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December 26th, 2011

Dear Hong Kong Veteran,

Most of you will have read newspaper articles or viewed television segments about Japan's apology to Canadian servicemen who were POWs during World War II. You all will have opinions about this, some positive and some negative. Many of you will question why you weren't informed about this beforehand. The latter is easier to answer. International protocol demands that the country making the move (in our case, Japan) be given the first opportunity to issue press releases. This means that the receiver nation must wait until the action has been completed. We released the news in Canada the following morning. The Executive of the Hong Kong Veterans were informed of the process as it developed.

We must be aware that the critical point is Japan did apologize, albeit 66 years after the end of the war. Whether our veterans accept the apology or not is their decision to make, for none of us not having endured the traumatic experience they endured, has the right to comment. This is not an issue of remuneration. This is an issue of acknowledging Japan's role in this infamous accounting of man's inhumanity to man. Understandably, we will all have our opinions, and thanks to all veterans, we have the right to express them, but the acceptance of the apology belongs solely to the veterans

On December 8th, 2011 at 4:10 pm Japan time, Minister Kato faced the three Hong Kong veterans present and the first sentences spoken were, "Thank you for coming to Japan. I want to express deep remorse and heartfelt apology for the treatment received by former Canadian prisoners of war." These words, 70 years in coming, started the closing of another door in history. For reasons described below, this was a face-to-face apology given without any Canadian politicians in the room. The veterans wanted no political overtones. This was to be an

apology given to Canadians who suffered as POWs, not to the Canadian government. Minister Kato did not read something written by an aide. He eloquently expressed his thoughts. This fact gave a credibility to the words that obviously impacted how they were received. He went one step further and requested acceptance from each of the Hong Kong veterans present separately.

I watched the faces of HKVA Vice-President George Peterson, Winnipeg Grenadiers; Gerry Gerrard of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals; and Ken Pifher of the Royal Rifles of Canada, and saw in their eyes a vindication of their long held position that an apology for the actions of the Japanese military in WWII was due. There was a noticeable tension in the room as George Peterson spoke. "To the honourable members of the Japanese Parliament and to the people of Japan, I wish to say that I accept your apology on behalf of my comrades and myself, who were captured on Christmas day 1941. I cannot forgive or forget, though I would like to, but I appreciate your apology today, sir. I have waited 66 years for this". He paused, then continued in Japanese. Ima yoi su (It is good). Semsoo haori su (The war is over). Arigatoo (Thank you).

The Japanese present held their breath for a second, for with these words spoken in their own language, they recognized that our HK veterans were honourable soldiers, perhaps bent, but never broken. With those words "C" Force had won the final skirmish of the battle of Hong Kong, they had taken back the victory the Japanese proclaimed on Christmas Day 1941. Gerry and Ken both made brief but similar statements as to how they felt and made firm acknowledgments of acceptance. (It must be made very clear that the apology was for all Canadian servicemen and women who were imprisoned as POWs.)

The quest for an apology goes back to 1947 with the then Executive of the HKVA. The more pressing concerns about pensions and benefits along with the difficult task of assisting our veterans in the transition back to civilian life kept pushing this issue onto the back burner. It came back into public awareness in 1988 when then PM Brian Mulroney made his infamous statement to the Japanese while negotiating trade deals and quashed any possibility of financial retribution. You will remember the intervention of the War Amps and the National Council of Veterans Association seeking financial retribution under the leadership of Cliff Chadderton. The following, in summary, reflects a genesis of the international claim.

[a] The Hong Kong Veterans and The War Amputations of Canada filed a claim against Japan with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1987 seeking compensation and an apology for the gross violation of human rights, the grave breaches of the Geneva Convention, and for slave labour remuneration under International Law.

[b] Following Prime Minister Mulroney's unfortunate intervention in 1988, we ultimately filed a Petition in the early 1990's against Canada under the Optional Protocol of the International Covenant on Civil and Political seeking compensation for Canada's failure to protect the interests of the Canadian Hong Kong veterans which ultimately led to our Government's financial recognition of this claim in 1998.

My personal involvement in seeking an apology started during my tutelage under Roger Cyr. He was well aware of several “apologies” offered by the Japanese, but all of these had political overtones meant to encourage trade rather than acknowledging the injustice to POWs. He had discussed this with his comrades many times over the years and the collective position was that only a face-to-face apology, with no political overtones, would be acceptable. My first action on the apology, was taken 13 years ago with my first letter to the Japanese Embassy. However it was in August 2009, when a visiting group of American ex-POWs received an apology that I escalated my efforts. After many meetings, telephone calls and e-mail correspondence, I felt the possibility of success and doubled my efforts. Not wishing to jeopardize the process, I sought the assistance of Canada’s Foreign Affairs department, and assist they did! They pushed the Japanese government from our Embassy in Tokyo, and locally they counseled me on wording and protocol. Without their assistance I doubt if we would have succeeded. I must mention the efforts of Ian Higginbotham in Ottawa and Christopher Burton in Tokyo. They are truly outstanding people. Finally Minister Hitoshi Ozawa while in Ottawa, asked for a meeting with me and said that the position of our Hong Kong veterans was justified and that Japan would apologize.

For the last six months, I had been using the date of the 70th anniversary commemoration services annually held in Hong Kong as a target date for the delivery of the apology. (Foreign Affairs had told me the Japanese respond better to deadlines). The visit by Minister Ozawa occurred on Friday, November 18th, just 13 days prior to when our small contingent must depart if they were to attend the services in Hong Kong. I had been keeping Veterans Affairs aware of the ongoing proceedings and asked them to arrange for our vets to travel to Hong Kong for the commemoration services, then on to Japan for the apology. They had not budgeted for this, but when informed of the situation, VAC Minister Blaney told his staff to “find the money”. To their credit and through the efforts of Assistant Deputy Minister James Gilbert, they did. (Aside here: Japan would have paid for the vets but for the time frame been longer and Canada’s position that it wanted this done now before any more Far East veterans leave us.)

The rest, as the saying goes is history, and I mean that literally. The apology actually had four phases which follow a pattern of international protocol.

First - Verbal acknowledgment that Japan would issue an apology.

Second - HKVA President received a letter of apology from the Japanese Embassy in Canada (copy attached).

Three - The veterans attending, their care givers, Dr. Nguyen from VAC, and I, were hosted by the Japanese Foreign Affairs department. Mr Koji Tomita, Deputy General for

North America Affairs Bureau gave an apology for the specific four points I had detailed in my negotiations - cruel punishment; malnutrition; withholding of medicine and medical attention, and slave labour.

Four - The official government/people of Japan apology given by Minister Kato.

In addition to the letter from the Japanese Embassy, I have enclosed a Press Release from the War Amps which gives more background to this issue.

I am sorry that we had to keep this unannounced until the actual apology was delivered, This is a requirement of international protocol, and any breach thereof could have permitted the Japanese to withdraw. I trust this letter gives sufficient background, but if you have any questions I would be pleased to answer them if I can. If you wish, please feel free to e-mail me at derrill@sympatico.ca, telephone me at 613-829-5033, or drop me a note at the address above.

Regards,

Derrill Henderson
National Secretary