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# John Robert Osborn

## Canada's Hong Kong VC

Cameron Pulsifer

Last July, world attention was focused on the return of Hong Kong to Chinese jurisdiction after it had spent the previous 156 years as a colony of Great Britain. Since little was said of this at the time, now is perhaps an appropriate moment to remind ourselves of the sacrifices made by Canadians on behalf of that colony some 56 years ago this Christmas. In November 1941 two battalions of Canadian infantry arrived in Hong Kong to assist British and Indian forces in defending it against a feared attack by the Japanese, who at that time were behaving with increasing bellicosity in the Pacific area, and had been at war with China since 1937. When the attack came on 8 December, the defending forces were overwhelmed in a bloody two-week campaign, with 290 Canadians losing their lives and the remainder entering four years of brutal internment in Japanese prisoner of war camps. The one Victoria Cross awarded during that campaign went posthumously to a Canadian - Company Sergeant-Major John Robert Osborn of the Winnipeg Grenadiers. CSM Osborn's medals were donated to the Canadian War Museum by the Osborn family in 1995. Besides telling the story behind these medals, it is hoped that the following will cast some light on an interesting man and his military career, and also serve to put a human face on the tragedy of the Canadian soldiers caught up in the Hong Kong disaster.

John Robert Osborn was born in the small village of Foulden, in the county of Norfolk, England, on 2 January 1899. Little is known of his family background except that his parents, John Robert senior and Harriet Sussanah, were involved in the carrying trade in and around the counties of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, and that there were four sons and one daughter.



Osborn is recalled by a schoolmate who knew him in those days as "a quiet, likable country boy."<sup>1</sup> It is known that his father died at Balsham, Cambridgeshire in April 1934.<sup>2</sup>

Osborn apparently left school at a comparatively young age (his attestation papers that he signed when the Winnipeg Grenadiers were converted from a militia to a regular unit in September 1939 indicate that he lacked both High School and Technical training<sup>3</sup>). After the outbreak of the First World War Osborn entered the Royal Navy and it is stated that he was present as a 16-year-old at the Battle of Jutland in 1915. On his attestation paper for enlistment in the regular force in 1939, however, Osborn refers only to service with the Hawke Battalion of the 63rd Royal Naval Division. This was a unit contributed by the Royal Navy to fight with the army on land. At some point during the war Osborn was gassed, which resulted in respiratory problems that lasted to the end of his life. For his First World War services Osborn was entitled to wear the British War Medal, 1914-1920, and the Victory Medal, 1914-1919. They are inscribed to "R. 901. J.R. Osborn A.B. R.N.V.R."

In March 1920, as the result of suffering pains in his lungs and fainting spells from the effects of having been gassed, Osborn took the advice of his doctor and travelled to Canada (where presumably dryer conditions might help to ameliorate his health problems). He worked for a time in the CNR yards in Toronto and then moved west to Wapella, Saskatchewan. Here he worked on a farm before again finding employment with the railway, which took him slightly further east to Carberry, Manitoba. At this time he met his wife, Margaret Elizabeth, whom he married at Gregg, north of Carberry



(NAC Original Neg. No. I-1432-7)

*John Robert Osborn of the Winnipeg Grenadiers stands proudly in his dress uniform, ca.1937.*

on 19 May 1926. The Osborns had five children: John Robert, (b.1927), Fern, (b.1928), Gerald, (b.1930), George, (b.1933), and Patricia, (b.1936).

For a time in the late 1920s Osborn tried his hand at farming, but gave it up when injured in an accident in 1929. Soon after, the Osborns were caught up in the Depression and went through some very tough economic times, with work being intermittent at best. Mrs. Osborn recalled that "Many times he went out and scrubbed floors to get a little money for his family." On his military attestation papers of 1939 Osborn lists "Maintenance of Way" as his trade or calling, which essentially means railway labourer. His wife, on a government form that she filled out in February 1943, lists his "Nature of Employment" as "Railway maintenance, Farming, and Unemployment." Whether it was pursuit of employment which brought the family to Winnipeg is not certain; but there can be no doubt that the small sums Osborn earned as a

militiaman with the Winnipeg Grenadiers, which he joined in 1933, would have been much appreciated by the family.<sup>4</sup>

Doubtless Osborn's training and experience with the Royal Naval Division was highly valued by the Grenadiers, and within a year of joining he had been made a Company Sergeant-Major. Osborn's reputation within the regiment was as a man of few words, a strict disciplinarian who expected things to be done by the book, and an extremely capable trainer of men. The same non-nonsense qualities were evidently characteristic of his approach around the home as well. Canadian author Ted Ferguson, has written:

Osborn was, in fact, a model soldier. Highly disciplined and a stickler for spit and polish, he had retained his military values at home. His five children stood at attention every morning for an inspection to make sure they were washed and neatly dressed. He was strict; backtalk or deceit to avoid a chore was liable to bring forth the large stick kept behind the kitchen door. But he adored his kids and in return they loved and respected him. Singsongs around the living room piano, country picnics, and trips to Judy Garland movies helped keep the family a vibrant, happy unit.<sup>5</sup>

Osborn was clearly a stern parent in the classic Victorian *paterfamilias* sense. Gerald Osborn recalls the stick definitely being behind the door (it was his father's military swagger stick) and it was often used - the intended recipient often ominously instructed to go and retrieve it, knowing full well what the results would be. But this was a different era in the approach to child discipline, and it is clear that John Robert was devoted to his family, and that an underlying current of good will and humour characterised his relations with his children. This is made clear in a letter that has been preserved by the family that he wrote to Gerald when posted with his regiment to the island of Jamaica in 1941. This is one of two letters written by him that is known to have survived, and it is worth quoting in full, as it conveys something of the man's qualities. It reads:

