4,000 CASUALTIES AT HONG KONG 'ROUGH GUESS'

Ralston Tells Commons of Indefinite Word on British Dead, Wounded

FROM WAR OFFICE

(By WILLIAM MARCHINGTON.)
(Staff Writer, The Globe and Mail.)

Ottawa, Feb. 3.—Hon. J. L. Ralston gave emphatic denial in the House of Commons tonight of the charge reported to have been made in the Welland by-election last night by Rev. B. C. Eckardt of London, Ont., that the Government of Canada is "deliberately withholding the Hong Kong casualty lists until after the Feb. 9 by-elections."

"I state that no casualty lists have been received respecting the Canadian Expeditionary Force at Hong Kong, except those who have already been published by the press," said the Minister of National Defense.

He added that the Government here has been straining every nerve to get further information and finally got yesterday another message which had been sent to the War Office in London to the effect that the casualties of the whole British force at Hong Kong, "very rough guess, were 4,000 killed and wounded."

"I have noted the statements said to have been made by the Rev. B. C. Eckardt, as published in a report in a Toronto paper this morning," said Colonel Ralston. "The report reads as follows:

"'The initial address was made by Rev. B. C. Eckardt of London, who charged the King Government with deliberately withholding the Hong Kong casualty lists until after the Feb. 9 by-elections. Ottawa knows them, and more are buried in the blood-stained soil of Hong Kong than are in Japanese prison camps.'

"The statement made by this reverend gentleman at Welland, to the effect that information regarding casualty lists was being deliberately withheld until after the Feb. 9 by-elections is absolutely false." said Colonel Ralston. "I can state that no casualty lists have been received respecting the Canadian Expeditionary Force at Hong Kong except those which have already been published by the press.

"Regarding the statement which directly implies that the number of dead exceed the number of prisoners of war—the Government has no information which would afford foundation for any such statement. In view of the distress which this statement will cause, I have thought it advisable to give the House the following circumstances:

"We pressed the Embassy at Chungking for information regarding Canadian troops from the reporter, MacDougall, who was reported to have escaped, and received a reply that casualties were difficult to estimate, particularly due to the fact that communications had ceased with the Royal Rifles, and the message then said 'Guess but only guess one-third of fighting strength killed, wounded or taken prisoners during fighting, remainder presumably taken prisoners on capitulation.'

Speculation Not Desirable.

"I consulted with the Associate Minister of National Defense who, as the House knows, is personally and very intimately interested in this Hong Kong expedition, and we considered that what was emphasized as being a pure guess, was not the sort of speculation which ought to be given to the public, at least without further efforts to get something reasonably definite and reliable.

"Since then we have been straining every nerve to get further information, and what we finally got yesterday was another message which had been sent to the War Office. It stated, 'Casualties whole British force, Hong Kong, very rough guess, 4,000 killed and wounded.' I must say that we estimate that the whole British force would number nearly 12,000. You will note that this was even less informative to us than the previous one since it made no reference to Canadians, and it was also emphasized as a very rough guess.

"I again consulted with the Associate Minister of National Defense and we decided that no good purpose could be served in making public such unsatisfactory and unconclusive reports. Neither of these statements gave any particulars whatever; there would be neither definiteness nor reliability in the statements; they would give no genuine information to Canadians that might needlessly increase the distress and anxiety which is now being endured.

"Even in view of the statement by the reverend gentleman, I have hesitated to give these uninformative and possibly misleading reports. However, his statement means in effect that more than half the forces were killed. What basis he has for this I cannot imagine. We have nothing whatever to indicate any such situation. The guesses to which I have referred certainly do not.

Answer Required.

"But after consultation with my colleagues we have decided that a statement of this kind made by a clergyman, if left unanswered, only adds to the terrific burden which the friends of those who were in the Hong Kong expedition are now bearing, and that is why I am now giving the House the substance of the indefinite messages, guesses though they are.

"Actually, I am afraid we have erred too much in the direction of giving information without confirmation. As a result of this, in one deplorable case, a cable which appeared to show an officer as killed proved on our receiving further word to give good ground for belief that this conclusion was incorrect.

"I deplore deeply the occasion which has made it seem advisable to give the wholly incomplete and unverified surmises contained in these messages. Only a desire to counteract as far as possible the additional distress which will have been caused by the statement made by the reverend gentleman would have led me and my colleague to change the considered view which we arrived at that we were not justified in publishing these guesses without verification and where they might only increase needlessly the anxiety which we all share."

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