

Ghosts of war felt through the generations

BY LESLIE HENDERSON



It's always interesting to find out what draws people to, or back to, Hong Kong. You can say laughingly that it's the money, or low taxes, but there are also some intangible reasons for choosing to live here. Sometimes these reasons are quite inexplicable.

Hong Kong was a word I heard around my house from a very young age. It isn't exotic pearl-of-the-Orient stuff that constitute my memories. What I recall is standing at the mirror in my parents' room trying on a navy blue tam that my father had, and on it was an emblem with the letters "HK" in bamboo-like script. He would get very distant and silent whenever that hat came out. It usually meant he was off to a meeting or parade at the cenataph. On a larger scale, it meant he was one of the 1,975 Canadians who were unfortunate enough to be in the army and in Hong Kong during December, 1941.

In 1983, my husband and I moved to Hong Kong "for the experience". It was a difficult decision not only because we were moving the family hearth to an unknown place 6,000 miles away, or because our friends thought we were crazy to sell all our possessions and take off to "China". The difficulty resided in the childhood memory of my father's impenetrable silences.

The details of what my father actually did during those terrible days of the war are blurred to me. He never talked much about it, and anyway, what child can actually picture their father doing anything as an 18-year-old boy. Some-

how, in my young mind, I had him staring as Alec Guinness in "Bridge Over the River Kwai" and wearing baggy shorts. I had no idea until much later as to the intensity of feeling behind his quiet.

He was in the Signal Corps and, so I was told, drove a bus with the last load of men to Kowloon's Star Ferry, making it to the island moments before the Japanese troops arrived at the Kowloon Peninsula. With the island's subsequent take-over, he helped build Kai Tak Airport and "lived" in Shamshuipo prison for a year. Later, he was transported to Japan for three years in a P.O.W. camp. When he returned to Canada, he told me how he was rescued by an American ship and therefore had an in-

discriminate love of Americans all his life. And he remembered, on that voyage, eating his first egg in four years, an experience that I'm sure was as tactile and amazing for him as if he were a newborn.

My husband and I took a flat at Jardine's Lookout during our first eight years here. We didn't know until later that my father had been captured at Wong Nei Chung Gap, the view from our window. "Wong Nei Chung" and "Shamshuipo" had been only words I had used as a child in order to pretend to my friends that I spoke Chinese. These words took on new life for me as I realized what they had meant to my father and what they now meant to me.

There are certainly the politics of what happened in 1941 and the cliché that in war, there are no winners. Even today, there are still concerns over just compensation for the Hong Kong veterans. (Part of my inheritance on my father's death included boxes of files and letters sent to Canada's Department of Veterans' Affairs over the years.) Finally, though, there is the legacy of war that is transmitted through families like ours and to the children.

When asked, my father would reply that he wasn't inclined to visit Hong Kong, even to see his daughter. He would simply say, "I've been there once and I didn't like it". Living here, over 40 years later, I have the opportunity to see Hong Kong the way he never saw it, to face a few of the family ghosts, and to approach doors he preferred, for his own reasons, remain shut. ♦

Wreath-Laying at Sai Wan Military Cemetery

In September 1941 the Canadian Government sent the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers to assist in the defence of Hong Kong against the impending Japanese invasion. The Canadians arrived on November 16, 1941; the Japanese attacked the New Territories on December 8th and crossed to the island of Hong Kong on December 18th. The governor surrendered on Christmas Day. Of the 1975 Canadian soldiers, 557 were killed or died later in prison camps. A wreath laying ceremony at Sai Wan Military Cemetery will take place on Sunday, December 5, 1993 at 3:30pm to honour the memory of those 557 soldiers.