Bernard Grindrod

THE SINGAPORE DEBACLE – by Bernard Grindrod

The moment of surrender was tense in the humid climate and low clouds over Singapore on that afternoon of Sunday, the fifteenth. It was February 1942. Lieutenant General Sir Arthur E. Percival, together with a few carefully selected senior staff officers, dismounted on Bukit Timah Road near the Ford Factory and walked across no man's land to a hastily erected table on which a single document lay.

There were British Officers carrying the Union Jack and the white flag. They reached the table and waited ---- a humiliating wait before Yamashita appeared and spoke. Cyril Wild translated as best he could with his limited knowledge of Japanese. They were already over an hour late for the appointment set up the previous day for four thirty and the Japanese General was angry. He spoke directly to Percival ignoring his own translator:

Yamashita: "I wish your replies to be brief and to the point. I will listen only to unconditional surrender. Have you captured any Japanese soldiers?"

Percival: "None".

Yamashita: "What about Japanese prisoners?"

Percival: "All who have been interned have been sent to India. Their lives are fully protected."

Yamashita: "I want to hear whether you wish to surrender."

Percival: "Will you give me until tomorrow?"

Yamashita: "I cannot wait."

Percival: "Give me five hours."

Yamashita: "Then we will continue to attack meanwhile."

General Percival remained silent but General Yamashita insisted on an answer and Percival finally replied, "Yes!"

In this single word, his lateness, his inability to negotiate with strength knowing full well from current intelligence the Japanese were short of ammunition and outnumbered three to one, and his inability to make decisions painted the true picture of why Singapore surrendered.

It was the decision of a weak man, a man whose on staff officers and leaders had little time for; a man brought up in the bureaucracy of the British Colonial Service: he had been in Nigeria as a staff officer before coming to Singapore in 1941 and it was his second assignment in the Malay Peninsula having served there as senior staff officer during 1936 – 37.

He recorded that fact then that in his opinion and the opinion of General Dobbie, if Malaysia and Singapore were attacked, it would be from the North during the Northeast monsoon. This indeed is exactly what happened. In spite of the fact he was recognised as a man steeped in tactics and strategy, and expert on the subject, he failed in the height of Singapore's greatest need, not because he didn't know what to do but because he could not lead others into doing it.

Those under his command and the people who appointed him must share the blame for that fateful day in 1942 during the capitulation of Singapore after only 70 days of fighting.

When Sir Winston Churchill realised the significance of Singapore's deficiencies, he sent General Wavell out by flying boat from Java on the 10th of February with a stiffener, rather melodramatic but to the point. "Battle must be fought to the bitter end. Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honour of the British Empire is at stake. With the Russians fighting as they are and the Americans so stubbornly at Luzon, the whole reputation of our country is at stake."

Of course, there were others who failed in the defence of Singapore. Sir Robert Brooke Popham before Percival and the Australian General, Gordon Bennett, who under Wavell's direct orders did mount a counter thrust quite successfully only days before the surrender; however, it quickly lost impetus when his anti British attitude, which had already placed him under a cloud of insubordination, brought a lack of support.

As night fell on the Loin City during the day after Wavell left, Bennett's courageous Australians and Indian brigades left without any backup, were forced to fall back almost to the city itself. The Bukit Timah water resource had gone over to the Japanese, together with major oil and food supplies. Other brigades around the Singapore perimeter to the east had yet to see action and the inner city itself was swarming with uncommitted troops, poorly disciplined and equipped soldiers, deserters and civilians.

Raffles Hotel was still doing a roaring trade during those vital last hours of the city's defence and Robinsons Department store was still advertising their specials. I remember during one of our many visits into the city to get much needed supplies, the N.A.A.F.I. and Cricket Club on the Padang with soldiers running wild without leadership.

At the time my leg was in plaster and I could do little else but try to bludge food and supplies being as my foot plaster had dissolved through jumping into stormwater drains and airport foxholes during the rains. My leg was sliding up and down in a softened spongy tube of gauze and filthy plaster of paris like a water pump plunger.

It was on one such visit with Oakey and Ashley Jones that we stopped at Raffles for a drink before returning to Kallang Airport and what was left of our 488 Fighter Squadron. It was then I learned how to make the now famous Singapore Sling. There was another air raid, the bar cleared, in fact the whole Hotel Raffles cleared. Only civilians and officers were allowed in Raffles so we took the

opportunity to defy protocol and drink at the hastily vacated long bar. We had become what is known as bomb-happy by then and weren't about to run for shelter. The barman, an elderly old Chinese soul was itching to "go down" so he showed us how to mix our own slings, gave us a Chinese grin and retired hastily as we slipped him some notes. For the record, I repeat his formula.

