

The Drumbeats of War

My grandfather had always been an avid reader of newspapers. In spite of having spent the bulk of his adult life in Singapore, his concerns were seldom far from the twists and turns of events in China. What was happening in the British-ruled Straits Settlements was relegated to secondary importance. The trouble was that events from China were often disconcerting and inadequately reported. Wars with foreign powers or between contending Chinese warlords were staples, as well as the recurring natural and man-made calamities. Each report troubled him, either for want of fuller details or because there was nothing he could do to affect the outcome. But, like some self-destructive addict, he craved for more news.

His normal reaction took the form of a wan, helpless shaking of his head. I sometimes felt sorry for him, in the same way I supposed he had felt sorry for me when I was “promoted to sergeant” by the headmaster of the Chinese primary school.

He seldom drew the attention of other members of the household to the recurring Chinese disasters, however. It was possible he wanted to avoid upsetting the womenfolk. Their concerns were more focused on developments in Canton, where my eldest aunt and her family resided.

My father, being a journalist, must have had some interest in Chinese affairs. But I saw little of him and had no idea what he thought, nor what he and my grandfather might or might not have discussed.

My own limited images of Canton were fading fast, save for a lingering nostalgia for companions at the kindergarten, for Miss Nice and for the sorry end of King Kong. My siblings in Singapore had no experience of China, so any mention of events there went over their heads.

When I was eight, however, I noticed that my grandfather’s response to news from China had become more agitated. One day he cried out in a strangled voice: “*Aiyeh!* Really war again!”

I did not know till later that it had to do with the Marco Polo Bridge

Incident occurring on the night of July 7, 1937. The bridge referred to was a 12th-century granite one at Wanping, near Peking. It was a thing of beauty, with 11 arches decorated by hundreds of stone lions of various shapes and sizes. Emperors and commoners alike had strolled upon it for centuries. It was referred to as the Marco Polo Bridge in the West because the Venetian had visited it and had described it in his traveller's tales.

Some years previously, in 1931, Japan had annexed the northern provinces of Manchuria. Waves of indignation and impotent rage had swept across China as a result. But the country was too fractured and its armed forces too badly organised to repel the invasion. An appeal against that aggression was made to the League of Nations but, as usual, the international community uttered platitudes and followed the convenient options of *realpolitik*. Japan, thus emboldened, set up a puppet regime the following year and plotted fresh encroachments. China lived in injured resentment, trapped by its own weaknesses and deserted by its fair-weathered friends. The situation dragged on and an uneasy stalemate settled in.

The stalemate took the form of two unequal encampments at either end of the bridge. Because of the tense situation, both sides agreed not to make night manoeuvres without prior notification to the other side. That understanding was honoured for some time.

On the night of 7 July, however, the Japanese broke the agreement. The Chinese troops thought they were under attack and precipitously opened fire. That exchange, coupled with more subsequent bungling by both sides, provided the spark which ignited another Sino-Japanese war.

The outbreak of hostilities caused distant Singapore to be turned into a hotbed of Chinese patriotic indignation. Individuals and community organisations set about raising funds to assist the motherland in its war efforts. The extent to which my grandfather took part is unknown.

Meanwhile in China, the Japanese forces swept steadily south, capturing first Shanghai and then Nanking in December. In the latter city, an appalling genocide known as the “Rape of Nanking” took place. It lasted for six weeks, during which time a carnage of women and children occurred on an epic scale. Blood flowed through the main thoroughfares like rivulets and mutilated bodies were strewn everywhere. The number of deaths is still in dispute even today. Conservative estimates placed it at around 200,000. The Japanese took a different view.

My grandfather was visibly shaken by that news. For once, he discussed the outrages with the womenfolk. They became equally horrified. My grandmother and my aunts, half-dazed with shock and disbelief, kept asking one another: “How can such things happen?”

