

A graphic of red barbed wire with sharp points, running horizontally across the top half of the page. The text is overlaid on this graphic.

**THE
SYONIAN
YEARS**

**SINGAPORE UNDER
JAPANESE RULE
1942-1945**

LEE GEOK BOI

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FOREWORD

The Japanese Occupation in Singapore (1942-1945) was a part of the theatre of the Asia-Pacific War and the Second World War, which was part of the still larger human drama of the twentieth century – the century of total war, of unprecedented mass violence on a global scale. Yet, the experiences of war in the twentieth century – also the century that witnessed the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs – should not be spoken of in the past tense. Six decades after the Japanese defeat, there are continued debates on how the war has been remembered or, in some cases, forgotten. At the same time, those who had experienced the war directly have either passed on or are in their elderly years.

How then will the war be remembered by generations to come? How will the war – the atrocities, sufferings, and deaths – be remembered in history textbooks and in the collective memories of peoples, the descendants of the perpetrators and victims of violence during the war? How will schoolchildren, scholars, politicians and ordinary citizens develop a complex understanding of war – its larger causes and consequences and its impact on human lives?

These questions highlight the necessity and significance of archival and oral history records – in particular, the kind of materials that have been referred to in the present study, which recounts the flesh-and-blood experiences of men, women and children who survived the Syonan Years. On the one hand, they lived through the horror and terror of war. On the other hand, in the midst of evil, indignity, and cruelty, they also witnessed courage, compassion and human decency.

This book updates previous publications by the National Archives of Singapore and Oral History Centre and the writer. Over the decades, the Archives has acquired photographs, published materials, maps, official archival documents, audio-visual footages and artefacts relating to the Japanese Occupation from individuals (in Singapore and abroad) and reputable institutions, which include the National Archives of United Kingdom, Australian War Memorial and Imperial War Museum. This is the first project since the Oral History Centre rejoined the National Archives of Singapore in September 2003, allowing a fusion

of contents from both institutions. To date, the Archives has collected a total of 324 interviews related to the Japanese Occupation, 31 of which were acquired from overseas. The interviewees include civilians, prisoners-of-war, teachers, students, medical personnel, military personnel and those involved in anti-Japanese resistance activities. In order to highlight different aspects of the Japanese Occupation, extracts from new oral history interviews, including those collected from a field trip to Malaysia (in July 2005), have been included in this book.

In bringing together a wealth of materials and weaving them into a compelling narrative, this book also provides a blueprint for the permanent exhibition gallery featuring the Japanese Occupation of Singapore at the former Ford Factory Building. Indeed, without the patient and painstaking work carried out by the staff of the Oral History Centre and the National Archives over the years – without the precious records that have been collected and collated – we are all the more impoverished in our memory and understanding of the war.

As we enter into a new age of violence in the new century, this book not only provides readers a wider perspective of the Occupation, but also calls upon readers to reflect on the nature and tragedy of war.

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CHAPTER ONE
70 DAYS TO OCCUPATION



70 DAYS TO OCCUPATION

Jitra set the pattern. The pre-war British strategy for the defence of Singapore was to hold off the invaders as far north and for as long as possible. Jitra in Kedah was thought to be the key to the south. The Jitra line was supposed to be held for three months but it collapsed in 15 hours. The British had counted on the jungle and rivers as natural obstacles to stop the Japanese advance and had concentrated their defences mostly along the roads. The bridges over swampy ground were demolished, the nearby jungle was mined and laid with barbed wire, with a third line of trenches and barbed wire around the troops along the road.

It rained continuously for two days after the 8 December 1941 invasion. While the Japanese took advantage of the dark and the poor weather to advance on their enemy, British troops took shelter from the rain away from their guns. Malaya Campaign planning officer Tsuji Masanobu who was travelling with the front line troops came across this sight: "Ten guns with their muzzles turned towards us were lined up on the road, but beside them we could not find even one man of their crews. The enemy appeared to be sheltering from the heavy rain under the rubber-trees; but the firing issuing from sentries' huts or from tents gave the impression of coming from a formidable adversary." Japanese troops were past masters at the art of psychological warfare and this feint did not work on them.

The loss of Jitra was a major disaster for British troops but a confidence-booster for the Japanese and Maj. Fujiwara Iwaichi of F Kikan may have had something to do with the Japanese Army's easy victory. In his 1973 oral history interview, Shinozaki Mamoru of the Syonan civilian administration said, "The Imperial Headquarters appointed a very clever major, Maj. Fujiwara, to establish contact with the Indian independence movement. They contacted Pritam Singh in Bangkok before the war. The intelligence agents under Maj. Fujiwara who were fluent in the local dialects and Malay were already coming down Malaya in October and November 1941. ...Capt. Mohan Singh was made a prisoner-of-war and he decided to co-operate with Japan. He and Maj. Fujiwara trusted each other. Members of his Company were then despatched to infiltrate into the British side to tell the Indian soldiers to surrender and join the Japanese Army in order to fight for the independence of India. The Indian soldiers of the 11th Indian Division assigned to guard the Jitra line surrendered easily to the Japanese army. They didn't want to fight."