A narrow straight-sided glass frosted in the freezer and plucked out by its heavy base to avoid fingerprints. Then a dash of Angostura Bitters around the bulging glass rim with a rolling of the elbow to swirl the bitters onto the rim itself, which was then inserted, in a sugar bowl to frost and give a sweet and sour drinking edge to the glass. Ice cubes followed and a jigger of Gordon's gin, or was it Gilbey's? Then followed one half jigger of Cherry Brandy and a quarter of Cointreau. Two limes squeezed through truncated ends and a strainer followed by soda water and rich red granadilla poured together one handed for colour almost to the top of the glass. Finally the dressing up. The rim mounted split orange and a twist of yellow lemon rind squeezed hard to release its oily perfume over the top and a single mint leaf. The toothpick with its red cherry came next, then presenting it with style and decorum as a final dash of soda water melt the sugar-coating to fizz and give substance to the fact that this Singapore Sling is unique to Raffles.

It is not a cheap drink. You paid the price even then. At Raffles it was business as usual and nobody under tipped at Raffles Long Bar even when the bombs were falling on the street outside. That is, if the staff were there and on this occasion the place emptied so quickly you could have easily slipped out without settling the full account. I'm afraid we did just that but we still had our drink at Raffles.

In 1969 I returned to Singapore. The old Raffles was still there, the bar was strange, not quite itself, a ghost of former days and the place seemed dowdy and different. I wondered what had happened to the old plucky Chinese barman who showed us the trick and disappeared with a smile on his face. Did he also survive the war as the Hotel had done? Did he also have the chance to age with dignity or did he too spend his last years in orison camps?

After spending 3 and a half years from 1969 with the United Nations working with the Government on the development of Singapore Technical Education after the British withdrawal, my wife and I spent our last night on the island at Raffles. We sat in the huge Tiffin Lounge having high tea at four in the afternoon with a vast empty dance space and dozens of empty rattan chairs between us and the bare orchestra pit. The dozen or so high fans swirled and swayed overhead on their long unsteady shafts to beat the hot humid air down on the dancers that were.

Those days in 1942 were but memories of starched white tropical uniforms covered with braid, the creased shiny shorts stiffly ironed and the cheongsams and sarongs on sinuous lithe bodies swaying to the rhythm of Victor Silvester's tunes. And the last waltz and finally the standing to attention to sing, "There'll always be an England" and "God save the King".

This was the place that was in those early days living in a dream world during those last days of indecision and finally capitulation: the stiff upper lip mentality before total defeat and years in Changi jail, to be treated like animals.

Even the Governor General of Singapore and Malaysia, Sir Shenton Thomas and his very sick wife suffered like the rest of the over 130,000 soldiers interned there. They could have left like General Gordon Bennett did but they stayed. They were not even soldiers. And what of all the other civilians, the Malays, Indians, Europeans, those other native Singaporeans, thousands of them, slaughtered for their loyalty to the mythical British Raj. How did they survive? How did they die? I found that out later in 1969 from the people I worked with as their Chief Technical Adviser on behalf of UNESCO and ILO.

Perhaps the greatest sting on the conscience of those responsible for surrender lies in the diaries of Yamashita himself who wrote, “My attack on Singapore was a bluff --- a bluff that worked. I had 30,000 men and was outnumbered by three to one. I knew that if I had to fight long for Singapore I would be beaten. That was why the surrender had to be made at once. I was very frightened at the time that the British would discover our numerical weakness and force me into disastrous street fighting”.

The battle for the City of Lions, that proud city, the world centre of commerce, the jewel in the far eastern British crown cost only 10,000 casualties. This is less by far than those who perished in Changi prison as prisoners of war during the years that followed, even less than those civilians who were slaughtered during the occupation. The Japanese lost almost 10,000 of which 1714 were killed and 3378 wounded in Singapore and they had few to spare. They had allowed 100 days to do the job. It took 70. From February 8, 1942 when the Japanese assaulted Singapore, history will surely record the most ineffective defence ever fought by a British General.

Wavell himself saw what was happening during his brief flying visit two days before the total collapse of Singapore’s defence. His final cable to Percival’s numerous messages simply stated, “You are the sole judge of the moment when no further result can be gained in Singapore.” He then added a sentence, a provision that “Last minute escapes were authorised by any bold and adventurous personnel.” Percival deleted this. Instead, after attending Sunday communion, a masterpiece of decision making, he ordered three of his staff, Brigadier Newbiggen, Colonial Secretary Hugh Frazer and Japanese speaking Cyril Wild to meet the Japanese General in an open car under the white flag of truce.

The time was 11:30 am on Sunday 15th February 1942. They had to walk some 600 metres over no man’s land to make an appointment for 4:30 pm at the Ford building complex on Bukit Timah Road. The subject --- surrender! Percival himself had to borrow a vehicle from the Bata shoe people for his final ride to surrender. The man didn’t even know how to give in with dignity.

A consensus of opinion then would surely have been to hold out ----- fight on. In my own mind I’m sure of this. But I, like the others including some thousands of Australians who had arrived ill equipped at the last moment and in many cases

had to swim ashore from bombed transports just in time to be taken prisoners as the final hours of defeat ran their course, would surely have preferred to fight on.

Of the 120,000 men who languished in prisons, some 88,000 were Australians. In the cheap "cop out" of the Singapore fortress we also jeopardised the lives of the thousands of civilians in Malaysia and Singapore, a people who believed in the impregnable nature of the island and the British. Even their Governor, General Sir Shenton Thomas, was intentionally kept in the dark. It was indeed the army that surrendered to the Japanese, not Singapore and it's people. As Yamashita had said and I shall repeat his words, "If Singapore had held for just a few days longer we would have been forced to pull back." In fact, he had completed his occupation plan thirty days under his original estimate of one hundred days to control the whole peninsular.

