

## **VJ DAY 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Presentation at the Fredericton Regional Museum August 15, 2015**

By Andy Flanagan

Veterans, special guest ladies and gentlemen;

Rifleman James Andrew Flanagan was a Canadian soldier during the Second World War. He fought in the battle of Hong Kong and subsequently spent three years and eight months as a POW. In the next 10 minutes I will try to presents a condensed version of his 4 years in the Far East.

In September 1940, Andrew and 37 of his friend from Jacquet River NB joined the Royal Rifles of Canada. They, along with over 200 other New Brunswick & Gaspé soldiers, spent a few weeks in basic training at Val Cartier Quebec before getting stationed in Sussex NB. By February 1941 they were transferred to Gander NFLD. In October 1941 Andrew and his hometown friends boarded a train in Jacquet River to crossed Canada. In Vancouver they boarded HMT Awatea and sailed out into the Pacific. After a brief stop in Hawaii they were told that their final destination was Hong Kong.

They docked in Hong Kong on November 16, 1941. A combination of culture shock and pleasure greeted them in this strange land. Their money was worth a fortune, many of the men hired their own batmen to shine their shoes, do their laundry and take care of their personal needs. For 3 weeks they lived idyllically, enjoying the nightlife and soaking up some sun during the day. Far too soon reality struck as News dispatches on December 6<sup>th</sup> warned that Great Britain and her allies would soon be at war with Japan. On December 8<sup>th</sup> battle orders were given. According to many accounts, during the battle of Hong Kong, the Canadians never put up their

hands or laid down their arms until they were ordered to do so. They were prepared to fight to the end, down to the last man.

Andrew kept a detailed account of the Battle of Hong Kong on a one page scribble sheet, from December 6<sup>th</sup> until they were ordered to surrender on Christmas Day 1941. He folded this page to the size of match book and kept it in the lining of his boot during his internment as a POW. This is real. It is the basic information that becomes part of our history. I'll not read the whole document but I would like to share a few excerpts;

*December 19<sup>th</sup> 1941 -Heavy battle going on upon Mount Parker. Bert Roy, Alfe Miles, Cpl. Vincent and quite a few more were either killed or captured up there. Lieut. Williams was killed this morning.*

*December 20<sup>th</sup> -We left to go to Repulse Bay however we were held up along the way by enemy intensive machine gun fire. We took shelter in a small trench. We were forced out of there and went up the hill and back to Pam Villa. A bullet went through my packsack.*

*December 21<sup>st</sup> -Left Pam Villa to launch an attack led by Major MacAulay. We ran into about 50 Japanese near the petro dump. There was a heavy battle there. We had several killed and a number wounded. I was sent back to Pam Villa to get an ambulance. I was sniped at all along the way. I got a flesh wound to my finger. When I returned we had cleaned up on the enemy and were moving on to the next turn where an enemy car careened towards us. Our Vickers opened up on to the vehicle several enemies jumped out of the disabled car and ran into the woods. Major MacAulay approached the abandoned car and was badly wounded in the arm. A few minutes later Lient. Peters of the HKV was killed at the same place.*

As you can see this is minute by minute history. Andrew meticulously recorded diary entries for the battle and his entire time spent as a POW.

He recorded how badly he and his fellow POWs were treated. Many of his diary entries were blacked out by Japanese's censors, but Andrew remembered and often told horrific stories about his time as a POW. Beatings, starvation, and forced labour, were almost daily routines. Many POWs died of diseases like berry-berry and cholera. They lived in lice infested dirty camps with only jute bags for bedding.

During the first year as POW's they stayed in Hong Kong and worked to rebuild Kai Tak airport. Conditions were awful and food was in short supply. They finished the airport by December 1942 and expected a bit easier time, but by January 1943 Andrew and 600 other Canadian POWs were drafted to go to Japan. On January 19, 1943 they boarded the Hellship TATATUA MARU. Andrew said he was lucky because he wasn't put in the hold where many of the POWs were on these hell ships. He and 12 others were forced into a small cabin meant to hold 2 people. After a few days at sea they docked at Nagasaki and were herded onto a train to a destination unknown. On January 24<sup>th</sup> they arrived at Yokohama to work at the Tokyo shipyards.

Andrew and the other Canadians were treated worst in Japan, but like always they remained unyielding. They took every opportunity to ridicule, disrupt or damage the Japanese war effort.

Marching to work every morning the POWs were focused to bow and pray to what they considered to be a pagan god. A make shift grotto was set up with a stature that they did not recognize. If the POWs didn't pray they were slapped or beaten. Andrew and a few fellows from Jacquet River decided it was time for some fun, so they would bow their heads and with their most pious voices would curse the statue with the most vulgar statements, each trying to out do

the other. The Japanese guards, who didn't understand English, were all smile, thinking that the Canadians were praying, until one day the boys got a bad beaten. Apparently the Japanese had a new interpreter.

Sabotage was one way that the POWs felt they could contribute to our war effort. Andrew and the other POWs build four ships, reportedly, three of them sunk during sea trials. The ship's steel plates were joined with rivets. After the rivets were inspected the Canadians would grind or file the inside of the rivets on some of the plates that would be submerged. As the ship entered the open seas the wave action, in theory would cause the rivets to fail and the ship to sink. By February 1944 they became so good at this that when the fourth ship was launched it sunk in the middle of Tokyo Bay. The Japanese suspected sabotage and Canadians secretly hoped it was true. As punishment, the POWs were ship north to the Sendia coal mines where they mined coal by following the ore seams. Andrew said that sometimes they were 500 feet below ground in steaming hot conditions, mining veins as low as 4 feet.

The conditions at the coal mine were the harshest that Andrew endured. Living on 3 ounces of rice a day, the POWs were sick and malnourished. On August 15 1945 Andrew recorded that he got a terrible beaten from a Guard named Suzuki. He broke his nose with a crow bar. Andrew said he did not provoke the attack and didn't understand why it happened until August 23, 1945.

Andrew said he woke up that morning to an eerie silence. There were posters around the camp that read if the Allies attacked that the guards were to kill the POWs. They carefully made their way out of the huts. There were no Japanese guards in the watchtowers and the gate was wide open. Someone shouted "The War Is Over" and the whole camp erupted into Yahoos. An American B-17 dropped papers that afternoon announcing that the war was indeed over, food

would be dropped and that it may take a few days to rescue them. The next morning colourful parachutes dropped tons of food and supplies on the camp.

September 9<sup>th</sup> Andrew and the other POWs at Sendia boarded a train to Tokyo harbour. They spent the night on the US Monitor. The next day Andrew and a number of other POWs were transported to the USS Wisconsin where he spent some time on a hospital ward. He weight 68 pounds.

On October 13, 1945 Andrew and 26 of his friend got off the train in Jacquet River. It was exactly 4 years to the day since they had departed. Eleven of their friends would never see home again. They lay buried in the Far East where the will stand to forever.

Andrew always referred to VJ Day as "Victory In Japan Day," because his victory was in Japan ... he survived.