Hello Old Man,

Very pleased to hear from you again, and sorry I couldn't answer before. No I didn't like those kisses from the cat, but a smell of that rabbit cooking would be very nice. So you are quite swell with your Air Force suit [Gerald or John must have become involved with the air cadets]. Whats

*Company Sergeant-Major Osborn enjoys a few moments of levity with two of his boys, Gerald (l.) and George (r.), around the time of his unit's mobilization in September 1939.*

the matter with you all have you gone air force crazy. Say listen Son, your mother tells me you have been a bad boy. Whats the matter with you. You know you promised me that you would be good, and look after mother for me but it doesn't look as if you are. You had better buck up or I'll be coming home and use my stick again. Gee you and John sure must have grown alot. Fancy weighing all that much. John sure will be a big man now he has so many ties won't he. Well old fellow I guess this is about all for this time. So will close hoping to hear that you are a good boy again.

From your old Dad  
and Pal  
Jack<sup>6</sup>

The move to Canada had not completely cleared up Osborn's lung problems. The family recalls that sometimes after a day spent parade square bashing with the regiment he would come home coughing and barely able to breathe. However, these difficulties were not in evidence by the time war broke out.

The mobilization of the Canadian forces was ordered the day that Hitler's armies invaded Poland on 1 September, although war was not formally declared until 10 September. Osborn's attestation papers for service with the Winnipeg Grenadiers as a permanent force unit were signed on 4 September. His appointment as company sergeant-major of "A" Company had been confirmed the previous day. A medical report completed on 4 September identified no problems with Osborn's lungs; rather it noted that the only lingering effect of the First World War gassing experience was conjunctivitis "due to gas," which necessitated the wearing of coloured glasses. There was, however, no evidence of this malady at the time of the examination, and he was not then wearing glasses. The medical report noted that Osborn was five feet five and one half inches tall, that he



(NAC Original Neg. No. I-1432-9)

weighed 135 pounds, and that he had a tattoo on his right arm.<sup>7</sup>

After mobilization the Winnipeg Grenadiers remained in their home city until May 1940. In that month they were sent to relieve a British force garrisoning the island of Bermuda and then to Jamaica where altogether they spent a rather uneventful 16 months. Returning to Canada in early October 1941 they were ordered almost immediately to prepare themselves for another stint of overseas service - this time, along with the Royal Rifles of Canada, as a reinforcement for the British-Indian force garrisoning the British colony of Hong Kong. The battalion entrained at Winnipeg for the west coast on 25 October, and the troopship *Awatea* that carried them across the Pacific departed Vancouver on 27 October.



*Personnel of the Winnipeg Grenadiers board a Canadian Pacific troop train en route to Vancouver, and ultimately, Hong Kong, 25 October 1941.*

Thus Osborn would have had only a precious few weeks to spend with his family. A tragic incident that occurred the night before he left would have ensured that his trip east was a troubled one. His youngest child, the five-year-old Patricia, had been severely burned when her dress caught fire while she played beside the coal stove at the neighbours. As a consequence Osborn had spent the night in hospital providing blood for the transfusions that were necessary to save his daughter's life. (William Bell, a veteran of "A" Company, Winnipeg Grenadiers, recalls that the whole battalion was shocked by the news of this incident, and volunteered virtually to a man to provide the necessary blood.<sup>8</sup>) When the train pulled out of Winnipeg Osborn did not know whether she would live or die, and he died not knowing her fate.<sup>9</sup> (She in fact survived, although she faced 11 years of being in and out of hospital.)

Gerald Osborn recalls that the night before the above incident, his father had taken him and his brother John Robert aside for a private chat. What he had to say is quite interesting for what it reveals of the thoughts of some of the more professional members of the battalion before they left for Hong Kong. After their return to Canada from Jamaica the Grenadiers had received a large number of new recruits. Osborn

considered these for the most part woefully undertrained (although according to Carl Vincent they were not really that much more worse off than the rest of the manpower.<sup>10</sup>) He told his boys that he knew he and his unit were headed for a highly dangerous spot and that, given the poor state of training, he had grave doubts about their fighting capacity. (The men knew that they were headed for the far east, though most thought Singapore was their destination rather than Hong Kong.<sup>11</sup>) Osborn told the boys, "Take care of mother and the family," as he did not expect to be returning. He was certainly not prepared to become a prisoner-of-war, he told them. He had been one once briefly during the First World War when serving with the Hawke Battalion and he had found the experience so dreadful that he was not prepared to repeat it under any circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

This is not the place to enter the sometimes heated debate concerning the reason why two Canadian battalions were sent to Hong Kong, or about the nature of their performance once fighting had begun. It is probably sufficient to say that neither of the Canadian battalions was as well trained as it should have been; and that they would have benefitted from a longer time in the colony before fighting commenced so as to become more familiar with the ground. But then

