

NO
44

The Fall of Singapore: 80 Years On



02
Reflections on War Memory:
80 Years Since the Fall



10
What About the Fall?

14
Remembrance through
Battle for Singapore

18
Piecing Together
Fragments of War

24
Sites of Memory:
Redeveloping Changi Chapel
and Museum and Reflections at
Bukit Chandu

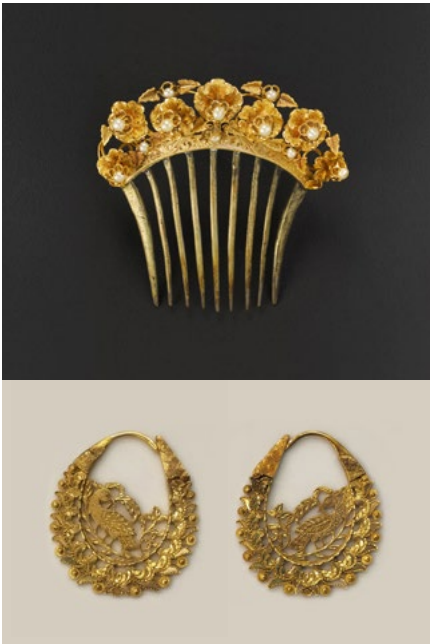


36
Singapore Discovery Centre:
Bringing Our Singapore
Stories to Life

44
Sembawang's Naval Past:
A Living Legacy

56
A Family's Gift:
Four Generations of Jewellery
from Negros Island, Philippines

66
Meet the Expert:
Ng Ching Huei



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COVER IMAGE:

A postcard depicting defeated British
troops with the Union Jack and the
white flag of surrender on 15 February,
1942. National Museum of Singapore
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A note from the MUSE SG team

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore—an event that altered the course of Singapore history forever. The British military surrendered to the Japanese invading forces on 15 February 1942, heralding the start of three-and-a-half years of military occupation. Even as eight decades, practically a lifetime, have passed since then, this dark period of our history ought to be remembered for generations to come—as we honour the memories of war survivors and reflect on how much our present has been shaped by it.

Our anchor section on the Fall of Singapore features Iskander Mydin's reflections on war memory; an opinion piece by history professor Brian Farrell that offers a sobering reminder of a nation's vulnerabilities and the far-reaching ramifications of the British military defeat; highlights of the annual *Battle for Singapore* programmes organised by the National Heritage Board; and a spotlight on collector-turned-researcher Lim Shao Bin's donation of fascinating WW2-related items as well as his recent research discoveries.

2021 was a year of rejuvenation for three museums. Site-based war museums Changi Chapel and Museum and Reflections at Bukit Chandu reopened after a facelift, each presenting strong narratives centred on their location history—as a former internment camp and as the site of a fierce battle fought by the Malay Regiment against Japanese troops, respectively. And we have the revamped Singapore Discovery Centre, which has been proudly telling stories of Singapore through their trademark edutainment approach for over 25 years. In these articles, we learn about the curatorial process behind their refreshed galleries.

We also take a deep dive into the history of Sembawang, the site of the newest heritage trail launched by the National Heritage Board, to discover its layered pasts including, famously, its naval history. The issue concludes with our regular columns: National Collection Spotlight and Meet the Expert. In the first, we delve into the history of an exquisite set of jewellery handed down four generations in the Filipino Montilla clan, and unearth the stories embedded within the artefacts. Finally, we feature a candid chat with seasoned heritage researcher Ng Ching Huei on what still makes him tick after more than two decades in the field.

We hope you will find this issue of *MUSE SG* thought-provoking, and we wish all our readers a fruitful 2022.

We welcome your feedback! Scan the QR code
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You can also get in touch with us at muse@nhb.gov.sg



Reflections on War Memory: 80 Years Since the Fall

With 80 years now behind us since the Fall of Singapore, it is timely to examine the gaps in war memory, and perhaps to look further towards postmemory to enrich current narratives.

Iskander Mydin
Curatorial Fellow,
National Museum of Singapore

This year is the 80th anniversary of the British surrender to the Japanese army in Singapore on 15 February 1942, also known as the Fall of Singapore. Much has since been written about the Fall, though with the hindsight of 80 years, much can now also be said about what is lacking in the corpus of literature relating to war memory. Besides paying attention to the missing voices, an examination of *postmemory* would enrich the discourse on war memory, which is especially timely as the generation of war survivors gradually passes on.

Transmission of Postmemory in Families

While the spotlight is often trained on the primary accounts of war survivors, there is in fact a great deal to unearth from the memories of war inherited by subsequent generations. These second-hand memories are referred to as postmemory, a term popularised by scholar Marianne Hirsch.

Postmemory originally refers to the inheritance of war memories by the children of war survivors. It is applied in this article broadly to also include grandchildren of survivors. Succeeding generations negotiate with the narratives, images and behaviours of the survivors who are now gone; in turn, their own retelling of the event adds



A section of the *Surviving Syonan* permanent exhibition on the Japanese Occupation, held at the National Museum of Singapore.

another dimension to the wealth of stories about the war, and enables them to avoid losing contact with the past.

The transmission of war memory across generations in the family is most likely carried out through anecdotal storytelling—in dialogue with another or as a cautionary tale from elder to younger. The latter then interprets and reconstructs the stories, and this provides a new layer to primary accounts. Additionally, how the stories were shared, received and treated as either meaningful or not is important in understanding how war memory is formed and sustained across time.

The following are some examples of postmemory encounters within the family. These experiences were shared by current and past National Museum of Singapore colleagues. First, a granddaughter has a vivid memory of her grandfather revealing his ill-treatment at the hands of Japanese soldiers and forbidding his family to purchase any Japanese-made goods for use at home.

Second, a son recalls that his father, born in the early 1950s and a football fan, would support any team playing against Japan or Germany, although he would also have some sympathy for Japan as an Asian country. He owned a Japanese-made car and the family bought Japanese household goods consistently. On the other hand, the maternal grandfather did not express any overt anti-Japanese sentiment, perhaps because he had worked for the Japanese as a driver during the war.

Third, a grandson did not inherit any memories of the war since both his parents and grandparents did not talk about it at all. And, finally, a granddaughter has only murky recollections from her grandfather.

Where there is little to no family transmission of war memories, the next generations are kept in the dark about what their elders might have gone through. The reasons for such exclusion

may not be clear—the trauma was perhaps too painful to be revisited—but the end result is a lack of awareness of the impact of war on the families. Each of these examples highlights how transmission of memories may occur (or not) and thus how they are woven into a family's biography of memories, which in turn enrich the overall tapestry of war memory in Singapore.

After the opening of the revamped Changi Chapel and Museum and Reflections at Bukit Chandu in 2021, there were enquiries addressed to the National Museum from descendants of former wartime officers. One was from the grandson of an Indian Army officer who fought in the Battle for Singapore and later won a Military Cross for his efforts in saving the lives of other wounded officers, and another from the grandson of a Malay non-commissioned officer in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. With only fragmented memories to start with, both individuals were searching for more details and the personal artefacts of their grandparents' war service. Thus, the museum is drawn into the realm of postmemory.

Within the National Museum's collection are some war medals donated in the 1980s which the museum hopes to reconnect with the awardees' descendants. In this way, the museum plays a role in expanding the postmemory of families. This can be especially meaningful for those who had little to no such encounters within their household. It is hoped that continued conversations on the war would spur younger generations to dig deeper into their family history and uncover the trove of (post)memories held by their grandparents or parents.



↑ Defence Medals awarded to war volunteers (from top) Julian Tay (NMS Z-0374) and Sahat bin Tahir (NMS Z-0371). The museum hopes to reconnect these medals, donated in the 1980s, with the current descendants of the awardees.

CONTRADICTIONS OF WAR MEMORY AND CONSUMPTION

In the decades that followed the war, Singapore embarked on rapid industrialisation, and one of its strategies was to tap on the strengths and success of Japan's industries. This saw the entry of Japanese-made goods such as rice cookers, electric fans and transistor radios into the local market, and these products became popular in many Singaporean households.

Interestingly, a survey conducted by the *Singapore Standard* newspaper in 1950 on the sentiments of local residents regarding a possible return of Japanese businesses to Singapore revealed a negative reaction. It appeared that the scars of the war remained fresh and the memory of the war was still too painful to be comfortable with Japanese businesses operating in Singapore.

Some of these commodities are now in the National Museum's collection. With the above context in mind, the contradictions that exist within the self, as well as between the people's war memory and the state's pragmatic approach to postwar economic development and international relations, are laid bare. As such, the objects gain a new interpretive layer to their biographies as museum artefacts.



NOTE

- 1 Please note that the ethnic term used in the headline is considered offensive.

- 1 A survey conducted by the *Singapore Standard* in 1950 on the possible return of Japanese businesses to Singapore, 17 September 1950.¹ NMS 2007-55180



- 2 From the 1960s, as Singapore ramped up its economic development, Japanese-made products entered the local market. Many of these goods, such as rice cookers and cassette players, became popular household items.

LEFT National brand rice cooker with original box, 1960s. NMS 2008-01550

RIGHT Sony radio cassette recorder, 1970s–84. NMS 2010-04930



Overlooked War Memory

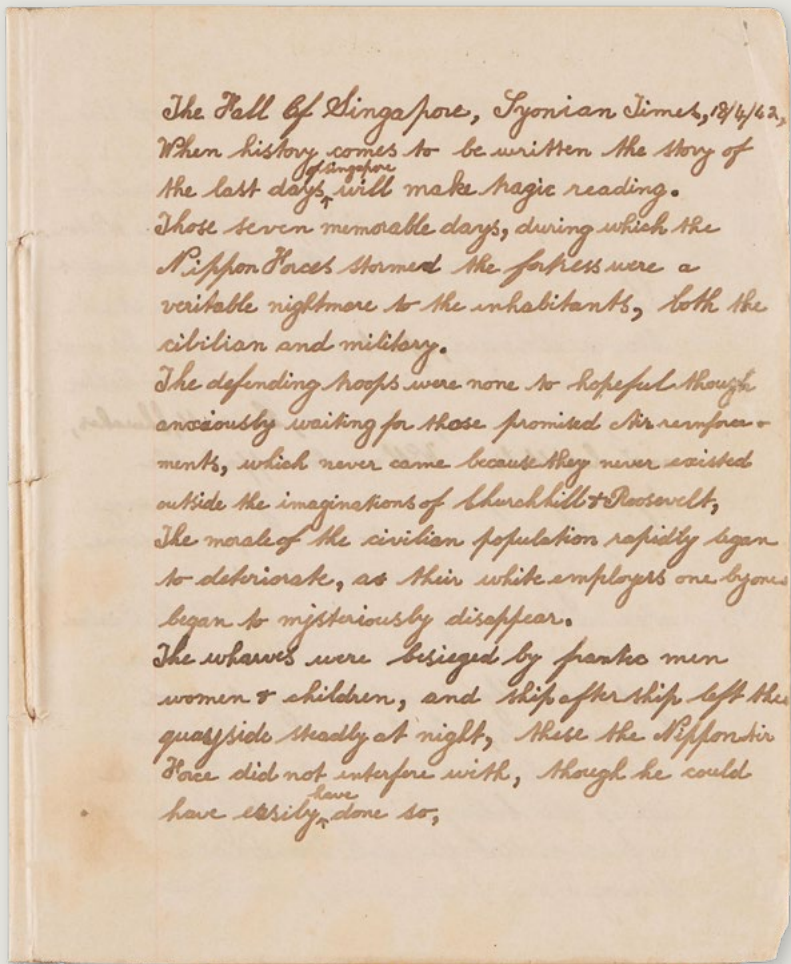
Under imprisonment in Changi, some prisoners of war and civilian internees documented their prison memories in the form of notebooks, sketches, diaries and so on, many of which have not been fully explored as war memory. One example comes from the surviving notebook of prisoner of war Sergeant John Ritchie Johnston, who wrote his recollections in the hope that a “history of the last days of Singapore” would come to be written.

Another example is a sketch drawn like a plaque illustrating the battle trajectory of the Royal Artillery’s 122nd Field Regiment, from the regiment’s opening shots in December 1941 right up to the British surrender.

These forms of war memory—from-below deserve to have their place alongside the well-known war memoirs of generals, such as *Why Singapore Fell* (1944) by Australian commander General Gordon Bennett and *The Road to Malaya* (1949) by General Arthur Percival, as well as the latter’s earlier despatch published in British newspapers and in the local *Straits Times* in 1948.

These forms of war memory—from-below deserve to have their place alongside the well-known war memoirs of generals.

Another category of war memory that merits greater attention is the journalism of foreign war correspondents and newspaper columnists. These include war correspondent Ian Morrison’s coverage in his book *Malayan Postscript* (1942) written three months after the surrender; and columnist Dorothy Crisp’s wartime book, *Why We Lost Singapore* (1943), based on interviews with serving soldiers. Reading them now is to follow their narratives of the impending collapse and to re-enact in our minds those “last days”, in the words of Sergeant Johnston.



