LESSON NINE – ONE SOLDIER'S STORY

INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

This lesson is quite different from the others within this unit of study. It focuses on "one soldier's story" exclusively. The soldier in this case is George MacDonell who provides a gripping and poignant eyewitness account of the men of Canada's "C" Force who fought in Hong Kong. His story is exceptional as well as representative. It is unique because Mr. MacDonell has done the requisite research, invested the time, care, and thought, and has written an accurate and compelling account of the story of Canada in Hong Kong entitled *One Soldier's Story (1939-1945).* It is a moving testament to both he and his brave comrades who fought and died in the Battle of Hong Kong and to those who suffered the indignities and brutalities of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps.

One thousand nine hundred seventy-five soldiers journeyed to Hong Kong in the fall of 1941. Nearly one-third of them never returned. Every one of them, those who came home and tried to come to grips with their Hong Kong experience and put their lives, physically and mentally, back together, as well as those who never returned, all had a story to tell. Mr. MacDonell has become their articulate voice. In that way he is fully representative.

This lesson adopts a journalistic approach. In the course of a rambling, yet incisive and revealing interview, Mr. MacDonell offers his insights and perceptions on what happened in Hong Kong, why it happened, and why it remains important. He is the living face and voice of those who are unable to communicate their thoughts and feelings. For a number of reasons, we would be well advised to heed both his words and counsel. By doing so, not only do we acknowledge and commemorate those courageous Canadians who experienced the tragedy of Hong Kong, but we also ensure that their sacrifice and their lives will not have been in vain. Further, we may well derive lessons that we can successfully apply in our time and thereby heed the words of the American philosopher George Santayana that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to increase students' knowledge of what transpired in Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945
- to have students understand the nature of asking questions to elicit information
- to have students adopt the role of a journalistic interviewer
- to have students respond, intellectually and emotionally, to information and ideas
- to have students improve their listening skills (The idea here is to possibly offer the interview in the form of an audio cassette.)
- to have students improve their powers to synthesize information

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Have students read carefully a transcript of the interview, recording information that they deem to be important.
2. As a class, ask students which three or four questions (and answers) were the most important and revealing? Why?
3. Select three different questions and create three or four related, follow-up questions that might have been asked of George MacDonell.
4. Put students in the following situation: You have invited George MacDonell to your house for dinner. What three to five additional questions would you want to ask him?
5. Ask students to identify three to five character traits that in their minds best describe the personality of George MacDonell.
6. Students should then write a one-to two-page biographical account of Mr. MacDonell that might appear in their local newspaper.
7. As an enrichment activity, students might be asked to organize a guest appearance in the class by either George MacDonell or another Hong Kong veteran.
8. As a foreword to his book, George MacDonell quotes the inscription on the Great War Memorial Wall of the Soldiers' Tower at the University of Toronto (which was taken from Pericles' funeral oration to the Athenians in 431 B.C.)

    > Take these men for your example. Like them, remember that Prosperity can only be for the free. That freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it.

    What do you think it means? Why do you think George MacDonell used it to open his personal account of Canada in Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945?
9. Students should write a personal reflective article. Imagine that you are in your late teens or early twenties. An international conflict has escalated into fighting and Canada is committed to one side in the dispute. Your government has put out a call for volunteers. Would you go and fight? Under what conditions would you agree to go? Why would you refuse? Explain your position with a well-reasoned and thoughtfully argued response.
10. Remembrance Day, November 11, is an annual commemoration of soldiers, like those in Hong Kong who sacrificed on our collective behalf. Yet, some have argued that since many of the living symbols of conflicts and wars of the past are no longer with us, it becomes increasingly difficult to organize ceremonies and observations that have relevance for young people. What suggestions could you provide to make the ritual observation of Remembrance Day more meaningful?

GEORGE MACDONELL INTERVIEW

This interview was conducted Friday, November 9, 2002 at the OHASSTA (Ontario History and Social Science Teachers Association) Conference. The responses are greatly abridged. (The interviewer is Nick Brune, the author of the Ten Lessons.)

1. Nick Brune: Your Hong Kong experience happened almost sixty years ago. What sorts of feelings and emotions do you have about it today? Have those feelings and emotions changed with the passage of time?

George MacDonell: It was a terrible military mistake resulting primarily from faulty intelligence and a poor grasp of strategy on cabinet's part. Politicians who had little understanding of the true picture made the military decisions. I personally have absolutely no bitterness, no personal anger or animosity. We're an un-military people; war thrust upon us. So what usually results when you have such a people with poor military intelligence and faulty decisionmaking is Dieppe and Hong Kong. There were terrible blunders by a people unprepared to defend themselves.

