



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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Macau Refuge 1942-1945



The mouth of the Pearl River, with Hong Kong on the eastern lip and Macau on the western lip.

Because Portugal was neutral during the Second World War, Macau became a place of refuge for “third nationals” and others fleeing Japanese-occupied Hong Kong some thirty miles away. They fled Hong Kong for a variety of reasons, but most saw in Macau a place of relative safety where food was at least adequate if not plentiful. Those who remained in Hong Kong did so mainly because of reluctance to abandon their homes and possessions. One of those who made the trip was Beatrice Greaves, a young student at the University of Hong Kong. As Bea Hutcheon and a senior member of our Association, she has been persuaded to overcome her reticence and tell her story.

25th December, 1941 was the worst Christmas in Hong Kong’s living memory and mine particularly. My two brothers were fighting on different fronts. John was an Australian POW in Greece (but later escaped) and Stan was in the HKVDC’s 4th Battery at Pak Sha Wan, missing in action but later confirmed killed on 19th December. I was half way through my third year in the Arts Faculty studying economics and politics. At that stage I had no fixed career objective in mind. I was 19 years old and enjoying my studies as well as sport – hockey, tennis and athletics. Life was happy though the clouds of war on the horizon made us all wonder what lay ahead. When Pearl Harbour was bombed life changed dramatically. It was 8th December (7th December in Hawaii east of the International Date Line). I first heard of it walking to the University that day to complete mid-term exams when I met a friend who told me there would be no need to go as war had begun. I was advised to go home where I lived with my uncle and aunt (my parents having died in Shanghai years earlier) and to await advice from the University. My next instruction was to become a volunteer nurse under Dr John Mackie who was conducting first aid courses, and present myself to a local hospital in the mid-levels. For the next several days I assisted in treating minor and small-scale injuries which got worse as the intensity of the Japanese shelling increased.

One of my few recreations was to attend St John's Cathedral on Sundays where I was a member of the choir; otherwise it was dangerous to venture out, with sporadic shelling and air raids by the Japanese invaders. When finally Hong Kong surrendered on 25th December we celebrated a low-key Christmas with friends and a religious group at Nethersole Hospital, and then went home to prepare for the long occupation, hardly a time to think of peace and goodwill.

During the attack on Hong Kong, I used to go out occasionally with my friend Cicely Kotewall (later Zimmern) to sketch scenes, under the tutelage of a Vietnamese artist. But once Hong Kong fell I was advised by my uncle not to go out under any circumstances. On the one occasion I attended a church service, I was "spotted" by a Japanese officer who turned out to be a former civilian now in uniform. He later approached a friend (and neighbour) with an offer of marriage and the promise of a few bags of rice (100 catties or 120 lbs) for my family. Rice was already in short supply and would have been a welcome addition to their dwindling larder. But the alarm this caused prompted my home-bound uncle to propose my immediate departure to Macau where I had a cousin, recently married to a Hong Kong Portuguese doctor who was then working in a clinic for the British Consul-General, Mr John Reeves. Dr Germano Ribeiro had moved to Macau shortly before the surrender. My cousin Alice arranged for me to travel to Macau in a junk which left the Western District of Hong Kong darkly at the dead of night. I wore Chinese clothes and a head-scarf and carried a small bag with personal belongings. After an all-night crossing (cold but calm) we arrived in Macau the next morning. I made straight for my cousin's house, and that became my home for the next three and a half years.

To maintain myself I worked as a nurse in the Consulate clinic under Dr Ribeiro where there was a growing number of refugees from Hong Kong seeking treatment for all kinds of illnesses. Administering injections, even intravenous, sometimes with a thick needle, was what I hated most, and one poor lady fainted at the sight of the needle. There were four nurses, only two of whom were qualified and two of us with only first aid experience. But for the most part we provided an essential and valuable service, and Consul John Reeves was widely admired as a generous, caring and conscientious man. Food in general was in reasonable supply as Macau was a neutral port, used as much by the Japanese as by refugees, and local businessmen bought and sold, imported and exported as circumstances allowed. Certain items such as butter and milk were difficult to obtain. But we had bread, eggs and even coffee (imported from Portuguese Timor). And there were a number of Chinese bakeries operating. But hunger and starvation could be seen in the faces of hundreds of people and corpses were regularly picked up from the streets. I remember once going in to buy a pastry from a local bakery. As I emerged from the shop with my pastry in a paper bag, a young boy grabbed it, stuffed it into his mouth (bag and all) and then ran away before I had a chance to react. In retrospect he was more hungry than I was. I hope he survived.

We ran a school for young Hong Kong children – T.S.Lo, son of Sir Man-kam Lo, was one of our students. The school was efficiently run by Miss Joyce Anderson (later wife of Dr Robert Symons). Though I lacked teaching qualifications, Joyce had been a teacher at the Diocesan Girls' School and after the war became Headmistress and an Unofficial Member of Legislative Council. Also I studied book-keeping and shorthand typing to prepare me for a career after the war. We had various recreations and could play occasional sport. On the whole our lives were not seriously affected, many of our friends had come over as refugees. We could attend church services at the Protestant Cemetery Chapel on Sunday but had no priest to administer Holy Communion until Hong Kong's Anglican Bishop, R.O.Hall, then living in the unoccupied interior of China, made a visit to ordain Miss Li Tim-oi, then a deaconess, to become a full-fledged priest. The decision caused an uproar in the Anglican Communion and Miss Li's Holy Orders were revoked after the war, but later reinstated when the ordination of women was accepted by Canterbury.

Our lives continued to improve in 1945 when the Japanese occupation of China and Southeast Asia came under serious Allied attack. However the Consulate clinic continued until war ended in August 1945 when Hong Kong refugees began slowly to return to the liberated but greatly run-down and impoverished British colony.

Bea returned to Hong Kong, where her first task was to find a job. She applied successfully to the South China Morning Post, and was assigned to covering war crime trials, including those of some of the Japanese officers who had tortured prisoners and internees. But that is another story for a later Occasional Paper.