

2021

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### Recommended Citation

St.Croix, Brad "The Victors, Not the Vanquished: A Conversation with Hong Kong Veteran George MacDonell." Canadian Military History 30, 2 (2021)

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FEATURE

# The Victors, Not the Vanquished

## A Conversation with Hong Kong Veteran George MacDonell

BRAD ST.CROIX

*Abstract: This article centres around a conversation the author had with Battle of Hong Kong veteran George MacDonell. Several questions were asked to gain insights about events related to the battle as MacDonell saw it and the years the Canadian prisoners of war spent in brutal Japanese captivity. MacDonell was also asked about his opinions on a variety of subjects. Ultimately, one of his greatest concerns is that the exploits of him and his comrades would be forgotten. This article is designed to bring attention to such a worry so that work can be done to ensure this does not happen.*

MEMORY is a funny thing. It is full of dichotomies and contradictions. Confusion abounds when memory is at play. Memories can haunt and uplift, be clung to, quickly forgotten or morph into many forms. They are intensely personal, but memory is also collective. Groups of people, such as countries, towns, organisations and companies, are said to have a collective memory. Collective memories are often entrenched in concepts larger than themselves, such as national identity. An event can be positively or negatively remembered in a collective sense but also can be forgotten. The Second World War is a case in point of these processes; in particular, the Battle of Hong Kong. In *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, historian Jonathan Vance highlights that “even Canada’s social memory of the Second World War, as just a war as the modern world has seen, is dominated by overtones of negativity. Notions of individual heroism, self-sacrifice, and fighting in a good

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cause have been pushed to the background by a dominant memory that has come to emphasize mismanagement, injustice, failure, and cupidity.<sup>1</sup> This statement was not written about the Battle of Hong Kong specifically, yet it accurately depicts how the battle is viewed in Canada.

No matter how memories are formed, they can be changed, in a collective sense. A case in point is how the Second World War has moved from being largely forgotten in Canada in the decades following the conflict to being commemorated more with a positive outlook on the Canadian contributions to the Allied war effort in the past few years. In *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada's Second World War*, historian Tim Cook argues that Canadians largely had forgotten about the Second World War in the decades immediately after the conflict. He concludes his book with: "While Canada neglected the Second World War for many decades, it never entirely disappeared. It has been waiting for us to return to it. The war ended in victory in 1945; but the fight for history has raged for seventy-five years. And it is not yet over."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the Battle of Hong Kong was not part of this reversal in memory and commemoration. It is still remembered largely negatively, much as Vance notes. Not much has been done to change the perceptions of the battle. The military service, life and work of Hong Kong veteran George MacDonell is an excellent demonstration of how the battle ought to be remembered in Canada. He fought in the battle, endured years of poor treatment at the hands of his Japanese captors and returned to Canada to successfully reintegrate back into civilian life despite numerous challenges and hurdles which were the result of his service and captivity.

Before I was offered the opportunity to speak with George MacDonell, I had known his story and read about him in numerous sources. I had recently defended my PhD dissertation on the Battle of Hong Kong and its memory in Canada. I used his book, *One Soldier's Story, 1939-1945: From the Fall of Hong Kong to the Defeat of Japan*, to gain insights into his battle experience and the

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Cook, *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada's Second World War* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2020), 436.

conduct of the Canadians. This book is also used extensively in this article to bring more of his experiences to light. I learned his story from him but never had the chance to speak with him in person. We spoke over the phone one summer morning and I asked him questions about his experiences in training, the battle and his captivity. As we spoke, I realised we shared many of the same objectives when it came to the Battle of Hong Kong. He was concerned that the veterans of the battle and their exploits would be forgotten. I share the same concern after closely studying the battle for many years. I have framed this article to give MacDonell a larger voice in a more digital age. I hope to share his opinions about the Battle of Hong Kong and the conduct of the Canadians both on the battlefield and as prisoners of war (POWs) with the goal of changing how these subjects are viewed.

