Defense of Hong Kong Against Hopeless Odds Told by Freed Canucks

By WILLIAM STEWART

MANILA, Sept. 7 (CP).—The melancholy story of the fall of Hong Kong on Christmas Day, 1941, is gradually being unfolded by Canadians who aided in the attempt to halt the Japanese onslaught and who now have been released from prisoner-of-war camps. As the Japanese threat began to unfold in the Pacific, members of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Quebec were sent to bolster the Hong Kong garrison of British and Indian troops, Hong Kong volunteers and other miscellaneous groups.

The campaign was a hopeless defense in which the defenders were outnumbered by two to one at least, outgunned by the Japanese and unsupported from the air.

All the naval units of any importance had been transferred south to Malaya. Apart from the fact that Hong Kong's defensive system was designed primarily against attack from the sea, the Canadians had barely got into position when the Japanese attacked. The Canadians, furthermore, generally were unfamiliar with the hilly island, which is 32 miles in circumference.

Garrison of 14,000

Men with whom the Canadians fought 10 days after the failure to hold the Japanese at the Shumshum River on the mainland included the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Scots, the 1st Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, a battalion of Punjabs, a battalion of Rajputs and groups of Hong Kong defense volunteers, some Royal Engineers and some shore-based naval personnel and dockyard defense units. Altogether they made up a garrison of 14,000.

Against them the Japanese employed up to two divisions (more than 30,000 men), supported by artillery firing across the Hong Kong harbor and the accuracy of which may have been helped by fifth columnists at large on the island. The inexperienced Canadians could hardly distinguish the Chinese from the Japanese.

The Canadian forces reached Hong Kong Nov. 16 aboard the transport Awatea, with one company of the Royal Rifles in the former liner Prince Robert, now an anti-aircraft cruiser with which the naval liberation forces sailed into Hong Kong last week.

The Royal Rifles had previously been in Newfoundland and Saint John, N.B., while the Grenadiers had spent several months in the West Indies. There were 1,972 officers and men and two nurses in the force which sailed from Vancouver, Oct. 27.

(It was anounced from Ottawa that the force consisted of 1,985.)

Brig. J. K. Lawson of London, Ont., was in command, with Col. Pat Hennessey of Ottawa acting senior administrative officer. Lt.-Col. J. L. R. Sutcliffe of Winnipeg commanded the Grenadiers, and Lt.-Col. W. J. Howe of Quebec commanded the Royal Rifles.

The force included medical and dental groups, signallers, army service corps, ordnance, postal and provost personnel. Some of the Canadian transport vehicles, travelling in another ship, didn't reach the force.

Manned Shore Positions

The day after their arrival the Canadians marched to the outskirts of Kowloon and into the Samshuipo military camp which, after the fall of Hong Kong, was turned by the Japanese into a prisoner-of-war camp.

Although the Canadians started 48-hour exercises in manning Hong Kong defense positions about Dec. 1, and had made tours of the island by road and boat, it was not until Sunday, Dec. 7 that they moved across the harbor from Kowloon to their battle positions.

The two battalions at first became part of an island brigade commanded by Brig. Lawson, later killed in action, and including a Middlesex battalion, stationed in prepared positions around the Hong Kong shoreline, and some volunteers.

The coastal defense guns were manned by Hong Kong and Singapore artillery units. The Royal Rifles went into the eastern positions and the Grenadiers into the western.

Besides rifles and Bren guns, the Canadians, some of whom were wearing battle dress, had two and three-inch mortars with considerable ammunition. Borrowed vehicles, manned at first by Chinese drivers and later by Canadians, were put to use.

On the island was the China Command Headquarters, headed by Maj.-Gen. C. N. Maltby, who had

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come to Hong Kong a couple of months earlier.

The Japanese struck across the Shumshum River border of 400 square miles of new territory as the Canadians settled in Hong Kong. The Japs had been in their position less than 20 miles from Kowloon since 1938 and had plenty of time to mount their attack.

