

LESSON THREE - THE VALOUR AND THE HORROR – "A SAVAGE CHRISTMAS: THE FALL OF HONG KONG"

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, two award-winning Canadian documentary filmmakers, Terrence and Brian McKenna, made a controversial three-part, six-hour series for television entitled *The Valour and the Horror*. It produced an immediate sensation, and an equally quick reaction. Supporters praised it as groundbreaking, refreshing, and engaging. Opponents called it poor history, bad revisionism, and extremely judgmental. Hundreds of letters to the editor, calls to on-line shows, opinion pieces, and finally a Senate subcommittee investigation, reflected the storm of controversy. There appeared to be little middle ground. Either the McKennas' indictment of the conduct of the Canadian government and the military in the Second World War situations they chronicled was tragically accurate, or it was grossly exaggerated.

In an interesting parallel, it was the second part of the documentary, "Bomber Command: Death By Midnight," dealing with the Allied bombing of German cities, that produced the most strident arguments. The third piece on Canadians in Hong Kong called "A Savage Christmas: The Fall of Hong Kong" was, by comparison, largely ignored. The lack of response seemed to mirror the Canadian attitude to the entire Pacific situation.

However, the Hong Kong story should not be ignored. This riveting account of what transpired in Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945 is deserving of all Canadians' complete attention. Mixing the words from journals, diaries, and letters with archival shots, as well as re-enactments, the McKennas recount a story of political expediency, military incompetence, and tragic indifference. Much of "A Savage Christmas: The Fall of Hong Kong" follows the return to Hong Kong and Japan of two veterans, Bob Clayton and Bob Manchester, after more than fifty years have passed. Viewers are captured by their telling of warmly human stories of courage and bravery. Against the background of incompetence and expediency at the top, viewers are made aware of profoundly moving tales of heroism and sacrifice.

While the McKennas may not have given us the complete truth about Hong Kong, arguably they have moved us a great deal closer to that elusive point. They have also destroyed what can accurately be called "a conspiracy of silence" that has surrounded Canada's participation in the defence of Hong Kong. The story of individual commitment and sacrifice in the face of highly dubious decision-making is as poignant as it is universal. The ultimate tragedy may well be that so few Canadians know about it. We owe it to those Canadians who endured Hong Kong to learn and "never forget" what happened there. And to understand – and apply – its lessons.

Comprehension and Recall

1. The total number of Canadian lives lost in Hong Kong was _____.
2. The British prime minister at the time was _____.
3. _____ changed the British prime minister's mind to conclude that it was worthwhile to provide at least a symbolic defense of Hong Kong.
4. The first Canadian troops designated for Hong Kong duty were _____.
5. The Canadian Prime Minister at the time was _____.
6. The Canadian government officially designated these troops as "unfit for combat" because _____.
7. The second batallion, soon added, with the same designation, was _____.
8. The number of troops to be sent to Hong Kong was _____.
9. The number of nursing sisters sent with the contingent was _____.
10. The voyage from Vancouver to Hong Kong lasted _____.
11. The date the Canadian contingent arrived in Hong Kong was _____.
12. The population of the colony had swollen to two million because of _____.
13. The principal city on the island was _____, and on the mainland, _____.
14. The main line of defense between the advancing Japanese forces and the defending troops on the mainland was _____.
15. Despite estimates that the number of Japanese troops was no more than 5,000, the real number of attackers was at least _____.
16. The incident that occurred at 7:50 a.m. on December 7, 1941 was _____.
17. The other sites, often overlooked or forgotten, which were also attacked in the hours immediately following that first attack were _____.

_____, and _____.

18. The Gin Drinkers' Line was supposed to hold out for weeks. The Japanese

Forces captured it within _____.

19. The first Canadian infantryman to die in combat on the ground in the Second World War was _____ of the _____ Battalion. The circumstances surrounding his death included

_____.

20. The name of the narrowest passage between the mainland occupied by the Japanese and the island held by the defenders was _____.

21. The date that the Japanese first crossed over to Hong Kong island was _____.

22. The number of Japanese who invaded the island in the first assault was _____.

23. For his bravery at the Battle of Wong Nei Chong Gap, Canada's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross was won by _____.

24. The evidence that UN investigators found after the war confirmed what had taken place immediately after the surrender. What was that evidence?

