



Operation Matador

Chit Chung Ong

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When Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, Churchill called it the “largest capitulation in British history.” Till today, the myth persists that this was due to the British forces’ being caught off-guard, with their guns facing the wrong direction—towards the sea. This book offers an alternative insight into why Malaya and Singapore were captured by the Japanese.

The question of the landward defence of Singapore and Malaya was first raised as early as 1918, eventually taking the form of Operation Matador, the elaborate planning and preparations for which amply demonstrate that the British fully expected the Japanese to attack Singapore from the rear, and had formulated a plan to stop the Japanese at the Kra Isthmus. Yet, when the Japanese forces landed, they found Malaya and Singapore defended by an emasculated fleet, obsolescent aircraft, inadequate artillery and no tanks. The battle for Malaya and Singapore was lost even before the first shot was fired—in the corridors of power at Whitehall. Churchill’s half-hearted support for Operation Matador meant that Malaya was starved of the necessary reinforcements, and the commanders on the spot were expected to “make bricks without straw.” The question that remains: If implemented, might Operation Matador have stopped the Japanese?

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