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Canada and the Pacific War

Marjorie Wong

The war in Asia and the Pacific did not end in as tidy a fashion as it had in Europe. Official surrenders of the Japanese extended from 28 August to the end of September 1945. Several theatres had been created by Allied political and military leaders with Canadians involved in all of them.

The first surrender occurred in Burma when General Sir William Slim and the British 14th Army defeated the Japanese Army in the Burma Campaign. Two Royal Canadian Air Force transport squadrons actively supported the 14th Army in Burma. Rangoon was taken by amphibious assault 3 May but surrender documents were not signed by Japanese envoys until 28 August. It had taken all summer to mop up the stragglers.

In January 1945 there were over 3,000 RCAF personnel operating in the Royal Air Force in the Southeast Asia Command (India-Burma-Malaya) including three RCAF Squadrons. SEAC was expanded in August 1945 to include the Netherlands East Indies and French Indo-China. In addition to the RCAF members, 117 Chinese Canadians had arrived in India in the spring of 1945; nine of these men were operating in the Malayan jungles as interpreters in Force 136 (Special Operations Executive) and one in Singapore as coder/wireless operator with the escape and evasion organization (MI 9). Also operating in this SOE guerrilla organization were several other Canadians who moved out to the Far East when the European war was ending. Surrender terms were signed by Lord Louis Mountbatten and General Itagaki Seishiro on 12 September at Singapore. There were at least twelve known Canadian prisoners of war in Malaya.

For most Canadians, Hong Kong remains the best known of the Asian theatres of war for

it was here where two Canadian battalions, the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada fought their first and only battle; those who survived were taken prisoner on 25 December 1941. Many of the men had been moved to Japan or Formosa to work in mines and to perform other heavy labour; the survivors were recovered by American hospital ships and taken to Manila in the Philippines.

Three Chinese Canadians had been sent to Manila by the Canadian military attaché in Australia to give assistance to prisoners of war recovered from Japan and from Hong Kong. Also sent to Manila were some members of the 73-man Radar Detachment as well as a contingent from the 336-man Royal Canadian Signals group posted to Australia. Teams were also sent from Ottawa.

Hong Kong was included in the China Theatre but a British Royal Navy Task Force entered the port at the end of August under Admiral Cecil Harcourt and took the local Japanese surrender on 16 September. Included in the RN Task Force was HMCS *Prince Robert*; HMCS *Ontario* joined the Force on 13 September in time for the surrender ceremony. Relief and repatriation of prisoners of war and internees was the first consideration.

Once Iwo Jima had been captured by US Marines on 26 March 1945, the B-29 bombers operating from the Marianas were able to receive fighter support in their fire bombing raids on the Japanese homeland. China was no longer necessary as a base for the bombing of enemy cities and its importance to the overall war effort almost ceased in the late spring of 1945. War between Japan and China had never been declared but an estimated one million Japanese soldiers were repatriated. The Nationalists and Communists were now free to fight their civil

war to its final conclusion in 1949. During the China Incident, as the 1939-45 war was called, a few Chinese Canadians operated with the 14th US Army Air Force in China and others were with the British Army Aid Group (MI 9) in the area surrounding Hong Kong helping escaping prisoners and downed American airmen.

Supplies were ferried into China over the Hump (the Himalayas) by means of the US Air Transport Command and the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) in which at least a dozen Chinese Canadians were employed as pilots and radio operators. When the Ledo Road across northern Burma was completed to Kunming by the Americans in the early spring of 1945, this air route was no longer so vital. The CNAC was a civilian organization but the pilots were finally recognized by the US government in March 1995 when fifteen (three of whom were Chinese Canadians) were selected to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross and other awards and all members were granted full veteran status.

