

DONAT BERNIER

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-war during WW2 in the Far East

Interviewed by

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Oral History Archives

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Charles G. Roland, MD:

I thought maybe I'd start by just asking you a few questions about when you got into the regiment and so on. You were in the RRC, is that right?

Donat Bernier:

Yes. First of all I joined the 7/11 Hussars, that's an Eastern Township outfit. And then I was in that for a couple of months, but it wasn't permanent. And I transferred, they came and asked for volunteers to join the Royal Rifles of Canada in Valcartier Camp. We were in camp in those days. So they say, whoever wants to join up in the Royal Rifles of Canada please take one step forward. So I stepped forward.

And that means I was with the Royal Rifles way up until about five years and eight months. Joined up the 4th of August, permanent, but previous to that I was in a non-permanent army with the 7th/11th. So I joined in and we had about one year field practice and firing squad and everything. And then we were transferred to Sussex, New Brunswick for three months.

From Sussex, New Brunswick we were drafted to Newfoundland. We spent three months there, three months in Botwood, three months in Gander, and three months in St. John. Then we came back to Valcartier, and they give us a pass. They say, "You're going to be drafted so we'll give you seven days pass to go home."

But before that I was too young, I was only seventeen, and Col. Home, of my regiment, says to me, he says, "We've got a letter from your mother, you're too young to join up the army."

So he says, "I'll give you a seven days pass extra, discuss with your parents, and sisters and brothers, if you decide to come back." I said, "I've got no money to go home." [laughter] So Colonel Home loaned me \$48 and I took off. I come back seven days after. He said, "If you do come back and if you don't come back you don't owe me no money." So I went back.

And a year after that we went back to Hong Kong, in 1941. On December 25, 1941, after spending all that time in Newfoundland, three months in Botwood, three months in Gander, three months there, plus couple of months in Sussex, New Brunswick, plus a couple of weeks in St. John's, New Brunswick, back to Valcartier, and then over seas. So we took the boat and then the train and from Valcartier went down to Vancouver. We took the boat, we stopped in Honolulu, we stopped in Manila, and then we landed in Hong Kong. And we had practice on the boat and I was sea-sick on the boat.

So we arrived there and we were about two weeks, you see we left, we arrived there the end of....

CGR:

I think it was the 16th of November.

DB:

It was the eighth of December that they bombarded Pearl Harbor, right?

CGR:

Yes.

DB:

Yes, the eighth. So on the eighth of December we were attacked by sixty thousand Japanese. They were the same, there

is 20,000 men to an Army, and six thousand men to a Division. So they arrive, so we only had about eight thousand men to defend the island of Hong Kong. And then there was sixty thousand come in on the eighth, but they landed by water and everything. We had pill boxes all around the island, and we got caught. We fought about 17 days, from that day up until December 25th, Christmas Day. And then we were taken prisoners. From then on we had what they called a death march. So we were at camp, at North Point Camp for quite a few months. And then after that we were transferred to Kowloon on the other side where we had our barracks when we landed.

CGR:

Right, at Sham Shui Po.

DB:

Yes, Sham Shui Po Camp. During the battle I didn't do too much. I saved a couple of lives, and carried a guy. We were at the one of the hotels.

CGR:

Sorry, which hotel?

DB:

And I was a very good shooter, I was a sniper. Major Young [Major Charles A. Young, RRC] comes to me and said, you see a Japanese it's a treat. You didn't see them. You didn't know that the Japanese was right behind. Major Young he says to me, he said, "Hey Bernie, pass me your rifle." "Why?" He said, "you are a good shooter." I was a sniper. So he got my rifle, and I see the tree fall down. He said, "See, that's a Japanese right

behind there." And it was, too.

After that I had two or three guys that were taking stones and trying to kill themselves, you know, they couldn't have make it. We got cut off, we had to try to swim across. We were all pretty good swimmers. I got across. I was the only one to get out of there.

CGR:

Where was this?

