

2021

www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

Author: Robert PALMER, M.A.



The Cross of Sacrifice
Imphal War Cemetery
With the poppy wreaths laid in memory of
Major Hugh WALKER and Major 'Sandy' LAMBERT

A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

MAJOR GENERAL H. D. W. SITWELL

A concise biography of Major General H. D. W. SITWELL, an officer in the British Army between 1914 and 1951. He was the General Officer Commanding British Troops on Java during the invasion by Japanese forces in 1942, and consequently was held in captivity for the rest of the war.

Copyright ©www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk (2021)

A Concise Biography of Major General H. D. W. SITWELL

Version: 2_1
This edition dated: 28 August 2021
ISBN: Not yet allocated.

All rights reserved. No part of the publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means including; electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, scanning without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Author: Robert PALMER, M.A. (copyright held by author)
Assist by: Stephen HEAL
Published privately by: The Author – Publishing as:
www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

Contents

	<u>Pages</u>
Family Background and Early Career	3 – 4
Post War Career	4 – 5
The Second World War and Java	5 – 9
Prisoner of War	9 – 11
Post Retirement	11 – 12
Bibliography and Sources	13 – 14

Major General Hervey Degge Wilmot SITWELL, C.B., C.V.O., M.C., p.s.c.

There are many campaigns of the Second World War that are little known to the public, but to the people involved they were very real. One of these was the defence of the Netherland East Indies against Japanese aggression in early 1942.

The British Army officer that commanded the British forces on Java was Major General SITWELL. Like so many others, it was pure fate that decreed that he should end up on Java as opposed to serving in the Middle East. He was a commanding officer of an anti-aircraft brigade, but in the confusion had to take command of a mixed arms force to attempt to hold back the Japanese invasion. Inevitably, the Allies had to surrender, so SITWELL had to endure three and half years of Japanese incarceration and brutality.

Family Background and Early Career

Hervey Degge Wilmot SITWELL was born on 25 October 1896 at the Manor House, Leamington Hastings; a small village in Warwickshire, England. His grandfather was the vicar of the parish. His father was Hervey Wheler SITWELL and his mother Alice May SITWELL (nee SCHWIND) who came from Derbyshire. He attended Wellington College in Berkshire, a private boarding school that specialised in preparing boys for service in the British Army. From Wellington College, having passed the entrance examination, SITWELL attended the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich.

SITWELL was commissioned in the Royal Artillery on 16 September 1914 in the rank of Second Lieutenant (service number 26181). This was one month after the start of the Great War, and in less than two months (on 2 November) SITWELL arrived in France to join the British Expeditionary Force. He served there until 9 December, returning to France on 31 May 1915. SITWELL was destined to serve the rest of the war in France and Belgium.

Promotion to the rank of Lieutenant came with effect from 9 June 1915, and to Captain on 3 November 1917. SITWELL was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry on 18 October 1917. Published in the London Gazette on 7 March 1918, his citation stated:

Lt. Hervey Degge Wilmot Sitwell, R.F.A.. For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in bringing his gun into action in a very forward position under most difficult conditions. On one occasion, he engaged over sixty hostile aeroplanes and forced two to land. Besides his ordinary duties he also engaged and dispersed a party of about 200 of the enemy advancing in close formation.

He was also Mentioned in Despatches on 23 December 1918, and he was awarded the 1914-15 Star and Clasp, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal.

Post War Career

With the end of the Great War, SITWELL was posted to the School of Instruction for the Royal Horse Artillery and Royal Field Artillery as a Captain, Instructor in Gunnery. He served there from 9 July until 8 September 1919. A period of Regimental duties followed, until Christmas Day (25 December) 1925 when he was posted as a Captain, Instructor in Gunnery at the School of Artillery, Deolali, India. On conclusion of four years on the staff of the school, SITWELL was posted to the 7th Field Battery on 25 December 1929, which was stationed at Rawalpindi. In 1931, having passed the entrance for the staff course, SITWELL attended the Staff College at Camberley, Surrey.

