

# BATTLE STATIONS

Monica McInnes explores Singapore's remnants of war.

It took just eight days for Singapore to be changed forever. Eight days of punishing fighting and gun battles for the Allies to surrender to the Japanese.

It was February 1942. Japanese troops infiltrated Singapore from Malaya, now Malaysia, in the north. It was not unexpected, but British commander, lieutenant-

general Arthur Percival, ignored intelligence reports and rallied troops and resources to defend Singapore from a southern sea-based attack. Only small regiments of Australian and Indian forces protected Singapore's north.

Fast-forward 75 years and Singapore's an independent, thriving metropolis with a unique

PICTURE: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL



blend of ancient cultures and modern-day conveniences. But remnants of the war days remain and are ready to be explored.

**FORT SILOSO**

Perched atop the recently built 181-metre Fort Silosos Skywalk, the fort has sweeping views past Singapore harbour’s calm waters to the mainland and across the boat-laden Singapore Straits. It’s easy to see why the fort’s location, on Sentosa Island, was an appealing strategic position.

Today, Fort Siloso is Singapore’s only preserved coastal fort. It was originally built in 1878 as part of the British Empire’s defence.

Our guide recounts stories about the fort’s tunnels, gun emplacements, munitions pulley systems, storage rooms,

and the living conditions for commanders, troops and hired civilian labour.

The fort was equipped with gun batteries and heavy armament,

was inaccurate and ineffective in halting the Japanese advance.

The final stop on the 90-minute tour provides air-conditioned relief from the tropical heat, to

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**Built in 1936, the highly secretive Battlebox was a command centre during the war. Accessible via guided tour only, the bomb-proof shelter is a labyrinth of corridors and 29 rooms.**

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but all the might and power were almost useless some 60 years later when Singapore was attacked from the north. Their minimal turning capabilities meant any barrage of bombs

view life-sized scenes of the two World War 2 surrenders – the Allies to the Japanese on February 15, 1942, and the Japanese to the Allies on September 12, 1945.

**FORT CANNING**

Back on the mainland, we stop at Fort Canning to see where Allied commanders made the fateful decision to surrender at the recently re-opened Battlebox.

Built in 1936, the highly secretive Battlebox was a command centre during the war, but was abandoned soon after the war’s cessation and forgotten for more than 40 years.

During the Battle of Singapore, commanders sought refuge nine metres inside the belly of Fort Canning with battle-critical intelligence personnel.

Accessible via guided tour only, the bomb-proof shelter is a labyrinth of corridors and 29 rooms. Most feature mannequin soldiers conducting daily duties – deciphering and encoding ➤

Scars of war ... Singapore's waterfront buildings on fire during hostilities in 1942 (above left); Singapore Strait from Fort Siloso (below).

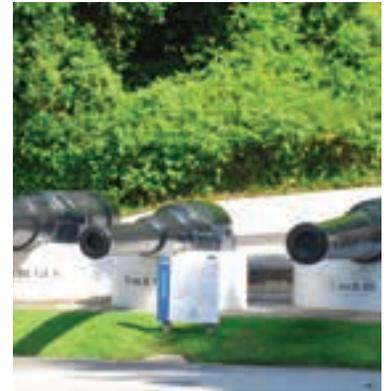


PICTURES: MONICA MCINNES, SINGAPORE HISTORY CONSULTANTS



Battle stations

War connections ... (from left) the telephone exchange room at Battlebox; Japanese aircraft wreckage at Fort Siloso; gun barrels at Fort Siloso.



radio transmissions, poring over maps and intelligence reports, and sleeping while 'off-duty'.

Our guide explains intelligence gathering, sorting and deciphering. Amid the chaos and overcrowding, commanders feared being overrun by an enemy twice their number, when in reality the opposite was true.

The tour culminates in a conference-like room where Percival and his commanders have looks of despair. They have decided to surrender. The meeting took just 15 minutes and was despite Percival's wish to make a counter-attack.

Later that day, Percival met with general Tomoyuki Yamashita

to sign an unconditional surrender of 80,000 Allied troops. It was the Commonwealth's greatest military defeat.

**CHANGI MUSEUM**

Many of the Allied soldiers were taken to Changi prison on the eastern side of the island, and later some were moved to work camps in Sandakan or Thailand.

The Changi Museum details Singapore's darkest days and features a Changi chapel replica. But out of the darkness stories of hope, ingenuity, and exceptional bravery are revealed. The audio-guide sounds in our ears, as we meander silently, pausing often to read and reflect.

We learn about courageous ➤



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- Chivas Regal 18 Year Old Scotch Whisky   - Ballantine's 17 Year Old   - The Macallan 1824 Collection Select Oak Single Malt Scotch Whisky
- Royal Salute 21 Year Old Scotch Whisky   - Cigarettes (Benson & Hedges and Winfield Blue)   - Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey

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War sites ... (from left) the underground entrance to Battlebox; the plotting room downstairs (middle); replica of an officer supervising the arrival of munitions at Fort Siloso.



everyday Singaporeans, like Mary Seah, who gambled her life by bringing food and supplies to Changi POWs, and the resourcefulness of a POW crafting a radio disguised in a broom. The risky broom-radio allowed outside information gathering and boosted POW morale.

We touch an original prison door, observe gloomy POW artworks, and feel uplifted by the notorious Changi quilts, which facilitated secret messages between camps.

**KRANJI WAR CEMETERY**

Standing on a former World War 2 Allied military camp and

munitions store in Singapore's north-west, is Kranji War Cemetery, the final resting place of 4461 casualties. It's a peaceful spot amidst the hustle and bustle of the city visible in the distance.

Opposite are glimpses of the Johore Strait – a poignant reminder of where Singapore's

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Battle stations

THE KEY SITES

**FORT SILOSO**

The fort can be seen on either a guided or self-guided tour. Entry is free, but there is a charge for a guided tour and to enter the Surrender Chambers. There are several options to access Sentosa Island – gondola, MRT and monorail, bus, taxi or by foot.

**FORT CANNING'S BATTLEBOX**

Wandering Fort Canning is free, but access to the Battlebox is by guided tour only. You can easily get to Fort Canning on foot from the nearby MRT and bus stops, or by taxi.

**CHANGI MUSEUM**

Allow about 90 minutes to travel by MRT and bus to reach the museum. Entry is free, but audio-guides and the 45-minute guided tours attract a small fee.

**KRANJI WAR CEMETERY**

Entry is free and the cemetery can be reached by an easy 10 to 15-minute walk from the Kranji MRT.

senseless loss of life and the atrocities of 75 years ago have contributed to their nation's identity, making it more independent and stronger. Our Fort Siloso guide agrees:

“In a strange way the war was good for Singapore – it has made us who we are and we are smarter for it”. ■

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