➤ Sergeant J.R. Johnston’s notebook in which he wrote his recollections of the “last days of Singapore”, 1942. The notebook is on display at the Changi Chapel and Museum. NMS 2018-00763

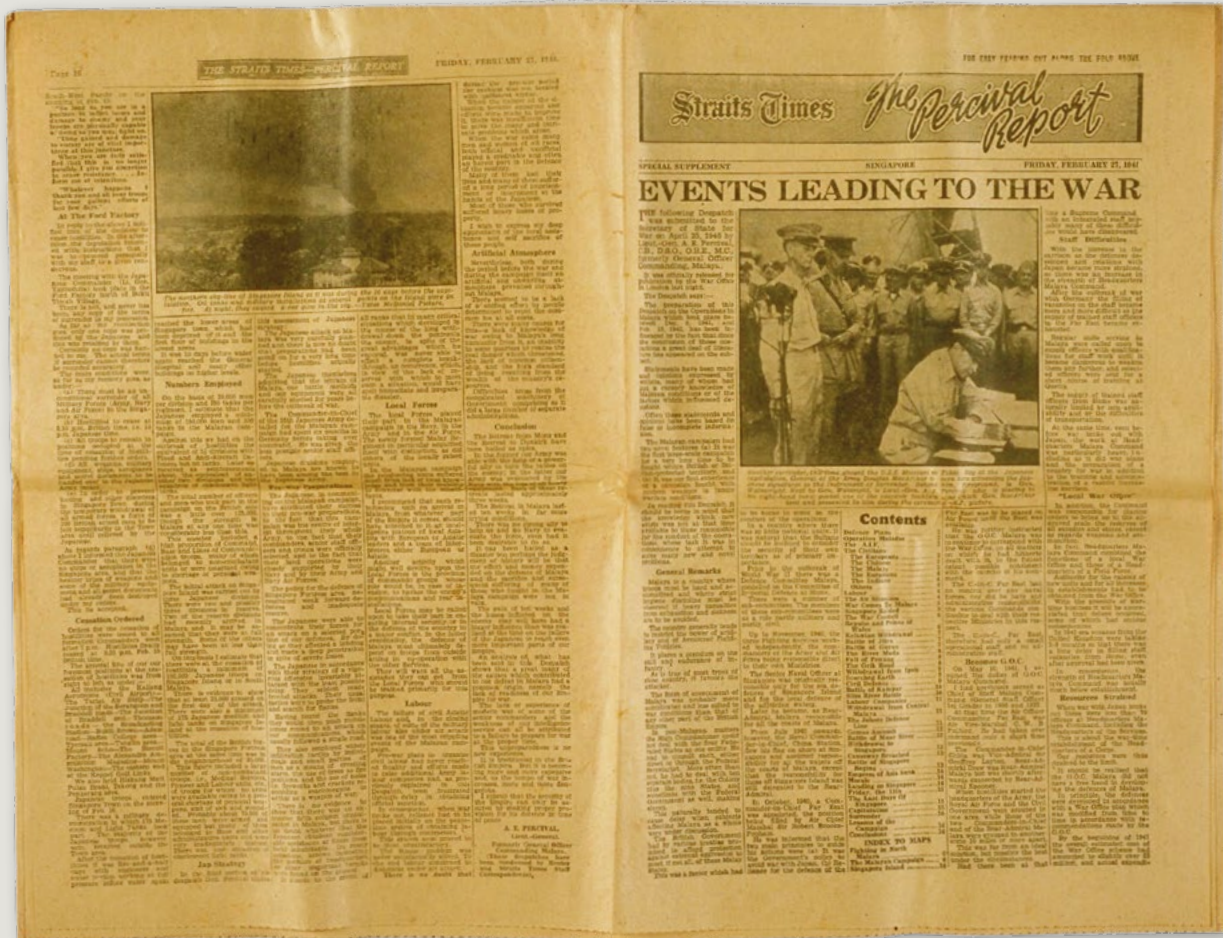
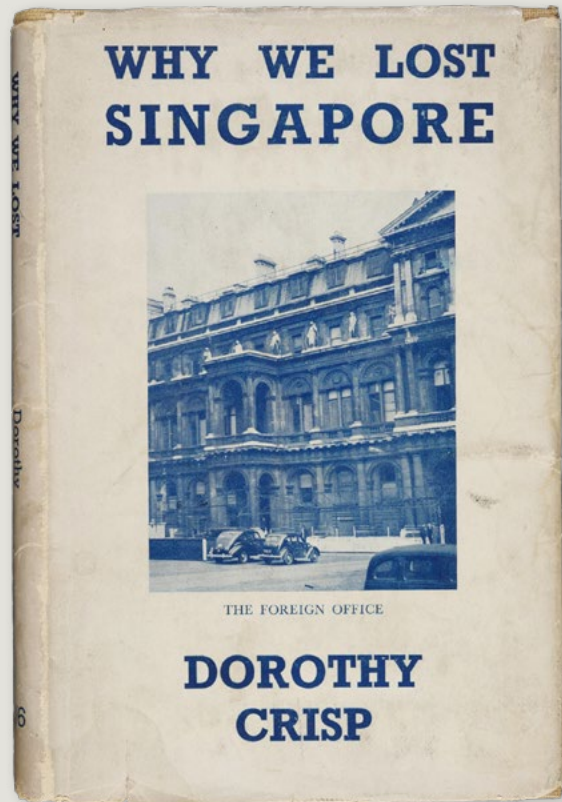


➤ A sketch, artist unknown, illustrating the battle trajectory of the Royal Artillery’s 122nd Field Regiment, circa 1942. This drawing is on display at the Changi Chapel and Museum. NMS 2017-00299

➤ Front page of the *Morning Tribune*, 27 February 1948, with General Arthur Percival’s take on the British defeat as the main story. NMS XXXX-03521-001

➔ Newspaper columnist Dorothy Crisp wrote her wartime book, *Why We Lost Singapore* (1943), based on interviews with serving soldiers. NMS 2010-02709

⬇️ *The Straits Times*, 27 February 1948, featuring a special supplement, 'The Percival Report', which provides General Arthur Percival's account of the Malayan Campaign leading up to the British surrender. NMS 2001-00216-002



Missing Voices

Although there is a seemingly vast amount of literature on war memory, compared to the volume of published accounts by European combatants, those of non-European combatants and local volunteers are still not on the same scale. In particular, notwithstanding some historians' efforts to highlight the contributions of Indian Army contingents to the British war effort,¹ the war memory of Indian Army soldiers in Singapore, who formed the largest contingent of Allied troops, has not been adequately covered.

The surrender of the British resulted in 45,000 captured Indian Army soldiers, who were assembled on the field at Farrer Park on 17 February 1942 by the British commander on Japanese orders. It was here that the soldiers had to decide whether to remain as prisoners of war, or to join the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army (INA) at the urging of officers who had earlier gone over to the Japanese side. One soldier recounted his mental struggle the night before he decided to join INA and took a personal vow to free India.² In his searing memory, Farrer Park was the birthplace of INA.³

This phase of INA's history was subsumed by the re-emergence of an INA led by Subhas Chandra Bose in Japanese-occupied Singapore in 1943, which became the dominant postmemory of INA. It is perhaps timely to have a divergent reading of the overlooked Farrer Park assembly as a turning point in subaltern self-awakening for the mass of prisoners who chose to join INA, in contrast to the sense of loss and betrayal as expressed in much of British and Australian war memory.

Other perspectives that would also be worthwhile looking into are those of the descendants of local volunteer units including the Singapore Volunteer Corps, Dalforce and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve; and of civilians like the air-raid precaution wardens, nurses, firefighters and labourers who removed debris and

retrieved corpses after Japanese aerial bombings. These war memories (or postmemories from their descendants) are necessary to balance British and Australian war memory, and for the Asian subaltern to move from a peripheral position in war histories to a more nuanced one with some agency.

A Continued Resonance

Today, the Singapore Civil Defence Force sounds the public-warning siren throughout Singapore every 15 February at 6.20 pm (local time), marking the nation's postmemory reminder of the surrender. Everyone in the city-state, young and old, is reminded of this dark period in Singapore's history.

One cannot ignore the impact of the Fall of Singapore upon new generations. As we look back 80 years to the surrender, narratives big or small emerge, embedded within our family, the community and the nation. Commemoration, after all, is about retelling and remembering, and the act of doing so can be generative and meaningful. As long as succeeding generations are willing to engage with their postmemories, commemorative anniversaries can resonate even with the passage of time.

Commemoration, after all, is about retelling and remembering, and the act of doing so can be generative and meaningful.

NOTES

1. Yasmin Khan, *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia 1939-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
2. Gurbakhsh Singh Dhillon, *From My Bones: Memoirs of Col. Gurbakhsh Singh Dhillon of the Indian National Army (including 1945 Red Fort Trial)*. (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1999), 96.
3. *Ibid.*, 541.



What About the Fall?

The far-reaching consequences of the 1942 British defeat in Singapore are a sobering reminder of the reality of a nation's vulnerabilities.

Professor Brian P. Farrell
Department of History,
National University of Singapore

↑ Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew with Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker (on Lee's right) at a meeting with the defence chiefs of the nations in the Five Power Defence Arrangements, 1969.
Australian News and Information Bureau, National Archives of Australia

The Fall of Singapore to the Japanese 80 years ago underlines concretely a cardinal fact: A country may well have friends in this world, but when real trouble comes—and it can come fast and unpredictably—they may be too busy to rush to your side. The only people who will always see your defence as the absolute and constant top priority are your own.

This is the foremost reason for National Service in Singapore—a duty that generations of Singaporeans have taken up. It is also the foundation for the concept known as Total Defence, which Singapore commemorates every year on 15 February, the date of the British surrender. Looking back eight decades, literally a lifetime, means that enough time has passed to allow us to think more penetratingly about the consequences of the Fall of Singapore not just locally, but also on the international level.

Impact of the Fall on Singapore and the World

Before the Pacific War, the British Empire had been the largest and most important Western power in East and Southeast Asia. But the loss of Singapore in the war opened the door to fundamental change: The United States

took on the burden of carrying the war to Japan and played the main role in defeating it. As a result, the United States replaced the British as the most important Western power in Asia.

The speed and ease with which the Japanese overran Singapore in 1942 also dealt a crippling blow to British prestige, with longer-term political consequences that paved the road for decolonisation. The event altered the psychology and politics of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Significantly, the question among the people had changed from 'Would the region decolonise?' to 'When and how would it do so, and to what effect?' Unlike earlier postwar views that the Fall would lead to the swift departure of the British from Singapore, the decoupling took a more realistic and extended process, with the British remaining a major force in the region until the 1970s.

The Fall also highlighted a military fact: the Malay Peninsula and the island of Singapore were strategically indivisible. If one was compromised, the other would be placed in grave danger. And this was partly why the Five Power Defence Arrangements was established in 1971 following the British military withdrawal from Singapore. Now over five decades old, this military pact is still going strong.



The [Fall of Singapore] had altered the psychology and politics of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Significantly, the question among the people had changed from 'Would the region decolonise?' to 'When and how would it do so, and to what effect?'



↓ The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) contingent at the SAF Day Parade of 2002. The Fall of Singapore highlighted the vulnerability of the nation, and thus the need for its own military to defend it against external threats.

Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



STUDYING THE FALL

Written mostly by Western academics and non-academics including British and Australian war veterans, there is an enormous amount of literature on the British military defeat. These texts are largely concerned with pinning blame on the party deemed responsible for the defeat and studying what had led to it.

Who were to blame for the Fall: army planners in London; British Prime Minister Winston Churchill; the colonial officials in Singapore; the generals and the soldiers in the battle; or the state of Britain in the interwar period? Some publications of the last decade—including *The Men Who Lost Singapore 1938–1942* (2017) and *A Great Betrayal? The Fall of Singapore Revisited* (2010)—tell us that this old debate which began in 1942 continues to haunt the present.

Controversies over the battles of 1941–42 persist, but they remain for the most part arguments between the countries whose armies fought to defend Singapore, especially the British and the Australians. Both withheld many of their official records for more than 50 years before allowing researchers access, reflecting how sensitive the defeat still remained.

A flurry of scholarship mined those records before and after the turn of the century, but for more than a decade now no new interpretation or archival material has added much to our understanding of the story. Only the oldest surviving Singaporeans can still bear witness to the day the Japanese marched into Raffles Place. But their descendants now have a rich tapestry of different forms of commemoration, interpretation and scholarly works by which they can try to understand their forebears’ experiences.

THESE INCLUDE:

- Toh Boon Kwan, “It Was a Thrill to See Rows of B-29s Going Through the Sky’: The American Strategic Bombing of Singapore, 1944–45,” *Journal of Military History*, vol. 73, no. 30 (July 2009), 905–24.
- Toh Boon Kwan, “Black and Silver: Perceptions and Memories of the B-29 Bomber, American Strategic Bombing and the Longest Bombing Missions of the Second World War on Singapore,” *War & Society*, vol. 39, no. 2 (March 2020), 1–17.
- National Museum of Singapore, *Surviving Syonan* (exhibition), 2017, ongoing.
- Tommy Koh and Scott Wightman, eds., *200 Years of Singapore and the United Kingdom* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2018).
- Brian P. Farrell, et al., *Pointer*, no. 6, special issue “Malayan Campaign 1941–42: Lessons for ONE SAF”.



Surviving Syonan is a permanent exhibition on the Japanese Occupation, held at the National Museum of Singapore.

Remembering the War

Singapore’s efforts to digest, reflect on, learn from and commemorate its Second World War experience, including the Japanese conquest, now stretch back some three decades. Heritage plaques were installed at significant war sites in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. This in turn led to concerted efforts over the next two decades to strengthen the heritage presence at an array of sites: Changi Museum, Battle Box at Fort Canning, the coastal artillery batteries at Fort Siloso and Labrador Park, and the military history museum at the Former Ford Factory.

The opening of Reflections at Bukit Chandu, a museum and historic site dedicated to the contributions of the Malay Regiment during the Battle for Singapore, was particularly poignant. The Second World War experience, including the brief but consequential military struggle to defend the peninsula and the island, forms a highly visible theme in the history and heritage engagement that modern Singapore has worked to provide for residents and visitors alike.

The Defence and Fall of Singapore also continue to form a significant component of the National Education programme, which is now a generation old. However, there remains a tendency to focus more on the Japanese Occupation than on the Fall of Singapore. This is understandable, given how much longer the occupation lasted, and how comprehensively it affected the entire population of the island.

Nonetheless, it is important to remind Singaporeans—via National Education and other forums—that these experiences cannot be understood fully if they are detached from the wider global turmoil that caused them in the first place, and within which they unfolded. Singapore remains fundamentally dependent on its ability to engage the world; its Second World War experience, particularly why it became a Japanese target, and why the British failed to repel their invasion, underlines this in stark historical terms.

The Battle for Singapore took place in Singapore, and it will certainly remain a landmark in the nation’s history. But let’s not forget that it was in fact an international event, part of a global war, and today’s global city-state of Singapore is now ready to engage it in that context.

Remembrance through *Battle for Singapore*

A signature initiative of the Museum Roundtable, the *Battle for Singapore* umbrella of programmes has been running since 2012, with exclusive guided tours to war sites being the highlights of each edition. *MUSE SG* takes a brief look at this series.

The arrival of Japanese troops on Singapore shores on 8 February 1942 heralded the start of the Second World War in Singapore. Eighty years on, the indignities of war and its lessons are commemorated by those of us living in Singapore, so that we do not take the peace we have for granted. Every year, over the span of a few weekends, the Fall of Singapore is remembered through *Battle for Singapore* (BSG), organised by the National Heritage Board (NHB), the Museum Roundtable and other heritage partners.

Through a diverse lineup of tours, programmes and activities, *BSG* aims to raise public awareness of Singapore's Second World War history as well as celebrate the tenacity and resilience of war heroes during one of the darkest periods in Singapore's history.

Remembering the Fall

While national commemoration of the Second World War started in earnest in the 1980s with the opening of the Changi Chapel and Museum, *BSG* began in 2012 when NHB kickstarted a year-long commemoration of the Fall of Singapore on the occasion of its 70th anniversary.

That year, significantly, the only surviving prewar civilian air-raid shelter in Tiong Bahru was restored and opened for NHB's guided tours, allowing visitors to get a taste of being in an air-raid shelter hiding from aerial strikes. A range of exhibitions by NHB was also held in conjunction with the commemoration, including *Four*



The air-raid shelter in Tiong Bahru, which was restored and opened for guided tours in 2012.

Days in February: Adam Park the Last Battle, co-curated with the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS); and *Images of Internment: The Eye and Art of William Haxworth*, co-presented with SHS and the National Library Board.