I am very sorry about the young men dying, but at the same time I am extremely proud of the way Canadians responded to the challenge. The crucial question is, "Would we surrender in face of an impossible situation or would we do our utmost?" And we choose the harder road, but I believe there were really no other alternatives. Surrender was never an option – until we were ordered to do so. The troops never deserted their positions; they never put their hands in the air. We were ordered to surrender after refusing to disarm. The troops never became a mob; never a rabble. And that is very different from other experiences involving other troops at other times. Within this disaster – we would never surrender; never acknowledge that we were defeated. Every soldier had a personal bullet stitched into his left-hand pocket. The final round was for the soldier himself. But we weren't quitters. We wouldn't take the easy way out. We were ordered to surrender by our officers. And finally the governor of Hong Kong had to put in writing that we had to lay down our arms. For eighteen days we were overwhelmed and overpowered.

Our leaders in the field were good. But that couldn't necessarily be said about the politicians who made the big decisions. What happened in Hong Kong is reminiscent of a comment made by German General Ludendorff, who said of the British army after the disaster at the Battle of Mons: "This is an army of lions led by jackasses." There were a series of incompetent decisions made supported, of necessity, by Canadian troops in the field. We were prepared to die rather than disgrace ourselves.

Our intelligence never said anything good about the Japanese. We were told that they were substandard and they turned out to be superior soldiers - disciplined, extremely brave, very experienced, and well armed.

Hong Kong was a tragedy then and is a tragedy now. But at the same time it was a tragedy in which remarkable courage was displayed. Hong Kong showed the spirit of the Canadians in the defence of their country.

2. N.B.: Do you think you'll ever forget about Hong Kong? Do you ever dream about it?

G. M.: Dreams of Hong Kong have persisted for sixty years. They have always persisted. They never go away. My most vivid dream is of the POW camps. I see the camp parade square and feel a powerless sense of frustration. In the dream I see the Canadians being told many, many times: "You will never go home; you haven't served your time here. Your country is under Japanese control. You'll be here forever." The dreams have died down a little bit over the last little while but I still have at least one a year. No one ever escapes the emotional trauma of being treated like a slave. No one escapes that total loss of control over your life. You have no control over any aspect of your life – for four years. You never get over it.

3. N.B.: With what feelings did you go to Hong Kong? Do you think that your sentiments were widely shared by your fellow soldiers? Or were they largely unique?

G.M.: Excited, all of us were excited. I didn't know when and where we were going. We were a bunch of farm boys. We had confidence in our government. Our government would never throw us into danger. That is what we believed. We had absolute confidence in ourselves. As well, we had the young person's invincibility. We all felt a great sense of excitement. Remember, we were very young. Seventy percent were twenty-two years of age or younger. There were soldiers as young as seventeen.

4. N.B.: How did your family and friends respond to your travelling to Hong Kong? Describe your departure scene. Did you receive letters from them?

G.M.: I didn't know our destination. Remember, there were one million Allied troops fighting throughout the world, all saving Western civilization. We were just 2,000 of that number. We simply didn't know where we were going. I remember standing on the dock in Vancouver. It was a beautiful sunny day. The train pulled up by the dock and the troops lined up, and prepared to receive the order to board the ship. I never received any letters. Letters from home took one to two weeks. But virtually no one received any.

5. N.B.: Exactly when and where did you find out that you were being sent to Hong Kong? What was your reaction? That of your fellow soldiers?

G.M.: I was from Listowel, Ontario. Like my fellow soldiers, I had been told nothing really. I was given embarkation leave of seven days and told to get ready after that to pull out. After the leave, the only hint was that we were issued tropical uniforms. So the thinking was that we must have been going to the desert. Probably Libya, as there was heavy fighting going on there. We were finally told that Hong Kong was our destination when we were at sea. When we pulled out from Vancouver, only one person knew the destination. That was the CO and of course he'd been told not to divulge it until told to do so. It must have been just before Hawaii; probably three or four days out of Vancouver, may be even less. Knowing where we were actually going didn't make any difference. Again, we were so young, and we were so full of confidence.

6. N.B.: How much did you know about Hong Kong before you shipped out?

G.M.: Nothing.

7. N.B.: What was the trip to Hong Kong like?

G.M.: It was crowded. The food was monotonous (Australian mutton was the most frequent meal). Of course there was no air conditioning. As a result, most of the men slept on deck under the stars. We trained on deck, worked on our machine guns, that sort of thing. We had recruits who had only really been in the army three weeks. Some of them didn't know how to fire a gun.

