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THE PRIME MINISTER

15 August 2020

Dear Veterans of the Far East Campaign,

At the end of any conflict, those who are last to come home deserve particular recognition. When your compatriots celebrated Victory in Europe on 8 May 1945, you were still in action against Japan, deployed thousands of miles away in the rainforests of Burma, the islands of the Pacific and the mountains of Borneo. Across a vast region, you fought on until the final day of the Second World War exactly 75 years ago.

When at last you returned, you sometimes found that your experiences had been overshadowed in popular imagination by the conflict in Europe. So in offering my thanks for your service, I would like to remember what you achieved.

Today the countries of South East Asia are prospering faster than almost anywhere else in the world. This transformation would never have been possible if they had stayed under the occupation of Japan, imposed through the defeat of British and Commonwealth forces in Malaysia, Singapore and Burma.

These blows were so heavy that many feared they would break your will to fight on. But you survived the longest retreat in British history, marching almost 1,000 miles from Burma to India, and then you regrouped and reformed.

Britain painstakingly assembled nearly a million soldiers in the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, the largest multi-national formation we have ever deployed. Most of its troops were Indian, and nearly 100,000 were African, including volunteers from Nigeria, Kenya and Sierra Leone.

This formidable force proceeded to turn defeat into victory. At Kohima in 1944, British and Indian soldiers, outnumbered ten to one, halted Japan's invasion of India and achieved one of the greatest feats of arms in military history. Momentous victories at Imphal and Arakan opened the way for the liberation of South East Asia.

You accomplished these advances through ingenuity and daring, mastering jungle warfare, overcoming malaria and solving the supposedly intractable problem of how to fight during the monsoon. General William Slim, the Commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, wrote that he asked his soldiers “for the impossible – and got it”.

Meanwhile, the firepower of the British Pacific Fleet aided the capture of Japanese islands and the RAF supplied entire divisions from the air, delivering the fuel and ammunition for each offensive.

You know better than me the fearful cost: 50,000 British and Commonwealth citizens laid down their lives in the war against Japan. Of these, nearly half died in brutal prison camps.

Yet this immeasurable sacrifice helped to change the course of history and lay the foundations of the success of South East Asia. You were the last to come home but your achievements are written in the lights of the glittering capitals of the dynamic region we see today. You fought for freedom, brought the Second World War to its end, and restored peace and prosperity to the world.

All of us who were born after you have benefited from your courage in adversity. On this anniversary – and every day hereafter – you will be remembered.

*Yours sincerely  
Barry*