Towards the end of staff course, SITWELL was promoted to the rank of Major on 18 October 1933. This meant that SITWELL had spent sixteen years in the rank of Captain, an indication of the slow promotion and career progression prevalent in the British Army between the two world wars. On successful completion of the course, he was appointed a Staff Officer Royal Artillery (graded as General Staff Officer 3rd Grade) in Western Command. He took up his appointment on 22 February 1934, and he remained in post until 1 January 1936. The next day, he started a new appointment as a Staff Captain at the Department of the Adjutant-General to the Forces in the War Office.

Major SITWELL was upgraded to a General Staff Officer 2nd Grade on 20 October 1937, and he remained at the War Office until 22 February 1938. On completion of the usual four years on the staff, SITWELL was posted to the 6th Anti-Aircraft Brigade which was stationed at Blackdown in Surrey. Just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, SITWELL was posted to Anti-Aircraft Command on 16 May 1939 as a General Staff Officer 2nd Grade.

The Second World War and Java

On 23 August 1939, SITWELL was appointed a General Staff Officer 1st Grade; on being promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant Colonel with effect from 1 September 1939. Promotion to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel came three months later on 1 December 1939.

In early 1941, the immediate threat of invasion of the United Kingdom had passed, and although a threat remained, the Army Chiefs of Staff now looked to reinforce overseas formations. The growth in anti-aircraft artillery at home allowed the deployment of units to the Middle and Far East. On 26 February 1941, SITWELL was promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier (and Acting Colonel) in order to form the Headquarters 16th Anti-Aircraft Brigade. SITWELL was promoted to the substantive rank of Lieutenant Colonel on 23 May 1941.

Having raised the brigade headquarters in the United Kingdom, SITWELL was ordered to embark for the Middle East. Having boarded the ship in late October 1941, it was not until early November that the Convoy WS14 sailed from the River Clyde, Liverpool and the British Channel ports to rendezvous off Oversay on 9 December 1941.¹ The twenty-nine ships, escorted by about twelve warships then sailed for Freetown in West Africa, where they arrived on 21 December. The convoy left Freetown on Christmas Day 1941 to sail on for South Africa.

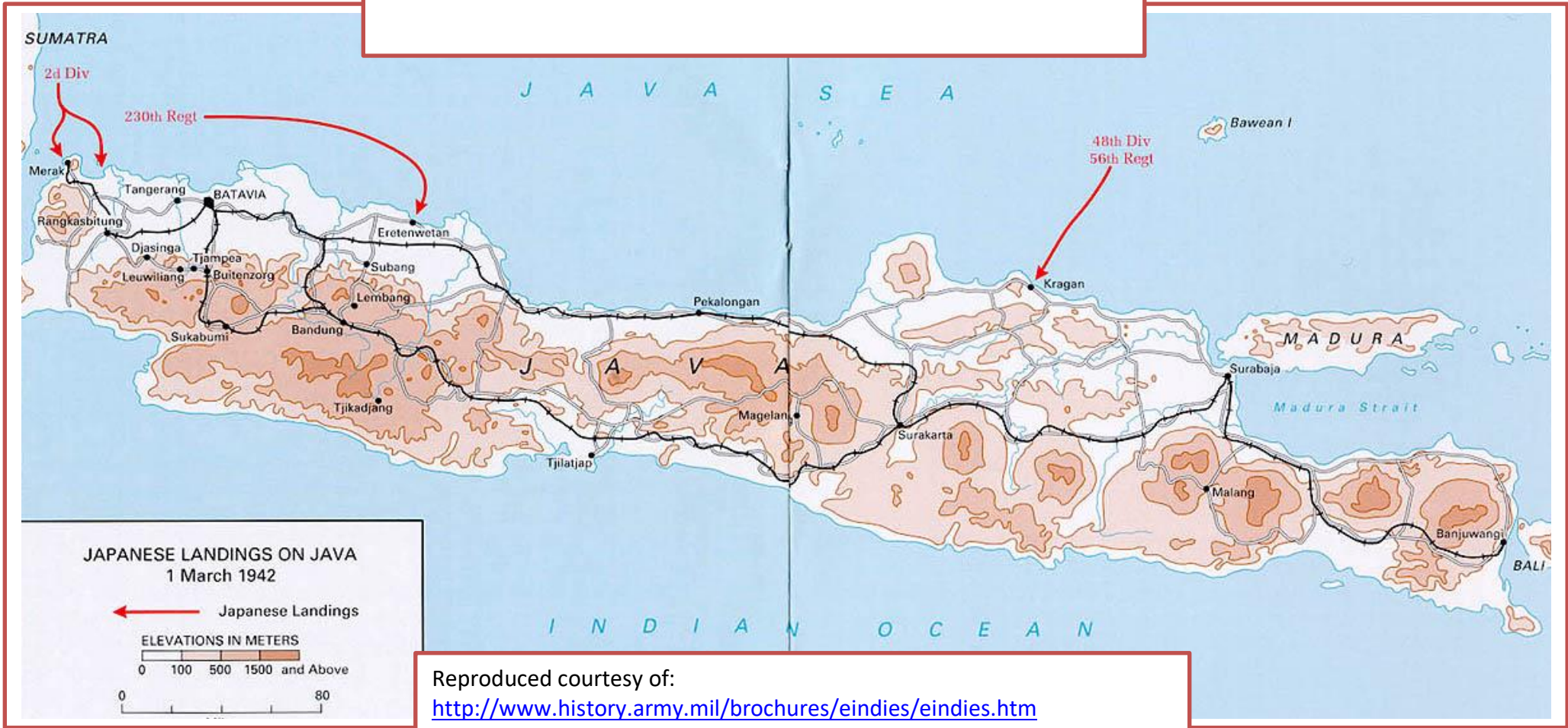
By the date the convoy reached South Africa, the Second World War had taken a dangerous development with the entry of Japan into the war. Malaya had been invaded on 8 December 1941, and the Japanese were making significant advances in Malaya, therefore, it was decided to divert elements of the convoy to Singapore. Arriving at Cape Town on 5 January 1942, the ships sailed again on 9 January. They met up with the section of the convoy that had docked at Durban. The convoy split into three sections off East Africa; one portion sailing for Aden and the Middle East, a second section bound for Bombay and Basra, and the third portion (on which SITWELL and his headquarters were embarked) sailing for Singapore. This convoy was designated DM2 (Durban – Malaya Two), and now comprised seven ships plus their escorts.

