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Stacey Barker

Jeff Noakes

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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM  
-  
MUSÉE CANADIEN DE LA GUERRE

## From the Vaults

### Objects Relating to the Canadian Experience in Hong Kong

STACEY BARKER AND JEFF NOAKES

*Abstract: This article focuses on the material culture of Canadians' experiences during and after the Battle of Hong Kong. Stories of combat, captivity, and the return home are told through this selection of personal objects now preserved in the collections of the Canadian War Museum. These artifacts highlight the particular circumstances and harsh conditions faced by prisoners of war and civilian detainees, and serve as entry points into the wider history of the battle, its aftermath and its lasting consequences.*

*Cet article porte sur la culture matérielle des expériences des Canadiens et Canadiennes pendant et après la bataille de Hong Kong. Des histoires de combat, de captivité et de retour au pays sont racontées à travers cette sélection d'objets personnels maintenant conservés dans les collections du Musée canadien de la guerre. Ces artefacts mettent en lumière les circonstances particulières et les conditions difficiles auxquelles sont confrontés les prisonniers de guerre et les détenus civils. Ils servent aussi de points d'entrée dans l'histoire plus large de la bataille, ses répercussions et ses conséquences à long terme.*

THE CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM collects and preserves material related to Canada's military history. The collection is especially rich in Second World War objects, documents and art, including material from the Battle of Hong Kong and its aftermath. Items such as uniforms, a bullet, surgical tools, blankets and even war trophies are tangible reminders of the brutal experiences of the troops tasked



The bullet fragment that wounded Albert Russell [Fonds of Albert J. Russell & John H. Russell, CWM 20150151-027]

POW broadcast recording. [Fonds of Albert J. Russell & John H. Russell, CWM 20150151-017]



with defending the territory, their ordeals as prisoners of war (POWs) and their eventual liberation and repatriation. Objects illuminate the lives of Hong Kong veterans and their families and contextualise the depth of their experiences, both on an individual and collective level. These objects are a sampling of the Hong Kong-related material held by the Museum. They were chosen to exemplify key aspects of Canada's Hong Kong experience, bearing witness to battle, captivity, liberation and return.

#### **BULLET FRAGMENT AND POW MESSAGE RECORDING**

Albert Russell was only seventeen when he enlisted in 1940. A member of the Royal Rifles of Canada, Russell was wounded at Repulse Bay during the Battle of Hong Kong. This bullet was removed from



Albert Russell and his mother upon his return home, 18 October 1945. [CWM 20150151-081\_1]

his lower back. Days later, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese. During his captivity, Russell was held at several camps, including North Point and Sham Shui Po in Hong Kong, before being sent to Japan. There he was held at the Tsurumi and Sendai prisoner of war camps and forced to work in shipyards and coal mines.

In September 1943, Russell participated in a prisoner of war broadcast on Radio Tokyo, sending greetings to his family back home and providing news about other Canadians held captive. The Canadian radio monitoring station at Point Grey, British Columbia transcribed and recorded the broadcast and authorities relayed the information to Russell's mother. She also received this privately-made recording from B. O. South in San Francisco, one of several individuals who recorded such broadcasts and forwarded them to next-of-kin identified by the POWs. While these messages were sent as propaganda by the Japanese, they nevertheless gave families some reassurance that their loved ones were alive. Albert's older brother, Robert Leslie Russell, also a POW in Hong Kong, died of tuberculosis in June 1945 while in captivity—the family did not receive this news until after the war's end. Albert Russell returned home and remained in the army after the war ended, serving thirty-five years with the regular forces and three with the reserves.



