

Hong Kong Island, December 18–19, 1941

There were false reports of the Japanese invading, but the real thing came in the middle of the evening of December 18.

The weather was awful, raining like mad, and with the smoke coming from the paint factory and docks that had been bombed on the shoreline near North Point, visibility was dire. The Indian troops were manning the pillboxes there. They never stood a chance. The pillboxes had already had the hell bombed and shelled out of them on the preceding day, and there were just too many Japanese coming ashore. I'm told that the Rajputs did their best, but once some of their officers were killed, the defence lost its backbone. Although they continued fighting, the enemy easily bypassed them. They were brave bastards.

We could hear the noise of fighting, but had no direct contact since we were far south on Obelisk Hill. We waited for an order to move forward, hearing the sounds of battle off in the distance, the dark sky lit up by mortar fire and tracer bullets. C Company, who were meant to be in reserve, took the brunt of it on Mount Parker, and were then sent to Sai Wan fort, only to find that it had fallen already. So much for

intelligence on what weak soldiers the Japanese were; they were top-notch fighting men. By the time morning broke on the nineteenth they were trying to capture the hills around Tai Tam Reservoir and had penetrated into the Wong Nei Chong Gap that split the island in two. If they took that, they'd separate us from West Brigade and the Grenadiers.

God, it was a confusing time. We were tired, wet and hungry and would get one set of orders, only for them to be countermanded. It seemed like we spent the day lugging our guns and equipment up one hill, only to be told to bring it down again. It was nerve-wracking too, because we knew that the enemy was getting closer.

We got orders to relieve C Company and set off. I was almost too numb to feel scared. I think we all were. We battled our way up the steep hillside, clutching at the scrubby bushes.

"Ike," I said, "this is it . . . "

He nodded, not replying, just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other.

"If I don't — "

"Stop right there, Jacko." Ike flashed a sideways look at me. "I don't want to hear it. We'll both make it through. We have to believe that."

"Silence in the ranks," Oldham hissed. He had

come up behind us. “Do you want to warn them we’re on the move?”

As it turned out, we got ordered back down before we even reached C Company. While the Japanese continued their advance, East Brigade headquarters was being moved from Tai Tam, near our old position, back to Stone Hill. We got the order to fall back to Stanley Mound.

It was not an easy trip. The hills on the island were horrific, steep and covered with a layer of small stones that slid underneath us. I came close to tumbling back down quite a few times, hanging on by digging in my boots. We took some casualties there from broken limbs even before we came under fire from Japanese snipers who had advanced ahead of their main troops.

It’s true, bullets do whine through the air. The Japanese had 150-mm howitzers too. The first time we got shelled, we all hit the dirt. I was so scared that I felt like I was trying to push my body into the dry, hard earth by sheer willpower. Our khaki uniforms blended in well with the ground, but I lay there thinking that our pale Canadian skin, even if we were sunburned, must present a really good target.

A bullet pinged off a stone close to me, sending a chip flying into my face. I could feel warm

blood trickling down and I offered a silent prayer of thanks that it had not been near my eye. I didn't dare move, not even to wipe the blood away.

I sensed movement behind me and wondered whether someone had been hit, but a familiar, rasping voice sounded in my ear. "Finnigan, we can't lie here all day like ladies taking an afternoon nap!"

Sergeant Oldham had belly-crawled alongside me. His face was a mask of dust, the whites of his eyes and his yellowing teeth the only colours showing.

"When the bugger stops to reload, I'll give the signal to make a run for it, but you need to move fast, understood?"

Worried that my voice would be shaky with nerves, I nodded.

Oldham stayed where he was and I could hear him muttering. Was he praying? Then he yelled and I could hear the lieutenant's voice up ahead too, like a distorted echo, "One, two, three, go!"

I don't think that I've ever moved so fast before. It felt like I had launched myself into a run before I even cleared the ground. I ran zigzagging and crouched over, trying to present as small a target as I could until I reached the shelter of an old, half-demolished wall where the rest of the platoon were arriving.

It was pure luck we took to no casualties and I think we might have even dealt with the sniper. Well, our lance corporal, Durand, did. He stayed behind to cover us. When he came running after us, unscathed, crouched low, he had a huge smirk on his face.

“That Jap boy, he won’t bother us no more!” he said, his accent thicker than usual.

I had forgotten about the nick from the stone chip until I saw Paddy staring at me, his mouth hanging open. “Jacko, you’re hit!”

“No, I’m not.”

Oldham was there in a flash. “What’s going on, boyos?” He looked us over and said, “Rifleman Finnigan, since you’re standing and making too much noise as usual with your friend here, I am presuming that you are quite hale and hearty despite the fact that the left side of your face is covered with blood!”

I gently touched my face, finding the left side wet and sticky. There was no pain when I explored further and found what felt like a small notch taken out of my forehead, just above my left eyebrow. Damn, it had been closer than I thought to my eye.

“Yes, Sergeant, just a scratch. Looks worse than it is.”

Oldham looked at me and nodded. “Slap a dressing on it, Finnigan, and next time you hit the dirt like that, try and cover your face.”

There was always that little dig with Oldham.

I was so tired that I thought I’d have no trouble sleeping when we finally made it back, but even after the first hot meal in days, sleep wouldn’t come. I lay there on the rocky ground thinking about Alice, even my family, picturing them getting ready for Christmas, wondering if they were thinking about me. Alice’s family was as big as mine and they would all gather and celebrate together, although there was probably a bit more churchgoing than she would like.

Ike and Paddy were thinking of family too, I guess, because Paddy suddenly piped up, “If I was at home, I’d probably be out with my pa scouring the woods for a tree. He likes to go out on a cold evening with a flask of whisky in his pocket and last year was the first year he gave me any.” His voice was dreamy, and I could picture the scene so clearly, a snow-covered wood, the two figures bundled against the cold with the stars burning brightly above them.

“Us, we buy a tree,” I said, thinking of the tattered ones that my sisters always chose because they felt sorry for them.

“What about you, Ike?” I asked. I didn’t think that Jewish people celebrated Christmas, but maybe they had a holiday round the same time.

“You great lummo! Jews don’t celebrate Christmas.” Ike was laughing. It did me good to see that; he’d been so drawn and serious lately. “Me, I’d be working in my dad’s deli. Just because we don’t celebrate, it doesn’t mean that we can’t help all you goyim do so!”

Even though I could hear the rattle of small-arms fire in the distance and shells bursting a ways off, it was a peaceful moment — one I’ll always remember.

“Boys?” a figure appeared out of the darkness, then crouched down beside us. It was Sergeant Oldham.

I immediately scrambled into a sitting position, ready to spring to my feet and stand to attention.

“No, no, rest easy.” He motioned with his hand that we should stay as we were. “The lieutenant has just got our orders for tomorrow. Brigadier Wallis has ordered D Company to retake Violet Hill and connect with the Grenadiers in Wong Nei Chong Gap.”

Paddy stifled a snort. “Bet they’ll change again before morning, Sarge!”

I froze, waiting for Oldham to explode as he

usually did if he got anything less than the respect he thought he deserved.

“Not this time, Houlihan. We’re definitely going in.” Oldham’s voice lowered. “Now try and get some sleep if you can. We’ll be moving out at first light.”