The Defence of Hong Kong
December 1941

Terry Copp

The series of disasters which marked the opening months of the war with Japan were unprecedented and disorienting giving rise to conspiracy theories and the search for scape goats. The destruction of the battleships at Pearl Harbour initially eclipsed all other catastrophes but even as President Roosevelt's opponents in Congress demanded an inquiry and circulated stories about how he had lured the Japanese into war, those who could think clearly recognized that the surprise attack, by uniting the American people behind the war, was really a defeat for Japan.[1] When Hitler, in one of his many blunders, declared war on the United States the Pacific war was merged into the larger struggle. Since the US Navy's aircraft carriers were undamaged, its submarine arm intact, and the base at Pearl Harbor operational, the Chief of the General Staff, General George C. Marshall, was able to expand the American war effort without reversing the Europe-first policy to which both he and President Roosevelt were committed.

If America emerged from the tragedy of Pearl Harbor stronger in every way that mattered the same could not be said for the British Empire and its Commonwealth. The sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* on 10 December 1941, the surrender of Hong Kong on 25 December and the collapse of resistance in Malaya and Singapore in early 1942 marked the beginning of the end of the British Empire in the Far East. In 90 days forces under British command had lost two battleships, 200 aircraft and 166,000 men, 130,000 of whom were taken prisoner. The Empire had been humiliated, particularly in Malaya and Singapore, when "a garrison that outnumbered the attackers by more than five to two... was hounded to utter destruction in seventy days."[2]

The campaign in Malaya and the fall of Singapore have been the subject of many books and much name-calling. The best accounts clearly establish that the causes of the collapse were rooted in the Empire's failure to enlist, equip and train armed forces capable of carrying out the obligations and strategic commitments considered vital in London. Unfortunately, British commanders, in seeking to explain operational failure, chose to single out Commonwealth and Indian forces for criticism.[3] The Australians in Singapore and the Canadians in Hong Kong bore the brunt of this criticism which was renewed in the early 1990s with the release of the uncensored versions of Lord Wavell's *Report on Operations in Malaya and Singapore, June 1942*[4] and Major-General C. Maltby's official account of the defence of Hong Kong.[5]

The controversies stirred up by these documents did not serve the interests of the Empire-Commonwealth in the 1940s and did nothing to encourage Australians or Canadians to cherish ties with Britain in the 1990s, but they have been a boon for historians who wish to know more about what happened in 1941. In the last days before the surrender of Hong Kong orders were given to destroy documents, including message logs and War Diaries, which might provide assistance to the enemy. Thus the basic record of events was lost. But once settled in prisoner of war camps the senior British staff officers began to compile, "from memory," not only a narrative but a listing of events which was declared to be "morally the war diary of Fortress Headquarters."[6]

It did not take long for rumours to spread about this endeavour and Canadian officers, convinced they and their troops would be made

scapegoats, responded. Major George Trist, who served as adjutant of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, wrote his *Report on the Part Played by the Winnipeg Grenadiers in the Defence of Hong Kong* in April 1942 while he was at North Point Camp. The report begins:

> Two important factors have decided me to compile this report without further delay and while still a prisoner of war... The first and most urgent one is the necessity for a very accurate recording of events as they occurred. This would not have so important but for the fact that it has become very evident that we (The Canadian Forces) are being blamed by the Imperial troops for the fall of Hong Kong. And while it is not definitely known that the Imperial Staff will adopt this attitude in their official report every precaution must be taken to ensure that any attempt to make "C" Force the scape goat is adequately challenged by a submission of the facts while they are still fresh in the memory.[7]

The Royal Rifles compiled even more extensive accounts of their activities[8] and it is this kind of material that the historian must use in reconstructing the events of December 1941. It is therefore necessary to proceed carefully. It is not difficult to ask questions about the defence of Hong Kong it is just answers that are hard to come by.

In 1941 the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, consisting of the island and the leased territories, had a population of 1.7 million about half of whom were recent refugees from the war in China. The population of European descent did not exceed 25,000, including the military garrison. The cities of Victoria and Kowloon accounted for most of this total but as many as 150,000 lived afloat on Junks and Sampans. The Japanese had conquered the adjacent area of mainland China in October 1938[9] and by December 1941 the Japanese 23rd Army in South China deployed four divisions with substantial artillery as well as air and naval units.[10]

The British government did not believe that Hong Kong could survive a determined Japanese attack and began evacuating European women and children in 1940. This decision, coupled with other problems in administering a colony deluged with refugees, led to charges of favouritism and corruption and, by the fall of 1941, Hong Kong was a deeply divided community. The Chinese population felt little attachment to the colonial authorities though they were at least preferable to the Japanese.[11]

Compulsory military service was introduced for male British subjects, of European birth, while those of Portuguese extraction were allowed to volunteer. By 1941 the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) consisted of seven infantry companies, five artillery batteries, five machine gun companies and an armoured car platoon.[12] The Hong Kong "volunteers" were to supplement the garrison of four infantry battalions; the 2nd Royal Scots, the 1st Middlesex (MG) and two Indian Army units 2/14 Punjabs and 5/7 Rajputs. Coastal Regiments of the Royal Artillery manned 29 guns, mostly 6-inch howitzers. The air resources, three Vildebeeste Torpedo Bombers and two Walrus amphibians were of no consequence. Three of the four destroyers based on Hong Kong were ordered to sea before 7 December leaving HMS *Thracian* plus four gunboats and eight motor torpedo boats.[13]

The basic plan for the defence of Hong Kong had been developed in 1937. A defensive line including pillboxes was built from Gin Drinkers Bay to Tide Cove, the narrowest, point on the Kowloon peninsula. After the Japanese occupation of Canton plans were changed: the Gin Drinkers line was abandoned. No attempt would be made to defend the mainland.[14]

Giving up the mainland and defending the Island made neither political nor military sense. There was less than a kilometreseparating Kowloon from Victoria and the main water reservoirs were in the New Territories. Hong Kong had 130 days reserve of food but there were bound to be serious water shortages in any protracted siege.[15] It was these difficulties that led Major-General Edward Grassett to propose obtaining additional troops from Canada and as soon as the new commander, Major-General C.M. Maltby, was informed that "C" Force would be sent to Hong Kong he resurrected the 1938 plan and began to restore the Gin Drinkers line. [see map Hong Kong: The Mainland]

Maltby, an officer of the Indian Army who had commanded the Staff College at Quetta arrived in Hong Kong in July 1941 during the middle of a local crisis provoked by Japanese attacks on Hong Kong-based boats and the international crisis provoked by Japan's

Hong Kong: The Mainland

occupation of southern Indo-China. Maltby and the colony's governor, Sir Mark Young, do not seem to have acted with any sense of urgency, apparently convinced that war with Japan was unlikely and that Japanese troops were poorly trained. Maltby spoke to the Canadian officers shortly after their arrival and according to George Trist told them:

> the Japanese had only about 5,000 troops with very little artillery support... their troops were ill-equipped and not used to night fighting... their aircraft were for the most part obsolete and their pilots very mediocre. [they were] unable to do dive bombing due to poor eyesight.[16]

Brigadier C. Wallis, a British Indian Army officer, who commanded the Mainland Brigade, told an interviewer that,

> The lack of any real belief that war was pending had astonished him. Col. Newnham GSO1, always regarded suggestions that the Japanese might be a serious threat as unpatriotic or even insubordinate. Brig. Wallis had tried to introduce into mainland schemes, tactics which would prepare for an enemy attack other than by the expected main road method. He spoke of the difficulty of getting the civil administration to release civilian property for the building of MG emplacements etc. The administration felt that this would be done during a "precautionary stage" which actually of course did not materialize.[17]

These post-conflict accounts are supported by the contemporary intelligence reports from Hong Kong which reflect little concern with military action against the colony and an optimistic view of events in Japan. The November summary, for example, doubted that Japanese preparations were more than a "general tightening up."[18]

Before condemning Maltby and his staff for what proved to be uninformed views bolstered by racist stereotypes it would be well to try and understand why British and American commanders consistently underrated the military effectiveness of the Japanese forces and doubted their willingness to begin a war against a major military power. The Japanese army had been involved in a military campaign to conquer China since 1938. Three years later the "China incident", as the Japanese called it, was far from over. Chaing Kai-Shek's nationalist army was intact and apparently growing in strength. The Japanese puppet government of Wang-Ching-Wei had lost what little credibility it had begun with. The failure to crush Chinese resistance, despite deploying 1. 5 million troops on the mainland, did not suggest great military prowess.

