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FEATURE

# A Historiography of C Force

TONY BANHAM

*Abstract: Following the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in 1941, a small number of books covering the then Colony's war experiences were published. Although swamped by larger and more significant battles, the volume of work has expanded in the years since and is no longer insignificant. This historiography documents that body of literature, examining trends and possible future directions for further study with particular respect to the coverage of C Force.*

THE FATE OF the 1,975 men and two women of C Force, sent to Hong Kong just before the Japanese invaded, has generated a surprising volume of literature. It was fate too that a Canadian, Major General Arthur Edward Grasett, was the outgoing commander of British troops in China—including the Hong Kong garrison—in mid-1941 (being replaced that August by Major General Christopher Maltby of the Indian army), and fate that his determination that the garrison be reinforced would see a Briton, Brigadier John Kelburne Lawson, arrive from Canada in November 1941 as commander of this small force sent to bolster the colony's defences.

Grasett's view of the Japanese, amplified by reports from his intelligence sources in Canton, was not positive. From a parochial Hong Kong perspective, he believed that a show of extra force locally would deter Japanese aggression. Although in hindsight we know that had the Hong Kong garrison been larger Japan would simply have attacked with a larger force, clearly Grasett sincerely believed that the extra Commonwealth manpower would make a difference.

The arrival of C Force saw Hong Kong's garrison expand to around 14,000 men, whose roles covered everything from a Mule Corps to infantry, from dentists to a Pay Corps. But the Japanese,

by the end of 1941, had access to 60,000 men just across the border—plus artillery and air power that would render Hong Kong's defences powerless. Eighteen days of war saw 10 percent of the defenders killed, and a further twenty percent wounded. Men entering POW camps—with their lack of basic nutrition and hygiene—would struggle to survive. It was without doubt an overwhelmingly negative experience.

Following capitulation, Hong Kong was effectively cut off from the outside world. While a varying quality of newspaper articles featuring Hong Kong were printed in the UK, Canada, and elsewhere from the start of the attack onwards, the first solid news of the fate of the colony was brought by escapers from the POW and internment camps that were established at the end of December 1941, and by returning American and Canadian civilian internees (who were repatriated in 1942 and 1943 respectively). Eyewitness works published before war's end included Robert Hammond and Jan Marsman in 1942; Phyllis Harrop, Gwen Dew, and Benny Proulx in 1943; and Gwen Priestwood, Emily Hahn, Lan and Hu, and Phillip Harman in 1944.<sup>1</sup> Although Proulx was a member of the Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, he was an old China hand and a Canadian, and in fact the only successful Canadian escaper.<sup>2</sup>

Proulx's book documented his early escape and was therefore the first publication on the subject by a Canadian, albeit not one from C Force. The majority of his account covered the eighteen days of fighting—including the Repulse Bay Hotel siege in detail—with his escape being simply the last chapter. Like most books written during

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Harrop, *Hong Kong Incident* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1943); Robert B. Hammond, *Bondservant of the Japanese* (Pasadena: Privately Printed, 1942); Gwen Dew, *Prisoner of the Japs* (New York: Heinemann, 1943); Jan Marsman, *I Escaped from Hong Kong* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942); Gwen Priestwood, *Through Japanese Barbed Wire* (London: George Harrap, 1944); Emily Hahn, *China to Me: A Partial Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1944); Alice Y. Lan and Betty M. Hu, *We Flee from Hong Kong* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1944); Phillip Harman, *Hellions of Hirohito: A Factual Story of an American Youth's Torture and Imprisonment by the Japanese* (Los Angeles: DeVorss and Co., 1944); Benny Proulx, *Underground from Hong Kong* (New York: Dutton, 1943).

<sup>2</sup> Four Winnipeg Grenadiers, Adams, Berzenski, Ellis, and Payne, also escaped from North Point Camp, but were recaptured. The final eight British escapers (from Shamshuiipo POW Camp) were caught in the act at the same time. The four Canadians, and five of the British, were executed. The majority of the successful escapers were, like Proulx, long-term residents with at least some knowledge of local geography and language.



Loading of Canadian military equipment aboard HMT *Awatea* en route to Hong Kong, Vancouver, British Columbia, 27 October 1941. [Library and Archives Canada PA116789]

the war while key players were still in Japanese captivity, it is short on names.

In camp, every unit involved in the attempted defence of Hong Kong produced some sort of war diary. Most, though not all of these, are in archives but Maltby summarised the battle with some clarity in “Despatch.”<sup>3</sup> The earliest and generally most accurate (though far from comprehensive) timeline of the December 1941 fighting to be published, it portrays a view of the situation as perceived by Maltby from his Battle Box headquarters from invasion to surrender.<sup>4</sup>

This was followed by other national and unit official histories, such as *The War Against Japan: Official History of the Second World War* which provides, in fifty pages of Volume 1, a short but accurate account in the impersonal style one would expect from an official history.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in *Six Years of War* volume one, Stacey

<sup>3</sup> C.M. Maltby, “Despatch,” *Supplement to London Gazette*, 29 February 1948.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, as will become clear, this was the expurgated version, a version more critical of C Force having been withdrawn after consultation with Montgomery.

