



# Hong Kong and the HOME FRONT

Exhibit sponsored by the Morrin Centre  
 Research, curating, writing: Patrick Donovan  
 Project management: Barry McCullough  
 Historical Consultants: Lorraine O'Donnell, Donald Fyson, Christopher DeWolf  
 French Translation: Josiane Callet  
 Graphic Design: Kyla Johnson

Canada  morrin

*“Perhaps this would be the practical road to world peace. Let us raise monuments, stock museums and name parks after our stupidities, blunders and pointless bloodbaths that too often are disguised as glorious victories.”*

—Ken Cambon (1923-2007),  
 Hong Kong veteran from Quebec City

The Royal Rifles of Canada, Quebec City’s main English-speaking regiment, took part in the battle to defend Hong Kong in 1941. They were unprepared, outnumbered, and poorly equipped. Roughly a third of them, 260 men, died. The rest faced inhumane conditions in Japanese POW camps for nearly four years. For a long time, their families did not know whether they were dead or alive.



Sign for King George V Memorial Park in Hong Kong shrouded by roots of banyan tree, 2015  
 IMAGE: PATRICK DONOVAN

Why did Canadians go to Hong Kong during World War II? Was this imperial loyalty misguided? How does this episode fit into the larger story of British and Japanese colonialism in Hong Kong? What is the legacy of this battle 75 years on?

Air raid precautions in Hong Kong, 1941  
 IMAGE: IWM, KF 112





# SETTING THE STAGE

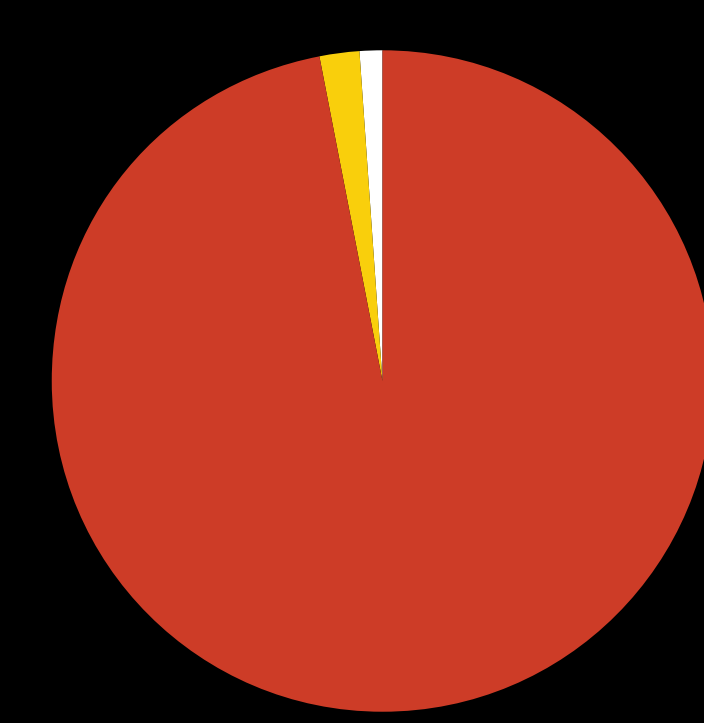
- **1841**  
China cedes island of Hong Kong to UK
- **1931**  
Japan invades Manchuria (China)
- **1938**  
Japanese occupation of China reaches Hong Kong border
- **September 1, 1939**  
Germany invades Poland; start of World War II
- **September 3, 1939**  
France and Britain declare war on Germany
- **September 10, 1939**  
Canada declares war on Germany
- **June 14, 1940**  
German troops enter Paris
- **September 19, 1941**  
Britain asks Canada for aid in the defense of Hong Kong
- **September 29, 1941**  
Canada agrees to send two battalions to Hong Kong
- **November 16, 1941**  
Canadian troops arrive in Hong Kong
- **December 7/8, 1941**  
Surprise Japanese attack on Hong Kong, Pearl Harbor (USA), Malaya, and the Philippines
- **December 13, 1941**  
Japanese occupy all of Kowloon and Hong Kong mainland
- **December 18, 1941**  
Japanese disembark on Hong Kong Island
- **December 25, 1941**  
Britain surrenders Hong Kong to Japan
- **August 6-9, 1945**  
USA drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
- **August 15, 1945**  
Japanese Emperor broadcasts surrender; POWs liberated
- **August 30, 1945**  
Japan returns Hong Kong to Britain
- **July 1, 1997**  
Britain returns Hong Kong to China

