
THE BATTLE FOR HONG KONG 1941-1945

HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

by

Oliver Lindsay

With the memories of John R Harris



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Contents

Acknowledgements	x
List of Maps	xi
Foreword	xiii
Part 1: The Beat of Drums	1
1 The Beat of Drums	3
Part 2: When Time Was Young	11
2 When Time Was Young	13
3 The Outbreak of War in Europe	21
4 An Ocean of Change	29
5 Visions of Delight	35
Part 3: Remember Them with Pride	45
6 The Vulnerable Outpost	47
7 Battle Stations	59
8 Shingmun Redoubt: The Vital Ground 8th–10th December 1941	67
9 Nothing but Darkness Ahead 10th–13th December 1941	77
10 “Clay Pigeons in a Shooting Range” 13th–17th December 1941	85
11 Triumph or Disaster: The Japanese Landings 18th–19th December 1941	99
12 Hell’s Destruction: 19th–20th December 1941	111

13	Slaughter and Manoeuvre: The Japanese Advance West and South 20th–24th December 1941	121
14	The Surrender of Hong Kong: Christmas Day 1941	135
15	Truth is the First Casualty in War	145
Part 4 Hostage to Fortune		155
16	Shamshuipo POW Camp and the Escapes	157
17	Argyle Street Officers' Camp	171
18	The Sinking of the <i>Lisbon Maru</i>	183
19	Operations Most Secret	189
20	The British Army Aid Group and Fresh Disasters	201
21	Sinister Developments: Stanley Internment Camp, the Japanese Occupation and the Privileged Nightmare	217
22	The Calm after Thunder: Returning Home	227
23	New Worlds to Find: An Architect At Last	235
24	Retribution	243
25	“Good and Gallant Leadership”	249
Bibliography		261
	Despatches	263
	War Diaries	263
	Reports and Notes	263
	Selected Articles	264
	Diaries	264
	Files	264
	Websites	265
	The Confusion of Events	265
	Index	266

CHAPTER 1

The Beat of Drums

Hong Kong, Saturday 6th December 1941. The day of bright sunshine started no differently from any other relaxed weekend in the Colony's long history. Yet it turned out to be a day nobody there would ever forget.

The newly arrived Governor, Sir Mark Young, attended a fête at Christ Church in Waterloo Road. Happy Valley racecourse was crowded, as usual. The Middlesex Regiment played South China Athletic at football. In the evening at the massive Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon both ballrooms were packed for the 'Tin Hat Ball' which hoped to raise the last £160,000 to purchase a bomber squadron which the people of Hong Kong planned to present to Britain.

It could have been a typical weekend – but on that same day, following secret instructions from Tokyo, a large number of Japanese civilians left the Colony, most of them by boat to Macao and then on to Canton.

* * * * *

Some 3,700 miles to the east of Tokyo, Japanese midget submarines planned their approach to eight battleships of the American Pacific Fleet at anchor at Pearl Harbor. Beyond them lay another 86 American ships. The American aircraft nearby, and also in the Philippines southwest of Hong Kong, "were all tightly bunched together, wing tip to wing tip, for security against saboteurs,"¹ despite orders to disperse them.

Some four weeks earlier, on 5th November 1941, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the C-in-C Combined Fleet, was warned by Imperial Japanese Headquarters that war was feared to be unavoidable.

General Douglas MacArthur in Manila remained convinced that there would be no Japanese attack before the Spring of 1942. As the

commander of the American and Filipino troops in the Philippines, and a man of immense prestige, few contradicted him.

The Japanese regarded the Philippines as a “pistol aimed at Japan’s heart”. An intercepted coded message from Emperor Hirohito’s Foreign Office to the Japanese Embassy in Berlin referred to breaking “asunder this ever strengthening chain of encirclement which is being woven under the guidance of and with the participation of England and the United States, acting like a cunning dragon seemingly asleep”. This was a surprising and rather silly claim because the Japanese had already seized every port on the Chinese coast except Hong Kong.

On 27th November the US Navy Department sent out a message which began most ominously. “This despatch is to be considered a war warning... an aggressive move by Japan is expected within the next few days... the number and equipment of Japanese troops and the organization of naval task forces indicates an amphibious expedition against either the Philippines, Thai or Kra Peninsula, or possibly Borneo.”²

J C Grew, the US Ambassador in Tokyo, believed that the Japanese negotiations with the Americans in Washington were “a blind to conceal war preparations”. He warned his Government that Japanese attacks might come with dramatic and dangerous suddenness. The Ambassador’s estimate of the situation was confirmed by intercepted secret messages from Tokyo to Washington; they stressed the urgency of bringing the negotiations to a favourable conclusion by 29th November since “after that [date] things are automatically going to happen”. Roosevelt gloomily concluded that America was likely to be attacked within a week.

On 29th November British, American and Dutch air reconnaissance was instituted over the China Sea; Malayan defences were brought to a higher state of readiness. The Japanese had earlier received intelligence of the arrival of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* in the Far East.

All Japanese forces were notified on 1st December that the decision had been made to declare war on the United States, the British Empire and the Netherlands.

Four days later Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, the Commander in Chief of Britain’s Eastern Fleet, flew back to Singapore from Manila after conferring with MacArthur and Admiral Tom Hart, MacArthur’s naval counterpart. Phillips, who had four days to live, left empty-handed; the Americans could spare neither men nor weapons.

That weekend Churchill was at Chequers with Averell Harriman. He was President Roosevelt's 'defence expediter' in England, who later became the American Ambassador in Moscow and then London. They discussed the progress of the Germans on the Russian front, while awaiting news of the British forces in Libya. But the difficulty of discovering Japanese intentions was to the forefront of their minds.

Meanwhile on 6th December President Roosevelt in Washington started drafting a personal appeal to Hirohito in a final attempt to avoid war. George Marshall, the US Army's Chief of Staff and senior general, prepared a dispatch to MacArthur with a final warning that war seemed imminent. His vital information subsequently went astray; radio communication with the Pacific broke down the next day.

Marshall's opposite number in London, General Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, had been in post six days. Brooke that same day was enjoying his first quiet morning, hoping to slip home to his family later that afternoon. "However, just as I was getting ready to leave, a cablegram from Singapore came in with news of two convoys of Japanese transports, escorted by cruisers and destroyers, southwest of Saigon moving west," he wrote in his diary. "As a result the First Sea Lord at once called a meeting of Chiefs of Staff." They examined the situation carefully but, understandably, could not decide whether the armada was sailing towards Siam (Thailand), Malaya or "whether they were just cruising around as a bluff. PM called up from Chequers to have results of our meeting phoned through to him." A second message came from Singapore shortly afterwards. "It only said that the convoy had been lost and could not be picked up again."³

At 7.20 p.m. Singapore sent an immediate signal to the Royal Air Force in Hong Kong ordering them to adopt "No. 1 degree of readiness". Wing Commander H G Sullivan, who had arrived in Hong Kong six days earlier, gazed at the signal with dismay for he had nowhere to conceal his three obsolete Vildebeeste torpedo bombers and two Walrus amphibians. All of them were over ten years old with a maximum speed of 100 mph. "It had been suggested that dispersal bays be carved out of the hills, but like everything else in Hong Kong these did not materialize," he later reported.⁴ The RAF aircraft remained at Kai Tak airport.

