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Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine

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Lawrence Rattie, Dorval, Quebec, 10 April 1985, HCM 39-85

Lawrence Rattie:

Well, briefly, I was born on the Gaspé Coast, and worked on a small farm. I was a farmer's son. At a young age, joined the army; I was still 18 when I joined the army. There wasn't much doing around the Gaspé coast, you know, so I guess like everybody else I went; your friends were joining the army, you joined with them, and that was the patriotic thing to do, I guess.

We enlisted in Matapédia, I think they called it -- Matapédia, Quebec. From there I went to Valcartier and did basic training in Valcartier like all the others. From there on to Sussex, New Brunswick, and did two months training there. And then off to Newfoundland, Botwood, Newfoundland. We then did service duty in Gander -- on to St John's, Newfoundland, and left there in August 1941. Came back to Valcartier, did a little stint there and went to St. John, New Brunswick. Then we were shipped back to Valcartier again, and mustered up there for our journey to Hong Kong. That's just a small summary up to the start of it, if that's what you want.

C.G.R.:

That's fine, yes.

L.R.:

So I guess from there you ask me what you want.

C.G.R.:

Well, tell me about the trip across.

L.R.:

I think there was about a five-day journey, something like

that, to Vancouver, by train -- them old slow trains at this time. We didn't have too much good accommodation going there because we sat up all the way, four men to those double seats.

C.G.R.:

Really.

L.R.:

No sleeping accommodation there. We boarded the boat in Vancouver, and unfortunately I was sea-sick all the way over. The only time I felt half reasonable was when you were out walking the deck or something, you know, because whenever you went down below deck on those old New Zealand ships it reeked of mutton, and that made me very sick.

C.G.R.:

Were you on the Awateah?

L.R.:

Awateah, yes. On the old Awateah. The journey was a very nice journey over except my sea-sickness, but everybody else that had any sailor's feet on them, you know, weren't sick, and they enjoyed the trip. Unfortunately I was one of those guys that got sick very easily.

Then we stopped off in Honolulu and saw the dancing girls come down and put a show on for us, and passed the time there while they refueled or something.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I hear you didn't get off the ship?

L.R.:

No, we didn't get off the ship. I was doing a little guard duty at the time, with friends of mine; you always had M.P. duty,

no matter where you go. So they usually stuck me for that on a lot of occasions because I was sort of a husky guy, I guess [laughter]. But there was nothing extra eventful for my trip across.

C.G.R.:

What about Hong Kong? What were your first impressions of Hong Kong, do you remember?

L.R.:

Well, it's hard to say. Hong Kong, at that time, at a young age -- I was 19 years old -- it was quite exciting, but we didn't do very much there. I didn't anyway. I went out a few times but nothing special, you know. We were only there a short time when we were sent out to dig our trenches and make barbed wire entanglements and dig foxholes in the mountain, which was all rock.

C.G.R.:

Yes, you didn't have very long, I know.

L.R.:

So it wasn't a very eventful thing. We went on route marches through the stinky city of Kowloon. Some places were so bad we had to put the gas mask on, on route march -- exactly through the slums of Kowloon! It was very hot there, you know. It was hot, and the people, the way they lived there -- a whole family would live in a doorway like my porch. So sanitary conditions weren't very good. It's too bad we hadn't had some more time there before the thing [war] started up. It was to our disadvantage because, you know, it would have been nice to see

the area and travel around a bit. The hot weather bothered us a lot because at that time of year, here it was getting cool and over there in this hot mosquito-infested area, we had to sleep under our tents all the time, with our mosquito nets.

C.G.R.:

Where were you in barracks? Were you in Sham Shui Po?

L.R.:

Sham Shui Po, yes.

C.G.R.:

And where was your post, was it on the mainland, or on the island? Where were you were digging ditches and...?

L.R.:

Our defence post would be on the island. You see, Sham Shui Po is the mainland. We went out to D'Aguiar peak, the name of the place where we were...was supposed to be our defence post. Eventually it wasn't a defence post. We had to run to the other side of the island.