<sup>5</sup> S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan: Official History of the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1957–1961).

gives, this time in fifty-four pages, a very good account of C Force's provenance and the fighting.<sup>6</sup>

But the first popular history, initially published anonymously, was *A Record of the Actions of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps* by Major Evan Stewart.<sup>7</sup> This is the original book on the subject, written by the wartime commander of 3 Company Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC). Most histories written since have largely relied for their foundation on a timeline based on this book plus Maltby's despatch. A short work, it is valuable for anyone wishing to get a basic understanding of the December actions, though as expected from the title it is naturally somewhat biased towards those involving the HKVDC. This publication, generally known in Hong Kong as 'The Little Red Book,' had a cathartic effect on the survivors and their families.<sup>8</sup> Eight years after the end of the war, for the first time, they had the possibility of a common understanding of their experience. Or at least the start of it, as the work covered only the eighteen days of fighting.

## BIFURCATION

It was inevitable that at some point full-length accounts would appear, of both the battle and the three years and eight months of internment that the prisoners of war experienced. The first, starting a Hong Kong tradition of history-by-amateur, was written by a British ex-soldier called Tim Carew. In *The Fall of Hong Kong*, Carew clearly focuses on the British troops—especially the Middlesex Regiment—and covered others with a slightly patronising air.<sup>9</sup> While in my own research I have come across his letters to survivors, and have thus developed a respect for the laboriousness of his pre-internet researches. His focus and style implies a fair number of interviews conducted in London pubs. His comments on the Royal Rifles' drunkenness (page 171) and abandoning positions and losing

<sup>6</sup> C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War, Volume 1, The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific*, (Ottawa: Department of National Defence 1955).

<sup>7</sup> Evan Stewart, *A Record of the Actions of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps* (Hong Kong: Ye Olde Printerie, Ltd., 1953).

<sup>8</sup> It was republished in hard back in 2004 as *Hong Kong Volunteers in Battle*, after Stewart's son approved his father's name being quoted as the author.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Carew, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, (Pan Books, 1960).

“all heart for further fighting” due to horrific casualties and lack of food (pages 189–191, 207) are unfair and would not make him many Canadian friends. Yet his summary: “The real trouble with the Royal Rifles of Canada was that one of their most experienced senior officers made no secret of the fact that he considered further resistance to be useless,” succeeded in asking an important question—yet to be seriously researched—about the cohesiveness of the two battalions that comprised the bulk of C Force.

Two years later, on the other side of the Atlantic, Arthur Penney wrote a history, aptly named *Royal Rifles of Canada*, which appears to have been indirectly responsible for much of the subsequent ‘Canadianisation’ of the battle.<sup>10</sup> Penney sticks to his subject with dogged determination (for example, although the book largely focuses on the battle of Hong Kong, he does not mention the HKVDC once). A number of more recent Canadian historians, using Penney as a starting point, have followed his single-mindedness with far less excuse in works that portray themselves as broad—rather than unit—histories.

From this moment on there was a general bifurcation in the literature. British works would typically attempt to be comprehensive (covering British, Indian, and Canadian forces and considering engineers, signals, artillery, Royal Navy, etc.) and somewhat disparaging of the Canadian involvement. Hard-core Canadian accounts would tend over time to ignore all other nationalities involved in Hong Kong’s defence—except when pointing out their deficiencies.

An example of the former would be Oliver Lindsay’s *The Lasting Honour*.<sup>11</sup> Lindsay’s first book, although appearing to owe much to Luff (see below) is still arguably the best basic text on the subject. It is very readable, covers all the more important engagements of the fighting, and is the first work that I recommend to people who show interest in the topic.<sup>12</sup> However, like Carew and Luff, Lindsay was not a professional historian. Reading between the lines, it sometimes

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Penney, *Royal Rifles of Canada* (Privately Printed, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Oliver Lindsay, *The Lasting Honour* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Both Carew and Lindsay followed up with works covering the POW years, *Hostages to Fortune* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971) and *At The Going Down of the Sun: Hong Kong and South-East Asia. 1941–45* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981) respectively. Lindsay’s two books were rehashed in 2005, together with some words from ex-POW John Harris, as Oliver Lindsay and John Harris, *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941–1945* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

appears that he failed to interview anyone with a rank lower than full lieutenant (he himself served in Hong Kong post war as a lieutenant-colonel).

