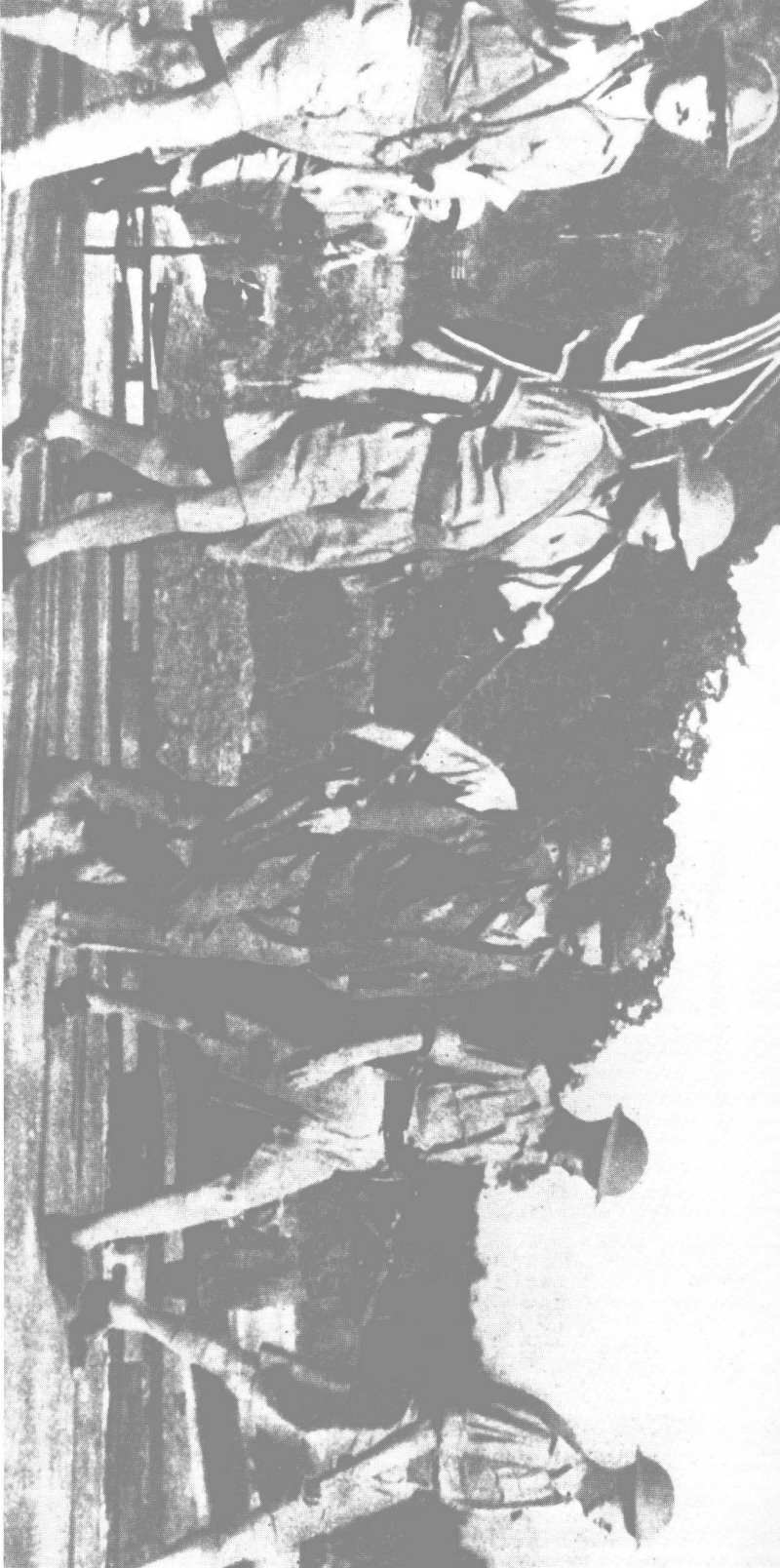


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Frank Owen



THE FALL OF Singapore



The Last March, February 15, 1942. Lieut.-General A. E. Percival, G.O.C. Malaya (extreme right), and British officers bearing the Union Jack and the white flag of truce going to sign the deed of surrender at the headquarters of Lieut.-General Tomoyuki Yamashita at Bukit Timah village on Singapore Island

THE FALL OF SINGAPORE

Also by Frank Owen

HIS WAS THE KINGDOM

THE THREE DICTATORS

GUILTY MEN

(in collaboration with Michael Foot)

