



*View of the Singapore River with bumboats capturing the back of the Fullerton building, Cavenagh bridge and Anderson bridge  
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# A View from the Top: Williams-Hunt Aerial Photograph Collection



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## INTRODUCTION

The Williams-Hunt aerial photograph collection is a special historical collection of aerial photographs on Southeast Asia gathered by P. D. R. Williams-Hunt. Williams-Hunt worked as an aerial photograph interpreter for the Royal Air Force (RAF) during and after World War II. The photographs in the Collection were taken during the Royal Air Force's reconnaissance missions, mostly in the 1940s.

There are about 5,800 photographs in the Collection, out of which 240 photographs are on Singapore. The National Library of Singapore acquired copies of 174 of the Singapore images.

This article is a brief introduction to the aerial photographs that Williams-Hunt gathered, as well as a look at Williams-Hunt himself.

## BACKGROUND

Many of the photographs in the Williams-Hunt collection were taken by the Allied Photographic Interpretation Service (A.P.I.S.). (Lertlum

& Moore, [198-?], p. 3) It was a unit within the Royal Air Force that specialised in gathering photographic intelligence. A few of the photographs were taken by Williams-Hunt himself, who also had an avid interest in archaeology and anthropology.

Before his untimely death in 1953, Williams-Hunt had passed his aerial photographs collection to his colleague and friend, John Bradford in 1951. The collection was housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum. The Museum subsequently passed the collection over to the University of London, where the photographs were scanned to create negatives. Currently, these photographs are held at the University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). (Lertlum & Moore, [198-?], p. 1-2)

Dr Elizabeth Moore from SOAS found out about the collection when she was researching for her doctoral thesis on Northeast Thailand. Previously unorganised and without any explanatory data,



View of the Royal Air Force Sembawang Airfield  
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Dr Moore helped to organise the photographs by the various major locations in Southeast Asia and came up with a database to identify and inventorise the photographs. (Lertlum & Moore, [198-?], p. 1)

The Center for Southeast Asia Studies (CSEAS) at the University of Kyoto has digitised the whole collection, making it accessible via a digital archive. (Lertlum & Moore, [198-?], p. 3). The digital archive, known as the "Geo-spatial Digital Archive for the Southeast Asia" is a collaborative effort between CSEAS, SOAS, the Chulachomkiao Royal Military Academy (CRMA) and the Inter-University Network of Thailand (UniNet). Such efforts in inventorying and digitising have facilitated access to the rich trove of information available within these images.

### WILLIAMS-HUNT, 1919-1953

Williams-Hunt was born in Caversham, Berkshire on 2 July 1919 as Peter Darrell Williams-Hunt. He was interested in archaeology from a young age. While in his teens, he joined the Berkshire Archaeological Society and was actively involved in their fieldwork activities. By 1940, his name on the Society's membership list was indicated as "P.D. Rider Williams-Hunt, Royal Fusiliers, Hounslow". (Moore, 1984, p. 98-99). John Bradford notes that



P. D. R. Williams-Hunt  
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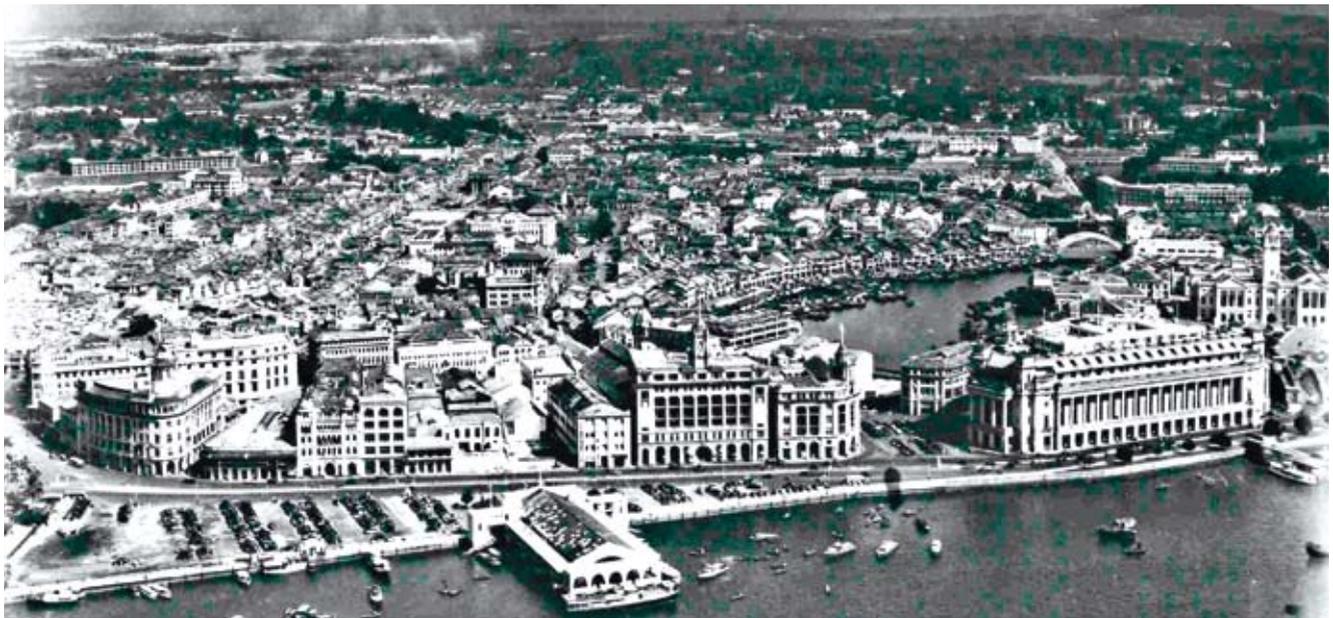
"Peter Williams-Hunt, F.S.A., F.R.A.I., A.M.A." was "self-trained in observation and recording" and his early experience with field archaeology in Berkshire proved useful when he was in Southeast Asia after the Second World War. (Bradford, 1953, p. 175). For his obituary, F. M. Underhill wrote that Williams-Hunt was admired for his "acute powers of observation as an archaeologist." (Underhill, 1953, p. 8)