What little I heard astounded me also. It sounded too inexplicable, too mind-boggling, for me to grasp. Armies were supposed to be comprised of highly disciplined men. From time to time, I had seen neat columns of British soldiers marching smartly down the streets, going to parades on occasions like the birthday of their monarch. How could such troops suddenly change into mobs of rapists and murderers for six whole weeks? I tried to imagine soldiers attacking *Ah Mah* and hacking the womenfolk to death. But I could not. Yet no adult explained what it all meant.

My grandfather stayed more taciturn than usual, retreating into himself, smoking furiously on one of his pipes or staring out into space while fingering his wispy beard. He also began disappearing for prolonged periods. He might have gone to No. 38 or to the homes of his friends. He did not take any of us children with him, as he had previously done.

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My perplexity over the conduct of Japanese troops stemmed from my ignorance of the racial ideology inculcated into them since the beginning of the twentieth century. They had been taught that all races other than theirs were sub-human. Therefore, any killing of non-Japanese was of no great significance, mattering no more than the killing of barnyard chicken or farm animals. Such an attitude was drilled most fervently into the Kempeitai, the Military Police Corps within the Imperial Japanese Army.

The fanaticism thus instilled also accounted for the biological and other inhuman experiments conducted on prisoners in Manchuria by the notorious Unit 731, and for the subsequent ill-treatment of Western prisoners-of-war during World War II. Japan had conveniently not signed the Geneva Conventions.

After the war, a number of Japanese officers were convicted of war crimes in respect of the Nanking massacres and were executed. But those higher up in the command structure escaped punishment and were never held to account. The extent and responsibility for the massacres remain bones of contention between China and Japan to the present day. China is still demanding an official apology for those crimes but Japan is seeking to downplay them and to expunge them from their collective memory and from their history books.

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As I heard the odd account of the Japanese forces capturing more and more cities in Southern China, I wondered how my mother and my younger brother might be affected. Could they have been brutalised as well? The International Settlement in Shanghai was supposed to be a protected zone but were they inside it or outside? I have had no word from my mother since the receipt of the parcel. Neither had anyone from the maternal side of the family

attempted to contact me following my departure from Canton. Had I become an outcast in their memories just as they had faded from mine?

It was to be another 10 years before I learnt that my mother had been relocated to Tsingtao soon after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, at the behest of her German employers. Later, with the outbreak of World War II, she and my brother found refuge in the neutral Portuguese territory of Macau.

As the Japanese advanced southward in China, the flow of refugees increased into the temporary havens of Hong Kong and Macau. Others trekked inland, to interior cities like Chungking and Kunming. Still others chanced more difficult journeys overseas. Among that last group was a cousin of Anna's by the name of Wong Hok-Keung.

He presented himself at No. 10 Blair Road one day in 1939, at around the time I disengaged from Tutor Tam. He was a pleasant and soft-spoken man of around the same age as Anna. My siblings were taught to address him as an uncle, since he was a cousin to their mother. That was correct if kinship were to be traced from Anna's family alone. But Anna's mother had re-married one of my mother's brothers. Hence, worked out from that connection, he was only my cousin. However, in order to avoid confusion and awkwardness, I also addressed him as an uncle.

Uncle Hok-Keung's arrival brought to the forefront not only the dire situation enveloping China but also the shortage of space at No. 10. Being a grown and single man, he could not be invited to sleep upstairs, among unmarried women and children. Yet there was no suitable place elsewhere to accommodate him. Eventually, it was decided that he should sleep on a folding canvas bed in the reception room, with the bed being folded away during the day.

My siblings and I took immediately to Uncle Hok-Keung. He was not only kindly and gentle but he could also regale us with tales of chivalrous

swordsmen and kung fu masters. One story he told concerned a kung fu expert who could summon up so much internal power or *chi* that he could break the back of a horse with a single blow. It set me dreaming of acquiring such prowess.

Uncle Hok-Keung was also an engaging companion on another score. He could play a quite respectable game of Chinese chess and he was more than willing to put up with my weak game.

