

THE VETERAN'S VOICE



“Keep ‘em or get rid of ‘em”:

a Veteran's Voice on the Importance of Democracy and Using Your Right to Vote



George Peterson

He is the last of the “Arden Seven”: seven men from Arden Street in Saint-Vital— many still full of boyish enthusiasm— who were among the very first Manitobans to enlist in the army at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

He is the last of the soldiers whose legacy lives on through the exploits of that storied local regiment, the Winnipeg Grenadiers.

And he is also the last of two twin brothers who served side by side during one of Canada's most horrific engagements during World War Two.

To fully understand why this makes George Peterson one of this community's true survivors, one must journey back to Christmas Day, 1941. It was on that day, not so long ago, that Hong Kong was occupied by Japan following a tenacious two week battle.

On that day, George Peterson and his twin brother Morris, joined 1,685 fellow Canadian servicemen and women, in becoming Japanese prisoners of war (POWs). Approximately 290 Canadians were killed in the battle of Hong Kong, which left another 493 Canadians wounded.

In spite of his 98 years of age, Mr. Peterson's memories of that period remain just as vivid as though it were only yesterday. MSBA had the privilege of meeting with Mr. Peterson in his room at Deer Lodge Hospital in Winnipeg, 73 years after the end of his war.

Through the questions asked and answers that followed, it was very evident that for veterans such as George Peterson, the war never really ended. This is because it is all just a memory, and oftentimes a nightmare, away.

Let's start back at the beginning.

In 1940, without a ready posting on the front-lines of the war in Europe, the Winnipeg Grenadiers were sent to Jamaica, to perform garrison duties at a prison camp intended for potential enemies of the British Empire, given the outbreak of the war in 1939.

But a short while later, the Grenadiers were called up for garrison duty in yet another far-flung corner of the British Empire, this time at the southern tip of China, in the then colony of Hong Kong.

Mr. Peterson recalled that the men and women who were sent there, had absolutely no foreshadow of the horrors and tribulations that were to befall them on and after Christmas Day, 1941.

“We heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. So we knew that they were then starting a war in the Far East. But then one day later, we were attacked at Hong Kong and, after defending the island, we finally surrendered on December 25, 1941.”

But surrender did not mean that the fight was over for the Winnipeg Grenadiers at Hong Kong. Every day over the next 44 months remained a battle, just to survive.

“I was sent to the Sendai Camp. It was a coal mine. The Japanese had us living on only calories a day, mainly rice or whatever we could find. Normal calorie intake for the kind of labour we were doing would have been four or five times the amount we received.”

Many of the POWs suffered from malnutrition and starvation that affected them for the rest of their lives. Others contracted multiple diseases, including malaria, beri-beri, and pneumonia.

“We were supposed to receive one parcel every month through the Red Cross. But by the time the war ended, I only received three and a half packages that my mother and other women in Winnipeg had sent. And those I had to share with two or

three other men. The Japanese kept most of the packages for themselves. What I did get had already been opened. I am not sure what they took”, recalled Mr. Peterson.

But taking goods from care parcels was the least of the indignities suffered. Approximately 267 POWs died in captivity, many from the harsh and unwavering combination of torture, starvation and unrelenting hard labour that were imposed on the POWs.

Over the course of our three hour interview, Mr. Peterson shared many other details of the Manitoba POW experience that have not typically been recorded in the histories on that period.

The fact that there were two Canadian nursing sisters who were also taken prisoner when Hong Kong fell- both of whom were promoted to the rank of Lieutenant by Canada with telegram sent to this effect to their Japanese captors in late December, 1941. The reason?

“Because they knew that under the Geneva Convention, officers could not perform hard labour, so they saved the nursing sisters from a certain death. Later, the nursing sisters were exchanged for Japanese prisoners, so they boarded a ship and got out of there. They were very lucky.”

For Mr. Peterson, the end of the war was also just a memory away.

“I’ll never forget it. The Americans had just dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And then a few days later we saw American B-29 bombers flying over the camp. The Japanese commandant had all of us gather in the camp courtyard. He stood on top of a table and addressed us in perfect English. That was the first time he had spoken to any of us, let alone in English: ‘boys, this is the day that we have all been waiting for’, as if he was suddenly our friend.”

