DEPARTMENTAL SEMINAR

TITLE

First Time Round They Did Not Succeed: Special Forces and the Malayan Campaign 1941-42

SPEAKER

A/P Brian Farrell

Day, Date, Time, Venue

Wednesday, 9 May 2007, 3 pm
HY/PS Lounge, AS1-0401

Abstract

In the Malayan Emergency and the Confrontation the special forces units of the British Army made such a name for themselves that they established special forces as an indispensable component of the Army's Order of Battle to the present day. But when the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Malaya in 1941 special forces were as ineffective as the rest of the Allied army in the futile effort to keep them at bay. This was not a minor matter. The special forces story is a microcosm that leads to larger conclusions about the way the British Empire tried to defend itself when its war expanded to Asia. And the Japanese advance provided the kind of opportunities well prepared well handled special forces could exploit to great effect, to disrupt an enemy on the march. This paper will address four questions. Why were special forces so ineffective against the Japanese? What if anything does this tell us about the campaign as a whole? And about the army that tried to defend Malaya? And about the national armies from which the troops came? One longstanding explanation for failure in Malaya is that the defenders were overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their control. A closer examination of the role played by special forces will help us test that explanation, and allow us to explore the interplay between the military and political circumstances in which an army had to fight and the organizational culture and doctrine by which it sought to fight.

About the Speaker

Associate Professor Brian P. Farrell is Deputy Head of the History Department at NUS and has been teaching military history there since 1993. In 2002 he organized the international conference Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited, the largest academic gathering ever devoted to the subject. He has published more words on the Malayan Campaign and the fall of Singapore than any other scholar. This presentation is derived from his 2005 monograph The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942.