More important in western eyes was the record of the Japanese army in clashes with the Soviets. The Red Army had crushed Japanese

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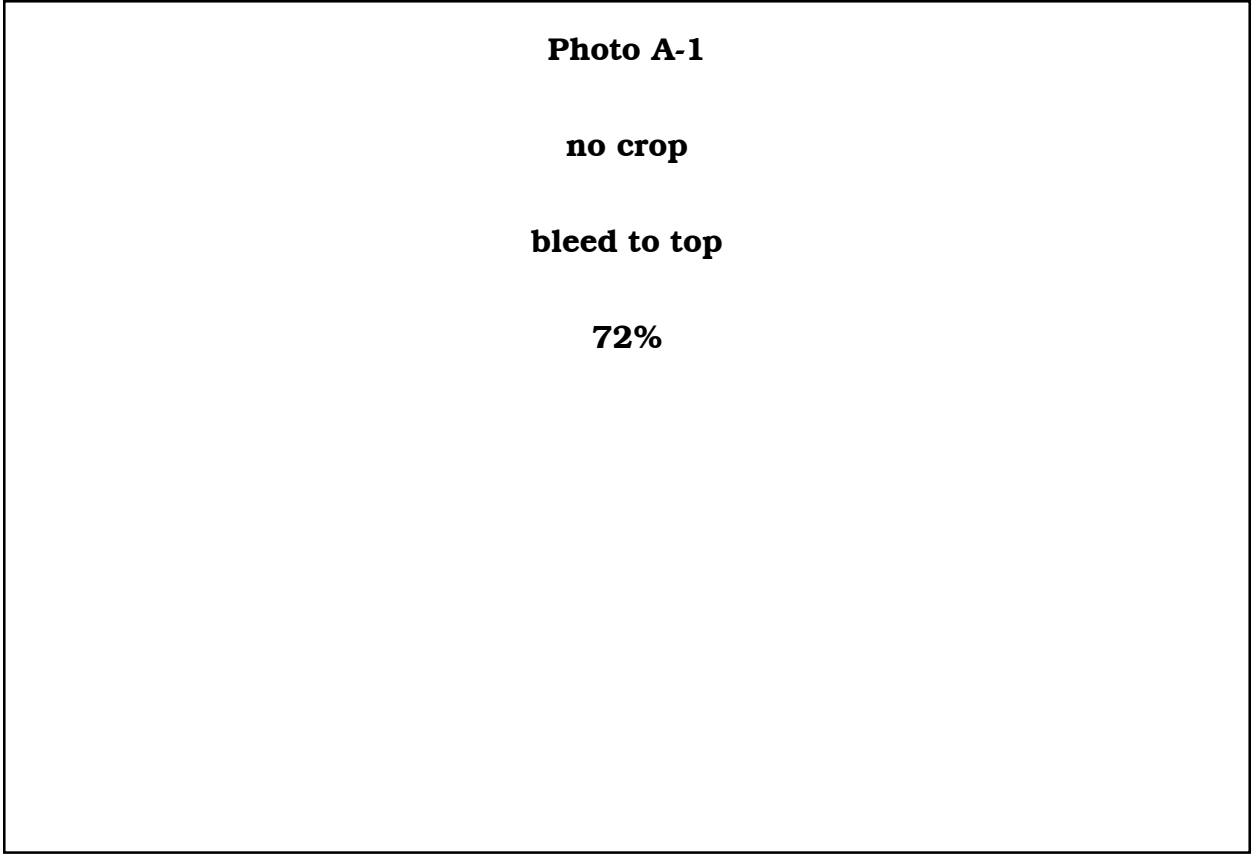

Japanese troops line up on the dock before shipping out to China, ca.1939.

advances in 1938 and again in 1939 when, under the command of General Georgi Zhukov, the Soviets humiliated the Japanese army inflicting 11,000 casualties on a force of 15,000. These defeats had led to some reorganization of the Japanese army, especially the development of armoured units, but little had been accomplished by the fall of 1941.[19]

Supplementing this general view of the poor performance of the Japanese army was an exaggerated belief in the power of Chiang Kai-Shek's forces. Much was made of the presence of three Chinese "armies" to the west of Canton and both the War Office and General Maltby seem to have believed that these forces would attack the Japanese and come to the relief of Hong Kong.[20] Maltby, like his counterparts in Singapore and Manila, was also unimpressed with the Japanese air arm which was said to be poorly trained and equipped with obsolete aircraft. It is not easy to understand how such a view remained dominant in military intelligence circles when the 'Zero' had been in operational use in China for over a year. One can only note that British intelligence on the Japanese armed forces was full of assumptions and little hard evidence.[21]

By the end of November 1941 the international press was freely speculating about an imminent Japanese offensive in South East Asia. Maltby ordered that certain precautionary measures be taken but as late as 7 December he was reassuring London that reports of Japanese strength in the Canton area were "deliberately fostered by the Japanese who, to judge from the defensive preparations around Canton and in the frontier area appeared distinctly nervous of being attacked."[22]

These extraordinary misjudgements may account for the lack of urgency in the final preparations for the defence of Hong Kong. When Maltby reactivated the 1938 defence plan the Gin Drinkers line had fallen into disrepair and "much work was needed to make the line fully operational."[23] The Shing Mun Redoubt, a 12-acre network of pillboxes, concrete fire trenches, underground shelters and an artillery observation post, which overlooked both roads to Kowloon, was restored to use but the troops who would occupy it were held in training camps until mid-November pending the arrival of the Canadians.[24]

If their was little sense of urgency in Hong Kong there was even less in London where Churchill and the War Office insisted that war with Japan was unlikely. As late as 16 November the British War Cabinet continued to maintain that, "in the absence of extreme danger in the Far East," priority should be given to the Middle East where General Auchinleck's offensive was

about to begin. At that meeting Churchill insisted "that it would be a grave strategic error to move forces to the Far East."[25]

When Churchill made this comment the War Cabinet was debating the reinforcement of Malaya and Singapore, Hong Kong was not mentioned, but military preparations in that colony were severely hampered by the generally low priority assigned to all Far Eastern matters. However, two issues of some importance to the defence of the colony could have been resolved without any impact upon the campaign in North Africa. The first was the recruiting of a battalion of Chinese volunteers to serve under British officers. Authority was not sought until October 1941 and then took one month to grant. Recruits were required to be 5' 7" tall which eliminated most of the first 600 volunteers who appeared.[26] The second problem was the shortage of ammunition for the 2" and 3" mortars which was so grave that preliminary firing "could seldom be carried out,"[27] so neither practice nor the registration of targets was possible. The arrival of the Canadians, who had been informed that they would be supplied with mortar bombs in Hong Kong, meant that the available supply had

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Right & Below: Troops of "C" Force en route to the Sham Shui Po Barracks, located on the mainland of Hong Kong, 16 November 1941.

