

Adapted From **THE Valour AND THE Horror**



The Canadian prisoners of war released by Japan in 1945 were mostly skin and bones, but very happy to have lived through their ordeal.

It was August of 1945. Japan had just surrendered, ending the war in the Pacific. One job of the USS Wisconsin was to pick up a group of Canadian prisoners of war who were being released from the work camp at Niigata Japan.

The hollowed-eyed, jaundiced men that came aboard had barely enough flesh to hold their bones together. Among them were Bob Manchester, John Stroud, and Bob Clayton. At six feet, one inch, Bob Manchester weighed only 105 pounds. At five feet, eleven inches, John Stroud was reduced to 79 pounds. Bob Clayton was 5 feet, five inches tall and 95 pounds. Armand Bourbonnière was down from 200 pounds to 117. They

were four of the survivors of the 1,975 Canadian soldiers sent to fight in Hong Kong. This is their story.

Canada Responds

By 1941 the Pacific theatre of war was about to take a turn for the worst. The allies were to experience the full brunt of the Imperial Japanese army. One especially vulnerable spot was the British Crown colony of Hong Kong.

The British government made a request of its independent Canadian ally: would Canada consider sending one or two battalions to bolster the garrison currently in Hong Kong? The British reassured the Canadians that the men would not

be in great danger. Their only responsibility would be maintaining a garrison, a visible presence, in the face of the Japanese [Imperial forces], who were at war with neighbouring China. Even if the Japanese [forces] attacked, said the British general commanding Hong Kong, the enemy was merely 5,000 strong. He stated that the Japanese troops were ill-equipped and unaccustomed to night fighting; they had little artillery support; their aircraft were mostly obsolete; and their pilots were "mediocre, unable to do dive-bombing because of poor eyesight."

The Canadian defence staff did not ask for an independent

assessment of the situation in Hong Kong. They urged Prime Minister Mackenzie King to send the soldiers, and the decision was made. In the eyes of the Canadian government, they would now have the opportunity to take an active role in the war. If the Japanese [Imperial forces] decided to attack, Canadian soldiers would be there and ready for action.

The British request was met with about 2,000 troops from the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles. These were young, untrained men who had recently been designated "not recommended for operational consideration." Along with the others, Bob Manchester, John Stroud and Armand Bourbonnière were sealed aboard transcontinental trains, sent to Vancouver, and shipped out to Hong Kong. The man chosen to lead the Canadians was Colonel John Lawson — the man who had designated them as unfit for combat.

The Reality

Although Canadian military intelligence came exclusively from the British, who were selective in what they shared, in retrospect it is difficult to comprehend that the Canadian government did not know Japan was close to invading Hong Kong and that the situation would be very difficult when that happened.

In a memo by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on January 7, 1941, he concluded that the tiny Asian outpost of Hong Kong was indefensible and should not be reinforced. "If Japan goes to war with us, there is not the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong or relieving it. It is most unwise to increase the

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loss of life we shall suffer there." Churchill wrote this 10 months before the Canadians were shipped out. "Instead of increasing the garrison, it ought to be reduced to a symbolic scale ... Japan will think long before declaring war on the British Empire, and whether there are two or six battalions in Hong Kong will make no difference to her choice. I wish we had fewer troops there."

And the enemy was hardly the incompetent few depicted by the British command. They were in fact seasoned victors of the Sino-Japanese war: determined, dedicated, and disciplined soldiers. Within three weeks Japanese soldiers would overwhelm the garrison and claim the island of Hong Kong for their own.

Japan Attacks

The Japanese high command chose Sunday, December 7, 1941, to order its troops into action across the Pacific. Despite the earlier British estimation of 5,000 troops, there were at least 50,000 troops amassing along the border of Hong Kong. Superior weapons and training gave them confidence; the Emperor

Hirohito was their cause. Hirohito had pledged to bring "peace" to the Far East, and these troops were there to enforce it.

On December 11, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the British commander of Hong Kong ordered the Chinese mainland (Kowloon and New Territories of Hong Kong) evacuated in the face of the attack by Japanese imperial forces. Without mental or technical preparation, the two Canadian battalions designated unfit for combat were suddenly pitted against the Japanese forces at the peak of its power. The Commonwealth troops, along with hundreds of thousands of Chinese, desperately tried to find passage to Hong Kong Island. Most of them made it to the island; however a few like John Gray did not. Tied to a lamppost at the Star Ferry Wharf in Kowloon and shot dead at 21, he became a footnote in history: the first Canadian soldier to be killed in the first wave of the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong.

