



HKVCA - Visit to Hong Kong & Japan 2010

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Hong Kong and Japan
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[Slideshow](#)

Hong Kong and Japan 2010

A group of 52 travelled to Hong Kong, leaving Canada on November 30. The purpose of the trip was to commemorate the Canadians who fought, died and survived the POW camps. Thirty eight of the group carried on to visit Japan.

Ken and Ruth Barton wrote the journal below and are pleased to share it with you.

A Traveller's Journal -- Hong Kong and Japan with the HKVCA

by Ken & Ruth Barton

Tuesday, November 30/Wednesday Dec 1 - Vancouver Airport.

The folks leaving from Vancouver began arriving at the departure gate about 10 P.M. A slow grouping of "poppies" began with many of the following questions: "hello, how you are...and how are you connected to this journey? Does it really leave at 2 A.M.? "Yuk, I'm tired already and we haven't even left"



It was a long flight over-- 13 hours but with excellent service from Cathay Pacific. Before landing at 7:30 HK time, we were served a

supper and breakfast --both very tasty. We were formally greeted and welcomed at the new airport on Lantau Island where our first group pictures were taken.

The eastern folks who had left from Toronto had arrived about an hour and a half before us, and had received the same greeting and flowers for the Veterans and widows.



The old Kai Tak that the POWs slaved on is long gone under land reclamation and this new modern facility is huge but seemed very efficient in getting our tired bones and luggage onto the tour bus.

Because our rooms would not be ready till later in the day, our first tour was a city tour from the airport ...over cable suspension bridges to Kowloon and then via tunnel to Hong Kong Island proper. First impressions are of how tall everything is. Apartment towers are 70 to 80 stories. Family living areas are often less than 500 sq feet and laundry poles stick out the balcony. I can see the odd bit of washing that has blown off from above, hung up further down. How they fight fires in these buildings is beyond me.

The day was fairly smoggy so May thought it best if we headed to Aberdeen harbour to take a sampan ride around the floating homes. Lots of fancy high priced boats from

A-Z in the marina proper, but this was nothing new for us who live on the west coast but certainly new for some of the eastern and prairie folks. Some floating families in Aberdeen harbour are born, live and die on the water. Space here is at a premium to be sure.



Once off the Sampans, we met Mike and Dawn Babin (our tour organizers) as we viewed the Jumbo floating restaurant. It is

aptly named and can only be described as huge!

Evidently it is capable of feeding 2,000 at time.

It was off to Stanley Market next. Great for the girls to get some preliminary scouting in for bargains but Greg Auld and I found the “Pickled Pelican” Pub overlooking the Bay where we found a Guinness and a plate of natchos with our names on them.

Next it was bussing up to Victoria Peak but the smog, compliments of the mainland according to our tour guide “May”, was obscuring what must be a terrific view on a clear day. While walking back I managed a few words with Gerry Gerrard, who at 89 puts most of us to shame with his energy level. He is from Victoria and certainly knew my Dad at Wong Nei Chong and later in some of the camps. His eyesight is not the best, but walks 2 km everyday or tries to get in a round of golf three times a week according to daughter Bev. I hope to have a small chat with our other vets, Ken Pifher and Fred Cooper at some time.

Being asked questions of events that took place 65 plus years ago must be difficult when so many of the veterans

who survived, tried to forget that horrific time. You have to greatly admire these three gentlemen for coming and dredging up terrible memories of their past.

After the Peak Tram ride down, it was time to head back to the Causeway Bay Hotel to check in and grab a quick nap as lack of sleep was beginning to tell.

Dinner was scheduled for 7 PM back in an exclusive banquet room at the Jumbo Restaurant. Food was good but, we felt no better than in Vancouver. No doubt super tired tasters were judging. Hong Kong at night with all the lights is spectacular. Little or no electrical conservation seems evident here!

Thursday Dec. 2nd



Breakfast at 7:30 in the hotel was an excellent buffet of both western and Chinese food. At 9:30 we were off to the “Central

District” for a 3 hour walking tour of historic Hong Kong led by our guide Martin Heyes. Martin is a retired policeman who came for a visit from England 40 years ago and never went back. He gave us a most informative tour and will be with us on Saturday’s battle ground walk along with Tony Banham.

That afternoon, we had a special trip arranged to a winery.... or so we thought.

