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A Study on Pillbox Distribution in Kedah Towards Historical Heritage Conservation

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Abstract. The awareness and urge to protect and preserve the remnants of past wars as military heritage has arisen internationally almost two decades ago especially with the establishment of IcoFort (ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Fortifications and Military Heritage) by ICOMOS in 2005. The main objectives of the establishment are to research, raise awareness and initiate international cooperation in conserving and preserving military heritage in the form of monuments, landscapes and defense structures including pillbox. Pillbox is a concrete structure with special design that is used as one of the defense mechanisms in war. In Malaysia, the existence of the pillbox that was built by the British army during World War II (WWII) as one of the defense systems can still be seen scattered in six states in Malaysia, namely Johor, Penang, Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah. However, the efforts to protect and preserve this pillbox as one of the heritage sites are still too little. Therefore, this study focuses on the efforts to track and record the distribution of pillbox in the state of Kedah Darul Aman as a fundamental step towards its conservation and preservation initiative. This study has adopted an exploratory approach by discovering the existence of the pillboxes in each district in Kedah and recording its information using an inventory system with reference to GPS coordinate numbers. The results of the study found that there are 27 pillboxes in the state of Kedah with 3 different typologies found in the districts of Kubang Pasu, Kota Setar and Kuala Muda that still intact and require further attention of protection and preservation.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Kedah with an area of more than 9,000 square km located in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia has many important heritage sites to be preserved. Heritage sites in Kedah consist of several types including archeological sites such as Lembah Bujang and Sungai Batu archeological sites, fortress wall such as Kota Kuala Kedah to heritage buildings such as Masjid Zahir, Istana Balai Besar and Masjid Pengkalan Kakap. These heritage sites are very important to be preserved as economic resource assets in the heritage tourism industry as well as to maintain the identity and historical value of the country. The preservation and conservation of heritage sites play important role in forming a shared nation state by multi racial and multi ethnic communities through country's historical knowledge and experience [1].

Apart of archeological sites, fortification structure and various types of heritage buildings, Kedah also has a number of heritage site in the form of remaining World War II defensive structure known as 'pillboxes' scattered in several districts. Pillbox is a concrete defensive structure built by the British army in preparation for the Second World War in Malaya (Malaysia) with particular design features such as a platform to place weapons include the MK-4 or MK-5 type rifles [2]. These pillboxes which used as defense system by British military to curb the advance of Japanese army is one important tangible evidence of our past nation history that was once a British colony. However, after the war ended and the country achieved independence, this defensive structure was left without any attention or conservation efforts until some perceive it evokes unpleasant visual of a place. Apart of it, there were also no efforts to make this historic structure as a memorial to remember the

difficulty and suffer that once experienced by our country during the colonial era which resulted many of them were neglected such as the British battle fortifications in Jitra or even destroyed to make way for new development [3,4].

Based on the understanding of the importance to protect and preserve pillbox as country's historical heritage, the efforts to track and trace the existence of this defense structure is an important fundamental step to take. It is because there is no study on the distribution of pillbox particularly in Kedah has ever been published which is important as a reference for researchers and parties involved in the conservation of heritage sites either at the state or federal level. It is also found out that none of the pillboxes in the state of Kedah had ever been gazetted under the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645) to ensure its heritage value was protected for future generation. Therefore, this study was conducted which aims to discover and record the location and distribution of pillbox based on districts throughout the state. The study was conducted with an exploratory approach that tracks the position of the pillbox throughout the state of Kedah and records its position information into the inventory form with reference to the GPS coordinate system (Global Positioning System).

PILLBOX AS HERITAGE ASSET

The neglect of the past wars structure is not something unique to Malaysia, rather it is a global situation to many countries which have remnant structure of the past war that once took place in the country. The ambiguity of status of this structure as a heritage subject based on historical studies and heritage policy are the two main reasons why this structure receives less attention [5]. Pillbox which built with a design that prioritizes functionality and durability over aesthetic value has caused this historical structure is perceived of posing visual disturbance to its environment once it is no longer used. In fact, some consider the existence of pillboxes in public areas as a 'distraction' because it only brings back memories of the past difficulty and sadness during wartime that many people try to forget [6]. As a result, structures that were once part of the war defense system now tend to be demolished to create more cheerful new development environment.

