VJ DAY: NORTHERN IRISH AND LOCAL LINKS WITH THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN THE PACIFIC, 1939-45

By Dr Éamon Phoenix, Historian and Broadcaster

Joyous crowds in Armagh celebrate the surrender of Nazi Germany on VE Day, 8 May 1945

VJ DAY, 15 August 1945: LOCAL CROWDS CELEBRATE THE END OF THE WAR

This week marks the 75th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War. As the last stroke of Big ben died away at midnight on 14 August, Clement Attlee, the new Labour Prime Minister, stepped to the microphone and gave the dramatic news that Japan had surrendered unconditionally. 'The last of our enemies is laid low', he told the ecstatic crowd in central London. 'Today is VJ Day!'

The news, flashed to the four corners of a tense and expectant world, stated that Emperor Hirohito had accepted the Allied ultimatum at Potsdam and was ready to order his forces to cease fighting at once and lay down their arms. The Allied terms had demanded the elimination of 'those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest'. However, there was no attempt to pin personal responsibility for the war on Hirohito himself. This loophole was seized upon by Tokyo following the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese cities by the United States and the Soviet declaration of war on Japan.

Almost immediately after the Prime Minister's broadcast, VJ celebrations broke out in Belfast, Armagh, Portadown and other towns across Northern Ireland, As on VE Day three months earlier, many people began dancing in the streets, even children of tender years were out with their parents singing.

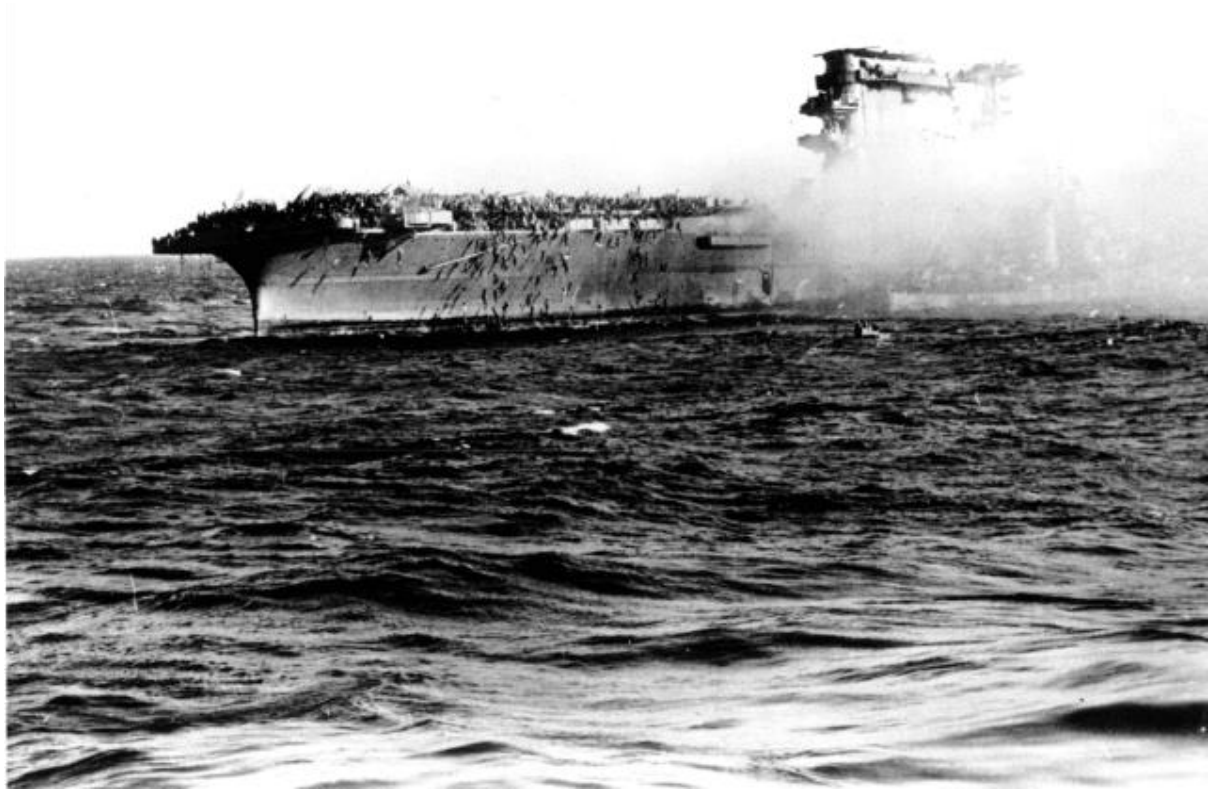
The Belfast **Irish News** reported: 'The din of the city was terrific as the cheering singing masses thronged the city centre. All the ships in the port kept sounding their horns while church bells pealed across the city'. Soldiers – British and members of the Belgian Army,

