

History of World War II: The Japanese March Through Southern Malaya and to Singapore's Outskirts, 80 Years Ago

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After the successful Japanese amphibious landings at Kota Bharu, northern British Malaya on 8 December 1941, in the 5 weeks that elapsed Tokyo's forces had advanced more than 200 miles to capture the Malayan capital city, Kuala Lumpur, on 11 January 1942. This was a remarkable achievement by the Japanese 25th Army, led by the 56-year-old General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who would earn the nickname "The Tiger of Malaya".

Mark E. Stille, a former United States Navy commander, wrote that "Of all the armies fielded by Japan during the war, the 25th Army was the best led and equipped" (1). On the ground, the distance that Yamashita's divisions had covered to capture Kuala Lumpur was much greater than 200 miles. They had to take arduous, roundabout routes in the face of substantially larger enemy forces, advancing through the Malayan jungle and along the coastline, before they entered Kuala Lumpur unopposed in central Malaya.

The island of Singapore, another 200 miles to the south-east of Kuala Lumpur, was now very vulnerable. Were Singapore to be taken by the Japanese it would constitute "the worst disaster" in British history, Winston Churchill wrote (2). This calamity for the British did unfold, on 15 February 1942, which will be the subject of the next article.

Almost immediately, the Japanese had gained command of the air over British Malaya (comprising today mostly of Malaysia), and they also dominated the surrounding seas. On 10 December 1941, Japanese aircraft had sunk the famous British warships the 'Prince of Wales' and 'Repulse', off the east coast of Malaya. News of the battleships' destruction came as a real blow to prime minister Churchill in London.

English military historian Antony Beevor wrote,

“Churchill, who had exulted in the great ships of the Royal Navy from his times as First Lord of the Admiralty, was stunned by the disaster. The tragedy felt even more personal to him, after his voyage in the *Prince of Wales* to Newfoundland in August [1941]. The Imperial Japanese Navy was now unchallenged in the Pacific. Hitler rejoiced at the news. It augured well for his declaration of war on the United States, announced on 11 December”. (3)

One indirect result of the early Japanese victories in south-east Asia, was that it had boosted the spirit of the Germans, at a time when their invasion of the Soviet Union was hitting the rocks. Japanese morale itself was very high, and a central factor in their advance through Malaya and elsewhere. The prominent British commander John Dill, in a memorandum to Churchill, had outlined that Singapore held more importance to Britain than the oil rich Middle East; because Singapore was “the most important strategic point in the British Empire” and “a stepping stone to Australia”. (4) (5)

In the final days of 1941 the British had already lost a prized possession, Hong Kong in south-eastern China, which was captured in a rapid Japanese assault. At this time, Japan’s forces were advancing through other Asian states namely British Borneo, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and the Philippines.

Like with the Japanese, the British had no rightful claim to territories such as Hong Kong. American intellectual and analyst Noam Chomsky said, “Hong Kong was stolen from China by British savagery, as part of their effort to destroy China in their huge narco-trafficking operations”. (6)

Regarding some of Britain’s other conquests Chomsky wrote,

“In extenuation, it could be noted that fostering drug production is hardly a US innovation: the British empire relied crucially on the most extraordinary narco-trafficking enterprise in world history, with horrifying effects in China and in India, much of which was conquered in an effort to gain a monopoly on opium production”. (7)

On 7 January 1942 the British General and Commander-in-Chief of India, Archibald Wavell, arrived in Malaya. He promptly attributed the Japanese successes, to date, as being due to errors committed by the British, refusing to give Yamashita’s men credit (8). Yet on the very day that General Wavell had landed in Malaya, along the Slim River the British-led divisions had suffered “The single most disastrous engagement of the entire Malaya campaign”, Stille stated (9); which he also described as “one of the most dramatic and significant actions of the entire Pacific War”. (10)

Stille is referring to the Battle of Slim River on 7 January 1942, which took place about 50 miles north of Kuala Lumpur. Thirty Japanese tanks supported by motorised infantry “rumbled down a single road machine-gunning and shooting up everything in their path”, inflicting 500 fatalities and capturing more than 3,000 British and Indian troops. By contrast the Japanese recorded fewer than 80 casualties during this battle.

The consequences were severe. Stille observed,

“It ensured the loss of central Malaya, and reduced the chances of holding southern Malaya long enough to enable the reinforcements flowing into Singapore to become fully effective”. (11)

Not resting on their gains the Japanese resumed their march southward, and 4 days later Kuala Lumpur was taken. In the capital, Japan's soldiers found large quantities of ammunition and supplies, left behind by the British (12). These reverses compelled Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival – in overall command of British and Commonwealth divisions in Malaya – to order a withdrawal to southern Malaya, towards the Muar District and Johore.



Lt. Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita (seated, center) insists upon the unconditional surrender of Singapore as Lt. Gen. Percival, seated between his officers, demurs (photo from Imperial War Museum) (Licensed under the public domain)

Allied to the British, the Australian forces laid a devilish trap at Gemencheh, around 150 miles north-west of Singapore. Soldiers from the Japanese 5th Division were in the process of crossing Gemencheh Bridge, at 4 pm on 14 January 1942. They were unaware that the Australians had mined the bridge with explosives. As the Japanese tanks, trucks and cyclists were traversing the bridge, a huge detonation erupted sending bodies, bicycles and armour hurtling into the air, a surreal and terrible sight.

Australian sources claimed to have inflicted 1,000 casualties on the enemy here; but the tally may have been as few as 70 deaths and 57 wounded, initially at least as the fighting continued (13). The Japanese quickly recovered from the shock at Gemencheh Bridge, and in following hours forced the Australians on to the backfoot. By nightfall on 16 January, the Japanese had captured Muar town and the harbour.