## HONG KONG

**SIZE: 1,104 km<sup>2</sup>**  
(approximate size of Quebec City, Lévis & Île d'Orléans)

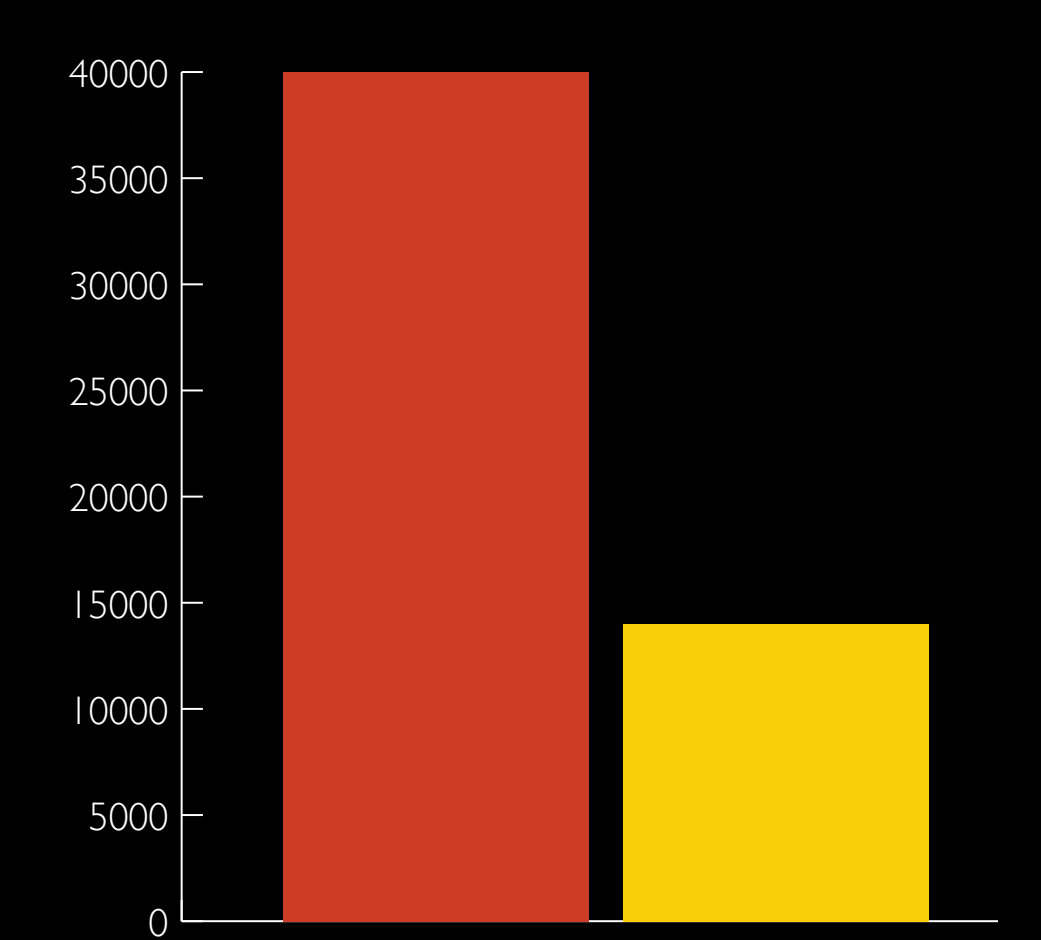


**POPULATION (1941): 1,729,000**



98.4% Chinese  
1.1% European  
0.5% Indian

**POPULATION (1945): approx. 600,000**



**JAPANESE TROOPS:**

approx. 40,000

**COMMONWEALTH TROOPS:**

approx. 14,000 British, Canadian, Indian and Chinese

**CANADIAN TROOPS: 1,975**



**CANADIANS DEAD IN BATTLE:**

290 (14.7%)



**CANADIANS DEAD IN POW CAMPS:**

267 (13.5%)

~20 soldiers





# WHY WAS HONG KONG BRITISH?

British drug smugglers founded Hong Kong. They used it as a base to sell opium to China. It quickly grew into a large trading metropolis.

From the 1700s on, British merchants traded Indian-grown opium for Chinese tea and silks. The Chinese made opium illegal, but trade continued. There were 12 million addicts by 1830. China took further action in 1839, leading to war with Britain. China lost, and in 1841 ceded Hong Kong Island, which became a British colony.