However, recent developments have shown that there is a significant effort to protect and preserve these war ramnants which are also now referred as military heritage, especially in Europe [5]. The establishment of IcoFort (ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Fortifications and Military Heritage) in 2005 under ICOMOS has shed new light on the past war ramnant structure such as pillboxes. IcoFort was established as an organization that acts to provide awareness of the significant value of the defense structure and military heritage while providing guidance on conservation and preservation needed. According to IcoFort (2021), fortifications and military heritage are key links to the history of human settlements, countries and regions. It is also a monument that can remind of the past sufferings of many communities, thus trying to remind people the importance of having mutual understanding and respect in order to build better relationships.

PILLBOX IN KEDAH

The pillbox in Kedah was built in 1941, when the British had sniffed that there would be an attack in the region. The British have made various assumptions and expectations of the direction of this possible attack, including from the north of Malaya, particularly through Thailand. When Lieutenant General Arthur Percival served as commander of the British army in Malaya, he had found out that the line of defense in northern Malaya was weak. Hence, he instructed the British army to make various defense preparations including by building pillbox [7-11]. The construction of this line of defense involving two phases, the first phase, focuses on defense on the border between Malaya and Thailand, and the second phase focuses on the south of Koding and Jitra road facing north (Loong, 2002). The construction of this defense structures has formed a line of defense known as the 'Jitra Line'. The existence of the pillboxes in the Jitra Line have been elaborated on an article by Lieutenant Colonel S. P. Weir, MC, (1962) in the Australian Army Jurnal titled The Malayan Campaign 1941/1942 which stated;

"The centre company, 500 yards to the left of the right company, was dug in on the rubber edge overlooking the wide swamp to the front. A concrete pill box, one of many still intact in the position in 1961, was well protected by a platoon dug in nearby".

"On the left of 2/9 Jats and deployed to cover the two roads leading into Jitra. was 1 Leicesters. Their right company was dug in astride the main road on a gradual forward slope, the right platoon east of the road in scattered rubber and scrub covering the bridge and the small swamp to its front. The other two platoons were in rubber on the left of the road covering across the large swamp and protecting a concrete pill box on their left. This company position was a strong one, well sited, well dug and quite heavily wired"

In the book of The British Battalion in The Malayan Campaign 1941-1942 by Loong (2002), he also stated;

“The 1st Leicesters were in their defence sector and the positions of the companies were as follows: - C Company under Captain E.Y. Dobson was covering the forward line west of the main road approach Jitra. This was in rubber estate land including the Public Works Department (PWD). Labourer lines along the main road. To the west across the road from Jitra to Kodiang at Kampung Rimba was D Company under Captain I.V. Mitchell, where there were two concrete pill boxes with Vickers machine gun installed”

In Kedah, the culmination of the second world war (WWII) can be seen in Jitra, known as ‘the Battle of Jitra’. Therefore, the existence of pillboxes scattered in several places has been important tangible evidence of the efforts and strategies of the British army to curb the advance of the Japanese army in Malaya at that time. It has been an important witness to the changing political power of the great powers of the world at that time. Although the second world war was over, the existence of these pillboxes was of particular importance to the various parties directly or indirectly involved with the events of the war. For the British, this pillbox is one of the proofs that once upon a time they had a foothold in Malaya and were involved in defending their colonies to the point of sacrificing many soldiers. Meanwhile, for the Japanese, this pillbox is a proof of their success because they have managed to defeat a world power at that time. However, for the local community, the pillbox has been a witness of our ancestors’ fighting spirit and struggle in the very challenging times and hence remind us to defend and appreciate the independence that we have [8].

