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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

BRIGADIER

W. AIRD-SMITH

A short biography of Brigadier William AIRD-SMITH, who was an officer in the British Indian Army between 1915 and 1942. He served in Malaya on the staff of III Indian Corps, losing his life during the evacuation from Singapore.

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A Concise Biography of Brigadier William AIRD-SMITH

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Brigadier William AIRD-SMITH

Brigadier William AIRD-SMITH was an officer in the British Indian Army from 1915 until his death in 1942. He served during the Great War, and he had a steady if undistinguished career between the wars. Fate determined that he was sent from India to Malaya in 1941 to serve in the Headquarters, III Indian Corps, and was serving there when the Japanese invaded in December 1941. He lost his life around the time of the surrender of Singapore in February 1942.

William AIRD-SMITH was born on 29 August 1893, in Hawick, Roxburghshire, Scotland, the son of Thomas and Janet AIRD-SMITH. During the Great War, in 1915 he was mobilised into the Indian Army Reserve of Officers, serving three years and one-hundred and ninety-eight days in the Reserve until 15 December 1918. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant on 1 June 1916. AIRD-SMITH served with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force from January 1917 until April 1918, and he was wounded during that campaign. Later he was recorded as having a shortened left arm, which may have been a consequence of his being wounded.

After the cessation of hostilities, he was granted a permanent commission in the rank of Lieutenant in the Indian Army on 16 December 1918 (his seniority dating from 1 March 1917), and he joined the 123rd Outram's Rifles (service number IA/888). AIRD-SMITH's career progressed steadily with him being promoted to the rank of Captain on 3 February 1920, although he was placed on the temporary non-effective list between 12 April 1920 and 25 January 1921. In the 1922 reorganisation of the Indian Army, his regiment became the 4th Battalion, 6th Rajputana Rifles (and his service number was AI/888). He served in Waziristan on the North-West Frontier in 1923 and 1924.

On 30 August 1924, AIRD-SMITH took up an appointment as a Staff Captain, which he held until 15 February 1927. He then attended the Staff College where he successfully passed the Staff Course to become qualified with the letters *p.s.c.* after his entry in the Army List.¹ The attendance on the staff course was an important element in the career of an Army officer who was aiming for advancement, as it taught students the requirements of holding a staff appointment, as opposed to a Regimental posting. Another important outcome was that a student would be on a course with other aspiring officers, who they would get to know, and also the instructors who in future could become a patron for promotions and appointments.

On completion of his staff course, AIRD-SMITH was appointed as a Staff Captain on 16 October 1930, with the 3rd (Jhelum) Brigade. This city is located in the Punjab, and the Brigade was part of the Rawalpindi District, which also formed the 1st Indian Infantry Division. As such, it was responsible for internal security in the area, but it also had an operational role in the event of war. The Staff Captain was the second staff officer in the brigade headquarters, and he supported the work of the Brigade Major with the day-to-day running of the brigade.

¹ It is not known whether he attended the Staff College at Quetta or Camberley, but it is likely that it was the Indian Staff College at Quetta.

On 17 September 1931, AIRD-SMITH was made Brigade Major for the brigade despite only holding the rank of Captain. The Brigade Major was the senior staff officer in the formation, and he was responsible to the Brigade Commander for all operational, training, discipline and personnel matters relating to the brigade. On 1 January 1933, he was promoted to the rank of Brevet Major, and then to the substantive rank of Major on 3 February 1934. On 8 October 1934, having completed the usual period of four years on staff duties, Major AIRD-SMITH relinquished his post as the Brigade Major and returned to regimental duties.

Having shown some ability as a staff officer, AIRD-SMITH was given another staff appointment on 5 December 1936, as Deputy Assistant Quarter-Master General at General Headquarters of the Army in India. This role involved the organisation and provision of stores and equipment for the British Indian Army. He was transferred to take up an appointment as General Staff Officer 2nd Grade (G.S.O. 2) of the Lucknow District on 7 April 1937. This district was based in Eastern Command, and it covered the Lucknow and Allahabad areas. At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, AIRD-SMITH was aged forty-six years, and he had served with the British Indian Army for twenty-four years, yet still held the rank of Major. This was typical of the progress of an officer's career between the wars, with promotion based on seniority and limited vacancies.