The people of Singapore and Malaysia have never forgiven those responsible for what occurred during those final weeks before capitulation and more important still what happened after under Japanese occupation. The wound has scarred but not healed; the distrust of the British Raj still exists not only in Singapore and Malaysia but in many of the Commonwealth and the developing countries today. The Englishman's word is no longer considered his bond. In Singapore they not only lost the jewel in the Empire's crown, they also lost there standing as empire builders and the trust of the people therein.

This was there greatest loss during those fateful days, when the world media was still emphasizing the impregnable nature of Singapore, the fortress of East Asia and open gateway to far Eastern commerce, that is until the day it surrendered. The impossible had happened. No one quite believed the British after Singapore.

Perhaps a pen picture of the good life in Singapore during those last months of freedom would not go amiss.

Our New Zealand 488 fighter squadron arrived on October 10, 1941. The people were still talking of the February 18 arrival of the Queen Mary with more troops for the defence of Singapore. It was said the Aussies were not at all impressed with their reception committee at the docks, the band and the gold braid and women in white dresses with hats and parasols. Some "wags" on board heated pennies with a blowlamp and tossed them to the top brass welcoming committee who joined in the joke to their horror when they picked them up. The British Services Club also got a rousing until General Gordon Bennett organised the volunteer staffed Anzac Club where the British N.A.A.F.I were not allowed to operate their profit making schemes.

There were tales of the high life --- stengahs, half whisky and half soda; the gin slings and cricket on the Padang and the colour bar where a house "boy" could be an old man and troops were still warned not to kick their rickshaw drivers "in the street." There were stories of the Tong wars and the little being done by the Police to protect the population. I remember one night sitting in a rickshaw leaving the Anzac Club to go back to our base on Kallang Airport when a gang rushed out and killed the rickshaw driver ahead of me apparently, as I learned later from the Police for not paying his dues; the protection money to the thieves

association. They smashed his head and face in with small tack hammers. It was their trademark.

I also learned of Sikh guards, sleeping outside shops as guards paying dues to the well organised thieves association for protection and in turn the thieves protected the guards from injury and job loss. I learned of the various Tongs and high flying gamblers, the “paki paki” schools and the percentage payments demanded against death threats amongst hard working enterprising people whether they were prostitutes or businessmen. I learned of a two-tiered system in the business world and the police force and army were the “wogs” were considered the worse off because of skin colour and even amongst the so-called wogs, the hierarchy of position and status according to race.

Singapore seemed to have become a testing ground for racial hatred and usery of people in the extreme and in particular those considered to be less fortunate: those not “made in England”. And as this hierarchy developed during those pre-war days the upper crust did less and less work whilst the rest did more and more. It took a man like Lee Kuan Yew to get things on track and the whole world can now see Singapore as a British Commonwealth leader with a well disciplined, well run, wealthy Republic in our Commonwealth of Nations. But it has taken him half a lifetime to achieve it. And you know something ---- they don’t hate the British. I know this from working with them at ministerial levels during nearly four years from 1969.

The German Teutonic Club in the Goodwood Park Hotel, built to represent a castle on the Rhine River was still in operation, can you believe it? They were our enemies. Then there was our Air Chef Marshall, Sir Brooke Popham at 62 years of age, who had been Governor of Kenya for some years, an ex-flying corps member and commander in chief Army and Air Force since November 14, 1940 who was all too hastily being replaced by General Sir Henry Pownall.

The change took place on December 27, 1941. Early that year the Japanese war code had been cracked in Washington, USA, so the British new of plans to invade the Malay Peninsula including the date they planned to occupy Singapore early in 1942. In spite of this, Churchill stated that Japanese entry into the war was remote. However, a plan for the defence of Singapore was being produced. Its code name was “Matador”.

We at Kallang were informed on good authority that the Japanese pilots couldn’t fly or see in the dark. Also their fighter aircraft were made mostly of paper and plywood. They were peasants; we were told, not worth our concern ---- small people with slant eyes ----- rice and raw fish eaters. There was even defeatist talk of our 16-inch guns defending Singapore from the south, only being able to turn 180 degrees. This was not so, these guns had a 360 degree firing range but, they only had armour piercing shells we found out later. One gun was quite close to our airstrip at Kallang on the south coast so we had first hand information on the subject.

On the lighter side of our stay on the island, I remember the cheeky Beroc monkeys at the Botanic Gardens and an eight metre python caught in a storm drain six feet deep. There were giant frogs, 22cm long, scorpions, centipedes

and huge huntsman spiders, which lived on cockroaches; and lizards kept as pets in our barracks to eat the mosquitos and there were fireflies we kept in glasses to read by after lights out. The climate was hot and humid and you got dhobi's itch in the crutch and rashes, which you treated, with menthol violet paint until the communal shower became a Walt Disney land. Nightlife for us mostly centred around Lavender Street and "The Worlds", Happy World, Great World and New World Entertainment parks. We played Rugby football on the Padang once and discovered how hard the ground was much to the amusement of the locals.