“Little Hong Kong” as it is known is an underground storage area for the exclusive storage of wines by collectors of vintages from around the world. Wines are

very carefully stored using the former ammunition bunkers that the Hong Kong Civil Defence Corps had ready to blow up as the Japanese advanced.

Of course that did not happen but this was a most interesting tour for our three vets, as one of them commented that



he never knew these bunkers existed. Gregory De'Eb was our kind host seen here with veterans Ken Pifher, Gerry Gerrard and Fred Cooper.

Dinner was on our own so we found a basement restaurant a couple of blocks from the hotel where we communicated to the waiter that all we wanted was war wanton and beer for the six of us. Our bill came to \$489 HK which is about \$70 for the six of us. Another day we can call a success.

Friday December 3rd

After breakfast we were picked up at 9:15 and bussed to the Stanley Cemetery for a commemorative service. The cemetery is old and was the Garrison's cemetery long before casualties of 1941 occurred. It has about 700 interned along with many "unknowns".

Mike led us in a short but appropriate ceremony.

We did a walk about and listened as Mr. Dennis Quong explained some of the heritage of the cemetery.



With the ceremony concluded, we had an hour of free time so it was back to Stanley Market for the obligatory shopping and then for lunch at the Rock Salt Restaurant over looking the bay. Again, the meal was first rate. We had perhaps the best ravioli we have ever tasted!

Yet another hour in the market after the meal but the nice thing is that the merchants do not hound you. They do expect you to bargain hard but will only do so to a point and if no deal is pending then no hard feelings are evident and no one chases after you.

While waiting for the bus, we were “interviewed” by a group of school kids and their teacher doing a “tourist survey” Truth be known they were practicing their “English”. The teacher looked all of 16 but it was a most enjoyable experience and of course there were lots of smiles when I gave each a Canadian flag pin.

Our driver took the long road home by mistakenly going under the harbour and over to Kowloon before reversing

back. Even with rush hour there is very little honking and I have yet to see driver rudeness or road rage. North Americans could take a chapter out of their book.

We arrived back with little time to get ready for a reception by Doreen Steidle, our Canadian Consul General, at the home of the Consulate. A very pleasant evening occurred. Great food and drinks were provided. A terrific display of historic newspaper articles and pictures of Dec. '41 was mounted around the terrace. Lo and behold I found a picture of my father standing at ease beside, what I assume, was another officer watching the Canadian troops disembark the Awatea as they marched to Sham Sui Po barracks. Gerry Gerrard came over to have a look and confirmed that that it certainly was the "Tommy Barton" he remembered. Just how coincidental are certain things in life? A copy of that picture in highest resolution possible is being emailed to me.



Several other locals from all walks of life were invited to the evening.

Representatives of the HKVDC attended

including one veteran. We all mingled for pleasant chats.

Saturday Dec. 4th

It was the busiest day yet with an early breakfast and out to the bus to head up to our Battlefield Walk with Tony Banham. Martin Heyes, our tour guide in Central, also came along and give valuable additional information. The walk basically started high up Wong Nei Chong gap and ended at Lawson's West Brigade Headquarters where my Dad was chief clerk of the Corps of Military Staff Clerks. So much of the topography has changed from the original, but you can certainly see the bunkers and follow the sections of the gap trail and visualize the movement of the Japanese as they closed in. There was a lot of information to take in over the 3 hours. One could easily spend several days on this trail section alone.

I wasn't quite sure how I was going to react when we got to this juncture of the tour. It was very emotional standing there alone staring down into that very Bunker serving as West Brigade Headquarters.

As Tony explained what happened here, I imagined a young very fit 21 year old Tommy Barton inside that



same structure with all hell breaking loose 365 degrees around them. I took a couple of pictures and had to move on as emotions were quickly getting the better of me.

A few meters to the north was the bunker that Gerry Gerrard was in before he, too, managed to escape up over

the hill known as Jardine's Lookout. Below is a picture of the three vets standing in front of that very bunker. I talked to Gerry shortly after about how he got out but he said that it was hard to remember the details as all hell was breaking loose very quickly and things seemed to happen instinctually for survival alone. He thinks about 3 of them managed to get through the encirclement and does not know how they really succeeded.



Dad's story at Brigade Headquarters was much like that of Gerry's.

He recalled taking his boots off to be in stocking feet and moving down the road in pouring rain in the dead of night. He and two other fellows could hear the voices of the Japanese troops either side of the road. He said it is strange how life deals some of the cards and the fact that they too were not discovered and shot was beyond him.