On 26 January, the orders for the convoy changed, so that on 28, it met up with the five-ship Convoy BM12 (Bombay – Malaya). General WAVELL was at this time appointed the Supreme Commander for the Australian, British, Dutch and American (A.B.D.A.) Command on Java. He ordered the anti-aircraft units in the convoy to divert to Java. Convoy DM2 arrived at Batavia on 3 February 1942, with the Singapore section sailing on to arrive on 5 February (during which the Empress of Asia was bombed and burnt out). Apart from the Headquarters, 16th Anti-Aircraft Brigade, the convoy carried a R.A.F. Wing Headquarters and ground staff to support three R.A.F. squadrons being deployed to Sumatra.

Also on board was the 77th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment (Lieutenant Colonel J. R. STANTON), with its three batteries. This was a Territorial Army regiment that recruited from Cardiff and the Rhondda Valley. In addition, two light anti-aircraft regiments were landed, the 21st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment (Lieutenant Colonel M. D. S. SAUNDERS) and 48th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiments (Lieutenant Colonel S. R. PEARSON). Each regiment comprised three batteries. All three regiments landed with their guns; twenty-four 3.7” guns for the 77th Regiment, and thirty-six 40mm Bofors guns for the 21st L.A.A. Regiment and thirty for the 48th L.A.A. Regiment.

¹ The designation WS apparently stood for ‘Winston Special’.

Map of Java (1942) showing landings of Japanese forces on 1 March 1942.



SITWELL established his brigade headquarters at Bandoeng and took under command the anti-aircraft units that were already deployed to Sumatra. These were the Headquarters 6th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment and its two batteries (the 12th and 15th H.A.A. Batteries – the 3rd Battery remained in Singapore); and two batteries from the 35th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, the 78th and 89th Light Anti-Aircraft Batteries (the Regimental Headquarters remained in Singapore). The units on Sumatra were deployed at the two airfields on the island, called P1 and P2. Both were near Palembang, where there were key refineries.

