

# So subterranean

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bunker tales. The entrance to Battlebox, formerly a network of bunkers built during WWII. (Photo by author).

‘We dance round in a ring and suppose, But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.’

Robert Frost’s lines came to mind as we walked into the underground bunkers that were the British army headquarters in Singapore during World War II. Nearly four decades after it was abandoned, this underground facility, sitting under the tranquil Fort Canning in the middle of the bustling city-state, was discovered serendipitously by a young journalist.

The Battlebox, as it is called, was a bomb-proof network of bunkers which served as the Command Centre for the 1,00,000 strong British and Commonwealth forces, among them 60,000 Indians, along with Australians and Malaysians during the Battle of Singapore in 1945. It was here that Britain’s decision to surrender to the Japanese was taken, which, in Churchill’s words, was the “worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history.”

## Pathway paradise

So, beyond the Sentosas and the safaris, there is this fascinating colonial-district walking trail for history buffs. Finding all guided tours booked, we decided to DIY. I read up on the Internet, printed out maps, and highlighted the milestones and monuments. Taxis go right up to the Fort Canning Centre, but we preferred the slow exploration on foot. So armed with my notes, a good breakfast, hat, water and walking shoes, we began our climb to the Fort from the rear (Clemenceau Avenue / River Valley Road). It's a scenic elevation to the top, with the walking path spiralling through lush green grass and canopied by majestic heritage trees.

The trail is wonderfully aided with plaques carrying bits of Singapore's history from as early as the 12th century. The hill was then called the Bukit Larangan, which in Malay means the Forbidden Hill, presumably to keep the commoners away as it was the sacred burial grounds of Malay rulers, or because a natural spring flowed there, where the royal ladies bathed.

When Sir Stamford Raffle, the founder of modern Singapore, landed in Singapore in 1819 and the British consolidated their presence, this hill came to be known as the Government Hill. Raffle built a house here, which no longer exists. In 1859, the Government Hill was renamed Fort Canning Hill after the Governor General and first Viceroy of India, Lord Canning. By the 1920s it had become the headquarters and barracks of the British army.

Today, there is no fort on the top, only the underground reservoir which was constructed in 1926. We walked past the reservoir and saw one of the remaining gates of the fort and the two remaining structures of the Old Married Soldiers' Quarters. As we began our descent to the other side and stopped to look at the only remaining sally port, we met two gentlemen coming out of the bunkers. One of them was the tour guide of the Battlebox. We learnt that the Battlebox Museum had officially opened for viewing only on June 28, 2016, after a two-year restoration. We decided to take the guided tour.

The tour through the bunker that was built in the 1930s took us back in time to February 15, 1942, the day that marked the British Army's humiliating defeat.

## On a bunker tour

The Battlebox has been recreated to resemble the crucial days of deliberations and difficult decisions. Complete with wax figures of the military officers in charge, led by the GOC Malaya Command, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, it exudes the gloom and helplessness before the surrender. It was a state-of-the-art communication facility that today displays, very authentically, some interesting mock-ups like that of the original telephone exchange and the Guns Operations Room with a plotting table. One of the three original, huge air-filtration plants to counter gas attacks, emergency power generators, the emergency rooftop exit, and the toilets marked Clerks (with original graffiti) and Officers, many war artefacts, war maps are also on display. The narrative is suitably augmented by several real film footages. It debunks many myths about the reasons for the British surrender, presenting the dismal circumstances due to food and water shortages and the heavy loss of civilian and military lives.

## Hollow years

After the British surrender, the Japanese are believed to have used at least the signals rooms till the end of occupation in 1945. When the British returned to Singapore after the war, Fort Canning became the military headquarters; the Battlebox, which had been stripped bare by looters, lay abandoned. It was forgotten in the years that followed, which saw the merger of Singapore with Malaysia in 1963, and its consequent independence in 1965 when the army moved out of Fort Canning and the Singapore Command and Staff College came up in its place. During this time, it was decided to seal the Battlebox off lest someone strayed in and lost their way in the labyrinth. It was 20 years later, in 1988, that a young journalist, on an investigative beat, discovered the Battlebox entrance just as he was giving up hope of finding it. Refurbished, it now offers us a gripping account of history.

The Battlebox tour is undoubtedly the most intriguing experience at Fort Canning, but also on the grounds are several other historical monuments and relics of the past like the Gothic gate, Cupolas, the first Christian cemetery, Arts Centre, Spice Garden, the first 'Experimental and Botanical Garden', and a nine-pound cannon.