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The Hong Kong Veterans Memorial Wall

story by Linda Stewart-Quesnel (Public Service Pension Plan); photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Veterans of Canada

When I think of Remembrance Day, I think of my mother. No, she wasn't in the military, but she married the love of her life and he was in the military—a soldier in World War Two. They had known each other for a while and when the Winnipeg Grenadiers, his regiment, returned from guard duties in Jamaica, the regiment picked up some new recruits. Believing that the training of these green recruits would keep them in Winnipeg for at least a few months, on October 15, 1941 my mom married the man who, 10 years later, would become my father. Two weeks after marrying, the 22-year-old newlyweds were saying their tearful goodbyes at the train station. She was destined not to see her husband again for four long years.

The Grenadiers were sent to Vancouver to be shipped out to a secret destination. They were joined by a regiment called the Royal Rifles of Canada and a Brigade Headquarters group. Together, these 1,975 Canadians were known as "C" Force. Weeks later they arrived at Hong Kong. They had been asked by Britain to reinforce the garrison at the British colony. History would show it was a foolhardy decision. On December 8, 1941, a few hours after the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbour, the Battle of Hong Kong began. Reinforced by the newly arrived Canadians, the garrison still numbered only 14,000 inexperienced soldiers and volunteers. Nevertheless, this small band put up a brave defense against 50,000 battle-hardened Japanese troops. The fierce fighting lasted 17 days. They were forced to surrender on Christmas Day. Two hundred and ninety Canadians died during the battle.

The survivors then had to endure the horrors of the prisoner-of-war camps. For the next 44 months there was little food, horrible sanitation, very little in the way of medical supplies and forced slave labour working in coal mines and shipyards. Two hundred and sixty-seven more Canadians perished during their harsh captivity. They faced every day knowing that it could be their last.

At home, my mother waited for months for any word of whether her new husband was dead or alive. She moved from Winnipeg to Toronto to aid in the war effort by working in a munitions factory. From her second-floor rooming house window she could see the telegraph boy pedaling down the street on his bicycle. It was a sight she had witnessed many times before. Each time, she prayed that he would not stop at her door. And each time he passed, she would burst into tears, partly from relief and partly because she felt guilty that her prayer had been answered while, at the same time, some poor family down the street was receiving the sad news of the death of their loved one. They were difficult times. The casualty lists were slow coming, but finally news came that her husband had survived the battle. Still, the anxious waiting was not over as she knew many were still dying in the camps. The end of the war against Japan came on VJ Day (Victory in Japan Day)—August 15, 1945.

Four years after she had said goodbye to her husband of two weeks, she returned to the train station in Winnipeg to wait for his arrival. She scarcely recognized him. His weight on his 6-foot-2 frame had dropped to 102 pounds. Even though he had gained back a few pounds on his weeks of travel back home, including a stay in the Gordon Head barracks, he still looked like a skeleton with skin draped over the bones. There was a long period of convalescing ahead and some of the scars on the inside would never heal. In the early days, she would walk with him down Portage Avenue and when they came to a restaurant he would go in and order a big meal. It would not stay in him, though, because his system was not used to such rich food. They would begin their walk again and, at the very next restaurant, he was compelled to go in and order another large meal. My mother saw him through this and many other battles and things very gradually got better.

The loved ones left waiting at home, like my mother, seem to me to be largely forgotten on Remembrance Day. I hope this story will get you thinking about them during the ceremonies when we remember and honour all the brave men and women who give so much to keep our country free. As the BC Regional Director for the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, I will be laying a

wreath at the cenotaph downtown.

The Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, along with many others, will have a display set up in the Royal BC Museum exhibit "Remembering the Past, Hoping for the Future." It is open to the public, free of charge, during Remembrance Week from November 5 to November 11. For more information about the event, please visit www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca.

If you would like to learn more about the Hong Kong Veterans of Canada, visit our website at www.hkvca.ca. There you will find that, on August 15, 2009, the 64th anniversary of VJ Day, we unveiled a monument in our nation's capital honouring the Canadians' role in the defense of Hong Kong. My dad's name is listed there: Carpenter, Clifford J., and I can only wish it could have listed my mom's name, too. The Hong Kong Children's Symphony Orchestra, ages 10 to 16, paid their own way round trip from Hong Kong to Toronto, where they played a benefit concert and raised \$24,000 toward the Memorial Wall. While in Toronto, the 70 orchestra members were billeted free of charge by members of the Chinese-Canadian community. Out of the proceeds from the benefit concert, they played at the unveiling in Ottawa and were treated to a sightseeing tour of Niagara Falls.



The completed Memorial Wall honouring the Hong Kong Veterans of Canada. The top of the wall represents the four mountains where key battles were fought on Hong Kong Island.

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