

## LESSON SEVEN – SURVIVING THE PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMPS

### SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

The great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, once sagely noted that the best way to judge the degree of civilization of any society was to visit its prisons. For the 1,694 Canadian survivors of the Battle of Hong Kong, this telling indictment speaks not only of the barbarity of the camps but also of the prisoners' incredible will to survive. Imprisoned by their Japanese captors in prisoner-of-war camps at North Point on Hong Kong Island and at Sham Shui Po on Mainland China, the Canadians were forced to endure conditions that could rightly be described as horrific and horrendous. Exhausted from battle, many wounded, they were hoping for the best. What they faced was unknown, but the Geneva Conventions that set out humane rules for the treatment of prisoners gave them some cause for hope. Three and a half years of brutal captivity proved just how illusory those hopes were, and the accuracy of Tolstoy's reflection.

The Japanese violated the Geneva Conventions with impunity. They set their captors to work – in mines, on the docks, and constructing an airport – all in direct violation of the rules regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. Nevertheless, having to work for the Empire of the Rising Sun may well have been the most minor of the Japanese infractions. Not only did the Japanese work their prisoners cruelly, the conditions in which they were kept were inhumane. Food rations were meagre – often only a small bowl of rice. The huts in which they had to live were rat infested, dark, with no heat. The prisoners were forced to sleep on wooden planks or a cement floor. Given their already weakened conditions, the hard work, and the lack of adequate medical care, diseases were rampant through the camps. Dysentery, thyroid problems, diphtheria, wet beri beri, and dry beri beri (hot feet) infected all but a small handful. Drugs that might have alleviated some of the suffering and saved lives were stolen by camp commanders and sold on the black market. Some prisoners were tortured and others executed.

The camps were, in short, a living hell. The casualty rate was high. While 290 soldiers had died in battle or had been executed by the Japanese, almost the same number died in the POW camps. In total, 555 soldiers of the 1,975 soldiers who originally sailed to Hong Kong were buried or cremated in the Far East. The soldiers who had fought bravely and survived the fighting, in some ways came to envy their fallen comrades. They had come through the battle, but now they faced another challenge in this "hell on earth," although a very different one. For example, those who were fortunate enough to survive typically lost almost half of their body weight.

This lesson seeks to have students understand and empathize with what these men endured. It is a testament to the indomitable human will to survive. We do them a great disservice if we fail either to remember or to commemorate their struggle.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to have students understand what the conditions in the Japanese POW camps were like
- to have students examine the ethical and legal sides of the issue of the Japanese POW camps
- to have students improve their research skills
- to have students empathize with those who were in the POW camps
- to have students improve their organizational skills
- to have students write persuasive letters and/or papers
- to have students improve their media literacy skills

## TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. For homework, have students conduct an Internet search for “the Geneva Conventions.” They should locate what the conventions stipulates about the treatment of prisoners of war. This information should be noted in their books.
2. Students should be taken into the library for a research period. Their specific task is to list the exact conditions experienced by the prisoners of war in the Japanese camps. Two of the best sources are Dave McIntosh’s *Hell on Earth: Aging Faster, Dying Sooner, Canadian Prisoners of the Japanese During World War II* and Charles G. Roland’s *Long Night’s Journey Into Day: Prisoners of War in Hong Kong and Japan, 1941-1945*. Students could search these and other pertinent sources, as well as more general references.
3. If sources are difficult to obtain, the teacher might read or photocopy an excerpt from either the McIntosh or the Roland book.
4. As students note the conditions in the POW camps, they should devise their own classification and organization structure. (Medical, nutritional, punishment, work, legal, illegal, etc., are some of the possibilities.)
5. Return to the classroom and show a brief video clip, either from “A Savage Christmas” or “Slaves of the Rising Sun.”
6. As students view the video, they should add to their list of camp conditions. As well, they should begin to analyze why the conditions were as dreadful as they were.
7. The class should then be divided into thirds. One third will act as prosecutors; one third will act as defense attorneys; one third will play the role of judges. They will legally argue the following indictment: that members of the Japanese Empire did knowingly and wilfully violate the terms and conditions of the Geneva Conventions as they pertain to the treatment of prisoners of war and should therefore be found guilty of crimes against humanity.

