

Reflections on VJ Day

By Major General (Retd) John Sutherland

On 15 August 1945 Japan announced its surrender and this day was designated 'Victory over Japan' or VJ Day. For the United Kingdom this marked the official end of the Second World War, over 3 months after the end of the war in Europe.

Imperial Japan, which included Korea and Taiwan, with a constitution and parliamentary system, had been an effective ally to Britain in the First World War. Becoming more authoritarian and militarized, Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931, left the League of Nations in 1933, signed a pact with Nazi Germany in 1936 and invaded China in 1937, waging there a brutal war for the next 8 years. Europe, pre-occupied with the German threat, through a combination of ignorance, cultural prejudice, complacency and delusional thinking, seriously underestimated Japan's ambitions and warlike capabilities. Taking control of French Indo China following the fall of France, on 8 December 1941, the day after their attack on Pearl Harbour, Japan invaded Malaya and Thailand, advanced into Burma, and attacked the Philippines. HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, sent to the Far East as a deterrent, against naval advice, were sunk by Japanese aircraft on 10 December. 'Fortress Singapore' fell on 15 February. By May Burma had been captured, India threatened, Australia had been bombed and Japanese troops were pushing through New Guinea towards Darwin. The British had been out-generaled and out-fought by smaller numbers but operationally experienced and fanatically brave Japanese. It took nearly 4 years of intensely bitter fighting in very harsh physical conditions for 14th Army under General 'Bill' Slim to drive the Japanese out of Burma; the Australians to recapture New Guinea and secure their homeland with no assistance from Britain; the massive commitment of the USA in the Pacific campaign; the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on 8 August 1945 and the atomic bombs on Hiroshima (6 August) and Nagasaki (9 August) to achieve 'Victory over Japan' on 15 August.

The human cost of this conflict was horrific. The Japanese regime was brutal and its forces were responsible for terrible war crimes against civilian populations throughout China and South East Asia and Allied servicemen wherever they were encountered; prisoners of war taken in Singapore, the Philippines and elsewhere were used as slave labour in Japan and on the 'Burma Railway' in Thailand, as were tens of thousands of Asian civilians. The cost to the Japanese was also very high. Their servicemen tended to fight, with suicidal bravery 'to the death'; the civilian population suffered severe privation from naval blockade and a ferocious bombing campaign, culminating in the dropping of two nuclear bombs.

Many of those who fought in this war were scarred by their experience. It was not just the terrible physical conditions of jungle and mountain, the harsh treatment, loss of friends and injuries, but also how they were regarded at home. 14th Army in Burma called itself 'the Forgotten Army', with attention, resources and press coverage always focused on the war in Europe. For many of those who had fought for years, and for those who had been captured in the Far East, their return home did not happen until late in 1945, and 'life had moved on'. Those at home had little or no comprehension of what had been experienced; and those returning were disinclined to share their stories. For those captured at Singapore many felt the bitterness of defeat and a rancour at having been let down and abandoned. And no one in a victorious but exhausted Britain wanted to think about 'Britain's Greatest Defeat'. The Japanese triumph had also been a great victory of non-Europeans over a European empire. That had not been lost on colonized countries throughout the world, and in 1945 Britain and others were already having to grapple with the consequences. For Australians, who had spilt much blood for Britain in the First World War, and in the Western Desert, Greece and Malaya/Singapore in the Second World War, it was the United States, not Britain, who had saved them from invasion in 1942.

VJ has a particular meaning for many in East Anglia. In October 1941 18th British Division, a formation of Territorial Army units most of whom were from East Anglia, sailed from Scotland equipped to fight in the Middle East. On 11 December, still, at sea, the Division was diverted, by order of the War Cabinet, to Singapore where they landed on 13 January. 54 Brigade, including 4th and 5th Battalions of the Suffolk Regiment, was involved in the fighting on Singapore Island in the 10 days before the surrender. Like all those many other British, Australian and Indian soldiers involved, the Suffolks spent the next three and a half years in Japanese hands. The first 9 months were in Changi Jail on Singapore Island; they were then moved in October 1942 to

Thailand to build the Burma-Thailand Railway. When the railway was completed in August 1944 most of the survivors were moved to Japan by ship to be employed as slave labour. The Casualty returns for 4th Battalion Suffolk Regiment are as follows: 955 all ranks landed in Singapore. Of these 90 were killed in action or died of wounds; 375 all ranks died while Prisoners of War or at sea en route to Japan; 490 all ranks survived and were known to be safe, but of these 90 died within one year of returning home. Figures for the 5th Battalion, and indeed other units, are comparable.

Princess of Wales RAF Hospital Ely for many years specialized in the care of Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs). From 1982 to 1991 2000 FEPOWs attended a 3 day check for tropical diseases. 70% were suffering from conditions attributed to war service. This would suggest that only 120 men (12%) of the 4th Bn survived without long term problems (and the figures take no account of mental issues – this was before PTSD was diagnosed). As an example, a hospital medical account of a survivor Pte Ernest Warwick, 4th Suffolks stated in 1987:

“He is haunted still by his years in captivity and today walks slowly and with painful difficulty as a direct result of his brutal torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the Japanese. In no way does he glorify war, but feels that as a proud nation we should always remember and honour our dead, who gave so much that we might live”.