ACTIVE AND MOTIVATED

In Canadian Snow

“Lest We Forget”
A group of nine wounded, injured and ill men and women spent late January and early February attending the annual “Sans Limites” ski and snowboarding camp at Whistler, north of Vancouver, conducted by Soldier On Canada.

This camp has been held for the past 12 years to build confidence, inspire and motivate veterans, through an adaptive snow sports program. It’s a program that has immediate benefits.

“I especially like that I am able to participate as an individual, with dignity and potential, and not my previous role or rank, and certainly not as a bloody diagnosis,” says Wayne Hopkins, who retired as a Squadron Leader from the RAAF after 21 years of military service.

“RSL Active provides a service like no other to ex-serving military personnel.”

The Australians paid for their own international airfares to Canada, while their attendance at the camp was funded by donations from the Five Dock, Auburn and South Lake Macquarie RSL sub-Branches, with support from RSL DefenceCare. Another group of 12 – five serving and seven non-serving veterans – was due to join the camp later in February.
Most of the Vancouver Island adaptive snow sports instructors are retired senior citizens who now dedicate their time and energy to helping veterans to learn and take part in skiing and snowboarding.

“Being active allows you to feel confident, capable, independent and successful in conquering new and sometimes terrifying sports or activities,” Wayne Hopkins explains.

“I experienced both physical and mental health decline due to serious accidents and various events during my service. After being medically discharged I spent a number of years feeling incomplete, without purpose and unable to feel confident in achieving everyday tasks without pain, fear and depression. “My wife and children continue to be the cornerstone to my gaining my health back bit by bit. The inclusive nature of RSL Active has been well received by my family.”

Attendance at the 2017 camps has continued to strengthen the close cooperative bonds between the RSL, its adaptive sports network, and the Canadian Forces Soldier On “Sans Limites” program.
It was seventy-five years ago this February that Singapore fell to the Japanese who had made their way down through then Malaya, after a couple of months of fighting the British, Australian and Indian forces. The Allies surrendered in Malaya and the last of their men left for Singapore on 1 February 1942. They were hoping to distance themselves from the bitter fighting with the Japanese, but on 8 February the determined enemy landed and began its advance on the battle-weary Allies. The Japanese bombed and shelled Singapore, and heavy fighting took place on the ground. The Battle of Singapore really lasted only a week but was “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”, according to Winston Churchill.

About 15,000 Australians were taken prisoner; another 1800 had been killed or were listed as missing in action. By the end of the war many of those men were among the 8000 POWs who died in captivity.

Today the small island feels like a well-organised fusion of East and West. In January red lanterns adorn buildings all over the country for the Chinese Lunar New Year, but as you continue gazing up towards the sky, the incredibly tall apartment blocks tower over you like something out of a sci-fi film. They’ve embraced Starbucks and McDonald’s,
but traditional Chinese, Indian and Malay cuisine can be found all over the island. The colossal high rises are a relatively new addition to the skyline, and if you do a little exploring you discover fantastic old colonial buildings and traditional Chinese architecture sprinkled amongst the daring, modern architecture. Delve a little more into their history and one discovers the city-state was very much caught in the middle of the Pacific War, which affected soldiers and civilians alike.

The Japanese occupied Singapore until September 1945. Around 7500 Allied troops were killed and an estimated 50,000 people died during the occupation. The Civilian War Memorial, a stone’s throw from the famous Raffles Hotel, commemorates the everyday victims of Singapore’s occupation. The four pillars specifically remember the four main races of the Singapore people: Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. It’s a stunning tribute to the thousands of innocent lives lost during the occupation. Rising over 65 metres, even against the imposing backdrop of office blocks and shopping centres, it is a prominent feature of this part of town. The Memorial was built after mass civilian graves were discovered in 1962, and is built over the exhumed remains of these graves. Singapore is a small island with limited space, but it’s gratifying to see that they’ve dedicated virtually a whole block to this memorial. It isn’t overshadowed or hard to find. The memorial stands tall, surrounded by thick green grass and well-manicured trees, highlighting the importance of remembering the toll that the occupation took on Singapore’s civilian population.