During World War II, Williams-Hunt joined the Royal Air Force as an Intelligence and Paratroop officer and assisted in aerial photographic interpretation. At the end of the war, he was based at the Army Photo Interpretation Unit located at North Africa and Italy. To his initial regret, Williams-Hunt was posted to the Far East in June 1945. He became more involved in aerial photographic interpretation while based in Singapore, Bangkok and Saigon for the next two years. With his experience, keen ability and the extensive resources available, Williams-Hunt made several significant archaeological discoveries from the air. He was also put in-charge of a huge library of aerial photographs on Southeast Asia, and henceforth devoted himself to aerial photo interpretation and the "assembling of his photographic library". (Bradford, 1953, p. 175; Moore, 1984, p. 99)

In Southeast Asia, Williams-Hunt became increasingly interested in anthropology and ethnology, studying tribal settlements and land use from the air and highlighting key techniques in his article "*Anthropology from the air*". (Bradford, 1953, p. 175) He also came into contact with the aborigines in Malaya. Upon demobilization in 1946 and with the rank of Major, he stayed on in Malaya, devoting his time to researching the customs and beliefs of the aborigines. He took up residence with them, and in 1950, married Wa Draman, the



*View of the Causeway facing Johore Bahru from Woodlands*  
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*View of the waterfront buildings at the city centre which include Clifford Pier, Fullerton Building, Victoria Memorial Hall, Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Union Building and Ocean Building*  
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daughter of a Semai tribal chieftain. (Underhill, 1953, p. 8; Moore, 1984, p. 99)

The plight and suffering of the Malayan aborigines during the war went largely unnoticed. Their struggles were further aggravated by the Malayan Emergency. To help ameliorate their situation, Williams-Hunt recorded his observations of and interactions with the aborigines in his book *"Introduction to the Malayan Aborigines"*, published in Kuala Lumpur in 1952. It was an attempt to educate the Malayan government and the British security forces about the aborigines and their problems. Furthermore, he helped in the resettlement of the aborigines and "taught them improved farming methods and simple camp hygiene and showed the Army how to use

them intelligently as guides and porters". (The Times, June 15, 1953, p. 5; Fagg, 1953, p. 8; Moore, 1984, p. 98-99)

Williams-Hunt is often cited for his pioneering work in locating both archaeological and ethnological sites from the air in Malaysia, Thailand and Australia. Although he had written only nine articles from 1946 to 1952 and mostly brief ones, he was regarded as a pioneer of scientific air photography. (Fagg, 1953, p. 8; Moore, 1984, p. 99)

Williams-Hunt was appointed as the Adviser on Aborigines and later as acting Director of Museums for the Federation of Malaya. (Bradford, 1953, p. 175). Interestingly, he had helped the British Museum collect aboriginal material culture, and had sent rare orchids to the Singapore Botanical Gardens and zoological specimens to the

Raffles Museum. He had also assisted in the re-construction of the Kuala Lumpur National Museum that was demolished during the war. (Fagg, 1953, p. 8; Moore, 1984, p. 99 & 100; The Straits Times, June 13, 1953, p. 1)

On June 3, 1953, Williams-Hunt was in Tapah, Perak to attend the wedding of his wife's sister when he met with a fatal accident. He was crossing a wooden bridge when a rotten timber gave way and he fell. The bamboo pole supporting the bridge pierced him. Eight days after the accident, he passed away in Batu Gajah hospital, leaving behind a wife and three-week-old son named Anthony. (Moore, 1984, p. 100). The man who endeared himself to the aborigines and who was known affectionately among them as "Tuan Jangot" (Mr Beard) was buried in his wife's jungle village near Tapah, according to Semai rites. (The Straits Times, June 13, 1953, p. 1; The Straits Times, June 15, 1953, p. 1)

### DETAILS OF WILLIAMS-HUNT COLLECTION

The Williams-Hunt collection at SOAS comprises the aerial photographs of the RAF gathered by P.D.R. Williams-Hunt, including some of his documents as well as maps and flight plans.