Jitra set the pattern for the Malaya Campaign. British commanders kept withdrawing rather than engaging the enemy in action. Tsuji said: "(T)he enemy was escaping without even making a sortie, although he had many cannons and machine-guns and was menaced only by one small section with a handful of guns. We now understood the fighting capacity of the enemy. The only things we had to fear were the quantity of



The Asahi Shimbun Company, 4 / 3 / 1942



The Asahi Shimbun Company, 4 / 3 / 1942



The Asahi Shimbun Company, 4 / 3 / 1942



Barbed wire, rivers, blown up bridges, jungle, trenches – nothing stopped the Japanese who were equipped with light tanks, just a few days supply of food, and teams of bicycle repairers and combat engineers to fix demolished bridges.

ammunition he had and the thoroughness of his demolitions.” The Japanese never gave up while the British gave up too easily and too soon. The conclusion of the Malaya Campaign was foregone.

With some 600 men and tank crews the Japanese had routed a far bigger force at Jitra. British casualties ran into thousands, the Japanese lost fewer than 50 men. The Japanese tactic of sending troops behind enemy lines, encircling and attacking from the rear and the flanks were met invariably by a disorderly and panicky withdrawal. In the assault on coastal positions such as Batu Pahat and Muar, the encirclement strategy made use of the numerous boats captured in Penang to move troops quickly down the coast past British lines to the rear to take the coastal towns. The strategy made the numerically inferior Japanese force appear to be superior and everywhere.

THE START AND END OF THE MALAYA CAMPAIGN

1941

2 DEC Force Z comprising *Prince of Wales*, *Repulse* and four destroyers arrived in Singapore.

4 DEC Japanese set sail from Samah port, Hainan Island, in the morning.

7/8 DEC On both sides of the International Dateline seven military operations took place in this order: Kota Bahru (0215 hours Tokyo time, 0045 hours Malayan time on 8 December), Pearl Harbour (0330 hours Tokyo time, 0200 hours Malayan time on 8 December, 0600 hours on Sunday 7 December Hawaiian time), Singora and Patani (0400 hours Tokyo time, 0230 hours Malayan time), Singapore (0430 hours Tokyo time, 0300 hours Malayan time). Attacks on the Philippines, Guam, Hong Kong and Wake Island followed later on 8 December. The landings at Kota Bahru were put forward by an hour because of high waves. Thus, Japan's first strike in the Asia-Pacific War landed on Kota Bahru.

8 DEC Force Z headed up the east coast for Kota Bahru without air cover.

9 DEC British troops fell back from the Jitra Line to Alor Star. Force Z was sighted by a Japanese submarine which reported its position.

10 DEC Sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* off the coast of Kemaman.

13 DEC Alor Star captured.

14/15 DEC Action in Gurun.

16 DEC British civilians evacuated Penang unannounced.

17 DEC British withdrew southwards to the line of the Perak River.

19 DEC Japanese entered Penang with no loss of Japanese lives but with about 2,000 Penang casualties from Japanese bombardment.

26 DEC Japanese broke through Perak River defences and moved south to Ipoh.

31 DEC Japanese took Kuantan. British defended Kampar in a three-day action.

1942

2 JAN British pulled back from Kampar to the Slim River.

7-8 JAN Japanese broke through the Slim River defences by outflanking the British and capturing the Slim River bridge intact. The British lost 3,200 men in this engagement. The road to Kuala Lumpur was now open. The new defensive line now stretched from the mouth of the Muar River through Segamat to Mount Ophir.

9/15 JAN Maj-Gen. Gordon Bennett, commander of the Australian Imperial Force, deployed his troops at Gemas across the trunk road. The Japanese were able to break the defensive line and take Gemas on 15 January. British withdrew south to Batu Pahat.

Gen. A. Wavell learnt that Gen. Percival did not have a plan for withdrawing British troops into Singapore nor for its northern defences.

11 JAN Japanese entered Kuala Lumpur. Gen. Yamashita ordered rest for 5th Division after five weeks of fighting; Imperial Guards Division went west to Malacca. Plans were made for 18th Division to land at Singora and to come down by road.

14 JAN Malacca captured.

20 JAN Wavell in Singapore found that little had been done about the northern defences of Singapore despite his urging Percival to do so.

21 JAN Collapse of the Batu Pahat-Yong Peng line.

22 JAN Labis captured.

22/24 JAN Some 40-50,000 British reinforcements arrived in Singapore.

