

SINGAPORE

Its loss was "Australia's Dunkirk"

A KORERO Report

WITH THE fall of France in 1940 Britain was placed in great peril. In many ways and at several widely separated points her position was endangered. Some results were immediate. Britain stood alone, the Dominions her only partners; the Soviet Union had not yet been attacked, the United States was still neutral. Lost to Britain were French naval and air bases in all parts of the world, the large French Navy, the substantial French forces which in North Africa and the Levant had guarded the flanks of the British position in the Middle East and all the industries of France. There was, too, the danger that these resources might be used by the enemy. How these problems were met and overcome is a matter of history. Other dangers lay in the future and were not at once apparent, notably the new threat to Singapore—"the chief British naval base and defended harbour in the Far East."

On the surrender of France, Japan was quick to demand the use of bases in French Indo-China, and soon was in virtual occupation of the whole country. Thus she gained control of the South China Sea, an area enclosed by the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, and the Malay Peninsula. And she obtained this advantage at a moment when the loss of the French Fleet had forced Britain to keep nearly all her naval strength in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and to bare the Far East. In December of 1941 Japan used her opportunity. Secure in control of the South China Sea, she landed forces at various points round it, and within two months had seized Singapore.

Singapore, an island about 26 miles long and 14 miles wide, with an area of 220 square miles, lies at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula. A strait, three-quarters of a mile wide, separates it from the peninsula, with which it is

connected by a causeway. It has been in British possession for 126 years since Sir Stamford Raffles, a servant of the British East India Company, in agreement with the Sultan of Johore and the Chief of Singapore, established a trading post there. Neither the company nor the British Foreign Office at first completely shared the views of Raffles about the importance of the East Indies. Thus, although when Napoleon took over the Dutch possessions in the East Indies, Raffles was able to persuade the Governor-General of India to annex Java, he was unable to prevent the return of the island to the Dutch in 1814. Five years later, however, after a difficult struggle with his superiors, he acquired Singapore, and he wrote then to a friend: "It gives us command of China and Japan, to say nothing of the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines." He added that Singapore would become "a great commercial emporium and fulcrum whence we may extend our influence politically as Empire circumstances may hereafter require." His reward was retirement, death at forty-five caused partly by worry connected with the threat of an unpleasant lawsuit by the company, and the perpetuation of his name in several public institutions in Singapore.

By the end of the last war Singapore Island, with a population of nearly 700,000, had become the great mercantile centre of Raffles' dream. With Province Wellesley and Malacca on the mainland, and Labuan, Penang, Christmas, and Cocos Islands, it formed the Straits Settlements, a Crown Colony with a total population of 1,500,000. Behind it, right up the peninsula to Thailand, lay the Malay States, in which British influence and control had finally been consolidated as late as 1909—the federated states of Perak, Selangor, Negri, Sembilang, and Pahang, 27,000 square miles in area and with a population of 2,200,000, and the unfederated states