The main Southeast Asian countries represented by the photographs are Singapore, Myanmar, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia. Majority of the photographs in the Collection are

**Table 1:** Geographical coverage and timelines

Location	Quantity	Major timeline of photographs
<b>Thailand</b>	<b>1,671</b>	<b>June 1944- May 1946</b>
North	187	
Northwest	602	
Central Bangkok	396 486	
<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>2,632</b>	<b>August 1947- August 1949</b>
Northwest (N)	901	
Northwest (S)	286	
Northeast	273	
Southwest	330	
Southeast General	826 16	
<b>Burma</b>	<b>821</b>	<b>October 1943- January 1944</b>
Upper Irrawady	73	
Shan Plateau	75	
Central: West	100	
Central: East	153	
Rangoon South Coast	282 138	
<b>Singapore</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>Various 1947-1948</b>
<b>Cambodia</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>January 1946- February 1946</b>
Angkor	128	
Phnom Penh Miscellaneous	11 12	
<b>French Indochina</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>December 1945</b>
Saigon	58	
Various	82	
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>October 1944</b>
Pacific various	65	
Nicobar Islands	84	
<b>Total in Collection</b>	<b>5,804</b>	

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vertical aerial images while "about 20 percent...[are]...lower-level oblique photographs (notably of Bangkok, Ayutthaya, Singapore and Saigon)." (McGregor, 1996, p. 208)

Table 1 highlights the geographical coverage and major timelines of the photographs in the Collection, based on the inventory and description done by Dr Elizabeth Moore.

The largest portion of the photographs is on Peninsular Malaysia, shot between 1947 and 1949. The earliest photographs will be those of Myanmar, shot between 1943 and 1944. Interestingly, almost "300 photographs exist of Japanese-occupied Rangoon."

Most of the aerial photographs of Malaysia were taken by the British during the Malayan Emergency in order to discover "possible activity of Communist insurgents." The aerial photographs are a "good record of land use, but are difficult to locate in the absence of flight plans and recognisable settlements or transport arteries." (McGregor, 1996, p. 208)

### DETAILS OF SINGAPORE PHOTOGRAPHS

The aerial photographs on Singapore were mainly taken between 1947 and 1948 and are "all obliques". (McGregor, 1996, p. 208) The Singapore images depict aerial views of various parts of the island, including coastlines, waterfront areas, ports, warehouses, airfields, rural and suburban areas, and government, commercial and residential buildings.

The inventory listing that accompanied the Singapore photographs is based on the list Dr Moore created to sort the photographs in the Collection. A sample is provided below to show how the photographs were organised within the list.

**Table 2:** Extract of inventory list of Singapore photographs

Box no.	Sortie	Serial	Location
81/30 Sing	81/30	0071	Singapore: Kallang: Airfield: Waterfront
81/30 Sing	81/30	0106	Singapore: Fishing trap: Waterfront
81/30 Sing	81/30	0131	Singapore: Causeway: Waterfront
VR-SCU Sin	VR-SCU	001	Singapore: Kallang: Flooded Residential Area
81/72 Sing	81/72	4108	Singapore: Warehouses: Waterfront: Boats

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The above list shows a broad organisation of the photographs by major locations in Singapore. Further investigation and research are required to identify the numerous details of Singapore landscapes evident in the images and to compare them with the current Singapore landscapes.

The National Archives of Singapore (NAS) holds a similar collection of Royal Air Force aerial photographs transferred to them by the Ministry of Defence, Singapore. These photographs span the period from 1946 to 1968. In their book, *Over Singapore 50 years Ago*, Brenda Yeoh and Theresa Wong researched on the aerial photographs taken between 1957 and 1958. They meticulously identified the places and buildings portrayed within these images, as they existed then in the 50s. The authors have also added a



View of the Kallang Airfield looking toward the city centre  
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View of the Royal Air Force Changi Airfield and the Selarang Barracks  
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current map of each of the areas studied, to better understand the changes that have occurred. (Yeoh & Wong, 2007, p. 7)

## CONCLUSION

The aerial photographs of Singapore offer unique insights into how the island looked in the 1940s and 50s, and a view of the buildings that are long gone. They serve as a testimony to how Singapore's landscape has changed over the years. Though originally taken for reconnaissance purposes, the aerial photographs provide an important visual study of the historical and socioeconomic development of Singapore.

On the whole, the Williams-Hunt collection of Southeast Asian aerial photographs has been useful in researching into land utilisation in Southeast Asia, especially with the use of GIS technology. It has also proved useful for archaeological, anthropological and

environmental studies. It is a unique and remarkable collection and "represents the oldest known freely available regional aerial photographic record of South-East Asia." (McGregor, 1996, p. 208)

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