



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 19

The HKVDC and Conscription in World War 2

G.B.Endacott says in his book **Hong Kong Eclipse** (Oxford University Press 1978) that Hong Kong was "Britain's first colony to follow her lead in introducing conscription".

The Compulsory Service Ordinance enacted in mid-1939, six weeks before the start of World War 2, was simple enough; it established a Defence Reserve in which all British subjects aged 18 to 55, if found medically fit, were liable to be enrolled for compulsory service.

But when the draft legislation was brought to the Legislative Council on 20th July, 1939 the Governor said: *Such a measure as this cannot be put into effect without a complete register of persons liable under its provisions. No such register exists except of British subjects of European extraction, nor would any other be compiled easily*".

Thus, although legally all British subjects were liable to be enrolled in the Defence Reserve under the Compulsory Service Ordinance, as a matter of policy only those registered under the Registration of Persons Ordinance enacted in March, 1939 were called up.

The Governor referred to those registered under the Registration of Persons Ordinance as "British subjects of European extraction", but in fact all British subjects were liable to be registered whether of European extraction or not, *excluding only those of Chinese race*.

Those British subjects not of Chinese race and not of European extraction, such as Indians, and those not wholly of European extraction, such as local Portuguese and Eurasians, were presumably liable to be registered and so were subsequently called up under the Compulsory Service Ordinance.

Although the Registration of Persons Ordinance applied only to British subjects not of Chinese race, following debate in the Legislative Council the Government agreed that Chinese British subjects could also register under that Ordinance if they wished.

The Chinese British subjects who registered voluntarily were subsequently called up but were, in a sense, volunteers having responded to the Registration of Persons Ordinance of their own volition.

Compulsory service was generally accepted in Hong Kong with minimal disagreement; the men of Hong Kong were not averse to military service. The Second World War did not come to Hong Kong until the Japanese invasion in December, 1941 but men with Hong Kong connections served not only in Hong Kong in 1941 but also before then in Allied armed forces elsewhere. Indeed, official action had been necessary to discourage men from leaving to join up in Europe, as it was feared the exodus might adversely affect Hong Kong's economic interests.

The Defence Reserve created by the Compulsory Service Ordinance comprised three groups: the combatant group, the key-posts group (required to continue in the work in which they were normally engaged) and the general group (required for essential services not those in which normally engaged). Those placed in the combatant group were automatically enlisted in either the HKVDC or the Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force (members of the latter, on mobilisation, were designated as the HKRNVR).

There are no surviving records available naming conscripts enlisted in the HKVDC. But Appendix III of the 2005 edition of Evan Stewart's **Hong Kong Volunteers in Battle** gives a total of 1,789 names of other ranks in the HKVDC (excluding the Nursing Detachment) and of these 113 have in their numbers the prefix DR denoting Defence Reserve, while 439 have no numbers at all. It seems likely that most if not all of the latter were from the Defence Reserve, and this suggests that the total number of conscripts may have been about 500 or roughly 30% of all other ranks.

Very nearly 200 other ranks are named in Appendix III to Stewart's account as having been killed in action or as having died of wounds. Of these, some 15 have the prefix DR in their numbers, while about 100 have no numbers. Assuming again that most of the latter were in the Defence Reserve, this would indicate that perhaps conscripts accounted for about 50% of the other ranks casualties.

Occasional Paper No.13 referred in passing to the ethnic basis of some of the HKVDC units. This was apparently adhered to with conscription, and those called up were generally allocated to units where members of their community were already serving as volunteers, so they found themselves amongst friends and even relatives. This may be why there was little conflict between conscripts and volunteers.

Endacott writes, in regard to the HKVDC, that "the addition of the conscripted element following the Compulsory Service Ordinance does not appear to have altered its character in any way". This view is endorsed by our Association's patron Colonel Solomon Bard who served in the HKVDC Field Ambulance during the war. He writes, of the Field Ambulance, that the conscripts "appeared to mix with the rest perfectly well".

This seems also to be supported by negative evidence, such as the fact that other surviving members of the HKVDC approached in the drafting of this paper had difficulty in recalling anything on the subject of conscripts and conscription.

The proportion of conscripts to volunteers varied from unit to unit. The Field Ambulance, for example, had relatively few conscripts. This may have been because a large proportion of its members were Hong Kong University medical students, many from Malaya, all of whom were volunteers – the OC of this unit was the then Professor of Physiology, and their motive in joining up voluntarily may have been coloured by this.

No.5 (MG) Company and No.6 (AA) Company also had relatively few conscripts – they comprised men from the closely knit local Portuguese community which had a long-standing connection with the HKVDC, and it may be this that prompted most of the members to volunteer before conscription was introduced. In contrast No.3 (MG) Company (the Eurasian Company) had a large proportion of conscripts.

Tony Banham in his article on the No.3 (MG) Company in the **Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch (Volume 45, 2005)** lists the names of 113 other ranks in that unit, and of these 12 have the prefix DR in their numbers while 41 are given no number. This suggests that conscripts may have made up nearly 50% of the other ranks in No.3 Company, a large proportion that had no adverse effect on this Company's heroic stand at Jardine's Lookout and Wong Nei Chong Gap.

Based on what evidence has come to hand, it would seem that conscripts played their full part in the defence of Hong Kong, and that the distinction between conscripts and volunteers in the HKVDC was of no significance and in no way affected the performance of the Corps in the battle in 1941, which won for it the battle honour "Hong Kong" worn on the Colours which replaced those lost in December, 1941.

The replacement Colours of the HKVDC are shown at right carried by a Colour Party from the Hong Kong Regiment to which they were entrusted for safe keeping after being presented to the Hong Kong Defence Force in 1951.



(photo from the Centenary Number of The Volunteer, 1954) – see Occasional Paper No.7 The Colours

The Compulsory Service Ordinance of 1939 was repealed and the Defence Reserve disbanded in 1948.

The HKVDC was itself disbanded in the following year and replaced by the Hong Kong Defence Force made up entirely of volunteers. But in 1951, with its numbers below what was felt to be required at a time of growing world tension and the uncertainties of Hong Kong's situation, a new Compulsory Service Ordinance was enacted applicable to all citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies over the age of 18 (21 for women).

Many were called up, including Chinese British subjects, and allocated to the Hong Kong Regiment, the Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force, the Hong Kong Auxiliary Police Force or the Essential Services Corps. Once more, as in 1917 and 1939, the Volunteers would have to train conscripts.

According to Phillip Bruce in **Second to None** “The introduction of compulsory service was greeted with mixed feelings by men who were Volunteers and protests were heard”. The Ordinance was finally suspended in 1961.

Further information from readers on the effect of conscription in the HKVDC would be most welcome.