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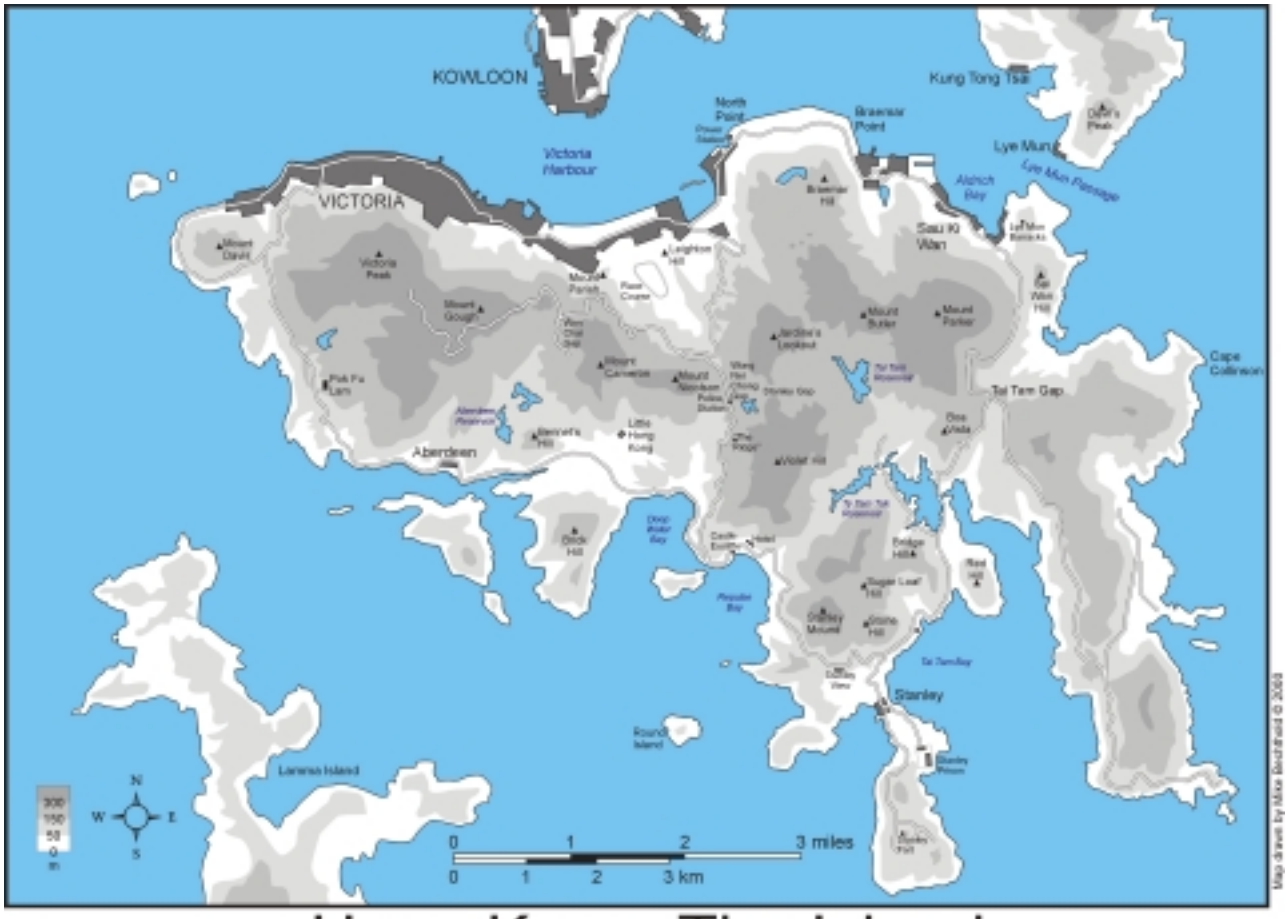


Hong Kong: The Island

to be spread even more thinly. As General Maltby was to note in his Dispatch, mortar ammunition "in any appreciable quantity did not arrive until November and then only 70 rounds per battalion for war and practice... the two inch mortar situation was worse."[28]

The arrival of the Canadians allowed Maltby to begin implementing his defence plans and the three battalions of the "Mainland Brigade" under Brigadier C. Wallis moved to the Gin Drinkers Line to begin digging in and wiring the positions. The Canadians were to serve together on Hong Kong Island under their own commander, Brig. John Lawson, who was also nominally in command of the 1st Middlesex Regiment, a machine gun battalion which was committed to manning 72 concrete pillboxes ringing the island. The two Canadian battalions were quartered at the barracks in Kowloon on the mainland and carried out "two 48 hour manning exercises" of designated areas on the island.[29]

Were there alternatives to this defensive scheme which were within the resources and capacities of the garrison? It appears that Maltby's dispositions suffer from the classic problem of a perimeter defence where one is weak everywhere. It is not second guessing to suggest that a defensive plan which places all battalions in line and provides a single company as a brigade reserve would not have won high marks at the Quetta Staff College which General Maltby directed. Is there an element of fatalism about these dispositions? Or are we examining preparations for a battle which Maltby was convinced would never take place?

For the people and garrison of the colony war began at 0800 hours on 8 December several hours later than Pearl Harbor and the Japanese landings in Malaya. The first air attack destroyed the five RAF aircraft which had been ordered not to take off unless the opportunity to attack a capital ship or a cruiser developed.[30] The Japanese ground attack was quickly underway with three infantry regiments, nine battalions, supported by three mountain artillery battalions, advancing on a broad front. Demolitions and rear guard "commando" actions imposed only minor delays on the Japanese and by dawn on 9 December they were within sight of the main British defences. Brig. Wallis felt obliged to commit his only reserve to plug a gap in the line so the thinly held perimeter was all that stood in the way of the Japanese.[31]

It may be important to note that information about the Chinese nationalist intentions reached Maltby during the first day. The British military mission in Chungking reported that operations to relieve Hong Kong would begin on 1 January though a postponement to 10 January might be necessary.[32] Whatever Maltby may have thought of the Chinese role before 9 December he must have now realized that it could have little influence on the struggle to defend Hong Kong.

Everything now depended upon holding the Gin Drinkers Line but the key position, the Shing Mun Redoubt, fell to an improvised night attack by a Japanese infantry battalion. The Japanese evidence mentions stubborn resistance but it is evident that the silent night attack achieved surprise and the position was quickly occupied. The comment of one Royal Scots officer on the events of the night may be quoted:

> I never met anyone who knew the redoubt…who believed it would be held with a force of less than one company. During the hours of darkness…it was without any value whatsoever- a large isolated position spread across a hillside, its total armament a few widely-separated machine guns laid to fire along fixed lines.[33]

These words were of course written in hindsight but it is not easy to understand how Brigadier Wallis imagined a single, widely-dispersed platoon could resist a night attack. Wallis himself claimed, in a postwar interview, that "he had continually pointed out the need for reserve forces" but had been overruled.[34]

Wallis "urged the Commanding Officer of the Royal Scots to counterattack at first light."[35] How this was to be accomplished with a half-strength company previously committed to its own sector was not clear and the CO declined to carry out the Brigadier's request. Maltby then ordered a company of the Winnipeg Grenadiers to the mainland to serve as a brigade reserve.[36] But the loss of the redoubt seems to have shaken his confidence and he issued a warning order to prepare for the evacuation of the mainland at 1000 hours on 10 December. The Japanese maintained pressure on the British forces and air attacks "continued spasmodically throughout the day" but the defences were still intact when Maltby decided to "evacuate the Mainland except for the Devil's Peak position…" under cover of darkness that night.[37]

Something very close to panic set in during the evacuation, not among the troops or even the civilian population but at Fortress Headquarters. When evacuation was ordered the plan was to hold the Devil's Peak and two companies of the Rajputs moved to the Ma Lau Tong position without interference. The Royal Scots, with the Winnipeg company, the Punjab battalion and the balance of the Rajputs withdrew together with the field artillery and armoured cars. While this retreat to the island was underway the Japanese army's 229th Regiment moved cautiously forward making contact with the Rajputs at 1300 hours on 12 December. The Japanese, encouraged by the ease with which they had overcome the main defensive line, attacked the Rajputs without prearranged artillery support and were beaten off with some of the heaviest casualties of the campaign.[38]

Maltby's response to this was to withdraw the Rajputs to the Hai Wan position shortening the line and allowing him to bring one Rajput company and the field artillery to the island. These moves were safely accomplished during the night of 12/13 December but Maltby now decided to evacuate the remaining Rajputs dug-in at Devil's Peak despite Brig. Wallis' protests.[39] In his Dispatch Maltby stated "that it was more important to have the Rajputs together to hold its sector of the Island defences"[40] than to control Devil's Peak, a judgement which few observers would share.

What comments may reasonably be offered about the first stage of the defence of Hong Kong? The British official historian noted that "judged by hopes and expectations the withdrawal was premature."[41] C.P. Stacey, the Canadian official historian wrote "the defence of Hong Kong had begun very badly."[42] Neither author developed any specific critique of the plans or their execution. General Maltby, who was well aware that his actions would be scrutinized, placed a good deal of the blame on the Royal Scots whose fighting qualities had "not inspired him." Needless to say, he offered no comment on his own performance.

