

2001

Hong Kong Inquiry

Kenneth Stuart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>

Recommended Citation

Stuart, Kenneth "Hong Kong Inquiry." Canadian Military History 10, 4 (2001)

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Hong Kong Inquiry

Lieutenant-General Kenneth Stuart

Editor's note: This document, dated 1 March 1942, is Stuart's brief to the Royal Commission which examined the Hong Kong operation - Sir Lyman Duff, "Report on the Canadian Expeditionary Force to the Crown Colony of Hong Kong" (Ottawa, 1942), commonly referred to as the "Duff Report."

1. Introduction

In an inquiry of this nature it is only natural that the alleged shortcomings of the inception, preparation and dispatch of the Hong Kong force will be apt to receive greater attention than the actual accomplishment of organizing, equipping and dispatching a force of this nature in slightly over two weeks.

I suggest that the completion of the task of organizing and dispatching the Hong Kong expedition in the time available and according to War Office specifications in practically every detail, is in itself good evidence that the Army was so organized and staffed that it could meet a difficult situation rapidly and effectively. In the light of subsequent events certain parts of our preparations appear to be open to criticism. I would ask the Commission to view those criticisms not in the light of after events, but in the light of conditions existing at the time.

On the 9th October we received the cable from the War Office in London that enabled us to begin our detailed preparations. Two days later we were asked to increase the force by the addition of a Brigade Headquarters and other details amounting to officers and other ranks. The force sailed from Vancouver on the 27th October. The troopship carried all personnel, a considerable quantity of stores, particularly asked for, and all the equipment (less transport) plus a substantial equipment reserve. The transport followed on another ship on 4th November.

I am sure that the Commission, after going through the files and reading the outline records of the two meetings held under the chairmanship of Colonel (now Brigadier) Gibson, will appreciate the large number of decisions that

had to be taken and the number of detailed arrangements that had to be worked out by the Staff in order to accomplish the given task in the time available. This work was further complicated by the need to maintain the utmost secrecy in all phases of the preparation and dispatch of the expedition.

For my part I breathed a sigh of relief when I was informed that the first ship had sailed at the time specified, without the news breaking in the press. At the same time I felt that we had accomplished one of the best bits of rapid preparation and organization that had ever been done by the Department of National Defence. We had organized and dispatched the force in slightly over two weeks. We had provided practically 100% of the equipment and reserve equipment as laid down by the War Office. We had provided 100% of the transport and reserve transport as laid down. This equipment and transport was the product of Canadian industry and its availability meant that the Hong Kong force was the best and most completely equipped force that had ever left the shores of Canada. In this connection I would call your attention to a cable M.O. 2B of 30th October from C.I.G.S to C.G.S. Canada, which reads as under-

We are very grateful to you for dispatching your contingent to Hong Kong at such short notice. We fully realize the difficulties of mobilization and of distance which have had to be overcome. The moral effect of their arrival in November will be much greater that it would have been two months later.

May I, at this stage of my evidence, remind the Commission of the conditions existing at the time of the inception and dispatch of the Hong Kong force. We were at peace with Japan. War was possible but not imminent, according to our information from London. As evidence of this



NAC PA 174501

Brigadier Kenneth Stuart, DSO, MC (centre) and CD. Howe, Minister of Munitions and Supply (left), inspecting one of the first Canadian-built Valentine tanks at the Angus Shops of the Montreal Locomotive Works, 27 May 1941.

statement, I would refer you to the original cable form London dated the 19th September and the cable received from the War Office as late as the 26th October. I would also refer you to the reaction of the press throughout Canada when the news broke that a Canadian force had landed in Hong Kong. The reaction was not only favourable, but enthusiastic from one side of Canada to the other. The only criticism I can remember seeing regarding the Hong Kong expedition at that time was that the Government did not make adequate use of the publicity value of the press release. I emphasize these facts because it is in the light of conditions as they existed prior to the 7th December that the various points included in the terms of reference of this inquiry must be considered and judged.

