

# Book Review



**Romen Bose**, *Singapore at War: Secrets From The Fall, Liberations & Aftermath of WWII*, (Singapore, Marshall Cavendish), 2012, 463 pages

By **Joshua Foo**

## INTRODUCTION

In a literary genre that consists primarily of military strategies, death of the innocents, and cold hard truths of World War Two (WWII) in Singapore, Romen Bose's three-part volume, *Singapore At War*, falls squarely in the latter category. This may frustrate some readers who, seventy years on, are still struggling to make sense of the mixed bag that caused the suffering of their ancestors.

For the first time, three of Romen Bose's ground-breaking works have been brought together in one volume—providing a panoramic account of Singapore's experience in WWII. These all help to piece the jigsaw of the past in Romen's insightful, tightly focused and fresh analysis of three significant problems in our history.

Romen Bose, born and bred into the world of journalism, begins his career as an intern in the Singapore Press Holdings where he first finds out about the existence

of the Battlebox. Since then, he has led teams of reporters in an international news organisation, Agence France-Presse, spearheaded projects in the Singapore Tourism Board and covered analysis on social media at IHS. His repertoire of books written includes research of similar areas—namely WWII and the history of Singapore.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the secrets discussed in the volume *Singapore At War: Secrets From The Fall, Liberations & Aftermath of WWII* were not declassified by various authorities until recent years. These include the highly confidential Battlebox—located nearly 30 feet beneath Fort Canning Hill, the complex was constructed as an emergency bunker for the Combined Operations Headquarters for the Malayan Campaign in the war. The 29-room bunker was fortified with one metre thick reinforced concrete walls to withstand direct hits from bombs and shells. It was fully equipped with a telephone exchange connected to all military and most civilian switchboards in Malaya, including a cipher room for coding and decoding messages.<sup>2</sup>

## TARGETED AUDIENCE

Romen Bose's ground-breaking work is targeted at both the casual reader filled with curiosity and also at dedicated research specialists who want to have a good fundamental understanding about the war in Singapore. The Battlebox during the Malayan Campaign is thoroughly discussed in the first volume—*Secrets From The Fall*. In the second part of the volume, *The End Of The War: Singapore's Liberation And The Aftermath Of WWII*, readers explore the few months in 1945 when the war had ended and Britain decided to regain Malaya and Singapore, shedding light into wartime hero Lim Bo Seng. The third and final part of the volume, *Kranji: The Commonwealth War Cemetery and The Politics Of The Dead*, covers the cemetery, discussing how it came about and examines some of those individuals buried there.

The two dominant characters in this memoir by Romen Bose are Bose himself, and arguably Singapore's most important strategist during the war—Lieutenant General Arthur Percival. Bose believes "that the understanding of history is formed on the basis of a disparate collection of facts and details, from differing viewpoints and periods."<sup>3</sup> Though he does not expound on this theology, it is

manifest in his unwavering search to uncover the hidden truths of WWII in Singapore and Malaya decades after.

## SECRETS OF THE BATTLEBOX

Sealed off and undiscovered until the late 1980s, Bose provides an account of his discovery of the Battlebox when he first began as an intern in the Singapore Press Holdings. As a young and curious journalist, he wandered into the extensively damaged underground headquarters (HQ) together with a fellow photographer. The pictures, appropriately used throughout the book, garner the interest of the readers, similar to how Bose felt whilst first exploring the place. The Battlebox beneath Fort Canning served as the British Command HQ in the last days before the fall. Through the author's research using the archives in the United Kingdom and Asia, he carefully arranged the pieces of the puzzle of what could have happened in the underground nerve centre of the Malayan Campaign.

Drawing on first-hand investigation, accounts of survivors and top-secret documents, the author reveals the fascinating inner workings of the Battlebox. The Battlebox was deemed too small for its intended use even before the war.<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant General Percival, General Officer

Commanding (Malaya), constructs another Combined Operations HQ at Sime Road, adjacent to the Royal Air Force HQ. The construction of the new HQ barely finished before the war in Singapore began, in December 1941. Despite the movement of many major operations to the new HQ in Sime Road, the Battlebox was still office to Major General Keith Simmons, responsible for the defence of Singapore's mainland, and other officers from the Navy and Air Force.<sup>5</sup>

This first edition begins with a narrative of 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942, the day when Lieutenant General Percival signed the inglorious surrender papers in the Ford Motor Factory in Bukit Timah. The hard truths of the day were described in grim detail, casting a dark shadow over the events that happened in Singapore and Malaya over the 70 days of the Campaign.

