

The Fighting Spirit

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Widely unacknowledged today, the Battle of Hong Kong was “one of the worst catastrophes, in terms of percentage losses, that the Canadian army suffered in the course of the Second World War” (“Battle of Hong Kong”). To this day, historians still debate over why Canadian forces were sent to Hong Kong since “Churchill himself initially opposed [the idea]” (Banham). Most historians, however, agree that “the Canadian soldiers were inexperienced fighters... [who] were not prepared to fight 50,000 well-trained Japanese soldiers” (Mason Crest Publishers). Because the Japanese still would have been able to seize control of Hong Kong even if more Canadian forces had been sent (Banham), the Canadian soldiers who fought in this 17-day battle deserve the utmost respect for fighting despite the odds that they faced against the colossal Japanese army. The Battle of Hong Kong must not be forgotten in order to honor those who boldly “[volunteered] to fight for [their] country” (Giberson). Harry Atkinson was one of those fearless, committed volunteers and would become the National President of the Hong Kong Veterans Association in his later years, “securing significant [compensational] gains for its members” (Turrene). Like the stories of many other brave soldiers, Atkinson’s account is one of unrelenting determination and resilience, and captures the indomitable spirit of numerous fellow Hong Kong veterans.

Hoping to follow the footsteps of his father, Atkinson enlisted in the army with his brother Ron in 1939 (Turrene). Originally stationed in Bermuda and Jamaica, they were later sent off as part of the Winnipeg Grenadiers (HKVCA) “to Hong Kong to fight alongside the British” (Turrene). They were ultimately captured as prisoners of war (POWs), but placed at different camps—Harry at Niigata and Ron at Hong Kong (Turrene). Following his capture, Harry was likely “marched to North Point refugee camp... [on December 20th]” (Banham) as he stated having suffered a horrible case of dysentery there, which he later regarded as one of the worst periods he went through during war (HKVCA). By the end of December, Atkinson, along with numerous other POWs, “[was] ferried to

Shamshuipo..., the main Hong Kong camp during the war” (Banham). Prisoners were treated cruelly at Shamshuipo, and had to survive on “a cupful of rice a day” (HKVCA). They worked on building a runway for the local airport every day from 6am to 7:30pm, and continued this routine until their move to Japan (HKVCA).

On August 15, 1943, Atkinson boarded the *Manryu Maru*, bound for Oeyama and the infamous Niigata camp (Banham), with approximately 500 other Canadians (HKVCA). This 22-day trip to Japan was extremely excruciating as the men had to take turns lying down to sleep because of the cramped quarters, and there were “250 men crammed into each hold” (HKVCA). Upon arriving at Niigata camp, Atkinson joined the Marutsu dockyard gang, the unit that loaded and unloaded ships and boxcars (HKVCA). Conditions in Niigata were significantly worse than in Hong Kong because of the exhausting menial labour that the prisoners carried out and the intensified disciplinary action that the officers took upon the prisoners (HKVCA). As Atkinson stated himself, “[it was hard] to stand there and be punched in the face and in the body and without fighting back” (HKVCA). For 44 months, he and his fellow comrades were “methodically starved and worked like slaves..., lifting bags... [that] weighed the same as [their] malnourished and wounded [bodies]” (Turrene). Atkinson and the men continued “[to endure such] torture and starvation by their Japanese captors” (Veterans Affairs Canada) until liberation in 1945.

When Atkinson returned home, he expressed disappointment over the government’s lack of responsibility, and “blamed... Mackenzie-King and his government” (HKVCA) for sending Canadian soldiers into an avoidable, brutal warfare (HKVCA). The fact that very few people were aware of the experience that the Hong Kong veterans went through further dismayed him, thus compelling him to serve as President of the Manitoba Branch of the Hong Kong Veterans Association, and later as the National President of the association (Turrene). Atkinson partook in negotiations with the federal government for compensations, and along with other proud Canadian soldiers, successfully achieved the doubling of the Hong Kong veterans’ pensions (Turrene).

Atkinson was, indeed, a true fighter and a man of integrity, refusing to settle for anything less than what was right.

Although the Battle of Hong Kong is still an obscure topic today, it has gained more recognition within recent years and remains a historically significant event that “resulted in 290 Canadian lives lost” (Thompson) and demonstrated the strength and will of the Canadian army “to serve [Canada] and the world” (Thompson). Even though the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers “had [not] been properly trained for combat” (“Battle of Hong Kong”), they fought valiantly against a formidable force. While many believe that Canada did not have to engage in this battle, Canada responded to Churchill’s request for two troops to defend Hong Kong (MacGregor) because “[answering] the world’s call [has always been] the Canadian way” (Thompson). Above all, courageous men such as Harry Atkinson must be honoured not only for their efforts in the war, but also for their efforts to preserve their difficult personal stories for future generations to come. Atkinson’s fighting spirit prevailed even after the war, as he proceeded to “[lobby] the government for twelve years to improve the pensions of his fellow veterans” (Turrene). Atkinson was a man of courage and determination, and his deeds, as well as those of the many other brave soldiers of the Battle of Hong Kong, shall not be forgotten.

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