The most likely explanation for Maltby's behaviour during the five days of the mainland battle is that he assumed the real battle for Hong Kong would be fought in defence of the island and that he would need all available troops for

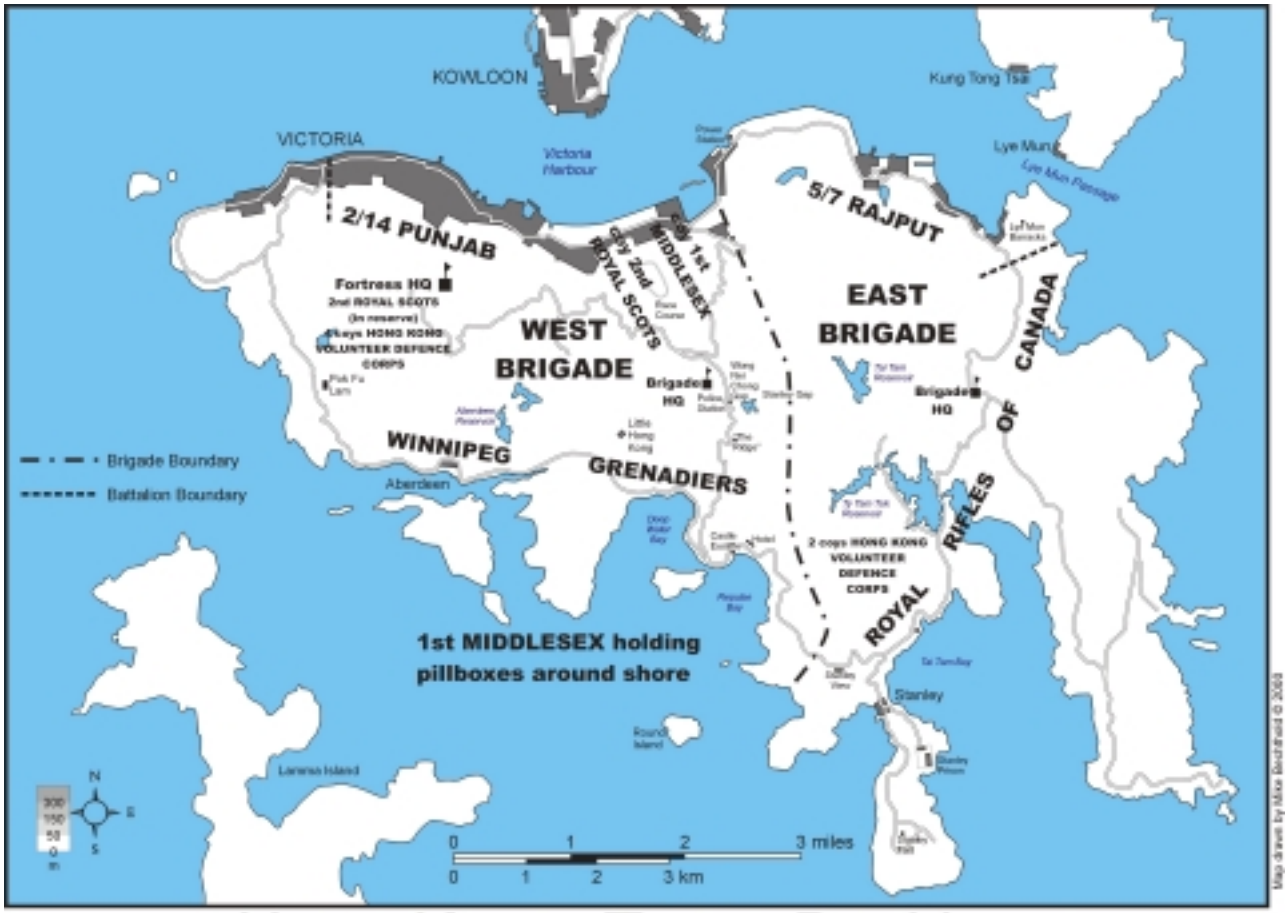
that task. How precisely he proposed to defend the island is another matter which we shall shortly examine. We must also note the impact of events in the wider world. By 11 December the garrison of Hong Kong knew of the fate of the American fleet and that night the BBC announced the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. Any chance of assistance for Hong Kong had disappeared.

The Japanese commander, Lieutenant-General Takashi Saki heard the same news and, given the haste of the British retreat to the island, assumed that the enemy might now capitulate. The text of the Japanese ultimatum of 13 December 1941 read:

> Since our troops have joined battle I have gained possession of the Kowloon Peninsula despite the good fighting qualities of your men, and my Artillery and Air Force, which are ready to crush all parts of the Island, now await my order. Your Excellency can see what will happen to the Island and I cannot keep silent about it. You have all done your duty in defending Hong Kong so far, but the result of the coming battle is plain, and further resistance will lead to the annihilation of a million good citizens and to such sadness as I can hardly bear to see. If Your Excellency would accept an offer to start negotiations for the surrender of Hong Kong under certain conditions, it will be honourable. If not, I, 'repressing my tears', am obliged to take action to overpower your forces.[43]

This was a political rather than a military question and Sir Mark Young, the Governor of the Colony replied "acknowledging the spirit in which this communication is made but he is unable to in any circumstances to hold any meeting or parley on the subject of the surrender of Hong Kong." For public consumption a more strident reply claiming the colony "was strong enough to resist all attempts at invasion"[44] was issued though its is unlikely anyone believed it.

The stage was therefore set for the invasion of the island. Maltby's dispositions to meet the expected attack are illustrated in the map Hong Kong: Troop Positions. Once again it is impossible to ignore the very serious problems apparent in these arrangements. Maltby placed his four full strength infantry battalions plus the Hong Kong volunteers in an extended perimeter defence designating the Royal Scots, who had lost a quarter of their rifle strength and a good deal of their confidence, as fortress reserve. He divided the island into two sectors, and insisted on breaking up "C" Force, assigning the Royal



Hong Kong: Troop Positions

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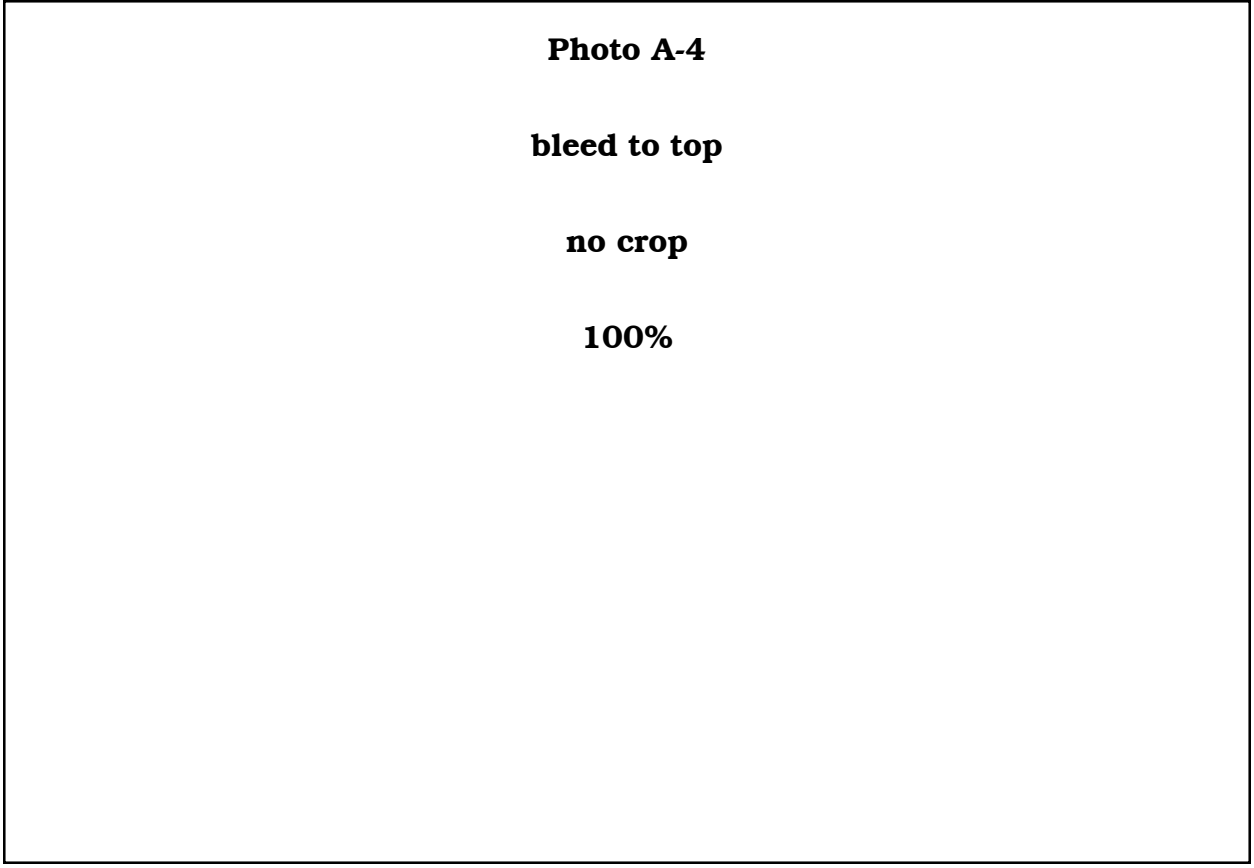

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A view across the Lye Mun Passage. The photo, taken from the Lye Mun Barracks (ruins visible in foreground) shows the short distance to the mainland which the Japanese crossed on 18 December 1941. Devil's Peak is visible at the left edge of the photograph taken in September 1945.

