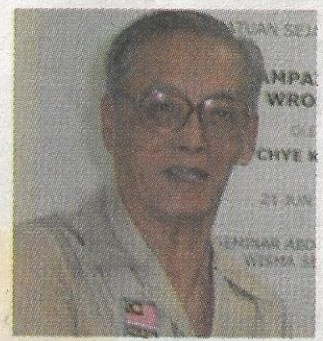
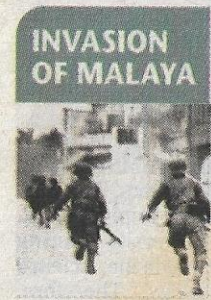


Singapore's fall to Japanese army

Ignominious British surrender ends fallacy of white man's supremacy

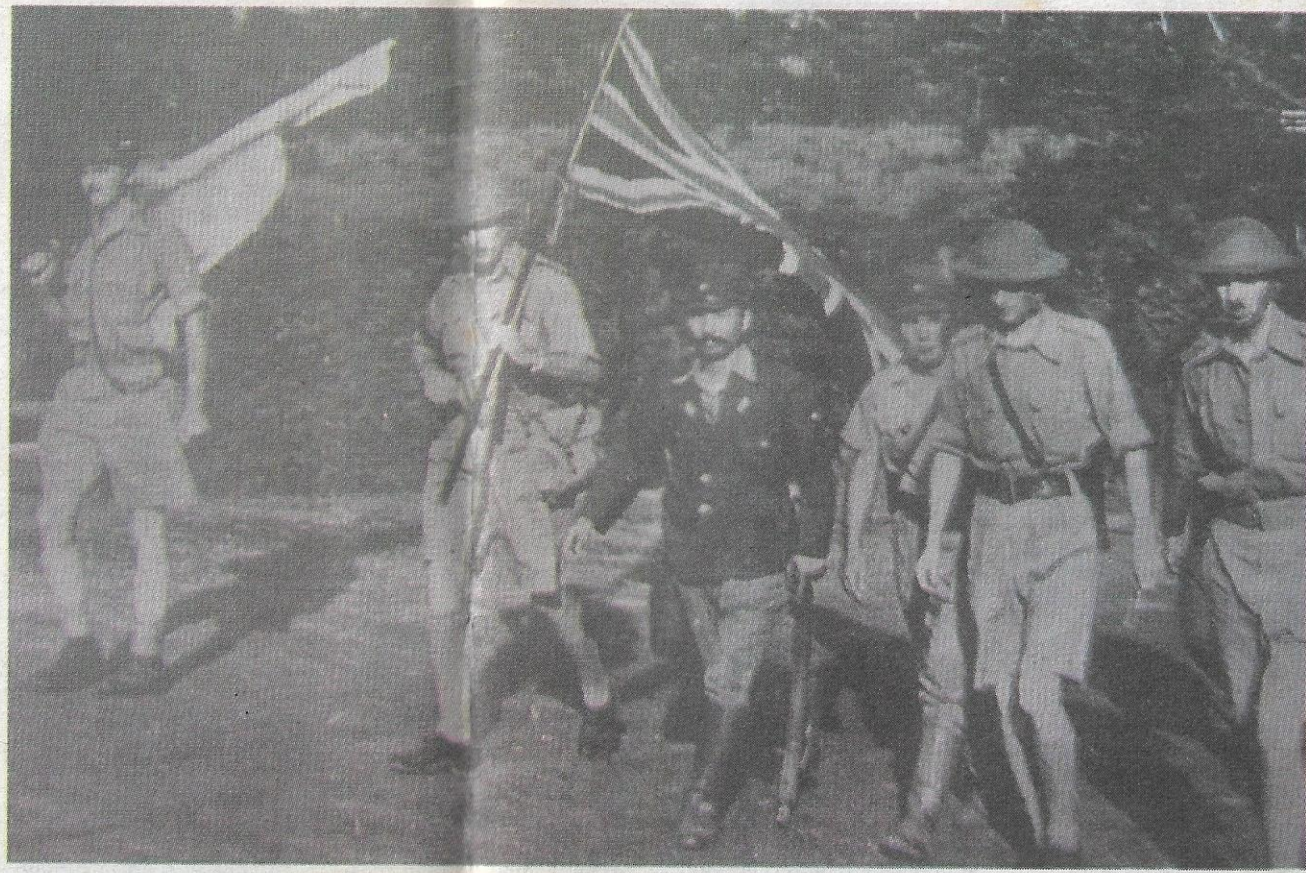
Sunday marks the 87th anniversary of the fall of Singapore during World War 2. SAGER AHMAD takes a look at the events all those years ago in the third part of this series



Historian Chye Kooi Loong says the British army was defeated in Singapore because of internal factors

IT was late afternoon, Feb 15, 1942, when Lt-Gen Arthur Percival and his staff took that lonely walk to the Ford factory in Singapore, carrying the Union Jack and a white flag.