To understand MacDonell's opinions about the battle and his goal that him and his comrades not be forgotten, the context of his military service needs to be understood. George MacDonell lived in Listowel, Ontario at the time of the outbreak of the war in September 1939. Initially he served in the artillery of the prewar militia, the 100<sup>th</sup> Battery, but at only seventeen years of age, his uncle made the unit aware of this fact and he was removed from service. A short time later he hitchhiked to London, Ontario and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. Training began the next day on the plain, known as Carling Heights, behind Wolseley Barracks in the east end of London. Conditions were difficult and they were moved to the Western Fairground, which was used as a training ground during the First World War as well. Later when the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) vacated Wolseley Barracks to head to Britain as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, MacDonell, along with the other recruits under nineteen who were not allowed to leave the country, returned to Wolseley Barracks to continue their training under the tutelage of the RCR officers and non-commissioned officers who remained behind.

In his book, MacDonell recalled the training he received during this period:

They taught us how to shoot and handle the two-inch mortar, the Lee-Enfield rifles, and the Bren gun. They taught us how to use the bayonet, drilled us in unarmed combat, and taught us how to use our respirators in gas-filled chambers. They taught the drill manual until

our response to command was automatic. Above all, they taught us that there were two ways to do things—their way or the hard way. We soon learned “their” way was the preferable course to follow. If one soldier messed up, the whole unit was punished by 20 push-ups or 10 laps around the track or one hour of drill with full packs after supper. Talk about peer pressure to do it right and smarten up! We learned that we were not individuals but a unit that must perform as such—weak links were not allowed. You never let the team down.<sup>3</sup>

MacDonell had impressed in his training and was promoted to lance corporal and again to corporal in quick succession. He was appointed to teach the use of the Bren light machine gun to new recruits. By the end of September 1940, he was promoted to sergeant and transferred to the Royal Rifles of Canada.<sup>4</sup>

He was assigned to “D” Company, Platoon 18 of the Royal Rifles of Canada. He went with the unit to Newfoundland, where they performed garrison duties and limited training. After completing their time in Newfoundland, the Royal Rifles of Canada moved on to more garrison duty in New Brunswick. In his book, MacDonell wrote:

In the spring of 1941, we were sent to guard coastal defence guns in New Brunswick and we lived part of that summer in tents in the forest along the rugged Atlantic coast. These postings, while perhaps necessary, interfered with the proper training of the regiment, especially in section, company, and regimental manoeuvres and field exercises. But all of this humdrum, routine guard duty came to a sudden end on October 9, 1941.<sup>5</sup>

The Royal Rifles of Canada were ordered to go to Vancouver and then on to Hong Kong as part of “C” Force.

“C” Force left Vancouver in late October to head for Hong Kong. The Canadian reinforcement was comprised of two infantry battalions, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, plus troops from assorted support branches such as the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps and the

<sup>3</sup> George S. MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story, 1939–1945: From the Fall of Hong Kong to the Defeat of Japan*, (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2002), 33.

<sup>4</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 40.

<sup>5</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 49.

Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. This force augmented the Hong Kong garrison, which at the time was made up of the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Scots; the 2nd Battalion, 14th Punjab Regiment; the 5th Battalion, 7th Rajput Regiment; the 1st Battalion, Middlesex Regiment; as well as the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) and supporting artillery units.<sup>6</sup>

In order to correct misconceptions about Canadian participation in the battle, I asked MacDonell about various subjects related to the battle and his service. Many questions still exist about the training level of the Canadian troops sent to Hong Kong. On this issue, MacDonell recalled the training “C” Force conducted on route to Hong Kong. For every day of the twenty-one-day voyage they trained with rifles, Thompson submachine guns, Bren and Lewis light machine guns along with physical exercises and map reading. This did not mean that MacDonell and his comrades did not participate in other activities. He participated in a poker game and won \$5000—a considerable sum in a colony where the average worker earned 25¢ a day.<sup>7</sup> As a platoon sergeant MacDonell was responsible for many men. He would lead them personally in combat for several days. On reflection, he admitted they were not the same standard as the troops that fought in Europe but were adequately trained for the fighting at Hong Kong and the terrain.<sup>8</sup> On arrival, MacDonell felt they were prepared psychologically for the task coming their way.