We worked long hours preparing our Buffalo four gun fighter aircraft and pilots for battle. We breakfasted very early at the N.A.A.F.I. next to our mess and paid for it dearly until we found the very same cooks were preparing our own camp inedible fare. We soon changed this racket, which amazingly was fully acceptable to the British airmen. It seemed to be a tradition of theirs. On arrival in Singapore we were issued with a tropical kit including topees and the most ridiculous long turn-up shorts you have ever seen. The theory was you could turn them down to long trousers at night and protect your legs from mosquito bites.

Long-short sleeved shirts were issued and on the whole we seemed to be purposely ill fitted by the R.A.F. in typical colonial fashion, so we swapped our gear to make it all the more ridiculous and held a clothing parade outside the R.A.F. Station Commander's office under the sacred flagpole on the hallowed parade ground. Our very sympathetic Commanding Officer, Squadron leader Clouston of Battle of Britain fame, fully appreciated the joke and turned out all the Officers, insisting on a mock full inspection parade --- it was a riot ---- we made our point and got better equipment from then on and gained our rightful place in the order of things.

Most of those early days were spent fighting the system, even getting ammunition was a bind and spare parts for our Brewster Buffalo Fighters, well, that was always difficult, we were always last on the list until we discovered the barter system, then we had it made.

There was such a gap between Officers and men in the British Military hierarchy that the MP's were constantly picking us up for fraternisation with the Officers because New Zealand 488 squadron were always together both on and off the field. Our Officers and NCOs were close, always on a first name basis so our war was personal, we would do anything necessary to keep our pilots flying and safe, and the challenge of keeping our aircraft operational was always there. It was a matter of pride. Brewster Buffalo No. 1248 was my own pride and joy.

In the meantime we watched the class war continue between civilians, the colour bar and the class-consciousness of all and sundry, which was fostered to the extreme under the British Raj. The Cricket Club, the Tanglin Club and the Singapore Swimming Club on the edge of our airfield, were all taboo as far as we were concerned. I well remember towards the end of our struggle their members would watch us from the balcony of the airport building on Kallang, the Officers and their ladies, with condescending waves and smiles. When I think of it, the security of our operations didn't really exist except for the gate where you had to show your leave pass to the guards on duty. I still have that pass with my picture

on it. I'm sure every move we made was reported. There were four operational airfields on Singapore, Tengah to the west, Changi to the east with Seletar at the northern naval base. Our Kallang air base was the civil airport on the south coast. We were also the home of operations R.A.F. a thing I was not aware of at the time.

For this reason and the fact we were farthest away from the causeway, we became the last to survive, to hold out, mainly because during those last days we were beyond shelling range: the other air bases were not. It is possible therefore that most of the aerial bombing seemed to come our way and towards the end we became the main target.

We dug out small two man foxholes about four feet deep as near to our planes as possible and in other places we frequented such as the bomb store where we dug much deeper. This is what kept us going when the place was patterned bombed by formations of twenty-seven Japanese Nakajima 97 bombers, each carrying some twenty or so bombs. A good number of these were clusters of anti-personnel bombs, which literally scythed the ground and left shrapnel patterns like spreading spider webs across the tarmac.

The explosive heavies dug out holes some twenty feet deep in the soft reclaimed airfield land which we quickly bulldozed back again to level the field for landing. As long as you got below ground quickly you were reasonably safe unless blown out or blown up. As I recall we were very seldom strafed and I often wondered why. I had the unfortunate experience of being blown out but never up as you might say. The bomb that blew me out hit some ten feet away and I ended up sheltering for the rest of the raid in its crater. The same bomb killed Andy and St George, two of my mates. Andy came from my town back in New Zealand.

Towards the end, we had only four aircraft in service, so many of us would move out to the Katong coconut plantation nearby and watch the bombings from under the safety of the rubber trees on the hillside. It was on one such occasion that an Australian Officer came out from behind the trees and tried to mobilise us. He said the Japs were coming through the trees and I believed him until we found out he was a deserter whom we accidentally flushed out of hiding.

By that time my leg and broken foot were in bad shape so the boys dropped me off at the Alexander Military Hospital on Bukit Timah Road up near the causeway. On February 10th, a few days before, General Wavell had arrived by flying boat in an attempt to stiffen up the defence. At Fort Canning that day I believe some angry words were exchanged. The honour of the British Empire was now at stake. With the Russians fighting as they were so heroically and the Americans so stubbornly holding out at Luzon, reputations were at stake and in the capitulation of Singapore it happened: Great Britain lost its greatness.

Black Friday 13th February 1942 came. The Japanese, having gained control of half the 220 square miles of Singapore, including the main water supply, burst into the Alexander Military Hospital, pushed aside a surgeon and killed his patient on the operating table. Then they proceeded to systematically bayonet the wounded. The staff tried to surrender, but as I have learned since, the Japanese soldiers ran amok with bayonets. Those who survived were herded into a small

room without food and water, to be dragged out and killed in the morning. I mention this because on the previous day I also had been in that same Alexander Hospital nursing my leg as the new plaster set. There was this terrible aura of defeat about the place. A doctor came around to tell us to stay put and we would be treated under the Geneva Convention as wounded prisoners of war.