That evening Major G E Grey 2/14 Punjabis, who was commanding the troops on Hong Kong's mainland frontier, "received a police mes-

sage stating that three Japanese Divisions (38,000 men) had arrived at To Kat, eight miles from the frontier on the previous evening”, recorded the second entry in Hong Kong’s War Diary.⁵

Major General C M Maltby, the recently arrived General Officer Commanding British forces in the Colony, wondered whether the report was nonsense or if he should mobilise the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, order all his 12,000 troops to their battle stations and start activating the demolition plans. Should he ask the Governor, Sir Mark Young, to summon a meeting of the Defence Council for a lengthy discussion at Government House the following day?

The General’s ADC, Captain Iain MacGregor, was about to be confronted by the Chairman of Hong Kong’s largest and most distinguished bank, who was to arrive fuming at Flagstaff House demanding to see the General. “The Chairman paced the room, all the time telling me the whole thing was bloody nonsense, and that only two days before he had received a coded cable from one of his managers who had been dining the previous evening with the C-in-C of the Japanese Kwantung Army,” MacGregor remembers. The C-in-C had assured the manager that under no circumstances would the Japanese ever attack their old ally, Great Britain. “‘Good God, Iain,’ said the Chairman, ‘you’re a civilian really, a Far East merchant. You know how these Army fellows flap. You know our intelligence is far better than theirs...’”⁶

General Maltby was not flapping. He was confident that the Royal Scots, Punjabis, Rajputs and Volunteers to the north of Kowloon could hold their defensive positions on the frontier and the Gin Drinkers’ Line for seven days. This would allow sufficient time to complete demolitions of installations on the mainland of value to the enemy. The two newly arrived Canadian Battalions were at Shamshuipo Barracks but they had seen their battle positions, while in the musty, heavily camouflaged pill-boxes on Hong Kong Island, the machine-gun Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment was largely standing-to.

One topic of conversation on that last Saturday of peace in the Far East concerned Duff Cooper, who had been sent by Churchill on a special mission to establish whether the Government could do more about the situation. Cooper, accompanied by his wife, Lady Diana, had met MacArthur before visiting Burma, and then Australia where he met wives evacuated from Hong Kong. Most were demanding to rejoin their husbands in the Colony and he promised them that he

would listen to their husbands' complaints. Fortunately it proved too late to reunite the families in Hong Kong.

One man who had no wish whatsoever to see his wife return from Australia was Major Charles Boxer The Lincolnshire Regiment, Maltby's senior Intelligence Officer. He infinitely preferred his mistress, Emily Hahn, an American writer who had once been the concubine, it was said, of Sinmay Zau, a frequently impecunious philosopher, publisher and father of a large family. Zau had introduced her to opium and for a time she had become a serious addict; she was also addicted to cigars. She had given birth to a daughter by Charles Boxer in October.

Hahn and Boxer hosted a cocktail party at his flat on that Saturday evening, 6th December. There were no Japanese present, naturally. But Boxer, who had served with the Japanese Army in the 1930s, was regarded by some as being too friendly with them. On the previous day he had enjoyed a lunch with a Japanese General beyond the frontier at which the General had casually asked Boxer whether he could obtain permission for him and his staff to attend a forthcoming race meeting at Happy Valley.⁷

Major Charles Boxer asked his guests where they would like to dine that night – a smart hotel perhaps, an exclusive restaurant or should they link up with friends at the 'Tin Hat Ball' in the prestigious Peninsula Hotel? Yet Boxer was visibly preoccupied; he knew that the massive Japanese armada had been spotted by British reconnaissance aircraft steaming along the coast of French Indo-China (now Vietnam) and that its destination was unknown. He planned to visit the frontier the following day to see what the Japanese were up to. Meanwhile, however, he accompanied Emily Hahn and their guests to a local restaurant for a buffet dinner.

It was just as well that they had not attended the Ball. Towards midnight the orchestra there had just started to play the current favourite, *The Best Things in Life are Free*, when suddenly the music stopped. T B Wilson, the local president of the American Steamships Line, appeared on a balcony above the dance floor. Urgently waving a megaphone for silence, he shouted, "Any men connected with any ships in the harbour – report aboard for duty." After a second's pause he added menacingly: "At once." The dance was forgotten. Men hurriedly said "Goodbye" before jumping into the waiting rickshaws.

Thirty miles to the north, the officers of Colonel Doi Teihichi's 228 Imperial Japanese Regiment studied markings in crimson ink upon their maps, while their men sharpened their bayonets and prepared for battle. Near Canton, 45 Japanese fighters equipped with machine guns examined air photographs of their targets, which were Kai Tak airport and Shamshuipo Barracks. Their objective was the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong.⁸

Notes

1. Manchester, William, *American Caesar*, New York: Dell, 1978, p. 224.
2. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*, US 79th Congress, 2nd Session, Document No. 244.
3. Alanbrooke, FM, *War Diaries 1939–1945*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, p. 208.
4. Letter, Sullivan to Oliver Lindsay (OL).
5. This Hong Kong War Diary is on Army Form C 2118 and is headed *Preliminary Summary*. It is undated and unsigned, and contains amplification in manuscript.
6. Interview MacGregor/OL.
7. Alden, Dauril, *Charles R Boxer: An Uncommon Life*, Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2001, p. 133.
8. Colonel Doi Teihichi's statements are in National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), Ottawa.

CHAPTER 6

The Vulnerable Outpost

In December 1939 the Japanese Army was told to prepare plans to invade Hong Kong should the decision be made to go to war. Seven months later Captain Sejima Ryuzo began spying in the Colony. He saw that work on the forward defensive Gin Drinkers' Line had ceased several years earlier. Construction of this line had started in 1937 when consideration was given to a division from Singapore reinforcing the garrison. About six miles north of Kowloon a chain of pill-boxes on the Mainland were to be built, zig-zagging 11 miles across the rocky and precipitous hillside. The line was so named because its left sector began at the scene of alcoholic picnics in happier days. Some trenches, particularly those on the west at the Shingmun Redoubt, were laboriously dug, cement overhead protection added and fields of fire studied. However, since the garrison could expect no reinforcements, the British concept of fighting well forward was stillborn, as the Japanese discovered.

Sejima recommended that the Army should capture the Mainland, consisting of the New Territories and Kowloon. But he was not confident that a Japanese assault from Kowloon on the Island's northern shore would be successful. A frontal assault in the face of British artillery and machine-gun fire would be a risky operation, he felt. However, Chinese Triad spies, well paid by the Japanese, had watched a British military exercise, in which a direct attack had been successfully staged on the north shore. Sejima's suggestions that the Army should invade on the south shore were therefore overruled.

Two months later, on 23rd September 1940, Japan invaded northern French Indo-China, marked on Map 1. (The US Army's Signal Intelligence service had broken the Japanese codes and accurately predicted an invasion. Unfortunately a cipher clerk had muddled the code names; Churchill was told by President Roosevelt that England was to be invaded by Germany at 3.00 p.m. on 23rd September.)

Four days later Japan signed the Tripartite pact with Germany and Italy, thereby recognising the 'new order' in Europe and gaining encouragement in turn for her aggressive policy in the Far East.

