SINGAPORE AT WAR

For the first time, three of Romen Bose's groundbreaking works have been brought together in one volume, providing a panoramic account of Singapore's experience in World War II.

SECRETS OF THE BATTLEBOX Sealed off and forgotten until the late 1980s, the Battlebox beneath Fort Canning served as the British Command HQ in the last days before the fall. What actually happened in this underground nerve centre of the Malayan Campaign? Drawing on first-hand investigation, accounts of survivors, and top-secret documents, the author reveals the fascinating inner workings of the Battlebox.

THE END OF THE WAR Having lost their "Impregnable Fortress" of Singapore, the British were largely diverted to the European theatre of war. But what went on behind the scenes as they prepared to return to the region and, when the Japanese surrendered, to re-establish their authority? In unprecedented detail, this book captures the circumstances, events, and unforgettable cast of characters – from swaggering generals to clandestine resistance fighters – that attended the end of World War II.

KRANJI A picture of serenity today, the war cemetery at Kranji is the final resting place of those who fought and died in the war. But it has been no smooth journey getting here. How are the war dead remembered in post-war Singapore – these men and women who gave their lives, heroes heralded and unheralded, and, till this day amidst them, a traitor?

Romen Bose has written and researched extensively on World War II and the military history of Singapore and the region. His other books include *Fortress Singapore*, a guide to battlefields on the island, and *A Will For Freedom*, on the Indian independence movement. He broke the story of the Battlebox in 1988 while at *The Straits Times*, and has worked with the United Nations, Channel NewsAsia and international news agency AFP.

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Marshall Cavendish Editions

HISTORY
ISBN 978-981-4828-18-5
9 789814 828185

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First published in 2012

This edition published in 2018 by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International

Secrets of the Battlebox first published in 2005 by Marshall Cavendish Editions
The End of the War first published in 2005 by Marshall Cavendish Editions
Kranji first published in 2006 by Marshall Cavendish Editions

A member of the Times Publishing Group

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices
Marshall Cavendish Corporation. 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd. 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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National Library Board Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Bose, Romen.
Title: Singapore at war : secrets from the fall, liberation & aftermath of WWII / Romen Bose.
Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2018] | First published in 2012. | Secrets of the battlebox first published in 2005 by Marshall Cavendish Editions; The end of the war first published in 2005 by Marshall Cavendish Editions; Kranji first published in 2006 by Marshall Cavendish Editions. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifier(s): OCN 1030409604 | 978-981-4828-18-5 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: World War, 1939-1945--Singapore. | World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--Singapore. | Singapore--History--Japanese occupation, 1942-1945. | World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--Malaysia--Malaya. | Great Britain--Armed Forces--Singapore--History. | Cemeteries--Singapore. | World War, 1939-1945--Monuments--Singapore.
Classification: DDC 940.5425--dc23

Cover photograph: Imperial War Museum © IWM (HU 3378)
Cover design: Benson Tan

Printed in Singapore

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Foreword

When I first came to Singapore in 1993, one of the first books I read was a small guidebook I thought would help me start to get to know the Second World War battlefields I now had the chance to explore to my heart's content. The book was new then, and aimed expressly at the history tourist market. One of the authors of *Fortress Singapore: The Battlefield Guide* was a journalist named Romen Bose. By good fortune fate brought Romen and me together, first as friendly acquaintances, before too long as the very good friends we remain today. As I came to know Romen, and to follow his energetic production of thoughtful and discriminating historical studies of aspects of the Second World War in Malaya and Singapore – all while working at a full-time job and becoming a father – it did not surprise me in the least to see what topics he chose to pursue. Romen not only had a good journalist's eye for what parts of this very human story needed further attention, he also gave us all a good indication of his interests as far back as that first battlefield guide.

The three books collected here – *Secrets of the Battlebox*, *The End of the War*, and *Kranji* – all addressed events and questions that received the kind of attention in the old guidebook any reader would recognize: 'We really do need to take another look at this point…' Romen did so, to the benefit of anyone with any level of interest in the twists, turns, ups and downs of the Malaya/Singapore experience of global total war. I have considerable experience in enduring warnings that there is no point researching this topic or that question because after all 'they have been done to death,' especially when it comes to Southeast Asia and the Second World War. I rarely took heed; neither, fortunately, did Romen. This compilation now allows both the serious reader and those with more general interest to reflect, in one volume, on Romen's insightful, tightly focused and fresh analysis of three quite significant problems in our military history. The first is how a military headquarters tried to do three things at once, and just why it could not in the end manage any: coordinate and organize the defence of an entire region, run a network of fixed defences, and fight a campaign then a battle. The second is just how hostilities actually came to an end in our region, and specifically on our island, in a delicate situation – wherein the surrendering enemy remained for quite a while far stronger militarily, on the spot, than the incoming victors. And the third is how and why Kranji became the central site of Allied historical remembrance and commemoration for Singapore. For that topic, Romen really now has made sure it is 'done to death.' Romen does not fail in all three cases to explore

the crucial dimension: So what, and to what end for all concerned? That, indeed, is what makes this collection of what he once called 'bits and pieces' a work of wider importance. Drawn with discrimination and experience from extensive work in primary sources, this new omnibus from Romen Bose should find a place on the bookshelf of anyone with any reason to read about Singapore and the Second World War.

I conclude by making perhaps the strongest point I can make. I teach the military history of Singapore for a living, at the university level. Romen's books are always on my reading list, and when I take my students out into the field we take them with us.

Brian P. Farrell
Department of History
National University of Singapore

Preface

When war came to the shores of Malaya and Singapore in the early hours of 8 December 1941, little did anyone realise how ill-prepared the British and Commonwealth forces were for a fight, nor how quickly the Malayan Campaign would end, leading to a brutal occupation that would last the next three and a half years.

Nor did anyone imagine how suddenly the war would end in this part of the world, leaving a power vacuum that would be filled by nationalists, communists and even opportunists – who would eventually end up doing what the Japanese were unable to: drive out the colonial powers.

Much has been written about these aspects of war in Singapore and Malaya. Those works produced while the wounds of battle were still raw, though largely accurate, tended to bury any inconvenient truths in favour of a narrative of the victors, one that was acceptable to the returning colonial powers. In the subsequent years, attempts were made to revise and broaden these perspectives and to provide alternative histories. However, many of the secrets of the war – from catastrophic foul-ups to shining acts of heroism – remained highly classified, only timed for release long after the main actors would have taken their final curtain call.

