



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



Editorial Letter to Accompany OPs 19 and 20

Dear Members and Readers,

In my last Editorial Letter I mentioned how it had become very clear that the Series of occasional papers has been contributing much to our greater understanding of the wartime HKVDC and its membership – and indeed, of pre-war Hong Kong itself. This latest pair of OPs Nos 19 and 20 has continued to enrich its contents further.

This time the theme has shifted from volunteering to *compulsion*, whether by conscription into local military service for men, or for their wives and children by compulsory evacuation from Hong Kong in time of war.

It may be timely here to recall how individuals, families, units, groups – the list is endless – are treated by War, and how, if it can be personified as a Force, it treats humankind in a most irrational way. Individual stories taken from past Occasional Papers show how it can save or condemn in equal measure.

How, for instance, explain how the men of the two batteries manning the coastal defence guns on the D'Aguilar peninsula suffered such different fates towards the very end of the fighting, leading to No 5 Battery's Bdr Douglas Orr's tragic death at Stanley with many of his mates on Christmas Day, 1941 only hours before the surrender (OP No 17)? Or the fate of the men of the ASC Company sent to defend The Ridge on Repulse Bay Road (OP No 3)? And how to explain our member Robert Lapsley's miraculous escape from death, as recorded in his memorable OP No 14?

Call it Chance or Fortune, Lady Luck, or Bad Luck, how does one explain how - sometimes beyond expectation – some are sent to their deaths and others are miraculously preserved from certain destruction? Whilst this is often brought about by human dictate, overall those taking the decisions can seem to be puppet actors in a vast playhouse, at the direction of an unknown force which simply revels in the Sport of War.

Born in 1930, I saw (but did not understand) something of this as a boy in Britain during the Second World War, and directly during my national service in the Far East towards the end of the Korean War, when I was preserved from harm and some of my contemporaries were not. I have often pondered on this.

What puts you in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or for that matter, in the right place at the right time? All said, of course, this is as true for life itself as for war.

OP No 20, on forced evacuation, deals with the effect of a hurried decision taken in London, which had hard consequences for some affected families from Hong Kong. Sent to Australia, Douglas Orr's widow (she did not learn that he was missing, later confirmed killed in action, until much later) had somehow to exist with her two children after the Australian Government cut off financial assistance from the evacuees (OP No 17). We need to have more information about other HKVDC evacuee families, please!

On the other hand, we now know more about conscription and conscripts in the HKVDC from OP No 19. Everything we now learn from this OP shows that, for the reasons that appear in the paper, they were a numerically significant part of the Corps. Moreover, they endured Winston Churchill's "blood, sweat and tears" in equal measure with their volunteer comrades, and with them earned the battle honour "Hong Kong" emblazoned on the replacement Colours presented to the HKDF in 1951.

During the editing of these OPs Henry has made some interesting comments which I am including here because they reveal something of the conflicting considerations behind the compulsion that replaced reliance on volunteering alone, and in so doing help shed more light on the Hong Kong of the day:

"There were those who regarded Hong Kong as merely an outpost of the British Empire, a fortress located in a foreign land. Once attack was envisaged it was natural to compel women and children to leave for a safer place, although this was not considered to be necessary for women and children domiciled there. On the other hand there were those who looked on Hong Kong as a territorial part of the British Empire, and the threat of invasion required that it should be defended and that all residents should play their part in this. And so compulsory service came about. These two opposed views had implications later on in regard to internees. Many of the Hong Kong internees themselves expected to be repatriated in some sort of prisoner exchange, as happened with the Americans and civilian Canadians. This also occurred with the British residents of other places in China, like Shanghai. But in Hong Kong it was decided that it would be wrong to repatriate British Subjects as Hong Kong was British territory, so they were required to stay put during the Occupation having previously been compelled to leave.

Was the same conflict perhaps discernible in regard to making air raids on occupied territories? In Hong Kong we had our fair share of Allied air raids, with considerable death and destruction for the civilian population (including British Subjects) – more so than was caused by the Japanese attack in December, 1941. I don't know if there were air raids on Singapore or Malaya during their occupation, but was any thought ever given to making air raids on, for example, the occupied Channel Islands?"

This letter and its accompanying OPs comes with best wishes from Henry Ching and myself. We hope they provide as much pleasure to you as their preparation does to us. Be assured that there are more on the way!

James Hayes
August, 2013