The Canadian Army is on trial at this inquiry. We, in the Army, find ourselves in a strange position. As a nation we are at war and are going through the most critical period we have ever faced. The Army is one of the major instruments used in the prosecution of the war. Yet, at this critical period, when we should be devoting all our thoughts and energies to the vital task on hand, we are forced to turn our backs to one main task and defend ourselves and the good name of the Army, not against our enemies, but against a charge of alleged gross incompetence based on matters that could not possibly and did not influence that final outcome of the Battle of Hong Kong.

It is a simple matter to be wise after the event had happened. It is a much more difficult matter to anticipate events before they happen. I confess

that I would be forced to plead guilty to the latter charge. I realized that was with Japan was possible, but I did not think Japan would take the plunge, if she took it at all, until the collapse either of Russia or Great Britain. Nor did I anticipate the disastrous events of 7th December and later. In these respects I was in good company. Because Mr. Churchill. By his own admission, was of the same opinions as were a great many others in Great Britain, in the United States and in Canada.

2. Inception of Hong Kong Expedition

You have been told by Brigadier Gibson of events that took place subsequent to receipt of the telegram, No. 162, dated 19th September, 1914, from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the Secretary of State for External Affairs. You will have noted that the records on file are very meager in respect to this action. The C.G.S. in his memorandum of 24th September addressed to the Associate Minister of National Defense, dealt with the risks to Canada in the event of the two battalions being dispatched to Hong Kong from our Home Defence forces. He concluded that, in view of the situation, it would not prejudice the defence of Canada to dispatch a force of two battalions to Hong Kong. On the same day in a record of a telephone conversation with Mr. Ralston, the C.G.S. specifically stated that he had recommended that dispatch of the force. There is nothing in our records to indicate the consideration given to the matter before this recommendation was made. I think I can explain

why there is no record of these considerations. In the first place I am satisfied that the C.G.S. felt, in the light of the nature of the request, that the decision was primarily a political one. I am sure he felt, as I did every member of the General Staff who saw the cable, that the Canadian Government had no other course but to approve the request of the British Government. British and Indian troops were already in Hong Kong. Australian, Indian and British troops were in Singapore, Canada was asked to reinforce the garrison at Hong Kong. There was a military risk in sending these reinforcements to Hong Kong, but we are at war and similar risks are inescapable in war, and we accept risks of a similar nature every time a troopship leaves the shores of Canada. I cannot imagine anybody with red blood in his veins suggesting that we should have refused to accede to the British request just because there was some risk involved. Other parts of the Empire had accepted the risk of Hong Kong. How could Canada refuse to accept a similar risk and at the same time justify our contention that we are in this war up to the limit of our resources.

What I have just said does not mean that the C.G.S. did not give careful consideration to the military risks involved. I know General Crerar very well indeed, and have been associated with him since we were at Royal Military College together before the last war. He never makes a decision without very carefully weighing the pros and cons of the problem under consideration. He did not have detailed information in respect to the actual nature and condition of the then existing defences of Hong Kong. He had, however, studied the defence of Hong Kong at the Staff College, at the Imperial Defence College and during a two-year term of duty at the War Office in London, he knew that Hong Kong was a defended advanced naval base. He knew that the defences had been modernized for all round defence, either from the sea or from the land. He knew that the land defences on the Kowloon Peninsula known as the Gin Drinker's Line, had been under construction since the early '30's. He knew that the base was capable of defending itself for a long period and that adequate reserves of food supplies and equipment were maintained in Hong Kong for that purpose. He knew that we would not be at war with Japan without the United States at our side. He knew that the United States' battle fleet was concentrated in

the Pacific, with its major component at Pearl Harbour. He knew that the British intended to strengthen their naval forces at Singapore. He knew that the Chinese were at war with Japan and that active assistance from the Chinese could be expected in the event of a Japanese attack on Hong Kong through the Kowloon Peninsula. As a result of this knowledge he undoubtedly felt that Hong Kong was capable of defending itself against Japan until relieved by the British and the United States' fleets, or by active assistance for the Chinese Army.

