

RECOLLECTIONS—a series by Jane Ram

Confronted by Japanese suicide boats

AS a member of the staff of Admiral Harcourt, W.K. Lore arrived in Hongkong with the liberating fleet. Literally one of the first of the naval force to set foot outside the Naval Dockyard, Mr Lore still vividly recalls the scene that met his eyes as the fleet came through the harbour.

A shoal of presumed "suicide patrol boats" greeted the allied forces as they approached Hongkong waters.

Mr Lore was present on board HMS Indomitable when the admiral gave the order for the 30 or so boats to be sunk by carrier-borne fighters.

"When the sighting was first reported to Admiral Harcourt, it was suggested that they might possibly be a welcoming party. However, the Japanese envoy from Hongkong was flown from Kai Tak to the Indomitable the previous day by one of Indomitable's own torpedo bombers. He did not mention any such reception.

"Intelligence reports showed that these motor boats were designed to carry half a ton of TNT at the bow. And also they had four forward speeds and no reverse. Admiral Harcourt then gave the order to sink them. It may appear that this was on the callous side. But it must be remembered that the British fleet included several capital ships with several thousand men each.

"These motor boats were extremely fast and manoeuvrable. They were very small targets.

The big guns of the fleet would be almost useless against such boats if one moved into the midst of the British ships. It was a decision reluctantly but correctly made after weighing the 30-odd Japanese lives against possible thousands of British lives and loss or damage to units of the British fleet."

For the first four days after the arrival of the fleet the Japanese continued in control and were responsible for law and order on Hongkong Island. Mr Lore could not recall any reports of violence between the local population and the soldiers which ended in the killing of Japanese troops.

Looting continued for several days and suspected Japanese civilians were in considerable physical danger.

Stories have been perpetuated about diehard Japanese elements fighting to the end, but Mr Lore questions these tales. "Rifle shots were fired by a single Japanese sentry from the sentry box at the bottom of Garden Road towards the crowd in front of the Naval Dockyard, who were beating up suspected Japanese found in stopped trams. A burst from the Royal Marine Sergeant Major's submachine gun put a stop to that."

When it became obvious that the war was near its end, the Japanese had started to collect up all the military yen. After the Emperor's surrender broadcast the notes were put into one of the Naval Dockyard buildings. The intention was to burn them so that it would be impossible to ask the Japanese government to redeem them.

"My sergeant major presented me with a huge roll of notes. I asked him what it was and he explained that it was money that was being used ashore. I told him to keep it and share it out among the men. He insisted that they had already shared out a vast quantity and this was my portion. It consisted of millions of yen. I could have been rich for life.

"I thought of the Hongkong people and remembered my own Chinese origins. I thought of those years of suffering my people had seen. I knew that if I spent the money they would suffer even more because they would be stuck with the notes.

"I was one of three people—the others were the Admiral and his Secretary—who knew that the money would be worthless very soon. The sergeant major was six foot four and weighed 240 lbs, but he had tears in his eyes as he begged me to accept the money or at least tell him why I refused it. I could not tell him why I would not take it. I just said he should spend the money.

"I went back aboard Swiftsure to the Admiral's quarters and asked what he was going to do about the yen. I told him that everything was

being bought up ashore and the merchants were going to be stuck. Harcourt asked what he could do. I suggested he should issue a general order explaining that the money was now worthless. It took five days for this to be distributed and in the meantime a great many yen were spent and many people made themselves prosperous overnight."

For the next two years Mr Lore remained on the Admiral's staff, first with the minesweeping technical force and then briefly on anti-piracy patrols. On the mine sweeping assignment, Mr Lore was appointed liaison officer between the Chinese military and naval authorities and Governor Harcourt as he was by then.

"I was only a lieutenant and this was the hardest job. Aside from the admiral himself, I was dealing with Chinese admirals, regional and provincial governors and field marshals. I had to talk like a diplomat, but I wasn't allowed to tell lies.

"It would have been too easy to rub people up the wrong way. For instance we knew that there were still mines in the Pearl River. The Chinese tried to clear the river for traffic, but they did not have our BYMS—wooden vessels for clearing the magnetic mines.

"After we had finished the work in Swatow and Amoy we offered our services for the Pearl River. The authorities said there would be no need. We did not want to hurt anyone's feelings. Minesweeping was very expensive but we were offering this free. Everyone was anxious for commerce to resume as soon as possible.

"In Canton more than 300 people were killed when a ship hit a mine. Then finally the authorities asked us to sweep the river and we did. People are very touchy when you offer to do something for them. Relations with other areas were generally easier. The Chinese admiral in Amoy wanted to adopt me as his godson!"

TO BE CONTINUED —
Next week anti-piracy patrols.

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