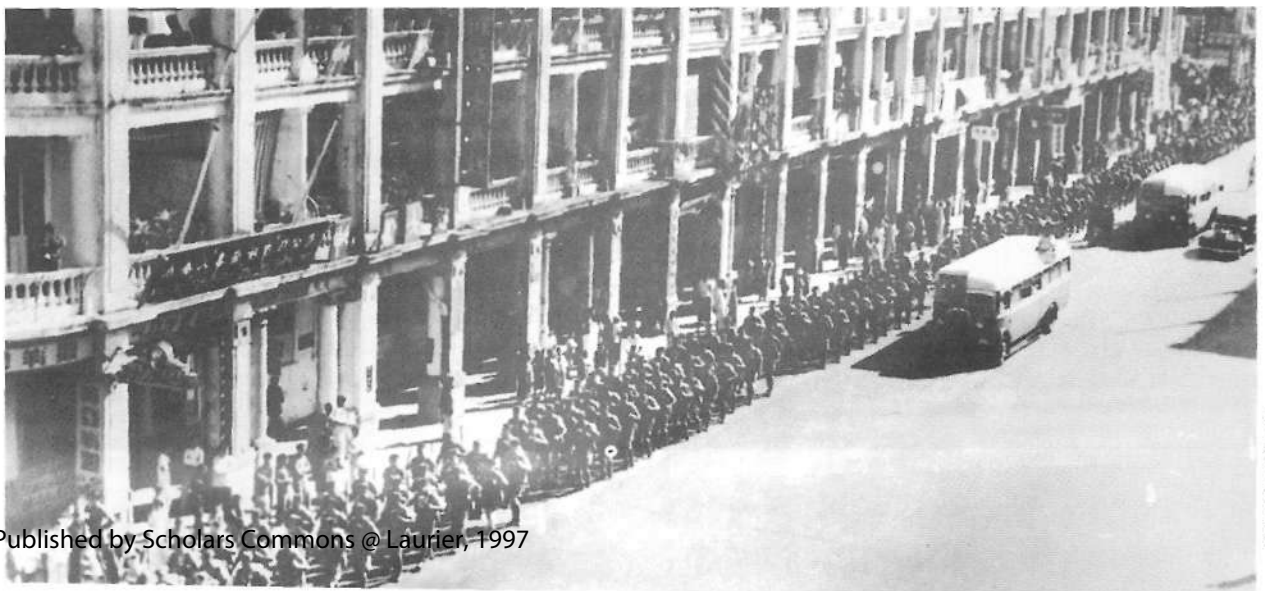
it was never thought that they would have had less than a month in the colony before the Japanese attacked. Indeed, however unrealistic it may seem in retrospect, it was seriously thought at the time that their arrival might deter the Japanese from attacking at all. What is certain is that once fighting had commenced the Canadians by and large acquitted themselves with great fortitude and courage. Carl Vincent, perhaps the leading authority on the campaign, has calculated that the two Canadian battalions executed more company-level counterattacks than any other unit. Also, he notes: "When the Japanese regimental commanders, whose standards were extremely high, recorded "strong opposition," "fierce fighting," and "heavy casualties" they were almost always referring to fighting against Canadians. It is a very conservative estimate to say that at least half of the Japanese casualties were incurred in battles against Canadian troops."<sup>13</sup>

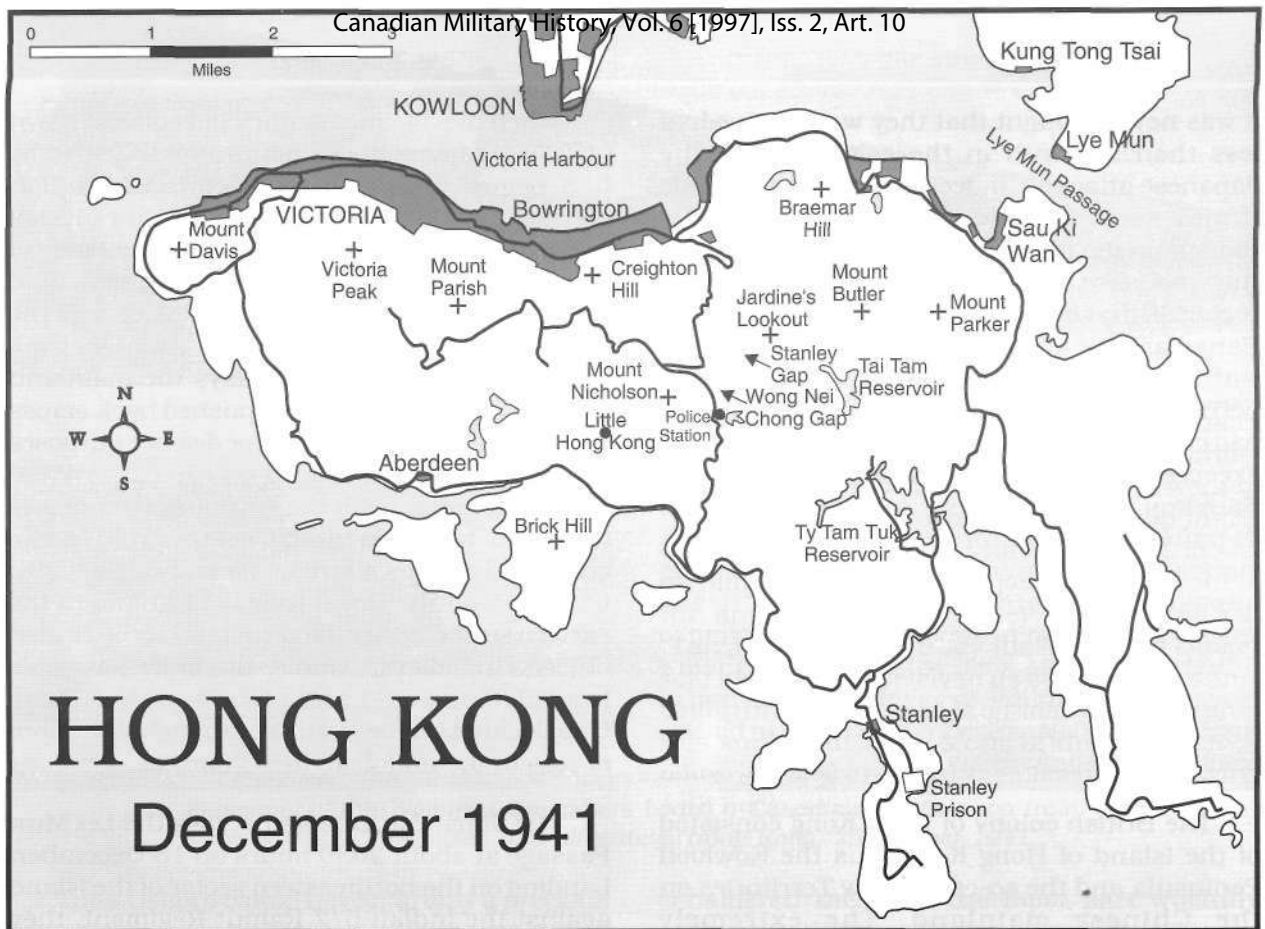
The British colony of Hong Kong consisted of the island of Hong Kong plus the Kowloon Peninsula and the so-called New Territories on the Chinese mainland. The extremely mountainous island of Hong Kong, separated from the mainland by the Lei Mun passage, only half a mile wide at its narrowest point, measures about 11 miles in length and is about 29 square miles in size. A coastal road circled the island, while another major route running north-south roughly bisected it. The British commander's plans called for the bulk of the defending forces to meet the enemy on the mainland. The two Canadian battalions, however, were assigned to the island to meet an anticipated attack from the sea (which never came).