The point I am trying to make here is that in General Crerar's mind there was no thought of futility or hopelessness in connection with the Hong Kong expedition.

Events of the 7th December at Pearl Harbour and the loss of the Prince of Wales and Repulse a few days later, completely changed the strategic position not only in the China Sea but in the whole of the Far Eastern regions. Japan in a few hours attained a command of the Far Eastern water that it was, and will be for some time, physically impossible to challenge. The dispatch of further assistance to Hong Kong was no longer a feasible operation of war; much less would there be even a fleeting opportunity to repeat the miracle of Dunkerque.

If at the time of the inception of the Hong Kong expedition General Crerar had felt that it was a hopeless venture, I know that he would not have recommended that dispatch of a Canadian force. He knew that the garrison at Hong Kong would be in for a bad time in the events of war with Japan. There was a military risk in dispatching the force but that risk, in the light of existing conditions, was not sufficient to warrant a recommendation from him that the British request should be refused.

For my part I subscribed entirely to the action taken by General Crerar. Had I been in his position I would have taken similar action.

I have attempted to tell you what I know went through General Crerar's mind when he was faced with this problem. If he were here today I do not believe he could add very much to what I have told you. I hope it will not be necessary for you to send for General Crerar. He is doing a job in the U.K. that requires his full thoughts

and all his energies. He is commanding the Canadian Corps of over 100,000 men. He is now engaged in training the formations that comprise the Canadian Corps. He may have to fight with that Corps any time, in these circumstances I suggest that he must not be taken away from his present command.

3. Selection of Units for the Hong Kong Expedition

The files that the Commission have had access to give a fairly complete story of this phase of our preparations. The Director of Military Training divided the units available into three classes. The two units that were eventually selected were in the third class because of their need for refresher training after a long spell of garrison duty. The period of refresher training given to such units is usually from six weeks to two months.

On the basis of this recommendation by the Director of Military Training (Colonel, subsequently Brigadier Lawson), the Director of Staff Duties (Colonel Macklin) prepared a memorandum which indicated the various alternative methods by which two battalions could be selected for the Hong Kong Force. He recommended these battalions be found from the 4th Division and that the matter be taken up with the G.O.C., 4th Division. The Director of Military Operations and Intelligence (Colonel Gibson) concurred and the question came before me. I wrote a minute to D.S.D in which I stated-

- (a) Please put up alternative (a) to G.O.C, 4th Division and ask for his recommendations.
- (b) It should be impressed upon the G.O.C. that we need the best he has."

The question was then referred to the G.O.C, 4th Division, who made strong representations that the two battalions be not taken away for his Division. The C.G.S. then made the decision and selected the two battalions that were to be sent to Hong Kong. His reasons are indicated in his memorandum to the Minister dated 30th September, 1941, which you have before you.

It would appear from the records that there was a definite conflict of opinion as between the C.G.S. and myself. I was not alarmed when I heard of the decision taken and made no attempt

to discuss the matter further with the C.G.S. My reasons for not doing so were that I felt, in the light of all the circumstances, that his decision was a sound one. I felt that there would be time to give refresher courses to both of these units prior to their departure, on the voyage and after reaching their destination. It is important to note that this time we were not aware of the date of departure.

This phase of the inquiry, like that of the inception of the expedition, suggests that desirability of hearing General Crerar's evidence. I trust the Commission will not consider it imperative that General Crerar should give his evidence in person. I am quite sure that General Crerar could add very little to what he has already said in his memorandum and to what Brigadier Macklin and other officers can tell you about this phase of the inquiry. As I have already stated I consider that the return of General Crerar to this country to answer questions in connection with this inquiry represents a course of action that would be most difficult and almost impossible to justify.

