

After this dark despair — still no passports

TODAY Hong Kong observes its 48th Liberation Day with befitting pomp and circumstance.

It is therefore timely to remind both the British and Hong Kong governments of their undischarged debt of honour to those, who 52 years ago, volunteered to risk life and limb for King and Country, when Hong Kong was attacked on December 8, 1941 by the overwhelming might of the Japanese armed forces.

After 17 days of savage combat, the hopelessly outnumbered garrison was forced to capitulate on Christmas Day 1941.

On December 21, Winston Churchill signalled the Governor, Sir Mark Young, "The enemy should be compelled to expend the utmost life and equipment. Every day that you are able to maintain your resistance you and your men can win the lasting honour which, we are sure will be your due."

Churchill, in his monumental history of World War II had this to say about Hong Kong's heroic stand against the Japanese, "Those orders were obeyed in spirit and to the letter. The Colony had fought a good fight. They had won indeed 'the lasting honour'".

Following the surrender, some 7,000 dejected men of the surrendered garrison were interned by the Japanese at Shamshuipo Camp. There, and subsequently in Japan, thousands of the once physically fit men languished miserably behind a tall, forbidding and electrified barbed wire fence in what, to them, would be a nightmare 44 months of dark despair.

During their cruel captivity the men were fed on a deliberate starvation diet which, predictably, resulted in an early outbreak of a spate of vitamin deficiency diseases, such as pellagra, blindness and dry beri beri, which is a form of neuritis in which the feet and hands went alternatively numb, followed by agonising shooting pains which made sleep impossible.

Malnutrition reduced droves of once portly men to pathetic walking skeletons. Bacillary dysentery and diphtheria raged unchecked and caused hundreds of deaths. Despite frantic appeals by Major Ashton Rose, the Senior Camp Medical Officer, to his Japanese counterpart, it was not until 100 men had died of diphtheria that a woefully inadequate supply of the

life-saving anti-toxin was delivered.

This forced the medical officers, willy-nilly, to assume the absurd role of having to play God in deciding which patient should be the lucky recipient of a minimum dose of the life-saving serum and who would be the unlucky one to die unhonoured and unsung.

The M/Os were confronted with a similar dilemma in obtaining the miraculous May and Baker sulphur drug. Had it been available on demand hundreds of dysentery victims would not have died. In October 1942, alone, there were no fewer than 55 deaths in the camp, while the total for that year was a staggering 352.

Freedom is man's most cherished birthright. Its deprivation leaves an indelible scar. The imposition of a total news blackout in camp did much to lower yet further camp morale by sowing the insidious seeds of unsettling doubts in the minds of men with too much time on their hands.

So insatiable is this thirst for news that there were brave souls in Argyle Camp, who risked their lives to find out what was happening in the outside world. They

were Colonel L. A. Newnham, Captain D Ford and Flight-Lieutenant H. S. Gray. However, informers tipped off the Kempeitai about the existence of an underground network. They were suddenly arrested, tried summarily by a Japanese kangaroo court and sentenced to be shot on December 19, 1943.

In flagrant abuse of Red Cross conventions, the Japanese forced PoWs in Hong Kong to work on the extension of the runway at Kai Tak. They had to level a hill-ock with pick axes and shovels. We will never know how many died as a result.

Before Governor Patten left for Italy on leave, he went to London to talk with the Prime Minister and in a live broadcast from London he made a reassuring statement regarding the granting of UK passports, without preconditions to the 25 wives and widows of ex-PoWs. He stressed that with "forceful advocacy", it was hoped that the Home Secretary could be persuaded to change his stance vis-a-vis the dependent womenfolk of the war veterans. I trust the British Government will not turn down his appeal.

LUIGI RIBEIRO
Kowloon