Ottawa Native Who Fled Hong Kong Says Canadians Never Had Chance

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Ottawa, July 17.—Canada's Hong Kong soldiers died or were taken prisoners in "hillbilly or guerrilla fighting," and, due to Japanese fighting strategy, never had a chance to fight as complete units, Lieutenant B. A. Proulx, native of Ottawa, and one of the Hong Kong Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, who fought alongside the Canadians for six days preceding the surrender, said in a press interview here today.

Proulx heard from a fellow-officer of the machine-gunning of soldiers and naval officers at the Repulse Bay Hotel and during his own six-day crawl over mountains to safety saw "a lot of soldiers and naval officers lying on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs and bayoneted. . . . I saw dozens of bodies, Canadians, naval officers and Indian soldiers."

The Japanese who attacked the island, said this fighter who survived the Hong Kong horrors, were directed by German staff officers. But he had never met Japanese such as their shock troops.

"I had lived in Japan for a long time," he added, "and never saw any Japanese like them. They must either have been from Formosa or the back lands of Japan. They were a different type from any I had ever seen before. But they were well trained."

Kept in semi-starvation for the first month, the approximate 1,600 Canadian soldier prisoners of the Japanese were being treated somewhat better when he escaped from Hong Kong on Jan. 27, he said. Proulx's own wife and two children remain in captivity in Japan and since his own escape he has learned from another escapee from Stanley Camp on Hong Kong Island, a woman, that his family was still alive and well when this woman escaped on March 19.

Aircraft Needed.

Hong Kong could not have been held, Proulx believes, even if there had been twice as many troops on the island. In his opinion, without aircraft "you can't hold any fortress. The bombers were coming over all the time and shelling every part of the city."

"To have fought longer would only have been to contribute to senseless slaughter."

A stockbroker in ordinary life, Proulx joined the Naval Volunteer Force at the outbreak of war.

When the Japanese invaded the island on Dec. 19 the navy men left their boats, grabbed rifles and joined the garrison. The Japanese landed in landing craft, with some parties which got ashore before the 19th being polished off. About 700 tried to swim across Lymoon Pass on the 17th but were all wiped out by the Canadians.

"The one way to beat the Japanese," said Proulx, "is to bomb Tokyo—go to Tokyo and beat them at Tokyo first."

He linked up with the A.V.G. airmen in China for a time after his escape and declared that United States materials are arriving in immense quantities; there were flying fortresses everywhere.

"Japan," he said, "is in for a good bombing almost any time now."

Proulx saw his first fighting at Repulse Bay on Dec. 19, immediately after the invasion by the Japanese. With him were a group of the Royal Rifles, commanded by a Major Young. Proulx believes it was "D" Company of the Royal Rifles.

Roads Cut Off.

Almost immediately after the landing of the Japanese, they came right through the middle of the island and cut all the roads which run around the island. The result was the defenders had to engage in guerrilla fighting, in small groups, throughout the island.

"We were at Repulse Bay on Dec. 19. At dawn of Dec. 20, we found the Japanese had filtered through and were out in front of the Hotel where we were. They had captured six British naval officers, and were handling them roughly.

"We fought for about six hours, and towards the end a company of the Royal Rifles under Major Young came along. We polished the Japs off, only three of about thirty-two getting away. We lost about three men. We got the British naval officers out.

"On the night of Dec. 22 we were in a terrible position. We had 200 women and children in the hotel, in the tunnel under it, including my own wife and two children. We were completely surrounded and the general commanding at Hong Kong sent us a message telling us to break through the Japanese lines that night, or else the women and children would be slaughtered with us.

"We decided to make the break at night, leaving the women and children with a few civilians. We thought it better to do that than to have them all slaughtered, as the Japanese were moving up heavy artillery.

"We discarded our boots, so we could go without noise. The break through was successful, though we lost perhaps thirty or forty out of the 150 in skirmishes along the roads or in the mountains. The majority reached Stanley Fort the next morning at 6 o'clock.

"When we left Repulse Bay we arranged that in the morning the civilians should meet the Japanese with a white flag, and to tell the Japanese the hotel was full of women and there were no fighting men there. The Japanese heavy guns were already in position.

"From a fellow officer who got lost and ended up in the morning back near the Repulse Bay Hotel, I found out what happened. His attention was attracted to the hotel by the machine gunning that was going on there. He saw a European woman, whom he believed was Miss Freeman, a Scottish nurse, go out with a white flag. She met the Japanese and took them up to the hotel.

21 Machine Gunned.

"The machine gunning was of a few soldiers and naval officers who had gotten lost and went back to the hotel. There were twenty-one of them. Miss Freeman hadn't known they were there. They were Canadians, men of a Middlesex Regiment, and some naval volunteers.

"I do not think you could call that machine-gunning an atrocity. After all, it was war, and when the Japanese arrived they saw the bodies of the Japanese we had killed on the 20th."

Interposing in his own story of the fight to tell of atrocities, Lieutenant Proulx stated that during his escape from the island he crawled over the mountains for six days.

"I crawled the length of the island and saw a lot of soldiers and naval officers lying on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs and bayoneted. Up to the time of the surrender the Japanese were not taking any prisoners. They were polishing them all off. I saw dozens of bodies, Canadians, naval officers and Indian soldiers."

After his arrival at Stanley Fort, where he found other Canadian troops, the fighting was continuing throughout the island.