4. The State of Training of the two battalions selected for the Hong Kong Expedition

The Winnipeg Grenadiers had been mobilized for two years and the Royal Rifles for about 15 months. During that period both of these units had carried out periods of garrison duty. The Winnipeg Grenadiers had served a tour of garrison duty in Jamaica and the Royal Rifles had carried out a similar tour of duty in Newfoundland. The length of time these units had been mobilized and the fact that they had gained experience in the same general type of work that they would be called upon to perform in Hong Kong must be considered in relation to their fitness to undertake their new duty. I admit, and all directly concerned will admit, that both of these units required a refresher course. In fact, our policy today is to carry out reliefs so that all units doing garrison duty are given refresher training after a period of garrison duty.

It is very necessary that we should have a clear idea in our own minds as to what exactly we mean by the term a well-trained and efficient battalion. Training is an all embracing term and must not be restricted to the purely mechanical and physical side of basic and elementary

training. The first is the morale training, the second is the mental training and the third is physical training.

Morale training seeks to develop such characteristics as loyalty, confidence, esprit-de-corps, determination, sense of duty and morale courage. These characteristics can be and are developed throughout the work of a unit, irrespective of the nature of that work. Both of these units had served as units for a considerable period of time. Both of these units had been reported to us as having carried out their work in an effective manner and as far as we know there had been no disciplinary trouble in either of these units during the course of their somewhat boresome garrison duty. I consider, therefore, that we had every right to assume that the morale of these units was good and given good morale a unit in spite of other limitations can, if called upon to do so, accomplish almost any task that may confront it.

Mental training comprises the development of constant mental alertness, initiative, judgement and a readiness to accept responsibility. These characteristics, like the morale characteristics, can be developed in the normal work of the unit, whatever its nature may be. The Winnipeg Grenadiers, unfortunately, did not have opportunity in Jamaica for certain types of tactical and technical training. Nevertheless, the garrison work they had to do, and which they were reported to have done very well, afforded ample opportunity for the development of the morale and mental class of training. The same applies to the Royal Rifles, although this unit did have a greater opportunity for tactical and technical training.

The physical side of training is for the purpose of conditioning the body so that it can fulfill the great demands of spirit and mind. Both battalions are reported to have paid considerable attention to this aspect of training.

The point I am trying to make here is that the real worth of a battalion cannot be judged solely on training reports in the tactical and technical spheres. One must dig much deeper, and provided the collective spirits and minds are healthy, then other limitations can be very quickly overcome.



NAC PA 501269

Colonel J.K. Lawson, photographed in Ottawa, 16 October 1941. At the time he was Director of Military Training of Canada, and was subsequently selected to command the Canadian Brigade headed for Hong Kong.

I maintain that the spirits and minds of the two battalions selected were healthy. Both units were well-officered and commanded by experienced commanders. Given a few weeks to settle down absorb their reinforcements and refresh, then either of these units could be expected to give as good an account of themselves as any other units available in Canada.

May I point out that Colonel Lawson knew more about the condition of each of these units than any other officer in Canada. It will be remembered that he was Director of Military Training of Canada at the time of the inception of the Hong Kong expedition. I was acting C.G.S when the cable arrived for the U.K. requesting the Hong Kong force be increased by the addition of a Brigade Headquarters. I discussed the selection of Brigade Commander and Senior Administrative Officer with General Browne the

Adjutant-General. We agreed that Colonel Lawson, the Director of Military Training, should be offered the command of the Brigade and the Colonel Hennessey be offered the Senior Administrative appointment. I telephoned to Montreal where General Crerar and Colonel Ralston were held up in their departure for the United Kingdom. I obtained their approval to these two appointments. I then sent for Colonel Lawson and asked him if he would like to command of the Hong Kong Expedition. He accepted and stated there was nothing in the world he would like better. The point I wish to make here is that Colonel Lawson knew the condition of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles better than any other officer in Canada. He made no representations to me whatever in the way of suggesting changes and was perfectly satisfied with all the arrangements made, including the selection of units, scales of equipment, etc. This, I consider, to be a fact of the utmost importance Lawson never was a yes man and everybody who knew him and worked with him will testify to this fact. If he had felt any qualms about the condition of the units he would have said so in no uncertain terms.

