

Assess Canadian soldiers' heroism in Hong Kong from 1941-1945 by focusing extensively, but not solely, on the pre-war preparation of Canadian soldiers and Japanese soldiers and the inevitability of defeat of the Allied forces

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On December 8, 1941, the Japanese – using their innovative *Zero* military aircrafts – launched a devastating onslaught on the Allied forces stationed at the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong. Japan was heavily favored in the Battle of Hong Kong for she possessed revolutionary military equipment and boasted invaluable military experience; yet, the Canadian forces, comprising the Royal Rifles of Canada and Winnipeg Grenadiers, displayed heroism of the highest degree. Despite a monumental disadvantage at the outbreak of war, Canada was represented valiantly, showed superlative courage in battle and desire to survive during the subsequent years in various excruciating detainment camps.

Prior to the December 8, 1941 Battle of Hong Kong, Japan had gained significant militaristic experience through engagement in a multitude of international battles. On September 18, 1931, the Manchurian Crisis was precipitated by Japan, who overtook Mukden, Changchun and Kirin in north-eastern China citing terrorist threats to their trade interests. In 1933, Japan dropped out of the League of Nations, thus displaying her aggressiveness when opposed by international forces. On 1937, Japan invaded China at Shanghai with 70,000 soldiers. On December 7, 1941, Japan initiated the famous attack on Pearl Harbor in which she destroyed 3 USA military cruisers, 3 destroyers, 1 mainlander, 188 aircrafts, killed 2,402 and contributed to 3,684 casualties. Moreover, Japan had recently introduced the *Zero*; the USA touted the *Zero* a “Wonder Weapon”. The title was indeed an accurate portrayal of the *Zero* – in 1940; the Japanese *Zero* claimed 59 Chinese aircrafts without suffering any damage to her own military aircrafts. Although Japan’s pre-Battle of Hong Kong militaristic endeavors do not pertain directly to Canada in WWII, they do emphasize the massive obstacles which Canada would have to surmount in her short involvement in the Pacific Theatre of WWII. One day later, the Winnipeg Grenadiers and Royal Rifles of Canada would begin a new chapter in their lives – many would endure brutality and solitude waged by malicious Japanese soldiers in the ensuing years of 1941-1945.

Conversely, the Canadian forces entered the December 8, 1941 Battle of Hong Kong deprived of crucial war experience – the paucity of experience would inextricably be of supreme importance in the outcome of the 1941 Battle of Hong Kong. Prior to December 8, 1941, the Royal Rifles of Canada served in Saint John, New Brunswick and Newfoundland whereas the Winnipeg Grenadiers received minimal training in Jamaica. Such experience paled in comparison to the missions undertaken by Japan in previous years; the 1,975-man contingent of soldiers was certainly unaware of the dangers which would unravel upon its landing at Hong Kong. In fact, the Canadians expected to see only non-combat duty. To the dismay of the Royal Rifles of Canada and Winnipeg Grenadiers, the conflict would arise rapidly and would later involve hand-to-hand combat – an area which characterized the ethos of Japanese soldiers. When juxtaposing the experience of Japanese soldiers with Canadian soldiers, a stark contrast is revealed; this contrast is summarized effectively through the November 21, 1945 Dispatch of Major-General Maltby entitled “Operations in Hong Kong”. The Canadian war effort was characterized by an “absence of modern air power, weakness of naval units, paucity of anti-

aircraft guns, lack of radar equipment and regular transport”. Canadian forces’ unpreparedness would exert a definitive influence on the losses suffered in the December 8, 1941 Battle of Hong Kong.

The Canadian forces’ initial challenge stemming from the Japanese invasion involved the defense of the “Gin Drinkers’ Line”, or “Oriental Maginot Line” for it was believed to have the capacity to hold Japan back for 6 months. The unwillingness to surrender, in addition to fighting valiantly throughout the night proved to be a task definitive heroism. On December 9, 1941, Japan captured *Shing Mun Redoubt*, a strategic point of utmost importance which had concrete bunkers and a 240mm heavy artillery cannon. Despite the loss suffered through the “Gin Drinkers’ Line” and *Shing Mun Redoubt*, the Canadian forces withstood hand-to-hand combat against Japan’s 38th Division – this division specialized in fist combat and represented the Japanese inclination to fight in allusion to samurais. Furthermore, Japan prided herself on conducting conniving night-raids which were designed to startle the enemy and take them by surprise. Nevertheless, the defense of the “Gin Drinkers’ Line” entailed heroic courage –the entrance of the Winnipeg Grenadiers into battle represented Canada’s initial military involvement in WWII, a feat which remains in Canadian history forever. Although the Winnipeg Grenadiers had been defeated in the defense of the “Gin Drinkers Line”, they categorically rejected to surrender to Japan on December 13, 1941, thus representing their firm resolve and inspirational determination in the December 8, 1941 Battle of Hong Kong. As the war progressed, Canadian efforts would continue to play key roles in the Allied initiatives and would consequently represent heroism of the highest degree.