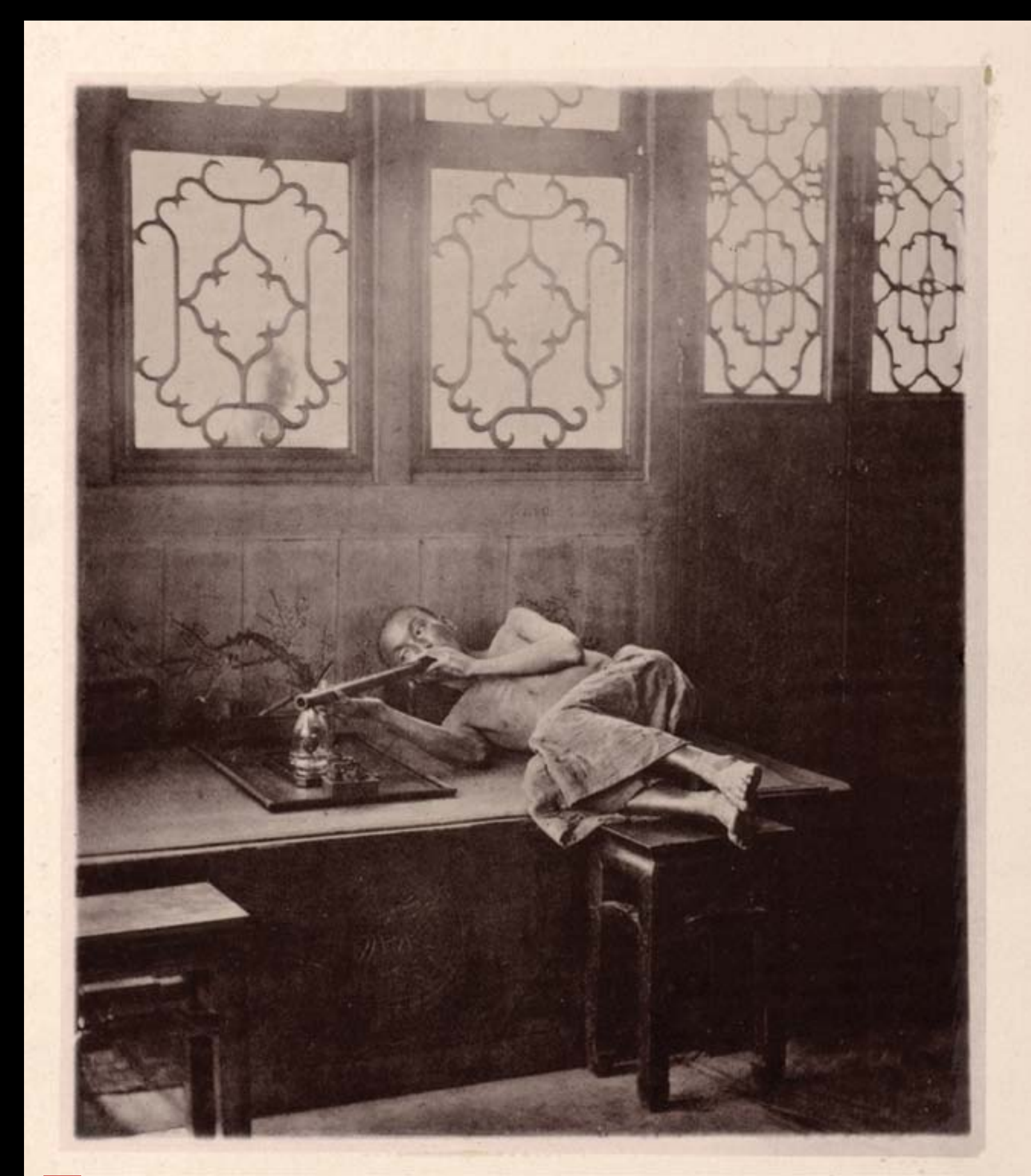
Over the next century, Hong Kong grew from a series of small fishing towns to a large city with over 1.7 million people.

The British saw Hong Kong as a civilized testament to the virtues of free trade. However, the colony's society was deeply unequal and racist. Although Chinese outnumbered Europeans, they were second-class citizens barred from certain parts of town. Enterprising Chinese could make fortunes in Hong Kong, but they were grossly underrepresented in government and the public service.