"We went over on a naval vessel to the naval headquarters at Aberdeen. We fought there on Dec. 24 and 25, until the surrender at 4:30 Christmas afternoon.

Water Mains Shut Off.

"The water mains had been shut off for five days. They were shut off by the public works department after they had been broken by shells. There were hundreds of bodies of Chinese and others lying around, and the water supply was shut off for this reason. We were without water for five days, except for a bit that had been stored in bottles or containers.

"The Canadians were scattered all over the island. It was hillbilly or guerrilla fighting. The roads had all been cut shortly after the landing on the 19th, though the telephones were still working when we got the message to leave Repulse Bay. There was no main battle-front. The fighting was in isolated sections by isolated units. There was no battle line, and one could not be formed.

"We laid down our arms at 4:30 Christmas afternoon, but apparently the Japanese batteries had not received the news, for they continued to shell us for 2½ hours after the surrender. Fortunately, it was small three-inch stuff and we were in a fairly solid building. There were few casualties after the surrender.

Camp Conditions Bad.

"On Dec. 26 we were taken to the naval dockyards, and on Dec. 27 to the main military prison at Kowloon on the mainland. There were a lot of Canadians with me, but there was never a murmur from any of them. There were 7,000 in my group. We were kept there a month.

"The conditions at the Kowloon camp were pretty bad. We were kept on a starvation diet of poor rice. A couple of months later Colonel Sutcliffe who was in good health when I left, died, it was so bad. He died from beri-beri, what you get on a diet of poor rice.

"They refused every single request we made of them. There were a lot of French-Canadian Catholic soldiers there. They asked permission to bring in a Catholic priest and were refused. During the first week dysentery broke out. We asked for drugs to cure it, but these were refused.

Five men died from dysentery, including one Canadian. We requested permission to bury them outside the prison in a cemetery, but this was refused. We had to bury them in the prison.

"We were fed rice twice daily, and on every third day got weak beef stew, as an alternative a weak vegetable stew. We requested there be one item of European food a day, and this was refused. We requested that each man be permitted to write one letter home, to his next-of-kin, so they would know he was alive. This was refused.

Japs Not Partner.

"We reminded the Japanese commandant of The Hague and Geneva conventions regarding treatment of prisoners. The commandant politely reminded us Japan had never signed those conventions, which happened to be true.

"On Jan. 2 we were transferred to North Point on Hong Kong, where Colonel Sutcliffe (of the Winnipeg Grenadiers) was in charge of the camp. We found conditions between him and the Japanese commandant had improved. Each morning they allowed two soldiers to go out of the camp in a truck to bring back flour, a better grade of rice, a small supply of beef, army biscuits and cocoa. How long this lasted I am unable to say. The men felt it would not last long as the Japanese were taking all the food supplies out of the colony to Japan. They also denuded the island of all metals, machinery, railings, seats, etc."

Lieutenant Proulx believed there were approximately 1,600 Canadian survivors "only a small proportion of them being wounded."

At the Kowloon camp, conditions were so bad three privates, none of them being Canadians, killed a dog and ate it. They said it tasted too sweet.

But at North Point the conditions were much better.

"The worst craving we had was for bread, proving this is the staff of life. The shortage of cigarets also made it very bad for the men. We had no beds but slept on the floor. Most of the men still had their blankets."

Proulx said he escaped from the Hong Kong camp on Jan. 27. He later met a woman who had escaped from the Stanley Camp on Hong Kong where the women and children were kept, and this woman said they were "fairly well treated." He had found out that his own wife and children were still well and alive when this woman escaped on March 19.

Attack No Surprise.

There were 75,000 Japanese in the attack, he said, adding:

"We expected to hold much longer though the attack did not come as a surprise to me. But I underestimated the Japanese. We thought it would likely start as soon as the Japanese diplomats left Washington. We began to think it was coming when Kurusu went to Washington.

"The fifth column in Hong Kong was very bad. Many Chinese were arrested immediately. The fifth column contributed much to the downfall. They encouraged the thieves to loot, and most European homes were looted before the surrender. Thousands of Chinese were shot in the streets for looting.

"This made it very difficult, because it was impossible to distinguish between the loyal Chinese and the fifth columnists. The Chinese were allowed to come into Hong Kong at will, and there was no way of preventing them."

There were more than 500,000 women and children in Hong Kong, mainly Chinese. When the water supply was cut off, it indicated the end. The Japanese were shelling the whole island, from the mainland, and thousands of Chinese were being killed.

Canadians Promoted Confidence.

Lieutenant Proulx said "the landing of the Canadian battalions came as a complete surprise, and gave us a great feeling of confidence. It indicated to the population that we would make a big stand. We thought we had enough troops to do it.

"But it was not expected (before the war) that a landing would be made from the mainland and at the main harbor, or the forts would have been different. From our three main forts, where we had 9.2-inch guns, our heavy artillery was pouring shells onto the mainland. The Stanley Fort was still firing right up to the surrender."

Asked if he thought Hong Kong could have been held with more men and equipment, he said: "In my opinion, without aircraft, you can't hold any fortress. The bombers were coming over all the time. They were shelling every part of the city. To have fought longer would only have been to contribute to senseless slaughter."

Lieutenant Proulx said the first bombers came over Hong Kong practically simultaneously with Pearl Harbor. The garrison knew then it was in for it.

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