I couldn't believe it ---- the impregnability of Singapore in question. But when the shells really got close and swished overhead to land with gigantic crumps around the grounds whilst patients screamed in shell shock and pain, I began to take stock of my position. My inner voice, the voice of reason prevailed and as the Japs moved in the north end of the complex, I moved out in a hot-wired MG red sports car parked conveniently in the south parking lot. It seemed the only vehicle, and there were plenty in the deserted parking lot that fateful day, which would accommodate my stiff plastered leg.

Back to Kallang and then out to the rubber into Katong I drove, changing gears, clutchless, dodging the odd bomb and shell craters. I moved fast down Bukit Timah Road away from the shelling: there were no planes overhead and black oily smoke belched up from the Shell Oil Depot. A few people rushed about but mostly they seemed dazed and silent, overcome by the impossible event. It took me some time to realize the 488 boys had gone. I was on my own and for the first time worried about what to do, but somehow I knew I had to go and go quick.

I would need to run the gauntlet of a blockade in the making if I were to get out. Squadron Leader Clouston had lectured us on getting across the Malacca Straits via the many islands and setting up again on the airfield at Palembang in Sumatra if things got worse. You can see the Java coastline from Singapore. Some Dutch pilots and crew had recently joined us and it was all arranged for us to withdraw and fight from the Dutch East Indies anyway if and when the situation proved intolerable.

We had four remaining aircraft when I left for the hospital and had for some time been flying Hurricanes flown out to us from the Middle East theatre together with what was left of our grand old Brewster Buffalos. The day I went into hospital, Clouston and three other pilots had left for Palembang. Apparently they arrived after the Japanese who trotted out to meet them on arrival. I remember one of the four bladed hurricanes had the tip shot off one blade and it made a hell of a noise vibrating as it took off.

Now it was my turn to follow. I was far from being a fit man but never thought of staying --- it was not far in terms of distance, about fifty miles with islands all the way to the Sumatra north coastline and possible another three hundred miles west to the airfield at Palembang. There were fair roads and a railway for at least half the distance. Somehow I wasn't worried, a little concerned perhaps at having been left behind but we had already planned our exits when the time came to step back and regroup under Dutch authority, so I did know where to go. One thing for sure ---- I wasn't about to hang around any longer!

I made my way to Keppel Harbour by dodging around the front of the Capital Theatre whilst apparently the Japs were looting the rear storehouses. I made the docks as another formation attack of bombers came over, about three groups of

27 as I remember as I went to ground. There was tons of coal heaped up on my left and the wharf to the right with bomb blasts coming up from the harbour where evacuation ships were endeavouring to manoeuvre. Guns were still firing. The noise was deafening.

I really don't remember to much detail except piles of loose coal, a gammy leg and the thump of explosions. I seemed to be their personal target as I buried myself in the black gold. Later when things stopped flying past and the noise abated, I hopped out, went down some steps under the wharf to clean up a bit and found a small sampan tied up, a little awash but oh so available. The MG was waiting there above with its engine still running --- old faithful. I couldn't bear to leave her like that for the Japs to abuse, so I hobbled up the steps and tried to crash the gears, but in the end I pushed her over the edge. My hospital shirt and my camera went with her and I managed to smear enough engine oil over myself on top of the coal dust to make me look like a Sengalese greaser, blond haired but a wog by any other name. I slipped my moorings and paddled out of Singapore in the falling light.

I figured my chances of getting out were better in the Sampan than on board one of the large ships constantly under attack. I had seen them take a hammering only moments before and in any case they weren't about to turn around for one wog in a leaking sampan during air raids. Another raid, more bombs and into the oil-slicked sea I went as the blasts and shrapnel came across the water. It was warm and dark except for the burning oil, there was no moon. I was weak but hung on. A stinking hot sun came up --- "the rising sun" I remember thinking as I wallowed in the oily see, drifting with the tide. I had found I couldn't get back in the boat; the oil filled my mouth and burnt my unprotected body. I had swallowed a great deal.

My leg pulled me down as I clung precariously to the slippery little craft, finding it more and more difficult to keep my head above the oil slicked water. My eyes were burning and my stomach rebelled from the salty sludge that had leaked down my throat. Feeling my leg to see if there was any chance of the plaster dissolving I managed to pull some gauze bandage away from the top; it came away freely but not the plaster which was fast becoming my anchor. With some bandage I secured myself to the boat knowing full well the dangers of falling asleep in the calm warm sea. I might even be able to get astride the narrow part now that I feel more secure I thought, but I badly needed a rest, just a few moments to gain some strength. Without the plaster I could have got back in. My mind raced ahead, shock I suppose, yet it seemed so simple; just right the boat and get back in. There was no bombing now just a lot of useless debris floating about. Another boat, I thought, and just then it came to me --- the chug chug of an engine.

