

# Britain's Greatest Defeat: Singapore, 1942

Alan Warren

Reviewed by Glenn Wahlert

Sixty-six years after what Churchill called the worst disaster in British military history a 'new' book is released promising a 'fresh study of the campaign in Malaya and the fall of Singapore'. I admit to being drawn in by such a promise as there are few truly great books still in print on the Malaya campaign. However, it was not until I started to read it that I realised that this was not a new release but a reprint of Warren's 2002 book. While the cover has been changed slightly, and the title altered a little, a comparison of the two books side by side reveal that it is essentially the same. First lesson, *caveat emptor* – check you are not buying a reprint of something you already have on your shelves.

Having said that, I did end up reading the book again because it is such a good read. Warren's narrative style is crisp, detailed, balanced and easy to follow. I also remembered why I enjoyed reading it the first time. This was because the Malaya campaign is arguably more relevant to today's young officers, soldiers and students of military history as any of our successes in World War II, and less well known. Besides the more obvious operational and strategic lessons, the Malaya campaign provides excellent examples of manoeuvre warfare, combined-arms and small-unit tactics, and sub-unit leadership.

Warren's first-class description of the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Division's hasty and disastrous withdrawals from Jitra and Asun, followed by the equally poor handling of the Gurun, Trolak and Slim River battles, leave the reader simply stunned by the apparent inept British conduct of the defence. However, the author is very even-handed in his treatment of individual British units. Many historians, for example, have been highly critical of the performance of the Indian Army units that provided the lion's share of Lieutenant General Percival's command. Warren quite rightly highlights that the overall combat performance of the Indian Army was about on par with that of British and Australian units. He is also balanced in describing the odd successes against the Japanese, such as the 8<sup>th</sup> Australian Division's performance at Gemas and Bakri.

While there were isolated allied successes, and individual units did show extraordinary bravery and extreme courage, these were short-lived as the British defence was unhinged though the enemy's ability to dictate the tempo of operations, supported by their employment of manoeuvre, and, ultimately, superior generalship. So many mistakes were made by Percival's force: failure to adequately reconnoitre the ground, resulting in troops being deployed to areas unsuited to their mission; failure to co-ordinate the blowing up of bridges, leaving their own troops on the wrong side of

a river; and failure to adequately prepare bridges for demolition, allowing them to fall intact into the hands of the enemy. There were just too many errors for them to simply be dismissed as 'bad luck', as a number of British generals attempted to do. These same generals, including at least one Australian, were responsible for incompetent planning, inadequate training, laughable intelligence and, in the face of a competent and aggressive enemy, petty rivalry and indecision.

Indeed, one of Alan Warren's key conclusions is that it was this failure of generalship that was the key to 'Britain's Greatest Defeat'. While General Yamashita had an experienced and well-trained force, and was supported by a superiority in naval and air power, his tactics were not novel nor his plan foolproof. It was Yamashita's superior generalship that gave the Japanese XXV Army the decisive advantage. 'Only equally good generalship on the part of the defenders could have slowed the Japanese juggernaut'. Percival and his subordinate commanders were simply not up to the test.

Finally, one of the enduring popular images of the Malaya campaign is Japanese infantry carrying their collapsible bicycles through the jungle to bypass British positions blocking the roads. A particular strength of this book is its due emphasis instead on the extensive and often decisive Japanese use of tanks in their swift advance down the peninsula. The British forces had no tanks of any sort whereas the Japanese employed hundreds of light and medium ones. Those modern-day theorists who suggest that tanks are somehow useless for either manoeuvre warfare or combined-arms tactics in the complex terrain of south-east Asia or the Pacific islands would do well to read Warren's detailed account.

The only criticism of the book, and one that unfortunately applies to many recent military history publications, is the poor quality of the maps used. The absence of coloured maps was most likely a decision of the publisher based on cost, but the author's attempts to describe the chaos of the campaign – and the reader's ability to follow the story – are not aided by maps that are generally too few and too basic (no scale and a lack of detail). I found myself having to flick constantly from map to map and, in the end, simply used a good map of the Malay Peninsula that I had in my library.

Dr Alan Warren, a lecturer in history at Monash University, has produced a very fine and serious study of the Malaya campaign. His research is comprehensive, the writing clear and balanced, the conclusions hard to fault and his story eminently readable. ♦

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