We were out there about a week before the hostilities started in that area. We were doing, well, regular guard duty, you know. We had to guard the searchlights and the big guns and the power stations, and other things out on that point. But that's all we did there, try to dig holes for our trenches, but we couldn't get down too deep because of the famous rock.

Then from there, when the war started then we had to move. We went around Tai Tam, and then over to Repulse Bay -- B Company -- that's where we ended up in that area. Unfortunately we were entrenched too far in those areas, because every place we went we ran into too many obstacles. The Japanese were too well

entrenched over there. Their forces were too heavy for our armament. I was a machine-gunner, myself, a Bren-gunner.

We saw action from the time they landed on the 18th or the 19th till the day it was over, because we went night and day. I mean there was no let-up. You'd eat when you could, scrounge what you could, because your service people couldn't bring you your regular rations because it was impossible for them to get through also. So as you went through from one place to another, you picked up stuff to eat what you could, and catnap when you could, which was not very often. That didn't happen too often.

C.G.R.:

Did your company take a lot of casualties?

L.R.:

Pardon?

C.G.R.:

Did your company take many casualties?

L.R.:

Oh yes, my company lost quite a few. Around Repulse Bay was their biggest place there. That's where I got the wounds I got -- the back of the ear and my face was cut with shrapnel. A Japanese sniper bullet hit a cement post right by my head and so I was lucky he hit the post. The shrapnel went into my face. As we went into the Eucliffe Castle, my Lieutenant saw me and right away he thought I was seriously wounded because I had a lot of blood on my face. He cleaned me up, because you don't have the personnel like other regular units to service those things. So after he got me cleaned up -- I tried to tell him it was

nothing, you know, it was just a scratch. So he said, "No, you have to be cleaned up." So he did it and then said, "Well, if it had been as serious as I thought it was, I guess you wouldn't be walking around."

C.G.R.:

Who was your Lieutenant?

L.R.:

Lieutenant Lester. He was killed over there. They found him about two days after that -- him and Lieutenant Fry, they were tied together, bayoneted, and burnt up. We got cut off from him, naturally, you were always getting cut off, because you'd go out in the hills and you'd be ambushed so you were "every man for himself," most of the time. You would have orders to go, to try and meet up some other company or group, and you went the best you could, and then you faced insurmountable resistance. You just couldn't get by, so you'd have to wind your way by.

We ran into some scary times. Anybody that says no, I think there's something wrong with them, because once you're facing the enemy, it's a scary situation, no matter who, or where, or when. A lot of my friends say, "Well what happens?" I say, "Well, you have to fire first. If you're lucky, you're all right." [laughter] I was in some tough situations. I think one of the most scary things that I had over there was, my lieutenant got another chap and I to go and search a house. We had to go by this place -- Deep Water Bay, I think was the name of it -- and we had to go and see if this house was occupied or not. I think that was one of the things that scared me more than

anything else. If we didn't search a house you wouldn't know whether someone was waiting behind the door with a rifle for you.

C.G.R.:

Nobody was, I gather?

L.R.:

Nobody was. We were very lucky. They had got out of there before we arrived. Somebody else maybe got them out before we did. But they had been -- all their equipment and everything was there, you know -- the Japanese Army had been there, probably a half an hour before or something like that. That night we had to turn back. We tried to meet up with the Winnipeg Grenadiers but we couldn't get through. So we came back to the Eucliffe Castle that night. But I guess [only] about half of our men got back, you know. A lot of them didn't make it back. Because you'd be going along and you'd be completely cut off, sometimes, by a squad of Japanese that would be going through your ranks, you know. Oh yes, sometimes it was good to stay quiet and let them go through because you knew you were outnumbered. Probably 25 to 1 sometimes. Sometimes discretion is the best part of valor.

C.G.R.:

I'll say.

L.R.:

All in all it was a bad situation, but as I said many times, I don't regret it, though it was a tough experience. I wouldn't want to go through it again. I wouldn't want anybody to go through it again. But I'm not really sorry for joining, or

defending my country.

C.G.R.:

Did you have any personal acquaintance with any of these atrocities that were carried out?