It was almost dusk when they picked me out of the oily sea. A small powerboat, a few civilians and some soldiers, then eventually the big ship the Empire Star where some nurses cleaned me up. The skipper had waited for them and they told me he was now waiting for dark to make his escape --- a run for it with all the survivors on board for Java and Australia. On board were most of the 488

Squadron and were they pleased to see me. Ashley Jones, Oakey and the rest. They had thought I would be much safer in hospital ---- how wrong in retrospect!

We owe our lives to that Captain, a man of courage and fortitude and above all else his survival instinct. He had run the Empire Star through the Atlantic blockades. Our skipper had the experience and cool nerve of a veteran navy man and his avoidance technique was not to panic, choose the moment and act. And he did just that when the waves of bombers came over us again the next day. We manned the guns in case of low level attacks --- there were none, and the rest ducked for cover as the bombs fell. He would go full speed straight ahead looking up with his field glasses until the Mitsubishi 97's dropped their load; then he would swing "The Star" hard to port or starboard. Each bomb pattern shook the ship and one or two came on target, a few lifeboats, some wounded of course and the bravery of those nurses in attendance, they were decorated later I believe when eventually the Empire Star reached Australia.

Another trick the skipper had up his sleeve was to speed up until the bombs were released then go hard astern, a rather frightening experience in the engine room no doubt. It was bad enough on deck with the whole vessel shuddering in agony as the bombs landed well ahead of us. God only knows what would have happened to us if the Japs had decided on low-level dive-bombing attacks. I stayed on deck seeking out some steel covered niches to crouch in whilst I tried to relieve myself of the plaster cast in readiness for another dunking.

I had left that little sampan which had served me so well for this larger vessel the Empire Star only to be bombed and bombed and bombed by hundreds of bombers, the 97's, each one carrying around 1000 kilograms of bombs. They usually came over in formations of 27 and pattern bombed using one bomb aimer to direct the drop pattern.

On one occasion I had taken shelter in the ship's paint locker near the stern of the Empire Star. I had managed to tear off most of my plaster by then but I must have looked a mess in borrowed clothes, a sunburnt oily face and neck with bleeding lips and three days growth of beard. I think there were six of us playing ostrich in that crowded paint locker; the smell of sweating bodies and turps and paint and thinners made me think it not such a good spot after all. The fellow opposite was a large guy with an English Midlands accent and he looked even more terrified than me as we all waited for the screeching, the swishing and the thump we would not hear if we were finally blasted into eternity.

The ship rocked as the bombs missed once again and his ugly long face lit up in the relief of knowing he had survived. The thought struck me. How come we are so terrified of dying? Surely its not death itself that concerns us but in the manner of our dying, the agony, the blood and guts and damage beyond recognition --- of becoming untouchable, the last indignity; after all I had always believed in God and had faith in the hereafter, so what's so important in the manner of one's going. Surely it's the arrival, the welcome that counts. I figured then that once you overcame this earthly fear, this fear of the unknown --- what the next bomb will do --- where it will land, you can really have faith, and fear becomes irrelevant in the scheme of things.

This reconciliation with my faith in God in the locker room of the Empire Star amongst the paints and brushes and turpentine seemed to give me the courage I needed to survive or to at least die with dignity. I remember looking up with fingers tightly pressed into my ears to drown out the thump of bomb blasts and the pressure waves and meeting the eyes of the big fellow, I removed the little fingers I had stuffed in my mouth to equalise lung pressure should we be blasted and smiled. It was a nervous smile and suddenly the big fellow laughed his head off. Also nerves. Me with bits of plaster hanging from my leg and grubby bandages hastily tied and a burnt up face and blistered lips from sunburn during my sea voyage --- the little guy that I was, only twenty years old, smiling --- he couldn't believe it he told me later as he stood on the upper deck entertaining us during a period between bombing raids --- the relief only those who have survived near death really understand. You see, he was a professional comedian and I guess he could see the funny side better than anyone. When we eventually berthed our stricken and torn ship at Tanjong Preok, the Port of Batavia, he was the guy who got me to the Hospital Militaire. The date, the 17th February 1942. I had managed to survive the first score of my three score and ten years.

Somehow we made Tanjong Preok the port of Batavia. The records show that of some fifty vessels, which left Singapore during those final hours, only two survived their run to freedom. One vessel, the Vyner Brooke also carried nurses and like the others she sank. Most of those on board managed to get clear in two lifeboats, the rest were in the water. Sylvia Muir, one of the nurses has recorded the event. "You looked around there's all these people, some of them dead. Then the boat turned over and just disappeared. Away in the distance was a little grey speck; it looked about an inch long. One of the men near me said, that's land. It's ten to fifteen miles away. I'm bobbing around there and a Chinaman grabbed me. He pulled me down and I couldn't get away from him. It was panic. But Sister Tweddell came over, slapped him on the face and he let me go. We had about 16 or seventeen hours in the water.

Vivian Bullwinkel came ashore on Radji Beach, Bank Island with some twenty-two nurses and others. There were already some twenty odd soldiers and twelve wounded on the beach. An Officer from the Vyner Brooke went to the nearest Japanese Officers to surrender after the village people said they were too frightened to help. On February 16th he returned with a troop of fifteen Japanese soldiers under an Officer. The men were taken round a cove and bayoneted whilst the nurses were ordered to walk out to sea. They were then machine gunned from behind. Vivian Bullwinkel lived to tell the tale of horror and murder by feigning death. Of the sixty-five nurses on Vyner Brooke thirty-two were eventually sent to prison camps in Palembang, the very place I intended to go to. Fortune had again gone my way.