Regarding their Japanese foes, MacDonell admitted he and his comrades knew little of them prior to arriving in Asia, saying “we knew nothing about them before battle.” He learned about the Japanese for the first time from the British Army in Hong Kong. He also explained that “C” Force was warned that they may face a hostile reception in Hong Kong and should prepare to fight their way off the ship. “We did not think it was a holiday,” he stated. “We knew we were going into a war zone.”<sup>9</sup> “C” Force landed safely in Hong Kong—the battle of Hong Kong began several weeks later.

The Japanese assault on the colony began on 8 December 1941. The garrison’s main defensive position located in the mainland New

<sup>6</sup> Kwong Chi Man and Tsoi Yiu Lun, *Eastern Fortress: A Military History of Hong Kong, 1840–1970* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), 165–66.

<sup>7</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier’s Story*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> George MacDonell, telephone discussion with author, August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> George MacDonell, telephone discussion with author, August 2021.

Territories, the Gin Drinker's Line, was quickly overrun by Japanese troops and the garrison was forced to completely withdraw from the mainland by 11 December. Hong Kong Island faced shelling for the next week as the Japanese softened up the defences for their upcoming attack. Japanese troops began to cross Lye Mun Passage on the island's northeast corner late on 18 December. By the 19<sup>th</sup>, the Japanese had split the garrison in two. On reaching the Wong Nei Chong Gap, the Japanese killed Canadian commander Brigadier J. K. Lawson.<sup>10</sup> The fighting developed in a series of attacks and counterattacks to gain control of the high ground. This seesaw fighting went on for several days with the Japanese continually pushing the garrison's troops to the edges of the island. The garrison stubbornly resisted the attack until capitulating on Christmas Day 1941. The Hong Kong garrison lost 955 killed, while 659 were listed as missing. The Japanese lost 675 killed and 2,079 wounded.<sup>11</sup>

MacDonell's battle was dominated by numerous counterattacks in order to push the Japanese off the hills of Hong Kong Island. In his book he recalled that, "[t]he physical effort to climb these tangled, scrub-covered slopes, loaded down with weapons, water, and ammunition, was a major effort in itself. To do it all day and almost every day in the face of a determined, well-led enemy, who had to be killed to be evicted led to mind-numbing exhaustion."<sup>12</sup> The threats posed by enemy action from grenades, machine guns and mortar fire made these conditions worse. Even when the Japanese were driven back, MacDonell noted, the Canadian troops lacked water and food and had little ammunition to defend against inevitable counterattacks. These attacks would often force the Canadians back down the hill with their wounded and to their starting point. They were ordered to undertake these attacks on a daily basis, each time with fewer men. MacDonell wrote how "[t]he utter futility and agony of these attacks have haunted my dreams to this day."<sup>13</sup> Having met them in combat, MacDonell developed a level of respect for the Japanese soldiers. During our interview, he praised the Japanese as very professional and said that they were the "best infantry in World War Two." He

<sup>10</sup> C. M. Maltby, "Operations in Hong Kong from 8th to 25th December, 1941," *Supplement to The London Gazette*, 27 January 1948, 714.

<sup>11</sup> C. P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), 488–89.

<sup>12</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 75.

applauded the quality of the Japanese equipment including their mortars, machine guns and artillery.<sup>14</sup>

The Christmas Day attack on Stanley Village by “D” Company of the Royal Rifles of Canada was one of the most daring and futile actions of the Canadians in the Battle of Hong Kong. MacDonell led Platoon 18 during the attack as all the officers in the platoon had been killed or wounded. After being briefed about the attack, MacDonell recalled thinking that “[t]he sheer stupidity of the order to send us without artillery, mortar, or machine gun support into a village full of Japanese, in broad daylight, was not lost on me.”<sup>15</sup> While previous counterattacks were necessary to push the Japanese back from the edge of the village, by the 25<sup>th</sup> the tactical usefulness had been out stripped by the collapse of the strategic situation as the Japanese had control of most of the island.