Since the inaugural nationwide commemorative effort, NHB has put together yearly programmes under the umbrella of *BSG* to remember the war. A signature initiative of the Museum Roundtable, the largest museum network in Singapore, *BSG* sees the participation of a host of member museums with their own programmes and exhibitions. These include the Former Ford Factory, Singapore Discovery Centre and Eurasian Heritage Gallery, among many others. Together, they contribute to a wide-ranging calendar of events for the public, offering diverse perspectives on wartime Singapore.

War Sites Less Travelled

Beyond prominent war sites such as the Former Ford Factory (where the surrender of Singapore took place) and Fort Siloso on Sentosa (Singapore's sole surviving coastal fort), *BSG* features special guided tours to lesser-known locations that are not typically open to the public. These exclusive tours have consistently been the highlight of *BSG*, attracting droves of adventurous participants who seek an off-the-beaten-path experience of wartime memory.

Besides the Tiong Bahru air-raid shelter, restricted sites that were part of past *BSG* lineups include Marsiling Tunnels (2014; former fuel reserve depot used by the Royal Air Force and later by the Japanese occupation forces), Attap Valley Bunker (2015; last surviving bunker of the British Naval Base's Armament Depot), Former View Road Hospital (2020; the British coordinated the defence of the Causeway and aerial operations via the watchtower of the building, which was then the highest vantage point in Woodlands), and restricted areas in the compounds of Fort Siloso (2021; including a forgotten

searchlight post, a submarine mine defence casement and Siloso Pier), which was one of a series of forts protecting the entrance of the harbour during the Second World War.



BSG 2022: A Milestone Remembrance

This year, Singapore commemorates the 80th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore, and the nation will embark on a milestone remembrance with the ninth edition of *BSG*. Held from 12 February to 6 March, over four weekends, *BSG 2022* promises an enriching experience for all.

This year's *BSG* will continue to offer different vignettes into Singapore's wartime history. Besides the participation of the two newly reopened WW2 interpretive centres—Changi Chapel and Museum and Reflections at Bukit Chandu—other Museum Roundtable members that will come on board include the National Museum of Singapore,

↑ Participants descending the stairs towards the former Siloso Pier, which is located near the entrance of Fort Siloso in Sentosa.



↑ **TOP** Participants on a guided tour of the Former View Road Hospital, 2020. During the Battle for Singapore, the British coordinated the defence of the Causeway and aerial operations via the watchtower of the building which was then the highest vantage point in Woodlands.

ABOVE A guided tour of Bukit Brown Cemetery at *BSG 2020*. The cemetery was the site of a fierce battle between Allied forces and the Japanese army during the Battle for Singapore.

Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital Heritage Gallery, Former Ford Factory and more. In addition to crowd favourites such as guided walks at Bukit Brown Cemetery, *BSG 2022* will encompass new special-access tours that will unravel and re-examine episodes in the lead-up to the outbreak of war as well as Singapore's experience during the Japanese Occupation.

Augmenting the myriad tours, talks and programmes is a 'hike and seek' activity, which will take a treasure hunt approach to encourage members of the public to locate war sites and structures all over Singapore. Taking advantage of renewed hiking interest due to the pandemic travel restrictions, this digital activity (which will take place on the I Love Museums Facebook page) aims to spur the public to go out and explore significant war sites on their own.

The yearly commemoration of the Fall of Singapore is a time of remembrance. While it may revisit and reopen old wounds for some; for the younger generations, the occasion allows them to better empathise with what their elders have undergone and connect with the lessons of resilience and fortitude gleaned from this traumatic period in Singapore history. In doing so, *BSG* offers a precious opportunity for reflection on the scars of war, while countering complacency during peacetime.



Find out more about the *Battle for Singapore 2022* programme lineup by scanning this QR code!

Piecing Together Fragments of War

MUSE SG met with collector-turned-researcher Lim Shao Bin to view the artefacts he is donating to the National Heritage Board, and to catch up on his latest research discoveries.



Collector-turned-researcher Lim Shao Bin spent over four decades collecting materials relating to the Japanese military invasion of Singapore during the Second World War. He now spends his time researching the wartime biochemical warfare unit in Singapore known as OKA 9420.

At 64 years of age, Lim Shao Bin wears a youthful demeanour—and this is accentuated when his eyes light up as he shares the stories behind an artefact from his personal collection. Lim began collecting materials relating to Japanese military history in Singapore and Southeast Asia in the 1980s while he was a student in Japan. Over the course of four decades, he amassed a trove of printed materials and artefacts.

After his retirement in 2018, Lim stopped expanding his collection and began researching in earnest. During this time, he also felt that his collection would be put to better use in the hands of national institutions. Thus, he began discussions with the National Heritage Board (NHB) and the National Library Board to donate materials to them for preservation and make them accessible to researchers.

Lim's recent donation to NHB comprises a rare photograph of the Causeway that was blown up by the British prior to the invasion, several Japanese stamp

booklets with seals commemorating the Fall of Singapore which were distributed as war propaganda, and two silk maps used by Allied pilots escaping Japanese military attacks. These artefacts will be added to the National Collection with the aim of broadening our perspectives and understanding of the war.

MUSE SG met up with Lim to catch up on his latest research discoveries and to take a closer look at the artefacts he is donating to NHB.

1

During the Japanese invasion of Malaya, retreating British troops set off two explosions on the Causeway on 31 January 1942 in order to impede the advance of enemy forces.

This photograph, probably taken in early February, shows the Causeway with a section of it missing after the explosions, while a large plume of black smoke billows from inland Singapore.

Taken by correspondents of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the photograph was widely published in Japanese newspapers during the war. This is one of the first war-related items that Lim Shao Bin collected.



A traditional hobby in Japan that has persisted to the present day is collecting unique stamps or seals known as *goshuin* (御朱印) from temples and shrines. The unique seals are collected during a visit to the religious sites and typically stamped in a booklet as a keepsake.

Besides religious sites, other Japanese entities such as the national postal service also issued stamps. These stamps served as a propaganda tool during wartime, and their widespread domestic consumption helped shore up popular support for the war.



This seal booklet (above) includes two postage stamps that commemorate the Fall of Singapore.

The red stamp features a portrait of General Nogi Maresuke of the Imperial Japanese Army, while the green stamp depicts Marshal-Admiral Togo Heihachiro of the Imperial Japanese Navy. On the left and right sides of each stamp are two lines of vertical text that read 'The Fall' and 'Singapore' respectively. The seals surrounding the postage stamps in the booklet are collected from various temples and shrines.

3

During the Second World War, Japan's postal service issued a special series of seals commemorating the country's military conquests in various parts of the world, including Singapore.

In this booklet we see a number of seals depicting the Fall of Singapore. These seals functioned as part of the war propaganda to ramp up popular support for the war.

On these pages, we see the sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* (top right, in red ink) and the aerial bombardment of Malaya by Japanese planes (bottom left, in green ink).



4

This is a seal catalogue published in Manchuria, December 1943.

The series offers an account of the conquests of the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second World War. Lim discovered this catalogue in a bookshop on Kanda Street in Japan by chance, buried underneath a pile of books. It was this publication that spurred him to embark on a search for more WW2-related stamps and seals.

The stamp on the open page of the booklet (below) depicts the start of the invasion on 8 February 1942, after Japanese forces crossed the Johor Strait into Singapore. The stamp on the bottom left celebrates the invasion of Singapore town on 11 February after Japanese troops broke through British defence lines.

The stamp on the bottom right depicts the signing of the surrender of Singapore on 15 February. General Yamashita Tomoyuki, who led the Imperial Japanese Army, is shown seated on the far left.



【大本營發表】(二月十一日午後八時三十分)

本十一日早朝来戦場なる敵の抵抗を撃破して進撃を續行中なる帝國陸軍部隊は、午前八時シンガポール市街に突入し敗殘英軍を隨所に捕捉蹂躪しつつあり。

(25)

【大本營發表】(二月十五日午後十時十分)

マレー方面帝國陸軍部隊は本十五日午後七時五十分シ



ンガポール島要塞の敵軍をして無條件降服せしめたり。

(26)

5

Known as an ‘escape map’, these two silk maps would have been likely used by Allied pilots during an escape.

The map on the right depicts the the Burma-China Road and the wider areas surrounding it. The road had been built to transport supplies up to Chongqing, and Allied pilots were tasked to protect the route. The fabric could be easily hidden in a sock should they be caught and searched by hostile forces.

The silk map below showing the border of Yunnan, China and Vietnam includes an additional sidebar with translated texts appealing for help. If the pilot was lucky and encountered a local, he could make use of the printed translations in various local languages explaining his predicament in order to seek help.

After eight decades, these silk maps are still in pristine condition, a testament to their high-quality manufacturing.



A Consummate Collector-Turned-Researcher

These days, Lim spends most of his time researching OKA 9420—the Singapore branch of the biological and chemical warfare department of the Imperial Japanese Army known as Unit 731. He has been trying uncover more about this clandestine wartime department and its activities in Southeast Asia, especially Singapore. Lim is involved in Japanese research associations dedicated to studying Unit 731, and regularly presents talks and publishes papers on the subject.

When asked why he decided to focus his research on this aspect of the war, Lim shared: “This is my way of preventing a war from occurring again—by revealing its dehumanising effects.” Lim, in fact, has a personal connection with the war: his grandfather had been brutally killed in Melaka by Japanese soldiers shortly after Japan’s surrender. On a personal level, researching the war was a means of making sense of the loss.

The death of Lim’s grandfather greatly altered the family’s fortunes, bearing consequences that rippled through generations. Due to the untimely demise of his grandfather, his own father did not complete his primary school education, and thus could only find work as a shopkeeper. There was little joy in his father’s growing-up years as the family lived in a state of poverty.

Making Sense of Fragments

Even though Singapore was the Southeast Asia headquarters of Unit 731, there is scant information on the kinds of experiments that were carried out there. But what we do know now, thanks to Lim’s research, was that officers of OKA 9420 had carried out experiments to breed rats carrying diseases such as the bubonic plague. These were to be used during the war as biological weapons. Large numbers of rats were imported into Singapore for this purpose.

Despite making such headway, OKA 9420 is still largely shrouded in mystery, with primary information not forthcoming. Whatever official documents for Unit 731 left behind had in fact been buried in the innocuous-sounding category, ‘Medical Services’, at the Japanese national archives.

Although it is now known that OKA 9420 was located in the present-day College of Medicine Building, which houses the Ministry of Health today, the storage facility for its medical supplies could not be determined. Lim was stumped for a long time. After trawling through the national archives of Japan, Britain and Singapore, he eventually found a British Military Administration record of the Japanese military declaring five storage locations, with Tanglin as the headquarters of medical supplies. Cross-referencing this with a hand-drawn map by a former OKA 9420 officer, Lim discovered that the military barracks at Dempsey Hill had been the storage location for OKA 9420.

Another recent proud discovery by Lim is research papers published by medical officers working in Unit 731, including those from Singapore’s OKA 9420. Out of over 140 papers originating from OKA 9420, Lim has found 68 reports, and he hopes to locate more of them to better understand the kinds of experiments carried out by the division.

Lim considers such findings to be very meaningful: “It is the piecing together of different sources and fragments to form a coherent story amid the incoherence of war.” Even after almost eight decades since the war, there are still gaps in what we know about this chapter in Singapore’s history. But because of dedicated researchers like Lim, new facts are being unearthed, which contribute to a fuller picture of the war and its atrocities. Importantly, this knowledge reminds us never to take peacetime for granted.



[Researching] is my way of preventing a war from occurring again—by revealing its dehumanising effects.



Sites of Memory:

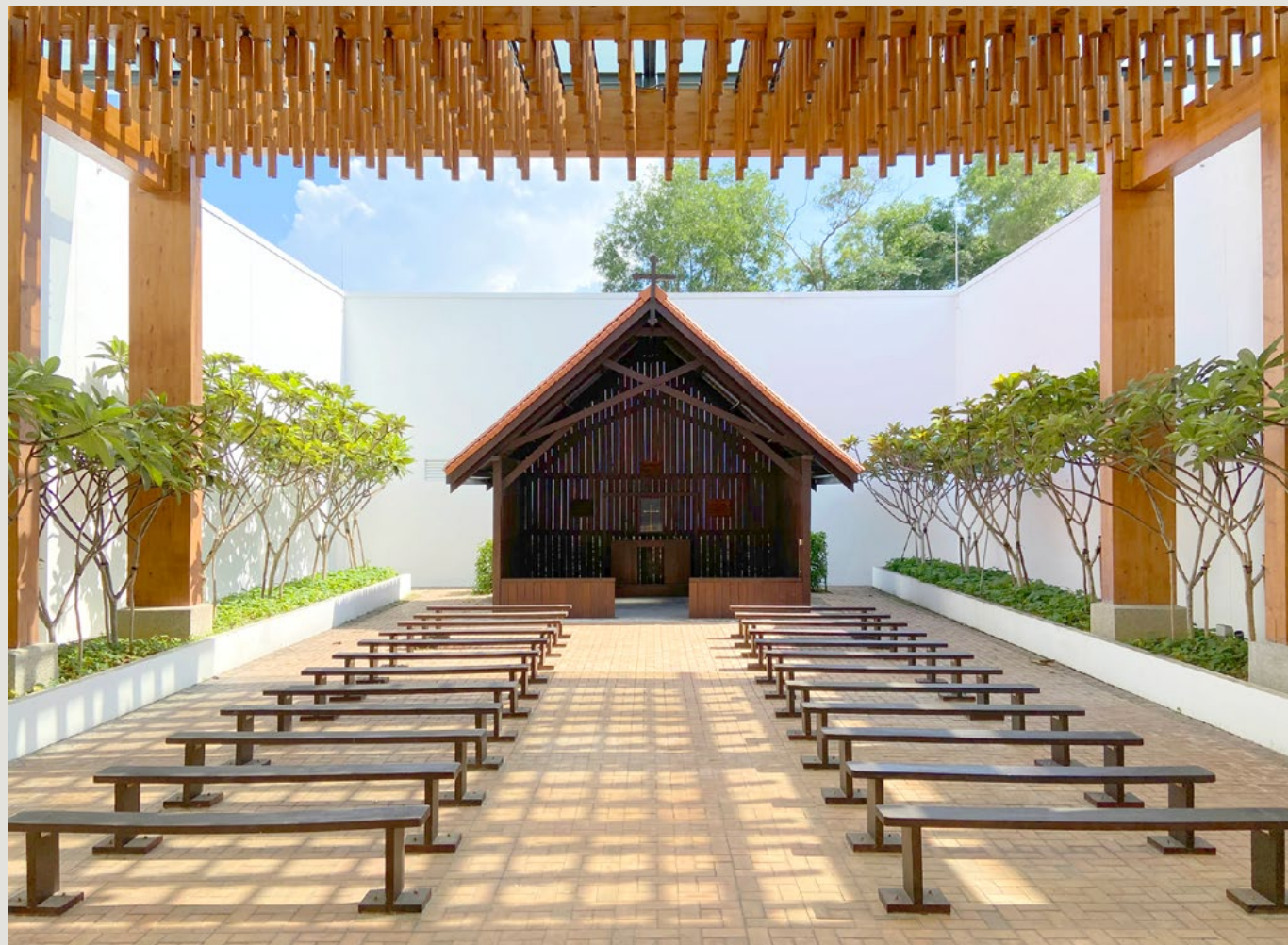
Redeveloping Changi Chapel and Museum and Reflections at Bukit Chandu

The revamped galleries of two war museums tell powerful and moving stories embedded deeply in their respective locations.