Rifles to Brig. Wallis' East Brigade leaving the Winnipeg Grenadiers with Lawson's West Brigade. Maltby offered no explanation of this decision which was in a sense necessitated by his equally unexplained decision to divide the island into two geographic sectors with the inter-brigade boundary just east of the main north-south road. Neither Brigadier was given effective control of his forces as all units were assigned to positions by Fortress Headquarters. Since there was no wireless communication available, command and control would depend upon existing buried lines and hand carried messages.

Japanese preparations for invading the island were thorough if somewhat leisurely. Artillery and air bombardment were directed at vital points and especially against the pill boxes on the north shore, more than half of which were knocked out. After three days the Japanese again sent a surrender demand under a flag of truce. Maltby informed the War Office that the Japanese envoys were "apparently surprised and disconcerted when proposal was summarily rejected."[45] The next evening after a further intensification of air and artillery strikes on the north coast the Japanese began their assault crossing of the narrow waters.

In his official dispatch, Maltby states that although he expected "the attack from across the harbour because the route was short and could be given full artillery protection"[46] he would not "disregard a possible attack from seaward" so he felt it necessary to position his forces so as to cover every contingency. This meant that the two Canadian battalions were widely dispersed along the southern side of the island leaving the two Indian battalions and the HKVDC to cover an eight mile stretch of coast including Victoria City, the docks and other built-up areas.

The Japanese concentrated their assault on a 4,000 yard front between North Point and Aldrich Bay, the sector defended by the 5/7 Rajput battalion. Though the enemy took losses in the crossing all six assault battalions quickly overran the fixed defences. The entire weight of the Japanese attack fell on the Rajputs who lost most of their British and Indian officers in the first few hours.

Wallis had created an East Brigade reserve by reinforcing "C" Company of the Royal Rifles with a platoon from each of the other rifle companies giving the Officer Commanding, Major Wells Bishop, a force of 200 men. The

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These two photos show the extremely rugged terrain of Hong Kong. **Above**: A view looking to the northwest across Repulse Bay. Visible is Castle Eucliffe directly behind the naval ship sitting in the Bay and the hotel set back from the water just to the right of centre. **Below**: Colonel Tanaka, one of the Japanese commanders in 1941 looks across Aldrich Bay to where his troops landed. This photo, taken in 1947 from Sai Wan Hill shows the town of Sau Ki Wan surrounding the bay, while the lower slopes of Mount Parker are leading out of the top left corner of the photo.

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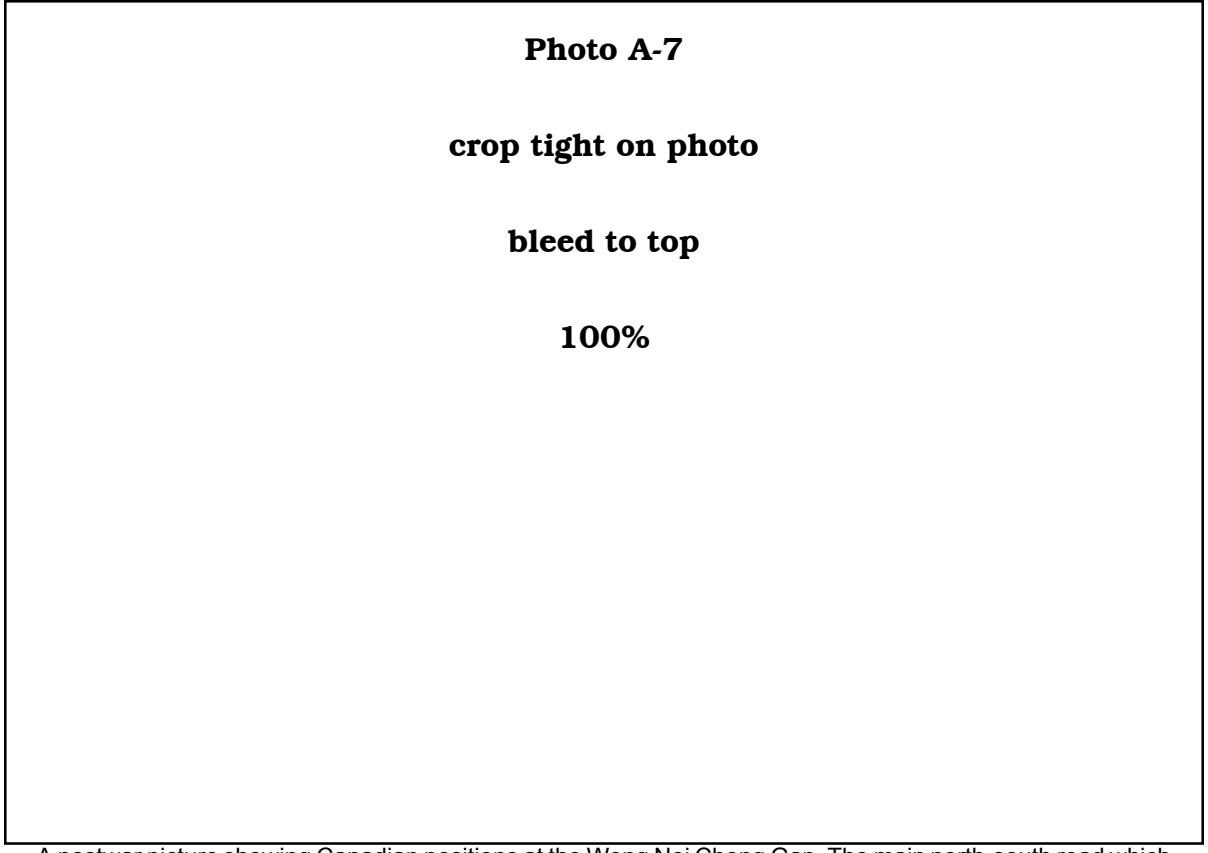


A postwar picture showing Canadian positions at the Wong Nei Chong Gap. The main north-south road which bisects the island is visible running across the middle of the photo.

events of the night 18/19 December are clouded by contradictory accounts as well as the fog of war.[47] 'C' Company first attempted to regain the fort on Sai Wan Hill using two six inch howitzers and several platoons. They reached the fort but were unable to capture it. Their War Diary reports that Chinese "coolies," or Japanese disguised in peasant clothing were part of the force which occupied the fort.[48]

The War Diary also notes the disordered retreat of elements of the Rajput battalion, some of whom were without weapons. It makes clear that the counterattacks mounted by "C" Company during the hours of darkness were uncoordinated and unsuccessful. By dawn on 19 December the Japanese had occupied Mount Parker, Mount Butler, and Jardine's Lookout and thus controlled the high ground in the northeast corner of the island.[49]

Fortress Headquarters was quite out of touch with the situation insisting that relatively few Japanese were ashore and ordering a general counter-attack at daybreak on 19 December. Since most of the Royal Rifle and Winnipeg Grenadier companies were still in the coastal positions these orders would be difficult to carry out. Brigadier Lawson had located his headquarters, and that of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, at Wong Nei Chong Gap which dominated the main cross island road. From there he could control both the south facing companies on the coast as well as the Punjabs and Royal Scots to the north. When 'D' Company of the Grenadiers returned from the mainland he positioned it to protect the gap facing north. Unfortunately, the high ground to the east was in Wallis' sector and there was no tie-in with the pill boxes on Jardines Lookout manned by the HKVDC and Middlesex Regiment.[50]