Bose brings readers back to 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1942, when Japanese troops crossed the Straits of Johor in a successful landing on the north-west coast of Singapore Island, followed by a second landing near the Kranji River. As communications between personnel at the Sime Road headquarters was poor and layout proven to be impractical, the new headquarters had to be abandoned after the Battle of Kranji.

Details of the campaign unfold as Lieutenant General Percival orders a movement of the Combined Operations Headquarters back to the Battlebox on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 1942. By the latter stages of the campaign in Singapore, the Japanese were sending aerial attacks on all of Singapore, including Fort Canning which was within range of the Japanese artillery, forcing personnel into the Battlebox. Bose brings readers right down to the site of the Battlebox with his descriptions of how poor living conditions were underground. With 500 officers and men in the Battlebox during that period, conditions were extremely uncomfortable as ventilation systems broke down, causing the underground headquarters to be hot and drowning in the stench of sulphur from the latrines.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most key moments in the Battlebox was the meeting that allowed Lieutenant General Percival to come to a decision to surrender Singapore. Drawing on recently declassified archives, the meeting was held in the Commander, Anti-Aircraft Defence Room on the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1942. With senior officers Generals Heath, Simmons and Bennett in attendance, they came to the conclusion that the war could not carry on with the diminishing water supplies,

dangerously low fuel reserves and ammunition. As no viable options for launching a counterattack were available, the decision was finally made to surrender to the Japanese.<sup>7</sup>

Bose aimed to let readers understand the history, the use and the final role of the Battlebox in the Malayan Campaign. Throughout the book, it addresses the gap in knowledge on one of the most crucial venues of WWII in Singapore and Malaya, as the secret underground command headquarters in the campaign. To a certain extent, Bose criticises how the military headquarters tried to manage three different things at once, resulting in the failure of managing even one.

## THE END OF THE WAR

After the fall of Singapore, effectively losing their 'Impregnable Fortress', the British diverted their attention to the European theatre of war. *The End Of The War: Singapore's Liberation and The Aftermath of WWII* is an account of the ending of WWII in Malaya and Singapore. Using recently-released classified documents, archival photographs and first-hand recollections, insight is given into the string of events and personalities which surrounded British official policy in the Pacific area. The clandestine resistance

forces in Malaya and Singapore are also discussed in detail. This book also describes Operation Zipper in Malaya, Operation Tiderace in Singapore as well as the official Surrender ceremony of 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1945 in Singapore. The final chapter gives readers a good insight of the post-war and anti-colonial social climate. In the appendix of the book are official documents, biographical summaries, bibliography and index.<sup>8</sup>

Operation Zipper—a British plan to capture either Port Swettenham or Port Dickson, Malaya as staging areas for the recapture of Singapore was never fully executed due to the end of the war in the Pacific. Operation Tiderace—the plan to recapture Singapore—was instead put into action following the surrender of Japan. The Allied fleet departed Rangoon on 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1945, as part of Vice Admiral Harold Walker's force. Sailing for Penang was designated Task Force 11, consisting of the battleship HMS *Nelson* and escort carrier HMS *Attacker*, amongst others. HMS *Nelson* was the flagship of the fleet, and the articles of surrender were signed aboard the battleship on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1945.<sup>9</sup>

But what went on behind the scenes as they prepared to return to the region and, when the Japanese surrendered, to

re-establish their authority? After Japan surrendered to the Allies on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1945, there was a state of anomaly in Singapore, as the British had not arrived to take control until September. Thousands of Singaporeans lined the streets to cheer the British Military Administration which ruled Singapore between September 1945 and March 1946. However, the failure of the British to defend Singapore had already destroyed their credibility as infallible rulers in the eyes of the locals in Singapore.<sup>10</sup>

The decades after and during the war saw a political awakening amongst the local populace. The rise of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments was rampant, including a cry for *Merdeka*, roughly translated to 'independence' in the Malay language. The British, on their part, were prepared to embark on a programme of gradually increasing self-governance for Singapore and Malaya.

