

# Sound and Fury of the Guns

The hill was closely associated with the military. It was named after Fort Canning, constructed on seven acres of leveled ground on the hill-top in the 19th century. Much of the fort was demolished in the 1920s when a service reservoir was built in its place. The only relics left from Fort Canning today are an old gate, remnants of the fort wall and a couple of cannons.

New military structures were added during the construction of the reservoir. The barracks and offices were impressive 3-storey buildings built on slopes, and together with the new roads paved to reach them, cost an astonishing \$1,000,000.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 20th century, the hill was occupied by different military authorities: the British, the Japanese, the Federation of Malaya and finally in 1966, the Republic of Singapore. From the 1970s onwards, the military buildings were converted for civilian and recreational use, and served as a squash centre, art and cultural space, culinary school, visitors' centre, country club and boutique hotel at different times.

Even grander, at least in ambition, than the military buildings is the bomb-proof bunker that was embedded into the hill next to the reservoir. It contained 29 rooms, and measured 44m by 48.6m, constructed 9.1m underground. Believed to be built sometime around 1936, it was meant to house the British Combined Operations Staff of the three services, air, sea and land, as well as allied representatives of the French, Dutch and the Americans.

Given that the hill was an important defence base since the 19th century, and that a number of structures are being

conserved, it is remarkable that the INSITU team could barely sense its military historicity.

Alan Harfield, a British soldier stationed on Fort Canning Hill in the 1950s, echoed a similar sentiment:

“Fort Canning, the home of Headquarters Singapore Base District and known to practically all military personnel stationed on Singapore Island, gives little impression of ever having been, or of being a Fort.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite all the expensive military hardware that have been constructed on the hill, the intense spirit of combat was never present. All the hardware signified nothing; the infrastructures were found lacking as soon as they were built.

Right from the beginning, Fort Canning was widely derided as being incapable of providing defence for the island:

“It is well known in what estimation the Fort itself is held by many, and how frequently it has been declared for all purposes of military defence to be utterly useless. It lies more than half a mile inland from the sea frontage, and has in front of it nearly all of Singapore that is worth protecting, - its shipping and its storehouses. A vessel with no superior ordinance to that on the Hill might lay the Town in ashes, and yet a shot not reach her.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the guns on the hill, when fired, were done for congenial purposes. By the 1860s, the fort was the de facto general signal centre for the town, a 68-pounder would faithfully crow at 5.00 am to usher in the day. In 1864, 21 rounds were fired to celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday, and in the early 1900s, a round was fired at dawn and dusk to mark the commencement and the end of the daily fast during the Malay Ramadan period.<sup>5</sup>

The sprawling underground bunker was an impressive construction: one metre thick of reinforced concrete wall to withstand bombings, fitted with three air filtration plants and emergency power generators in case of gas attacks or power failures. However when it was completed, General Percival, General Officer Commanding (Malaya) admitted that it was “already too small... and, although it was occupied during the operations, it was never actually used for the purpose intended.”<sup>6</sup>

In the last throes of the war, the bunker did serve its original purpose, for four days. Percival retreated to the bunker on 11 February 1945 as the battle had reached his headquarters at Sime Road. Probably the most historically significant event to take place on the hill was the British decision to surrender to the Japanese, made in Room 27 in the bunker on 14 February 1945.

There is another possibility for the muted military spirit, one that extends to all other relics and replicas of antiquities found on the hill. Fort Canning Hill has witnessed many construction works, each erasing the previous. And set within the future-looking exuberance of Singapore, the remaining historical objects - the Keramat Iskandar Shah<sup>7</sup>; lighthouse, time ball and flagstaff; Service Reservoir; cemetery plaques and tombstones; cupolas; and an uncovered archaeological dig site - shrink in their potency to evoke a connection with the past.

Though these carefully conserved objects show and tell the fascinating stories that took place on the hill, their aura is of the present. It is telling that none of the INSITU artists chose to engage directly with the relics and replicas in their mapping. No visceral reaction was triggered.

#### FORT CANNING

1859 Commenced construction  
1861 Completed  
1867 Armament consisted of 19 guns, which were made up of seven 68 pounders, eight 8-inch guns, two 13-inch mortars and a two 14-pounder carronades  
1907 Ceased its function as a defence base, and instead became the headquarters of the British army in Singapore  
1923 Commenced demolition of the Fort to make way for a service reservoir  
1927 Completed. Only old Gate remains

#### MILITARY BUILDINGS

1923 Commenced construction of offices and barracks  
1927 Completed  
1929 Quarters for locals constructed

#### UNDERGROUND BUNKER

1936 Commenced construction  
1938 Completed  
1942 Used as part of the British Malayan Command Headquarters  
1942 Occupied by the Japanese military authorities  
1945 Returned to the British military authorities  
1963 British handed Fort Canning to the Singapore Military Forces  
1963 63 4th Malaysian Infantry Brigade Headquarters housed at Fort Canning  
1966 Fort Canning handed to the Singapore Armed Forces  
1970 Command and Staff College opened  
1976 Command and Staff College moved out of the hill