Four of the more nationalistic Canadian works are Carl Vincent's *No Reason Why: The Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy—An Examination*, Merrily Weisbord and Marilyn Simonds Mohr's *The Valour and the Horror*, Dave McIntosh's *Hell On Earth*, and Brereton Greenhous's "*C*" *Force to Hong Kong—A Canadian Catastrophe*.<sup>13</sup>

Vincent's work has many good features, and while somewhat biased, at least puts together well-researched arguments.<sup>14</sup> But while the key reason for C Force's existence was that Grasett fought tooth and nail for London and Ottawa to agree to it, a bigger question—which Vincent discusses—is why these two particular battalions were chosen. And while Maltby comes in for some mild character assassination, Vincent notes correctly that he "still considered an attack from the sea on the south coast of the Island a strong possibility." But the second part of the book, covering the fighting, appears to assume that all Canadians were heroes and all other nationalities (and most especially the British officers) were incompetent and/or cowards. The reason for this slant is clear: almost every point comes directly from the reports compiled by C Force themselves in the POW camp. However, no primary source is itself unbiased, and in this case C Force was pre-emptive in their self-defence. As the preamble to the Winnipeg Grenadiers' war diary begins: "[Writing this report] would not have been so important but for the fact that it has become very evident that we (The Canadian Forces) are being blamed by the Imperial troops for the early fall of Hong Kong."<sup>15</sup>

*The Valour and the Horror's* Hong Kong episode of the TV series on which their book was partly based, described the Gin Drinker's Line as a 'white ribbon of concrete.' Watching it you realise that the author's appear to have mistaken the MacLehose Trail—a

<sup>13</sup> Carl Vincent, *No Reason Why: The Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy—An Examination* (Ontario: Canada's Wing, 1981); Merrily Weisbord and Marilyn Simonds Mohr, *The Valour and the Horror* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1991); Dave McIntosh, *Hell on Earth: Aging faster, dying sooner: Canadian Prisoners of the Japanese During World War II* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1997); Brereton Greenhous, "*C*" *Force to Hong Kong—A Canadian Catastrophe* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Grasett is 'Canadian born' on page twenty-four but has inexplicably become fully British by page thirty-five.

<sup>15</sup> This was compiled by George Trist, as Sutcliffe had already succumbed to disease by the time the report was written,



footpath visible as white dust on an otherwise green hill—for the irregular trenches, barbed wire, and occasional pillbox of the line itself. Apparently while conducting their research they did not think it worth actually visiting the scene of the fighting; rather a major omission, given that the complex topography of Hong Kong played such an important part in the fighting.

When *Hell On Earth* arrived, McIntosh's six-word summation of Hong Kong: 'A British waste of Canadian manpower,' shows how far the origin of C Force had been simplified and made (from a Canadian perspective) politically correct. No question now needed to be framed as the answer was already established; the British were to blame.

"*C*" *Force to Hong Kong—A Canadian Catastrophe* contains many useful facts on the Canadian contribution. Like Vincent's work, it is serious in nature but has too many basic mistakes (such as constantly referring to the HKVDC as the HKVDF—a strange affectation, rather implying that the author has not considered them worth studying in any depth) and also perhaps too many attempts to second-guess Maltby. The author's selectiveness in presenting material, in part, damages the work's credibility. Lawson, for example "emigrated when he was still a child" and "stood in some awe of his British cousins," though in fact he did not leave the United Kingdom until after university and was very comfortable handling both Wallis and Maltby.<sup>16</sup> St. Stephen's College, a schoolhouse hastily equipped as an emergency hospital becomes "St. Stephen's, a fully fledged hospital" and a "massive concrete structure." Vincent's accurate comment about Maltby's thoughts on the invasion of Hong Kong Island have here been simplified to "attack from the sea, still considered the most likely scenario by General Maltby and his staff"—which is rather an odd 'accusation' to make of someone charged with defending an island.<sup>17</sup>

The danger of the one-dimensional approach (giving credence only to Canadian War Diaries and Canadian veterans) is obvious. Of

<sup>16</sup> Lawson and Grasett were mirror images. Both were born and educated in their respective countries, and then moved to the other. Lawson's death in combat was made more tragic by the fact that he was a natural and competent bridge between the British and Canadians—a point entirely missed by Vincent.

<sup>17</sup> In reality, Maltby and staff argued only whether the primary attack would come in the northwest or northeast of the island's coast. However, they also recognised that the Japanese might have made a secondary landing in the south had the primary failed. It is no coincidence that Maltby placed the battalions he was most comfortable with along the north coast, and the Canadians in the south.





