

Hong Kong Prisoners Tell Story of Gallant Defense

Grenadiers Battled Against Hopeless Odds

Here William Stewart, CP War Correspondent, in the first complete story of the battle of Hong Kong, depicts the part played by Canadians as described to him by various men who fought there.

By WILLIAM STEWART

MANILA, Sept. 8.—(CP Cable)—The calamitous story of the fall of Hong Kong on Christmas Day, 1941, is gradually being told by Canadians who aided in the attempt to hold the Japanese onslaught and who now have been released from prisoner-of-war camps.

As the Japanese thrust began to unfold in the Pacific, members of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Quebec were sent to bolster the Hong Kong garrison of British Commonwealth and other units.

The campaign was a desperate battle in which the defenders were outnumbered by two to one by sea, surrounded by the Japanese and disarmed from the air.

All sorts of air operations had been considered, such as "blitzing" Japan from the sea, but Hong Kong's defensive plans were directed primarily against attack from the air. The Canadians had little air support, with the Japanese attacking. The Canadians, however, generally were unharmed until the fifth night, when a 22-hour air bombardment began.

Some 7000 men, the Canadian units in Hong Kong, were divided into four battalions, the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Rifles, the 1st Battalion of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, a Battalion of Frontier, a Battalion of Signals, and a Battalion of Engineers. The units were equipped with light machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, and other defense arms. Altogether they made up a garrison of 14,000.

Against them the Japanese advanced on two divisions, more than 30,000 men, supported by artillery being sent to the Hong Kong harbor. Artillery support was also sent to the island. The units' headquarters, Canadian units were organized in the Chinese from the Chinese.

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Hong Kong Battle

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Three-inch mortars with considerable ammunition. Borrowed vehicles, manned at first by Chinese drivers and later by Canadians, were put to use.

On the island, was the China command headquarters, headed by Maj.-Gen. C. N. Malby who had come to Hong Kong a couple of months earlier.

The Japanese struck across the Shumshun river border, just after the Canadians settled in Hong Kong. The Japs had been in their position less than 20 miles from Kowloon since 1938 and had plenty of time to plan their attack.

The Kai Tak airfield east of Kowloon was attacked by 30 Japanese fighters at 8 a.m. Dec. 8, and after the raid, one Wildbeest, an old single aircraft, was the only British plane serviceable. A proposal that the single plane be used for a token radio was rejected.

The Samsuhpo barracks were bombed and some among the Canadian rear parties there became the first casualties of the campaign. Ten of the three British First Great War destroyers left the harbor that night for Singapore, with some smaller craft.

As air attacks were carried out, the Japanese sent two columns across the Shumshun river toward the lines manned by the Royal Scots, Punjabs and Rajputs, bolstered by Hong Kong defense volunteers.

The Scots held the key position of the Shingmun redoubt and on the night of Dec. 8-10, a company of the Grenadiers commanded by Capt. A. S. Bowman of Winnipeg crossed to the mainland to provide close support. As it turned out, the Grenadier company covered the withdrawal.

Shingmun fell the same night when the Japanese advanced with armor and aircraft. The mainland defenders started to fall back toward the harbor. By the morning of Dec. 13 the mainland had been evacuated, with the troops crossing to Hong Kong in whatever craft they were able to board.

Japanese shells were dropping now into the waterfront area of Hong Kong and some accurate fire was directed at the concrete positions on the island even before the Rajputs, last troops to leave the mainland, crossed to the island.

During the three-day evacuation period the island defenses were reorganized with the Canadian battalions being placed in different brigades. The eastern brigade was made up of the Royal Rifles, Rajputs, elements of the Middlesex Battalion, and some volunteers.

The western brigade, commanded by Brig. Lawson, comprised the Grenadiers, the Scots, Punjabs and also some Middlesex men and some volunteers.

The first Japanese move toward Hong Kong came the night of Dec. 15-16 following a heavy bombardment from the Kowloon area. It was a dark night and the Japanese crossing in boats was made in the

northern area of the channel near the positions occupied by a platoon of the Royal Rifles.

Whether the Japanese attempt was a reconnaissance-in-strength, a diversion or a full-fledged attack was not known definitely but it was beaten off, though some of the enemy worked their way into the hills. From then on there was sniping into the defense positions.