L.R.:

Not personally myself, no, not really. I think what happened is, when the Japanese took prisoners or supposedly had prisoners -- most of the time they didn't take prisoners, they probably beheaded them. But I'm lucky that I didn't have to surrender to them. I surrendered when the Island surrendered. You see, we went out on Christmas day from Stanley; the war was supposed to be over at 3 or 3:30 in the afternoon, but we only went out at 3 o'clock on our last stand. We went up to Stanley Mount someplace and we never got word that the war was really over until about 11:30 or 12:00 o'clock that night, so we only got in in the morning. We had orders to not attack -- if you were attacked, you defend yourself, but stay put. So we only got back on the 26th. A lot of men was lost that day -- on Christmas day -- needless to say, even after the armistice was signed, because you were still being shelled and in hopeless situations.

C.G.R.:

Well, tell me then what happened after you surrendered.

L.R.:

Well, we stayed about one week. I assume about a week. You know, after so many years it's hard to say how many days you were there. But we were at Stanley, and we moved down to North Point, which had been a refugee camp originally. Then the

Japanese used that as a staging place for their horses while they were in battle [laughter]. So we took over that camp which was a very, very bad situation. The water -- no water, we had to bring water with lorries. You were rationed -- probably a very small ration of water a day. The toilet situation, you know, the sanitation was terrible. There malaria and dysentery was rampant. I had dysentery there. I was into a dysentery ward, or hospital -- it was a makeshift thing, part of an old barrack. Usually when you went in, the ones that went in there usually didn't come out alive. But I was in there for about a week or ten days and I got out, but not very strong, I'm telling you, because you're in there laying on a cement floor and when you have to go to the washroom, if you can make it, you make it to a pot some place, a barrel or something, or over the sea wall. It was a very tough place.

C.G.R.:

Were they doing anything for you medically, there?

L.R.:

Well, our own orderlies were exceptionally brave and good men, and they treated you with what little bit of medication that they had, which was practically nil, you know. But only because of those dedicated orderlies, I think, many of us, today, wouldn't be here. Because they worked in this -- men just couldn't even make the washroom. They went all over the place, all the time, you know. There was probably 50 guys in there that were just about dead from dysentery. I mean, they were a brave crew of orderlies.

C.G.R.:

Who were they? Do you remember the names?

L.R.:

Oh, I can remember, say from my own regiment, Pat Poirier and Freddie Kelly, were two of our own orderlies that worked throughout those death traps, throughout the time. They were very dedicated people.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I planned to interview Poirier today, but when I talked to him yesterday, he said he thought he was going into the hospital to get some tests. I phoned during the day and he isn't there, so I take it he did go in.

L.R.:

Well, I hate to...maybe I shouldn't say this, but he phoned me one night wanting to know about this thing. I said, "Yes, that I had agreed to be interviewed." And he said that he didn't think he would because he didn't care about doing it. So I don't know if I'm spilling the beans but this is what he told me.

C.G.R.:

Maybe he was, this was his was of....

L.R.:

He was reluctant to do it.

C.G.R.:

Well, I'll be in touch with him again and I hope maybe I can persuade him that it would be all right.

L.R.:

Yes, because he was one of the orderlies.

C.G.R.:

He is exactly the kind of person I especially want to interview.

L.R.:

This is what I thought. I mean, you're a doctor. He lives in Montreal North and you have his address, I guess.

C.G.R.:

Oh yes, I've talked to him on the phone twice about it, but I just got his address a few days ago. At any rate, please go ahead.

L.R.:

Well, after that siege in this camp, you get out of there and you sort of pick up a little bit of strength. Then they started working us, over on the Kai Tak airport. They used to bring a crew over there to work, bright and early in the morning, and go by boat and come back very late in the evening. Worked in the hot sun with a pick and shovel. In fact we were moving a mountain; there was a sacred mountain that they had that they [the British] couldn't touch. The English enlarged that airport, but once the Japanese took over they removed it. So that was our task of making an airport -- mixing cement on the runways and pulling this earth down by little trolley cars like they used for mining cars. So we had to make our own railroads and push those cars up and load them and push them down there. Going down wasn't so bad because it was down grade. That was a heavy ordeal. In fact when I left North Point Camp to go over to Sham Shui Po (I think probably it was about September [1942] if I'm not mistaken too much), I was kind of sick then with malaria as a

result of all this dysentery, so that I was too feeble to carry my own little bit of pack I had. My friends had to do it for me. You know, it's amazing how you can pull out of those dire straits with enough strength to move around.

