

Address by Admiral Sir Ian Forbes 15th August 2020, for the 75th VJ Day Commemorations



We gather today to remember and commemorate Victory over Japan VJ Day – 75 years on. The months before the surrender of Japan on 15 August 1945 were truly momentous.

In May, Victory was declared in Europe. In July, Britain held a General Election in which the Labour Party won a landslide victory. Churchill left Downing Street and Attlee became Prime Minister.

Between these dates, less than 3 months, the war continued to rage in Asia and the Far East. The brutal Battle of Okinawa, in which the United States lost over 82000 men and the Japanese 117000, prompted a Declaration from the Potsdam Conference by the Allies calling for Japan's unconditional surrender. President Truman told Japan – to surrender or suffer prompt and utter destruction. The Japanese rejected the Declaration.

A week later, on 6 August, the United States dropped the Hiroshima Atomic bomb. 3 days later, the bomb on Nagasaki was dropped. The day after Nagasaki, Emperor Hirohito, whose voice the Japanese had never heard before, told his people and the Allies that Japan would surrender unconditionally.

Thus VJ Day was announced by the Allies – Britain and the Commonwealth – on 15 August 1945.

Against this background, we remember the sacrifices of the British and Commonwealth Forces. We remember this was a very different war to that in Europe. All war is cruel; the Asia Pacific War was crueller than most.

We remember the war was fought over an area bigger than the Theatres of war in Europe, Africa and the Atlantic combined.

We remember the war involved fighting marked by extremes. Across the vastness of the Pacific, in monsoon drenched jungles, on snow covered hills, and in scorching insect infected tropical heat. We remember the Fall of Singapore and the Malayan Peninsula that resulted in the surrender of over 80000 British, Australian and Indian troops in Singapore, and a further 50000 in the Peninsula, many of whom became Prisoners of War. In the same time frame, we remember the loss of two of the Royal Navy's capital ships, the Prince of Wales and the Repulse, to Japanese Air Attack, with extensive loss of life.

We remember over 140000 Allied Prisoners, military and civilian, many kept in atrocious and harrowing conditions to work as forced labour on such projects as the Death Railway from Burma to Thailand, during which thousands of Allied personnel and local people perished. We have the privilege of having a child POW who was kept in captivity in the Philippines, Mrs Susanne Maile, sitting behind me here today.

We also remember the British and Commonwealth successes that helped to turn the tide. Notably the Fourteenth Army commanded by General Bill Slim. An army not established until late 1943, and one drawn from people of many Asian nations. It stopped the Japanese invasion of India at the historic battles of Imphal and Kohima. One of Slim's soldiers was Captain Sir Tom Moore who has been so prominent as an example during today's Covid crisis.

We remember South East Asia Command led by Mountbatten of Burma that led the Allied effort that retook the Malayan Peninsula. In this and beyond, units of the Royal Air Forces Third Tactical Air Force, and the Royal Navy's Pacific Fleet played a vital part.

We remember finally that VJ Day is so significant because it marked the end of the Second World War on all fronts. As Prime Minister Clement Attlee stated – the last of our enemies is laid low. The War against Japan for Britain and the Commonwealth had involved over a million military personnel. British and Commonwealth casualties numbered over 71000 dead and 12000 POWs. Millions of others, from other Nations, military and civilian, lost their lives in this savage War. The cost in human life across the region was staggering. Over 50 million is the number quoted.

Given all this, the words of the King, our Queen's father, George VI, in his broadcast to the Nation on 15 August 1945, truly capture the meaning of VJ Day, then and today.

He said – Our hearts are full to overflowing, as are your own. Yet there is not one of us who has experienced this terrible War who does not realise that we shall feel its inevitable consequences long after we have all forgotten our rejoicings today.

Drawing on these remarks, we remember and commemorate the heartfelt words of the Kohima Epitaph in Kohima Cemetery in North East India.

When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today.

By courtesy of Admiral Sir Ian Forbes