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## Ronald Routledge, DCM, CD

Robert Fowler  
bfowler@travel-net.com

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# Ronald Routledge, DCM, CD

## T. Robert Fowler

In the late summer of 1941, the British government requested that Canada assist in the defence of the Empire by sending a combat formation to Hong Kong. The Canadian government quickly agreed, assigning the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada to the mission. In addition, 33 members of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, most of whom had been undergoing training at various west coast stations, were dispatched to provide communications support to the Brigade and Command Headquarters (made up mostly of British officers). Sergeant Ronald Routledge, second-in-command of the Signals Troop, was thus among the 96 Canadian officers and 1,877 other ranks, designated as "C" Force, that sailed away from Vancouver at the end of October to join the small British garrison off the south coast of China.

On 8 December (Hong Kong time), only three weeks after the Canadian arrival, the Second World War in the Pacific burst, when the Japanese launched a surprise attack on Hong Kong simultaneously with their attack on Pearl Harbour. The reinforced Japanese 38th Division, with strong air and artillery support, advanced remorselessly onto the Island and on Christmas Day the British commander surrendered, realizing that further resistance was hopeless.

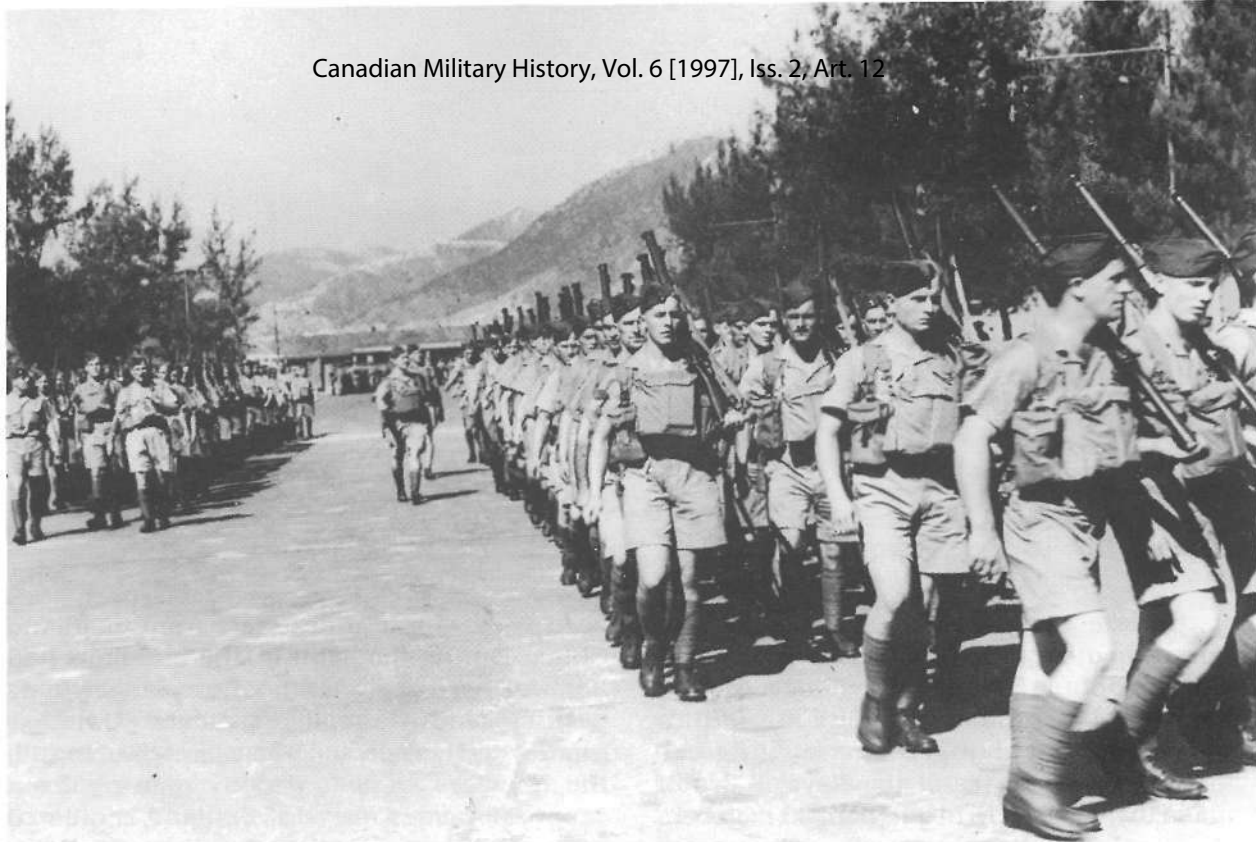
The surviving defenders now faced an indeterminate period of incarceration as prisoners of war. They could not imagine how terrible this would be, although they had some clues from the atrocities already committed before the fighting ceased. The Japanese divided the prisoners into three groups, with the Canadians going to North Point Camp, a collection of miserable huts which had originally

