

Life as a Canadian Prisoner of War: Canada in the Pacific, World War II

The Battle of Hong Kong

Canada's first major combat experience of the Second World War was in the Pacific region. They did not confront Hitler's armies, but rather the expansionist Empire of Japan. In December 1941, the Canadian government honoured a British request to bolster the defences of Hong Kong. Canada sent 1,975 troops, consisting of two battalions of infantry and a brigade headquarters. Our forces included the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers. The battle for Hong Kong, a British Crown Colony, would turn out to be a debacle.



Figure 1: Non-Commissioned Officers of the Royal Rifles taken at Sussex NB (Photo copied from Restigouche (NB) County Genealogical site)

Strategically and tactically, Hong Kong was a difficult territory to defend. By 1940, Hong Kong was already isolated; China to the North had Japanese forces well established, even as far as Kowloon Peninsula. And to the South, less than 400 miles away the Japanese had air bases on Formosa (now Taiwan). (Birch and Cole)



Figure 2: Map of Hong Kong Island 1941 (HKVCA website)

Strategically, the British were not well prepared to defend Hong Kong.

It was common knowledge that Japanese spies had been at work in Hong Kong for years before the war and that they had obtained accurate intelligence on British defenses and troop dispositions. The garrison, commanded by Major General Christopher M. Maltby, normally consisted of only four battalions, two British and two Indian, with additional small support units. In a surprising reversal of policy, however, the British accepted a near-inexplicable offer by the Canadian government to send two additional battalions to Hong Kong, thinking it would lend more credibility to the defense, however doomed it might be in the long run. Thus Canadian troops, the first to see action in World War II, sailed for Hong Kong on October 27, 1941. As weak as the British were on the ground, their air and sea arms were even more inadequate, consisting of seven aircraft, eight motor torpedo boats, and four other smaller gunboats. The twelve thousand regular troops were augmented by the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery and citizen soldiers of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defense Force. (Williamson)

Within a few weeks, the Japanese attackers overwhelmed the Canadian defenders, who were still waiting for vehicles and other supplies. Although our troops fought bravely, by Christmas Day 1941, they and 12,000 British and Indian troops had lost the battle. Every Canadian soldier was wounded, captured, or killed.

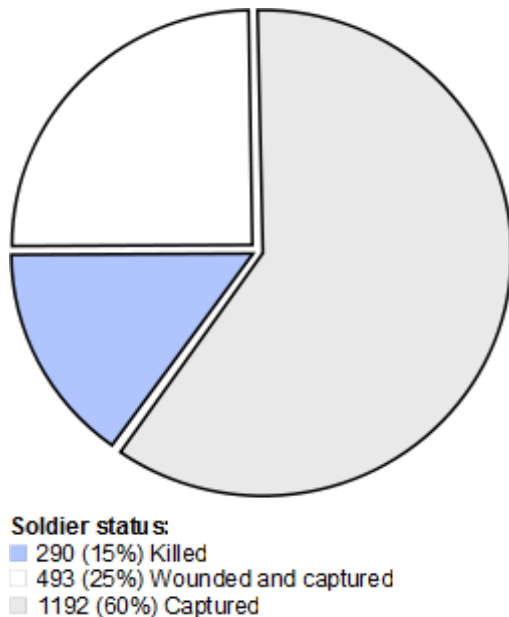


Figure 3: Casualty statistics from the Battle of Hong Kong, December 1941

Prisoner-of-War Camps

Upon capture, Canadian prisoners had to endure appalling treatment in the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. Prisoners were forced to endure horrific conditions. Exhausted from battle, many wounded, they faced the unknown and hoped for the best. The Geneva Convention set out rules for the humane treatment of prisoners, but instead our Canadian soldiers faced three and a half years of brutal captivity. Many did not survive. By the end of the war, only 1,428 POWs (prisoners of war) returned to Canada.