Airfield Bombed

The Kaitak airfield east of Kowloon was attacked by 30 Japanese fighters at 8 a.m., Dec. 8, and after the raid, one Wildbeeste, an old style aircraft, was the only British plane serviceable. A proposal that the single plane be used for a token raid was rejected.

The Samshuipo barracks were bombed and some among the Canadian rear parties there became the first casualties of the campaign. Two of the three first Great War destroyers left their harbor that night for Singapore with some smaller craft.

As air attacks were carried out, the Japanese sent two columns across the Shumshum River toward the lines manned by the Royal Scots, Punjabs and Rajputs, bolstered by Hong Kong defense volunteers.

The Scots held the key position of the Shingmun redoubt and on the night of Dec. 9-10 a company of the Grenadiers commanded by Capt. A. S. Bowman of Winnipeg crossed to the mainland to provide close support. As it turned out, the Grenadier company covered the withdrawal.

Shingmun fell the same night when the Japanese advanced with armored spearheads and the mainland defenders started to fall back toward the harbor. By the morning of Dec. 13 the mainland had been evacuated, with the troops crossing to Hong Kong in whatever craft they were able to board.

Defenses Reorganized

Japanese shells were dropping now into the waterfront area of Hong Kong and some accurate fire was directed at the concrete positions on the island even before the Rajputs, last troops to leave the mainland, crossed to the island. During the third day of the evacuation period the island defenses were reorganized, with the Canadian battalions being placed in different brigades. The eastern brigade was made up of the Royal Rifles, Rajputs, elements of the Middlesex Battalion and some volunteers. The western brigade, commanded by Brig. Lawson, comprised the Grenadiers, the Scots, Punjabs and also some Middlesex men and some volunteers.

The first Japanese move toward Hong Kong came the night of Dec. 15-16 following a heavy bombardment from the Kowloon area. It was a dark night and the Japanese crossing in boats was made in the northern area of the Lei Mun channel near the positions occupied by a platoon of the Royal Rifles commanded by Lieut. A. B. Scott of Quebec.

Whether the Japanese attempt was a reconnaissance-in-strength, a diversion or a full-fledged attack was not known definitely, but it was beaten off, though some of the enemy worked their way into the hills and from then on there was sniping into the defense positions.

As the Japanese crossed again in strength on the night of Dec. 18-19 the Hong Kong defenders were strung out, with the Punjabs occupying the western end of the island, which includes the city of Victoria. The Scots were in the central positions on the northern side and the Rajputs to the east and northeast. There were no perimeter positions on the north face of the island occupied by the Canadians.

Week-Long Battle

The real battle of Hong Kong lasted a week after the Japanese landing in the Taikoo dock area, at Quarry Bay and at North Point, enveloped in heavy smoke from oil fires started by shelling. By midnight the Japanese, wearing rubber-soled sneakers, had reached the sanatorium in a gap between Mount Parker and Mount Butler, having cut through the Rajput positions in the darkness.

Southeast of the Indians' positions, a Royal Rifles company commanded by Major W. A. Bishop of Bury, Que., suddenly came under rifle fire from a position overlooking their defenses in the Lei Mun gap. The company fell back after carrying out counter-attacks in which casualties were suffered.

The Japanese worked up toward the top of the 1,500-foot Mount Parker looking down on the northeastern channel and dominating the hills around. Meanwhile, platoons of Grenadiers engaged the Japanese pushing southwest in the area of Jardines Lookout, a feature due west of Mount Parker.

Fatal casualties included Lieuts G. A. Birkett and C. D. French, both of Winnipeg.

A Grenadier company commanded by Major A. B. Gresham of Winnipeg was ordered to a position in Little Hong Kong on the southern side of the island, and came under personal command of Brig. Lawson. Moving forward to meet the Japanese the company was ambushed and with few exceptions every members was killed or captured. Both the company commander and the second in command, Capt. L. T. Tarbuth of Winnipeg were killed. Lieut. O. W. McKillop of Portage la Prairie was wounded and died a week later.

Lieut. W. V. Mitchell and Lieut. E. L. Mitchell of Winnipeg were missing after the action. Both are presumed dead.