In Sham Shui Po, then, we continued the work on the airport. But then it was a longer trek across to work. We went by boat, also, from Sham Shui Po down the river there, down the bay. But we left there when it was dark in the morning, and we got back and it was dark at night.

C.G.R.:

It was a long day.

L.R.:

Long days on very small rations of food, you know. It was like everything else. We had the language problem, we couldn't understand them and they didn't understand you too well. So you had to be pretty careful of what you said and did. So they wouldn't smash you with a rifle butt or use a pair of boots on you.

I went to Japan in 1943. I assume it was around January or February 1943. I went to Yokohama.

C.G.R.:

That must have been the first draft then.

L.R.:

I think there was a draft that probably went before us. But I think it maybe was all English who went first. I think I was the first Canadian draft.

C.G.R.:

I meant of the Canadians, yes.

L.R.:

We went to Yokohama in the hold of some old freighter there; we were tacked in there like sardines. And everybody was sick - - both ends. Washroom facilities were nil. Your food was brought down to you in pails on a rope. All this kind of stuff, you know. You were sitting, you didn't even have a place to lie down, you were sitting in the hold of the ship for days and days. I really don't remember now how many days we were, but it was too long. We landed in Nagasaki, I guess, and went by train to Yokohama.

I think I was better going to Japan than if I stayed in Hong Kong, in the heat. I figured it this way, because at least you worked outside in the cooler air. It was fresher. The work was hard. The work was very hard, but we worked in a dockyard, building freighters. I worked in a steel gang -- well, everybody's work to some extent consisted of steel or pertains to that. But we were laying the keel, snaking bolts, putting on the decks. We were H2 gang, they called them; we were the heavy steel workers. So you worked a 7- to 8-hour day on this heavy steel. Some days you had to swing a 16-pound sledgehammer all day while you were shaping the plates to meet up with the ribs, and do drilling, reaming. It was very hard.

The food there was no better either. You got your three bowls of rice or something to that effect. If they gave you a little something else, well they cut something out of your rice ration. But they didn't give you anything, you know. If they gave with one hand, they took away with the other.

But as I mentioned, I think it was healthier going to Japan as far as I'm concerned. Because we worked outside. It wasn't as hot as Hong Kong. But our guards there weren't any [laughter], not too much kinder than they were in Hong Kong. They were good with the rifle butt and the boots. But you tried to keep your nose clean to keep out of trouble, because their idea of punishment there was if you were 500 men into a camp, and you did something wrong, everybody was punished to a certain extent. So that made us kind of behave, I think, because you didn't want to punish your friend, you see. But you did get in trouble. I got in trouble a few times over there. As I say, we were starving, so I stole Japanese rice boxes. If I found it, I took it and ate it. That was a good meal for me. Well, eventually I got caught and I was put in what they called a little jail. It was just behind the guards in the guardhouse, but it really wasn't that bad because I stayed in there for three days. I used to tell the guards after I had three days rest. I didn't have to go to work those three days. And they didn't strike me while I was in there. They did a lot of questioning, but no, they didn't strike me while I was in there.

One thing happened over there. As I say, I worked with this crew -- Japanese, and Canadians also, because we worked with young Japanese. They could be anywhere from 13 years up to 18 or so. They were students from reform schools, and schools, and some even from Korea. You know they were boys 13, 14 years old, and some of those young Japs, well, they really didn't want to work either -- after all, they were only schoolboys. They really couldn't work very hard. When we used to get, say, one