DISTRIBUTION OF PILLBOX IN KEDAH

In discovering and identifying the distribution of pillbox in the state of Kedah, researchers have conducted an exploration search to the entire state of Kedah by focusing on each district within the state. The results of the study found that, out of the twelve districts in Kedah, only 3 districts have a pillbox structure, namely Kubang Pasu, Kota Setar and Kuala Muda districts. The pillboxes found are in diverse surrounding and consist of several different designs with different levels of preservation as follow;

District of Kubang Pasu

Kubang Pasu district is the border district between Kedah Darul Aman and Perlis Indera Kayangan. Based on the field study conducted, a total of six pillboxes have been successfully discovered in this district which is located in the districts of Pering, Gelong and Bukit Tinggi. In Pering sub -district, two pillboxes were discovered in Kampung Bukit Kalong. This pillbox is located at the foothill of Bukit Kalong and there are few local community houses located around the pillbox. Based on the location of the pillbox which is located close to the KTMB Kodiang station, we can understand the purpose of the pillbox built in this area is to defend the station from enemy attacks. Mukim Gelong, Kubang Pasu has four pillboxes. One is located at Lorong Lebai Bakar in a land owned by a villager while the other three are located near the paddy fields. Interestingly, the design of the pillbox in this sub-district is very different from other pillboxes in Malaysia and can only be found in the Gelong sub-district, Kedah. The other two pillboxes that were discovered in the Kubang Pasu district are located in the Bukit Tinggi sub -district. The first pillbox is located in the private land of a villager at Lorong Idaman 7/2 and the other is located at Lorong Idaman 8.



FIGURE 1. Pillbox located in the middle of paddy field at sub-district of Gelung, Kubang Pasu District of Kota Setar

Generally, the existence of pillbox in Kota Setar district can be found along Hutan Kampung road as well as around the Air Force College (KTU) and Sultan Abdul Halim Airport (L TSAH). On the way from Jitra, one can see a pillbox that has been painted in camouflage pattern which located at the intersection of Bukit Pinang. The pillbox is located in a fenced area and a mini square has been built on the side of it and one information board is built to explain briefly about the history of the Second World War that took place in this area as well as the distribution of pillboxes and bunkers in the state of Kedah. This pillbox is basically in a good care compare to others which mostly surrounded by bushes. Not far from the pillbox there is another pillbox which is located in the football field owned by Nor Izzy Nirman football club.

Along the Hutan Kampung road there are three pillboxes located on the side of the road. The first location of pillbox, it is located in front of the KTU Officer's Family House or also known as KM 8, Jalan Hutan Kampung by some people. There is one significant feature of the pillbox here which is the existence of internal dividing wall inside the pillbox. It is therefore denying the general assumption of some pillbox researcher in the country who stated that there has no such typology of the pillbox in Kedah. For the second pillbox, it is located near the office of the Bukit Pinang Sub -District Head/Hutan Kampung and is located near to the paddy fields. The last location where pillbox has discovered is along Hutan Kampung road which near to a used car shop. Its location is also known as KM 10, Jalan Hutan Kampung. Meanwhile, in Kampung Bohor, there are two other pillboxes located on the private land. One is located next to the villagers' houses and the other in the middle of a paddy field.



FIGURE 2. Pillbox located on the intersection of Bukit Pinang

There is another pillbox located in the KTU Officer MES area. The location of this pillbox is close to the exit of the place. In order to enter this area, one need to ask permission from the Air Force College control post as it is a restricted area for public. This is the last location for the type of pillbox which has internal wall divider in Kedah. In general, the state of Kedah has only two pillboxes that have internal wall divider. There is another pillbox along Anak Bukit road which is located on the left side of the road near Titi Besi Religious School. The last pillbox that can be found in the Kota Setar district is located near the Sultan Abdul Halim Airport (L TSAH) or more precisely in the middle of a paddy field.