The second point I would like to bring out here is that Lawson's actions were based on conditions existing at that time. He knew there would not be time for refresher training in Canada and was satisfied with the selection of the units.

In the light of after events, the training of these units is in question. In this connection, I would point out that both units had a total of practically two months for the refresher training before going into action at Hong Kong; about two weeks was available in Canada; three weeks was available during transit and a further tree weeks was available before operations began in Hong Kong. Naturally, I would have preferred to have had more time, bit I am satisfied that when we are informed of the derails of the actual operations at Hong Kong, we shall find that both units acquitted themselves in a manner creditable to Canada and that alleged lack of training in certain particulars did not and could not have affected the ultimate issue.

I think I can say without any possibility of authoritative contradiction, that the two units went to Hong Kong were better trained than most of the units that went overseas with the 1st and 2nd Divisions.

To sum up I agree entirely with the statement made by the C.G.S. in his memorandum to the Minister of 30th September, that "the battalions going to Hong Kong should be efficient well-trained battalions". I agree also with the statement made in para 10 of the above memorandum to the effect the "both of the units are units of proven efficiency", the latter statement, of course, refers to the past work of these two units. The main point at this stage

A group of soldiers from the Royal Rifles of Canada, along with the regimental mascot, Blackie, relax prior to their departure for Hong Kong, 27 October 1941.



appears to be whether the two units in question lived up to the specifications outlined by the C.G.S., namely, were they "efficient, well-trained battalions". Given two-months period of refresher training then I am satisfied that both battalions would live up to specifications as stated. Unfortunately, events did not permit of these battalions being given the full period of refresher training desired. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the two-months available was not wasted and that great strides must have been made in the individual training during the three weeks; voyage, and in unit and sub-unit training during the three weeks that were available in Hong Kong. The energy and training ability of Brigadier Lawson is good evidence that every advantage was taken in the time available. I feel, therefore, that when these units actually went into action they would have been "efficient, well-trained battalions".

Before I leave this aspect of the preparation of the Hong Kong expedition, I would like to point out that the factor of availability of shipping is tied in with our training policy. We all would like to complete the training of units and reinforcements before sending them overseas. We have never been able to enforce this policy rigidly. The shortage of shipping, particularly ships equipped to carry personnel, had been a problem since the beginning of the war and had become more of a problem as each month passes. The policy we have had to lay down is that tying in of our training programmes very closely with those of courses overseas. This enables us to make use of shipping space as it is made available to us, without any lack of continuity of training. The training of units and reinforcements overseas continues from the point reached in Canada prior to embarkation. Such a policy is open to criticism. On the other hand, it is the only practical policy to follow in the light of the shipping situation. In the case of the Hong Kong expedition, we were particularly requested to make use of the sailing on the 27th October. Failing that, another sailing would not be available for about two months. The value of sending our troops via this first sailing was emphasized in the cable received for the United Kingdom. Should we in Canada have disregarded to urgency to the British request and have done everything possible to get the expedition on the first sailing and completed the

refresher training in Hong Kong? I suggest, in the light of conditions at the time, that there was no alternative but to accept the course we did.

4. The Training of Reinforcements

You will be given the detailed picture of how the two units were built up in reinforcements, by officers for the Adjutant-General's Branch. The question I shall attempt to deal with is the extent to which the inclusion of about 150 partially trained reinforcements might affect the efficiency of the two units.

My understanding is that these 150 men had not fully completed their training but were very carefully picked from the volunteers for the units. This, I suggest, is a most important point when you remember that training is an all embracing term and when measured, as we are attempting to measure it, must embrace the characteristics of the individual in addition to his record of technical training accomplished. Other things being equal, it is obvious that a man who had completed his technical training is more useful than one who has not. On the other hand, and speaking with the experience of one who commanded various units in the last war for over three years, I would say without hesitation that I would prefer as a reinforcement a really good man who had not completed his full training, to an average or poor man who had completed his training. I make this statement on the strength of my knowledge of the power of absorption in a good unit.

