

ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET EARL MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA

INNOVATOR, STATESMAN AND
HERO ON TWO FRONTS

Lord Mountbatten had fully embraced busyness in a war he knew was coming, as **Joshua M Casper** writes. His leadership as a destroyer captain motivated a nation, he forged meaningful political relationships and his staff helped plan the largest amphibious invasion yet seen. Now, the war took him to Asia to battle a new foe.



ABOVE Mountbatten speaking with Capt John Cassady and Cmdr Howard Caldwell on the USS Saratoga. (VIA AUTHOR)

OPPOSITE Lord Louis speaking on the Saratoga as the carrier joins the British Eastern Fleet in April 1944. (VIA AUTHOR)

Most Britons recognised the public image of Lord Louis Mountbatten when the Second World War started – an aristocrat who had made quite a name for himself as a socialite with royal connections. Yet, the future Earl of Burma’s leadership acumen and ability to galvanise creativity had drawn him into the inner sanctum of command. He had been integral to the European incursion. Now, he was off to the Far East as The Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia to help revitalise an army bogged down by the Japanese in Burma. It was all too close to the Jewel in the Crown – India.

Britain had been on the brink but had now turned the tide in Europe, however while the Allies stormed Normandy, Britain’s hold on the Far East was, at best, tenuous. Most Indian soldiers fought gallantly but

other actions were in evidence, like the then imprisoned political activist Jawaharlal (Pandit) Nehru – the nation’s future first prime minister – who would not support the war without a promise of independence. It was within this milieu that Mountbatten came to know India and use his knowledge as its last Viceroy. But first he had a war to win.

A BEATEN BUNCH

In the Far East, the Allies were a both physically and mentally beaten bunch. When he arrived in 1943, the Japanese were at the Indian border. Whitehall was worried about them being bolstered by a small number of anti-colonialist Indian combatants with whom they collaborated. Additionally, Malaya, Singapore, Ceylon and Siam – which also fell under the former destroyer captain’s command – were all occupied. Winston Churchill’s orders, which were easier said than done, were

BIOGRAPHY

Nickname(s): Dickie

Born: June 25, 1900, Windsor

Died: August 27, 1979 (aged 79), Mullaghmore, Ireland

Allegiance: United Kingdom/British Empire

Service/branch: Royal Navy/Chief of Combined Operations, Supreme Allied Command South East Asia, First Sea Lord, Chief of the Defence Staff

Battles/wars: *First World War:* North Sea, internment of the High Seas Fleet, *Second World War:* Namsos, the Lizard, Crete, [As planner: Operation Biting, Operation Chariot, Operation Jubilee, Operation Overlord], Recapture of Burma, *Post-war:* Operation Tiderace,

Awards: KG, GCB, KCB, CB, OM, GCSI, GCIE, GCVO, KCVO, MVO, DSO, KStJ, CSTJ, Order of Isabella (Spain), Order of the Nile (Egypt), Order of the Crown (Romania), Order of the Star (Romania), War Cross (Greece), Legion of Merit (USA), Order of the Cloud and Banner (Republic of China), DSM (USA), Grand Cross of the Légion d'honneur (France), Order of the Star (Nepal), Order of the White Elephant (Thailand), Order of George I (Greece), Order of the Netherlands Lion (Netherlands), Order of Aviz (Portuguese Republic), Royal Order of Seraphim (Sweden), Order of Thiri Thuhamma (Burma), Order of the Seal of Solomon (Ethiopia)





ABOVE Mountbatten, possibly in Arakan, Burma, prior to meeting Gen Joe Stilwell in 1944. (VIA AUTHOR)

RIGHT Lord Mountbatten arriving at Gatow, Berlin on July 24, 1945, ahead of the Potsdam Conference. (HARRY S TRUMAN LIBRARY/NARA)

famous Chindits, led by Major-General Orde Wingate and a large number of Indian, Australian, African, French, Burmese and Dutch contingents. The future earl's deputy was the ornery but competent General 'Vinegar' Joe Stilwell, an American known for his antipathy for the Brits but who got on well with Lord Louis.