Rachel Eng
Assistant Curator, National Museum of Singapore

Changi Chapel and Museum

This war museum chronicles the experiences of internees at Changi prison camp after the Fall of Singapore. Visitors learn about the hardships that the internees went through as well as the resourcefulness that they showed.



There is something different about site museums like Reflections at Bukit Chandu (RBC) and Changi Chapel and Museum (CCM). Each tells stories of events that happened on the very site that visitors are standing on, bringing them ever closer to the past.

RBC and CCM commemorate specific events of the Second World War that are strongly tied to their locations. Along with other site museums such as the Former Ford Factory, they provide the depth to match the breadth of the overarching story of the invasion and occupation told at the National Museum of Singapore. As we curators approached these two museums for the revamp, we wanted to ensure that the stories told would well reflect the key perspectives of what occurred at each site.

Reflections at Bukit Chandu

This interpretive centre focuses on the local Malay Regiment during the battle of Pasir Panjang against the Japanese forces—in particular, the valiant last fight put up by the 'C' Company on Bukit Chandu.

← LEFT

A replica of St George's Church, one of the places of worship built by prisoners of war during their internment, at Changi Chapel and Museum.

↑ ABOVE

A sculpture at the entrance of Reflections at Bukit Chandu depicting soldiers from the Malay Regiment firing a mortar round.

Setting the Context

At RBC, the focus is on the battle of Bukit Chandu, which was defended on 14 February 1942 by the Malay Regiment's 'C' Company. Titled *Bukit Chandu: Battle Point 226*, the exhibition features the Malay Regiment's actions during the Battle for Singapore and commemorates the military position atop Bukit Chandu where the 'C' Company gave their lives in battle. Making use of both the everyday name and military reference in the title acknowledges not only the importance of these events to the story of the hill, but also the importance of Bukit Chandu to the story of the Battle for Singapore.

Meanwhile, CCM shares the experiences of prisoners of war and civilians interned at the Changi prison camp during the occupation years. The museum covers the internment and traces the journeys of various soldiers, starting from their role in the Fall of Singapore to their imprisonment.



➤ **TOP**
An exhibition view of *Bukit Chandu: Battle Point 226*, which remembers the Malay Regiment's fierce battle against enemy forces.

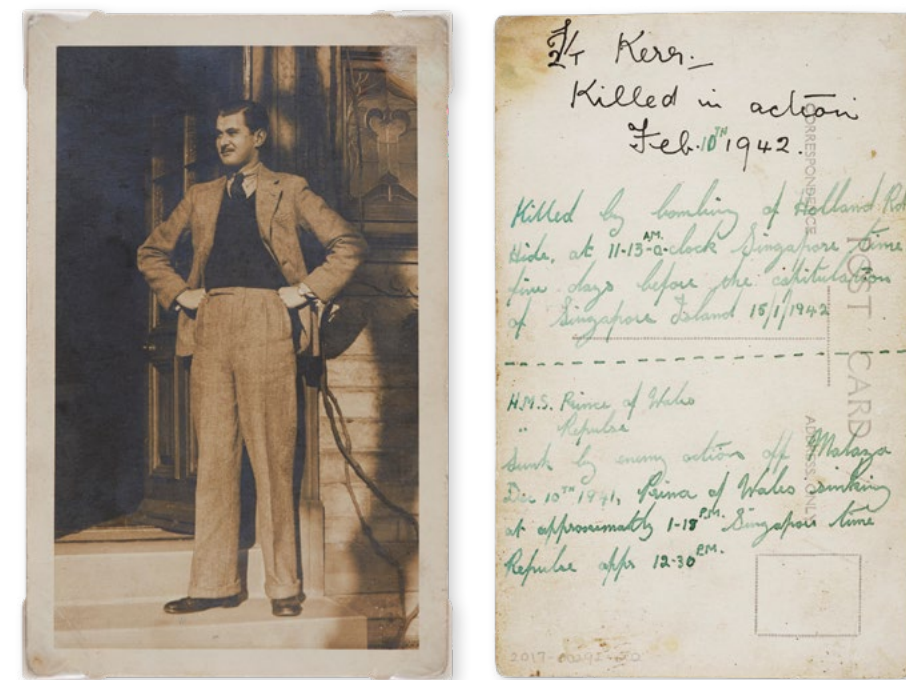
➤ **BOTTOM**
A segment of the exhibition featuring a floor map of the Pasir Panjang area, where the battle between the Malay Regiment and Japanese troops took place.

A memorial plaque made for an officer killed along Holland Road; the engraved mess tin of a private who was shipped to Singapore just before the surrender; and the diary of an Australian sergeant chronicling the final moments of resistance—these are some belongings of the soldiers on display that tell the events of February 1942. Other such artefacts are featured throughout the galleries, painting a vivid, unsettling picture of their fateful journeys.



↑ The bottom of this display case features artefacts that belonged to the soldiers. Among them is an engraved mess tin (second from right) of a private who was shipped to Singapore just before the surrender.

➔ A postcard featuring Lieutenant Graham Kerr, who was killed on 10 February 1942. The reverse of the postcard notes the sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*.
1941–45
2017-00292-002
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

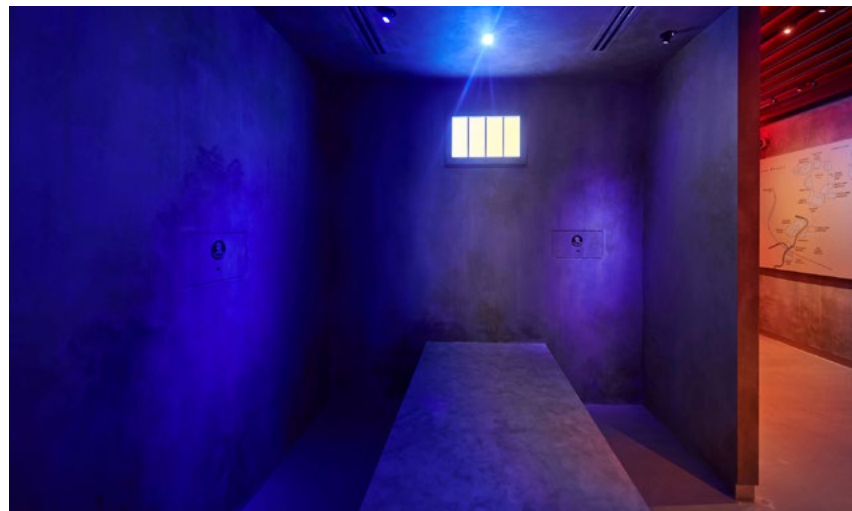


Artefacts and Experiences

A comparison of the two interpretive centres raises a question: how does the respective subject matter of the galleries inform their modes of presentation? The duration of each event differs: the battle of Bukit Chandu took place on 14 February 1942, while the internment at Changi prison camp lasted three-and-a-half years.

Moreover, while many internees filled their time creatively and left behind many artefacts; a battle, by nature, is destructive. This means that artefacts originating from the battle of Bukit Chandu are few and far between, but we have a fair number of diaries, paintings and other homemade materials produced by the internees of Changi.

↓ A replica of a Changi Prison cell exhibited at the Changi Chapel and Museum features the original door and number plate. Visitors can step into the 'prison cell' and experience the cramped confines that would have housed four people.



The exhibition narrative at CCM is thus told through multiple artefacts, following a linearity that brings visitors from pre- to postwar Changi and covering different aspects of the internment. There are over a hundred artefacts on display to capture the diversity of the internee experience.

Some of the artefacts do so more generally—such as the door of a Changi Prison cell—but most have a story behind them that is unique to their owners. It is the latter group of artefacts that is highlighted at CCM. As remnants of a person's experience, they speak for themselves; our job as curators is to allow them to do so in the context of the larger narrative. For instance, recreations of the prison environment, such as the cells, help contextualise the artefacts and prompt visitors to contemplate the prisoners' circumstances during their time in captivity.

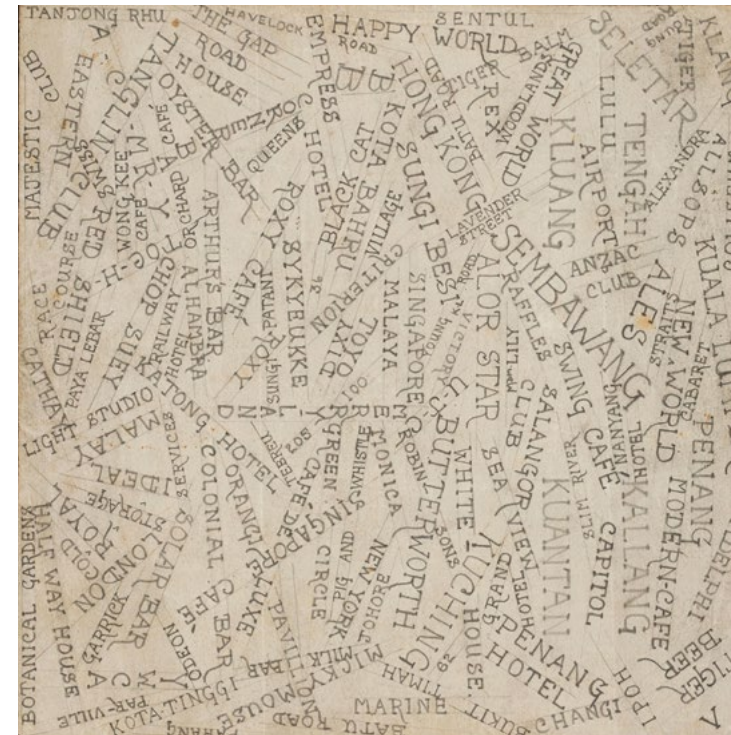
One of the artefacts displayed right after the replica of a prison cell is a set of cutlery stamped with the owner's name. Individual possessions were much cherished during captivity. One prisoner of war even used a magnifying glass to burn his name into the handle of a knife. With the image of the cell fresh in mind, the pair of fork and knife becomes even more impactful as visitors are led to reflect on the person who owned them as well as the conditions under which they were used.

What these personal artefacts share is the imprint of their respective owners: an artistic style, handwriting, even the act of making or repairing something. Such imprints create an immediate connection between the owner of the item and the visitor viewing it.

A piece of paper recording place names from Singapore and Malaysia, for example, might not be inherently interesting. However, seeing the artefact in the author's original handwriting and witnessing his exploration of what was likely his first time overseas form a window through which we glimpse a part of this soldier's life.

→ This knife and fork belonged to Forbes Wallace, an officer with the Federated Malay States police who was attached to the Royal Norfolk Regiment during the Battle for Singapore. His name is stamped on the handles.

1940s
Gift of the family of Forbes Wallace
2019-00639
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



← **LEFT**
On this piece of paper, Leading Aircraftman Ronald Bailey wrote down places that he would have visited or heard about, as well as the local food and drink that he might have tried. He died while working on the Thai-Burma railway at the age of 23, and being one of the last items he left behind, the artefact takes on added poignancy.

c. 1942–43
Ronald Bailey
2017-00300
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

↑ **ABOVE**
Handmade items reveal what the internees held dear. This set of Royal Air Force (RAF) wings was stitched by Flight Lieutenant George Binsted entirely from scraps of thread he had found around the camp.

1942–45
2017-00586
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

Female internees embroidered squares that made up a set of three quilts, known as the Changi quilts. These were presented as gifts to wounded British, Australian and Japanese soldiers in the military hospital. Some squares depicted their creators' circumstances, while others conveyed what they missed about home.

Replica of the British Changi quilt
2003

2014-01482

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



These two artworks depict civilian internees doing laundry. The painting on top is a watercolour sketch by Mary Angela Bateman, one of the two known female artists interned in Changi.

The sketch above is by Harold Young, a planter in Johor who drew with materials supplied by a Japanese guard. Through the different styles and perspectives applied to the same subject, we get an intimate view of life in the prison camp.

Laundry Day
1942-45

Mary Angela Bateman

2014-01494

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

Laundry

1942-45

Harold Young

2014-01451

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



At RBC, on the other hand, although there are few artefacts from the battlefield presented at the gallery, the place itself is the most important artefact: it was the site where local soldiers died defending their homeland. Therefore, over the years, RBC has acquired an emotional resonance among Singaporeans and Malaysians.

Visitors are generally appreciative of their proximity to the battlefield as they step into RBC. As one visitor commented, "I am proud to be standing where the men used to stand." Accordingly, the centrepiece of *Bukit Chandu: Battle Point 226* is a five-minute immersive multimedia show that transports visitors to not only the battle but also the emotional last stand of 'C' Company.

Two battalions of the Malay Regiment were involved in the Malayan Campaign. In the multimedia show, we follow the



ABOVE
Replicas of the Lewis and Bren guns that the Malay Regiment used during the battle.

TOP RIGHT
Stills from the multimedia show in the 'Into Battle' section of *Bukit Chandu: Battle Point 226*.

2nd Battalion from engagements in Province Wellesley and Kelantan to their arrival in Pasir Panjang, where the 1st Battalion was preparing for battle. A map highlighting the Pasir Panjang area where the Malay Regiment fought is projected on the ground to provide a geographical reference for the battle.

While overall details of the campaign are briefly introduced, it is through the soldiers' eyes that we experience the fighting. We hear about the surrender through the words of Lieutenant Abbas bin Abdul Manan, the only surviving officer of the battle.