been used to intern deserters from mainland China. During the fighting, the buildings had been damaged and, after the surrender, anything useful (like furniture, lights, door and window frames) had been looted by civilians. Worse still, the quarters were fouled by manure from Japanese horses, parts of the land contained garbage used as land fill, and one end of the area was littered with decomposing bodies of animals and Chinese civilians killed during the fighting.'

The Japanese showed no concern for providing sufficient basic necessities such as fuel, blankets or food. Soon the men were suffering permanent pangs of hunger from an inadequate diet described as "a cup of rice -- maggots, mouldy and full of mouse turds... twice a day with a thin soup of vegetable tops dubbed Green Horror."<sup>2</sup> Little wonder that the men's health steadily deteriorated and a wide variety of illnesses related to malnutrition appeared. The most serious of these was a diphtheria epidemic which broke out in the late summer of 1942, at about the same time that the Canadians were transferred to the larger camp at Shamshuipo. By the end of October, 230 cases had been admitted to the primitive hospital and 41 Canadians died that month.<sup>3</sup>

The Japanese, as could be expected, refused to supply adequate medical supplies to treat the sick, ignoring the terms of the Geneva Convention to which they were a signatory. British and Canadian Medical Officers, who staffed the hospital, provided what elementary care they could, but without medicine could do little as their patients died.

Some were saved, however, by serum bought on the black market and smuggled in through a



(Imperial War Museum, K 1385)

*The Winnipeg Grenadier of the Canadian contingent land at Hong Kong, 16 November 1941.*

clandestine network that had been established with the outside world. One of the first Canadians to come into contact with the network was Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Price, Commanding Officer of the Royal Rifles and senior surviving Canadian officer. In July 1942, Price fell seriously ill with dysentery and beri-beri and was sent out of North Point to the Bowen Road Hospital. On his release, he was first sent for a brief period to a separate prison camp, Argyle Street, which held only officers. Just before he returned to Shamshuipo, he was informed of the network and asked if he would carry a packet back, hidden in his cap. There was no doubt that the Japanese would react brutally if he would be found carrying such an item, but Price agreed. However, the packet was safely delivered to Captain Douglas Ford of the Royal Scots, the main contact in Shamshuipo. Ford then asked Price if he would join the camp committee as senior officer.

The secret network was known to only a select few of the prisoners. As far back as February 1942, the British had established a clandestine group called the British Army Aid Group (BAAG) "to find out what was happening in Hong Kong and to contact guerillas who might be helpful in guiding further escapees."<sup>4</sup> Initial attempts to establish contact with the prisoners

were unsuccessful as the Japanese guards shot at anyone approaching the camp's perimeter. However, in September 1942, when the Japanese began to use prisoners from Shamshuipo to build the Kai Tak airport, the BAAG seized the opportunity to place Chinese agents among the construction overseers.

The first messages slipped into the camp were passed on to Captain Ford who, after some deliberation as to whether the Japanese were setting up a trap, took a chance and responded to them. When he felt the BAAG messages were legitimate, he managed to pass on this information, hidden in a bar of soap, to the senior British officers in Argyle Street. An elaborate network with links between camps was thus set up, directed from Argyle Street by Colonel L. A. Newnham, Chief of Staff of British Army Headquarters, China Command.

This development gave the prisoners involved in the network some renewed new hope for the future.<sup>6</sup> BAAG's original purpose was to promote and assist escapes, but soon it became involved in collecting information on enemy activities and conditions within the camps, providing medicines, and sending in war news which was spread carefully through the camp. Each camp developed its own method of

communicating with the BAAG. In Shamshuipo, Captain Ford became the main contact for assembling all messages, writing these out in invisible ink on toilet paper.<sup>7</sup> The messages were then cautiously passed along a chain which included Flight Lieutenant H.B. Gray, RAF, Flight Sergeant R.J. Hardy, RAF, and finally to Driver T. Farrell, RASC, who was part of the ration party driven by truck to a market in Kowloon.<sup>8</sup>

This system worked well until January 1943. At that time, the Japanese began to ship prisoners to Japan as slave labour for their war industries, and Driver Farrell, the key link, was selected for departure. A reliable replacement had to be found quickly since, as Lieutenant-Colonel Price put it, the network had become critical in

bringing in drugs which the Japanese failed to supply...I therefore selected Sergeant [Ronald] Routledge, RCCS, for this extremely dangerous assignment. Routledge was a young fellow of above average intelligence...a strong physique, pleasing personality and of staunch character. I sent for him and explained the importance of continuing our communications with the outside.