In July 1941 the Japanese Government sought agreement from the French Vichy regime to enable her forces to occupy all Indo-China including the bases at Camrahn and Saigon which were potential invasion springboards to attack Siam, Singapore, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. France meekly agreed. Meanwhile Hitler had invaded Russia, thereby ensuring that the Japanese had nothing to fear from their northern flank.

Just when Japan felt that everything was falling neatly into place, on 26th July the United States froze all Japanese assets in its territories in order to persuade Tokyo to leave China and Indo-China. Britain and the Dutch did likewise, thereby cutting off all tin, rubber, oil and steel to Japan.

At an Imperial Conference in Tokyo on 6th September 1941, the decision was taken to complete preparation for war against Britain, America and the Netherlands. The alternative, of withdrawing Japanese troops from China and Indo-China, was quite unacceptable. Japan recognised that America would never surrender; their hope was that Japan's initial successes, coupled with Hitler's victories in Europe, would force the Americans to accept a compromise peace, leaving Japan supreme in East Asia.

Hong Kong was a valuable prize because the harbour would provide an important anchorage for Japanese shipping. Moreover war materials could no longer be delivered to China to support Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Government. After the fall of Canton, when the railway route was cut, innumerable junks in Hong Kong endeavoured to smuggle what they could to those fighting in China. Tokyo estimated that the junks were channelling 6,000 tons of munitions to the interior each month. If Hong Kong could be captured, the Japanese optimistically believed that China might despair of getting help from the West and come to terms.

Japan's spies in Hong Kong were fairly unsuccessful. Sakata Seisho, sent by Major Okada Yoshimasa to gather intelligence, was imprisoned by the Hong Kong police, but escaped to the Portuguese territory of Macao thanks to Triad connections. Maizuno, who ran a sports shop in Wanchai, turned out to be a Japanese Lieutenant. There were others like him. In 1949 Colonel Tosaka expressed dissatisfaction with the

information provided by his agents. True, Colonel Suzuki, based in the Japanese Consulate, had picked up details of where the signal cables were laid and the location of some of the pill-boxes and guns, but his activities had been exposed. Tosaka had to fall back upon the Wanchai brothel girls, the Japanese jeweller in the Queen's Arcade, the Italian waiter at the Peninsula Hotel and the Japanese barber at the Hong Kong Hotel, who reappeared after the fighting in the uniform of a Lieutenant Commander as the Commandant of the Stanley internment camp.

So much for the Japanese preliminary plans and their intelligence, or rather the lack of it. Let us now turn to the British and Hong Kong Governments' priorities, relate them to later years, and consider the success or otherwise of their intelligence gathering.

* * * * *

The Chiefs of Staff in London had long recognised that Hong Kong could not be held without considerable reinforcements. They considered evacuating or reducing the garrison, but decided instead to make no change to its strength and simply ordered that the outpost should be defended for as long as possible.

In 1938 Major General A W Bartholomew, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) in Hong Kong, told the War Office: "I still regard the building of defences as unnecessary. I have also made it clear that troops must resist with arms any sudden attack on themselves or their charge, but this is not to apply to any properly-organized and authoritative request by a military command to enter the concessions..."¹

To ensure that the virtual hopelessness of the position was understood in London, General Bartholomew signalled the War Office on 13th April 1938: "In event of wanton attack on Hong Kong, the garrison would have no option but to fight... the chances of effecting a prolonged resistance even in the best circumstances seem slight." The War Office needed no convincing. The vulnerability of the outpost was well understood. It was again confirmed that the Hong Kong garrison would have to do the best it could with what it had. By the Summer of 1940 it was even suggested in some quarters that the option be considered of reducing the garrison to cut down on the casualties they would suffer in a hopeless attempt to fight the Japanese off.

It could be argued that Britain was considering almost an 'open city' scenario. A precedent for such a policy was set later when Japanese

forces were allowed to enter the British and French concessions at Tianjin (Tientsin). In mid-August 1940 the British Chiefs of Staff withdrew the two infantry battalions that were contributing to the security of Shanghai's International Settlement. That same month they recognised that: "We should resist the strong pressure to reinforce Hong Kong and we should certainly be unable to relieve it. Militarily our position in the Far East would be stronger without this unsatisfactory commitment."²

On 15th August the Chiefs of Staff in London summed it all up in a dispatch which stated that "Hong Kong is not a vital interest and the garrison could not long withstand a Japanese attack. Even if we had a strong fleet in the Far East, it is doubtful whether Hong Kong could be held now that the Japanese are firmly established on the Mainland of China; and it could not be used as an advance base. In the event of war, Hong Kong must be regarded as an outpost and held as long as possible."³

This dispatch was sent to the Commander in Chief Far East with other documents on *Automendon*, a British cargo liner en route from Liverpool to Singapore and Hong Kong. The crew of a German sea raider attacked and boarded the liner 300 miles from Sumatra and captured all the documents despite frantic British efforts to sink the dispatches. German officials handed the most secret documents to the Japanese in Tokyo.⁴ The Japanese therefore had precise knowledge in late 1940 of Britain's inability to hold Hong Kong.

* * * * *

It is relevant to compare the position then to the 1970s and 80s when, again, there would be no opportunity of sending significant reinforcements to Hong Kong quickly. Let us examine the two periods in question.

In January 1975 I was Second in Command of 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards. We were taking over from 1st Battalion The King's Regiment on arrival in Hong Kong. I asked what secret tactical plans existed in the safe to cover any aggression from China. I was told there was no plan held at Battalion level. This did not worry me unduly because there was no apparent threat whatsoever from the People's Liberation Army. Moreover there would presumably be time to issue the necessary orders, deploy the battalion, undertake reconnaissance of our areas and prepare for battle. All our more senior Officers and

Warrant Officers had some experience of all phases of war after innumerable peacetime training in the British Army of the Rhine. I recently asked the then Battalion Commander, Colonel David Fanshawe, if he felt the Grenadiers would have given a good account of themselves in a limited war scenario in Hong Kong. He gave an emphatic “Yes,” and added one point which is particularly relevant to the fate which awaited the Canadians in December 1941.

David Fanshawe emphasised the vital necessity of building up Infantry soldiers’ mental robustness and physical stamina. In extremis soldiers are likely to be required to march long distances, often in atrocious conditions, carrying heavy loads and then fighting for their lives. Armchair critics are all too ready to condemn when things go wrong – as inevitably they may do. Such people must appreciate that the soldiers involved ‘at the coal face’ are usually young, often exhausted, cold and hungry and probably exceedingly scared. They are held together by effective training, discipline and by their junior leaders.

The British Army’s experience for 30 years in Northern Ireland – and more recently in Iraq – sometimes tested men to their limits and beyond. Political people and their lawyers in cosy offices suffer no lack of enthusiasm in finding fault. They and indeed historians in the longer term, having no experience whatever of the horrors of war, must appreciate the condition of those who put their life on the line for King, or Queen, and Country. The Canadians did their best in the most adverse circumstances. The same can be said for those today fighting in Iraq.

The British, Canadian, Indian and Chinese soldiers would be called upon in Hong Kong to face the pandemonium of battle – the explosions of shells and mortars, machine-gun fire, hearing the screams of the wounded and the loss of close friends to their left and right – such was the full horror of war in December 1941.

