

Eighty years ago today the war in Asia ended, or did it?

by Rick Green

On 7 May 1945, Generaloberst Alfred Jodl, Nazi Germany's Chief of Operations Staff, signed the Act of Military Surrender at Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force in Reims, France. At Soviet insistence, a second, formal surrender ceremony was held the next day at the Soviet 5th Shock Army headquarters in the Berlin suburb of Karlshorst. An amended surrender document, dated 8 May, was finally signed at 00:45 AM Central European Time on May 9.¹ World War II in Europe had ended.



In London, addressing the crowd at Whitehall from a balcony at the Ministry of Health at 3:00 PM on 8 May, Winston Churchill declared "Victory in Europe Day". He raised his hand in the V-for-Victory sign, igniting the masses into loud cheering. Cause for celebration in Halifax, however, degenerated into mass rioting and looting over two days when longstanding antipathy between the military and civilians came to a head.

The Jewel Must Break

News of the German surrender may have been welcomed with some relief by the thousands of Canadians still in Asia and the Pacific, but there was little fanfare. As

Prime Minister Mackenzie King stated when addressing the nation by radio broadcast on VE Day from the San Francisco Conference,²

"...the end of warfare in Europe is not the end of the war. There is yet another enemy. The United Nations have still yet to bring about the unconditional surrender of Japan... Our national war effort must, and will, continue until the war in the Far East has also been won."

For Sergeant George Bing Lee Chin, a 25-year-old grocery store worker from Vancouver, VE Day was business as usual. He had been training for missions behind Japanese lines in Special Operations Executive schools since arriving in India in March. By June, Chin received his parachute jump wings and had successfully completed his paramilitary interpreter course. He was ready for action.

On 28 July 1945, George Chin — codenamed Haricot — parachuted into Kerling subdistrict in Selangor State, roughly 65 kilometres north of Kuala Lumpur. The mission of the Galvanic Green Patrol Liaison Team to which he was attached, was to support the 1st Regiment of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) — the military wing of the Chinese-dominated Malayan Communist Party (MCP). They were to prepare the region for Operation Zipper, the amphibious landing to retake the British colony. Like the nine other Force 136 Chinese Canadians who inserted into Malaya, little did Chin know of the political maelstrom he dropped into.

The Battle Within

Unlike the democracies of Western Europe, India, Burma, Malaya, Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies were not sovereign, independent countries. They were colonies of Britain, France, and the Netherlands. When the Japanese steamrolled through Southeast Asia, the reaction of the indigenous populations ranged from caution to jubilation. In anticipation of their "liberation" from the British, military units of Burmese and Indian independence movements even collaborated ³ with the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) to hasten that end.

After the humiliating defeat of the British in Malaya and Singapore in 1942, it didn't take long for the Malays and resident Indians to realize that "Asia for Asians" was a hollow Japanese slogan. The Malayan Chinese were already well aware of this since 1937, from news of the IJA's vicious brutality in China.⁴ Ethnic tensions between the Malays and Chinese, however, prevented them from uniting in a joint effort to resist the occupiers.

Further divisions within the Chinese community mirrored the Communist-Nationalist rivalry in China. Force 136's agreement to train and supply the MPAJA in exchange for their co-operation, made them the dominant anti-Japanese guerilla group in Malaya. Consequently, the MPAJA took every opportunity to liquidate their political rivals, such as the two Nationalist wireless operators who had landed with George Chin's Galvanic Green team.

Liberation or Recolonization?

British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and American President, Franklin Roosevelt, had included the right to self-determination in their Atlantic Charter of 1941. This, along with the American promise of independence for the Philippines, created high expectations among Asian independence movement leaders for regaining sovereignty after the war.



At the February 1945 Yalta Conference, however, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Soviet premier, Stalin, had agreed to the division of Asia into spheres of responsibility. The Soviet Union was entrusted with Northeast Asia and the United States the Pacific region, leaving the area under South East Asia Command (SEAC) to Britain. The Big Three would recognize Chinese sovereignty and Chiang Kai-shek as representative of the Chinese people, as well as agreeing not to interfere in the country's economic and political affairs.⁵

When Emperor Hirohito suddenly announced to his subjects on August 15 that the Japanese government had accepted the Allies' Potsdam Declaration, it produced a political vacuum in the colonial territories east of Burma. Who would disarm the Japanese, take their surrender, maintain order, and assume the administration of government?

The Rising Sun Sets

In Hong Kong, Britain considered it of "paramount political importance that we should, at the earliest possible moment, send a British Commonwealth force to accept the surrender of the Japanese..."⁶ Having set up the Hong Kong Planning Unit in London in February 1943, they had long been preparing for the reoccupation of the colony ahead of Nationalist Chinese forces.

Task Force 111 under Rear Admiral Cecil Harcourt sailed into Victoria Harbour on 30 August 1945. Commanding the first landing party of Operation Armour was Lieutenant William King Lowd Lore of Victoria, BC. Among their various duties, Lore and his party liberated the terribly emaciated Commonwealth prisoners of war at Sham Shui Po Camp, who had survived brutal captivity since 26 December 1941. From that day until 1997, the colony commemorated August 30 as Liberation Day.⁷

After the emperor's announcement, Japanese troops in peninsular Malaya retreated to urban areas, leaving it to Force 136 and the MPAJA to maintain order. They were relieved after Operation Zipper delivered the main British reoccupation force to the west of Kuala Lumpur on 9 September. The British Military Administration was installed in KL three days later, and set to work on a plan for self-determination in a Malayan Union with citizenship rights for non-Malays to satisfy the principles of the Atlantic Charter. In the short term, however, the priority was to regain control of Malaya's rubber and tin resources that would help repay Britain's war debts to the United States.⁸