He had a further talent not apparent to most of us children. Apart from knowing both Chinese and English, he also knew Japanese. Partly because of that latter skill, and partly because of Anna's connections, he was soon offered a post as translator and interpreter within the Singapore Special Branch.

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September of 1939 saw a formal declaration of war in Europe. A War Fund was set up in Singapore to aid the British war effort and *Ah Yeh* was among the early small donors. His name duly appeared in the local newspapers.

I was puzzled by his gesture. I knew he had been ambivalent towards Britain, because I had heard him denouncing Britain in conversations with his friends, especially when they touched upon the consequences of the Opium Wars and other conflicts with China. I asked him why he had made a donation to support Britain.

"The lesser evil," he replied.

His meaning escaped me. The conventional Chinese wisdom was that one should do one's utmost to stay out of the fights of others. If Europeans wanted to fight one another, why should a Chinese poke his nose in? I could not work out why a donation should be a lesser evil compared with not making one at all. I eventually asked *Ah Yeh* for an explanation.

“In an imperfect world, one is sometimes forced to choose,” he replied. “Between Britain and Germany, Britain is the lesser evil.”

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The war in Europe also touched me personally in an indirect way. I came out of it thoroughly humiliated.

Even before war had been declared, Britain had planned the evacuation of millions of residents, particularly children of school age, from urban centres and vulnerable areas. Some children would be sent to the Dominions. The operation was code-named Operation Pied Piper. Some time towards the latter part of 1940, a group of British children en route to Australia called at Singapore. St. Andrew’s decided to prepare a concert to entertain them.

I was chosen to recite the poem *Casablanca* by Felicia Hemans. It did not strike me as very appropriate in the circumstances but mine was not to reason why. I practised what I was asked to do. A couple of other poems were also rehearsed in anticipation of thunderous encores to come! All went well till the day of the concert. When I stepped onto the stage in the assembly hall and saw the sea of alien faces staring at me, I completely froze. I could not get out a single word.

“The boy stood on the burning deck,” my teacher prompted, in desperate hisses from the wings. But it was no good. I stood as mute as a statue. At that moment -- and for long years afterwards -- it seemed as if I had indeed stood alone on a burning deck from which everyone else had fled.

My teacher had to come out at the end, to lead me shamefacedly off the stage. The silence accompanying my exit was so deafening I did not realise I was drenched in sweat. Try as I might, I have never been able to erase that horrible disgrace from my memory.

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As 1940 turned into 1941, the fear of Southeast Asia becoming embroiled in conflict gradually gained traction among the roughly half a million residents of Singapore. By then, Whitehall had a defensive plan for Singapore and Malaya known as Operation Matador. But, with a war raging in Europe, Churchill refused to provide the aircraft and other resources needed by the plan. He accorded priority to the oil resources of the Middle East and grossly underestimated the capabilities of the Japanese.

Nonetheless, a naval force, called Force Z, comprising a new battleship, the *Prince of Wales*, an old battle cruiser, the *Repulse*, and an aircraft carrier, the *Indomitable*, was ordered to the Far East. The *Indomitable*, however, quickly hit a rock and had to be pulled out. Military advisors warned of the dangers faced by the other vessels in the absence of adequate air cover. But Churchill again ignored their advice.

The *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* made their appearance in Singapore on December 2 to much fanfare. They were welcomed by the population as symbols of British naval might and of British determination to defend her colonial possessions. I was impressed too, gazing wide-mouthed at the gray hulks of the two ships bristling with cannons. They seemed like solid symbols of British power and splendour. With their arrival, people thought the Japanese would not get the kind of walkovers they had been used to in China. Singapore was hailed as the Gibraltar of the East. At that moment, I was glad to be British and to be protected as such by the might of the British crown.



Last picture of HMS Repulse as she sailed from Singapore on her last expedition in 1941. She was sunk by Japanese aircraft two days later. Copyright Imperial War Museum.