#### POW BADGE

This prisoner's badge belonged to Rifleman Percy Wilmot. A veteran of the First World War, Wilmot enlisted again in 1940 and, at age forty-nine, volunteered to join the Royal Rifles of Canada for service in the Far East. He was among the troops captured in December 1941. The Japanese assigned Wilmot POW number 6842 and he wore this aluminum badge during his captivity. Wilmot was seriously wounded in the defence of Hong Kong and suffered from a number of severe



health problems while he was a prisoner, including malnutrition, dysentery and malaria. He survived the ordeal and was repatriated to Canada, but he spent several years recuperating in hospitals and continued to suffer from the effects of his war service for the rest of his life until his death in 1967. His son, Stanley Wilmot, also served in the militia before joining the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War.



### **SURGICAL KIT**

Many Canadian POWs—like Percy Wilmot—suffered injuries and ill health during their brutal captivity and they received poor medical care from their Japanese captors. Kenneth Cambon, a private with the Royal Rifles of Canada who worked as a medical orderly while held captive, surreptitiously liberated this surgical kit at the Niigata Camp in Japan and used it to treat fellow prisoners. The fourteen instruments in the case include forceps, clamps and scalpels.

Kenneth Cambon's McGill yearbook photograph, 1951. [Old McGill Yearbook - Students' Society of McGill University]



Like Albert Russell, Cambon was an underage recruit and was only seventeen years old when he was taken prisoner by the Japanese on 25 December 1941. Cambon also had two sisters who served: Margery Cambon, a nurse with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps who was stationed in England, and Noreen Cambon, with the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division. After his release and return home to Quebec, Cambon took advantage of education benefits for veterans and went to McGill University, eventually graduating from medical school. He became a respected otolaryngologist in British Columbia and later wrote the book *Guest of Hirohito*, an account of his experiences as a POW.





*Untitled*. Painting by William Allister, 1942-1944. [CWM 20120037-003]

## PAINTING

The years of captivity were not only brutal but could often be monotonous. The situation drove some POWs to find creative and intellectual outlets, even at the risk of punishment if discovered. Montrealer William Allister, a member of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, was a talented artist. Using crankshaft oil on scraps of tent canvas, he secretly depicted scenes from his POW experience that were later sewn into the pantleg of a fellow prisoner for safekeeping. This work, portraying ships in Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong was begun in 1942 and completed in Japan in 1944. Allister added the coloured paint post-war.

After the war, Allister worked as an actor, artist and writer. In 1961, he published *A Handful of Rice*, a novel based on the experiences of the Canadian POWs. Later, he returned to Japan with his wife Mona as part of his efforts to come to terms with his wartime experiences and subsequently wrote *Where Life and Death Hold Hands*, a memoir of his time as a prisoner. In 1995, Allister and Japanese Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama—the designer of the Canadian War Museum who had been interned by the Canadian government during the war—were the subjects of the documentary *The Art of Compassion*.

[CWM 20090057-001, 002]



### **CIVILIAN INTERNEE BLANKETS**

The fall of Hong Kong led to hardships for its civilian population as well as the troops stationed there. Frederick and Hermena Jean Oppen, a British-Canadian couple, were imprisoned by the Japanese until their release in a prisoner exchange in 1943. Held at the Stanley Internment Camp, they were only allowed to bring with them a cot, towels, a cup and a spoon. They were issued these blankets. The rest of their possessions, along with their house, were taken over by Japanese occupation forces. Prior to their internment, Frederick Oppen was a sea captain, commanding a vessel of the Chinese Maritime Customs. His wife Hermena was Canadian, born in Stratford, Ontario. She moved to Hong Kong in 1940 when she married Frederick.

When the Japanese invaded, Hermena, who had trained as an auxiliary nurse, worked at St. Paul's casualty clearing station, while Frederick helped supervise the station's operations. In January 1942,



Frederick and Hermena Oppen on their wedding day, 31 August 1940. [CWM 20090057-003]

the Oppens were arrested by the Japanese and imprisoned in Stanley Internment Camp. Hermena Oppen later recalled that conditions in Stanley Camp were bleak, with inadequate food, harsh treatment by guards, poor sanitation and very little, if any, medical care.



