



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



Transcript of talk delivered by Robin Hutcheon, former editor of the South China Morning Post, at the Hong Kong Volunteer & ex-PoW Association of NSW combined BGM/Foundation Day/Liberation Day Dinner, held in the Adam Room of the NSW Masonic Club, Sydney, on 22nd August 2014.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong in 1953 to join the editorial staff of the South China Morning Post, eight years had elapsed since the liberation from the Japanese occupation. But with the Korean war still on, the presence of several British military contingents headed by renowned generals left no doubt that Hong Kong, that borrowed place, was living on borrowed time. We existed with the ever-present threat of a telephone call from Peking calling time on the Treaty of Nanking, informing us of our marching orders that our days were numbered and our time was up. And frankly no one would have been surprised. Colonialism was on its way out with the winds of change then sweeping through the post-war world.

Hong Kong had been liberated in 1945 by Lord Mountbatten and the Royal Navy. Thankfully this went smoothly, ahead of a possible attempt by the United States to fly in military units of the Koumintang to reclaim the territory for China. Neither General Stillwell nor General Chennault, the leading US Generals in that part of China controlled by the KMT were admirers of the British Empire and its colonies. Fortunately after internal quarrelling, Stillwell was withdrawn before the end of the war, and following Roosevelt's death, Chennault was sidelined. HMS Swiftsure won the race. If its arrival had been delayed, the post-war history of Hong Kong might have been very different.

For while the newly installed regime of Chairman Mao had chased the Nationalist remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's army and administration to Taiwan and the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, it would not have tolerated a KMT presence on the southern tip of the mainland. All Chinese people remember the way in which the Sung dynasty ended in 1279-80 – with a massive sea battle off the coast of Lantau and the suicide drowning of the last Sung boy-emperor – and had no wish to see history repeating itself in 1949.

As it was a small number of KMT soldiers ended up as refugees on the eastern shores of Kowloon at a place called Rennie's Mill, Hong Kong's first flour mill – remember the Battle of the Flags on October 1 and the Double Tenth? But fortunately the numbers were too small to constitute a threat. Over the years they were submerged by the far larger and on-going influx of refugees from Guangdong province.

These included many industrialists who gave Hong Kong its first kiss of economic life by establishing an industrial base, while exiled textile manufacturers from Shanghai and Tianjin grew so big that they challenged the output of Manchester and India. Its ship-owners owned the biggest tanker fleets in the world. Its movie-makers became legends in their life-time. Its banks became giants of finance

Hong Kong Volunteer & Ex-PoW Association of NSW. *Robin Hutcheon.*
Sydney, August 2014

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on the international scene, and to top it all there was an endless reclamation, property and infrastructure boom. From having more beggars per square mile when I arrived HK moved to having more high-rise millionaires than anywhere else in the world when I left.

Miraculously Hong Kong's future did not become an issue for 30 years when on a visit to Beijing the then Governor, Sir Murray MacLehose and Sir Y.K. Kan held talks with China's leader, Deng Xiaoping. He asked the two men to tell Hong Kong people to "put their hearts at ease" – a Chinese whisper that was meant to allay fears, but only aroused them. The time was drawing nigh, and the curtain finally came down in 1997 with the expiry of the NT's 99-year lease, happily with a fairly good 50-year deal for the people of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China. Macau went the same way.

I must confess I had misgivings about the British Government's intentions when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, when she launched the invasion of the Falklands after their seizure by Argentina. When she later travelled to Beijing to negotiate Hong Kong's future I feared that the same hubris and intransigence would drive her into a bellicose refusal to make any concession on the territory's future. Happily she stumbled down the steps in leaving the Great Hall of the People and came to her senses. One day Britain will have to do the same over the Falklands, though I hope it will be a similarly cordial handover.

Did we live in a fool's paradise during those post-war colonial years? Possibly we did. But if so it was with the firm belief that we could make a good job of restoring the territory and in a way that future generations would be proud of. And we did, thanks to the extraordinary energy, talent and resourcefulness of the Chinese people who lived there. The Government's role was to keep out of the way, with the minimum of bureaucracy and red-tape, and the maximum incentives to develop and grow in a laissez faire environment. All the surpluses we accumulated in our annual budgets were spent on the betterment of HK; none, apart from defence costs, was repatriated to Britain.

So we who lived there during those times had the immeasurable privilege of seeing the huge transformation from all that was worst about Japan's Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere to certainly the best and greatest metropolis on the China coast, since equalled perhaps by its northern neighbours, Shanghai and Shenzhen, following in HK's footsteps.