Luckily for us in the mid 1970s no Chinese threat developed and we concentrated on internal security scenarios, jungle warfare, counter-revolutionary war and civil assistance. Nevertheless some of us recognised that any limited war involving the withdrawal from the border through built up areas towards Victoria Harbour, regardless of civilian casualties, chased by the Chinese Communist Army, was a concept which was scarcely credible.

I recently asked Lieutenant General Sir Peter Duffell, the Commander of the British Forces in Hong Kong in 1990, what the concept of

operations amounted to in his day. Had he favoured an ‘open city scenario’ as Major General Bartholomew had proposed in 1938, or to even reduce the garrison, as suggested by some in the War Office, in 1940? General Duffell replied as follows.

“In the mid 1980s when I became Brigade Commander in Hong Kong under Major General Derek Boorman who was Commander British Forces, the negotiations on the 1997 agreement were in hand. I had inherited a defence plan that saw the brigade fighting a classic withdrawal battle down to Kowloon (and through the Gin Drinkers’ Line) and the Island in the face of an all out invasion by the People’s Liberation Army. This seemed to me to be both an unlikely and impracticable scenario and one that was out of touch with military and political reality. We did not have the military strength to take on the PLA even if such a scenario was likely and anyway for the Chinese there were other ways to skin a cat or exert their will. It seemed to me that the British were not going to go to war to attempt to save Hong Kong. I saw in defence terms that the threat lay in the potential for the Chinese government to exert pressure on the British and Hong Kong governments in a variety of ways and that the border and its security and integrity was the key to any plans that we had. This ignored the possibility of air and maritime incursions which were also a possibility. On the former, unless we had a good deal of warning, we had no means to counter such an incursion. On the maritime front the best we could do was to shadow and confront any such maritime adventure with our patrol craft.

“On land my assessment was that the Chinese might exert some form of threatening pressure on the border to extract diplomatic advantage during negotiations with the British. I sketched an escalatory series of possible scenarios that started with verbal exchanges and stone throwing/banners, etc. from across the border and moved through mass illegal immigrant and civilian incursions, militia and PLA troop movements to the north of the border, closing up to the border; possible attempted incitement of military exchanges and eventually some form of military incursion. For each scenario I outlined a series of non-escalatory responses designed to hold the line – in a non-confrontational manner – that would allow us to maintain the sovereignty of the territory within the closed area while diplomatic measures to defuse the situation were put in hand. Our response was to be controlled and disciplined, limited, until military life was threatened, and in the style

of our response to the border problems that occurred during the cultural revolution. I could not see any advantage in taking on the PLA full frontal and escalating matters to a situation where the whole territory could possibly be laid bare and diplomatic opportunity thrown away. We needed to buy time with our response. I put this plan to Derek Boorman who told me it was music to his ears.

“Later when I returned as CBF in 1990 I found that the brigade had reverted to the old defence plans. I reintroduced my original 1985 plans in the tense post-Tiananmen situation. We had one such confrontation where the Chinese after some difficulties with the Hong Kong Government in one aspect of our negotiations suddenly decided that they would not take back captured illegal immigrants. The result was a mass influx. We responded by upping our presence on the border, opening holding camps and holding the line while diplomatic exchanges continued. A few days afterwards the Chinese reverted to the old procedure and announced that they had ‘taught us a lesson’. The realities were plain enough. As Kissinger used to say, ‘There is a China card and China holds it.’”

* * * * *

To revert back to the situation 40 years earlier, why didn't the British declare an 'open city' in 1940 in the face of the overwhelming threat posed by the highly experienced Japanese forces just beyond the border, saving many thousands of British, Canadian, Indian and Chinese lives thereby? Why take on the Japanese Army “full frontal – and escalating matters to a situation where the whole territory could possibly be laid bare...” – an option General Duffell sought to avoid, in quite different circumstances, in the 1980s?

The Chiefs of Staff wanted the garrison to fight in 1940 because it was all a matter of Britain's prestige. For political and moral reasons Hong Kong had to be defended. Moreover many Chinese would have been seriously discouraged from continuing their weary and interminable struggle against Japan, if Britain had lacked the courage and determination to resist and had abandoned the Colony to the mercy of the Japanese before they had even declared war. Such a sordid act of appeasement would also have shaken the neutral Americans who were then strengthening their forces in the Pacific while critically assessing Britain's determination to fight on. The Chiefs of Staff had no wish to

blatantly broadcast the extent of Britain's military weakness not only in the Far East, but throughout the world.

But other considerations were at play – those in Hong Kong and Singapore gradually came to believe that the Japanese Army was a second rate, contemptible force. Major General A E Grasett, Bartholomew's successor, urged that his garrison be strengthened by one more battalion. It would enable him to defend the Mainland, he said, against Japanese incursions from the north. Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, as indicated earlier, also believed that greater robustness would defeat the Japanese.

Grasett was a Canadian who had graduated from the Royal Military College in 1909, having won the Sword of Honour before being granted a British commission in the Royal Engineers (John Harris's Corps). He had won the DSO and MC during the First World War after which he had attended the Staff College at Camberley and the tri-service Imperial Defence College when he and his colleagues studied the Hong Kong situation in 1934. It was remarkable how closely the exercise mirrored the actual development of events through to 1941. Their prophetic conclusion had been that the risks involved in holding Hong Kong were unjustifiable.

Yet, strangely, Grasett throughout 1940 became convinced that the Colony was defensible, believing that the Japanese troops were vastly inferior to Westerners in training, equipment and leadership. Japan's inability to defeat Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists in battle was put down to incompetence.

In August 1941 Grasett was posted back to Britain, travelling via Ottawa where he held long discussions with his Royal Military College classmate, Major General H D G Crerar, Chief of the Canadian General Staff. Crerar subsequently told the Royal Commission convened in March 1942 that "Major General Grasett informed me... 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."⁵

Grasett briefed the Chiefs of Staff on 5th September 1941 to persuade them to reverse their policy and recommend to the Prime Minister that significant reinforcements be provided.

The existing force in Hong Kong, he argued, was quite insufficient to deter an attack, or even delay the enemy sufficiently to destroy the

port and installations, while the addition of two battalions would enable a full brigade of three battalions to deploy on the Mainland, with a second brigade defending the Island from a seaward assault. In addition, the Chinese would be encouraged by confirmation that Britain and her Empire were determined to fight for their possessions in the Far East.

“The Chiefs of Staff heard an interesting account on the present situation in Hong Kong from General Grasett,” read the memorandum to Winston Churchill. “He 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. The Chiefs of Staff have previously advised against despatch of more reinforcements to Hong Kong because they considered that it would only have been to throw good money after bad, but the position in the Far East has now changed. Our defences in Malaya have been improved and Japan has latterly shown a certain weakness in her attitude towards Great Britain and the United States The Chiefs of Staff are in favour of the suggestion that Canada should be asked to send one or two battalions... ”⁶ Some five months earlier Churchill had advocated that the isolated Hong Kong garrison be reduced to a symbolic scale: “We must avoid frittering away our resources on untenable positions,” he had argued.⁷ But now he was not sure whether to agree or not to the new suggestion that Hong Kong, if reinforced, could be held after all. “It is a question of timing,” he replied a week later. “There is no objection to the approach being made [to the Canadians for two battalions] as proposed; but further decisions should be taken before the battalions actually sail.”