HMS Prince of Wales in Singapore in 1941. Copyright IWM

A rude awakening came within days, however. When the Japanese launched their attack at dawn on Pearl Harbour on December 7, they simultaneously bombed Singapore. Because of the International Date Line, the Singapore attack actually began at 4.15 a.m. local time on December 8. It caused thousands of civilian deaths and casualties. On that same day, the Japanese started a land assault on Malaya, sending in battle-hardened troops through Thailand.

The *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* at once responded, by setting sail with four destroyers to attack Japanese supply ships. But the predicted lack of air cover proved to be their undoing. Both capital ships fell victims to enemy bombs and torpedoes, sinking with the loss of 840 naval personnel in total. In one fell swoop, Japan shattered forever the long-held myths about British naval power and superiority.

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Those developments alarmed my family. Plans were soon put in hand to evacuate the womenfolk and the children from Blair Road. A Chinese village by the seaside on the northwest of the island was chosen. That location had probably been picked because British military judgement had been predicated upon an enemy attack from the south, by sea. I imagine the general expectation was for a long war, with Singapore being able to withstand indefinitely against assaults.

My grandmother, my aunts and my siblings went to the designated village. Some of the children of my grandfather's adopted daughters also joined us. I cannot now remember which ones or how many of them, except that my cousin Kan Fook-Chuen and some of his siblings were definitely there. The move for me did not come with any sense of danger but rather with a tingle of

excitement and high adventure. My images of war had until then been pieced together from reading comics and adventure stories, where narrow escapes and dodging bullets came coloured by a fictional glow of romance and heroism. Bombs had not fallen on Blair Road; if lives had been lost, they had been lost elsewhere. They seemed like mere abstractions, affecting others but not ourselves.

When we installed ourselves into a large *attap* house, we children were possessed by a morbid curiosity akin to that felt by adults about car wrecks and crime scenes. We slept higgledy-piggledy in our new abode. It was not at all unpleasant or uncomfortable, except for the mosquitoes and flies.

My cousin Fook-Chuen soon became the leader of the children. He was the eldest among us and he led us on expeditions to explore the mangrove swamps by the sea and to harvest papayas, rambutans, guavas, coconuts, jackfruit and mangoes, all of which grew in abundance around us. Plucking fruits from trees instead of buying them from vendors seemed somehow more magical and enjoyable.

Fook-Chuen also induced us, through example, to pick up sticks to poke at pigs in sties and to chase squawking chickens all over the place. It was perhaps just as well that none of the villagers spotted us during those escapades. Otherwise they might not have been as hospitable.

The village setting appeared novel and exciting to us, for it brought us closer to rude nature than we had hitherto been denied. Sometimes we could hear the distant sounds of gunfire and bombs going off. But we quickly accepted those sounds as a regular feature of life. We actually resented our inability to get closer to where the action was. We were still largely strangers to fear.

After a couple of weeks we were suddenly returned to our respective homes. I did not know why. The atmosphere at No. 10 had turned unaccountably tense and ominous. Low-voiced conversations took place among

the adults, as if they were wrestling with issues unsuitable for the ears of children.

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It transpired that the battle for Malaya was going from bad to worse for the British. A litany of poor planning and inept leadership subsequently emerged -- shortages of armoured vehicles and air cover, insufficient ammunition for anti-aircraft guns, not enough high explosive shells for the artillery. Commanders had also organised defences on the assumption that certain jungles were impenetrable. Unfortunately, they did not turn out to be so for the Japanese, who repeatedly found their way through to outflank the British.

By January 31, the Japanese forces had cut right through Malaya to reach the Straits of Johore, capturing 50,000 prisoners along the way. An order was given to blow up the causeway linking Johore to Singapore. That did not deter the Japanese. By February 8, they had made an amphibious landing near Sarimbun Beach, close to the very village where my family had earlier sought shelter, and the week-long battle for Singapore had begun.

Churchill sent an impassioned message to the Commonwealth defenders on February 10. He ordered that the battle be fought to the bitter end, at all cost. Commanders and senior officers should die with their men, he declared. "The whole reputation of our country and our race is involved," was how he put it.