The majority of this book is part of a build-up of the main plot where every ending leads to a new beginning. Following the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, Singapore's political leaders voiced their demands for independence, determined to move away from British rule.

## KRANJI

A picture of serenity today, the war cemetery at Kranji is the final resting place of those who fought and died in the war. In his book, Bose describes that it has been no smooth journey achieving the peace we now see. As much as this book is dedicated to remembering the men and women who gave their lives during the Japanese Occupation, it also covers the struggles faced by the authorities in building a civilian war memorial during the tumultuous period of independence.

The Kranji War Memorial is located at 9 Woodlands Road, in northern Singapore. Dedicated to the men and women from United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Sri Lanka, India, Malaya, the Netherlands and New Zealand who died defending Singapore and Malaya against the invading Japanese forces during WWII, it comprises the War Graves, the Memorial Walls, the State Cemetery and the Military Graves.<sup>11</sup> The grounds are immaculately maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and accessible only from Woodlands Road—the same road that the invading Japanese Imperial Guards Division had marched down on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1942.<sup>12</sup>

The War Memorial represents the three branches of the military—the Air Force, Army and Navy. The columns represent the Army, which marches in columns, the cover over the columns is shaped after the wings of a plane, representing the Air Force, and the shape at the top resembles the sail of a submarine, representing the Navy.<sup>13</sup>

Highlighting some of the lesser known facts in the construction of this memorial to British and Commonwealth troops, *Kranji* looks at how the war cemetery in Singapore was built and serves as the first-ever visitor's guide to the cemetery and its environment. The book also underlines some of the more famous residents of the cemetery and their roles in the Malayan Campaign as well as in the Japanese Occupation. Major Ivan Lyon, the famous *Rimau* team and two Victoria Cross winners are examples of persons highlighted by *Kranji*.<sup>14</sup> Bose also expressed his opinions towards the policy against the Japanese War dead and the final entombing of the ashes of the Japanese troops in the Japanese Cemetery along Jalan Chuan Hoe.

Kranji also provides an account of the opening of the Cemetery in 1957 and the creation of a Military Cemetery and finally the Singapore

State cemetery at Kranji. It also delves into the present ceremonies at Kranji and provides a detailed map and layout plan of Kranji and the Japanese cemetery.

## CONCLUSION

With three books placed in an exciting and intriguing volume, readers will be able to enjoy this book. This in-depth insight by Bose provides readers with a broad perspective of Singapore's experience in WWII, whilst remaining tightly focused and creative in his attention to detail. The three significant areas of Singapore's military history—namely the Battlebox, the aftermath of WWII and the Kranji War memorial are described in great detail, with good sources of reference, supported with primary and secondary photographic evidence and well balanced with exciting narration as well as facts.

For anyone seeking to learn more about what happened in Singapore during WWII and how it has affected the small nation, *Singapore At War: Secrets From The Fall, Liberations & Aftermath of WWII* is a must-read. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

1. Romen Bose Profile, *LinkedIn*, <https://uk.linkedin.com/pub/romen-bose/23/74/49a>.
2. Bose, Romen (2005). *Secrets of the Battlebox: The History and Role of Britain's Command HQ in the Malayan Campaign*, Marshall Cavendish Editions (Singapore: Times Publishing Group), 40.
3. *Ibid.*, Preface.
4. *Ibid.*, 70.
5. *Ibid.*, 74.
6. *Ibid.*, 82.
7. *Ibid.*, 64.
8. *Ibid.*, 199.
9. *Ibid.*, 201.
10. *Ibid.*, 185.
11. Kranji War Memorial, *Your Singapore*, <http://www.yoursingapore.com/see-do-singapore/history/memorials/kranji-war-memorial.html>
12. Singapore Memorial, *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/2053500/SINGAPORE%20MEMORIAL>
13. Kranji War Memorial, *Ghetto Singapore*, <http://www.ghettosingapore.com/kranji-war-memorial/>
14. Bose, Romen (2005). *Secrets of the Battlebox: The History and Role of Britain's Command HQ in the Malayan Campaign*, Marshall Cavendish Editions (Singapore: Times Publishing Group), 322.