25. The most shocking massacre during the siege of Hong Kong took place at _____.

26. The official surrender of Hong Kong took place at _____(time) on _____ Day, _____(year).

27. The nickname of the notorious Japanese guard, born in Canada, who committed numerous atrocities was _____.

28. List at least six of the conditions that made life in the POW camps inhumane.

29. The epidemic that deepened the tragedy in camp was _____. It killed a total of _____ men.

30. Name three types of projects the POW's in the various camps had to work on. _____

Answers to the Comprehension and Recall section

1. The number of Canadian lives lost was 555.
2. The British prime minister at the time was Winston Churchill.
3. British military advisors changed the British prime minister's mind to conclude that it was worth making at least a symbolic defense of Hong Kong.
4. The first Canadian troops designated for Hong Kong duty were the Winnipeg Grenadiers.
5. The Canadian prime minister at the time was William Lyon Mackenzie King.
6. The Canadian government officially designated the Winnipeg Grenadiers as "unfit for combat" because of their lack of training.
7. The name of the second battalion chosen to join the Winnipeg Grenadiers was the Royal Rifles of Canada.
8. *The Valour and the Horror* documentary says 2,000, but it was actually 1,975 troops that were sent to Hong Kong.
9. There were two nursing sisters sent with the contingent although *The Valour and the Horror* says three.
10. The ocean voyage from Vancouver to Hong Kong took three weeks.
11. The Canadians arrived in Hong Kong on November 16, 1941.
12. Chinese refugees fleeing the Japanese advance had caused the population of the colony to swell to two million people.
13. The principal city on the island of Hong Kong was Victoria. The principal city on the mainland was Kowloon.
14. The main line of defense between the advancing Japanese forces and the British and Canadian troops was the Gin Drinkers' Line.
15. Despite estimates that there were only 5,000 Japanese troops threatening Hong Kong, there were in fact 50,000.

16. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had occurred at 7:50 a.m. on December 7, 1941.
17. The other sites that were also attacked in the hours immediately after Pearl Harbor were the Philippines, Malaya, and Hong Kong.
18. The Gin Drinkers' Line was supposed to hold out for weeks, but the Japanese forces captured it in just a few hours.
19. The first Canadian infantryman to die in combat in the Second World War was John Gray of the Winnipeg Grenadiers. He was a 21-year-old farm boy who missed the last boat leaving the mainland. He was captured by the Japanese and executed.
20. The narrowest passage between the mainland occupied by the Japanese and the island held by Commonwealth troops was Lye Mun Passage.
21. The Japanese crossed over to the island on December 18, 1941, after five days of bombardment.
22. In the first major assault on the island, the invasion force numbered 7,500.
23. John Osborn won the Victoria Cross, Canada's highest military honour, for his bravery at the Battle of Wong Nei Chong Gap.
24. After the war, investigators discovered evidence that confirmed Japanese atrocities, that is, the murder of wounded prisoners, had taken place immediately after the surrender.
25. The most shocking massacre to take place during the siege of Hong Kong was at St. Stephen's Hospital.
26. The official surrender of Hong Kong took place at 3 p.m. on Christmas Day, 1941.
27. The nickname of the notorious Japanese guard, born in Canada, who committed numerous atrocities was the Kamloops Kid.
28. Some of the conditions that made conditions in the POW camps inhumane included a rice-only diet, lack of medical care, theft of Red Cross packages, hard labour, diseases, beatings, and murders.

29. The epidemic that deepened the tragedy in the camps was diphtheria. The number of Canadians who died from it was 108.
30. The projects the POWs were forced to work on included the Kai Tak airport runway in Hong Kong, and coal mines and shipyards in Japan.

Thinking

1. Put yourself in the position of the two returning veterans, Bob "Flash" Clayton and Bob Manchester, portrayed in the documentary. What feelings and emotions would they be going through? Why would their return be difficult?
2. "They look at stones; we look at people." (Bob Clayton) What is the important idea being conveyed?
3. Why did the British government decide that rather than dispatching British troops for the defense of Hong Kong to ask for Canadian troops?
4. Can you suggest reasons why Canada never made "an independent investigation of the peril" prior to deciding to commit Canadian troops?
5. Suggest reasons for the British supreme overconfidence regarding the fighting abilities of the Japanese troops.
6. Put yourself in Bob Clayton's shoes. What would you say to Lieutenant Scott, the man who saved you, if you were able to meet him later in life?
7. Why could it be rightly argued that the surviving POWs would come to envy the dead?
8. Should the Japanese government and businesses, guilty of war crimes and war profiteering, compensate their Canadian victims? Justify your position with supporting evidence.
9. Would you have attended the reunion dinner between the two Canadian Hong Kong veterans and Japanese soldiers depicted in the documentary? Why or why not?
10. How did Canadian POWs view the dropping of the atomic bombs? Why?

