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Speech by Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean at the Opening of “Memories at Old Ford Factory”

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Minister for Defence, Mr Teo Chee Hean

Good evening, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

The first bombs fell on Singapore in the early hours of the morning of 8 December 1941. Simultaneously, the Japanese Imperial Army was landing invasion forces at Singora, Patani and Kota Bahru. Singapore and its Naval Base was the prize.

The British plans for the defence of Singapore were not matched by the allocation of forces adequate to execute those plans. The British had concentrated their forces and the best of their weapons in Europe and North Africa, where they were also at war. They had only some 150 obsolete warplanes in Malaya, which proved to be no match for the hundreds of superior Japanese warplanes. Without sufficient air cover, the battleships Prince of Wales and Repulse, which arrived in Singapore only on 2 December 1941, were sunk off Kuantan while attempting to interdict the Japanese invasion fleet.

The British troops who had been sent to defend Singapore against an attack down the peninsula had received little or no training. Several battalions of Australian troops on their way to the Middle East were diverted to Singapore, but many of them were untrained recruits and were completely unprepared for jungle warfare against the Japanese troops who had prepared and trained for this campaign.

In two months of fighting, the Japanese pushed the defending British forces southwards down the peninsula and reached the shores of the Johor Straits, just across from Singapore. The remaining British troops blew a gap in the Causeway as they retreated south across it to Singapore.

The Japanese landed on 7 February 1942 on Pulau Ubin, from which they shelled the northeastern part of Singapore. This was a diversionary action before their main landing on the northwest coast of Singapore in the early hours of 9 February. In just about a week, Singapore was taken over by the invading Japanese army.

One of the fiercest battles before the surrender – the Battle for Bukit Timah - took place near this building. The Japanese reached Bukit Timah on 11 February and met strong resistance from the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force comprising local civilian defenders who fought bravely and fiercely with rifles, shotguns, and hand grenades tied to their waists and swords strapped to their backs. With the capture of Bukit Timah hill, the Japanese gained a stranglehold on Singapore's water supply – which they promptly cut off. This was a strategic move that contributed to the British surrender.

It was here at the Ford Motor Factory, where General Yamashita of the Japanese Imperial Army had set up his headquarters, that Lieutenant-General A E Percival, commander of the British forces, signed the surrender papers on 15 February 1942. That was the first day of the Chinese New Year.

The day after the British surrendered, exactly 64 years ago today, Singapore was renamed “Syonan-to” or “Light of the South” by the Japanese invaders. But for the people of Singapore, it marked the beginning of dark times, which was to last 3 years and 8 months. Singaporeans went through extreme hardship and suffering as an occupied people. Conditions were desperate. There was not enough food; there was no healthcare. Worse than the physical hardship was having to live in constant fear. The walls of this gallery tell the stories of torture and massacres. Many families lost loved ones and suffered grievously.

The gallery here at the old Ford Motor Factory is a powerful and poignant reminder to all Singaporeans that we once paid a terrible price because we could not defend ourselves. We must learn from this most painful lesson of what could be taken away from us if we are not able to defend ourselves.

The need to learn from our past cannot be overstated. It provides the backdrop that helps us make sense of our present and guides us so that we do not repeat the same mistakes. This gallery ensures that the history of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore is not forgotten, and that the important lessons it holds are conveyed to future generations of Singaporeans.

Singaporeans must know that we should never take our nation's peace and stability for granted, and that we ourselves must be responsible for our own defence. Without security as a strong foundation, we cannot develop and progress as a nation.

That is why we have invested so much in our defence since we became an independent nation – by requiring our men to do National Service and steadily developing the capabilities of the Singapore Armed Forces. Anyone who may be tempted to think that our small island will be an easy target – like it was in 1942 – must be left in no doubt about the resolve of Singaporeans and our commitment to defend our nation, and that the Singapore Armed Forces can and will repel any aggressor and defend Singapore. We want to live in a stable and peaceful region. But like many other countries which have seen the ravages of invasion and occupation, we have learned through bitter experience that in order to remain secure and to enjoy peace, we must first be prepared to fight to defend ourselves.

I congratulate the National Heritage Board for restoring the old Ford Motor Factory and developing this gallery to present the human face of war with its focus on the life of the people of Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. This permanent exhibition completes the picture of Singapore's experience during that dark period of our history, together with the other World War II centres at the Battle Box, Changi Chapel and Museum, and the Reflections at Bukit Chandu exhibition.

It gives me great pleasure now to declare the permanent gallery "Memories at Old Ford Factory" open. Thank you.

National Archives of Singapore