

Hong Kong Portuguese Community Artefact Collection Campaign (January 2020)

Hong Kong's Portuguese community settled in Hong Kong more than a century and a half ago, so they have long considered Hong Kong home. During the Second World War, they stood with Hong Kong through thick and thin by fighting in the Battle of Hong Kong. Many were interned in the prisoner-of-war (POW) camps after the surrender of Hong Kong. This article introduces the "round letters", which bear testimony to the suffering they endured during the war. The letters were kept by Mr Ruy Barretto, a member of the fifth generation of his family in Hong Kong.

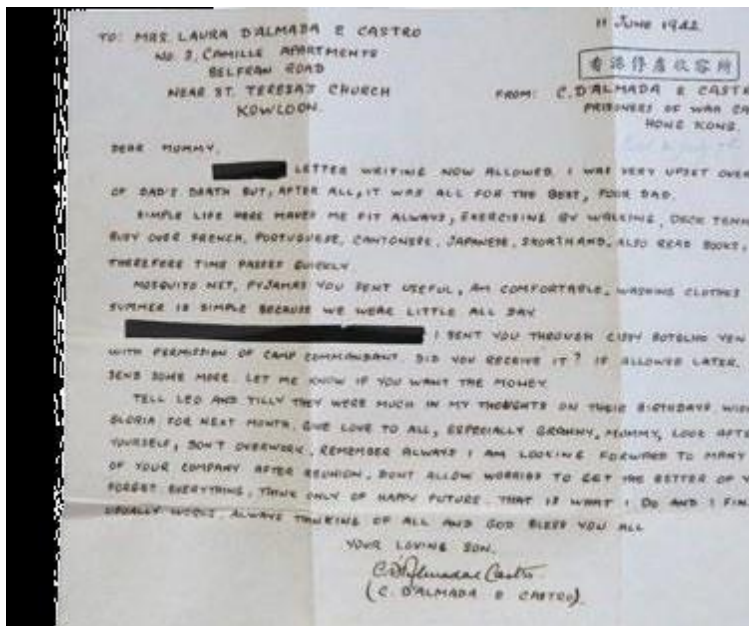
Ruy's uncle, Christopher d'Almada e Castro, known as Bippo to his family and friends, was a captain, who commanded the No. 5 Portuguese Machinegun Company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, which guarded the west part of Hong Kong Island. After the surrender, he was interned in the Sham Shui Po POW camp, and was later moved to the Argyle Street POW camp. As Portugal remained neutral during the war, the local Portuguese soldiers' family members were not interned and were allowed to bring necessities into the camp. To communicate with his family without censorship by the Japanese soldiers, Bippo cut some thin papers into round shapes, wrote secret messages to his family on them and smuggled them out of the camp by stuffing them into the lid of a cod liver oil bottle.

His family was surprised to find the secret messages and smuggled replies in the same way into the POW camp. In her first reply message, his younger sister, Gloria Barretto, wrote humourously, "Your welcome note was much appreciated by all...(after reading the letter) Mum murmured 'Coitado Bip'... We all wonder at your neat writing..."

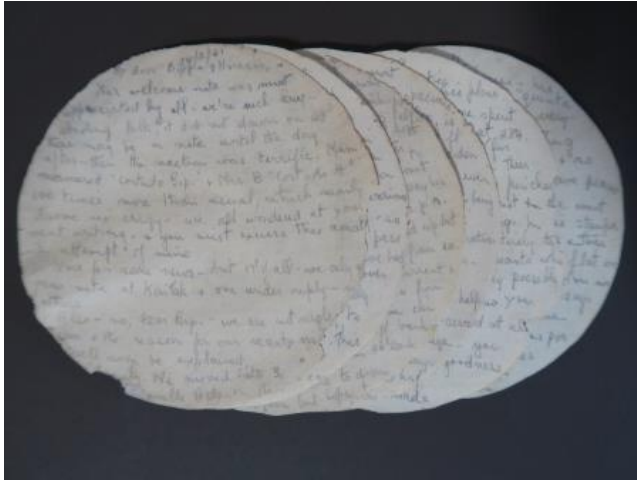
This started the secret messaging between Bippo and his family. Dozens of the round letters have survived to this day about topics such as the current situation of the family, life in the POW camp, Bippo asking Gloria to keep his stamp collections well and to use his money to make ends meet. These secret home letters helped keep up the morale of Bippo and his family to survive the ordeals of internment, separation, disease and scarcity, and gave them hope for the return of peace.



Illustration from an internee about life in the Sham Shui Po POW camp. Inside the hut, there were bed bugs everywhere, making it impossible for the internees to sit or sleep peacefully. They could not get rid of them, so they had to endure them. (Collection of Hong Kong Museum of History).



A letter sent after removal of sensitive content by the Japanese army.



The secret round letters hidden inside the lid of a cod liver oil bottle.



Christopher d'Almada e Castro (left) and his sister Gloria Barretto (right) communicated by way of the secret round letters.