Beginning December 12, 1941, the Japanese imperial forces began a week-long series of flying raids over the island of Hong Kong. Having demonstrated their military superiority, the Japanese dispatched a peace mission to the island, demanding that the British and their Commonwealth army surrender or be annihilated. Within 15 minutes, the ultimatum received a one-word reply: "No!" The Japanese met the Commonwealth defiance with a ferocious artillery barrage. For the next five days, the Japanese forces hit the island with everything they had, softening it up for the coming amphibious assault. The British reorganized their defences.



The Fall

On December 18, 1941, 3,500 Japanese soldiers swarmed onto the island. A second assault force of 4,000 men followed at midnight. Within hours of landing, the Japanese forces had taken control of the bluff on the island's northeast coast. Grenadiers, including the 100 men in Bob Manchester's D Company, had been sent to Wong Nei Chong Gap. This remained the only way through the center of the island. To control Hong Kong, the Japanese would have to take the pass.

Two Japanese infantry regiments, about 2,000 men, were assigned to the task. Facing them were 100 Canadian Grenadiers. The Japanese

outnumbered their defenders 20 to one but were taking four times the casualties. The Canadians hung on until they ran out of ammunition. Lawson led the last desperate stand of the Canadians at Wong Nei Chong Gap. After his death, the handful of men still alive surrendered. They had no food, no water and no ammunition. The bodies of their comrades lay bullet-ridden in the trenches.

At 3:15 p.m. on Christmas Day 1941, the British commander officially surrendered to the forces of the Emperor. The defenders, their backs to the sea, had been all but vanquished in a one-sided battle that lasted only 18 days. The corpses

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of 1,600 Commonwealth soldiers, including 303 Canadians, lay on the beaches and in the rugged mountains and valley passes of Hong Kong.

Prisoners of War

The 1,672 Canadian survivors of the Battle of Hong Kong were herded into prisoner of war camps at North Point on Hong Kong Island and at Sham Shui Po on Mainland China. They were exhausted by battle and many were wounded. They didn't know what they faced but could reasonably hope the Japanese would follow the rules for humane treatment of prisoners set out in the Geneva Convention. Three and half years of misery proved this to be a false hope.

Building the Airport

The conditions at Sham Shui Po were hard. Inside the vermin-infested huts, some slept on wood plank double bunks, others on cement floors. There was no heat. Despite the meager rations — too often, only a handful of rice — the POWs were soon pressed into the service of the Empire of the Rising Sun as slave labour — against the rules of the Geneva Convention.

"They decided that there was no sense in wasting good manpower, that these lazy buggers had better

find something to do," recalls Bob Manchester. "They decided they were going to enlarge their international airport. And so, they shipped us over there in work details at seven in the morning. And we'd stay over there until six at night."

"We chopped down bloody mountains with pick and shovel and a wheelbarrow. We had our breakfast before we went — some kind of punky rice and fish head soup or something. We'd have to take a goddamn can or anything we were able to accumulate to carry our lunch for our midday meal. An old bottle or whatever. And it was generally the rice and the soup all mixed together or seaweed. Then we'd get out there and have our lunch out there and then we'd have to come back. And we'd get the same old crap when we got back into camp."

Compelled by the threat of starvation, the prisoners began to build the runway. But they sabotaged the construction by mixing too much sand in the concrete, which would make the tarmac weak. It worked. The first Japanese aircraft to use the runway, a large fighter escort filled with dignitaries, crashed on landing. The Japanese engineer in charge of the project was decapitated. It was a small, sad victory in a long defeat.

Niigata

Bob Manchester, John Stroud, and Armond Bourbonniere were among the 500 POWs sent to a work

camp at Niigata, an industrial port 250 miles northwest of Tokyo.

"They said we would be better housed and better fed," recalls Manchester. "We wouldn't be worked as hard as when we were working on the airport runway. So we assumed, okay, this is what they're saying, this must be true. But it was a shit of a camp. Because of the type of work we had to do and the brutality of the camp staff and the weather, we lost more men than all the rest of the work camps put together."

Manchester loaded coal, while other Canadian and British prisoners worked old mines, reopened to feed the battleships and factories of the Japanese war machine. If Sham Shui Po was purgatory, this was hell. The work was dirty, dangerous, and often dragged on for 15 to 16 hours a day.

