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A number of these pieces have appeared in *Event* and *Border Crossings*, for which I thank the editors. I have also had the pleasure of seeing the entire narrative produced on stage at the University of Winnipeg, directed by Per Brask and performed and mounted by students from the Department of Theatre and Drama.

I am indebted to the whole library of memoirs, journals, novels, popular and military histories and journalism that has gathered around the Pacific war, particularly that relating to the fall of Hong Kong. Most important were the testimonies of the veterans themselves, given to me personally or made available to me on tape by the Aural History Section of the Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg or in written form through books such as Grant S. Garneau's *The Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong*.

I would also like to thank the Canada Council for assistance in the early stages of this work and the University of Alberta for tolerating a brief absence in 1977 that first brought me to Hong Kong.

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This book is dedicated to my uncle, Tom Turner, who fell from the sky into captivity, but found his way home.

## PREFACE

Some time early in 1975, when the Manitoba winter was at its worst, my friend Doug Elias left his job at the Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg to make his annual pilgrimage to the sea. As I was living in Victoria, about as far west and south as a Canadian can get without losing his identity, Elias paid me a call. I was glad to see him and I remember some pleasant talk around a quantity of good scotch. Lapsed Mennonites are an interesting lot and Elias was no exception. As I spoke briefly about my latest work and my interest in the dark zones of the Canadian conscience, Elias shifted his considerable weight on the couch and began to twist the ends of his huge black beard with both hands, like a man who wants to talk.

I don't recall his exact words on that night, but I remember the force with which he hooked me into his "story." Later, I was to see him as one in a long line of land-locked Ancient Mariners stationed at regular intervals along my life-line, whose messages would so profoundly determine what I wrote and how I conducted my life.

Elias told me of 1975 soldiers, one for every year of the Christian calendar, thrown away, pawns to the vanity of their leaders, the bungling of bureaucrats and the indifference of elected officials. Two battalions, untrained, ill-equipped, as hastily forgotten as they were despatched, fighting an impossible battle against crack Japanese troops, surviving defeat and the POW camps only to be faced with an equally intransigent adversary in the Canadian government and Department of Veterans Affairs.

One anecdote from Elias' dream-script that has stayed with me ever since concerns a young researcher from the Aural History Section at the Museum, who went out to interview a Hong Kong veteran on his farm. She found him in the fields

on a Massey-Harris tractor, a huge man who looked like Moses or one of the prophets, a sort of bearded Gibraltar. When she introduced herself and explained the nature of the project, she was not prepared for the terrible silence that ensued or for the single tear that released itself from the left eye of this colossus and slid into the mat of black whiskers, leaving a clear track in the dust on his cheek.

I was not prepared for Elias' story either or the demands it would place upon me. He left shortly afterwards, mission accomplished, the albatross he had given me hanging from my back like a medicine bundle, or a rocket-launcher. I haven't seen him since, but I have thought of him often as I scrambled over rocks, beaches and tombstones in Hong Kong, as I poured over books and tapes in the libraries and archives, even as I went AWOL from my writing when the nightmares started.

I hope I have acquitted myself well of Elias and those two shades who met in the Manitoba wheatfields and that I have done justice to the courage and endurance of the men of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada. Their story required of me some hard lessons in archaeology, digging deeply as I did into history and then even more deeply into myself. What I have drawn from conversations, books, archives and the recesses of my own heart and imagination is part fact, part fiction, but true, I hope, to the spirit of events.

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Our reinforcements were mainly in the shape of very large Canadians, who looked quite able to go out and win the war with a set of brass knuckles. It was Christmas, however, and they were homesick for snow. "O Jesus, fellows! The kind that sits all over the trees like cotton." And food . . . (*Underground from Hong Kong* by Benjamin Proulx).

They were magnificent men, lacking nothing but the training suitable to their task of fighting in the Hong Kong hills. Unfortunately, a bureaucratic error sent all their transport down to Australia (*The Hidden Years* by John Luff).

It must be said here and now that, through no fault of their own, these regiments added little to the lustre of Canada. They were despatched to Hong Kong at a week's notice after a long period of stagnation as garrison troops in the West Indies and Newfoundland respectively . . . . Their appearance on the island prompted a senior staff officer, among whose virtues tolerance was not the most prominent, to say they were "straight off the trees" (*The Fall of Hong Kong* by Tim Carew).

Close-up of soldiers on duty  
in 1941 at Shamshuipo Camp.  
They pose on steps, one at ease,

one at attention, two kneeling,  
and grin for the photographer  
who might have been a friend.

Knapsacks over chests, rifles diagonal  
from right hip to left shoulder.  
One remembers the stranger

in the men's washroom at Regina,  
who gave him fifty dollars, a uniform  
and a new identity, then went AWOL

out of the train station, wearing  
striped overalls and boots with no socks.  
One anticipates a rendezvous later

at the Sun Sun Café in Wanchai:  
red silk dress and almond skin.  
One forgot to polish his boots

and hopes the duty officer won't notice.  
One has nothing in his head  
that might be called a thought,

yet he too smiles. Four Canadians  
on duty. What you notice first  
is the length of the bayonets.



I did most of my fighting in Repulse Bay  
in a hotel half-full of civilians.  
We took up positions in a plush suite  
on the second floor.

One of the men sat in an armchair  
scanning hills out back with binoculars.  
When he spotted movement, I'd swing  
into the window and fire, then drop back.

Suddenly there was a woman in the doorway,  
saying, My dog, I'm looking for water for my dog.  
We pulled her down out of the line of fire  
and gave the dog radiator water we used for tea.

Later, when the Japanese were two football fields away  
and their planes were dive-bombing the barracks,  
I thought of that woman and her parting comment:  
If he bothers you by barking, shoot him.