Two such camps where Canadians were imprisoned were the Sham Shui Po Prison Camp on the mainland, near Kowloon, and the North Point Camp in northern Hong Kong. In Cambon, a soldier recalls the conditions of North Point Camp:

North Point was originally a camp on the outskirts of the city, built to house 300 refugees from China. It was badly damaged during the battle, and several of the huts were burned to the ground. The others had been looted of anything that survived the shelling. To further sweeten the pot, the Japanese had quartered their horses and mules there. It was a mess! A stinking mess! To compound all this, one

end of the camp had originally been a dump; the shelling had uncovered all the old garbage, which turned it into a paradise for flies. The other end was littered with dead bodies of Chinese civilians and Japanese pack animals who had been killed by the defenders.

The first month was tough as chaos reigned. There was no water in the camp. It had to be brought in by truck and the delivery of any food was unpredictable. We had nothing to eat for the first two days, and the situation looked grim.

Accommodation was no better, as at first we had all the British and Indian troops as well as the Canadians. We were packed about 200 men into a hut designed to hold perhaps 30 refugees. There was no glass in the windows and in some huts large holes in the roof. Most of us had no blankets and the concrete floor was no Beauty Rest Mattress. Hong Kong can be damp and surprisingly cold at that time of the year. (Palmer 34-35)



Figure 4: Prisoner barracks, North Point Camp in Hong Kong

The Geneva Convention and Bushido

Forty-seven nations signed the Geneva Convention in July 1929, which dictated that a prisoner of war "must at all times be humanely treated." (*International Committee of the Red Cross*) This document spelled out the rights of the captive and captor. A prisoner's food, clothing and shelter were to be equal to that of the captor's own troops.

Although Japan signed the convention in 1929, it did not ratify it. Japan announced that it would apply the provisions "*mutatis mutandis*," meaning "necessary changes have been made."

When Japan agreed to adhere to the terms of the Geneva Convention of 1929 under the terms of *mutatis mutandis*, the Japanese government also included the loophole that when provisions could not literally be complied with, Japan would comply with the nearest possible equivalent to literal compliance. [76] "For the Japanese Ministry of the Army, *mutatis mutandis* was interpreted not as western jurists would understand the term but to the effect that 'we shall apply it with any necessary amendments' and not strictly." (Senatore)

In reality, widespread torture and other atrocities prevailed. Cultural ideas about warfare and the role of soldiers affected the treatment of prisoners. Bushido or "the Way of the Warrior" refers to an ancient rule of conduct on the battlefield. It is, above all, a code of honour and shame. Under this code, surrendering is considered shameful, and this belief influenced the manner that Japanese military handled their captives. By allowing themselves to be captured, these men merited contempt. Regarded as cowards, captors were punished with starvation diets, brutally hard work, and physical abuse. (Palmer 42-44).

The Conditions

Canadian prisoners of war experienced in inhumane conditions in the camps. The casualty rate was high. While 290 soldiers died in battle or had been executed by Japanese soldiers, almost the same number died in the POW camps. In total, 554 of the 1,975 Canadian soldiers were buried or cremated in the Far East.

All camps were surrounded by a high barbed wire fence. Later, at North Point Camp, an electric fence was installed outside this barbed wire fence. Soldiers lived in wood buildings that were built over concrete floors. At North Point, the buildings were 120 feet long by 18 feet wide. These buildings were usually drafty and dirty, and were infested with lice, bed bugs, and flies.

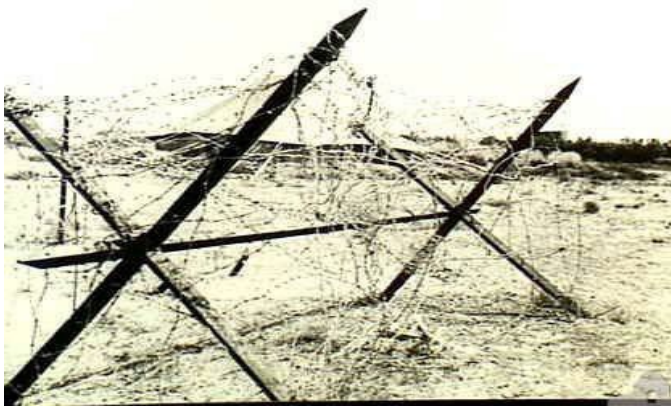


Figure 5: North Point Camp, barbed-wire fences prevented POW escapes

Palmer describes the conditions in the camps:

