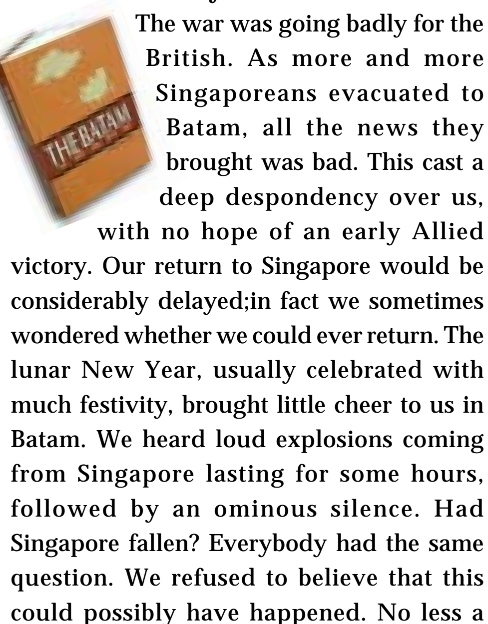
Dr Wong Heck Sing - The Batam Years

Dr Wong Heck Sing
(Photo Archive 1971)

Dr Wong Heck Sing is role model exemplar for younger doctors and budding doctors-to-be. Born in 1923, he is the sixth child and second son of a family of 9 children.He served his patient community in his General Practice in western Singapore, was the President of CFPS from 1973 to1977 and 1983 to 1985 and thus one of the early pioneers in the family medicine movement in Singapore.He believed in voluntary work and was a leader of leaders being involved in selecting leaders for civil service in the Public Service Commission.

His words of wisdom echo in a SMA lecture 1997 –"In search of Future Role Models in Medicine" where he said "*..there may come a time where a whole new generation is brought up in an environment where doctoring is no longer a calling but a service industry, leaving behind a legacy that commands little respect."*

One way to forget not is to hear the stories of lives of men and women who have forged the road of medicine and be inspired to walk on bearing such legacies.Thus in this September edition of Down Heritage Trail, we are proud to publish excerpts from privately published "*The Batam Years*" which chronicles Dr. Wong's pre-medical school days and his family to survive during the war years of 1942 to 1945. It was a time when young Singaporean males were executed by the thousands.His family with 5 sons had a lot to lose and his parents then decided to evacuate the family to Batam where the story is set.



War Days

The war was going badly for the British. As more and more Singaporeans evacuated to Batam, all the news they brought was bad. This cast a deep despondency over us, with no hope of an early Allied victory. Our return to Singapore would be considerably delayed;in fact we sometimes wondered whether we could ever return. The lunar New Year, usually celebrated with much festivity, brought little cheer to us in Batam. We heard loud explosions coming from Singapore lasting for some hours, followed by an ominous silence. Had Singapore fallen? Everybody had the same question. We refused to believe that this could possibly have happened. No less a person than Winston Churchill, had said that Singapore would never be allowed to fall.

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That evening, the first British troops arrived in Batam, confirming our worst fears that Singapore had indeed fallen. We met the soldiers, walking through Father's rubber estate towards Sungei Panas village.They were a dispirited lot and their faces told us a story of despair and defeat. They asked how they could get away from Batam. They hoped to sail to Java, and in order to get there they wanted a boat. As they were walking, they were dislodging the firing pins from their guns. They threw the pins in one direction and the guns in the other. My brothers and I led them to the village headman, who told them to go to Big Company's godown. The soldiers numbering about twenty then parked themselves on the verandah of the godown. They were thoroughly worn out. When I inquired whether they had brought any food with them they shook their heads. I then went home, and asked Mother to prepare a large kettleful of hot coffee. I brought them the coffee and a tinful of Marie biscuits.

The Japanese advance and an officer

We never expected the Japanese would come to Sungei Panas so soon, not to the village anyway. They must have had a well organized and an efficient intelligence service. News of British soldiers throwing their guns away must have been relayed immediately to them. The Japanese dispatched troops to investigate. When the Japanese came we were caught off guard. In fact, the whole village was caught unawares. The japanese were at our doorstep before we realised who they were. There were two of them, accompanied by Indonesian guides. They appeared to be looking for something. We immediately guessed they were looking for the British guns. They came to one of the bedrooms where we kept the books we had brought from Singapore. The books were mainly English books.