In 1940, after the start of WWII, Britain evacuated thousands of European women and children from Hong Kong to Australia. Many Chinese objected that their taxes were being used to evacuate a privileged minority, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

*"I have heard that the smoking of opium is forbidden in your country, proof that you are clearly aware of its harm. Since you do not permit opium to harm your own country, you should certainly not allow it to be passed on to other countries."*

-1839 letter from Commissioner Lin Zexu to Queen Victoria



Opium smoker, Hong Kong, 1870s  
IMAGE: JOHN THOMSON, CHINA AND ITS PEOPLE, 1874

Colonial Hong Kong, 1870s  
IMAGE: JOHN THOMSON, CHINA AND ITS PEOPLE, 1874





# THE ROYAL RIFLES

The Royal Rifles of Canada, Quebec City's main English-language regiment, was one of two Canadian regiments sent to defend Hong Kong in 1941.

Recruits hailed mostly from eastern Quebec and northern New Brunswick. Although the regiment operated in English, over a third of the ranks were bilingual Francophones.

When the Royal Rifles were shipped to Hong Kong in October 1941, the regiment was classified as "unfit for combat." Some were taught how to use their rifles on the journey over. Misleading lectures on board ship perpetuated stereotypes of the Japanese as short people with buck teeth who could not see at night because of the shape of their eyes. They could be defeated.

Canada thought the troops would have lots of time to train in Hong Kong. They had only three weeks. Their Canadian salaries went a long way in the colony. Many hired servants to shine their shoes in the morning and Chinese prostitutes at night. There were "three glorious weeks of wild luxury, shopping, dining, drinking, spending, buying embroidered kimonos, carved tusks, silk pyjamas," remembers soldier William Allister.



Royal Rifles recruitment poster  
IMAGE: CWM 19750317-052, CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM



Racist caricature of Japanese portrayed as lice from the U.S.  
Similar views prevailed in Canada.  
IMAGE: LEATHERNECK MAGAZINE, US MARINE CORPS, 1945

Royal Rifles leaving Valcartier for Hong Kong, October 23, 1941  
IMAGE: LAC, Z-3643-2





# THE BATTLE

Six hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese launched a surprise attack on Hong Kong. Eighteen days of death and destruction followed.

On December 8, 1941, Japanese planes destroyed Hong Kong's air defense. Thirty-six hours later, the main line of defense on the mainland collapsed. The Allies retreated to Hong Kong Island.

The odds were stacked against the 14,000 British, Indian, Canadian, and Chinese troops defending the colony. Many were unprepared and ill-equipped. Britain had underestimated its enemy. Faced with 40,000 veteran Japanese troops, the Royal Rifles' commanding officer called for surrender to save Allied lives. He clashed with British high command. Churchill said that there was to "be no thought of surrender," that every day of resistance helped the Allied cause.

The battle raged on. The Japanese disembarked on the island on December 18, took control of the water supply a few days later, and the British surrendered on Christmas Day. Nearly 2,800 Japanese had died or were wounded, and slightly more on the British side. There were up to 7,000 civilian casualties. Ten thousand women, mainly Chinese, were raped in the days after surrender.



Canadian forces training in Hong Kong, 1941  
IMAGE: IWM, KF 189



Canadian soldier in the ruins of Hong Kong  
IMAGE: TORONTO STAR WEEKLY, 1941



Hand-drawn map of Hong Kong Island in  
Capt. ACM Thomson's diary  
IMAGE: THOMSON FAMILY COLLECTION

Japanese leaflets dropped onto Hong Kong, 1941  
IMAGE: PUBLIC RECORDS OFFICE, HONG KONG





# PRISONERS OF WAR

The Japanese captured some 10,000 Allied soldiers in Hong Kong, including around 1,700 Canadians. Roughly one in six died under the cruelty, starvation, and slave labour they endured for nearly four years in Hong Kong and Japan.

