



## Capitulation, occupation, incarceration, regeneration, education: How Singapore has rediscovered its World War 2 legacy

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Singapore experienced profound suffering in World War 2: bombing, invasion, occupation, interrogation, mass execution. After the war, accordingly, the public mood was not disposed towards overt reminders of those years. The concentration was on creating economic and social revival – war memorial sites had little part in that. Today, though, a mood of regeneration is apparent; sites of significance in that wartime experience have been refurbished, and are now advertised as places of significance to tourists interested in military history. In unison, they proclaim Santayana's assertion that 'those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it' (Santayana, 2018).

At each of those locations – four of which are examined for this journal – the trauma of conflict is readily apparent. Come February 1942, the Allied forces had endured 70 days of brutal conflict, right down the Malay peninsula and latterly in the bombardment of Singapore itself. Morale was briefly massaged by a lingering belief that Singapore was indeed – as had been bruited abroad – an impregnable fortress. It all came to abject surrender.

The Japanese had seized control of the water and oil supplies, and Lieutenant General Arthur Percival (General Officer commanding Malaya Command) was persuaded by his senior staff that surrender was inevitable. The act itself took place at the former Ford motor factory – seized and transformed for the moment into the Japanese HQ. On the evening of 15 February 1942 General Percival led the surrender cohort, with his interpreter, Major Cyril Wild, carrying the white flag. Wild quickly threw it down when he realised he was being filmed for the Japanese newsreels.

Indicative of the widespread post-war unwillingness to reflect or remember that humiliation was the decision in the 1960s to board up The Battlebox at Fort Canning, a steep hill rising above what is known as the colonial district. This bunker complex, where General Percival and his staff took the decision to surrender, had been abandoned and effectively buried. It would remain closed and unexplored for nearly 20 years. Then, in 1988, Romen Bose, a trainee journalist serving an internship at The Straits Times (Singapore's English-language morning newspaper), was

shown a letter that changed his life and that of the Battlebox. The letter, from a former president of the Singapore History Association, described the existence of the bunker. Bose and a photographer followed the letter's directions and noticed a door with a padlock, set into some earthworks (Bose, 2005, p. 28).

The padlock looked rather feeble, so they gave it shake and it fell apart. In they went, finding within the bunker complex an abandoned motor scooter, the skeleton of an unfortunate dog, a penknife, a spanner, a pair of pliers, and cork boards that had probably once displayed charts. This was where Percival had taken the momentous decision; this was where, in microcosm, Singapore had subsequently chosen to forget. Bose wrote his story, publishing it on July 26, 1988. The Singapore authorities recognised the tourism potential; come the 1990s, the place was cleaned up, tours were scheduled, and highly expensive animatronic figures were installed. They are clad in World War 2 uniforms, their facial characteristics modelled to match those of the senior officers who decided that surrender was unavoidable.



**Figure 1: Battlebox Exterior. The Battlebox at Fort Canning: sealed up for 20 years, now a major tourism location.**

General Percival and his staff had occupied 29 rooms, nine metres below the surface, without air-conditioning. The temperature therefore had to be fixed for tourists, along

with lighting and cleaning, construction of a newsreel booth, the models installed, and (inevitably) a souvenir shop. It reopened on 15 February 1997, exactly 55 years after the surrender. I paid my modest \$5 entry fee in April that same year.

The immediate experience back then, while most informative, had one major flaw. The animatronic figures' movements were accompanied by dialogue, with a script that could with reason be described as wooden and voiced by actors who would have failed auditions for Australia's Wagga Wagga amateur dramatic society. In particular, the characterisation of Major General Gordon Bennett, commander of the Australian 8th Division, was shamefully off-key. He was portrayed as a Crocodile Dundee sound-alike. Elsewhere in the complex, the souvenir shop of 1997 contained some violent anti-Japanese images – notably in the postcards on sale. They depicted the invader as a devil figure, much in the manner of WW1 posters that depicted the Hun as the violator of Belgium.



**Figure 2: Battlebox Surrender Decision (Percival). Inside the Battlebox bunker: lifesize models of General Percival (standing) and his staff.**

In more recent times, the Battlebox underwent a three-year hiatus for cosmetic and aesthetic alterations. The National Parks Board awarded a new tour management contract to a group calling itself Singapore History Consultants, which draws on the expertise of the history department at the National University of Singapore. These have been the shifts in emphasis:

- A much longer tour (by some 20 minutes so that it now lasts 80 minutes) – and, wisely, with those animatronic figures now rendered static and, blissfully (for sensitive Australian ears), mute.
- An extended screening of World War 2 newsreels.
- A more thorough, and in some ways more scholarly, assessment of factors that led to the surrender: the loss of water and fuel supplies to the Japanese; atrocities perpetrated on the civilian populace; hopelessly inadequate air power; and the pre-war notion that an attack down the Malay peninsula would be either impossible or easily repelled.

- A toning-down of memorabilia in the souvenir shop, with a greater emphasis on books by authors of repute.

Visitors are able to learn a great deal about the traumatic loss of the so-called impregnable fortress, through newsreel footage of the time and through the tour guide's detailed account. A popular urban myth is put to rest, too, in the literature available at The Battlebox (Bose, 2005, p. 62). It is often said that the gun emplacements protecting Singapore were rendered useless because they were facing south, out to sea, and could not be swivelled round. This is entirely untrue. The problem was in reality one of ordnance. They had been armed, for the most part, with armour-piercing shells rather than high-explosive shells. Consequently, they hit the ground with a mighty thud – but little effect. Rather than being easily repelled, therefore, the Japanese advanced remorselessly down the peninsula.