The Hong Kong Volunteers, which celebrates its 160th anniversary this year, came into being with an initial roll call of 99 men – hence our first toast to the 99. They had been formed in a time of anxiety in 1854 when Britain was fighting the Crimean war and unable to meet its worldwide commitments. The emergency – an upsurge of internal crime and external piracy to which these remote islands were particularly exposed – did not last and interest flagged. Indeed there was widespread resentment and protest when the Government in London proposed a contribution from Hong Kong for the upkeep of the garrison of regular army regiments. But when that highly unpopular Governor, Sir John Pope Hennessy, proposed reviving the Volunteers 20 years later they became a fixture, even with a mounted corps led by a Jardine taipan, the Volunteers holding the fort in 1914-18 and rising to supreme heights in December 1941. I might add that Pope Hennessy's unpopularity was mainly with the British residents. He was admired by the Chinese. Not only did he appoint the first Chinese to Legislative Council, the barrister Ng Choy, but he abolished public flogging and branding of criminals – he was a 19th century man way ahead of his times.

The Volunteers' record in 1941 is too well known to need repetition here. Our banners tell it all. But may I tell you one true story of an incident involving our good friend, Dr Solomon Bard. In 1941 he was sheltering with 18 men in a bunker on High West during a Japanese artillery bombardment. Suddenly they were transfixed as a huge shell came through the open doorway. It flew past them and embedded itself in the earthen wall at the other end of the bunker without exploding. The senior officer present ordered an evacuation, calling for volunteers to leave four at a time. Who wanted to go first? Not surprisingly 36 hands went up immediately. Solly Bard was immediately refused, "You have to stay to the last in case it goes off and they need medical attention," he was told. On later inspection the shell was found to be a Royal Naval relic made in 1915 which the Japanese had captured during their advance through Kowloon. Solly later joined hundreds of others in PoW camps in Kowloon and later Japan. Thank God most survived that ordeal, and a few even escaped to reach Kunming.

The Volunteers were still there in 1953 when I arrived. I wanted to become part of the Navy but the then Director of Information Services, the rambunctious, hard-drinking Jock Murray drafted me into the Emergency Services as a news writer grade 3, to write press releases in the event of an emergency. But he did not object to my wife Bea, then a senior court reporter on the SCMP, remaining as a corporal in the RHKR with the responsibility of manning the HQLF telephone exchange – this in years before phone hacking made reporters and newspapers toxic to the authorities. Bea heard no secrets and her main job was ordering taxis for officers' wives.

I was however often regretful that I was never able to join the weekend camps of the regiment – those Volunteers on our staff always came back looking refreshed and rejuvenated and full of great stories of life in this Dad's Army scrambling through the hills of the New Territories. Many of our staff and many of Bea's friends had been front-line members of the Volunteers in 1941 and had ended up as PoWs in Shamshulpo, Argyle Street and Japan, others under headstones in Stanley cemetery. Lest we Forget.

I regularly attended the November 11 Cenotaph Service and enjoyed the parades and the mess dinners to which I was occasionally invited. I was moreover always mindful of the fact when Bea married me in 1957 that her brother Stan, a Volunteer, had perished in the invasion of Hong Kong island on December 20 in his first action at Lyemun – one of more than 250 killed in the two-week battle and another 166 wounded - while her elder brother, John, fought throughout WW2 in the AIF in the front line and only sustained the loss of the top digit of his finger and thumb. But that's war.

But throughout my years in Hong Kong while I never expected a contest between the Volunteers and the People's Liberation Army, I did have the comforting assurance that in all our many local emergencies – the 1953 Christmas night fire when 50000 were made homeless, the Korean war, the continuous refugee influx from China, the Cultural Revolution of 1967, and the Vietnamese boat people influx of the 1970s, together with our many typhoon encounters – the Volunteers were on duty with the Police and emergency services, doing their stuff, helping to keep Hong Kong on the rails and ensuring us a speedy recovery. For that I and all of Hong Kong's residents are deeply grateful.

As a Rotarian I remember our motto: Service above self. And indeed this is applicable to all volunteers organisations, and that spirit had helped those who give their time in contemporary

society overcome many problems and difficulties, in much the same way as the Hong Kong Volunteers Corps has done. This was borne through to me when I attended a recent volunteering breakfast of the importance of doing good things for local residents to make life more enjoyable for all.

Today we are a shadow of our former selves but cling to the traditions and institutions of the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps and on Anzac day march proudly with heads held high displaying our battle honours so dearly won. As an outsider I salute you and thank you for all you did and for giving me the honour today of speaking to you – the *Nulli Secundus in Oriente*.