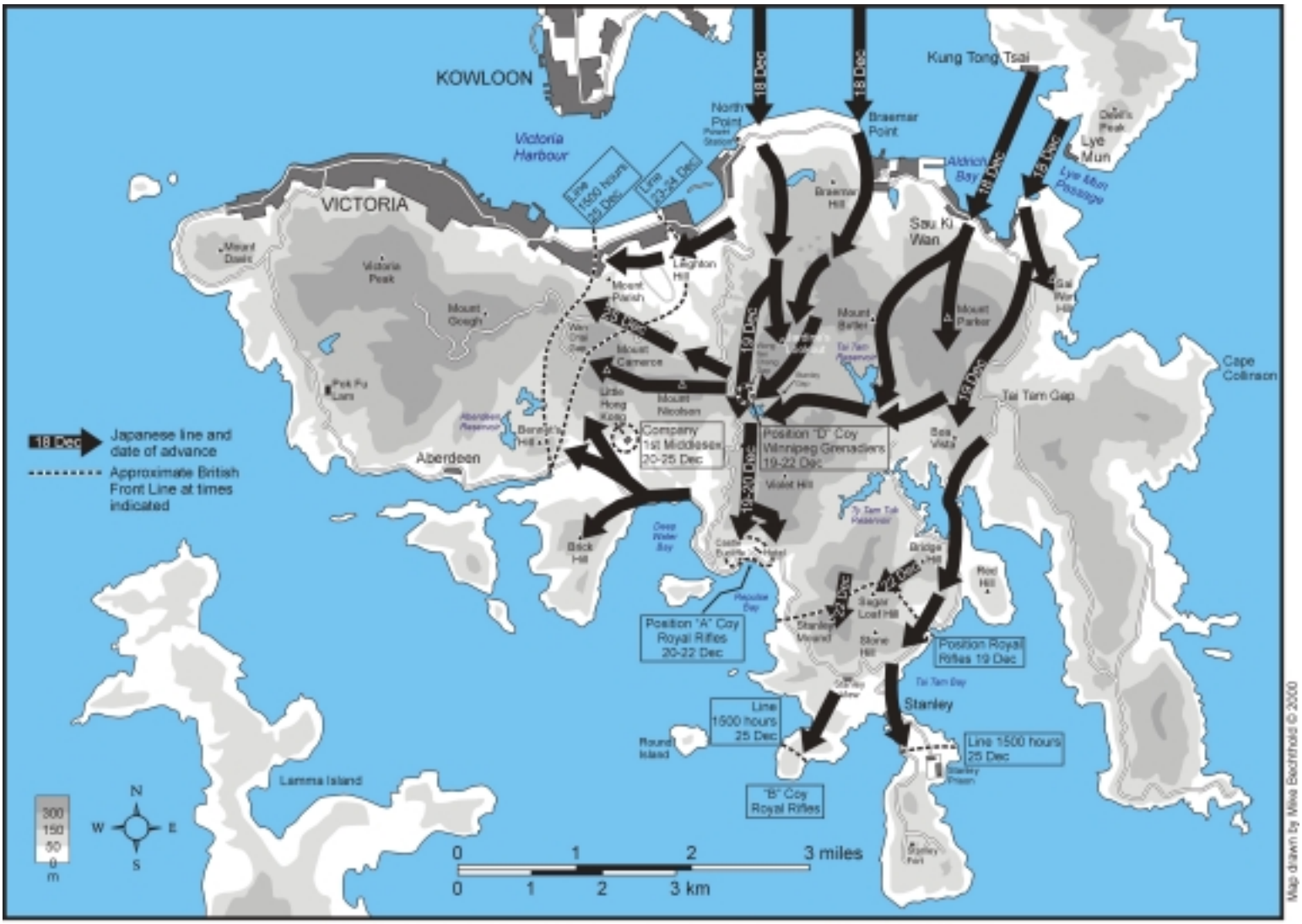
Lieutenant-Colonel J.L.R. Sutcliffe, CO of the Grenadiers, had organized his headquarters company into three "flying columns" and it was these platoon sized units which were ordered to go to the relief of the men on Jardine's Lookout. These brave attempts failed as the position was firmly in Japanese hands. "A" Company of the Grenadiers was brought north to reinforce this thrust and was systematically destroyed by a well organized enemy. "All officers, NCOs and men were killed, wounded or taken prisoner,"[51] so it is difficult to reconstruct what happened in any detail in this hastily improvised night attack. The best information comes from witnesses who provided information that led to the award of a Victoria Cross to Company Sergeant Major J. R. Osborn.[52]

At first light it was the Japanese who were on the move breaking into the gap from several directions. Attempts to send reinforcements met with disaster.[53] Lawson's headquarters were

overrun and at 1000 hours he informed Maltby that the enemy was firing into the position at point blank range and that he was "going outside to fight it out."[54] All that now stood in the way of the Japanese were two platoons of the Grenadiers dug-in along the road. Their courageous stand, which according to Japanese accounts led to heavy Japanese casualties,[55] delayed the advance of 230th Regiment but the 229th succeeded in reaching Deep Water Bay and splitting the island early on 20 December. [See map Hong Kong: The Battle]

The Japanese advance in the East Brigade sector was equally successful. By dawn on 19 December the Rajput battalion no longer existed as an organized formation and Wallis decided to withdraw his remaining forces to a secure base in the hope of being able to organize an attack the next day. The Japanese pressed forward seizing Violet Hill and the Hotel at Repulse Bay. Wallis ordered the Royal Rifles to recapture the hill and clear the coast road on the morning of 20 December, a task well beyond the capacity of infantry without artillery, not to mention armoured support. "D" Company was able to climb a "steep cliff up to a water catchment" and work their way forward on the slope of Violet Hill. They ambushed a Japanese pack train and engaged other groups of the enemy but were brought under fire from the top of Violet Hill and forced to withdraw.[56]

The next day, the 21st, found the Royals in desperate circumstances. "A" Company was holding ground at Repulse Bay, "C" Company, reduced from a strength of 177 to 68, was at Stanley Mound and the remaining companies were under orders to prepare a new attack towards the Wong Nei Chong Gap. "A" Company of the Hong Kong Volunteers led the advance which ended abruptly when Japanese troops brought the leading troops under heavy fire. The day was spent in a series of costly attempts to



Hong Kong: The Battle

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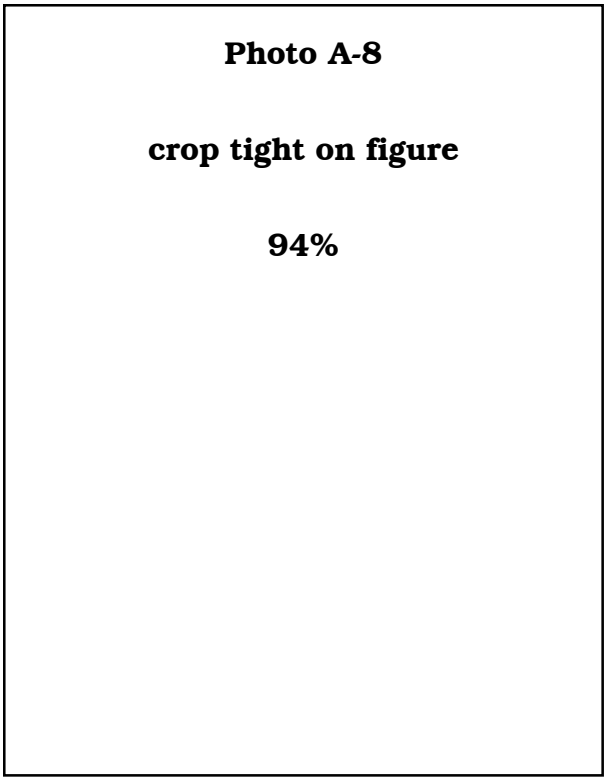

NAC PA 116459

Lieutenant-Colonel (later Brigadier) W.J. Home, Commanding Officer of the Royal Rifles of Canada, was the senior surviving Canadian officer at Hong Kong.