"The weather killed us more than anything," reports Manchester. "When we arrived it was late September, early October. And then the winter set in, and in the middle of November, the snow came. We had seven feet of snow. The Japanese provided us with heavy matted grass capes to help ward off the cold and dampness on our backs. But they were more of a hindrance than help, because they became thoroughly soaked and they weighed you down. The snow was so heavy that it crushed one of our shacks. That's where we lost 16 men on New Year's Eve, 1944."

There was also disease: dysentery, thyroid infections, wet beri beri, dry beri beri (hot feet), diphtheria, plague, and pneumonia. Often those suffering from hot feet would keep the men up at night with their uncomfortable moaning, so they were put in their own hut, nicknamed the "misery ward."

And always, there was hunger. Armond Bourbonniere recalls one time when they decided to try the local rats. "We asked our medical officer if we could cook some rats. He kind of laughed and said if you boil them for three or four hours, you'll boil the poison out of them. So me and my friends, we caught 22 rats. And they were big — just like cats. We stole a little wood at the foundry, a couple pieces at a time. And hid it in the camp. We asked our officer to ask the Japs if we could make a little fire, you know, at Christmas, the few days we were off. They granted us that much anyway." (Note: "Japs" is a racist term, used in the context of war.)

"So we cooked our rats. And then we took the meat, eating it and the juice, the fat. So we figure we got protein. We drink the juice — hey, vitamins. We were like a bunch of kids. So the next day we went to work, and we were sick! Every two minutes we got to go to the lavatory. We get diarrhea, you could not believe it. We never had any meat of any kind for two years. Nothing. And then drink the juice and that meat. We nearly died, the three of us. We couldn't walk. But they were good, those rats. Just like chicken."

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Release

On August 6, 1945, and again on August 9, 1945, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The tremors reached the Canadian POWs, more than 500 miles away. Emperor Hirohito surrendered, and the POWs were brought from the work camps of Niigata to American ships anchored in Tokyo Bay. Their misery as POWs was over. But now there were new battles of a different sort to fight.

The Long-Term Effects

One recent study enumerates the many chronic illnesses intensified by the prison camp experience: 30 percent of Hong Kong veterans suffer from deteriorating eyesight or blindness, 46 percent from psychological problems ranging from anxiety-caused sleep disturbance to psychosis, 50 percent from gastrointestinal illness, 50 percent from oral and dental ailments. Another study in 1965 concluded that due in large part to prolonged malnutrition and vitamin deficiency, the death rate of Hong Kong survivors is 24

percent higher than that of soldiers who fought in Europe.

Compensation and an Apology

The Hong Kong veterans have spent the decades since the war fighting for compensation for the work they did and an apology from the Japanese government. According to the Geneva Convention, Japan is required to pay POWs who they forced to work the same pay as civilians. Initially, following the war, Hong Kong Veterans got less than a penny a day from Japan for their time as captive slave labourers.

Since 1987 the War Amps organization has been arguing a claim for compensation for former Hong Kong POWs before the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations. Canada has continued to ignore this claim. Canada insists that the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty signed with Japan formally extinguished all claims. Under this treaty each prisoner received \$1 a day for the time spent in captivity. In 1958, Canada kicked in another \$.50 per day. The official government policy remains that the Canadian government "will not be seeking reimbursement for the compensation payment from the Japanese government."

In December 1998 the Canadian government awarded the Hong Kong veterans nearly \$24,000 per person. This figure was based on \$18

a day for 44 months of captivity. Although grateful for the money received, the Hong Kong veterans are frustrated that it did not come from Japan. "Canadian taxpayers don't owe us this money. Japan owes it to us," say Lionel Speller, President of the BC Branch of the Hong Kong Veterans Association.

For many veterans, receiving compensation is less important than what they feel is their right to an apology from the Japanese government for their treatment.

For the aging veterans, time is of the essence. However, a letter to a student, Danny Albietz, from Fred Mifflin, Minister of Veteran's Affairs, stated the following: "the Canadian government will not be seeking reimbursement for the compensation payment from the Japanese government" as government-to-government claims were settled by the 1952 peace treaty. Despite this official policy of the Canadian government, veterans continue to fight for compensation and an apology from the Japanese government and corporations who enslaved them — and to tell their story so that the service they and their comrades proudly and bravely gave their country will not be forgotten.

Adapted from Merrily Weisbord and Marilyn Mohr, The Valour and the Horror. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1991.