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The Controversy over Maltby's Hong Kong Dispatch

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The Controversy Over Maltby's Hong Kong Dispatch

The recent release of the full text of Major-General CM. Maltby's Official Dispatch as the General Officer Commanding at Hong Kong (Public Record Office WO 106/240113) prompted British and Canadian newspapers to run sensational stories quoting Maltby's criticisms of the discipline and battlefield performance of the Canadian battalions. Maltby's statements, which were censored when the Dispatch was initially released, require a detailed examination and will be discussed in a future issue of *CMH*. In addition, the Spring 1994 issue will carry an article by Paul Dickson on "Crerar and the Decision to Garrison Hong Kong." For the present we are publishing an exchange of correspondence, dated January 1948, between Lieutenant-Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, then Deputy Director of the Army Historical Section, and Brigadier John H. Price

who was second-in-command of the Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong. Brigadier Price was asked to comment, not on the censored Dispatch, but on extracts from a draft report prepared by the Historical Section of the British Cabinet Office. This report contained the substance of the most serious charges Maltby made about the conduct of the Royal Rifles. For the information of the reader, other officers mentioned in the exchange include Brigadier C. Wallis, Indian Army, commander of the East Brigade (to which the Royal Rifles belonged), Lieutenant-Colonel W.J. Home, commander of the Royal Rifles, Lieutenant-Colonel J.L.R. Sutcliffe, Commanding Officer, Winnipeg Grenadiers, Brigadier J.K. Lawson, Commanding Officer, "C" Force (as the Canadian contingent was known) and Colonel P. Hennessy, Lawson's second-in-command.



Major-General CM. Maltby and Brigadier J.K. Lawson

HQC 5393-13 (DDHS)

13 January 1948

Brigadier J.H. Price, M.C., E.D.,
249 Laurier Ave.,
Quebec City, P.Q.

Dear Brigadier Price,

You will remember that I called on you towards the end of March 1946, when I was visiting Headquarters M.D.5 for the purpose of interviewing various surviving officers of "C" Force.

You will probably recall on that occasion that you suggested the desirability of my seeing Major General Maltby and Brigadier Wallis. You had gained an impression, during your internment with these officers on Formosa, that they were of the opinion that during the last days of the seige the Officer Commanding the Royal Rifles had put forward proposals for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from operations.

I subsequently interviewed General Maltby and Brigadier Wallis in London, and was given an opportunity of reading the former's official Dispatch on the Hong Kong Operations, and the latter's War Diaries of the Mainland and East Island Brigades. From their conversations and from material recorded in these documents it was evident to me that you were correct in your assumption.

The Historical Section A. H. Q. has now received a draft report dealing with the War with Japan prepared by the Historical Section, Cabinet Office, London. The report contains certain passages describing incidents concerning the participation of Canadian troops in the defence of Hong Kong which have not appeared in Canadian sources seen by this Directorate. In view of our previous conversation on this matter, I am taking the liberty of forwarding to you a copy of extracts from this report for your comments.

From the point of view of historical accuracy, we are naturally anxious to arrive at the true facts of the case. Brigadier Home has not been approached on the matter, which it was felt, might be a source of embarrassment to him. It was considered that as you are in the position of having been a close observer of the events which took place and yet were not personally involved in the controversial matters under consideration, your assistance would be most valuable.

Yours sincerely,

sgd G.W.L. Nicholson

(G.W.L. Nicholson) Lt-Col,
Deputy Director,
Historical Section (G.S.).

Encl.

Extracts from the Report of the Historical
Section, Cabinet Office, London

"21 Dec. At 2200 hours at Stone Hill headquarters Lieut.-Colonel Home informed Brigadier Wallis that he wished to see the Governor: his battalion was exhausted; further resistance would only result in the wastage of valuable Canadian lives; as senior Canadian officer he felt a grave responsibility. This unprecedented request came as a great shock to the brigadier who pointed out that the G.O.C. could not be ignored in such a fashion. Eventually Colonel Home was persuaded to await what counsel a night's sleep might bring and Brigadier Wallis reported the matter to General Maltby by telephone.

The attitude of Lieut.-Colonel Home, who had consulted Lieut.-Colonel Sutcliffe of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, is not to be regarded as that of an ordinary battalion commander. He was, indeed, the senior surviving Canadian officer and as such felt himself answerable to the Canadian Chief of the General Staff, to the Dominion Government, to the Canadian people."

22 Dec. "At 1030 hours the brigadier (Wallis) conferred over the telephone with General Maltby, after reporting that Lieut.-Colonel Home's attitude had not changed: he was more than ever convinced of the futility of continued resistance."

23 Dec. "At night Brigadier Wallis telephoned to Fortress Command a request from Colonel Home to speak both to General Maltby and to Sir Mark Young. The Canadian commander had again urged that his men were unfit to continue the struggle which had become a useless waste of lives, and the arguments and persuasions of the brigadier had no effect: all he required was an assurance that the Canadians would continue to resist.



