

PRESS RELEASE

Media Division, Ministry of Information and the Arts, 270, South Bridge Road, Singapore 110692. Tel: 37377445 Fax: 2731326
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**SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM,
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE,
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE BATTLE BOX
HELD ON SATURDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 1997
AT 11.30 AM AT FORT CANNING**

I am pleased to be here today to officiate at the opening of the Battle Box.

The 15th of February 1997 is a significant day in the history of Singapore because it marks the 55th anniversary of the fall of Singapore in World War II. When war broke out in the Far East, Singapore was regarded as the mighty fortress guarding the eastern defence line of the British Empire in Asia - the Gibraltar of the East. The British and had a sizeable military presence here, which gave an appearance of strength. The British and local Singaporeans were so confident about the defence of Singapore that life in wartime Singapore went on normally. It was a shocking blow to everybody when Singapore rapidly collapsed in the face of the advancing Japanese Imperial Army. The opening of the Battle Box is thus significant for three reasons. First, the Battle Box is a reminder of our nation's vulnerability. Second, the Battle Box brings home to us the importance of having our own defence capability. Third, the Battle Box is a significant historical monument.

First, the Battle Box is a reminder of our nation's vulnerability. It was here, in the Battle Box on Fort Canning Hill, that the British had their command headquarters for the defence of Singapore. It was also here that Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival made the decision on 15 February 1942 to surrender, and then set out to meet the Japanese at the Ford factory in Bukit Timah. During the Occupation, there was a meeting among some Japanese commanders and the Kempeitai in the Battle Box, at which a plan was agreed on to eliminate all undesirable elements from the Chinese community.

Second, the Battle Box brings home to us the importance of having our own defence capability. During the Second World War, the defence of Singapore was in the hands of the British, who ruled over a large and powerful Empire. Singapore seemed safe. But when war broke out, the British had to fight their enemy in Europe first. Their best resources - their fighter planes and crack fighting troops - were deployed to defend their home base. The lesson to learn is that we may have friends and allies, but ultimately, the defence of our country is our own responsibility. And we must have the resources and capability to carry out that responsibility.

Third, the Battle Box is a significant historical monument. The Battle Box was the most extensive underground operations complex in Singapore and the nearby region. Today, the Battle Box has been refurbished to recapture a moment in time, recreating the events and atmosphere of the last few hours before the surrender in 1942. Attention has been paid to every minute detail. The Fort Canning Country Club and the National Parks Board should be commended for investing much time and resources to make this project a reality. I am sure that visitors to the Battle Box, both Singaporeans and tourists, will find it an interesting and meaningful historical attraction.

Today, Singapore is an independent nation. We have risen from shaky beginnings to become a stable, secure and economically vibrant country. Amidst the peace and prosperity we now enjoy, it is easy for us to be lulled into a false sense of security, and to become complacent. Let us not forget that peace and prosperity cannot be taken for granted. Just as economic prosperity is the result of correct policies and hard work, peace can be sustained only with constant vigilance and sustained effort which includes building a strong defence capability and a strong commitment by our people to defend our nation should the need arise.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare open the Battle Box. Thank you.
