

Hong Kong, 1941 – The Canadian Commitment

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The Canadian involvement in Hong Kong in 1941 was a tragedy. It marked the first commitment by Canadian troops to battle in the Second World War. The decision to send Canadian troops affected many Canadian families, such as the families in Winnipeg, where my grandparents grew up. My family was one of those affected. My grandmother's uncle, William Harding, was a member of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, one of the battalions that were sent to Hong Kong. He survived the battle, and became a prisoner of war under the Japanese. His family, like hundreds of other Canadian families, experienced the heartbreak of not knowing where their loved one was. His family was told that he had died, yet his wife refused to believe this. Her belief held her through until her husband came home. They were lucky to have him alive, but he was a greatly changed man. Many men died in the battle, or in the prison camps that followed. Those that survived the ordeal returned to Canada with the physical and psychological scars of their experience. Many had extremely shortened life spans.

Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Island was ceded to Great Britain in 1842 as a result of the first Opium War. The main importance of the Crown Colony of Hong Kong was a deep water harbour which was an important trading post in China. Thus when Japan invaded China and hostilities worldwide increased, Britain was faced with the issue of defending the colony. A variety of defence options were considered, and the colony was ultimately defended by six battalions, two of which being Canadian. In the end, the colony's defence failed, Japan took control of the colony, and the soldiers involved either died or became prisoners of war.

The Original British Defence Plan

As World War II intensified and Japan continued its Chinese invasion, it became clear that an attack on Hong Kong was likely. The British Chiefs of Staff began discussing the defence of Hong Kong in detail in 1937, following the Japanese invasion of China. The construction of a line of fixed defences on the mainland began, named the Gin Drinkers Line. The existing strength of the garrison at Hong Kong in 1937 consisted of four battalions.¹

The Cabinet's Committee for Imperial Defence immediately decided that the loss of the colony would not only be "a grievous blow to China"², who imported a great deal of its arms through the port, but it would also result in a loss of "Britain's prestige"³. They decided that they would not reinforce the garrison, but rather have the existing troops defend the colony for as long as they could. Both the GOC in Hong Kong and the War Office in London understood that the colony's chances of prolonged defence without reinforcements were not promising. The British chiefs of staff decided that they should not reinforce Hong Kong and that they would be unable to relieve it in the event of war,

¹ Lindsay, 2

² Lindsay, 2

³ Lindsay, 2

the conclusion was that “Hong Kong must be regarded as an outpost and held as long as possible”⁴.

Major-General A.E. Grasett, a Canadian, took over from General Bartholomew in November 1938⁵. He had a vastly different view about the defence capability of the colony. Unlike the British chiefs of staff, Grasett believed that the defence of Hong Kong was vital, and often pushed to receive reinforcements. The British decision makers recognized the inherent flaws in the defence of Hong Kong from the beginning; however they still employed meager attempts at increasing defences due to political reasons.

The Changing Opinion

General Grasett was relieved from his post as the Hong Kong GOC in July 1941 and was replaced by Major-General C.M. Maltby, MC. While in Canada, he spoke with Major-General H.D.G. Crerar, the chief of the Canadian general staff at that time. Crerar was told by Grasett that “the addition of two or more battalions to the forces then at Hong Kong would render the garrison strong enough to withstand for an extensive period of siege an attack by such forces as the Japanese could bring to bear against it”⁶.

Upon his return to London, Grasett began to persuade the Chiefs of Staff to provide reinforcements to the garrison at Hong Kong. It was decided that the case should be presented to Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The memorandum sent to Churchill on 5 September 1941 “pointed out the great advantages to be derived from the addition of one or two battalions, and suggested that these might be supplied by Canada”⁷. Churchill approved the proposal. While no significant change in the situation had occurred, the British decision makers were willing to change their initial opinion of the situation.

As a result, the British government sent a telegram to the Canadian government on 19 September 1941. The British government stated that “a small reinforcement of garrison at Hong Kong, e.g. by one or two more battalions, would be very fully justified” and also discussed the “great moral effect” that it would have in the Far East.⁸ In the telegram sent, military requirements were played down while the diplomatic and political aspects were greatly emphasized. This further stresses the importance of this decision as a political one, as opposed to a military strategy.

The Canadian Response

In Ottawa, the associate minister of national defence, Major C.G. Power, MC received the telegram and discussed the matter with Crerar. Crerar felt that this decision was

⁴ Greenhouse, 10

⁵ Lindsay, 3

⁶ Greenhouse, 15

⁷ Lindsay, 7

⁸ Robert Parker, The Telegram, n.d., available from <http://www.geocities.com/rcwpc/index-27.html> accessed on February 5, 2007

mainly political⁹, the issue being whether or not a now independent nation, formally under British rule, would assist “the Empire”. He recommended that Canada accommodate the request. The telegram was referred to the minister, Colonel J.L. Ralston, DSO, and his thoughts were that the reinforcement of Hong Kong by two Canadian battalions seemed an obvious choice. He agreed with the initial decision after confirming with Crerar that it was militarily feasible. However, Crerar’s opinion of the military feasibility of Hong Kong was likely greatly influenced by his conversation with Grasett, and this was not based on a solid foundation of fact, rather of belief.