On 19th September the Dominion Office cabled Ottawa stating that “Approved policy has been that Hong Kong should be regarded as an outpost... a small re-enforcement of the garrison of Hong Kong, e.g. by one or two battalions, would be very fully justified. It would increase the strength of the garrison out of all proportion to the actual numbers involved and it would provide a very strong stimulus to the garrison and to the Colony, it would further have a very great moral effect in the whole of the Far East and would reassure Chiang Kai-shek as to the reality of our intent to hold the Island.”

With the benefit of hindsight, we must ask ourselves how was it that Britain's, and in particular Hong Kong's and Singapore's, intelligence gathering was so bad in the months leading up to the Japanese onslaught throughout the Far East?

Major General C M Maltby, Grasett's successor as GOC Hong Kong, reassured by further reports from his staff of the inferior quality and material of the Japanese, and by the prospect of reinforcements from Canada, decided to deploy almost half his force forward on the Mainland. He referred in a signal to the War Office to holding the Gin Drinkers' Line "permanently" in order to protect Kai Tak airfield, simplify civil defence problems and make possible eventual offensive operations. Maltby posed the question a month before the catastrophic defeat by the Japanese: "Is not the value of Hong Kong as a bridgehead increasing every day? Looking at the future, a complete mobile brigade group could undertake offensive operations to assist Chinese forces operating in Japanese-occupied territories."⁸

Maltby saw Hong Kong as the potential springboard for Britain, Canada and her allies to liberate South China from the Japanese. A month later in Shamshuipo prisoner of war camp, the terrible anguish and despair he felt at his defeat was so much greater because, through no fault of his own perhaps, the Japanese threat had been so misrepresented to him.

A heavy responsibility for the misreading of the intelligence, it appears, must fall on Maltby's senior officer, Major Charles R Boxer, arguably the most experienced Intelligence Officer in the Far East.

Educated at Wellington College, Boxer had been commissioned in 1923 into The Lincolnshire Regiment after 18 months at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. Over the next seven years he successfully developed two careers – his military one, and secondly as an historian and author, learning Dutch, Portuguese and Japanese.

Boxer learnt Japanese at the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London. In 1930 he undertook an additional year of intense instruction in Tokyo before being assigned to a Japanese regiment as a Military Language Officer where, it was confidently believed by the British Ambassador in Japan, Sir Robert Craigie, that the British Language Officers were in a much better position to understand the minds and ambitions of their Japanese hosts than were the ordinary British Military Attachés on his staff. In the months to come,

Boxer formed lasting friendships with fellow Japanese army officers, and scholars who shared his academic interests.

By 1931 he was serving with the 38th Nara infantry regiment at Kyoto, living with his Japanese hosts in their barracks. They 'leased' him a cook-concubine who saw to his needs and improved his colloquial Japanese. In mid 1933 he returned to his regiment in Yorkshire before a posting to the Intelligence division of the War Office in London.

This then was the man who became a key member of the intelligence-gathering Far East Combined Bureau (FECB), and the GOC's principal Intelligence Officer and Interpreter. He travelled extensively in China and became highly thought of, despite his remarkable private life. After his wife had been despatched to Australia with others, he took an American journalist and one time opium addict, Emily Hahn, as his lover, having an illegitimate child with her. As we will see, he was probably responsible for one of the most erroneous signals ever sent on the eve of battle to the War Office.

The other important Intelligence Officer in Hong Kong was Flight Lieutenant H T 'Alf' Bennett, also a Japanese linguist.

In September 1990 I was running a major two-day battlefield tour for British Servicemen in Hong Kong. While waiting to be taken by helicopter for a reconnaissance of the Shingmun Redoubt with veterans of the campaign, Bennett approached me unexpectedly. "You should be aware why the intelligence was so bad before the war," he told me. "It was the fault of the British Ambassador's staff in Tokyo. They had been there much too long, and had become complacent, some marrying Japanese. Confined to restricted areas of Japan, they were fed false intelligence by Japanese agents. And so it was that we were misled."

Sir Sydney Giffard, who served four tours with the Foreign Office in Japan between 1952 and 1980 ending up as the Ambassador, disagrees with Bennett's assessment "because it had been clear to experienced observers for many years (since the Manchurian Incident and the murder of Prime Minister Inukai) that the Japanese Government was coming under increasing pressure from extreme nationalist elements, especially in the army, bent on expansion in China and against Western interests in Asia".

There is no evidence that the British staff had been in Tokyo too long before the war.

Major General Maltby found it easy to blame the Embassy in Tokyo. He stated in his post war report that the civil defence plan was not fully

implemented before Japan's invasion because of "the belief that Japan was bluffing... the true gravity of the state of affairs was not reflected in the Embassy despatches from Tokyo."⁹ Yet the British and American Ambassadors were giving London and Washington grim warnings of impending Japanese operations, and at least one British Military Attaché in Tokyo from 1938, Colonel G T Wards, had accurate views. He was another Japanese linguist who, like Boxer, had been attached to a Japanese regiment. Lecturing to the officers in Singapore in April 1941, he had emphasised the excellent morale and thorough training of the Japanese, condemning the common belief that they would be no match for British soldiers. However, the senior officer present vehemently disagreed, announcing that Wards' views were "far from the truth" and "in no way a correct appreciation of the situation".¹⁰

Whether Alf Bennett was right to blame the Military Attachés in Tokyo is therefore highly questionable. Both he and Boxer were frequently across the border in China with their Japanese friends. Surely they were in a good position to discover what was going on?

Just as Prime Minister Blair and President Bush were seemingly misled, it would appear, by their Intelligence and Secret Service Officers before the 2003 Iraqi war on the question of Weapons of Mass Destruction, so General Maltby must, it appears, have been ill informed by his senior staff responsible for advising him on Japanese intentions and capabilities. Nobody in Hong Kong knew what the Japanese were up to. They were soon to find out.

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Index

- Abadan 238
Abyssinia 22
Afghanistan 18
Alabaster, C G 222
Alanbrooke, Field Marshal Lord 6, 9, 22,
39, 62, 64, 136,143
Albright, M 237
Ali, Sheikh 236
Aley, A J 207
American Air Force 181,188, 194, 204, 215,
216, 220, 223
American Ambulance Service 235
American Pacific Fleet 3, 70, 87, 214, 227
Anderson, W J 206
Ansari, M A 197, 205-206, 258
appeasement 18, 21, 23, 53, 64
Architectural Association 236
Architectural Association School 235
Argyle Street POW Camp 13, 160-224, 255
'armchair critics' 51, 112
Arundell, D 25, 29, 37, 38, 65, 158
Ashdate 199
Atkinson, R A 212
Atlee, C 223
atom bombs 188, 215, 223, 226
Australia 7, 25, 31-32, 92, 148, 178, 184,
186, 211, 219
Austria 19, 21
Awatea 41, 89