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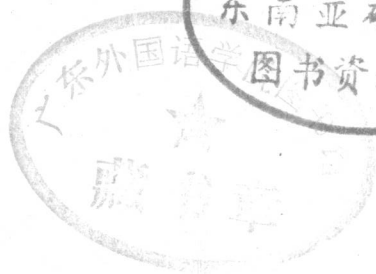
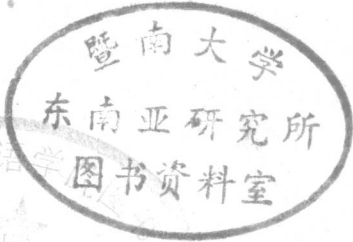
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FRANK OWEN

The Fall of Singapore



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CHAPTER ONE

THE FLAG THEY NEVER LOST

A RADIO picture in the Second World War, widely reproduced in the newspapers of Great Britain, the Commonwealth and the United States of America, shocked opinion throughout the English-speaking world.

It showed a squad of men, two of whom carried flags over their shoulders, marching along a sunlit village street in the Island of Singapore. The furthestmost flag was a Union Jack, the near one a white flag of truce. Their bearers were British officers, in shorts, shirts and steel helmets, and by their side stamped high-booted Japanese armed escorts. Included in the party was Lieut. General Percival¹, commanding the troops who were the last British garrison of Fortress Singapore. He had come to sign the deed of its surrender.

The fall of Singapore, so long believed (and so often boasted) by British leaders to be an 'impregnable citadel,' a 'bastion of Empire,' the 'Gibraltar of the Far East', and the loss of the great modern Naval Base on which some £63,000,000, or so had been spent before the war, had already on the day of capitulation, 15th February 1942, stunned the public of the Allied countries, their Armed Services and their Governments.

For it seemed utterly incredible that a defending force of 85,000 men could have laid down their arms to invaders of less numerical strength without even a show of resistance in the streets of the greatest city in South-East Asia.

¹Lieut. General A. E. Percival, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.

Now, more than a month later (17th March 1942) this shaming photographic record of the hour of Britain's deepest humiliation was flashed across the world.

Lieut. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the conqueror of Singapore, had insisted on making the ceremony of surrender as degrading to his captives as Japanese arrogance and ingenuity could devise.

On the morning of that Black Sunday, 15th February 1942, Lieut. General Percival held a fateful conference at Fort Canning with his Senior Commanders. Both the continued defence of the city and the project of a last desperate counter-attack were debated, and rejected as impracticable. It was decided to send off a Joint Military and Civil deputation to the enemy lines to invite Japanese envoys to visit Singapore and discuss a cessation of hostilities.

They returned with orders that Percival himself must proceed with Staff Officers, bearing a Union Jack and a white flag of truce, to the Ford Automobile Works beyond Bukit Timah village, northward of Singapore City, where the Japanese Commander would lay down the terms of surrender. A further requirement was that the Japanese Rising Sun flag should be hoisted over the Cathay Building, the tallest in Singapore, so that the British troops should know that due submission had been made.

The final parley (if this one-sided dictation can be so described) took place towards evening of that sultry day. On the floor of the large Assembly Room in the Ford factory had been chalked the names of the many Japanese officers who were to be privileged to witness this official mortification of the beaten White Imperialists. They queued up, filed in, and took their seats on the floor. The four British envoys were then led to the table where General Yamashita sat with his Staff. He acknowledged them briefly, then read out from a paper before him the terms—or rather, the orders—of surrender. 'There was not much chance of bargaining' says Percival, but he claims, justly, that he did the best

he could to ensure the safety of both troops and civilians.¹ . There was only one copy of the surrender document, and this, says Percival², the Japanese kept.

'Certainly no copy was handed to me. The actual terms of surrender cannot therefore be recorded accurately.'

But, as far as Percival's memory goes, he says³ they included:

- (1) The unconditional surrender of all military forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) in Singapore Area.
- (2) Hostilities to cease at 8.30 p.m. that evening.
- (3) All troops to remain in position until further orders.
- (4) All weapons, military equipment, ships, planes and secret documents to be handed over intact.
- (5) To prevent looting, etc., during the temporary withdrawal of all armed forces in Singapore, a force of 100 British armed men to take over until relieved by the Japanese.

Percival had already, earlier that day, issued orders to destroy before 4 p.m. all secret and technical equipment, ciphers, codes, secret documents and heavy guns⁴. Now, at Bukit Timah, he informed Yamashita of this, adding that no ships or planes remained in Singapore. The Japanese Commander accepted it. Hostilities ended that night.

