

2021

Fun Behind the Wire?: Francis “Huck” O’Neill and the Canadian POW Experience in Hong Kong, 1941-1945

Michael B. Pass

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pass, Michael B. "Fun Behind the Wire?: Francis “Huck” O’Neill and the Canadian POW Experience in Hong Kong, 1941-1945." *Canadian Military History* 30, 2 (2021)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Canadian Military History* by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Fun Behind the Wire?

Francis “Huck” O’Neill and the Canadian POW Experience in Hong Kong, 1941-1945

MICHAEL B. PASS

Abstract: Many prior studies of Canadian POWs during the Pacific War have focused on the sadism and mistreatment of their Japanese jailors, helping to make this a dominant image of the conflict. This article moderates this view by discrediting the notion that Japanese soldiers were motivated by an omnipresent belief in “bushido,” as well as by studying newly discovered documents produced in captivity by Canadian Auxiliary Services Officer Francis O’Neill. It argues that Japanese conduct towards POWs was more variable than previously recognised and highlights moments of levity and fun as O’Neill and his fellow prisoners organised sporting events, games and theatrical productions.

ON 21 JULY 1945, Francis Gregory O’Neill sat down at his typewriter in the officers’ prisoner of war (POW) camp in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong. Thousand of kilometres away, American forces had just captured the Japanese island of Okinawa while a Soviet invasion of Manchuria would soon begin. By this time, even the Allied prisoners at Hong Kong clearly knew that the Pacific War had entered its endgame. This realisation prompted O’Neill, an Auxiliary Services Officer with the Royal Rifles of Canada, to compose a formal report of his imprisonment experiences for his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel W. J. Home, leader of Canada’s C Force. “This report will necessarily be prepared in greater part from memory,” O’Neill peremptorily apologised, “since diaries and records have always been viewed as contraband by our captors and with periodical searches one was not encouraged to compile such

records.”¹ In fact, O’Neill was being modest; he had actually saved numerous documents from his time as a prisoner, though it is unclear if his rough report, penned on whatever paper he had on hand, ever reached its intended recipient. Regardless, several months after his liberation and return home to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, O’Neill neatly retyped his account for his superiors at the Knights of Columbus to inform them of his wartime activities, keeping a carbon copy for himself.²

The survival of O’Neill’s report and his private papers is an incredible boon for historians. Rediscovered years after O’Neill’s death, they comprise twenty-six files that were only donated to the Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island in 2009. In addition to his formal report, O’Neill retained numerous records of the activities he helped arrange for his fellow prisoners as well as dozens of letters from fellow POWs that he remained in contact with after the war’s end. To my knowledge, this is one of the largest collections of contemporary documentation on the Canadian experience in Hong Kong during the Second World War, making it a valuable record of events as they occurred in real time. Additionally, coming from the pen of a civilian Services Officer, they offer an unusually detailed window into a less explored aspect of Canadians’ internment experiences in East Asia: those moments of diversion and entertainment.

To both the lay public and many historians, the abuse of Canadian and other Allied POWs by the Japanese during the Pacific War is one of the most ubiquitous images of the conflict. From works such as Pierre Boulle’s *Bridge over the River Kwai*, immortalised in David Lean’s Hollywood adaptation, and Laura Hillenbrand’s best-seller *Unbroken*, to the memoirs of the prisoners themselves, such as Canadian William Allister’s *Where Life and Death Hold Hands*, Allied prisoners “are portrayed as martyrs to the unmitigated cruelty of their guards and camp commanders,” in historian Sarah Kovner’s words.³ This is a narrative dominated by

¹ Draft Report to Lt.-Col. W. J. Home, Officer Commanding Canadian Forces (Force “C”), 1, 21 July 1945, acc.5020, file 21, Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island (PAROPEI), Charlottetown.

² See Report to Philip Phelan, Secretary of Columbus Canadian Army Huts, 1-22, 11 December 1945, acc.5020, file 21, PAROPEI (hereafter O’Neill Report).

³ Sarah Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 1.

beatings and the actions of sadistic jailers to intimidate and humiliate POWs. Often, such actions are explained with reference to Japanese military ethnics and the values of “bushido” that death was better than dishonour; part of Japanese soldiers’ own behaviour during the war which saw them neither surrender nor retreat. As British General Bill Slim, commanding the British XIV Army in Burma, later argued in his autobiography, the average Japanese soldier “fought and marched till he died. If five hundred Japanese were ordered to hold a position, we had to kill four hundred and ninety-five before it was ours—and then the last five killed themselves.”⁴ In the words of Canadian historian Brereton Greenhous, “from Japan’s own perspective, to be taken alive was both shameful and degrading. Death was better.”⁵ A citation of Japanese wartime propaganda or the inflamed rhetoric of an Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) manual then clinches the argument.⁶ Such Japanese beliefs explain the hostile treatment meted out to those foreign soldiers who failed to do the same, or so goes the common wisdom.

As recent historians have concluded, this culturally deterministic account is highly selective and inaccurate; there were numerous instances during the war where Japanese troops chose to retreat or surrender and the treatment of Allied prisoners in captivity cannot be explained solely by appealing to Japanese culture or “warrior” ethics. As Kovner observes, while the testimony of Canadian and other Allied POWs can prove the horror of their experiences, we must study the Japanese records to understand *why* this happened.⁷ Moreover, as recent historians have noted, there was more to the life of Canadian prisoners in Hong Kong than purposeful Japanese cruelty. There was, in fact, some cooperation between the Japanese and their prisoners and like most POW experiences during the Second World War—indeed, most service members’ experiences in any war—life comprised long periods of boredom intermixed with short moments of intense terror. This is not to say that Canadian POWs fared well in

⁴ William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (New York: David McKay, 1961), 447.

⁵ Brereton Greenhous, “C” Force to Hong Kong: A Canadian Catastrophe 1941-1945 (Toronto: Dundurn, 1997), 75.

⁶ “Do not fall captive, even if the alternative is death,” as Greenhous indirectly quotes it. “Bear in mind the fact that to be captured not only means disgracing the army, but your parents and family will never be able to hold up their heads again.” See Greenhous, “C” Force, 75.

⁷ Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 3.

Japanese captivity. The grim statistics tell the story: 264 Canadians dead in Japanese hands, twenty-seven per cent of C Force, compared to four per cent in German captivity; a diphtheria epidemic in 1942 killed fifty-eight alone.⁸ Others were dogged by serious illness for the rest of their much-reduced lives.⁹ By O'Neill's own count, 109 Hong Kong prisoners died within a year of capture, while another twenty-three died throughout the remainder of the war.¹⁰ Others, unknown to O'Neill, died at work camps in the Japanese Home Islands. However, as this article argues along with recent Canadian historians, there was more than this to C Force's imprisonment. Like the experiences of Canadian POWs elsewhere during the war, we must also explore, in scholar Matthew Schwarzkopf's phrasing, "the more positive aspects of their experiences and how those contributed to their survival."¹¹ And, in Schwarzkopf's words, few Canadians had a better view on how POWs completed this "second mission" than Auxiliary Services Officer and entertainment provisioner Francis Gregory O'Neill.¹²

"KNIGHTS OF BUSHIDO"? JAPANESE SOLDIERS AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CANADIAN POWS

Perhaps even more than at the German Nuremberg Trials, as Canadian legal scholar Patrick Brode asserted in 1997, it was the Japanese war crimes trials which "showed the cultural chasm between the triers and the accused." While explaining the appeal of Nazism was often difficult for Canadian judges in the 1940s, Brode argues that at least in Japan "the commissions were faced with accused motivated since early youth by the Bushido code of absolute obedience and disdain for everything that was not Japanese." In many cases, Brode observes, Allied officials "got a glimpse of the

⁸ Tim Cook, *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada's Second World War* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2020), 271; and Charles G. Roland, *Long Night's Journey into Day: Prisoners of War in Hong Kong and Japan, 1941-1945* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 322.

⁹ Roland, *Long Night's Journey*, 323-24.

¹⁰ Statistics of Canadians at Hong Kong POW Camps, acc.5020, file 22, PAROPEI.

