



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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VOLUNTEER FAMILIES

Immediately following Hong Kong's surrender on Christmas Day, 1941 those families still resident in Hong Kong of members of the HKVDC received little or no official information regarding the fate of their husbands/fathers/sons. But rumours abounded. Some were able, shortly after the surrender, to remove the uncertainty by locating loved ones or friends in the POW camps, and news circulated by word of mouth.

Some of these Volunteers' families were billeted in flats on May Road. Among them was Ellen Field (also known by her married surname as Nellie Lee) with her three children, and in her book **Twilight in Hong Kong** she describes how, on hearing that some Volunteers were gathering at their headquarters in Garden Road after the surrender, she and other wives made their way down the hill to find their husbands. She was lucky, and succeeded in locating her husband, Pte Frank Lee of the Armoured Car Platoon.

Others were less fortunate and remained in the dark as to whether their husbands were casualties – one such was Rose Peters (mother of Association member Eileen Ching), also billeted in May Road with her three children, who could only learn from friends that her husband, Pte William Peters of the ASC Company, was missing, believed killed.

Jean Gittins in **Stanley: Behind Barbed Wire** writes, with reference to some of the Volunteers, "By New Year's Day, 1942 they had been assembled in a large refugee camp at North Point which civilians were allowed to visit. At its gates many learnt for the first time of the loss of a loved one during the fighting, but many of the details were mere hearsay....." She learned, through a friend who visited the camp, that her husband Sgt William Gittins of 4th Battery was missing, believed killed, but this proved to be incorrect and she later discovered that her husband was a POW in Sham Shui Po Camp.

For the overseas families of expatriate Volunteers it was an even more trying time as there was no way they could obtain any information at all to relieve their anxiety. Some of these families were temporarily away from Hong Kong when the war began and were unable to return, while many had left Hong Kong in 1940 under the compulsory evacuation scheme. These families did not receive news of their loved ones until many months after the battle.

This situation particularly affected the families of the Volunteers in Nos.1 and 2 Companies which had perhaps the largest number of expatriate members.

Included amongst those anxiously seeking news of their husband/father was the family of Captain Harry Penn, OC of No.1 Company. Captain Penn's wife, Rene, was in Canada with her two children Patricia and John (an Association member of many years standing).

When, in response to their enquiries, they received news that Captain Penn had “recovered” they had no idea what he had recovered from! They received details in a letter in mid-1942 from Canadian Benjamin Proulx writing from Kunming in China.

Benny Proulx was a Warrant Officer in the HKRNVR. He became a POW, but escaped from North Point Camp in early 1942 and successfully made his way into China. He has given an account of his experiences in a book entitled **Underground from Hong Kong**, published in 1943. His letter to the Penn family did much to relieve their prolonged anxiety. Extracts are given below, courtesy of Association member John Penn.

In his letter Proulx wrote,

“.....I met Harry as he came into Shamshuipo prison camp (Kowloon) being transferred from North Point Hong Kong. He came up to the room we were in to see me and I gave him my camp bed as I was being taken over to the North Point camp on the Hong Kong side with the rest of the Navy and the Canadians.....I saw Harry and spoke to him and examined him carefully because I knew he had been shot. I could not believe my eyes as his recovery was miraculous.....The miracle is that he was actually shot right thru the face and the bullet went thru either passing thru his mouth when he had it open or passing behind the nose above the jaw and teeth. Believe me not even his teeth were touched. He said he bled a bit but beyond a vague feeling like a toothache he was not hurt.”

Captain Penn and No.1 Company were engaged in the fight at Quarry Gap, and later in what has been referred to as the battle of Red Hill. Together with two companies of the Royal Rifles of Canada, the Volunteers attempted to dislodge the enemy from Red Hill, but this was unsuccessful. Penn was wounded at the foot of the hill. Proulx wrote in his letter

“As a matter of fact he got hit in a battle near my house at Tytam and was picked up by Tiny Coates and taken to St Stephens Hospital at Stanley I believe. Tiny was in my outfit and when he rejoined me a couple of days later he told me he picked up Harry, shot thru the face, so at that time I said to myself that’s the end of Harry and thought of you in Vancouver as I knew you were there. You can imagine how relieved I was to see him come into the prison and as right as anything.”

Penn fortunately discharged himself from the hospital on 24th December, and thus just managed to escape the massacre of patients and staff which took place when the enemy entered the hospital on Christmas Day. He was subsequently a POW in Argyle Street Camp.

In the chaotic conditions that prevailed immediately after the surrender it is not surprising that no information was readily available. As Jean Gittins has explained, “The authorities were not entirely to blame. One of their greatest difficulties had been the lack of information and co-ordination, because of the rapid deterioration of the situation .”