Two days after Japan's capitulation, nationalist leaders in Jakarta proclaimed Indonesian independence, sparking the Revolusi Nasional Indonesia. This surprised the Dutch colonial government, then exiled in Australia. Unable to quickly deploy Dutch

reoccupation forces, they relied on the British, who sent Indian Army units of XXXIV Corps under Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Christison. Resistance from the Tentara Keamanan Rakyat led to armed conflict. With insufficient troops to accept the Japanese surrender, liberate Allied POWs and civilian internees, and maintain order, Christison controversially re-armed tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers (Japanese Surrendered Persons) to help suppress the independence movement on behalf of the absent colonial administration.⁹

Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence in Hanoi on 2 September 1945. Nevertheless, the Allied powers at the Potsdam Conference had assigned the Nationalist Chinese to take the Japanese surrender north of the 16th parallel and the British to the south. Operation Masterdom saw the 20th Indian Division of the British Indian XIV Army under Major General Douglas Gracey, arrive in Saigon on 13 September with orders to disarm the Japanese, restore order, repatriate Allied POWs, and facilitate the return of French colonial authority. However, with the outbreak of rioting and growing attacks from Viet Minh guerillas, Gracey armed Vichy French prisoners and rearmed tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers to join battle against the nationalist resistance.

Sealed with a Kiss

News of Japan's surrender reached the Americas on the evening of 14 August, triggering spontaneous celebrations across cities and towns. In New York City's Times Square, George Mendonsa, a U.S. Navy sailor, impulsively grabbed and kissed Greta Zimmer Friedman, a dental assistant. The moment was captured by photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, whose image was published in *Life* magazine a week later. The iconic photo famously symbolized the joy and relief of World War II's end.



In Europe, the public woke up to the news the next morning and celebrations unfolded throughout the day. Victory over Japan Day is commemorated in Britain and the Commonwealth on 15 August. The official VJ Day in the United States, however, is 2 September when the Japanese Instrument of Surrender was signed on board the battleship, USS *Missouri*, in Tokyo Bay. The Canadian representative, Colonel Lawrence Vincent Moore Cosgrave, mistakenly signed the document on the line below that for The Dominion of Canada, the place that was designated for France.

Clawing their Way to Independence

At the end of the San Francisco Conference on 26 June 1945, 50 nations had signed the United Nations Charter. Article 1, Paragraph 2 states:

"To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace."

It would take many more years before this would be realized in all of Europe's Asian colonies.

Sergeant George Chin returned to Canada from Malaya in 1946. He was demobilized from the Canadian Army and resumed working in the retail trade. Lieutenant William Lore remained on loan to the Royal Navy until November 1946. He then resumed duties with the Royal Canadian Navy until 1948, where he was promoted to Lieutenant-Commander. Although Chin and Lore were both born in Canada, they only became eligible for Canadian citizenship under the new Canadian Citizenship Act on 1 January 1947, and gained equal legal status when the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act was repealed on 14 May 1947.

Britain's Malayan Union did not survive Malay nationalism and the 12-year Chinese Communist guerrilla insurgency, known as the Malayan Emergency. The succeeding Federation of Malaya finally achieved independence on 31 August 1957. In the Dutch East Indies, the Netherlands transferred sovereignty to the Republic of the United States of Indonesia on 27 December 1949, after a four-year war of independence.

Ho Chi Minh's quest for an independent Vietnam had begun with his petition to American President Woodrow Wilson in June 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference, inspired by Wilson's Fourteen Points. Ho's vision would not be fulfilled until the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed on 2 July 1976 — following his death and that of up to 3.1 million Vietnamese.

Although Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula were ceded to the United Kingdom in perpetuity, the New Territories were leased from the Great Qing¹⁰ in 1898 for 99 years. In 1984, Britain agreed to honour the termination of the lease and return the entire British Dependent Territory of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. This took place on 1 July 1997. Two years later, Portugal relinquished control of Macao to the People's Republic of China on 20 December 1999. Thus marked the end of 442 years of Portuguese administration and the end of European imperialism in Asia.

Notes

1. As the revised Act of Military Surrender was signed after midnight on May 9, VE Day has been commemorated on that day by the Soviet Union and Russia.
2. The United Nations Conference on International Organization, also known as the San Francisco Conference, hosted delegates from 50 nations from 25 April to 26 June 1945. Its purpose was to establish the Charter of the United Nations and the statute of the new International Court of Justice.
3. The Burma Independence Army assisted the Japanese in conquering the colony in 1942. The Japanese dissolved the BIA shortly thereafter and replaced it with the Burma Defence Army. This was expanded into the Burma National Army of

- the puppet State of Burma in 1943. The Indian National Army, led by anti-colonial nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, operated from July 1943 to September 1945.
4. World War II in Asia began on 7 July 1937 when the Imperial Japanese Army used the pretext of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident to launch a full-scale invasion of China.
 5. Nagai, Yōnosuke and Akira Iriye. *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*, pp. 326-329.
 6. Williamson, Mitch. "Admiral Harcourt Arrives in Hong Kong".
 7. Today in Hong Kong, the end of the war is commemorated on 3 September as Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression — the same as in mainland China and Macao.
 8. Deery, Phillip. 'Malaya, 1948: Britain's Asian Cold War?', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9 (1), pp. 29-54.
 9. McMillan, Richard. *The British Occupation of Indonesia: 1945–1946*, pg. 166.
 10. Great Qing (大清 Dà Qīng) was the name of the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912) that encompassed what is now China.

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