According to Tokyo's *Domei News Agency*, Yamashita also accepted

'full responsibility for the lives of the British and Australian troops, as well as the British women and children remaining in Singapore. He declared "Rely on Japanese *Bushido*." *Bushido* is the ancient Japanese code of chivalry, inculcating courage, loyalty, courtesy and self-control.'

¹In his book '*The War in Malaya*,' Lieut. General A. E. Percival, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C. (Eyre & Spottiswoode).

²In his *Despatches*. London Gazette, 20th February 1948.

³See *Despatches*. *Ibid*.

⁴These orders, as we shall see, were not effectively carried out.

Although next morning, 16th February, the Japanese advance guards occupied the suburbs of Singapore, and a token 'Triumph Parade' of 175 Japanese medium and light tanks was staged through the main streets while Rising Sun flags fluttered in the breeze from all public buildings, the mass forces of the invading army never did enter the city. The teeming population of more than a million mixed peoples, Chinese, Indian, Malayan, British and Australian, were spared the horrors of the rape, murder and massacre which had disgraced the Japanese capture of Hong Kong the previous Christmas Day—and which had been among the reasons impelling General Percival to surrender Singapore and avoid a repetition of such lurid events here.

But *Bushido* soon ran out when it came to the treatment of the military prisoners-of-war.

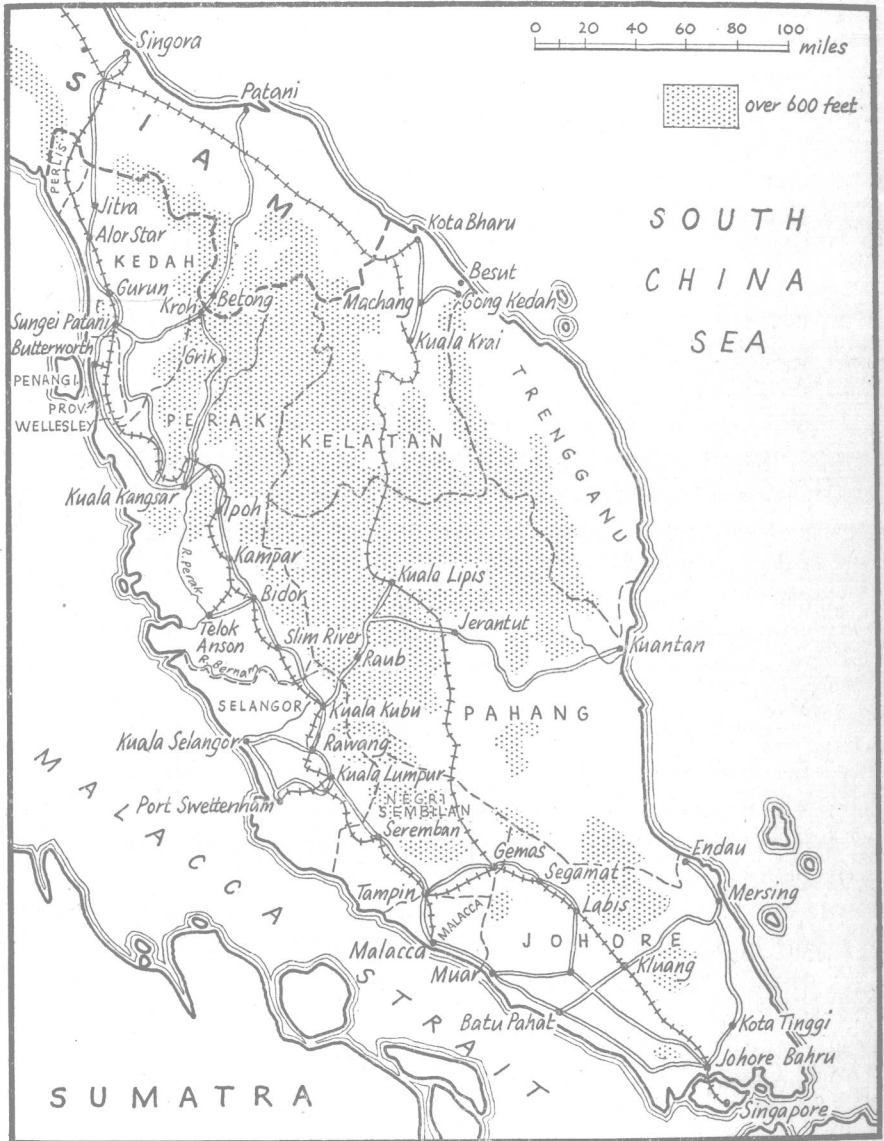
Now, of the 85,000 troops who had passed under enemy rule by this surrender, some 45,000 were Indian. Two days after the fall of Singapore the Japanese imposed a colour bar, segregating all Indian ranks from their British and Australian comrades and putting them into a special camp at Farrar Park.

