

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Extract from a report by an officer who escaped the fall of Singapore 1942

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Extract a

A few General Remarks Bearing on the Campaign.

Civil incompetence.

Administration broke down. No plan for, or system of evacuation of the population had been arranged (this in spite of lessons from other theatres.) This enabled the Japs to mingle with the local population and made the job of fifth columnists a sinecure. The Police, in almost all cases, disappeared.

Intelligence.

Poor. Underestimated Jap strength and intentions before the war - overestimated it during the war.

Staff Work.

Must have left much to be desired when one considers the number of changes made during the short campaign. Were there too many cooks? War House, C-in-C Far East, G.O.C. in C, Corps, divs etc. Sometimes orders came direct from div; bde uninformed. Conflicting orders; often late and sometimes none. Were H.Qs too far back and were they usually out of the picture or out of date?

Information.

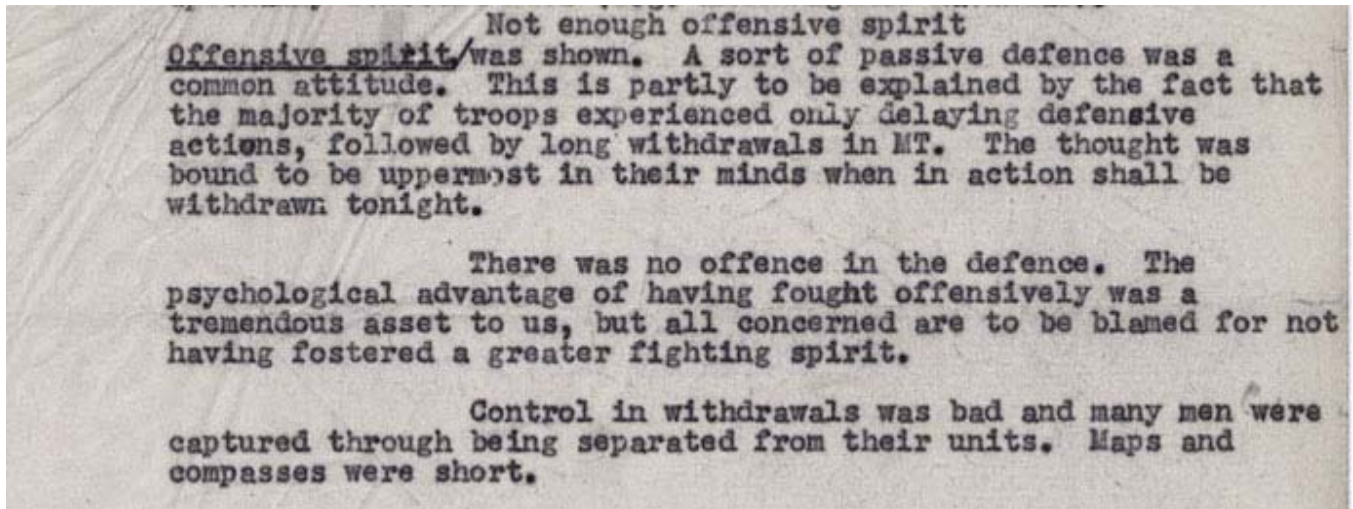
The lack of it was deplorable. We got little or none and rarely even knew what was happening in other formations in Malaya.

Promised air parity in January! Continual vague talk of counter-offensive which never happened, presumably because the Japs retained the initiative and we continued to conform to his movements.

Defence of Singapore.

Why were beach defences not prepared? They may have been in some parts; there certainly was not as much as a strand of wire or a trench on the North East. There were some R.A. positions.

Extract b



What is this source?

This source is an extract from a report by a British officer who was in Singapore as it fell in February 1942.

There were many reports from different officers in different services that were sent to the government.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. In the Far East war broke out on December 7th 1941 when Japanese forces destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Japan had already built up forces in Indochina and Thailand and surprised the British forces by attacking Malaya (part of the British Empire) in December 1941. Although the Allied forces outnumbered the Japanese, they were less experienced and less well equipped. The British also did not expect to attack Singapore by advancing 600 miles through difficult territory in Malaya. By February 1942 the Japanese were attacking the heavily fortified naval base of Singapore and it surrendered on February 15th 1942.

The defenders outnumbered the attackers at Singapore. However, the Japanese were better trained and equipped. They were especially strong in terms of aircraft. Defenders were constantly attacked from the air. One of the deciding factors in the surrender was the heavy civilian casualties suffered from bombing by aircraft. A related factor was that Singapore's anti-aircraft defences ran out of ammunition.

It's worth knowing that...

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill admitted to US President Roosevelt in a telegram that the fall of Singapore had been a total disaster.

Debate still rages today about whether British forces could have held out in Singapore. The British Commander General Wavell said he was very disappointed with his performance. However, one of the crucial factors was Japanese superiority in aircraft. Many of the aircraft that Britain planned to send to Malaya and Singapore ended up going to Russia in 1941.

How will you use this source?

1. The officer lists six problem areas. Which do you think did most harm to the defence of Singapore?
2. Some officers were accused of trying to shift the blame away from themselves after Singapore. Do you get the impression that this officer is trustworthy or not?
3. In what ways does this source support or contradict any other sources in this investigation?
4. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.