8. N.B.: What were your impressions of Hong Kong when you first arrived?

G.M.: I was stunned. It was so sophisticated – the cities of Kowloon and Hong Kong. They were elegant, modern, big cities, with buses, wide teeming population. Our barracks were beautiful - spotless, with beautiful messes. Remember that Hong Kong was called the "Pearl of the Orient" and it rightly deserved the title. And the Canadian dollar went so far - food, services, rickshaw rides, anything. It was all dirt cheap.

9. N.B.: Describe a typical day in Hong Kong prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

G.M.: Most of it was taken up with training, preparation, trying to learn our position on the island. That sort of thing. There was absolutely no wasted time. But there was a quick change from our initial feeling of excitement to recognizing that our defence position was a serious problem. We were ordered to stay on the perimeter of the island, close to the water. Our orders told us to be prepared to defend attacks from the sea. But our commander saw that that wasn't going to happen. Somehow we had been told to contradict the most basic military strategy and logic - always get the high ground.

10. N.B.: Who were your best friends in Hong Kong? What happened to them? Do you keep in touch with those still alive today?

G.M.: The other sergeants in my company and I were close friends. Almost all of the guys I got to know well were killed in battle or got split up. After the war I would see some of them, in going to meetings and reunions. However, I got so depressed in those kinds of situations that I had to stop going to them altogether. I was being asked to remember, but all I wanted to do was to break away from those memories and forget.

I carried this large, unconscious sense of guilt, which I imagine many returning veterans did as well - this sense that my friends had died and I had not. I never shirked my duty. I was always at the front of troops. But I couldn't cope with being alive and the fact that they were not. I was virtually in tears every Christmas Day – this overwhelming sense that I was alive and they were not. So I went to Sunnybrook Hospital and saw a doctor, and he in turn recommended a psychiatrist. I had three or four sessions with him. The most profound conclusion came around his central question – Is it your fault? My answer was – No. But then he asked me - Do you believe that? That was exactly what I was having trouble dealing with. I really didn't believe it.

All the good things that were happening in my life after my return from the war turned to ashes. Always, just below the surface, I was asking myself - why do you deserve this? It was a huge self-inflicted burden. And I just couldn't talk to anyone about it. I started mentioning it to a few very close friends and they suggested that I should write it down. My visit to see the Chinese doctor, Dr. Keith Wong, who was very sensitive and who had helped other POWs turned out to be the critical decision. He was an extremely insightful person. He told me to write it all down; to say what had happened. In that way I could leave a record for the children and grandchildren of my comrades. So I began putting it down and I found facing up to it was very helpful.

But I didn't want to write a bitter, vengeful account. Rather, I wanted a balanced approach. The story should not just be all the gore, all the racial hatred, because that wouldn't be helpful. I'm eighty years old so I could be a little more balanced and reflective.

11. N.B: What were you doing when the first fighting broke out? What was your emotional reaction to the fighting?

G.M.: I was at Lye Mun. My men and I could hear the battle raging but since we thought the enemy would come from sea, we stayed in our positions a mile or two away. We listened to the uproar. We weren't engaged until dawn of the next morning. In combat, I was always a leader, so I was worried about whether or not we had enough food, enough ammunition; whether we were in the right positions. The important concerns that vitally affected my platoon totally absorbed me, so I didn't really have any strong personal emotional reaction to the start of the fighting. I do remember being afraid of being wounded, lacerated mostly. However, I was preoccupied with my troops. I can say that I was never frightened.

12. N.B.: How would you describe the life of a soldier?

G.M.: In peacetime, I liked it, especially the comradeship. I had it great. I was a seventeen-year-old kid rapidly being promoted and learning something new every day. I enjoyed the activities, the training, just the whole atmosphere and environment. In combat, I was not terribly afraid. In fact, I reached a high – a kind of super high – an adrenaline pumping kind of rush. It was an indescribable kind of excitement.

13. N.B.: What did you think of the fighting abilities of the Japanese?

G.M.: It's important in answering that question to understand the culture. However, at the time, I, like virtually every single Canadian, had no real concept of that culture- let alone a true understanding. The Japanese represented a completely different culture. It wasn't a question that it was a culture that was inferior and not as advanced as our own. It was just a matter that it was very different from where we came from. In terms of military matters, that difference had a great impact. The Japanese believed in either killed or be killed; they had no respect for anyone who surrendered. Added to that, in their military planning, they could not be encumbered by prisoners. At Iwo Jima, 76,000 Japanese soldiers fought to the death. Not a single soldier surrendered. They weren't murderous but they were savage beyond the extreme. What they did to captured civilians and soldiers was beyond belief. It is a known fact, though not widely known, that they engaged in cannibalism as they ate body parts of executed American pilots. However – and it is a very large however – when we look back on what occurred, we must make a distinction between the average Japanese individual and the Japanese soldier. Japanese civilians had none, absolutely none, of that savagery.

