

# **The Fall of Singapore – an alternative view**

**Bill Edgar**

**General Percival was not a driving personality. The man on whom much of the blame has fallen for the disastrous fall of Singapore on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942, was a calm and precise administrator, well qualified to take command. Gordon Bennett, one of his divisional commanders, later wrote:**

**This officer was typical of the best produced by the Staff College. He was well skilled in the science of war - war establishments, equipment and tactical methods as taught in our textbooks. His appreciation of the situation was sound and his plan of action and his troop distribution beyond criticism ... He knew Malaya and its problems and was probably the best selection for the appointment to command the land forces there. <sup>1</sup>**

**In fact Percival had been sent to Singapore in 1936 as the first General Staff Officer, First Grade, at Headquarters, Malaya Command. He joined a team whose task it was to develop the defences of Singapore. Percival travelled widely, visiting all units while studying the region carefully. At the conclusion of his period there he drew up an appreciation and plan for an attack on Singapore from the Japanese point of view. When he returned home to England he handed it over to the War Office. 'The plan of attack which he envisaged did not differ very materially from that adopted by the Japanese when they attacked Malaya four years later.' <sup>2</sup>**

**So, what went wrong in late 1941 and early 1942? Quite obviously a great deal. But does Percival so completely deserve the many and manifold scathing criticisms that have subsequently been levelled at him? Surely no one of his intelligence and experience could act (or fail to act) as he did without strong reason? Are there not, somewhere, points of mitigation? Have we missed something?**

**Upon arrival at Singapore in May 1941, General Percival inherited many of the problems which were subsequently to beset the command - shortages of the correct equipment, poor communication facilities, an outdated and under-strength air force, a poorly equipped and under-trained army, and inadequate naval presence, as well as a host of other physical difficulties. As a loyal subordinate, however, he was prepared to do the best with what he was given.**

**The fact is that the island fortress's inadequacies had been some considerable time in gestation before he re-appeared as General Officer Commanding Malaya. Winston Churchill's pre-occupation had been, understandably, centered on the European Theatre of operations early in the war. When the Chiefs of Staff proposed to form five extra squadrons early in 1941 and have them sent to the Middle East, Churchill responded with a curt minute:**

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, Gordon, *Why Singapore Fell*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1944, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> Smyth, J., *Percival and the Tragedy of Singapore*, Macdonald, London, 1971, pp. 41-42

I do not remember to have given my approval to these very large diversions of forces. On the contrary, if my minutes are collected they will be seen to have the opposite tendency. The political situation in the Far East does not seem to require, and the strength of our Air Force by no means warrants, the maintenance of such large forces in the Far East at this time. <sup>3</sup>

And it was at Winston's insistence that the ill-advised and disastrous foray into Greece earlier in 1941 took place. Many of the vital resources that may have been sent to Singapore were lost when the German divisions overran the Allied forces in Greece and on Crete.

But there is another, not inconsiderable proclivity, to consider. Personality clashes of considerable dimension were by no means the least of the difficulties in the Malayan Theatre. In fact it is quite arguable that the in-fighting among the various senior commanders was a dominant issue. There were to be some monumental clashes well before the enemy arrived. The command structure within the Singapore theatre of operations in 1941 had about it the distinct taint of a latter-day Roman senate.

Sir Basil Liddell Hart has written that military history, '... should be a study of the psychological reactions of the commanders, with merely a background of events to throw their thoughts, impressions and decisions into clear relief. <sup>4</sup> Could we assume that he was also referring to the in-fighting between fellow commanders besides those lining up for the stoush on the opposite side of the hill?

Almost by definition a driving, thrusting personality is the 'type' who is most likely to succeed to high command in the armed services. After all, in this profession, such characteristics are often judged to be the most likely to save the nation's bacon in time of crisis. To be promoted general and succeed to the top of the writhing, seething heap of like personalities beneath, is a considerable achievement. And as well as the adornments of red tabs and ornate epaulettes, there is much in the way of power, prestige and influence - in all probability a knighthood and, on retirement, lucrative service on one or more influential boards - if one has, somehow, managed to keep one's nose 'clean' along the way.