The front of Stanley Village was occupied by Japanese troops in prepared positions with machine guns while other troops were dispersed in the local cemetery. The Japanese heavily outnumbered “D” Company. After the war, Major John H. Price, the second in command of the Royal Rifles, estimated that at least a brigade’s worth of Japanese soldiers had been in the Stanley area.<sup>16</sup> One rifleman recalled being falsely told that there were only fifteen Japanese soldiers in the bungalows on the high ground at the edge of the village.<sup>17</sup> Other estimates ranged from a few hundred to over a thousand Japanese soldiers being present. MacDonell estimated that only 120 Canadian troops were available for the attack.<sup>18</sup>

Platoon 16 advanced on the right side along the coast while Platoons 17 and 18 attacked on the left through the cemetery.<sup>19</sup> The attack began at about 1330 hours from Stanley Prison. Promised artillery and machine gun support never materialised. The attack by Platoon 16 was quickly stalled. MacDonell led Platoon 18 forward by advancing in short rushes and utilising existing cover. They made it

<sup>14</sup> George MacDonell, telephone discussion with author, August 2021.

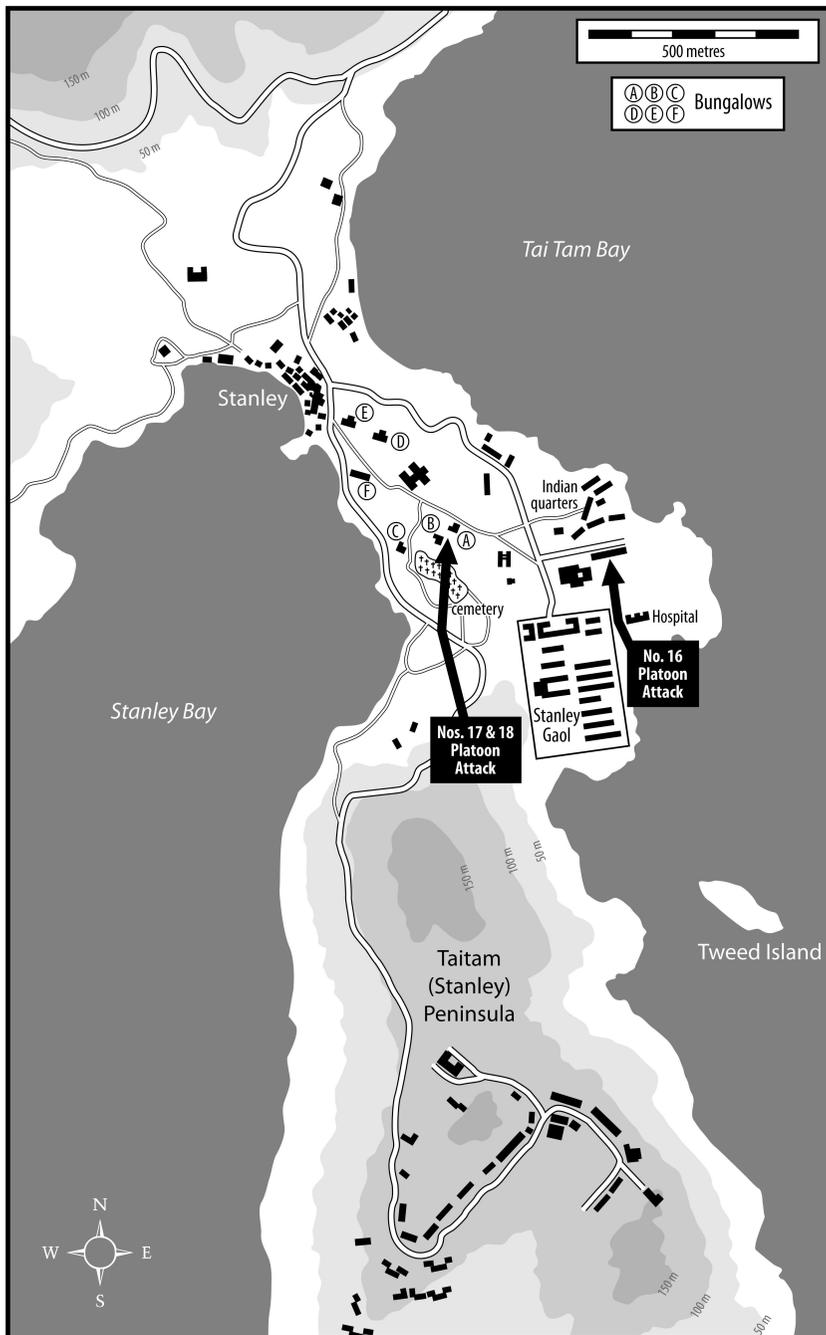
<sup>15</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier’s Story*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Lt-Col J. H. Price, 2IC R.R.C., 22 March 1946, 1, file 593 (D26), Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH).