Mountbatten knew strategic overhaul was necessary, ideally, he'd implement the ethos and apply the tactics he developed in Combined Operations. "In his method, he did not like to take decisions in isolation," said Vice-Admiral Ronald Brockman, a member of his staff, who added: "He liked hearing other people's views, in meetings with the commanders-in-chief, with the planning staff; he would give his views and like everyone to speak up. He expected them to say so and state their views in this way, what

he used to call the 'spirit of the hive.'

From his headquarters in Delhi, Lord Louis and his commanders devised a plan. The navy men proposed an ingress led by an amphibious assault from the Bay of Bengal, a coastal invasion by 50,000 well-trained troops. Whitehall and the Pentagon had other ideas. It was 1944 and the war had reached a fevered pitch. The Anglo-American Allies were just beginning their European incursion, and the Russians were working their way west. In the Pacific and the Far East, the Japanese still held from Manchuria to New Guinea. Burma was, to the Allies, an afterthought. They rejected the plan. Attention and resources were needed elsewhere. So, the 'Forgotten Army', as it would come to be known, had to rely on minimal air support, gule

"YOUR FIRST DUTY IS TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY AS CLOSELY AND CONTINUOUSLY AS POSSIBLE"



(VIA AUTHOR)

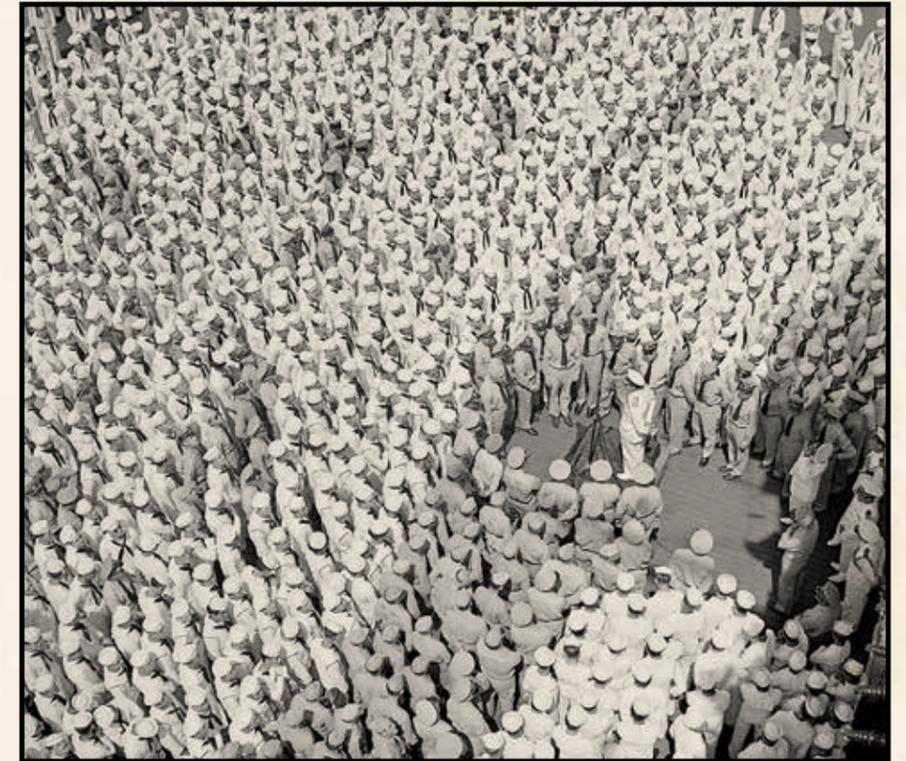
and a war of attrition against the dogged Japanese.

MAKING DO, AND CRAFTING A VICTORY

Lord Louis was determined to make do with what he had and instead of a coastal incursion the Allies would come from the north to surround the Japanese. His men were at least well trained by the likes of Stilwell, Slim and the British General Claude Auchinleck – who was largely responsible for training Indian forces. Orde Wingate's Chindits began to exact damage by way of small tactical raids, before the pioneering officer lost his life in a plane crash in India on March 24, 1944.

Mountbatten's plan involved tackling what he called the three Ms: morale, malaria and monsoons. He sought to inspire what would come to be known as the Fourteenth Army: "I hear you call this the Forgotten Front. I hear you call yourselves the Forgotten Army. Well, let me tell you that this is not the Forgotten Front, and you are not the Forgotten Army. In fact, nobody has even heard of you." And then, after a stunned silence, when the message had sunk in, he would go on: "But they will hear of you, because this is what we are going to do..."

