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Local Hong Kong Belongers in the HKVDC

To fight where he dwells is probably the most distasteful task a soldier faces. It was in the few days of the battle, fighting among the ruins of their homes, that the HKVDC truly confirmed the right to its motto "Nulli Secundus in Oriente".

Lt.Col.R.J.L.Penfold, 12 Coast Regiment, RA

Most of the units in the HKVDC had both expatriates and local men, but some were made up predominantly of expatriates, such as Nos 1 and 2 Companies, while some comprised mainly local Hong Kong belongers largely from the Chinese, Eurasian or local Portuguese communities. The term "local Portuguese" is here used in reference to local belongers whose ancestors were a mix of Portuguese and other races. They formed a distinct and close-knit community and, although legally British Subjects by birth, they were usually referred to as Portuguese.

Units with significant numbers of local Hong Kong belongers included the ASC Company and No.5 Company. Their war experience differed, reflected in their casualty records. The ASC Company with a strength of 72 lost 33 men in the battle (killed, missing or wounded), while No. 5 Company lost five men in a total strength of 98.

In the ASC Company, Eurasian Pte William Henry Peters, father of Association member Eileen Ching, was killed in action on 22nd December, 1941. He was aged 42 and was survived by his wife, Rose Margaret Shea, and a young family of two daughters and a son.

William Henry Peters was conscripted in late 1939, but received little military training before the invasion of Hong Kong in December, 1941 at which time he was working for the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company. In the ASC Company his duties were those of a stores clerk and it was not envisaged that he would be engaged in actual combat.

Following mobilisation he was able to obtain leave for part of a day to be with his family as they were moved from Kowloon, where they lived, to billets in May Road. It was the last time his family saw him.

When the Japanese captured the strategic Wong Nei Chong Gap, the need was seen to prevent their further movement south towards Repulse Bay and so splitting the defence into two areas. However, there was a reluctance to re-deploy trained infantry troops from the coastal defence, and so a mixed bag of men from various units was formed for the purpose. This included the men of the ASC Company who were moved on 20th December from sedentary duties in their stores depot into the front line at the Ridge.



*The Ridge (from Oliver Lindsay's **The Lasting Honour**, Hamish Hamilton: London, 1978)*

The Ridge denied the enemy the use of the Repulse Bay Road, but the position was soon found to be untenable. Efforts to withdraw were unsuccessful, and so were attempts to surrender the position. A final attempt to withdraw was made on the night of 22nd December, but few of the men who left the Ridge that night were ever seen again. Some were captured and taken to “Eucliff” at Repulse Bay where they were executed. The wounded left at the Ridge were captured and killed. Most of the men of the ASC Company who were killed, including William Henry Peters, have no known grave.

Unlike the ASC Company, No.5 Company was engaged in coastal defence on the west coast at Mt Davis from the start of the battle, but saw little action although it was subjected to heavy aerial bombardment in which one man - Pte L.R. Sequeira - was killed. Pte Philippe Diniz D’Almada Remedios, elder brother of Association member Carlos Remedios, enlisted in No.5 Company in mid-1941, at the age of 18. He was an articled clerk, just embarking on his chosen legal career.

Following the surrender, the Company was marched to Sham Shui Po POW Camp. Many of its members were later moved to Japan in the Fifth Draft in December, 1943 and in the Sixth Draft in April, 1944. Philippe Remedios remained in Sham Shui Po.

In an unpublished memoir he recalls that the camp, formerly a British army barracks, had been ransacked by looters. Windows had been ripped out for firewood, and the POWs were bitterly cold until materials could be found to block out the weather.

The memoir goes on, *“During our days in Camp we were only given two meals a day, consisting of a bowl of plain rice and a little garlic water. Meat was a rare occurrence, perhaps once a fortnight or once a month. Occasionally we were given vegetables: tung choi.....On this measly ration we had to work from dawn to dusk, cutting away the..... hills to extend Kai Tak Airport. Each morning, we were awakened by the reveille, played at 04:00 by a British bugler. At 04:30 we were given our first meal..... At 05:00 we were marched from Sham Shui Po to Kai Tak Airport where we worked until 6:00 pm or 7:00 pm. We marched back to Camp, getting in at around 9:00 pm. At 10:00 pm we had our second meal of the day.....”* The local Hong Kong belongers were relatively lucky in that many had relatives who were able to send them some food to supplement their rations, but of course the relatives themselves were in short supply of foodstuffs.

In conclusion, Philippe Remedios remembers that in August, 1945 while marching to the Airport, they saw the mother of a young Volunteer standing outside St Teresa’s Church in Prince Edward Road. She shouted to them that the war was over. They didn’t know whether or not to believe her, but two days later the Japanese turned over the running of the Camp to the POWs. Philippe Remedios was able to return home to his parents – he was 22 years old and weighed a mere 96 lbs.

Through the vagaries of war the local Hong Kong belongers of the ASC Company and No.5 Company had different experiences. But while the men of No.5 Company were spared in the 18-day battle, they perhaps represented one of the largest single contingent of local men who suffered the deprivations and hardships of life in a POW camp for three and a half years.



*Air raid on Mt Davis, 16th December, 1941 (from Ko Tim Keung and Jason Wordie’s **Ruins of War**)*

St Teresa’s Church in Kowloon
(photo posted on the Gwulo.com website)

