

THE SERGEANT WITH A HEART OF GOLD



by Raffaella Cortese de Bosis

Sergeant Gander keeps fit by swimming as much as he can. He loves the ocean, as does his whole family, after all. 1940 will mark a turning point in his life. From the Hayden household, where he lived in Newfoundland, Canada, he is transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force base, not far from there. He joins the 1st Battalion of the Royal Rifles of Canada.

In October 1941, the Royal Rifles are stationed at Valcartier base, not far from Quebec City. They receive the order to get ready to leave. Destination: the Pacific. No details. Along with the Royal Rifles, the military force includes the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the soldiers of the "C" Force Headquarters. 2,000 total. Departure is set for the end of the month.

In the meantime, they need to reach Vancouver, by train. A journey of over 3,000 miles, the whole span of Canada! En route, the troops share their stories. They talk about their latest conquests, many of them smoke constantly. Sergeant Gander is among the few who does not smoke. He seems to be sulking, but he is not. That is his expression. After a few sips of beer, he becomes tolerant and does not complain. All adjust to the small space.

They try to imagine what awaits them, the conditions, the dangers. But they are young, they have lots of energy and they certainly do not lose heart.

He is good-natured, but if he gets mad ... better stay out of his way! He feels the need to move about, and in those close quarters it is not easy. He concocts an obstacle course by jumping between one backpack and the next, he is surprisingly nimble. He hears someone whistling upbeat melodies, he does not know that some of his fellow travelers have Italian parents and these melodies are typical of that land. Among the travelers are James Maltese, Tony Caruso, Emilio Bertulli, Sam Di Sensi. Sergeant Gander looks at them cunningly, amused.

The itinerary of this part of the trip includes Montreal, Ottawa, Armstrong ON, Capreol ON, Winnipeg, Melville SK, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Jasper, and Vancouver. Just by looking at the map the voyage is bewildering. But Sergeant Gander is not the type to be bewildered, he is calm and patient. But he does miss the open space. And as soon as the train slows down approaching Montreal, he jumps down the steps and starts running back and forth on the platform crowded with soldiers. Fred Kelly, also with the Royal Rifles, follows suit and does not let him out of his sight. It's hard for him to keep up with the sergeant, he is like a lightning bolt! For Gander these stops are a godsend and he will take advantage of each stop to move about.

Finally, on October 27, they arrive in Vancouver. After a handful of hours, the second leg of the voyage starts: by sea.

In Vancouver, they board two ships: the Winnipegs board Awatea, "Eye of the Dawn" in the Maori language, is a New Zealander ocean liner requisitioned by the British government to transport troops. The Royal Rifles board Prince Robert, an ocean liner requisitioned for the war and repurposed as a war ship.

On the dock, sergeant Gander gazes at the sea: it is his element. He quickly boards the ship, followed closely by Kelly. He gets his bearings fast and finds a way to adjust to the new quarters. He notices the sleeping arrangements: Hammocks made of white cloth. They swing. He isn't too keen on sleeping there. So, the first chance he gets, he settles for a more traditional accommodation. Compared to the train, there is a lot of space here. Although it's very crowded. The ship sails away one cold night in late October.

As the day go by, the temperature becomes mild, then warm, they really hot. The route heads toward Hawaii, but on board they get very little news. On November 2, they arrive in Honolulu. But they cannot disembark! While everyone enjoys a local music show leaning on the side of the ship, Sergeant Gander and his friend Kelly are having a ball: they race on the bridge, which is now almost empty. The ship sets sail again. More days. Hotter temperatures. Flying fish accompany the ship. On November 14, Manila and finally on the 16th, Hong Kong. As the ship enters the port, among all the colorful junks there is sweeping enthusiasm.

They disembark and get a few hours of shore leave. Some get a tour on a rickshaw, others walk bemusedly in the busy streets full of stores, others get a tattoo. "Tattoos? You must be crazy!" thinks Gander.

Suddenly, a wave of aromas never smelled before, unique: spices? cooking? "I wonder what kind of food they eat over here!" he thinks. And continues on, with his self-assured and springy walk.

They are quartered at Nanking Barracks at Camp Sham Shui Po of Kowloon. Finally, Gander can take a shower, a long, fresh shower that energizes him. He is ready for the activities assigned to his regiment which include training and day and night simulations. Gander excels in night operations; he is quiet and stealthy. Many wonder how he is able to walk self-assured and relaxed where there is no shred of light. So they all follow his tracks!!

A few days go by. December 7. Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Japanese launch a surprise attack on the U.S. base. It is a carnage. The U.S. reacts immediately: on December 8, the United States declares war on Japan, as will the Commonwealth countries. Hong Kong was a Commonwealth territory and is immediately invaded by the Japanese. It is December 8, 1941, thus starts the battle of Hong Kong.