Latrines (Toilets)

The area was thick with millions of flies, and the latrines were awash with human excrement when the first POWs arrived.... The toilets were oriental style, with indentation in the floor for one's feet, and the toilet bowls were built into the cement floor. The building the toilets had been in had been demolished with bombs or shells and it didn't exist, so we squatted in the rain and enjoyed the scenery. (46)

Sleeping Quarters

The camp had been constructed for refugees, and the huts were considered crowded when occupied by 70 Chinese. Now the prisoners found themselves with 125 to 200 men per hut. The bunks were pushed together in pairs, and in this way 7 could sleep in the floor space otherwise occupied by 3 -- 2 on the top bunk, 3 below and 2 on the floor. The lucky ones had a blanket but many had none. (47)

At Sham Shui Po, the men often slept on concrete floors:

Most men slept on the cement floor rather than in the vermin infested Japanese beds. Since all the windows and doors were missing from the buildings, there was no protection from the wind and rain. One POW said: "When I went to sleep at night, I put all my clothes on and wrapped myself in the gas cape and laid down on the cement floor, and used my boots for a pillow."

Kitchen Facilities

The first few days were hectic as the Japanese were not able to supply the camp with sufficient food or with fuel to cook what was available. They did supply a few plates to the prisoners, but not enough, and they provided several rice 'kongs' (large kettles) used by the former refugee inhabitants and some mouldy rice. The rest was

up to them. Many men had lost their mess kits. Serviceable items (cans, lampshades, hub caps, etc.) were put to good use and had to last the duration. (48)

Flies, Lice, Fleas, Parasites and Bedbugs

The flies swarm through every man's recollections. One veteran had the smothering nauseating sensation of almost breathing flies. They settled on every forkful of food before it could reach the mouth. Men spent their days swatting flies....The bedbugs were especially hated. Attempts to eliminate the vermin were completely unsuccessful. Captain Banfill noted on release in 1945 that 'the bedbugs were so tough that when I put a couple in a bag of DDT, it didn't even faze them!' (60)



Figure 6: North point Prisoner-of-War camp buildings

Brutalities

Very few of the guards spoke English, and internees were forced to learn Japanese to understand their commands. "Tenko" was the name given to the daily roll-call and prisoners had to call out their prisoner number in Japanese. Beatings were given to those who failed to comply with instructions. Canadian POWs were exposed to brutality on a daily basis, ranging from cuts in already meager rations to savage beatings.

Some prisoners were tortured and others executed. Private Don Nelson of the Winnipeg Grenadiers recalls, "They were pretty rough on us. They tied our hands together with barbed wire. A lot of boys that fell and couldn't walk because they were wounded so badly, they were cut loose and bayoneted right there." (Dancocks 228-229)

Nelson continues, "They tied up one of our men at the guard house behind a post with wire. They tied his hands behind his back and they poured water on him. Kept pouring water on

him. Every time they changed shifts, as they went past him, they would belt him as he was tied to that post." (Dancocks 228-229)

Food and Rations

Hunger was a constant. Food was often the main topic of conversation as men tried to remember specific meals of the past, favourite restaurants, and recipes. This obsession with food reflected the lack of it in the camps. Most of the time, the food in POW camps was insufficient and nothing more than filthy rice.



Figure 7: Emaciated POWs 1943

POWS had many challenges with the rations (Roland 128):

1. Food adjustment from a western diet to a rice-based diet.
2. Cultural adjustment as POW cooks had to learn to prepare Japanese meals.
3. Overcooked food was often a necessity to prevent parasitic infections.
4. Logistical problems due to not enough fuel to cook and too few large cooking vessels
5. Rice bust were meals of only rice.
6. Caloric intake was very low. Rations were based on the average size of a Japanese man, smaller than a westerner.
7. Sickness rations were smaller still. Japanese regulation dictated that a sick POW deserved less food than a working POW.

