



# Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association

## Portraits of Valour Writing Contest

### *It Was Our Duty*

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Grade 11

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Social Studies 11

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For Private John Edward James of the Winnipeg Grenadiers

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This work is a ballad fictitiously written by Private John James between his settling on a farm in Emo, Ontario and his death on June 2<sup>nd</sup> in 2005. This piece was to be found in one of Mr. James' many boxes of memorabilia, covered in dust and water stains from when he wrote this grim and telling tale. The lines are meant to revisit many of his experiences while participating in WWII, both as a soldier fighting for peace and freedom and as a prisoner-of-war suffering in Japanese POW camps.

*It Was Our Duty*

O'er golden fields, stalks roll with wind,  
Hills rise and fall under sky.  
Memory stirs in the mind and body,  
A river of journeys gone by.

Orders came on Jamaican warm breezes,  
We abandoned all for home.<sup>[5][6]</sup>  
The Grenadiers sailed for Canada's shores  
Where our fate was set to roam.<sup>[3][5]</sup>

With Eastern brothers we met at port,  
We voyaged across the sea.<sup>[6][7]</sup>  
To lands of sun and exotic bamboo,  
We left in October's lee.<sup>[7]</sup>

We landfalled on the Sun-shadowed isle,  
Un-bloodied by battle or war,  
As forces massed in skirmish initial,  
From hill rifts the enemy did pour.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

The Rising Sun had scorched its mark,  
Yet more it did demand.  
Though scattered like shadows, we sought to protect;  
To stay the Rising Sun's hand.<sup>[7]</sup>

Overwhelmed in water, our ally the Earth,  
Air taken by Sun's early rays.<sup>[6]</sup>  
While the Gin Drinker's Line was first to succumb  
To the Sun's bloodthirsty ways.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

Our "D" Company brothers a vanguard became,  
To protect their allies' retreat.<sup>[6]</sup>  
Withdrawn from the mainland after three days of battle,  
Canada did war finally meet.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Sun gained a foothold when high hills were mounted,  
Repulse Bay split us in two.<sup>[6]</sup>  
Our "A" company's mission, to regain Mount Butler,  
A task fraught with danger anew.

The summit of Mount Butler proved a grisly display;  
John Osborn fought to save us.

Surrounded and sighted, a duet he danced;  
A rhythm that death led thus.<sup>[3][6]</sup>  
I mourned brave John Osborn, I mourned others more.  
Kennedy rushed on ahead.<sup>[3]</sup>  
Thunderous explosions obscured him from view,  
His fate, the worst I did dread.<sup>[3]</sup>

Private Bert Broadfoot fought at my side,  
Both wounded, we fled from the scene.  
My leg shrapnel-bitten, Bert's lung punctured through,  
Meant furlough in safe Aberdeen.<sup>[3]</sup>

Fate played her hand in our hasty withdrawal:  
Our brothers were drawn all around.<sup>[6]</sup>  
By an enemy brimming with fiery might,  
Snared foully atop the mound.<sup>[6]</sup>

We could do nothing for our brothers fallen,  
But guilt for their capture still carries.<sup>[3]</sup>  
I back to battle with leg wounds now treated,  
Broadfoot ordered to Queen Mary's

Private Orvis and I waged a war by ourselves,  
With shells that we found here and there.<sup>[3]</sup>

Till three fellow soldiers crossed our path  
One bleeding in need of care.<sup>[3]</sup>  
I tended his wounds, used my kit for his aid.  
Then took them to Aberdeen's door.<sup>[3]</sup>  
Gratitude paid by a kiss on the hand  
Gave joy in the midst of a war.<sup>[3]</sup>

Then back to the fight went Orvis and I  
To a battle upon Bennet's Hill.<sup>[3]</sup>  
By Fate's cruel kiss Orvis perished that day,  
Further charges on war's costly bill.