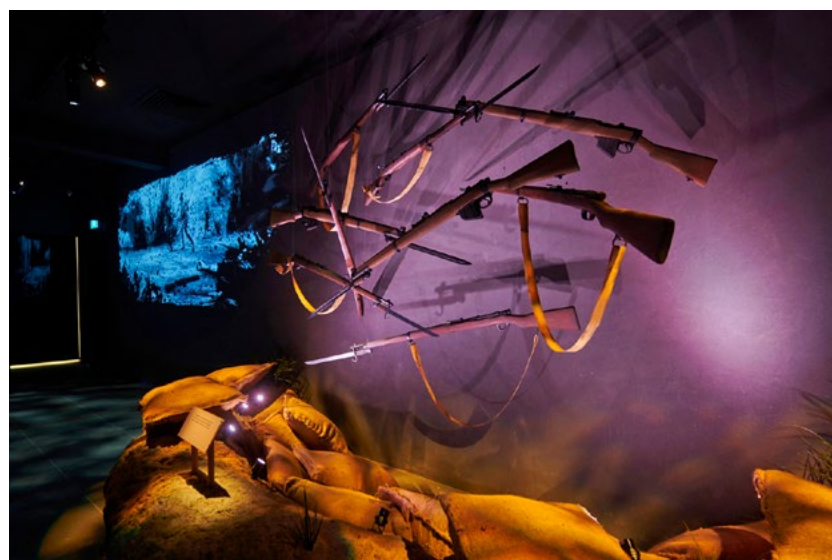
The artefacts in the space also assist in creating an immersive experience of the battle alongside the multimedia show. Visitors see rifles and equipment similar to those used by the Malay Regiment during training and battle. At the same time, they hear Lieutenant Abbas bin Abdul Manan describing how he and Lieutenant Adnan Saidi cut down the first enemy advance with a Lewis gun, while seeing a replica of that gun framed atop a trench.

→ Entrenching tool sets such as these were issued to soldiers in the British army, including the Malay Regiment.

1942–45

2016–00581

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



← In the last-ditch defence of Bukit Chandu, desperate hand-to-hand combat broke out. One lieutenant was killed while leading a bayonet charge. This light installation evokes the close-quarters fighting.



← These bullets were found by the Harmer family while walking along Pasir Panjang Ridge in the 1970s. They are likely from the battle of Pasir Panjang, among the few remnants of the battle.

1940s

Metal

Gift of the Harmer family

2020–00500–006, 2020–00500–016, 2020–00500–030, 2020–00500–032, 2020–00500–035, 2020–00500–038, 2020–00500–064

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

Bearing Witness

Of course, the Second World War was not the only event to have taken place at Changi Prison or Bukit Chandu over the hundreds of years that they have been in existence. In revamping these two centres, the curators were also aware of the history of the locales themselves, including events that would have had a direct bearing on what happened in 1942. Why, for example, were barracks built in Changi, or how did Bukit Chandu derive its name? Hence, the revamps to these two galleries saw their anchor narratives on the war supplemented with their respective place histories, in order to give visitors a more holistic understanding of the background of the sites.

The CCM gallery begins with a section on the prewar landscape of Changi, which largely comprised swamps and rainforests. This began to change in the 1920s when British planners deemed Changi to be a suitable place from which to defend the eastern approach of the Johor Strait. They then embarked on the construction of coastal defences, including the Johor Battery, and barracks were built for the men who operated these defences. These barracks later housed most of the Allied prisoners of war.

After the war, Changi Prison and its military barracks remained in operation. We were fortunate to have met a donor, Christine Churchill, whose father had served in the Royal Air Force Changi in the 1950s and had kept a photograph album depicting life in Changi after the war. In the final room of CCM, which is dedicated to the internees' lives after the war, the album is the last artefact visitors see, signalling the continued story of Changi.

Over at RBC, the recorded history of Pasir Panjang, which dates back to the 16th century, and Bukit Chandu are also showcased. Pasir Panjang was known for the maritime landmark Longyamen and pineapple plantations. A section on the area's place histories is placed outdoors so that visitors can



↑ TOP

Changi in the 19th century was covered with dense foliage including towering trees.

The famous 'Changi Tree', a landmark in the area, was said to have been as tall as 76 metres before it was felled.³

View in Changi

1869

Eugen von Ranssonnet

2007–00839

ABOVE

Former Royal Air Force serviceman Derek Warne's album features photographs of the barracks and its surroundings, as well as paraphernalia picked up from shops around the area. These capture the bustle of life in Changi in the 1950s.

1950s

Gifted by Christine Churchill and Robert Warne, daughter and son of Derek Warne
2019–00634–058, 2019–00634–079, 2019–00634–097, 2019–00634–099
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



↑ TOP
This watercolour by John Turnbull Thomson depicts the rocky outcrop known variously as Longyamen (Mandarin for 'dragon's-teeth gate'), Batu Berlayar (Malay for 'sailing rock') and Lot's Wife (after the Biblical character who is turned into a pillar of stone). Longyamen was used as a navigational aid for sailors around Keppel Harbour. It used to be visible from the summit of Bukit Chandu.
1848
PA-0539-A
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

ABOVE
Pasir Panjang was a popular site for the cultivation of a number of crops, including pineapple. Seen here is a pineapple plantation at Buona Vista Road.
1907
XXXX-14805-001
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

associate the landscape they see with what the area looked like centuries ago.

RBC's second-floor gallery delves into the history of the building, which was one of four bungalows built for the British staff of the opium packing plant located at the foot of the hill. Bukit Chandu (Malay for 'opium hill') was named after the opium packing plant that opened in 1930. The gallery also includes some items found during an excavation in 2019. While it is not known whether the battle of Pasir Panjang reached the bungalow itself, these objects from different time periods uncover the layers of history that characterise this site.

Sites of Memory

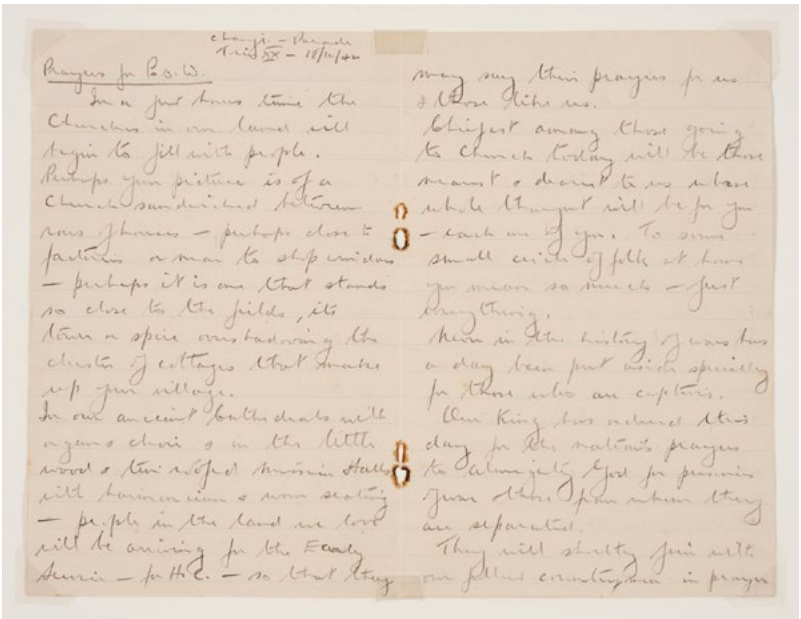
Beyond what they commemorate, the institutions of CCM and RBC themselves have become *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. This term, as originally defined by French historian Pierre Nora, refers to sites where people engage in activities that convey "a collective shared knowledge... of the past, on which a group's sense of unity and individuality is based".⁴ Although there have been criticisms of Nora's original definitions, the concept is useful for thinking about how CCM and RBC have become a part of public memory.

As a significant war site, CCM receives visits, enquiries and artefact donations from families of former prisoners of war and civilian internees.⁵ RBC, too, remains significant to many in Singapore for 'localising' the war and connecting it to our communities.⁶

During preliminary engagement sessions for the revamp, there was an overwhelming wish to keep the existing replicas of the Changi murals rather than replace them with digitised versions of the actual Changi murals. Evidently, even replicas have acquired much significance for visitors to the gallery, demonstrating how sites of memory become "points of reference not only for those who survived traumatic events,

but also for those born long after them".⁷ It is these future generations that site museums like CCM and RBC serve.

As we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore, and as questions of the relevance of events of the Second World War are raised, perhaps it is all the more important to consider how these sites of memory contribute to our attempts to remember.



Artefacts donated by families include (above) the handwritten sermon of chaplain Eric Cordingly, who set up the chapel on which CCM's replica chapel is based, and (above right) a Changi souvenir song album that belonged to the donor's father.

↑ Reverend Eric Cordingly's handwritten sermon
1942
Gift of the Cordingly family, on behalf of Reverend Eric Cordingly
2021-00023-001
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

7 Changi Souvenir Song Album
1947
Malcolm De Carteret Bowen and Family
2020-00502
Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



NOTES

1. See: Knife belonging to Major Francis Douglas Kingsley Simmance (EPH 9245), Imperial War Museums. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/24474>
2. Hamzah Muzaini and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, 'War Landscapes as 'Battlefields' of Collective Memories: Reading the Reflections at Bukit Chandu, Singapore', *Cultural Geographies* 12 (2005), 357.
3. Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (2012: Singapore, NUS Press), 80.
4. Jay Winter, 'Sites of Memory', in Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 312.
5. Joan Beaumont, 'Contested Trans-national Heritage: The Demolition of Changi Prison, Singapore', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 15:4 (2009), 299.
6. Donna Brunero, 'Archives and Heritage in Singapore: The Development of 'Reflections at Bukit Chandu', a World War II Interpretive Centre', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12:5 (2006), 431.
7. Winter, 313.

Singapore Discovery Centre: Bringing Our Singapore Stories to Life

Many young adults today remember a fun day out at the Singapore Discovery Centre, thanks to the engaging and immersive experiences through which national stories are told. *MUSE SG* takes a look at how the centre has evolved into a lifestyle attraction.

Wouldn't it be great if what were commonly perceived as dry, boring topics, like a country's history and National Education messages, could be enlivened through fun and games? For a quarter of a century, the Singapore Discovery Centre (SDC) has honed its signature formula of educational entertainment, or edutainment, to deliver to visitors stories and lessons drawn from the nation's history.

SDC has remained steadfast in sharing the 'Singapore story' in accordance with the nation's changing needs. Since 2019, the centre has reinvented itself to become a lifestyle destination where visitors acquaint themselves with national narratives through innovative exhibitions, immersive learning experiences and engaging storytelling to appeal to both youths and young families.



Visitors in the first section, The Beginnings, of the revamped permanent exhibition *Through the Lens of Time*. The multimedia showcase takes one back to the 13th century, when Singapore was known as Temasek.

Joseph Tan, Executive Director, SDC, elaborates on the centre's renewal:

SDC's rejuvenation started in 2019 to become a lifestyle attraction to engage families and youths with its renewal efforts. As SDC looks at bold and innovative ways to bring our Singapore stories to life, we hope to make them relevant and exciting to both local audiences and beyond. The revamped attractions leverage on augmented technology to retell the Singapore Story through a new lens with an immersive and engaging approach.

State-of-the-Art Theme Park

The story of SDC is closely tied to the SAFTI Military Institute, a military training institute for officers of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). In fact, SDC today is still located within the grounds of the latter in Jurong. The seeds of SDC were planted in 1988 when it was proposed that a museum dedicated to the history of SAF be established.

Four years later, the Ministry of Defence gave the go-ahead to set up SDC, and the centre was officially opened on 23 November 1996 by then President Ong Teng Cheong. SDC was unveiled to great fanfare, promising a "state-of-the-art theme park" experience that combined fun and education into an appealing package.¹

SDC's very first exhibition featured three galleries: Singapore Dynamics, Technology and Tactics. Each employed high-tech, interactive exhibits to showcase cutting-edge military technology and to share the stories of Singapore's survival.

One of main draws, however, was the 59-seater six-degrees-of-freedom motion simulator. While watching battle scenes on screen, audiences would feel as if they were flying in a fighter jet or riding in a warship. Other highlights included a virtual shooting gallery where visitors could simulate firing at enemies using

decommissioned M16 and SAR21 rifles. There was also a parachuting simulator that employed virtual-reality technology, where visitors could 'leap off' an airplane and manoeuvre a parachute to 'land' on the ground.

But beyond the military-focused sections, the Singapore Dynamics Gallery showcased the successes of modern Singapore. The gallery had a life-size reproduction of a modest public housing flat, complete with clothes hung to dry on bamboo sticks in the kitchen, as well as that of the much-beloved everyday public fixture—the *kopitiam*, or coffee shop. Visitors are thus driven to celebrate the present and ruminate on Singapore's success stories, which would not have been possible without a strong military defence and a resilient people.

Over the years, the mission of SDC expanded from a predominantly military angle to encompass the broader aim of telling the 'Singapore story', with a focus on survivalist themes. Nonetheless, the centre has maintained its edutainment approach, embedding nation-building messages within innovative, fun-filled presentations.



↓ Then President Ong Teng Cheong (left) officiating the opening of Singapore Discovery Centre on 23 November 1996.

→ A view of the replica of a *kopitiam* (coffee shop) can be seen here, as Princess Siriwanwaree Mahidol of Thailand is led on a guided tour of the Singapore Discovery Centre, 4 July 1999.



↑ Facade of the Singapore Discovery Centre, 1997. Described as a "state-of-the-art theme park", it was opened to great fanfare on 23 November 1996.

Through the Lens of Time

Following a six-month major revamp to its galleries, SDC launched its new permanent exhibition in October 2020 titled *Through the Lens of Time*, whose impressive exhibition design recently won the Singapore Good Design Award for interior design. The refreshed gallery space is divided into four sections: The Beginnings, The Turning Point, Against All Odds and Building Our Foundations. The immersive experience takes visitors through Singapore's 700-year history, starting from the 13th century, through to the colonial period and up to present times.

The exhibition highlights pivotal moments in the life of the nation—specifically, threats, challenges and tribulations—to impress upon visitors Singapore's survivalist strategies,



TOP
The screening of *Days of Darkness*, a film about the Second World War in Singapore. The design of the screening room invokes the chaos of war, even including a ceiling feature with an image of enemy planes overhead.

ABOVE
An exhibition segment on Singapore's road to independence.

including defence, to cope with these turbulent episodes. Among these are the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), Konfrontasi (1963–65) and the cable car tragedy (1983).

Each segment makes use of eye-witness accounts via oral history interviews, mixed with audiovisual recordings and pictorial presentations. Drawing from different perspectives, these form a multivocal framing of a historical event. This curatorial strategy encourages visitors to consider different sources and appreciate the dynamic nature of history where voices and narratives, whether big or small—and contrasting, at times—interact with each other to form an understanding of a historical event.



TOP
With its state-of-the-art patented technology, the XD Theatre provides a four-dimensional simulation ride.

ABOVE
Players in The Armoury solving a puzzle—one of 13 rooms of the escape room game, Black Lake Facility.

Leveraging Technology

Going beyond what the physical exhibition space permits, *Through the Lens of Time* also employs augmented reality (AR) technology to enhance and expand the experience of the exhibition. Additional content in the AR 'gallery' showcases, for instance, the Battle of Pasir Panjang in 1942 and the Kota Tinggi jungle ambush of Singapore soldiers during the Konfrontasi years.