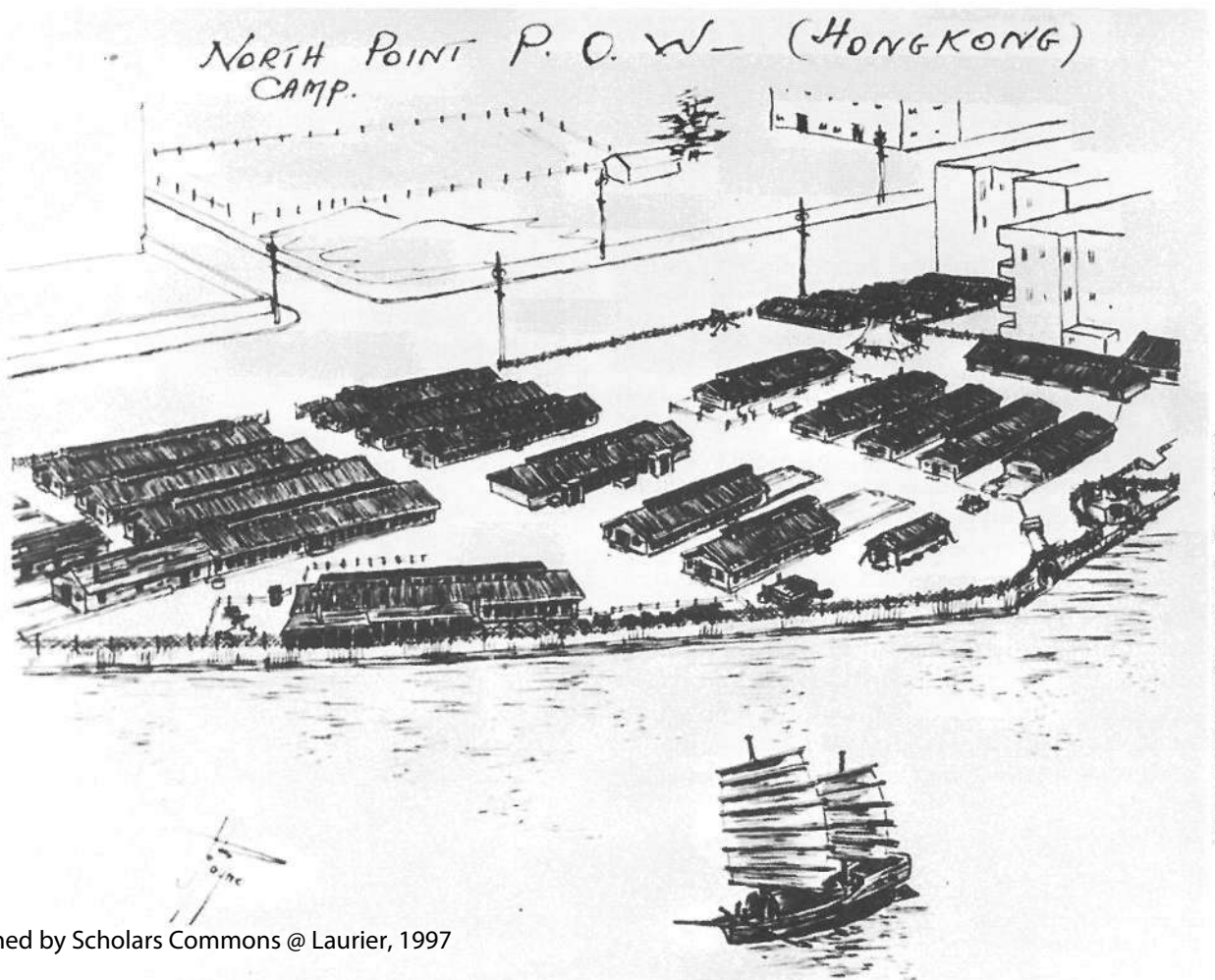
Without hesitation he accepted and was put immediately on the ration party.<sup>9</sup>

Ronald Routledge was born in Regina and joined the Permanent Force just prior to the outbreak of the war. He had finished high school during the Great Depression and was coaxed into joining the Army by his father who had fought in World War I and was closely associated with the local military. Routledge had excelled in sports, having competed at the national level in badminton, and was in excellent physical condition, a fact which ultimately would save his life.