8. Conduct the legal trial in groups of three. Both sides should have time to prepare their legal brief. At the conclusion of their presentations, the judge should have an opportunity to write his/her verdict.
9. As a possible research extension activity, students could do one of the following:
  - a. Write an updated version of the Geneva Conventions (related to the treatment of POWs.)
  - b. Write a letter to the current Japanese government expressing concern over what transpired in the WW II camps and demanding redress.
  - c. Write a letter to the present Canadian government expressing support for the Canadian POWs.
  - d. Write a letter to Kofi Annan at the United Nations expressing concern over what transpired in the WWII camps and demanding redress.
  - e. Write a letter to the International Court of Justice at The Hague expressing support for the Canadian POWs.
  - f. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper expressing support for the Canadian POWs.

#### THOUGHT, DISCUSSION, AND RESEARCH

1. Students should be required to write one of the research extension activities listed in Task 9 of the Strategies section.
2. Could the conditions in the Japanese camps be considered analogous to those of the camps of the Nazi Third Reich? Why, or why not?
3. Write out a list of minimal conditions that all prisoners of war should be accorded.
4. Causal analysis – Why do you think that the conditions in the Japanese POW camps were so brutal?
5. Write a letter or a series of diary entries imagining yourself as a Canadian POW in the Japanese camps.
6. People sometimes speak of “the indomitable human will to survive.” What is it? Why do some people possess it? Under what conditions and circumstances does it appear?
7. Imagine that it is sixty years later and you are meeting one of your former Japanese prison guards. What would your feelings and attitude be? What sort of questions would you ask?
8. Knowing that the chances of a successful escape were perhaps one in a hundred, or worse, would you have tried to escape or would you have tried to endure the brutal camp conditions? Why?

9. Compare and contrast the internment of the Japanese Canadians in Canada with the treatment accorded the Canadian POWs in the Japanese camps. Is it a fair comparison? Why, or why not?
10. Write a poem or song in praise of the spirit of the Canadian POWs who survived the camps.
11. Research other POW camps, both historical and contemporary, How do they compare with the Japanese camps of World War II?
12. Is there someone to blame for what transpired in the Japanese POW camps? If not, why not? If there is, who is it and what should their punishment be?
13. If evidence is uncovered that a country violated the regulations regarding prisoners of war, what should the punishment be? Explain. Who should enforce it? How?
14. What is the major “lesson of history” that we should derive from the experience of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps?

## LESSON EIGHT – COMING HOME AND THE ISSUE OF COMPENSATION

### INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

The great American writer, Thomas Wolfe, entitled one of his novels *You Can't Go Home Again*. He intended it in another sense but it is no less appropriate for soldiers returning home from war. "Coming home" from any war is a difficult and often traumatic experience. For Canadian soldiers, returning from Hong Kong was traumatic, and more so. These survivors most certainly felt a myriad of emotions – relief, guilt, confusion, euphoria, frustration, and bitterness. And they were the lucky ones. Close to six hundred soldiers of the original contingent, almost one-third, never returned.

Those Canadian soldiers who did come home were scarred, in many cases permanently. There were the evident physical wounds with which they returned. Many were emaciated, having lost close to half of their normal body weight. That was not altogether surprising, given the fact that they were conscripted labour in the POW camps and fed meagre rations. Most returned with a number of different ailments and diseases. Decades of medical treatment in Canada would alleviate some, though scarcely all of them. The overwhelming majority of returning Hong Kong veterans would endure a lifelong variety of medical problems, from hearing and sight loss to intestinal and digestive difficulties.

As serious as their physical challenges were, they paled in comparison to their emotional and psychological difficulties. They had to be demobilized and re-integrated as civilians. They had to struggle to get their lives back in order. They had to return to school, get a job, and make a living. They had to relate to family and friends after having been profoundly changed by their Hong Kong experience. They had to cope with the sense of guilt that they had survived and friends had not. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) did not exist as a term back then. But it certainly did exist as a devastating reality and condition.

