Retracing the Penarikan Route

by

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The story of the Penarikan route is a fascinating one. Dr. Paul Wheatley, who was a Lecturer in Historical Geography at the University of Malaya in Singapore, discovered a unique feature in many of the old maps of the Malay Peninsula. More than 40 maps of the Peninsula prepared by different European Cartographers between the years 1541 and 1613 showed a broad canal running right across the Southern portion of the Peninsula in a WSW - ENE direction. A careful look at a modern map of the Peninsula showed that the two great river systems, viz. Muar and Pahang, are separated by only a short stretch of land. Near this stretch is a small hill named Bukit Penarik. It is believed that this stretch of land was used as a Portage and that the hill obtained its name from the word “iarek” or “to drag”. It is obvious now that this transpeninsular route must have been used a great deal, so much so that the cartographers were deluded into thinking that there was a transpeninsular canal.

Although the route was a difficult one involving a portage near the modern town of Bahau and possibly another one in the lower section of R. Muar near present Pulau Penarek, there is much evidence to show that the route was used regularly. In olden days, due to the absence of roads the rivers of the Peninsula were the main high ways. Moreover, it is a well known fact that Pahang was noted for its gold. The attraction of valuable goods to be obtained in Pahang together with the fear of pirates in the Southern waters of the Peninsula, persuaded men to open up this difficult route between Serting and Jempol rivers. It should be realised that Pahang was also famous for other valuables such as pepper, maize, nutmegs, hogstones, camphor, sapanwood, agallochium and porcupine quills. These were all goods of little bulk but of great value in the markets of Europe. Gordinho Eredia, the Portuguese Chronicler wrote, “By the

Panarikan one travels from Malacca to Pahang in Six days.”

More information on the Penarikan route is given by Tuan Haji A. Shukor bin Ismail of Muar in his forthcoming work on the History of Muar. According to him, the Penarikan played an important role in the economic and military history of Malacca. Furthermore, he attempts to relate the Penarikan with several important historical events such as the route of the Siamese forces defeated by Tun Perak, the kidnap of Tun Teja, and the invasion of Pahang by Abu Bakar’s forces.

Two previous attempts were made to retrace at least part of the route. In 1827 Charles Gray crossed from Malacca to Pahang on a trading mission. The journey took him three weeks each way. In 1875, Daly followed the same route but experienced great difficulty in dragging the boat across the portage. Our attempt is perhaps the first one made to retrace the entire Penarikan route from Muar to Pekan.

There was very little information available on the route except for brief descriptions given by Prof. Wheatley in “The Golden Khersonese” and “Transactions of British Geographers, 1955”. The descriptions of the portage as given by Charles Gray and Daly were most discouraging. It was therefore decided to locate and study the portage before making further plans.

In April, 1968, I took a small team with me to Bahau. After about 3 hours survey of the Jempol and Serting rivers, the team picked a site which could have been the original portage for the following reasons:—

(a) it was the narrowest point between the two river systems and covered a distance of less than half a mile.
(b) the route from Jempol to Serting was in line with Bukit Penarik, a hill which in ancient times would have served as an important land mark. Besides, it cannot be a mere coincidence that the name of the hill is associated with the act of pulling.

(c) there is a well trodden path from the Jempol to the Serting at this site, although nowadays the main Bahau/ K. Pilah road divides the path into two. On one side of the main road are padi fields and Malay Kamponds. The other side is occupied by the Serting rubber estate. But strangely enough, between the edge of the rubber estate and the Serting River are more Kamponds. Did these kamponds originate from the days of the Penarikan? Their location supports this conjecture.

The actual route was carefully plotted. The team was finally selected. I decided to take along with me four pupils belonging to the Pioneering Society of High School, Setapak and their Adviser, Mr. Chew Yew Kai. We managed to purchase a 12 foot long secondhand inflatable rubber dinghy and a 60 h.p. Perkins outboard motor for a total of $400.00. During trials in mining pools and in Klang River, the Perkins proved most unreliable. However, as a result of our appeal, the Honda agents gave us on loan a brand new Honda - 4.5 h.p. engine.

The trip was scheduled for August, 1968 and was expected to take 6 days. In actual fact, it took 11 days and only about 300 miles of the entire 400 mile journey was completed by river. This was mainly due to obstacles both natural and man made. It should be borne in mind that large sections of the basins of these historic rivers are nowadays covered with a network of roads and cart-tracks. Consequently there is little need to depend on the river for transport. Through long periods of neglect and disuse, the rivers have become clogged with fallen trees and assorted debris. It is true that parts of S. Bera and S. Muar are used by fishermen, mostly aborigines. However, these people travel only short distances generally in their small but slick dugouts and carry out fishing in short stretches of the river. As a result, every few yards of the river is blocked by fishing nets, fishing tackle and stout wires with hooks, stret-
ched right across the river from one bank to the other. We also failed to take into account natural hazards such as floating logs, sunken debris and the numerous shallows and sandbanks. Finally we were most unfortunate to have two most unexpected accidents which almost ended the expedition prematurely.