Discussion

1. What evidence is there to support the claim made at the outset of the documentary that for Canada, Hong Kong constituted “an impossible mission”?
2. Why is Hong Kong “one of the darkest stories in Canadian military history”?
3. Were 2000 Canadian young men “offered as a lambs for the slaughter for some political expediency”?
4. Explain the significance of the title “A Savage Christmas: The Fall of Hong Kong.”
5. Why do you think the Japanese authorities withheld needed medical supplies?
6. Why was the Japanese POW death rate six times higher than German POW camps?
7. What are the Geneva Accords? Did Japan violate them? If they did, what should the consequences be?
8. Japanese and Canadian soldiers appear to have very different versions of the truth. Suggest reasons for that situation.
9. Why do you think that the Canadian government, in 1992, without the permission or knowledge of the Hong Kong veterans, absolved the Japanese of any guilt, responsibility, or blame in their actions in Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945?
10. Identify the bias in the McKennas' documentary “A Savage Christmas: The Fall of Hong Kong” and provide a minimum of six examples when that bias is shown.

LESSON FOUR – START OF THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC

SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

This lesson focuses on how the war in the Pacific began as well as beginning to explore the role that Hong Kong played within that theatre. Students will examine a variety of related topics: the rise of Emperor Hirohito, the invasion into Manchuria, the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations, the growing ascendancy of the army within Japanese politics, the perceived Japanese need to establish a “firm position” within the Asiatic continent, the significance played by oil, the decision to strike at Pearl Harbor, and the strategic importance of Hong Kong.

Unfortunately, textbooks and courses often give scant and superficial coverage of the Pacific theatre of World War II. Rather, the coverage is concentrated on Europe: the rise of Hitler, the failure of appeasement, the Battle of Britain, the Battle of the Atlantic, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, D-Day, and the like. The war in the Pacific is treated largely as an auxiliary to the main event being played out in Europe. If any coverage is provided it usually is a mention of “the day that will live in infamy” (the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor) and/or an examination of the American decision to drop the two atomic bombs on Japan in August of 1945. This is both unfortunate and shortsighted. The war in the Pacific, within the larger context of World War II, has its own intrinsic importance. It brought the United States into the war, making World War II a truly global conflict. It produced Pearl Harbor, the American “island hopping” campaign, the firebombing of Japanese cities, and the internment of Japanese-Americans and Canadians. Obviously, it also ushered in the modern nuclear age and made Hiroshima and Nagasaki defining events of the twentieth century. And finally, the war in the Pacific resulted in the tragedy that was Hong Kong.

Thus, in order for students to understand “the bigger picture” as well as to diminish their Western bias and perspective, an examination of the Pacific theatre of World War II is essential. Without such an analysis, the understanding of the war is incomplete. Also, knowing something of that area and background helps set the story of Hong Kong into a more meaningful context.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to have students gain an understanding of the chronology of the war in the Pacific
- to have students gain insight into cause and effect

- to refine research techniques
- to have students analyze the motivations behind Japanese actions prior to 1941
- to have students understand how the war in the Pacific dovetails with the European war within WW II
- to broaden students' perspective and lessen their biases
- to develop students' listening, presenting, and debating skills

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Divide students into groups of three.
2. Provide each group with individual strips of paper which list seventeen of the major events (without dates) in the Asia-Pacific War. (See RESOURCE for the correct order of events).
3. Each group should be instructed to try to place the events in the correct chronological order. Give approximately fifteen minutes for this task.
4. Put the class back together and go through the correct chronological order. As the events are put in their correct order, provide further information about the events, either through question-and-answer or through thumbnail sketches photocopied and distributed.
5. Map analysis. Distribute a copy of a map that reflects the information provided by the Timeline. (page 51 of the BC Unit has an appropriate one.) Questions might include the following: What are the geographic advantages of the Japanese location? What are potential disadvantages? What areas would be attractive to Japan? Why? Why might Japan be interested in Hong Kong?
6. Debate. Resolution - Be it resolved that the outbreak of the war in the Pacific was inevitable. This debate could either be conducted as a full class debate or in triads (a person for, a person against, and a person acting as judge.)
7. An alternative activity to the debate would be a research and brief presentation activity. If this was chosen, divide the class into teams of two and assign them one of the seventeen events in the Timeline. Their task is to research it (what it was and how it helped bring on the war in the Pacific) and then provide a brief (three to five minute) presentation to the class. This