¹¹ Matthew Schwarzkopf, "The Second Mission: Canadian Survival in Hong Kong Prisoner-of-War Camps, 1941-1945" (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 2019), 3.

¹² This phrasing comes from C Force veteran George S. MacDonell. See Schwarzkopf, "The Second Mission," 2-3.

harsh reality that motivated every Japanese soldier.”¹³ In short, in the estimation of both contemporary Canadians and more recent scholars, Japanese mistreatment of Canadian POWs was the result of vast cultural differences and the values of bushido.¹⁴

Such views are hardly unique to Canadian scholars and have a long history. In 1958, the British Lord Russell of Liverpool—hot off the success of writing a study of German war crimes in *The Scourge of the Swastika* (1954)—titled his parallel look at Japanese atrocities *The Knights of Bushido*. His title came from the words allegedly spoken by a Japanese guard to a captured Allied pilot who later testified at the International Criminal Court for the Far East, Japan’s equivalent of the Nuremburg Trials.¹⁵ Decades later, Liverpool’s sobriquet remains shorthand for both Japanese brutality and its soldier’s military fortitude. The writer Nathan Greenfield, for example, cites it repeatedly in his 2010 study of Canadian POWs in Hong Kong. Asserting that Japan refused to formally ratify the Geneva Convention because “Japanese legal scholars argued that prisoners of war had forfeited their moral right to life,” Greenfield argues that this belief was the result of “the way sixteenth-century *Bushido* Code came to be interpreted” in the 1930s.¹⁶

Despite such allegations, historians of Japan have long since marginalised bushido in explaining Japanese hostility towards Allied prisoners during the war. For one, as historian Karl Friday notes in a 1994 article pointedly titled “Bushidō or Bull?”, the original concept was only codified *after* the long era of samurai warfare from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries when Japan was at peace. The modern iteration of the concept circulated in the twentieth century was thus derived from the purely theoretical bushido of the seventeenth and

¹³ Patrick Brode, *Casual Slaughters and Accidental Judgments: Canadian War Crimes Prosecutions, 1944-1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 186.

¹⁴ For other comparable conclusions by Canadian historians, see Daniel G. Dancocks, *In Enemy Hands: Canadian Prisoners of War, 1939-45* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983), xii-xiii; and Michael Palmer, *Dark Side of the Sun: George Palmer and Canadian POWs in Hong Kong and the Omine Camp* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 2009), 43-44.

¹⁵ Lord Russell of Liverpool, *The Knights of Bushido: A Short History of Japanese War Crimes* (London: Cassell, 1958), xv.

¹⁶ Nathan M. Greenfield, *The Damned: The Canadians at the Battle of Hong Kong and the POW Experience, 1941-45* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010), xxvii, 185, 75.

eighteenth centuries.¹⁷ Nor are bushido's concepts, as Friday argues, somehow unique to Japan: "It is not terribly difficult to find examples of [Japanese] warriors who, in desperate situations, chose to turn and die heroically rather than be killed in the act of running away. By the same token, it is not terribly difficult to find examples of this sort in the military traditions of virtually any people at any time anywhere in the world."¹⁸ Moreover, when bushido was eventually revived by Japanese military ideologues in the nineteenth century, the values that it was reputed to promote—"loyalty, decorum, faith, obedience, frugality, and honor"—were both generic and vague. "There is nothing especially samurai-esque about them," Friday concludes, as they "could apply to almost any military anywhere at any time."¹⁹ In short, bushido is neither a timeless virtue nor a unique product of the Japanese psyche. As historian Stewart Lone argues, this view that Japan was the guardian of a mystical bushido tradition helped feed an "overheated fantasy view of imperial Japan" where "ordinary people were the inheritors of an idealized system of samurai values, giving them an almost inhuman 'will-to-sacrifice'." As Lone notes, this perception was of comparatively recent vintage, dating from the era of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). But encouraged by Japanese propaganda, these views were "taken up and inflated both by Western observers and sections of the Japanese government and intelligentsia; the former took them at face value, the latter recited them like some Buddhist mantra in the hope that their own people might actually be numbed into believing them."²⁰ By the mid-twentieth century, this inflation had fostered dangerous stereotypes, with fateful consequences. Japanese immigrants, in Lone's words, easily became "fifth columnists just waiting for the command to rise up and take revenge against the Western colonial powers."²¹ When British Columbians later claimed Japanese-Canadians in their province were prospective spies and

¹⁷ Karl F. Friday, "Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition," *History Teacher* 27, 3 (May 1994): 340, 342.

¹⁸ Friday, "Bushidō or Bull?" 341. The contemporary Waffen SS, for example, had a similar credo.

¹⁹ Friday, "Bushidō or Bull?" 343.

²⁰ Stewart Lone, *Provincial Life and the Military in Imperial Japan: The Phantom Samurai* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

²¹ Lone, *Phantom Samurai*, 2-3.

saboteurs which necessitated their internment, it demonstrated that such views had a long shadow.²²

In fact, the historical record is clear that there were countless Japanese soldiers who chose to retreat, were captured or otherwise went against the tenets of bushido during the Pacific War. In the months after Pearl Harbor, for instance, Japanese units routinely retreated, withdrawing from Guadalcanal and up the Solomon Islands in 1942 and 1943. Only in mid-1943, after Japan was permanently on the defensive, did desperate orders to hold in the face of dwindling supplies and Allied counterattacks arise. The destruction of the garrison on the Aleutian island of Attu in May 1943 was the first time in the war that a Japanese army unit was destroyed wholesale and even there an evacuation had been planned, only to be flouted by regional commanders. Making a virtue of defeat, the army boasted that this was an intentionally noble way to die (*gyokusai*). In historian Edward Drea's words, this was "a powerful, if ephemeral, propaganda tool, and made fighting to the death acceptable and accepted in the popular consciousness."²³ As the Allied advance continued and Japan increasingly lost the ability to evacuate remote garrisons, such appeals were normalised. When Lieutenant-General Kuribayashi Tadamichi, newly-appointed commander of Japanese forces on Iwo Jima, received his orders in mid-1944, he was reportedly exhorted by Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki to "do something similar to what was done on Attu."²⁴ But Kuribayashi was hardly a bushido-steeped fanatic. He spoke fluent English, had lived in the United States and had been the first military attaché to Japan's embassy in Ottawa between 1931 and

²² See Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981), 11. It should be noted this somewhat contradicts the view, first articulated by Jack Granatstein and Gregory Johnson in 1988, that there were honest issues of national security at play in the internment. For a recent restatement of this argument, see J. L. Granatstein, *Canada at War: Conscription, Diplomacy, and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 249-76. See also Cook, *The Fight for History*, 267.

²³ Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 231.

²⁴ Kakehashi Kumiko, *So Sad to Fall in Battle: An Account of War Based on General Tadamichi Kuribayashi's Letters from Iwo Jima* (New York: Presidio Press, 2007), 18. For the rise of *gyokusai* from Attu to Iwo Jima, see David C. Earhart, *Certain Victory: Images of World War II in the Japanese Media* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2009), 375-408.

1933.²⁵ Iwo Jima became one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific War, not because Kuribayashi exhorted his troops to die gloriously, but rather because he refused to let them mount suicidal “Banzai charges” against well-equipped Americans as had been done on Attu. Instead, he ordered them to stay in their bunkers to be dug out one-by-one, blunting America’s doctrine of using overwhelming firepower to reduce its losses.²⁶ Whereas in earlier battles U.S. forces had suffered less than their Japanese opponents, on Iwo Jima the ratio shrunk to 1.25 Japanese casualties for every American, a fact that alarmed American war planners. This Japanese cost-efficiency was not a result of inculcating bushido, but rather due to better tactics and ingenuity. Thanks to men like Lieutenant-General Kuribayashi, the IJA, as historian D.M. Giangreco observes, “was riding its own learning curve.”²⁷

This history leads to two clear conclusions. Firstly, there was a clear gap in Japan between the exultation of bushido and its lived reality. As Sarah Kovner puts it, while the revived bushido reached new heights during the war years, “magnified by new media,” it is still difficult to assess how far this belief went within the Japanese armed forces. “After all,” she notes, “the IJA needed capital penalties to make sure soldiers adhered to the [official] policy not to surrender. Soldiers chose to not surrender because of the consequences they believed they could face from their fellow soldiers.”²⁸ Where did sincere belief in bushido end and a fear of being ostracised begin? Canadian POWs rarely saw a difference; all they knew was that they were being abused regardless. Indeed, even Japanese historian Ienaga Saburō, a famously critical scholar of Japan’s wartime behaviour, observes that there were cases where Japanese soldiers refused to abuse prisoners or who defied orders and retreated under the right conditions. Despite “depraved acts” by many, there were also examples of “humane conduct” towards POWs. “Conscience was not completely expunged,

²⁵ Kakehashi, *So Sad*, 36-37; and “Military Attache Coming to Ottawa,” *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, 29 September 1931, 2.