The commander of British forces in Malaya must have felt dejected that the island, touted as the bastion which would forces did have one good effect. He said the surrender marked the end of an era where most Asians looked up



The British surrender at the Ford factory in Bukit Timah. Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival is on the right. — Picture from Wikipedia

led out against the invading Japanese forces, had fallen.

At the factory, Percival surrendered to Lt-Gen Tomoyuki Yamashita, ending the invasion of Malaya which had begun just over two months earlier in Kota Baru.

Chye Kooi Loong, a historian from Kampar, Perak, and the author of *The British Battalion in the Malayan Campaign 1941-42*, said the British lost the fight “simply because of internal factors”.

Among these factors were disunity, inter-service rivalry, a lack of urgency, an obsolete working culture, unsuitable diet, and miscommunication between the troops (many of whom were young men from India) and their British officers.

He said the inter-service rivalry was “well publicised” where the army and the navy ganged together and the air force was left alone.

Citing one example, Chye said when the two Royal Navy battleships, HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* asked for air support from Singapore while being attacked by Japanese bombers in the South China Sea on Dec 10, 1941, fighter planes only arrived at the scene 20 minutes after they were sunk.

The surrender of Singapore led to more than three years of suffering for Allied prisoners of war and Malaysians in general under the hard rule of the Japanese. According to Chye, however, the fall of British

to the “white man as infallible gods, the “Tuan Besar” and “Mem Sahib”.

It dawned on those who thought so that they were also humans, capable of making mistakes, bleeding and dying.

“Although the Japanese did not keep their promise of ‘liberating the Asians from the yoke of the colonialist masters’, they showed us how to look after ourselves. This eventually paved the way for independence.”

Chye met with Maj-Gen B.S. Key, the former commander of the 8th Indian Brigade defending Kelantan, in England in the 1980s. He recalled that the general was still puzzled as to who had given the order to retreat and why the British lost the battle for Malaya.

“When the order was given all men stopped fighting and did the unthinkable — cut the telephone lines and destroyed their supplies. It was like giving a walkover to the Japanese and the whole eastern seaboard was left undefended.

“The Japanese reigned supreme, had three airfields for themselves — Pengkalan Chepa, Machang and Gong Kedak — and used them to attack other targets,” said Chye.

He said the Japanese were determined and prepared, had light uniforms, rubber shoes, silk maps and bicycles and could live off the land and navigate accurately with information from their spies who had lived and worked among the people for years.



A British World War 2 sea mine on display at the Kelantan War Museum — NST picture by Sager Ahmad

The voice of the occupiers

SHORTLY after taking Singapore, the Japanese renamed the island Syonan-to, meaning “Light of the South Island” and turned back the clock to Tokyo time for easy administration.

The *Straits Times* newspaper was renamed *Syonan Times* (later *Syonan Shinbun*) and made the official paper in Singapore during

the occupation.

The paper was run by Japanese officers from the Propaganda Department, who threatened to behead anyone who spelt the Emperor’s name or title incorrectly.

The paper ran on Tokyo time, then two hours ahead of Singapore. Staff had to come to work in the dark, working till sundown.

Allied prisoners of war from Changi gaol were forced to build the Syonan Shinto Shrine (Syonan Jinja) modelled after the famed Yasukuni Shrine in Japan. They demolished it when Japan surrendered on Aug 15 1945.

Its ruins can still be seen within the thick jungle of the MacRitchie Reservoir.

“

THE BRITISH RULED MALAYA FOR 120 YEARS SINCE THE LANDING OF STAMFORD RAFFLES IN 1819 BUT WE MANAGED TO CHANGE THAT IN 70 DAYS. ”

— Colonel Masanobu Tsuji in his book ‘Singapore, the Japanese Version: The Japanese greatest victory, the British greatest defeat’

“

CONSIDER THE ENEMY AS THE KILLERS OF YOUR FATHER, KILLING THEM WOULD LIFT A HEAVY BURDEN FROM YOUR HEART AND WASH AWAY THE DIFFICULT SEA JOURNEY. ”

— Pamphlet distributed to Japanese soldiers, taken from Tsuji’s book where it appeared as an appendix