



# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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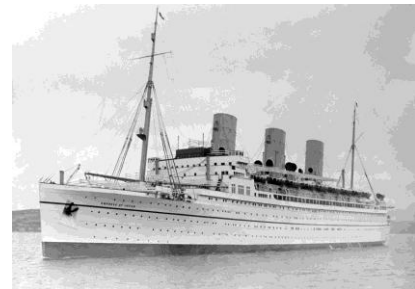
### Compulsory Evacuation

Philip Snow in *The Fall of Hong Kong* (Yale University Press, 2003) writes “In a series of assessments carried out in the course of 1937-38, the Chiefs of Staff in London had arrived at the bleak conclusion that Hong Kong was indefensible. The colony, they advised, was an outpost, important but scarcely vital. If attacked by Japan it should be held for as long as possible; but no attempt should be made to strengthen its garrison or to reinforce its defences.” This view persisted, leading to Winston Churchill’s opinion expressed in January 1941 “If Japan goes to war with us there is not the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong or relieving it.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the need to evacuate British women and children from Hong Kong was early addressed. The matter was raised by the UK Government in 1939, concerned with the safety of families of servicemen and expatriate civilians employed by the armed services. This concern was not remarkable, as regular members of the garrison and its expatriate civilian employees were regarded as being on overseas postings, and it was normal that their families should be removed to safety should hostilities threaten. But the area of concern was widened with the Hong Kong Government’s appointment of the Crown Solicitor as Director of Evacuation in September, 1939 and an incomplete attempt was made to register those liable to be evacuated.

No further action appears to have been taken until June, 1940 when the UK Government suddenly gave instructions that evacuation should proceed forthwith. The families of regular members of the armed forces were largely evacuated on 1<sup>st</sup> July. Other women and children were told to report for registration on 2<sup>nd</sup> July and to be ready to leave on 5<sup>th</sup> July. From the outset there was a problem defining who was required to report for registration. It was clearly not feasible to evacuate all women and children simply because they were British subjects. The aim was thus restricted to those who were not normally domiciled in Hong Kong.

G.B.Endacott in *Hong Kong Eclipse* (Oxford University Press, 1978) records that in July, 1940 the evacuees left in two Canadian Pacific Empress liners, followed by another small group in early August. The ships were most likely the *Empress of Japan* (renamed the *Empress of Scotland* in 1942), the *Empress of Asia* and possibly the *Empress of Canada*. The ships sailed first to Manila, where the evacuees were off-loaded to await transport to Australia.



*The Empress of Japan*

The evacuation scheme met with strong opposition from those affected. The threat of a Japanese invasion of Hong Kong was very real, and it would be naive to think that the outcry against the scheme reflected a belief that there was no danger of this happening. It would seem that the negative response was more the result of the way in which the scheme was implemented. In particular, the haste with which the evacuation was carried out left no time for those affected to become accustomed to the idea of a break-up of families, however temporary, and gave no opportunity for them to arrange their personal affairs. Little information was given as to where the evacuees were to live in Australia, and how their living expenses were to be met, and of course there was no indication of how long the enforced separations were to last. The evacuation order was also felt to be totally unjustified at the time it was hurriedly announced, as the situation did not appear to warrant it. This was questioned in London, and an Under-Secretary of State in November, 1940 explained in the House of Commons that “at the time the order was given on the advice of the highest defence authorities, it was felt to be urgent and desirable”.

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Another factor that may have contributed to the discontent was the apparently haphazard way in which the registration was carried out. Some of those liable to be evacuated had to be exempted because they were needed for such essential duties as nursing and official secretarial work. But some of those exempted were seen to be the wives of officials, giving rise to suspicions of partiality. There also appeared to have been a failure to take action against those who did not register, or who defied the evacuation order. Hilda Selwyn-Clarke, wife of Dr Selwyn-Clarke the Government's Director of Medical Services avoided registration by going to Macau on the day of registration. She returned and remained in Hong Kong throughout the subsequent Japanese occupation. Helen Kennedy-Skipton, wife of George Kennedy-Skipton a senior Cadet in the civil service applied for exemption which was denied. She nonetheless remained in Hong Kong and no action was taken to make her leave, perhaps because she was American-born.

But while there were many who sought to avoid evacuation, there were also many who tried hard to be included in the scheme although Hong Kong was their domicile. Eurasian Joyce Symonds (then Joyce Anderson), ever proud of her mixed heritage, was refused evacuation, as were other members of the Eurasian community. Some Eurasians bluffed their way to Manila, but most were there weeded out and returned to Hong Kong. This was a somewhat humiliating experience for them, but was the source of some amusement to the Eurasian community as a whole. The official argument, rightly or wrongly, was that only those who were not Hong Kong belongers needed to be sent to safety, but of course the White Australia policy was a consideration as Australia, the destination for the evacuees, would not accept non-whites (this attitude was later softened when it was announced that the non-white wives and children of white British Subjects would be allowed into Australia for the duration of the evacuation). The timing of the evacuation was also unfortunate because legislation had just been enacted for compulsory military service of British subjects, and those domiciled in Hong Kong were not excluded from service as their families were from evacuation (see Occasional Paper No.19 Conscription).



Among those returned to Hong Kong from Manila was Ellen Field, popularly known as Nellie Lee (she was the wife of Eurasian Frank Lee who served in the Armoured Car Platoon). In her published memoir *Twilight in Hong Kong* (Frederick Muller Limited, 1960) she writes ".....I travelled as far as Manila..... But the journey proved to be an uncomfortable and strenuous one: the ship – a palatial Canadian Pacific liner – was overcrowded under troop-carrier conditions.....the prospect of further discomfort and loneliness which I felt was unnecessary even at this moment of panic, angered me and I decided instead to return with my little family to Hong Kong....."

Ellen Field (from a newspaper cutting)

Another returned to Hong Kong was Edith Hamson. In a family history entitled *Prisoners of the East* (Macmillan, 2002), written by her granddaughter Allana Corbin, she is reported as saying "Life in Baguio seemed like a holiday.....The only unrest came from fellow evacuees when a bitter feud erupted between the pure and Eurasian British.....We had only been in Baguio for three weeks when we were told by the authorities that 'those who are domicile (sic) can return'" This is puzzling, for as explained earlier eligibility for evacuation was restricted to those who were *not* domiciled in Hong Kong.

The cost of the official evacuations was met by the Hong Kong Government. But some left at their own expense. Les Fisher, an employee of the Hong Kong Telephone Company, writes in his memoir *I Will Remember* published in 1996, "At the last minute I was able to get a passage on the Nankin for Kath and Angela (his wife and daughter) which.....I had to pay for." Australian-born Henry Ching sent his family to Manila at private expense, as his Australian-born wife and five Hong Kong-born children were regarded as domiciled in Hong Kong. But living expenses in Manila were high, and as the situation in Hong Kong settled down they returned – fortunately, for the dangers and deprivations of life in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong were as nothing compared with life amongst strangers in a friendless and hostile Japanese-occupied Manila.

According to historian G.B.Endacott, the evacuees in Australia received a weekly maintenance allowance from the Australian Government, but this was reimbursable by the families concerned. Late in 1940 it was announced that all maintenance from Australian official sources would cease, and reimbursement would be demanded as arranged. The financial difficulties faced by the Orr family were perhaps typical for all the Hong Kong evacuees (see Occasional Paper No.17 Bombardier Douglas Orr, HKVDC). Any information that readers may have on the problems encountered in Australia following evacuation from Hong Kong in 1940 would be most welcome.