DB:

The Japanese were down there.

CGR:

Yes, where you swimming to, where was this?

DB:

That's the battle, that seventeen days like that, trying to shove off and take off, you know what I mean.

CGR:

Yes.

DB:

Get away from the Japanese, there was too many. There was lots of men will tell you this is a....

But after that we were at North Point Camp. Then I started in the dysentery ward, chronic diarrhea, plus beriberi, strawberry, what you call strawberry disease under the arm and between the principals [in the crotch], you know, and between the toes. I got the sickness of that. I had the swelling of beriberi. Some of the guys had the dry beriberi which you tried to put your feet in the bath tub, but we didn't have no bath tub. If you could find your bucket, you put it in cold water.

CGR:

This is the "happy feet" or "electric feet."

DB:

Right, yes, yes. And then in North Point Camp that's where dysentery, malaria, chronic diarrhea, and we had to take the guys in our hands, you know, carry them over, big guys like you, carry them. But they didn't weigh the way you weigh to day. Don't forget I used to carry them and put them on the bandage, and do the salve.

After that they transferred me to Jubilee Building. In the Jubilee Building they had guys that were blistered, because they didn't have enough food, enough sugar into their body, so I used to treat them with blisters, you know, not from the doctor. Take off them bandages where they had the wounds and everything. That's before the diphtheria started. So I used to go and treat them and put, try to get some boiling water and a rag, not even sterilized and like that, but I did my best. So we had four stories. I was looking after one story which was all those discovered different diseases, and outside also.

And then he transferred me, it seemed that way pretty good treatment, you know, he transferred me to the diphtheria ward, which it was in the barracks separated from the camp. They were the officers barracks before the war. That's completely out of the Jubilee Building. Then I started to work in the diphtheria room -- no mask or nothing. We used the rules about, no serum. They finally got serum about three weeks after, but we already lost maybe 60 guys, they died from that. We had a difficult job

here. The guys were so weak they didn't, I didn't hurt them, but I used to light up their cigarettes when they had a chance to get a cigarette. I used to, oh in the kitchen which we had boiling water, big pot, you know. I guess one here in front of one house. And I used to go and light up a cigarette and give it to them. I never got caught, never caught [by diphtheria], I don't know. God must have been with me.

CGR:

Must have been yes.

DB:

And it went on like that. After that it was finished. They got us lining up one morning, the Japanese guard, the officer with his sword, he said, "Anybody who did their duty for their comrades who died in this diphtheria ward and in the Jubilee Building, step one step forward." I didn't step, I did my duty. But one guy did step, he's got the MM (Military Medal), Varley.

CGR:

I've heard of Varley, yes.

DB:

I don't know if he's still living yet, he was living in Toronto.

CGR:

Yes, I don't think he is.

DB:

I think he died. Well we don't get so much news from the Winnipeg Grenadiers and that gang, you know, because we report, in the two regiments over 900 men to a regiment, plus the Brigade that included dental corps, medical corps, engineering,

carpentry, and everything, building bridges, but there was only a few of them, in Hong Kong there was only 2000 in the regiment and the brigade maybe 2300, something like that.

The Brigadier General got shot at the beginning, by the Japanese. And me, I lost my drum, I used to play the drum in the brass band in the regiment. I lost it to a bomb or something like that. And after that I was drafted, after all those looking after in the hospital. I was able, I don't know, the morale or what, I was easing better than them, I was getting the same ration, just a little bowl of rice. And that big barley, barley; we used to eat grasshoppers, snakes, whale meat, and everything.

CGR:

Yes you're still here.

When did you start being an orderly? Was this in North Point?

DB:

Yes.

CGR:

But you hadn't been an orderly before?

DB:

Right after the war, right after we were prisoners of war, I had to go and work in there. I didn't have to, but they need somebody. People who had fallen sick, the way the Japanese treated us.

CGR:

Why did you volunteer?