guy, one Jap -- a little guy like this -- and you worked yourself, you know, just two people, well, they would love to try to learn English. So they would get us to show them how to speak English and write. They could read it pretty well, but they couldn't understand it that well. So if you got to work with them, you'd have sort of a break, if you got down in the hold of a ship someplace where all the foremen and guards couldn't see you. After they launched those ships they stayed in the harbor for quite some time, and they were tested -- there was always some follow-up work on them, like there would be a rivet missing someplace, or a bolt someplace else, or something had to be replaced. So one day I was sent out with a young Jap on one of those boats that was in the harbor, to do some work down over the engine room, the part under the floor. Some of our work that wasn't finished well, before it was launched. Working down there, you didn't know the time, one time or another. So eventually I wanted to go on deck to see something and God! it was getting dark. I didn't know the time and the Jap didn't know the time, the young guy, because we weren't working very hard down there. We were trying (this is one day we would try and fool around) to have a rest. So anyway, I went back on the deck and I told him, "Guy," I said, "I have to go because we passed our time. We were supposed to finish at 5 o'clock." It probably was about 7 o'clock.

So out I went, and I got off the boat and went to go home, and as I came to the gates going out from the plant, the guards wouldn't let me out. They said, "Well, you can't go out on your

own." I could have went home on my own after doing this trekking, morning and night, and it was only about a 20-minute walk anyway. But no, they wouldn't let me go, so they phoned the guardhouse, the camp, and they said they had a prisoner out there that had stayed behind. But how they left me behind -- left work without noticing or missing one -- but they noticed when they got in camp. You see, they gave the count. Say if they had 300 men, they gave 300 men to go through the gate, but there was one missing. When they got to camp, when they numbered off, there was one man missing. So those poor guys in camp had to stay on parade until they heard from where I was. There was no way they were going to let those guys go.

So then they sent a guard out for me and brought me back to camp. They didn't believe my story too well; the men from the dockyard would come in with the camp commander, and the sergeant and those guys, and they would call me over to the office about three to four times a night. This went on for three or four days. They tried to make you foul up, but you'd make sure -- after you're a prisoner awhile you make sure your stories stay straight all the time, you see. So luckily they never caught me make a mistake. Actually I didn't stay there on purpose, because they figured I was doing some kind of sabotage, when actually it was just misjudging the time. But after about three days they gave up on me. They they questioned you which part of the boat were you on? It was all numbered, you know. So you'd have to say, "Well, I was in number," say section 32 of a certain place and all this, and make sure you told them the same thing the next time. So this went on for 3 or 4 days and then

they gave up on me.

That this happened to me was sort of a funny thing, to be out from the rest of the camp. But unfortunately I got in trouble like all the other guys around there, doing things you shouldn't do and got beat up by the guards for a little bit of nothing. One rainy day I was warming my back by a boiler, you know, a big hot water boiler. The guard saw me here and reported me to the camp guards. Well, that night I got a going over for that, but it was partly my own fault too, I shouldn't have been there, but a rainy day you sort of sneak up and warm your back. Because rain or shine you worked. It doesn't mean anything -- wet clothes -- you go home at night and you didn't have too much place to dry them, you know. You slept with them on half the time to dry them.

C.G.R.:

How was your health all this time?

L.R.:

In Japan, well, I had dysentery all the time. You always had dysentery, or diarrhea, or something. I had dysentery for...from North Point, I had dysentery 18 months in a row, without stopping. Eighteen months there, you could go maybe 10, 15, 20 times some days, to the washroom. And you'd be working. Even after I got to Japan, I still had this dysentery. You'd be working up on the top of the deck and you'd want to go to the washroom. You had to go down the ladder maybe 50 feet to get down to get some washroom. Well, sometime you made it and sometime you didn't. Many times you didn't make it. So it was

a very sticky situation all the way. Your health, your health was...you had to work if you were sick or you weren't, so your health was always good enough for them to work you. I went to work with a 103-104 degrees temperature. That didn't make any difference to them.

C.G.R.:

They'd just make you go regardless.

L.R.:

They'd make you go. If you could walk, you could work. This is what they did. If you were too sick to go to work, they had a section that they kept the guys in camp; it was the sick work section. They would re-thread bolts, and clean bolts that they would bring in from the dockyards. You were too sick to go to work but you could do that in camp because you could sit down and do it. You were doing something useful.

