



# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



## OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 25

### Cameron de Saille Robertson, M.M., the ANZACS and the HKVDC

In Occasional Paper No.8 *Australians in Hong Kong in the Pacific War* mention was made of the Anzac Company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps and of Captain Cameron Desailly Robertson. Several errors of fact were unfortunately made in that brief mention.

As stated in Occasional Paper No.8, the Anzac Company of the HKVDC was formed in 1932, but initial enthusiasm waned and the unit was disbanded in 1935. It was however wrongly recorded that Robertson was the last OC of the Anzac Company. He was the *first* OC and was instrumental in the Company's formation.

Following an Anzac Day ceremony at the Cenotaph in April, 1932 Australians and New Zealanders attended a dinner at the Hong Kong Hotel. Robertson, described as an old resident of the Colony, was chosen to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph and at the dinner he gave a speech in which he appealed to those present to form a company of their own in the HKVDC. The response was astounding according to the HKVDC's Year Book 1934-35, which also records that before 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1932 a new company had been formed, called the Anzac Company, and Robertson had been commissioned a lieutenant to command it (Robertson was in fact promoted from private to lieutenant with effect from 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1932). Permission was given for the new company to wear the slouch hat, and the Vickers medium machine gun was chosen as the appropriate weapon, this being in the words of the then HKVDC Commandant "pre-eminently the weapon of Gallipoli".

Robertson had served in the AIF in the First World War and according to the HKVDC's Year Book 1934-35 he was a member of the original 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division "who had been present at the landing at Gaba Tepe (in Gallipoli in April, 1915)". At war's end he was a Corporal in the 4<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division having been awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field in France in December, 1916. He returned to Australia in December, 1918 to be discharged early the next year, and appears to have left Australia for Hong Kong in the mid-1920s.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Battalion was one of six such units formed in the AIF in 1916. John McNamara in Australia is working on a unit history for this battalion, and has kindly made some information available to me, including Robertson's birth and death certificates. The birth certificate shows that Robertson was born in Sydney and not Melbourne as previously stated. It also gives his personal names as Cameron Desailly, but at some time after he arrived in Hong Kong he appears to have changed the form of his personal names to Cameron de Saille and this was the name by which he was known in the HKVDC.

It has not been possible to determine precisely what work he obtained in Hong Kong, but he was employed for a while by the Hong Kong Hotel. He was living in a room there at the time of the fire on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1927 when he lost most of his personal possessions. A letter is on record with the National Archives of Australia in which he seeks replacements for his military discharge and other documents of his military service, all consumed by the fire, and his name is printed and not handwritten at the head of the letter paper above the emblem of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels, indicating that he was working for the hotel. His name was on the Jury List for 1927 and 1928 where his employment was shown as the Hong Kong & Shanghai Hotels. But in the Jury List for 1932 his employment is given as Secretary, Hong Kong Brewer & Distillers Ltd.

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As explained above, Robertson was in May, 1932 OC of the Anzac Company, but shortly afterwards (in August, 1934) he transferred to the Machine Gun Battalion Headquarters and was replaced as OC the Anzac Company by 2/Lt J.R.Way. Lt Robertson was promoted to Captain in October, 1937 and in the following year he was made OC the Pay Detachment, HKVDC attached to the Royal Army Pay Corps. He was in this position when the Japanese attacked Hong Kong in December, 1941. He was promoted to major shortly before the war.

He apparently remained in Sham Shui Po POW Camp when most of the officers were removed to the Argyle Street Camp, as his name is not in the list of officers who were in Argyle Street. After the war and the disbandment of the HKVDC, he remained in the newly formed Hong Kong Defence Force initially as OC, Pay Section and then as OC, Depot until well into the 1950s when he left Hong Kong and returned to Australia. He passed away in Sydney in September, 1963.

A number of Volunteers who mobilised in December, 1941 had previously served in the short-lived Anzac Company, including Major Cameron de Saille Robertson (Pay Detachment), Capt. J.R.Way (Corps HQ), CQMS E.C.Fincher (No.3 Company), Sgt B.J.Monks (3<sup>rd</sup> Battery), Cpl J.F.C.Mackay (No.3 Company) and Bdr. D.Orr (1<sup>st</sup> Battery). They may be in the photo reproduced below. Two other members of the Anzac Company were John Luke and Harold Brokenshire, both in civilian life journalists on the staff of the South China Morning Post. Luke resigned from the HKVDC and was placed in the key-posts group of the Defence Reserve – i.e required to continue in the work in which normally engaged. He spent the occupation years in Stanley Internment Camp. Brokenshire was on his way back to Hong Kong from overseas leave in Australia in December, 1941 – his ship turned round and returned to Australia and he spent the war years in the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF.

*The Anzac Company, HKVDC in about 1934 (from the Year Book 1934-35)*