Here, they were exhorted by Indian deserters to enlist in the new 'Indian National Army' of Subhas Chandra Bose¹ which the Japanese were sponsoring for the invasion and 'Liberation' of India, next step in their own Greater East Asia plan of conquest.

Dazed and disillusioned by the disaster of Singapore and the apparent end of the British Raj, many of the younger Indian soldiers succumbed (and many were very young and, indeed, had far from completed their training as soldiers before being thrown into battle). But thousands of others refused to break their oath of loyalty, though cut off from their comrades and under the threat—and sometimes, actual

¹Educated at Cambridge, Subhas Chandra Bose became a violent Indian Nationalist leader, was arrested by the British early in the war, released, made his way first to Berlin and then to Japanese-occupied Malaya. He was killed in an aeroplane crash August 1945.

The 'Indian National Army' eventually recruited as many as 25,000 ex-prisoners-of-war and deserters,



暨南大学
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flail—of Japanese torture. The Gurkhas held out to a man.

As for the British and Australian prisoners-of-war, they were marched off to Changi Barracks, at the eastern end of Singapore Island, where they were herded into overcrowded prison pens. (They were even worse accommodated at the River Valley Camp, to which working parties were sent.) Prisoners who tried to escape and were re-captured were shot publicly. Many hundreds died from their wounds, from malaria, dysentery, beri-beri and other diseases. Thousands more would perish from sickness, exhaustion or savage ill-treatment on the 'Railway of Death,' which the Japanese built as a military supply line from Siam to Burma with forced labour drawn from their prison camps. Under the 'Code of Chivalry' called *Bushido* the casualty rate was far higher in the Japanese jails than on the battlefield.

Was it inevitable that so many soldiers who served under the Union Jack should have had to follow that flag into captivity in Singapore? That they should have had to spend, either the remainder of their life or the next three-and-a-half years of it, in a Japanese hell? Could not 'Fortress Singapore' have been held, as Winston Churchill himself believed it could almost up to the very day it fell?

There was some suggestion during the war that a Royal Commission should hold inquiry into the mystery of this 'impregnable citadel.' But Churchill, as Prime Minister, judged that this was not then possible. We could not spare the time, the men, or the energy while the war still raged in Europe, Africa, Burma and Indonesia. Parliament agreed with him.

Six years after the war was all over (1951), Churchill was writing¹

'but I certainly thought that in justice to the officers and men concerned there should be an inquiry into all the circumstances as soon as the fighting stopped. This, how-

¹In *The Second World War*. Vol. III. 'The Hinge of Fate' by Winston S Churchill.

ever, has not been instituted by the Government of the day.'

The British Government of that day (1951) was a Labour one. Now, nine more years have gone by (including four under a Churchill Tory Government and five more under other Tory Governments), but no Royal Commission has ever yet been set up to sift the mystery of the Fall of Singapore, and may be it is now too late, since many of the leading personalities have passed on.

True, there were published within a few years, the Despatches of five British Commanding Officers (or Acting C.O.'s), the personal narratives of two of the leading Service figures, many references in their volumes by three historians of the latest World War, and a score of interesting books by fighting men, reporters and others who were actually on the scene. But not until 1957 did any official British account appear and even this disclaimed any attempt 'to be a comprehensive history of the war against Japan.'¹

Meantime, History itself had played its own strange tricks.

On another Sunday, 2nd September 1945, General Percival, lately released from the Japanese jail in Manchuria to which he had been transferred later in the war, was present in Tokyo Bay when Japan formally surrendered to the victorious Allies.

The Wheel of Fate completed its full turn next day when at Manila, in the Philippine Islands, General Percival stood alongside the United States Commander who had been forced to surrender that great American base a few weeks after the fall of Singapore. Signing the deed of capitulation now for the beaten enemy, was General Tomoyuki Yamashita. An eyebrow lifted, a flash of recognition—and then the sphinx-like mask again of all the Sons of Nippon.

¹See introduction to '*The War Against Japan*.' Vol I. by Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby, C.B., C.M.G., C.I.E., O.B.E., M.C. (H.M. Stationery Office).

The Japanese Thrust, by Lionel Wigmore, an account, 'with full access to official documents' was issued in the same year, 1957, by the Australian War Memorial. (The Griffin Press, Adelaide.)