### JAPANESE RIFLE, BAYONET AND HELMET

The end of the war in the Pacific meant an end to forty-four months of captivity for Canadian POWs. Some were liberated in Japan. Those who had remained in Hong Kong were being freed as Allied Stoker Fernand Paquin, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, arrived there in September 1945 aboard the cruiser HMCS *Ontario*. He helped liberate civilian prisoners from internment camps and was part of the combined guard for the Canadian delegation at the ceremony marking the official Japanese surrender of Hong Kong on 16 September. The sailors were allowed to keep surrendered Japanese weapons and equipment as trophies. This Arisaka rifle, bayonet and helmet were obtained by Paquin from one of Vice Admiral Ruitaro Fujita's Special Naval Landing Force guards, who were required to lay down their weapons following the surrender.



[CWM 20000100-001]

### **BATTLE DRESS UNIFORM**

Most of the Canadian troops who emerged from their nightmarish captivity in September 1945 did so wearing only the rags on their back. As part of the repatriation process, they were issued new battle dress uniforms. They had not been given any distinctive patch or insignia when they went to Hong Kong, but after they were released, the survivors of C Force were issued a special “HK” badge. This uniform belonged to Sergeant Leonard Wood from Lac Mégantic, Quebec. Wood had joined the Royal Rifles of Canada in August 1940 and was taken prisoner in December 1941. He spent time in the Stanley Hospital, Sham Shui Po, North Point and Sendai Camps. Wood’s cousins Albert Andrews and Donald Wood were also with the Royal Rifles in Hong Kong, along with a number of their friends from Lac Mégantic. Albert was killed on 23 December 1941 and Donald died in captivity in September 1943.



[CWM 20110028-004]

### **SOUVENIR PIN**

Hong Kong veterans came home to Canada wounded, both physically and in spirit. They arrived to a nation ill-prepared to handle their particular needs and concerns, including the lasting consequences of their years as prisoners. In the years following the end of the war, the former POWs drew strength from each other, forming the Hong Kong Veterans Association of Canada in 1965. It has since been joined by the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, which has the goals of educating Canadians on the role of Canadians in the Battle of Hong Kong and the effects of captivity on the survivors and their families as well as assisting the remaining Hong Kong veterans and their widows.

This pin, featuring the coat of arms of the former City of Toronto, was distributed during the Hong Kong Veterans Association's National Convention in 1975. It belonged to Lieutenant Nursing Sister Kathleen (Kay) Christie, one of two nurses with the Canadian Hong Kong contingent. Christie, along with Lieutenant Nursing Sister Anna May Waters, spent eight months as POWs, treating sick and wounded Canadian and British troops while in captivity. Like other Hong Kong veterans, they witnessed and experienced ill treatment and brutal conditions. Christie and Waters were subsequently moved to



Kay Christie meeting her father W. R. C. Christie upon her return to Canada, 1943. [Library and Archives Canada PA-141659]

the Stanley Internment Camp before being released and repatriated as part of a prisoner exchange in 1943.

The Battle of Hong Kong left a deep legacy on those who fought it and survived their subsequent captivity, something that can be seen in the objects kept long after the veterans' return to Canada. The artefacts featured here are a sampling of those held by the Canadian War Museum in its collection. Individually and together, they demonstrate that material culture can offer important entry points into history, in this case fostering a greater understanding of an important part of Canada's Second World War and its post-war memories of the conflict.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Stacey Barker** is Historian, Arts and Military History at the Canadian War Museum (CWM). She received her doctorate in history from the University of Ottawa in 2008 and has contributed to many exhibitions at both the CWM and the Canadian Museum of History. Her most recent publication is the co-authored book *Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914-1945*.

**Jeff Noakes** is Historian, Second World War at the Canadian War Museum (CWM). He received his doctorate in history from Carleton University in 2005 and, in addition to his responsibilities for the museum's Second World War Gallery, has curated and contributed to exhibitions at the CWM and the Canadian Museum of History. He is the author or joint author of books, book chapters, exhibition catalogues and articles on subjects related to the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War and the Arctic.