As soldiers, the Japanese were excellent. They were superb. They had better weapons; they understood how to fight in mountainous terrain; they had all the necessary equipment. Importantly, they used mules instead of what we used – humans - to carry equipment up the mountains. We were constantly exhausted and constantly consuming water – you had to doing such heavy physical labour in a very hot climate.

So when we were finished the job, we were completely dehydrated. Running out of water was a big problem for a soldier. The Japanese had great light artillery. Perhaps one of the greatest advantages was their excellent camouflage. It was superb. They could be thirty yards away and you couldn't see them. So often that allowed them to slip around behind us. Finally, they were much better trained that we were. They were the 38th Division, which had been fighting in China for two years – and they showed it.

14. N.B.: What did you think about the Japanese, in general?

G.M.: As far as the soldiers in the field were concerned, there was no crime they didn't commit. But the people of Japan weren't like that at all. In fact, many of us wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for them. They stole and lied for us. In many ways, they kept us alive. If the general population had mirrored the troops, then none of us would have survived. In general, I have a great respect and liking for the Japanese people. I bear them absolutely no hostility.

15. N.B.: What were the relations like between Canadian enlisted men and officers in Hong Kong?

G.M.: They were excellent. We had outstanding senior officers and we had great respect for them. They were all World War I veterans. They were highly respected.

16. N.B.: Were you ever frightened for your life in Hong Kong?

G.M.: Absolutely! On Christmas Day, we were ordered to attack Stanley Village. I really thought I was going to die. And I couldn't get over the thought that my Mom would be very unhappy about that. The only thing that saved me from certain death was that their shots simply missed me. It was somehow fitting and symbolic that this final clash took place in a graveyard.

17. N.B.: Describe how you were taken prisoner.

G.M.: At 8:30 at night, we were ordered to lay down our arms and stop resisting the Japanese. The Japanese left us alone for two days. That was wonderful and so many of us simply lay down and slept. We were so exhausted and sleep deprived. Sentries slept where they stood. We were all very disoriented.

18. N.B.: What were conditions in the POW camps like? Which camp were you in?

G.M.: You have to understand that the Japanese were never prepared to run the camps. They had no experience, leadership, or plan. In fact, in terms of leadership, the camp commanders were misfits. They were sick quirks who couldn't make it in the army. The combat officers were different. They had respect for other soldiers, especially for the Canadians. The guards were almost all Japanese, though it varied. Some of the Korean guards were terrible, just as bad as the Japanese, if not worse.

19. N.B.: Describe your typical day. When did you get up? What work did you do? What food were you given? Did you have any "free time"? When did you go to sleep?

G.M.: It's been estimated that an average man needs 3,500 calories to remain healthy. It's been estimated that as POWs in the Japanese camps we received about 1,000 to 1,200 calories. Most of it consisted of rice, barley, and assorted greens, and eventually we began to starve to death. A deficiency of 2,000 calories per day means simply that the body breaks down – the optic nerve; heart muscle; both break down. They simply can't function as they normally do. The immune system breaks down. So many just died of treatable diseases. For instance, in cold climates such as where we were in Japan, pneumonia killed in a matter of three days. I could never understand the motivation of the Japanese. Never understood it! They never showed any concern. And yet we were working and assisting in their mines and docks, so we were of benefit of them. And yet they never showed any kind of concern. A farmer shows concern for a plough horse when it is in bad health. But never the Japanese. Thirty percent of all Japanese POWs died, and, by comparison, three percent of German POWs died.

20. N.B.: Had you ever heard of the Geneva Conventions while you were held prisoner?

G.M.: Yes, we knew about them. But when we challenged the Japanese that they were not living up to them, they simply replied that they had never signed them in the first place. They concluded by saying, "so just shut up and be thankful that you're alive." They were not a civilized enemy.

21. N.B.: What happened to your health while in the camp?

G.M.: I was one of the lucky ones. I survived. But nevertheless I was affected by an assortment of medical problems, and when I was released I weighed less than 148 pounds. I had started the war at 210 pounds. I was a walking skeleton.