Lieutenant-Colonel W.J. Home
(NAC PA 116459)

In the early morning of the 24th Brigadier Wallis held a discussion with Colonel Home and the senior officers of the Royal Rifles of Canada who were all firmly convinced that their men could do no more. For five days and nights the Royal Rifles, the only infantry battalion remaining under Brigadier Wallis' command, had borne the brunt of the attack and counter-attack; they had had little opportunity to rest and for long intervals had gone without food. Untrained, they had bought their knowledge at a heavy price, their hardships and casualties being the greater for their total lack of battle experience. Discussions over the telephone between the brigadier and General Maltby followed. Eventually it was understood that the Canadians would be withdrawn into reserve at Stanley Fort, but that the defence of the Stanley Peninsula would continue."



Sai Wan Militanj Cemetery, Hong Kong.

(Commonwealth War Graves Commission Photo PMR 93-326-1)

January 27, 1948

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Lt.Col. G.W.L. Nicholson
Deputy Director
Historical Section (G.S.)
Department of National Defence
Ottawa, Ontario

Dear Col. Nicholson:

I must apologize for not having answered your letter of the 13th of January, #HQC 5393-13 (DDHS). I have been away and also I wanted to take some time to consider the copy of extracts from the report of the Historical Section, Cabinet Office, London.

This account is written in such a manner as to create a wrong impression as to intent and motive.

There were plenty of Canadian officers who had battle experience in the first war and who were competent to judge as to the possibility of a successful outcome of the defence of the island. Consider the facts - The Island had been split in two by vastly superior Japanese forces. On the eastern brigade front, which included the Stanley Peninsula, the Royal Rifles and one company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Force were the only troops who had fought continuously day and night, without rest, since the landing on the 17th and were still carrying all the fighting. By the 21st they had been greatly reduced in fighting strength and by the 23rd to a strength of around 500 all ranks. (It might be interesting to note that when troops in this sector were marched out of Stanley fort as Prisoners of War, they numbered over 2000).

The enemy controlled the sea and the air. 3" Mortar ammunition had run out. Only one battery of 18 pdr. guns were available for artillery support. Only L.M.G.'s and rifles were left to fight with.

The men had been fighting without much food and practically no sleep and were dead tired. They were obviously in no condition to put up a spirited defence without some rest. A request that they be given 24 hours rest was a reasonable one particularly as it was judged that there were ample troops available who had participated up to date only to a comparatively small degree in the battle and also as the plan then was to contract the front held by a retirement to the Stanley Peninsula itself.

This is part of the story.

The other part casts a reflection on Brig. Home and senior Canadian officers which I greatly resent and about which I protested to General Maltby when I was with him at Argyle St. Officers P.O.W. Camp, Kowloon, in 1942-1943.

In my opinion Brig. Wallis' report is not to be relied upon. He was then in such a state of great nervous excitement and I believe his mental state was such that he was incapable of collected judgement or of efficient leadership. The insinuation in his report is that Brig.

Home suggested a complete and final withdrawal of the Canadian force from the fighting. This is untrue and I so told General Maltby.

What happened was this. It was known definitely by December 21st that Brig. Lawson and Col. Hennessy had been killed and that consequently, Brig. Home became the senior Canadian officer in the Colony. As such he inherited responsibilities which he took very seriously and which caused him great anxiety.

It required no great military genius to predict the outcome of the battle once the Japanese had landed on the island with their control of sea and air and great superiority in weapons and men. He felt, I think rightly, that he would be derelict in his duty to his men and to the Canadian Government if he did not communicate his conclusions to the highest authority. Also neither Brig. Home nor his officers had any faith in Brig. Wallis' judgement or in his conduct of operations. And who had better right than he had? He and his men were bearing the brunt of the fighting and knew from first hand knowledge the strength and armament of the forces against them. The Higher Command had consistently shown an inability to grasp the realities of the situation and to pursue tactics which might have prolonged the struggle but could not have altered the final result.

At the meeting on the morning of the 24th, reported by Brig. Wallis, the question of capitulation of the Colony was discussed but never was any suggestion made of a separate final withdrawal of the Canadian forces.

It was after this meeting that the Royal Rifles were withdrawn and came into action again on Christmas day after some six hours rest only.

Generally speaking, there are certain inaccuracies which should be corrected:-

1) Brig. Home on the 21st was called by Lt. Col. Sutcliffe who informed him that he had received and answered a cable from the Minister of National Defence and also that Brig. Lawson and Col. Hennessy had been killed. Lt. Col. Sutcliffe reported that his battalion had been terribly decimated and also that he had had some argument with Higher Command about useless attacks which his regiment was ordered to make. He asked Brig. Home if he could not do something to stop what he considered was a useless waste of lives.

2) I cannot believe that Brig. Home asked Brig. Wallis to see the Governor. This does not make sense as we were cut off from the other sector and there was no practical way of carrying this out.

3) So far as I can remember, Brig. Home and I were the only two Canadian officers present at the meeting with Brig. Wallis on the 24th.

If there are any further details you think might serve to clarify the situation, I will be glad to let you have them if I can furnish the information.

Sincerely yours,

sgd John H. Price