As the Japanese crossed again in strength on the night of Dec. 18-19 the Hong Kong defenders were strung out, with the Punjabs occupying the western end of the island, which includes the city of Victoria. The Scots were in the central positions on the northern side and the Rajputs to the east and northeast. There were no perimeter positions on the north face of the island occupied by the Canadians.

The real battle of Hong Kong lasted a week after the Japanese landing in the Tai Koo dock area, at Quarry Bay and at North Point, which was developed in heavy smoke from oil fires started by shelling. By midnight the Japanese, wearing rubber-soled sneakers had reached the summit in a gap between Mount Parker and Mount Butler, having cut through the Rajput positions in the darkness.

Southeast of the Indians' positions, a Royal Rifles company and a position overlooking their defenses in the Lei Mun gap. The company fell back after carrying out counter-attacks in which casualties were suffered.

The Japanese worked up toward the top of the 1,500-foot Mount Parker looking down on the north-eastern channel and dominating the Hills around. Meanwhile, platoons of Grenadiers engaged the Japanese pushing southwest in the area of Jardines Lookout, a Fatal casualties included Lieut. G. A. Birkeitt and C. D. French, both of Winnipeg.

A Grenadier company commanded by Maj. A. B. Gresham of Winnipeg was ordered to a position in Little Hong Kong on the southern side of the island and came under general command of Brig. Lawson. Moving forward to meet the Japanese the company was ambushed and with few exceptions every member was killed or captured.

Both the company commander and the second in command, Capt. L. T. Farbut of Winnipeg were killed. Lieut. O. W. McKillop of Portage la Prairie was wounded and died a week later. Lieut. W. V. Mitchell and E. L. Mitchell of Winnipeg were missing after the action. Both are presumed dead.

In their inflicting advance the Japanese crawled along concrete water troughs winding around the hills for catchment purposes and by dawn, Brig. Lawson's brigade headquarters area was under direct fire.

At 7 o'clock in the morning of Dec. 19 the Japs held the Jardines Lookout and Mount Parker to strength and an attempt by the Royal Rifles to clear Mount Parker failed.

Some Japanese had penetrated by then to the Wong Nei Chang gap, better than half way across the island and their plan to cut the island defenses in two became clear.

Brig. Lawson was killed about 10 o'clock, evidently while arranging for withdrawal of his headquarters group from Wong Nei Chang.

During the morning of Dec. 19, the eastern force, started to evacuate the area of Tai Tam, Nicholson Dugart and Obelisk Hill toward the general line of Notting Hill, Sugar Loaf Stone Hill and Stanley View. Pillboxes and gun positions had to be abandoned, and by dark a new line was formed.

On the left a composite company commanded by Maj. Ernie Hodgkinson, of Winnipeg, moved east to reinforce in the Wong Nei Chang area and had to fight its way there. There were casualties from shelling, and an attack was carried out against the Japanese in the police station building. Maj. Hodgkinson was wounded but has recovered.

Infiltration now extended toward Repulse Bay, on the south side of Hong Kong, and by nightfall the island had been cut in two. Orders to Col. Sutcliffe and the Grenadiers came direct from China command headquarters in underground positions above the naval dockyard at Victoria.

Sir Mark Young, governor of Hong Kong, visited Col. Sutcliffe before dusk on the 19th, and still displayed good spirits.

A Grenadier company moving out from position at Lokfulham to Wan Chai Gap and toward Wong Nei Chang collected troops from scattered positions, but came under attack, and retired with heavy casualties.

A Royal Rifles company was ordered to move along the road west of Stanley Mound toward Repulse Bay, with the object of breaking through to the western brigades forces, while a second company traveled a few hundred yards inland from the southern coast in the Violet Hill area.

The Japanese were found to be holding a spur position overlooking the bay but the company traveling along the road under command of Maj. C. A. Young, of Quebec, reached Repulse Bay hotel which was full of civilians, and mopped up the Japanese in the hotel strage. However, the company couldn't get beyond the hotel. The company commanded by Maj. M. A. Parker, of Quebec, moved along the east slopes of Violet Hill, along the water catchment troughs and inflicted a number of casualties on a Japanese mountain battery caught in the act of unlimbering their guns.

Parker's company was engaged immediately by Japanese forces high on Violet Hill and was forced to pull back to Stanley View.

A force of the Royal Rifles under Maj. T. G. Macaulay, of Quebec, and some Hong Kong volunteers, attempted to push through the enemy positions around the Tai Tam Tsk reservoir in the hope of

joining up with the western force troops at Wong Nei Chang. Again there was no artillery support and progress was impossible.

