

Be Thankful

A Letter From Private Frank Christensen

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Author's note: The following is written as a letter that Frank Christensen could have written to his grandchildren about his horrific experiences as both a signaller and as a prisoner of war in World War II. This was written to help Canadians understand the sacrifices that those who served made, and how we can honor them by trying to better understand what Hong Kong Veterans went through. Basic human rights that Canadians regularly take for granted are pointed out in context of events where they were lost.

To my dearest grandchildren; Lincoln, Brian and Lisa,

Words alone cannot describe all that I went through, and all I experienced as a prisoner of war, but I'll do my best. I can honestly say I've been to a place worse than hell; worse than anything you could ever imagine.

I grew up like a normal kid in McCreary, Manitoba; I went to school, graduated, worked and then everything changed when I joined the Queens Own Cameron Highlanders and was shipped off to Hong Kong as a Winnipeg Grenadier. Sounds like fun, doesn't it? I got to see the world, I got paid, and then I got to be in war and that's when the fun stopped. It came to a grinding, screeching halt as soon as the first shot rang through the air.

Be thankful that you live in peace.

In 1941, I was a signaller stationed on a telephone exchange called Pok Fu Lam for a month until the exchange became abandoned because communications got cut off. I was picked up by some Middlesex regiment people who took me down to the Happy Valley Race Track to guard an area. For three days before Christmas Eve, we had nothing to eat and no relief. The other two guys I was with were wounded, and on my way back from taking them to a truck with the other wounded for help, I was shot. This was my first injury in the war, but nothing compared to what I would later face. Using my rifle as a crutch I got to a truck that took me to a military hospital, and was eventually put under and patched up. For the four months I was in that hospital, people died every day. I could hear the gut-wrenching screams of pain and was witness to more suffering and agony than anyone should ever see. I remember Sgt. Albert Cox, one of the other prisoners, was helping another guy dress his foot with a bandage, and when he removed the old one, three of his toes were lying in the bandage. Now, at this point, if you had asked me what the rest of my time in the war would be like, I would have told you that the worst was over, because really, how could it get any worse?

When I woke up I got the news that I was now a prisoner of war of the Japanese.

Be thankful for your freedom.

As a prisoner of war, we lived (if you can even call it that) in compounds surrounded by wooden fences topped with barbed wire and slept on concrete floors in our huts. Living as a prisoner of war involved everything from starvation, disease and slave labour to slow and painful torture which killed many in the camps. Starvation, torture, disease; these are all just words, aren't they? To fully understand what these camps were like, they need to be experienced. Here are a couple stories to help you fathom what these four years were like.

At Sham Shui Po, we were working to enlarge the Kai Tak Airport and build a longer runway. If daily quotas were not met or we weren't working fast enough, which the Japanese seemed to think was almost every day, we got one of the three B's:

Boots
Bayonets
or Riffle Butts.

It was a life of fear and constant distress. Our lives were in danger every day, it seemed, almost more so than on the battlefield. You see, in a battle, death was almost always quick, but as a prisoner of war, you were slowly tortured and every day of misery was a day you wished you weren't alive anymore. The conditions and mistreatment were so awful that I considered trying to escape a couple times, but each time I decided that it wasn't worth the risk of execution.

Be thankful that you can live a life free of suffering.

After being moved to the Shinagawa hospital camp I got a touch of pleurisy (every time I coughed it felt as if a knife was being plunged into my chest), The Red Cross came to the camp to inspect the conditions. The Japanese gave us each a piece of a Red Cross Parcel to be put in view and made us fold our blankets to make it look like there were more than there actually were. We were also prohibited from talking, so they left deceived, thinking the conditions were humane.

Be thankful for your freedom of speech.

The Geneva Conventions, which defined the rights of prisoners of war, were not followed by the Japanese, and it is because of this that I was a walking skeleton for most of my time as a prisoner of war and suffered many awful diseases that brought me closer to death each time. The hopelessness that came from perpetual sickness, meager food and implacable torture is something I would never wish on any human being.

Be thankful for your health.

When the war ended and I was freed, I came back here to Canada and my “normal” life, but I cannot ignore the fact that my life will forever be changed by what happened during the war. To give you an idea of the scale of this event, 30,000 men died as prisoners of war of the Japanese from the cruel mistreatment and torture we were subject to in the camps. Everyday I count my blessings and think about how fortunate I am to have made it back, because so many of my friends weren’t so lucky.

Be thankful for each and every day you are alive.

With love,
Your Grandfather

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