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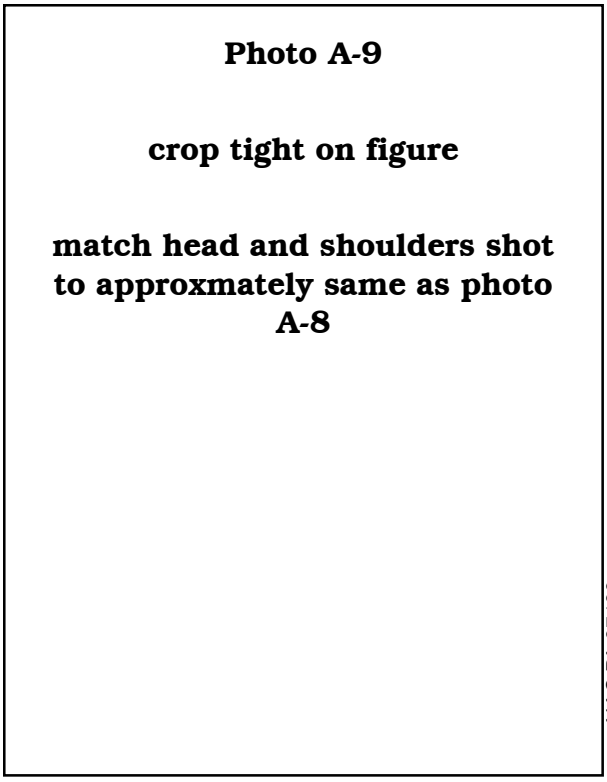

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Company Sergeant-Major J.R. Osborn, "A" Company, Winnipeg Grenadiers was killed in action on 19 December 1941 and posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross

stop the Japanese advance, including several platoon-level actions, which temporarily stabilized the front.[57]

The situation in the western sector had also continued to deteriorate and sometime on the evening of 21 December Lieutenant-Colonel W.J. Home, now the senior surviving Canadian officer, spoke to Lieutenant-Colonel Sutcliffe, learning that what was left of the Grenadiers were holding the crest of Mount Cameron awaiting a Japanese attack.

> Lieut. Colonel Sutcliffe reported that his battalion had been terribly decimated and also that he had some argument with Higher Command about useless attacks which his regiment was ordered to make. He asked Brig. Home if he could not do something to stop what he considered a useless waste of lives.[58]

Home decided it was time to end the pointless conflict and informed Brigadier Wallis that he wished to see the Governor. According to Wallis, Home stated that "his battalion was exhausted; further resistance would only result in the waste of valuable Canadian lives; as senior Canadian officer he felt a grave responsibility."[59] Wallis says that he persuaded Home to wait until morning and told him he could not ignore Maltby. The next morning Home was adamant, "he was more than ever convinced of the futility of resistance."[60]

Relations between the senior Canadian and British officers were now poisoned by mutual hostility and distrust and Wallis came to believe Home was threatening a separate Canadian surrender. The Canadian officers had long since lost confidence in Wallis, Maltby and their staff officers who seemed willing to sacrifice as many men as necessary to ensure that the honour of the garrison and its commanders was maintained. As the Royals 2IC, Major (later Brigadier) John H. Price put it:

> There were plenty of Canadian officers who had battle experience in the first war who were competent to judge as to the possibility of a successful outcome of the defence of the island. Consider the facts - The Island had been split in two by vastly superior Japanese forces. On the eastern brigade front, which included the Stanley Peninsula, the Royal Rifles and one company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Force were the only troops who had fought continuously day and night, without rest, since the landing on the 17th and were still carrying all the fighting. By the 21st they had been greatly reduced in fighting strength and by the 23rd to a strength of around 500 all ranks. (It might be interesting to note that when troops in this sector were marched out of Stanley fort as Prisoners of War, they numbered over 2000).
>
> It required no great military genius to predict the outcome of the battle once the Japanese had landed on the island with their control of sea and air and great superiority in weapons and

Photo A-10

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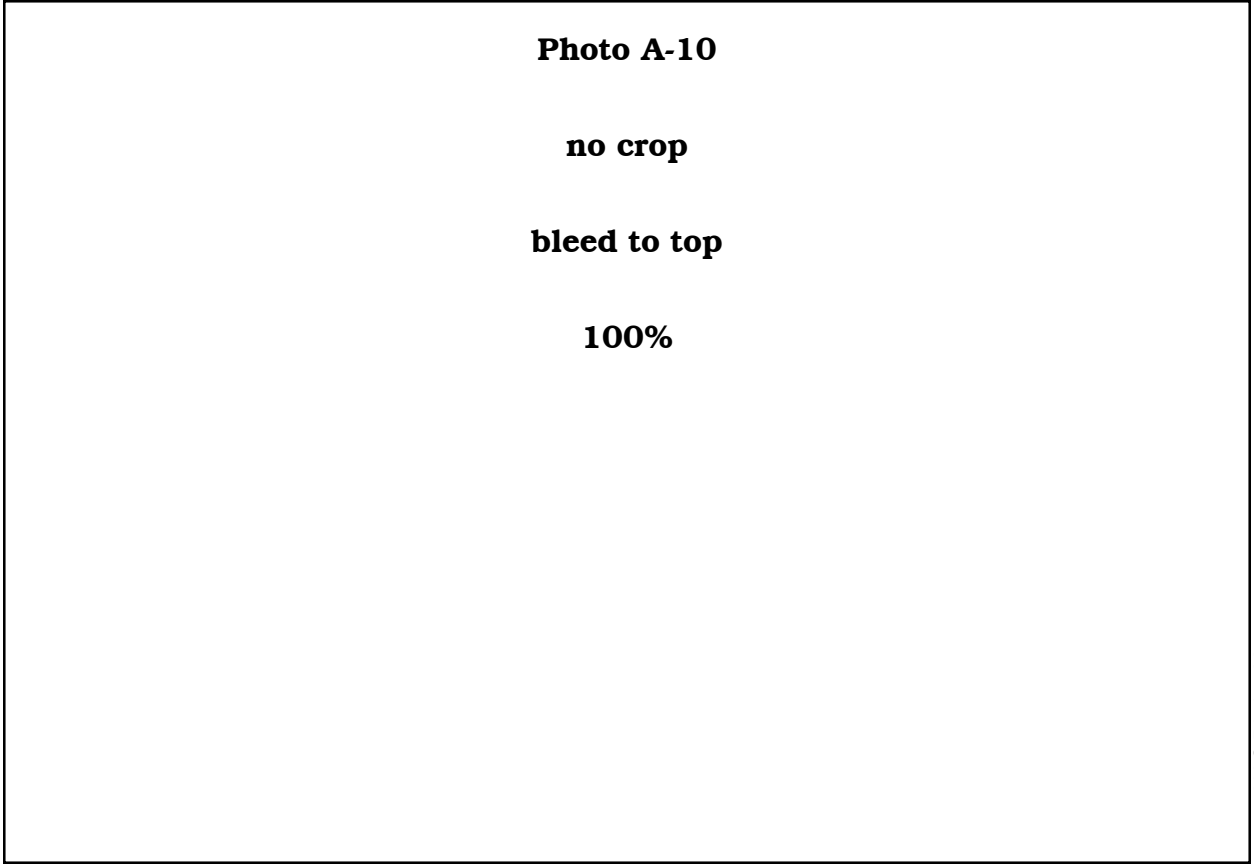

NAC PA 145985

A battle-damaged, bullet scarred building on a ridge overlooking Repulse Bay. Photographed in September 1945.

> men. He felt, I think rightly, that he would be derelict in his duty to his men and to the Canadian Government if he did not communicate his conclusions to the highest authority. Also neither Home nor his officers had any faith in Brig. Wallis' judgement or in his conduct of operations. And who had better right than he had? He and his men were bearing the brunt of the fighting and knew from first hand knowledge the strength and armament of the forces against them. The Higher Command had consistently shown an inability to grasp realities of the situation and to pursue tactics which might have prolonged the struggle but could not have altered the final result.[61]

It may well be that Wallis had also lost confidence in the direction of the campaign. He telephoned Maltby on the morning of the 24th and was told "you will not chuck it unless you run out of ammunition, water or food. Do not TALK of surrender. Put Col. Home in Hospital."[62] The confrontation ended with a decision to allow the Royal Rifles 24 hours of rest which was to begin on Christmas Eve. The rest lasted less than eight hours for at 0230 hours on Christmas day the battalion was ordered back to the front as "there was a grave danger of a break through."[63] Lieutenant-Colonel Home was now close to mutiny. He protested demands for a daylight attack but when Wallis insisted, "D" Company, without receiving the promised artillery support, fought a battle which is said to have cost 26 killed and 75 wounded. While this was taking place Maltby and the Governor suddenly agreed to capitulate. The news reached the Royals three hours after the surrender when white flags began to appear on government buildings.