²⁶ Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 246; and Kakehashi, *So Sad*, 42-43.

²⁷ D. M. Giangreco, “‘A Score of Bloody Okinawas and Iwo Jimas’: President Truman and Casualty Estimates for the Invasion of Japan,” *Pacific Historical Review* 72, 1 (February 2003): 121, 105.

²⁸ Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 39. As Karl Friday observes, there is “a logical fallacy in trying to deduce norms of actual behavior from formal legal and moral codes.” Friday, “Bushidō or Bull?” 342.

even from the armed forces,” he concludes.²⁹ Secondly, by relying on bushido as a catch-all description of Japanese conduct during the war, historians turn ubiquitous human emotions and fears—anger, altruism, a dread of social criticism—into seemingly unique Japanese attributes, rehashing the sort of lazy stereotypes that Allied soldiers indulged in during the war years.

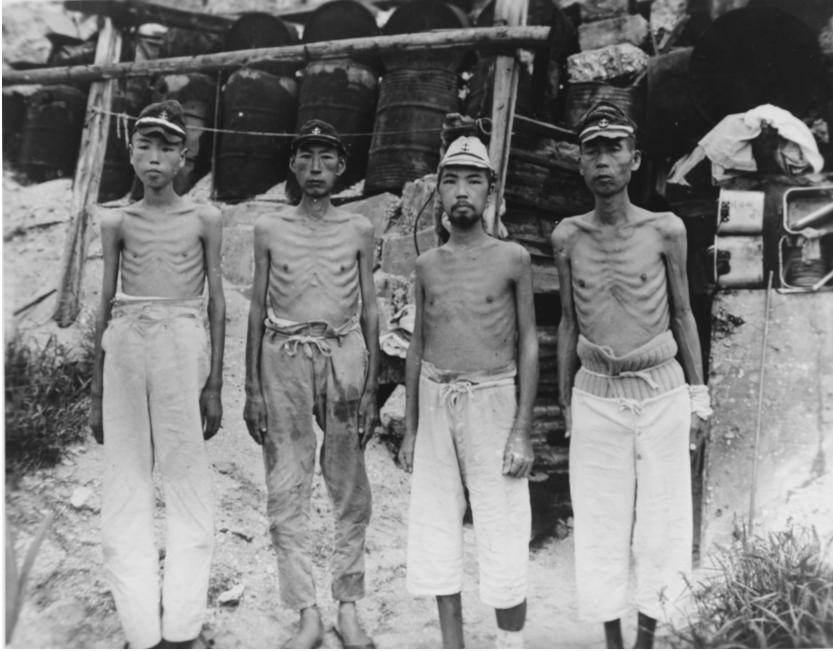
If not bushido, then, what explains the still undeniable accounts of widespread Japanese hostility directed against POWs, Canadian or otherwise, during the Pacific War? Part of it was down to the sheer tenuousness of Japanese supply chains during the conflict. While most Japanese military officers in both the army and navy were obsessed with fighting “decisive battles” in the field or at sea, few had given any prewar thought to military logistics. As historians David Evans and Mark Peattie bluntly phrase it, to Japanese naval personnel, “[t]he problems of ‘bullets, beans, and black oil’ could not hold the attention of either staff or line officers fixated on the dramatic strategies and tactics of the great encounter at sea.”³⁰ The military result of this lapse was the navy’s utter inability to properly protect Japanese merchant shipping and thus its near total destruction at the hands of Allied submarines and aircraft over the course of the war. For isolated Japanese island garrisons and Allied POWs camps, this meant a steadily diminishing supply of food and medicine and increasing pressure to conserve those resources on hand. Many garrisons—left to “wither on the vine” as U.S. Marines island-hopped their way to Japan—were often as emaciated as Allied POWs by 1945.³¹ Allied prisoners shared in these miseries as camp supplies dried up and the “hell ships” transporting them for labour in Japan were torpedoed and sunk.³²

²⁹ Ienaga Saburō, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 190. Ienaga also highlights the story of a Japanese army captain who, when his commanding officer refused a sensible order to retreat rather than be needlessly wiped out, promptly shot him with his pistol so they would not all be killed.

³⁰ David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 401.

³¹ Japanese writer Ōoka Shōhei was not being entirely fanciful in his classic war novel *Fires on the Plain* (1951) when he depicted Japanese soldiers in the Philippines gradually descending into cannibalism and madness. For accounts of Japanese cannibalism during the Pacific War, see Tanaka Yuki, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 124-27.

³² Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 210.



Emaciated Japanese POWs in the Marshall Islands at the war's end, September 1945. Compare their condition with the photo of liberated Canadian POWs on page 28. [Official U.S. Navy photograph, NARA catalog no. 80-G-347131]

Finally, Japanese records indicate that there was no grand plan to mistreat POWs, a claim often made by historians. Canadian historian Tim Cook, for example, cites the “illegal abuse and deliberate starvation” suffered by Canadians in Hong Kong as the product of “four years of deliberate neglect.”³³ In fact, there was little thought given by the Japanese about what they would do with POWs before December 1941. As Kovner puts it, their treatment “was just one of many examples of [the] poor planning and strategic incoherence” that dogged Japan throughout the conflict. “But there was no overarching policy or plan to make POWs suffer, or starve them, or work them to death. There was little policy of any kind.”³⁴ Fighting a “total war” on a shoestring, the Japanese treatment of POWs was, almost inevitably, haphazard and inconsistent, dictated by the individual choices of Japanese officers “on the spot” and the availability of supplies locally. Yet this idea of neglect is so pervasive

³³ Cook, *The Fight for History*, 271-72.

³⁴ Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 209.

that when many prisoners, and later historians, found cases of Japanese compassion, they seemed unable to accept them. When Hong Kong's British Director of Medical Services, Dr. Percy Selwyn-Clarke, wanted to distribute tins of fortified biscuits to POWs, he had "good fortune" to be under the supportive guard of a certain Lieutenant Tanaka. However, some time later, Tanaka "subsequently disappeared, and rumour had it that he had been removed to Canton and there executed for displaying excessive concern for the Hong Kong prisoners."³⁵ When Brereton Greenhous quoted the account of Canadian POW Oscar Keenan, then at a work camp near Niigata, he could only read his claim that "the Japanese are pretty good to us, and sincerely try to make our lot as bright as they can" as a form of Stockholm Syndrome.³⁶ Given the alleged ubiquity of Japanese mistreatment, any "good Japs" the prisoners met must have been aberrations quickly rectified or the products of deluded minds. That there may have been a variety of Canadian experiences in Japanese captivity, ranging from the horrific to the passable, is rarely voiced. It is this sort of mixed reception that we find in Francis O'Neill's report from 1945.

FROM CHARLOTTETOWN TO NORTH POINT: FRANCIS O'NEILL'S WAR, 1939-1942

Known as "Frank" or "Huck" to his friends, Francis O'Neill was born in Charlottetown on 9 February 1913. Growing up on Prince Edward Island, O'Neill married Norma Margaret Newsom in 1938 and was a modestly successful accountant when war broke out in 1939.³⁷ O'Neill remained at home for the conflict's early years, though he was still involved in the war effort. On 16 August 1940, he was made a Voluntary Assistant Deputy Registrar for the electoral district

³⁵ Roland, *Long Night's Journey*, 129. A similar account is related in Sergeant George S. MacDonell's postwar memoir about a Japanese military interpreter, likely Reverend Watanabe Kiyoshi, who provided the POWs medicine. "He was discovered, arrested, and court-martialled. No doubt he was executed for his 'crime.'" In fact, Watanabe survived the war. See MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story 1939-1945: From the Fall of Hong Kong to the Defeat of the Japan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2002), 105; and Roland, *Long Night's Journey*, 162.