In pre-war Singapore there was intense inter-service rivalry. The commanding generals, admirals or air marshals, dominant personalities that they were, barely gave each other the time of day.

A continuation of this state of affairs was ensured by siting the Army, Navy and Air Force headquarters in Singapore as far apart as possible. Just one, albeit fairly disastrous, consequence of this carefully planned lack of interaction was that the R.A.F. began constructing airfields without consultation with the Army who would have to defend them. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Smyth, p. 61

<sup>4</sup> Liddell Hart, Basil, *Thoughts on War*, Spellmount Classics, London, 1998, p. 219

<sup>5</sup> Dixon, Norman, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Futura Publications, London, 1979, p.132

Air Chief Marshall Trenchard's insistent argument, at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in London, held sway - that forward based aircraft were essential to ward off infiltration from all possible directions. It was a fine theory, but totally impractical, considering the promised aircraft were never likely to arrive and there were never going to be enough troops to adequately fulfill the task and still maintain effective defences against the subsequent Japanese infiltrations. 'When the Japanese war started Britain and her Commonwealth were stretched to the limit with the war against Germany and Italy - to say nothing of the demands for arms and munitions made by her Russian ally. Malaya came only fourth on the priority list.'<sup>6</sup>

It would appear that powerful advocacy can often hold sway over common sense and sensible strategic planning. What is so surprising about that? Vibrant, driving personalities have a way with words; they have a thrusting power and surety which is invariably very hard to deny, even when their arguments are patently flawed or 'thin'

This 'driving' *modus operandi*, in itself, throws up formidable smokescreens. And it has an ulterior, albeit intuitive, purpose. When such personality types are wrong it is much harder to distinguish the truth through the swirling, protective cyclones of their forceful arguments - and it is quite rare to have anyone with the reciprocal force of personality to counteract it, or be taken notice of (under threat of being torn apart with a brow-beating or a dose of disdainful rhetoric). A notable example in 1915 was the lowly Captain Wyndham Deedes of the War Office intelligence staff and an expert on the Gallipoli Peninsula. He suffered considerably at the hands of Field Marshal Lord Kitchener when he had the temerity to suggest that the First Lord of the Admiralty's (Winston Churchill's) plan to capture Istanbul via the Dardenelles was heavily flawed.

In Singapore it took bombs falling on the city to wake people from their trusting trance. By that time it was too late. Some of his subordinate commanders suggested to Percival that there should be dramatic changes in tactics to suit the desperate situation. But Percival felt bound to continue to follow the tactics and procedures insisted upon by his direct superior, General Wavell, and by his distant superiors, the Chiefs of Staff in London. Many heads remained buried in the sand.

Dr Norman Dixon explains:

It is a feature of strongly held dogmas that they steadfastly resist not only unpalatable truths but even the faintest suggestion of the barest possibility of the most tangential reference to an unacceptable fact. Better that men should die and cities overrun than the sacred teaching should be found wanting.<sup>7</sup>

As the Japanese approached there were some who were still more than anxious to act decisively. It has often been related how Brigadier Simson, the Chief Engineer Malaya Command, pleaded with Lieutenant General Percival to throw up a variety of defences, obstacles, traps, mines and other like

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<sup>6</sup> Smyth, *Percival*, p. 246

<sup>7</sup> Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, p. 136

paraphernalia as hindrances to the enemy. He urged vigorously that it be done with haste.