Banfill, S M 230
Bardell, N 208
Barnett, K M A 179
Bath Abbey 226
Bartholomew, Major General A W 49, 52
Battle Honours controversy 67, 83, 146,
151-152, 257
Battle of Britain 27
Beavor, A 133
Belfast, HMS 242
Belgium 26, 93, 245
Belgrano 148
Bennett, H T 57-58, 166
Bennett, Padre 163
Berlin 127
Bird, D 255
Bird, G V 189-190, 195-196, 209, 212-214,
250, 255
Birkett, S A 105
Bishop, W A 111, 250
Blair, Prime Minister Tony 58
'bloodless mutiny' 138, 255
Blunt, A 222
bolt, used for passing messages 193
Bond, Corporal 193
Boon, C, trial of 241, 246
Boorman, Major General D 52-53
Borneo 4
Bosanquet, D I 167-169
Bowen Road Hospital 141, 172-176
Bowie, D C 176, 250
Boxer, C R 8, 56-58, 63-66, 86, 122, 145,
172, 175, 196-199, 206-207, 225, 244,
251-252
British Ambassador's staff in Tokyo 56-58
British Army Aid Group 199-213, 220, 231,
246, 252-253, 258
British Army of the Rhine 51
British Expeditionary Force 24, 25-27, 70
British military weakness 6, 18, 22
British spying in Hong Kong 203-204
broadcasts made by POWs 212
Brooke, General Sir A *see* Alanbrooke
Brooke-Popham, Air Chief Marshal Sir
R 40-41, 60, 71, 83
Brown, W 101
Browne, H W 29
Brunci 239
Burd, F 66
Burma 7, 83, 85, 245, 257, 260
Bush, H 123
Bush, President 58

Cambon, K 42
Campbell, K J 113
Canada 73, 175, 180, 228-231, 255
Canadian contribution to victory in
Europe 62
Canadian Forces 7, 25, 41, 51, 55, 62, 69,
85-187, 230
brief before they departed 61
lack of training 51, 89-93,100, 112, 152
reputation maligned 67, 150-152, 255
Carr, A S 256

- Carroll, D 28
 Castro, S 209
 casualties, overall 159
 Canadian 102
 Japanese 87, 100, 151, 159
 Royal Scots 83, 257
Ceramic 32
 Ceylon 63, 85
 Challoner, R H 141
 Chamberlain, N 22
 Chan Chak 164
 Chan, H 202
 Chaplin, C 22
 Chennault, C L 181
 Cheung 202
 Chiang Kai-shek, Generalissimo 48, 54-55,
 87, 197, 202, 223
 China 25, 41, 48, 86, 193, 202, 220-223,
 240, 254
 China's contribution in Second World
 War 203
 Chinese involvement in smuggling secret
 information 189-199
 Chinese Servicemen 51, 82, 87-89, 107, 254
 Chow, Sir S 222
 Churchill, Sir Winston 6, 7, 15, 17, 23, 31,
 55, 69, 85-87, 124, 152, 257
 CIA 151, 214
Cicala, HMS 77
 Clague, Sir Douglas 167-169, 202-204
 Clark, M 15
 Clarkson, W 65
 Clifford, E H 157
 Coldstream Guards 16
 collaboration 222, 234, 245
 Colours, lost in Far East 256
 Colquhoun, A R 208, 231-232, 246
 Colvin, R B R 139
 communications in Hong Kong 79, 127, 132
 conscription in Hong Kong 69
 Cooper, A D 7
 Cooper, Lady Diana 7
 Corrigan, L 208
Country Life 216, 242
 Craigie, Sir Robert 56
 Craven, D H S 197-199, 206, 225
 Crawford, J N 165, 244
 Crerar, Major General H D G 54, 62
 Crewe, Q 28
 Cripps, Sir Stafford 64
 Crossley, D 165
 Cuthbertson, H 185
 Czechoslovakia 21-22
 D'Almada, C 191
 Dawson, G 21
 decapitation of internees 206
 Deloughery, F J 100
 Dennys, L E 197
Detroit News 85
 Dew, G 85, 97
 Dill, Field Marshal Sir John 64
 diphtheria in POW camps 13, 175-177, 180,
 244
 discipline in POW camps 161-162
 Dixon, H C 197-199, 206, 225
 Doha 13, 236-237
 Doi Teihichi 9, 72-83, 99, 102-132
 Dorchester Hotel 239
 Dubai 237-238
 Duff, Sir Lyman 58
 Duffell, Lieutenant General Sir Peter 51-53, 254
 Duke of York's HQ 19
 Dutch East Indies 4, 48, 85, 203
 East Brigade HQ 88, 95, 112
 Eden, A 26
 Edward, Prince of Wales 22
 Egal, R 179
 Egle, E 178-180
 Eguchi 221
 Elizabeth II, Queen 229, 237-238
 Empress of Asia 40
 Empress of Australia 29, 227, 230
 escape controversy 163-169, 174, 194-195,
 203, 207, 251
 Esquimault 228, 231
 Eton College 27, 63, 209
 Eucliffe, massacre at 120
Euryalus, HMS 216, 242
 Evans, A J W 186
 Fairclough, C H 160
 Falklands War 93-94, 148
 Fallace, J C 186
 Fanshawe, D V 51, 112
 Ferguson, G P 191
 Field, F D 212-214
 Fifth Columnists 63, 96, 105, 115
 First World War 14, 27
 Flynn, J R 181, 191-195, 204, 207, 211,
 233, 245
 Ford, D 79, 113, 193, 196-199, 252, 258-260
 Ford, J A 78-83, 95, 114, 250, 254
 Formosa 177, 224
 Forsyth, H R 140, 150, 251
 Foulkes, Lieutenant General C 92
 France 22, 24, 30, 93, 245
 Fraser, J A 205, 222, 259-260
 Frederick, E C 118
 Freedom of Information Act 147
 French Indo China 8, 47, 214
 Fujihara 213
 Fujimoto 205-206