Palmer writes: "The rice the men were given was of a very inferior quality and almost always infested with worms. Often, it had been swept up from warehouse floors....Fish was often spoiled....The Japanese left it up to the imagination and efforts of the prisoners to cook and, in many cases, capture their own meals." (59)



Figure 8: Canadian prisoners in a Japanese POW camp (VAC photo)

MacDonell explains the difference between what they needed and what they had to eat:

Nutritionists have calculated that in order to maintain health and weight, a soldier or average male engaged in manual labour requires 3,500 calories per day. It is estimated that at North Point Camp, where the diet consisted almost entirely of rice and chrysanthemum tops, the caloric intake for the individual prisoner was about 1,200 calories. (96)

Disease and Sickness

Dysentery, thyroid problems, pellagra, diphtheria, malnutrition, ulcers, cholera, wet Beriberi, and dry Beriberi (hot feet) infected almost all prisoners. Medicines delivered by the Red Cross, medicines that might have alleviated some of the suffering and saved lives, were stolen by camp commanders and sold on the black market.

- Dysentery is caused by the ingestion of food or water containing micro-organisms that inflame the intestinal lining. Also known as the "bloody flux," it is characterized by abdominal pain and intense diarrhea with blood and mucus.
- Pellagra is a vitamin deficiency disease caused by dietary lack of niacin and protein and is characterized by red lesions on the skin, dementia, diarrhea, and sensitivity to sunlight.
- Cholera is an intestinal disease caused by contaminated water and food, resulting in muscle and stomach cramps, vomiting, fever and diarrhea.
- Diphtheria is a respiratory disease characterized by a sore throat, low grade fever, and the eventual growth of a membrane over the larynx. It is a highly contagious disease.
- Beriberi, a name derived from a Sinhalese phrase meaning "I cannot, I cannot", is caused by a lack of thiamine. It is common in people whose diet consists mainly of polished white rice. Wet Beriberi affects the heart, while dry Beriberi can cause paralysis and swelling.

Work

POWs were generally expected to work, often in brutal conditions. They worked in mines and on docks, railroads, and an airport. This was a direct violation of the rules regarding the treatment of POWs under the Geneva Convention.

Work parties were sent from North Point Camp after mid-June 1942 to work on at the Kai Tak Airport and other projects around the Island. By September, the Japanese had decided to complete an extension of the Kai Tak Airport, and the prisoners were required to level the ground and build the runways – most of the work being done with shovels. (Palmer 60)

Workers would often arise at 4 am and would work all day. They would have a breakfast of rice, a lunch of perhaps a bun, and would return anywhere from 6 to 10 pm at night.

Some Canadian POWs were sent to Omaine Camp in Kyushu Japan, where they worked as slave labourers in coal mines: "Mining was an extremely dangerous job: the state of the mines was frightening; the work dangerous and exhausting. The shafts had been constructed to accommodate the much smaller Japanese bodies. Therefore, the POWs had to stoop constantly and painfully." (Palmer 75)

The worst conditions were suffered by those that were sent to build the Burma-Thailand railway. POWs and Asian labourers worked side-by-side to build the 260-mile railroad. They were expected to work from dawn to dusk, ten days on and one day off, moving earth, building bridges, blasting through mountains, and laying track. Other Canadian POWs were sent to Japan to work as slave labourers at the NKK (Nipon Ko Kan) shipyard. "Nipon Ko Kan made millions of dollars profiting from the Japanese war effort, partly from using Canadian prisoners as slave laborers." (Marsh 48)

Many Canadian soldiers did not survive the POW camps. In Sai Wan Bay War Cemetery, Hong Kong, 283 soldiers from the Canadian Army were buried, including 107 who are unidentified.



Figure 10: Sai Wan Bay War Cemetery, Hong Kong

Diversions

Despite the horrendous conditions at North Point and Sham Shui Po Camps, many men were able to occupy themselves.

Books

Brought into North Point Camp by foraging parties under Japanese command during the first few days, the books were kept in a room in one of the huts, considered to become the camp library. English books were available because Hong Kong was a British colony at this time.