The advent of war, albeit that it was focused on Europe, led to an expansion of the British Indian Army, mainly to fulfil the requirement to send formations to the Middle East. This expansion allowed a more rapid period of advancement for Regular officers in the Army. AIRD-SMITH was promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant Colonel on 10 February 1940 (whilst still in the role of G.S.O. 2) and having served the usual three months in the acting rank, he was further promoted to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. He was probably considered too old for command of an operational battalion, so on 29 May 1940, he was appointed an Assistant Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General.

In April 1941, III Indian Corps was formed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, under the command of Lieutenant General HEATH. AIRD-SMITH moved to Malaya, where he assumed the post of Deputy Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General (D.A.Q.M.G.) for the newly formed corps on 27 April 1941, being promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier and Acting Colonel on the same day.² A Corps Headquarters included two Brigadier's appointments, a Brigadier General Staff (B.G.S.) and a D.A.Q.M.G.; the former being responsible for operational orders, plans, movements, discipline and training, while the latter was responsible for the organisation of the services for the Corps, including food, water, equipment, arms and ammunition. Brigadier FAWCETT held the post of B.G.S., and Brigadier AIRD-SMITH was the D.A.Q.M.G..

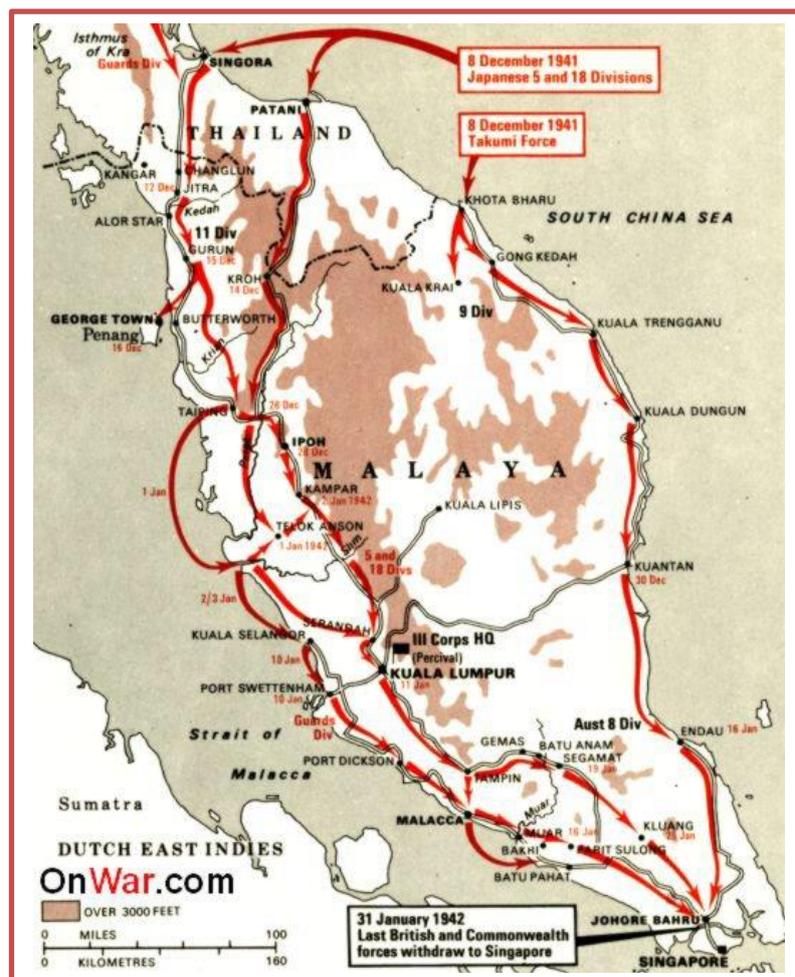
² In one source, he is referred to a Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, 11th Indian Division. This cannot be correct, as that role is a Major's appointment, and AIRD-SMITH's rank is shown as Brigadier. As an Indian Army officer, it is more likely he held the post of D.A. & Q.M.G for III Indian Corps, which is confirmed in the diary of Brigadier E. W. GOODMAN (see Sources).



III Indian Corps was formed to come under command of Malaya Command, and it was tasked with defending the border with Thailand, and the north-eastern coast of Malaya. For this purpose, it had two incomplete Indian divisions, the 9th and 11th, and an infantry brigade in reserve. The Corps was required to defend the airfields situated in the north of Malaya, which were built close to the border because of the limited range of the R.A.F. aircraft of the period deployed to Malaya, and the need for them to be deployed to advanced bases to attack any invasion force, and to provide fighter cover for the bases.