And finally, they had to deal with the issue of compensation. Certainly there was the financial aspect to it, that they should be compensated for what they had endured, and for what they had suffered, as well as for the violation of their rights. But that was merely the tip of the iceberg. They wanted to be recognized, to be acknowledged, and not be forgotten. Compensation was a verification of all those things. In addition, it would be evidence that their own government recognized their suffering, as well as proof that the Japanese government was admitting a wrong and attempting to redress it. Unfortunately, neither government has acted with much dispatch or integrity. It was only in December, 1998, after considerable pressure and lobbying, that the Canadian government granted compensation of \$24,000 to each surviving Hong Kong POW, or POW's widow, after the Japanese refusal to do so.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to increase students' awareness and understanding of the situation of returning Hong Kong veterans
- to have students attempt to empathize with returning Hong Kong veterans
- to increase students' media literacy skills
- to have students detect and analyze bias
- to have students sensitively judge issues of guilt, responsibility, and compensation
- to have students adopt an ethical position, and articulate and develop it in a written fashion

## TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Begin by showing the video "Canada's Hong Kong Veterans: The Compensation Story", which is part of the War Amps series *Never Again!*
2. Prior to viewing, divide the class in half. Each side should take notes on the video. One half should record evidence that supports the claim for compensation while the other half should note proof for the anti-compensation side.
3. The entire video is almost an hour in length, so either plan to complete this lesson over two days, or show only short clips of the video.
4. Reassemble the class and record on the blackboard arguments for and against compensation. As you do so, have students evaluate the strength and legitimacy of each point made.
5. Have students identify the bias of the video. What is it? Why might the producers have that particular bias? Is it possible to present a truly unbiased account of this issue? Why, or why not? So what does that tell you about people claiming that they have "no bias" or that "the facts speak for themselves"?
6. Reverse roles within the class. Those who have been recording arguments in favour of compensation must now become opposed to compensation. Those who had been recording arguments against compensation must now become supportive of compensation.
7. Students are to present a legal brief, representing their newly adopted position, that they might have delivered to either the Canadian Parliament or the Japanese Diet (the Japanese legislative assembly). It should be succinct and concise, no more than one page in length.
8. For homework (or if any time remains in class) have students read the articles contained in the Resources section. Their assignment is to identify the main idea (thesis) of each passage, and then to write a reasoned personal response that they might actually mail to the respective body to which they are responding.

## RESOURCES

From *Human Rights in the Asia Pacific 1931-1945*, BC Resource Guide for Teachers

From the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 (Article 14 [a])

It is recognized that Japan should pay reparations to the Allied Powers for the damage and suffering caused by it during the war. Nevertheless, it is also recognized that the resources of Japan are not presently sufficient if it is to maintain a viable economy to make complete reparation for such damage and suffering and at the same time meet its other obligations.

From the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 (Article 14 [b])

Except as otherwise provided in the present treaty, the Allied Powers waive all reparation claims of the Allied Powers, other claims of the of the Allied Powers and their nationals arising out of any actions taken by Japan and its nationals in the course of the prosecution of the war, and claims of the Allied Powers for direct military costs of the occupation.

From the General Assembly of the United Nations (Resolution 2391 [XXIII] of November 26, 1968) – Preamble

Noting that the application to war crimes and crimes against humanity of the rules of municipal law relating to the period of limitation for ordinary crime is a matter of serious concern to world public opinion, since it prevents the prosecution and punishment of persons responsible for those crimes.

Recognizing that it is necessary and timely to affirm in international law through this convention the principle that there is no period of limitation for war crimes and crimes against humanity and to secure its international application.

From Article 1 of the Convention

No statutory limitation shall apply to the following crimes, irrespective of the date of their commission:

- (a) War crimes as they are defined in the Charter of the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, of 8 August 1945... for the protection of war victims.
- (b) Crimes against humanity whether committed in time of war or in time of peace as they are defined in the Charter of the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, of 8 August 1945... even if such acts do not constitute a violation of the domestic law of the country in which they were committed.

## Japan's Responses to the Issue of Compensation

1. Japan paid compensation to the military and civilian prisoners of war of the Allied Powers in accordance with treaties between countries. Examples of compensation paid out include:
  - One dollar, fifty cents for each imprisoned day paid to the former imprisoned Canadian Hong Kong veterans
  - Seventy-six pounds to each British military prisoner of war and about forty-eight and one-half pounds to each adult civilian internee
  - One dollar (US) for each day of internment for the United States military and civilian prisoners of war and fifty cents (US) for child internees
2. According to Japan's domestic laws, the legal expiry date (statutory limitation) is fifteen years for legal responsibility of the most serious crimes. More than fifty years has passed since the end of the Asia-Pacific War, so Japan has no legal obligation to the victims of atrocities that were committed so long ago.
3. The governments, including Canada, who signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty had agreed to waive their own citizens' right to make claims (Article 14 [b] of the Peace Treaty). Since treaties govern relations between states, individual prisoners of war have no legal right to claim further compensation directly from the Japanese government.

