

RE- LIVING WORLD WAR II

War ruins and the memories
of veterans are all that remain
to remind us of World War II in
Hong Kong

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It is a fine, bright Sunday afternoon on Mount Davis in the west of Hong Kong Island. The remains of a Second World War (WWII) gun battery sit on top of the hill. The cannon and the guns have long been removed. Only a cement base is left, with weeds pushing out from the cracks and vines growing up the sides.

Along the hilly trail, barracks and bunkers can be seen everywhere. There are rusty window bars, faded walls camouflaged by vegetation and rooms daubed with graffiti. During the war, soldiers temporarily lived in these barracks, sleeping in hammocks.

Mount Davis is only one of the many remaining defensive structures from WWII in Hong Kong. Batteries, pillboxes, bunkers and tunnels are scattered throughout the mountains in the city, from Hong Kong Island to the New Territories. Besides Mount Davis, the main sites include the Shing Mun Redoubt above Tsuen Wan, the Lei Yuen Mun Fort in Shau Kei Wan, and the Pinewood Battery within Lung Fu Shan Country Park.

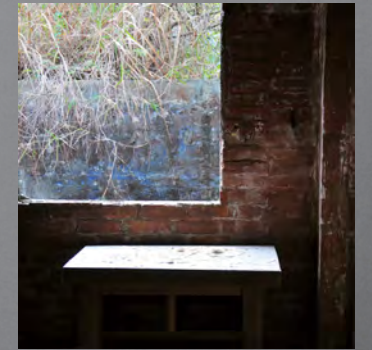
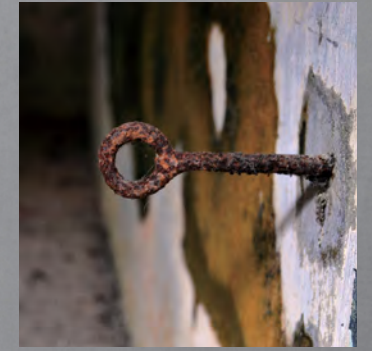
Despite the abundance of these historic remains, not many people in Hong Kong know about their existence. Compared with other historical sites, the war heritage on Mount Davis is relatively easy to access. During *Varsity's* visit, there were a few groups of young people in military outfits. Some were playing war games, whilst others posed in front of cameras.

Dressed up in an American WWII uniform and carrying a fake gun, Johnny Chak was engaged in a "battle" with his friends. In his 30s, Chak is obsessed with the history of WWII. He collects military uniforms and equipment, and wears his collections for photo shoots in his spare time. The barracks on Mount Davis is one of his favourite sites.

"Boys are always interested in wars, but we also like history," Chak says. "Since we are involved in dressing up in soldiers' uniforms, it is inevitable that history comes into play."



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The remains of WWII battlefields are not the only place where history is preserved. For the veterans, history is always carried in their memories.

Carlos Jacinto Pintos is an 85-year-old veteran. He was born to a Portuguese father and a Chinese mother in Hong Kong. When Japan declared war on British Hong Kong, Pintos was only 12 years old. "I was in La Salle. I saw the plane coming and there was smoke," he says of the day the Japanese fighter planes arrived.

When the war came, everyone had to take on his or her own responsibility. "It's time to go and you have to go. You cannot say no," Pintos says.