- Gallacher, J 166, 250
 Garneau, G 120
 Geneva Convention 168, 173
 Genichiro, N 177
 George Crosses 257-260
 George VI, King 18, 175, 246, 251, 257, 259
 German POW camps in UK 194
 German-Soviet Pact 22
 Germany 6, 19, 168, 187, 194
 Gibraltar 31, 148
 Giffard, Sir S 57
 Gimson, F C 218-220, 253
 Gin Drinkers' Line 7, 47, 52, 56, 59, 71-83
 Gloucester, Duke of 239
 Goodwin, R B 168, 191, 193, 251
 Gordon, V R 114
 Gort, Field Marshal Lord, VC 25
 Grayburn, Sir V 205
 Grafton, Duke of 231
 Granelli 221
 Grasset, Major General A E 39, 54-55
 Gray, H B 166, 193, 196, 199, 258-260
 Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere 207, 222
 Greenhous, B 62, 73, 108, 148, 151, 230
 Grenadier Guards 50, 139, 147
 Gresham, A B 105
 Grew, J C 4
 Grey, G E 6, 68-71, 191-193
 Gross, D C E 36
 Guards Armoured Division 93
 Guernsey 222
 Guest, F 122
 Gurkhas 254
- Haddock, J R 191, 195
 Hahn, E 8, 57, 172, 175
 Hall, W A 106
 Hamlon, CSM 120
 Happy Valley racecourse 3, 8, 96, 222
 Harcourt, C H J 216, 220
 Harding, Field Marshal Sir John 256
 Hardy, R J 193, 196, 199
 Harland, H 143
 Harriman, A 6, 69
 Harris, A 14, 26, 27, 39, 157, 229, 236
 Harris, F 14, 27, 229
 Harris, Jill 13, 235-236, 240-241
 Harris J R
 youth 13-19
 as an architect 13, 16, 18, 233-240
 joins TA 19, 23
 illness 15, 32, 175-177, 230, 235
 in Hong Kong 35-42, 65, 68, 102, 115-119, 122-123, 225-232
 as POW 157-224, 258
 smuggling secret information 189-194, 251, 254
- Harris, M 18, 240
 Harris, R 235
 Harrison, G C F 176
 Harrow School 15-18, 27, 209
 Harth, C 222
 Harvard University 240
 Heath, Sir L 224
 Hennesey, F 166
 Hewitt, A G 39, 42, 71, 165, 202, 254
 Hill, D S 191
 Hindenburg, President, von 17
 Hirohito, Emperor 4, 6, 220, 226
 Hisokazu, T 242
 Hitler, A 17, 18, 22, 48, 85, 127
 Hodges, D 166
 Hodgkinson, E 250
 Holland 4, 26, 217, 245
 Holliday, M 25, 29, 36, 37, 158
 Home Guard 26
 Home, W J 89, 127-143, 196
 Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank 205, 256
 Hong Kong Club 36
 Hong Kong defence plans 3, 49, 50, 52, 54-56, 59-70, 88
 Hong Kong Hotel 205
 Hong Kong, negotiations for handover in 1997 52
Hong Kong News 214-215
 Hong Kong, reasons for defeat 68, 75-76, 82, 87, 137
 Hong Kong reinforcements 50, 54-55, 61
 Hong Kong, relative strengths 59, 68, 70, 99
 Hong Kong reservoirs 35, 124, 137
 Hong Kong, threat facing Colony 40, 47, 52, 54
 Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps 7, 36, 69, 80, 88-143, 150, 164, 167, 179, 234, 251, 255
 Hong Kong's importance 48, 50, 53
 honours and awards 150, 196-197, 245-260
 Howell, W M 185
 Hughesiliers 106, 113, 255
 Hull, C 62
 Hunter, T D 178
 Hurd, B A 233
 Hurd, E L 208
 Hyland, Lieutenant 182
- Ile de France* 229-231
 Imperial Defence College 54
Implacable, HMS 231
 Indian collaboration 234, 245
 Indian Medical Service 202
 Indian POWs 191, 204, 216, 233-234

- Indian Servicemen 25, 51, 88-138, 255
 Indians involved in smuggling secret
 information 191-193
 Inouye Kanao 177
 Intelligence (British) 26, 41, 47, 54, 56-58,
 66, 203-204
 Inukai 57
 IRA 148
 Iran 238
 Iraq 18, 51, 58, 60, 94, 221, 238
 Italy 30, 194
 Ito 245
- Japanese Air Force 9, 41, 95, 97, 130
 Japanese atrocities 41, 120, 131, 142, 164-
 165, 185-187, 198, 221, 243-247
 Japanese generosity 166, 241
 Japanese Intelligence 47-50, 69
 Japanese Navy 3, 6, 64, 77
 Japanese occupation of Hong Kong 220-223
 Japanese Regiments 9, 99
 Japanese threat 6, 54-55, 87, 99
 Japanese war preparations 4, 49
 Jardine Matheson 107
 Jews, persecution of 21, 222
 Jockey Club 96, 107
 Johnstone, W C 186
 Jones, C R 74-75
 Jones, M 148
 Joseph, Sir K 252
- Kadowake 220
 Kai Tak Airport 36, 56, 68, 79, 197
 Kanazawa 243
 Katayama 177
 Kendall, F W 74
 Kennedy, J N 136, 143
 Kenya 40
 Kershaw, I 18, 19
 Keung, Sir R K 222
 Khan, R 192, 250
 Kidd, G R 113
 Kimura 108
 King's Regiment 50
 King's School Canterbury 38
 Kissinger, H A 53
 Kiszely, Lieutenant General Sir John 94
 Korea 225, 234, 250
 Kozi 205
 Kuala Lumpur 239
Kure 184
 Kuwait 18, 236, 238
 Kyoda Shigeru 185, 245
- Laird 75
 Laite, U 123-124, 250
 Lamb, R G 107, 142
 Lamble, R 176
 Lan, J 213
 'Lasting Honour' 257
 Lawson, Brigadier J K 60, 89-95, 97, 100,
 105-108, 123, 255
 Lee, C R 85
 letters sent by POWs 212
 Lewis, F W J 244
 Liddell, I, VC 16
 Lincolnshire Regiment 8, 56
 Linge, H F 188, 231
Lisbon Maru 13, 183-187, 204, 245, 250,
 254
 Lomax, J A 191
 Lyndon, C A 108
- M19 202
 MacArthur, General D 3, 4, 7, 70, 219
 Macauley, T G 128-130
 MacDonald, Mrs 85
 MacDonell, G S 141
 McDouall, J C 191
 McDougall, D J 82
 MacGregor, I 7, 59, 96, 135, 256
 MacGregor, Sir A 218
 MacGregor, R R 184
 MacKenzie, A K 114
 Macmillan, H (*later* Lord Stockton) 147
 MacMillan, P 96
 Macpherson, R A P 119
 Macao 3, 48, 184
 Malaya 4, 29, 48, 55, 67, 85-87, 93, 143,
 166, 203, 224, 234
 Maltby, Major General C M 7, 56-64, 71,
 87, 104, 111-138, 148-149, 162-169,
 191-198, 224, 233, 245, 252, 255-256
 character 59, 173, 224
 Malzuno 48
 Man, C M M 94, 125, 137, 151, 250
 Man, Topsy 125, 217
 Manchester, R 108
 Manchester, W 9
 Manchuria 225, 226, 252
 Manners, C M 137
 Marshall, General G 6
 Marsman, J H 42, 43, 130
 Mary, Princess 250, 257
 Masaichi Mimi, Admiral 97
 Masanobu Tsuji 67
 mass escape plans 167, 194-195
 Massy Beresford, T 225-226
 Matsuda 196
 Mau Tau Chung POW Camp 171, 191, 197
 Merthyr, Lord 30, 32, 209-210
 Middlesex Regiment 149, 151, 256, 258
 1st Battalion 3, 7, 39, 59, 88-140, 183-
 187, 245

- Military Language Officers in Japan 56-57
 Millar, H A W 178
 Ministry of Defence, clearance of articles 146-147
Missouri, USS 231
 Mizuno 86
Montevideo Maru 184
 Montgomery, Field Marshal Viscount 67, 145
 Moore, Flying Officer 166
 Morgan, B 158
 Mosey, Miss 131
 Mosley, L 22
 Muir, A 120, 147
 Munro, J H 166
 Muscat 239
 music in POW camps 163, 208
 Mussolini, B 18, 21

