

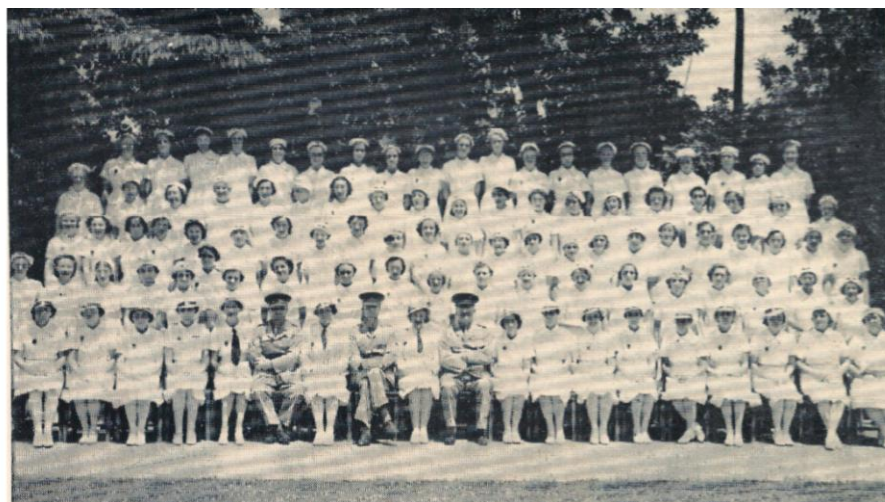


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The Nursing Detachment of the HKVDC



*Nursing Detachment, Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, 1941 (from the Centenary Number of **The Volunteer**)*

According to the 1934-1935 Year Book of the HKVDC the Nursing Detachment was born on 1st October, 1934 and overnight became 70 strong with “women almost falling over each other to join”. The intention was that it should be a part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment Scheme in England, but the War Office advised that this scheme was capable of administration only “at Home” and that therefore the proposal could not be approved.

The decision was then taken to make the Nursing Detachment a part of the HKVDC. The final form of the HKVDC's Nursing Detachment differed from the Voluntary Aid Detachment Scheme in England. That scheme envisaged its members working under fully trained nurses with support duties including sweeping, cleaning, washing, sorting linen, cooking, driving ambulances and letter-writing for patients. They were given first-aid and short nursing courses but were not intended to be fully trained nurses. In contrast, the HKVDC's Nursing Detachment undertook nursing duties and nearly 10% were fully trained qualified nurses.

The group photograph shown above, taken in 1941, shows very nearly 100 ladies. Evan Stewart's **Hong Kong Volunteers in Battle** (Blacksmith Books, 2005) gives in Appendix III a list of 116 names. This unit was thus one of the largest in the HKVDC. Its popularity may partly have been the result of the compulsory evacuation of European women from Hong Kong in 1940, as those serving in the Detachment were exempt from evacuation, and membership appealed to those who wished to remain in Hong Kong.

Members of the Nursing Detachment served mainly in the Bowen Road Military Hospital. A few were posted to the temporary military hospitals located in the Hong Kong Hotel and in St Albert's Priory (Rosary Hill), and there were six serving in the temporary military hospital in St Stephen's College in Stanley when the Japanese entered that hospital on Christmas Day.

Shortly after the surrender most of the members of the Detachment were withdrawn to Bowen Road and for many of them internment followed. In the latter half of February, 1942 St Teresa's Hospital in Kowloon was taken over to accommodate POWs requiring hospital care, and some members of the Nursing Detachment not yet interned were posted there. The nurses still remaining free were finally sent into internment in Stanley in August, 1942.

It seems, from the names in the list, that almost all the members were European, with very few Eurasians and no Asians. Strangely, however, the total number eventually interned falls short of the number listed in Appendix III. Of the 116 names only 99 are to be found in the lists of Stanley internees, i.e. 17 short. Missing are, of course, the names of the three who were killed in the massacre at St Stephen's College temporary military hospital in Stanley – ND17 Nurse Eileen Begg, ND9 Nurse Alberta Buxton and ND118 Nurse Marjorie Smith.