22. N.B.: Did you ever give up hope?

G.M.: Never! I was determined to live through it no matter what. And that feeling was repeated by my comrades. It was part of our training and psychology. We were the best; we were temporarily in a bad situation. But we'd beat it.

23. N.B.: How did you hear about the ending of the war? What was your reaction?

G.M.: By radio. A secret radio that the Japanese never knew we had. It was concealed in a hollow beam. A ship, the American cruiser, "Houston," had sunk and the radio staff went over the side but they managed to save parts of the powerful receiver. It was assembled and it found its way to our camp, which was close to a mine. We listened to AFN (American Forces Network) – a program called "Treasure Island" on a radio station in San Francisco. It broadcast the news twice a day to troops in the Pacific. So we knew about the dropping of the atomic bomb when the camp commander didn't have a clue. By radio, we heard that at noon on August 12 the Japanese emperor was going to speak. But at that point, which was a couple of days before the announced speech, we weren't sure exactly what he would say. He might very well have instructed his people to continue the fight, to fight to the death. But on August 12, we heard the broadcast instructing the Japanese to lay down their arms, that the surrender was official.

24. N.B.: Do you remember your return to Canada? What was your reception back home like?

G.M.: Incredible! We landed at Gordon Head Reception Centre in Victoria. We were issued new uniforms. We had complete medical checks. Our new uniforms were fully tailored. After ten days, which let us acclimatize ourselves as well as get part of our health back, we were allowed to go into Victoria. We couldn't buy anything in stores; we couldn't pay for a meal in a restaurant. Everything was given to us. We were treated as conquering heroes. It was embarrassing. We were each given one hundred dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. But we never were able to spend it on anything. Perhaps my happiest moment was when I signed over my sixty-eight men. Now someone else was going to look after them and be responsible for them. In my camp, at the time of release, the Americans told me that I was responsible for seeing that those men got back home safely. When I got the receipt for the safekeeping of those men, my heartbeat went well over one hundred. I had to be hospitalized and sedated. I had promised my men that we'd be home by Christmas. And all sixty-eight of them made it home with a week to spare. We had survived by being strong, mentally and physically. We had survived one day at a time, one foot at a time. We had this powerful will to survive and not to disgrace the uniform.

25. N.B.: How difficult was it for you to readjust to civilian life? What was the greatest challenge? Why?

G.M.: It was terrible. It was so different and I felt so guilty. Now nobody's telling you what to do – no one crowding you – poking you with a bayonet. You're totally on your own. But this sense of freedom and independence, after this life of strict regimen and orders, was difficult and threatening. You didn't really know what to do. The next feeling was one of anxiety. Here we were, released, but not knowing what to do. Again there was that sense of anxiety. There was no daily command structure; there were no daily plans and orders. In the Army, everything is planned and regimented down to the smallest detail. Now I was completely on my own, so those feelings of security and order and certainty were all gone.

I spent my first year at the University of Toronto. And, quickly, things started to come together. I did suffer from severe abdominal pains. The doctor said they were simply withdrawal symptoms and told me to relax.

26. N.B.: What did you decide to do for a living? What success did you have in that endeavour? Did you marry? Have children? Grandchildren? Where in Canada did you live?

G.M.: I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, so I went to see Bora Laskin at the law school at the University of Toronto. He gave me some law books, and they bored me to tears. Then I went to see Dean Bissell at the university, and he asked me what I liked to do. I told him that I had loved being an officer, so he helped steer me into the field of industrial relations. I came to love that area just as much.

While I was in school, I wrote a paper on General Electric and their industrial relations. And I was extremely critical of GE. Pretty soon after I submitted the paper,

which received an A+, the phone rang. It was the secretary of the president of GE. I wondered: How did he get my paper? I later learned that my course instructor and the president were close friends. He asked me if I had written the paper? I said that I had. He asked me if I believed what I had written in it. And again I said yes. So he said that he wanted me to come to work for him the next Monday. I told him that I couldn't do that, that I was still working on my MA. I wouldn't be through for at least another year and a half. Well, he and his company were big contributors to the U of T – something that I didn't know at the time. So he said that was no problem; that they could easily work something out. And he did. I worked for GE half days and for the other half, I was a student. This was 1948. He offered me forty dollars a week. I thought he was kidding. I couldn't believe that anyone would pay me that much money. So I said, " Oh, right!" He thought I was negotiating and said, "Oh, all right, make it fifty." I was in a complete state of shock. I went home and told my wife, "We're rich." I rose rapidly, step by step, until I became a senior executive, and a member of the Board at General Electric.

We have two children, Paul and Susan, both fifty now. And one grandchild, Tyler, who is eleven.