This was the challenge I took up when I decided to write on crucial parts of the war in the region, to remove parts of the veil of secrecy on individuals, events and issues still sealed in the most secure of archives in the first decade of the new millennium. The result was three books: *Secrets of the Battlebox*, *The End of the War* and *Kranji*. All of them were aimed at helping a younger generation of researchers and readers better understand what transpired here at crucial periods during the Second World War and the implications for local populations in their ensuing bid for independence in the following years. What you hold in your hands is the result of several decades of research into archives and libraries in the UK and Asia, first-hand interviews with participants who have now mostly passed on, and unpublished manuscripts and letters, all of which reveal a wealth of little-known facts and facets of the war, and help clear up some of the mysteries that have long surrounded the fall and the eventual liberation of Singapore and Malaya.

I was very pleased when Melvin Neo at Marshall Cavendish approached me with the idea of this omnibus of sorts to mark the 70th anniversary of the fall of Singapore as it brings together for the first time three facets of the war in Singapore and Malaya which together provide a bigger picture of the monumental events that shaped these countries. The three books

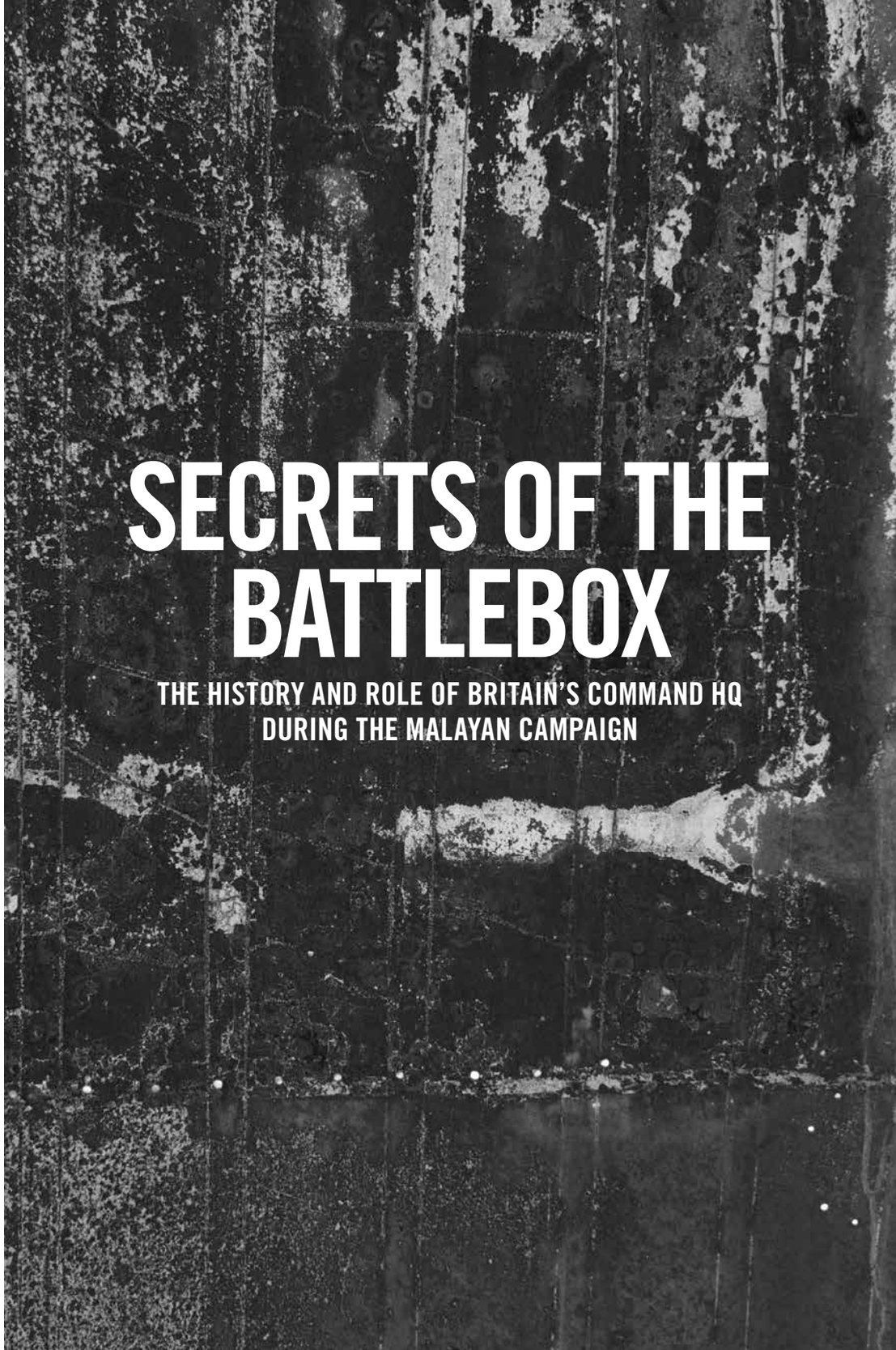
have also been updated throughout with additional details, latest research findings, and testimonies of several more key participants.

I have long felt that the understanding of history is formed on the basis of a disparate collection of facts and details, from differing viewpoints and periods, that when brought together help add to our jigsaw of the past. And so it is with the Second World War. The various aspects, angles, periods and people constitute pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of what happened. No book can really cover the war in totality, as the numerous perspectives thrown up would preclude the author from being able to come up with a necessarily coherent narrative, unless bits and pieces are left out, for others to comment or write on.

As such, this volume does not pretend to cover the entire war and its impact on the region; rather, it provides a better understanding into various key aspects of the Second World War whose impact are still felt today, more than seven decades after the outbreak of this global conflict.

I would like to dedicate this compilation to the memory of my father Tapas Kumar Bose, who in his own way helped shape me as an individual and as a searcher of the truth, and whose expectations I hope I met in his living years. I also dedicate this tome to the latest addition to the Bose family, Cilla Ruma Bose, and I hope that she will read this book one day, and find in it the excitement, wonder and satisfaction with which it was written. I must also thank my mother Anupama Bose, for her continual support, my brother Ajoy, sister Anita and their families. More importantly, I owe it all to my very patient and understanding wife Brigid for all that she puts up with daily, and to Lara and Olive, who are now viewing with interest what their father writes.

Romen Bose
Kuala Lumpur
21 January 2012



Chapter 1

Introduction

Sunday, 15 February 1942.

