

## **Insights into the Invasion and Occupation of Singapore through Japanese Wartime Propaganda**

**Garth O'Connell, Curator, Military Heraldry and Technology,  
Australian War Memorial**

National Museum of Singapore, Gallery Theatre  
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### **Introduction: Imperial Japanese Propaganda**

In his lecture, Mr Garth O'Connell provided insights on the Imperial Japanese wartime propaganda during their World War Two Malayan campaign. He focused specifically on the invasion and occupation of Singapore.

The Imperial Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore in early 1942 was a globally significant event with far-reaching ramifications, both in place and time. The Imperial Japanese army created a diverse range of wartime propaganda to impress upon the subjects of their newly seized lands, their own people and the world that they were invincible.

They had a system of war artists record their victories throughout the South Pacific, from China, down through Malaya, across to Borneo to New Guinea and Solomon Islands and to Australia.

Beautifully illustrated in realistic and imagined souvenir postcards, posters, prints and magazines, the images and artworks featured the struggles, battles and victories of the Imperial Japanese army, as well as the local people and the places. Some of these were even made into regularly published series. This form of propaganda was popular because it was the most easily mass-produced.

### **Propaganda Materials**

The lecture was divided into three themes: (1) the driving charge to Singapore, (2) how the Japanese commemorated and celebrated the Fall of Singapore, and (3) the people and places of Singapore during the Japanese Occupation.

These were illustrated by images rarely seen in Japan, Australia and Singapore. Each image for the presentation slides was handpicked by Mr O'Connell from the collection at the Australia War Memorial in Canberra and his own personal collection.

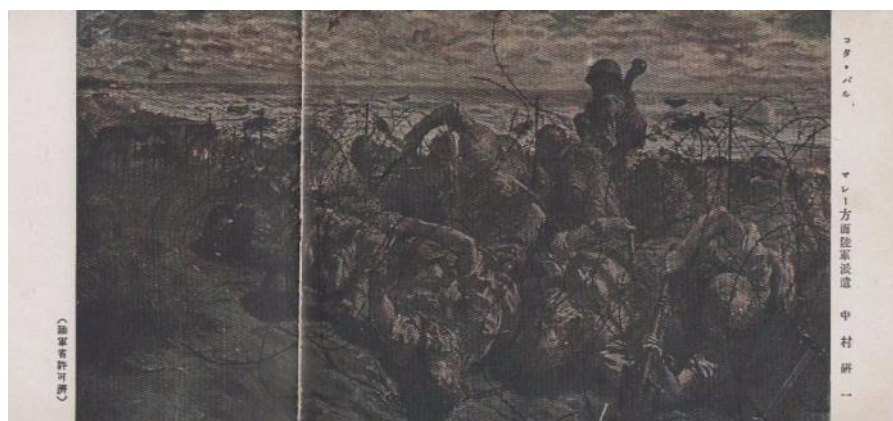
#### **Driving Charge to Singapore**

The first set of images shows the Imperial Japanese infantry and tanks advancing southwards towards Singapore from Malaya. In *Kota Bharu* by Imperial Japanese war artist Kenichi Nakamura and in *Landing Operation on Kota Bharu, December Showa 16* by Gyosui Suzuki,

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the Japanese Army is depicted in gritty and dramatic imagery.<sup>1</sup> Fiery explosions and death clearly show the destructive conditions of war.



*Kota Bharu* by Kenichi Nakamura



*Landing Operation on Kota Bharu, December Showa 16* by Gyosui Suzuki

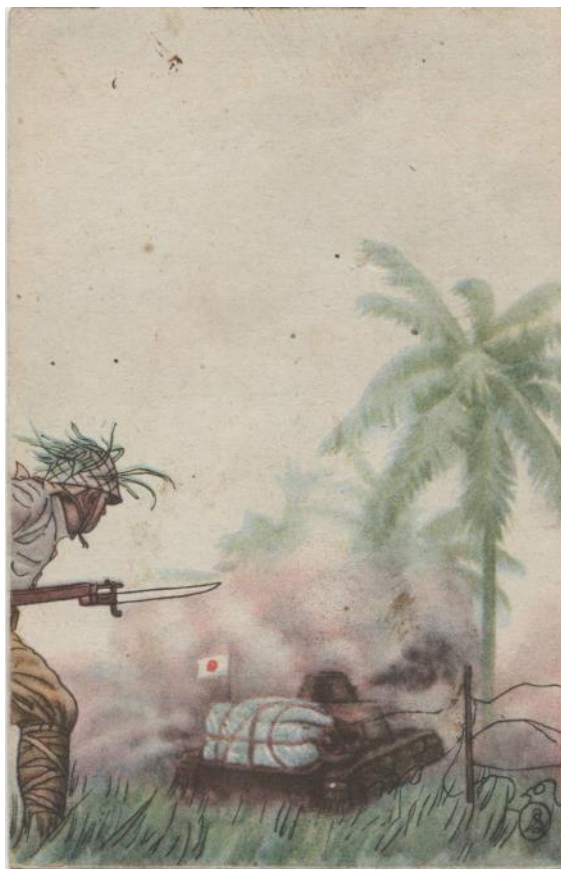
The mood of the images shifts to, depending on perspective, brighter illustrations of the Imperial Japanese war machine progressing through the dense jungles of Malaya. *Army Tank and Soldier Attacking Enemy Position in the South Pacific Front* depicts how well the war was going for the Imperial Japanese. All of the Japanese tanks that came into Singapore landed in Thailand and worked their way through Malaya. They were brought ashore with the help of elephants, and were also used to mow down the jungle, as seen in *A Tank Moves Forward a Coconut Wood* by Tsuguharu Fujita. Japanese troops are shown cutting through basic defences put up by young Thai soldiers in *Advance in the Jungle in Malaya*.