Both units were brought up to strength with fully trained reinforcements. First reinforcements consisting of about 6 officers and 150 men per battalion accompanied the force. Of this number, approximately 150 of the first reinforcements for each unit had not been completely trained. On the other hand, according to my information, these men had been volunteers and had the advantage of a further six weeks intensive training in transit and at Hong Kong before operations began. It is probable that these first reinforcements were called upon to join their units shortly after operations began. I am satisfied, from my own experience, that such men could have been absorbed in the battalions without adversely affecting the efficiency of the unit.

5. Transport

The situation in respect to the transport is rather complicated. It will be explained to you by those officers who actually dealt with this aspect of the detailed preparations. There are two general questions that should be asked in connection with the preparations involved in the shipping of the mechanical transport that was to accompany the force. These questions are as under:-

- a. Why was not some mechanical transport loaded on the troopship, and what effect would the lack of this transport have on the fighting efficiency of the force?
- b. Why were not arrangements made for the second ship that carried the mechanical transport to accompany the troopship, and what effect did the non-arrival of this second ship have on the fighting efficiency of the units?

In respect to the first question, I can only say that so far as I know it has not been firmly established that any transport could have been placed on the troopship. On the other hand there is some evidence to show that approximately 18 vehicles might have been loaded in certain space that was alleged to be empty. The vehicles that were ear-marked to accompany the troopship were 6 Bren Gun Carriers, 2 Water Tanks and the balance made up of passenger and loader-carrying vehicles.

I have a contour map here which shows that area in which our troops were fighting in Hong Kong. It is a very enclosed country and mountainous. That area within the Gin Drinker's Ling in the Kowloon Peninsula and the Island itself, is not suitable for the use of tractor or wheeled vehicles off the roads, other than in a few isolated areas. I do not believe, therefore, that the lack of these 6 carriers and of the other transport indicated, had any appreciable effect on the fighting efficiency of the units.

In respect to the second question. We know that we were asked to send a two-years' reserve of mechanical transport with the force. We did so. My assumption is, therefore, that the British troops in Hong Kong had a similar reserve. When this factor is taken into consideration and also the fact that civilian transport was available to be used from the large centers of Kowloon and

Victoria, it is difficult to see how the Canadians transport to arrive did not affect the fighting efficiency of the force and I am convinced that it had no effect on the ultimate issue of the battle.

If we throw our minds back to conditions existing at the time, it is difficult to find any reasonable argument to support holding up the sailing of the troopship in order that both the troops and the freighter carrying the transport could sail in one convoy. The troopship was a fast ship capable of making nearly 20 knots. The freighter was a very slow ship capable of making about 8 knots. At the time war with Japan was not thought to be imminent and we had no information at Headquarters in Ottawa to suggest that war with Japan was likely to break out before the arrival of the second ship. It is interesting to speculate as to what might have happened if both ships had sailed in the one convoy. There are three possibilities. The convoy could not have got to Hong Kong according to my information, but might have got beyond Manila and have been picked up by the Japanese Navy between Manila and Hong Kong. Secondly, it might have got to Manila as did the second ship and be now fighting with MacArthur's forces. Finally, the convoy might have been re-routed at sea to Singapore. None of these alternatives are very attractive.

6. Conclusion

May I again emphasize the necessity to view all aspects of this inquiry in the light of conditions prevailing at the time and not in the light of subsequent events. If the first course if followed, then I consider that there is little ground for criticism in respect to the inception and preparation and despatch of the Hong Kong force. In fact, I feel that in the short time available, an excellent job was done.

Kenneth Stuart was born in 1891 in Trois Rivieres, Quebec. He graduated from The Royal Military College in 1911 and served overseas with the Royal Canadian Engineers between 1915 and 1918. He was the editor of Canadian Defence Quarterly in the 1930s and served as Vice Chief of the General Staff at the time of the decision to send troops to Hong Kong. He succeeded H.D.G. Crerar as Chief of the General Staff in December 1941. He died in Ottawa in November 1945.