The skies over the island of Singapore were overcast, filled with black smoke and fires, smoldering throughout the island. The constant sounds of explosions and air raid sirens filled the air.

The sun could not be seen for the large plumes of smoke from burning oil tanks, destroyed by the retreating military, obscuring most of the island's skyline.

On the streets, large numbers of exhausted and battle-weary troops filled the city, their faces covered in mud, soot and grime, their bodies unwashed for weeks, their will to fight completely destroyed. Many of their comrades had been killed in the preceding 70 days with even more captured as prisoners of the Imperial Japanese Army.

These men, who were resigned to the fate that awaited them, roamed the bombed-out streets that had already become the graveyard of numerous luxury cars and sedans, abandoned in the middle of roads and in alleyways by their fleeing European owners, many with keys still in their ignition. The cars and men were the only occupants of the streets as shops and offices were boarded up and shut without any sign of the local populace about. Everyone was in hiding as if in preparation for an impending storm or typhoon.

No one believed it would come to this. The proud subjects of a mighty British colony now hiding in terror as wave after wave of bombings scarred the city and where the smoke-laden air became too heavy even to breathe.

Singapore island had been shelled for the better part of a week with

constant air raids over the city, decimating what remained of the civil services, with thousands of refugees fleeing from upcountry, filling burnt-out buildings and huddled in slums throughout the city.

As the dull rays of the sun began to light the dawn, a tall, lanky figure in a sweat-drenched senior commander's khaki uniform stood on the balcony of his office on Fort Canning Hill, overlooking the burnt-out city and the chaos below.

There had been no sleep for a long, long time and there was to be no rest. He was tired, oh so very tired. All he wanted was sleep, but sleep would not come. As his blood-shot eyes roamed the city, he took a slow drag from his umpteenth cigarette this hour, his thoughts wandering to England where his daughter, Dorinda, would be getting up in a few hours, celebrating her twelfth birthday with presents and cakes and parties.

There would be no presents and cakes and parties for him. He would not be there to share her joy or to help cut the cake, to lead the festivities. He knew now he might never ever see her again, as he and more than 100,000 men stood on the verge of destruction by a superior enemy.

"How had it all ended like this?" he wondered yet again as he walked into his office filled with the stale smell of too many cigarettes and sweat from too many huddled meetings.

It was barely six in the morning when he called his assistant from the outside office, telling him to arrange for a final meeting with everyone by nine in the morning. A decision would have to be made.

He washed his grimy and stubble-filled face in the bowl of brackish water, his only concession to his appearance. The taps had long since stopped working and all that was left was the water he had washed up in for the last four days. It didn't matter. None of this mattered any more. The battles had been lost one after the other and so many, many men had given their lives.

All that he had left now was his faith. But would that save him and his men? As he knelt down at the early morning communion service, Lieutenant General Arthur Ernest Percival, General Officer Commanding, Headquarters Malaya Command, prayed that his men and the civilians caught in this bloody nightmare would survive the final onslaught of the Japanese Army that was sure to come in the next day or so.

The man who finally remained in charge of this shell-shocked and pockmarked island, Percival had withstood all that had been hurled at him and persevered, despite the massive blunders by senior and junior commanders and the lack of permission to carry out a real defence of the Malayan peninsula.

Here amidst the green and lush vegetation, which had been ripped up by heavy bombs and shelled with mortars, men from the headquarters,

part of the remnants of the 100,000 strong British and Commonwealth military forces who had fought on the peninsula and had now retreated onto the island, gathered for prayers to sustain themselves for another day against an enemy that was about to overrun them.

Thanking Padre Hughes for the service held in Percival's own office, a colonial-styled building sitting on Fort Canning Hill, he was barely aware of his surroundings. Located on Dobbie Rise, it was the nerve centre of Headquarters Malaya Command, where the military defence for Malaya and Singapore had been planned, executed and ultimately lost. Built in 1926, when British supremacy in the Far East was assured, the building had become, just like these final defenders of Singapore, an anachronism in the face of the new Japanese order in Malaya.

As Percival looked out across the balcony again, Ivan Simson, Chief Engineer and the Director General of Civil Defence walked in. The news overnight had been terrible. The water supply, Simson said, would not last another 24 hours. The food supplies, he was told, were expected to last another few days while ammunition was running very low and the only petrol left was that in the fuel tanks of vehicles. All this Percival noted studiously in his Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank bill folder; the final reports of a dead city. This bill folder would last the war and Percival's captivity, finally ending up in a box of personal papers at the Imperial War Museum in London, a long-forgotten testament to one of the lowest points in British military history.

Percival knew the time had come. The decision had to be made and made quickly. He picked up the telephone and waited to be connected. The military telephone exchange finally managed to get through on an external line. Most of the extensive telephone networks throughout Singapore and Malaya had been destroyed by the enemy. What remained barely worked. It was strange, Percival thought, that in order to make such a momentous decision, he would have to use a public telephone line to get hold of the one man who had the political power to make that decision.

That man was the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Shenton Whitlegge Thomas. Thomas was responsible for Singapore and the Federated Malay States but it was the immense bureaucracy and red tape of the civil administration

Lieutenant General A.E. Percival, General Officer Commanding, Headquarters Malaya Command

and their lack of willingness to prepare fully for war that led to the huge suffering of the local population and the total unpreparedness for the Japanese bombings and attacks.

Days before, the Governor had abandoned his residence at Government House and was squatting at the Singapore Club in the burnt-out city. He had refused to make the decision when Percival and his senior Generals approached him in his new abode. He refused to meet with the Japanese nor would he respect their rule. He was the Governor, not a stooge of the Japanese. No, he would not surrender and he would not meet with them until they came and dragged him away.

On that fateful Sunday morning, the final logs from the switchboard at Fort Canning recorded that they were unable to raise the Governor. So it was that soon after the morning services and a short briefing by his chief engineer, Percival headed for a conference of his commanders, deep under the offices of Fort Canning, for another assessment of the situation.

Leaving his office, Percival made his way to the back of the command building. Under heavy camouflage lay a small flight of stairs leading further up Fort Canning Hill. Percival, who was accompanied by Simson and his Administrative Adjutant Brigadier Lucas, walked up the short flight of stairs that led to an opening on the side of the hill.

