Pro Valore

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This story, although fiction, is based on real events and is dedicated to all soldiers of the Canadian Forces, past and present, as well as to those in Hong Kong who lived through this ordeal in December 1941.

On 16 November 1941, two utterly undertrained Canadian regiments, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers disembarked in the British colony of Hong Kong to meet political expectations in China and to act as a show of force against the Japanese guarding Mainland China. However, with Japanese troops crossing the borders of the New Territories on 8 December 1941, the British led garrison force was forced to withdraw to Hong Kong Island. The Japanese then launched an amphibious assault and landed on the northeast side of the island pushing towards Wong Nei Chong gap while capturing the strategic hills held by the Canadian forces.

The British Governor of Hong Kong finally surrendered on 25 December 1941 which began four long years of a horrific life as prisoners of war for the Canadian soldiers in Japanese camps. Of 1975 Canadians who went to defend Hong Kong, 554 did not come home, almost half of whom, died as prisoners of war.

Although the late evening rays of the Pacific sun was slowly setting into the far off mountains in the west, another light, one much more violent and destructive, lit the greyish clouds with a scarlet hue. It didn't seem as if night was falling upon them. For many nights, it had been like this. Pillars of flames shot up into the air devouring anything that moved. Explosion rocked the shores as fires spread uncontrollably.

The roar of artillery grumbled like rolling thunder as its shells fell upon the coastal city and its harbour facilities setting them alight. Tonight, the guns seemed more violent than ever. The opponents were keen on blood and their psychological warfare of shock and awe was wearing down the British garrison. The whistling of bombs could be heard as they plunged down from aircrafts, shrouded by the heavy cloud cover above. As search lights scoured for these tiny specks in the sky, the bombs fell upon its targets disintegrating them as if they never existed.

Finally, it began.

In the small narrow strait of Lei Yue Moon, dozens of small watercrafts filled with men in khaki coloured uniform rowed to the opposite shore. They were armed to the teeth – standard issued rifle, grenades, mortar launchers, side-arms and submachine guns were strapped to their bodies. With their helmets secured and adrenaline rushing, these soldiers were ready to face some more action. They looked menacing.

Invasion!

On the island, there was chaos and confusion. The blast of explosions left devastation, demolishing anything in sight. What once was a thriving cultural centre of the proud British Crown Colony of Hong Kong was on fire. Rivers of crimson flowed down the streets as soldiers and civilians alike took cover behind anything they can find. The opposition army seemed to march relentlessly up the hills and through the streets spraying gunfire at everything in sight.

The date was 18 December 1941. It had been ten days since the Japanese army crossed the borders of the New Territories and blitzed their way into the urban centres in the Kowloon Peninsula driving the combined British, Canadian and Indian forces to take refuge on Hong Kong Island as a last resort. Digging in, the demoralized and battered garrison forces prepared their final stand against the veteran Imperial Japanese Army.

Medical Corporal Brian McCoy of the Winnipeg Grenadiers only arrived in Hong Kong three weeks prior to the Japanese invasion. Looking forward from the bow of the Canadian troopship, the HMCS Prince Robert, he and the other young men of the Canadian regiment were taken aback when they first caught a glimpse of the exotic colony on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. It didn't matter if it was the fresh smell of the ocean waves battering upon Victoria Harbour or was it the vibrant marketplace where the voices of street vendors blared in order to

attract customers, everything felt so fresh and foreign to the newly arrived garrison forces.

The colony was young. It was built upon a rock wrestled from what was then Imperial China's rule during the Opium War. Although the population was predominantly Chinese, much of the architecture was very European in style. From the court houses to the government offices, there was an obvious British flavour in the colony.

Not only did the colony appear European, the young soldiers were greeted to a vibrant nightlife. When the sun set, the boys who were barely out of their teens were surrounded by a multicoloured light fest of what were the pubs and night clubs of Wan Chai. Together with Englishmen and Scotsmen, the soldiers could go on leave and party all night long.

It was a large contrast from the war the Canadian soldiers stationed in England faced. There, day in and day out, they were being bombed by German airplanes. Every single day, they were in fear of a massive crossing across the English Channel. Every single day, they were faced with the fear of facing the grey ominous steel monsters called "panzers" – the modern tanks which proved so successful for the Germans in their defeat of the French. Instead, serving in the Hong Kong garrison seemed exotic. It seemed so carefree for the soldiers and it felt as if the war was far off into the distance. It seemed as if the war was nothing but a fairy tale in a far off distance.

"Incoming!"

Corporal McCoy ducked behind some thick vegetation as a blast knocked the soldiers in front of him off their feet. As the smoke cleared, he immediately rushed to where he last saw the two troopers. He found them shaken but luckily, only escaped with several minor scratches and burns. Their helmets absorbed most of the shock from the bomb blast.

A continuous crescendo of exchange in gunfire was heard in the distance.

"Get a move on it, soldier!"

