



# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



## OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 17

### Bombardier Douglas Orr, HKVDC



*(This Occasional Paper has been written from information kindly supplied by Geoffrey Orr and his sister Rosemary Carter. The writer is grateful to them for the diligence with which they have both gathered together information concerning their father, and for so readily agreeing to make it available to us)*

Bdr Douglas Orr was killed in action at Stanley on Christmas Day, 1941. He was aged 37, and was survived by his wife Lallie and two young children – Rosemary, then aged 10, and Geoffrey, aged six. Bdr Orr is buried in the Stanley Military Cemetery. His grave is pictured at right (courtesy of his son Geoffrey).

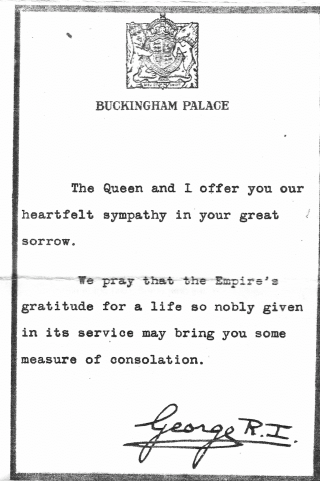
Orr was born in Essendon, Victoria in 1904, of mixed Scottish and Irish ancestry. After finishing his secondary schooling at the Essendon High School he joined the Melbourne Teachers College. At the same time, he enrolled in the University of Melbourne, from which he graduated with a Master of Science degree and a Diploma of Education. But his real interest was in his specialist subject, geology, and after a year of teaching in Melbourne he was appointed an Assistant Geologist in the Geological Survey of Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Before going to Tanganyika in 1929 he married Lallie Evans, also a teacher – they had been fellow students at the Melbourne Teachers College.

But their stay in Tanganyika was cut short. A global economic downturn resulted in a retrenchment of staff, and when Orr returned to Australia on leave he found that he was without a job. When he received an offer of appointment in Hong Kong as a teacher at the then Central British School, he accepted although not in his favoured field of geology. With his wife and his one year old daughter, he moved to Hong Kong in 1932.

Shortly after his arrival in Hong Kong, Orr joined the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps. In 1934 he was a private in the Anzac Company of the HKVDC. This company was formed in 1932 with a group of enthusiastic Australians and New Zealanders, but the enthusiasm waned and the company was disbanded in 1935. Orr remained in the HKVDC and became a gunner in 1<sup>st</sup> Battery.

With the war clouds gathering, 1940 saw the compulsory evacuation from Hong Kong of women and children who were not domiciled in the Colony. Lallie Orr and her two children were evacuated to Australia in July, 1940. Alone in Hong Kong, Orr maintained an outward calm. Two letters that he wrote at this time were not delivered until after the war. One was addressed to his mother, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1941. He wrote, "Hong Kong seems to be in another flap. The army is more or less standing by.....and we have to expect to be mobilised.....However, this is not the first flap by any means, nor probably to be the last. I am glad however that Lal and the children are not here and I don't feel the least bit concerned. If the Japs are mad enough to start anything I don't think they will last very long, and I can't see them having much military success here."

The other letter was addressed to his wife, dated 7<sup>th</sup> December. Half-way through it he wrote reassuringly, "I have just been rung up and informed that the Volunteers are being mobilised and that we go out at 4 p.m. this afternoon.....It is probably a precautionary measure until we know what way the Japs are going to jump. Don't you worry.....even if the balloon does go up out here. We will be much better off out at D'Aguilar than we would be in Hong Kong or Kowloon – in fact we will probably have a very boring time....."



Orr's unit, 1<sup>st</sup> Battery, HKVDC manned two 4-inch guns in what was known as the D'Aguilar Battery, located on the ridge of D'Aguilar Peninsula in the south-east of Hong Kong Island. The situation there was relatively quiet for the first ten days following the Japanese attack on 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1941 but with the enemy's landing on the north shore of the Island on 18<sup>th</sup> December, and their swift advance southwards, it was decided to abandon D'Aguilar Battery. The guns were destroyed and the gunners were withdrawn to Stanley where they were given an infantry role.

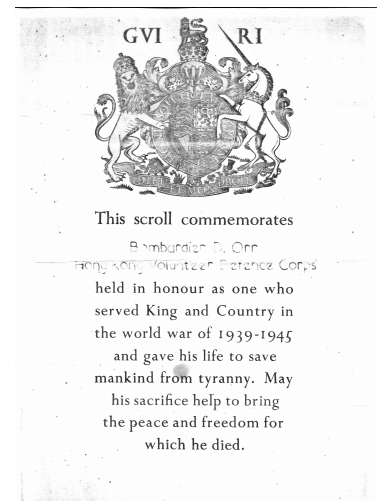
On 24<sup>th</sup> December men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battery were holding the line at St Stephen's College, running roughly east-west from the road leading to the Fort to the road leading to the Prison. The attack came in the very early hours of the 25<sup>th</sup> and the gunners turned infantrymen were overrun, suffering heavy casualties. It was in this engagement, which took place just hours before Hong Kong surrendered to the invading Japanese, that Orr was killed.

Following his release from POW Camp in Hong Kong after the war, the Officer Commanding 1<sup>st</sup> Battery, Captain G.F.Rees, wrote to Mrs Orr saying, "Douglas was killed on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1941 on the Stanley Peninsula, on the ridge just behind St Stephen's College, and was buried just below Barton's Bungalow.

He was killed instantaneously, and did not suffer at all. 1<sup>st</sup> Battery suffered severe casualties in that engagement."

With over 30% casualties (killed and wounded) 1<sup>st</sup> Battery had the second highest casualty rate of all the units in the HKVDC.

Rees ended his letter on an exceptionally sad note, "I felt his loss particularly as we had been colleagues for many years in Central British School."



Orr's family in Melbourne was notified of his death just over seven months after the sad event. Rosemary, then 11, recalls "I (had) developed measles..... and it would have been after that, when I was better, in August, 1942 that the Hong Kong Government's liaison officer in Australia told Mother that they had been notified through the British Embassy in Chungking that (Father) had been killed.....I could not take in or believe that our strong, vital, energetic, life-loving father was simply not in this world any more. It just could not happen. I said that we would go back after the war and find him."

The family apparently and understandably sought further details, but they heard nothing more until April, 1943 when a letter was received from the Victorian Division of the Australian Red Cross Society to say that a cable had arrived from the International Red Cross in Geneva confirming that Douglas Orr was killed in action on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1941 but regretting that no further details were available. This must have been very disappointing, particularly after an anxious wait of eight months for more information.

In a memoir, Orr's daughter Rosemary has written, "I think 1942 was the worst of those early years.....Mother still had virtually no income – point being she was not a war widow of an Australian serviceman, so we could not get any service pension."

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Lallie Orr returned to live in Hong Kong after the war, joined later by her son Geoffrey while Rosemary remained in Australia at a boarding school. She retired from the Education Department in 1961, and years later Geoffrey joined the Administrative Service in Hong Kong where he continued the family's dedicated service to the Colony, having first served as an Administrative Officer in the then British Colony of Fiji. Geoffrey's daughter still lives in Hong Kong, and his granddaughter is about to complete her schooling at the King George V School (previously the Central British School), making a four generation connection with that place.

In addition to the Central British School, Douglas Orr also taught in Queen's College when the Central British School was closed following the 1940 evacuation of expatriate children. He was in addition a part-time lecturer in geography at the University of Hong Kong, and his name is included in the list of staff who gave their lives in Lindsay Ride's article "The Test of War" in **The First 50 Years**, a history of the Hong Kong University edited by Brian Harrison (1962).