There was no early warning radar on Sumatra and limited communications. Japanese air attacks commenced on P1 on 23 January 1942, and they continued intermittently until the invasion. On 14 February, Japanese parachute troops dropped around P1 and the town of Palembang. The airfield was quickly captured, and the R.A.F. fighters moved to P2 airfield, of which the Japanese appeared to be unaware. The situation on Sumatra deteriorated rapidly, so much so that on 16 February the Australian senior officer on Sumatra, Brigadier Clive Selwyn STEELE, ordered the evacuation of all Allied personnel to Java.

On 25 February 1942, General WAVELL closed the headquarters of the Australian, British, Dutch and American Command on Java and left the island. As the senior British Army officer in the Netherland East Indies, SITWELL was appointed the General Officer Commanding British Troops in Java and Sumatra, and he was given promotion to the rank of Local Major General. Lieutenant Colonel PEARSON was granted the rank of Local Brigadier to assume command of the 16th Anti-Aircraft Brigade from SITWELL. By now, SITWELL had command of about five-thousand, five-hundred men. This comprised his anti-aircraft brigade, the surviving personnel from the 6th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Brigade and the two batteries from the 35th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment which were formed into an ad hoc infantry unit. There was a squadron of light tanks, a few Royal Engineers, Royal Signals, medical, supply and transport and pioneer units.

The Japanese landed at three locations on Java on 1 March 1942. The main assault was at Merak to the west of Batavia. The Allied forces retreated towards Bandoeng, with the predominantly Australian 'BlackForce' inflicting significant delays on the Japanese advance.² As the senior British officer on the island, SITWELL worked with the Australian Brigadier Arthur BLACKBURN, V.C. (the commanding officer of 'BlackForce') in organising the defensive positions, but despite their endeavours, the Allies were steadily forced back.

On 8 March 1942, the Dutch Commander-in-Chief on Java, Lieutenant General Hein Ter POORTEN decided to surrender, and ordered the Dutch forces on Java to cease fighting. SITWELL was left out on a limb, and initially decided to keep fighting. The Japanese continued to envelop Java, and due to his concerns about how the Allied soldiers would be treated if they keep fighting after the official surrender, SITWELL decided to comply with the Dutch order and surrendered all Allied forces on 12 February 1942.

² 'BlackForce' comprised Australian, British, and American units.

Prisoner of War

SITWELL was to remain a prisoner of war of the Japanese until the end of hostilities in August 1945. At the age of forty-five years, SITWELL was the most senior British Army officer captured in Java.

He and PEARSON were taken prisoner with several senior R.A.F. officers, including:

- Air Vice Marshal P. C. MALTBY, A.O.C. Java
- Air Commodore W. E. STATON, Senior Air Staff Officer, Java
- Air Commodore B. J. SILLY, A.O.C. R.A.F. Base, Java

together with four Group Captains.

After only eight days in detention, on 12 March, SITWELL was made subject of his first beating. He was paraded in front of Major SAITO from the 2nd Imperial Guards Division. SITWELL was asked a number of questions but refused to answer. At one stage, he turned his back to his interrogator, which led to him being marched to his cell where he was kicked and punched by five guards. He was stamped on the head, kicked in the ribs, and eventually knocked unconscious. On regaining consciousness, SITWELL has his hands handcuffed behind his back. He was kept like this for ten days. For the next four days, he was handcuffed in front of him. On some days, he was not fed; and received no water for two days.

At the end of fourteen days of solitary confinement, SITWELL was cleaned up and released from his handcuffs. He was then taken to a Roman Catholic school at Bandoeng, which was now being used by the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police as an interrogation centre and jail. SITWELL was held here for four days, during which time he was not badly treated but saw many beatings and was poorly fed. From this school, he was taken to Soekamiskan Jail where he was held until 18 April. SITWELL was then detained at the Bicycle Camp on Java, so called because of the number of bicycles left behind by the previous occupants of the barracks. From Java, SITWELL was transported to Karenko Camp on Taiwan, and then transferred to Shirakawa Camp on Taiwan.

He was sent from Shirakawa to Manchuria in China with PEARSON on 10 June 1944, but Air Commodore SILLY was not with them as he had died at Shirakawa on 12 July 1943. Being released by the Soviets, freedom in August 1945 meant a frustrating period as the officers had to find their way back to the United Kingdom.