Maj. Macaulay was wounded and evacuated and Lieut. W. S. Fry, of Montreal, was killed by a sniper. By the night of the 21st Maj. Young's company was able to infiltrate the enemy ranks and made its way to Repulse Bay on the Wong Nei Chang road. That was the nearest they came to a junction with the western brigade.

The Japanese attacks against Maj. Young's company holding the east flank, meanwhile, had been repulsed.

Remnants of a Grenadiers' headquarters company surrendered at Wong Nei Chang after having been encircled for three days. At the time they were commanded by Lieut. T. A. Blackwood, of Saskatoon, who had taken over when Lieut. (now captain) R. W. Phillip, Winnipeg, was wounded. Lieut. Phillip had replaced Bowman when he was killed.

Seven unmounted men who were left of a headquarters company were without ammunition. Remnants of the Grenadiers were reorganized by Maj. G. Trust, Winnipeg second in command, who also took under his command a platoon of Royal Engineers. But Dec. 21 was spent under heavy shelling and bombardment of five-inch Japanese mortars.

The Grenadiers were holding their positions on Mount Cameron where the Japanese now have a memorial to their men who died in winning the 1941 victory of Hong Kong—and turned back attacks from the Wong Nei Chang area.

On the 22nd, the Grenadiers had to retire from the Wan Chai Gap when a company suddenly came under machine-gun fire and the Japanese broke into the Grenadier lines. The withdrawal was covered by Capt. A. W. Frederick, Winnipeg, with a machine-gun section.

Maj. Young's company of Rifles at Repulse Bay was cut off. A company under Maj. E. E. Denison of Danville, Que., held its position in the area of Stanley Mound during the day with Parker's company just east. Elements of a headquarters company remained on Notting Hill and battalion headquarters at Stanley Hill.

On the following day the Grenadiers retired still farther to Wan Chai Gap and a line running south-west to Aberdeen which was re-occupied by a force under Maj. J. A. Baile, Winnipeg.

Defense groups now were being torn wider and wider apart and were subjected to sniping, mortar bombing and shelling by day and infiltration by night.

Young's Rifles company was ordered back to Stanley from the Repulse Bay area but was cut off. Members of the company tried to get to Stanley independently to rejoin the battalion. Finding it impossible to reach Stanley, Young and group 34 hoarded a small boat and rowed out to a lone British destroyer which was aground offshore and spent the night there. Lieut. Colin Blaver, Toronto, swam across the bay and reached Stone Hill safely. Lieut. John O'Greer, Quebec, also got through.

Meantime, Denison's company held off Japanese attempts on Stanley Mound.

In the afternoon, the Rifles were ordered to retire south to Stanley peninsula for a last stand with Denison's company left behind on high ground at Cheong Ham rock.

The Japanese attacked Mount Cameron next day and a section led by Lieut. L. B. Corrigan of Bewit Current, Sask., held off attempts at the foot of the west slope. A group headed by Lieut. W. F. Nugent, Lindsay, Ont., held the Japanese at Bennett's Hill as Baile's company position at Aberdeen was penetrated.

On the 24th the Rifles were relieved by Hong Kong volunteers and Middlesex and retired to Stanley fort. Shortly after midnight the Rifles were ordered to a position overlooking Stanley village to stave off a reported Jap breakthrough attempt. Denison's company held on at Cheong Ham Kok. Day attacks were carried out by companies of rifles but lack of artillery support made them hopeless. One company lost 26 men killed and 75 wounded.

A general armistice was declared at 3 p.m. on a bloody Christmas Day but the Rifles and British and Indian troops continued to receive heavy shelling.

At 5 p.m. a reorganized company led by Capt. Charlie Price, Quebec, was ordered to attack in the area of Stanley road. It made no progress. Six men were killed and 12 wounded.

A car flying a large white flag appeared with a lieutenant-colonel of Royal Engineers who brought word of the end of the fight.

The Grenadiers fought Christmas Day, attacking in an attempt to support Baile's company at Aberdeen. There was an armistice to permit civilians to leave Repulse Bay hotel during the day but the Japanese shelling was uninterrupted and machine-guns were trained on the Grenadiers' battalion headquarters.

The Grenadiers moved from Wan Chai Gap to Gough. Sutcliffe, who survived the campaign but died April 6, 1942, of illness, was ordered to brigade headquarters and sent back word that hostilities were over.