When the Japanese attack did come at dawn on 8 December, some six hours after their bombs had begun to fall on Pearl Harbour (which occurred at 0115 hours Hong Kong time), it was concentrated against the landward defences on the mainland. The British commanders had seriously underestimated the competence of the Japanese army, particularly in nighttime operations, and within five days the mainland had fallen and the defenders pushed back across the straight onto the island. For defence purposes the island was then divided into an eastern and a western sector, with the Winnipeg Grenadiers assigned to the western sector, under the command of its own senior officer, Brigadier J.K. Lawson; and the Royal Rifles of Canada to the eastern sector, under the command of the British officer, Brigadier C. Wallis. Brigadier Lawson's headquarters was located at the Wong Nei Chong Gap, located on the north-south highway, more or less in the middle of the island.

The Japanese attacked across the Lei Mun Passage at about 2030 hours on 18 December. Landing on the northeastern sector of the island against the Indian 5/7 Rajput Regiment, they established a beachhead fairly quickly and began to push forwards in a southwards and southwestwards direction. The first Canadians to engage the enemy were members of "C" Company of the Royal Rifles of Canada, who attacked the Japanese near the coast at about 2215 hours. They succeeded in inflicting a fair number of casualties before finally retiring at about 0130 hours on 19 December. Thereafter the officers and men of this battalion, together with the other units of the eastern sector, fought a valiant, if sometimes confused and ultimately futile resistance against the intense and insistent

*Troops of "C" Force march through the city of Kowloon on their way to the Sham Shui Po Barracks, 16 November 1941.*





Japanese onslaught, until finally surrendering on the Stanley Peninsula at the southernmost tip of the island on Christmas Day.

Accounts of the fighting in Hong Kong of necessity lack somewhat in conclusiveness. The war diaries of the units involved, completed under the most strained and difficult of conditions in Japanese prison camps, are understandably quite brief, and the information they contain skimpy. Thus the histories that have been written have of necessity been pieced together from the personal recollections of survivors, which for the most part did not begin to be heard until at least some four years after the events had occurred, and also from Japanese accounts, which of course are more concerned with the actions of their own units than those with of their enemy. With these difficulties in mind, the following describes the events that resulted in John Robert Osborn losing his life and being awarded the Victoria Cross.<sup>14</sup>

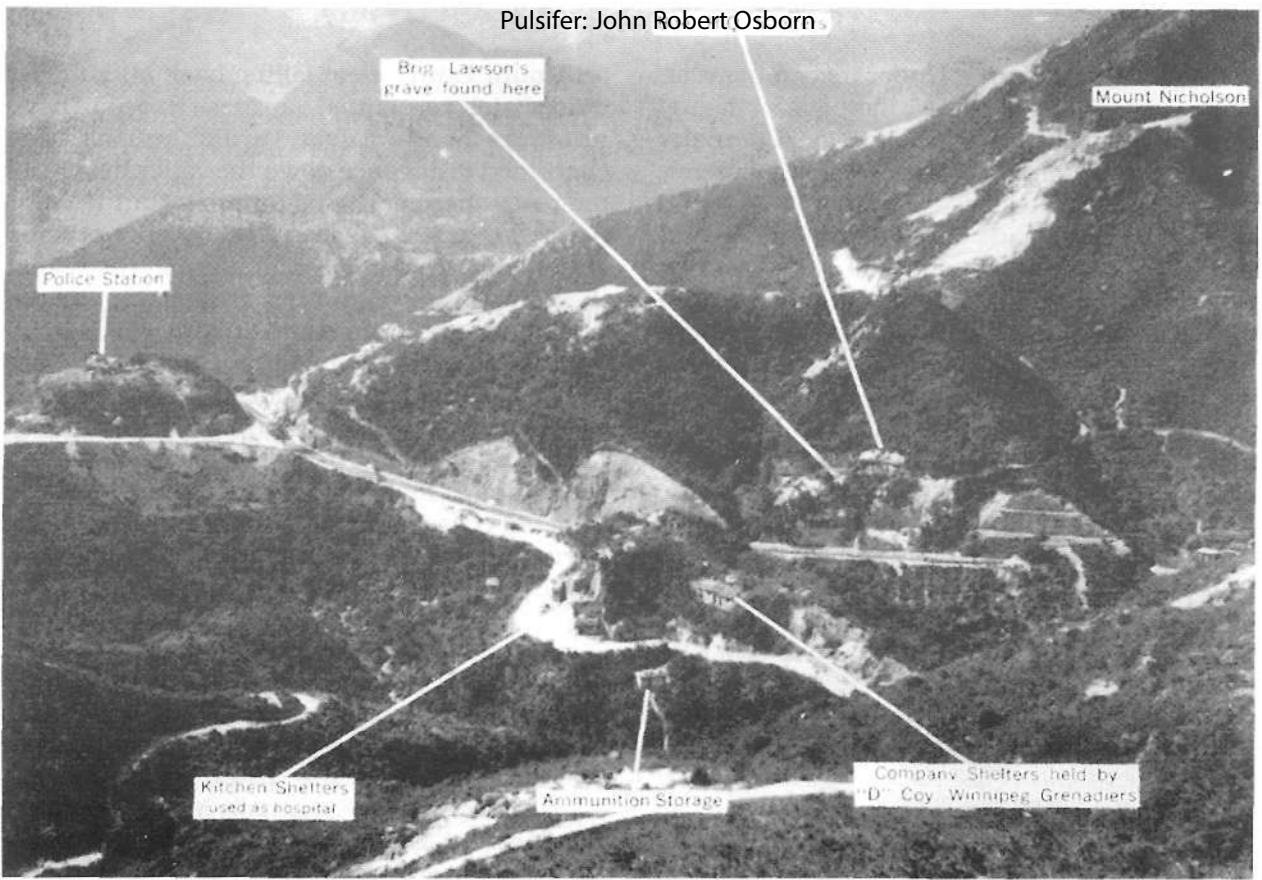
The Winnipeg Grenadiers' headquarters at the Wong Nei Chong Gap was surrounded by hills and mountains. To the northeast, between them and the site of the Japanese landings, were three major peaks - about three quarters of a mile to