DB:

I don't know why. I said I am able, I'm in better health than them, so why not go in. So I went in with Dr. Banfill, Dr. Gray, all of them. [Capt. Stanley Martin Banfill, RCAMC, RRC; Capt. Gordon Cameron Gray, RCAMC, RRC.]

CGR:

I was with Dr. Banfill....

DB:

Dr. Crawford, I think he's dead. [Maj. John N.B. Crawford, RCAMC, WG]

CGR:

No, he's alive. I had a letter from him a month ago.

DB:

He's still alive. Yes. Crawford, he's big, tall.

CGR:

He sure is.

DB:

And we had an Indian doctor in there, he was half and half Indian.

CGR:

Dr. Ashton Rose?

DB:

Yes, Ashton Rose. I don't know if he's Indian descent or something, I forget. Dr. Gray, Dr. Banfill, Dr. Crawford, Ashton Rose, and there was another doctor. But the doctor, after when I was sent to Japan in 1943, I went up to Northern Japan, 70 miles past Niigata area where they dropped the second atomic bomb [Nagasaki?].

CGR:

Oh this is fine yes, oh yes.

Were you at Niigata? Were you at the camp at Niigata?

DB:

Yes Niigata.

CGR:

Yes, 5B?

DB:

Niigata, 5B Camp, that's what....How come you know?

CGR:

Oh, I've interviewed a lot of people who were at 5B.

DB:

Yes I was there. Then I was called up as a medical orderly for a while. I used to give the first treatment, you know, when the guys were working in the coal yard and on shovel, they'd get blisters. With all the medication the Japanese give us, it wasn't enough to cure, it wasn't something like an ointment for burns which I get today, you see.

CGR:

Do you remember the doctor at Niigata?

DB:

Pardon?

CGR:

Do you remember the doctor at Niigata?

DB:

What was his name, an English doctor.

CGR:

Yes, Stewart.

DB:

Stewart. Then there was the dentist, he's the one that did my tooth, and I got a pension for it. My own family doctor they finally gave me a pension though for it. I was operated inside of two years. Bad plumbing in the tooth. And then it turned to a cancer, and they gave me a special....I've got to go Monday again to the doctor.

CGR:

What was the worst camp you were in?

DB:

The worst camp, I don't know about the other camps, but I can tell you in my place it was quite tough, Niigata 5B. Get up at 5 in the morning and then go down to the coal yard. I learned to shovel there, in the coal yard. And then after that I got the first aid. I still have to work but I had my medical kit so I used to go and see, I worked in the Jubilee Building every day. They knew all about me. Even the Japanese knew. They'd say, "This guy is pretty good." I said, "OK. I'll look after them."

Then the Americans came in and I treated them. And we were working on the trestle, eighteen, twenty feet, in the air, you know by boat, pushing carts, you know, with a v-shape like you work in the mines, you know, come off of that. And the Americans couldn't push. When they hit them they turn around the corners, the Japanese said, the American are no good, so we would go and [inaudible]. And then you would feel like that, take the pin off, no number, and then after that we had to go and do your basket, your basket, what may be the 90, you know, 80 you know weight, two big baskets like that, and we used to do that work in

the car, doing that in Niigata. And we used to leave messages, put the, you know, get a little piece of paper, put your name, regiment number, where you belonged, what camp you were at, where you were working in the coal yard, and the same God damn thing used to come back [laughter].

CGR:

Where did you put the messages?

DB:

We just shoved it in the boat, the message, and the guard was covering at that Kobe, or Osaka. They were unloading the same God damn coal, they didn't have enough coal but they had to keep us busy. So we used to get the message back.

CGR:

[laughter] Really?

DB:

Oh yes, that's the truth. Anyway, I belonged to a section apart to escape -- go and escape a prison camp in Japan -- you ain't going to go far.

CGR:

No.

DB:

Oh the other thing before that, I forgot to mention, when I was taken prisoner it was at St. Stephen's College, and we were put about eighty or ninety standing up in a small room like my sitting room. And they used to come up once in a while, "you, you, come." We didn't hear, you know.