25 JAN Kluang taken by 5th Division and British withdrew to the Johore River line.

26 JAN Endau and Mersing taken by 18th Division.

28 JAN Percival ordered British troops to withdraw from Malaya into Singapore by 31 January.

29 JAN Main body of British 18th Division arrived in Singapore.

30 JAN Rear-Admiral E.J. Spooner ordered the evacuation of the Naval Base.

31 JAN The last British troops crossed over the Causeway into Singapore by 0530 hours, and dynamited the Causeway after them, making a 200-metre crater. Percival assumed command of Fortress Singapore. The Japanese forced the Johore Bahru civilians including women to help their engineers repair it. Yamashita held a sake party to congratulate his commanders on the rapid progress of the campaign.

1 FEB In a rubber estate in Scudai, Johore, Yamashita gave out the battle orders for the capture of Singapore to his assembled commanders of about 40 men, after which they solemnly drank a toast with wine that was an imperial gift. They also changed into clean clothes in preparation for battle and death. The toast: "It (Singapore) is a good place to die. Certainly we shall conquer."

1/4 FEB Yamashita ordered reconnaissance of the Singapore north shoreline for his landing parties. Two teams swam across under cover of night and returned with intelligence on British troop deployments and the lie of the land. The recce was completed by 4 Feb. Japanese artillery began shelling Singapore.

6 FEB Yamashita moved his HQ to the highest building in Johore Bahru facing Singapore, Istana – Bukit Serene, the Sultan of Johore's palace. The high point gave him a commanding view of the Straits of Johore.

7 FEB In the dead of night Imperial Guards Division slipped across to Pulau Ubin, occupied it with little resistance and installed their artillery amongst the rubber trees. The guns began firing on Changi the next day. The Imperial Guards were accompanied by a company of Indian National Army soldiers.

8 FEB At about 11 pm, the main Japanese force made up of 5th and 8th Divisions began moving out in small boats from the river estuaries of Johore for the short crossing to Singapore. They landed on the north-west coast in Sarimbun. A decoy group went to the north-east in Sembawang.

9/10 FEB Japanese tanks began crossing the repaired Causeway in the evening. The Imperial Guards crossed into Singapore during the next two days. Yamashita came

ashore on the evening of 9 February and made his HQ in a rubber estate north of Tengah airfield.

10 FEB Gen. Wavell made his last visit to Singapore to assess the situation, exhorted Percival to keep fighting, then cabled Churchill to say that the battle of Singapore was not going well. Bukit Panjang Village was captured. Japanese troops prepared to battle for Bukit Timah, the highest point on Singapore.

11 FEB The 5th and 8th Divisions captured Bukit Timah. The day was *Kigensetsu*, an important Japanese holiday and the original Japanese date for the capture of Singapore. Yamashita dropped his surrender offer in a communications tube behind enemy lines.

Percival moved his HQ from Sime Road Camp to the Fort Canning bunkers.

12 FEB Japanese 5th Division attacked the reservoir sector.

12/14 FEB Battle of Pasir Panjang Ridge between Malay Regiment and men of 18th Division.