the north and slightly to the east sat the 1,411-foot-high Jardine's Lookout, then about the same distance to the east was the 1,421-foot Mount Butler, and about the same distance further east still the 1,726-foot Mount Parker.<sup>15</sup> Although heavily wooded today, in 1941 these heights were covered by only a low scrub, due to unrestricted cutting that had taken place over the previous years.

Upon getting word of the Japanese landings on the evening of the 18th, Brigadier Lawson's response was to send out flying columns of infantry from his Headquarters Company into these northern hills, which were in the line of the expected Japanese advance. One platoon made it to the top of Jardine's Lookout but was driven off by a Japanese attack, its commander being killed; another was driven off the slopes of Mount Butler, its commander being wounded and afterwards killed.

At about 0230 hours on the 19th Lawson summoned "A" Company north from its base at Little Hong Kong, about a mile or so southwest of the Wong Nei Chong Gap, and ordered it to retake Jardine's Lookout and apparently (the record here is not clear) to move on from there

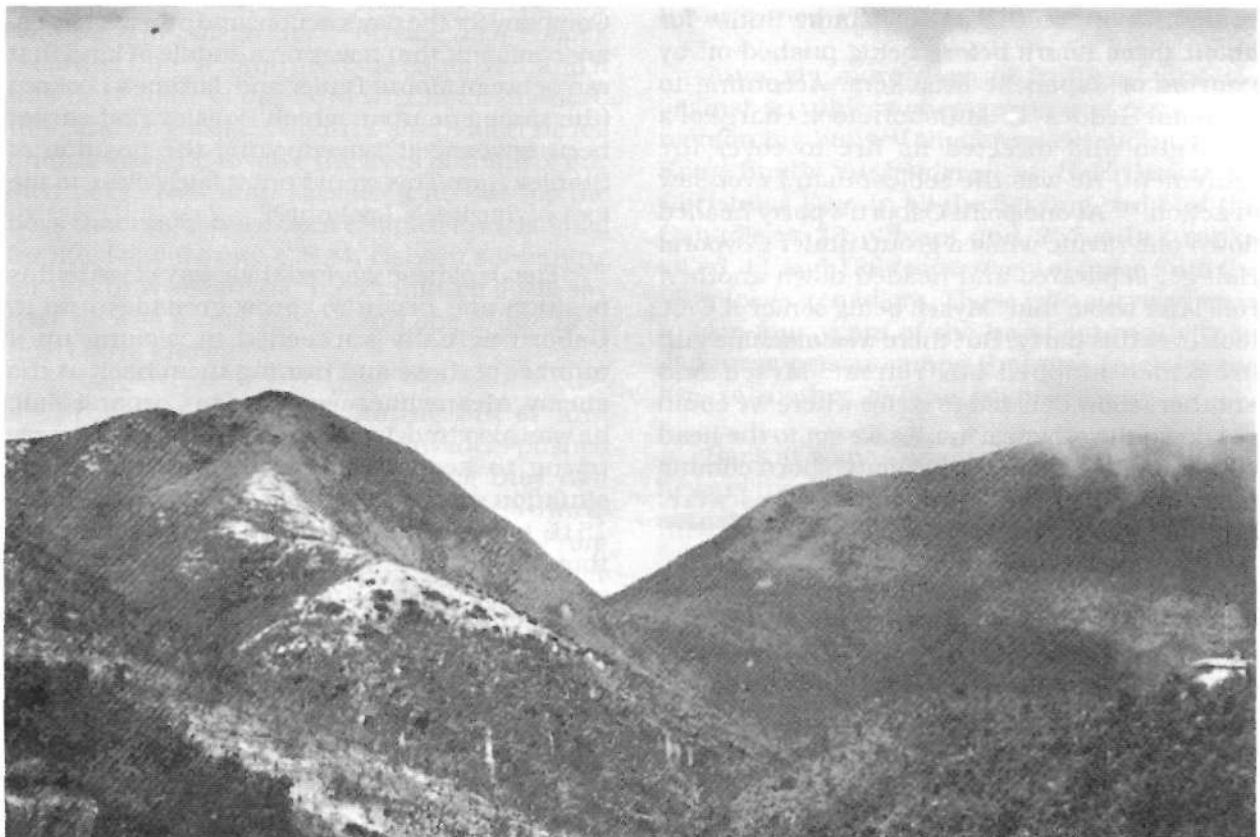




(Canadian Forces Photo Unit (CFPU) Photo PMR 79-166)