Flanked by two huge metal doors and with a resonance of a deep rumbling coming from inside, Percival and his two senior officers walked in slowly. Where only days ago Sikh and Gurkha guards manned the entrance to this Top Secret inner sanctum of Malaya Command, with passwords and Secret clearances demanded of all who sought entrance, the doorway now lay empty with flickering lightbulbs illuminating the path into the warren of tunnels and rooms underneath.

The lack of guards showed the desperate plight of these last defenders of Singapore. All available troops had been drafted in the last line of defence against the enemy, a line that crumbled even before it was engaged by the enemy. Now there were no guards left to man the posts and it did not matter who sought entry. All was lost.

This was the fate of the Battlebox, Headquarters Malaya Command's state-of-the-art Underground Communications Centre. Based on British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's own Cabinet War Rooms, from where the Battle of Britain and the battles of World War II were planned and fought, the Battlebox was supposed to provide British and Allied forces in Malaya and Singapore a unified command centre from which to defend and strike against the invading Japanese army. Instead, it would now mark the end of British dominance in Southeast Asia.

Percival entered a blistering inferno of heat, as the ventilation system had broken down with the cut in power supply. The back-up generators were insufficient to the task and so the entrances to the bunkers were left open at all times and could not be closed even during bombing raids as the air would then be unbreathable.

With more than 500 officers and men working feverishly in the 30-room Battlebox, the rooms were filled with the all-too-familiar sour smell of sweat and stale cigarette smoke. A constant stench also permeated the rooms as the latrines had broken down from being overloaded and there were no troops around who could fix them.

Percival walked by the chaos in the Gun Operations Room. Sector after sector had been conceded to the enemy even as late as 14 February, with most remaining battalions in tatters and communications cut off to most major units on the island. The faces of exhausted and demoralised staff officers greeted Percival as he looked at the plotting table.

As he looked over the final dispositions of troops, Percival received an urgent communiqué from the Signals Control Room. The highly secret teletyped sheet was final permission from General Sir Archibald Wavell, Supreme Commander of the American, British, Dutch and Australian Command to capitulate the Allied forces in the worst case.

The Most Secret message read:

> So long as you are in a position to inflict losses and damage to the enemy and your troops are physically able to do so you must fight on. Time gained and damage to enemy are of vital importance at this crisis. When you are fully satisfied that this is no longer possible I give you discretion to cease resistance. Before doing so all arms, equipment and transport of value to enemy must of course be rendered useless. Also just before final cessation of fighting opportunities should be given to any determined bodies of men or individuals to try and effect escape by any means possible. They must be armed. Inform me of intentions. Whatever happens I thank you and all troops for your gallant efforts of last few days.[1]

He read it carefully, then folded the sheet and put it in his pocket. He would now have to make the decision. He was finally given the permission to surrender all British and Allied forces as well as the civilian government.

If only they had given him and earlier General Officers Commanding in Malaya similar permission years before, to fight the enemy with the various services and the civilian government under his authority, things might have been very different. At the start of the War, he only had control over the army, while the air force and navy were instructed by their own

service chiefs. He had no control over the bureaucratic red tape in the civil administration or even, at times, what the Australian and Indian troops were doing under their various commanders.

By 9:30am, most of the senior commanders had gathered in the room of the Commander, Anti-Aircraft Defences, Brigadier A.W.G. Wildey. Wildey had been made responsible for up-to-the-minute movements of the Japanese forces, which were being plotted out of the Gun Operations Room next door.

It was a very small and stuffy room, filled with pipes from the emergency generators set up once the power supply to the Battlebox had been cut. The atmosphere in the room was tense and the smell of defeat permeated the air as further reports of casualties and retreats trickled in.

Percival walked in with Simson and Wildey, who took their seats next to him. Seated already were Lieutenant General Sir Lewis Heath, General Officer Commanding the III Indian Corps, Major-General Gordon Bennett, Commander of the 8th Australian Division, Brigadier T.K. Newbigging, Brigadier K.S. Torrance and several other senior officers.

The only junior officer present was Major C.H.D. Wild, a staff officer from the III Indian Corps and one of the few officers remaining who was fluent in Japanese.

Major Wild, who came to play a key role in prosecuting the Japanese for war crimes after the war, described what happened in that small, stiflingly hot room.

> … Between 0900 and 0930hrs on 15 Feb '42 I accompanied the Corps Commander in my capacity as his GSO2(O) to the final conference in the underground "Battlebox" at Fort Canning. Lt.Gen. A.E. Percival invited a review of the situation from the senior officers present. I recall in particular that the C.E. (Chief Engineer) Brigadier Simson said that no more water would be available in Singapore from some time during the next day (16 Feb): also that the C.R.A. (Chief of Royal Artillery, Brigadier E.W. Goodman, 9th Indian Division) said that Bofors ammunition would be exhausted by that afternoon (15 Feb), and that another class of ammunition, either 18pdr or 25pdr, was likewise practically exhausted. The decision to ask for terms was taken without a dissentient voice. Some minutes later, when details of the surrender were being discussed, Major General Gordon Bennett, GOC 8th Aust Div, remarked "How about a combined counter-attack to recapture Bukit Timah?" This remark came so late, as was by then so irrelevant, that I formed the impression at the time that it was made not as a serious contribution to the discussion but as something to quote afterwards. It was received in silence and the discussion proceeded.[2]

It is interesting that in the official minutes of this meeting, written in captivity and which survived the war, it was noted that Percival asked about a combined counter-attack. There was no mention of Bennett's comment. It was clear that the various commanders were all in favour of surrender but that it was Percival who would have to make the final decision.

When he asked General Heath for his opinion on the best course to adopt, the commander of the III Indian Corps, was acerbic. "In my opinion there is only one possible course to adopt and that is to do what you ought to have done two days ago, namely to surrender immediately"[3]

In the final stage of the meeting, there could have been no doubt as to what the decision would be.

Based on the water shortage, the demoralised troops, his commanders' unanimous decision to surrender and with the final permission from Wavell in his pocket, Percival could now capitulate without the loss of more troops and the death of huge numbers of civilians should the Japanese attack Singapore town. For being forced to make the decision to surrender, the blame of the fall of Singapore would forever more fall upon his shoulders, whether it was deserved or not.

The official minutes recorded dryly,

> The G.O.C., in view of the critical water situation and the unsatisfactory administrative situation generally, thereupon reluctantly decided to accept the advice of the senior officers present and to capitulate.[4]

Hostilities would cease at 1630hrs GMT with a deputation sent to meet the Japanese as outlined in flyers dropped by the Japanese air force all over Singapore days before.