<sup>17</sup> “Memories Uninvited - The Battle,” Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, accessed 8 October 2021, <https://www.hkvca.ca/memoriesuninvited/Chapter%206.php>.

<sup>18</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier’s Story*, 84.

<sup>19</sup> See Map



The Christmas Day attack on Stanley Village. [Map by Mike Bechthold]

to the outer perimeter of the village with no casualties. MacDonell ordered his troops into a skirmish line and to fix bayonets. Yelling as they advanced, they took the Japanese by surprise and closed on them quickly. Hand to hand fighting broke out with submachine guns being used to force the advance. MacDonell stated this was the first time that he saw Japanese falter and retreat during the battle. Platoon 18 entered the village after clearing Japanese troops out of the first row of houses with grenades. The Canadians moved further into the village, pouring fire into Japanese troops advancing toward the bungalows. MacDonell ordered his platoon to take up positions in and around the line of houses they had just cleared. Lieutenant Francis Power, commander of Platoon 17, was wounded, forcing MacDonell to take command of Power's platoon in addition to leading Platoon 18. A lull ensued as the Japanese regrouped for a counterattack. The men of "D" Company were running out of ammunition and had suffered several casualties. Their supply of water was exhausted, leaving the troops to suffer from thirst in the scorching heat of Hong Kong. It was at this point in recalling the story of the attack that MacDonell stressed how important water is during a battle.<sup>20</sup>

The lull proved short-lived for the Japanese attacked again after twenty minutes, this time with artillery support. The Japanese outflanked Platoon 17 and 18's positions and were about to encircle them. Fortunately, later in the afternoon a runner arrived at MacDonell's position with an order to retreat to Stanley Prison. Around 1500–1600 hours the retreat began. The non-mobile wounded had to be left behind. The company lost twenty-six killed and seventy-five wounded.<sup>21</sup> MacDonell concluded that his men fought exceedingly well and took the objective. He observed that "the Japanese suffered every heavily as we did."<sup>22</sup> That was one of the few occasions during the Battle of Hong Kong that such a statement could be said.

In his book, MacDonell wrote that:

I am glad to say that, faced with such a formidable, better equipped, and more experienced enemy, I never saw or heard of a single soldier in my company who failed to carry out his orders, whatever they were, to hold or to attack. The men of D Company faced the enemy and fought

<sup>20</sup> George MacDonell, telephone discussion with author, August 2021.

<sup>21</sup> War Diary, Royal Rifles of Canada, December 1941, file 593 (D3), DHH.

<sup>22</sup> George MacDonell, telephone discussion with author, August 2021.

without respite as an organized, coherent unit until it was ordered to cease fire and lay down its arms at 8:30 p.m. on Christmas Day.<sup>23</sup>

Historian Franco David Macri quotes George MacDonell view's that: "No one disobeyed orders and MacDonell stated that there was 'no whining'. The men were prepared for the worst, and there was no discussion of surrender. He added that he 'never heard of any AWOL [absent without leave]; not a single case of discipline.'"<sup>24</sup> After discussing the surrender of the garrison to the Japanese, MacDonell stressed that he and his fellow Canadians did not surrender and kept fighting and resisting the Japanese after Christmas Day. They had been forced to give up by their commanders.