27. N.B.: Who do you hold responsible for what happened to you in Hong Kong?

G.M.: I think it was Prime Minister Mackenzie King - for purely political reasons. He wanted the Opposition off his back – he sent the troops. He was being accused of harbouring his troops, of not wanting to send them into combat. In his defence, he was told Hong Kong was a secure position, that there was no danger. But clearly he was given bad advice. The Australians and the troops from India were fighting in the desert. Everybody was helping Britain, but the Canadians troops hadn't been sent to engage the Germans at this point. Mackenzie King wanted to show he was warlike. Remember, this was a man who had come back from Europe extolling the virtues of Hitler.

28. N.B.: What would, in your view, constitute adequate compensation? To whom should it be given? Who should provide it?

G.M.: The federal government. They are the ones responsible for war-related injury and anything that prevents a soldier from living and supporting his family.

29. N.B.: Do you think that this present generation and government can and should be called to account and held responsible for what a previous generation and government did?

G.M.: The modern government has been exceptionally good. They never lacked sympathy or understanding. It was the Canadian government who compensated Canadian troops for their slave labour in the Japanese POW camps when the Japanese government refused, so I have no criticism of the Canadian government on that score. They just didn't know about tropical diseases or post-traumatic stress disorder. They'd never really experienced anything like that before. They never tried to hide from their responsibility. The major problem now is, of course, that there are so few survivors remaining.

30. N.B.: How do you think of the Japanese today?

G.M.: Respectful. I competed with many Japanese business executives while I was at GE. I have absolutely no hatred or animosity towards them. I find them warm and respectful.

31. N.B.: People frequently speak of "defining moments." Clearly, Hong Kong marked such an event in your own life. How do you think your Hong Kong experience changed your life?

G.M.: It taught me that I could draw on enormous reserves, that I wouldn't break under pressure, that I was a survivor. It gave me a heavy dose of confidence. It also served to put things in perspective. You learn what's really important. It helped me to know who I am.

32. N.B.: If you could have changed any one thing about your Hong Kong experience, what would it be?

G.M.: I would have insisted that military intelligence be better. If it had been, it might have prevented the whole debacle. We might never have gone to Hong Kong. Remember, Churchill had initially said that no one should be sent there, that it would be a waste of men. That prediction turned out to be true. But our military intelligence messed up. Too few listened to those with professional military training.

33. N.B.: Are you bitter about what happened to you? Do you think your comrades share your sentiment? Why, or why not?

G.M.: Not a bit. We were faced with a crisis, and we did it without a blink. The government made a mistake, but they did not deliberately try to kill us. It was just a grave mistake.

34. N.B.: Did Canada make the right decision in committing troops to Hong Kong?

G.M.: No! Canada should not have sent troops to Hong Kong because the island could not be successfully defended. Water and food for the civilian population of more than a million people came from the mainland, so a prolonged siege would have meant starvation and disaster for everyone. Our military supply lines were too far away to supply or support our troops in the face of a superior Japanese navy and air force that controlled the approaches to Hong Kong.

35. N.B.: What legacy, personally and nationally, do you think Hong Kong has had?

G.M.: Hong Kong has shown us that poor preparation for our defence and faulty intelligence are serious mistakes for a nation wishing to preserve its freedom, and protect itself from aggressors like Hitler. Also, it has shown once again the determination, courage, and self-sacrifice of those young Canadians who, during the national crisis of World War II, stepped forward to defend their country.

36. N.B.: Why do you think that the Canadian experience in Hong Kong has been largely ignored and forgotten by Canadians?

G.M.: It was too remote, too overshadowed. It was soon forgotten with the great struggle in Europe. It was swept under the rug. The Canadian government didn't want to publicize it – for obvious reasons. It was the beginning of the end of the British Empire. It was the first card that led to the whole collapse. It was probably just easier to forget the whole thing.

37. N.B.: Have you travelled to Hong Kong or Japan since the war?

G.M.: Yes. I have returned to Hong Kong to visit my comrades who lie buried in the Sai Wan Cemetery near Lye Mun. I have tramped on the ground we fought over, and where so many of my company were killed. The terrain was even more difficult and forbidding than I remembered it.

38. N.B.: If you could write an epitaph for those who died in Hong Kong, how would it read?

G.M.: I t would read: Against overwhelming odds, without thought of surrender, they fought bravely for their cause in the best tradition of the Canadian army. Their conduct both on the battlefield and in Japanese prison camps was characterized by their discipline, their courage, and their loyalty to their country. Theirs is a story of the strength and dignity of the human spirit, and about those who believe in service before self.