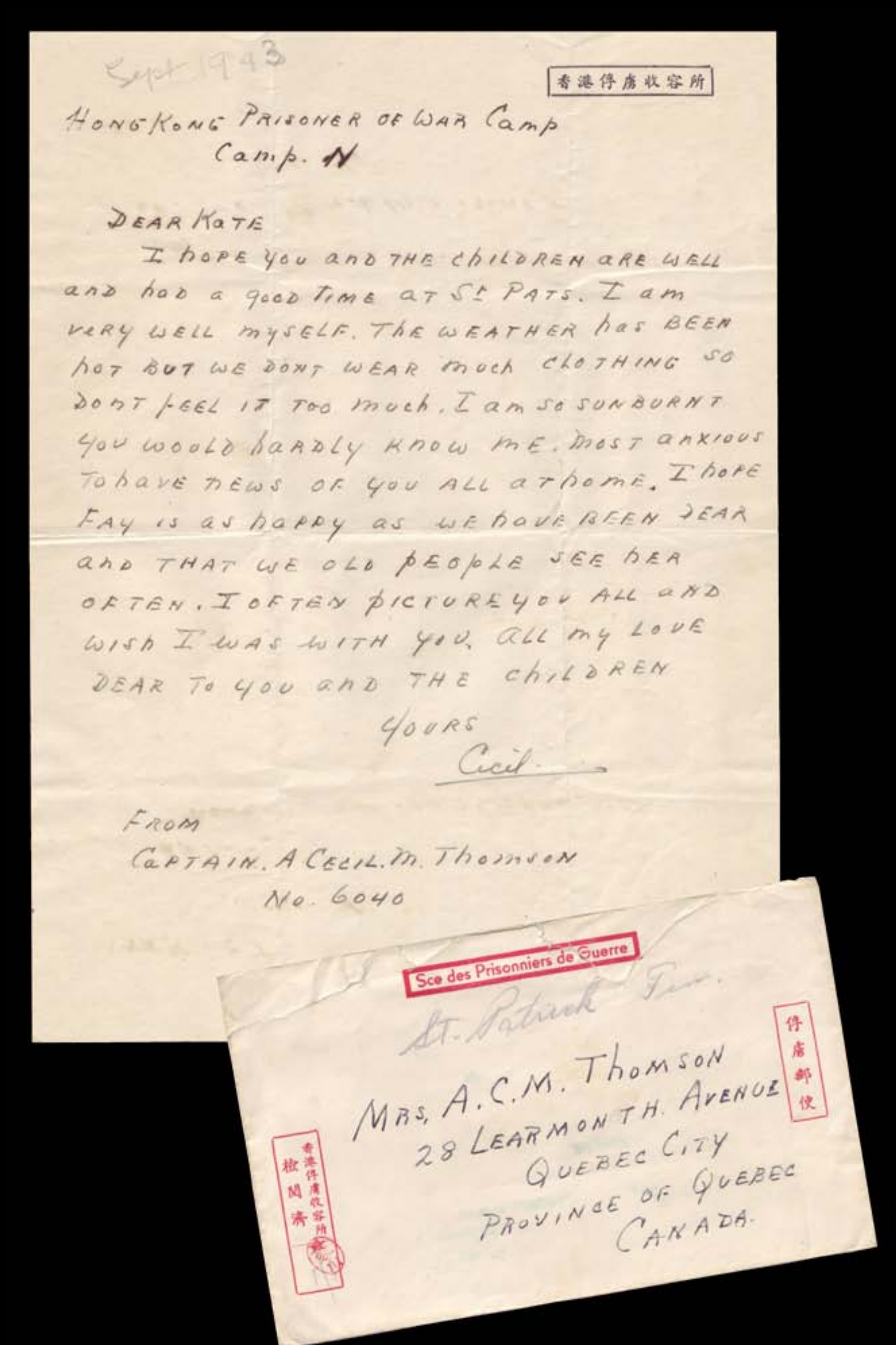
Japan rejected the Geneva Convention with regard to POWs. They believed surrender was contemptible—victory or death were the only acceptable paths. Consequently, Japan had little regard for Allied POWs. The death rate for captured Canadians was four times higher than for Allies captured by the Germans. POWs in Thailand and Burma fared even worse.

POWs lived off small portions of rice, unfamiliar greens and occasional bits of rancid fish. Vitamin deprivation and poor sanitation made them ill. Many had legs that swelled like balloons with a condition called beriberi. Some suffered from “electric feet,” shooting pains every 10-15 seconds that prevented sleep.

A guard nicknamed the Kamloops Kid had grown up in Canada and been called “a dirty yellow Jap.” In Canada, thousands of Japanese-Canadians were imprisoned in camps during the war, their property seized and sold. The Kamloops Kid took revenge on POWs and was hanged for his crimes after the war. “A life gone full circle” wrote POW William Allister. “It was a sentence we were, in a way, pronouncing on ourselves, destroying our own Frankenstein creation.”