In today's networked society where digital tools are indispensable, SDC understands the need to venture beyond the traditional format of an exhibition to attract and engage the public. They achieve this by staying relevant and being in tune with the ever-changing appetites of the public, leveraging design and technology creatively. Peh Yee Joo, Gallery Director, SDC, who has been with the centre since its inception, highlights this central aspect of SDC:

→ Players in the laser tag game, Black Lake Laser Battlefield, which features a large-scale, state-of-the-art projection mapping.



For 25 years, SDC has evolved with time and we continue to find new ways to effectively engage the changing audience. We went through one major revamp in 2006. For SDC to be successful, we must be relevant to the daily lives of the people and integrate in a natural way. And, our goal is simple: to create an interesting platform and attractions where we can involve our audience and make meaningful engagements for us to share the Singapore Story, and to inspire a desire to contribute to Singapore's future.

players encounter cyborgs, zombies and other creatures in extraterrestrial and postapocalyptic realms. Players employ strategy and teamwork to beat their foes and protect the team of military scientists on their expeditions.

Sandbox

Following the successful launch of *Through the Lens of Time*, SDC recently unveiled *Sandbox* in the lower gallery, which features sand motifs and a multimedia show that introduces Singapore's defence systems. Through multisensory storytelling and immersive interactives, the exhibition aims to showcase how Singapore guards itself against complex and fast-evolving threats. Visitors discover how resilience, adaptability and foresight are crucial in the fight against challenges to our national security.

Memories of a Generation

SDC has partnered not only schools, but also National Service and army units as well as grassroots and community groups. Most students will have at

one point visited SDC on learning journeys; today, even in their adulthood, many remember the SDC experience, especially the 'moving' theatre.

Although the exhibition and its focus have changed over the years, the hazy childhood memory of a fun day of learning at SDC with classmates or family still sticks around more than a decade later—a testament to the enduring appeal of SDC even as it evolves into a lifestyle attraction that brings our Singapore stories to life.

—
All images courtesy of Singapore Discovery Centre

NOTE

1 [Advertisement], *The New Paper*, June 21, 1996, 63.

Learning through Play

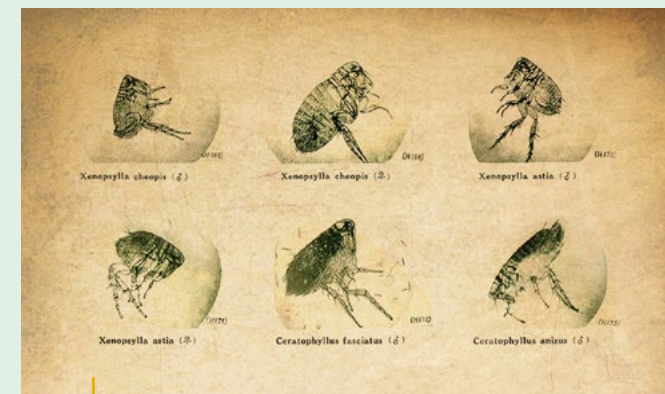
Of course, at SDC one never has to look far to find the element of play. The revamped space features two new game attractions: an escape room and a laser tag arena. Encompassing 13 rooms, the multisensorial escape room game involves players navigating through four chapters in a story about the mysterious 'Black Lake Facility'. This is the largest two-storey escape room game in Singapore.

The laser tag game, Black Lake Laser Battlefield, features a large-scale, state-of-the-art projection mapping. There are various gameplay scenarios in which

THE TURNING POINT

Focusing on the Japanese Occupation, The Turning Point section in *Through the Lens of Time* traverses what many consider the darkest chapter in our history. Using a wide range of sources such as photographs, oral history accounts, print materials and artefacts, the inhumanity of war is presented alongside other lesser-known facets of wartime Singapore.

The segment features a small showcase of Japanese materials from the private collection of citizen historian Lim Shao Bin (see article on Lim on page 18). They include a wartime postcard of a painting depicting the sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* leading up to the outbreak of the war in Asia-Pacific. This showcase of the triumphalist and aggrandising perspective of imperialist Japan offers a counterpoint to the quotidian suffering of the people during the occupation years.



2 Different types of fleas used in experiments of OKA 9420, a biological warfare unit of the Japanese Imperial Army. Collection of Lim Shao Bin



1 Exhibition view of the section, Enduring the Scars of War. The centre illustration is of the critical infrastructure of Singapore, published in the *Asahi Weekly*, 1 February 1942.

A highlight in The Turning Point is the little-known biochemical warfare unit, OKA 9420. This was the local branch of Unit 731, the biological warfare research division of the Imperial Japanese Army. Operating under the guise of a medical facility, OKA 9420 oversaw unethical experiments in creating biological weapons such as breeding disease-carrying rodents and fleas. The segment features first-person testimonies from former employees of OKA 9420, including Othman Wok, who later became the Minister for Social Affairs.

Complementing the content is the spatial design, which employs exaggerated settings such as a street of wrecked shophouses to enhance the emotional aspect of the chaos brought by the war and its privations. Together, the different elements contribute to a layered, multisensory experience that encourages visitors to empathise with the common people on the atrocities of war, while also highlighting a range of perspectives on this event that dramatically altered the lives of many.

3 The section on the Japanese Occupation employs exaggerated settings such as a street of wrecked shophouses to enhance the emotional aspect of the chaos brought by the war and its privations.

Sembawang's Naval Past: A Living Legacy

Formerly home to the British Naval Base, Sembawang used to be central to the military defence of the British Empire, with thriving communities that sprang up around the base.

Stefanie Tham

Senior Manager, Education and Outreach,
National Heritage Board

Today a modern suburban town housing some 100,000 residents in mainly high-rise flats, Sembawang is not unlike most housing estates in Singapore. However, there is more than meets the eye when one digs deeper into its history: Sembawang used to play a central role in the military defence of the British Empire—HM Naval Base, built to protect British territories in Asia-Pacific, was located here.

For more than half a century since the 1920s, the naval base brought sailors and dockyard workers from around the world to this part of Singapore. The communities here were an international mix, and included people from Britain, Australia, India, Malaya and Hong Kong. The naval base also led to the establishment of satellite villages such as Chong Pang and Sembawang Village, which started out catering to dockyard workers and later matured into thriving socioeconomic centres.



Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh visits HM Naval Base, 1959.
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Establishing a Naval Base

As early as 1919, Britain had identified Japan to be a serious threat to its empire in the Pacific. However, the First World War had exposed Britain's limitations in protecting its overseas territories if it were to be engaged in a concurrent war in Europe. A naval fleet based in Asia was therefore deemed necessary to counter this threat.

At the time, the Royal Navy's base in Hong Kong was too close to Japan—and thus vulnerable to attack—and its anchorage was too small for modern warships. The British government hence decided to build a naval base that was large enough to house its main naval fleet. Singapore was chosen as it was relatively far from Japan and strategically located among key trading routes between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Four potential sites north of Singapore were considered for their proximity to the narrow Johor Strait, which would have sheltered the base from an open sea attack. In 1922, Sembawang was selected as the site, and plans for the base were approved the following year, including accommodation and facilities for thousands of sailors.

The decision to site the naval base in Sembawang permanently changed the physical and social landscape of the area. Like most of rural Singapore, the land in Sembawang had been used for the farming of cash crops since the early 1800s. By the 20th century, much of Sembawang was covered by rubber plantations, with most owned by Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company, which was set up by some of Singapore's early pioneers including merchant Tan Chay Yan and Straits Chinese community leader Lim Boon Keng.



Rubber tappers working for Bukit Sembawang lived in houses built on land rented from the company, forming some of the earliest communities in the area. Lim Hoo Hong, who worked on the rubber plantations in the 1910s,



↑ **ABOVE**
Beaulieu House, 1920s.
*The National Archives,
United Kingdom Collection*

↶ **TOP (FACING PAGE)**
A rubber estate along
Sembawang Road (then called
Seletar Road), 1923–24.
*The National Archives,
United Kingdom Collection*

↵ **BOTTOM (FACING PAGE)**
View from Seletar Pier, with the
shoreline near Kampong Wak
Hassan, 1920s.
*The National Archives,
United Kingdom Collection*

shared in an oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore:

I was nine years old then, my mother went with me to tap the rubber. The two of us—mother and son—tapped two lots together, we made 80 cents a day. We built our home on the land that belonged to the Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company. They charged us a rent of only 50 cents a month.

There was also the Orang Seletar, a boat-dwelling people who resided along the Johor Strait, as well as villagers who inhabited kampongs near the coast, which included Kampong Sembawang, Kampong Wak Tuang and Kampong Wak Hassan. These early communities were affected when the British took over swathes of land in Sembawang for the building of the naval base in the 1920s.

Sections of rubber plantations were cleared, and some villages as well as most of the Orang Seletar were relocated, while other settlements dispersed after the land was acquired by the British.

Besides local communities, some of the earlier establishments in Sembawang included seaside bungalows built by wealthy individuals who were drawn to the area for its scenic coastal location. These holiday getaways were located along the northern coast. One of them is Red House, which was built in 1919 by tycoon Joseph Aaron Elias, and another, Beaulieu House, was erected in the 1910s by businessman Joseph Brooke David. Both of these are still standing today. Such picturesque seaside houses were later also acquired by the British and adapted for new uses as part of the naval base.

A Base Without a Fleet

Delays plagued the construction of the naval base, which dragged on for more than a decade due to vacillating directions from the UK government. Finally, in 1938, HM Naval Base, Singapore, also known as Sembawang Naval Base, was officially declared open by Governor Shenton Thomas. The centrepiece of the base was the 305-metre-long King George VI Dry Dock, which was then the world's largest dry dock and could fit the Royal Navy's biggest battleships.

Britain's defence plan was to dispatch its fleet of battleships from Europe to the naval base in Singapore in the event of a seaborne attack by the Japanese. In the approximately five to six weeks before the fleet arrived, it was expected that Singapore would be defended by its artillery guns.

This defence plan fell apart quickly when the Second World War broke out in Europe in 1939. Despite its top-of-the-line facilities, the naval base never hosted the fleet it had been designed to accommodate. Britain was unable to send its fleet to Singapore as it was needed in naval confrontations with Germany. Instead, they dispatched a small squadron known as Force Z to deter the Japanese on 2 December 1941, but the Force's capital ships were swiftly attacked by Japanese planes and sunk.

Without a fleet, the naval base was indefensible. As the Japanese army gathered across the Johor Strait, the British decided to damage the docks and destroy their equipment to prevent enemy use, before evacuating the base by the end of January 1942.

↓ Guests at the official opening of the naval base, 1938.

From the Edwin A. Brown Collection. All rights reserved. Celia Mary Ferguson and National Library Board, Singapore 2008

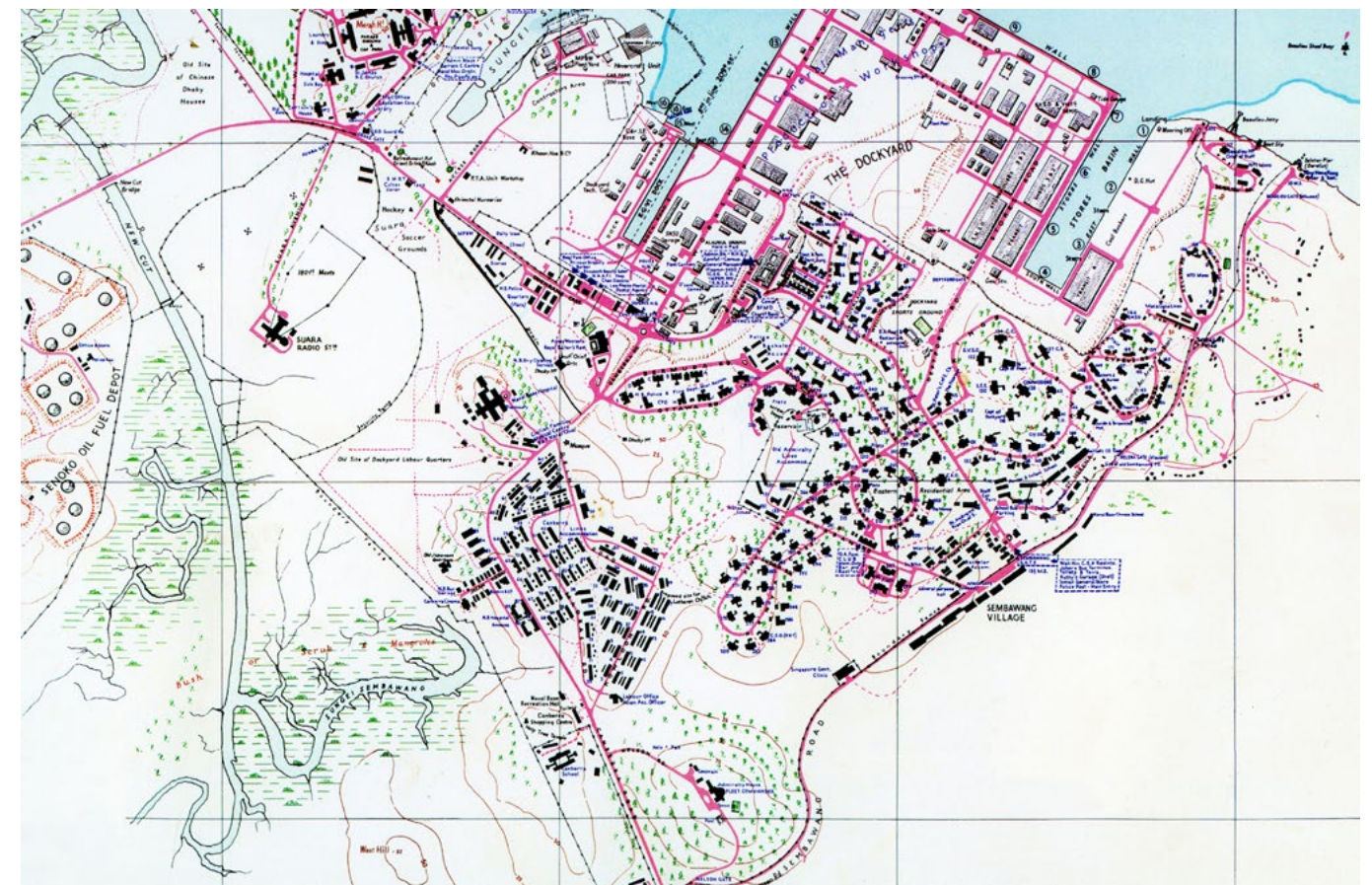


↗ Dockyard workers in the blacksmith's workshop, 1941.

Australian War Memorial (00746)

→ Dockyard workers at the naval base, c. 1942.

© IWM (K 785)



↑ A map showing part of HM Naval Base, Singapore, 1968.

Courtesy of Marcus Ng

Postwar Life at the Base

Despite the swift end to the role of the naval base in the theatre of war, the base continued to be used in the subsequent decades after the Second World War. It was returned to the British following the Japanese Occupation, and was involved in the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), the Korean War (1950–53) and Indonesia's Konfrontasi against the Federation of Malaysia (1963–66).