Then, after that, I think it was about May, I think maybe April or May 1945, we went up into the north, to Sendai, in a coal mine. Well, that was the most miserable place to work. because you were down, maybe a mile underground, in this hot mine. You went down, you went down, you went down. And after you got down there the ventilation system was, I think, practically nil. Even though you worked in shafts. I think some of the miners, they did what they called a drifting, because they weren't taking out all the coal, you know, they were cutting a pattern. You'd go down about half way to a rock level, and you changed cars and went down the coal face, then. Then you'd go down very steep, and they go down and cut across and then come up to meet the other shaft. So you were like a checkerboard form.

They were cutting grooves all through this, which could be maybe 100 feet apart, leaving all the center, and it was all rows through there. Well, you were drifting those tunnels through all the time; and when you were going down, you weren't too bad, you know, you were working on the hot coal pails, but then when you turned around to come up to meet the other section, your shaft could be 135 degrees heat. So you worked in there with a pick and a shovel and 135 degrees, picking coal on a hard coal face.

When you went down in the morning, they gave you a certain amount of tags; I think it was 16 tags. So you had to put a tag on each box of coal you sent up. But it was four men, and once you reached your coal face, they gave you a drill and four sticks of dynamite, and none of us was miners, so we didn't know what we were doing. So you went down and you drilled a few holes and put a few sticks of dynamite in. Well, if you were lucky, you'd get maybe three or four boxes of coal. But if you had a bad blast, where you got one puff and you got no coal, it meant you had one hell of a day with a pick. This happened to us invariably, all the time, because, not being a miner, you didn't know really how to use the drills and the dynamite. And we were taking about, I'd say, five feet of coal, and then there was a layer of rock there, about a foot, maybe more. You had to take that out, send it up, and then get this other foot and half of coal or so that was underneath. But that rock didn't count. So if you had 16 tags and you sent up 4 boxes of rock, that meant 20 boxes that day, not 16, and you had to put them out; [often] I

stayed down longer than my shift to put out your amount of tags. It was very hard. You went down there and ate a bowl of rice for your breakfast and used a pick [laughter]. By noon time that little box of rice didn't fill up much of a hole. And the same thing when you got back at night, you got your same slop, whatever it would be -- rice and greens, potato stocks or pumpkin leaves or something like this boiled up -- not fit for an animal but that's what we subsisted on.

C.G.R.:

Who else was in your group? You said there were four, was it always the same four?

L.R.:

Yes, I worked with a guy named...he's dead now. He lived up in the Lac St. Jean area. He was a cook, he was the officer's cook. Anyway, the name is off my mind now. Another name was Ernest Bourget, from the Gaspé Coast -- he is also dead; John Lebell is in Campbellton, New Brunswick, and he's still living. That's the crew. Now, it's the same thing in the dockyards, you had a crew you worked with also. I worked with Dick Keays, Charlie Campbell, no, not Dick Keays, Arnold Ross, Charlie Campbell, Les Cole, and myself. So you were four guys who worked together all the time. I think it goes better that way, anyway, because you got to know the work; you knew your men. But we are...the four of us are still around. In fact we had a picture taken there, at the last reunion, together. One guy said, "I want a picture of the four guys that worked together."

Then came our famous day, and it was my birthday on the 17th of August, you know. The day we didn't have to go down to work.

And then the American planes started coming around and dropping us supplies. It was a delightful sight.

C.G.R.:

I'll bet. Was anybody getting back at the Japanese at the end of the war?

L.R.:

Not in my camp, because, well, for one thing the camp we stayed in in Yokohama, in the dockyards, we were gone from there. They brought us away in May. We were mistreated enough by some of them. I guess, if they had been there, probably there would have been some trouble. In the coal mines you worked with civilians in the mines. So you weren't really mixed up with too many people that you had a grudge against or they against you. They only had one guard there, he was a big sergeant -- you didn't see too many big Japanese --but there was a big tall sergeant there, and he was a real heller. Because when you came in off a parade he could stand you and make you drill, route march, and march to the parade ground 12 o'clock at night, rain or shine. So everybody kind of had it in for him. But, when the war was over, our camp commander told the Japanese commander that if they didn't want any trouble in the camp, to make sure that sergeant disappeared. Nobody ever saw him again. I'm sure the guys would have strung him up.