based locally – were carried shoulder-high by the jubilant crowd. Bleary-eyed youngsters came out with tin cans and beat their way around the lighted streets to the tune of 'Roll Out the Barrel' while other favourite numbers were 'Tipperary' (recalling the dark days of the Great War) and 'When Irish Eyes are Smiling'.

For most people in Northern Ireland the Japanese surrender marked the definitive end of almost six years of fear, trauma and loss. However, while the Belfast Blitz and the direct involvement of many local volunteers had brought the conflict in Europe home to people, the War in the Pacific was seen as much more remote.

In the wake of the Beveridge Report (1942), the people who celebrated on the streets of Armagh, Portadown and Belfast on that historic weekend dared to dream of a brave, new world. Within three years their lives would be transformed by the arrival of the new Welfare State, the National Health Service and free, universal education. Things would never be the same again.

THE ROAD TO WAR IN THE PACIFIC



Sister Irene Wright of Portadown was lost when the Japanese torpedoed the HMS Kuala off Singapore on 13 February 1942. The picture show the fate of the US warship, USS Lexington during a similar attack by the Japanese in May 1942. Ordered to 'abandon ship', the troops can be seen diving into the warm waters of the Pacific Ocean to be rescued by nearby cruisers.

A formidable naval power in the Pacific, Japan's road to war had begun in 1931. In that year, Japan invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria. When the League of Nations branded her action as aggression, Japan left the League. Under an extreme Nationalist faction led by General Tojo, the Far Eastern power embarked on an aggressive expansionist policy in the region.

As War Minister, Tojo built up Japan's armed forces and advocated closer collaboration with Germany and Italy .By 1937 Japan's position was further strengthened by the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact with Hitler and Mussolini. This agreement, by aligning Japan with the Axis powers confronted Britain with the simultaneous hostility of Italy in the Mediterranean and Japan in the Far East.

It was Tojo who gave the order for the devastating surprise attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7 1941. Totally unprepared, the US Fleet lost five battleships and 177 aircraft and the Japanese. What this 'act of infamy' brought America into the war, it gave Japan military and naval supremacy in the Pacific.

Following Pearl Harbor, the Japanese swept through the Philippines, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Hong Kong surrendered on Christmas Day and Manila (capital of the Philippines) fell a week later. February 1942 saw the fall of Singapore. The surrender of the largest British-led force to lay down its arms was the most humiliating military defeat in British history. When the Japanese invaded Malaya in December 1941 the British were unprepared. They had no tanks or anti-aircraft guns whereas the Japanese, led by General Yamashita, had both tanks and air and sea superiority.

Yamashita quickly conquered Malaya, forcing the British under General Arthur Percival to retreat from the mainland to Singapore. After an intensive air bombardment, Percival surrendered unconditionally on 15 February. As a result, 80,000 British, Australian and Indian troops were captured by a Japanese force of 30,000 men. Allied losses in the whole campaign were 140,000.

LOCAL CASUALTIES IN THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC

Several natives of the Borough paid the supreme sacrifice in the fighting surrounding the Fall of Singapore its aftermath as the Japanese advanced. Especially poignant was the death of Sister Irene Wright. A native of Portadown, where her father, Ernest owned a bakery, Irene studied at Portadown Technical School where she was a noted hockey player.

