

Upper & Lower Barracks

The former Upper and Lower Barracks, located in the heart of Chinatown at Pearl's Hill, were completed in 1934 to accommodate the Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police. After World War Two ended in 1945, the buildings continued to serve various government agencies, including the headquarters of the Singapore Police Force and the Criminal Investigation Department, right up to 2001. It was also at the Upper Barracks that the Ministry of Interior and Defence, later split to form the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, had its beginnings.

The Former Upper and Lower Barracks on Pearl's Hill

Completed in 1934, the former Upper and Lower Barracks, located at Pearl's Hill Terrace and Eu Tong Sen Street respectively, are among the few remaining police buildings designed and constructed under the colonial government.

While both buildings were commissioned to serve the police force in Singapore, their roles had expanded over the years as various other government agencies were housed there during different periods of history. Most notably, the Ministry of Interior and Defence was housed in these barracks during its formative years in the 1960s and 1970s.



Lower Barracks

Both structures were designed in the neo-classical style and constructed of reinforced concrete. The five-storey Lower Barracks was an imposing sight in its time, as it towered over the low-rise shophouses in Chinatown, most of which were two or three storeys tall. The three parts of the building are clearly defined, in line with the principles of Classical architectural design.



Upper Barracks

The three-storey Upper Barracks, situated on Pearl's Hill, is one of the longest pre-war civic buildings at 160 metres in length. Overlooking Chinatown, the building dominated the landscape at a time when skyscrapers were yet to be constructed in the vicinity.

The former barracks were occupied by government agencies till 2001, when the last occupants, the headquarters of the Singapore Police Force and the Criminal Investigation Department, moved to New Phoenix Park at Irrawaddy Road and the new Police Cantonment Complex at New Bridge Road respectively. The buildings were put up for lease in 2007 as office space and were gazetted as conservation buildings in 2008. Today these former barracks serve as salient reminders of the Singapore Police Force's early years, as well as the origins of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Defence.

Did you know?

The Pearl of Chinatown

A sanctuary of green in a bustling town, Pearl's Hill took its name from James Pearl, captain of *Indiana*, the ship which brought Sir Stamford Raffles to Singapore in 1819. James Pearl purchased the hill in 1822 from Chinese planters, who had established gambier plantations on the site. Pearl named the hill "Mount Stamford" after Raffles, and replaced gambier with pepper crops. However, Raffles ordered the repossession of the hill by the Government. Though the rights of the hill were eventually accorded to Pearl, the disgruntled merchant renamed the hill after himself after the incident.

The history of Pearl's Hill is an interesting and varied account. In 1828, Pearl sold the hill back to the government and returned to Europe. Thereafter, the hill saw various developments. The first Chinese Paupers' Hospital, built by Tan Tock Seng in 1844, was located on Pearl's Hill. The building, together with a European Seamen's Hospital which was also located at Pearl's Hill, was demolished in 1857 after the hill was taken over for military use. In 1859, the top of Pearl's Hill was removed as it obstructed guns installed on Fort Canning. An arsenal was built in 1864 and work on a service reservoir on the hill took off in 1898. The hill was also the site of the island's first prison, Her Majesty's Prison, which was built in 1847.

A Vision of Progress – Inspector-General Harold Fairburn and the Need for New, Modern Police Buildings



*Chimney at the top level of the Upper Barracks
Courtesy of Singapore Police Force*

By the late 1800s, Singapore had become a densely populated colony famous for trading opportunities and infamous for its high crime rate. The island had an unsavoury reputation as the "Chicago of the East", a result of factors such as an understaffed and under-equipped police force, pervasive networks of organised gangs and a largely laissez-faire colonial government.

The state of law and order deteriorated steadily as the population boomed. In the early 20th century, Inspector-General Harold Fairburn, who headed the Straits Settlements Police from 1925 to 1935, recognized that to battle the high crime rates, the police force had to be reorganised and modernised. Part of his strategy included the construction of new and better facilities to equip the police force and expand their presence. Fair-

burn lobbied the government persistently to make police development a priority and to allocate funds to the cause.

Fairburn's perseverance resulted in one of the most extensive building schemes in the history of the police in Singapore. From 1931 to 1934, new barracks, stations and various other facilities for the police force were constructed. The Central Police Station (demolished), Hill Street Police Station, Beach Road Police Station and Traffic Police Station at Maxwell Road were some of the results of the scheme.

The Upper and Lower Barracks at Pearl's Hill were the last large buildings to be completed in the scheme. The planning of these buildings took about two years and the site for which the Lower Barracks was built on, formerly part of People's Park, was only secured in 1929.

The Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police

Built as barracks to house the Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police, the buildings were officially opened by Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of the Straits Settlements (1934-1942, 1945-1946), on 19 December 1934. The Upper Barracks housed the married members of the Sikh Contingent and their families whilst the Lower Barracks accommodated non-married personnel. Prior to that, the single policemen were housed in 13 blocks of former military barracks built sometime in the 1830s on Pearl's Hill while married personnel lived in wooden sheds located along Havelock Road. The Upper and Lower Barracks served the Sikh Contingent till it was disbanded in 1946.

From 1881 to 1946, the Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police played a critical role in enforcing law and order in Singapore. Between 1934 and 1946, they were housed in the Upper and Lower Barracks, where their presence in the heart of Chinatown, the hub of criminal activities then, was readily felt.

The Radio Division – Coordinating Police Work from Pearl's Hill

After the Sikh Contingent was disbanded, the Upper and Lower Barracks were occupied by various police units. The Radio Division was one of the more well-known occupants at Pearl's Hill.

In 1948, the Radio Division moved into the Lower Barracks. The Upper Barracks at Pearl's Terrace was assigned to the division as well during the early years so that more policemen could be quickly mobilised to man the radio cars in the event of emergencies. A new 90-foot high radio mast was constructed at Pearl's Hill in 1948, and radio network extended to cover Singapore and its neighbouring islands. The top floor of the Lower Barracks was used to house the Operations Room, where radio links with police vehicles, launches and Divisional headquarters were maintained. For years to come, it was from Pearl's Hill that police response to public calls and emergencies was coordinated.



Operations Room, CID building, 1946. A far cry from today's complex comms system.

Courtesy of Singapore Police Force



State of the art equipment in the forties.

On the left, a megaphone, with battery pack carried on the back; on the right, a walkie-talkie with headphone reception. Courtesy of Singapore Police Force



*The Control Room in the Combined Ops Headquarters, 1956
Courtesy of Singapore Police Force*



*The Singapore Police Force Radio Division then.
Courtesy of Singapore Police Force*

The Nerve Centre for Police Communications

Over at the far left end of the Upper Barracks, there stands an unassuming annex block which was once the nerve centre for police communications in Singapore.

The years following the end of World War Two were fraught with riots and unrest. In particular, the Maria Hertogh Riots in 1950 highlighted the need for local security forces to reorganise to deal with such crises. In 1951, an operation combining police and military forces was established at Fort Canning, and combined internal security exercises were held regularly. The operation moved to the headquarters of the Radio Division at Lower Barracks in 1952, where a Combined Police and Army Operations Room was established. The Police Commissioner's office was also set up in the same building and direct contact between the units of the police force and the commissioner was made possible.

These joint exercises led to the decision to construct a purpose-built Combined Operations Headquarters in 1954 for more efficient responses to emergencies. Designed as an annex to Upper Barracks, the block was completed in 1956 and officially opened by then Chief Minister, David Marshall (1908-1995). Shortly after the block was completed, it was put to use during the Chinese middle schools riots in October 1956. More than 5,000 urgent telephone calls were handled and the army and police worked together to address the crisis.

The Combined Operations Headquarters, which was brought into use only during emergencies, played a critical role during times of unrest in Singapore's history, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. Today, the annex is an important reminder of Singapore's turbulent post-war times and the dedication of police and military personnel who guarded Singapore's security.



*The Operation Room in the Combined Ops Headquarters, 1956.
Courtesy of Singapore Police Force*



*The Operation Room in the Combined Ops Headquarters, 1956
Courtesy of Singapore Police Force*

Ministry of Interior and Defence



*The Straits Settlements Police crest on the Upper Barracks building.
Courtesy of Ministry of Home Affairs.*

The Upper Barracks was where the present-day Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) had their beginnings.

Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the Ministry of Interior and Defence (MID) was established to take charge of Singapore's security and defence. The ministry was temporarily housed at Empress Place and moved into Upper Barracks in November 1965. The office of the Minister for MID, and later Minister for MHA, was housed on the second level of the building. MID's first minister, Dr Goh Keng Swee, had his office on that very level.

It was at the Upper Barracks that Singapore's first policies and strategies on internal, civil and military defence were planned and crafted, such as the move to split MID in 1970 to form MHA and MINDEF. Two years later, MINDEF moved out of Pearl's Hill to Tanglin complex while MHA continued to operate in Upper Barracks till 1977, when it relocated to Phoenix Park along Tanglin Road.



Courtesy of Singapore Police Force