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Registered office 8 St. Andrew's Hill London EC4V 5JA Telephone 01-236 0202  
Telegrams Observer London EC4 Telex 888963

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Dear Mr Perceval

Thank you for your response to our request for your memories of historic events for our feature "I Was There".

I have read your contribution with interest but I regret that, due to an enormous response from readers and to pressures of space, we are unable to publish it so I am returning it to you. It was very kind of you to take the trouble to write.

Yours sincerely,

John Walker,  
Observer Magazine.

Directors: Lord Goodman (Chairman), The Hon. F. D. L. Astor, The Hon. J. J. Astor, Roger Harrison, Tristan Jones, J. C. Littlejohns, Donald Treford.

Our commanding officer together with key personnel had already taken leave of us, his instructions being to join up with existing allied forces in Java in order to continue the fight against the Japanese. Those of us fortunate enough to survive subsequent captivity were to learn several years later of the sinking of their ship close to the coast of Java and the machine-gunning of their entire party including nursing sisters by the waiting Japanese as they waded ashore.

Meanwhile those of us who remained in Singapore having received General Wavell's "no Surrender" orders issued from his headquarters in Java realised that even in the last resort with complete command of the seas and skies by the Japanese a Dunkirk or a Crete was completely out of the question. At this late stage the sole support for our land forces came from a single R.A.F. biplane which continued its attacks on the invading Japanese forces right up to the hour of the surrender.

From Command Headquarters at Fort Canning we had an uninterrupted view of Singapore Town. It was apparent on the morning of 14th February that either Japanese advance columns or fifth columnists were now close at hand as between 8 and 8.30 a.m. mortar shells burst within the perimeter of the Fort causing casualties. Instructions had already been issued from the battle box that all headquarters personnel were to vacate ground level buildings and to take up working positions in previously-prepared basement accommodation. Most of this was on sloping ground, and in consequence views of the surrounding Town could still be obtained from the basement areas. Public transport had long-since ceased to function. Shells of the single-deck solid tyre trolleybuses littered the streets, while the trolley wires assumed strange patterns around buildings and over pavements. Shells were bursting on the outskirts of the Town, and an air raid alert sounded some 48 hours previously was still in being. Whenever enemy planes bombed or machine-gunned it seemed contrary to the nature of the citizens other than to run in every direction; although little attempt had been made to provide civilian air raid shelters, nevertheless very

considerable cover could have been obtained from the deep storm drains which lined both sides of every street.

As 14th February wore on it was obvious that the battle for Singapore was intensifying. Wave after wave of Japanese aircraft were indulging in low-flying bombing and machine-gunning, and shells were now bursting well within the Town area. From time to time we would lose touch with the Service Corps Units for which we were responsible as they become overrun or communications severed. As the Japanese advance continued instructions were given for the destruction of supplies and for the taking into use of alternative availabilities. More and more small detachments and single individuals cut off from their main bodies of infantry found their way into command headquarters as the day wore on; these were quickly reformed into ad hoc bodies under new command and despatched to already fully-stretched defence points. Little was now seen of anti-aircraft defences, which anyway had never appeared particularly effective in the Battles of Malaya and Singapore.

By this time Radio Singapore had apparently ceased to function, and it was from a B.B.C. World Service broadcast that we learned that the Singapore Garrison was continuing to fight. We also learned that three German pocket battleships having left Brest were about to be attacked in the English Channel - with disappointing results we learned some  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years later!

The night of 14/15 February was a continuation of the daylight hours with sticks of bombs falling within the Fort perimeter. Water supplies generally were becoming short since the main supplies were situated in Johore, in mainland Malaya, which had been under Japanese control for some two or three weeks. Perhaps the most reassuring sound throughout that night was the deep boom of the defence guns from smaller islands off Singapore. It was considered that the danger hours for any frontal attack would be at sunrise and sunset, and in consequence at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. administrative personnel were required to reinforce the perimeter defences. At the sunrise standto, on what subsequently transpired to be the day of the capitulation of Singapore, 15th February, 1942. I found myself viewing the Town across a Chinese cemetery which had a row of coconut palms for its furthestmost boundary, some of

which were now stunted through war damage. One particular tree drew my attention. Whilst the others were still, this appeared to be moving freely. Although I fired several rounds into its foliage its movement continued; it subsequently transpired that these were to be the only shots which I was to fire. That morning the last issue of the Straits Times (a single sheet) appeared. A masterpiece, considering the conditions under which it must have been published.

The morning and early afternoon of 15th February saw a further intensification of the battle, and from our viewpoint it was obvious that the Japanese were closing on the Town. The lone R.A.F. biplane was continuing to operate, and again we were able to obtain the B.B.C. world service broadcast. From internal sources we were to learn that it had been estimated that in the region of 15,000 civilians had died on the previous day. At 4 o'clock that afternoon the gunfire and the bombing and machine-gunning gradually ceased, apart from the occasional lone gun from some distant point, and the pall of dust and smoke, apart from the large scale fires, gradually started to clear. Some two hours later all officers commanding were summoned to the battle box, where they were notified officially of the surrender, and told of the instructions they were to give to all troops under their command.

With the presence of hundreds of thousands of civilians who had packed Singapore Island since the end of the Battle of Malaya, few really believed that Wavell's "last man" order would apply. Any relief felt at the end of hostilities was quickly replaced by a realisation that we were now in the hands of an army without a history of having taken prisoners. That night was spent in receiving instructions from Command and communicating them to individual units on such subjects as the non-destruction of arms, ammunition, transport, supplies, &c. and correct behaviour towards the Japanese.

Most troops that night slept for the first time for a very long period. Early the following morning numerous fires were seen to be burning throughout Singapore Town, and there were large gaps in familiar patterns of buildings.

A long line of Japanese troops were advancing on Fort Canning. Some were pulling handcarts and others wheeling bicycles. Accustomed to the ways of the British Army one could not fail to be surprised by their gait and the general appearance of scruffiness and disorder. Not to be confused with an absence of discipline however, as we were to subsequently learn. At that moment the Union Jack was still flying from the masthead of Fort Canning. Several minutes later it was lowered, to be replaced by the flag of Imperial Japan.

Although one could not fail to feel some emotion, it has only been in retrospect that I have realised that, if only symbolically, this was the very moment when the British Empire had ceased to exist.