

'Gander' to guard Belledune's Hong Kong war memorial

BY TIM JAQUES

BELLEDUNE ► A new war memorial is taking shape in northern New Brunswick. It involves a tale of men who endured some of the worst treatment of the Second World War, and of their mascot Newfoundland dog—himself a decorated war hero.

The story of the Battle of Hong Kong is perhaps one of the lesser known events in Canadian military history. In September 1941 Great Britain asked Canada for support to defend its colony, Hong Kong, against an expected Japanese attack. Japan had not yet entered the war, but had already occupied most of China and had troops massed just outside Hong Kong's borders. Canada agreed to send two battalions and a brigade headquarters.

One battalion was from the Royal Rifles of Canada, a unit based in Quebec City, and the other was the First Battalion of the Winnipeg Grenadiers. It was in the former that many men from northern New Brunswick and the adjacent Gaspé peninsula were serving when sent to Hong Kong.

One of those men was the late James Andrew Flanagan, father of Emma Flanagan, Deputy Mayor of Belledune. A member of the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, Flanagan explained at the May 16 meeting of Belledune village council how the idea of a Hong Kong memorial in the village came to her.

"Some people have asked the question: 'Why Belledune?'. This goes back to about three years ago when I attended one of our reunions. I started looking at the list of the people and the names of the Hong Kong veterans and I noticed specifically the Belledune, Jacquet River, and Nash Creek area. There were 26 of these men just in our local area. Of the 26, seven did not make it back."

When looking at the list of those who had served, she saw something else.

"I started to realize that within a one-and-a-half hour drive of Belledune, there were over 270 men who had served."

The men had first been posted in Gander in what was then the Dominion of Newfoundland. There, they were given a large Newfoundland dog by a local family. Originally named Pal, the dog was renamed Gander and given the honorary rank of sergeant. Gander quickly became popular with the men, although pilots making landings sometimes mistook him for a bear on the runway. The man with primary responsibility for looking after Gander and making sure he looked good as the mascot was Fred Kelly, from Campbellton.

When orders came for them to ship out, the men were determined to bring the dog with them. They brought him on the train across Canada, and then had to convince the captain of their ship on the west coast that they were bringing a dog, and not a bear, onto his vessel.

They arrived in Hong Kong on Nov. 16, 1941. A photo in *The Campbell-*

ton Graphic of Dec. 18, 1941 shows a smiling Rfm. T. A. Roberts of Campbellton looking out of the porthole of the ship that delivered him.

"Since then the unit has been in action with the Japanese and according to all reports are giving a fine account of themselves", *The Graphic* wrote, without adding much in the way of detail.

The article did not mention that on Dec. 8, 1941, only hours after the sneak attack on the Americans at Pearl Harbor, over 50,000 Japanese troops attacked the approximately 14,000 Canadian, British, and Indian troops at Hong Kong. The Canadians had few mechanized transport vehicles, these having been diverted by the Canadian government to the Philippines to assist the Americans in the futile defence of those islands. The vehicles likely wouldn't have mattered anyway against the overwhelming strength of the Japanese.

As set out in an episode of the television show *Pet Heroes*, which Flanagan showed at the council meeting, it was in the defence of Hong Kong that Gander distinguished himself, attacking any Japanese soldiers who came his way. It was said that he met his end by running off with a Japanese grenade in his mouth. It was for this reason that on Oct. 27, 2000, Gander was awarded the PDSA Dickin Medal, a British award sometimes called the Victoria Cross for animals. It was the first time the medal had been awarded to a dog since 1949.

"For saving the lives of Canadian infantrymen during the Battle of Lye Mun on Hong Kong Island in December 1941. On three documented occasions Gander, the Newfoundland mascot of the Royal Rifles of Canada engaged the enemy as his regiment joined the Winnipeg Grenadiers, members of Battalion Headquarters 'C' Force and other Commonwealth troops in their courageous defence of the Island. Twice Gander's attacks halted the enemy's advance and protected groups of wounded soldiers. In a final act of bravery the war dog was killed in action gathering a grenade. Without Gander's intervention many more lives would have been lost in the assault," his citation reads.

That was not the only recognition he received. When the Hong Kong memorial wall was erected in Ottawa in 2009, Gander's name was listed with the names of those men killed in the battle or who died later at the hands of the Japanese. Included was his honorary rank of sergeant.

The war years were not kind to those men captured at Hong Kong. They were the first Canadian soldiers to see battle in that war and the last to come home. Those men who were taken prisoner and not soon murdered by the Japanese spent a hard time as prisoners, forced to work as slave labourers in Japan and elsewhere. Some died of starvation or disease. Beatings were frequent. So bad was their treatment that most suffered life-long health problems. Few



Belledune Deputy Mayor Emma Flanagan shows an artist's rendition of the granite carving of Gander, the Newfoundland Dog which accompanied members of the Royal Rifles of Canada to Hong Kong as their mascot during World War Two. The statue of the dog, which was killed in action and awarded a posthumous medal for bravery, will serve as one part of a monument in the village to those veterans of the Battle of Hong Kong who came from New Brunswick and the Gaspé peninsula. (Tim Jaques/Tribune)

of their tormenters were punished and the government of Japan has never formally apologized to them.

Flanagan wanted these men honoured. And she wanted the gallant Gander included too. Thus when Flanagan unveiled the tentative plans for a war memorial to the veterans of the Battle of Hong Kong, Gander figured prominently.

She explained that the normal rule of thumb for statues is that they stand one-and-a-half times large than life. A granite statue of Gander, sitting with one paw on a Canadian helmet of the era, will stand six feet tall. The dog, she said, will draw people to look at the monument, which will be a semi-circular wall with the names of all Hong Kong veterans of the Royal Rifles of Canada from New Brunswick and the Gaspé. She estimates these at about 323 men. Plaques will present the story of the Battle of Hong Kong. One will tell the story of Gander and his citation.

The spot Flanagan has in mind for the memorial and statue is next to

Route 134 at the entrance to the Jacquet River campground. She estimated the cost at \$15,000.

Speaking on Tuesday, Flanagan said that the statue of Gander could be ready in about three months, although the wall may not be ready until next year. She said Councillor Mario Lapointe is busy working on a three-dimensional design. However, this December marks the 70th anniversary of the battle. She would like to see the Gander statue in place in time for a ceremony to mark the occasion.

The Belledune Battle of Hong Kong memorial will not be the only one on the North Shore. Former Campbellton mayor Mark Ramsay—the nephew of Fred Kelly, Gander's handler—took a special interest in Hong Kong veterans. He arranged for an evergreen to be planted in the city's Riverside Park, with a plaque next to it explaining the significance of the battle. Each December, it serves as Campbellton's community Christmas tree. It is lit up during a service that commemorates those Canadian

soldiers who fought in the Battle of Hong Kong, particularly those for whom the Christmas of 1941 would be their last.

Phillip Doddridge of New Richmond, Que., directly across the Baie des Chaleurs from Belledune, is the president of the Hong Kong Veterans Association. As a young man of 18, he enlisted in the Royal Rifles of Canada and was in Hong Kong as a company clerk. He remembers Gander well and supports Flanagan's plan.

"I am overjoyed. I think it is going to be great," he said by telephone on Tuesday. Doddridge praised Belledune for already having donated money toward the construction of the Hong Kong memorial wall in Ottawa.

While his association plans a reunion in Granby, Que. this year, he isn't sure how many of his old comrades will be able to attend, given their age and infirmity.

"There are only 62 of us left. That's everybody, coast to coast."



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