But, as I say, the guards, we didn't have anything to do with the guards in the mines. We were there working with civilians, so after you went in the mines well, you were in, they didn't care what....They knew we couldn't get out [laughter].

But actually if you had wanted to run away in Japan, if you think you could have got some place, it wouldn't have been difficult, because the guard situation wasn't extreme. The fences weren't extreme. I guess they knew you wouldn't go no place. You couldn't go, you were like a nigger in a wood pile.

C.G.R.:

It's not a very easy place to escape, no.

How do you feel about the Japanese now?

L.R.:

It never even bothered me after I got back. I had no animosity against them. War is war -- live and let live.

I went back to Japan in 1978. The federal government brought over some people. It was the 25th anniversary of the Korean armistice, and I went to represent my regiment from the Hong Kong end of it. They would bring over, I think it was five people, and I was selected to go over and represent my regiment. I went to Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong. There were drastic changes in Hong Kong at that time and I can imagine there's more today. But we went to visit a lot of the places through the hills where we had to [fight]. They brought us on a bus tour. The Hong Kong Volunteers over there, if you go over there on a pilgrimage or anything, they sort of organize the thing for you. They brought us through what they called the battle areas, and explained the different names of places that we would never remember or know anyway, you know. At that time it was Sid Vaile, Charlie Brady, myself, Kay Christie and Bill Mayne. Probably you know Bill Mayne.

C.G.R.:

No, I have his name and I'm hoping to get to interview him soon. He's in Belleville, I believe.

L.R.:

Yes. He's blind, he's blind but he's a very nice chap. His wife came with him because he couldn't look after himself.

We went out and we...at that time they said North Point, our first camp, was obsolete, it was finished, but from one of the lookouts we could see it down below. So the day before we left to come back, we managed to have an afternoon off and we -- the Minister of Veterans Affairs was with us, so he heard that we wanted to go to North Point, so he give us these limousines to go out there [laughter]. We had a chauffeur-driven limousine to go to North Point! We couldn't get in the camp. Some of the buildings were still existing. Part of it was a children's playground, and some of it was an old dump where they had a lot of scrap. But there was a lot of buildings around there that changed the face of the place so much. Facing our camp when we were there, we were looking up the mountain, now it's all apartment buildings. So that things, you know, have changed so much. While there, as everybody else probably had told you that went there, we went to the cemeteries there. Very sad. In fact I did some of the services over there -- the things were read out, like the leading prayers. I did it in French because they wanted some French and some English, so I did the French section. But it was all you could do to repeat it, to say it sometimes, because you would break up. It's a sad situation going to cemeteries, especially when you know all your friends are there.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I understand.

Did you lose a lot of weight?

L.R.:

I weighed 127 pounds when I came out, and my normal army weight was about 180, 185. I weigh 185 now, and I'm pretty well normal. But I was one of the lucky guys. I can say this, because I had friends of mine that were much heavier than that who came out less than 100 pounds.

I didn't have all the sicknesses that a lot of them had. I didn't have diphtheria, I didn't have pneumonia, I didn't have pleurisy. My main problems were dysentery, beriberi, and malaria, but I didn't have any of those killer diseases.

C.G.R.:

How did beriberi affect you?

L.R.:

Well, there was different kinds of beriberi. They had some that used to swell -- they called it the wet beriberi. Your legs got this size, and your arms, and your face swelled up, that's what I had. But some of them had -- they called it, I think, the dry beriberi -- it was more painful.

C.G.R.:

The "electric feet," and so on?

L.R.:

Well, I had the hot feet, but not as much as some of the poor guys that I used to see stand there with their feet under the water all day. It probably killed them, but that's what they used to do. Well, I have a problem now; I've always had a

problem with my feet since I got back, I sleep with my feet out of the blanket all the time. I never wear shoes in the house. I come in and the first thing I do is drop. My feet are sore from the heat.

No, I was lucky. I think [those of us] from the Gaspé coast I think are sturdier and tougher. You grew up on a farm, working from the time you were a young boy, and you muscled up more, you were harder worked than the boys that come from the town and the cities where they didn't work so hard, and they were young.

