Canadians in Hong Kong
During the Second World War

Late in 1941, the Allies, hoping to deter hostile action by Japan, reinforced their outpost at the Crown colony of Hong Kong. Canada was asked to provide two battalions, and sent 1,975 members from the Royal Rifles of Canada (from Quebec City) and the Winnipeg Grenadiers. They sailed from Vancouver on Oct. 27, 1941, and arrived in Hong Kong Nov. 16.

Some 14,000 Allied troops from the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Canada, Singapore and India defended the Crown colony, including the island of Hong Kong and the adjacent mainland areas of Kowloon and the New Territories. The Canadian battalions, with Britain's Middlesex Regiment, formed the island brigade.

Neither Canadian battalion had battle experience, having served only on garrison duty — the Grenadiers in Jamaica and the Royal Rifles in Newfoundland. Nor had they received all the training required for front-line troops, but it was believed they would have time to complete their training in Hong Kong. Instead, they became the first Canadian soldiers to fight as a unit in the Second World War when Japan almost simultaneously attacked Pearl Harbor, Northern Malaya, the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island and Hong Kong.

The Japanese attacked the mainland positions on Dec. 8 (in North America the date was Dec. 7), and all mainland troops withdrew to Hong Kong on the 11th. On Dec. 18, the Japanese invaded the island. The invasion force was overwhelming in strength, backed with a heavy arsenal of artillery and air support. The Allied troops had no significant air or naval defence, and no hope of being relieved or resupplied. Yet they fought and held out for several days. Governor Young, after being advised that further resistance was futile, surrendered the colony on Christmas Day.

In 17½ days of fighting, 290 Canadians were killed; 493 were wounded. Those who survived were imprisoned in foul conditions in camps in Hong Kong, where another 129 Canadians died. Early in 1943, 1,184 Canadians were taken to Japan for forced labour in industries, including mining. About 135 of them died. In all, more than 550 of the Canadians who embarked for Hong Kong never returned to Canada.

Company Sergeant Major John Osborn of the Winnipeg Grenadiers earned the Victoria Cross — the Commonwealth's highest award for valour in action — posthumously, in the defence of Hong Kong. The Japanese were throwing grenades into the Canadians' positions and Osborn grabbed several and threw them back. One grenade fell where he could not reach it in time; he shouted a warning to his comrades and threw himself on the grenade, saving many lives.