39. N.B.: What is the most important lesson that the current generation should derive from the Hong Kong experience?

G.M.: There may come another time in the future when young Canadians are faced with a national crisis similar to that of 1939. If that occurs, then all Canadians must be prepared to fight, and sacrifice their lives if necessary, in defence of their country.

40. N.B.: What led you to write your book? What was your prime purpose? What, in your mind, will mark it as a success?

G.M.: I wrote *One Soldier's Story* to provide an eyewitness account of what happened in Hong Kong in 1941 for the wives, children, and grandchildren of those who served with me in Hong Kong. I felt that the story, so little known, should be told so that it could become part of our history. The book will be a success if it makes us a little prouder to be Canadians, and if it reminds young people that preserving our Canadian citizenship exacts a price, that of defending our country and its people.

41. N.B.: What do you think has happened to Canada's military over the last sixty years?

G.M.: The government of Canada has lost sight of the fact that, although we have no territorial ambitions and are not a military nation, we must have a minimum armed force to ensure our national security.

42. N.B.: How do you think Canadians generally regard their military today? Is that view a reflection of the government's view?

G.M.: After the 9/11 tragedy, Canadians have awakened to the fact that we are woefully unprepared for the uncertainty of our times, and are now urging the government to rebuild our armed forces. Some seem to think we can leave our national security to the United States, a view not shared by the Americans or a majority of Canadians.

43. N.B.: When you sit down with your grandchild how do you begin to try to make sense of the experience of Hong Kong?

G.M.: I tell my grandchild that when the whole Western world was threatened by a dictator name Hitler, Canadians, along with others, decided to oppose him. Sending soldiers to Hong Kong was a serious military blunder made by the politicians. Despite that, the Canadians acquitted themselves with honour and distinction. I tell him he should be proud of the fact that these soldiers behaved with courage, and loyalty, and they never gave up. They volunteered to serve, and we should never forget them.

LESSON TEN – THE LESSON AND LEGACY OF HONG KONG

INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

Hong Kong speaks many lessons, but only if we listen sensitively and carefully. For us to gain collectively from the tragic experience, we must do a number of things. First, we must know exactly what exactly. That is perhaps the easiest part of our task. The story is well documented – how almost two thousand Canadians were sent by their government for dubious reasons at best - to defend what was basically an indefensible position. They were, to put it generously, poorly trained and ill-equipped. Their defeat, after a gallant and heroic defense, was almost a forgone conclusion. Close to three hundred soldiers died. However, that was merely the first stage of the tragedy. The next was the brutal conditions in the Japanese POW camps wherein the Canadians suffered – and died – under a repressive and illegal regime of hard work, filthy conditions, meagre rations, grossly inadequate medical care, and torture.

Knowing what happened is merely the first essential part. The next is analyzing and understanding why it happened. Why did the Canadian government acquiesce, with scant investigation, to the altered British policy of sending soldiers to the colony at Hong Kong? How were those troops selected and why were they sent untrained, unprepared, and poorly equipped? How did such a tragedy occur? Who was responsible? Who was to blame? Who is to be held accountable? What would constitute adequate redress? Knowing why the tragedy occurred allows us to move to a higher level of understanding.

But knowing what happened and why it occurred is still not enough. We need to appreciate the significance of Hong Kong. We need to learn from it and apply it in other situations. Further, we need to pass on the knowledge and understanding to other generations. In short, we need to learn fully “the lesson of history” Hong Kong provides. In so doing, we not only improve our own lives and reduce the threat of a reoccurrence of such a tragedy, but we also keep faith with those who gave their lives and those that suffered in Hong Kong. If we do all those things, sacrifices will not have been in vain. Rather, the deaths and suffering will have been for some purpose. We will live our values, not only in our words but also our actions.

> Take these men for your example. Like them, remember that Prosperity
> can only be for the free. That freedom is the sure possession of those
> alone who have the courage to defend it.
> - from Pericles' funeral oration to the Athenians in 431 B.C.

This lesson, the final one of the unit, examines “the big picture” and attempts to synthesize what has come before, as well as pointing the way to the future. The title, “The Lessons and Legacy of Hong Kong” is apt as both a sense of closure as well as a point of departure.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to have students synthesize their understanding
- to have students communicate and convey their understanding
- to have students examine “the big picture” associated with Hong Kong
- to increase students’ sense of civic responsibility
- to have students understand the concept of the rules of war
- to have students improve their writing and arguing skills

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Have students research, through an Internet search, the Geneva Convention of 1864, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, and the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 1929. If that is not possible, provide photocopies of pages 42 to 48 of the BC Resource Guide for Teachers for *Human Rights in the Asia Pacific 1931-1945.*

2. If either of the above suggestions is impossible, refer to the Resource section below.

3. Have students read the relevant rules of the conduct of war and the treatment of prisoners of war.

4. Have them explain those rules by writing them in their own words.

5. Conduct a mock war crimes trial. This should begin with the writing of the actual indictment against the Government of Japan for the period from 1941 to 1945, relative to Hong Kong.