13 FEB Yamashita moved his HQ to the Ford Motor Company in Bukit Timah.

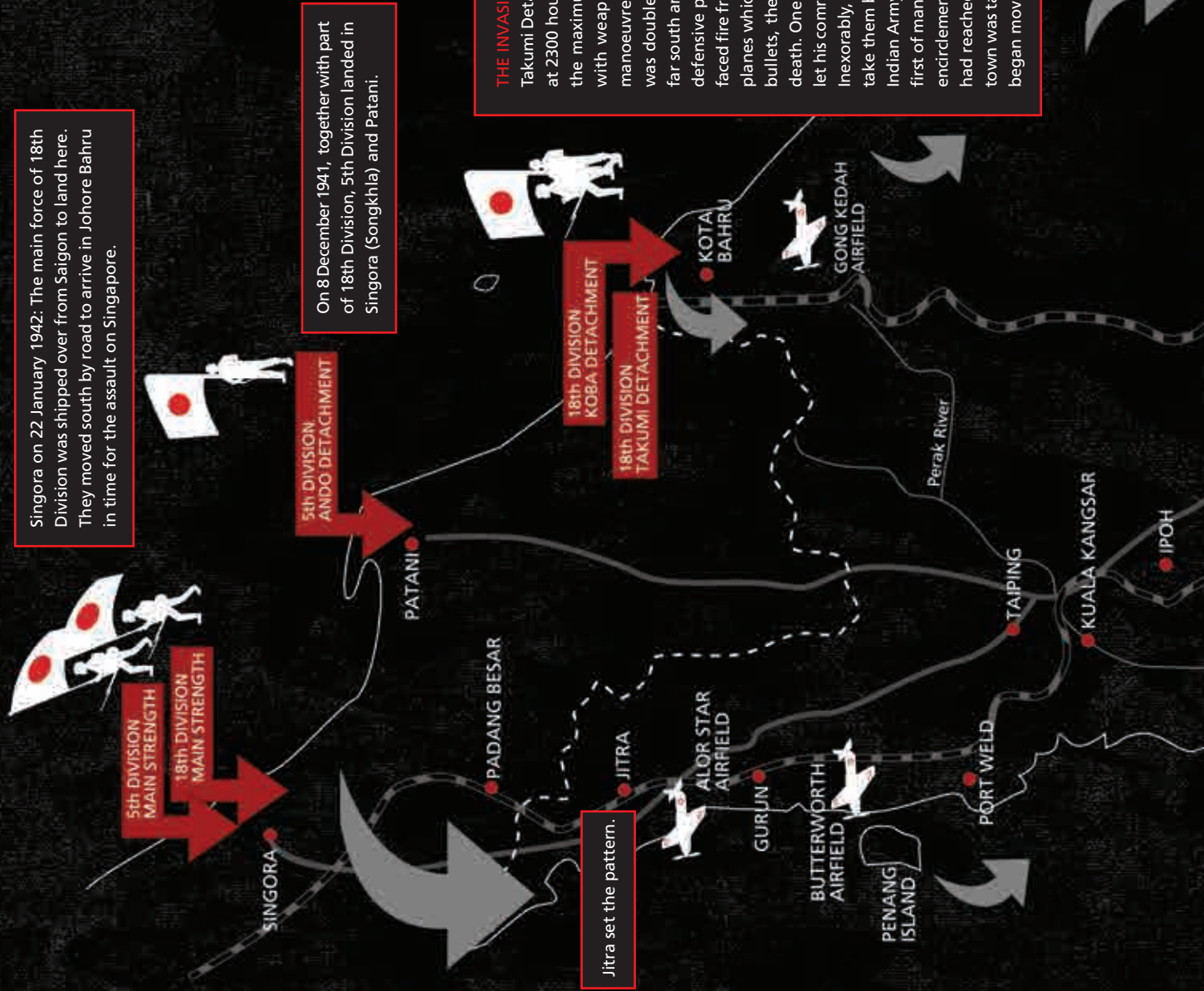
Percival conferred with his commanders most of whom reported their troops to be exhausted and demoralised.

14 FEB Percival cabled Wavell saying that Singapore could not resist for more than a day and asked to be given the discretion to surrender if necessary. Wavell replied that they were to keep fighting. Later that day, Churchill gave Percival the discretion to surrender if necessary.

FEB 15 British surrendered to Yamashita. The Malaya Campaign took just 70 days and was 30 days ahead of schedule.

Yamashita did not have to call for the 4th Division that was on stand-by.

Singora on 22 January 1942: The main force of 18th Division was shipped over from Saigon to land here. They moved south by road to arrive in Johore Bahru in time for the assault on Singapore.



On 8 December 1941, together with part of 18th Division, 5th Division landed in Singora (Songkhla) and Patani.

Jitra set the pattern.

THE INVASION BEGINS
Takumi Detachment from 18th Division arrived offshore Kota Bharu at 2300 hours on 7 December 1941. The waves were six-foot high, the maximum height at which any landing was possible. Laden with weapons and equipment, the soldiers did the dangerous manoeuvre of disembarking on to the landing craft. The danger was doubled by the fact that the ships were off-target and too far south and about to disembark their troops in front of a British defensive position. As the troops scrambled onto the beach, they faced fire from British shore positions as well as from the few enemy planes which took off from the airfield nearby. Under hails of bullets, the Japanese swarmed up the beach and fought to the death. One soldier threw himself over the opening of a battery to let his comrades charge safely into the gun position and capture it. Inexorably, the Japanese began to get behind British positions and take them by 0345 hours. By 1900 hours of 8 December 1941, the Indian Army brigade commanded by Maj-Gen. B.W. Key began the first of many British withdrawals in the face of fierce Japanese fire, encirclement and aerial bombardment. By 2000 hours the Japanese had reached the airfield and captured it by midnight. Kota Bharu town was taken on the afternoon of 9 December. The detachment began moving south.

• KUALA TERENGGANU



Prince of Wales and Repulse sunk by Japanese bombers on 10 December 1941.

Gemas: The Australians succeeded at first with the Japanese tactic of ambushing their enemy but were unable to sustain the momentum.

25th Army assembled in Kluang before moving off to the east and west.

Prince of Wales, Repulse and four destroyers sailed up on 8 December 1941.

Imperial Guards began coming down the coast to land in Muar and threaten the British.

MALAYA CAMPAIGN MAP

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