Training as a nurse, she was posted to the Far East as a member of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. She was lost at sea when the ship to which she was attached, the **HMS Kuala**, an anti-submarine vessel, was sunk of Pompong Island, 90 miles south of Singapore on February 13 1942.

The **Kuala** had sailed from Singapore, following the Japanese invasion, and was carrying some 500 evacuees -men, women, children and a large number of nurses. The ship had been at anchor when she was attacked by Japanese bombers. A dive-bomber scored a direct hit on the ship which immediately burst into flames. The women survivors were placed on rafts in the calm sea but when they were struggling between the sinking ship and the rocks, Japanese war planes deliberately bombed the struggling women. Many were killed. Nurse Wright's body was never recovered.

At least two men from the Borough fell in the final Allied thrust to liberate Burma and Singapore. Fusilier William Wallace was a 28-year old member of the 1st Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers from Lurgan. He died at Rangoon in Burma on 3 April 1943. Another

Lurgan volunteer, Private Patrick Murray joined the 2nd Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He was killed at Singapore, aged 27 on 21 September 1944.

THE TIDE OF WAR TURNS AGAINST JAPAN 1944-45

The Japanese run of victories was not halted until the summer of 1942 when the US Navy greatly weakened the Emperor's fleet at the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway.

By October 1944, as the Allies advanced across Europe, American forces liberated the Philippines. However, Japan still held Burma and most of China and attacked Imphal, the main British base on the Indo-Burmese border in the hope of triggering an Indian uprising against British rule. But the Japanese suffered an overwhelming defeat at the hands of British and Indian troops, led by Lord Louis Mountbatten who went on to reconquer most of Burma by the end of the war.

The costly war in the Pacific was approaching its close at last. In March 1945, as the tide turned decisively against the Nazis in Europe, the Americans took the tiny island of Iwo Jima, only 750 miles from Tokyo and began an intensive bombing campaign against Japanese cities. In June they took nearby Okinawa. But these two battles had cost between them 60,000 US casualties as the Japanese soldiers fought until they were all dead. At the same time, at sea suicide pilots crashed their bomb-laden cargoes into Allied ships.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff calculated that it would cost another million British and American casualties and a further 18 months of savage fighting before Japan could be successfully invaded. It was a horrifying prospect.

THE WARTIME CAREER OF ABLE SEAMAN JAMES MAGENNIS, VC:

Able Seaman James Magennis from West Belfast who was awarded Northern Ireland's only VC for valour in planting limpet mines on a Japanese cruiser in the last days of the war.

Two Northern Ireland men were honoured for their valour in the War against Japan.

Able Seaman James Joseph Magennis (1919-86) was born in 1919 in Majorca Street in West Belfast, the son of William Magennis, a packer in a local mill. His early years were marked by extreme hardship and in 1935, aged just 16, James joined the Royal Navy as a boy sailor. On the outbreak of war in 1939 he was transferred to the destroyer, **HMS Candahar** and was engaged in action against German E-boats in Mediterranean.

In March 1943 Magennis volunteered for special service in midget submarines and trained as a frogman. In April 1945 the Belfast man was transferred to the Pacific with a Submarine Flotilla which operated the XE-type midget submarine. On 31 May 1945 it was decided that they should attack two Japanese heavy cruisers, **Takao** and **Miyoka** which were anchored in the Johore Straits off Singapore. Magennis was to sail in the XE3 under the command of Lieutenant Ian Fraser and towed by **HM Submarine Stygian**. As the diver, it was Magennis's job to leave the midget craft and attach mines to the hull of **Takao**.

Having left the cover of the submarine, the XE3 negotiated a dangerous passage of over 40 miles, avoiding minefields and surface vessels and finally reaching **Takao.** As Magennis tried to leave XE3 to place the mines he found that the hatch would only open a quarter of the normal distance. However, he managed to escape by deflating his breathing apparatus and wriggling though the narrow gap. His problems did not end there, however, for he had had to scrape the barnacled hull with a knife in order to make the mines stick.

Although physically exhausted and lacking oxygen, Magennis persevered. Finally, the frogman had to return to the depths as the starboard charge would not release. Eventually the midget submarine made good its escape. The charges later exploded, crippling the Japanese cruiser.

