceedingly tough, and in spite of their lack of training would, I have no doubt, have made excellent fighters had we been able to arm and equip them properly. As it was, the effort, though most praiseworthy, came too late to have any real effect on the course of events (Percival 1949: 269–70). Praising Dalforce notwithstanding, Percival maintained that it had little impact on the Battle for Singapore.

Thus, the immediate years after the war saw the creation of Dalforce as a heroic legend as it was written into the history books by an Overseas Chinese community in Singapore that desired to see itself as united in its struggle against Japan, and helping China in the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, while undoubtedly the members of Dalforce were brave, they were not a small number of supermen inflicting heavy casualties upon the enemy out of proportion to their numbers. Overseas Chinese nationalism was the force behind the exaggeration of the achievements of Dalforce in the same way that Australian nationalism was the motivation behind the exaggeration of military performance of Australian soldiers vis-à-vis soldiers of other nationalities at the fall of Singapore. In both cases these heroic legends have lived on to the present and have been used as affirmation of nationalism and a sense of identity. Dalforce therefore appears to be an Overseas Chinese equivalent of the Babai Zhaungshi of mainland China.

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