

The Singapore Battle Box

By Clem McMurray



The gun operations room in the Battle Box, photo by the author

On the morning of 15 February 1942 a meeting in the Singapore Battle Box ended in a decision to surrender Singapore to the Japanese. The decision was described by Winston Churchill as *"the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history"*.

Japanese forces invaded Malaya on 8 December 1941 by moving south through Thailand (then known as Siam), along the northeast coast of Malaya. The superior strategies of the Japanese had forced the allied forces back to Singapore Island by 31 January 1942. On 8 February, Japanese troops made a successful landing on the northwest coast of Singapore, followed by a second landing near the Kranji River. Irrespective of which way the allied forces turned, it quickly became obvious that they had been outmanoeuvred in almost every respect.

At 9:30 am on 15 February 1942, Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, Commander of the British Commonwealth Forces called a meeting of senior



The Surrender Ceremony on 15 February 1942. The British surrendered to the Japanese at the Ford factory building in Upper Bukit Timah Road, with general Tomoyuki Yamashita, the "Tiger of Malaya" thumping the table to emphasise a point to Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, photo from the collection of Lim Kheng Chye

officers in the Battle Box as reports regarding the Singapore offensive couldn't have been worse. Singapore city was under constant aerial bomb attacks, resulting in shocking civilian casualties. Allied troops were retreating and the lack of food, water, petrol, ammunition and other essential supplies was causing insurmountable problems. Percival advised the meeting's attendees that there were no viable options for launching a counterattack so the only options were to fight to the death or surrender.

The meeting and final decision to surrender was made in the 'Commander, Anti-Aircraft Defense Room' of the Battle Box and concluded at 11:30 am. Later that day a party consisting of Lieutenant General Percival, Brigadier Torrance, Major Wild carrying the flag of surrender and Brigadier Newbigging carrying the Union Jack, left the Battle Box at Fort Canning to meet the Japanese at the Ford factory in Upper Bukit Timah Road where Percival signed the surrender. All British empire soldiers were ordered to lay down their arms at 8:30 that evening.

General Tomoyuki Yamashita's front-line troops, numbering between 30,000 and 40,000, had defeated over 140,000 British, Indian and Australian troops



The British surrendering to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, image from the collection of Lim Kheng Chye



Lieutenant General Percival and others on the way to the Ford factory in Bukit Timah Road to surrender, marking the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Singapore, photo from the collection of Lim Kheng Chye

(50,000 in Malaya and 88,000 in Singapore) and led to the largest surrender of British-led personnel in history. Yamashita became known as the 'Tiger of Malaya'. It had taken the Japanese just 70 days to crush the British and Commonwealth forces in Singapore and Malaya.

The Battle Box

The Battle Box consists of 26 rooms 9.1 metres beneath a small building on top of Fort Canning Hill. This is the popular name for what was originally constructed as an emergency, bomb-proof command centre for the Combined Operations Headquarters during the Malayan campaign and the Battle of Singapore. The one-metre thick reinforced concrete walls were constructed to withstand direct hits from bombs and shells.

Fort Canning Hill is about 60 metres high near the central city area of Singapore. Stamford Raffles, as a keen botanist, established the first botanical garden on the hill in 1822 and built a residence there in 1823. When the Straits Settlements, which included Singapore, became a crown colony in 1867, a fort was constructed on the hill. By the turn of the century, construction of other defenses around Singapore rendered the Fort Canning fortifications unnecessary.

Fort Canning was used as British army headquarters in Singapore in the 1920s. However, the lack of a general headquarters combining all three services present in Singapore – the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force – was recognised in 1936. To remedy this, a Combined Operations Headquarters was proposed for Fort Canning.

The Battle Box became a communications hub and included a telephone exchange connecting all military and most civilian switchboards in Malaya, various signals and operations rooms, sleeping quarters and latrines. The Battle Box also included a cipher room for coding and decoding messages, but by the time of the fall of Malaya this work had shifted elsewhere and the cipher room was used as sleeping quarters.

By 1941, the Battle Box was considered far too small for its intended use. Having returned to Malaya,

Lieutenant General Percival authorised construction of a Combined Operations Headquarters at the Royal Air Force Headquarters in Sime Road. Construction of this new headquarters began in 1941 and was completed in December of that year. Although Combined Operations Headquarters had been relocated to Sime Road, the Battle Box remained the Headquarters of the 'Fortress Commander, Singapore' who was responsible for the defense of Singapore Island. The Anti-Aircraft Gun Operations Room and Naval Extended Defences Offices also remained at the Battle Box.

The Sime Road location was abandoned after the Battle of Kranji when the Japanese were close to Bukit Timah and Bukit Panjang. Percival moved Combined Operations Headquarters to Fort Canning on 11 February 1942. By the later stages of the battle for Singapore, the Japanese were bombing the city area of Singapore, including Fort Canning, without encountering any military resistance. Fort Canning was also within range of the Japanese artillery, forcing personnel into the Battle Box. There were around 700 officers and men inside during the final stages of the battle.

Japanese forces occupied the Battle Box for a short period after the surrender, but it is not known for what purpose. Although Fort Canning was again used by the British after the war, as the Singapore Base Headquarters, the Battle Box remained empty and unused. It was sealed off in the late 1960s owing to safety concerns and over time its exact location was forgotten. The Battle Box was brought back into the public eye in 1988 when it was rediscovered by a journalist, who was following a number of leads claiming the existence of an underground bunker complex on Fort Canning Hill.

The Battle Box is now a museum depicting the final days of the Battle of Singapore. The museum was formally opened on 15 February 1997, on the 55th anniversary of the surrender of Singapore.



British officers at a meeting to decide the fate of Singapore

Clem McMurray lives in Australia. Professional activities took him to various Asian capitals for over eight years and led to his interest in Asian culture and history. His first visit to the Battle Box was a few years ago and he has now visited it several times.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore, including those from the collection of Lim Kheng Chye