

ITALIAN-CANADIAN SOLDIERS IN THE FAR EAST THE BATTLE OF HONG KONG, 1941 AND WHAT FOLLOWED



Pvt James Maltese



Pvt Frank T. Caruso



Pvt John D. Caruso



Rifleman Sam Di Sensi



Pvt Emilio Mario Bertulli

By Raffaella Cortese de Bosis

Still half asleep and disoriented, James Maltese gets up from his cot. He takes a few steps toward the restroom and outside he sees a swastika fluttering high on the flagpole. No, it cannot be. He takes a better look, but it is there. He gets to the restroom, opens the faucet, and hears gunshots. He runs to the hallway and a fellow soldier tells him: "Don't pay any attention to it, that is Jimmy "Wahoo" Murray shooting at the swastika to rip it out of the way". James doesn't say a word. His interlocutor explains: "Here, in Jamaica, there are about 2,000 prisoners, we have Italians and Germans. The Germans? They are the most arrogant people in the world, dismissive and inflammatory! We are here to guard the camp. This is what we are here for." James walks back, shaking his head, and resumes shaving.

This is the beginning of James Maltese's first mission abroad, with the Winnipeg Grenadiers. It is 1941.

He was born in Winnipeg in 1918 where his Italian parents settled after getting married in Pennsylvania in 1906. His father, Nicola, was born in Cinisi, Palermo (Italy), and his mother, Agostina Delisi, was from Alcamo. They would have 6 children. James enlisted in 1939. In 1940 he was assigned to the "Y Force", destination Kingston, Jamaica: a journey of almost 2,500 miles. As they cross the ocean, they hear a radio message reporting that a ship with Canadian soldiers had been sunk by a German submarine. That makes them very anxious. It turned out to be Nazi propaganda, but so scary!

They are guards in the internment camp. The guards have a lot of free time and in the Caribbean you can really have fun! As he sips a Jamaican Rum, James meets Frank, Frank Caruso, who is part of his same regiment. "Have a rum ice cream, you will not regret it, it's irresistible!" James suggests. They start talking. It turns out they are both of Italian origin; they talk and Frank tells him that he just got married and can't wait to go back to his Katherine.

Frank was also born in Winnipeg, on February 17, 1920. His father, Michele, was born in Minnesota from Italian parents. Before enlisting, Frank had worked at the Gibson Alley Bowling. He enlisted in 1939 and marries Katherine Bauer; and has to leave her 4 months after the wedding to serve in Kingston, Jamaica.



Frank with his father Michele, a short man with the strength of a giant.

Frank's tour of duty in Jamaica is almost one year, James stays longer. Their paths seem to separate, but once back in Canada they will join the "C Force". Destination: Hong Kong. And there will be another Grenadier by the name Caruso: *John Dominic. Born in Thunder Bay on December 15, 1912. His father, Nicola, originally from Campobasso, and Maddalena Zappitelli, from S. Angelo in Grotte, Campobasso. At first, they settled in Ohio then at 426 McKenzie street, Fort Williams, Ontario.*

October 27, 1941. The grueling journey starts: by train, from the East Coast to Vancouver. Then they board the Awatea. Destination: Unknown. Once on board, they are assigned a huge area where they would sleep, on hammocks set right above the dining room tables. "Don't even think about it... can you imagine having lunch while someone is battling nausea right above you... and you are trying to swallow some food?" This thought becomes a protest. Many get off the ship and ask for a different accommodation. They are assured that the spaces have been reworked, so they return on board. But nothing had been changed. In order to prevent the troops from disembarking again, the Awatea rapidly sets sail.