**Inexplicably, the commanding general remained unmoved.**

**"I believe that defences of the sort you want to throw up are bad for the morale of the troops and civilians," was the response. Percival has been condemned roundly ever since for his seeming lassitude and for this unbelievably ineffectual reaction. When action was required how inept could a commanding officer be?**

**Is there, though, more to it than at first meets the eye? The general was certainly well grounded and versed in the history and conduct of past British military campaigns. Gordon Bennett was of the opinion:**

**Critics have unfairly blamed Percival and [Air Chief Marshal] Brooke Popham for their complacent attitude ... It is admitted that they made public statements that all was well. These statements were made for enemy consumption. While they were making these public statements they were filling the secret dossiers with copies of their urgent and appealing demands for aeroplanes and equipment.<sup>8</sup>**

**Major-General Bennett, like Simson, felt he knew where the problems lay:**

**Our staff colleges have become somewhat pedantic. The army organization and its methods have thrown away simplicity and adopted intricate and complicated details in everything. The result has been that the blunt, simple-minded fighter who often lacks the patience for such detail and the scholastic brain to master the intricacies, has been left behind in the race, and pedantic officers have won promotion. The hall-mark "p.s.c." (passed staff college) had produced thinkers rather than fighters. As a result of all this, we have seen in the senior ranks of the British Army too large a percentage of brilliant staff officers and too small a percentage of aggressive fighters.<sup>9</sup>**

**Later on he was even more specific:**

**There are too many officers who cling to the idea that barrack-square discipline makes soldiers fight ... Barrack-square discipline does not develop individuality, initiative, resourcefulness nor the aggressive spirit. In this type of war every soldier must be imbued with a mad determination to fight ... and even to die.<sup>10</sup>**

**Bennett was a brusque, abrasive and aggressive character, the antithesis of Arthur Percival. The situation that now confronted the latter was not in his practical or theoretical experience, or training. It is arguable that, unable to think 'outside the square', he suffered enormous anxiety, even to the point of a probable degree of cognitive paralysis. In some respects it is understandable, given the enormity of the situation, that he chose to do very little.**

**But is there another factor to be countenanced? Percival was well versed in the command structure of the military and how it should work. Over a long career he had agonized through it, obeyed the protocols, endured the petty**

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<sup>8</sup> Bennett, G., *Why Singapore Fell*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1944, p. 227

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 19-20

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 228

politics, and was now approaching the top echelons. It is quite conceivable that the forceful, even aggressive Simson, somewhat his junior, broke the rules with the tenor and style of his urgent arguments. A relatively junior officer was always obliged to remember his place despite the urgency of any hour. Dixon again:

A hazard of belonging to any rigidly authoritarian hierarchical organization is that, from time to time, the individual, out of dire necessity or from strong personal conviction, feels compelled to apply pressures to those above him. It is a hazard, because the ethos of the organization, whether it is a Victorian family, an English boarding school or the British Army, demands that pressure always moves in one way only, downwards rather than upwards. To buck the system, by prodding those above, can have unpleasant consequences.<sup>11</sup>

Is it not therefore conceivable that one of the contributory factors in the failure to adequately defend Singapore was simply that General Percival, in the face of a military disaster, did not take the necessary steps because he was determined to adhere to the security and certainties of established behavioural patterns? Had Simson, belligerent, insistent and urgent, a decisive but brusque personality, raised the hackles of his normally affable commander? And having done so, he had travelled 'beyond bounds'; his insistent recommendations dismissed for lack of attention to due protocol within the chain of command.

And then there was 'Piggy' Heath, the commander of III Indian Corps. Heath had previously been highly successful on the battlefield; he was titled and he was older and more senior than Percival - and of equivalent rank. Their relationship was not a happy one, particularly when Heath disagreed with his commander's tactical decisions while the Japanese were moving rapidly southward. Percival lost confidence in 'Piggy' too.

Major-General Bennett, the GOC of the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division, was also an abrasive, thrusting personality. He and Simson did not see eye to eye. Surprise! But Bennett, nevertheless, was very experienced and very competent. He, too, wrangled with Percival over the strategies that should be adopted. Had Bennett had his way, and had he and the likes of Heath and Simson joined forces, things may have been different. The combined force of their rationale may have persuaded Percival to act more positively.

