



# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



---

## OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 14

### The Lapsley Family in the Defence of Hong Kong

**(an abridged version of a memoir written by Robert Lapsley for Michael Hambrook's recently published book *On the Front Line*)**

I was born in Hong Kong in 1921, by which time the Lapsley family had been resident in the Colony for several generations, and entered the Diocesan Boys' School in 1929. On leaving school, I joined one of Hong Kong's oldest companies, the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company Ltd. for which my father (also Robert) worked in a senior management position.

I had wanted to enlist in the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) as soon as I left school but, being under 18, I was too young to be a full member. Instead, I was signed up as a "drummer boy", but this still meant that I had to take part in the annual two-week military camp in the New Territories. In December, 1941 my brothers Tony and Ferdie and I were in the No.2 (Scottish) Company. My father was an officer in the Field Company Engineers of the HKVDC.

Early on the morning of Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1941 Tony, Ferdie and I received orders to report in full kit at the HKVDC Headquarters on Garden Road. When we arrived we found a dozen or so had been summoned. We were to be the headquarters guard that night. The HKVDC had been called up for duty the following day.

It was just after dawn the following day that we heard aircraft flying overhead. Then we heard the rumble of bombs exploding not far away and we knew that the long awaited Japanese attack had started. Shortly afterwards we learnt that the Japanese had been bombing Shamshuipo Barracks and Kai Tak airport.

When the rest of our platoon arrived we were told that we were to go to Mt Collinson to establish anti-aircraft positions using our four Lewis machine guns. We had only been on Mt Collinson a few days when we received orders to relocate to Stanley Mound. The place was now under constant bombardment with the depot a principal target. There was little, however, that we could do, so after only a few days there we redeployed to the Repulse Bay Hotel to patrol the surrounding hillside to see if there were any Japanese in the area and if so how far they had advanced.

Unknown to us, the Japanese were already within firing range of the hotel, and we suddenly found ourselves coming under heavy fire from the Island Road side of the hotel. This is where we suffered our first casualties. Ferdie was shot in the leg and was evacuated to the temporary hospital located in St Stephen's College in Stanley.

---

After a few days we were told to return to Stanley Fort. We marched off, but as we approached Stanley we encountered more enemy fire. Several were injured including my other brother Tony who was shot in the shoulder. Bill Sharp was shot in the groin and later died. Fire was coming in from every direction. I was then ordered with about a dozen men to clear a section of the hillside where the Japanese were firing down on the village.

After a day or so we realised that we were outnumbered and that we would all be killed if we stayed up on the hill. We were ordered to retreat. Suddenly there was a burst of fire and the chap next to me fell with a bullet in his forehead. I was also hit in the leg, arm and side, and collapsed on the ground. I remember nothing more until I awoke the next morning.

There was no one to be seen. I was alone on the hillside. I decided I should try and swim across the bay to Stanley Fort. I took off all my clothes and crawled the 600-700 metres down to the water's edge. I started to get into the water but realised I was too weak. Fortunately no bones had been broken, but I had three bullet holes in me and had lost a lot of blood. So I changed my mind and dragged my clothes back on.

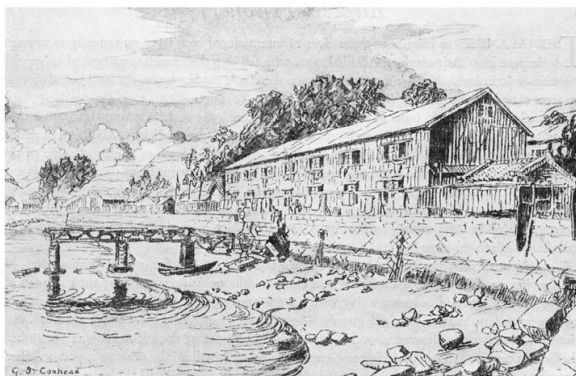
I started to crawl along the side of the hill. How I did it with no food or water I do not know. I did know that as long as I had some strength I was not going to simply give up. So I carried on, but stopping to rest more and more frequently. It took me a day and a half to reach a small collection of huts. Someone saw me and I was helped up and taken into one of the huts. They gave me something to drink and some food, and said I could stay overnight as I was too weak to go on that day. It was now three days since the attack on our patrol.

The next morning I asked if they could get news of my plight to the military at Stanley. They smiled and said "Oh, the war is over." So I said goodbye and using a walking stick made my way slowly to the road above the village. A couple of hours later I surrendered to the first Japanese I came across. He seemed surprised to see me.

My captors were very considerate. When they saw I had three bullet wounds they got our people to send transport to collect me. They were surprised to see me because just after the surrender they had been over the hill looking for dead or wounded. Of course, I had crawled down to the water's edge and so they had missed me.

I was taken to the hospital in St Stephen's College and learned that my brothers had survived the massacre that had taken place there on Christmas Day when the Japanese entered the hospital, by hiding under their beds. Tony had been moved to Bowen Road Hospital, where I joined him some days later. We were there for six months before we were moved to Shamshuipo POW Camp, where we met up with Ferdie.

At the end of 1942 we were given the chance of going to a work camp in Japan. My brothers were in favour of getting out of Shamshuipo and as I was keen that we stayed together I volunteered as well. There were about a hundred of us in the third draft which left Hong Kong on my 22nd birthday on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1943. We marched down Nathan Road to Kowloon Wharf to board the *Tatsuta Maru* for Nagasaki. After three days there, we were moved to Onamichi, and then to Innoshima, a newly built POW camp on the Inland Sea.



INNOSHIMA PW CAMP ON THE INLAND SEA OF JAPAN  
*from a painting by G. S. Coxhead*

The camp consisted of a number of buildings. There were eight rooms in each block with 48 people in each room. We were divided into gangs. I was in the foundry with Clifford Matthews, while my brother Tony was in the machine shop and Ferdie on an electrical gang.

We were there for two and a half years until Japan surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1945. We survived in the hope that the Allies would win the war, but with very little information as to what was actually happening. After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki our imprisonment ended very quickly. The guards told us we were free to roam about the island and more or less do what we wanted. The food improved, but not by much.

A week later the Americans arrived and we were sent by train to Yokohama where we were given new clothes and were able to enjoy the luxury of a shower. Then it was inoculations for all, followed by a good meal.

We were then put on an aircraft carrier, HMS Ruler, which was being used to transport POWs from Japan and sailed to Sydney. I was delighted as my mother, two sisters and younger brother had been evacuated there in 1940, and I was looking forward to seeing them all again. The voyage was a wonderful experience. We talked, ate, reminisced and played deck games with each other and with the crew. We were starting to re-discover life outside a prison camp.

In Sydney, my mother, two sisters and younger brother were at the quayside to meet us. It was a great day. Later we were taken to Warwick Farm where we were demobilised. When my father arrived from Hong Kong we were again all together. That Christmas my mother bought a large turkey, too big for her small oven. She had to cook it on top of the stove.