With very low morale, they descend to their "apartments" and are hit by a revolting stench of rendering mutton. Their first meal is a bowl of tripe, which almost all refuse. In the next few days, the situation does not improve. At breakfast, mutton stew. A loud protest brings some positive change. From that moment on, the food becomes edible! Emilio Bertulli, a Winnipeg Grenadier, shares a few jokes and with some of the Italian words he heard from his parents, he is able to lighten the mood. *Emilio Bertulli, son of Attilio, born in Fano in 1885 and Matilde Perlini, also from Fano.*

Sam Di Sensi crossed Canada by train also, but he boards Prince Robert, as all the other Royal Rifles. *Sam was born in Montreal on July 6, 1917. He is the son of Francesco, born in Bella di Catanzaro and Maria Guadagnolo, born in San Biagio di Catanzaro.*

It's smooth sailing all the way to Honolulu where they arrive on November 2, 1941; a stop in Manila then Hong Kong, which is the final destination. It is November 16. Nanking Barracks, Sham Shui Po Camp, in Kowloon is where they stay.

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. A paradise that turns into an inferno on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese forces launch a surprise attack on the US port. Hundreds of casualties, many ships sunk. And immediate repercussions. The Japanese invade Hong Kong, a British colony. The Forces stationed there are caught off guard in overwhelming numerical and military inferiority with little military preparation and few weapons, fighting a trained, ruthless enemy, armed to the brim.

On December 8, 1941 the battle of Hong Kong begins. What had been described to the Canadian troops as a patrol service turned into a massacre. John Dominic Caruso is badly wounded on Dec. 21 and initially taken to Bowen Road Hospital then to the Red Cross Hospital where he will remain for one month. Sam Di Sensi is wounded Dec. 23.

After 17 days of raging battle, they surrender. For the Canadians it is a crushing defeat.

The Battle of Hong Kong ends on Christmas day 1941.

James is killed on December 25 at Cape Collinson Road Chai Wan Hong Kong.

In this exceptional, unpublished document, we read the name of J. Maltese in the handwritten list of the fallen, written by Lance Corp. Richard Trick, who survived the battle and four years of prison camp:

H6842	Pte.	Hallet F. M.	19-12-41	H77410	Pte.	Pista H	22-12-41
H36817	Pte.	Hargreaves J	22-12-41	L2855	Pte.	Ross V.	25-12-41
H6631	Pte.	Kaslan M	23-12-41	H6447	Pte.	Rutherford T. A.	23-12-41
H6922	Pte.	Killgale W. H.	19-12-41	H6561	Pte.	Silkey S.	19-12-41
H6289	Pte.	Land G. S.	19-12-41	H6088	Pte.	Simpson K.	19-12-41
H6141	Pte.	Larsen R. E. A.	21-12-41	H6813	Pte.	Smelton E. C.	20-12-41
H6860	Pte.	Law G.	19-12-41	H6598	Pte.	Smith C. E.	19-12-41
H6301	Pte.	Lawre K. R.	21-12-41	L13729	Pte.	Smith R. B.	19-12-41
H21796	Pte.	Little J.	21-12-41	H6353	Pte.	Stogill S. F.	19-12-41
H6719	Pte.	Low J. A.	19-12-41	H6338	Pte.	Schadale G.	20-12-41
H6163	Pte.	Maltze J.	25-12-41	H6894	Pte.	Walker H. C.	20-12-41
H6014	Pte.	Matte G.	20-12-41	H6140	Pte.	Walsh B. B.	19-12-41
H6197	Pte.	Mathews D. C.	19-12-41	H17693	Pte.	White T. C.	22-12-41
L6745	Pte.	Maxwell R. C.	19-12-41	H6564	Pte.	Williams J.	19-12-41
H6540	Pte.	Meades R. A.	20-12-41	H65230	Pte.	Waytowick F.	24-12-41
H6162	Pte.	Morris J. L.	21-12-41	H6299	Pte.	Wright R. F.	19-12-41
H6143	Pte.	M. Bride W. F.	21-12-41	H6659	Pte.	Pontius R. W.	19-12-41
H6883	Pte.	M. Farlane T. W.	22-12-41	H6646	Pte.	Shatford H. C.	20-12-41
H6938	Pte.	M. Laway R. C.	19-12-41	H77148	Pte.	Wiche H.	21-12-41
H6644	Pte.	O'Neil D. J.	19-12-41				
H6526	Pte.	Ouellette C. R. A.	25-12-41				
H6810	Pte.	Pare G. J.	19-12-41				
H6505	Pte.	Priest W. A.	20-12-41				

Charles Richard Trick's Diary, casualty list
(courtesy of Jim Trick)

Lance Corp. William Bell wrote: "On December 25, my best friend Denis Matthews and James Maltese were killed, along with many others whom I will remember affectionately."