Once the conference terminated at 11:15am, Percival headed to the Signals Control Room, where he drafted his last message to Wavell:

> Owing to losses from enemy action water petrol food and ammunition practically finished. Unable therefore continue the fight any longer. All ranks have done their best and grateful for your help.[5]

Throughout the rest of the day, Percival was listless. Once the decision had been made, orders had been given to destroy everything. With the last message sent to Wavell, instructions were given to destroy all the cipher and code books. Brigadier Lucas also ordered all signal equipment to be smashed up.

As this began, calls continued to come in from units all over the island for instructions. The officers at the Battlebox had none. In the afternoon and evening, there were bonfires outside the Battlebox as secret documents

and files were burnt in order to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. However, much of the equipment and infrastructure in the Battlebox was left intact.

What transpired later that afternoon is well documented in history books as Percival signed the surrender document handing over the British and Commonwealth forces under his command to Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita, Commander of the Japanese 25th Army, ending 70 days of fighting down the Malayan peninsula, leading to the inglorious surrender at the Ford Motor Factory in Bukit Timah.

Much has been written on the fall of Singapore and the last hours and days of the British command as they agonised over the final surrender to the Japanese but very little has been recorded of what went on within the walls of the Battlebox and Percival's war rooms as well as the conditions that the officers and men of the Battlebox worked under. Many of these officers and men are now long gone, more than 60 years after the end of the Second World War.

What remains, however, are the rooms where these most difficult of decisions were made.

The history of the Battlebox and its surroundings as well as of the combined headquarters of the British and Commonwealth forces during the War in Malaya still remains shrouded in mystery. They were kept very secret to prevent the enemy from destroying these complex nerve centres of military operations. Even before surrender, many of the records detailing the goings-on in the Battlebox were destroyed with no traces left.

Many who died in Japanese prisoner of war camps took the remaining secrets of these facilities with them to the grave, and those who survived have passed on in recent years, making it difficult to piece together the full use and historical events that these bunkers saw. Thus, some of the events above and in this book have been extrapolated and re-created through extensive research and analysis, in order to link the various pieces of the secret puzzle and form part of the real story of what took place at the Battlebox.

In the chapters ahead, from recently declassified documents, numerous interviews, secret sources and over 17 years of in-depth investigations, you will read about the building of this long-forgotten underground communications centre, its nooks and crannies, how it was utilised in the Malayan campaign and its role in the final days of the battle for Singapore.

For the first time ever, the secrets of the Battlebox will be revealed, like the location of the Allied combined headquarters of the army and air force in Sime Road and the post-war history of these complexes that remain a historical legacy of the last world war.

Secrets of the Battlebox will shed much more light on what happened in the Malayan Campaign and in the deep dark rooms under Fort Canning Hill, rooms in which the future of Singapore and Malaysia were decided – rooms that, even today, have an uncomfortable resonance of a not-too-distant past.

Endnotes

1 Churchill, W.S. *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, USA, 1950. p. 104.

2 Wild, C.H.D. *Note on the Capitulation of Singapore.* Unpublished typescript. New Delhi, India, 30 November 1945. p. 2.

3 *Proceedings of the Conference held at Headquarters Malaya Command (Fort Canning) at 0930Hrs. Sun. 15 February 1942, Papers of A.E. Percival, P16-27.* The Imperial War Museum, London, p. 2.

4 Ibid, p. 3.

5 Churchill, W.S. *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, USA, 1950. p. 105.

Chapter 2

The Discovery

It was the middle of July 1988 when I walked into the newsroom at *The Straits Times*, Singapore's oldest daily, then located at Kim Seng Road.

Two weeks into a summer internship working on the General Desk at the renowned newspaper, I was relishing the fact that although only eighteen and in university, I was able to rub shoulders with some of the best veteran journalists in the trade.

So a few weeks into my internship, when I was approached by Faridah, assistant to then General Desk Editor Felix Soh, I thought I was going to get a big break.

To my disappointment, she presented me with a Forum page letter printed in the newspaper days earlier and told me that Felix wanted me to follow it up.

The letter, by Doraisingam Samuel, a former president of the Singapore History Association, claimed the existence of an underground bunker complex under Fort Canning Park in downtown Singapore. The bunker, he said, had been used by the British in 1942 during the Second World War and Samuel wanted the Parks and Recreation Department to open it and turn it into a museum.

"Oh boy," I thought to myself. Just another weak lead to follow up on, one which would most probably not pan out as there was obviously no such thing as a bunker under Fort Canning. If there was, surely we would all have known about it by now.

Yet another historical mystery that would never be solved just like the rumours of "hidden Japanese gold" claimed to have been secretly buried by Japanese soldiers in the Philippines and Thailand at the end of the War.

I made the requisite calls to get hold of Mr. Samuel but was unable to reach him. I went down to the newspaper library and searched through all the files we had on the Malayan Campaign and Fort Canning but there was no mention of any bunker or underground complex.

It seemed a hopeless task to be able to dig any deeper and even my letter to the British High Commission's Defence Advisor turned up nothing. I was later to learn that even the High Commission had no clue as to the existence of the Battlebox.

Just when I was about to give up on it all, Felix called me over to his desk.

A veteran newspaperman, Felix had worked with many newspapers in his career before joining *The Straits Times* as the very dynamic editor of the General Desk. His inspiration and energy carried most of us on, even when we didn't want to go on. He did not suffer fools gladly and many were the days when I would get an earful for submitting substandard copy or committing some grammatical or stylistic faux pas. The other interns and I were terrified of him and with good reason.

On that day, Felix was in his element. There had been several major scoops the day before and many compliments on how well the General Desk was performing. When I gave him my report, he looked thoughtful and then gave me the lead that would break open the story.

It was a picture of the outside of the alleged "tunnel complex" at Fort Canning that was opened by Civil Defence officers just months before, in February 1988, and was only briefly examined before being sealed up by the Parks and Recreation Department.

The picture had been published in the Chinese-language papers and promptly forgotten. No mention of it had been made in *The Straits Times* or anywhere else.

I was intrigued. So was there really an underground bunker like the one Churchill used, a cabinet war rooms of sorts in Singapore? I had to find out more and I called up Mr. Kwa Chong Guan, then director of the Singapore Oral History Department, who was named in the photo caption as one of the key persons involved in the February opening.