³⁶ Greenhous, "C" Force, 138.

³⁷ "Marriages," *The Guardian* (Charlottetown), 12 November 1938, 6.

of Queen's, in central Prince Edward Island, during that year's national registration of military age Canadians under the National Resources Mobilisation Act (NRMA) passed in June.³⁸ By October 1941, however, O'Neill had joined the Knights of Columbus and had been ordered by the army's Auxiliary Services Department to join the newly-raised Canadian C Force forming at Valcartier.³⁹ As O'Neill himself noted, it was a quirk of fate which brought him to the unit: "Called at the last minute, I replaced another man who was to come on this job."⁴⁰ By common consent with George Porteous, C Force's other Service Officer serving with the YMCA, O'Neill was attached to the Royal Rifles of Canada while Porteous took the Winnipeg Grenadiers.⁴¹ O'Neill sailed with the majority of C Force onboard the HMT *Awatea* from Vancouver on 27 October 1941.

Arriving at Hong Kong on 16 November, O'Neill and the rest of the Rifles were encamped at Sham Shui Po's Nanking Barracks in Kowloon, on the mainland, and where one hut had been set aside for O'Neill's sports equipment, games and other provisions.⁴² Fresh off the boat and with little to do in way of training, C Force was soon set loose on the town. This began what Canadian signalman William Allister later dubbed "three glorious weeks of wild luxury."⁴³ Meeting local British groups, O'Neill tried to offer the Canadians more wholesome entertainment, such as dances or car tours of the colony. "I emphasised the fact that such entertainment for the troops was ideal since it would help keep them out of the clutches of Chinese dive-keepers," O'Neill wrote in his report. "Hong Kong was filled to

³⁸ Appointment and Oath of a Voluntary Assistant Deputy Registrar, acc.5020, file 2, PAROPEI. For more on the registration campaign, see Daniel Byers, *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 52.

³⁹ In November 1939, the Canadian government made the Knights of Columbus one of four civilian organisations tasked with providing auxiliary services to the armed forces, along with the Salvation Army, the YMCA and the Canadian Legion. These men were civilians but had the privilege of officer rank and would go on to organise "sports and dances [...] movies and concerts, reading, writing and recreation rooms, libraries, mobile canteens and tea vans, [...] leave hostels and information bureaux for troops on leave." See C. P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), 421-22.

⁴⁰ Report to Lt.-Col. W. J. Home, 1, acc.5020, file 21, PAROPEI.

⁴¹ O'Neill Report, 1.

⁴² O'Neill Report, 1-2.

⁴³ William Allister, *Where Life and Death Hold Hands* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1989), 17.

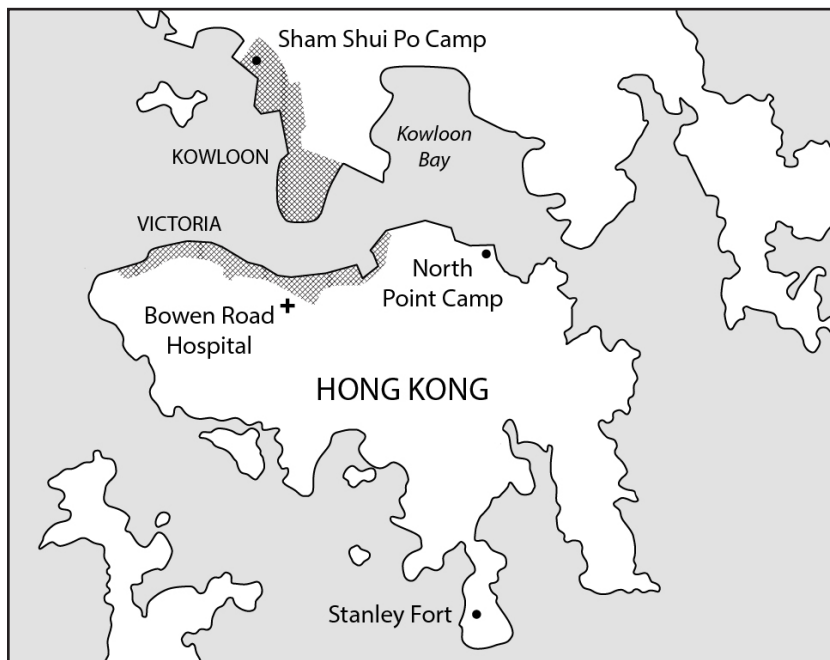
overflowing with refugees and the troops were exposed to all the worst type [of] vices on all sides.” Practically speaking, these diversions would contain the spread of venereal disease, build unit comradery and help keep the Canadians out of trouble. Despite the appeal of the “dives”, O’Neill held numerous activities for the men of C Force, including a softball match with a local Portuguese club, the renting of a swimming pool (at HK\$9.00 an hour) and a fruitless attempt to acquire a film projector. “[I] was about to write asking suggestions from Sussex Street,” O’Neill noted of his movie troubles, “when the war also caused an abrupt end to this scheme.”⁴⁴

On that fateful morning of 8 December 1941, “most of the Canadian Force was already in position on Hong Kong Island, having been thus placed to get acquainted with the defence set-up and also just in case things began to happen.” O’Neill with a “skeleton maintenance force” was left in barracks. His war would begin a few hours later with the arrival of Japanese bombers. Only later would he learn that the war had already started: “Funny that nobody had thought of advising the people in the Camp about it.”⁴⁵ Evacuating to the Island with what equipment he could, O’Neill purchased a large quantity of cigarettes in Hong Kong city but had difficulty getting them to the Rifles since “transport for Force ‘C’ had not arrived at Hong Kong before the war started. This made it short all around and I had not been lucky in getting use of a civilian car.”⁴⁶ Over the next two weeks, O’Neill acted as a makeshift telephone operator as the Japanese cut the island in two, eventually finding a billet with some local Maryknoll priests. “When the final withdrawal started[,] I left Maryknoll House and joined one of the companies of the Royal Rifles and with them spent two days proceeding slowly under fire of Jap mortars which kept up with little interruption during the daylight hours.” On Christmas Eve, the Rifles took shelter at Stanley Fort where they surrendered on Christmas Day. “When the war was over

⁴⁴ O’Neill Report, 2-3.

⁴⁵ O’Neill Report, 3. The loss of records and confusion on the Allied side has made reconstructing the battle difficult even for historians. See Greenhouse, “C” Force, 71-72. O’Neill himself believed that over 100,000 Japanese soldiers had attacked Hong Kong, rather than the single reinforced division of about 30,000 men. See O’Neill Report, 4.

⁴⁶ O’Neill Report, 3-4. The transport issue was a source of major controversy in the years which followed and a prime subject of debate for historians. For a particularly trenchant criticism, see Carl Vincent, *No Reason Why: The Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy, an Examination* (Stittsville, ON: Canada’s Wings, 1981), 81-89.



Hong Kong island and mainland POW camps.

in Hong Kong and we realized we were in for a long unhappy session as prisoners-of-war, I knew my job was just beginning.”⁴⁷

O’Neill’s experiences in Japanese captivity were divided between two POW camps: North Point from January to September 1942 and Sham Shui Po from then until the end of the war. In January 1942, the Rifles “together with bits and pieces of the British units and the Hong Kong Volunteers” were marched to North Point, a cramped former Chinese refugee camp badly damaged during the fighting: “As many as seventy to ninety men were herded into huts which normally held only 30.” It was, O’Neill observed with understatement, “a bit of a shock to be introduced to this type of accommodation.”⁴⁸ Still, the overall Canadian experience at North Point does not seem to have been too grim. Food was not a major issue at this point; the Japanese were supplying regular shipments and the prisoners still had access to

⁴⁷ O’Neill Report, 4.

