

LEARNING FROM THE BATTLE OF HONG KONG

As Canada marks the Year of the Veteran, a new generation is finding out about a brutal chapter in the country's military history.

It has all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster. An enduring story about the original band of brothers. An epic battle costing 290 soldiers their lives through 17 days of combat. Those 1,184 who survived were sent to prisoner-of-war camps to endure four years of torture, starvation and forced labour, many never to return home.

Yet, few Canadians are even aware of their countrymen's involvement in the Battle of Hong Kong in December 1941. As the number of survivors has dwindled with each passing year, memories of this landmark event in Canadian history have slowly faded, becoming a mere footnote in most standard high school texts.

Now, however, a new generation of Canadians is learning about their country's role in countering the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong. And the sacrifices of the veterans who died or were brutally imprisoned there are being acknowledged.

"Just lately, we're getting more recognition than we've ever had," says veteran John Lowe, 83, of White Rock, British Columbia, who fought with the Winnipeg Grenadiers. "We never talked too much about it. When you did talk about it, most people thought you were nuts or exaggerating...you couldn't live like that."

Awareness of the Battle of Hong Kong heightened with Prime Minister Paul Martin's visit to China

in January. Standing before a large gathering at the Sai Wan Bay War Cemetery in Hong Kong, Mr. Martin and Veterans Affairs Minister Albina Guarnieri paid tribute to veterans of the battle. Some of the survivors later visited an international school to talk with classes.

Among those in attendance at the ceremony was Lawrence Stebbe, 83, of Beauséjour, Quebec, one of the Royal Rifles of Canada based in Quebec City. For him, recalling his experiences, especially to youths, is new.

"It was such a severe degradation that most people, if you started talking about it, they wouldn't believe you," says Stebbe. "I never spoke about it to my children—and I have four of them and seven grandchildren. It took me 30 years before I ever started talking about anything that happened to us."

Today, as Canada marks the Year of the Veteran, such heroes are sharing their stories with captivated young audiences through the efforts of The Dominion Institute's Memory Project and Veterans Affairs Canada. The goal, says Veterans Affairs spokesperson Janice Summerby, is to help a whole new generation of Canadians gain a greater sense of the past.

"These veterans are advanced in age, and we really need to pick up that torch and remember," says Summerby, adding that the challenge is "to turn youth on" in new ways. "We have to approach them in their own world with technology."

Veterans Affairs this spring is launching a new database on its Web site of audiovisual interviews with veterans in an effort to preserve a part of history that is silently slipping away—and to help today's youth identify with yesterday's heroes.

Veteran Aubrey Flegg, 86, also a Winnipeg Grenadier, understands the difficulty that Canadian youngsters, who "want for very little," have in understanding what he and his comrades endured more than six decades ago.

"For younger children to really grasp what it was to be a prisoner-of-war, it's pretty hard," says Flegg, of Kelowna, B.C. "All our people should know what their veterans went through." 🍁

To learn more about the Battle of Hong Kong go to www.hkvca.ca, for the Year of the Veteran see www.vac-acc.gc.ca and to view The Dominion Institute's Memory Project Digital Archives, visit www.thememoryproject.com.



A Canadian officer (below) greets POWs of the Sham Shui Po camp (above) after the Japanese surrender in 1945.