

8. VICTORY AND PEACE

While 339 was busy in Mindanao waters, Germany surrendered unconditionally on May 7th. Navy ships in the Atlantic and in Europe were therefore available for duty in the Pacific. Huge numbers of troops would be similarly available. By any reasonable calculation, Japan should have also surrendered then. US submarines and air-launched mines were strangling its economy, which lacked natural resources. B-29 bombers were causing havoc and terrible casualties with incendiary and high explosive bombs. The Japanese fleet was a shadow of its former self. But the Japanese home army was huge, undefeated, and defiant. The battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa had demonstrated the tenacity and fatalism still strong in their army. The civilian population could be expected to resist mightily as well. More than 10,000 planes were dispersed in reserve to use as kamikazes in opposition to invasion, compared to 1,500 used at Okinawa. While their pilots had limited training since fuel was scarce, the flight distance to the invasion ships would be short, so there would be less chance for US planes to shoot them down. Japan's leaders knew they couldn't win the war, but hoped to inflict enough American casualties that they could get an armistice on favorable terms, that would keep their government in place and the home islands unoccupied. This was unacceptable to the Allies, who intended to occupy and bring those who committed war crimes to justice, and to start a different form of government, democracy, in the hopes of eliminating Japan as a future source of world war.



Celebration of war's end on a US cruiser

The American commanders expected a very bloody series of invasions, planned to start on the island of Kyushu in November, 1945, after the main typhoon season. It was called Operation Olympic, to be followed by Operation Coronet, the invasion of Honshu island, near Tokyo, in the spring of 1946. Minesweeping would be especially deadly in the Japan invasions. Not only were there many sensitive Allied mines to neutralize, but the Japanese had decided to concentrate their huge number of kamikazes on the ships nearest the beaches.

As an indication of what was expected in the invasions, nearly 500,000 Purple Heart medals were manufactured to be available to be awarded for the US killed and wounded. As of the end of 2005, all the American military casualties of the subsequent 60 years, covering the Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq Wars, have not exhausted that stockpile.

Such was the intransigence of the Japanese leadership that it was thought that even the atomic bomb might not bring about surrender. However, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the entrance of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan, led finally to surrender on August 15, 1945. The only Allied concession was that the Japanese Emperor was allowed to stay in a ceremonial position, even though he had been involved in the decisions to start and prosecute the war.

YMS 339 had gone from Borneo to Morotai, arriving on July 19th. On the 25th, the ship got underway with other minesweepers going to Seeadler Harbor, with a stop en route at Hollandia Bay, New Guinea, for refueling. The port engine broke down one day during this journey but was repaired by the crew. They arrived on August 2nd. That is where they were when they learned of the atom bomb and of war's end on August 15th. The actual surrender ceremony would take place on September 2nd, in Tokyo Bay, but all offensive operations were suspended in mid-August. The deck log makes no mention of the news. The Navy prohibited diaries during the war, with the worry that they could give useful information to the enemy if found after a ship was sunk. [Quartermaster Hartford Holden may have avoided this rule by mailing pages home periodically, although that subjected the pages to censors. Harper Gruber said that the rule wasn't strictly enforced. In any case, Hartford's diary ended July 14th]. Thus there is no written record of how the news was received and how 339's crew celebrated. They would likely have been part of the landings in Japan, so a huge weight had been lifted.

Diaries were allowed in the Civil War, and there is a notable example of the sentiment at war's end from the diary of Sergeant R. C. Bull of the 123rd regiment of New York volunteers. In spring 1865, they were marching with Sherman's army through the Carolinas, on the

way to join with Grant's army in Virginia—to do battle with Lee's Confederate army in what was expected to be the war's final bloody battle. These young upstate New Yorkers were hardened veterans, whose battles included Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. After breakfast on April 12, 1865, they were called to formation and a colonel, sitting on his horse, read the news of Lee's surrender. Sergeant Bull, in his published diary "Soldiering" related: "It would be impossible for me to describe the scene that followed. The men went wild, ranks were broken, and shouting and crying, the men in their joy hugged and kissed each other. Never have I witnesses such happiness. The news seemed too good to be true."



Famous Life photo taken in Times Square on day the war against Japan ended.

Sixteen million Americans served on active military duty in WWII, out of a population less than one half of today's. 407,000 died in service, over 70% of these killed in action. Maurice would certainly have said that those dead were the true heroes. They sacrificed their futures. The losses averaged over 6,600 US dead per month for the whole war. (The Civil War was even more terrible, with average 10,000 dead per month for fours years in a population less than 15% of today's). As sobering as these US casualty figures are, the WWII numbers for the Soviet Union and for the overrun and defeated nations were higher including millions of civilians. In all, on both sides, an estimated total of 30 to 50 million people died.



In September 1945, YMS 339 went into a floating dry-dock (AFD 27) for maintenance, in Seadler Harbor. That month, on the 16th, a typhoon near Okinawa sank a number of vessels, including four YMS's. There was tragic high loss of life, the month of the war's end.