Headquarters Under Fire

In their infiltrating advance the Japanese crawled along concrete water troughs winding around the hills for catchment purposes and by dawn Brig. Lawson's brigade headquarters area was under direct attack.

At 7 o'clock in the morning of Dec. 19 the Japs held the Jardines Lookout and Mount Parker in strength, and an attempt by the Royal Rifles to clear Mount Parker failed. Lieut. G. M. Williams of Quebec set out with a group from the Royal Rifles and with Sgt. H. B. Hughes of Toronto as guide, but the officer and the N.C.O. were killed.

Some Japanese had penetrated by then to the Wong Nei Chang Gap, better than halfway across the island and their plan to cut the island defenses in two became clear.

Brig. Lawson was killed about 10 o'clock, evidently while arranging for withdrawal of his headquarters group from Wong Nei Chang.

During the morning of Dec. 19 the eastern force started to evacuate the area of Tai Tam, Nicholson Dagular and Obelisk Hill toward the general line of Notting Hill, Sugar Loaf Stone Hill and Stanley View. Pillboxes and gun positions had to be abandoned, and by dark a new line was formed.

On the left a composite company commanded by Major Ernie Hodkinson of Winnipeg moved east to reinforce in the Wong Nei Chang area, and had to fight its way there. There were casualties from shelling, and an attack was carried out against the Japanese in the police station building. Major Hodkinson was wounded, but has recovered.

Island Cut in Two

Infiltration now extended toward Repulse Bay on the south side of Hong Kong, and by nightfall the Island had been cut in two. Orders to Col. Sutcliffe and the Grenadiers came direct from China Command headquarters in underground positions above the naval dockyard at Victoria.

Sir Mark Young, Governor of Hong Kong, visited Col. Sutcliffe before dusk on the 19th, and still displayed good spirits.

A Grenadier company moving out from a position at Pokfulham to Wan Chai Gap and toward Wong Nei Chang collected troops from scattered positions, but came under attack and retired with heavy casualties.

A Royal Rifles company was ordered to move along the road west of Stanley Mound toward Repulse Bay, with the object of breaking through to the western brigade forces, while a second company travelled a few hundred yards inland from the southern coast in the Violet Hill area.

The Japanese were found to be holding a spur position overlooking the bay, but the company travelling along the road under command of Major C. A. Young of Quebec reached Repulse Bay Hotel, which was full of civilians, and mopped up the Japanese in the hotel garage. However, the company couldn't get beyond the hotel.

The company commanded by Major M. A. Parker of Quebec moved along the east slopes of Violet Hill, along the water catchment troughs and inflicted a number of casualties on a Japanese mountain battery caught in the act of unlimbering their guns.

Forced to Fall Back

Parker's company was engagcd immediately by Japanese forces high on Violet Hill and were forced to pull back to Stanley View.

A force of the Royal Rifles under Major T. G. Macaulay of Quebec, and some Hong Kong volunteers, attempted to push through the enemy positions around the Tai Tam Tuk reservoir in the hope of joining up with the western force troops at Wong Nei Chang. Again there was no artillery support and progress was impossible.

Major Macaulay was wounded and evacuated and Lieut. W. S. Fry of Montreal was killed by a sniper. By the night of the 21st Major Young's company was able to infiltrate the enemy ranks and made its way to Repulse Bay on the Wong Nei Chang road, but that was the nearest they came to a junction with the western brigade.

The Japanese attacks against Major Bishop's company holding the east flank, meanwhile, had been repulsed.

Remnants of a Grenadiers headquarters company surrendered at Wong Nei Chang after having been encircled for three days. At the time they were commanded by Lieut. T. A. Blackwood of Saskatoon, who had taken over when Lieut. R. W. Phillip, Winnipeg, was wounded. Lieut. Phillip had replaced Bowman when he was killed.

Seven unwounded men who were left of a headquarters company were without ammunition. Remnants of the grenadiers were reorganized by Major G. Trist, Winnipeg, second-in-command, who also took under his command a platoon of Royal Engineers, but Dec. 21 was spent under heavy shelling and bombardment of five-inch Japanese mortars.