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<sup>1</sup> Showa 16 refers to 1941. The Showa period refers to the reign of Emperor Hirohito, the Showa emperor, from 25 December 1926 to 7 January 1989.

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*Army Tank and Soldiers Attacking Enemy Positions in the South Pacific Front*

*The Loss of "Force Z" on 10 December 1941* shows a series of various postcards, posters, images and even a board game that celebrated the Japanese Navy's victory over the Royal Navy off the coast of Kuantan. They had sunk two major British capital ships: the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*. Only a few months prior to this, President Franklin Roosevelt of the United States of America and Prime Minister Winston Churchill of the United Kingdom had met on the *Prince of Wales* to sign the agreement to lead America and Britain together.

More importantly, the Japanese Navy saw the victory to have great significance. They had looked up to the Royal Navy for decades. As they progressed into the modern 19th century, the Japanese looked to the British as an example. Britain was a similar country, having many small islands but a big population. Yet, they had a large empire and it was accredited to their navy. The sinking of the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales* for the Imperial Japanese was likened to the student defeating the master. It was also the first time that any major ship had been sunk by purely air attacks in the open sea, making the victory all the sweeter.

*Twelve Large Land Eagles Bombing Singapore* by Teiji Takai depicts Singapore being attacked at night by Japanese aircraft. Sitting in the pilot's seat of the aeroplane as you look over your right engine, you are directly in the bombing of Singapore during the War. Search lights beaming from Singapore exposed the bombers and some were shot down. Singapore was resisting the Japanese – it was not a walkover by any means. While the Japanese Army referred to their aircraft as "land eagles", Japanese Navy aircraft were called "sea eagles". This was also part of their propagand terminology. Codenamed "Lily", the Ki-48 bombers

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were used throughout all Pacific campaigns. This illustration was part of a series that was published twice a year, once in autumn and once in spring by artists in the field. This was one in the 1943 series.



*Twelve Large Land Eagles Bombing Singapore* by Teiji Takai, depicting Ki-48 "Lily" light bombers attacking by night

From the same series, *Twenty-three Sea Eagles Aerial Onslaught over Singapore* by Miyamoto Saburofude shows Japanese Navy aircraft shooting down British planes, the Supermarine Spitfire. The Spitfire, however, was never used in the Pacific – only the Brewster Buffalo and the Hawker Hurricane were. Unlike the above mentioned image by Teiji who depicted the reality of the situation, Miyamoto intentionally (mis)placed a famous British aeroplane into this illustration of the sea eagles' engagement with the British. Depicting the shooting down of a well-known fighter plane, in Mr O'Connell's opinion, made the Imperial Japanese look better to their home country and to others.

The Australian 22nd Brigade takes on the Imperial Japanese in *Japanese Forces Landing under Australian Fire at Singapore*. This was accurately depicted in terms of the actual equipment, the helmets, the uniforms, the search lights being used, machinegun fire, canons and so forth. The way it was done shows an upward struggle for the Japanese fighting in the mangroves. The soldiers were forcibly grabbing onto the vines, getting torn and ripped in the process. This shows that taking over Singapore was not a walkover. In fact, the Japanese had lost hundreds of soldiers coming across the Causeway. This image was part of a series published in 1943, a year after this battle, to depict their victories in 1942.



*Japanese Forces Landing under Australian Fire at Singapore*

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## The Japanese Commemorating the Fall of Singapore

The Battle of Bukit Timah is seen in two images of *The Day of Fall of Singapore (Bukit Timah)* by Fujita Tsuguji. The first image portrays such realism that even the details of a serial number on the back of a Brent Gun Carrier, an armoured tracked vehicle, can be seen. This also extended to the equipment, badges, helmets and weapons. Dead British and Australian troops lie in the foreground while advancing Japanese troops on their backs cut barbed wires above their heads. In the second image, Singapore burns in the distance and two soldiers crawl on the battlefield. One clearly has been wounded and is being carried by the other. These again show the reality that the harshness of war is indiscriminately dealt out to both sides.



*The Day of Fall of Singapore* by Fujita Tsuguji

In *Surrender – the Final Day of the British Flag*, the artist imagined General Officer Commanding (Malaya) Arthur Percival and his delegation meeting Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita and his delegation on Upper Bukit Timah Road, though the road was not depicted accurately. General Yamashita was made to look thinner than he was, holding a map and with a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck. A surrender flag and the Union Jack were made prominent, with a canon pointing at the British. In the background, parts of Singapore are burning.