With unimaginable ruthlessness, the Japanese, numerically superior, and heavily armed, day after day, crush the allied troops.

The massacre lasts until Christmas. On December 25 is the surrender. The white flag is hoisted. The Allied troops are defeated. The Canadian troops are decimated: 290 are dead, 493 wounded. But the atrocities do not end with the surrender. For many, this is when they start. For over three years, the troops are thrown in Japanese concentration camps. Here the gruesome brutality, famine, forced labor have more than one wish he "had died in the battle!!" Of the roughly 2,000 who had left Canada, 550 never came back.

Back to December 19. It is late at night when the battle of Lye Mun starts. It is an infernal scenario: screams, shootings, heartwrenching wails, explosions. At night, the horror of combat is magnified. Gander even resorts to biting the enemy.

In this long nightmare, Gander notices that the enemy launched a grenade very close to where some wounded Canadians lie. Without giving it any thought, the Sergeant jumps on the grenade, picks it up and runs away so that it doesn't hurt his troops.

Sergeant Gander is torn apart by the explosion. His seven wounded troops are saved.

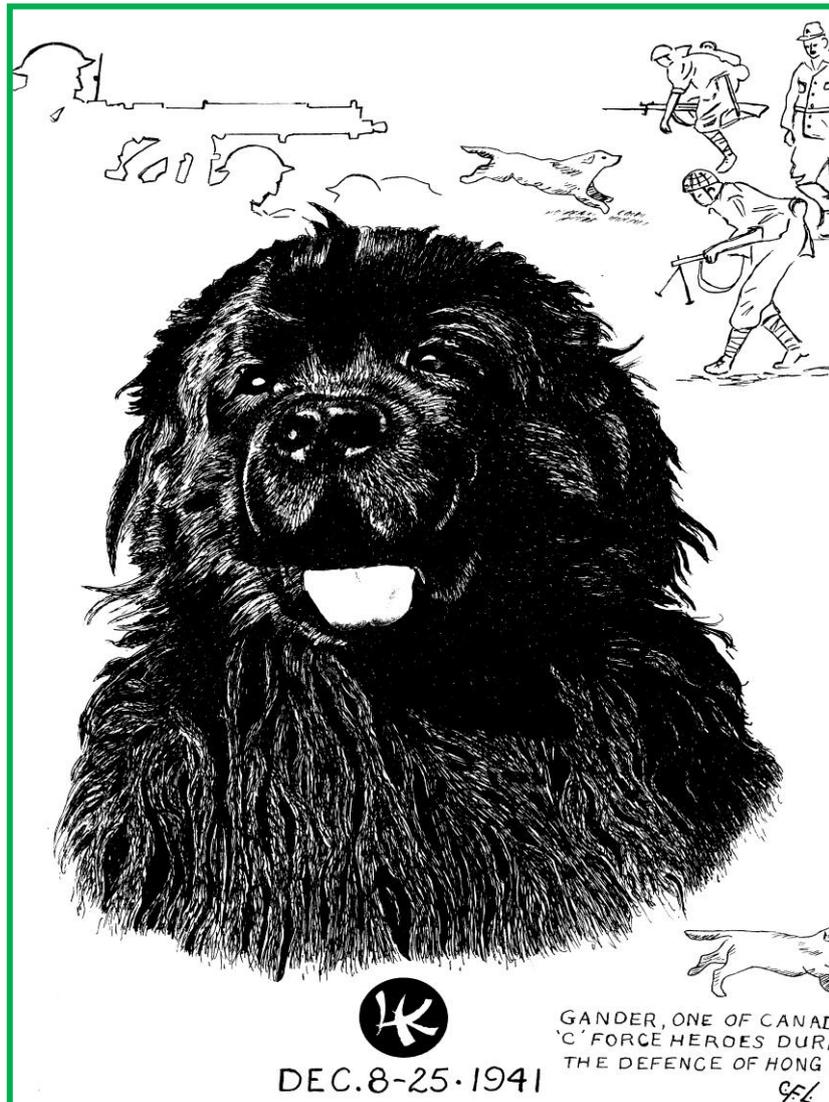
A heroic act!

A few Royal Rifles arrive and try to help the seven wounded soldiers. The least seriously wounded of them, with immense effort, raises his arm, his uniform is in tatters, and searches in his shirt's pocket. His hand shakes, the pain is unbearable: "Wait," he says, "I have his picture ... it was in my pocket.. wait... here it is." Despite his shaking hand, he is able to pull it out of his pocket and gives it to his rescuer.

Here is Sergeant Gander, the large Terranova who became the mascot of the Royal Rifles. He is the hero!

He was awarded the Dickin Medal, equivalent to the Victoria Cross for four-legged heroes.

Rest in peace.



Our gratitude to Charles Frederick Lalonde, author of this drawing

We especially thank the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association www.hkvca.ca

Translated from Italian by Alessandra Cortese de Bosis