

Tigers in the Park, POWs by the Pool

WWII history is uncovered at Adam Park

By Jon Cooper

Nestling amidst suburban sprawl on the edge of Singapore's 'highlands' is a remarkable time capsule. The 19 colonial 'black and white' bungalows built around 1928 that make up the Adam Park estate have been nearly untouched by the surrounding development. Yet beneath their manicured gardens and lantern-lit gazebos lies evidence of a violent and poignant past.

In February 1942 Adam Park was the site of intense fighting in the battle for Singapore. It was here that men of the 1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment held off repeated attacks by the troops of the Japanese 41st (Fukuyama) Regiment for three days. In so doing, 'The Fen Tigers' became arguably the only Allied unit to successfully defend its allotted ground under fire throughout the week-long invasion.

A few days after the Allied surrender, the Fen Tigers were marched off to Changi Prison, leaving behind a scene of devastation. The bungalows had been blasted by artillery fire, lawns were pockmarked with shell holes and slit trenches and the dead lay unburied where they had fallen.

But that was not the end of the estate's wartime story. Two months later, 3,000 Australian and British Prisoners of War (POWs) were quartered at Adam Park as part of the 10,000-strong work party tasked by the Japanese conquerors with building a Shinto shrine on the shores of MacRitchie Reservoir.

The POWs made the best of a bad job by turning the bombed and blown-out buildings into reasonable living quarters. With few Japanese on site, the camp's Australian Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel RF Oakes, had a relatively free hand in creating a military barracks with the amenities one might expect in a barracks back home: surgery, dentist, canteen, orderly room, administration building, theatre and camp chapel. Unfortunately, the meagre rice diet, tropical climate, hard labour and beatings inflicted by the captors took their toll and the list of sick and injured grew daily. The absurdity of the situation must have been palpable as the men, living amongst the battered splendour of a colonial estate and clinging to the vestiges of normality, witnessed the British Empire collapse around them.

By October 1942, work on the shrine was completed and the men were sent up to the Thai Burma Railway, a true hell on earth from which few returned.

In January 2009, The Adam Park Project (TAPP) was established to assess the site's potential for World War II battlefield archaeology. The metal detectors began to chirp almost immediately, revealing artefacts galore. During a recent survey we collected more than 30 bullets and cartridges from a lawn – before even starting any 'serious' detecting for the personal items associated with named individuals that reveal the human tragedy of the conflict and confinement. A collection of water bottles, cap badges, belt buckles, buttons and grave markers now take pride of place alongside a growing archive of faded portraits and personal diaries pulled



Detail of a General Service cap badge found in Adam Park

from museums or sent to us by veterans. The architects on our research team are homing in on the POW Chapel murals, believed to be in an upstairs bedroom and covered by decades of paint.

My own research has taken me further afield than Singapore: in September 2010, in the small village of Linton, Cambridgeshire, I found inscribed on the discreet village war memorial the name of a Sergeant Tofts, killed on Friday, 13 February 1942 on Water Tower Hill, ground now occupied by my Singapore condominium. The cool autumnal air sent a chill through the bones – mine for certain - and perhaps Sergeant Tofts' as well.

Jon Cooper arrived in Singapore in January 2009 as a 'significant other' after graduating from an MLitt course in Battlefield and Conflict Archaeology at Glasgow University. The Adam Park Project (TAPP) was born from a desire not to waste his newly acquired skills.

Editor's Note: TAPP is a collaborative venture between the Singapore Heritage Society, the National University of Singapore and the Centre for Battlefield Archaeology at Glasgow University supported, in part, by the National Heritage Board. For more information, contact Jon Cooper at jonalicooper@googlemail.com

Photos courtesy of the author



Mike Eng, a volunteer digger, reveals WWII artefacts by the porch of 18 Adam Park