More than rhetoric was needed to boost morale. Films were brought in a newspaper run by former *Evening Standard* and *Daily Mail* editor Frank Owen, was started. These helped, but Mountbatten's beleaguered men were



still bogged down in jungle warfare. With the jungle came the dreaded mosquito, and the exhausted force was suffering badly from the scourge of malaria. Mountbatten set up a medical advisory division to look into tropical diseases; on his arrival in Burma 120 soldiers were afflicted with sickness for every battlefield casualty. By 1945, the ratio was 10:1. "The prevention of tropical diseases", said Slim, "had advanced immensely within the last

few years, and one of the first steps of the new Supreme Commander had been to get to South East Asia some of the most brilliant research workers in this field. Working closely with medical officers who had experience of practical conditions, they introduced new techniques, drugs, and methods of treatment."

Finally, Mountbatten made the tactical decision to fight through the monsoon season. Previously, commandos had unsuccessfully tried raids during the dry season only, but a path had to be opened through the old Burma road. Britain's first and toughest major victory in the theatre was at Imphal in July 1944 and it turned the tide of the campaign, secured Assam and led to the recapture of northern Burma and the building of the Ledo road, which ran from Assam and into China. The Allies held the Japanese U-go offensive at Imphal and pushed back, also earning an unlikely but decisive victory at Kohima in June 1944. Having gained all important air superiority, Slim took a page from Mountbatten's book of ingenuity and also planned one of the great assaults of the conflict: "...there's the river – and there are the trees..." said Slim. So, the Fourteenth Army fashioned craft out of anything they could find to cross the mighty Irrawaddy

ABOVE Adm Mountbatten addresses US Navy personnel on the flight deck of the carrier Saratoga at Trincomalee. (US NATIONAL ARCHIVES/NARA)

LEFT Gen Joe Stilwell conferring with Mountbatten in 1944. Stilwell was gutsy and caustic, and clashed with many key figures in the Burma-India theatre – but, importantly, not Mountbatten. (VIA AUTHOR)



RIGHT Lord Mountbatten inspects members of the Royal Navy at the post-war victory parade in Singapore.

river, which carved through the Burmese jungle.

THE DECISIVE END

As the British planted the Union flag on the ancient Fort Dufferin in Mandalay, the Nazi scourge was finally eradicated in Europe. It looked like Burma too would also soon be free of the Axis occupier. Mountbatten's generals led their troops into Rangoon as conquering heroes, complete with parade and a gun salute. As always, Mountbatten gave a rousing speech to the soldiers who had triumphed under some of the most arduous conditions of the war. Likewise, his the humanitarian work of his wife, Edwina, working with the St John Ambulance Brigade was recognised. She too had made her mark in Burma.



BELOW Lord Mountbatten at the signing of the Japanese surrender in South East Asia, in Singapore September 12, 1945. To his left stand Adm Arthur Power and Gen William Slim. On the right are US Lt Gen Earle Wheeler and ACM Sir Keith Park.

But despite being on the ropes, Japanese capitulation seemed unlikely. An invasion of the Japanese home islands – if the fighting on Iwo Jima or Okinawa was anything to go by – was going to be incredibly costly in lives. At the Allied Potsdam Conference in Germany in July 1945, Mountbatten was told of a new weapon that would end the war. General Marshall pulled Mountbatten aside and swore him to secrecy, not to even tell the PM, but lo and behold, Churchill took him aside at dinner because he too had been let in on the 'secret'. Harry Truman, now US President, also told the Supreme Allied Commander the truth of the atomic bomb, when and where it was going. He told the earl at their initial rendezvous: "Just as the British

feel that Eisenhower was very fair in looking after the British interests in SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force], so all of us Americans feel you have been very fair in looking after American interests in SEAC."

