



The Scots at War Trust

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Entry: **The Battle of Hong Kong 8th to 26th December 1942**



Japanese Troops in Causeway Bay 24th December 1941

While the Japanese attack on the American Naval Base at Pearl Harbour on 8th December 1941 is widely known about, and has been the subject of a recent multi million dollar movie, few appreciate the drama that began on exactly the same day in Hong Kong many miles to the west.

Hong Kong Island had passed into British hands as a result of the Treaty of Nanking of 1842 and it quickly became a busy commercial hub and a

valuable trading gateway for Britain in the Far East, much of the business being initiated by Scots. In 1860 the Kowloon Peninsula, part of the Chinese mainland lying adjacent to and north of Hong Kong Island, was given to the United Kingdom and in 1898 Britain leased for 99 years the area called the New Territories, again part of the Chinese mainland and lying to the north of Kowloon.

With Britain already fighting a desperate land, sea and air battle in Europe, the Atlantic and North Africa, the Japanese threat in the Far East in 1941 was acknowledged but there were few resources available to counteract that threat. The Japanese, fighting a bitter war in China, now occupied the Hong Kong border area and it was agreed therefore that should Hong Kong be invaded by the Japanese the only course of action was to hold out for as long as possible, deny the harbour to the enemy, defend Hong Kong Island and, in the extreme, hope that an orderly evacuation would be possible.

The Garrison of Hong Kong in December 1941 comprised: Headquarters China Command; Royal Artillery and Royal Engineer units; Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery; 2nd Battalion Royal Scots; 1st Battalion Middlesex (Machine Gun Battalion); Hong Kong Chinese Regiment; representatives of support Corps (Signals, Ordnance etc); the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) made up of a number of Companies including Number 2 (Scottish) Company; two recently arrived Canadian Regiments, The Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada; two Indian regiments 5th/7th Rajput Regiment and 2/14 Punjab Regiment; a number of Royal Navy ships, Auxiliary Patrol Vessels and Merchant Navy Vessels; two Supermarine Walrus aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm; three Vickers Vildebeeste aircraft of the Royal Air Force and Police, Fire Brigade, Air Raid

Precautions, Auxiliary Service, St John's Ambulance and NAAFI Units.

Equipment, transport, drivers and ammunition were in short supply. The Canadians had arrived three weeks previously and had no battle experience, the Indian regiments were made up primarily of Reservists and HKVDC was drawn from the bankers, merchants and businessmen of the Territory few of whom were fully trained or prepared for the battle ahead. The most effective and battle worthy battalion was the 1st Middlesex. Civilians of many nations, women and children, were all ultimately caught up in what happened.

As for the 2nd Royal Scots, they had certainly been abroad too long and were not as efficient as they should have been. Many of their best NCOs had been sent home at the beginning of the war in 1939 and in 1941 the strength of the Battalion had been seriously depleted by malaria and venereal disease. There had also been an unusual number of courts martial in the Battalion, some of them on Officers. While individuals fought with immense bravery and determination, the battle was to expose serious weaknesses in the leadership of the Battalion, which were to have terrible consequences on the outcome.

Ranged against these few defenders were 60,000 battle hardened Japanese troops fully equipped and supported with aircraft and naval units. Japanese intelligence, largely gathered by Japanese barbers, barmen, waiters, taxi drivers and masseurs in the Territory, was excellent. It was an unequal struggle from the start.

The terrain comprised steep hills, deep-water bays, a busy city and scattered islands. The defence plan was to fight delaying actions on the mainland, in the New Territories and Kowloon, and then to withdraw to defend the Island of Hong Kong. Key to the mainland actions was "The Gin Drinker's Line" so called because the western end of this defensive line began at Gindrinker's Bay. Along this line were a number of strong points the pivotal one being the Shing Mun Redoubt held by the elements of 2nd Royal Scots.

The Japanese crossed the border into the New Territories on 8th December 1941 at the same time launching devastating air attacks. Two days later the undermanned and professionally poorly defended Shin Mun Redoubt fell. The Royal Scots withdrew to Golden Hill and on the 11th December, after a major battle in which 29 Royal Scots were killed, and amidst numerous individual acts of considerable bravery, the Battalion were forced off Golden Hill, initially in some disarray. Withdrawal from the mainland was inevitable. Many of the defenders, especially the men of the Middlesex Regiment, who fought with enormous tenacity, attributed the withdrawal to the poor performance of the Royal Scots. Meanwhile, heavy air raids, acts of sabotage, rioting and looting continued.

On the 18th of December the Japanese invaded Hong Kong Island forcing their way through the Wong Nai Chung Gap taking Repulse Bay and splitting the Island in two. Stanley was encircled and the Garrison finally surrendered on Christmas Day 1941.

What marked out the Battle of Hong Kong was the ferocity and ruthlessness of the Japanese both in and out of battle. 1589 of the defenders were killed. Of these at least 325 soldiers, civilians, doctors, nurses, women and children, some wounded and prisoners, were shot, raped or bayoneted in massacres and atrocities at Sai Wan Hill, the Salesian Mission, St Stephen's College and elsewhere. It is estimated that about 2000 Japanese died in the battle.

After the surrender the Japanese interned the defenders, along with women and children, in prisoner of war camps

at Stanley and Sham Shui Po where numerous further atrocities were committed. Indian soldiers were separated from their officers and subjected to intense propaganda. Thousands of Hong Kong Chinese were forced north into China where many died of starvation and exposure.

A British Naval Force finally reoccupied Hong Kong on 30th August 1945.

Tim Carew, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, Pan Books, London, 1976

Tony Banham, *Not the Slightest Chance-The Defence of Hong Kong 1941*, Hong Kong University Press, 2003

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