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Sept 4, 2005

The real Japanese surrender

Recently declassified war records reveal that the Japanese had surrendered in Singapore days earlier than the Sept 12 date recorded in history books. Romen Bose, who was given access to the British War Office and South-east Asia Command documents at the National Archives in London, files the first of a two-part series on the events leading to the end of World War II in Singapore

SINGAPOREANS who lived through World War II would remember pictures of Lord Louis Mountbatten taking the Japanese surrender in the City Hall chambers on Sept 12, 1945. But this was not the real Japanese surrender.



EIGHT DAYS BEFORE THIS FORMAL SURRENDER at City Hall on Sept 12, 1945, the Japanese had already agreed to surrender their forces and accept British military rule.

Top-secret documents unsealed recently by the British government show that eight days before the City Hall ceremony, on a British warship in the Strait of Singapore, the Japanese agreed to surrender their forces and accept British military rule.

Although some public records refer to a brief meeting between Japanese and British officers on Sept 4, 1945, secret files from Mountbatten's South-east Asia Command (SEAC) show that the

Sept 4 meeting was the occasion of the actual surrender of Singapore.

The files, sealed for over half a century, contained the communications between the Chief of Imperial General Staff in London and British commanders in South-east Asia. They were declassified early this year under Britain's new Freedom of Information Act.

Singapore was a powerful symbol of British military might in the region, and the fall of the island fortress in 1942 was a severe blow to British pride and morale. The Japanese used Singapore as their headquarters with the 7th Area Army based on the island.

From the British point of view, it was imperative that Singapore be recaptured as quickly as possible. Its recapture would symbolise to the Japanese the destruction of their southern forces and at the same time restore Britain's prestige in the region.

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The files show that the initial plan to recapture Singapore, codenamed Operation Zipper, would have meant a prolonged fight down the Malayan peninsula before the Allied troops reached Singapore. The Japanese were aware of the British strategy and were in the midst of boosting their defences on Malaya's west coast when the war ended.

Emperor Hirohito's surrender announcement prompted the British to come up with a separate plan, codenamed Tiderace, to retake Singapore. Instead of the step-by-step reoccupation as planned, Mountbatten ordered British troops to set sail from Trincomalee and Rangoon (Yangon) on Aug 21 for Singapore.

He gambled that the Japanese in Malaya would hand over Singapore without a fight.

Declassified records showed that Mountbatten also took a second, bigger gamble. The Tiderace fleet was not armed with offensive weapons, so if the Japanese had put up a fight, it would have been disastrous for the British.

By dawn on Sept 4, 1945, British troops reached Singapore.

Typewritten verbatim minutes of the Japanese surrender aboard the HMS Sussex, in the sea off Keppel Harbour, reported a tense atmosphere when the two war foes met. Security was tight. A British Royal Marine was posted at the doorway.

Lieutenant-General Alexander Christison, Mountbatten's representative, did not give General Seishiro Itagaki, commander of the Japanese 7th Area Army, a chance to begin, as the minutes reveal:

**Christison:** Do you abide by the Imperial decision to cease hostilities and are you prepared to carry out the orders of the Supreme Allied Commander, South-east Asia?

**Itagaki:** Yes, I am quite prepared.



Children cheering the arrival of the Allied Forces after the recapture of Singapore. Soon after that, the British declared pre-war currency as legal tender, making Japanese 'banana' money worthless.

Three days after the emperor's announcement, Itagaki flew to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) to meet Field Marshal Count Terauchi, Commander of the Japanese Southern Army and forces in South-east Asia.

Itagaki had initially balked at Terauchi's order to surrender. An early landing by Allied forces might have precipitated the stubborn Itagaki into ordering his 70,000-strong Singapore garrison and the 26,000 men in Malaya to resist. It was recently revealed that there was even a secret plan to massacre all POWs.

But on Aug 20, Itagaki signalled Mountbatten that he would abide by his emperor's decision and was ready to receive instructions for the Japanese surrender of Singapore.



General Itagaki, commander of the Japanese 7th Area Army, had initially balked at the order to surrender.

By 6pm, the Japanese had surrendered their forces in Singapore.

For the people of Singapore and Malaya, the practical impact of the HMS Sussex surrender was immediate: It put a stop to the communal violence that had broken out on the island and parts of the peninsula.

The demoralisation that comes with being a vanquished force meant the Japanese were hardly in a position to assert control when violence broke out. News of the British return had the effect of stopping the ethnic clashes. The people believed that the British would now be the adjudicators of the numerous disputes and troubles plaguing the people.

Still, the surrender did not proceed that smoothly. Emperor Hirohito's surrender announcement had caught the Japanese Command in Singapore by surprise. Many Japanese were unwilling to surrender and had vowed to fight to the death.