During this postwar period, Royal Navy sailors who disembarked at the naval base resided at the Royal Navy Barracks, or HMS Terror. For sailors, docking at the base was a respite from the uncomfortable and stuffy quarters on board ships. Alan Tait, whose aircraft carrier HMS *Centaur* docked at the base in 1958, recalled:

The accommodation at HMS Terror was on several levels with each having lovely cool balconies. We spent hours

there writing letters home, chatting and playing cards. A short walk away was a swimming pool. Tiger Beer flowed like water. After life on board, this was just about paradise.

The thousands of workers at the naval base lived in quarters segregated by race and nationality. Europeans and Asian staff lived separately, with the former residing in the numerous black-and-white houses along Admiralty Road East. Asian workers lived in an area known as the Canberra Asian Quarters (or Canberra Lines), which comprised around 90 residential blocks along Canberra Road and three former side roads: Kowloon, Madras and Delhi Roads. These quarters were set aside not just for the workers, but also for their families.

Former residents of Canberra Lines described the community to be close-knit. Subhas Anandan, who had lived there in the 1960s, remembered it as such:

→ A milk bar at HMS Terror naval barracks, 1966.

Courtesy of David Ayres

↓ Dockyard workers during their daily commute, 1966.

Courtesy of David Ayres



cannot go out. So the whole dock is full of fish and people are just going down and collecting the fish. People were very good in the sense that not everybody worked in the dry dock, you see. So those who were there would take [fish] and share with all the workers. So when the big ships come, it's like a party, a carnival in the base, everybody having fresh fish.

Most of the Chinese dockyard workers came from Hong Kong, which perhaps explains why Cantonese was the predominant Chinese dialect used by the workers. Leung Yew Kwong, who lived in Block 8 of Kowloon Road, described:

My father, together with others from the Hong Kong dockyard, were transferred to the Singapore Naval Base in the 1930s. The naval ships in the dockyard, their cooks are usually Cantonese. So when they docked, he would invite them to our house and play mahjong.

While the Asian dockyard workers were made up of people from Hong Kong, Malaya and Tamil Nadu, the majority were Malayalees who came from Kerala in southwestern India. In 1960, there were around 5,000 Malayalee workers employed at the dockyard, leading some to nickname the naval base 'Little Kerala'. Poravankara Balji, who lived on Delhi Road with his family, shared:

The naval base was unusual as it was a little island and a secure place. One thing I valued being in the naval base was that it was a Little Kerala—the Keralan people were tightly knit. They even organised lessons in Malayalam. Even today I can still read and write Malayalam.



↑ **TOP**
Residents of Canberra Lines welcoming Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh during his visit, 1959.
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

ABOVE
A dance performance organised by the Naval Base Kerala Library, 1966.
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

People knew each other, the community was really united, we had no problems, racial problems, nothing. And we had Chinese, Malays, Malayalees, Tamils all living together.

He also fondly recalled the community spirit among the workers:

When the big ships come in, they will open up the dry dock. The ship will come in and they will close it back. The water will go off but the fish that come in

Indeed, many of these naval base communities took charge to set up amenities and religious institutions to cater to their needs. For example, the Malayalees established a Naval Base Kerala Library in 1954 which housed thousands of Malayalam, Tamil and English books. The library also organised performances for the annual Onan festival celebrated by Malayalees of all faiths. Responding to the need for



↑ **TOP**

The former Masjid Naval Base located at the junction of Canberra Road and the former Delhi Road, 1986.

Courtesy of Loh Koah Fong

ABOVE

A football game at the Deptford Road playing field, 1966.

Courtesy of David Ayres

a proper place of worship for Muslim workers, Syed Amran Shah and his colleagues from the Naval Police Force raised funds to build Masjid Naval Base on Delhi Road.

While the living quarters were segregated, one social activity that transcended ethnic lines was football. Work at the naval base ended at 4pm, leaving workers and sailors with plenty

of daylight for a game of football at the empty field on Deptford Road. The matches were exciting events that attracted thousands of spectators who cheered for the different dockyard teams.

The football culture in the naval base even honed homegrown talents including Quah Kim Song, who later became part of Singapore's national football team. Quah's father, Quah Heck Hock, worked in the dockyard and resided at Block 80, Delhi Road. Another national player with roots in the naval base is V. Sundramoorthy, popularly known as the 'Dazzler', whose family lived at Block 75, Madras Road.

Chong Pang and Sembawang Village

While the naval base had enough basic amenities for daily needs, there was a demand for more food options and other types of services. Locals saw the demand and jumped on this economic opportunity by establishing businesses and communities at the fringes of the naval base.

To the east of the naval base was the former Sembawang Village, which had been established in the late 1920s. Sembawang Village was also a transportation hub: Not only did it have buses that connected the village to Beach Road in the city, it was also a base for taxis, which brought residents to other parts of Singapore. By the 1960s, Sembawang Village had expanded to around 1,200 residents living in some 150 houses.

Alan Tait recalled the diverse array of products sold at Sembawang Village:

Sembawang Village was close by with its duty-free shops and bars. Cameras, watches, binoculars and all the usual were on offer at good prices. However, we were more fascinated with the toy shops. There were toys for sale that you couldn't find in the United Kingdom... While we made our selections, we would be given a

glass of Tiger Beer. The shopkeepers knew how to keep a customer happy.

The village was perhaps best known for its drinking holes and eateries that opened in the evening. The most famous stretch of bars was located in a row of shophouses at the junction of Admiralty Road East and Sembawang Road. Built in 1965 and known as the Sembawang Strip, it housed bars including Melbourne Bar, Golden Hind, Ship Cabin and Nelson Bar. Former Royal Navy sailor David Ayres described the nightspot in its heyday in the 1960s:

When I left Singapore in May 1964, there were about eight bars in Sembawang. Sembawang Bar was nearest to the naval base entrance. When I returned to Singapore in May 1966, there were more like 20 bars in Sembawang.

A much larger neighbourhood with a wider range of shops was Chong Pang Village, which was located to the south of the naval base. Chong Pang Village was established on land owned by Lim Chong Pang, the second son of landowner and early pioneer Lim Nee Soon. The younger Lim saw an economic opportunity in the naval base and proceeded to convert a former rubber plantation into a residential area. The proximity of the village to the base attracted dockyard workers such as clerks, mechanics, cooks, laundrymen and domestic help.

By 1957, the population of Chong Pang Village had grown to around 11,000 residents. Chong Pang Village's town centre was known for being a community hub where people gathered, shopped and went about their daily lives, or sought entertainment at the Sultan Theatre, which screened Hindi, Tamil, Chinese and English films.



BELOW

Rows of shops and bars at Sembawang Village, including Bluelight Café and Bar, 1967.

Courtesy of David Ayres

BOTTOM

Food stalls at Sembawang Patio, an open-air eatery in Sembawang Village, 1967.

Courtesy of David Ayres





↑ This popular row of shophouses, which still exists today, used to house bars including Melbourne Bar, Golden Hind, Ship Cabin and Nelson Bar.
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer

→ Chong Pang Road, 1960s.
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer



↑ A shop at Chong Pang Village, 1960s.
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman and Tony Dyer

End of a Chapter

On 8 December 1968, a year after Britain had announced that it would withdraw its military forces from Singapore, HM Naval Base was transferred to the Singapore government. The dockyard was converted into a commercial shipyard under a new company, Sembawang Shipyard. Many of the base's workers continued to live at Canberra Lines until the 1980s and 1990s when the quarters were cleared for the construction of new public housing flats.

Some of the former naval base workers still maintain close contact with each other via social media, and most of the stories in this article were uncovered through the active networks of former naval base residents.

Remembering Sembawang's Pasts

In July 2021, the National Heritage Board launched the Sembawang Heritage Trail to explore the colourful history of the area as well as the diverse communities that had sprung up around the naval base. In this self-guided trail, participants can visit some of the former landmarks associated with the naval base and imagine what life might have been like for some of these communities.

Although some of the sites mentioned may no longer exist, the legacy of the naval base communities still persists in the community and religious institutions that have their roots in the base, and these serve as important tangible markers of social memory, reminding us of Sembawang's varied, past lives.



Scan here to find out more about the Sembawang Heritage Trail!

NATIONAL COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

A Family's Gift: Four Generations of Jewellery from Negros Island, Philippines

A set of jewellery tells the story of the networks of conquest, trade and migration in the Philippines.

Naomi Wang
Curator, Asian Civilisations Museum

FIG. 1
The set of jewellery that was handed down four generations of the Montilla clan.

Creator: unknown
Date/Period: 19th–20th century
Region: Philippines
Material: gold, silver, pearls, diamonds, coral, tortoiseshell
Dimensions: varied
Accession no.: 2020-00652 to 2020-00665
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Gift of the Montilla Family of Pulupandan, Negros Occidental and the estate of Doña Leoncia Lacson y Torres of Talisay, Negros Occidental

In 2020, the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) received a gift of Philippine jewellery from the Montilla clan, one of the earliest settler families in Negros Occidental, Philippines. Handed down four generations, this is a significant donation as it furthers ACM's mission in promoting cross-cultural art and sheds light on centuries of goldsmithing and trade in the Philippines.

The Montilla Clan

Josefa Jordan Ortaliz (birth and death unknown) was the daughter-in-law of the family's patriarch, Agustin Orendain Montilla (1802–?), a Philippine-born Spaniard who married Vicenta Locsin-Zarandin Yanson (1807–?), a mestiza from Iloilo.¹ Ortaliz bequeathed her jewels to her eldest daughter, Lina Ortaliz Montilla (1868–1939), and she thence to her daughters, Lilia Montilla y Montilla (1901–83) and Lina Juana Montilla y Montilla (1906–85).

From the Montilla sisters, the jewels were passed down to their niece, Corazon Arroyo Montilla (1933–2021). Separately, a pair of diamond earrings were gifted to Corazon for her high school graduation from her grandaunt Doña Leoncia Lacson y Torres (1903–81). The latter had received the earrings from her father, General Aniceto Lacson y Ledesma (1857–1931), who served as president of the short-lived Republic of Negros in 1899.





FIG. 2

The Montilla family crest with lineage from Córdoba, Spain (reproduction). Philippines, 1950s. Paper, ink. Private collection.

Agustin Orendain Montilla relocated to Negros Island from Manila to set up an agricultural settlement in Pulupandan. He grew a variety of crops, including rice, abaca and maize, and later became one of the first to produce sugar on a commercial scale in the Philippines.² Negros Island became a dominant player in the world's sugar economy in the 19th century.

Composed of thousands of islands, the cultural fabric of the Philippines is diverse. The Negrenses from Negros Island are proud of their distinct culture and language. On the island, two main languages (different from Tagalog) are spoken: Hiligaynon in the province of Negros Occidental (northwestern Negros Island), where the Montilla family settled; and Cebuano in Negros Oriental (southeastern Negros Island).

Beyond Manila: Multiple Centres of Commerce

From China come many persons able and willing to engage in all sorts of trades and they are skilful, quick and economical. They are... tailors, the shoemakers, and the silversmiths, the sculptors... and they take over all classes of work in the city.

—Fr. Pedro Chirino³

Historically, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean served as natural conduits for cross-cultural interaction between individuals of various faiths, cultures and occupations.⁴ Even before the 1521 arrival of Spanish conquistadors in the Philippines, multiple centres, such as Cebu and Iloilo (on either side of Negros Island), had been flourishing ports with developed settlements. Under Spanish rule, these centres continued to evolve due to intensified global interaction.

From 1571 to 1815, the galleon trade made Manila's walled city, Intramuros,

one of the main entrepôts of the world.⁵ From nutmeg from the Moluccas to coral from the Mediterranean Sea, the world's luxury goods converged in Manila's multicultural trading hub, where pidgin Hokkien or pidgin Spanish with Tagalog elements developed in the course of daily encounters.⁶

It was against this backdrop of mercantile activity that the exchange of goods and ideas occurred. The racial hierarchy imposed under Spain's colonial rule placed Peninsulares (Spaniards born in Spain) on top and Indios (indigenous inhabitants of the Philippines) at the bottom.

However, this did not impede interactions between people of different classes and ethnic backgrounds. It was in the Parian, a Chinese-designated area outside the walled city of Manila, where the Spanish made their orders, and where itinerant artisans produced objects according to the varied tastes of customers, further fuelling artistic exchange and creativity.⁷

From the 16th century, Spanish accounts have noted the impressive command of techniques by local goldsmiths. Multiple centres for jewellery production soon developed, drawing large numbers of local and foreign goldsmiths to areas beyond Manila, including Luzon Island, Damortis in the province of La Union, and Vigan and Bantay in the Ilocos Region.⁸

The influx of local and itinerant smiths contributed to the hybrid nature of Philippine jewellery. The abundance of silver due to the galleon trade attracted Chinese silver artisans from Guangzhou and Fujian, where the famed Chinese silver export market had been established in the latter half of the 17th century.⁹

By the 19th century, descendants of these immigrant artisans had assimilated into Philippine society, and were working in a style heavily influenced by European demand and the varying tastes of local communities.¹⁰

FIG. 3

The Montilla ancestral home known as *Balay Daku* ('big house' in Hiligaynon), built in 1853. Negros Island, Philippines. Photograph. Private collection.



Practical Liaisons: Mixed-race Marriages and Hybrid Tastes

In the 17th to 19th centuries, travellers to Asia often recorded observations of racially hybrid communities in port cities.¹¹ Mixed marriages, such as that between Montilla and Yanson, were practical: they allowed foreign businessmen to access Asian networks and grow commercial opportunities, as the local wives could speak several languages and understand two or more cultures.¹²

As 'cross-cultural brokers', mixed communities became indispensable in trade and politics.¹³ It was against this backdrop of cultural and religious mixing that indigenous communities, Christian Chinese, and mestizos of mixed Spanish, Chinese and Indios origin, developed hybrid forms of art and manners of dress.¹⁴

Josefa Jordan Ortaliz married Montilla and Yanson's oldest son, Bonifacio Yanson Montilla (birth and death

unknown), in 1867.¹⁵ A portrait of Josefa based on a photograph from the 1890s shows the hybrid dress of a wealthy mestiza (Fig. 4). Notably, a large gold *peineta* (comb) holds her chignon in place.

Peinetas were used until the mid-20th century, and were eventually made obsolete as shorter hairstyles became de rigueur. While tortoiseshell combs were popular in Spain by the 19th century, crescent-shaped combs are Chinese in origin, and the Spanish vogue for tortoiseshell combs was likely due to the Manila galleon trade through Spain's colonies.¹⁶ Two *peinetas* (see Figs. 1 and 5) worn by Ortaliz are made of gold, silver, tortoiseshell and seed pearls from the Sulu archipelago. These lavish materials reflect the resource-rich bounty of the Philippines.