The nurses that were there, they raped them. We took all,

quite a few out, all the dead people, comrades in my regiment, there was a guy by the name of....I didn't write the diary book or anything like that, but I got the book from the Royal Rifles of Canada.

CGR:

Yes, I've that book too.

DB:

That one?

CGR:

Yes.

DB:

It cost \$27 something, \$28.

CGR:

Yes, by Garneau. [Grant S. Garneau, The Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong, 1941-1945 (Sherbrooke: Hong Kong Veterans' Association of Canada, 1980)]

DB:

I got it. I got something better than that because here, take the pictures.

CGR:

Tell me about some of the doctors and some of the orderlies, who were the really good ones in your opinion? Was Ray Squires, was he....?

DB:

They were all good. I'm concerned to tell you because I was not replacing them but really helping them.

CGR:

Yes. Do you remember Squires? [K80593 Sigm. Arthur R.

Squires, HQ "C" Force]

DB:

Yes.

CGR:

Yes. I've interviewed him in Victoria.

DB:

[Showing photographs.] And this is one when we got ready to take the trains in Valcartier. This is my brother which I told you. He was in World War 2. That was the plane in Gander, Northwest Territories.

CGR:

Did he go to Hong Kong?

DB:

No, no, he went to Europe. I'll put my glasses on to make me find them.

This is Goering, and that's his car, that was in Montreal in the museum on St. Catherine's. That's after the war again.

This is in Gander when we had the hockey team.

That's Rance the interpreter, and also Harding.

CGR:

Yes, I'd like to borrow a few of these if I could too.

DB:

Babin, Fred Babin [G27036 Rfn Alfred J. Babin, RRC], he used to bring his own....

CGR:

And maybe Rance also.

DB:

Yes, he lives in London, Babin.

CGR:

Yes, he and his wife are there. Now who are the others? I don't know Parenteau [E29918 Rfn Joseph R. Parenteau, RRC]. And this is Valcartier, maybe I could borrow that one too. And Harding, is this the Harding from the Winnipeg Grenadiers?

DB:

No, they are all my regiment.

CGR:

All RRC, OK.

DB:

Lloyd Doull [E29875 Sgt Lloyd C. Doull, RRC], from Drummondville, he was our national president for awhile.

CGR:

Yes, I know of him.

DB:

That's Castro.

CGR:

Yes, I'd like to borrow that too if I may. Everybody remembers him.

DB:

He's the one who was doing that, Carmen Miranda, that's the one, he's dressed.

This is the Island of Hong Kong, Pearl Harbor and everything. Those are prisoners of war. Those are the officers in our own barracks. When the officers from the, what was the boat that picked up the guys?

CGR:

The Prince Robert?

DB:

Prince Robert, he was a commando, and there, and that's Hong Kong. Bowen Road Hospital is up in the hills. That's far away from that point. From Bowen Road I could see the race course track.

CGR:

It looks different now, very different.

DB:

Yes [laughter]. Must be.

See the Japanese guard there. But the war was over and we'd been in there, got fat there, because we we weren't getting anything to eat. They were dropping with parachutes.

CGR:

Dropping it in the parachutes, yes, yes.

I'm just going to put a note on the back so I don't forget that that's just after the war, right.

DB:

Yes, in 5B. That's 5B camp, that's the gate I was sent to.

CGR:

That's the gate right there, is that where they...?

DB:

Yes, that's the guardhouse. You see the Japanese sitting there. I could slap him on the face like he slapped me or kick.

CGR:

Did you?

DB:

No [laughter].

CGR:

No, most people didn't.

DB:

That's me after the war.

DB:

This one is Duguay, Normand, this one I think is LeBlanc, who was playing clarinet. This one is Doug (I forgot). Parenteau, Robert, this guy from Newfoundland. It was Fred Drover, I think he died not too long ago.