Frank Caruso is among those captured by the Japanese forces. Prisoners get kicked; they get punched. Heart-piercing screams are heard everywhere. They are handcuffed with a metal wire tied around their wrists behind their back and then to each other. They have to walk among mangled, mutilated and burnt remains, and debris. Slowly, this chain of prisoners moves. Some stumble, some faint, some cannot stand because their legs are broken. They fall to the ground only to be stabbed with a bayonet and left to die.

Within just a few days, Frank Caruso, Emilio Bertulli and Sam Di Sensi are deported, as are all the survivors of the Battle of Hong Kong. John Dominic Caruso, just after being dismissed

from the hospital, in late January 1942, is sent to North Point and then to Camp 3 where he will remain until April 1945.

These young soldiers are still strong, the hope of returning home keeps them going. They encourage each other.

Everything is taken from them: their rings, pendants, belts, wallets, watches. The watch – at this point, it still ticks but its hands no longer move. With no clothes and stripped of things that were dear to them, frightened, but with a strong spirit of resilience, they enter the camps: some of the names are Narumi, Niigata, Tsurumi, Yokohama-shi, Ohashi. They enter into a ghost-like environment: the walls are crumbling; cots, unglazed windows, non-existent toilets; mice, insects and garbage everywhere. The mass of wounded soldiers receive no comfort, and minimal treatment. More screams.

An added burden to this already extreme condition is forced labor. Backbreaking work shifts in mines, foundries, steel mills, construction of runways. Malnourished, sick, insufficiently clothed for the freezing weather, many die. With no medications, care, hygiene, in the throes of delirium and attacked by parasites and insects, enduring 12-hour workdays is an overwhelming experience, and no one knows how long they will have to live in that hell.

At home, their families receive no information at all. James Maltese's father will say: "My wife has been sick with worry for close to one year now, wondering what has happened to our son. But we still have not given up hope and pray for the day when we will have news that our boy is safe. We are very proud that we have a boy in service fighting for this Country."

The prisoners too are cut off from the news. But – as Pvt. Ross Purse, Winnipeg Grenadier will recount – secretly and at high risk, someone managed to get some information. With a ruse: incredibly, a few grenadiers had learned to read Japanese papers. On the site where some of them were enduring forced labor, a Japanese guard kept his newspaper in the sentry box. They would simulate an accident. The "injured" soldier would be taken to the sentry box for permission to return him to the camp. At this point they would take off their hats and get in the sentry box. The Japanese guard would jump up at the news of the accident. At lightning speed, one would take the newspaper, hide it under his hat and put the hat back on. Then he would slip the paper under the injured person on the stretcher because upon his arrival at the camp, he would not be searched, while everyone else was.

Some of them went as far as sabotage, as Lance Corp Richard Trick, Winnipeg Grenadiers, recounted in an interview. "I was doing forced labor to build airport KaiTec, flattening the ground, taking the mud off of the mountain side. As we prepared the cement, we would throw in it any and all garbage but mostly sand, so that when they would pour it, it would not hold. The first flight that landed on that strip, carrying Japanese VIPs, crashed. The man in charge of the project was arrested and decapitated. John Dominic Caruso took part in this construction also, employed in the extension of the airport.

However, even in the darkest moments, a shard of light seeps through. In this concentration camp, the light seeped thanks to Elmer McKnight and his brothers, who offered live music!! Elmer, Gerald (twin brothers) and Melville McKnight, Winnipeg Grenadiers, POW of the

Japanese had created a band back in Winnipeg and played well together. Elmer writes a song inspired by his yearning for his fiancée: *I'll never say goodbye again*. Incredibly, the concert is featured in a Japanese propaganda radio broadcast and captured by Canadian and American listening stations. In all likelihood, the Japanese wanted to show how well they treated their POWs. The McKnight brothers could not have imagined that their song had been broadcast throughout 1944 by CBC radio in Canada and had become a hit!