option will clearly take more time but would provide students with not only greater knowledge and understanding but also further refined and polished research and presentation skills.

8. Discussion/Homework/Research questions.

DISCUSSION/HOMEWORK/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why did Japan embark on an aggressive policy of foreign invasion and annexation?
2. Why did the League of Nations remain powerless in the face of Japanese aggression in the Far East?
3. Did the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor make sense (from a Japanese perspective)? Why, or why not? Provide supporting historical evidence.
4. A central debate surrounding the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is whether or not the United States knew of the attack before it took place. Research both sides of the debate and decide which has the stronger position.
5. Research the place of oil in the thinking behind the Japanese policy.
6. Research the increasingly important role played by the Japanese Army within Japanese decision and policymaking.
7. Why did Japan join the Axis of Fascism?
8. Which country, Russia, China, Britain, or the United States was best situated to stop the Japanese expansionist drive? Explain and defend your choice by providing evidence.
9. Could the outbreak of the war in the Pacific have been avoided? Why, or why not? At what point would that possibility have been the greatest? Explain.

10. Why do North American curriculum and textbooks concentrate on the European rather than the Pacific theatre of World War II?

RESOURCE

Timeline of Major Events of the Asia-Pacific War and the History of Hong Kong

1. 1842 - By the Treaty of Nanking, China first cedes island and peninsula of Hong Kong.
2. 1843 - By Royal Charter, Hong Kong becomes a separate British colony.
3. 1895 - Shimonoseki Treaty. After its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, China cedes Taiwan to Japan.
4. 1898 - New Territories leased to Britain for ninety-nine years.
5. 1905 - Japan defeats Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. The Treaty of Portsmouth forces Russia to give up its claim in southern Manchuria to Japan, and recognizes Japan as the dominant power in Korea.
6. 1910 - Japan “officially” annexes Korea.
7. 1926 - Hirohito, after five years as regent, becomes the 124th Emperor of Japan.
8. 1931 - The Japanese army launches an invasion of Manchuria.
9. 1932 - The Japanese army seizes Manchuria and establishes the puppet

- state of Manchukuo.
10. 1933 - After the League of Nations declares that Manchukuo is not a legitimate state, Japan withdraws from the League. Japan keeps its troops in Manchuria and expands its control in the area by gaining control of much of North China.
11. 1936 - The Japanese Army gains ascendancy in Japanese political life.
12. 1937 - After the “Marco Polo Bridge Incident,” Japan launches an invasion of China. Japan captures Peking (now Beijing) and Shanghai. After the capital of Nanking (now Nanjing) falls, the Japanese military commits the Nanking Massacre.
13. 1939 - World War II begins in Europe with the Nazi blitzkrieg of Poland.
14. 1940 - Japan moves into northern Indo-China (now Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). Japan joins the Axis Alliance with Germany and Italy.
15. 1941 - Tojo Hideki becomes prime minister of Japan. Canada agrees with the British assessment of Hong Kong’s strategic importance and agrees to send 1,975 troops that arrive on November 16. On December 7, Japan raids Pearl Harbor. Simultaneously, Malaya, Philippines, and Hong Kong are attacked. After seventeen days of fighting, Hong Kong is surrendered to Japan. Of the 1,975 Canadian troops, 290 are killed in action while 1,685 are captured and interned in POW camps. Two hundred and sixty-seven die in internment.
16. 1942 - By mid-year, Japan has gained control over much of southeast Asia including Hong Kong, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Malaya (now Singapore and Malaysia), and Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia).

17. 1945 - The first atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima on August 6.
The Soviet Union declares war on Japan on August 8 (as agreed to by the Potsdam Treaty that ended the war in Europe). The second atomic bomb is dropped on Nagasaki on August 9. With Japan's surrender on August 15, World War II ends.