 NAAFI 101
 NATO 17
 Naylor, Major General D M 94
 Newnham, L A 122, 128, 148-149, 162-168, 173, 189-199, 214, 252, 258-260
 Newton, H R 74-76
 Newton, I 81
 Neve, G E 122
 New Zealand 25, 31, 148, 165, 197
 Noma 242
 Northcote, Sir Geoffrey 63
 Northern Ireland 51
 North Point POW Camp 161, 168, 179
 North, R A C 222
 nurses in Hong Kong 40, 95, 115, 125, 131, 140, 158, 173, 178, 205

 Okada Yoshimasa 48, 108
 Oman 238-239
 'Open City' scenario for Hong Kong 49, 52-53, 222
 Osama bin Laden 18
 Osborn, J R 106, 245
 Othsu 86
 Otway, C 162, 250
Oxfordshire 227, 230
 Oyadomani 77

 Parachute Regiment 94
 Pardoe, T M 122
 Parsons, W W 36, 118
 Paterson, J J 107
 Pearce, J L C 167
 Pearce, Tam 107
 Pearl Harbor 3, 69-70, 85, 87, 228
 Peffers, A 121
 Peninsula Hotel 3, 8, 39, 49, 65, 215, 224
 People's Liberation Army 50-53

 Percival, Lieutenant General A E 87, 224
 Philippines 4, 70, 214
 Phillips, Admiral Sir Tom 4, 86
 Pinkerton, D 78-83, 113-114, 250, 257
 Poland 22
 Porter, J 174
 Portugal 69, 215, 219, 252
 Potter, Lieutenant 185
 Potts, A H 119
 POWs in Japan 187-188
 Prasad, H 191
 Prasad, K 233
President Coolidge 40
 Price, J N 138, 193, 196-198
 Priestwood, G 101
Prince of Wales, HMS 4, 86
Prince Robert, HMCS 230
 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment 256
 Prior, J T 142
 Proes, G E S 117
 Prophet, D L 193
 prostitutes 49, 95, 211, 216, 245
 Proulx, B A 181
 Puddicombe, Major 244
 Pugsley, W J 106
 Punjabis, 2/14 6, 7, 59, 68, 88-138, 171, 255

 Qaboos bin Said, HM Sultan 239
 QAs 29, 32
 Qatar 13, 236
Queen magazine 21
 Queen Mary Hospital 68
 Queen's Regiment 256
 Quetta 24, 59

 Rajputs, 5/7 7, 59, 74, 80-83, 88-138, 171, 252, 255, 258
 Rashid bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, HH Sheikh 237-238
 Rashid Hospital 237
 Rawlinson, R C 82
 Red Cross 40, 166, 175, 178-180, 212
 Red Cross parcels 181, 225, 244
 Redman, J 191
 Redwood, M 43, 95
 Reeve, Brigadier 82
 Regimental Histories 146-148
 rehabilitation, lack of 232, 234
 relative strength 93, 203
 religious influence 100, 163, 219, 222
 Rensuke Isogai 223, 243
 repatriation 219, 228-229, 234
 Repulse Bay Hotel 39, 88, 122, 128-141
Repulse, HMS 4, 86
 Richardson, F S 79
 Ride, Sir Lindsay 164-165, 171, 197, 203, 253

- Ridge, battle for 118-120
 Rifle Brigade 63
 Robb 75
 Rollo, D 120
 Rommel, Field Marshal 87
 Roosevelt, President F D 6, 47
 Rose, H B 123-124
 Rose, W R T 79
 Rossini, F 231
 Royal Air Force 6, 22, 40, 68, 81, 86, 88, 166, 216, 258
 Royal Army Dental Corps 176
 Royal Army Medical Corps 176
 Royal Army Ordnance Corps 188, 231
 Royal Army Service Corps 38, 118, 145
 Royal Artillery (*and* the Hong Kong and Singapore RA) 36, 74, 100, 112, 116-117
 arcs of fire 31, 36
 mentioned 29, 30, 77, 80, 96, 101, 140, 159-160, 163, 167, 183-187, 208, 212, 232
 Royal British Legion 102, 220, 259
 Royal Engineers 19, 23-42, 54, 68, 80, 107, 117, 124, 158, 168, 250
 Royal Hampshire Regiment 256
 Royal Horse Guards 60
 Royal Marines 94, 124
 Royal Navy (*including* HKRNVN) 30-31, 65, 68, 77-83, 88, 100, 117, 119, 164-165, 183-187, 214, 227, 233
 Royal Rifles of Canada 42, 65, 88-143, 152
 demands to surrender 131-133, 138, 151, 255
 Royal Scots 7, 59-83, 88-138, 166, 178, 183-187, 250, 256, 258
 reputation maligned 83, 150-151, 256
 should have Battle Honour of Hong Kong 152, 257
 Royal Scots Regimental History 147
 Royal Signals 127
 Russia 6, 25, 64, 127
 Rutledge, R J 196, 199
- sacking senior officers in battle 133, 138-139
 Saddam Hussein 18, 152
 Said bin Taimur, HM Sultan 238
Sainfoin, HMS 233
 St John's Cathedral 64
 St Stephen's College 140, 218
 St Swithuns 32
 St Theresa Hospital 178
 Saito Shunkichi 175, 244
 Sakai 85-88, 97-99, 243
 Sakata Seisho 48
 Sandhurst, Royal Military College 56, 191
 Sano, Major General 99
 Scandinavia 236
- Scots Guards 93-94
 Scott, M I E 94
 Scriven, D 165, 202
Sedana 30
 Sejima Ryuzo 47
 Selwyn-Clarke, P S 175, 176, 184, 219, 222, 253
 Shamshuipo Barracks 7, 39, 42, 68, 234
 Shamshuipo POW Camp 13, 56, 160-224
 Shanghai 50, 186, 224
 Sherwood Foresters 60
 Shields, A L 137
 Shingmun Redoubt, battle for 47, 61-76
 Shirer, W L 28
 Shoji Toshishige 99-132, 245
 Siam 6, 48
 Silesian Mission murders 131
 Simpson, T S 213-214
 Sing Pan Islands 186
 Singapore 4, 6, 25, 30-31, 40, 47, 48, 58, 171, 253, 256
 battle for 70, 224
 Skelton, S 101-102
 Slater-Brown, A M S 114
 slave labour in Japan 187
 Slim, Field Marshal Viscount 214, 245
 Smith, S 244
 Soden, E J 186-187
 Somerville, Admiral of the Fleet Sir James 30
 South China Athletic Club 3
South China Morning Post 71, 136
 Special Air Service 148
 Speight, Private 185
 spies in UK 194
 Staff College, Camberley 54, 254
 Stalin, Generalissimo 64
 Stanley Fort, plan to blow up 142, 255
 Stanley Internment Camp 49, 175, 177, 186, 197, 204-206, 216-220
 Stanley Prison 174, 198, 258
 Stewart, C B J 159
 Stewart, H W M 138, 165, 183-187, 245
 Strangeways Prison 239
 Strellet, Captain 119
 Sudetenland 21
 Sullivan, Wing Commander H G 6, 166, 258
 surrender discussion 86, 97, 132, 136-138, 223
 Sutcliffe, J L R 92, 108, 121, 131, 172-173
 Suzuki 49
 Swetland, S 208
Swiftsure, HMS 216
- Takliwa*, SS 233
 Tala, Colonel 86
 Talbot, Dr 204
 Tamworth, I 191