*“I would say generally that the treatment which I experienced at the hands of the Japanese during my captivity was almost invariably inconsiderate, that it was frequently objectionable, and that it was on occasion positively barbarous.”*

– Sir Mark Young,  
Governor of Hong Kong



POW letters had to be falsely cheerful to ensure they made it past Japanese censors  
IMAGE: THOMSON FAMILY COLLECTION

War diary of Capt. ACM Thomson, Quebec City lawyer and member of the LHSQ  
IMAGE: THOMSON FAMILY COLLECTION

Canadian and British POWs at the liberation of Hong Kong - looking skinny but better than in the worst years of their captivity, Hong Kong, 1945  
IMAGE: LAC, PA-145983





# THE HOME FRONT

Meanwhile in Quebec, soldiers' families waited anxiously for news, volunteers packed parcels for prisoners, and new wartime industries meant an end to the unemployment of the 1930s.

The European war was on Quebec City's doorstep. German submarines prowled the St. Lawrence, sinking 18 ships with their torpedoes. Quebec also hosted two strategic meetings between Churchill and Roosevelt.

The war years saw Quebec City prosper as industrial jobs doubled. New factories in Saint-Malo and Valcartier produced 300 million cartridges for the front every year. A new airport opened with training facilities for the air force; it now functions as Quebec's international airport.

Volunteers also pitched in. The Morrin College building played a pivotal role, with the women of the Imperial Orders of the Daughters of Empire (IODE) sewing furiously and packing parcels for servicemen and air raid victims. Red Cross volunteers prepared packages for POWs.

Unfortunately, the packages sent to POWs in Asia were often looted or seized by guards. Many letters disappeared. Families did not know whether their sons were alive as the Japanese did not provide a list of casualties until October, 1942.



Red Cross parcels sent to POWs were often looted by the Japanese  
IMAGE: CANADIAN RED CROSS



Dominion Arsenal factory in Saint-Malo, Quebec  
IMAGE: LAC, PA-116093

The Morrin Centre's College Hall, seen here in 1976, was used by IODE volunteers from WWII to the late 1980s  
IMAGE: MCCO





# LIBERATION

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the war and freed POWs, but it also killed some 200,000 Japanese.

Rifleman Ken Cambon remembers August 15, 1945, the day the Japanese surrendered. At noon, the guards were lined up, bowing deeply to a small radio as the Emperor said they must “endure the unendurable.” American fighter planes swooped overhead, dropping magazines and cigarettes. Cambon snuck out into town and bartered cigarettes for saké, drinking until he passed out. They returned on American navy ships and were given a hero’s welcome at Quebec City’s Gare du Palais.

Among the returnees was Lt. John McGreevy. He went back to working as an accountant and became a devoted community volunteer. McGreevy was Treasurer of the Literary and Historical Society for 48 years and its President from 1961 to 1966. “I was treasurer of every single bloody Anglophone foundation in Quebec,” he said, “that and the kitchen sink.” This earned him the Order of Canada in 1989.

Others had a more difficult time readjusting, particularly the lower ranks that had endured smaller rations and harsher conditions. Nearly half of the returnees suffered from long-term ailments related to food deprivation. Many died young. Others carried psychological trauma with them, causing difficulties at home and work. “Freedom is more than a lack of a barbed wire fence,” wrote rifleman Ken Cambon.