He now settled into his new role, in Colonel Newnham's clandestine operation, carrying out his dangerous duty without incident until 1 July 1943. As Lieutenant-Colonel Price described that fateful day,

during a softball game between the Canadians and Portuguese prisoners of war in camp, I noticed Tsutada [a Japanese camp interpreter] and two sentries coming in through the main gate. They disappeared from view down one of the lanes...coming back into the yard and

*Sketch of North Point prisoner of war camp, Hong Kong.*



*(Photo courtesy of Captain R. Routledge.)*



*Above left:* Sergeant Ron Routledge, on board a hospital ship leaving Hong Kong for hospital in Manila, 1945.

*Above right:* Routledge arriving home in Regina from hospital in Vancouver, 1945.



(Photos courtesy of Captain R. Routledge.)

walking towards the main gate. With them was Sergeant Routledge.. Realizing that our key man had been caught, I remained helplessly watching the game, waiting for developments.<sup>10</sup>

Two months earlier, one of the Chinese truck drivers who had been delivering messages to the camp became careless and had been discovered. He was tortured until he revealed the name of other Chinese contacts; these in turn were tortured until the Japanese had a good picture of the organization. They first arrested the key contacts in the other camps, including Colonel Newnham and Sub-Lieutenant J.R. Haddock, Hong Kong RNVR. On July 1st, they came for the men who had been betrayed in Shamshuipo - Flight Lieutenant Gray, Flight Sergeant Hardy, and Sergeant Routledge; and ten days later, they took Captain Ford. Sergeant Routledge's citation describes what happened next:

He was removed from the camp and taken to the Gendarmerie Headquarters and charged with communicating with the enemy. He was brutally beaten and suffered a variety of tortures including the Japanese water torture,<sup>11</sup> to endeavour to

compel him to disclose the names of the officers directing these operations. In spite of incredible suffering he resolutely refused to divulge any information and showed great courage and fortitude in enduring these repeated tortures for several hours before finally being removed to Stanley Prison to await Court Martial for espionage.

Routledge and the others were held in solitary confinement and on starvation rations for the next four months, but all refused to betray anyone. Finally, on December 1st, the Japanese convened a formal court in a sham display of twisted Japanese justice. Most of the trial was conducted in Japanese and the prisoners were not provided with any defence counsel.<sup>12</sup> While it was known that the accused had been involved in passing messages out the camp, the Japanese made no effort to determine whether such message had any military significance. All the arrested men stuck firmly to their original stories: Colonel Newnham taking full responsibility for the activities at Argyle Street, with Ford and Gray doing so for Shamshuipo.

Ford testified that, as senior officer, he had ordered Routledge and Hardy to participate in the network, thus saving their lives. In the end, Newnham, Gray and Ford were sentenced to death for espionage and for inciting espionage-while Routledge, Haddock and Hardy were sentenced to 15 years with hard labour for aiding and abetting espionage. On 18 December, the three officers were taken out of the prison for the sentences to be carried out. Newnham and Gray could not walk and had to be helped by Ford as they were placed before a firing squad.

Routledge and Hardy were kept in Stanley Prison until June 1945 when they were transferred to a Chinese prison in Canton, remaining there until finally released at the end of the war. Lieutenant-Colonel Price had not forgotten the men who had been arrested: immediately upon the surrender of Japan, the senior officers in the camps demanded to know where the officers and men had been taken. Routledge and Hardy were returned a few days later "in a shocking physical condition" and it was only then that the fate of the others became known.

Testimonial to Sergeant Routledge's behaviour was further given by Major C.R. Boxer of The Lincolnshire Regiment, who wrote to Lieutenant-Colonel Price:

Sergeant Routledge was subjected to very severe beating and physical torture on July 1, 1943, with the object of forcing him to give away the names and details of the persons involved with him in the secret liaison maintaining between the prisoner of war camps at Hong Kong and the British Military Intelligence authorities at Waichow. . .Despite the severity of this ordeal, he resolutely declined to mention any officers names, although particularly pressed regarding your own name and those of Brigadier Home, Captain Crewe, RASC, and Captain Bush, RCASC. This conduct saved the lives or health of officers who would have otherwise been involved and inevitably tortured and subjected to trial by court martial for espionage.