⁴⁸ O’Neill Report, 4.

some of their own rations.⁴⁹ This is corroborated by O'Neill's records of the near continuous softball, volleyball and soccer matches held during this period.⁵⁰ It was the gradual decrease in food over 1942 combined with the warm summer weather which finally weakened the Canadians' health. "Certainly the highlight in sports was reached at North Point," O'Neill later stated, as "the work parties had not yet become the strenuous session they were to become later, and the lack of food did not begin to show its very weakening effects until just before the move in September [1942]."⁵¹ Undeniably, the height of recreation at North Point took place on 1 July for Dominion Day. With the support of Lieutenant-Colonel Home and John Price (the Rifles' second-in-command), O'Neill and George Porteous planned a full slate of activities for the day. These included a softball match between "All Stars" from among the Grenadiers and the Rifles, a volleyball tournament, a horseshoe throwing contest, a minstrel show, a handicraft exhibition where men submitted products of their own design and even a take on the old jellybean contest where one had to guess how many grains of rice were in a glass jar. According to O'Neill's records the correct total was 6,912 and the winner Private Gerald McKnight with a guess of 6,865. "Thus was a bit of colour injected into the lives of the prisoners and the celebration of Dominion Day became an established affair in the Camp."⁵² Despite declining health, the Canadian POWs held similar yearly celebrations for the remainder of their captivity.

Interestingly, at least according to O'Neill, the Japanese at North Point do not appear to have ruled harshly. In his report, the most degrading thing the prisoners were forced to do here was "to bow lowly to the guard commander and ask permission to go through the gate" to retrieve errant softballs. In fact, the Japanese backed the prisoners in their sporting activities. With only a single softball

⁴⁹ O'Neill Report, 5. This claim contrasts with Charles Roland's later conclusion that "Throughout North Point Camp's nine-month existence, rations were desperately thin." See Roland, *Long Night's Journey*, 130. For a similar view, see Patricia E. Roy, J. L. Granatstein, Iino Masako and Takamura Hiroko, *Mutual Hostages: Canadians and Japanese during the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 70-71.

⁵⁰ Several schedules and scorekeeping records for these events are held in acc.5020, file 5, PAROPEI.

⁵¹ O'Neill Report, 6.

⁵² O'Neill Report, 7-8; and Reports of Activities Conducted July 1st - 1942, acc.5020, file 3 and file 5, PAROPEI.



The multinational entertainment committee at Sham Shui Po in the Summer of 1942, including Canadian, Dutch, and Portuguese POWs. [Canadian War Museum, CWM19960007-011]

initially at their disposal, constant resewing was required as the ball wore out. This first ball “did service in at least 100 games” at which point “we got a second one, a gift from a Japanese enthusiast.”⁵³ Given the prewar popularity of baseball in Japan, this is not a surprising claim.⁵⁴ A library was also acquired after “a scrounging expedition under Jap guard” discovered a number of books at the nearby Hong Kong Electric Company.⁵⁵ When O’Neill began organising weekly Saturday night concerts, these were performed “on the back of a Japanese truck, obtained for that use only after much diplomatic

⁵³ O’Neill Report, 5.

⁵⁴ For the spread of baseball in prewar Japan, see Joseph A. Reaves, *Taking in a Game: A History of Baseball in Asia* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 49-73. Later, when the officers received pay in Military Yen, “a pool was created for the purchase of softballs, etc. which were procurable though the Japs.” See O’Neill Report, 6.

⁵⁵ O’Neill Report, 8. For more on Canadian reading habits in Hong Kong, see Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 100.

persuasion.”⁵⁶ While his laconic prose obviously hides a good deal of unspoken back-and-forth between the prisoners and their jailers, it does suggest that the Japanese were willing to subsidise the POWs’ activities, likely as a concession to keep order. The Canadians also had access to electricity in the evenings (O’Neill mentions a “100 watt lamp borrowed [*sic*] from Camp office” to illuminate their concerts) and to all sorts of building materials, running a forge which made the horseshoes for Dominion Day and a wood lathe for baseball bats. When the POWs wanted a proper stage for their shows, Major Wells Bishop and the Royal Rifles’ pioneer section convinced the Japanese to let them retrieve some lumber “which was lying within sight of the camp” to build a thirty-by-fifteen-foot platform with bed-boards for flooring.⁵⁷ None of this suggests that life at North Port was excessively grim, nor the Japanese guards uniformly sadistic. Most Japanese seemed content to let the prisoners get along with their activities and to occasionally benefit from the results.⁵⁸ Indeed, when the move back to Sham Shui Po was announced, although O’Neill worried he would lose his equipment, “[t]his fear was unfounded and I managed to bring everything along with the help of some willing men,” carting away everything from their books to their homemade costumes.⁵⁹

THE PLAYWRIGHT OF SHAM SHUI PO: FRANCIS O’NEILL’S WAR, 1942-1945

Unsurprisingly, given the history noted above, relations with the Japanese deteriorated with both a different set of guards at Sham Shui Po and with the worsening Japanese war effort. It was about this time that the previously mentioned diphtheria outbreak arose. The three months from October to December 1942, as O’Neill averred, were “the darkest days in the Hong Kong prison” and he spent most

⁵⁶ O’Neill Report, 7.

⁵⁷ O’Neill Report, 6-8. “One could find almost anything,” O’Neill claimed, “if he searched hard enough.”

⁵⁸ Interestingly, as Canadian Private Bill Ashton later asserted, part of the decision to build the stage allegedly came from the Japanese camp commandant, who “ordered lumber brought in” and who would “sit there in his chair [during performances], front and centre, his two interpreters interpreting for him.” See Dancocks, *In Enemy Hands*, 242-43.

⁵⁹ O’Neill Report, 9.

of this time tending to the sickest men in hospital.⁶⁰ As historian Charles Roland observes, seriously ill POWs at North Point had been able to transfer to nearby Bowen Road Hospital for treatment as both were on Hong Kong Island, partially limiting the spread of disease there. Prisoners at Sham Shui Po on the mainland had no such luck.⁶¹ “Only one case here yet,” Tom Forsyth of the Grenadiers reported from North Point in his diary on 14 August, “but we are warned to keep to our own areas, no mixing with the Rifles. No more soft ball games nor classes, nor bat. [battalion] parades.”⁶² With the Sham Shui Po outbreak, as O’Neill noted, “any thought of organized entertainment was out of the question,” barring a handful of musicians who would travel “from hut to hut and playing while several lookouts were posted to watch for the coming of the Japs.” Only in early 1943, after the initial round of Red Cross parcels had been distributed and the epidemic had abated was O’Neill able to return to his entertainment duties.⁶³

It was against this backdrop that relations with the Japanese deteriorated. In December 1942, as O’Neill related, the Japanese purchased a large inventory of equipment for the prisoners, running from sets of the boardgame Monopoly to musical instruments and even a roulette wheel, when 30,000 Military Yen was donated to them by the Vatican.⁶⁴ While these supplies, carefully itemised by O’Neill, were later enjoyed by the Canadians, it was certainly not what was needed most at the height of an epidemic.⁶⁵ When a British Catholic priest in camp wrote to the Japanese to ask that the money be spent on food and medicine, O’Neill stated that “[h]e was severely beaten

⁶⁰ O’Neill Report, 10. Amazingly, neither O’Neill nor any of the professional medical officers caught diphtheria despite their constant contact with infected patients during this outbreak. See O’Neill Report, 11; and Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 167.

⁶¹ Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 157.

⁶² Library and Archives Canada, R2463-0-8-E, Tom Forsyth, “Hong Kong Diary and Memories of Japan: Gleanings from the Diary of a Winnipeg Grenadier,” entry for 14 August 1942, as quoted in Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 163-64.

⁶³ O’Neill Report, 10-11.

⁶⁴ This shipment may explain the provenance of some of the games and activities mentioned by POWs in their diaries and autobiographies as well as their apparently extensive supply of certain products, such as playing cards. For examples, see Schwarzkopf, “Second Mission,” 123-25.

⁶⁵ While O’Neill cites the date as February 1943 in his report, the apparent inventory included in his papers is dated December 1942. See O’Neill Report, 10; and Notice of Supplies, 18 December 1942, acc.5020, file 5, PAROPEL.

for this inquiry.”⁶⁶ As Roland concludes, it is hard to know whether these and other obstinate Japanese acts were “sheer bureaucratic incompetence or malevolence,” but it does appear that “ineptitude in the Japanese POW bureaucracy was widespread and pervasive.”⁶⁷ As O’Neill’s own report also implies, the Japanese at Sham Shui Po may have been less tolerant than those at North Point.⁶⁸ Further, as the transfer of POWs worsened the diphtheria outbreak, they seemed utterly incapable of transferring the food and medical supplies that would have lessened it.

