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# FIFTY-FIVE MINUTES WITH MOUNTBATTEN

**A**DMIRAL LORD LOUIS  
MOUNTBATTEN, as  
everybody knows, was in  
Wellington last week, with Lady  
Mountbatten. It was an occasion  
for another of those press confer-  
ences, and so we went along too. We  
found a handful of journalists standing  
round waiting for the electric clock to  
show 4.0 p.m., and we joined that  
fidgety throng. A very charming young  
major, who had exactly the right way  
with reporters, was going round making  
us feel at ease and offering everyone  
cyclostyled "material" and photographs.  
And then in a moment—it was right on  
4.0 p.m., or felt like it—the Supreme  
Allied Commander in South-east Asia  
walked into the room.

### Roll Call

He faced a quiet, diffident little  
bunch of men and women. An  
officer introduced him to one of us and  
then he took his right hand round the  
room, and we all shook it and said our  
names, and the names of our papers.

Then he sat down and said, "Just  
draw up as close as you like." So we  
settled down and Lord Louis began to  
tell us that he had intended to speak  
off the record at the State luncheon and  
then talk on the record for us, but he  
had gone and spoken on the record at  
the luncheon . . .

At this point, the glass doors, which  
had a pair of discreet blinds supplied  
by the hotel management, opened a  
second time, and Lady Mountbatten  
came in. When we had settled down  
again, Lord Louis resumed: "I was say-  
ing, Ethel, when you came in, that I  
was to have talked on the record now,  
and off the record at the luncheon, but  
now the position is reversed . . ."

This had just got going when the door  
opened once more and a contingent of  
women reporters, who had evidently  
been waiting in the wrong place, began  
to pour in. So we all made some sort of  
compromise between the demands of  
courtesy and our own anxiety to get on  
with the business, and before long  
everyone had a seat of some sort.

After a pause, one who was bolder  
than the rest said: "Er, sir, would you  
discuss Singapore?"

Lord Louis felt there wouldn't be any  
point in that.

"I don't want to really; it's all in the  
melting pot—you might call it *sub*  
*judice*, because the conference of Em-  
pire premiers will be discussing the  
question. Anything I might say would  
be, well, mis-timed."

"Premature," nodded the reporter. And  
there was another silence. Lady Mount-  
batten smiled and said, "They can't  
think of any questions." So here we had  
an accession of boldness. We had a  
question:

"A landlubber's question—what is a  
station-keeper?" Lord Louis laughed. He  
smacked his left fist with his right hand.

### Too Technical

"It's not simple, and you won't want  
to take it down. When two ships are to-  
gether, one is the guide, and the other

has to keep station. That's all right  
when there are just two, but when you're  
the ninth of nine ships it's not so easy,  
and I have been the 26th of 27 ships,  
going hard-astern, then full speed ahead,  
and so on. My station-keeper is simply  
a device that . . ."

And at this point we took refuge in our  
conviction that no one else understood  
the answer any better than we did. But  
we should explain that the Mountbatten  
station-keeper for destroyers is one of  
quite a number of instruments and gad-  
gets Lord Louis has produced during his  
service career. He perfected it just be-  
fore this war.

Then someone asked for something  
about India:

"Well now, if I were a politician, I  
should welcome your question—I should  
make a brilliant broadcast, and it  
would come true, and I should get  
in at the next election. But I'm a  
military commander, and I'm not sup-  
posed to know anything about these  
things, you see. There again, it's *sub*  
*judice*, isn't it? The Cabinet mission is  
sitting in Delhi to-day considering it  
all . . ."

### Off the Record

"But of course if you want to know  
anything about India off the record, I'll  
say anything you like. I understand that  
if I say a thing is off the record that's  
observed here—isn't that so?"

He looked round the room and there  
was an earnest chorus of "Absolutely"  
and "Why, certainly."

"Ask me the most indiscreet questions  
and see what I'll say!" he went on. But  
no one asked any indiscreet questions.  
There was another pause. Lord Louis  
was quite at his ease, one leg up across  
the other knee, his fingers tapping on the  
knee. Lady Mountbatten just smiled  
now and again at one of the women.

A voice from over Lord Louis' shoul-  
der spoke up:

"Can you tell me, sir, what was the  
most outstanding lesson learned at  
Singapore?"

He found this such an easy one that  
he went far too fast for us, and we left  
it to the dailies.

### In the Line of Fire

It was round about this time that we  
began to be conscious of the presence  
of a photographer about 18 inches from  
our left ear. He had a leather case on a  
bookshelf, and he was plunging his hand  
into a mess of crisp and noisy wrap-  
pings, like someone at a concert with a  
bag of sweets. At last he got it out—  
another flash-bulb—and screwed it into  
his lamp. Then he asked us to keep our  
pads down. He had his camera on the  
shelf, aimed at Lady Mountbatten, about  
eight feet away. So we promised to try  
and remember to keep our pads low  
down.

The questions and answers went on:  
"Has the British effort in Burma re-  
ceived full credit?" someone asked.

Lord Louis thought not. But the editor  
of his SEAC newspaper was writing a  
pamphlet that would come out in July  
or so and that would be the first auth-  
oritative thing of its kind.



LORD LOUIS MOUNTBATTEN

"Can I say a word on that?"

Everyone looked up. Lady Mountbat-  
ten had joined the discussion for the  
first time.

"I think it is being recognised now in  
Britain," she said. "People have been  
going back to Britain and making it  
known—General Slim, my husband's  
general in Burma, for instance—and  
there's a film called *Burma Victory*"  
which I hope you'll see in New Zealand,  
because it's a very fine picture."

### Suspense

Some allowance must be made for any  
shortcomings in our notes from here on.  
It was that flash-bulb. When was it go-  
ing to go off? We feared to look round  
in case it went off just then. So we went  
on taking notes and hoping it would  
be soon.

To the question about the value of  
Burma in the Grand Strategy, Lord  
Louis brought a tentative answer—the  
number of enemy killed, for the whole  
campaign:

"Now don't quote me harum scarum,  
*please*, or we shall all look ridiculous,"  
he said. "But here's just a fruitful  
source of inquiry for you that may prove  
something: find out the number of  
Japanese killed in the whole campaign  
and compare it with the number killed  
in any other campaign in the war."

Lord Louis at no stage called the Jap-  
anese "Japs." Nor did his wife, who  
joined in again at this point:

"In September," she said, "when we  
were in there recovering Allied prisoners  
of war, I found that the Japanese who  
spoke English didn't link the defeat of  
Japan with the atom bomb at all, but  
with their defeat in Burma. I think that  
says something for the importance of  
the Burma campaign."

There followed some talk of prestige,  
and the British Army's relations with  
the people of Burma. Lord Louis said it  
depended on behaviour and right-mind-  
edness.

"And food," said Lady Mountbatten.  
And all the pencils of the female re-  
porters sprang into life again. A feeling  
that this was partly their show suddenly  
overcame the women's contingent, and  
they began to put Women's Angle ques-  
tions to Lady Mountbatten: "How had  
the children of Britain come through the  
war?" "How about daytime nurseries?"  
and so on.

Then came questions about the Red  
Cross, and St. John Ambulance, for Lady  
Mountbatten to answer. Our pads re-  
minds us that she emphasised her