During the period of our incarceration, particularly the first six months, when the whole party was fed *on* totally inadequate rations and subjected to severe disciplinary punishment with the object of undermining our health and morale, Sergeant Routledge remained unfailingly cheerful and resolute, giving an outstanding example of

*Presentation of the Distinguished Conduct Medal to Sergeant Ron Routledge by Lord Alexander.*



*(Photo courtesy of Captain R. Routledge.)*

fortitude under exceptionally difficult conditions. He was at all times ready and willing to help the physically weaker members of the party and his careful and conscientious nursing of Sergeant Hardy, RAF, during the latter's critical illness during the winter of 1944-45 was already instrumental in saving his life according to the testimony of Dr. Selwyn-Clarke who was a prisoner at this period.<sup>13</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Price paid a final tribute when he later wrote: "None of us, their comrades, who shared so many experiences with them can ever forget their bravery and fortitude under torture of the worst kind. We owe our lives to them. Technically they were not guilty of espionage, but were merely engaged in the humanitarian enterprise of securing relief for dying men."<sup>14</sup>

The concept of courage remains difficult to describe in a simple way, as it depends so much on the context within which the courageous act occurs. Most commonly, courage is viewed as a bold act taken in the face of great danger. Psychologists have also observed that determination to overcome danger is strongest among men in a small cohesive group. The situation faced by Sergeant Routledge, however, lacked these elements, requiring a special kind of inner strength to hold on to a decision which would result in the certain infliction of suffering, if not death. This kind of behaviour has been described as "the lonely courage of one 'in the midst of his enemies and in the face of death' who undergoes the inner struggle of deliberation.. The quiet courage to freely permit one's own destruction in lonely and terrible circumstances...(it) seems a uniquely difficult act."<sup>15</sup> Thus, Sergeant Ronald Routledge's refusal to divulge information to the Japanese showed him to be a unique individual, resulting in the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1946.<sup>16</sup> Colonel Newnham, Captain Ford and Flight Lieutenant Gray received the posthumous award of the George Cross.

Ronald Routledge continued to serve in the Canadian Army following the war. After he recovered his health on his return to Canada, he attended various university courses, including Royal Roads and the School of Signals in Kingston. This eventually led to his being commissioned, and he retired with the rank of captain in the RCCS in 1965.

## Notes

1. Oliver Lindsay, *At the Going Down Sun* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981), p.48; Kenneth Cambon, *Guest of Hirohito* (Vancouver: PW Press, 1980), p.35; John S. Whitehead and George B. Bennett, *Escape to Fight On* (London: Robert Hale, 1990), p.41.
2. William Allister, *Where Life and Death Hold Hands* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd, 1989), p.51.
3. Lindsay, p.66.
4. Lindsay, p.90. Lindsay appears to have the most thorough description of the operations of the BAAG. Otherwise, little detail has been revealed up to this time, with the records sealed until 2010. See Lloyd Shoemaker, *The Escape Factory*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p.220.
5. Lindsay, p.97.
6. The BAAG was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Lindsay Ride who, after escaping from Shamshuipo in February 1942, devoted his efforts to the mission of helping other prisoners escape from the hell of the prison camps. Unfortunately only a few escapes were accomplished. Almost in desperation to save those in the camps, in May 1943 the BAAG planned a daring airborne raid to seize Kai Tak airport to enable a mass escape. It was probably fortunate that it was cancelled, since many prisoners by this time were too weak to participate and would have felt the full force of Japanese anger. See Lindsay, pp. 100-102.
7. Grant Garneau and others, *The Royal Rifles of Canada in HongKong, 1941-1945* (Sherbrooke, 1980), p.214.
8. *Ibid.*, p.211; Ralph Goodwin, *Passport to Eternity* (London: Arthur Barker, 1956), p. 106.
9. Garneau, p.214. While otherwise correct, Ron Routledge was already a member of the ration party which made the switch from Farrell less suspicious to the Japanese.
10. Garneau, p.215.
11. Described in Garneau: "tying a piece of cloth over nose and mouth, and dropping water slowly on it. This results in a gradual filling of the lungs with water, leading to a slow and agonizing suffocation." p.217; Goodwin, in describing the water torture of Godfrey Bird, G.M., stated that it "reduced one to a state of helplessness and ultimate insensibility,... [leaving him] in a state of mental depression which made suicide an attractive prospect." Goodwin, p. 179.
12. Goodwin, p. 187.
13. National Archives of Canada, Record Group 7, Group 26, Vol.59, File 190-1, Part 8, Citation for the Award of the DCM to Sergeant Ronald John Routledge.
14. Garneau, p.218.
15. Douglas N. Walton, *Courage: A Philosophical Investigation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.9.
16. *The Canada Gazette*, 15 June 1946.

Robert Fowler lives in Ottawa and is the author of *Valour in the Victory Campaign: The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division Gallantry Awards, 1945* (1995).