Officers of the Canadian Brigade aboard SS *Awatea* en Route to Hong Kong, Vancouver, BC, October 1941. Left to right, Major Lyndon, Brigadier Lawson, Colonel Hennessy, Captain Bush [Library and Archives Canada PA116457]

the roughly 14,000 uniformed defenders of Hong Kong, only one in seven were Canadian. There were whole areas, the navy for example, and the artillery, Royal Engineers, and air force, where there was no Canadian component. There were whole battles—most crucially the all-important defence of Wanchai—where no Canadians took part. And yet the Canadian experience cannot possibly be understood outside this bigger context, and to attempt to do so is as futile as attempting to understand Brownian motion through examining a speck of smoke in a vacuum. The fighting around Wong Nai Chung Gap is a good example of the false logic sometimes used here: the Japanese admitted to 800 casualties in the location, the Winnipeg Grenadiers were there, therefore the casualties were caused by the Winnipeg Grenadiers. While the Grenadiers—holding on with great tenacity and courage and refusing to surrender—certainly caused their share of casualties, broader reading and walking the ground shows clearly that a great number of those casualties (and most probably the majority) were caused by the machine guns of Number

3 Company, HKVDC, who covered the path along which most of the Japanese advanced.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of this series of books, one is left with the impression that only C Force is concrete and three-dimensional, and that Hong Kong and everyone else there has simply become a cartoon-like backdrop. Lieutenant General Charles Foulkes—who ended the war commanding 1 Canadian Corps in Italy and successfully persuaded Montgomery to delete the more damning paragraphs from Maltby’s 1948 despatch of that year—arguably made the most accurate analysis of the underlying cause of this dichotomy in his report of the same year: “The most regrettable feature arising out of the inadequate training and equipping was the effect on the morale and fighting efficiency of the Canadian troops, which unfortunately was interpreted by their British superiors as a lack of courage, willingness to fight and even in some cases cowardice. On the other hand this has caused in the minds of Canadian troops bitterness, lack of confidence and resentment in the British superiors.”

## GENERAL HISTORIES

But aside from these extreme examples—and a cynic has to note that controversies probably drive book sales—a steady stream of varied works (from the scholarly to the popular) has resulted over the last fifty years.

The earliest of note was *The Hidden Years* by John Luff.<sup>19</sup> Luff’s book was the first attempt to tell the whole story, and as such has been re-hashed many times since. A good starting point for anyone interested, it is however far from comprehensive. Having said that, without it we may never have had Oliver Lindsay’s later works or many others.

Grant Garneau’s huge and impressive MA thesis *The Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong*, is a must for anyone seriously studying East Brigade or the battle as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Like the vast majority of Canadian

<sup>18</sup> Hong Kong place name spellings were rationalised post war, with Wong Nei Chong becoming Wong Nai Chung. The fact that even today many Canadian accounts continue to use the 1941 versions is telling.

<sup>19</sup> John Luff, *The Hidden Years: Hong Kong 1941–1945* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> Grant Garneau, *The Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong* (Sherbrooke: Progressive Publications, 1970).

works, it needs to be read in the light of a wider understanding of the event to prevent undervaluing the achievements of the other units involved. If I have one complaint (see the Bifurcation section above) it is that the author continually refers to single sources rather than cross-checking all facts with multiple witnesses. This is a dangerous tactic in studying any war, and the uncertainties and inaccuracies of all source material relating to the battle of Hong Kong seem more extreme than most. However, as a source for the Royal Rifles it is excellent.

In *Hong Kong Eclipse*, G. B. Endacott gave us arguably the nearest thing to a formal ‘history book’ in the literature.<sup>21</sup> The result of considerable years of research, it provides the broadest coverage of the Hong Kong wartime experience of servicemen and civilians alike. While essential reading for the serious student, World War Two buffs interested solely in the fighting and POW experience might find its coverage of the occupation of Hong Kong (a woefully under-researched topic, especially in English) distracting.

A year later came *Captive Christmas*.<sup>22</sup> This simple but effective work was originally broadcast on radio and consists primarily of verbatim quotations from combatants.<sup>23</sup>

Ted Ferguson’s book *Desperate Siege: The Battle of Hong Kong* is a decent general summary of the action.<sup>24</sup> Published before the big backlash sparked by ‘No Reason Why’ and the release of the unabridged version of Maltby’s report, this is arguably one of the best-balanced books to come from Canadian sources.

Two years late came *Season of Storms* by Robert L. Gandt.<sup>25</sup> An airline pilot who came to know Hong Kong, Gandt’s book grew from a series of articles about the war that he wrote for the *South China Morning Post*. Gandt’s story is a rehash of the basic Stewart/Maltby timeline, brought to life by useful interviews of around thirty participants in the fighting.

<sup>21</sup> G.B. Endacott, *Hong Kong Eclipse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> Alan Birch and Martin Cole, *Captive Christmas: The Battle of Hong Kong, December 1941* (Hong Kong: Heinemann Education Books, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> In the traditional manner this was followed by Alan Birch and Martin Cole, *Captive Years: The Occupation of Hong Kong, 1941–45* (Hong Kong: Heinemann Education Books, 1982). In the same vein as the earlier volume, this book describes the years from 1942 to 1945 in a series of interviews originally broadcast on radio. The early chapters include some useful extra information on the 1941 fighting itself.