A distinguished scholar, who had researched Singapore's early history and that of Fort Canning, Kwa would later head the National Museum. He and his team were in the midst of trying to discover the secret history of this underground complex which I had yet to see for myself. Kwa along with John Miksic, an archeologist and lecturer at the National University of Singapore, had instigated the February opening of the bunker.

Kwa and Miksic said at that point only a handful of people had made it briefly into the complex and a full investigation had yet to take place.

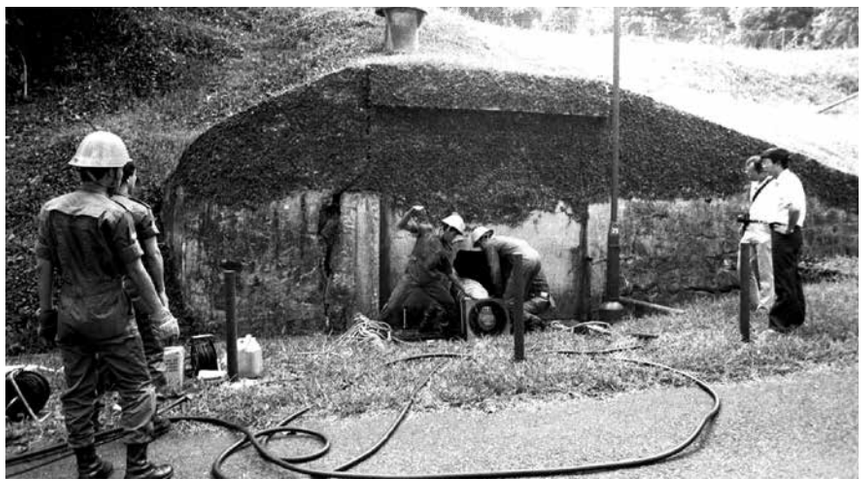
But it was clear from Kwa's initial research that this was where General

Percival held his last meeting with senior commanders before surrendering Singapore and 100,000 British and Commonwealth troops to the Japanese.

My first question to Kwa was who was this Percival? And what was so significant about this underground tunnel?

Up until the early 1990s, secondary school students in Singapore who did not take history up to Secondary Four level were only exposed to two years of history lessons, which covered ancient history in the near and far east but nothing about the 20th century in Southeast Asia. I had known from elderly relatives that Singapore had suffered during the War but not much more. Kwa and his senior researcher G. Uma Devi gave me a quick history lesson on the Second World War in Singapore.

At the end of it, Kwa said it was unclear when exactly the bunkers were built but confirmed that there definitely were bunkers, a huge complex of rooms that were sealed up since the late 1960s.



The initial opening of the bunker on 22 February 1988, with Kwa Chong Guan and John Miksic standing to the extreme right of the picture. Singapore Civil Defence officers can be seen ventilating the complex. The bunker was only cursorily examined before being "sealed up" again.

Although information on the Battlebox was scarce, Kwa was able to locate a blueprint of the bunker complex in the Land Office at Singapore's Law Ministry. He had made enquiries in London and at the National Archives in Singapore but to no avail. It was the Law Ministry that finally located a copy of the blueprint, which was handed over to the Oral History Department.

In addition, he showed me numerous maps of Fort Canning from the turn of the century when an actual fort was located on the hill, with gun redoubts and a moat!

From the minutes of meetings among papers donated by Percival to the Imperial War Museum in London and documents from the historian Louis Allen, a rough picture began to emerge of the use of the Battlebox and the last days of Headquarters Malaya Command.

Kwa and his team had done an enormous amount of research in the hopes that the information would convince the authorities to preserve the Battlebox for future generations.

Could it be that such an interesting campaign and the building of such a highly sensitive structure occurred in this country less than 50 years ago? That night I got hold of a copy of Noel Barber's classic work on the fall of Singapore, *Sinister Twilight*, and began boning up on the Malayan Campaign.

The next day, I told Felix that we were on to one of the most exciting historical sites in the history of the Malayan Campaign. I was thrilled to finally sink my teeth into what was becoming a very exciting story indeed.

"This is the kind of excitement I like to see in a journalist", he said grinning. "But, you must make sure that you have the full story, from all angles. I want quotes from the authorities and the historians and an explanation of what actually happened 46 years ago. And I want it quick before anyone else gets this story."

I was impressed that Felix let me run with the story instead of putting a seasoned journalist on it. He knew it was my scoop and made sure I would break it when the time came.

But what I needed to do next was to see the bunkers for myself. That would be the most exciting part of this assignment.

From a copy of the blueprint that Kwa lent me, it was obvious that the bunker was large and that without actually walking through the complex, it would be impossible to write about it.

So I called up the National Parks Department, which was in charge of the Fort Canning Park and the bunkers within it, to get permission to go into the Battlebox. But the officials there refused to let me view the complex as it was "dirty and hot and was not safe for entry. Moreover, the entrance had been sealed!"

I was thoroughly disappointed. For days, I tried to get permission to go in and for days the department had been indecisive on what to do and had referred my request to higher authorities.

Finally, in frustration, I decided to take things into my own hands and go down to Fort Canning to see what was actually there.

I needed a photographer and as luck would have it, the Photo Desk was keen to send out a rookie photographer who had joined the paper after serving in the military. The photographer, whom I shall call Al, to protect his identity, was young, idealistic and very, very gung-ho.

I decided that if the entrance had been sealed and we couldn't get in through the doors, what about trying to sneak in through vents on the blueprint that appeared to lead directly into the complex? This would mean I would get an exclusive scoop on the bunker which was now being talked about in historical circles around town.

Al was quick to agree when he heard my plans as it clearly sounded like the beginnings of an exciting adventure.

So the next day, we took a quick cab ride from Times House to Fort Canning and stood at the foot of the bunker on Cox Terrace as a thick canopy of trees covered the entire area in a surreal greenish light, with the chirping of cicadas our only company in the jungle-like surroundings.

We looked all round for the vents on the side of the hill where the bunker was supposed to be located but all we could find was a disused children's playground on the top of the hill and these odd-looking mushroom shaped concrete structures. I then realised that the mushroom structures were the roofs of the vents which had been sealed on all sides to prevent nosy people like me from gaining access.

I sat next to the playground located directly above the bunker and was pondering how to proceed with my story without having any chance to see the inside.

Al then called me over to the other side of the bunker on the Dobbie Rise side of the hill. He pointed out a door in a wall that jutted out slightly and looked like a storage shed from the outside. Al asked whether this might be the entrance but I told him that the Parks Department said the entrance had been sealed so the door most probably led to a storage shed.