Mr. Peterson continued *“A British signalman who was also in our camp climbed on top of one of the huts and started waving messages to the B-29s overhead, to let them know who we were. The Americans started dropping parcels with food and other goods down into the camp. Wouldn’t you know it but one of those parcels came down right on top of the signalman. Here he had survived all those months and was killed right before we were finally liberated– absolutely tragic.”*

Upon release, the Canadian prisoners at Sendai Camp were rescued by the Americans. George Peterson boarded the USS Iowa in late August, 1945.

“The entire time we were at sea, the Americans were giving us vitamin B1 tablets (B1 is used to fight malnutrition). We arrived at Alameda military base in California via Iwo Jima, Guam and Hawaii. From there, it was a train ride to Seattle and then onto Canada. We got on the train in Vancouver and arrived in Winnipeg. I will never forget those who were waiting for us when we finally stepped off of that train. I cannot tell you the tears that flowed from my mother’s eyes.”

Adjusting to post-war life back on the home-front did not come easy for the Hong Kong POWs. With many straddling the fine line between life and death due to the lingering effects of malnutrition, deprivation, hard labour and torture, many did not long survive in the years following the war. They are counted among the hundreds of prisoners who paid the ultimate price for their service with their lives. For George Peterson, fever blisters from the malaria he had suffered continued to cause pain years after the war ended.

Others continued to re-live the horrors of what they witnessed and endured through many nightmares, delusions and phantasms of the past: manifestations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, an affliction that has only recently come to be defined by the Canadian Armed Forces as an “operational stress injury” deserving of the utmost sensitivity, care and treatment.

For George Peterson, a return to domestic duties was no easier. *“After the war, I had several jobs. First as a mail-order clerk at Eaton’s and then at The Bay. Then I became a boilermaker and so that was my career. I met my wife at a Christmas Party at the place where my sister worked. My mother-in-law, she was one of the members of the women’s committee of Winnipeg who had prepared packages to send to the POWs during the war, so I actually knew her longer than I knew my wife.”*

It was not soon long after that George and his wife Margaret saw the addition to their family of three daughters, Nancy, Pat and Alison. During the girls’ education, their father paid close attention to what they were learning.

“Education is so very important. I attended many of the parent council meetings at my girls’ schools when they were growing up. It is especially important for us to teach young people the lesson that the War Amps of Canada has tried to teach for many years now– “Never Again”. It is important that through our schools, we teach our kids that never again can they let another Hitler rise to power. It is important that they know what their politicians are up to. If Churchill and Stalin and Hitler had wanted to fight, then let them go to war and let them fight it out. Never again should we tell our young people to go and fight another man’s war, and let them die doing it. War never settles anything.”

Following his retirement, George Peterson continued to play a key role in helping to raise awareness and promoting the cause of the Hong Kong veterans among Canadians, while also remaining active in the community.

A signature moment came in 2011 when, as one of just three Hong Kong veterans, he formed part of the official delegation to receive a semi-official apology from the Government of Japan to Canada, for their treatment of Canadian prisoners during the war.

“The Japanese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs was seated opposite us right across the table. I looked him square in the eye and told him that, while I accepted his apology, I would never ever forget what they did to us.”

In his hospital room, surrounded by some poignant mementoes of the past, including the framed certificate for the Peace Medal that he received from the People’s Republic of China, thanking him for his service during the war, along with his Commendation from Canada’s Minister of Veteran’s Affairs, the final question of MSBA’s interview focused on what lesson he wanted to share with future generations of Manitobans and Canadians.

George Peterson chose to end our interview with two simple words, spoken with greater feeling, and authority than perhaps can be shared by most other Canadians: **“Never again.”**

Lest we forget



George’s Thoughts on Democracy

During the course of our interview, MSBA asked Mr. Peterson what he thought of the importance of freedom and democracy in Canada. In the context of today’s municipal and school board elections, as well as any other democratic election in Canada, his advice to fellow citizens concerning those who serve in an elected role was very simple:

***“If they are doing good, and they know what they are doing, keep ‘em!
If they are not doing good, and they don’t know what they’re doing, get rid of ‘em!”***

Certainly, some sound words of advice from a soldier who endured and sacrificed so much for his country and his community. Practical insight from a man who has seen and lived through some of the very worst conditions that can be endured by humanity, and is now the very last local survivor of Hong Kong to pass on the wisdom learned by those of his generation.

For George Peterson, democracy remains one of Canada’s most foundational values. When it comes to local democracy, he emphasized that it remained important for all members of the community to stay informed and aware of what is happening in one’s community, to settle disputes and arguments in peace and not in war, to participate in community and its government, and most of all, to vote and to protect the right to vote.