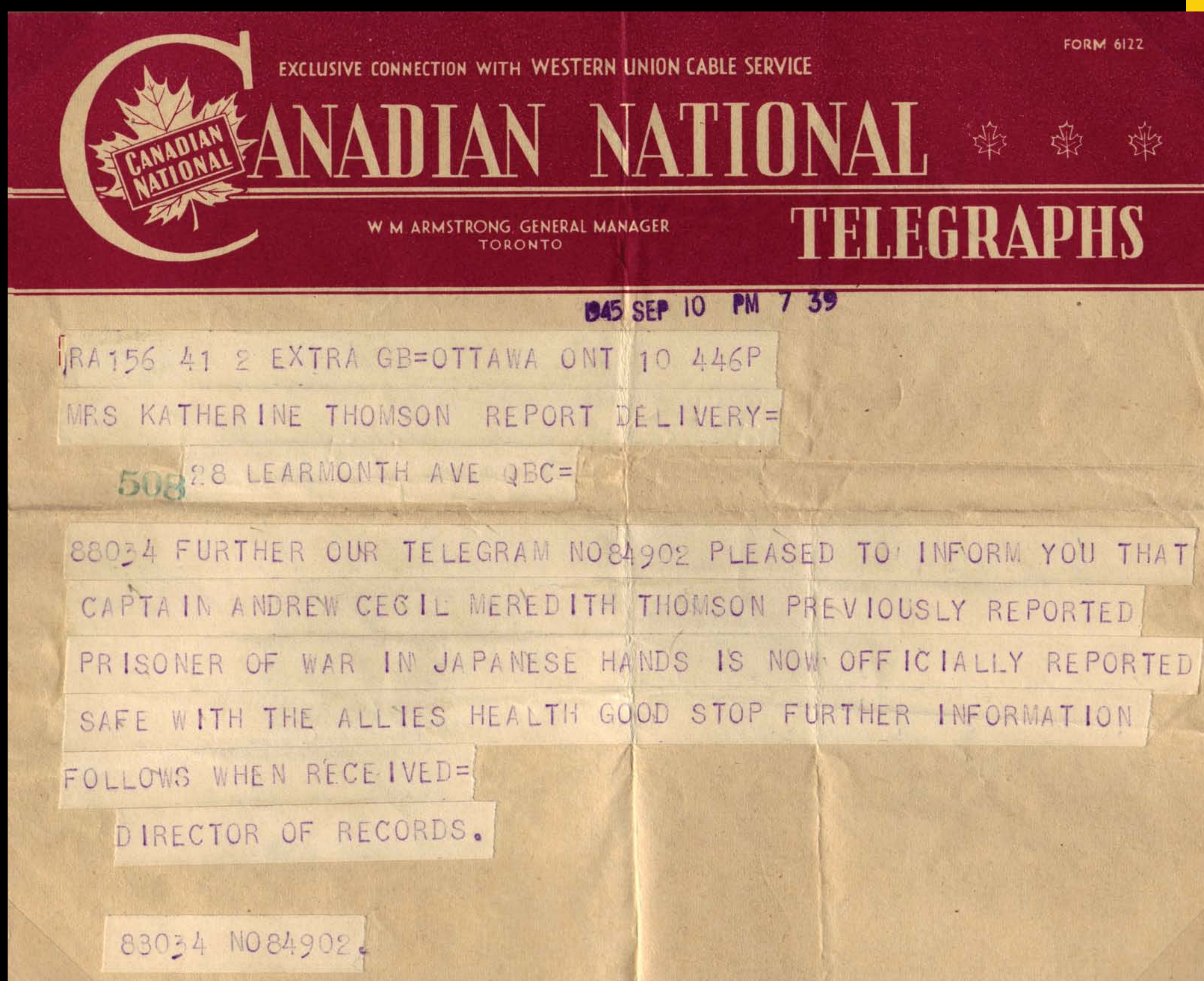
*“That must be why men love war: the chance to play God. War, the ultimate insanity, was the magic password. Once accepted, all values, norms, ethics could be stood on their heads and made to look very sensible. Now the fun was over and we could all go home. Back to sanity. Or was it? Could the world just flick a switch, sign a paper and return everything to its former state?”*

– William Allister (1919-2008),  
Hong Kong veteran



The Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph regularly published images of prominent local men affected by the war.  
IMAGE: QUEBEC CHRONICLE-TELEGRAPH

Telegrams were sent out to family members following the liberation of POWs  
IMAGE: THOMSON FAMILY COLLECTION





# LEGACY

Hong Kong returned to British rule in 1945, leaving a complex legacy that continues to this day.