With a return to relative normalcy in April 1943, O’Neill tried to restart the softball league, but with only modest success. While nine teams were assembled, each named for a Chinese city,⁶⁹ from among the able-bodied Canadian and Portuguese POWs, there was little real enthusiasm, especially when the hot weather arrived again. This, O’Neill noted, “was evidence enough that the previous year’s lack of food had left its imprint and none of the old form shown at North Point during the early months of internment could be recaptured.”⁷⁰ After this point, barring the annual Dominion Day match—now a spectator sport more than anything—less strenuous concerts and plays became the focus of O’Neill and Porteous. Over the next two and a half years, dozens of these were held at Sham Shui Po, with Canadian, British and Portuguese performances. The first performance mentioned by O’Neill was *Café Casanova*—“enacted by a complete Portuguese cast”—with special mention given to the role of a famous diva, played in drag by Ferdinand “Sonny” Castro, whom O’Neill supplied “with what ladies clothing we had made at North Point and helped him with some coaching.” As O’Neill observed, Castro was “the best female impersonator yet produced in the prison camp” and his performances were later cited by many Canadian

⁶⁶ O’Neill Report, 10.

⁶⁷ Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 157.

⁶⁸ The “new Jap Camp commandant” as O’Neill observed later, was apparently a disciplinarian who later classified educational classes as “illegal gatherings [...] not to be held under any circumstances” and his prohibition on camp gambling would even initially extend to playing bingo. See O’Neill Report, 9, 19-20.

⁶⁹ According to O’Neill’s records, these were Tientsin, Hankow, Nanking, Shanghai, Chungking, Amoy, Swatow, Foochow and Canton. Softball Team Roster, acc.5020, file 5, PAROPEL.

⁷⁰ O’Neill Report, 12.



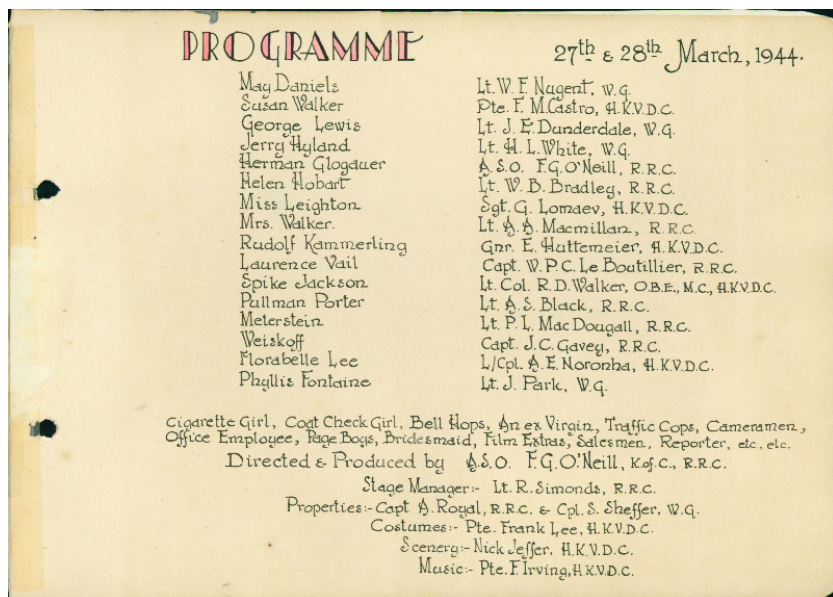
A page from Portuguese POW Marciano Francisco de Paula “Naneli” Baptista’s wartime album depicting a scene from the play *Here Comes Charlie*, as directed by Francis O’Neill in Sham Sui Po for the camp’s Dominion Day celebrations, July 1943. [From the private collection of Filomeno Baptista]

POWs.⁷¹ As historians like Clare Makepeace have explored, female impersonation was common in most British and Commonwealth POW camps throughout the war, not only providing male prisoners “with a release from the abnormal state of a single-sex society,” but also containing a hint of “transgressing the boundaries of male heterosexual desire.”⁷² Whether or not there was homosexuality in Sham Shui Po—many prisoners thought not—the repeated mentions by O’Neill and his fellow POWs certainly suggest that Castro’s acting was memorable.⁷³

⁷¹ O’Neill Report, 12; Schwarzkopf, “Second Mission,” 128; and Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 98-99.

⁷² Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 114-26. For the same practice in Japanese POW camps, see Sears A. Eldredge, *Captive Audiences/Captive Performers: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway 1942-1945* (Saint Paul, MN: Macalester College, 2014), 516-41.

⁷³ For the issue of Castro’s homosexuality, see Roland, *Long Night’s Journey*, 100.



The cast list for the play *Once in a Lifetime* from Nenei's album, citing Francis O'Neill as both the director and as an actor in one of the main roles, March 1944. [From the private collection of Filomeno Baptista]

Restricted to a "one-show-a-month basis" by the Japanese, O'Neill would assist most of the camp's performances. One of the first Canadian shows was on 8-10 April 1943, based on a bit previously performed at North Point called *The Dixie Minstrels*, which played "to capacity houses of approximately 750 each."⁷⁴ On Dominion Day 1943, O'Neill produced the "three-act comedy drama" *Here Comes Charlie*, "a double head-ache in that, besides handling the direction which got underway the first week in June [...] I had to spend the balance of each day writing from memory the other two acts."⁷⁵ Still, the play was seemingly well received; Captain Lionel Hurd of the Rifles dubbed it "splendid" in his diary.⁷⁶ The biggest work attempted in Sham Shui Po was entitled *Once in a Lifetime* in March 1944. This had fifty-one parts, forty-one of

⁷⁴ O'Neill Report, 13-14. An orchestra list and plot summary for this play are included in O'Neill's files, acc.5020, file 4, PAROPEL.

⁷⁵ O'Neill Report, 14.

⁷⁶ In Grant S. Garneau, *The Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong 1941-1945* (Carp, ON: Baird O'Keefe Publishing, 2001), 194, as quoted in Schwarzkopf, "Second Mission," 128.

them speaking roles. “I was lucky to procure the full script for the play in a book in Camp,” O’Neill reported, “and with a slight bit of altering and cutting produced it in its entirety.”⁷⁷ Lieutenant Harry White of the Grenadiers, as Matthew Schwarzkopf observes, “was one of those officers who caught the acting bug” during his captivity. White played a lead role in this show, despite his own claim to have “done no memory work since school days, years ago.”⁷⁸ Not only did these shows provide a much needed distraction, but “the task of memorizing dialogue would have been good for keeping one’s mind and memory sharp, and the execution of a role on stage in front of a crowd would have been good for one’s confidence.”⁷⁹ The same went for the play’s producers. By the end of his captivity, O’Neill was fancying himself quite the director, having helped adapt numerous books in the camp’s library to the stage. When a set of professionally-made wigs and costumes arrived in a February 1945 Red Cross delivery, O’Neill even claimed that “though manufactured” they “did not measure up to our prison-made stuff”!⁸⁰ The Canadians in Hong Kong, as Schwarzkopf concludes, “were productive and imaginative, enthusiastic about learning new things, and managed to have some fun even though their circumstances dictated that was likely the last thing that should have happened.”⁸¹

By this point, many of the Canadians in Hong Kong had been drafted for work in Japan and both the number of POWs and the camp’s conditions had declined noticeably. By Dominion Day 1944, POWs no longer had access to electricity. When the show *Club Canaluja* was performed over Christmas 1944, “very effective lighting” was improvised “by reflecting the sun through mirrors on to a specially prepared white ceiling on the stage.”⁸² By March 1945, the price of cigarettes had become “prohibitive.”⁸³ Food, of course, was the constant worry. From December 1942 onwards, the Japanese would often distribute Military Yen from the Red Cross in lieu of food, leaving the ex-accountant O’Neill “with the problem of helping

⁷⁷ O’Neill Report, 17. A call list for this play is in O’Neill’s files, acc.5020, file 4, PAROPEI.