Unfortunately, some of the guys would give up too. They would get discouraged, and you could see it if a guy got discouraged. Within a week he was gone, he was dead. It was just the way it went, guys give up. But it was hard not to give up, but some of them....

C.G.R.:

Why didn't you?

L.R.:

Well, I was determined, I was going to get back. I said, "Well, these yellow bastards will never keep me over here." I was determined that I would get back. We worked hard, you know. I think it was hard doing it at the time, but I think it was good that we worked. I think if you were just sitting there, I don't know, I don't think nobody would have come out it, the situation we were in.

C.G.R.:

Did you have much to do with the medical officers at all?

L.R.:

Over there?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

L.R.:

No. Only getting the little bit of medicine they could give you for diarrhea, dysentery, and malaria, and stuff like that. No, I really had no dealings with them.

C.G.R.:

What about sex -- was the absence of sex a problem? Was it something people talked about, worried about?

L.R.:

Over there?

It never really entered my mind, because you didn't have the stamina. No, it wasn't talked about much, as far as I'm concerned it wasn't talked about much. Most of the talk was food. No matter where you met somebody they were talking about food -- what they were going to eat when they come home, what they were going to do, what they were going to cook. There was some of them, I'm sure they must have been chefs when they got back because they were always cooking up some fancy thing. No, sex wasn't a problem really.

C.G.R.:

What was the worst part of this for you? Can you put your finger on one thing and say, well, that was what I found the worst?

L.R.:

Well, you're cut off from the rest of the world. You don't hear -- I was about 2-1/2 years before I ever got a letter from

my home. You know, it was a year and a half before my mother knew that I was alive. Then when she heard, she heard that there was....

[End of side 1.]

Two from my mother...

C.G.R.:

Three letters.

L.R.:

I was 3-1/2 years before I got the first letter, and it was 18 months from the time it was mailed when I got it. Well, this is hard because you don't know what's going on back home, you know. You've heard nothing. So regardless of the group that you're with, you're still lonely. It's hard to take. I think that's why we're such a close-knit bunch today -- our association, you know. We're more than a family. You meet the guys, you go to those reunions. Last year we were down to Sussex, New Brunswick; well, I met guys that I hadn't seen since I left prison camp in 1945. They're like a family to you, they're more than family, I think. We are a very close-knit bunch throughout Canada, you know. You can travel to Winnipeg, or anywhere -- you meet someone and it's like you've met a long-lost brother.

I know them all because I've been on the executive of the association for 25 years, I guess. So I have all their addresses there and I have them all over Canada, but this is my own group here -- it's the Quebec Maritime Branch. As I say, I've been a long, long time on the executive, so you get to know

everybody. You know their addresses, you know where they are, what they're doing, and the ones you don't meet this year, you meet next year. If I can travel, I go and visit them. I went to Newfoundland the other year and I went to see a man by the name of Bob Durdle, which I hadn't seen from 1945. Well, I drove 60 miles out of my way to go and visit him. Well, he was so happy. It was just like Queen Elizabeth had arrived there. But now, I had a letter from him this year, and he's very sick. I'm going over to Newfoundland this year, so I hope to go and visit him again. But it's things like this, I don't know, seems to make it all worthwhile.

C.G.R.:

Can I ask about your hand?

L.R.:

I lost this hand not in the army. I lost this in 1949. I had an accident working in a textile mill. I had my hand in hot rollers and it got burnt, so they had to amputate it. In 1949 it was. You get used to it, like everything else.

C.G.R.:

Anything else that you can think of that we ought to talk about?

L.R.:

No. Not really.

My health now, since I got back. Well, I've looked after myself very well. I never drank in my life, I never smoked in my life. So maybe it was a good thing, or a bad thing, I don't know, but my health has been fairly good. I have my aches and pains like everybody else -- every Hong Kong veteran, I suppose, or

every other veteran, I suppose. My feet bother me a lot. As I say, I can't sleep with them under the blankets. I have a pension for my feet. My back bothers me. But clear of that, I'm a fairly healthy man.

C.G.R.:

Good. Maybe that's a good place to stop.

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