I am beginning to notice how little effort is made in saving the heritage of this island. It seems that the thinking of the residents is only towards the future and the past is nothing more than that. An example of that attitude was evident when we looked across the road streaming with buses cars etc. to see the cricket match in action. Had the scene been 7 a.m. Dec. 19th 1941 we would have looked across to an aid station just up from a drainage culvert to collect fresh water and not what is now a substantial landfill with a service station also visible. Flat land is a premium here of course.

Tony mentioned that slowly they are making inroads to preserving local history. He explain the area which was known as Sir Cecil's Ride and how savage and horrific the fighting was where the Canadians were outnumbered 10 to one, and yet inflicted very heavy casualties on the Japanese until their sheer numbers and wave after wave of Banzi attacks overwhelmed the defenders. They fought until they ran out of ammunition, food, water or were too wounded to continue. Dad's official report before he left the bunker makes so much more historical sense now.

From "Lawson's Bunker" we walked over to what was known as the "Ridge" overlooking Repulse Bay.



Here too was a location of some of the fiercest fighting with both sides taking heavy casualties but once again, and this time, the

Royal Rifles, Canadians were vastly outnumbered. The initial Japanese troops, according to Tony, were much less prone to committing the atrocities that were to come with the following platoons. History now records a series of atrocities committed all the way down to where the Repulse Bay Veranda Restaurant now stands. In '41, it was a posh hotel catering to upper British society with all the trappings, racism and discrimination current of that day.

We enjoyed a first rate lunch at the Veranda Restaurant.

Again, it was with excellent service. I did slip out and grab a shot of what was known as the "Garage". The "Garage" still stands and was the location of one of the worst



recorded
atrocities.

After lunch we
arrived at St.

Stephens
College for
informative

historical talks by

both Tony Banham and Geoffrey Charles Emerson as to the atrocities that occurred here. Emerson has written an extensive history of the Stanley Civilian Interment Camp of 1942-45.

Dinner was at a more western style restaurant, the Water Mark, on the waterfront of course. Repetitious as it sounds ... the service and food were excellent.

The first Sunday in December is remembered with a ceremony at the Sai Wan Cemetery. We start there tomorrow and then bus to Jiang Shan Xiao restaurant for lunch. Later in the day we have a reception by the Royal Hong Kong Regiment and finally dinner at the Dragon King. This trip is rapidly drawing to a close with a final day, Monday, at our own leisure

Sunday December 5th

Bright warm weather continued today as we left for Sai Wan Cemetery for a remembrance of all who served and died here during the battle. The cemetery is truly awe inspiring from the moment you pass through the gates, down the many steps through row upon row of headstones

to the Cross of remembrance at the bottom, where a very moving commemorative ceremony was held.



With all we had witnessed and learned over the past few days, we were coming



to some small understanding of why so many returning vets spoke so little to their families of the horrific days spent here in Hong Kong and then somehow surviving as slave labour the deprivation, beatings, malnutrition and disease as a POW. Emotions brought many of us to tears as we remembered our loved ones.

Dignitaries and veterans were led down by a piper as he continued to play at the back of the many who were

gathered. A Children's choir beautifully sang "Amazing Grace" and "What a Wonderful World". Fred Cooper spoke of his time as a POW in Japan. Veterans and then dignitaries laid wreaths. Two minutes of silence followed....the most difficult I've had to stand through. The tears flowed but I was never more proud to sing "O Canada" and be thankful for the life I've been privileged to have.

We returned later that afternoon to a reception hosted by Mr. Ron Taylor, Chairman of the The Royal Hong Kong Regiment (the Volunteers) Association. Free beer and an informative talk and slide show of their history had been graciously arranged for us. Their club house just happens to be in Happy Valley just above the race course. They have quite a view from their windows of the Happy Valley Race Track.



Our day
concluded with a
14 course
traditional meal

at the Dragon King. This dinner was for me the topper of

several excellent meals we have enjoyed. May and Wendy joined us at our table and many a laugh was had.

It has been a very emotional day for us all and I'm struggling to write this tonight. I think a night's sleep will help clear my head for a more accurate discourse of the day.

Monday Dec. 6

Today was a free day and we did little except wander the streets and soak in some of the sights and culture. You see very little if any litter, no panhandling or homeless in a mass of humanity of all shapes and sizes.

