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The Eighteen Days

The following edited extracts from the diary of Henry (Harry to his friends and colleagues) Ching, then Editor of the South China Morning Post, give an indication of the limited experience of a family living in Happy Valley during the battle for Hong Kong. During the eighteen days of the battle he continued to work, initially in his office in Wyndham Street and later at home as it became impossible to get to Central past the dockyard and military barracks. The South China Morning Post continued to be published daily, the last edition being on Boxing Day, 1941. The diary covers the period of the Japanese occupation and is accessible on the Gwulo.com website. It was, unfortunately, written on scraps of paper which, over the years, became disordered, and also there are gaps through loss and because entries were not made on a daily basis – and, of course, there were no entries for the time he spent imprisoned, although he did write an account of this after the event which is not included in his diary.

Monday, 8th December. Early morning phone call from Bill O'Neill of Reuters, "The balloon's gone up. They'll be here for breakfast." At breakfast our first air-raid alarm. Explosions at Kai Tak. Shops that had opened were closing again. I phoned the wife and she rushed to buy tinned food. People from Kowloon crowded the ferries and permits to cross became necessary. A complete black-out at night which was unexpectedly quiet.

Tuesday, 9th December. Heavy fog and drizzle, but there were seven air raids. Rice shops closed but were ordered to re-open. There was a shortage of small currency notes. Shops would change large notes only at a heavy discount. Communal food kitchens were opened.

Wednesday, 10th December. News that the Royal Scots had been driven from the Shingmun Redoubt, threatening collapse of the whole Gin Drinkers' Line. Night quiet apart from some artillery bombardment.

Thursday, 11th December. European police sent to Kowloon as militia. Street guards organised, composed in part of Chinese refugee soldiery. Decision to abandon Kowloon, withdrawal to commence at nightfall. Friends there phoned to say bands of men appearing everywhere and boldly entering and ransacking homes.

Friday, 12th December. Day of alerts and shelling of the Island. Driving home at sunset I had a taste of shell-fire. Two whistled by into the Dockyard as I dodged a military vehicle on the wrong side of the road. The day closed in an atmosphere of tension and depression. I parked the car and removed the rotor arm as instructed. About 11 pm a great explosion.

Saturday, 13th December. Japanese sent over a "Peace Mission" demanding unconditional surrender. Governor replied he was not prepared to enter into any conference on the subject. Many felt Hong Kong should never have been defended, but we were proud of our defiance.

Sunday, 14th December. Heavy artillery exchanges throughout day. People urged to conserve water. The scavenging service failing and garbage piling up in the streets. People were asked to burn their rubbish and bury what would not burn. Shelling increased, with the Dockyard and central barrack areas receiving much of the attention. Now difficult to reach town from Happy Valley, and I was permitted to remain at home and work by telephone.

Monday 15th December. Japanese seen concentrating small craft in Kowloon Bay. Shelling continued throughout the night.

Tuesday, 16th December. Heavy shelling all day.

Wednesday, 17th December. People have taken up residence in the air-raid tunnels. No sanitary conveniences and the tunnels quickly became filthy. Same problem arose in the arcades. Squads of men detailed to cleanse and disinfect them. Breakfast eaten during heavy bombardment. Hong Kong Shanghai Bank hit, also the Gloucester.

Thursday, 18th December. Heaviest shelling and bombing so far. Shells hit the oil stores near North Point. Huge column of black smoke rose high. Heavy shelling into the night, accompanied by machine-gun fire. A shell through the roof of the SCMP building.



*Japanese troops at North Point (from Cheng Po Hung's **Hong Kong during the Japanese Occupation**)*

Friday, 19th December. Cloudy and rainy, helping smoke blanket eastern districts. A friend in the rice depot at the Lee Theatre phoned to say his staff this morning saw Japanese soldiers at Causeway Bay nearby. Later a neighbour went by and shouted "They landed last night, at North Point". In the afternoon, a long file of soldiers along Stubbs Road, presumably reinforcements for Wong Nei Chong Gap. Electricity supply ceased.

Saturday, 20th December. Very foggy morning, brightened by hawker selling milk. We did not ask its source. Our car requisitioned. The battle in the hills went on all day, but a strangely quiet night. The looting in Kowloon was a warning. A neighbour had two pistols and gave me one.

Sunday 21st December. Heavy shelling of Happy Valley. The wife took the children to the ground floor. I went on the front verandah to take a look and a shell hit the corner of our roof shaking me severely. I retreated to the back of the flat to close the shutters. Another shell took a corner off the back of the building. I scuttled downstairs where they told me I looked as green as I felt. The women prayed and the children cried, while the house bounced again and again. Suddenly the ordeal ended. At sunset Indian soldiers with mountain guns went up Shan Kwong Road. They stopped at the corner of Village and Sing Woo Roads and opened up on the Japanese who peppered our district furiously in reply.

Monday 22nd December. Air-raid alarm for breakfast. They were so frequent and so mixed with the all-clears that they were meaningless. Another terrific bombardment around us. Shell on our roof destroyed my tomatoes.

Tuesday, 23rd December. A dud shell which landed in King Kwong Street this morning had been moved to our back door. A coolie wandered along and looked at it. We asked him to take it away, and he demanded forty cents which we paid. Later the shell was back at the door of our neighbour. The same coolie wandered along and looked at it. We ignored it and him. Late in the forenoon a clatter drew us to the front verandah. Some troops had climbed down from Stubbs Road through Fung Fai Terrace. In the afternoon, a file of soldiers went down Shan Kwong Road, some wounded and one with a boot gone and a bloodily bandaged foot. Dejected they symbolised all the frustration and tragedy of our useless little war. The water supply failed. At dusk suddenly the Japanese above the Jockey Club stables fired tracer bullets past our back door. The mountain guns went by again, disappearing towards Central.

Wednesday, 24th December. In the afternoon we saw Japanese coming over Broadwood Ridge. I phoned defence headquarters and waited for shells to arrive. But none came and the Japanese continued along Broadwood Road. Sounds of battle from Leighton Hill. In the twilight the Japanese shelled the civil servants' quarters there and set them alight. Flashes told of guns firing across the racecourse to Mount Parish and Morrison Hill. Then strident war cries as they charged across the racecourse.

Thursday, 25th December. In the morning some rifle and machine-gun fire. Horses galloped past set loose from the stables. A shell next door scattered their penthouse all over my roof garden. At noon Japanese troops up King Kwong Street, helmets festooned with leaves, and up Shan Kwong Road. We ate our Christmas lunch walking about nervously while distant sounds of firing rattled on. About 4 pm a telephone call, "It's all over; we've surrendered". I phoned Ben Wylie, the SCMP Manager. Unbelieving, he snooted indignantly. Later, he phoned back and apologised, warning also "Keep out of sight. I've been talking to a friend. He says you're on the black list". The friend was working in a Japanese news agency. I had telephoned an editorial exhorting our readers to a final display of spirit. This had to be scrapped in favour of some soothing syrup accepting our fate and advising calm and restraint. All quiet at sundown. We rested in blessed relief from the shelling.