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PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON. P.J. KEATING

THE FALL OF SINGAPORE

In recent days the media has carried stories based on reports prepared by unidentified British military officials and endorsed by General Sir Archibald Wavell 50 years ago.

Some of these reports suggest that Australian troops were in some way responsible for the fall of Singapore, others contain allegations that a number of Australian troops behaved in ways which, if true, would bring discredit on themselves and their country and reflect on the 17,000 Australian men and women who served on the Malaya Peninsula and Singapore.

It is important that our history be discussed and that the truth be told. We should not seek to hide from it.

In this context it is a pity if it is true that these reports were suppressed 20 years ago in an effort to appease Australian feelings when Britain was seeking to enter the Common Market.

In fact, the substance of the reports appears to confirm what has long been known: that Singapore's defences were inadequately prepared, and the British Government knew it.

It was certainly not Australian troops - or British troops - but British policy which led to the fall of Singapore.

It is unlikely that the other allegations can ever be satisfactorily tested.

But blaming young soldiers for the failures of politicians and generals will not find much support in this or any other country.

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Whatever the alleged behavior of individual soldiers in the last days of Singapore, the fact remains that Australian, British and other Commonwealth troops were placed in an impossible position.

Overwhelmingly, they served with courage and distinction in appalling circumstances not of their making.

That there was an attempt in this instance to saddle young Australian soldiers with the responsibility for the British Empire's most humiliating debacle is beyond the bounds of decency and credibility.

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