Tucked away in the north-west corner of Singapore, away from the busy city, malls and motorways is Kranji War Cemetery. When the Japanese invaded Singapore, they did so near where the Cemetery stands today. During the occupation, a prisoner of war camp was set up at Kranji and, after the Japanese finally left in 1945, a small cemetery was established by its prisoners. Graves from all over Singapore were moved to Kranji where 4461 Commonwealth casualties of World War Two now lie. More than 850 of these are unidentifiable. It is a beautiful place to visit and it’s impossible not to be affected by its scale. Rows upon rows of tombstones line the lush green hill. The blazing heat of Singapore is hard to escape, giving you just an inkling of what it must have been like fighting and suffering here during the war. I visited Kranji with my husband and one-year-old daughter and as she ran through the grass, sheltered from the sun by the beautiful big trees at the top of the cemetery, I wandered about, looking at Australians’ tombstones, and realised that she is part of yet another generation owing its freedom to the supreme sacrifice of so many, laid to rest all over the world. People of many different nationalities are buried at Kranji. The Singapore of today is the same. It’s a melting pot of people from all over the world, here for different reasons, enjoying a small part of the Pacific ultimately made free by the sacrifice of so many Allied soldiers.

Another major historical place I visited was Reflections at Bukit Chandu, an interpretive centre housed in an old colonial-style building which had been...
used by the British during the war to store supplies. It sits at the top of a steep, winding road on the southern coast of Singapore, enshrouded in jungle, and is close to where the 48-hour Battle of Pasir Panjang took place in mid-February 1942, towards the end of the Battle of Singapore. Members of the Malay Regiment defended the Pasir Panjang Ridge against the Japanese only a couple of days before the Allies surrendered. By all accounts it was a fierce, violent battle. The Malay Regiment was outnumbered and 159 of them lost their lives. “They started fighting the Japanese with just rifles virtually”, recounted Lt. Penrod V. Dean, 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion of the 8th Australian Division in an interview commissioned by the centre in 2001. “They fought very hard, but for every Malay soldier there was about 10 or 12 Japanese soldiers”. Lt Dean had become separated from his battalion and joined the Malay Regiment in their defence of Pasir Panjang and penned his own incredible story of escape and torture in the book Singapore Samurai.

Reflections encourages visitors to consider the plight of all sorts of people caught up in the chaos of the Battle of Singapore. There are stories of children who had their families massacred, and an audio account of the experience of a prisoner of war, imprisoned for three and a half years, tortured, “trying to live knowing that at any second of any day someone could do something terrible to you. And not because you were doing anything wrong”. These stories are a powerful reminder of the toll the fight for Singapore took on both soldiers and civilians. The exhibition is also peppered with interesting facts, perhaps unknown to the average visitor. Two old bicycles sit on the ground floor of the building next to a statue of Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, the senior officer of the British forces in Malaya. “Bicycles, similar to these displayed, played a critical role in the Japanese advance down to the Malayan Peninsula”, reads a sign underneath some reproduced photographs. “Japanese Army planners adopted the bicycle as their main and preferred means of transport for their troops invading Malaya and Singapore”. When you read such information, you get a sense of the ease with which the Japanese advanced through this part of Asia. They invaded on bicycles: just how unprepared were the Allied forces? It’s implied at Reflections that the British and their allies, including Australia, were ill prepared and had underestimated the might and determination of their enemy to continue their southward march.

Upon walking the streets of the Art Deco neighbourhood of Tiong Bahru, I came across the one of the last remaining air raid shelters in Singapore. It sits beneath an old public housing building, with just a few simple signs outside indicating its presence. The signs explain that residents used the shelter during the air raids conducted by the Japanese but that it was otherwise used as a place for children to play. Old newspaper articles republished on these signs indicate that there was some reluctance from the British to build such shelters and that residents were encouraged to build their own, using plans from the British, or to place a mattress underneath a table for protection in the event of a raid. The Tiong Bahru neighbourhood was lucky to have this shelter. It was also the only one purpose-built underneath public housing.

After the British surrendered on 15 February 1942 at the Old Ford Factory which had become the headquarters for the Japanese, 130,000 people became their prisoners. It was a huge disaster for the Allies, and marked the beginning of over three and a half years of not just occupation, but pain, suffering, torture and death. Walking around the Singapore of today there is very little evidence of this war-torn past but what you find when you do a little digging is fascinating.

Seventy-five years after Singapore fell to the Japanese it is again an important time to reflect on the devastation that the Second World War brought to so many parts of the world, and the brave, desperate fight that thousands of Australians engaged in to ensure the security of Asia-Pacific, and our own island home.