Logic? Logic, in all probability, had little to do with it. As Liddell Hart suggests, personality probably far more. Bennett and Heath and Simson, like types, were never going to 'get on', and never likely to join forces for the common good. And Percival, gentleman that he was, was not decisive enough to ensure an equable core of like purpose. It seems likely the Allied senior commanders may well have remained disastrously intransigent and unyielding to the last, as much toward each other as to the enemy.

An irony in this situation is that the British military's hierarchical structure, put in place over centuries to serve the power and control of the generals, now, arguably, failed itself. A not inconsiderable problem was that it had

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<sup>11</sup> Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, p. 138

understandably evolved to protect them from debate and opposition - arguments they might consider injudicious or ill-advised, not to mention quite unpalatable. General Percival, paralyzed and ineffectual, but by virtue of the insignia on his shoulders and the omnipotent power that it represented, and loyal to the traditions of the chain of command, was able to fend away the distasteful, querulous, driving energies of his turbulent subordinates, the men who, had they been effectively co-ordinated, may have saved a perilous situation.

Arthur Percival was far from an aggressive, thrusting personality. He was probably more a deep-thinking *melancholic*, level-headed *phlegmatic* mix. 'Weak and hesitant, though brainy,' Bennett noted in his diary.<sup>12</sup> But these quiet-natured people, however, can be stubborn and immovable to heroic proportions, especially if confronted by those who would seek to ride over them with insistent and pervasive force of personality. The potentially destructive interchange between aggressive commanders like Simson and Bennett and those of the more considered mien typified in Percival, exemplify how destructive such confrontation and non-co-operation between dissimilar types can be.

This is not an isolated phenomenon by any means. Noel Barber describes how Hore-Belisha, who was the British Secretary for War in 1939, visited the British Expeditionary Force in France and was aghast at the lack of defense works. What is more to the point is that he plainly showed his annoyance to the military commanders there. The upshot was that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff came to see him when he returned, to tell him, with great emphasis, that the officers were most upset at the criticisms. In fact, the commander of the B.E.F., Lord Gort, was threatening to resign! 'There is ... the sobering implication that even the chief of the Imperial General Staff evidently regarded the lack of defences as rather less important than the fact that military feelings had been hurt.'<sup>13</sup> A virtual rout and the evacuation at Dunkirk followed shortly after.

To a man with quiet dignity like Percival, the brusque demands of his subordinates may well have been anathema. Despite the fact that the world was falling in around him, it seems he was not about to accede to their crude, bludgeoning demands. One simply did not behave that way. Within the parameters of a unique, civilizing protocol, in centuries previous, the British had conquered the world. Was it that General Percival, a product of that long-proven but outmoded system, a dinosaur, would not, and did not, brook such querulous crudities? He held on stubbornly to what he knew, to what had stood the Empire in good stead for many centuries. He stubbornly evaded the truth and procrastinated, intent on maintaining 'form' rather than promoting sorely needed innovative substance?

On one occasion, Duff Cooper had told Churchill, '... it is all a field day at Aldershot for him. He knows the rules as well and follows them so closely and is always waiting for the umpire's whistle to cease-fire and hopes when the moment comes his military dispositions will be such as to receive approval.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Keegan, John, *A History of Warfare*, Random House, London, 1993, p. 263

<sup>13</sup> Barber, Noel, *Sinister Twilight*, Cassell Military Publications, London, 2007, p. 66