Two Russian ladies, possibly ND142 Nurse E.Lovzevitch and ND150 Nurse L.Morosov, were not interned following the withdrawal of the female nurses from Bowen Road Hospital in August, 1942 and also missing from the internees lists are ND82 Nurse J.M.Tadema Weilandt, ND140 Nurse E.Tonoff, ND146 Nurse C.Gehring and ND147 Nurse R.Gehring. Some of the 116 may have left Hong Kong - ND28 Nurse Joan Dowbiggin, for example, is known to have left in 1936 for England where she joined the Royal Naval Nursing Service and was posted to Ceylon.

Thus the Appendix III list, based on a nominal roll kept by the Commandant, Mrs Irene Braude, may not reflect the membership of the Detachment as mobilised in December, 1941. Apart from those who may have left Hong Kong, there is also a possibility that some of those interned had resigned from the Detachment before the Japanese attack. Eurasian ND55 Nurse Mabel Hall vacated her home in the New Territories and sought shelter on Hong Kong Island with her three children and, in her son's published book **In the Web** (published 1992), a detailed account is given of the family's movements but no mention is made of her nursing duties. It seems likely that she was no longer in the Detachment. The name of ND30 Nurse Florence Deacon, the interned mother of Mrs Braude, is crossed out in the Commandant's nominal roll, so perhaps Nurse Deacon also may no longer have been enlisted.

It is difficult to ascertain the precise movements of the members of the Nursing Detachment between the surrender and August, 1942. According to Greg Leck's list in his **Captives of Empire** (Shandy Press, 2006) 84 were interned in January, 1942 and 15 were eventually interned later that year, making the total of 99 internees. But Major Donald Bowie, RAMC in charge of the Bowen Road Hospital from August, 1942, says in his written account entitled **Captive Surgeon in Hong Kong** that at that time there were 32 members of the Detachment in that hospital. This implies that the 17 who were not interned were all present in Bowen Road Hospital in August, 1942 but this is not possible having regard to those who were killed and those who had left Hong Kong or who were no longer members of the Detachment.

Some names appear with their husbands in the lists of inmates of the Chinese hotels which housed internees in January before they were removed to Stanley, and this suggests that they either were no longer members, or were early released in order to join their husbands. There is a further complication in that Greg Leck's list also includes 13 additional ladies who were interned and who are recorded as being in the Detachment although inexplicably they are not listed in Appendix III (this does not include another half a dozen internees in Stanley described as being "HKRNVR VADs").

In Stanley Camp, although the members of the Detachment were presumably not yet demobilised, there was apparently some uncertainty as to whether they were still serving members of the Nursing Detachment. The record of a meeting in the camp between Hong Kong's Colonial Secretary, Franklin Gimson, and Matron E.M.B.Dyson QAIMNS in charge of the army nurses indicates some doubt as to her authority over them.

Two members of the Nursing Detachment died in Stanley Camp – ND47 Nurse Sarah Gubbay and ND 32 Nurse Leontine Ellis. Both are named on the Memorial in the Ohel Leah Synagogue, as well as on the HKVDC's Roll of Honour together with the three nurses who were murdered at the St Stephen's College temporary hospital. A member of the Detachment who was Mentioned in Despatches was ND145 Sister E.A.Hills. Her citation in the London Gazette gives no details of the circumstances which won her this award, but it may have been for the part she played in nursing a wounded Japanese officer; he died, but the nursing care that he received at the temporary hospital at St Albert's Priory (Rosary Hill) is thought to be the reason why the nurses there were not ill-treated.

When the decision was taken to make the Nursing Detachment a part of the HKVDC, there was apparently some difficulty in determining how this was to be achieved. It was finally designated an "Affiliated Unit" of the HKVDC, and was included as such in the list of units tabled in the Legislative Council on 24th November, 1936. Strangely, the Volunteer Ordinance of which the list of units was a schedule makes no mention of Affiliated Units. The Ordinance itself provides only for Corps Units and Auxiliary Units, and Affiliated Units are nowhere defined. The status of the Nursing Detachment in relation to the rest of the HKVDC is therefore unclear, but it is certain that it was intended to be a part of the Corps, and the Detachment was suitably represented at the Victory Parade in London in 1946.