For his courage and devotion to duty James Magennis was awarded the Victoria Cross. He was the only Northern Ireland-born recipient of the award in World War II.

PROFESSOR FRANK PANTRIDGE, MC, CBE:

Co Down-born Professor Frank Pantridge (1916-2004), the cardiologist and inventor of the Portable Defibrillator, served as a doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps in Malaya during World War 2. Awarded the Military Cross for his 'inspiring example' during the Siege of Singapore (1942), he spent most of his captivity as a slave labourer on the infamous Burmese 'Railway of Death'.

Another local man decorated for his role in the Pacific War was to make a massive contribution to medicine in post-war Northern Ireland. He was Professor Frank Pantridge, MC, CBE who made his name as a leading cardiologist and the inventor of the portable defibrillator. He is remembered today as 'The Father of Emergency Medicine',

Frank Pantridge was born into a farming family in Hillsborough, Co Down in 1916. He was educated at Friends' School, Lisburn and Queen's University, Belfast where he graduated in medicine on the eve of the war. Pantridge was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Royal Army Medical Corps and posted to the Far East. He was awarded the Military Cross during the Fall of Singapore in 1942. The citation stated that he 'worked unceasingly under the most adverse conditions of continuous bombing and was an inspiring example to all...'

Captured by the Japanese, he spent much of his captivity as a slave labourer on the notorious 'Railway of Death' in Burma. When he was freed in 1945, the young doctor was emaciated and had developed a serious heart condition as a result of his ill-treatment. He would suffer poor health for the rest of his life.

The so-called Japanese 'Railway of Death' in Burma , constructed during 1942-44 by 'slave labour'. Professor Frank Pantridge from Hillsborough was one of the thousands of Allied POWs forced to work on this gruelling project.

After further study in the United States after the war, Pantridge was appointed as cardiac consultant at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. In 1957 he introduced the modern system of Cardio-pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) for the early treatment of heart attacks. He went on to develop the portable defibrillator. He died in 2004 and is commemorated by a statue at the Island Centre in Lisburn.

SIR JOHN DILL, DSO, CMG: ARCHITECT OF ANGLO- AMERICAN MILITARY CO-OPERATION:

Sir John Greer Dill (1881-1944), was one of the most eminent soldiers from N Ireland during the Second World War. Born in Lurgan, he served as Chief of the Imperial General Staff before heading the British joint staff mission in Washington. President Roosevelt paid tribute to him as the architect of Anglo-American military co-operation. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery where his monument portrays him on horseback.

Sir John Dill (1881-1944) was one of the most eminent military figures during the Second World War to come from Northern Ireland and has a special link with the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon area.

Born in Lurgan in 1881, Dill embarked on career as a professional soldier. Educated at the Royal Military College in Sandhurst, he served in both the South African War (1899-1902) and the Great War where he was awarded the DSO and CMG. During the Second World War, the Lurgan man served briefly as Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) before going to Washington as head of the Joint British Staff Mission. There he played a key role in promoting Anglo-American military co-operation after Pearl Harbor and attended the wartime conferences at Casablanca, Quebec and Teheran.

In 1944 Sir John's health broke down and he died in Washington. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia. President Roosevelt paid tribute to him as a great soldier and friend and 'the most important figure in the remarkable accord…in the combined operations of our two countries.'