*Surrender – the Final Day of the British Flag*

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Also on display at the National Museum of Singapore is *Meeting of General Yamashita and General Percival* by Saburo Miyamoto of the Malaya Dispatch Force. Much like *Surrender – the Final Day of the British Flag*, the event did happen, but the portrayal of the scene by the artist added to the propaganda of the Imperial Japanese military machine. In reality, there was no white surrender flag or the Union Jack hanging in the background. The artist also elevated the Japanese side, led by General Yamashita, above the British. In a position of superiority, they look down upon the British. Postcards like this were printed in the thousands and given to soldiers to send home. These were the perspectives that families in Japan had of the war.



*Meeting of General Yamashita and General Percival* by Saburo Miyamoto

*Our Fleet Makes an Entry Singapore Military Port* and *View of Singapore Harbour Shortly after Japanese Occupation* show the victorious Japanese Navy coming into the newly-captured Singapore. A Japanese heavy cruiser making port was quite an auspicious event. In some cases, the Japanese might have used some parts of the port facilities to repair and replenish ships so they could continue moving out towards the southeast. Singapore's strategic importance was not lost upon the victors.

### *Some People and Places in Occupied Singapore*

In Imperial Japanese propaganda, the war artists portrayed Japan as “liberating” the native populace from the grip of the West. In *Children of East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Play Together under the Rising Sun Flag*, *The Bright Future of Asia*, *A Heart to Protect the Japanese Flag* and *Southern Hinomaru Village*, all types of people, such as South Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Malays, Indians and others, celebrate with the Japanese on their victory and welcome them with handshakes and smiles.

In some of the propaganda, the occupied population speaks in Japanese. Directly translated, they say: “Let’s go to [the] kind Japanese military clinic to [have a] medical check”, “Japanese is [in a] just position to help us like god”, “Let’s fight to smash terrible Britain and American to establish [a] great Eastern Asia”. The Japanese war artist positioned Imperial Japanese forces as magnanimously helping the occupied countries.

Postcards being sent all around the captured part of the world also featured the Japanese military with adoring civilian crowds. The Imperial Japanese called out to the locals: “Malays, let’s stand since [your] people [have] become free, now great East Asia co-prosperity is waiting

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for you.” The Japanese also touted what they did to the occupied populace, with students being instructed in Japanese as part of the re-education.

The *Faceless Solider Series* features postcards with painted or drawn Japanese soldiers without faces. The idea was for the senders to draw their own faces in or paste photographs of themselves to send home. These postcards included those that featured a Japanese male riding a turtle with local children looking on, and a man riding an elephant. These can also be seen in the National Museum of Singapore.



Japanese Occupation propaganda postcard from a set of five, circa 1940s  
National Museum of Singapore collection

## Conclusion

Mr O’Connell concluded by stating that the Fall of British Malaya and of Singapore in 1942 was a truly major historic event of global significance that continues to have ramifications today. The Pacific War still touches a raw nerve with many people throughout the world, from former occupied territories such as China, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, to Western nations such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Holland, New Zealand and Australia.

When Mr O’Connell was still studying for his degree, he brought his Japanese peers to the War Memorial. As they were confronted with the evidence of what Imperial Japan had done, they were astounded. One Japanese friend told him: “For me as a girl, back in Tokyo, I knew a little bit about a war in China, America forced us to go to war, we had to attack Pearl Harbour to defend ourselves and then 1945, two atomic bombs hit Japan.”

Mr O’Connell’s family was very much a part of the War in Singapore. In *The Spiritual Heart of the Imperial Japanese Occupation*, which was taken from a magazine, the picture of the Syonan Jinja (“Shrine” in Japanese) at MacRitchie Reservoir recalls memories of the bridge that was constructed using slave labour and supervised by Japanese engineers. Mr O’Connell’s family members were part of the Australian slave labour. Yet, he shared how during his time in Singapore, he had visited the site where the bridge once stood. He admired what remains of it and the landscape. In fact, it is his favourite place in Singapore.

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**About the Speaker**

Garth O'Connell is a curator from the Australian War Memorial. He completed a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Cultural Heritage Management in 1999 and joined the Memorial immediately after graduation, working as a curator with the Military Heraldry and Technology section. Proud of his cross-cultural family roots to Ireland and the Aboriginal people of North Western New South Wales, Garth's research and interests are diverse, and include the service history of Indigenous Australians in the military, the Malaya-Singapore campaign of 1941–1942 and the Vancouver Canucks ice hockey team.

**About HistoriaSG**

HistoriaSG is a lecture series that focuses on important but lesser-known aspects of Singapore's history. With in-depth presentations by local and international academics on a range of topics viewed through a variety of lens from business to science and technology, the environment and specific communities, the series sheds new light on Singapore's culture, history and heritage. Organised by the National Museum of Singapore, HistoriaSG is part of the museum's efforts to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Singapore's history.

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