Maurice told a of a YMS that went into an uninhabited island atoll with a typhoon coming on. Once lines were tied to trees in every direction, the captain ordered the crew to nearby high ground. This was a serious violation of Navy regulations. Ships are ordered to sea in bad storms, where less damage normally occurs compared to staying in a port; assuming that the storm is survivable, which is usually true. So this captain would have been court-martialed for his decision not to stay at sea had his ship been damaged or sunk where it was tied up. Yet staying at sea could have meant the loss of both ship and crew—another "Catch 22". A review of all the Pacific typhoon tracks in 1944 and 1945 shows none near the locations of 339, so this story was not about Maurice's ship. Nor is there any known record of it happening to another YMS, although that skipper would have asked his crew to keep it secret.

Seven more YMS's were wrecked or sunk in a worse typhoon that also hit Okinawa on October 11, 1945. But the storm was unpredicted and the ships were not able to leave port, Bruckner Bay, in time once it did hit. The ships that were lost were mostly grounded and not worth salvaging as the war was over. Thankfully there was only limited loss of life. These ship losses, unlike the ones in September, were not counted as war losses.



Of the 411 YMS's put in service in the Navy in WWII, 271 received at least one battle star. 25 YMS's were lost, or 9% of the number that had seen battle. Some other kinds of Navy ships had higher loss rates, submarines for example, while others had lower rates. At the least, the crews of the wooden "yard birds" had done their part.

In the 1950's, a senior officer asked Maurice if he would write an official detailed history of Navy minesweeper operations during the war. He agreed with one condition: that he could include the bad decisions and mistakes along with the successes and glory, in other words the full story. The senior officer decided not to pursue it, and no such book, with or without this condition, was ever written by anyone.

In October, 339 motored with other YMS's back to Morotai, then back to Samar Island in the Philippines, arriving October 22nd. Thus they approximately followed the route they had taken one year earlier. This time the world was at peace, and the tropical ocean could be appreciated. Maurice came home with a love of the sea.



YMS 424 grounded and wrecked at Okinawa in October 1945 during a typhoon.

Harper Gruber recalls an incident in port around this time. The crew was given extra beer and cases of apple juice after the war ended. Although he didn't drink, most of the crew did and they wanted something stronger than apple juice. They mixed in raisins and other fruit in one of the ship's water distilling units (that normally produce fresh water from sea water). The resulting "apple jack" led to a hung-over crew, and some broken glasses that had been secretly borrowed from the officers' wardroom. A disciplinary "Captain's Mast" was held, as called for by Navy Regulations. Coxswain Benny Schneider confessed that he took the glasses because it didn't seem right to drink from coffee mugs. Harper recalls that the skipper appreciated a good drink himself in port. The participants all came out laughing from the hearing, and nothing else came of the matter.

On October 27th, while operating off Samar, 339 ran hard aground again, this time "on an uncharted reef." It was pulled off by two LCM's after only two and a half hours with no damage.



Maurice in Lt (jg) uniform.

In November, 339 motored to Luzon Island, and later in the month to Leyte Island, and did minesweeping nearby both. The Navy still had to worry about any remaining mines, especially those in Japanese home waters. Minesweepers that swept there in late 1945 and in 1946, which did not include 339, received the only battle stars awarded to ships after cessation of hostilities. Lt(jg) John Jennings (whose picture is on page 18) had also been promoted to skipper and his minesweeper did this work after war's end.

On November 30th, YMS 339 anchored near Manicani Island, Guiuan Bay, in eastern Samar. There was a wartime Naval base there. Here Maurice was officially relieved as captain, was detached from the ship, and began his long journey back home. He most probably did not care that it was a Friday.

There was an elaborate system of "points" to determine the order in which the millions of military people would be sent home. It included consideration of items where Maurice scored high, such as time spent overseas since last trip home, the combat seen, and personal considerations such as illness of direct family members—his mother Delia had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. These points were offset by what was called "the needs of the service"—in his case, the post-war need for minesweepers to clear mines. Nevertheless, his net score was high and he got orders to go home.

About his trip home, we only know that he made his way to a fleet carrier somewhere in the Philippines, a big change from a YMS, that was full of the homeward-bound. It steamed at high speed across the Pacific to San Francisco. Maurice celebrated his 32nd birthday at sea. He wrote a letter to his mother while on the carrier that said in part: "It feels great to be coming home. I had no chance to write before leaving my ship and coming aboard this one (quite a difference).....we are jammed aboard here and we heard that 20,000 arrive daily in San Francisco and I suppose just as many arrive in other West Coast ports....I am coming back and definitely will be in the country by Thursday [December 20th]. From there it is only 3,000 miles and most of the trip is over now....Your loving son, Maurice." He very likely arrived home before this letter.

Another of Maurice's nephews, my brother Bill, recalls from age eight Maurice coming home with a dark tan and wearing short Navy uniform pants—both unheard of in mid-winter Milford, in the days long before cruise ship vacations.