

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Canadian PoW unimpressed by Japanese apology

By James McLeod and Derek Abma, Postmedia News December 8, 2011

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Allied POWs greeting their liberators at the Omori POW camp near Tokyo, August 28, 1945.

Photograph by: Japan : The Photographs of John Swope, National Post

Japan apologized Thursday for the harsh mistreatment of Canadian prisoners of war after the disastrous Battle of Hong Kong in the Second World War.

For one Canadian who was imprisoned in Japan during the war, however, the belated apology isn't worth much.

"Apologies don't mean a thing. There's no money in apologies and you can't eat 'em," said John Ford, now a resident of St. John's, who spent 3 1/2 years in a Japanese PoW camp in Nagasaki as a forced labourer. "At my stage in the game, there's not a thing they can do for me.

"They were requested to do it years ago, and they refused point blank, they wouldn't acknowledge it," said Ford who was seven kilometres from ground zero, working on the Nagasaki dockyard when an atomic bomb levelled the city on Aug. 9, 1945. Since then, he has had four operations for skin cancer, a consequence of his exposure to the blast's radiation.

Toshiyuki Kato, Japan's parliamentary vice-minister for foreign affairs, delivered the apology in Tokyo Thursday on the 70th anniversary of Japan's invasion of Hong Kong in 1941.

Ford was with the Royal Air Force in Singapore when the invading Japanese army captured the British stronghold in February 1942.

He escaped to Sumatra and, when that country fell, escaped again to Java. There his luck ran out and he was captured in March of that year.

On Thursday, he questioned why the apology was only for prisoners who were captured in Hong Kong.

"Conditions in every prison camp were very similar, there wasn't a great lot of difference, starvation and beatings and everything like that," he said.

Another Canadian PoW agreed the apology is of little value to those who survived the camps — but it might be very important for the Japanese people.

"The apology is of little value to us," said Toronto's George MacDonell, an 89-year-old veteran who chronicled some of his experiences in his book, *One Soldier's Story*. "Almost all the Canadian veterans of (the Battle of) Hong Kong either died in the camps, on the battlefield or have died since.

"But the real good news about this is that this apology may signal that the Japanese people are finally going to admit, instead of denying, their behaviour in Southeast Asia during World War Two.

"I don't think any culture can ever be healthy if it denies whole, major parts of its existence."

After the Allied forces surrendered Hong Kong on Christmas Day 1941, the Japanese kept thousands of prisoners for the next four years. That included about 1,700 Canadians, who suffered beatings and malnutrition and were treated as slaves during their time in captivity.

Almost 300 Canadians were killed and 500 wounded in the 17 1/2 days of battle up to that point. Another 267 died in Japanese custody.

MacDonell said he suffered his share of ordeals, including one incident in which he was almost beaten to death by four Japanese guards for defending a comrade accused of stealing food (which he actually did).

However, it's not himself or other combatants MacDonell feels are most deserving of an apology, but rather the scores of civilians who were brutalized or murdered by Japanese soldiers during the war. This includes the millions of Chinese who were killed and Korean women who were captured and turned into sex slaves.

"As soldiers, we didn't really expect to be treated like Sunday school teachers," MacDonell said.

One atrocity that stands out for MacDonell happened during the final stages of the Battle of Hong Kong, when Japanese forces stormed a hospital near where he was stationed and bayoneted wounded Canadians who were being treated, killed doctors and raped and dismembered nurses.

A Canadian historian said the apology is "extremely significant" since explicit expressions of guilt for things done during the war are rare from Japan.

"It's an extremely significant event in that respect, and of course it's extremely significant to both the surviving veterans, of whom there are somewhere around 30, and to the families of those who died during the war and have died since," said Nathan Greenfield, writer of *The Damned*, a book released last year that details Canadians' involvement in the Battle of Hong Kong and their subsequent treatment in PoW camps.

Greenfield, a resident of Ottawa, said the battle marked the worst-ever outcome for the Canadian military — every military person involved was either killed, wounded, missing or captured.

The treatment these soldiers endured after that battle was also unprecedented in Canada's military history, he said.

"The word 'hellish' doesn't describe it," Greenfield said. "They were starved, they were beaten, they were turned into slave labourers."

Some of the specific things Canadian soldiers endured, Greenfield said, including one soldier having lit cigarettes shoved in his nostrils with his mouth taped shut, another being forced outside in the freezing cold without clothing and others losing up to 45 kilograms due to lack of food.

The Japanese mostly refused to provide medical treatment for PoWs suffering from injuries or sickness, Greenfield added, contributing to the hundreds of in-custody deaths of Canadians and health problems others suffered when they returned home.

Veterans Affairs Minister Steven Blaney, who accompanied a delegation of veterans to Japan for the apology, said in a statement: "This important gesture is a crucial step in ongoing reconciliation and a significant milestone in the lives of all prisoners of war. It acknowledges their suffering while honouring their sacrifices and courage."

Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird added that the apology would help in healing the "terrible pain and heavy burden of the Second World War."

With files from Robert Hiltz, Postmedia News

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Canada and its role in the 1941 defence of Hong Kong

By Jonathan Manthorpe, Vancouver Sun December 9, 2011

Hong Kong's sombre but lovely Sai Wan War Cemetery holds the graves of 283 Canadians and lies in a fold in the land below the thickly forested and precipitous hills they died defending 70 years ago against the invading Japanese.

In all, 550 of the 1,973 men of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada are buried there, over on the other side of the mountain spine of Hong Kong island at Repulse Bay where they made their last stand on Christmas Day 1941 and in other cemeteries in the territory.

But of those 550, only 290 died in battle. The rest died of starvation, disease and mistreatment in prisoner-of-war camps before Japan's surrender on Aug. 15, 1945.

It was for this awful tally that the Japanese government apologized on Thursday.

It was long overdue, but it is also a reminder that Canada's role in the battle for Hong Kong was just as much a nation-forming moment as was the Dieppe raid of August 1942, or the battles of the Somme in the First World War.

The battle 70 years ago has also forged an indelible link between Hong Kong and Canada, a link which, sadly, is per-haps better remembered in Hong Kong than it is here.

There was much criticism at the time when the Canadian government agreed to a British request to send two battalions, known as "C" Force, to bolster the British garrison of 14,000 troops in Hong Kong, of which about a third were local troops, a third Indian and a third British.

In October 1941, when Ottawa agreed to send the troops, there was no anticipation that the Japanese would attack Hong Kong. It was expected the Canadians would only be beefing up Hong Kong's coastal defences and performing guard duty.

So the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles were picked because they had experience of these duties in two British colonies; Newfoundland and Jamaica.

It was only later that their lack of training for front line fighting became the cause of much criticism.

War is often a matter of chaos and confusion. The departure of the Canadian expeditionary force from Vancouver on the merchant ship SS Awatea accompanied by the escort vessel HMCS Prince Robert on Oct. 28 was no exception.

The ship was too small to comfortably accommodate the 1,973 soldiers (plus one stow-away), but it sailed with about one-third of its holds empty because the battalions' vehicles never arrived.

During the uneventful voyage they did some training with unfamiliar weapons - mortars, Bren light machineguns, and Thompson submachineguns - and arrived in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour on Nov. 16.

They were assigned quarters at Sham Shui Po Camp on the Kowloon side - a dark irony because it was here that many of the Canadians were imprisoned after their surrender - but were detailed to garrison Hong Kong island across the harbour.

The Winnipeg Grenadiers were deployed to the island west of the Repulse Bay Road, then the only road crossing the island from north to south, and the Royal Rifles were sent to the east.

The Canadians had hardly familiarized themselves with the brutal territory of perilous hillsides and dense tropical forest they were there to defend when, on the morning of Dec. 7, the Japanese announced their invasion by bombing and destroying the five ancient Royal Air Force warplanes parked at Kai Tak Airport.

From then on, the defending allies were without air cover or effective intelligence about the strength and movement of Japanese troops.

Early in the morning of Dec. 8 Japanese troops crossed the rivers separating Hong Kong's hinterland New Territories from China and began assaulting the British lines.

The British had underestimated the fighting qualities of the Japanese and over the next five days they were steadily pushed back to the harbour. On the night of Dec. 12 the surviving troops were evacuated to Hong Kong island.

Over the next six days the Japanese battered the island with artillery fire and bombing raids.

On the evening of Dec. 17 Japanese Lieut. Zempei Masu-shima secretly swam ashore to reconnoitre and the following morning Japanese landing parties attacked on a section of the shore defended by an Indian Rajput regiment.

The Japanese swiftly over-came the defenders and sped into the heart of the island, effectively separating the two Canadian battalions.

There followed nearly two weeks of often hand-to-hand fighting in the most brutal conditions. The young, inexperienced and inadequately trained Canadian troops fought like veterans and the examples of outstanding courage in that unequal fight are many.

But one deserves special mention. On Dec. 19 Sgt.-Maj. John Osborn of the Winnipeg Grenadiers with half his company captured the top of Mount Butler at bayonet point.

He and his men held the position for three hours until the tide of Japanese troops became unstoppable. The Japanese were close enough to throw grenades, which Osborn and his men caught and threw back.

But then one grenade landed out of reach. Osborn threw himself on it and died in the explosion. He was awarded the Victoria Cross and there is a memorial to him, topped by a bronze statue of a Canadian in battle dress, in Hong Kong Park in the centre of the city.

By noon on Christmas Day the remaining defenders were close to being overwhelmed and in the early afternoon the British commander, Gen. Christopher Maltby, advised the governor to surrender.

The postscript is that in September 1945, it was Chinese-Canadian naval officer, William Law, who sought out the prison camp at Sham Shui Po and, with three petty officers armed with revolvers, liberated the Canadian survivors.

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