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The Ronnie Ross Story

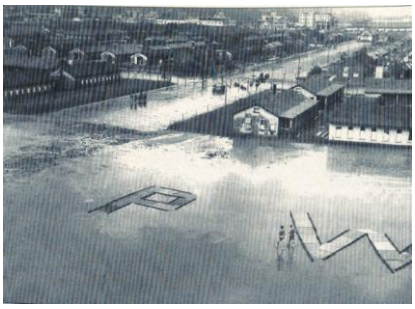
The author of this Occasional Paper is Robin Hutcheon, CBE for many years Editor of the South China Morning Post and husband of Association member Bea (Greaves) Hutcheon. It is based on his interviews with G.R.Ross before Ross died in 2008, and on other material used by him for his published book entitled ***The Merchants of Shameen****, a history of Deacon & Co.Ltd. This is the firm Ross worked for and of which he later became Chairman.*

Not everyone who fought in the battle of Hong Kong, and then spent years in prison camp, looks back upon the experience with unalloyed bitterness and despair of wasted years and brutal deprivation and hunger. One of the luckier survivors was Ronnie Ross who, after seeing the writing on the wall of Japanese invasion and occupation, left the city of Canton to set up an office in Hong Kong. His firm, Deacon & Co.Ltd. had been in business since 1858 but in 1938 the future in Canton looked grim and survival in the seemingly more secure environment of a British colony became the partners' objective. Ronnie Ross, later to become Chairman of his company holding many directorships, and a Hong Kong Executive Councillor, was the chosen man to accomplish that task. One of the first things he and his new wife, Rae, did was to set up office in the old Prince's Building (just behind where the Mandarin Hotel stands today), and then rent an apartment for themselves. The move to Hong Kong was a godsend for the business which, following the fall of Canton, picked up an extensive export trade supplying wartime needs to Britain.

Ross joined the Hong Kong Volunteers and was made a gunner, having never fired a shot in his life. His weekend service and a 10-day camp enabled him to become familiar with two six-inch guns taken from a World War I cruiser, *HMS Kent*. Ross was mobilised on Sunday, 7th December, after a day at their matshed Castle Peak swimming hut. He said goodbye to his wife, whom he would not see for the next four years, and changed into uniform. His assigned post was with 2nd Battery at Bluff Head, Stanley. At 6 am on 8th December Ross was told, "We are at war with Japan". It would take another week or 10 days before he heard a shot fired in anger. Ross recalled that life at Stanley during that period was "pretty futile". Their guns were pointing out to sea, expecting a Japanese sea-borne invasion, and could not be turned around to fire into advancing Japanese invaders who had crossed the Lyemun Channel (near Saiwan where my brother-in-law, Stanley Greaves, was killed in action on 18th December, 1941 serving in 5th Battery which was the target of heavy Japanese fire and suffered many casualties).

Because there was no action at Cape D'Aguilar, 1st Battery there was ordered to destroy its guns and evacuate to Stanley. Ross, who had his own Morris 8, volunteered to help move personnel and made several trips between Stanley and Cape D'Aguilar. These men were redeployed as infantry and more than half were killed in the final stand at Stanley Village. 2nd Battery, however, at Bluff Head suffered only one casualty. Following the surrender, Ross and his mates under the command of Capt. Douglas Crozier (later Director of Education in the HK Government) remained where they were until New Year's Eve. They were then marched to North Point to a prewar refugee camp which had been used by the Japanese as a stable.

The camp was filthy, with thousands of flies, no lights, water or latrines. Many of the wounded succumbed to dysentery. A month later they were moved to Sham Shui Po where conditions were not much better, five or six people dying each day from sickness. Working parties were sent to extend the runway at Kai Tak. Ross reckoned this did most of them more good than harm since it got them out of the environment of the camp into the open air.



*Sham Shui Po Camp, from **"C" Force to Hong Kong** by Brereton Greenhous, incorrectly identified there as North Point Camp.*

In September, 1942 the Japanese began moving POWs to Japan to work as labourers. While the first draft of 700 reached Japan, the second draft of 1,500 men was on the *Lisbon Maru* which was torpedoed by an American submarine. Ross was in the third draft in January, 1943 on the *Tatsuta Maru*, a liner well known to expatriate residents of China who used to travel on her when they went on home leave in prewar years. "There were no luxury cabins waiting for us but compared to the ordeal of those on the *Lisbon Maru* which we knew all about, it was a champagne cruise" recalled Ross. The prisoners were disembarked at Nagasaki and sent to work at Habu Dockyard, controlled by the Osaka Ironworks. This was at Innoshima on the Inland Sea where conditions were described as "pretty grim". Food would consist of rice and seaweed for breakfast, rice and cabbage and turnips for lunch and occasionally dried fish in the evening. When rice was short, the prisoners would be given barley and beans "which contained more vitamins and so we began to feel better".

His group was split up to build ships. He was assigned to plate laying, a tough job with punishment duties for those unable to keep up with the schedule. Ross recalled that about 10 per cent of their number died from despair and physical decline. He survived, and became an expert at laying plates and bolting them to the steel ribs of the ships. "It was nerve-wracking to begin with, standing anything between 20 and 100 feet above the ground but we got used to it. There was not much scope for sabotage but occasionally we managed to get the bolt into the wrong hole so the whole exercise had to be done again. This infuriated the foreman, but when we behaved ourselves he occasionally rewarded us with the odd packet of cigarettes".

"One redeeming feature", Ross remembered, "was the Japanese bath. The cooks in the camp lit a fire every day to get a bath ready for the workers coming back at 6 pm. The bath was eight feet square and about three feet deep and piping hot. Each of six rooms with 32 men per room took it in turn to make first use of it. You soaped and rinsed outside the bath and then soaked inside. It made you feel alive again." The prisoners were issued with khaki drill jackets and trousers, and shoes were made out of rubber tyres. They slept on tatami. Ross recalled "At least Japan was clean and I never saw a bedbug there – unlike Sham Shui Po which was filthy".

The war ended suddenly with the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, only 40 miles away, though the prisoners heard nothing of it, nor of the subsequent bomb which destroyed Nagasaki. On the day of the Japanese surrender, the camp commandant advised the prisoners that "the weather is too hot to-day and we don't think you should go out and work". The prisoners were then freed to walk around the island. American aircraft dropped food parcels and cigarettes, but Ross recalled that the food was too rich and they were unable to eat it. The cigarettes were too strong being made of real tobacco, and the perfume worn by personnel of the American Women's Air Corps who visited "made us sick".

In time Ross and his fellow prisoners were put on a British aircraft carrier, *HMS Ruler*, and sent to Australia. From there he wired his wife who had been a volunteer nurse at the Bowen Road Military Hospital, and later was interned in Stanley. She was able to travel to meet him in November, 1945 when they were reunited after four years apart.