The decision to surrender was apparently the product of developments in the western sector. On 21 December General Maltby's communique to the War Office indicated that resistance was almost at an end. According to General Sir John Kennedy, the Director of Military Operations in London:

> We had to decide whether to order the troops to fight it out or give the Governor permission to surrender as he wished to do... the psychological aspect was of overriding importance, particularly with an Oriental enemy. If we fought to the last round and the last man at Hong Kong, we should gain an indirect military advantage, in that the Japanese would judge our powers of resistance elsewhere by the same standard. Therefore my opinion was that, although it was an unpleasant decision, the garrison should be told to fight it out.[64]

The Prime Minister was informed and sent a typically Churchillian message insisting "there must be no thought of surrender…the enemy must be compelled to expend the utmost life and equipment. There must be vigorous fighting in the inner defences, and, if need be, from house

to house. Every day that you are able to maintain your resistance will help the Allied cause…"[65]

The Governor and his military commander had little choice except to agree. As late as the morning of 25 December the official line contained no hint of surrender. The Governor's Christmas Message urged everyone to "fight on. Hold fast for King and Empire." Maltby joined him declaring the Order of the Day is to hold fast. These words meant little, by the afternoon it was apparent the Japanese would soon be in Victoria city. At 1500 hours the order to cease-fire was issued. After all the heroic rhetoric surrender came as soon as the Japanese got near Fortress Headquarters. Almost 2,000 men had been killed or died of wounds including 300 Canadians. The rest would spend the balance of the war in prison camps.

The decision to reinforce Hong Kong and the defeat of its garrison will continue to be a subject of both controversy and recrimination. The Canadian troops sent to Hong Kong were grievously handicapped by their lack of training, poor equipment and shortages of ammunition. They were poorly served by their own government which had for so long avoided spending the sums of money necessary to prepare the Canadian forces for a global war which Canadian public opinion would demand that they fight. Their lives were also endangered by Churchill and his Cabinet who were prepared to sacrifice British and Commonwealth forces in the Far East rather than jeopardize hopes of a major victory in North Africa.

An officer who served with the Winnipeg Grenadiers reflected on the situation in a post-war diary and his observations are worth quoting:

> Only one consolation that I can think of and that is, if we had been better trained and fought better, we should unquestionably have sustained many more casualties. At least every one of us would have fought with some understanding of what it was all about and with some ability to properly defend ourselves. When on Mt. Cameron at night the Japs suddenly attacked our position, I wanted to find out just what the situation was, what the enemy were doing, etc. So I fired my "Very" pistol. This was the very first time I had ever fired one. I got the angle slightly too high and lit up my own position and the surrounding country as well as the enemy's position and caused a hell of a commotion. At that time I had spent five years in the Mlitia, and had been on active service two years. This is the kind of training Canada gives her soldiers. If no other lesson is learned from our fiasco than this, it would be well worth the cost, in the efficiency of future Canadian Armies.[66]

Before we judge the army of 1941 too harshly it may be worthwhile to ask if the government of Canada would send troops who were inadequately equipped and trained for the task assigned to them into harms way today? We may also wish to discuss whether Canadian forces might again come under the orders of officers of limited competence in circumstances when the command and control function is deeply flawed? If we are certain that such situations will never exist again then we can congratulate ourselves, the lessons of Hong Kong and a host of other imperfect military operations have been learned, at least until the next international crisis explodes out of control.

Notes

1. The best account of the immediate background to Pearl Harbor and its impact see Gordon W. Prang, *At Dawn We Slept* (New York, 1981). For the broader story see H.P. Wilmott, *Empire's in the Balance* (Annapolis, 1982).
2. Wilmott, p.333.
3. The most recent and among the best is Malcolm H. Murfett *et al*, *Between Two Oceans*, (Oxford, 1999). See especially Appendix 3 "The Controversies Surrounding the Surrender of Singapore, February, 1942," by Brian Farrell, a Canadian scholar who teaches at the University of Singapore
4. Public Record Office [PRO] CAB 106/38, Lord Wavell, *Report on Operations in Malay and Singapore, June 1942*.
5. PRO WO 106/240113 A copy of this document is available at the Directorate of History and Heritage [DHH], DND Ottawa - DHH 93/75
6. War Diary, Fortress H.Q., PRO WO 106/2401A, p.1
7. Lieutenant-Colonel George Trist, *Report on the Part Played by the Winnipeg Grenadiers in the Defence of Hong Kong*, North Point Camp, April 1942. DHH 593/D33
8. War Diary, Royal Rifles of Canada. DHH 593/D3
9. The best description of Hong Kong and the impact of the war on the people is G.B. Endacott *Hong Kong Eclipse* (Oxford, 1978)
10. S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Vol. I, (London, 1957), p.116. The official history provides basic information and excellent maps.
11. Endacott, p.16
12. *Ibid*., p.46
13. Kirby, p.109
14. Endacott, p.58
15. Brereton Greenhous, *"C" Force to Hong Kong* (Ottawa, 1997), pp.40-41
16. Trist, p.2

17. G.W.L. Nicholson. Interview with Brig. G. Wallis, 1946. DHH 593
18. Hong Kong Combined Situation Report 1. November 1941. DHH 593
19. Wilmott, p.56
20. Kirby, p.112. A Chinese "army" had the strength of one division - 15,000 men.
21. *Ibid*., p.116
22. *Ibid*., p.117
23. *Ibid*., p.61
24. Kirby, p.115
25. Both quotations are from a summary of War Cabinet discussions. W.J. Hudson and H.J. Stokes, eds. *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy*, Vol.V. (Canberra, 1982), pp.199-200
26. Endacott, p.62
27. Kirby, p.115
28. Maltby Dispatch quoted in C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War* (Ottawa, 1957), p.457
29. Stacey, p.460
30. Dispatch Appendix A, p.33
31. *Ibid*., p.120
32. *Ibid*., p.120
33. Quoted in Greenhous, p.48
34. Wallis Interview.
35. Kirby, p.125
36. *Ibid*., p.122
37. Quotations from War Diary, Fortress H.Q. PRO WO 106/2401A
38. Kirby, p.125
39. *Ibid*., p.125
40. Dispatch Appendix A, p.33
41. Kirby, p.126
42. Stacey, p.468
43. Endacott, p.80
44. *Ibid*., p.81
45. Stacey, p.470
46. Endacott, p.86
47. The most detailed account is in the reconstituted War Diary of the Royal Rifle Regiment DHH 593/D3 and S. Garneau, *The First Battalion Royal Rifles of Canada*.
48. War Diary, Royal Rifles
49. A comparison of the reconstituted Fortress War Diary and the parallel documents produced by the Royal Rifles and Winnipeg Grenadiers demonstrate how difficult it is to piece the events together. This article relies on Stacey's account unless otherwise indicated.
50. Trist, p.8
51. *Ibid*., p.9
52. Greenhous, pp.82-83
53. Three naval platoons sent to Fortress Headquarters and a company of the Royal Scots were both savaged in attempts to reach retake the Gap. Stacey, p.481
54. Dispatch Appendix A, p.63
55. Stacey, p.482
56. War Diary, Royal Rifles, p.39
57. *Ibid*., pp.43-45
58. Letter, John H. Price to Lieutenant-Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson 27 January 1948 in *Canadian Military History*, Vol 2, No. 2, Autumn 1993, pp.115-116
59. *Ibid*. Enclosure titled Extracts from the Report of the Historical Section, Cabinet Office, London.
60. *Ibid*. Nicholson to Price, 13 January 1948
61. Letter. Price to Nicholson, *op. cit*.
62. War Diary, Fortress HQ, p.27
63. War Diary, Royal Rifles, p.56
64. John Kennedy, *The Business of War* (London, 1957) pp.191-192
65. Quoted in Winston Churchill *The Grand Alliance* (Boston, 1950), p.635
66. "The Second World War Diary of Capt. H.L. White," Imperial War Museum, London.

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