The invading force, though, did encounter some considerable resistance. This factor has inspired the creation of another tourism site, in this case on a hill overlooking Pasir Panjang on Singapore's southern coastline. 'C' Company of the 1st Battalion, the Malay Regiment, defended stoically and heroically – outnumbered and suffering heavy casualties, yet inflicting them too. Eventually it put up a last stand at a hill called Bukit Chandu (Malay for 'Opium Hill', named for the nearby opium factory). Today there is a permanent exhibition and memorial with daily tours at a restored colonial bungalow, operating under the title Reflections at Bukit Chandu. The final assault, visitors are told, led to desperate hand-to-hand fighting, with but a few survivors. In the Battle of Pasir Panjang Ridge, the Malay Regiment lost 159 men. The Japanese, infuriated by the events of Pasir Panjang, swept into the main military hospital, the Alexandra. On February 14, they bayoneted patients and staff, locked up others overnight, then paraded them outside and opened up the machine guns. Total fatalities, according to Singapore in World War II (National Heritage Board (2016: 19), were approximately 250.

That sort of treatment was directed at the local Malay and Chinese populace too. The accumulated effect of these atrocities, along with the loss of water and fuel supplies, was instrumental in Percival's acceptance that surrender was the only option. After that decision was taken at the Fort Canning Battlebox on the morning of the 15th, it was signed at the Ford motor factory, Bukit Timah – a location for yet another prominent feature in the regeneration of Singapore's wartime memories.

The Ford motor factory had opened in October 1941, only a few weeks before Japan's dramatic entry to the war; it was the first automotive assembly plant in south-east Asia. It would soon be making vehicles for the Japanese army, after briefly serving as headquarters for the invaders. After the war, it reverted to its old role until 1980, by which time Japanese motor manufacturing had achieved its own victory. Reopened as a museum in 2006, it has subsequently devoted its galleries to displaying what the years 1942 to 1945 meant for the civilian populace, under the permanent banner of Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and Its Legacies.

Those immediate legacies in 1942 included internment and obeisance; the museum displays images of civilians bowing to the occupying forces. There are images also of the inevitable slaughter and torture, by bayonets directed even at infants and by slivers of steel probed under fingernails during interrogation by the Kempeitai, the Japanese internal security agency.



**Figure 3: Ford Factory Surrender. February 15, 1942: General Percival (extreme right) arrives at the Japanese military headquarters, in the Ford motor factory, to sign the surrender. Major Cyril Wild (extreme left) carries a white flag.**

The major centre of incarceration for the Armed Forces taken prisoner was Changi. According to *The Changi Book*, published by the University of New South Wales Press in collaboration with the Australian War Memorial (Grant, 2015, p. 16), its various barracks and the gaol itself over the war years held an accumulated total of 87,000 Allied prisoners; 850 of them died there. They were hungry, they were bored, and they were frequently abused on work parties for the Japanese war effort. It has become the most popular site of all for contemporary reflection, as demonstrated by the hundreds of messages left on its notice board by visitors with POW connections.



**Figure 4: Chapel notes. The notice board at Changi chapel; visitors with a connection to former prisoners of war leave messages every day.**

Until recently, there have been five guided tours a day of the Changi museum and replica chapel. (The original chapel was brought to Australia after the war and re-erected at the Royal Military College, Duntroon.) For the present, though, access is severely limited, as the entire site is being given a make-over as part of Singapore's war-themed tourism regeneration; it will re-open in 2020.

When teaching in Singapore, on behalf of an Australian university, I have often directed my students to enrich their knowledge by inspecting all these locations. Their educational value is immense, for those studying history and politics and (especially of late) creative endeavour in tourism. This form of directed study has appreciable legitimacy when considered as experiential learning → and, in the instance of Singapore's initiatives, the combined force of such experiences is guaranteed to supply some enduring messages.

One such message is found – for the student, the tourist, and the reader of this journal → in a poignant story of personal pain and loss at Bukit Chandu. It emerges in the paintings of Chia Chew Soo, a Chinese boy aged just 10 at the time of the Pasir Panjang battle. He was seized by the Japanese, his parents were bayoneted, his father died, and his mother died two months later (after giving birth). Chew Soo himself was bayoneted, and he captured this chapter of horror in watercolour. His paintings record that day in February 1942 when his village became a place of reprisal and slaughter.



**Figure 5: Bukit Chandu Capture. Memories in watercolour: Chia Chew Soo's painting of what happened when his village was invaded in February 1942.**



**Figure 6: Civilian atrocities. A young artist's memory of civilian slayings, preserved in paint: acts such as these hastened the surrender.**

As a veteran researcher in this field of scholarship, I was immediately reminded of a visit I made some years earlier to Dachau concentration camp, just outside Munich. There, one encounters the paintings of an unknown inmate whose artwork merges seamlessly, but disturbingly, with the monstrosities painted by Chew Soo. One can take a hilltop walk at Bukit Chandu today, reflect on the turbulence and trauma of times past, and in so doing one is immediately aware – especially when the Dachau experience is added to the story of Pasir Panjang – that in war the capacity for acts of atrocity has no bounds.



**Figure 7: Dachau. Same war, same level of atrocity: Dachau concentration camp, outside Munich, mirrors what happened at Bukit Chandu.**

All photographs by the author

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