From his experience in the military, Al did not look convinced. "It's a strange looking storage shed which has a ventilation shaft right on top of it," he said. How could it be that a storage room would have a ventilation shaft right on top unless it led to something? But the Parks and Recreation Department said they had sealed the entrance so how come there was a door here? Could they have overlooked this door? It had been padlocked but the lock used was very flimsy.

As Al and I were tugging to see whether the lock would budge, it suddenly broke. I was now in a quandary. Should I open the door and go in and find out what was in the room? If my hunch was right, it would lead to the huge bunker complex which would earn me my first-ever scoop. Should I stay outside and not enter a place that was clearly sealed off and not meant for trespass? Going in could also mean that we would get lost or even prosecuted for entering a restricted facility!

It was a very long 10 seconds as my journalistic instincts got into gear and I dived in with Al in tow into a musty-smelling chamber. On entering, the darkness enveloped me and the musty air made me cough. We walked

The only identifiable signs of the Battlebox from the top of Fort Canning Hill, the concrete mushroom-like structures formed the top of the ventilation systems operating in the complex below. The mushrooms still remain in the park, in addition to a new structure above the emergency rooftop exit. In the background is the former barracks on Cox Terrace. It has now been converted into an arts centre and a culinary institute.

The locked door on the Dobbie Rise side of the bunker, before the lock accidentally fell apart. It could easily be mistaken for a storage shed. Note how close it is to the main road on Dobbie Rise and the drainage ditch dug in front of the doorway.

in further and a short staircase led up and down again until we were in a long corridor which was only brightened by the flashlights we had brought along.

I recorded the adventure in a notebook I had brought along.

Inside it was extremely humid and very hot even though the complex was located so deep under the hill.

The bunker was totally dilapidated with wires hanging from the walls and the rooms were flooded with two to three inches of water.

Just below the entrance, we spotted a wrecked scooter. Discoloured and rusty, it was a relic from the 40s or 50s. Ironically, wordings were penned on the bike which said, "Do Not Remove", and there it remained, for the last thirty to forty years, lying in situ until we happened upon it. I wonder whatever happened to that relic of the bunker?

Further down the passage, we spotted a doorway labeled, "Air Filtration Plant". Inside, what remained was just a shell of the machine, with its ducts all rusty and stained.

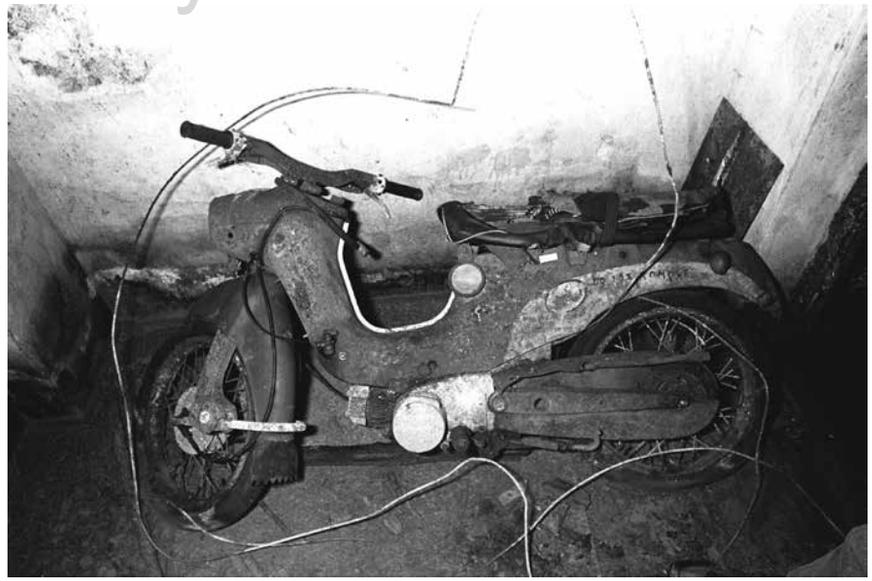
The metal doors throughout the complex were all rusted and several were falling off their hinges. Surprisingly, we found ceramic washbasins with taps intact inside some of the rooms. Most of the metal pieces and wiring had been stripped clean by looters, including light switches and furniture. All the rooms were completely stripped of any moveable objects.

In the "G" Clerks room, we found an empty stretcher that had been abandoned on the floor and decomposing in the heat and humidity of the place. It looked bloodstained but it was hard to tell 40 years on. It was eerie to see a stretcher lying in the middle of a dark empty room and I felt a cold chill run down the back of my neck. We decided not to tarry any longer and quickened our pace.

There were also toilets in the bunker. The urinals were yellowed with age and we found a light bulb at the bottom of one. The toilet bowls were no better for we found a door stuck into one and the toilet seats and walls filled with fungus growth.

Power and light sockets were also stripped and rotten planks were strewn all over the place. The clay floor tiles had begun to dissolve in the various flooded rooms, which appeared to have been waterlogged for decades. This meant that we ended up getting stuck in the wet muck every time we took a step forward. It was hard moving and we realised that it would be easier to walk on any dry spots where the tiles had not dissolved. We found lots of tiles stacked in corners and when I lifted one, it crumbled in my hands.

We also found the remains of a dog, most probably lost in the maze of rooms in the bunker. It had died of starvation or sickness, its bones a reminder not to stray too far away from the entrance.



The rusted motorcycle in the bunker. Just above the rear tyre, the words "Do Not Remove" were scribbled on. No one had moved it for more than 20 years by the time we found it in 1988.

One of the few items left intact in the Battlebox, this washbasin was located in the Fortress Plotting Room.

The toilet bowl seats showed signs of decay with fungus growth; the bowls were badly discoloured.

The room labeled "Fortress Plotting Room" had large parts of its floor dug out and a huge pile of dirt lay exposed on the side. The walls were covered with cork boards, obviously used for hanging maps and charts on the walls.

We also found several artifacts including a penknife, a spanner and a pair of pliers in the bunker and in the process, located another two sealed entrances into the bunker (Cox Terrace side and roof entrance).

There was also a metal plank standing vertically, with what seemed like red stains on it, and the walls which were covered with dangling wires were also dirtied, stained and marked with unidentifiable graffiti.

That was enough adventure and mustiness for one day as Al shot at least ten rolls of film in the bunker complex itself.

