

**Jump TO Article**



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)



**Jump TO Article**

## BOOK REVIEW

# *The rise and fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919–1942*

by W. David McIntyre

*The Macmillan Press Ltd.: London; 1979; 289 pp.; ISBN 0333248678;  
Ursula Davidson Library call number: 740 MCIN 1979*



The crumbling and capitulation of the 'impregnable' redoubt and naval base of Singapore in February 1942 has spawned many books. The fall of this cornerstone of Allied defence policy in the Far East and the basis upon which Australian defence capabilities and strategies were built was a traumatic event. Most writers have attempted to analyse the causes of the collapse of British resistance and to assign blame. However, this book, published in 1979, starts from first principles and details the story of the design and construction of the base itself and the associated defence works.

'Everybody knows' that the defences were inadequate (true), that the naval guns could only enfilade the sea approaches to Singapore (false), and the Japanese were shown to be invincible jungle fighters (also false). What McIntyre demonstrates is that there was a long chain of causation that produced the first result and that the project was bedevilled by political, financial and strategic wrangling from the very start, and that the military planning for its manning and defence was deeply flawed. Readers will be familiar with the well-rehearsed arguments about the merits of the 'main fleet to Singapore' basis for the naval reinforcement of Singapore, but may not be aware that the arrangements for bolstering the island's air defences were equally fragile and tenuous. The failure by military commanders to exercise their troops, the bulk of them Indian regiments, in the arts and sciences of jungle warfare seems inexcusable. Effective construction of defences and their provisioning was hamstrung during the 1930s by an interminable war of words between the gunners and the aviators about which could provide the most effective defence, shells or aircraft bombs.

Meanwhile, the centrepiece of this crucial defensive position, the naval dockyard, lurched from crisis to crisis. There was simply not enough money voted, nor the priority given, to have this ambitious major work of construction completed, so that the dockyard opening ceremonies had to be photographed from predetermined angles to ensure that the state of incompleteness was not revealed to the enemy – or more importantly – to the British and their allies. McIntyre concludes that senior British politicians and military officers were engaged in a programme of corrosive disinformation from the early 1930s.

There was never an official enquiry into what Churchill described as 'the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history', and, in his discussion in his chapter titled 'Post-Mortem', McIntyre suggests

cogent reasons why this was so. None of the senior figures in the British government from 1923 to 1941, or their senior military advisers, could escape censure for their role in the steps that led to the debacle. It would have been too embarrassing to reveal the shifting sands on which the strategic jewel in the British Crown in the Far East had been built.

McIntyre provides a very good set of notes on the British and other records to which he had access from 1972 onwards, but he did not have the advantage of the discussion that signals intelligence of the time can now add to this sad saga. Nevertheless, this is a valuable and interesting book and the researcher will be gladdened by McIntyre's assessment of other publications on the subject available to him at the time.

**Ian Pfennigwerth**