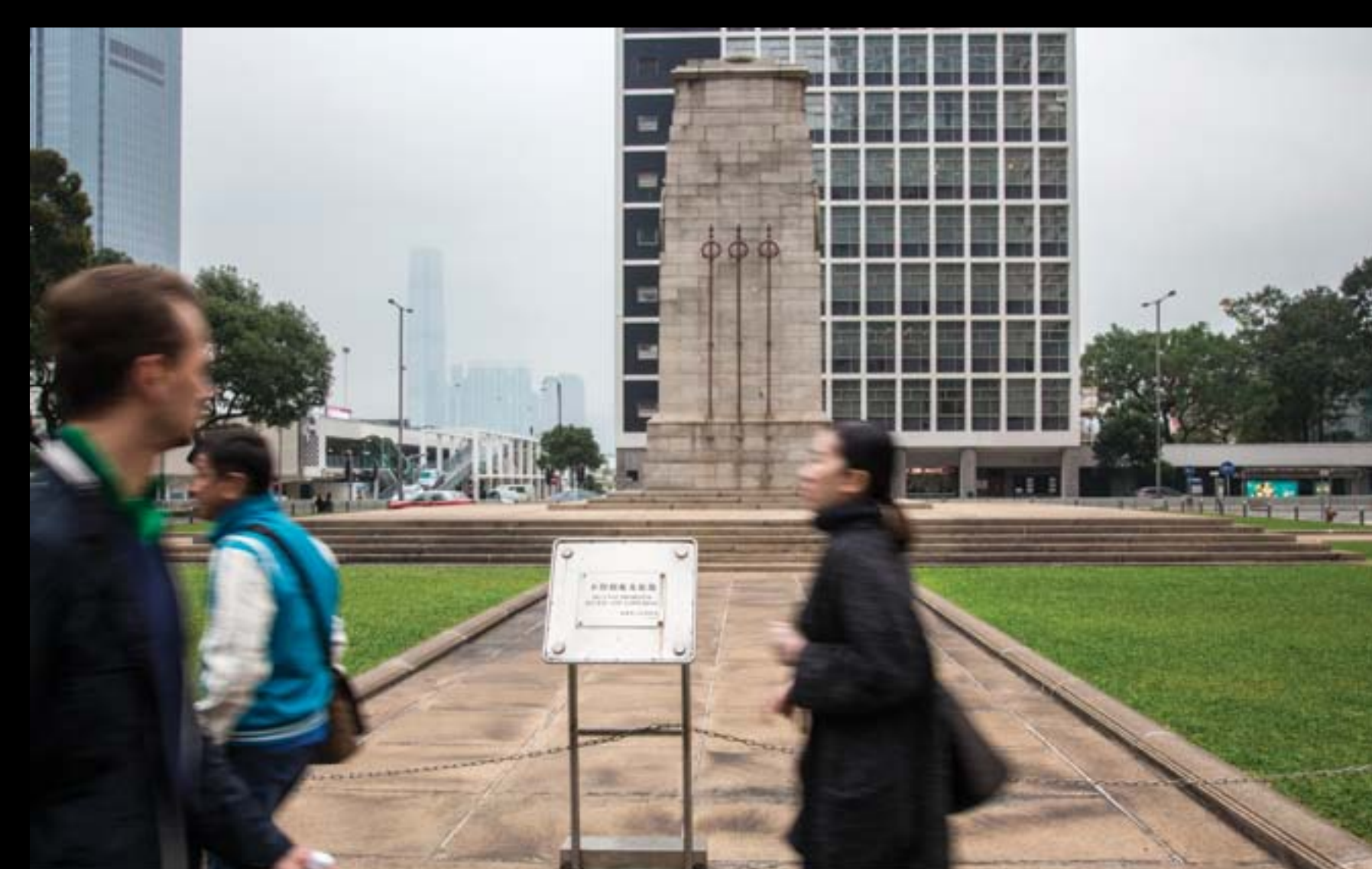
Many Chinese Hongkongers felt British rule was a lesser evil than Japanese occupation. They considered both the British and the Japanese as arrogant upper castes, but had experienced more vicious repression under the latter. The occupiers had made civilians bow to them, forced them into hard labour, and performed routine executions. Food was rationed under the Japanese and most people went hungry. Nearly a million were deported to China and many did not survive.

Observers have characterized postwar British rule as less stuffy and exclusive, with modest and gradual changes. More local Chinese were recruited into the government, but Hong Kong never became a representative democracy. Despite this, it flourished, its per-capita GDP eventually surpassing Britain's.

What vestiges of the battle remain in Hong Kong today? Some war cemeteries, maple trees planted by Canadian veterans, a cenotaph and, despite Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, there are annual Remembrance Day celebrations with local Chinese police playing bagpipes. One should not mistake this as enduring loyalty to the British Empire—the primary loyalty of Hongkongers is to Hong Kong itself—but the past nevertheless leaves traces.



Recruitment poster produced after the fall of Hong Kong  
IMAGE: CWM 19700036-024, CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM



The Cenotaph, Hong Kong, 2015  
IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF



Bagpiper in Hong Kong, 2016  
IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF



Sai Wan Military Cemetery, Hong Kong, 2016  
IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF

Canadian wreath at Sai Wan Military Cemetery, 2016  
IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF

