

Synopsis: Canada's C-Force in Hong Kong and its Forerunners
From a Social Philately Approach
1941-1945

Mission As a Display Exhibit, the postal history of Canada's C-Force in Hong Kong (HK) and the postal history of its forerunner for the Winnipeg Grenadiers (WG) as Y-Force in Jamaica, are shown, from a Social Philately approach.

Treatment (Plan on Titlepage) The exhibit consists of two chapters. The first chapter shows, in chronological order, the postal history of C-Force from its forerunner as Y-Force to its members as POWs in Hong Kong. The second chapter shows, by individual correspondences, different sectors of C-Force's postal history. As some of these correspondences spans long time periods, the correspondences are roughly arranged in chronological order.

The use of ephemera, which is important in Social Philately, is amply applied throughout this exhibit to support the Social Philately approach. The personal information of the sender/writer of these items together with the censor are presented on each item to highlight its relevance to Social Philately.

Exhibitor does not collect mail sent by POWs from the Japan Camps (even though families letter received at the Japan Camps are shown) and these items are not included in the exhibit. He only collects mail from the HK Camps.

Importance C-Force in Hong Kong were the first Canadians to fight and die in WWII. The first Canadian casualties in WWII occurred when the Canadian Corps of Signal members of C-Force were caught in the fighting with the invading Japanese when they were stationed in Sham Shui Po on Dec 8, 1941. The first and highest ranking Canadian to be killed in WWII was Brigadier Lawson, who was commanding C-Force, when C-Force HQ in Wong Nei Chung Gap was surrounded by the Japanese, on Dec 19, 1941. The only Victoria Cross given to a Canadian fighting in the Pacific was to Company Sergeant Major John R. Osborn, who died when he threw himself over an exploding grenade to save his men, was also in the Battle of Wong Nei Chung Gap on Dec 19, 1941. Even today, the surviving members of C-Force and the relatives of these fighting men and officers are strongly united in the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association (HKVCA). Their mission is to bring the story of these brave soldiers to light.

Arguably, the amount of new knowledge that this exhibit has created and shown, is important to our overall understanding of not just the postal history of C-Force in HK, but also to its history as a fighting force as well.

Difficulty of Acquisition The Japanese captors tried to demoralized interned POWs by burning their incoming mail in front of the camps. The mail was looted and some bags were recorded where it was water lodged. Greenhous quoted Endacott: "for the 3 years and 3 months in captivity, a FAIR AVERAGE for a POW was to have received 3 letters in total".

The tremendous and unmentionable suffering by the members of C-Force as POWs, either in the camps in HK or as slave labourers when about two-thirds of them were transferred to Japan, left an unrecoverable mark on these survivors for the rest of their lives. Many would never speak of these times to anyone, including their closest family members. Many such items were deliberately destroyed as whatever remained would remind them of this terrible period of their lives. Thus, much of the material, philatelic or ephemera, has been forever lost.

Many of those who did keep these items, came to treasure them as a way of remembering a special experience in the lives of their relatives. They treated them as family heirlooms and would never be willing to part with them. What is left is a small number of covers, cards and ephemera that have entered the philatelic market. This explains the difficulty of acquisition and why there exists so little C-Force material in the hands of collectors.

Personal Research Based on his collection, which is shown here, plus published records of covers and cards, the exhibitor has established the following, thus creating new knowledge:

- There were 3 different periods of censorship procedures for the service period that WG was serving as Y-Force in Jamaica. Findings published in Journal 25, The Hong Kong Philatelic Society, pg. 46-60, May 2022;
- The earliest covers that were sent by C-Force member after its arrival in HK was on Nov 20, 1941;
- The latest surface covers sent by C-Force members out of HK before the mail was trapped by the invading Japanese were Nov 29, 1941, as the last surface transport westward departed from HK was on that day;
- The latest airmail covers that were sent by C-Force members out of HK were also on Nov 29, 1941. This was because the weekly flight of the last Pan Am Clipper flight that brought mail from HK to Manila left HK in the early morning of Nov 30, 1941;
- None of the mail sent by C-Force members' families from Canada left in time to reach C-Force members in HK before the start of fighting and therefore was returned, undeliverable. A cover in the exhibit that was trapped and

undeliverable was sent on Oct 31, 1941, from the Lieutenant Ian Breakey Correspondence. (C-Force set sailed on Oct 27, 1941, from Vancouver). An earlier cover from the same correspondence is also recorded;

- Parcel Post procedures were not set up yet in HK for C-Force to send parcels back to Canada before the start of the Battle of HK. This is mentioned in a letter written by Private Cecil E. Smith dated Nov 22, 1941 (in exhibit);
- A bilingual flyer “*Notice to Allied POW and civilian internees*” prepared by the Americans, declaring the end of the war was air-dropped onto the liberated Sham Shui Po POW camp reached Canadian POWs on Aug 18, 1945, at 4 PM. This is mentioned on the handwritten note on his copy of the flyer by Signalman Dowling;

Important Philatelic Items (highlighted with purple matting)

- Earliest recorded Y-Force cover (during service period of WG), Jul 6, 1940; Latest, Sep. 2, 1941;
- 1 of 2 recorded registered covers from Y-Force (in the service period of WG), only 1 sent outside of Kingston, Ex-Richardson;
- Only recorded “OHMS” registered Military Post cover of Y-Force (in the service period of WG), Ex-Richardson;
- Only recorded cover with 2 strikes of “*Detained in HK*” marking on a WG item (1 of 2 of C-Force; 1 of 7 recorded on all “*Detained in HK*” marking covers);
- Only recorded British Censor Military Marking in vermilion ink on a C-Force item;
- One of under 5 items known with “*Via S.S. Gripsholm*” endorsement on a cover addressed to a C-Force member.
- Two LPW (Liberated Prisoners of War) airletter forms. Arguably, all known LPW airletter usages recorded to date have different usages. Ellison had 4 in his past exhibit. Barnett Correspondence has 2;

Important Ephemera (some ephemera were not shown on exhibit page, while others are shown as reduced size photocopies only, mainly due to size and/or thickness of items e.g. the 5 cap badges,)

- Handwritten four pages (plus backs) Casualty-List of the Winnipeg Grenadiers by Private Duncan Benton;
- Personal notebook of Signalman Dowling. **HKVDC.ca** website showed 6 more of these notebooks, most were from Officers, and few were from enlisted men; (photo shown only, due to thickness of notebook)
- “*Welcome Home*” card presented at Winnipeg by the Train Reception Committee to Signalman Dowling. Exhibitor has only seen one other of this type;
- Department of National Defence, form-letters to families. Two from the Wilbert Lester Correspondence, one dated Oct 1942, the other dated July 1943. Ellison had a set from the Gray Correspondence, two were form-letters but different from these, while the others were letters specifically answering to Gray’s past correspondence;

References:

(Most important): Information from Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association website at: hkvca.ca

(Critique of exhibit): Piercey, David, *Let’s Talk Exhibiting: Social Philately as Display Exhibit*, The Canadian Philatelist, pg. 278-281, No/Dec 2021.

(by exhibitor) *Adding New knowledge: Canada’s C-Force in Hong Kong*, The Canadian Philatelist, pg. 254-262, Nov/Dec Y2021. (Winner of RPSC’s Geldert Award for Best Article of the year, 2021, in The Canadian Philatelist) (Sarasota 2022, literature competition, Gold Medal)

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