



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Singapore 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat, and: Moon Over  
Malaya: A Tale of Argylls and Marines (review)

Raymond Callahan

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003,  
pp. 270-271 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40441>

***Singapore 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat.*** By Alan Warren. New York: Hambledon & London, 2002. Available from New York University Press. ISBN 1-85285-328-X. Maps. Plates. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiii, 370. \$29.95.

***Moon Over Malaya: A Tale of Argylls and Marines.*** By Jonathan Moffatt and Audrey Holmes McCormick. Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002. ISBN 0-7524-2114-X. Photographs. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 256. \$19.99.

The sixtieth anniversary of what Churchill called “the worst disaster” in British military history has not called forth anything like the flood of books that marked the celebration, a few years ago, of the Anglo-American alliance’s ultimate victory. This is unfortunate because if defeat, as we know, is an orphan, it also has much to teach. The two books under review approach those lessons from very different perspectives.

Alan Warren, a lecturer in history at Monash University, has written a “professional history of the tactical campaign” (p. xii), the first, he claims, since the official histories were published nearly fifty years ago. This seems to ignore Stanley Falk and Louis Allen, both of whom wrote rather substantial accounts, as well as the recent work of Brian Farrell. It is, however, true that Warren’s research has been extremely comprehensive, including archival material only released in the 1990s. The tone is cool and balanced, and the writing is very clear. It is hard to fault his conclusions: Yamashita’s generalship was very good, and “only equally good generalship on the part of the defenders could have slowed the Japanese juggernaut” (p. 293). Even when all allowances have been made, Lieutenant General A. E. Percival was badly outgeneraled. Churchill, although obviously interested in spreading the blame widely, was not entirely wrong in raising, at the time and later in his memoirs, the issue of how the local commanders in Malaya used the resources they had. One of the strengths of Warren’s account is that it is careful and fair in its treatment of the Indian Army units that formed the bulk of Percival’s command. The recruitment of large numbers of them into the Indian National Army after Singapore’s fall has tended to obscure the fact that the Indian Army’s combat record during the fighting was about the same as that of British and Australian units. In fact, given their training, leadership, and equipment—not to mention poor decision making at the top which put them in impossible situations—the raw Indian Army units that fought in Malaya may be judged to have turned in a generally creditable performance—a rather overlooked point initially made by Compton Mackenzie in *Eastern Epic*, published in 1951. The first really good account of Singapore’s fall was by the Australian official historian, Lionel Wigmore. To that Alan Warren has now added the best tactical and operational analysis to date. The “worst disaster” clearly resonates still in Australian history—more so, ironically, than in Britain itself.

One of Warren’s points is that several battalions suffered losses in Malaya and on Singapore Island “at a level seldom seen among British-led

ground forces anywhere in the Second World War" (p. 292). One of these battalions was the 2d Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who lost 224 men (plus 192 in Japanese POW camps). Jonathan Moffat and Audrey Holmes McCormick have done a very detailed history of the battalion's experiences in *Moon over Malaya*, which in some ways complements the detached professionalism of Warren's narrative. Like many regimental histories, the story is often overburdened with details and anecdotes, but certain key points emerge clearly enough. The Argylls' driving, charismatic commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ian MacAlister Stewart, was perhaps the only unit commander in Malaya Command who had trained his men, largely prewar regulars, to a standard of mobility and aggressiveness comparable to that of the Imperial Japanese Army (winning, in the process, a reputation among senior officers as a crank). That even the Argylls were surprised on occasion by the speed with which the Japanese moved is a measure of how ill-prepared most of Malaya Command was for the tactical tempo of its opponent. The account of the fighting on Singapore Island (by which time the Argylls had absorbed the Royal Marine survivors of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*) is a worm's eye view of the disintegration of Percival's command. The stories of the ensuing three-and-a-half years in Japanese POW camps are a reminder of the incredible resilience of body and spirit that extreme situations can evoke in some—as well as of the power of unit loyalties.

Raymond Callahan

University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware

***An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943. Vol. 1 of the "Liberation Trilogy."*** By Rick Atkinson. New York: Henry Holt, 2002. ISBN 0-8050-6288-2. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Sources. Index. Pp. 681. \$30.00.

Operation TORCH has never glowed so brightly. Rick Atkinson, former assistant manager at the *Washington Post* and a Pulitzer Prize winner, has written an engrossing narrative of the action in North Africa from the initial planning to the final victory in Tunisia in May 1943. While his emphasis is on the American army, the author includes trenchant comments about the British, French, and German forces and their commanders. Atkinson has an impressive command of words, a flair for simplifying complex issues, and a vast reservoir of information. For the sake of readability, footnote numbers are omitted, but the innumerable sources are easily accessed page-by-page following the text.

This is a popular and very readable history. For those who swear by the U.S. Army's official "Green" books (to which Atkinson gives "special recognition" on p. 655), it should be pointed out that *Army at Dawn* differs notably from George Howe's *Northwest Africa* (Washington: GPO, 1957) in its ability to bring people, issues, and events to life. Atkinson's vignettes, with shrewd eye-witness quotes, give the reader some unusual insights into