Another vessel, the Osprey carrying foreign diplomats out to another larger vessel in the harbour, the Mary Rose, was boarded by Japanese and a Mr Bowden was killed whilst endeavouring to negotiate a safe passage under the Geneva Convention agreement.

There were at least two nurses decorated later on for bravery seeing to the wounded in spite of the bombs but the real hero on the Empire Star was the

skipper who waited patiently whilst the formations came and went undisturbed at 27000 feet across on their bombing runs to strike exactly where we would have been and he continued our course. Time and time again he fooled the Jap bomb aimers and many years later in New Zealand he invited some of the 488 squadron boys living in Auckland aboard the "Star" for a reunion --- a few drinks and a "how he did it" talk. I wished I could have joined them. He saved a lot of lives including my own. True heroes often remain unrecognised in the heat of events.

The full story of Singapore's capitulation may never be told. All the books I've read give their own accounts. Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor living in the past, who disliked his army commander General Percival and made no bones about showing it. Brooke Popham who was relieved of his command, the incompetent Duff Cooper, the diplomat and Churchill's personal envoy who came out to tell them what to do, a man who disliked the Governor Shenton Thomas. Then there were the Australians and General Gordon Bennett who seemed to be the only one to have command of the situation in the field but little or no support from his superiors and became very unpopular after escaping to Australia leaving his men to see the war out in Changi prison.

They all played their part in the destruction of a myth; the impregnable jewel in the crown of the British Raj and of course there was General Wavell himself, the Commander in Chief. What of him? He, of course, holds the full responsibility as Commander in Chief. But to my mind those really responsible sat in Whitehall, London. Those senior colonial servants who, over a long period failed to administer and protect an Empire in which Singapore played a vital role.

It becomes an even greater catastrophe when you realise the American intelligence had cracked the Japanese Code in a clever Washington event called "Majic" even before Pearl Harbour". Therefore they knew in some detail the dates and intentions of the Japanese Imperial Government with regard to Singapore and the Dutch East Indies.

A few comments on matters, which have worried me over the years and may give some substance to what really happened in Singapore. But first, the diary of my unit during those troubled times of 488 Fighter Squadron's part in the Far East debacle. Squadron Leader Clouston an ex battle of Britain pilot was in command with Flight Lieutenants Hutchison and McKenzie as Flight Commanders.

The diary as we wrote it (the official 488 Squadron record)

September 2, 1941:	488 Fighter Squadron assembled and were equipped for a cold climate campaign.
September 11, 1941:	Advance party left New Zealand and we followed on S.S. Tasman
October 10, 1941:	Arrived in Singapore via New Guinea.
October 20, 1941:	We become operational using USA Brewster Buffalo aircraft mounting four 50 cal guns.

October-November:	Advanced training for operations at Kallang civilian airport, Singapore.
December 8, 1941:	Singapore bombed – all aircraft undamaged. They bombed Raffles Place instead.
December 8, 1941:	Flying sorties all day with no casualties on our side.
December 9, 1941:	Kallang, our airfield, heavily bombed – we retaliated from our foxholes on field.
December 10, 1941:	Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales sunk within flying range of our aircraft. They had no air cover. We flew over the sinking ships after the attack. Squadron Leader Clouston was furious we were not ordered to provide air cover until after the sinkings. Nearly 1000 men lost.
December 10 – 15	Kallang bombed everyday at almost exactly 9:45am so we would get our aircraft off and disappear to Katong Hill to watch the bombing, then return and get ready for the next "scramble". Losing pilots and aircraft over Jahore Bahru but we are shooting down zeros.
January 9, 1942	Bombings continue – caught with our aircraft on the field. We managed to get my 1248 Buffalo off but Anderson and St. George didn't get theirs off the ground. (They were cut down diving for their foxhole next to ours. Nearest bomb crater centre 10 metres away from our hole.") Pilots from gunned down aircraft returned wet but buoyant. Only half our aircraft operational now but still shooting them down. Eddi Kulnes the best pilot. A great team. Plenty of action, no sleep, bombings so severe only half airport serviceable. The British have their operations room on our airport ("—how silly can you be.")
January 15:	Japs shot down.
January 18:	More shot down.
January 20:	One of our A/C shot down. Some Hurricanes arrived as replacements.
January 22:	Another heavy raid just as we were taking off in Buffalos and Hurricanes. Lost some of our boys.
January 23:	Hangars bombed, ammunition dump caught alight. ("Three of us dashed in to extinguish flames. Bullets and shell everywhere – like Guy Fawkes night.") Hangar hit again. ("I got caught under falling beam but boys got to me in time – explosions everywhere. Very lucky man. Only a broken foot and a few burns.")