⁷⁸ Schwarzkopf, “Second Mission,” 128.

⁷⁹ Schwarzkopf, “Second Mission,” 129.

⁸⁰ O’Neill Report, 21.

⁸¹ Schwarzkopf, “Second Mission,” 132.

⁸² O’Neill Report, 17-18.

⁸³ O’Neill Report, 20.

the boys spend it as wisely as possible.”⁸⁴ Consulting with camp doctors, O’Neill tried to make the best purchases from among the supplies brought into the camp weekly by the Japanese, including “such things as dried beans, soy sauce, Chinese sugar in small quantities, dried fish and a few other weird products.” The prices were exorbitant “and later the prices were completely out of reach.” O’Neill would perform this duty until it was taken over by some quartermaster sergeants in early 1944.⁸⁵

One acutely controversial aspect regarding the Canadians in Hong Kong were the actions of the Red Cross. As historians like Jonathan Vance and Sarah Glassford argue, the Japanese were reportedly unforthcoming with Red Cross aid for POWs, lied frequently to their inspectors and the Canadian government often appeared naively credulous in taking Japanese Red Cross reports at face value.⁸⁶ In a particularly infamous incident, POWs were surprised to see several truckloads of new sports equipment arrive at the camp just prior to a Red Cross inspection. When Captain John Norris of the Grenadiers told the inspectors of this fact, he was viciously beaten after their departure by Inoue Kanao, the notorious “Kamloops Kid.”⁸⁷ O’Neill’s account paints a checkered picture of Red Cross aid. As already noted, the Japanese were forthcoming with some material diversions for the POWs, ranging from individual softballs donated by Japanese guards to entire shipments of games provided through the Red Cross, meaning Norris’s experience was not a universal one. As O’Neill wrote, they were receiving aid first through the Chinese Red Cross and later via the International Red Cross. “This was controlled by the Japs,” he noted in his report, “and the percentage released to us was negligible compared to what had been sent. We figure the Japs did very well by it themselves.”⁸⁸ However, this fact did not seem to

⁸⁴ As O’Neill’s report and papers show, despite the possibility that the Japanese were skimming funds, the Canadians seemed to have had quite a bit of money in captivity. For these accusations, see Roy et al., *Mutual Hostages*, 72.

⁸⁵ O’Neill Report, 11.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Jonathan F. Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 183-216; and Sarah Glassford, *Mobilizing Mercy: A History of the Canadian Red Cross* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 208-10.

⁸⁷ This incident was first reported by William Allister (*Life and Death*, 81-83) before being widely repeated in the secondary literature. See Vance, *Objects of Concern*, 188n23; Greenhouse, “*C*” *Force*, 130-31n6; and Brode, *Casual Slaughters*, 158n7.

⁸⁸ O’Neill Report, 11.

stir anger against the Red Cross itself and O'Neill even softened his tone on the Japanese in later years.

After his return to Prince Edward Island in 1946, O'Neill took part in that year's provincial-wide Red Cross Campaign, going on the local radio to praise the organisation in a well-received speech.⁸⁹ "In the long months during which contact with the outside world was cut off," O'Neill lectured, "never did it occur to us that the Red Cross was not working on our behalf" and on behalf of all Canadians in Hong Kong he offered them their "deepest gratitude." O'Neill also claimed that when the Red Cross finally did break down "the Japanese barriers [...] it was estimated that only a tenth of what he been delivered to our captors actually reached us—but then I suppose some hungry Japs were well fed for once."⁹⁰ While O'Neill thus confirmed the routine pilfering of Red Cross packages, he certainly did not think the Japanese were living in the lap of luxury while the POWs were being cruelly starved.⁹¹ Indeed, as he summarised events in his report with a rather shocking accusation, "[w]hile the Japanese usually were somewhat co-operative, approach to them was often blocked by the liaison officer, a British Major, who collaborated with the Japanese, and made life more miserable for all the prisoners."⁹² Still, O'Neill's account does not indicate that he believed the Japanese were intentionally and spitefully trying to kill prisoners out of innate cruelty or adherence to the ethics of "bushido." Incompetence and Japan's own logistical difficulties seem to explain much of what O'Neill witnessed in Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945.

⁸⁹ Edwin C. Johnstone to Frank O'Neill, 19 November 1946, acc.5020, file 23, PAROPEI; and "1946 Financial Report: Provincial Red Cross Campaign," *The Guardian*, 21 November 1946, 3.

⁹⁰ Red Cross Radio Script, acc.5020, file 23, PAROPEI.

⁹¹ As Charles Roland observes, despite the argument that POWs were being deliberately deprived of food, "[t]here is no documented proof of this assertion, which many of the prisoners shared." Roland, *Long Night's Journey*, 131.

⁹² O'Neill Report, 19. This was likely a reference to British Major Cecil Boon, who acted as a mouthpiece for the Japanese and was hated by many POWs. Boon was later tried for collaboration but was exonerated. See Roland, *Long Night's Journey*, 75-77.

CONCLUSION

By the time O'Neill moved into Sham Shui Po's Camp N for officers on 27 April 1945, he had ensured that shows in Sham Shui Po would continue in his absence. The annual Dominion Day production, for instance, went ahead with Sergeant Archibald McKinnon acting as director.⁹³ "Many [POWs], I'm sure will have pleasant memories of shows they either worked in or saw," O'Neill proudly wrote in his report, "and for my part I'll remember all the help all of them were to me."⁹⁴ With the war's end in August 1945, O'Neill was hard pressed to keep the ex-POWs entertained while they awaited evacuation, holding "nightly concerts in the open air, mostly reviews of old shows which were new to one camp or the other." By this time, Japanese obstinacy had ceased to be an issue. When O'Neill wanted to produce a local news broadcast for the men, he did so from bulletins taken "off radios we had demanded and got from the Japs" and he acquired a film projector and some captured American films after applying "some pressure" to his erstwhile captors. On 9 September, O'Neill was bound home on the *Empress of Australia*, "my final act on behalf of troops [being] a distribution of cigarettes" in Victoria, British Columbia. With that, O'Neill's "second mission" came to an end: "The rest you know."⁹⁵

Francis O'Neill's report confirms what historians have long since argued about conditions in Japanese POW camps during the Second World War. Despite popular images of unrelenting cruelty, the reality was rarely so clear-cut. Being a Japanese POW, as Sarah Kovner concludes, was often "like a terrible game of chance."

It was usually better to be a civilian internee than a soldier, better to be captured in Singapore than in the Philippines, better to surrender at Corregidor than Bataan, and better to be transported to Japan in 1942 than in 1944, when convoys were routinely attacked and sunk. But someone who survived the Bataan Death March, the most hellish of the hell ships, and a stint at Fukuoka 1 [prison camp in Japan], might end up at a camp in Korea originally built to showcase Japan's honourable treatment of POWs. Conversely, some civilian internees

⁹³ O'Neill Report, 19.

⁹⁴ O'Neill Report, 21-22.

⁹⁵ O'Neill Report, 22.

endured appalling treatment, or much the same treatment as POWs, since they were often kept in the same camps.⁹⁶

O'Neill's report reveals this principle in miniature. It was better to be interned at North Point than Sham Shui Po, better to remain in Hong Kong than go to Japan and the quality and amount of food and other provisions predictably deteriorated the longer the war continued. Likewise, while there were clearly sadistic guards, the Canadian-born "Kamloops Kid" being the most infamous,⁹⁷ there were also those like Dr. Selwyn-Clarke's Lieutenant Tanaka, who went out of their way to aid POWs. Many guards were not even Japanese at all but Taiwanese or Korean conscripts; O'Neill himself noted that some of the guards at Sham Shui Po were "Formosans."⁹⁸ These varied experiences make generalising about Canadian life in Japanese captivity difficult and suggest that historians should consider normalising the experience of Allied prisoners of the Japanese rather than setting them apart from those captured by the Germans or Italians.⁹⁹ After all, even in the very worst of circumstances, basic humanity and decency can emerge.