On his return to the United Kingdom, SITWELL was promoted to the rank of Colonel on 19 June 1946. He was Mentioned in Dispatches on 29 August 1946 in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the field. On 23 January 1947, SITWELL was created a Commander of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (C.B.) (to date from 21 December 1946).

He had been recommended by Air Vice Marshal P. C. MALTBY on 30 May 1946 with the following citation.³

On 20th March 1942, shortly after the capitulation in Java, this officer was subjected to military interrogation by the Japanese. He flatly refused to give any information whatever, in accordance with a rigid instruction which had been issued to all troops immediately before surrender.

He consequently underwent a month's rigorous imprisonment and brutal treatment at the end of which he had divulged nothing and was in considerable physical and mental distress when released. The example which this officer set, in company with three other senior officers, was largely responsible for the same reticence being observed by a number of their juniors who were subsequently treated in a similar fashion, with the result that the Japanese extracted nothing of value from the British P.O.W.'s and finally gave up the attempt.

Major General SITWELL deserves great credit for the example he set.

In 1946, SITWELL having recuperated from his period of incarceration was appointed District Officer Commanding the Canal Northern District in Egypt. He held this post for three years during which the British forces withdrew from Egypt into the Canal Zone in the face of significant local opposition. During this appointment, he held the rank of Temporary Brigadier until he was promoted to the substantive rank of Brigadier on 18 November 1948. At this point in time, SITWELL was fifty-two years of age and had thirty-four years of service in the Army. In 1949, he was given his last appointment in the Army, as the Deputy District Officer Commanding East Anglia District, still in the rank of Brigadier.

Post Retirement

On 4 August 1951, having completed thirty-seven years' service, and now aged fifty-four years, SITWELL retired from the British Army. Following his retirement, in 1952 SITWELL was appointed Keeper of the Jewel House at Her Majesty's Tower of London. In his role, he made a detailed study of the published material on the Regalia. In addition, he examined the original documents relevant to the Regalia and ensuring the information regarding each item was correct. This work led to him producing final and conclusive evidence with respect to the antiquity of the gold in St. Edward's Crown. He published books on the subject, the 'Crown Jewels' was published in 1953, and 'The English Regalia' in 1973.

³ It is not known whether this citation was used for the Mention in Dispatches or for the award of the C.B.

SITWELL was elected to be a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries on 2 May 1957. On 10 June 1967, in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, SITWELL was created a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (C.V.O.). He retired from the role as Keeper of the Jewels on 5 February 1968, being replaced by Colonel Thomas Pierce BUTLER, Bt., D.S.O., O.B.E., F.R.G.S.

Major General SITWELL died on 28 September 1973 at the age of seventy-six years. He had married Catherine Florence Parke OLIVE in 1919, and they had one daughter together. After his retirement, they lived on the Isle of Wight.

Bibliography and Sources

Services of British Army Officers & cc 1939 – 1945

Published by: Savanna Publications 1999 as reprint of the Half-Yearly Army List January 1946
90, Dartmouth Road, Forest Hill, LONDON. SE23 3HZ

[ISBN 1 902366 02 6]

The London Gazette

Date: 16 October 1917	Issue number: 30340	Page number: 10711
Date: 5 March 1918	Issue number: 30561	Page number: 2933
Date: 9 March 1926	Issue number: 33140	Page number: 1741
Date: 7 March 1930	Issue number: 33586	Page number: 1491
Date: 16 May 1930	Issue number: 33606	Page number: 3070
Date: 20 January 1931	Issue number: 33682	Page number: 458
Date: 6 June 1933	Issue number: 33947	Page number: 3825
Date: 19 January 1934	Issue number: 34016	Page number: 459
Date: 6 March 1934	Issue number: 34030	Page number: 1530
Date: 23 March 1934	Issue number: 34035	Page number: 1945
Date: 7 January 1936	Issue number: 34240	Page number: 135
Date: 16 November 1937	Issue number: 34455	Page number: 7185
Date: 22 February 1938	Issue number: 34486	Page number: 1165
Date: 28 July 1939	Issue number: 34649	Page number: 5204
Date: 18 August 1939	Issue number: 34656	Page number: 5676
Date: 20 March 1942	Issue number: 35496	Page number: 1321
Date: 26 July 1946	Issue number: 37669	Page number: 3881
Date: 27 August 1946	Issue number: 37704	Page number: 4342
Date: 21 January 1947	Issue number: 37861	Page number: 441
Date: 20 February 1948	Issue number: 38216	Page number: 1395
Date: 20 February 1948	Issue number: 38216	Page number: 1403
Date: 21 December 1948	Issue number: 38486	Page number: 6657
Date: 3 August 1951	Issue number: 39301	Page number: 4153
Date: 1 February 1952	Issue number: 39453	Page number: 641
Date: 1 August 1952	Issue number: 39616	Page number: 4201
Date: 17 November 1953	Issue number: 40020	Page number: 6241
Date: 23 October 1956	Issue number: 40909	Page number: 6029
Date: 9 November 1956	Issue number: 40922	Page number: 6397