<sup>14</sup> Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, pp. 270-271

Perhaps Arthur Percival should have stayed an instructor, or been born to serve in a different era. Waterloo perhaps? 'The French came on in the same old way, and we saw them off in the same old way!' Arthur Wellesley commented after the Battle of Waterloo. That may have suited Percival too. But one wonders how the Duke of Wellington, calm, cool and collected under the severest of pressures, the staunchest, most phlegmatic British officer of them all, might have handled Singapore. He may not have found the bold and innovative Japanese quite so obliging as the brave but predictable French. But certainly, however, he would have been assertive and definite enough to have made a better fist of more effectively co-ordinating such a command as Singapore, bringing in to line the plethora of disparate personalities brawling in the wings.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942, Allied troops surrendered to the rampaging Japanese who, having outrun their lines of supply, were short of water and ammunition. The invaders were surprised by the ease with which the campaign culminated. They, too, had almost come to the end of their tether. Several more days of determined opposition from the defenders and the history of the war and region might very well have been very different.

And it may well have turned out differently for twenty-five year old Geoffrey Raphael and many others like him. The young Lieutenant arrived at Singapore from Australia on the 14<sup>th</sup> February, as a re-enforcement officer for the Australian 2/4<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles, which added to his scholarly appearance, and his favourite hobby was photography. He was hardly cast in the warrior mould. He did not seem much of a threat.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> General Percival officially surrendered; on the 16<sup>th</sup> Lieutenant Raphael and his men were detailed by their captors to load a line of trucks. When they had finished the task they were taken behind the vehicles and summarily executed. Geoffrey Raphael's war was over too. It was a singular, terrible tragedy amid the 'Viking funeral' that was the fall of Singapore. Many more were to follow in the coming three and a half years.

After the official surrender, General Bennett escaped back to Australia, thinking it was his duty to do so. He believed that his knowledge of Japanese tactics would be more valuable to the Allied war effort if he continued to freely serve rather than if he languished in a prison with his 15 000 men for the duration. Curiously, General Douglas MacArthur's escape from Corregidor has a similar heroic 'ring' to it. MacArthur, however, was painted in as a hero but, back in Australia, Bennett was publicly and viciously vilified.

Bennett's real problem appears to be that he had a rival with a similar personality to his own and, like two mountain goat rams slamming up against each other, one had to be brutally butted off the cliff - two aggressive rivals for the same limited territory - Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Army. It has been contended that General Sir Thomas Blamey played no small part in the skilful manipulation which effectively destroyed the career of a fellow *choleric* of equal proportion, one who he perceived as a distinct rival to him for the top job.

Bennett and Blamey had been fiercely competitive rivals throughout their military careers. At the end of the Great War both had achieved the rank of Brigadier at a very early age. Bennett ended hostilities in 1918 the more senior by a matter of weeks.

Charles Moses, on Bennett's staff in Singapore and later the General Manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, was of the opinion that the military board of inquiry set up after the war to examine the circumstances of General Bennett's departure from Singapore early in mid-February 1942, was a hostile inquiry. He felt that Blamey men 'stacked' the court and that the terms of reference were narrow and loaded against Bennett.<sup>15</sup>

Given the nature of the beasts involved, this is not at all inconceivable; in fact it would be quite within character for a driving personality to manipulate and dispense with a real or perceived rival in this way, either during the war or after it; a rival with much the same behavioural traits as his own, who would have meted out reciprocal treatment given the opportunity. Do unto others *before* they do unto you! The 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment of the overt *choleric* character?

But is Arthur Percival merely the 'fall guy'? Winston Churchill and Archibald Wavell, Percival's masters, forceful personalities that they were, were never, of course, going to take the blame for the disaster of Singapore. Conveniently, they had to look no further than General Percival - gentlemanly, acquiescent, always an obedient servant of his masters - and at hand [albiet 20,000 kilometres away in Japanese internment] - a scapegoat, a cover for their own inadequacies and '... for years of national illusion, of a democracy's ignorance, and of the myopia and complacency of the political leaders of that democracy.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Clisby M., *Guilty or Innocent? The Bennett Case*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, p. 42

<sup>16</sup> Smyth, *Percival*, p. 228