<sup>24</sup> Ted Ferguson, *Desperate Siege: The Battle of Hong Kong* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Gandt, *Season of Storms: The Siege of Hongkong 1941* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1982).



Personnel of 'C' Company, Royal Rifles of Canada, aboard H.M.C.S. Prince Robert en route to Hong Kong, 15 November 1941. [Library and Archives Canada PA-166999]

### VETERANS' MEMOIRS

Typically the greatest war literature from participants themselves has been published some ten years after the events (from *All Quiet on The Western Front* and *Goodbye To All That* covering the First World War to *Chickenhawk* from Vietnam). With Hong Kong, the first veterans' memoirs (such as James Bertram and Martin Weedon) appeared almost immediately after the war, products of years of thought as POWs.<sup>26</sup> Canadian veterans' contributions generally arrived later, but one of the earliest to be published was William Allister's *Where Life and Death Hold Hands*. Allister's book was arguably a minor classic of World War Two literature.<sup>27</sup> Written by a Canadian signalman, an artist who should never have been near a war, it is at times painfully honest.

<sup>26</sup> James Bertram, *The Shadow of a War: a New Zealander in the Far East, 1939-1946* (New York: John Day, 1947); Martin Weedon, *Guest of an Emperor* (London: Arthur Barker, 1948).

<sup>27</sup> William Allister, *Where Life and Death Hold Hands* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989).

Ken Cambon's *Guest of Hirohito* is another worthy volume. Cambon was just seventeen when he joined up and this work covers the fighting, the POW years, and even the war crimes trials.<sup>28</sup> Cambon was a Royal Rifle, but as a POW was attached to the Bowen Road Military Hospital. Postwar, thanks to that experience, he became a doctor himself.

The next to be published, *From Jamaica to Japan* by Thomas S. Forsyth includes the clearest description of the fighting on Jardine's Lookout.<sup>29</sup> I have stood where he was then, with his manuscript in hand, and had a better understanding of events than ever before—to the point where some ten or more years ago when taking some Winnipeg Grenadier veterans around the battlefields, one of them said, “Who was it who came running down this road, shot in the face?” “Tom Forsyth,” I answered automatically. “Fancy you remembering that!” was the reply. I took this as a sign that at least I had done enough of my homework to have a sensible conversation with these people!

A year later saw *Diary of a Prisoner of War in Japan* by George Verrault.<sup>30</sup> George ‘Blacky’ Verrault, like Allister, was a signaller in the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. Verrault had no qualms about describing what he thought of his officers; a common refrain in both published and unpublished memoirs of Canadian Other Ranks.

Leo Paul Berard's *17 Days Until Christmas* covered the period from his joining the Winnipeg Grenadiers in 1933 to leaving the Canadian army in 1965, though the vast majority of the book concerns his experiences in Hong Kong and Japan with his original unit.<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that the twelve platoon members listed here are those serving prior to the formation of ‘C Force.’ By the time of their arrival in Hong Kong nine of these men were no longer with them.

The year 2000 delivered another classic account: *One Soldier's Story*.<sup>32</sup> The author, George S. MacDonell, was one of the Canadian

<sup>28</sup> Ken Cambon, *Guest of Hirohito* (PW Press, 1990). The appendices are taken from the War Crimes transcripts in the PRO. ‘Bill M.’ was almost certainly Rifleman William S. McAra.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas S. Forsyth, *From Jamaica to Japan* (Manitoba: William R. Warwick, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> George Verrault, *Diary of a Prisoner of War in Japan* (Quebec: Vero, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Leo Paul Berard, *17 Days Until Christmas* (Barrie: Barrie Press, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> George S. MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story* (Nepean: Bair O'Keefe Publishing, Inc., 2000).

NCOS who used his time in Hong Kong before the start of hostilities in making contacts in the established British garrison. His description of witnessing a Rajput parade says a great deal about the old British Indian army and his own open mindedness, and his coverage of life in the camps is excellent. My wife and I were fortunate to have dinner with George and friends one night a number of years ago at the Repulse Bay Hotel ‘Spices’ restaurant. There he, a sergeant in D Company Royal Rifles, told us of his efforts to motivate his men before the Christmas Day attack up through Stanley cemetery that left twenty-eight of their force dead. He also mentioned seeing Brigadier Wallis directing operations from the back of a motorbike during the fighting, and having dinner with him in Canada years after the war, discussing whether the Christmas Day attack had been necessary.

Considering that more than 35 percent of the Royal Rifles of Canada were French speaking, it is interesting that *Prisonnier de guerre au Japon (1941-1945)* is the only volume in my library to be in French.<sup>33</sup> When aged nineteen, Castonguay volunteered to join the Royal Rifles, leaving for Hong Kong a year later. He kept a personal diary almost every day during the entire period, describing his day-to-day life.