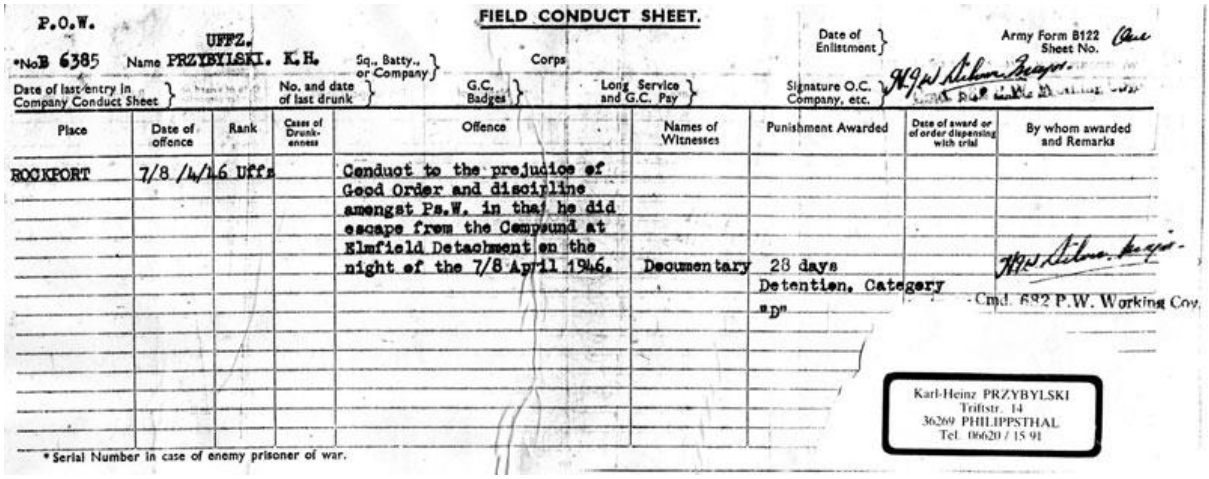
PEACE FOLLOWS THE DROPPING OF THE ATOM BOMB

By May 1945 Germany had surrendered following Hitler's suicide. The British and United States governments made it clear to the Japanese that they wanted an unconditional surrender. In particular, Attlee – the British PM – insisted that she should surrender immediately or face 'prompt and utter destruction'. Two days later, on 28 July 1945, the Japanese government publicly rejected the Allied ultimatum. The Japanese war lords calculated that the Allies would choose a negotiated settlement over the prospect of further catastrophic losses.

By this time, however, the Americans had successfully developed the atomic bomb. On 6 August 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped from a US Airforce plane on the town of Hiroshima, killing about 100,000 people. The Japanese government still could not agree to accept defeat. On the following day a second atomic bomb was dropped on the port of Nagasaki, killing at least 40,000.

As the Tokyo regime dithered, Emperor Hirohito-regarded as a god-like figure by his own people- intervened decisively on the side of surrendering and 'enduring the unendurable'. For the first time in its history Japan had been defeated in war.

The Second World War was over. It had cost 50 million lives, including 500,000 – both armed forces and civilians – from the United Kingdom. It had also witnessed the use of a horrific new weapon – the Atomic Bomb – which would now threaten world peace.



P.O.W. FIELD CONDUCT SHEET.

*No B 6385 Name UFFZ. PRZYBYLSKI. K.H. Sq., Batty., or Company Corps Date of Enlistment Army Form B122 Sheet No.

Date of last entry in Company Conduct Sheet No. and date of last drunk G.C. Badges Long Service and G.C. Pay Signature O.C. Company, etc.

Place	Date of offence	Rank	Cases of Drunkenness	Offence	Names of Witnesses	Punishment Awarded	Date of award or of order dispensing with trial	By whom awarded and Remarks
ROCKPORT	7/8/4/46 Uffz			Conduct to the prejudice of Good Order and disciplne amongst Ps.W. in that he did escape from the Compound at Elmfield Detachment on the night of the 7/8 April 1946.	Documentary	28 days Detention, Category "D"		Cmd. 692 P.W. Working Coy.

Karl-Heinz PRZYBYLSKI
Triftstr. 14
36269 PHILIPPSTHAL
Tel. 06620 / 15 91

* Serial Number in case of enemy prisoner of war.

Elmfield Castle near Gilford served as a German POW camp from 1944. Among the POWs was the future Manchester City goal-keeper, Bert Trautman. This report records a punishment for one of the prisoners there. The camp closed in 1946.

A poster for the Ulster Home Guard (1939-44). Based on the B Special Constabulary, it was trained to resist an airborne German invasion.

Many American troops were stationed at Brownlow House and other locations in the Borough before the D Day landings. This picture shows GIs enjoying a Céili in a local hall.

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Armagh City Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council

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