

Sime Road Camp


by *Faizah Zakaria*

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Sime Road Camp is the site of the former combined operational headquarters of the British Army and Royal Air Force during World War II. Located along Sime Road, the 470-acre site was used as an internment camp during the Japanese Occupation.

After the [surrender of the Japanese](#)

(http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_123_2005-02-03.html) in 1945, the camp was closed the following year and the buildings subsequently demolished. The [National Heritage Board](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_94_2005-01-27.html)

designated the site of Sime Road Camp a historic site in 2002.

Background

Sime Road, where the camp was located, was named after Scotsman John Sime, who moved to Malaya in 1909 and founded Sime, Darby & Company with his brother in 1910.¹ When Sime came to Singapore in 1915, he joined and became active in the [Singapore Golf Club](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1519_2009-05-11.html) which was then at [Farrer Park](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1111_2007-07-19.html). As president of the club, he had it moved to [Bukit Timah](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_730_2005-01-25.html) and supervised the laying out of the new Bukit Timah golf course.² Work started on the course in 1920 and the new club house was opened in 1925.³ The road leading to the golf course was hence named after Sime. He retired from Malaya in 1937, before the outbreak of World War II (1942–45).⁴

Military command centre

Sime Road Camp served as the headquarters of the Royal Air Force until early December 1941, when it became the combined operational headquarters of the British Army and Royal Air Force Operational Headquarters Malaya Command. Lieutenant General [Arthur E. Percival](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_796_2004-12-28.html), General Officer Commanding Malaya in charge of the Malaya Command, ran military operations from this camp.⁵

Japanese forces landed on the beaches of northern Malay Peninsula on 8 December 1941, sweeping through Malaya and arriving in Singapore on 31 January 1942.⁶ By 11 February 1942, they had advanced to within a mile of the Sime Road Camp, forcing Percival and his forces to retreat to [Fort Canning](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_8_2004-12-10.html) and abandon the camp.⁷ This retreat was followed by the surrender of British forces to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, thereby subjecting Singapore to three-and-a-half years of Japanese occupation.⁸

Internment camp

After the fall of Singapore, Sime Road Camp was used as an internment camp for prisoners-of-war (POWs).⁹ From December 1943 to May 1944, 1,800 survivors of the construction of the infamous Burma Railway (also known as the Death Railway) stretching from Thailand to Burma (now Myanmar) were housed here.¹⁰

During the latter part of the Japanese Occupation, Sime Road Camp was converted into an internment camp holding mainly British and European civilians. According to Stu Lloyd's account, a Major General Shito, who took over the administration of internment camps in April 1944, ordered that the military POWs at Sime Road Camp be moved to Changi Prison, and the civilians at [Changi](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_245_2004-12-15.html) be moved to Sime Road.¹¹ Among the more prominent internees in this camp was Lady Daisy Thomas, wife of former [Straits Settlements](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-07-30_084623.html) governor [Shenton Thomas](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_557_2005-01-09.html).¹²

Women internees had a separate compound within the camp, even having their own hospital separate from the men's hospital.¹³ Children stayed with their mothers until they were 12, when the boys would be transferred to the men's camp.¹⁴ The camp had two chapels: a Roman Catholic chapel and the Anglican St David's Church.¹⁵ Food rations were inadequate, reaching their lowest in March 1945. A deficiency in vitamin B complex put a further toll on the emaciated internees. Fortunately, their intensive farming provided supplies of green vegetables that helped to stave off the onset of beri beri.¹⁶ The internees occasionally received [Red Cross](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-06-25_123856.html) parcels containing food and other items but this was often distributed among the Japanese guards first, leaving only one parcel for every 40 prisoners.¹⁷ Malaria and typhus were endemic, and the internees conducted eradication programmes to rid the camp of mosquitoes and mites.¹⁸

In early 1945, towards the end of the Occupation, a group of boys and girls secretly sat for the [Cambridge School Certificate Examination](#) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-06-24_110607.html) at Sime Road Camp.

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This examination was organised by H. R. Cheeseman, former Deputy Director of Education in the Straits Settlements. Six students passed and obtained the School Certificate that year.¹⁹

By the time of their release, there were 4,507 persons from 27 nationalities interned at Sime Road Camp, including 1,023 women and 328 children.²⁰ Although, the British formed the largest proportion, there were also significant numbers of [Eurasians](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-08-06_115106.html) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-08-06_115106.html), [Australians](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_805_2004-12-28.html), [Jews](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_805_2004-12-28.html) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_805_2004-12-28.html), Chinese and Poles. Among the 758 Eurasians were a group of 80 from the Roman Catholic settlement of Bahau in Negeri Sembilan, Malaya, who were moved to Sime Road Camp in March 1945.²¹ The internees at Sime Road were reportedly treated better than those at other Japanese camps, such as those in Sumatra or even [Changi Prison](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2018-10-17_135549.html) (https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2018-10-17_135549.html) in Singapore. However, many prisoners died in the camp, for instance the editor and managing director of the *Malay Mail*, J. H. M. Robson.²² After the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, Japanese administrators of the camp were arrested as the British Military Administration carried out a full investigation into the appalling conditions at the Sime Road and Changi camps.²³ Five were subsequently found guilty and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, ranging from one to ten years.²⁴

Transit camp

After the Japanese surrender, a curfew was initially imposed on released internees who were advised to remain in the camp for their own safety.²⁵ They were given a small amount of money, dubbed the "Freedom Fiver". Non-Europeans were paid half the amount given to European internees, causing much unhappiness.²⁶ Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Commander-in-Chief, South-East Asia Command, and his wife Lady Mountbatten, separately visited the camp in September 1945, bringing messages from relatives and friends overseas as well as food parcels.²⁷

During the subsequent months, Sime Road Camp became a place of transition for former prisoners before they found accommodation or were repatriated. Again, this included Roman Catholic settlers returning from the [settlement of Bahau](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1220_2006-12-29.html) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1220_2006-12-29.html).²⁸ The use of Sime Road Camp as a transit camp for internees led to a great deal of unhappiness, since it meant that they had to return to their site of internment. It was also alleged that the camp was used because the prisoners' homes in Singapore had been taken over by military authorities.²⁹

A few hundred internees were repatriated home by sea and air, but some internees were so dissatisfied with the conditions on the first repatriation ship that they returned to the camp in protest.³⁰ Some staff at the Sime Road Camp stayed on to look after the needs of the displaced people who were still in the camp.³¹ The camp. Therefore, became a transit centre for former internees and even destitutes off the streets.³² The inhabitants were known as "campers". The colonial government gave cash grants to those leaving the camp.³³ In July 1946, it was announced that the camp would be closed down and its remaining destitute campers were sent to settlement homes in [Poh Leung Kuk](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1175_2010-03-31.html) (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1175_2010-03-31.html) at York Hill.³⁴

Historical site

In 2002, the site of Sime Road Camp became the fifth place in Singapore to be designated a historic site by the National Heritage Board. A board explaining its historic significance was put up at the junction of Adam Road and Sime Road.³⁵ The buildings at the site no longer exist.³⁶

Author

Faizah binte Zakaria

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