The next morning, close to a week after the Japanese emperor's announcement, newspapers in Singapore were finally allowed to carry the text of the emperor's speech, confirming what many already knew from listening to All India Radio broadcasts from Delhi on forbidden shortwave radios.

On Aug 22, Itagaki met his generals and senior staff at his headquarters at the former Raffles College in Bukit Timah. He told his men that they would have to obey the surrender instructions and keep the peace.

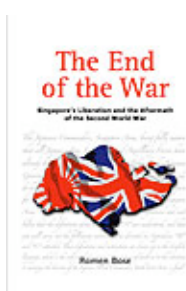
That night, more than 300 Japanese officers and men held a farewell sake party at one of the lounges in the Raffles Hotel.

Then, leaning on their short swords, 'they hastily returned to their ancestors'. A whole Japanese platoon later pulled the pins off hand grenades and blew themselves to pieces.

Defeat made strange bedfellows, as close to 200 Japanese soldiers decided to join the communist guerillas whom they were fighting just days before in a bid to continue the fight against the British. It was only when they found out that the Malayan Communist Party-funded Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army did not plan to fight the returning British that many Japanese soldiers returned to their units.



Japanese prisoners of war being put to work. A few of the Japanese soldiers fled into the jungle after the surrender.



**The End of the War: Singapore's Liberation and the Aftermath of the Second World War (\$19 excluding GST)** draws on declassified war documents in London to reveal some of the lesser-known but crucial events leading up to the end of the war in Singapore and Malaysia.

Nonetheless, some stayed hidden in the jungles with the communists, and when Chin Peng and the remnants of the Malayan Communist Party ended their struggle in 1989, two former Japanese soldiers emerged from the jungle with the communists.

The ordinary folk were unsure as to what the sudden ending of the war meant. Richard Munby, a special assistant on Mountbatten's headquarters staff, had arrived days earlier to prepare for the 'supremo's ceremony'.

In his confidential memoirs now released at the Imperial War Museum, he noted that the local Chinese population had suffered terribly at the hands of the Japanese and that many wanted revenge.

He wrote: 'For the past three or four years, the Chinese in particular have lived a life of inconceivable hardship and intense humility, many having been tortured into submission, and thousands have never lived to see the day of their city's liberation.'

Two days after the return of the British, the local population was in for another rude shock.

On Friday, Sept 7, the British Military Administration declared that apart from \$1,000 and \$10,000 notes, which had to be handed in and accounted for, all pre-war Malayan and Straits Settlements currency notes and coins would be legal tender.

Overnight, the Japanese military's 'banana' money became worthless. On Saturday, beef, which could be bought for 20 cents a kati (605g) or 150 Japanese dollars on the black market, went up to 1,000 Japanese dollars. On Sunday, when the full implication of the news had sunk in, no one would accept Japanese dollars. By Monday, Sept 10, every shop, food stall and market was closed.

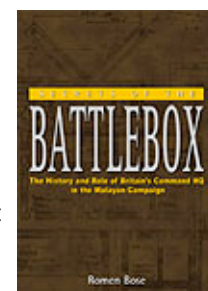
The British Military Administration reacted quickly to the crisis. The files reveal that the chief civil affairs officer assured reporters that large quantities of Straits dollar notes were available, that everyone would be paid salary advances and Allied servicemen were already spending their local dollars, so there would be plenty of legal currency in circulation soon. At the same time, the first free rations of rice, sugar and salt began to be distributed.

Clearly, the reoccupation of Singapore and Malaya was not going to be easy.

The formal Japanese surrender in City Hall on Sept 12, 1945, was a grand affair as British Royal Marines lined the streets and crowds filled the Padang.

Harry Miller, chief reporter at The Straits Times, who until the week before had been interned at the Sime Road camp, gave a vivid description of events in the newspaper:

'General Itagaki reaches in his pockets...bringing out a large seal and a tablet of



**Secrets of the Battlebox: The history and role of Britain's Command HQ in the Malayan Campaign (\$17 excluding GST)** is a culmination of 17 years of research into the role of the command headquarters in the campaign.

vermillion wax. It is the large square seal of the Japanese Army that he sets on the table. He reaches in his pockets...and produces a little leather case from which he extracts his own personal seal. He 'chops' the instrument with both - the 11 copies are signed.

'All the while, all the other Japanese delegates look straight ahead. They do not look at General Itagaki, who is the only one showing movement.'

To the ordinary people however, the City Hall ceremony, held little significance. With 'banana' money now worthless, people were worried about making a living and putting food on the table.

**In Part II next week:**

**The traitor who betrayed wartime hero Lim Bo Seng Romen Bose, a former journalist, is the author of two new books published by Marshall Cavendish Editions that will be out in major bookstores next week.**

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