Mending and Handicrafts

Much time was spent doing essential household duties, including mending clothes, constructing shelves, and doing odd jobs around the camp. Old socks were deliberately unraveled to be re-knit into other items, such as sweaters, and fasteners for clogs and sandals. Cribbage boards were also created. These amusements lessened with the increase in work duties.

Sports

During the first few months of captivity, an active sports program was initiated, with substantial participation in softball, soccer, and cricket. The sports program was later abandoned as the men lost strength and fell into ill health, a result of "inadequate diet, sickness, and the Japanese requirement for forced labour." (Palmer 49) Card games later became popular, especially bridge.

Religious Activities

Successful attempts were made at holding church services. Holy Communion and church parades were held every Sunday. Other church meetings were very well attended. A choir was formed, and the words to the hymns were written out on a blackboard which happened to arrive in camp. (Palmer 49)

Outside Contact

Despite the brutalities, Canadian POWs had some exchanges with local civilians. They would often trade for commodities, such as sugar and cigarettes, with Hong Kong civilians at the fence line. Cigarettes were a very important commodity for POWs. The cigarette was the principal item for barter and exchange: "One ... buys a bun, two or three a stew. Half of one a sweet sauce or an issue of black China tea." (Palmer 58)

Letters

Postal communication between POWs and their families was distressingly slow. In Hong Kong, a small percentage of POWs were allowed to send letters home beginning May 1942; however, the letters rarely arrived sooner than one year later.

The Red Cross

On December 21, 1942, the Red Cross was permitted to visit Sham Shui Po Camp for the first time; its assessment was neutral. The Japanese authorities read all reports by the Red Cross, and any negative reports could deny Red Cross entry in the future.

The Japanese authorities also rarely permitted Red Cross parcels to be delivered to the POWs. Most were stockpiled by the Japanese for their own use. Different people, including the Japanese, mentioned that there were warehouses full of the prisoners' parcels. Many POWs received only five or six parcels throughout the whole duration of their imprisonment. One soldier, George Palmer, received only one parcel in four years. (Palmer 57)

Escape

Escape was a common subject during those long days of camp life. However, escape carried hazardous risks, in particular blending in with a local Asian population. Many ignored the whole idea and set themselves the task of surviving the camps. Those who attempted escape were executed in front of other prisoners. In some camps, the Japanese soldiers executed another ten other prisoners as well. Even if an escape was successful, retaliation increased the misery of those left behind. Consequently, escape attempts from Japanese camps were rare.

Liberation

The defence of Hong Kong was a difficult chapter in Canada's military history. Of the almost 2,000 Canadians who sailed to Hong Kong in late 1941, more than 550 would never see Canada again. Many died in the fierce combat of December 1941. Others perished in the grinding conditions of the Japanese prison camps throughout the rest of the war. With the formal surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945, many POW survivors returned home in ill health, forever shaken by their experiences and the extreme hardships they endured. They had to cope with a sense of guilt that they had survived and their friends had not. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) did not exist as a term back then.

Many ex-POWs found it hard to contain their excitement:

"Happiest day of my life. The Japanese could not believe it. We prisoners were wild with excitement."

"The first food drop was by American planes dropping oil barrels full of food welded together on a regular-sized parachute. They made the drop on the mine head and a lot of it came down too hard; they hit rails and it broke up. We salvaged most of it but it got pretty messed up. Fruit cocktail – meat – sugar – so when we ate it, it was like three meals in one." (Palmer 120)

The men would often share their food with the local populace who were starving just as much as they were: "The Japanese women and kids thought much of Canadians because we gave them gum, chocolate, candies... they were starving too." (Palmer 120-121)

The surviving prisoners were liberated after the fall of Japan. Many were too weak to walk, and it was months until they were healthy again.



Figure 12: Canadian prisoners liberated from a Hong Kong POW camp

Compensation

The experience of Canadians in Hong Kong reminds us of the high price of war and of the incredible effort and sacrifice that Canadians and the Allies put forth to eventually triumph. In December 1998, after considerable pressure and lobbying, the Canadian government granted compensation of \$24,000 to each surviving POW or POW widow.



Figure 13: POW survivor Captain Stanley M Banfill returns home (Jacques 1945)

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