Fresh injured, alone, with no kit for my aid,  
Half-blinded, one-legged did I roam<sup>[3]</sup>.  
Till the English appeared, a Christmas Day gift,  
On Puddifoot's back carried home<sup>[3]</sup>.

My doctor a man so worthy of praise  
My ills *sans* amputation did cure.<sup>[3]</sup>  
A joyous reunion in hospital's halls:  
Private Kennedy found safe and secure.<sup>[3]</sup>

Beyond my sickbed, the battle was lost  
The White Flag was raised Christmas Day.<sup>[3][4][6]</sup>

Japan was the victor, our lives in their hands,  
Our future as prisoners it lay.  
Almost three weeks since the fighting began,  
Our surrender at three-fifteen;  
Just like children released from school,  
Views changed with reality seen.<sup>[3][6]</sup>

Sham Shui Po was a nightmarish hole.  
A prison for soldiers like me.  
Infested with vermin and pestilent lice,  
Our days suffered sorrowfully.<sup>[2][3][4]</sup>

Three things I retained those horrible years,  
Each gifts from sickbay nurses.  
A towel, a pillow, and mosquito net too,  
More precious than contents of purses.<sup>[3]</sup>

The camp itself in dire ruins lay,  
Ransacked for its wood and glass.<sup>[3]</sup>  
The walls were kept damp by rain and by dew,  
Condemning us to illness *en masse*.<sup>[2]</sup>

My crowded hut was nearest the sea,  
The damp and waves ever-present.<sup>[3]</sup>

The lull at first thought calming to mind,  
Marked only our time forespent.  
Our bodies betrayed us, without our intent,  
Starved cruelly and thoughtlessly laboured.<sup>[2][3][4]</sup>  
Our nights were crowded with insects unwelcome,  
Their end as food not savoured.<sup>[3]</sup>

My leg was lamed, tendons torn by metal,  
But little heed to it I paid.  
Then fever struck it virulently,  
And amputations were made.<sup>[3][5]</sup>

With only one leg, no hard work could I do,  
My task a medical aide.<sup>[3]</sup>  
Forced to stand watch as sick comrades fell weaker,  
My pain for this privilege paid.

Those darkened places held many terrors,  
Disease and famine rampant.<sup>[2][3][4]</sup>  
Our medics proclaimed only one cure would serve:  
Hope and faith kept lambent.<sup>[2]</sup>

Then the time came when we left Sham Shui Po.<sup>[3]</sup>  
Our departure ironic to note.

This hellhole began as something more welcome,  
Our barracks 'pon arrival by boat.<sup>[3]</sup>  
The Sun tried to hide the fuel it needed,  
But all of their efforts for naught.<sup>[6]</sup>  
Three nights long it burned like stars up above,  
Kindling hopes hard fought.

Beatings followed for those unhappy,  
Insolence it thought to show.<sup>[3]</sup>  
Blame not the soldiers, we learned as we saw  
All lived by Bushido.<sup>[2]</sup>

Many months went by, two score and more,  
Till Rising Sun set on Hong Kong.<sup>[3]</sup>  
Some a sickness felt more than a joy,  
While others burst out in song.

The Eagles arrived with delights in their wings  
One man's final taste of sweet.  
Next morning found him in infinite sleep,  
Death after war thought complete.<sup>[3]</sup>

Back on the sea, eastward we went.  
Treated like kings were we now.



By soldiers and nurses we trudged back to health,

To one I made love's sacred vow.<sup>[3]</sup>

A nurse she was who loved me to health,

Limbs pushed past their goal.

I proposed marriage and we were even,

Her love freeing my soul.<sup>[5]</sup>

Now love and children fill up my life.<sup>[5]</sup>

My comrades and leg are no more;

A bitterness left only a soldier can fathom:

The injustice suffered from war.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup>

Wind fell over these vast plains golden,

Hills met the arch of the sky.

Memories and pain still fester and linger,

Journeys still flowing by.

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