We were hot, sticky and our shoes filled with soft muddy clay from the terracotta tiles that lined the floors in the bunker. The water was believed to have been rain which came in from the vents and rooftop entrances in the decade that it was abandoned before the complex was finally sealed off.

Weary after our afternoon's adventure, I was now terrified. How was I going to explain to Felix what I had done in order to get the pictures for the story and to view the complex for myself?

It took a lot of nerve to walk up to him that afternoon and tell him what I had just done.

Felix hit the roof!

After an hour of being bawled out for such unprofessional behaviour and for jeopardising our lives, he calmed down. On the inside, he was thrilled that we had the pictures and the potential for a big scoop. On the outside, he had to set rules for these journalists who had flouted the law.

I was slightly ashamed but knew that we had a good story. However, as a result of the risk we took, I could have done much damage to the reputation of the paper and to myself. After the scolding and my promise not to do something like that again, Felix let us off, saying, "When I say take the initiative, I don't mean breaking and entering! You two are the craziest reporters I know and I must make sure not to send the two of you out together on any other assignments."

For the next few months, almost every assignment I covered was with Al!

But we still had a dilemma. In order to use the pictures, we had to get permission to go into the bunker officially and do it by the book this time. Otherwise, it would be impossible to publish the story or the pictures we had in our hands.

Again, I called the Parks Department and again they demurred. When I spoke to the senior official in charge and told him there was a door to the bunker and that it was not sealed up, he was very surprised.

If we hadn't been down to the bunker we would not have known of the existence of the door. The presence of a door meant we could go in as there was no resealed wall that would have to be broken.

It transpired that the Public Works Department (PWD), who had been involved in the February opening, felt that it would be better to put a door to the entrance rather than seal it off again for easy re-entry so they had installed a door just days after the initial reopening of the bunker by the Parks Department.

Although we even managed to get the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) from Nee Soon Camp to agree to come down and ventilate the bunkers before we went it, permission was still not forthcoming until Felix got on the line with the officials.

It seemed that they were planning a big launch of the Bunker's discovery and *The Straits Times* story would steal the thunder from their press conference in a few months' time.

Felix told them that the cat was already out of the bag and it was better to cooperate on this story so that we could publish the full picture which would then benefit everyone.

After much cajoling, the Parks Department became one of our biggest champions in making sure the story was told. Permission was quickly granted and on 23 July, together with the SCDF and S.C. Wong, a technical officer from the Public Works Department, we "officially" went into the bunker.

On arrival at the bunker, officials from the PWD were curious as to why the door was unlocked but assumed that the flimsy lock must have been removed by vandals.

Al and I didn't say a word. A few days later a new lock similar to the old one, anonymously donated, appeared next to the entrance.

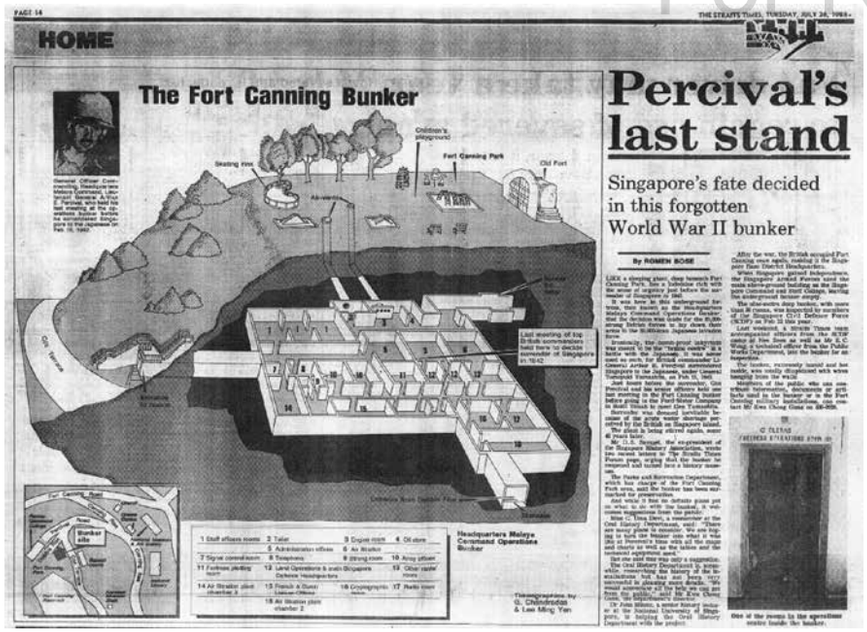
Once inside the Battlebox, we documented the place thoroughly, and today the large number of photographs as to what the complex looked like when it was reopened remains in the *Straits Times* photo library for use by historians and researchers.

My exclusive story on the bunker and its history appeared in *The Straits Times* on 26 July 1988, a scoop that was the talk of the town for the next few days.

But for me, the story didn't just end there. The introduction to the history of Singapore and the secrets of the Battlebox lit a flame within me.

It inspired me to finally do a honours degree in modern Southeast Asian history in addition to a finance degree as well as making numerous trips in the intervening years to the Imperial War Museum, National Army Museum and the Public Records Office in the UK.

The past 17 years have been spent in researching and understanding the history of the Battlebox and the role it had played in the War



HOME

THE STRAITS TIMES, TUESDAY, JULY 26, 1988

The Fort Canning Bunker

Percival's last stand

Singapore's fate decided in this forgotten World War II bunker

By ROWEN BOSE

The article which appeared in The Straits Times on 26 July 1988 highlighting the discovery of the long forgotten Battlebox.

in Malaya. I co-authored a book on World War II battlefield sites in Singapore and wrote another on the Indian Independence Movement in Singapore during the Second World War. As a former Bureau Chief and correspondent, I also produced historical documentaries on the Second World War and news reports on events marking the period.

As a result of my ongoing in-depth research into the Battlebox and Singapore's World War II history, I had accumulated so much material on the Battlebox that I decided to put it all in a book. So, more than 17 years after I first set foot in the Battlebox, I have finally managed to pen down a history of this amazing complex.

Today, the Battlebox has been converted into a first-rate museum with interesting displays and animatronics to highlight what happened in Singapore and Malaya during and after the campaign. The complex has been converted to educating the young on the mistakes of the past and the opportunities for the future. A trip to the Battlebox is a must for anyone who wants a quick lesson on Singapore's wartime history.

In the next chapter, you will read about how the Battlebox came about and what its various rooms were used for and, more importantly, how it faced up to the challenge of the War in Malaya.