Probably the last of the veterans’ memoirs to be published was *Hoping in Hell* by Robert J. “Flash” Clayton and Howard W. Raper.<sup>34</sup>

A disappointing example from this group of works is *Seared in My Memory* by Bernie Jesse and Norm Park.<sup>35</sup> This volume was recorded by an author who had studied neither the battle nor the location and thus largely wasted Jesse’s story, which—as a survivor of D Company Winnipeg Grenadiers—could have been a useful addition to our understanding of events. D Company, uniquely of Canadian formations, had been sent Kowloon side early in the battle to plug a perceived hole in the defence. During that period, the first Canadian soldier to be lost in the Second World War (Private Gray) disappeared.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately this work casts no light in that subject, or any other of importance.

<sup>33</sup> Castonguay, Bernard, *Prisonnier de guerre au Japon (1941-1945)* avec la collaboration de Renée Giard, Longueuil, R. Giard Impression, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Robert J. Clayton and Howard W. Raper, *Hoping in Hell* (Ontario: Royal Canadian Legion, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Bernie Jesse and Norm Park, *Seared in My Memory* (Canada: Privately Printed, n.d.).

<sup>36</sup> Human remains and a Second World War helmet were found in a credible location in 2004. Alas, DNA testing proved negative for Gray.



## FAMILY HISTORIES

A welcome new trend in the twenty-first century has led to families producing their own histories—normally associated closely with the experiences of a family member. In 2002, Major Kenneth G. Baird's letters home to his daughter were carefully gathered and interpreted in *Letters to Harvelyn*.<sup>37</sup>

*Dark Side of the Sun* by Michael Palmer covers—in a broad context—the experiences of the author's grandfather George Thomas Palmer, Royal Rifles, while in *Deadly December*, Ron Parker does the same for the author's father, Major Maurice Parker who commanded D Company of the Royal Rifles.<sup>38</sup> Both works illustrate how much useful material is still in private hands and can be usefully found and organised by enthusiastic parties.

In *A Hong Kong Diary Revisited*, Leonard Corrigan's four daughters have taken this Winnipeg Grenadier officer's diary and added their reflections on the time before and during the conflict, his homecoming, and his life until his death in 1994.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, they have provided historians with the clearest description to date of the fighting on Mount Cameron.

*Uncle Mac's Hong Kong Diary* by Philip J.M. Gallie, and compiled in 2011 by his niece Betsy is, as the title suggests, a published version (minus one year, 1943, that was lost) of the diary of this rifleman of the Royal Rifles of Canada.<sup>40</sup>

No doubt more works like these will appear during the coming years, combining the rich sources that many families of these veterans have kept, with the good general understanding of the battle

<sup>37</sup> Kenneth G. Baird, *Letters to Harvelyn* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Michael Palmer, *Dark Side of the Sun* (Raleigh: Lulu, 2009); Ron Parker, *Deadly December* (Raleigh: Lulu, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Corrigan was an officer truly popular and respected by his men. Forsyth: "It's hard to put into words our feelings when we heard the Governor of the Colony had surrendered to the enemy. I saw some men breakdown and cry like children, 'What, surrender now?' they sobbed, 'after all the good men we've lost?' (We had 137 men killed). Others cursed and raved as though delirious. Others like myself were stunned, dazed, apathetic. I had never dreamed it could happen, up to the last moment until Lieut. Corrigan (The Fighting Irishman) ordered us to lay down our arms." Leonard Corrigan, *A Hong Kong Diary Revisited* (Baltimore, ON: Frei Press, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Philip J.M. Gallie, *Uncle Mac's Hong Kong Diary* (Canada: Privately Published, 2010).



and period of internment which can today be easily gained from previously published works and internet sources.

### MODERN WORKS

Fortunately the twenty-first century started with a true tour de force, the late Charles (Chuck) Roland's excellent book *Long Night's Journey into Day*.<sup>41</sup> Roland's focus is on all medical aspects of the fighting and the POW experience. For this he interviewed several hundred veterans to build the most comprehensive coverage in existence. Admittedly the focus is on Canadian veterans, but the lessons learned are applicable to all. Fortunately Roland made his interview transcripts widely available, and these have been of great help to many other researchers (myself included).

Two years later my first effort, *Not The Slightest Chance*, was published.<sup>42</sup> In a perhaps negative way, it owed its existence to Lindsay's first book which I found very good but too impersonal for my liking. Whenever Lindsay mentioned a skirmish with men left dead, my thesis was that it should be possible—considering the small numbers relative to most World War Two engagements—to find out exactly who was killed and how. That level of detail became this work's focus.<sup>43</sup>

In the same year, Philip Snow's *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* appeared.<sup>44</sup> While coverage of the battle of Hong Kong was squeezed into a single chapter, the depth of study of Hong Kong during the occupation is unequalled (and in fact unattempted since *Hong Kong Eclipse*).