*Above: A view overlooking Wong Nei Chong Gap taken from Jardine's Lookout.*

*Below: Looking north towards Mount Butler (L.) and Mount Parker.*



(CFPU Photo PMR 79-169)



and take Mount Butler. Under its commander, Major A.B. Gresham, and including its company sergeant-major, J.R. Osborn, "A" Company pushed forward into the darkness. By dawn they had reached their objective, although it would appear that they had passed Jardine's Lookout and were in fact at the slopes of Mount Butler. One of those present, Corporal W.A. Hall, recalled that at this point the calm and steady Osborn "was going from section to section giving instructions and advise [sic] to everyone. We all got a great deal of assurance and confidence from his attitude."<sup>16</sup>

The attack went in at about 0700 hours and almost immediately a section of the lead platoon under its commander Lieutenant McKillop became separated. CSM Osborn then took charge of the remainder and led them with bayonets fixed to the summit of Mount Butler. Corporal K. Geddes who was present recalled that Osborn "showed himself to be a real leader and his coolness under fire helped all of us."<sup>17</sup> Another witness, Sergeant W.J. Pugsley, who had remained with a reserve section at the bottom of the hill, wrote that "CSM Osborn was with the forward attacking troops and we could see the bayonet charge from our position."<sup>18</sup>

The men of "A" Company remained in command of the summit of Mount Butler for about three hours before being pushed off by swarms of Japanese attackers. According to Corporal Geddes "CSM Osborn took charge of a bren gun and directed its fire to cover the retirement. He was the coolest man I ever saw in action."<sup>19</sup> At one point Osborn's party headed down one ravine while a group under Corporal Hall got separated and headed down another. Hall later wrote that "Myself being senior N.C.O. took over this party. But there was machine gun fire which stopped our retreat. Myself and another fellow decided to go up where we could see down the other ravine. As we got to the head of the ravine we met Sgt. Major Osborn coming back to find out where the rest of us were. Through his instructions we all got down with the remainder of the company."<sup>20</sup>

Sergeant Pugsley had been watching his comrades' retreat from his position below on a saddle of land that ran westwards between Mount Butler and Jardine's Lookout. "At about 1000 hrs.," he wrote later, "I noticed our troops

on Mount Butler were falling back and almost immediately recognized Japanese troops in large numbers coming over Butler and as they continued to advance down the valley in spite of the resistance [sic] being put up by our troops I realized that the position held by me would be cut off and decided to try and rejoin the rest of the company." He and his men eventually did manage to get through and link up with a small party that included Major Gresham, CSM Osborn and a badly-wounded Captain Tarbuth as they were reaching the bottom of Mount Butler. "CSM Osborn now took charge of the two bren guns of my platoon," wrote Pugsley, "and directed covering fire for the withdrawal of the party. He was cool and steady at all times and greatly helped the spirit of the men."<sup>21</sup>

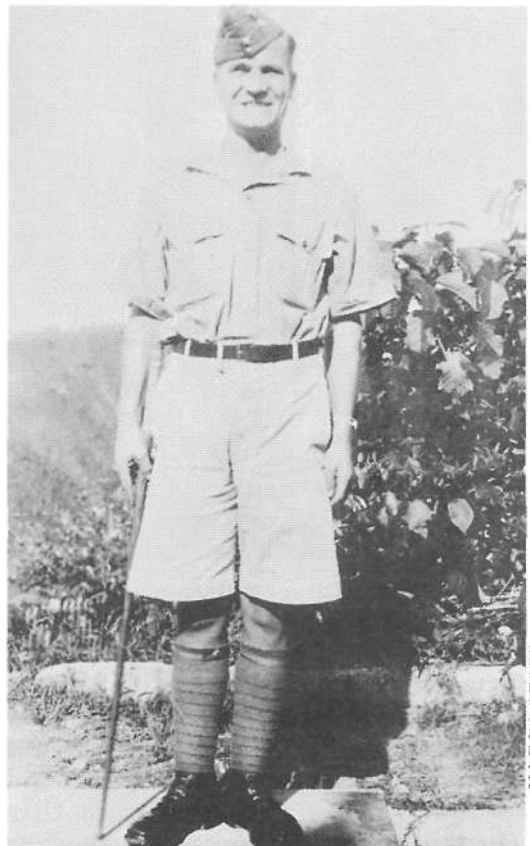
Under constant machine gun fire the remains of "A" Company pushed westwards hoping to get back to Headquarters at the Wong Nei Chong Gap. The Japanese were by now pressing in from all sides, and at about 1300 hours Captain Tarbuth was killed. Eventually Major Gresham, CSM Osborn, Sergeant Pugsley and their party found themselves completely surrounded in a hollow in a small cul de sac. There is still some dispute about the exact location of this spot, but Harry Atkinson who was present with a platoon from "D" Company that had been assigned to "A" Company for the day's action, and other veterans, are confident that it was on a saddle of land that ran between Mount Butler and Jardine's Lookout (the same one upon which Pugsley had earlier been ensconced?) overlooking the position of Stanley Gap. This would put it fairly close to the foot of Jardine's Lookout.<sup>22</sup>