Why, then, have accounts of Japanese brutality remained fixed in the public consciousness? In part, it was the result of racist assumptions about "the Japanese character." As Kovner notes, in reading the contemporary coverage of Japanese prisoners, "it is impossible to ignore the influence of both implicit and explicit racial hierarchies in how the POW experience was felt and portrayed." Adapting to Japanese norms in captivity—sleeping on tatami mats, using Japanese toilets, counting rollcall in Japanese—clearly grated on many men inclined to look down on "Orientals," both at home and

⁹⁶ Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 208.

⁹⁷ After his lawyer argued that, as a Canadian citizen, Inoue Kanao could not be tried for war crimes, he was returned to Canada and convicted of treason. He was executed on 25 August 1947. See Brode, *Casual Slaughters*, 169-76.

⁹⁸ O'Neill Report, 11. As C Force medical officer Major Gordon Gray later observed, many Japanese guards were eventually replaced by Taiwanese conscripts. "Sometimes I felt the Japanese had more trouble looking after the Formosans than they did after us!" See Dancocks, *In Enemy Hands*, 268.

⁹⁹ Contrast the evidence of this article with the more categorical statement by Jonathan Vance that the Japanese were "a tougher nut" than the Germans who "clearly had little interest in treating its prisoners better" or Daniel Dancocks's assertion that German adherence to the Geneva Convention was "unquestionably better than that of the Japanese." See Vance, *Objects of Concern*, 215; and Dancocks, *In Enemy Hands*, xiii.

in colonial settings.¹⁰⁰ When British POW Dr. Aidan MacCarthy, captured on Java, described Japanese brutality, he fell back on the idea that “[o]ne of the strictest codes of the Oriental way of life is the concept of ‘Face’ and ‘Loss of Face’.” Thus, if the camp commandant slapped his officers, they would slap the men, who abused the POWs in turn.¹⁰¹ While physical abuse had a long history within the IJA, this was due to a deliberate ethos of petty violence within the military, not Japanese mentality.¹⁰² While we cannot dismiss all accusations of Japanese brutality as merely the result of bigotry, it is clear that many Allied allusions to “bushido” or Japanese “face-saving” were simply lazy stereotypes born of ignorance, ones often repeated by later historians.¹⁰³

It was also a result of POW criticisms regarding the portrayal of their captivity in popular culture. As historian Frances Houghton has explored, many post-1960 British POW accounts about the Siam-Burma Death Railway were shaped by what they felt were distortions of their experiences in David Lean’s 1957 film, including the feeling that it “sanitized” their suffering.¹⁰⁴ In the Canadian context, the POW experience is often framed by the broader controversy over whether C Force was needlessly sacrificed by bungling British commanders and craven Canadian politicians, as well as the assertion that the Canadian government inadequately supported the survivors.¹⁰⁵ After all, the more Canadian POWs suffered, the larger the guilt of the men who sent them there. As historian Galen Roger Perras observes of Nathan Greenfield’s book *The Damned*, its major

¹⁰⁰ Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 212-13.

¹⁰¹ Adrian MacCarthy, *A Doctor’s War* (London: Robson House, 1985), 56-57.

¹⁰² Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 135; and Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire*, 213. Indeed, a major theme of Pierre Boulle’s original *Bridge over the River Kwai* was that “[d]uring the last war ‘saving face’ was perhaps as vitally important to the British as it was the Japanese,” thus setting up the conflict between Colonels Nicholson and Saito. See Boulle, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, trans. Xan Fielding (Glasgow: Fontana, 1956), 7.

¹⁰³ Even historian Tim Cook, writing in 2020, chastises the “culture in Japan, with its stringent sense of honour, [that] made it difficult for political leaders to issue a formal apology [for the war].” Cook, *The Fight for History*, 277.

¹⁰⁴ Frances Houghton, “‘To the Kwai and Back’: Myth, Memory and Memoirs of the ‘Death Railway’ 1942-1943,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 7, 3 (August 2014): 227-29, 234.

¹⁰⁵ Cook, *The Fight for History*, 273-84; and Dave McIntosh, *Hell on Earth, Aging Faster, Dying Sooner: Canadian Prisoners of War of the Japanese during World War II* (Whitby, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1997), vii-x.



Canadian POWs in their quarters at Sham Shui Po after their liberation by crewman from HMCS *Prince Roberts*, September 1945. Note the smiles and generally well-fed figures. [Jack Hawes, RG 24, PR-510, Library and Archives Canada]

strength—“a moving depiction of the pain C Force members endured in battle and in Japanese POW camps”—is also deeply flawed: “By emphasizing this narrative of suffering, Greenfield has perpetuated the notion that C Force’s sacrifices were the tragic product of colonial subservience.” Instead, Perras argues, what is needed are works that avoid “fingerpointing and grudge settling.”¹⁰⁶ In reading Canadian POW accounts, historians must remain vigilant lest they too fall into these snares.

As for Francis O’Neill, life would go on. Stopping at Ottawa in October 1945 on route to Charlottetown, O’Neill met with Chester McLure, the newly elected member of Parliament for O’Neill’s home district of Queen’s and whom O’Neill “paid” for his troubles with a (now worthless) Military Yen banknote. McLure would personally write O’Neill after his return home and later noted his pride that “a Prince Edward Islander was the No. 1 morale-builder in that terrible

¹⁰⁶ Galen Roger Perras, “Defeat Still Cries Aloud for Explanation: Explaining C Force’s Dispatch to Hong Kong,” *Canadian Military Journal* 11, 4 (Autumn 2011): 37.

starvation camp in which our men were confined.”¹⁰⁷ Many of Sham Shui Po’s former inmates also remembered O’Neill actions as his papers are filled with letters and postcards received from ex-POWs updating him on their postwar lives. One message O’Neill received came through the Knights of Columbus from former POW British Major Arthur Grieve, Sham Shui Po’s former officer in charge of entertainments, who was “fortunate enough to have ‘Huck’ O’Neil [*sic*] as my assistant.” As Grieve wrote, “I have seen O’Neil whilst ill with malaria and general malnutrition get up from his sick bed to appear on the stage, the audience little knowing how he himself was suffering and what an effort it must have been for him to produce that spontaneous humour with which he was always associated.” Grieve trusted that the Knights would convey his “personal thanks to him and to yourselves thank you for sending out such an able man to eventually assist me in the difficulty of keeping up waving morale and showing the men a little civilization, taking their minds off camp horrors and generally showing them that life was still worth living.”¹⁰⁸ In his postwar years, the “playwright of Sham Shui Po” continued to hone his theatrical skills, hosting local productions in Charlottetown.¹⁰⁹ In June 1946, the Department of National Defence would retroactively mention O’Neill in dispatches for his work among his fellow Hong Kong prisoners.¹¹⁰ Francis Gregory O’Neill passed away on 26 December 1971.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pass is a PhD graduate student at the University of Ottawa where his research is focused on Japanese-Canadian relations during and after the Second World War. He is the author of several articles on Japanese-Canadian interactions, including “A Black Ship on Red Shores: Commodore Matthew

¹⁰⁷ “Southam Press Praises Island M.P.’s Teamwork in ‘Citizen’ Editorial,” *The Guardian*, 25 October 1945, 1; W. Chester S. McLure to F. G. O’Neill, 19 October 1945, acc.5020, file 10, PAROPEI; and “Mr. McLure Reviews Session at Ottawa,” *The Guardian*, 31 October 1945, 10.

¹⁰⁸ A. Grieve to Knights of Columbus, 9 November 1945, acc.5020, file 10, PAROPEI; and Philip Phelan to Frank O’Neill, 16 November 1945, acc.5020, file 10, PAROPEI.

¹⁰⁹ See Community Theatre Papers, acc.5020, file 26, PAROPEI.

¹¹⁰ “Department of National Defence, Ottawa. 15th June, 1946,” *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 25 July 1946, 3826.

30 ∴ *Fun Behind the Wire?*

Perry, Prince Edward Island, and the Fishery Question of 1852–1853” in 2020 for the journal *Acadiensis* and “Red Hair in a Global World: A Japanese History of Anne of Green Gables and Prince Edward Island” with the *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies* in 2021.

The author would like to thank Dr. Galen Roger Perras for help with an earlier draft of this article.