The voice of the captain was hoarse. He had been barking out orders all night and trying to organize a counterattack to take back Mount Parker, a hill which the Japanese captured early that morning. However, ever since their unit was caught up in the thick jungle and meeting stiff resistance from the experienced Japanese soldiers who had already served multiple campaigns during the Pacific War, the advance slowly came to a halt and began turning into what seemed to be an organized retreat back to their defensive positions scattered between Jardine's Lookout and Mount Nicholson.

Although Corporal McCoy worked as a paramedic in a small humble town in Canada before the war, he had not seen so much blood and death as he did that day. He saw soldiers crying for their mothers during their last moments of life. He saw men whom he socialized with almost every day get sawed down as a machine gun opened fire on them. He even saw panicked fellow Canadians accidentally opening fire against their own soldiers. As he tried saving them, he felt their fingers digging into the medical corporal's uniform smearing it with blood.

"Morphine…" they cried out desperately with all their remaining strength, "…I want morphine…"

There was chaos everywhere. Stray bullets zigzagged between the thick vegetation ricocheting off trees spraying bark and splinter on the men. From a distance, the distinct rhythmic rattle of a Canadian Bren machine gun was abruptly stopped after a blast ripped through the steep hillside. Somebody's position was overrun.

Armed with only syringes of morphine and bandages, McCoy followed his company's soldiers, who had their bayonets fixed on their rifles, as they tried to force their way through the hills while being continually harassed by enemy units. With every skirmish with the Japanese, the numbers of soldiers in the company decreased. Pretty soon, the captain who was so passionate in encouraging his men was struck by a bullet in the shoulder. Some of the more pessimistic of soldiers in the unit feared for the worst as he cried out in agony as McCoy rushed to his side and pulled him into the cover of safety. It was only morning the next day and the defending garrison was in disarray.

"McCoy, is that you?" The captain was reaching into his left pocket as the medic pressed a wrapped piece of gauze onto his wounds. The

older man seemed dazed as he pulled out a carefully folded piece of paper already stained in crimson on the corners.

"Captain, don't move." The medic put more pressure in the wound as the captain waved the paper around in front of him. "You'll survive, just stop moving and let me fix you up."

A burst of machine gun bullets whizzed by their heads as McCoy struggled to keep the captain from moving. "Give this letter to my wife…"

McCoy snatched the letter from the captain's hand, hoping that it would stop him from moving so much. With the captain moving about, it was difficult to wrap his wound in field dressing. As another explosion ripped into the jungles nearby, the medic knew that there were a lot more others waiting for his helping hands.

"Medic!"

The cry was everywhere. Soldiers wounded by gunfire and shellfire cried desperately for his help but he could only assist them one at a time. Running low on field dressing, he resorted in using other items – ripped uniforms and handkerchiefs became temporary bandages. However, the lack of extra morphine was a greater problem.

There were more carnage he saw that morning than one could ever imagine. It was as if they were pigs sent into a slaughterhouse. It was horrible.

Who would have expected this to happen so soon? Having only completed a quick course in military boot camp in Canada and immediately sent overseas, these soldiers were no more than boys in soldier costumes. Some of these men haven't even fired a gun before. Now, they were fighting for their lives against veteran Japanese soldiers who had served scores of campaigns during their war with China.

When they arrived in Hong Kong, they were expecting mostly garrison duty. Their war wasn't with the Japanese. They were at peace at the time. The war was with the Germans all the way in Europe. They came to Hong Kong to help Britain defend after her possessions – the remnants of her old imperial glory. Japan was at war with China but little did they know the Japanese forces would launch surprise attacks against British and American possessions in the Pacific as well.

All the colourful parties in the bar districts were all but forgotten. The boys, still young, drank to their hearts content as some of them were happy to be free for the first time. They were without parental supervision for the first time and through enlistment, it was their escape from the facing the chores at home. For others, it was an escape from the Great Depression. They were suffering from unemployment and the war was an opportunity for them to be fed and earn a bit of money. It didn't matter the reason why they joined, the fact was that they were there together, fighting side by side for king and for country.

"We've taken too many casualties, let's retreat."

That was the decision of the lieutenant who was now in command. Ordering McCoy to watch over the wounded captain, the company from the Winnipeg Grenadiers began withdrawing from their positions on the hill. As they retreated, a sergeant he knew by the name of Osborn volunteered to cover for them.

McCoy recognized him. To the men, he was like a fatherly figure. During the battle, he stood out amongst the men encouraging them and trying his best to boost their morale. He was one of the very few with experience as he had served in the Great War several years earlier.

"Hurry up and go." The sergeant shouted out to the men who began to make their way back towards the concrete bunkers on the other side of Jardine's Lookout. "We don't have all day."

McCoy and another soldier loaded the wounded captain on a makeshift stretcher as they quickly made their way into the thick jungle while bullets whistled past their ears. They could hear the snapping sound of wood as shots from the Japanese missed them by several inches. The raw smell of blood mixed with the sulphuric stench from the firearms, hot from overuse, was almost unbearable.