You name it, and it is for sale somewhere here. You wonder with the price and scarcity of real estate how so many shops survive and thrive. This place is truly amazing. One does not describe Hong Kong, you only experience it. As most Canadian cities tend to spread out, Hong Kong only goes up and then up some more! After a leisurely walk back to the hotel, which included an afternoon stroll thru Victoria Park, we headed down for 2-1 in the hotel bar about 4p.m. It was time to let loose.

Several others joined us over the evening to share their day's events.



Those of us of Scottish heritage tackled the "waters of Life" about 8 p.m.

Many a hearty laugh was enjoyed including Oda Barlow's

"ashes" joke along with Ruth's time tested demonstration

of “Levitation”. Both Gerry and Ken got a kick out of that one.

Truth be told, several of us got to the edge but did not go over... although I’m sure by evening’s end we were well lubricated for the final night’s sleep in Hong Kong!

Tuesday Dec.7th (a day that will live in Infamy)—Pres. Roosevelt on Dec. 8th as he addressed the American Congress

Today is off to Japan. It was up for breakfast at 6:30 and onto the bus by 7:15.

Fred Cooper was also down to send us off to the airport. Many shook his hand thanking him for making the trip. He was genuinely pleased to know that in our way we are continuing to remember the HK veterans but he said he was up anyway as his wife had called at 6 am HK time.

The flight up to Narita Japan was on an A330 airbus. Very comfortable and much quieter than the 777 that we came over on. They served us a tasty lunch accompanied with a very nice Aussie white wine. Cathay Pacific is currently rated #2 in the world and we can certainly understand why. Their service is fabulous.

We landed at Narita and had an hour bus ride into the Grand Prince Hotel Takanawa. This hotel is a step up from the Causeway Bay but obviously pricier to boot. It is well located just five minutes from the Shinagawa rail station. Once checked in we headed back down to the main street looking for a place to eat. Beside the 7-11 we

found five tiny “hole in the wall” restaurants. We chose the one that looked as if it was Thai food and were not disappointed. Lucky for us, they moved a “reserved” card off a table just in time as a line up steadily grew outside the front door.

Below our hotel room is a large Japanese garden immaculately sculpted and although it is the end of the season now, it must look terrific come the spring blossoms.

Wednesday Dec. 8

The hotel buffet breakfast was a combination of both western and eastern.



We met Sumiyo Terai, our tour guide for a bus tour of Tokyo. Su-san as we soon called her gave an informative introduction to us who were first timers in

Japan as to some of the local traditions and customs, as our driver took us to a holy Buddhist shrine. A traditional lunch was provided and it too was outstanding, but certainly no better than what we have had back home. We are fortunate to have the best of both worlds. Our afternoon was spent with a visit to the Imperial Palace.

Tokyo is 13 million and traffic concurs with that so a third of the day was sitting and travelling. Perhaps tomorrow when we go to Yokohama we will have a greater variety of sights to see. Big cities are still big cities with not much difference.

Tomorrow will be another remembrance ceremony of all the Canadian men who did not make it back from Japan. The afternoon will be spent with a team of Japanese researchers who are doing their best, in some cases, to write or re-write the true accounts of the number POW



camps that existed.

Because I think this just may be the last trip for a Canadian POW to make, I am hoping, more

than anything they just might receive some form of apology from some government official. It is likely too much to expect but it did happen to a group of American vets who were here a couple of months back. My fingers are crossed as I doubt there may be any of the survivors of those horrible 44 months able to make another trip. The 70th anniversary of the surrender of Hong Kong is in 2011.

Thursday Dec 9th 2010

We were at breakfast by 7:30 and on the bus by 8:20 for a trip to the Yokohama Cemetery commemoration ceremony. The day was bright and sunny after the clouds burnt off. Traffic moves well but driving on the left still can be confusing at times and streets lights and signs are quite bewildering. The ride was about an hour and ½ over several bridges and tunnels crossing the harbour. We arrived to find a city of only 3 million and counting.



The ceremony at the cemetery was very similar to that at Stanley and equally moving and emotional. The graves are just

immaculately cared for. The gardener responsible for the Canadian section was attending in his black suit, no less. He bowed deeply and waved as we left on our bus. I felt that to be a most respectful gesture of our visit.