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Meanwhile, an air of deepening desperation took root at No. 10. Nothing was said to the children but the adults were clearly worried. With Anna

and Uncle Hok-Keung in the Special Branch, they might have gleaned a clearer picture of how the fight was faring and what might be in store. Few had foreseen the speed with which British defences had crumbled. Rumours abounded. Japanese spies were being caught and interrogated. Even a British captain was executed for treason.

Then, suddenly, late on the afternoon of February 14, my four siblings and I were gathered hurriedly together. We were told curtly we would be going on a sea journey. Adult nerves were clearly on edge, if not already in a state of panic.

My grandmother, Anna and Uncle Hok-Keung would go with us, they said. There was no time for packing or leave-taking, no time even for tears of farewell. My grandfather pressed whatever ready cash he had into my grandmother's hand and we started out as we stood, without a single piece of luggage between us. I had on a white shirt, a pair of white shorts and a pair of canvas tennis shoes. I did not even have a handkerchief in my pocket.

On the way to the dockside, I asked *Ah Mah* why my grandfather and father were not coming with us. Men were not allowed, I was told. Yet Uncle Hok-Keung was with us. I got the impression no adult was prepared to entertain questions or contradictions.

At the dockside, after showing some kind of pass, we were allowed to board a launch which took us alongside a small ship called the *Gorgon*. It was a minesweeper painted in naval gray, on loan to Britain from the United States under a Lend-Lease arrangement. It was obviously not meant for carrying passengers.

By the time we boarded, the vessel was already filled with women and children and all the desirable spaces were occupied. There was a mixture of Europeans and locals, all strangers. Why we or any of them had to be evacuated was totally unclear. Uncle Hok-Keung was about the only male on board who

was not a member of the crew.

We had to make do with either the corridors or the open deck. The atmosphere was tense. No one seemed to know what was going to happen next or where the ship might be heading. There were at first rumours of Java as a destination but they proved to be wrong. The general expectation was merely to escape from the clutches of the Japanese.

Later on the same evening of February 14, under the cover of darkness, the *Gorgon* set sail. It was not a moment too soon. The very next day, February 15, Singapore surrendered. In spite of Churchill's exhortation to fight to the death, the commanders on the ground had no stomach for resistance. A force comprising some 85,000 men laid down their arms before an enemy force totalling little more than 30,000.

Lt. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the Japanese Commander who led the battle for Malaya and Singapore, subsequently made some illuminating comments. He asserted he knew he was outnumbered three to one and his supplies were running low. If the conflict dragged on, he was bound to be defeated. He therefore bluffed the British with a threat of dire consequences for both defenders and civilians if they did not surrender immediately. The Gibraltar of the East duly surrendered.

Churchill described that disaster as "the largest capitulation in British history".

The battle illustrated once again the wisdom in Sun Tzu's observations made thousands of years ago in *The Art of War*. According to the ancient strategist, numerical strength is not decisive. Reliance should be placed instead on moral strength, intellect, discipline and deception. The Japanese certainly used deception.

For many years after that flight in darkness, my siblings and I were convinced that the *Gorgon* was the last ship of any size to leave Singapore before it fell. We were mistaken. I subsequently learnt that three other ships of comparable size -- not to mention dozens of small craft of various kinds and shapes -- fled the port also on the night of 14 February. A number got sunk during their flight but we had no information on which ones they were and which made it to safety.

The voyage was trying but quite uneventful, except for one incident. About one and a half days after the start, a couple of enemy planes came into view. The siren sounded and children were told to hide beneath the tables in the mess room. The first intimations of fear, of meeting a watery grave, took possession of me.

But the planes, for some reason, did not engage. Someone speculated that they might have been too far from their base and running low on fuel. Somebody else said the planes might have spotted a more tempting target. It seemed, nevertheless, pretty touch and go for a time. I realised during those brief minutes that our lives might be hanging by the most slender of threads.

My family spent most of the voyage on deck, exposed to the elements. We tried our best to manoeuvre ourselves out of direct sunlight and to seek whatever shelter we could when it rained. The adults naturally tried to shield us with their bodies. The wind and the spray from the sea were constants. We managed to lay hands on a couple of thin blankets and huddled beneath them at night. The only respite was when one of the adults was fortunate enough to squeeze out a place for one or two of us in a passageway. My siblings changed places among the adults from time to time, though I stuck consistently with *Ah Mah* during the nights.

Minesweepers were small vessels, built with shallow drafts. They

were slow and unstable, with poor sea handling ability. Huddling with my grandmother brought back echoes of our more comfortable sea voyage years earlier, travelling from Hong Kong to Singapore. But I did not suffer from seasickness on this occasion. I do not know, however, whether any other member of my family did because we were not always together in one group.

The nights were a dread, even with *Ah Mah* by my side. Another of my siblings was usually with us. The night winds seemed to warn of danger at every turn and sea mists stole over us like ghosts. Sea spray clung to us like dank cobwebs, which we could neither brush off nor wipe away. With every buck and roll of the ship it was as if we were edging closer to some infernal region, so dark and godless that even the moon and the stars did not dare to show themselves. Or maybe they had already been swallowed up by the darkness.

Unsettling thoughts disturbed my sleep. But *Ah Mah* had a knack for sensing my restlessness.

“Stop thinking so much,” she would whisper, squeezing me reassuringly, on whichever part of me her hand happened to be resting at that moment. “Just go to sleep. Everything will be all right.”

I usually felt better when daylight came and I could see what was around me. I would then seek to explore all the unrestricted places on the ship. The minesweeper had an anti-aircraft gun at its stern. I was keen to examine it but its crew did not allow me near it.

We all stank after a couple of days, because washing facilities were limited and evacuees were many. We had no soap to wash with or fresh clothing to change into. My grandmother smelt as bad as the worst of us. Indeed, she probably stank more because her chignon kept unravelling and her inability to wash her hair after exposure to sun and rain brought an odour that was quite unpleasant.

Exposure soon chapped my lips. I worried the cracks with my

tongue and fingers. “Leave them alone,” my grandmother advised. “Learn to bear the rough with the smooth. A Superior Man ought to be able to treat both with indifference.”

Sadly, after more than 70 years, I have yet to live up to my grandmother’s concept of a Superior Man.

After six days, the *Gorgon* reached Fremantle in Western Australia. It transpired the evacuees on board totalled more than 280. The extent of overcrowding can be imagined when it is realised that such minesweepers are constructed to hold a crew of about 40. A complete list of the evacuees still exists in the archives of the Australian government. My family disembarked at Fremantle, together with a number of others. The rest went on to Sydney.

For reasons not entirely self-evident, our family was then transported swiftly to Perth. Upon arrival, Uncle Hok-Keung was immediately inducted into the Australian Army and despatched to New Guinea. We hardly saw him again except when he came to Perth intermittently on leave, dressed in an ill-fitting army uniform and a hat that was oddly folded up on one side. The rest of us were placed in the care of welfare and charitable agencies, to begin life as refugees.

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Throughout our uncertain journey by sea I had been too apprehensive of the future to think much of where we were heading or whether we would ever safely reach our destination. Once we landed, however, more practical worries on how to survive in a strange and foreign land came to the fore. The few dollars in my grandmother’s possession were a far cry from sufficient for food and other essentials. The stink from my body reminded me the family owned not a single toothbrush or a bar of soap between the lot of us.

My own clothes had by then grown limp and discoloured with grime.

The voyage on the *Gorgon* was the third time I had been snatched from one environment to be placed into another. I began to wonder if such dislocations were a form of trial designed for someone born out of original sin. I might even be a jinx, condemned to bringing harm and hardship to everyone in contact with me.

I tried desperately to make some sense of the sequence of events leading to our predicament. There had been no clear explanation for anything, like the switching of abode between Blair Road and the Chinese village, or why some of our family were allowed to be evacuated and not others. The fragments of information I came by did not get me very far. It was like dismantling one of those wooden Russian dolls -- the opening up of one merely revealed a smaller replica inside.

I knew from story books that British chivalry demanded the evacuation of women and children in cases of emergency. But then, that left the exception of Uncle Hok-Keung. Had he vital information to pass on, following interrogations of Japanese spies at the Special Branch? Similar considerations might apply in Anna's case. Many Top Secret files must have passed through her hands. If she were taken by the Japanese, she might -- under coercion or extreme torture -- reveal information detrimental to the British war effort. Her superiors must have considered it prudent to get her away. It would be natural also for her to insist upon her children leaving with her.

But what about *Ah Mah* and myself? Where did we fit in? Anna and I had not really warmed to each other over the years. Indeed, in her eyes I must represent a reminder of a past misstep and a lost friendship. She would be unlikely, off her own bat, to claim me as her "child" in any evacuation plan. Could my father or someone else have pressed her to include me? Such imponderables swirled inside my head like leaves trapped in a turbulent

whirlpool.

Another impenetrable fact was my grandmother's willingness to leave. Everyone in the household would have wanted to keep her safe. But why should she agree to leave? When the two persons most dear to her -- her husband and her son -- had to face unforeseeable fates, how could she bear to be separated from them? The prospect of abandoning *Ah Yeh* to the care of the subsidiary wife at No. 38 must have grated against her dignity and pride, let alone what she must feel as a mother for an only son.

She was not the kind of woman to flinch before the spectre of death either. She was already 67 and her health had been indifferent of late. Her movements had visibly slowed. In her own eyes, she had already begun her inevitable journey to the next world. There had to be some more compelling motivation behind her decision. What was it?

For a long time I groped for explanations in the dark, since none of the main players in the drama had revealed the bargains struck. Because of the last minute rush, agreements must have been settled long before anyone boarded the *Gorgon*. A clearer picture of the decisions arrived at did not emerge for me till well after the war.

An anodyne story circulated within the family after our return to Singapore started me thinking again. It suggested that Anna's superiors had granted her permission to evacuate with her children. But *Ah Yeh* and my father pressed for *Ah Mah* to be included, on the basis that Anna could not possibly cope with so many small children on her own, wherever they might be heading. Helen was only nine and a half at that time while Tzi-Seng was just a little more than two. When permission was eventually secured to include my grandmother, *Ah Mah* agreed to go.

I suspected a more complicated truth. Where did I feature, for instance? I did not feature in that story and *Ah Mah* was not longer around to

offer her version. Given that my grandmother viewed the perpetuation of the family as her overarching duty, she must have made her departure conditional my being evacuated as well. Otherwise, I doubt if I would have ever set foot in Australia.

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Many decades have passed since *Ah Mah*'s demise. I know in the marrow of my bones, as I knew back then, that she loved me. Yet, when I was a boy, I could not help being obsessed over knowing exactly why she loved me. Did she love me for myself, in spite of my unattractive appearance, or only because I happened to be the first-born, the standard repository for her hopes for the perpetuation of the family? And no matter why she loved me, why had that love not been sufficient to prevent my being beaten at the Chinese primary school? I yearned to have everything spelt out, verbalized, laid down definitively. But that had not been her way.

As I dip into my memories, I cannot help thinking I had made an unholy mess of things. Because *Ah Mah* had never spelt out her love, I had resisted telling her that I loved her -- until it was too late.

Perhaps I had been exposed too early to an un-Chinese type of education, to seek after scientific and rational explanations for things. I had mistakenly imagined love could be sliced up, analysed and apportioned like salami. And if self-interest were to be the dominant rule of human behaviour, then it seemed right I should have seek out the thickest slice for myself! It took me too long to realise that love was but a fleeting moment in the perpetual flux of life, a thing perhaps only partially intimated, as in a sparse Chinese landscape or a terse line of Chinese poetry. It was incapable of being pinned down by whys and wherefores.