For perhaps the first time during the war, the British could assess the new world that was to follow. Churchill said to Mountbatten: "When the war is over, I am going to arrange a great ovation for you and for your battle-green jungle warriors. When we get back to London come and see me and we will talk about your future, as I have great plans in store." It was not to be, just 24 hours later, Winston discovered his fate. The war-weary

country took a different direction, an election had been called in the summer of 1945 and Labour had won. By the time the Potsdam Conference was over, the coalition government would be no more, and former Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee would stand in for Churchill as the new British Commander-in-Chief. Of the original 'big three' - Churchill, US President Franklin D Roosevelt and the USSR's Joseph Stalin - only the latter remained in power. Earl Mountbatten of Burma, as he would soon be titled, was sorry to see his mentor, Winston Churchill, leave office. He reflected: "It was sad to see Winston go... I had enormously admired his stand against Appeasement in the '30s... He was never the easiest of men to work with. He nearly drove the chiefs of staff mad at times, with his endless flow of ingenious schemes. But he kept us up to the mark all the time. His whole mind was concentrated on winning the war; that is why he was such a wonderful leader. That, and his human touch: he knew how to inspire us, when to make us weep, when to make us laugh. I was extremely fond of him and I know he was fond of me – but perhaps for the wrong reasons. I suspect he thought of me as being more of a swashbuckler than I really am. In war he was splendid, but I was already worried about how he would get on in peace."

The fall of Imperial Japan was in hand. The atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945. For the first time the Japanese heard the voice of their Emperor, and it was to

announce the nation's capitulation. "Well, Dickie [the earl's nickname], it's happened..." cabled Churchill. "I hope you have made all plans and that you are ready to send your first aeroplane into Singapore tomorrow. Mind you, I no longer have the right to talk to you like this but speak as a friend who hopes we will press on quickly." Mountbatten did just that. He travelled to Germany and on to Britain where he met with everyone from General Lionel 'Pug' Ismay and US Major General 'Wild' Bill Donovan to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and General Douglas MacArthur, whom he found not to be the austere gung-ho figure of legend but reserved and charming.

Then came the official surrender on August 15, 1945, a day Lord Louis called the greatest of his life. As in Rangoon, he put on a show. Unlike MacArthur who did not insist on the Japanese losing face and surrendering their swords, the Supreme Allied Commander made no such concession, eventually receiving two swords, one he kept and the second he presented to King George VI.

DEALING WITH THE PEACE

The war had come to an end. Firstly, there was the triumph of victory. Now Mountbatten had to deal with the peace and the next priorities concerned regional aspirations for freedom. As a member of the Royal family he could not be overtly political, but as he began implementing post-war infrastructure



"FOR THE FIRST TIME THE JAPANESE HEARD THE VOICE OF THEIR EMPEROR, AND IT WAS TO ANNOUNCE THEIR CAPITULATION."

in the liberated European colonies Mountbatten made his post-war philosophy of self-determination clear: "The guiding principle which I am determined shall be observed is that no person shall suffer on account of political opinions honestly held, whether now or in the past, even if these may have been anti-British, but only on account of proven crimes against the criminal law, or actions repugnant to humanity. This principle

is no more than an elementary point of British justice."

The future of Burma was complicated, and he was determined to work with Aung San – father of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi – and leader of the Burmese independence movement. Mountbatten saw fit that Burma would have a say in its own governance. He arrived back at Singapore, determined to manage the differing factions and keep order with limited resources on the ground. Again, Lord Louis would have to rely on his force of personality and penchant for reading the lay of the land. One Burmese official told him: "If the British Government had, at any time during the last 100 years, behaved to Burma as you have been behaving during the last few weeks, none of the troubles between us would ever have arisen, and no Burmans would have dreamed of supporting the Japanese."

Like the Burmese, the majority of Indians, Siamese and Malaysians resented the Japanese incursion, but likewise wanted self-rule. It was up to Mountbatten to ensure order with limited troop support in the newly freed colonies while simultaneously giving credence to political aspirations. When he arrived in Siam, the Thai were still at war

LEFT Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, speaking on August 15, 1947 at the declaration of Indian Independence. (TOP PHOTO)



LEFT Mountbatten (second left) with (from left) the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen Lyman Lemnitzer; C-in-C Atlantic Command, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, and Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic, Adm Robert Dennison; and Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, Europe, Gen Lauris Norstad in April 1961. (JOHN F KENNEDY LIBRARY/NARA)

RIGHT
Mountbatten, as an admiral, at sea with elements of the Mediterranean fleet in 1954.
(TOPFOTO)



service in Europe. Rapid promotions followed. In April 1950, he was appointed second-in-command of the Mediterranean fleet and two months later became the Fourth Sea Lord. He soon returned to the Med, as the fleet's commander, and from June 1952 was also NATO commander of Allied Forces Mediterranean. In 1953 Mountbatten was promoted to full admiral and made aide-de-camp to the young Queen.