For the reconquest of Sarawak, Borneo, in the Southwest Pacific Theatre, Special Operations Australia (SOE) or Z Special Unit, infiltrated guerrilla leaders, including six Canadians, five of whom were Chinese Canadians. The Australian Army invaded and captured first Tarakan Island on the east coast, and then Labuan Island and the Brunei Bay area on the west coast. Finally Balikpapan in Dutch Borneo on the east coast was invaded and captured. Surrender documents for all Japanese forces in the Netherlands East Indies and Borneo were signed at Morotai by General Sir Thomas Blamey of the Australian Army and Lieutenant-General Fusataro Teshima on 9 September. Another surrender occurred the following day when Major-General George F. Wootten accepted the surrender of Lieutenant-General Baba Masuo, the general officer commanding the Japanese Army in Borneo.

The war in Borneo did not end with these surrenders, however, and the prisoners of war and internees at Kuching, the capital, including one Canadian, were not recovered until 11 September, with individual Japanese units in the interior not surrendering until 17 September at Sibu to members of Z Special Unit. Several hundred strays heading for a last stand in North Borneo were also rounded up by Z Special Unit

operatives and turned over to the Australian Army on the coast 28 October.

There were several theatres in the Pacific Ocean, the most important division being made in April 1945 in preparation for the invasion of Japan with the Navy and Marines under Admiral Chester Nimitz as Pacific Naval Commander; Nimitz formerly controlled the Central and North Pacific Theatres. US Armed Forces, Pacific, came under General Douglas MacArthur, expanding his former responsibilities from the South West Pacific Theatre. While MacArthur reached north into the Philippines, successfully invading Leyte and then Luzon, Nimitz and the US Marines captured Iwo Jima and Okinawa with terrible casualties on both sides. For Iwo Jima, Marine casualties totalled 23,300 with nearly 6,000 dead; almost 21,000 Japanese were killed. When the battle ended on 22 June, the losses on Okinawa were over 49,000 (including 12,000 dead) for the Americans while the Japanese losses were 120,000 military and 42,000 civilian dead. These figures do not include navy and air force losses.

But Japan could now be starved and bombed into submission; the fire-bombing of Japanese cities killed many more civilians than died as a result of the two atomic bombs. To invade the Japanese home islands, the carnage was estimated in millions of lives lost on both sides. Iwo Jima and Okinawa had demonstrated just how bloody such an invasion would be.

From March 1945 the British Royal Navy, Task Force 57, which was joined by HMCS *Uganda* on April 8, operated as part of the American Pacific Fleet. *Uganda* then operated in a Task Force against Truk in the Carolines. In July the British Pacific Fleet (BPF) joined the US 3rd Fleet, Task Force 37, in the attack on the Japanese home islands; at the end of the month *Uganda* left the BPF and departed for Esquimault. [For more information on the *Uganda* see the article by Bill Rawling on page 23 of this issue.]

Many Canadians served in the Royal Navy. Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray, Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve, served with the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm on HMS *Formidable*. He died 9 August 1945 when he sank at least one warship off the Island of Honshu although his

aircraft was already in flames, having been hit several times by anti-aircraft fire. He was the last Canadian to posthumously receive the Victoria Cross for outstanding valour in World War II. Lieutenant G.A. Anderson, RCNVR, was the last Canadian to die in Pacific operations when his aircraft crashed after it too was disabled by anti-aircraft fire.

The Potsdam Conference of July-August 1945 had called for Japan's unconditional surrender. The Japanese warlords were not willing to accept such terms and made their views known to the Allies through the Japanese ambassador in Moscow since Russia was then neutral. When Russian troops invaded and defeated the Kwantung Army in Manchuria and the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Emperor Hirohito took matters into his own hands and broadcast on 15 August that the nation must accept the "unendurable" and admit defeat.

General Douglas MacArthur took the official surrender of the Japanese in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945. President Harry S. Truman declared 2 September as the official VJ-Day, but VJ-Day is generally considered to be 15 August. As the reader will note from the above, there were several Victory over Japan days. On the US battleship *Missouri*, representatives of nine Allied Governments signed the surrender document including the Canadian military attaché from Australia, Colonel L. Moore Cosgrave, who signed on behalf of Canada.

Marjorie Wong is the author of *The Dragon and the Maple Leaf: Chinese Canadians in World War II*.

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