6. One third of the class should then be assigned the role of the defense. One third should be assigned the role of the prosecution. The remaining third should be divided in half. One half should form the judge’s panel. The other half should be members of the press.

7. The defense and prosecution should prepare and organize their evidence. While they are doing that, the judges should prepare an exact rendering of the pertinent laws in the case as well as reviewing the major historical and legal points that they expect to hear in the upcoming case. The press should write articles that would appear prior to such a case.

8. Conduct and convene the case. It should begin with the prosecution side making its opening statement, followed by the defense with its opening statement. Then, the prosecution should call witnesses, introduce exhibits, and provide evidence to prove its side of the indictment. The judges can question and examine as they see fit. The defense should then present its case in the same way as the prosecution has already done. Once again, the judges may question and examine.

9. Closing statements are then delivered, first by the prosecution and then by the defense.

10. The press should write a second series of articles covering the actual conduct of the trial.

11. The judges retire to deliberate their verdict. They must decide solely on the presentation of the evidence that they have just heard.

12. They should then write out their verdict, along with the reasoning and rationale underlying that verdict.

13. The press should write a third and final set of articles about the verdict and its significance.

THOUGHT/DISCUSSION/ RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. List the lessons that should be learned by Canada from the experience of Hong Kong.

2. Research the Nuremberg War Crime Trials that followed World War II in Europe.

3. Is it possible, realistically, to have "rules of war"? Why, or why not?

4. Why do you think Canada has been slow, and reluctant to learn, in applying the lessons of Hong Kong?

5. Have you ever in your previous educational experience learned anything about Canada's role in Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945? Why do you think that is the case? What do you think is the significance?

6. Write a eulogy for the Canadian "unknown soldier" of Hong Kong.

7. Write a letter to the current Canadian government outlining your thoughts on Canada's role in Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945, advocating what should be done and explaining why.

8. Write the same kind of letter to the current Japanese government.

9. Write a song or poem dedicated to the Canadian soldiers of Hong Kong.

10. If you were apportioning blame for what happened to Canadians in Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945, who would it be? Justify, with evidence, and reasons for your choice.

11. Can the Canadian experience in Hong Kong during World War Two truly be called a "tragedy?" Why, or why not? Has anything that has been done, or not done, since that time made the tragedy worse? Explain.

12. What do you think should and could be done to show that this generation has really learned the lesson of Hong Kong? What specifically can you do?

RESOURCES

Rules of War

1864 – The Geneva Convention of 1864 established the International Red Cross and laid down the rules for the treatment of the wounded in war.

1899 & 1907 – From The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 that established as international law many of the customary laws of war that existed prior to World War I.

> …the inhabitants and belligerents remain under the protection and the rule of the principles of the law of nations, as they result from the usages established among civilized peoples, from the laws of humanity, and the dictates of the public conscience.
>
> Article 3: a belligerent part which violates the provisions of the said Regulations shall, if the case demands, be liable to pay compensation. It shall be responsible for the acts committed by persons forming part of its armed forces.

October 18, 1907 – From the Annex to Hague IV (of 1907)

> Article 4: Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or corps who capture them. They must be humanely treated. All their personal belongings, except arms, horses, and military papers, remain their property.
>
> Article 6: The State may utilize the labour of prisoners-of-war [*sic*] according to their rank and aptitude, except officers. The tasks shall not be excessive and shall have no connection with the operations of the war.
>
> Work done for the State is paid for at the rates in force for work of a similar kind done by soldiers of the national army, or, if there are none in force, at a rate according to the work executed.
>
> The wages of the prisoners shall go towards improving their position, and the balance shall be paid them on their release, after deducting the cost of the maintenance.

Refinement of the Rules of War

July 27, 1929 – From the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners-of-War[*sic*]

> Article 2: Prisoners-of-war [*sic*] are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or formation which captured them. They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity. Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden.

August 8, 1945 – From the Charter of the International Military Tribunal

> (b) War crimes: Violations of the laws or customs of war include, but are not limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave-labour or for any other purpose of the civilian population of, or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war, of persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.