The Japanese worked their way close to this position and began to throw grenades into it. Osborn actually succeeded in picking up a number of these and hurling them back at the enemy. Meanwhile, according to Corporal Hall, he was also "moving around talking to the men, trying to keep their confidence up, as the situation was really getting critical."<sup>23</sup> By about 1515 hours Major Gresham finally concluded that the position was untenable and decided on surrender. Private F.G. Gard who was present recalled Gresham saying: "well boys it looks as if we will have to surrender and we said well sir that is up to you. Sgt Major Osborn said yes boys that [sic] right, but I never liked the idea of surrendering to the Japs."<sup>24</sup> Despite his CSM's

reservations, Gresham tied a white handkerchief to a stick and proceeded to climb up out of the hollow to surrender. Corporal Geddes who earlier had become separated from the group in the hollow and who could look down onto it from a position on a hill above described the scene thus: "I could see them in another gully some distance to my left and from where I was I could see they were surrounded by Japs who were throwing hand grenades into their positions. I opened up with my bren on the attacking Japs and then saw Major Gresham step up out of the gully holding a white handkerchief tied to stick above his head. He was cut down by machine gunfire."<sup>25</sup>

It was shortly after this that Osborn met his end. According to Sergeant Pugsley he and the CSM were huddled together on one of the interior slopes of their position discussing what to do next when a grenade landed near-by. It lodged in an awkward position where it could not be retrieved to be thrown back. Pushing Pugsley aside with enough force that he tumbled backwards down the slope, Osborn threw himself onto the grenade. It exploded killing Osborn instantly, but not touching any of those in its vicinity. Pugsley wrote: "I firmly believe that he did this on purpose and by his action saved the lives of myself and at least six other men who were *in our group*."<sup>26</sup> Private J.D. Pollock recorded that "a hand grenade came over and it was near some of our boys who hadn't noticed this, and on C.S.M. Osborn's sharp alert he fell on this grenade to save the lives of some of our own boys. This man sacrificed his life for the boys that might have been crippled and maimed for life. I say we owe C.S.M. Osborn something for this brave deed that he committed. I will say that he was a real soldier and one of the best that I have known."<sup>27</sup>

From the slopes of Mount Butler and Jardine's Lookout the Japanese invaders pushed onwards, and by ten that morning they had surrounded the Winnipeg Grenadiers' headquarters at the Wong Nei Chong Gap. From inside the headquarters building Brigadier Lawson's last words on the telephone to the British commander were that he was "going outside to fight it out." Emerging from the HQ building he bolted for cover, but was cut down by Japanese machine gun fire in mid-passage.



*CSM Osborn in Jamaica, 1941.*

When his body was found later by the Japanese it was buried with full military honours.<sup>28</sup>

After six more days of fruitless struggle against a ruthless enemy who was constantly reinforcing himself the forces defending Hong Kong finally surrendered at 1515 hours on Christmas Day. In all the fighting had cost the Canadians 23 officers and 267 other ranks killed, 11 and 128 respectively of these from the Winnipeg Grenadiers. Those who survived were to face four years of the harshest captivity in Japanese prison camps that was to claim the lives of another 267 Canadians.<sup>29</sup>

Back at home Canadians anxiously followed news of the developments in Hong Kong, the first occasion during the war that Canadian troops had been involved in land fighting. This would have been especially acute in the Osborn household and in the homes of other Canadian soldiers who were then fighting for their lives in that distant outpost. Margaret Osborn was anxious to tell her husband that their daughter Patricia was now recovering and indeed would



*Osborn's Medals Group (CWM AN #1995006). Left to right: Victoria Cross  
British War Medal, 1914-19  
Victory Medal, 1914-19  
1939-45 Star  
Pacific Star  
Defence Medal  
Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Bar for overseas service  
War Medal, 1939-45  
Since this photograph was taken the Hong Kong Bar, issued in 1992, has been acquired and added to the CVSM.*

*(CWM Photo)*

be spending Christmas with the family, but she was not sure that a letter would get through.<sup>30</sup>

In fact the Osborn family were not certain of John's fate for a couple of years, and thus must have entertained some hopes that he had survived the fighting. It was not until 5 January 1943 that a telegram came from Ottawa informing them that confirmation of John's death had been received, probably through the Red Cross. The official letter of condolences that followed from the Adjutant General on 9 January read:

I deeply regret to inform you that your husband, H.6008 Company Sergeant-Major John Robert Osborn, gave his life in the Service of his Country at Hong Kong. The official date of death has not been reported.

From official information we have received, your husband was killed in action against the enemy. You may be sure that any additional information will be communicated to you without delay.

The Minister of National Defence and the Members of the Army Council have asked me to express to you and your family their sincere sympathy in your bereavement.

We pay tribute to the sacrifice he so bravely made.<sup>31</sup>

Osborn has no known grave. His name is inscribed in column 23 of the Sai Wan Bay Memorial in Hong Kong, which bears the names of all those who died in defence of the colony.

On being informed of Osborn's deeds by Sergeant Pugsley after the war, Major George

Trist, the senior surviving officer of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, who had arduously compiled the unit's war diary while in Japanese prison camp, began collecting testimonials from those who had been witnesses (many of which are quoted above). From these a recommendation was made for Osborn to be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. The awarding of the medal was duly announced by Buckingham Palace and gazetted on 6 April 1946. The citation's last paragraph perhaps best sums up Osborn's accomplishments:

Company Sergeant-Major Osborn was an inspiring example to all throughout the defence which he assisted so magnificently in maintaining against an overwhelming enemy force for over eight and a half hours and In his death he displayed the highest quality of heroism and self-sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

Osborn's widow, Margaret Elizabeth, travelled to Ottawa in January 1947 to receive the award from the Governor-General, Field Marshal Viscount Alexander.