It seems that the Canadian government was under the impression that the battle was winnable and that there would be assistance provided by the United States and China in the event of war with Japan. With all these assumptions, which were based solely on information provided by Britain, on 29 September 1941, Canada agreed to send two battalions to aid Britain.

The Selection of Units for Hong Kong

A list of Canadian infantry battalions was compiled, each ranked according to their states of training. It was General Crerar’s duty to select the two battalions to be deployed. Class C, “due either to recent employment requiring a period of refresher training, or to insufficient training” were “not recommended for operational employment at present.”¹⁰ Both of the battalions chosen were from Class C: the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers.

The commanding officer of the Royal Rifles of Canada was Lieutenant-Colonel W.J. Home, MC. The Winnipeg Grenadiers were commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel J.L.R. Sutcliffe. Brigadier J.K. Lawson was made the commander of Dominion forces at Hong Kong. The units set sail at 8:30 pm on 27 October 1941, aboard the *Awatea* with one company of the Rifles aboard the *Prince Robert*.¹¹ The Canadians arrived in Hong Kong on 16 November 1941.

The Battle

The initial battle plan called for three battalions on the mainland and three battalions on the island. The Mainland Brigade consisted of the Royal Scots, the Punjabis and the 5/7 Rajputs, led by Brigadier C. Wallis. The Brigade on the Island included the Winnipeg Grenadiers, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Middlesex Regiment, led by Brigadier J.K. Lawson.¹²

⁹ Kenneth Stuart, Hong Kong Inquiry, March 1, 1942, available from <http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~ghayes/Stuart.pdf> accessed on February 5, 2007

¹⁰ Greenhous, 21

¹¹ Greenhous, 28

¹² Tony Banham, Hong Kong War Diary, Feb 2007, available from <http://www.hongkongwardiary.com/thebattle.html> accessed on February 5, 2007 – the information is under the subtitle “The Attack”

On 7 December 1941, Maltby received information of the imminence of a Japanese attack. At 8 am on 8 December, the battle broke out with Japanese air raids. This proved highly effective in wiping out the majority of the colony's air force.

The Battle on the Mainland took place from 8 to 13 December. The Mainland Brigade was slowly pushed back by the Japanese, eventually being forced to retreat to the island on 13 December. Following the retreat to the island, the defence was reorganized into a West and East Brigade. The West Brigade consisted of the Punjabis, the Winnipeg Grenadiers and a company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, led by Brigadier Lawson. The East Brigade consisted of the Rajputs, the Royal Rifles of Canada and a company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, led by Brigadier Wallis. The Royal Scots bridged the East and West Brigades.¹³

From 13 to 18 December, the Japanese focused on bombing the island. On 18 December Japanese landings began between North Point and Shau Kei Wan. They split the island in two when they took the Wong Nai Chung Gap on 19 December. The Japanese army then advanced West from 19 to 25 December, moving from Wang Nai Chung Gap to Wan Chai Gap. As the Japanese gained territory, and the defenders lost strength and water supplies, the situation became more dismal. On 25 December the defenders surrendered to the Japanese.¹⁴

Conclusion

It is important to note the political and moral reasons behind the British decision to defend the colony. Britain had no choice but to defend Hong Kong if they wanted it to remain British territory in the future. If they had simply decided to give the colony to the Japanese without a fight, they would have likely lost it forever. Had the decision been made to let the Chinese fight the Japanese themselves, it would have been both politically unwise and morally wrong. As British territory, the British government could not leave the colony defenceless or evacuate all British citizens to leave the city in a state of anarchy. Had Britain done so, Hong Kong would not be the same city it is today. Although Britain questioned the defensibility of the island, it was willing to make a sacrifice based on the political and moral reasons.

Canada was a separate nation from Britain at that time, and did not have the same political and moral obligations to Hong Kong. However, the Canadian government still responded based on political and moral reasons. The reasons for the decisions made by the leaders clearly indicate a greater emphasis on political strategy as opposed to military strategy. The evidence indicates that the decision was made due to the desire to maintain a close diplomatic relationship with Britain. Even the decision regarding what troops would be sent was a political one. Rather than sending the forces with the highest level of training, Crerar chose the battalions that were conveniently available, although they were poorly trained. He also based his selection on geographical and cultural reasons, as the Winnipeg Grenadiers represented the English and the West, while the Royal Rifles of

¹³ Banham, Hong Kong War Diary – this information is under the subtitle “Reorganisation”

¹⁴ Tony Banham, *Not The Slightest Chance*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 17-19

Canada represented the French and the East. While obviously the Canadian decision makers may not have been able to affect the final outcome of the battle, they most certainly could have prevented their citizens from becoming involved in that fate.

According to Carl Vincent, the Canadian politicians based “their decision on two sources of information only – the statement of the United Kingdom that troops were required and it would be desirable that Canada supply them, and the advice of the Canadian Chief of the General Staff that it was militarily feasible to supply the battalions and that Canada should accept the commitment.”¹⁵ It seems they genuinely desired and believed that there would be success, but their unquestioning acceptance of the information they received was irresponsible. It was also irresponsible for the British politicians to imply that the defence of Hong Kong was feasible. Ultimately, the Canadian politicians made the final decision to trust the information given to them and to supply Britain with Canadian troops. As a result the lives of hundreds of Canadian soldiers were lost, while the lives of thousands of Canadian citizens were changed forever.

¹⁵ Vincent, 38-39

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