The team left the old jetty at Muar on the morning of August 11th. The dinghy carried six adults and their equipment totalling 1200 lb. Progress was very slow since the Honda had to struggle against the swift current in the lower Muar River. Changing over to the more powerful Perkins motor was futile. After several on the spot repairs and change of vital parts, the motor finally gave up the ghost when the propeller struck a sunken log and caused extensive damage to the shaft.

Our first scheduled overnight stop had been Lengga. But the swift current and trouble with the engine delayed us by 2½ days. Moreover, between Grisek and Panchor, we had the first of the two major accidents. The rubber stays holding the transom to the boat gave way and fell into the river. It took a local mechanic at Grisek 8 hours to make a new contraption which could take the place of the original transom. This was indeed a creditable effort since the 50 lb. engine had to be attached to the boat with only the air pressure of the boat to hold it in place.

The river up to Bukit Kepong was wide, deep and navigable. A speed boat could have made the journey is less than a day. At Bukit Kepong we were warned of floating logs and crocodiles "as big as your boat". Although we did not encounter crocodiles, we hit the first shallows a few miles after Bukit Kepong. Also, floating logs became more and more numerous. The first of the several fishing gear was also encountered. Progress was very slow and tiring. A look out man equipped with binoculars had to be posted to warn the steersman of impending danger. We managed to reach a small village called Kampung Tekam and spent the night on the verandah of the local mosque.

The next day, there were more shallows and more obstacles. Towards the end of the day, we could only make progress by getting down into the river and dragging the boat. Most of us were surprised to do the "penarikan" so early in the journey. Contrary to popular belief from this point onwards the river bed as well as the banks were of fine golden sand. When standing on the large stretches of fine sandy banks one tends to imagine one is on a seashore. Hence, members of the team were infected with a holiday mood. Even the act of dragging the boat was great fun. The fifth night was spent under a bridge on the Segamat/Muar road.

'It was not fun any more',
on the way to Buloh Kasap.
The journey from there to Buloh Kasap, a distance of about 10 miles was the most memorable one. There were so many obstacles that the boat had to be dragged most of the way. It was not fun anymore. Moreover, the route was blocked in several places by fallen trees. Sometimes it was possible to dismantle the motor and push the boat under the trunk. At other times it was possible to drag the boat over the trunk. However there were occasions when neither was possible. On such occasions a lot of time and effort had to be spent in unloading and reloading the boat. It was during an encounter with such a difficult obstacle that we had the second major accident. It was mid-day and members of the team were cutting away the branches of a fallen tree in order to facilitate unloading the equipment on the bank. This task took a couple of hours. Meanwhile, because the boat was stationary, the air pressure in the rubber chambers of the boat had built up and finally the front section gave way with a terrific explosion. The rest of the day was spent in patching up the two-foot gap. We camped for the night on the sandbanks. Total distance covered that day was 3 miles.

The journey to Buloh Kasap next day was back-breaking. Most of the time it was just dragging, loading and unloading. At places, water was only ankle deep. About half a mile from the railway bridge at Buloh Kasap, we gave up any hope of continuing the journey. The boat was grounded once again and developed a leak in the repaired chamber. In front of us stretched the river or rather a series of shallow sand banks. Small children were swimming in the middle of what was left of the river.

The policemen at Buloh Kasap advised us not to proceed any further since conditions further upstream were worse. In addition to the obstacles already encountered we would also have to put up with sunken boulders and small rapids. They said that the river was only navigable to small craft such as canoes and dug-outs. After considering the unfavourable report it was decided to proceed by road to Bahau and continue the journey from the portage.

Two taxis carried all of us and the equipment to Bahau. The boat was taken to a tire-repairer for vulcanised patching. The next morning we got into the Serting near the portage. The river was narrow, shallow, smelly and was choked with debris and refuse. It was not possible even to drag the boat. We therefore took a taxi to Kampung Mahsan, four miles downstream. The Serting was slightly wider than at Bahau but due to neglect and disuse, thorny bushes and shrubs have grown in the middle of the river. The water was still and gave the eerie impression that it

![Removing fallen trees in the Serting river.](image-url)
contained no living creatures. However, we carried our packs on our shoulders and began to proceed down stream. It took us more than an hour to travel half-a-mile through this choked up stream, removing small tree-trunks, slashing away thorny bushes, dragging, pushing and carrying the boat. Finally it was decided to abandon this stretch of the river. We were not prepared or fully equipped to travel at this slow rate. Nor could we risk further damage to the boat.

The only alternative to abandoning the expedition was to continue the journey at a point further down stream. We stopped a passing lorry and persuaded the driver with considerable monetary inducement to take us to Kemayan Village and thence to a place called Padang Gudang, another ten miles away over a cart-track. We were quite familiar with Padang Gudang since on the currently available topo maps this is the only settlement on an apparently uninhabited 40 mile stretch of the Serting. We had counted on using this place as an emergency stop. On reaching Padang Gudang we were most surprised to note that the bold black square on the map was actually a small attap hut housing 5 or 6 Chinese loggers.