<sup>41</sup> Charles Roland, *Long Night's Journey into Day: Prisoners of War in Hong Kong and Japan, 1941-1945* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Tony Banham, *Not the Slightest Chance: The Defence of Hong Kong, 1941* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> At the time of writing I was following the tradition of being an interested amateur. And like Carew and Lindsay before me, I followed this book—which concerned only the period of fighting—with a second volume *We Shall Suffer There* that in a similar style studied the period of captivity for the survivors. Tony Banham, *We Shall Suffer There: Hong Kong's Defenders Imprisoned, 1942-45* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

An admirable history at the unit level, *Beyond The Call* by D. Burke Penny, covers the story of the thirty-three members of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals who were part of C Force from enlistment and training, through the battle, their years as POWs, and eventual repatriation to Canada.<sup>45</sup>

More recently, Nathan Greenfield's *The Damned: The Canadians at the Battle of Hong Kong and the POW Experience, 1941-45* broke from the mould in some ways—the author being a Canada-based, American-born professional historian with previous works on Ypres and the Royal Canadian Navy.<sup>46</sup> In other ways, this work takes us right back to the bifurcation. Treating the Canadian battalion's war diaries as gospel may be a popular move with local readership, but took what was in part a useful new direction (the coverage of the POW years in the latter third of the book, and the inclusion of some Japanese material, were particularly welcome additions) instead down familiar paths questioning Wallis's comments in the East Brigade War Diary. Foulkes' 1948 advice: "I would strongly recommend that every effort should be made to avoid reopening this Hong Kong enquiry" might have been better adhered to.

Interestingly the latest work at time of writing, *Eastern Fortress: A Military History of Hong Kong, 1840-1970*, has opened entirely new ground by studying the evolution of Hong Kong's defences over the years since 1841 and how they actually fared when invasion finally came.<sup>47</sup>

## FUTURE RESEARCH

So, after wartime accounts from escapees and repatriates, official war diaries, amateurs' attempts to document the battle and its aftermath, survivors' autobiographies, biographies by their offspring, and modern works, what is still missing from the literature?

<sup>45</sup> D. Burke Penny, *Beyond the Call: Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, Brigade Headquarters, "C" Force, Hong Kong and Japan, 1941-1945* (Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Nathan Greenfield, *The Damned: The Canadians at the Battle of Hong Kong and the POW Experience, 1941-45* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Kwong Chi Man and Tsoi Yiu Lun, *Eastern Fortress: A Military History of Hong Kong, 1840-1970* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014).



Canadian and British prisoners-of-war awaiting liberation by the landing party from HMCS *Prince Robert*, Hong Kong, ca. 30 August 1945. [Library and Archives Canada PA114811]

An in-depth study of C Force's role in the battle, in the full context of the fighting going on around them, would be supremely valuable. Obviously it means more than simply regurgitating the two battalions' war diaries (yet another Canadian hagiography would be of little use), and there is an opportunity to get down to the company and platoon level; understanding each officer, his character and experience, and his position in the chain of command. At the same time, the senior officers, their backgrounds, and their engagement at brigade and headquarters level could be examined. Structurally, the question is whether this would be best covered in a single volume about C Force, or a volume for each of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada. The latter format would allow more depth, and as the two battalions never fought side by side the fragmentation might actually work to emphasise the split between the brigades. On the other hand, covering both together would avoid repetition of events external to C Force, simplify the coverage of the components outside these two battalions, and would better demonstrate the fact that they were at times fighting different battles only a couple of hundred yards apart. Of course, the rapidly closing window of opportunity to talk to the few remaining survivors would limit primary research. However, this may be a good thing;

the meme-pool is now so small that the few interviews possible might unnaturally bias such a work.<sup>48</sup> It is also worth noting that serious researchers such as Chuck Roland have made much oral history available, and thanks to the internet there is vastly more primary written material easily accessible than ever before.

Research that addresses the ‘bifurcation’ head-on would be welcome. While Wallis-bashing has been a popular pastime amongst Canadian authors, a detailed reading of the East Brigade War Diary reveals that his negativity about the Canadians (aside from one unfairly-worded sentence in his summary) was specifically about the Royal Rifles officers, and most specifically about Home. In that diary, the Royal Scots came in for even worse coverage, yet we know that—with the exception of their HQ and D Companies—they had major issues resulting from the milking of many of their best young officers and senior NCOs, and a change in commanding officer. But what were the causes of Wallis’s dissatisfaction with Home? Wallis seemed quite content to accept orders to fight to the last man, himself included, whether it made sense or not. One could argue that made him a good soldier rather than a good man. Home, it seems, thought this irresponsible.<sup>49</sup> In 1941, popular opinion might have backed Wallis, whereas today I suspect it would back Home. But was it just a problem between these two senior officers? Wallis actually recommended specific other Royal Rifles for decorations, and conversely it is interesting to see how many negative comments there are from Canadian rank and file about their officers (vide Verrault, Allister, and several unpublished memoirs)—certainly more than are recorded from the British battalions (though the least respected officer of all, Cecil Boon, was British, and both British and Canadians were

<sup>48</sup> A problem we saw with Carew (interviewing almost solely Middlesex), Gandt and Greenfield (interviewing almost exclusively Canadians), Lindsay (interviewing almost always officers), and Banham (interviewing only those who survived into the 1990s).