January 24:	("Foot and leg in plaster") Now have more Hurricanes to work with.
January 25:	Our fighters attacked 27 bombers who jettisoned their load over Kallang. Nobody hurt. Another raid --- 8 of our men buried but we dug them out --- a few bruises.
January 26:	Down to three serviceable aircraft --- 2 Buffalos and 1 Hurricane with a damaged propeller / still flies.
January 31:	Clouston ordered to fly remaining aircraft out to Sumatra. Our new base is in Palembang where the Dutch are ready and waiting. We went to other dromes to get spare parts to take with us (under shell fire) to repair remaining aircraft.
February 1 – 10:	Working on remaining aircraft continuously. (Oke, Jones and I commandeered Chinese truck to go to City for food and tools etc for squadron. Got some rum from Naval base, also spare parts and good in the city. On return were arrested for stealing the truck. The British MP's are priceless. Flight Lieutenant Hutchinson told them to get lost.
February 11:	I'm taken back to hospital --- foot very bad. Bottom out of plaster through jumping in and out of wet foxholes and the 8ft Singapore drains. Can no longer walk without crutches.
February 12:	Empire Star sailed with what was left of 488 Squadron on board to join C.O. and pilots at Palembang Airport in Sumatra. ("I'm in Alexander hospital again with new plaster on crook leg. Foot not good. Had a bad tooth removed whilst there. Heard Japs were coming in under shelling --- lectured to stay put as a P.O.W. but got out instead.")

The whole sorry tale of inefficiency and bad leadership continued. Our C.O had spoken to us before he flew out. "Don't trust them," he said. "Do what you think best if the moment to surrender comes, but never submit to the Japanese."

Unfortunately for him he arrived at Palembang Airport to be taken prisoner himself. A reception committee was waiting. The Japanese had got there first. The Empire Star managed to make it to Batavia where we joined the Dutch Air Force for a time. We continued to fight using their aircraft, which also happened to be Brewster Buffalos. Years later back in New Zealand I received a cheque from the Dutch Government for services rendered at Tjlillatang Airstrip up in the hills behind the Capital. Actually I was in their Hospital Militaire for some of the time until I moved to the Lugt's, some Dutch friends, whose name I had been given by penfriends in New Zealand. They nursed me back to health. I had a new plaster cast, the third, but was coughing badly and my shoulders were still raw.

On the 23rd February in the evening the boys came to get me and those of us who were left sailed on a war-damaged ship the “Esperance Bay” for Fremantle, Australia. The Japs were right behind us and Batavia was declared an “open city” the next day. The Esperance Bay was far from seaworthy due to heavy bombings and together with her sister ship the Jarvis Bay and three others, these bay ships named after various bays around the Australian coastline were built by the Australian Government to counter high cost shipping in the U.K.

The Jarvis Bay and her captain gained posthumously the Victoria Cross for breaking convoy and making a courageous frontal attack on one of Germany’s pocket battleships. She managed to divert the attentions of the battleship long enough for the Atlantic convoy to escape in the surprise and confusion.

My leg again played up. I got worse. We sneaked through the Sundra Straits during the night of February 24th with the red glow of Mount Krakatoa active on our right in the darkness of a moonless night. We passed some ships from the American Fleet and two nights later we woke to a loud explosion, a self-exploding missile that had missed us. The old ship already had a hole, the size of a baby Austin, in her port side and fuel oil polluted with sea water was burning out the furnace fuel injectors at such a rate that we needed to stop occasionally to replace them with ones turned and drilled on board by the engineering crew. I believe that some of our fellows helped.

As we neared Fremantle Harbour we were still taking in water, our speed was down and we listed so badly the Harbour Master sent out a barge for us, thinking if we came through the heads we might sink in the Harbour. The only thing I could think about at this time was my leg. When I arrived at the Claremont Military Hospital I was in a very bad way and my left lung also now showed serious signs of damage through the oil and salt water taken in during my Singapore run.

I shall never forget the people of Perth. They were wonderful. Eventually we arrived in New Zealand on an old ship the “Ducaleon”. I actually had a bed in the ship’s jail. The Aussies, Kind as always, had put us in camp at Northam before training us on the four-day trip across the Nullabor Plains to Adelaide in order to catch the ship home.

We arrived and we were hastily taken to Whenuapai aerodrome to be given a lecture on security. We were not to say anything about Singapore. As a matter of interest, I had been posted missing, possibly a P.O.W. Major General Gordon Bennett and two officers who likewise arrived in Australia with the sole purpose of speaking their minds were also gagged --- even ostracized for abandoning their men. He retired from the Forces soon after a broken man, yet he was the one leader who had the vision in Singapore of what to do and when to do it.

He, and the Australian Forces under his command carried out Wavell’s orders to the letter and held the perimeter for a time on the Jahore Bahru side of the causeway. I’m quite sure, knowing how well the Australians performed on the Kadoka Trail under incredible hardships in New Guinea, which has since been recognised as the most difficult holding action of the war, they could have held Malaysia or Singapore until forces were regrouped and counterattacked if the

powers that were in command had supported them. The Singaporean people would have done anything to defeat the Japanese --- they hated them --- they still do.

Japanese war diaries and records now show us their side of the story in the surrender of Singapore. If they had suffered sustained fighting and counterattacks they would have had to retreat. Singapore need never had surrendered.