The loggers gave us a warm welcome and allowed us to set camp adjacent to their hut and make use of whatever facilities were available. Beyond the loggers' hut was a shack which served us an overnight shelter for the aborigines from Tasek Bera who worked for the loggers. The aborigines informed us the Serting is not used by anyone nowadays. One chap persisted in dissuading us from getting into the Serting. He said it was the home of demons, and huge pythons. Next morning he even took me to a large hole nearby which was supposed to be the former home of a python.

The Serting at Padang Gudang was quite wide. The water was about six feet deep. However there were countless fallen tree trunks blocking the river. A one-mile survey along the bank revealed more than 20 tree trunks presenting various degree of difficulty. That evening, the contractor informed us that there was another logging camp a few miles further down stream. I went down to Kemayan in the contractor's Land Rover and managed to hire a small station-wagon. This little vehicle somehow managed to carry the team and all the equipment over the 20 miles long bumpy cart-track to Kemayan Logging Co.

The officials of the Company were very generous and allowed us to spend the night in the Company's office. There was piped water, electric lights and even a coffee shop where we could purchase food and drinks. We spent a comfortable night.
The next morning we had a pleasant surprise. First of all, we discovered that the logging station was actually on S.Bera just beyond the confluence of Serting and Bera. Secondly, we were told that S.Bera was very much used by the aborigines from Tasek Bera. Furthermore, only a few months earlier, an armed Forces team had carried out a landing exercise and in the process had cleared most of the major obstacles on the river.

We got into S. Bera on the morning of the 8th day. The first few miles were difficult since the current was very swift and the underpowered motor made manoeuvring very difficult especially in avoiding boulders and sunken debris in the narrower parts of the river. After this progress was good. We were able to reach Kampong Bera on S. Pahang by evening. The sight of S. Pahang after travelling in small rivers was a little frightening. The river stretched almost half a mile from bank to bank. Half way across the river, the propeller struck sand. It was hard to believe that the river was so shallow. Although thirsting for a cup of tea, we were unable to reach the shops on the river bank. We spent quite some time in extricating ourselves from the sand-bank traps. Finally it dawned on us that the deeper section of the river would be where the current flowed. Using the current and the oars to measure the depth of the water, we zig-zagged our way to Chenor.

The Police officials at Chenor gave us a hearty welcome and gave us one of their barracks for the night. Our boat too was sheltered in the police-boat shed.

Since it appeared that we might have to do quite a lot of dragging on the S. Pahang we were anxious about crocodiles. A Policeman told us there were a great number of crocodiles on S. Pahang especially at the estuaries of the many tributaries. He stated that the king of crocodiles was about 30 feet long and lived near Lubok Puku. However he assured us that there was an understanding between the local bomor and the crocodiles. If a crocodile attacked a human, the bomor would cause the offender to come out of the river and die. So far, the crocodiles have kept to their part of the bargain.

Helped by a swift current we were making tremendous progress. The Honda was doing about 5 knots and we were on the river up to ten hours each day.
From Chenor we made our way to P. Pelok. This is a mile-long island in the Pahang river. The large sandy beach made an excellent camp-site. On the 10th day at about 4.00 p.m. we reached our destination - Pekan. Although we made excellent progress, it was not plain sailing. The river was full of sand-bars, some visible, others submerged. We hit the last sandbar only a few miles from the new bridge at Pekan. In this respect, the topo maps were practically useless since the sandbars had shifted their position drastically since they were last surveyed. The flow of the current was our guide. Sometimes we followed the wake of an occasional aborigine who sped along in boats fitted with powerful Johnsons. On many occasions local residents on the bank, helped us by shouting and waving their hands.

The final day was really trying. We encountered sand banks right to the end. Navigation was tricky since the river was very wide and contained many islands. Even with binoculars we occasionally landed up in a cul-de-sac. The sun was merciless and we were all sunburnt. Finally, the boat had to be continually bathed in cold water to keep the air pressure down. Reaching Pekan was truly a tremendous relief.

The expedition completed about three quarters of the Penarikan route. The team kept quite close to it wherever possible. We have surveyed the portage near Bahau and also know the condition of the river at Mahsan and Padang Gudang. The craft used by the team was probably one well adapted for river work.

What then are our views of the Penarikan route?

The evidence of the ancient maps is unmistakable. In addition, there is Bk. Penarik as well Pulau Penarik in Lower Muar which originally must have been a land mass enclosed in a river-loop which through constant dragging of boats across the narrow part must have now become an island.

The route no doubt is a difficult one, but manageable by small craft, especially since a number of the obstacles were the result of neglect and disuse. The shallows encountered convince us that the journey must have been made during the raining season since we are told that the water level in the Muar river rises from 4 feet to 7 feet at this time. In the Pahang the water level should rise considerably higher.

However, I am most satisfied that the attempt to retrace the Penarikan has brought much public attention to the historic route. The valuable experience gained by us has been passed on to other interested groups. A team from Terendak camp is planning to travel by canoes and are determined to succeed where we failed. Similarly, another group from Royal Military College is planning a similar expedition. Both these groups are privileged in that they possess resources beyond our reach. The reports of their attempts should be most fascinating.
H.R.H. Sultan Sulaiman Ibni Raja Musa. b. 1865, d. 1937.

Photo Arkib Negara.