Then, an explosion threw them off their feet. The soldier helping him carrying the captain screamed in agony as McCoy, in the front of the stretcher, was thrown by the force of the explosion and was tossed into some vegetation. Shaking off the initial shock, he saw the soldier who was

behind him earlier crawled up into a ball and trembling hysterically.

"I've had enough!"

That was the last thing McCoy heard coming out of the soldier's mouth as he grabbed his rifle and disappeared into the jungle in the directions of the Japanese. He has gone mad.

Although he tried to focus on bringing the captain back to safety, he still couldn't help but think the worst had happened to the soldier who had gone berserk. However, as the first grenade flew in and landed into his general area, he knew he had to concentrate on bringing the captain home. He shielded the captain as another explosion rocked the earth. They were beginning to get pelted by grenades.

McCoy quickly heaved the heavy captain onto his back as, from his peripheral vision, he saw Osborn and several other soldiers catching and throwing back the explosive devices back towards the enemy. It was a snow ball fight in the middle of war. This time, it was in Hong Kong, a hot tropical area – unlike the frozen snow-covered plains of Manitoba.

Ah, wintertime in Canada. He could remember his childhood as if it was yesterday. He and his sister would build huge snow forts in the flat prairie plains of Manitoba with neighbours and they would have snowball battles pelting each other with numerous white frozen orbs. Once in a while, one of the snowballs would contain too much ice and it may cause scrapes and bruises on one or several of the kids. Their parents would scold them but then again, at the time, it was all fun and games.

Afterwards, they would return indoors and sit around the fireplace roasting marshmallows and warming up to hot chocolate. If it was close to Christmas, they would have the entire house decorated. A Christmas tree adored with sparkling ornaments and lighted candles would tower over them while old Uncle Benjamin would tell them the many stories he had about his adventures during the Great War. They were heroic stories indeed. It sounded like going out on a crusade, riding a steamship crossing the grey waters of the North Atlantic to stop the "invasion of the Huns". In these stories, the sides were clear – the Germans were the "bad guys" while his uncle fought for the "good guys".

He would then show off his battle scars presenting them as if he would when he presented the many shimmering medals framed on the wall of his home.

"This one was from Vimy Ridge and this was from Passchendaele." He would have pointed out.

Then, he would tell great adventurous stories where he was the main character. He would glorify the Canadian soldiers claiming that the Germans were terrified when they heard their names.

"They called us storm troopers." He claimed. "They hated to fight against us because we always win."

At the time, they were innocent young boys and girls. Stories of war were adventurous. They seemed like old western films where the good guys would always win the day. It was such a contrast from reality – the reality he faced and the reality he wished he hadn't experienced.

Now, it was raining lead and they were caught in a hailstorm of grenades. They were thrown and tossed around a burning cauldron where surviving from this Hell's inferno was bleak.

"Grenade incoming!" That shout came from a familiar voice. "Take cover!"

McCoy turned around to see Osborn throwing the warning towards him and the other soldiers in his general direction. As he watched the sergeant, his eye caught onto a small projectile that was coming closer and closer.

It was if his life was suddenly put in slow motion as he watched a grey metallic object flew overhead and above him bouncing off a rocky surface and rolling to rest on a ditch several feet away from him. The pin was missing from the hand-thrown projectile. He instinctively dropped to the ground and used his back to shield the wounded captain while expecting the worst when he saw Sergeant Major Osborn dart from his entrenched position and threw his body onto the grenade.

The entire world shook around him. The force of the grenade explosion felt as if the entire earth below him had ripped opened and devoured him. Then, it was followed by silence. He could not hear the

machine guns nor did he hear the exchange of shots anymore. He could not hear the explosions which were so dominant throughout the battle. He laid there on the ground motionless.

Am I dead?

Then he heard a moaning sound under him. The captain! Thoughts of his obligation to bring the officer to safety filled his mind as he summoned all his strength to pull himself back up. As he propped himself back up, he noticed that in the depression of land where the grenade landed, atop of it was the sergeant's now motionless and barely recognizable body. Realizing the great sacrifice contributed by the sergeant, the medic quickly pulled himself together and carried the captain towards safety.

He finally reached the concrete bunker. He was exhausted and his uniform was wet with sweat. His hands reeked of the raw stench blood. As its great metal door opened and welcomed the remnants of his company into the bunker, McCoy collapsed onto his knees as other medics helped carry the captain in. Another corporal offered him a bottle – it was mostly empty but still, the feeling of liquid through his dry husky throat was refreshing.

However, he knew this rest wouldn't last forever. The Japanese were coming and pretty soon, he would be back tending the wounded and patching them up. Many of the soldiers now lined up at the openings in the bunker with their guns ready to fire would depend on him if they were so unfortunate to get shot. He will have to be ready to save more lives.

Was this really worth fighting for?

Was it worth fighting and dying in a foreign land, somewhere you have been for the first time for a country you haven't even been to?

It is true that war is horrifying and dying in a land so far away from home is even more terrible. Corporal Brian McCoy however knew that as he tended to the wounds of those who were fighting, these soldiers were fighting for something more. They were there to defend freedom and to defend peace. Those they defend will never forget their contributions.