## Japan's Position of Apology

A No War Resolution that expressed Japan's apology was adopted by the Lower House of the Diet (Japanese Parliament) in 1995. This was to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Asia-Pacific War.

The House of Representatives resolves as follows:

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, this House offers its sincere condolences to those who fell in action of wars and similar action all over the world.

Solemnly reflecting on many instances of colonial rule and acts of aggression in the modern history of the world, and recognizing that Japan carried out those acts in the past, inflicting pain and suffering upon the peoples of other countries, especially in Asia, the Members of this House express a sense of deep remorse.

We must transcend differences over historical views of the past and learn humbly the lessons of history so as to build a peaceful international society.

This House expresses its resolve, under the banner of eternal peace



enshrined in the Constitution of Japan, to join hands with other nations of the world and to pave the way to a future that allows all human beings to live together.

### Individual Apologies

Japanese dignitaries have offered their own individual apology. Arguably, the best known is that of Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi given on August 15, 1995.

Now that Japan has come to enjoy peace and abundance, we tend to overlook the priceless and blessings of peace. Our task is to convey to younger generations the horrors of war, so that we never repeat the errors in our history. I believe that, as we join hands, especially with the peoples of neighbouring countries, to ensure true peace in the Asia-Pacific region – indeed in the entire world – it is necessary, more than anything else, that we foster relations with all countries based on deep understanding and trust. Guided by this conviction, the Government has launched the Peace, Friendship and Exchange Initiative, which consists of two parts: support for historical research into the relations in the modern era between Japan and the neighbouring countries of Asia and elsewhere; and rapid expansion of exchanges with those countries....

...During a certain period in the not too distant past, Japan, following a mistaken national policy, advanced along the road to war, only to ensnare the Japanese people in a fateful crisis, and, through its colonial rule and aggression, the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. In the hope that no such mistake be made in the future, I regard, in a spirit of humility, these irrefutable facts of history, and express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and state my heartfelt apology. Allow me to express my feelings of profound mourning for all victims, both at home and abroad, of that history.

### DISCUSSION/HOMEWORK/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Compile a list of problems, difficulties, and challenges faced by returning Canadian Hong Kong veterans. If that returning veteran had been you, put them in rank order beginning with the most difficult problem.
2. Do you think that returning Hong Kong veterans had it any more difficult than returning veterans from other theatres of conflict during World War II? Why, or why not?
3. If those same veterans were to return to Canada today, do you think they would have an easier or more difficult experience? Justify your answer.

4. How would you assess and describe the Canadian government and people's reaction and response to the returning Hong Kong veterans? Can you suggest reasons for it?
5. What exactly is compensation? How is related to but different from an apology?
6. Should a later government apologize and offer compensation on behalf of the actions of an earlier government? Why, or why not? Are there dangers in doing so? Are there dangers in not doing so?
7. If the compensation is to be financial, how does (or should) a government go about computing it? What factors should be involved?
8. In 1988, the Canadian government paid surviving Japanese Canadians who had been interned in camps in Canada \$20,000. Do you think that was justified? Based upon that decision, what do you think of the government's decision to offer \$24,000 to Hong Kong POWs or their widows? Can you equate suffering?
9. Victims of wrongful legal convictions, for example Donald Marshall, have received compensation packages in excess of \$1 million . Can that be justified? Can the \$24,000 for the Hong Kong veterans be justified?
10. If you had been a Hong Kong veteran, what would you demand? How would you go about trying to get it?
11. Write a response to either the Japanese Diet or Prime Minister Tomiichi.
12. There have been several other claims for compensation, either in war time or peacetime. Research one of them and evaluate the strength of the claim.
13. Do you think that a more generous compensation package, settled sooner, would have brought more of a sense of closure to Hong Kong veterans? Why, or why not? Explain.
14. From the perspective of the issue of compensation for Canadian Hong Kong veterans, do you think that the law is invariably right, fair, and ethical? Why, or why not?