At the age of 42, Osborn was the second oldest Canadian to receive the Victoria Cross during the Second World War (the oldest being Captain F.T. Peters, RN, age 53, at Oran in North Africa in 1942). Osborn was the only VC awarded at Hong Kong, and although his medal was gazetted after the war was over, his actions were the first Victoria Cross winning deeds performed by a Canadian during the war.

By all accounts, Company Sergeant-Major John Osborn was a poor, hardworking man, strict and aloof, but devoted to his family. He had probably entered the Canadian militia to help make ends meet as much as anything else, but with his previous experience as a serving soldier, he injected a welcome note of calm professionalism into his battalion's last desperate struggle against the Japanese. His Victoria Cross can in many ways be taken to symbolize the experiences of so many Canadian soldiers of similarly humble backgrounds who went on to perform heroic deeds and meet their deaths on foreign battlefields in the Second World War.

### Notes

1. This information is derived from a tribute to Osborn by D.D. Waters who acquired the information from his native Norfolk, and published it in the *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol.25, 1985, pp.209-215. The involvement of the parents in the carrying trade is also referred to by a letter from another Norfolk researcher, Stephen Snelling, in a letter to the Directorate of History (DHH), Department of National Defence (DND), contained in Osborn's personal file at the National Archives of Canada (NAC). See National Personnel Records Centre (NPRC), 41-21335, File of John Robert Osborn^Stephen Snelling to the DHH, 3 May 1995.
2. *Ibid.*, Memorandum for DND completed by Margaret Elizabeth Osborn, 2 February 1943.
3. *Ibid.* Attestation Paper, John Robert Osborn, Winnipeg Grenadiers, 4 September 1939.
4. The information in the above two paragraphs is based upon an article on Osborn that appeared in *The Legionary*, Vol.XXI, May 1946, pp.8-9; and on information contained in Osborn's personal file at the NPRC.
5. Ted Ferguson, *Desperate Siege: the Battle of Hong Kong* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1980), p.40. This account is confirmed by the recollections of Gerald Osborn, in an interview with the author of 19 July 1995, although he did say that he does not recall going to any Judy Garland movies.
6. John Robert Osborn to Gerald Osborn, 9 April 1941. Letter in possession of Gerald Osborn. In the interview of 19 July Gerald Osborn confirmed Ferguson's reference to the stick.
7. These documents are contained in Osborn's personal file, NPRC.
8. Interview by the author with William Bell of Winnipeg, 18 July 1995.
9. The incident is recounted in Ferguson, *Desperate Siege*, pp.39-41, and confirmed in the author's interview with Gerald Osborn, 18 July 1995.
10. Carl Vincent, *No Reason Why: the Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy - an Examination* (Stittsville: Canada's Wings, 1981), p.93.
11. *Ibid.*, p.95.
12. Interview by the author with Gerald Osborn, 2 September 1997.
13. Vincent, *No Reason Why*, pp.203-204, Pending the imminent publication Brereton Greenhous's much-awaited *C Force to Hong Kong*, Vincent's book remains the best of all accounts of the battle for Hong Kong. It successfully rebuts previous slurs about the effectiveness of the Canadians' performance in the battle.
14. The war diary of the Winnipeg Grenadiers for the events of the battle of Hong Kong was completed by Major George Trist in the North Point Camp, Hong Kong, in April 1942. Although a considerable effort and a useful document, given the circumstances the amount of information that it conveys is quite limited compared with similar diaries of other battles, that were written under less constrained circumstances. See DHH, File No. 593 (D33) War Diary, Winnipeg Grenadiers, 8-25 December 1941. As noted, the best accounts of the battle remain Vincent's, *No Reason Why*. See also C.P. Stacey's account in *Six Years of War: the Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), pp.437-491, and Oliver Lindsay's *The Lasting Honour: the Fall of Hong Kong, 1941* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).
15. The distances are scaled off the map in C.P. Stacey's *Six Years of War*, following page 490; the heights are given on the map in Lindsay's *Lasting Honour*, pp.68-69.
16. DHH, File No. 593.(D25), Honours and Awards, "C" Force, Appendix C, Testimony of H.6047 Corporal Hall, CIC, Re. H.6008 WO II (CSM) John. R. Osborn [January 1946].
17. *Ibid.* Appendix E, Testimony of H. 17407 Corporal K. Geddes, 14 January 1946.
18. *Ibid.*, Testimony of Sergeant W.J. Pugsley, 12 January 1946.
19. *Ibid.* Testimony of Corporal K. Geddes.
20. *Ibid.* Appendix C, Testimony of Corporal Hall
21. *Ibid.*, Appendix A, Testimony of Sergeant W.J. Pugsley, 12 January 1946.
22. Interview by the author with Harry Atkinson, 20 July 1995.
23. Honours and Awards "C" Force, Appendix C, Testimony of Private Hall
24. *Ibid.* Appendix F, Testimony of Private. F. Gard, 4 January 1946.
25. *Ibid.* Appendix E, Testimony of Corporal K. Geddes, 14 January 1946.
26. *Ibid.* Appendix A, Testimony of Sergeant W.J. Pugsley, 12 January 1946.
27. *Ibid.* Appendix D, Testimony of Private J.D. Pollock.
28. Stacey, *Six War Years*, p.481. The circumstances of Lawson's death are described in the most detail of all the accounts in Lindsay, *Lasting Honour*, p.96.
29. The figures are from Stacey, *Six Years*, pp.488-489.
30. See Ferguson, *Desperate Siege*, p. 132.
31. See Osborn's personal file at the NPRC, F.F.G. Letson, Major-General, Adjutant General, to Mrs. Margaret Elizabeth Osborn, 9 January 1943.
32. *The Canada Gazette*, 6 April 1946 p.2066.

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