

Connecting Study with Reality

A Battlefield Tour with Brian Farrell

By Joan Yap

The 'Fall of Singapore' in 1942 was an anti-climax, a pre-destined tragedy, a punctuation mark ending a chapter of history written by the Imperial Japanese Army. Such was the setting of a Singapore battlefields tour for National Museum of Singapore Docent Trainees led by Brian Farrell, author, military historian and deputy head of the Department of History at the National University of Singapore. A former soldier, Brian makes history come alive and has the ability to transport listeners back in space and time.

The tour took several dozen NMS docent trainees to the north-western part of Singapore, past the high-rise buildings to the tropical countryside. We travelled along the old Lim Chu Kang Road, a stretch of which was once used as an alternate runway to Tengah Air Base by the British Royal Air Force, and is still used for the same purpose today by the Republic of Singapore Air Force.

Brian led us to a small, seemingly insignificant beach at the end of the road. He wanted us to feel the environment: salt water, sand on our feet, the muddy mangrove swamps where snakes and mosquitoes thrive. We imagined it was nightfall; the story began to unfold.

On the night of 8 February 1942, Japanese commander General Tomoyuki Yamashita stationed himself on high ground on the Malaysian peninsula overlooking the Straits of Johor and the Singapore coast. His strategy was to storm the island with a wave of 4,000 experienced infantrymen. From the Singapore side, two Australian brigades fired at the invading enemy, but the Japanese pushed inland with their large numbers. The Australians became confused and their formations broke up.

About one kilometre away from Lim Chu Kang, Japanese vessels passed a small *kelong*, an off-shore fishing platform, near Sarimbun beach. Penetrating the dense brush, the Japanese soldiers encountered the disoriented Australian soldiers. In the early hours of 9 February, the Australians called for retreat after only four hours of fighting. Today, Sarimbun is home to the Singapore Scout and Girl Guides campsites, and to the Ministry of Education's Adventure Centre.

Our next stop was the mouth of the Kranji River, site of fierce British and Allied resistance and of the heaviest Japanese losses. Kranji housed important installations, including the Radio Intercept Station, the Petroleum Storage complex and the Singapore-Johor Causeway.

Perhaps the British commander, Lieutenant-General A E Percival, could have successfully resisted the enemy in Kranji. Unfortunately, he lacked the co-operation of his brigadiers: Australian commanders broke ranks and withdrew their men further inland, compromising their defence positions for the safety of the troops. Taking full advantage of miscommunications between the Australians and the British, the Japanese took control of Kranji village on 10 February. They began their march towards Singapore at



NMS Docent Trainees with Professor Brian Farrell at landing site of Imperial Japanese Army soldiers

about noon, coincidentally the time we paused for lunch at the Kranji hawker centre.

After lunch, we stopped at Woodlands facing the Johor-Singapore Causeway. Built in 1923, the causeway serves as a road, rail, pedestrian and water link between the island of Singapore and the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula. It was partially severed in 1942 to prevent the Japanese army from invading Singapore, but unfortunately the strategy failed: the causeway was quickly rebuilt by the Japanese and used as an easy invading point.

By 11 February, civilian casualties were increasing, the British forces were in a dire predicament and the Japanese, although gaining ground, were running out of supplies. Under the circumstances, which command might win the battle? We know now, of course, that Yamashita bluffed, asking for unconditional surrender, and that Percival yielded.

By showing us the battlefields, Brian brought our docent training studies to life, connecting the textual and the actual accounts of the Japanese invasion of Singapore. After the tour, we couldn't help thinking about the many lost or ruined lives. Perhaps the most chilling thought was that despite the power of weapons and combat technologies, war is waged with the minds and hearts of those who fight, and the judgement of those in command.

For more information on Singapore during WWII visit the following museums, sites and memorials:

- Battle Box at Ft. Canning
www.newasia-singapore.com/places_to_go/world_war_ii_sites
- The Changi Museum
www.changimuseum.com
- Kranji War Memorial
Memories at Old Ford Factory
Reflections at Bukit Chandu
www.s1942.org.sg
- National Museum of Singapore, History Gallery
www.nationalmuseum.sg

Joan Yap joined FOM after her retirement from the IT and banking industries in 2003. She is a docent at NMS and STPI and has authored an historical fiction entitled *Son of an Immigrant*. As a Singaporean, she is keen to share her knowledge of local history through writing and guiding tours.