Here is Gerry with daughters Pat and Bev beside him before laying a HKVCA wreath on behalf of the Gerrard family.



Our next stop was at Kisoji Restaurant for a traditional beef sukiyaki lunch. All the servers were splendid in their national dress of kimonos. How does one find another superlative for that meal?

It took the better part of 1 ½ hours to get through traffic and back to a local university classroom where we were greeted by the POW Research Network of Japan. This too was a highlight for the next three hours as they showed their work to-date and then video taped interviews of both Ken Pifher and Gerry Gerrard as to their experiences in Hong Kong and Japan as POWs.

I imagined myself seated in our hosts' place. It would be very hard to be a researcher sitting on that side of the table listening to our veterans' stories. My question to one of them as we were leaving was "what has brought your team together as volunteers to pursue this interest?". For the most part the answer was "for personal reasons". At



the very least these volunteer researchers need to be congratulated for taking on such a difficult task. They have an opportunity for

keeping the facts of history in front of their government. It is also an opportunity for our HKVCA to have a role in supporting their research. The three hours passed before we knew it. Unfortunately there was little time for questions.

It was back to the hotel before heading out to the “American” restaurant for a small dinner. I would rather have had a traditional meal but got out voted by the gang of 5. :-)

Today has been not only a very worthwhile, but also a very emotional day, particularly during the two minutes of silence. It would have been so good to have been able to take back this journal along with my pictures and video for Dad. We have learned that so many of our fellow travellers have the same story to tell. Many did not know of the part their fathers played until a few years before their death, if at all.

Tomorrow is a trip to Mt.Fuji and Hakone.

Friday Dec. 10

Our final day began early with an “on the bus at 7:45” for a trip out to Mt. Fuji. Traffic at that time of day was heading

into Tokyo and our driver did a fine job for us all day over narrow roads up hill and down dale.

Into the countryside we saw much more of the rural Japan. Houses are narrow and if any land is flat, it has been planted in rice although the fields are at rest at this time of year.



The highways are tolled, and numerous stations electronically tally the number of kilometres you have travelled

between toll stations. Drivers are generally very courteous to one another and little sign of the road rage we know about at home was ever seen. Of course the obligatory piddle stops came with gift stalls, and all the tourist trappings available for purchase. Most of what was for sale had “made in Korea“ labelled on it.

Because of the mountainous nature of this country, there were many tunnels ranging from a few hundred metres in length to several kms. Mt Fuji grew ever larger as the bus approached. Again we were fortunate to enjoy a bright sunny yet cool day. Cameras clicked madly.

From here it was on to Hakone which is renowned for its hot springs and lake. It was a favoured place to holiday for the Shoguns of old. In fact the original old road they travelled on was lined each side by 400 year old cedars, and paralleled our route for a short portion as we approached Hakone. We just don't see 400 year old trees in B.C. any more, period.

We boarded a catamaran



for a trip across the lake back to our bus which next took us up to the summit for a gondola trip back down.



Su-San did a

superb job as our guide with many little cultural stories to keep the troops entertained.

The ride back to the hotel was long and tedious. Twice a year is “Bonus Day” in Japan and today just happened to be one of them. Suffice to say....traffic was very heavy.



A final farewell dinner was held at the Gonpachi Ginza restaurant. It too was superb in all ways. Mike thanked everyone and presented Su-San with her tip. She thanked us from the heart and then headed over to her chair to have a private wee tear, as tipping in Japan is not standard. We Canadians made a tremendous impact on her and she loved our sense of humour and quick retorts and teasing that was constantly ongoing.

Eric Campbell thanked Mike and presented him with an empty envelope - the combined tip collected from his

Scottish friends! 🖨️ 📄 🕒

Gerry Gerrard was last to get up, and he thanked all of us for what he remembers as the best of three trips he has made. His speech was from the heart. He thanked us all for remembering and continuing to remember the history of the veterans of Hong Kong.

It was back to the hotel for an early start for Canada



tomorrow. Time has flown by and we would not have missed this trip, as they say, for all the rice in China. We would be remiss

in not giving much of the credit and thanks to Mike and Dawn Babin for all the effort they put forth to have everything to flow without a hitch.

This has truly been an excellent trip where both the weather and the itinerary came together to commemorate a horrific part of Canadian history. May we never forget!

Ken and Ruth Barton Dec. 2010

Last updated: December 21, 2010