At once the Japanese faces changed. They looked grim and the leading man drew out his sword. I did not realize he was an officer until I saw that he had pips on his shoulder. He ordered all of us out of the house. He then counted and found one of us was missing. He shouted to me to get the missing person out. I used sign language to indicate to him that the wanted person was ill. Not believing me, the officer strode into the house to see for himself. Third Brother was in bed with a burning fever. At once the officer's demeanor changed. His face, which a moment ago, was grim now appeared kind and gentle. He bade me to fetch him a basin of cold water and proceeded to sponge Third Brother's forehead. After a while he asked me to continue the sponging. The officer left soon after, followed by the others. They were then seen sitting under a tree in the village, fanning themselves. The Indonesian guides pointed to Mr Ong's house and indicated that there were young women staying there. The

Japanese ignored the guides. They continued to sit under the tree.After a while they all left in their boat.

The Wongs and the Ongs had two lucky breaks that day. The Wongs were lucky to have got off so lightly for the English books. When the Japanese officer drew his sword, we thought we would all be killed. The Ongs were also lucky. Despite the urgings of their Indonesian guides, they refused to go to the cottage to molest the women. The Japanese were known for their barbarism towards women in wartime. Fortunately, the officer had a restraining influence on the other soldier and the Indonesian guides. As to why the officer was so kind to Third Brother one would never know. Perhaps he had a son in Japan. We were just lucky. The news of our luck soon spread, especially the news about the womenfolk in the Ong family, and people talked about the subject for a long time.

Following the visit by the Japanese, Father decided to shift as soon as possible to the second rubber estate, even though the repairs to the hut were not completed. Father said, "The Japanese are unpredictable. They may come back to punish us for the English books. We can't take any chances". We shifted that same day. So did the Ongs. They too thought the Japanese might return. They moved while there was time. We completed the move in one day, locking up house at Sungei Panas village. The neighbours were curious, asking us the reason for our move. After our explanation, they agreed that it was the right thing to do.They never questioned the Ongs. They knew there were many women in the Ong family.

After the shift, the Wongs continued to face challenging times hiding from the Japanese and braving a tip-off on an attempted robbery in their new hide-out...

After sending the womenfolk off, we immediately set to work to get ready for the night. Father's fail-safe plan, was to spend the night in the repaired hut's newly constructed latrine. "Nobody would ever look in the latrine for us!" Father said, "Especially if we put out all the lights and remained very quiet". We had an early and quick dinner, eating only the leftovers from lunch, and then hurriedly prepared to bed down for the night. We did not expect much sleep that night. We listened to what Father said and prepared to be in bed with the lights out before the robbers came. They would be armed, he warned. The latrine had been in use during our brief stay. There was already a strong stench coming from it, despite having covered its opening with our bedding. There was no time to bathe. Anyway it made little difference, as we were by that time sweaty and smelly.

Sleep was out of the question for the rest of the night. We talked for a while in whispers and wondered whether the robbers would return. We soon began to notice the stink of the latrine, the odour of which escaped us earlier. The presence of the robbers made us forget the smell, as well as the hordes of mosquitoes attacking us. Now that the excitement was over the odour of faeces and the mosquitoes stinging, proved well nigh intolerable. Father warned us to keep quiet. "We could never be sure whether there were neighbouring farmers walking at night, and they might spread the word that we were hiding in the latrine. We have to think of future robberies. The latrine might once again come in handy", he said. The next day we started early, ferrying the rest of our belongings to Sungei Panas. Father warned us against discussing the attempted robbery. He told us to say that the womenfolk found the new place too uncomfortable and too isolated. They wanted to return to the house at Sungei Panas.

After a while the robbery incident became a blurred memory. Once again life became a dull boring repetition of each day. There was nothing to look forward to, not even an early return to Singapore. That had all along served as a morale booster.

Of Motan and Malaria

Then one day I came down with a high fever. At first I thought it was a common cold. The fever persisted and continued for several days. "Motan", somebody said, "and the best cure is needling your finger to let out the bad blood out, followed by swallowing an opium pellet".

Thus I had my first experience of blood letting. It was not a pleasant experience. I was asked to go to the village opium den to get the treatment. The same person, who suggested the cure, took charge of the proceedings. He took hold of my middle finger, and turned my palm downwards and proceeded to squeeze my terminal phalanx of that finger. He then pricked the phalanx next to the nail bed, letting out some blood. I let out a gasp of pain. He pricked several a few fingers, each two times, and each time below the nail bed. "Aha", he cried triumphantly, "dark blood! ." "I was right. The dark blood means that you definitely have "motan". I was made to swallow one black vile looking pellet. "In no time you will be up and about", he said reassuringly. Father offered to pay him for the treament. "No", he said. "You don't have to pay me. You know I don't do this for a living. I am a farmer like most people here. I learned this treatment from a friend and he made me promise never to make money out of it", he continued. He had promised his friend that he would only do this to help people.

On the third day I had an attack of rigors, which made the diagnosis obvious. My fever was due to malaria, and not due to "motan"

By this time the opium was beginning to take effect. I was feeling very drowsy, and was unable to stand up, and maintain my balance. How I managed to reach home I am unable

Map of Singapore and Batam
From "The Batam Years"

to say. I seemed to be sleepwalking. I then fell into a deep and drugged sleep. On waking, my fever continued. I was feeling as miserable as ever. The farmer who pricked my fingers and gave me the treatment was incorrect when he said that I would be better after the sleep. His diagnosis that I had "motan" was wrong. The burning fever continued for two days. It caused an unquenchable thirst. I had to drink glasses and glasses of water and still felt thirsty. On the third day I had an attack of rigors, which made the diagnosis obvious. My fever was due to malaria, and not due to "motan". Motan was a term used to describe typhoid fever. The term "motan" was a descriptive term. It was used to describe a phenomenon, found only in typhoid fever. In cases of typhoid, a rash over the abdomen usually appeared within 10 days. If one were to rub a damp dough over the abdomen of a typhoid patient, strands of "hair-like fibres" would appear. That was how typhoid was diagnosed by the traditional Chinese physician. "Mo" meant hair in the Chinese language; and "tan" meant "illness".

I was having malaria, and not "motan". Quinine, the cure for malaria was unobtainable anywhere in Batam. The island never had malarial cases as far as the present inhabitants could remember. Now there was an epidemic of such cases. It was after I had graduated as a doctor that I discovered the reason behind the malaria outbreak. The environment of Batam was disturbed. Large and increasing number of farmlands were used to plant food, causing large areas of trees in the forests to be felled to make way for new farmlands. After each rainfall, puddles of water collected, breeding mosquitoes including those that carry the malarial parasire. Soon the inhabitants infected with malaria reached epidemic proportions. I was told that in the 1920s when land was cleared for rubber planting, there was also malaria in Batam. By the 1930s conditions had stabilized and malaria was no longer a problem. Now malaria had returned and there was no quinine available anywhere in Batam. After my attack of malaria, Father and Third Brother also developed high fever. They too had malaria. Their rigor, like mine, occurred at various intervals. The typical pattern of the illness was altered. The fever, usually followed by a rigor on the third day, varied.

The rigor, in Batam cases, could occur at any time, up to 5 days interval. A few weeks later, we heard some boatmen were trading in cinchona bark around the islands nearby. We knew quinine came from cinchona bark. We immediately contacted the boatmen and bought some cinchona bark from them. The bark was a godsend. Cinchona bark soon became a tradable commodity, better than money. It was traded for practically anything, including rice, which in wartime was the most sought after commodity. The demand for cinchona bark was greater than the supply, as malaria was so widespread in Batam. In Sungei Panas village alone, about 10% of the population died from malaria. The ones who died, had the most feared form of malaria, cerebral malaria.

We had no idea how much quinine the bark contained, but by trial and error we found that a teaspoon of bark could abort an attack or prevent it from occurring. We measured a teaspoon of the bark, ground it into powder, wrapped in a small piece of newspaper and swallowed paper, print and all!

We had learnt how to anticipate an attack. There would be prodomal symptoms like aches and pains in the limbs. If we took a teaspoon of the bark as soon as the aches and pains appeared, we could ward off an attack. The duration of the effect of quinine medication varied. Sometimes the cinchona bark worked for one or two days. Other times the intervals was shorter. If however, one delayed in taking the cinchona bark when the symptoms appeared, or if the bark was not readily available, a full-blown attack would ensue. We continued having malaria till the end of the war. By we, I meant Third Brother, Fourth Brother and Father, although Father had far fewer attacks than us. Big Sister and Mother were spared during most of the war years. Mother especially had fewer attacks. There was no explanation to account for it. On one occasion, when Mother had malaria, I tried giving her a quinine injection from the ampoules I bought in Singapore. Mother recovered from the malaria, but in its place she developed a large abscess at the site of injection. She was not at all pleased. Fortunately the abscess burst discharging much pus, without further complications. Big Sister did not have malaria till the last year of the war. That was in early 1945. I did not know whether Big Brother had malaria because he was never at home. He apparently escaped or he would not have been able to travel so much. The reason Big Sister was spared for so long was that she always kept herself fully covered from the sun. Mosquitoes never had a chance to bite her. When the war was over and we were back in Singapore, none of us had any relapse of malaria, which was surprising. We also did not have enlarged spleens despite the many attacks we had in Batam. I lost a lot of weight from the many attacks of malaria, so much so I was reduced to skin and bones. I saw what Big Brother wrote in his diary. I must have been very ill for him to write "Sing's last days"! He did not expect me to live and he must have forgotten to put away his diary.

My Unexpected First Patient

A few days after Singapore fell, we had visitors from another village, asking for our help. It seemed that one of their relatives who had just arrived from Singapore, was shot in the head by a Japanese soldier, and was seriously wounded. They thought he would soon die. They waited for two days and the wounded man was still alive. They had heard they could get help at Sungei Panas, from people like Big Sister who was a trained nurse in Singapore, and had some experience in treating wounds. Big Sister asked how far was their village. "About three hours' walk." they replied. Big Sister was not keen to go, as she had a sore foot. She turned to me and said, "Why don't you go, since you were in the MAS. You had some training in first aid and had some experience in treating bomb casualties."

Let me explain. In 1941, I was offered a place to study in Raffles College in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics. When the war broke out, on the morning of December 1941, I was busy preparing for the first terminal examinations. However the examinations were cancelled. The College announced that

all studies would be halted and all male students were asked to join the Medical Auxiliary Service or M.A.S. Before we were sent out, we were told we would be given training, both in theory as well as in practice. But the war broke out so suddenly and unexpectedly, and with the Japanese troops advancing, all the training we had was an hour's lecture, all about treating the seriously wounded with morphine injections. It was given by a British doctor, a recent evacuaee from Penang. That lecture was a complete waste of our time, as only doctors were allowed to give morphine injections. As a consequence, we made some horrible mistakes in carrying out our duties to the war victims. Father agreed with Big Sister that I should go. The long journy on foot, coupled with the fact that the people were complete strangers, made it neccesary that I should go. The long journey on foot, coupled with the fact that the people were complete strangers, made it necessary that I should go. I had earlier brought with me some medicines when I came to Batam with Father and Little Sister. I should explain that after finishing school in 1939,l enrolled to do the Pharmacy course at the College of Medicine, Singapore. In 1940, unlike presently, the course consisted of three years work in practical dispensing, followed by a year of academic studies. During the first year of practical dispensing, I acquired some knowledge on the use of the common drugs. A newly introduced drug at that time, was the "MB 693". It had worked wonders on infected wounds, even on topical applications. That box of medicines I had brought with me to Batam, consisted of a bottle of tincture iodine, a bottle of Eusol lotion, a packet of potassium permanganate crystals and some fifty MB 693 tablets. I set off with the visitors, with the box of medicines. After three hours walking, we came upon a cluster of attap huts raised on stilts. I was ushered up the steps to the verandah of a large hut. Drinks were served. I looked around. There was no patient to be found.

