

For PoW in Japan, there was little joy

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Illustration: Colour Photo: Debra Brash, Times Colonist / Larry Stebbe, attending a memorial service for Hong Kong Veterans in 2003: The prisoner-of-war camp in Japan "was such a desolate spot that ... very little news of anything came out."

VE-Day came and went for Larry Stebbe with no fanfare. He was hungry and tired -- barely alive.

Stebbe was in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Sendai, about 300 kilometres north of Tokyo. It would be several months after victory in Europe before his hell on earth ended.

"I think we heard about (VE-Day)," Stebbe, now 82 and living in Victoria said in a recent interview.

"But it was such a desolate spot that we were in, very little news of anything came out."

It was sometime during the previous month that Stebbe, along with more than 100 other prisoners, had been transferred to Sendai after bombings of Tokyo on March 10 had sparked massive fires.

In the PoW camp in Tokyo, Stebbe and his mates had been used as forced labour in a smelter.

"We'd be breaking cast iron and scrap iron and coke and rock and everything else. We'd go to work early in the morning -- at quarter to eight we'd be out there.

"We'd come back in and have a bowl of soup and a potato and then go to work smelting at 10 o'clock in the morning and work straight through till 5. There'd be no facilities of any kind."

In northern Japan they were forced underground into a coal mine, digging out the coal in pitch-black darkness with picks and shovels while wearing nothing more than a G-string.

"(VE-Day) didn't change much for the cruelty anyway. It was just a hellhole. I really don't talk about that part of the internment," Stebbe said, his voice cracking.

"It was so bad that nobody can really realize what some of us went through."

Just 18 at the time of the battle of Hong Kong in 1941, Stebbe was one of almost 2,000 Canadians sent to defend the British territory from Japanese troops. Of that number, only 1,483 returned home in 1945, the rest died in battle or from the appalling conditions of the Japanese prison camps.

Stebbe went into the PoW camps at 185 pounds. He went down to 118 at one point.

Nothing was easy for the prisoners. Even the transfer was made difficult by their captors.

Stebbe remembers they were transported by train at night with shades drawn. When they arrived at Sendai in the cold and rainy early morning they were marched about two miles to the camp.

"They had a parade square and we stood there and stood there. There must have been 150 of us. Then all of a sudden the guards showed up, made us strip out in the cold, early in the morning of everything we had, which was very little.

"We just stood there for hours and then they gave us different clothes and different shoes to go down the coal mine with. It was just a terrible ordeal."

Even VJ-Day Aug. 6 didn't mean the end of the war for Stebbe.

"We were still in camp. The guards stayed around for about another 10 days."

Soon, the Americans arrived "and unloaded loads and barrels of food and clothing and lots of chocolate bars and lots of cigarettes."

It wasn't until September that Stebbe was evacuated.

After the war he returned to Beausejour, Man., where he opened a snack stand which he ran for several years. He retired to Victoria in the fall of 1982.