On 19 January 1943, MacDonell was sent on a draft to Japan, along with 663 other Canadian POWs, to work as slave labourers in mines, shipyards, factories and railyards. MacDonell was sent to work at the Yokohama Shipyard. He detailed the story of how Canadian POWs shut down the Yokohama shipyard when Staff Sergeant Charlie Clark orchestrated a fire in a storage building where the blueprints of the ships were kept. MacDonell told me this story as part of his goal that the actions of him and his comrades not be forgotten. This fire forced a stoppage of ship construction at Yokohama. Clark kept the plan a secret to prevent leaks, telling only those who needed to know. MacDonell stressed that the shutting down of the shipyard was something that the American bombers could not do and that it demonstrates the resistance that was characteristic of Canadian POWs under the Japanese. He considers the conduct of the men in the POW camps and in Japan more impressive than that on the battlefield.<sup>25</sup>

The Hong Kong POWs were freed from captivity after the Allied victory over Japan in August 1945. Like most of the returning Hong

<sup>23</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Franco David Macri, "Canadians under Fire: "C" Force and the Battle of Hong Kong, December 1941," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 51 (2011): 249.

<sup>25</sup> George MacDonell, telephone discussion with author, August 2021.

Kong POWs, MacDonell faced difficulties upon his return to Canada. In his book he wrote:

Yes, it was true that I was home, physically free, and my health was beginning to improve, but I wasn't as free or untroubled as I might have appeared on the surface. I found I could not forget what had happened in the last four years, and I especially could not forget the fate of my comrades who had not returned from Hong Kong and Japan. These memories continued to disturb and trouble me.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the difficulties he faced in the POW camps and as a slave labourer, George MacDonell worked hard to gain a post-secondary education after the war. He had a successful career in business and government.

The most important question I asked MacDonell was how he would like him and his fellow soldiers who fought at Hong Kong to be remembered. He answered that they did not come home whining about being victims. He repeated that they never let Canada down. He wants himself and his comrades to be remembered as victors. The Canadian troops were taken prisoner by the Japanese in December 1941, but they were also part of the Allied forces that defeated Japan. As MacDonell stressed many times during our discussion, the Canadians never gave up and continued the fight while in captivity. We must try our best to remember the Hong Kong veterans as victors and not victims.

Seeing the Hong Kong veterans as victors is a powerful way to change our perceptions of Canada's role in the Battle of Hong Kong. The Canadian troops sent to that far away colony were put in an impossible situation, but they fought hard during and after the battle. MacDonell's experiences and opinions offer a new perspective of the battle and what the POWs endured. Of course, we know they were still Canadian soldiers on the winning side of the conflict but are they ever presented as victors or resisters of the Japanese? In my experience, this is not the case. Perhaps doing so will help to change how Hong Kong veterans are remembered.

To close, it is best to let George MacDonell have the final word. He began his book with:

<sup>26</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 184.

It is not about how they failed at Hong Kong, but how they succeeded in that bloody conflict to show the world their mettle. These young men of the Royal Rifles of Canada, under impossible circumstances and against desperate odds, with their backs to the sea, fought to the end without a thought of surrender because of who they were and what they believed in. Despite the odds, they fought until they were ordered to cease fire and to lay down their arms. Today, more than 60 years later, as I think about their sacrifice at Hong Kong, I still marvel at their valour and am proud to say I was one of them.<sup>27</sup>

This is the sentiment that should stick in our memories about the Battle of Hong Kong.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Brad St.Croix** holds a PhD in history from the University of Ottawa, where he wrote his dissertation on the Canadian memory of the Battle of Hong Kong. He runs the digital history brand “On This Day in Canadian Military History,” which includes accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram along with a YouTube channel of the same name. His historical interests include Canadian participation in the world wars, the commemoration and remembrance of conflict and digital history.

George MacDonell has written three books connected to the Battle of Hong Kong. In addition to *One Soldier's Story, 1939-1945: From the Fall of Hong Kong to the Defeat of Japan*, he has written *They NEVER Surrendered: Allied POWs who defied their captors in World War 2 in Hong Kong and Japan 1941-1945* and *A Dog Named GANDER* with Sue Beard.

<sup>27</sup> MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, 18.