District of Kuala Muda

Kuala Muda district has nine pillboxes which are located in the three sub -districts namely Sungai Petani, Bukit Meriam and Kota. Mukim Sungai Petani recorded the highest number of pillbox distribution in Kuala Muda district. There are four pillboxes in the Sungai Petani Airport Camp area. Two pillboxes are located in the middle of the camp and two more are located near the camp fence which has loophole directly facing the railway tracks. There is another pillbox can be found on the street side of Jalan Lencongan Barat, Kampung Sungai Layar Hujung. Meanwhile there is a pillbox in Tok Kamis village which is located in the middle of two villagers residential. In sub -district of Sungai Petani, there is a pillbox facing the Merbok River. This pillbox is located in the area of bunker complex which happened to be the remain site of the palace of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah, the 21st Sultan of Kedah.



FIGURE 3. Pillbox at Pantai Merdeka, the only pillbox located on the costal area

Kedah has only one pillbox which located right on the coastal area, which is at Pantai Merdeka. It is found that a concrete fence has been built around the pillbox with a plaque put on the pillbox facade. Currently, this pillbox is located within the area of Jerai Geopark. The final pillbox in Kuala Muda is located in the Kota sub-district or more precisely behind the Kuala Muda post office. Nowadays this pillbox is located right in front of a food stall. The following is a table showing the Distribution of Pillboxes in Kedah by District;

TABLE 1. Pillbox Distribution in Kedah by District

BIL	DISTRICT	SUB-DISTRICT	COORDINATES	NUMBER
1.	Kubang Pasu	Pering	6°22'24.3"N 100°18'19.0"E	2
			6°22'24.2"N 100°18'19.1"E	
		Gelong	6°16'18.5"N 100°23'58.4"E	4
			6°16'42.3"N 100°24'05.7"E	
			6°16'16.5"N 100°23'51.9"E	
		Bukit Tinggi	6°12'17.0"N 100°23'52.3"E	2
6°12'17.7"N 100°24'18.2"E				
2.	Kota Setar	Bukit Pinang	6°12'17.1"N 100°24'14.6"E	6
			6°11'57.9"N 100°24'43.6"E	
			6°11'34.9"N 100°24'37.6"E	
			6°11'43.752"N 100°23'55.956"E	
			6°12'10.6"N 100°24'02.6"E	
		Hutan Kampung	6°12'8.307"N 100°24'14.913"E	4
			6°11'55.10"N 100°24'43.30"E	
			6°10'33.674"N 100°24'20.766"E	
			6°10'10.9"N 100°24'14.4"E	
			6°10'31.5"N 100°24'10.1"E	
3.	Kuala Muda	Sungai Petani	6°10'23.2"N 100°24'08.3"E	7
			5°40'18.9"N 100°27'57.0"E	
			5°41'05.3"N 100°29'14.8"E	
			5°40'30.3"N 100°29'20.3"E	
			5°40'13.2"N 100°29'00.1"E	
			5°40'13.9"N 100°29'39.5"E	
		Bukit Meriam	5°40'13.32"N 100°29'37.95"E	1
			5°39'55.4"N 100°28'13.5"E	
		Kota	5°40'11.5"N 100°22'13.3"E	1
		Kota	5°35'08.8"N 100°22'21.4"E	1

CONCLUSION

Kedah has a number of pillboxes scattered in three districts, namely Kubang Pasu, Kota Setar and Kuala Muda. The existence of the pillboxes in particular locations within the districts has a strong connection with the British military defense strategy in order to curb the advance of the Japanese army during the World War II. The existence of these pillboxes not only related merely to the two great powers during the WWII, but also has an impact on the locals who were also affected by the war. In line with the purpose of military heritage conservation recommended by international bodies such as ICOMOS which is to increase the value of universal humanity, pillbox in Kedah should be given better attention. Involvement and cooperation from

stakeholders such as the British and Japanese government should be established to find the best approach in conserving this military heritage for mutual benefit. However, before this major effort can be realized, a fundamental step towards historical heritage conservation can begin with the fundamental efforts such as to trace and document the distribution of this pillbox just as the purpose of this study.

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