

327-40 Oaklands Avenue
Toronto ON M4V 2Z3

March 1, 2003

Dear John and Tony:

Bob (Flash) Clayton and I thought that since we both served under your father for nearly two years and since so little has been written or made public about his role, both as our Commanding Officer and as our Medical Officer in Japan, we should write a joint eye-witness account of his outstanding leadership and his courageous service to his men and to his country in World War II.

In January of 1943, the Japanese shipped 663 Canadian prisoners of war from Shamshuipo prison camp in Hong Kong to a camp to be known as Camp 3D which was located in Yokohama, Japan, just a few miles from Tokyo. These Canadians were from the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers. They were the survivors of the Battle of Hong Kong and had been taken prisoner on Christmas Day 1941, along with your father who, at that time, was a medical officer in brigade headquarters.

Camp 3D housing, in the Kawasaki area of Yokohama, consisted of porous, flimsy wooden structures made out of ¼-inch plywood with dirt floors. It was completely inadequate to house humans, especially as it was unheated during the freezing winters of Japan. It had no proper sanitary arrangements and the men were forced to use outdoor privies. Each man was issued with two blankets made of wood fibre which possessed little, if any, insulation, with the result that the prisoners, on an inadequate diet that provided far too few calories, suffered severely from the cold. For beds, the huts had wooden shelves covered with grass mats raised 18 inches above the dirt floors.

The inmates of Camp 3D were transported there from Hong Kong to work as slave labourers in a nearby shipyard owned and operated by the Nippon Kokan Shipbuilding Company of Japan.

The diet was largely barley and rotten greens which inevitably caused a form of constant diarrhea for everyone. Suffering from the cold and a wide range of malnutrition-induced diseases and living in primitive conditions, often louse-infested and without adequate hygiene, these men were expected to work at manual labour at the shipyard for 13 out of every 14 days. Men who were now being slowly but surely starved to death in this rotten hell-hole of a camp were expected to walk two miles to and back from the shipyard and to do there a full day's work, under the supervision of often brutal and sometimes sadistic guards.

It was into this impossible situation that your father was projected as our senior Canadian officer and only doctor when he volunteered to accompany us to Japan to act as our commander and our medical officer. He had no medicine, few primitive instruments, no hospital and only one or two trained orderlies to minister to his command of more than 660 sick — and getting sicker — men. His job was to save the lives of as many as he could. All he had were his brains, his excellent medical training, his courage and his determination to rise to the occasion.

The first thing he did was to get the Japanese to agree to allow him — and him only — to decide who must work and who must be excused from the daily work party that went to the shipyard. This was a crucial issue because to send the wrong man to work would be tantamount to a death sentence. Using his skill, his charm and every ounce of courage he possessed, he somehow kept the sickest men in camp and refused to allow the Japanese to send them to work. This in itself saved many lives. He constantly argued to reduce the daily work party and to improve the diet and living conditions and he somehow persuaded the Japanese to bring into the camp some of the medicine he needed for the sick. His constant demands on the Japanese to be more humane put him at great personal risk but he never failed to act to protect his men, always arguing and demanding better conditions for them.

In doing so, he earned the undying gratitude and respect of his command and the respect of the Japanese who also took personal risks to meet his demands. He was a powerful and positive force for raising morale and keeping hope alive. He never showed the awful despair he must have felt as a skilled doctor watching his men in their sometimes losing struggle to stay alive. He attended to every sick man himself. No one in that camp ever died alone because he was there for every one, without fail.

As we look back on the leadership skills of young Captain Reid, we are amazed at how he took command of us and that camp and how effective he was because he had no prior training as a military officer. But he had the character, the courage and the desire to be a powerful leader — and he was. He never lost his sense of humour and he never became subservient to the Japanese.

Even though he had to make tough decisions every day about who would receive scarce medicine or treatment or who would work or be excused, I never, ever heard a single word of complaint or criticism of him from anyone in that camp. Bob Clayton and I, as two of his senior N.C.O.'s, were proud of him because we saw his conduct was in the best tradition of the officers of the Canadian Army. Both of us feel he should have been decorated for his contribution to his country and for his courageous execution of his duty. The demands on him every day went far, far beyond the demands of any other captured Allied officer.

And then, to show how big a man he was and how fair-minded, when our Japanese Camp Commander, Captain Omori, was placed on trial for his life before an Allied military tribunal, your father pleaded with the court to spare Omori because he had helped your father buy much needed medicine on the black market for the camp and had put a stop to the brutal behaviour of the Japanese guards toward the prisoners. The court agreed with your father's assessment

and sentenced Omori instead to a short prison term. That magnanimous act on behalf of a defeated enemy officer was final proof to us of what a man of compassion and conviction your father was.

In our opinion, no officer in Canada's Army in World War II did his duty better or with more courage, and no officer did more for his men, than your father, Captain John Reid, R.C.A.M.C. We will never forget him!

Sincerely,

George MacDonell

George S. MacDonell

Bob. - Flash Clayton

Robert Clayton