<sup>49</sup> But certainly not without personal courage in his younger days: note the Great War citation for his MC: “Lt. A/Capt. William James Home, Royal Canadian R., Nova Scotia R. For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in command of a company during operations commencing 26th August 1918. When almost surrounded by an enemy counter attack he dashed forward at the head of a party, shooting four enemy himself, causing considerable casualties and checking their attack. His courage and initiative saved an awkward situation.” *London Gazette*, 1 February 1919. However, in 1948 Foulkes reported that there was: “some doubt about Home himself, he was removed from Commanding a Company in the R.C.R. in 1939 as unfit to command in war, and later was appointed to the R.R.C.”

tried for collaboration post-war). And why, though I suspect there may be a very simple answer that simply has not surfaced yet, did almost 100 British officers go to POW camps in Japan itself with their men (or die in the attempt), but only a single Canadian officer?

Clearly the Canadian authorities did not send their most battle-ready formations to Hong Kong. They sent two unready battalions with a varied quality of officers, generally good NCOs, and a wide spectrum of men. They also—through unfortunate timing—sent them too late. This work does not attempt to explore those limitations, but to point out that to accept them and then conclude that everything that went wrong afterwards was therefore ‘the fault of the British’, is unrealistic. There are many examples of areas where these faults were simply misunderstandings caused by a lack of local knowledge. One will suffice: At a certain point in the battle of Stanley, Royal Rifles attempted to enter what they recorded as an “officers’ club” and were asked to leave. This incident has widely been interpreted as typical British snobbishness. What they did not realise, however, was that this was the Stanley Prison Officers’ Club, the billet of the Stanley Platoon of the HKVDC (which entirely comprised prison officers), and the Canadian billet was elsewhere. An honest appraisal of issues such as these would actually emphasise the remarkable courage that the rank and file of C Force generally displayed on the battlefield despite this lack of time on the ground. Alternatively we could argue that in the twenty-first century the time for further study of the battle and the POW years has passed. We could also draw a line under the Canadian good/British bad/others irrelevant (and vice versa) arguments. Very few unit war diaries focus on their mistakes, and where battles are lost no unit is likely to voluntarily take the blame. In marshalling arguments against the bifurcation it is worth noting that the three best-known Canadians killed in the fighting (Lawson, Hennessy, Osborn) were British (Lawson and Osborn had moved to Canada as adults, and did not—as far as their families know—formally take Canadian citizenship, and Hennessy was born in pre-partition Ireland), whereas Wallis—and many other British survivors—moved to Canada post war (and Wallis’s all-Canadian family today have naturally been hurt by certain writings). The division between Canadian and British citizenship was nothing like as binary in 1941 as it is today. So instead we could turn to the impact on the families—both those damaged directly by the loss of

husbands and sons, and those of the survivors.<sup>50</sup> This is the natural next step, and plays to the fact that many sons and daughters of veterans are still around to tell their stories, and there is a wealth of medical and other data that opens new sources for researchers. It is also, of course, a far longer and vastly more complex story than that bracketed by the years 1941–1945. This line of work is likely to be of broader interest and greater relevance, today, than further re-telling of episodes of battles and disagreements on remote hillsides and in abandoned POW camps.<sup>51</sup>



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Tony Banham** was born into an academic family in Norfolk, UK. He is nephew of architectural historian Professor Reyner Banham and great nephew of 1945 Member of Parliament Edwin Gooch. He graduated in Computer Science at the University of Hertfordshire and had an initial career in research & development with Royal Dutch Shell and the European Space Agency. At the age of 30 he moved to Hong Kong where he founded the Hong Kong War Diary project, which studies and documents the 1941 defence of Hong Kong, the defenders, their families, and the fates of all until liberation. With Hong Kong University Press and the University of British Columbia Press, Banham has published a number of books on the topic and is also active in the “human side” of historical research relating to the era, often speaking at symposia on the subject and carrying on active dialogues with survivors of the conflict and their families. He was awarded a PhD in history by the Australian Defence Force Academy in 2014.

<sup>50</sup> I should declare an interest here, as my researches have moved in this direction. Although I expect to return to wartime Hong Kong once more to finalise a study of the secret war of spies and intelligence, my current work is on the families, specifically those torn apart by the 1940 evacuation of British women and children to Australia.

<sup>51</sup> This review is not intended to cover all works on the subject as the body of literature now runs to hundreds of volumes and articles. However, a majority of published Canadian books have been included, together with all other works that have been significant in setting the direction of the genre.