The subsequent defense of the island would split the Allied forces into two distinctive brigades – the West Brigade consisting partly of Canadian signalers and Winnipeg Grenadiers, and the East Brigade, comprising the Royal Rifles of Canada. On December 17, 1941, Japan demanded for surrender once more; yet, this was rejected for a second time. At this point, little hope was left for Canada. The USA had suffered in the travesty of Pearl Harbor and was effectively unable to supply aid to the war effort; the defense at Hong Kong had deteriorated the troops’ resources and left behind overwhelming despair. Still, the Canadian forces continued to fight. On nightfall of December 18, 1941, Japan attacked the island, thus prompting a Canadian defensive effort. The Royal Rifles of Canada were involved this time, in an attempt to subdue the Japanese forces. Among the notable efforts in the 1941 Battle of Hong Kong was the “C” Company of Royal Rifles which counter-attacked throughout the night of December 18, 1941, inflicting significant casualties on the opposing forces. To Canada’s dismay, Japan captured up to *Wong Nei Chong* and *Tai Tam Gaps* by December 19, 1941; however, this was not without a fight. A further effort to retaliate was launched on December 21, 1941, but the Royal Rifles of Canada were deprived of food and had little strength left in them. At 3:15 PM on Christmas Day, December 25, 1941, the Allied forces surrendered, terminating a war which marked Canada’s first involvement in WWII – an effort defined by altruistic heroism. Historians believe that

Canada suffered an enormous 554 deaths and 1,050 casualties in the December 8, 1941 Battle of Hong Kong.

There was another definitive, lasting memory created in the Battle of Hong Kong through the selfless act of a Canadian soldier – Company Sergeant Major, John Robert Osborn – of the Winnipeg Grenadiers. On December 19, Sergeant Major Osborn threw himself on top of a grenade to save the lives of fellow Canadian soldiers around him – he was posthumously awarded the Victorian Cross. The split-second decision made to prevent other soldiers from dying represented the heroism which distinguished the Canadian forces during their endeavors in the 1941 Battle of Hong Kong. Despite losing the war, Canada gained significantly through the reverence of the Canadian soldiers.

The surrender of the Allied forces on December 25, 1941 did not terminate the Canadians' stay in Hong Kong. Japan had gained a reputation of hostility regarding her soldiers' treatment of prisoners of war – the surviving Winnipeg Grenadiers and Royal Rifles of Canada (in addition to other remaining Allied soldiers) – would endure terror until 1945. Canadian prisoners of war were sent primarily to the North Point Camp or Stanley Internment Camp. Fundamental human rights would be violated by the Japanese captors. For example, prior to the official surrender of the Allied forces, on December 24, 1941, Canadian soldiers were bayoneted by Japanese soldiers in a Hong Kong hospital. Moreover, Canadian soldiers were forced to endure near-starvation in despicable living conditions contributing to a pathetic standard of living. Additionally, Canadian soldiers would work days of up to 12 hours – indeed, horrifying when considering the diet of the soldiers, which was estimated to be a mere 800 calories (a veritable starvation diet) per day. These soldiers would live without salvation for a three-and-a-half year period before gaining the means to leave Japan or Hong Kong.

The December 8, 1941 Battle of Hong Kong immediately followed the famous December 7, 1941 invasion of Pearl Harbour and became an important battle in the Pacific Theatre of WWII. The 1941 Battle of Hong Kong was the source of Canada's first involvement in WWII; yet, her involvement would begin with defeat stemming primarily from a lack of preparation in the lead-up to the war. Prior to the 1941 Battle of Hong Kong, Japan had developed the *Zero* – a potent military aircraft – battled and conquered Manchuria in the 1931 Manchurian Crisis and had even conducted an overwhelming surprise bombing of the USA at Pearl Harbor. Canadian forces, on the other hand, had little experience, with minimal training occurring primarily in Canada and Jamaica. Despite the lack of preparation, Canadian forces – the Winnipeg Grenadiers and Royal Rifles of Canada – would demonstrate remarkable heroism. They fought valiantly during the night while defending the “Gin Drinkers' Line” and later, the island. On December 19, a Sergeant Major of the Winnipeg Grenadier named John Robert Olson sacrificed his life by falling on a grenade to save other Canadians. The internment camps would become a future source of adversity for Canadian soldiers. Overall, the Battle of Hong Kong in 1941 presented plenty of failure; yet, the heroism exemplified by the soldiers will last forever in Canadian history.

Bibliography

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