London Gazette web-site: <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/>

[Accessed 10th May 2012]

Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives – Location Register

Available on-line at: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/lhcma/searchlocreg.cgi>

[Accessed 3rd February 2011]

The War Against Japan

By: Major General S Woodburn KIRBY, C.B., C.M.G., C.I.E., O.B.E., M.C. and others

Volume I – The Loss of Singapore

First Published: H.M.S.O. (1958)

This edition published by: The Naval and Military Press Ltd (2004)

Who Was Who

Volume VIII 1981-1990

Published by: A & C BLACK Publishers Ltd.

Major General Hervey Degge Wilmot SITWELL

Available on-line at: <http://dutcheastindies.iblogger.org/sitwell.html>

[Accessed 9th May 2012]

'Loyalty and Honour' – The Indian Army September 1939 – August 1947

Part I Divisions

Part II Brigades

Part III

By Chris KEMPTON

Published by the Military Press (2003)

[ISBN 0-85420-228-5]

Third Supplement to the London Gazette dated 20th February 1948

Report on the Air Operations during the campaigns in Malaya and Netherlands East Indies from the 5th December to 12th March 1942, by Air Vice Marshal Sir Paul MALTBY.

Available on-line at: <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/38216/supplements/1347>

[Accessed 10th May 2012]

The Coolie Generals – Britain's Far Eastern Military Leaders in Captivity

By: Mark FELTON

Published by: Pen & Sword Military, 47, Church Street, BARNSELY, South Yorkshire. S70 2AS (2008)

[ISBN 978-1-84415-767-9]

Biographical Dictionary of British Generals of the Second World War

By: Nick SMART

Published by: Pen and Sword Military, BARNSELY, South Yorkshire. S70 2AS (2005)

[ISBN 1 84415 049 6]

Archibald WAVELL – The Life and Times of an Imperial Servant

By; Adrian FORT

Published by: Jonathan CAPE (2009)

[ISBN 978 0 224076784]

The History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery – The Far East Theatre 1941 – 46

By: General Sir Martin FARNDAL, K.C.B.

Published by: Brassey's, 33 John Street, LONDON (Revised Edition 2002)

[ISBN 1 85753 331 3]

The History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery – Anti-Aircraft Artillery 1914 – 55

By: Brigadier N. W. ROUTLEDGE, O.B.E., T.D.

Published by: Brassey's, 33 John Street, LONDON (1994)

[ISBN 1 85753 099 3]

Regiments of the British Army 1939 – 1945 (Artillery)

By: Malcolm A BELLIS

Published by: Military Press International (1995)

[ISBN 0 85420 110 6]

The Royal Artillery 1939 – 45

Available on-line at: <http://www.ra39-45.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/>

[Accessed 9th May 2012]

6th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery – the extraordinary untold story of this unlucky regiment from the Midlands and Penn Common.

By: Patrick WALKER (2011)

Published by: The Choir Press, Gloucester GL1 5SR (2011)

[ISBN 978-0-9562190-4-6]

The Route to the East – the WS (Winston's Special) Convoys

By the late Arnold HAGUE, Lieutenant Commander R.N.R. (retired) (2007)

Available on-line at: <http://www.naval-history.net/xAH-WSConvoys04-1941B.htm>

Major General H. D. W. SITWELL

www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

Robert PALMER M.A.

Published by: The Author