His relationship with Churchill ebbed and flowed, especially once Winston was re-elected. Both were cut from the same cloth; patriots and the epitome of 'the great man'. Each toed a line between liberal ideals and convention which evolved over time but their politics, grew in the opposite direction. They deeply disagreed over the issue of Indian independence but would be reconciled with Winston's last act as prime minister in 1955 was to name the earl First Sea Lord.

RIGHT
Lord Mountbatten (seated, centre) presides as general Seishirō Itagaki signs the surrender of the Imperial Japanese Army in Singapore.
(PA ARCHIVE)



BELOW
Earl Mountbatten of Burma (right) with friends on his boat, *Shadow V*.
(TOPFOTO)



with the Brits. He quickly made peace. Then, in Malaya where the Japanese were entrenched, he managed to restore order. Mountbatten toured the recaptured colonies and on his visit for Victory in India day experienced his most prophetic meeting. Jawaharlal Nehru was now out of prison for advocating the "quit India" movement.

Mountbatten showed him the deference and respect that Whitehall didn't. He ensured Nehru's inclusion in the festivities, making just one request – that the activist did not acknowledge the monument to the soldiers who had collaborated with the Japanese. Nehru obliged and the day passed off without a glitch. Mountbatten had again used his strength of character as both soldier and statesman to win over Nehru and the Indian people. Their bond was prophetic. Together, they would usher in Indian independence. Both concluded a united India was unachievable, it would be the 'Mountbatten Plan' – partition – that would not only make it happen but also accelerate the process. Partition was not smooth, there were serious problems and Lord Louis among others was at unease at times about some of the arrangements, perhaps the lasting unresolved thorn was his handling of Kashmir – a territorial dispute that continues today.

For almost a year after Indian independence on August 15, 1947, Lord Louis remained in that country but following that he returned to naval

That was the seat his father had been made to relinquish and it was Winston he had tendered his resignation. In a sense it brought his relationship with the Mountbattens full circle.

ASSASSINATION

By the time he left the Admiralty in 1959, Mountbatten had been instrumental in the application of nuclear technology to the Royal Navy and had served for more than four years as First Sea Lord with promotion to Admiral of the Fleet coming in October 1956. His career continued after he left the Royal Navy, being appointed Chief of the Defence staff in 1959. There, during his six-year stint, he established the Ministry of Defence – a single, unified, military/government branch that in



April 1964 replaced the preceding individual departments, such as the War Office, the Admiralty and the Air Ministry.
Throughout his later life, Lord Louis frequently visited Ireland for his holidays, where, just miles from the border with the

United Kingdom he had a house, Classiebawn Castle, in Mullaghmore, County Sligo. On August 27, 1979, he was out fishing in his boat, *Shadow V*, with family members when a large radio-controlled bomb planted the previous night by the IRA was detonated.



One of his grandsons, Nicholas Knatchbull, aged 14, and 15-year-old boat hand Paul Maxwell were killed. Doreen Knatchbull, dowager Lady Brabourne (83), who was also on-board, died of her injuries the following day. Earl Mountbatten (79) was seriously injured and pulled from the water by nearby craft. He died before he reached the shore. The IRA claimed responsibility for the assassination, which occurred on the same day as the Warrenpoint Ambush that killed 18 British soldiers – the bloodiest attack on British troops during The Troubles.

The earl's funeral at Westminster Abbey was televised and followed a procession from Wellington Barracks. In addition to the Queen and other members of the Royal Family, military contingents from Burma, India, France, Canada, and the US attended alongside British military personnel. His coffin was drawn on a gun carriage, surrounded by more than 100 members of the Royal Navy. The ceremony solemnly illustrated the depth of respect felt by compatriots, allies, and armed forces personnel for a man who changed the world.
Louis Mountbatten, Earl of Burma, was undoubtedly one of the 20th Century's most influential individuals. 🇬🇧

LEFT
The body of Earl Mountbatten is carried from the harbour at Mullaghmore.
(TOPFOTO)

BELOW
The Royal Navy *Sea King* carrying the body of Earl Mountbatten takes off from Sligo on the first stage of its journey back to England.
(TOPFOTO)