



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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The Best and Cheapest Club in the Colony; Colonels in the HKVDC 1920-1941

The Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) which was formed in March, 1920 replaced the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps and the Hong Kong Volunteer Reserve. The dissolution of the existing Hong Kong Defence Corps was announced, and its members became members of the new HKVDC without the need for further swearing in.

Major L.G.Bird was appointed the first Administrative Commandant of the new HKVDC from the date of its formation, with the local rank of Lt.Colonel (the term Administrative Commandant was amended to Commandant in 1929). He was thus the first of the HKVDC Lt.Colonels, but in the 21 years to the Japanese attack in December, 1941 a further seven men were appointed/promoted to this rank in the HKVDC.

Lennox Godfrey Bird, an architect in Hong Kong, was a temporary Lt.Colonel in the Lancashire Fusiliers in World War 1, when he won the Distinguished Service Order. He was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1929, and was promoted to Colonel in the HKVDC in 1932. He transferred to the Reserve of Officers two years later, having been Commandant of the HKVDC for nearly 15 years, and resigned his commission in 1939.

He was succeeded as Commandant in 1934 by Lt.Colonel H.B.L.Dowbiggin. Hugh Blackwell Layard Dowbiggin, an exchange broker in civilian life and a Sergeant in the HKVDC, was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1923, and was eventually promoted to Lt.Colonel in 1934. It was Dowbiggin who in 1930, then a Major, famously described the HKVDC as "really the best and cheapest club in the Colony". He was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire the following year. Dowbiggin was replaced as Commandant in 1936, but was present in Hong Kong in December, 1941 when he was 56 years old and was apparently no longer on the active list. He was interned in Stanley Internment Camp.

Major R.C.B.Anderson, MC of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders was Adjutant of the HKVDC and was appointed Commandant in 1936 as a local Lt.Colonel, being replaced as Adjutant by a Volunteer officer. There was a legal requirement for either the Adjutant or the Commandant to be a Regular Army officer.

In 1938, for the second time, a Regular Army officer was appointed Commandant. Henry Barron Rose was described as a "Lt.Colonel, late of the Wiltshire Regiment" in which he won the Military Cross in World War 1. The local rank of Colonel was granted to him in 1940. Colonel Rose commanded the HKVDC in the defence of Hong Kong in December, 1941 but when the Brigade Major of West Brigade was killed at Wong Nei Chong Gap on the morning of 18th December, he was placed in command of the West Brigade. He became a PoW on the surrender of Hong Kong.

Thomas.Addis-Martin, a wine merchant in civilian life, was a Gunner, commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in the HKVDC in 1927 and promoted Captain in 1928. But he resigned his commission three years later before rejoining as a Captain in 1935. He was eventually promoted to Lt.Colonel in 1940, but resigned his commission again the following year. He apparently did not take part in the defence of Hong Kong, although he remained in Hong Kong and was interned in Stanley Internment Camp.

In Evan Stewart's "**Hong Kong Volunteers in Battle**" (Blacksmith Books, 2005) , Appendix I records that there were 1,759 officers and other ranks in the Corps. Appendix III "Nominal Roll of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps" includes, apart from Colonel H.B.Rose, the names of no fewer than five Lt.Colonels. Two were transferred to other units on the outbreak of hostilities in 1941 (Lt.Colonels G.D.R.Black and H. Owen Hughes), one fought with the HKVDC until the surrender and then joined some other unit (Lt. Colonel L.T.Ride), and two were prisoners of war at the time of the Japanese surrender in 1945 (Lt.Colonels E.J.R.Mitchell and R.D.Walker).

George Duncan Ralph Black, a medical practitioner, joined the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps in 1912, as a Surgeon Lieutenant. In 1920 he was confirmed Major (Medical) in the newly formed HKVDC. Appointed Lt.Colonel in 1934, he was transferred to the Reserve of Officers that year, and the following year was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire, but his status in December, 1941 is not clear. What is known is that he was killed at the St Stephen's College temporary hospital in Stanley. St Stephen's was a Royal Army Medical Corps hospital, and stationed there was a Captain P.N.Whitney, R.A.M.C. - it is debateable which of the two men was in charge. Tim Carew in **The Fall of Hong Kong** (Anthony Blond 1960) makes this comment, "It was tactfully explained to Captain Whitney that Black was in command, although to this day no one really knows how the old man got there in the first place. Whitney.....got the gist of the thing at once and treated the gallant old man with the proper deference....."

Harry Owen Hughes was a Sergeant, commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in 1926. In civilian life he appears to have been working in his father's firm, Harry Wicking & Co. It has not been possible to ascertain the date of his eventual promotion to Lt.Colonel, but the indications are that it was late in 1941. He left Hong Kong for China on 9th December, 1941 to coordinate action with the Chinese Nationalist Army to threaten the rear of the Japanese forces attacking Hong Kong. G.B.Endacott in **Hong Kong Eclipse** (Oxford University Press 1978) records Hughes as saying "Mine was a mission doomed to failure, because so far as I am aware, the Chinese never fought the Japanese anywhere".

Lindsay Tasman Ride, the University of Hong Kong's Professor of Physiology, was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the HKVDC in 1931, and eventually promoted Lt.Colonel ten years later. In December, 1941 he was in command of the HKVDC Field Ambulance and in charge of the Hong Kong Field Ambulance which included elements of the Royal Army Medical Corps and St John Ambulance. He successfully escaped from Sham Shui Po PoW Camp early in 1942 and, in China, established the well-known British Army Aid Group.

Eric John Reinhold Mitchell, who worked for an insurance firm in civilian life, was a Corporal in the HKVDC commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in 1925 and eventually Lt.Colonel in 1938. He was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1933. He was second in command of the HKVDC when the Japanese attacked, but took over command when Colonel Rose was moved to West Brigade Headquarters.

Reginald David Walker, Manager and Chief Engineer of the Kowloon-Canton Railway, was in the Royal Engineers in World War 1 and won the Military Cross in 1918. In the HKVDC he was in 1935 commissioned a Major in the Railway Operating Detachment Cadre. In January, 1941 he was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire, and was appointed Lt.Colonel four months later. He commanded the Field Company Engineers in December, 1941.

Reception held at Government House in 1936 showing, left to right, the Acting Governor Sir Thomas Southorn, Colonel LG.Bird and Lt.Colonels G.D.R.Black and H.B.L.Dowbiggin

*(cropped from a photo in **Old Hong Kong**, Formasia 1988)*