Nevertheless, with the passing of months, and then years, the prisoners become weaker, exhaustion takes over. The young men strive to stay anchored to life, they hold to hope as tightly as they possibly can with what is left of their energy. The beat of their hearts has become nearly undetectable: they beat within shadows that stand on bones.

Attacked by rats, by terrible insects, sleeping amidst excrements, putrid mud and still water, without food that can be called such, the death rate is staggering. The soldiers contract unspeakable diseases: beriberi, cholera, typhus, malaria, amoebic dysentery, diphtheria. One of the soldiers would later say that diphtheria survivors are ready for anything. Frank Caruso contracts beriberi. It attacks his heart and nervous system causing unbearable cramps. Frank dies on January 13, 1944. He was buried at the Yokohama War Cemetery.

Year number 4. Conditions worsen. Rflmn Henry Lyons, Royal Rifles, writes in his diary: if we ever get out of here alive, talking about it will be futile, everything is so terrible that no one would ever believe that human beings can be so cruel.

The imprisonment and hardship of these boys come to an end, after years! August 1945. The cataclysmic explosion of the atom bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following such disruption and devastation, Japan surrenders. The news sweeps the camps and their liberation gets closer! Prisoners of war are free. The Royal Rifles and the Winnipeg Grenadiers lost too many comrades and friends. They will remain in their memory forever. Repatriation operations start but it will take two months for them to set foot on Canadian soil again.

On January 19, 1946, a Special Proclamation by General Douglas McArthur, Supreme Allied Commander, established the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. With its permanent headquarters in Tokyo, at the War Ministry. For Canada, the judges were Edward Stuart McDougall and Henry Grattan Nolan. The trial ends on November 4, 1948 with 25 conviction of the high political-military Japanese criminals. Seven were sentenced to hanging. 16 life sentences. One 20-year sentence and one for 7 years. No acquittal.

James Maltese, June 29, 1918 – December 25, 1941. Reported officially killed Dec 25, 1941. Rests at the Stanley Military Cemetery, Hong Kong.

Frank Tony Caruso, February 17, 1920 – January 13, 1944

POW at Niigata , Niigata-ken, Nakakambara-gun, Stevedore labor at port of Niigata (Marutsu), primarily foodstuffs; mining coal then to Niigata Rinko, Marutsu, Rinko Coal, and labor at Shintetsu foundry.

Rests at the Yokohama War Cemetery, Japan

Emilio Mario Bertulli: May 13, 1921 – April 18, 1987

POW at Yokohama-shi, Tsurumi-ku, Suyehiro-cho, 1-chome, Japan: Tsurumi, Nippon Steel Tube - Tsurumi Shipyards, then Ohashi al Iwate-ken, Kamihei-gun, Katsushi-mura, Ohashi, Japan, Nippon steel Company

All his life, he fought for human dignity

He rests at Brookside Cemetery, Winnipeg.

John Dominic Caruso, December 15, 1912 – April 15, 1980

Experienced PTSD, tormented by the nightmare of deportation. Tsurumi Yokohama-shi. Nippon Steel Tube. Tsurumi shipyards. Then Yumoto, Fukushima-ken. Joban Coal mining. Rests in the Mountain View Cemetery, Thunder Bay.

Sam Di Sensi, July 6, 1917 - June 7, 2009.

Narumi, Aichi-ken, Aichi-gun, Narumi-machi, Arimatsu Mura 114-, Nippon Rolling Stock Company and Daido Electric Steel Company, Men employed as slaves for Daido Electric Steel Company and made wheels at the Nippon Wheel (Vehicle) Mfg. then Tateyama, -Banchi, Shimookui-cho, Toyama City, Toyama, Japan, Tateyama Heavy Industry Company Manufacture

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Translated from Italian by Alessandra Cortese de Bosis