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After the end of World War II, the *Gorgon* was returned to America by Britain. The Americans subsequently sold the ship to the Greeks. I have not followed what happened after that.

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From the distance of only a few decades, it is not yet safe to attempt to be definitive about the banged-up defence of Singapore in a banged-up war. Some emotions are still raw and all available documents have not yet been made public, particularly those from the Japanese side.

Nonetheless, I will hazard a few tentative observations. Information in the public domain indicates that the conduct and management of the defence of Singapore had been little short of lamentable, given the strategic importance claimed for the city. Workable defensive plans existed but they got sidetracked or were not implemented. The reasons were many -- political blind spots, cultivated arrogance, institutional failings, poor leadership, crumbling morale, contempt for the enemy, lack of appreciation for the shifting dynamics of the region and so forth. Whatever the chosen reasons, the results had been grievous in terms of the loss of fortune, reputation and lives.

It seems passé at the present time to claim that the Battle of Waterloo had been won on the playing fields of Eton. But it might not be too far-fetched to suggest that the Battle of Singapore could have been lost in the classrooms of certain elitist Western institutions.

One of the assumptions commonly made by the instructors at such places is that their alumni would be the best to be found. They were exceptional,

blessed by ancient gods, the victors of old wars against old enemies. They emerged ill equipped for future conflicts with enemies imbued with entirely different ethos and value systems. The Japanese kamikaze suicide attacks towards the end of World War II must have taken Western strategists by surprise. Otherwise American carriers would not have been built with wooden flight decks. The bungling way the French went to their defeat at Dien Bien Phu must have been totally unexpected by their high command. What use would nuclear weapons and aircraft carriers be against the current terrorist cells imbedded within the cities of one's own country?

The defects of focusing on past experience were often compounded by a self-regarding myth of Aryan superiority, tapping into the utterances of politicians like Sir Robert Peel and Lord Palmerston and the outpourings of people like Robert Owen, Rudyard Kipling, the Comte de Buffon and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Such myths might not have mattered much if they had not led to hubris and dangerous conceits in both the political sphere, where the great issues of war and peace had to be decided, and in the battlefields where lives could be forfeited in split seconds.

Churchill was a towering British political hero during World War II. He had been trained at Harrow and Sandhurst. He believed firmly in British superiority. Yet his military judgements had often been poor and his vision defective. For instance, he consistently underestimated the military threat from Germany before World War I, until he made an about-face when he became the First Lord of the Admiralty in 1911. When war eventually started, he advocated the disastrous assault on the Dardanelles. As First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939, after the start of World War II, he was again responsible for the fiasco of invading Norway in April of 1940.

His refusal to make adequate resources available for the defence of Malaya and Singapore and his subsequent decision to send the *Prince of Wales*

and the *Repulse* out in spite of inadequate air cover followed that unhappy pattern of his previous military misjudgements. A dispassionate observer may have grounds for suspecting his underestimation of the capabilities of the Japanese was rooted in a belief in the superiority of the white man.

Churchill would not be the only Western leader to have such a kink in his mentality. General Douglas MacArthur, a product of West Point, repeatedly showed lack of respect for his Asian enemies during his military career, most notably in Korea, notwithstanding his masterstroke in the Inchon amphibious landing.

The French also displayed a similar attitude towards the Vietnamese. No doubt the generals of the Ching Dynasty who took on the “foreign barbarians” during the Opium Wars also had their own fantasies of Chinese or Manchu superiority.

There are simply too many instances of such a belittling approach in international and military affairs to be purely coincidental. Perhaps some day a doctoral candidate will see fit to follow in the footsteps of Edward Creasy, to tabulate all the battles of the last couple of centuries and to analyse how many of them might have turned out differently if not for an ignorance of the enemy or for an underestimation of the capabilities of the opponent.

The results may well prove illuminating.