The Corps Commander, Lieutenant General HEATH, was not under any illusions about the challenges he faced, and it would be expected that Brigadiers FAWCETT and AIRD-SMITH worked hard to establish the Corps in northern Malaya and to prepare for the likely Japanese invasion as tensions rose in South-East Asia. Brigadier AIRD-SMITH received substantive promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on 9 September 1941, and to the ranks of Temporary Brigadier and Temporary Colonel on 27 October 1941.³

It was known by late 1941 that a Japanese offensive across South-East Asia and the Pacific was imminent. An invasion convoy was sighted off the coast of Thailand, and the Japanese invaded Malaya on 8 December 1941 by sea and on land. This invasion actually pre-dated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but as Hawaii lies across the International Date Line, the date of the attack there was on 7 December. III Indian Corps faced three distinct thrusts by Japanese forces, one in the north by land from Thailand (nominally an independent country), one by land down the centre (via Kroh), and the third from the sea on the eastern coast. All three attacks made progress, with the one in the centre threatening to outflank the British forces in northern Malaya. The British and Indian troops were generally poorly equipped and ill-trained, and despite some determined resistance, the troops of III Indian Corps began to collapse and retreat.



³ During the Second World War, the 'rank' of Brigadier did not exist, as technically it was an appointment. This why officers only held the rank of Brigadier on an acting or temporary basis. The rank of Colonel was the first rank above the Regimental structure, hence the reason why Brigadier AIRD-SMITH apparently held two ranks at the same time.

The Headquarters III Indian Corps had great difficulty in maintaining control of the formations and units under its command, and so attempts to form other defensive positions were soon overwhelmed by the decisive Japanese advance. After the positions held by III Indian Corps were overrun in northern Malaya, Lieutenant General PERCIVAL, the General Officer Commanding Malaya Command, organised a conference which was held at 11.00 hours, 5 January 1942, to discuss the plans for the withdrawal of III Indian Corps and the defence of Johore. It was decided to continue to hold Johore to ensure the integrity of the Singapore Naval Base, which would allow the arrival of reinforcements. III Indian Corps was to defend north of a line from Mersing through Batu Anam to Muar, including the defence of the airfields at Kuala Lumpur and Port Swettenham. The Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) (8th Australian Infantry Division) was to hold the east of Johore.

These plans were quickly overtaken by events as at dawn on 4 January 1942, the Japanese attacked the 12th Infantry Brigade Group holding the Slim River line. The key issue was that the understrength brigade held few anti-tank weapons, and these were mainly obsolete anti-tank rifles. Fifteen Japanese tanks, followed by infantry, drove through the British positions, causing chaos and heavy losses. These were followed by another thirty tanks that cleared any obstacles and cut up two battalions deployed along the road waiting to move. After this battle, the three battalions of the 12th Brigade could only muster about one company each. III Indian Corps was withdrawn into Johore without delay after this setback, and it was sent to southern Johore behind the A.I.F.

III Indian Corps now had under command the 11th Indian Infantry Division, the 22nd Australian Infantry Brigade and Corps Troops. The Australian Brigade was known as 'East Force', and it had an operational role, while the rest of III Indian Corps rested and refitted as best it could. On 14 January 1942, III Indian Corps assumed responsibility for south Johore, with its headquarters located at Johore Bahru. The headquarters of the 11th Indian Infantry Division were located at Rengam, with the 6th/15th Indian Infantry Brigade and the divisional artillery at Klaung, and the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade at Pontian Kechil.

The administrative situation that faced Brigadier AIRD-SMITH was very difficult. The losses in material and reserve stocks had been heavy, with petrol being in very short supply. There was not enough transport to bring petrol stocks back from forward areas when they were overrun. The Headquarters III Indian Corps was forced to retreat from northern Malaya, with an element of confusion as communications broke down. It withdrew back to Singapore Island, where it reformed as a much-weakened formation, and took its place in the defence of the island.