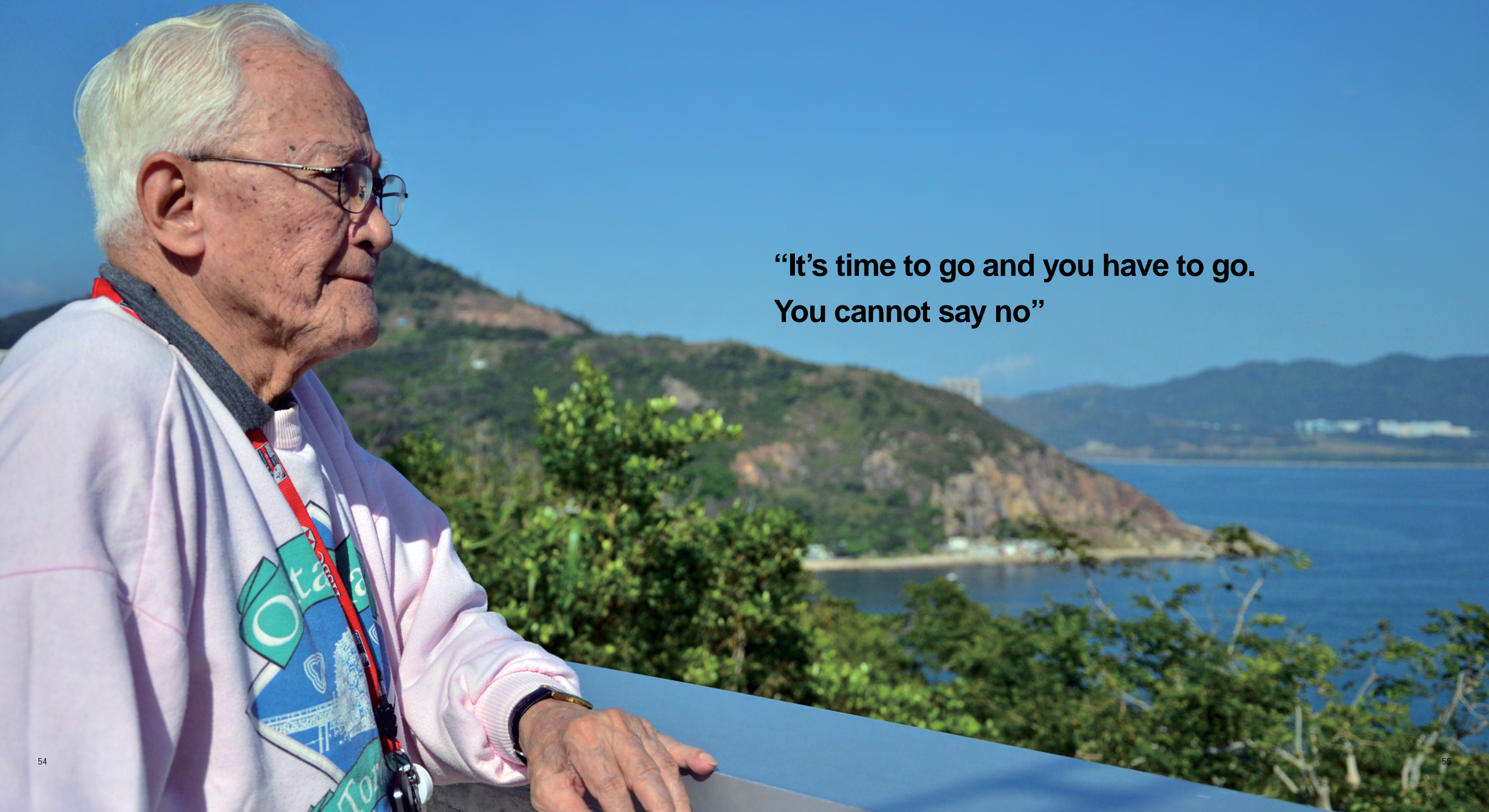
Back then, Pintos was too young to fight, but his 18-year-old brother was in the Hong Kong Regiment (the Volunteers). He fought in the war and was made a prisoner of war (POW), interred at the Sham Shui Po camp. Although he managed to survive the war, he died when he was in his 50s, his family thinks ill-treatment in the POW camps contributed to his premature death.

In 1953, Pintos followed in his brother's footsteps and joined the Volunteers. He served for 44 years till the handover, and worked his way up through the ranks from a private to a Sergeant Major. His duties included taking part in border patrols and parades.


Army life has given him glory, discipline and the pride of being a serviceman. But during these years, he has also seen his brother and his brother's comrades-in-arms pass away one after another. He always shows up at the funerals, to salute them for one last time.

Today, there are only around 15 WWII veterans still alive in Hong Kong. Nearly all of them are aged over 90 and can no longer hear or walk well. The post-war veterans are also aging, with the oldest being in their late 80s.

Most veterans cling onto the memories of service. In order to provide a platform for the 1,300 or so veterans to preserve their ties and comradeship, the Hong Kong Ex-Servicemen's Association (HKESA) was established in 1997. On the last Friday of each month, former servicemen gather in a club-house to play mahjong, drink beer and reminisce about the "good old days" in the army with their old buddies and colleagues.



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But it seems like Hong Kong's experience of the Second World War is only fascinating to history lovers and veterans. Albert Lam Ping-wai, the chairman of HKESA and a former officer, says the young in Hong Kong do not know much about the battle of Hong Kong, nor do they show much interest in its history. In his opinion, the government does little to help the HKESA.

"There is a lot of war heritage that remains in Hong Kong. But the government is not doing enough," says Lam. "A lot of passionate veterans want to repair and preserve [the heritage] very badly, but they don't have the money needed."

Watching the defensive structures deteriorate and become covered up by plants, Lam feels sad and helpless. At present, only the old Lei Yuen Mun Fort is renovated regularly because it is now the site of the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence.

However, not everyone believes the government will do a good job in preserving these historical sites. "The bad thing is that they don't care, but the good thing is that since they don't take care of it, the heritage still exists," says the WWII re-enactor Chak. Chak says there are many examples of government-led attempts to save Hong Kong's heritage that have been less than ideal.

The tangible WWII heritage is still with us, from Mount Davis to Shing Mun, while the intangible memories are always in the hearts of veterans. However, it is easy to forget both the historical structures and veterans in this peaceful era in Hong Kong where war seems to be so distant.

As the sun sets, war gamers and military enthusiasts on Mount Davis have left. The mountain returns to silence. The old battery stands still, bunkers remain empty, paint falls off the walls and the wind blows, carrying the memories of the brotherhood and comradeship of the old veterans. 

Edited by Nectar Gan