CGR:

Very good. Well those are excellent, I've very pleased. I'll take these and get them copied and get them right back to you, so they are safe. Well that's wonderful, thank you, and I will get those back very soon.

Well I'm going to have to go fairly soon but....

DB:

In the morning they dropped the atomic bomb in Niigata [sic], they said to me that seeing that I speak quite a bit of Japanese, not enough to carry on a conversation a whole day long or an hour time like I'm talking to you, but he come to me, he said by my number which I had shown on my shirt, 133, my prisoner of war number, I remember. [Some Japanese conversation]: it all meant, "No more work." So I said to the rest, said "there's something coming up. I don't know if the war is over." And I heard one of the Japanese guards that had a thing, he had a little radio or something, or the house around, I heard on the radio, "America hikoki," hikoki were planes. "Boom boom

takusan." They didn't know right off the bat, you know. Anyway we didn't go no more to work after that.

Then they were dropping with the B-29s. But you know sometimes if they burst, you know with the wind, the parachute, they had three parachutes and four or five gallon drums, and welded together, with canned goods, and so they tried to hit the sand hill, you know, so they wouldn't burst to pieces.

So they had some drop right in the city of Niigata, so we had to go about six or seven guys of us. So I went into a place, I wanted to bring a Japanese sword from an officer. There was two there, and I don't know what kind of whores, they were maybe prostitutes. I didn't take those. You didn't dare.

The only thing, they doubled the guards from 5B when the war ended on account of the civilian tried to get a revenge on us. So they doubled the guards but no ammunition whatsoever. Then the Americans came in. The Americans came to an airport not far from Niigata. You'd see the old American fired the command not four or five yards. And it took a couple months, you see the atomic bomb was dropped on the 6th of August, 1945, and Hiroshima, and the second atomic bomb was dropped on the 9th of August 1945 which I remember, I was born the 9th. And it took about maybe a month and a half before we went to Yokohama and passed through the bathroom and everything, sterilized our equipment, diary book we wanted to keep and things like that. Because I've got my Japanese pipe and everything, tobacco from Japan, cigarettes, they wanted to take that too, my lighter.

Yes, when I worked on the stones for the Tai Tak Airport,

and I was for one week and a half I got dysentery, everything. I got pneumonia left hand side in 1942. The first year I was drafted to Niigata 5B. I got through that figuring I'd have...and I got the raw spots in my finger nails, I still got to use sandpaper to cover it up.

CGR:

Oh yes, was it kind of an infection?

DB:

No, it was a, let's forgot about that. But I was questioned, how many Canadians..."Boys, I said, you won't get nothing out of me son, kill me, do what you want, I don't give a damn.

CGR:

Where was that?

DB:

When the American command at Niigata to work in the coal yard, the Japanese interpreter, he says, "I want 40 truck drivers," he says, with a license. OK he says, they came in from Corregidor, Bataan, and Manila, they were eating buffalo meat, they were in better health than we were. But we were better men than they were after they got on the trestle walk, twenty feet up in the air. So he said, "I need 40 American truck drivers today." He gives the command and a right turn, in Japanese. So he brought them up the trestle, you know, where you worked atop the V shape, you had a half a ton of coal to move around on a small track that big. And that's where we used to move a half a ton of coal with, otherwise....The guys were all falling down. I've seen guys break their arms and legs off.

One morning he wanted me to move, the boat was coming in and we had barges against the dock.

CGR:

Barges, yes.

DB:

The barge where they dump the coal from the boat. And we shoveled in snow in the elevator, you know, it goes up like this, it comes in. So one morning I didn't want to go on that. I turned and said, "Byoki takusan," that means to say I'm sick, and I got the diarrhea, you know, in Japanese. "Ni, ni, ni, ni, shovelo." Shovelo means you go on the road. I said, "ni."

which was coming in like a bayonet. They finally gave up and then send me on the basket. I won that. But the guy he was scared.

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