The Japanese attacked across the Johore Strait on 8 February 1942, and soon made inroads into the British defences. The survivors were pushed back into a position around Singapore town itself, with importantly the water supply for the town coming under Japanese control. The British forces surrendered on Singapore on 15 September 1942, amid scenes of confusion and chaos. The town had been subject to heavy bombing raids on the town and the dockyard overnight 13 and 14 February, with the Chinese population very concerned about their safety once the Japanese occupied the whole island.

As the Japanese closed in on Singapore, Brigadier AIRD-SMITH and Brigadier Walter FAWCETT were both ordered by Lieutenant General HEATH to leave Singapore and attempt to return to India. FAWCETT boarded the S.S. Kuala on Saturday, 14 February 1942 and was lost at sea on 17 February after this ship was sunk with the loss of many soldiers and civilians.

Thanks to the excellent research by Michael PETHER from New Zealand, the fate of Brigadier AIRD-SMITH in those final chaotic days is now known. Any sea-going boat was enlisted by the authorities to evacuate soldiers and civilians from Singapore, under almost constant bombing and machine gun attacks by Japanese aircraft, and the increasing presence of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Dark, thick smoke hung over Singapore, and the streets were littered with the dead and wounded as normal civil authority broke down.

About fifty vessels of varying sizes were commandeered and assembled to leave as a convoy in the 48-hour period of 11 to 13 February. There were few Royal Navy warships to escort the convoy, which was intending to make to Java in the Dutch East Indies, and only ten vessels successfully made the journey. Brigadier AIRD-SMITH boarded a boat called H.M.S. Fanling (or H.M.S. Fan Lin), a former customs launch converted for war use, and under the command of Lieutenant John Pierce UPTON, R.N.Z.N.V.R.. Details of this vessel are scarce, but it was probably one of two customs vessels built by Thornycroft in Singapore, and it was about 60 feet in length. The vessel mounted a 4" gun on its foredeck.

It is believed that H.M.S. Fanling embarked either thirty-five or forty-seven passengers, of which only three are known to have survived.⁴ The vessel had two officers, one New Zealander and one Canadian, and about ten to twelve crew. Both officers were university graduates, UPTON in law, and Temporary Lieutenant RIPLEY in commerce. Most, if not all of the crew, were survivors from H.M.S. Repulse or H.M.S. Prince of Wales, sunk off the Malayan coast early in the campaign. Brigadier AIRD-SMITH was the senior officer of the party of passengers that included six other officers and some British and Indian other ranks, all formerly members of the Headquarters, III Indian Corps.

H.M.S. Fanling sailed on the night of 13 February, but at 6.30 hours on 16 February, Lieutenant UPTON found himself in the Banka Straits amidst a group of Japanese group warships that included one cruiser and two destroyers. Lieutenant UPTON decided to sail straight on, in the hopes that the Japanese would not spot him, but they did so, and fired a shot across the bows of H.M.S. Fanling. The vessel stopped, and Lieutenant UPTON opened up with his 4" gun, but the vessel was sunk quickly by Japanese gunfire.

⁴ The total of forty-seven persons on-board is contained in correspondence, but it is not clear whether this includes the crew or not.

Lieutenant Colonel R. H. LONG, 7th Bn. 6th Rajputana Rifles was one survivor, who made it to Banka Island just before dawn on 18 February, having been in the water for about forty-eight hours, swimming with a lifebelt. The Japanese had made no attempt to rescue any people in the water. The other survivors were Stoker David KERR, and Able Seaman BASHAM.

It is not known whether Brigadier AIRD-SMITH was killed in the shelling, or that he drowned after the vessel sank. He was forty-nine years of age, and as he has no known grave, he is commemorated on Column 144 of the Singapore Memorial. On 19 December 1946, he was posthumously Mentioned in Dispatches in recognition of his gallant and distinguished services in Malaya.

William was married to Dorothy Edith AIRD-SMITH, who was born in Melbourne, Australia, but is also stated to have come from Langport in Somerset.⁵ Some of their travels include arriving at Vancouver in Canada on 9 April 1934 from Hong Kong, and then embarking at Bombay on 21 September 1934. On 8 March 1935, they travelled from London to Bombay, having given an address in the U.K. on 86, Banstead Road, Carshalton, Surrey. On 5 July 1938, Dorothy and William embarked at Sydney for Liverpool, but there are no details of their return. Dorothy's fate is not known.

⁵ The fact of her birthplace is found on passenger records from some of their sailings, and Langport is mentioned on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website. It is not known if they had any children.

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