"He is not here," volunteered one of the guides. "We left him under that tree thinking he would die," pointing to a large tree to one side of the hut. "That was two days ago. He is still alive this morning. That was why we sent for you." I hastened to him. I could hardly suppress a gasp when I reached him. The group of people who came to our house did not mention that his eyeballs were protruding out of the eye sockets. What startled me most were his two bloodshot eyeballs staring vacantly at the sky. He was lying on the ground on a mat in a pool of dried blood, his face also caked with dried blood. There was dried blood on his clothing. He was still alive as he was breathing. His half-opened mouth, revealed dried blood on his teeth and lips. His tongue was parched dry. My tongue was equally parched, not with thirst but with anxiety and fear. Tremblingly, I knelt beside him. With unsteady hands I opened up my medicine box. I called for a basin of hot boiled water, and after it had cooled I proceeded to clean the man's face. I found a wound in his left temple and a similar one on the opposite side, presumably the entry and exit points of the bullet. I cleaned the two wounds with Eusol solution. After drying them I sprinkled some MB 693 powder on the wounds. Gingerly, I pushed his eyeballs back into their sockets and covered them with a light bandage. I bandaged his wounds in his temple. I cleaned the rest of his face and head. Thankfully no questions were asked. I would not have known how serious his injuries were, and whether he would live. I did tell the people around to give him fluids, as he was parched dry and obviously dehydrated. The wounded man was carried into the house. He was put to bed in one of the rooms. When offered a cup of warm water he opened his mouth and drank greedily. He also drank half a bowl of watery congee. Soon he fell into a deep sleep. I then realized how thirsty and hungry I was, and gratefully accepted a large cup of hot coffee. A basin of warm water was provided for me to wash up, and clean myself.

Gingerly, I pushed his eyeballs back into their sockets and covered them with a light bandage

- Dr Wong Heck Sing on giving first aid to man with gun-shot wound

Over the next few mornings the same group of men came to fetch me. The patient continued to make good progress. His wounds were not infected, and the swelling around his eyes had visibly subsided. Big Sister accompanied me one morning. She said the man was doing well. He had no fever, and his eyeballs were settling into the eye sockets. His eyelids could partially close and his temple wounds were healing well. He was eating, and drinking, and was able to sit up. He could also respond to questions, but he remained blind. Big Sister thought the bullet had severed his optic nerves. When we asked him what had happened during the boat journey, he was thankfully unable to remember. Big Sister and I continued seeing him until his wounds were completely healed. He was totally blind, but in good spirits. He said he was very fortunate to be alive and he thanked us profusely. The morning after our last visit we were greeted by a group of the patient's relatives. They brought with them several baskets of presents. Each basket contained eggs, chickens, ducks, fresh fish, prawns and a red packet stuffed with money. They were very grateful for the help we gave to the patient.

There is a postscript to this story. About twenty years later, after I had graduated as a doctor and was in private practice, a blind man came to my consulting room accompanied by his teenaged sons. He had to be helped to a chair by his sons. I proceeded to question the man about his symptoms. He became silent as he listened intently. All of a sudden he spoke,"Dr. Wong, Dr. Wong, don't you remember me? You saved my life. You treated me in Batam. I was the man shot by the Japanese. You saved my life. I can recognize your voice". "Yes, 1 remember," I said to him. "But I couldn't have possibly. I have saved your life, I was not a doctor then", I explained. He refused to accept my explanation, and kept insisting that I had saved his life. He told his children that I was the man who had treated him in Batam, and saved his life. I was quite amazed that after all these years, I should meet the man who was my very first patient, although I was not even a qualified doctor then.

Excerpts from chapters 4-6 of "The Batam Years" by Dr Wong Heck Sing."The Batam Years" memoirs is privately published and a copy of the book is available for reading and reference in the College Library.