As early as 18 January 1942, Lieutenant-General Percival was mulling over whether to pull out of southern Malaya, and to relocate all of his forces to Singapore slightly further south, in order to bolster that island's defence. On 20 January, General Wavell instructed Percival to defend the southern Malayan region of Johore for as long as possible.

Also on 20 January, an angry Churchill issued an order demanding,

"I want to make it absolutely clear that I expect every inch of ground to be defended, every scrap of material or defences to be blown to pieces to prevent capture by the

enemy, and no question of surrender to be entertained until protracted fighting among the ruins of Singapore city". (14)

By 24 January, Percival had no choice but to compose an outline plan for a total withdrawal from the Malayan mainland, across the narrow Strait of Johore to Singapore (15). Churchill later expressed some sympathy for his beleaguered commander, writing that a "terrible load" had fallen "upon the shoulders of General Percival" (16). Between the 24th and 31st of January, the Australian troops retreated southward through Johore under Japanese pressure. The 11th Indian Infantry Division withdrew along the Malayan coastline, and was pursued by the Japanese Imperial Guards Division.

By the end of January 1942, some Indian and Australian units successfully reached Singapore, either by bridge or vessel across the Strait of Johore. The only road and rail lines, connecting Malaya to Singapore, was the Causeway at Johore Bahru, a kilometre long, 70 foot wide bridge. At 8:15 am on 31 January, the last British troops were safely over the Causeway and had entered Singapore. The Causeway was then destroyed with depth charges to prevent the Japanese from using it.

Seldom lacking in pride even in the most desperate circumstances, the British had conducted their retirement to Singapore in an orderly fashion. A Japanese lieutenant, Teruo Okada, when asked after the war what he thought of Britain's forces, had said, "We thought the British officer was a very good fighter, although the ones we captured they always said to me 'We will win the war, you see'. This I couldn't understand because here is a man who has surrendered, and he still said 'We will win the war'." (17)

There was, amazingly enough, no hint of panic from the British soldiers, and no congestion of armour or infantry over the Causeway to Singapore, a commendable action personally overseen by Percival, who has been much criticised.

Stille wrote that this "was certainly Percival's best-conducted operation of the campaign, and thwarted Yamashita's plans to destroy British forces before they could reach Singapore" (18). Yamashita was furious to learn that the Japanese aircraft, for some baffling reason which has never been properly explained, had failed to bomb the Causeway at Johore Bahru – which the British and their allies were pouring across, the most ideal target for enemy planes.

Otherwise, Yamashita should have been exuberant with how the fighting had proceeded. In less than 8 weeks, the Japanese had reached the Strait of Johore on 31 January 1942, a lot sooner than they had expected (19). The battle for the Malayan mainland was now over and the battle for Singapore was imminent. From the second half of January 1942, Singapore had been the primary target of Japanese air raids, which occurred each day and were launched against the British naval base in Singapore, along with the nearby airfields and port. The Japanese air superiority contributed to a sense of futility in defending Singapore for long.

The population of Singapore according to one source was 1,370,300 in 1939 (20); but a detailed study shows that the island's population in 1931 was 557,745, when the last census was compiled (21). About 75% of those living in Singapore by the 1930s were ethnic Chinese, with the remaining percentage consisting largely of Malays (11.7%) and ethnic Indians (9.1%). (22)

Singapore's majority Chinese population presumably viewed with alarm the Japanese approach – as they should have, considering how Japan's soldiers had conquered much of eastern China and sometimes committed dreadful atrocities. Of the approximately 70,000 combat soldiers and 15,000 service troops defending Singapore, only 13 of the 38 battalions in all were British, 17 were actually Indian battalions, and the remainder mostly Australians.

Just one of the 17 Indian battalions was at full strength. They had taken a pounding in the earlier fighting for Malaya. The British-led forces, despite suffering heavy personnel losses on the Malayan peninsula, still outnumbered the Japanese by at least 2-to-1, but the defenders for the most part were poorly trained and under-equipped. (23)

Singapore was a fortress in name only. There were no field defences or fortifications on the northern part of the island. Percival was determined to fight the Japanese on the beaches, and to prevent them from establishing a bridgehead. His plan had little chance of succeeding, due to the terrain's unsuitability and the lack of depth in defence (24). What's more, none of the officers subordinate to Percival had confidence in his strategy for defending Singapore, particularly the Australians, who were to endure most of the serious fighting.

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Notes

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2 Winston S. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate* (RosettaBooks, 11 May 2014) p. 81

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4 Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (Vintage Digital, July 6, 2010) p. 417

5 Donald J. Goodspeed, *The German Wars* (Random House Value Publishing, 2nd edition, 3 April 1985) p. 381

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7 *America's Other War: Terrorizing Columbia*, Doug Stokes, Foreword by Noam Chomsky, [Bloomsbury Collections](#)

8 Stille, *Malaya and Singapore 1941-42*, p. 68

9 *Ibid.*, p. 62

10 Ibid., p. 67

11 Ibid.

12 Alan Chanter, C. Peter Chen, Thomas Houlihan, Hugh Martyr, David Stubblebine, "Kuala Lumpur in WW2 History", [World War II Database](#)

13 Stille, Malaya and Singapore, 1941-42, p. 71

14 Ibid., p. 72

15 Ibid.

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21 Saw Swee Hock, Population Trends in Singapore, 1819-1967, Journal of Southeast Asian History, Cambridge University Press, March 1969, [p. 4 of 14, Jstor](#)

22 Ibid., p. 6 of 14

23 Stille, Malaya and Singapore 1941-42, p. 79

24 Ibid., p. 80

Featured image: General Tomoyuki Yamashita plans a successful assault by Japanese troops in Malaya (Licensed under the public domain)

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