The Grenadiers were holding their positions on Mount Cameron—where the Japanese now have a memorial to their men who died in winning the 1941 victory of Hong Kong—and turned back attacks from the Wong Nei Chang area. On the 22nd the Grenadiers had to retire from the Wan Chai gap when a company suddenly came under machine-gun fire and the Japanese broke into the Grenadier lines.

The withdrawal was covered by Capt. A. W. Prendergast, Winnipeg, with a machine-gun section.

Company Cut Off

Young's company of Rifles at Repulse Bay was cut off and at Stanley Mount, Lieut. Jimmy Ross, Quebec, was killed by a grenade. Lieut. Don B. Languedoc, Montreal, was wounded.

A company under Major E. E. Denison of Danville, Que., held its position in the area of Stanley Mound during the day with Parker's company just east. Elements of a headquarters company remained on Notting Hill and battalion Headquarters at Stone Hill with Major Jack Price, Quebec, second in command.

On the following day the Grenadiers retired still further to Wan Chai Gap and a line running southwest to Aberdeen which was reoccupied by a force under Major J. A. Bailie, Winnipeg.

Defense groups now were being torn wider and wider apart and the troops were subjected to sniping, mortar bombing and shelling by day and infiltration by night.

Young's Rifles company was ordered back to Stanley from the Repulse Bay area, but was cut off. Both Lieut. Frank Lyster, Richmond, and Lieut. Beresford Scott, Quebec, were killed as members of the company tried to get to Stanley independently to rejoin the battalion.

Finding it impossible to reach Stanley, Young and Group 34 boarded a small boat and rowed out to a lone British destroyer which was aground off shore and spent the night there. Lieut. Colin Blaver, Toronto, swam across the bay and reached Stone Hill safely. Lieut. John McGreevy, Quebec, also got through.

Meantime, Denison's company held off Japanese attempts on Stanley Mound. Early on the morning of the 23rd Lieut. Raymond Thorne of Quebec was killed.

In the afternoon, the Rifles were ordered to retire south to Stanley Peninsula for a last stand with Denison's company left behind on high ground at Cheongham Kok.

The Japanese attacked Mount Cameron next day and a section led by Lieut. L. B. Corrigan of Swift Current, Sask., held off attempts at the foot of the west slope. A group headed by Lieut. W. F. Nugent, Lindsay, Ont., held the Japanese at Bennetts Hill as Bailie's company position at Aberdeen was penetrated.

On the 24th the Rifles were relieved by Hong Kong volunteers and Middlesex and retired to Stanley Fort. Shortly after midnight the Rifles were ordered to a position overlooking Stanley Village to stave off a reported Jap breakthrough attempt. Denison's company held on at Cheongham Kok.

Armistice Declared

Day attacks were carried out by companies of Rifles but lack of artillery support made them hopeless. One company lost 26 men killed and 75 wounded.

A general armistice was declared at 3 p.m. on a bloody Christmas Day, but the Rifles and British and Indian troops continued to receive heavy shelling.

At 5 p.m. a reorganized company, led by Capt. Charlie Price, Quebec, was ordered to attack in the area of Stanley Road without making progress. Six men were killed and 12 wounded.

A car flying a large white flag appeared with a lieutenant-colonel of the Royal Engineers, who brought word of the end of the fight.

The Grenadiers fought Christmas Day, attacking in an attempt to support Bailie's company at Aberdeen. There was an armistice to permit civilians to leave Repulse Bay Hotel during the day, but the Japanese shelling was uninterrupted and machine guns were trained on the Grenadiers' battalion headquarters.

The Grenadiers moved from Wan Chai Gap to Gough. Col. Sutcliffe, who survived the campaign, but died April 6, 1942, of illness, was ordered to brigade headquarters and sent back word that hostilities were over.

Bailie's company at Aberdeen couldn't be notified until 6:30 p.m., but held its position until the end.