FIG. 4
Portrait of Josefa Jordan Ortaliz Montilla based on a photograph from the 1890s. Fernando Amorsolo (1892–1972). Philippines, 1950s. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

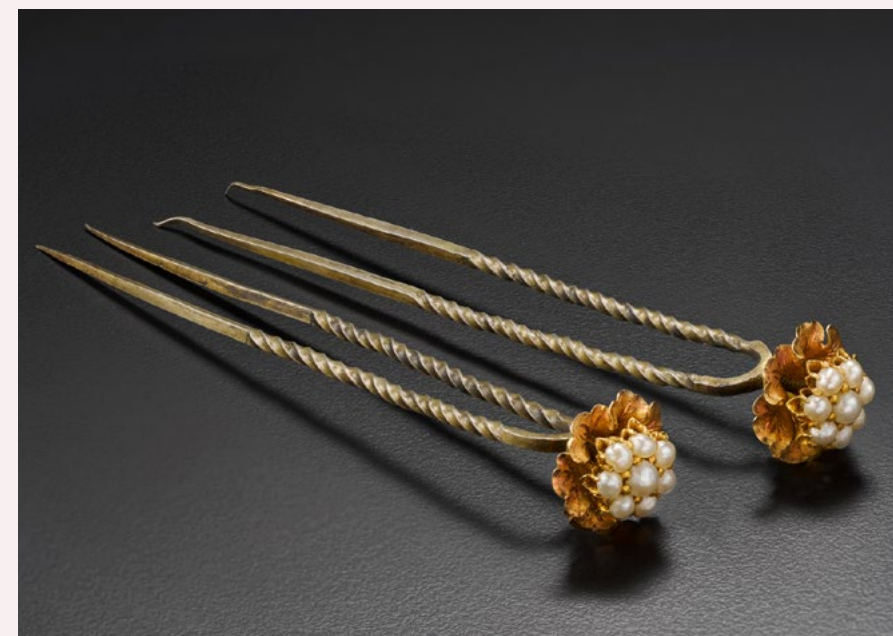


FIG. 5
These *peineta* and veil hairpins illustrate the accomplished work of local goldsmiths.

Creator: unknown
Date: circa 1870s
Region: Manila, Philippines
Material: gold, silver, pearls
Dimensions: varied
Accession no.: 2020-00652, 2020-00664
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Gift of the Montilla Family of Pulpandan, Negros Occidental

Historically, the Philippines was rich in natural resources beyond gold. Valuable sea products like tortoiseshell and pearls are indigenous to the Philippines. The hawksbill tortoise, now sadly endangered, enabled workshops in Manila to become major producers of luxury products made from tortoiseshell. The trade of pearls is likewise centuries old. As early as 1349, the Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan had observed that "pearls from the Sulu archipelago were prized for their lasting blue-ish white colour, and traded for gold, silver and iron bars".¹⁷

The gold and silver *peineta* and veil hairpins (Fig. 5) illustrate the accomplished work of local goldsmiths. The undulating outlines of golden flowers and leaves reveal the remarkable ability of local craftsmen to go beyond imitating European jewellery styles, to create objects of great naturalism. During this time, botanical drawings inspired a Victorian fondness for floral and vegetal motifs. In these ornaments, the flowers and leaves capture the essence of life and movement in nature.

Centuries of goldsmithing knowledge enabled local smiths to work in a wide range of techniques and forms, their skills and inspiration garnered from a myriad of cultures. Oblong *criollas* (earrings) derived their name from hoop earrings worn by Mexicans of mixed race.¹⁸

The form of these earrings has an equally hybrid origin as they take after Spanish ear ornaments, though they originate from styles introduced to Spain by Muslim rulers (the Umayyad Caliphate was in Spain by the 10th century)—hoop earrings appear frequently in medieval Islamic jewellery.¹⁹ In Figure 6, we see the rare example of *criollas* that are each decorated with a bird holding a rice stalk in its beak (*criollas* embellished with floral and vegetal motifs are more common).



FIG. 6
A pair of *criollas* (earrings) with birds.

Creator: unknown
Date: mid-19th century
Region: Northern Luzon, Ilocos region
Material: gold
Dimensions: varied
Accession no.: 2020-00659
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Gift of the Montilla Family of Pulpandan, Negros Occidental

FIG. 7
Lina Ortaliz Montilla (1868–1939) and her first cousin and husband Candido Montilla (1871–1943). Philippines, circa 1931. Photograph. Private collection.



European Religion and Superstition in Philippine Jewellery

In accordance with the Montilla family tradition, Ortaliz passed down her jewellery to her eldest daughter, Lina Ortaliz Montilla. The popularity of veil hairpins in the Philippines is in large part credited to the adoption of Spanish dress. They were used to secure prestige accessories like the lace *pañuelo* (veil), which wealthy native and mestiza women wore to church as an indication of modesty, religious devotion and upper-class status.²⁰

Devotional jewellery played a central role in Philippine dress. Beyond religious piety, Christian ornaments indicated an allegiance to Spanish rule and luxurious ones conveyed social status. Religious jewellery from the Philippines, though taking after Spanish examples, have their own distinctive character and gradually evolved to adopt a native style.

Undoubtedly, other influences—from the Chinese, for instance—also played a key role in trade and goldsmithing in Manila.²¹ The centuries-long Chinese–Philippine interactions are evident in how natives in the Philippines used Chinese terms for gold weight, tools and techniques long before Spanish arrival.²²

FIG. 8
Lithograph of a mestiza wearing a veil with hairpins.

Una India de Manila
Creator: Justiniano Asuncion (1816–96)
Date: mid-19th century
Region: Philippines
Material: hand-coloured lithograph with on paper
Dimensions: 30 x 20 cm
Accession no.: 2014-01428
Collection of: National Gallery of Singapore





FIG. 9
A gold bead with the stylised Chinese character 寿 (*shou*), meaning 'longevity', on a rosary.

Creator: unknown
Date: late 19th or early 20th century
Region: Philippines
Material: gold and coral
Dimensions: varied
Accession no.: 2020-00654
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Gift of the Montilla Family of Pulpandan, Negros Occidental

In Figure 9, we see a gold bead on the coral rosary which is decorated with the stylised Chinese character 寿 (*shou*), which refers to 'longevity'. Jewellery with highly prized coral beads (see *criollas* with coral beads in Fig. 1) were a marker of luxury, and they reflect the trading port status of the Philippines. Because Manila was a doorway to the global trading world, luxury commodities like coral were made available to its wealthy residents.²³

The use of *llaveros* (keychains) was also common throughout the Philippines, Java and the Straits Settlements. In the later decades of the 19th century, ringed key hooks modelled after European examples became fashionable.

A popular form involves a key ring suspended from a clenched fist, referred to as *figa* (derived from the Latin *ficum facere*). It is symbolically linked with the fig and signifies life. The *figa* is known in various cultures throughout antiquity, among them the Egyptians, Phoenicians and Etruscans, who used this symbol as an amulet. In Spain, the *figa* functioned as an amulet against the evil eye and was worn by children. For grown women, the phallic shape of the *figa* alludes to ideas of fertility.²⁴

A large quantity of Chinese jewellery found in the 1638 wreck of the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción* (a Manila galleon bound for Acapulco) includes several jewels with this clenched-fist motif. This attests to the widespread circulation of the *figa* motif and its global use spanning centuries. In the same way that the crescent-shaped *peinetas* were likely brought to Spain from China through its colonies, it is possible that the Portuguese and Spaniards introduced the *figa* symbol to their colonies in Southeast Asia.²⁵

From China to the Philippines and from Mexico to the Iberian Peninsula, networks of conquest, trade and migration impacted the cross-cultural and hybrid characteristics of Philippine jewellery—and this set of jewellery from the Montilla clan is a gleaming example of that. Unearthing the provenance of these historical gems allows us to understand the culturally fluid reality of the Philippines during the 19th and mid-20th centuries, and, no doubt, their donation to ACM will contribute greatly to the study of Philippine history and material culture.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Corazon Arroyo Montilla who passed away on 11 June 2021.



FIG. 10
Key ring with *figa* (clenched fist). Such ringed key hooks became fashionable in the later decades of the 19th century.

Creator: unknown
Date: late 19th or early 20th century
Region: Philippines
Material: silver
Dimensions: varied
Accession no.: 2020-00656
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Gift of the Montilla Family of Pulpandan, Negros Occidental

NOTES

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- Ibid., 40–41.
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- Tremml-Werner Birgit, *Spain, China and Japan in Manila, 1571–1644* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 267.
- Ramon N. Villegas, ed., *LIKNA Enduring Legacies of Filipino Artistry: The Decorative Arts Collection of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas* (Philippines: Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2017), 110.
- Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China and Japan in Manila*, 271; Alan Chong et al. eds., *Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiums of Asia, 1500–1900* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2016), 12, 14.
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- Ibid., 16, 19; Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China and Japan in Manila*, 267.
- Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China and Japan in Manila*, 267.
- Richter, *The Jewelry of Southeast Asia*, 254.
- "The Montilla Family", <https://montillas.tribalpages.com/tribe/browse?userid6457>
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- Montinola, *Piña*, 9.
- Villegas, *Enduring Legacies*, 96.
- Richter, *The Jewelry of Southeast Asia*, 256.
- Stéphanie Marie R. Coe, *Clothing and the Colonial Culture of Appearances in Nineteenth-century Spanish Philippines (1820–1896)* (Nice: Université Nice Sophia Antipolis, 2014), 102, 188.
- Chadour, *The Gold Jewelry*, 137; Richter, *The Jewelry of Southeast Asia*, 253; Villegas, *Enduring Legacies*, 118.
- Chadour, *The Gold Jewelry*, 137.
- Chong, *Port Cities*, 12.
- Chadour, *The Gold Jewelry*, 347; Richter, *The Jewelry of Southeast Asia*, 256.
- Chadour, *The Gold Jewelry*, 347.



Meet the Expert

Ng Ching Huei
Senior Manager (Heritage Research),
National Heritage Board



Ng Ching Huei has spent over two decades with the National Heritage Board (NHB), joining the statutory board mid-career. A witness to the transformations of the local heritage sector, Ng is a living repository of information. He started out in the 1980s as a participant with Friends of the Museum and became a volunteer guide in 1997. Today, Ng primarily works on a database that maps heritage sites in Singapore—providing an invaluable tool for NHB researchers and government urban planners.

MUSE SG speaks to Ng about his life in heritage work, and finds out what continues to thrill him after all these years.

Another instance where my ‘seniority’ came in useful was a project I was involved in to catalogue materials such as photographs and postcards. We had to go through the collection and tag the items with descriptive information. I found it much easier to identify places in the images and on maps compared to the younger colleagues, and I suppose it was because I’d witnessed a lot more of the landscape transformations.

01.

CAN YOU TELL US HOW YOU GOT YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR OF HERITAGE WORK?

I joined NHB quite late as a second career. Before that I’d spent 15 years at the Ministry of Defence, also doing research work. However, I recall that even when I was in the army, every Friday I would attend a talk by Friends of the Museum.

I subsequently became a volunteer with Friends of the Museum. From there, I got to know [archaeologist] John Miksic and joined him in a project at Kampong Gelam, sorting and labelling archaeological items. Due to my involvement with such projects, I met some curators from the then Singapore History Museum [now National Museum of Singapore], and was recommended by Miksic to Iskander [Mydin; then Senior Curator of the Museum and now Curatorial Fellow], who offered me a part-time position with the Museum’s curatorial team. Subsequently, I joined the Museum as a fulltime staff.

02.

KNOWING THAT YOU ENTERED THE HERITAGE SECTOR LATER IN YOUR CAREER, HOW DID YOUR SENIORITY PROVE ADVANTAGEOUS IN YOUR WORK?

One of my early projects was with the Chinatown Heritage Centre. At the time, museum exhibitions were shifting to ‘contextual displays’, where we tried to recreate scenes from the past. We collected as many ‘living’ objects as possible to display in a contextual manner.

Together with Lim Guan Hock [former Deputy Director (Special Projects) of the Singapore History Museum], we went around collecting artefacts for the Singapore History Museum’s Folklife Collection. I was 40 years old at the time and was working with colleagues who were much younger. My age gave me an edge as I had the language skills to communicate more easily with the elderly individuals, and therefore I was tasked with handling acquisitions.

03.

WITH OVER TWO DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IN HERITAGE WORK, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE GREATEST TRANSFORMATIONS YOU HAVE WITNESSED IN THE MUSEUM SECTOR?

I think one of the greatest changes pertains to staff strength and the volume of heritage programmes. Before 2003, there were only about 10 or 12, at most, 14, staff at the Singapore History Museum. When the public approached the museum for advice, there used to be only one person to handle everything.

There were very few programmes in those years—one exhibition, followed by one or two public programmes. But things started to expand from 2003 onwards: Every department had more people, and thus there were more programmes such as children’s programmes, and public



↑ Ng Ching Huei conducting a training session for Mandarin Docents at the National Museum of Singapore in 2015.

outreach. Researchers now have the opportunity to share their findings.

Today, the scope of museums is also much wider and more comprehensive. Over the years, the presentation of artefacts was honed and improved, leading to today's multi-encompassing form of curatorial presentation, which includes the digital aspect. The museum is no longer traditional; instead, it adopts a 'softer' approach. For example, the National Museum embarked on a thematic approach in 2005, with different galleries for fashion, food, etc.

04.
WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN HERITAGE WORK? AND WHAT SUSTAINS YOUR INTEREST TODAY?

I find heritage research to be akin to detective work, like solving a jigsaw puzzle. I enjoy connecting the dots and putting things together to tell a story. For instance, someone recently donated an old hawker licence. I tried to interpret the story based on the item. Every word and detail on the artefact provides a clue to understanding the object; with the

right amount of research, we can then start to piece together the historical context. You begin to feel that everything is connected. From a simple hawker licence, you can link it to the hawker's dialect group, social connections and other stories. It is a very exciting process!

What makes it tremendously fulfilling is then sharing these stories with the younger generation who might not know what the hawker licence means and what it tells them about their grandparents. I find it very meaningful to meet people and share information with them. Finally, heritage is a crucial part of life, and it sparks good conversations!

05.
WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF WORK?

The best thing I like about my work is the many opportunities to visit forested or limited-access areas in Singapore to discover forgotten buildings, military structures, hidden graves and boundary markers. After gathering more information to enliven the history of these sites, we add it to our database

“
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”

and plot it on the map. Thus, we not only rediscover and reconnect with the past, but also enhance our database of heritage sites in Singapore!

06.
IS THERE AN ARTEFACT OR A PLACE THAT YOU CHERISH DEEPLY?

Personally, I like to trace cityscape changes. I live in the town area, so I am particularly drawn to the sites around me. These include the Singapore River, Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Gelam. The historical districts are my favourite places. I find out about the different styles of shophouses and their classification, and learn how to identify them. When the stories of our present-day buildings and sites are put into context and they become part of our daily life, we will find that life is more meaningful.

