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Report on the Part Played by the Winnipeg Grenadiers in the Defence of Hong Kong

Lieutenant-Colonel George Trist

Officer Commanding, 1st Battalion Winnipeg Grenadiers
North Point Camp, Hong Kong, 30 April 1941

The writer commences this report knowing full well that a report containing criticisms or accusations is bound to be read with a certain amount of skepticism particularly if it is written in opposition to an official report submitted by a much higher authority.

Two important factors have decided me to compile this report without further delay and while still a prisoner of war and subject to search at any time by the Japanese authorities (although they have not done so as yet). The first and most urgent one is the necessity for a very accurate recording of events as they occurred, this would not have been so important but for the fact that it has become very evident that we (The Canadian Forces) are being blamed by the Imperial troops for the early fall of Hong Kong. And while it is not definitely known that the Imperial staff are going to adapt this attitude in their official report every precaution must be taken to ensure that any attempt to make 'C Force (Canadians) the scape goat is adequately challenged by a submission of the facts while they are still fresh *in the memory*. The second is that the G.S.O.1. Col Nunam informed the late Lieut Col Sutcliffe before we left Sham-Shui-Po camp that he had already commenced compilation of the official report.

Owing to the very early death of Brigadier Lawson and the loss of any record or report he may have written, Coupled with the fact that the two Canadian Battalions operated in different

Editor's Note: This is an abridged version of this report. The full report can be ordered from our website for a nominal charge: <www.canadianmilitaryhistory.com>

Brigades and were entirely separate throughout the campaign it will be necessary for Lieut Col Home who commanded the Royal Rifles of Canada and myself to submit separate reports in order to have a complete picture of the operations as far as the Island is concerned and I would also point out the fact that during the whole of the operations the late Lieut Col Sutcliffe was in command of this Battalion at the battle box while I was detailed to take care of the administration, reports, returns etc at the Battalion Headquarters except for one phase of the battle when I was sent up to Mount Cameron in command of two composite Companies allotted for the defence of that position. And I must rely therefore on the reports of the Adjutant who was with Col Sutcliffe during the whole of the period, and the various company commanders to cover the various points of which I have no personal knowledge.

At the outbreak of the war 'C Force was assigned to the protection of the south coast of the Island of Hong Kong and with the exception of a small support role during the withdrawal. Undertaken by 'D' Company Winnipeg Grenadiers, they took no part in the battle for the mainland and the withdrawal to the Island, And any reference to the operations there is made on information obtained from senior Officers of the units taking part and is submitted as such....

Immediately on arrival at Hong Kong we were handed the defence scheme and a guide was allotted to us, on the following day we



A mother runs along the tracks to say goodbye to her son as he leaves with the Winnipeg Grenadiers, 5 June 1940.

And a few scattered beach defence guns, Anti personal mines, And Barbed wire on the beaches. (4) Infantry strong points situated in the hills above the coast line to stop penetration and to localize any landing. (5) A reserve force to counter attack and isolate or destroy any enemy landing parties. Though as regards the latter force it remained a paper force to the end....

The whole defence scheme was designed to meet a major attack for the sea. The possibility of an attack coming from the Japanese occupied territory to the North of Kowloon on the mainland was not apparently given any serious consideration until just prior to the outbreak of war as evidenced by the fact that wiring and field works on the mainland had not nearly been completed when hostilities broke out. This was no doubt due to gross under-estimation of the Japanese forces in the area. General Maltby told us in a lecture shortly after our arrival that the Japanese had only about 5000 troops with very little Artillery support opposing us from the North. And further that their troops were ill equipped and not used to night fighting. He also said that their aircraft was for the most part obsolete and their pilots very mediocre, Unable to do dive bombing owing to poor eyesight. All of which proved to be incorrect. The unfortunate part was that apparently the staff believed it and directed their preparations accordingly although it should not have been very difficult to obtain correct information had their intelligence staff been functioning as it should have been.

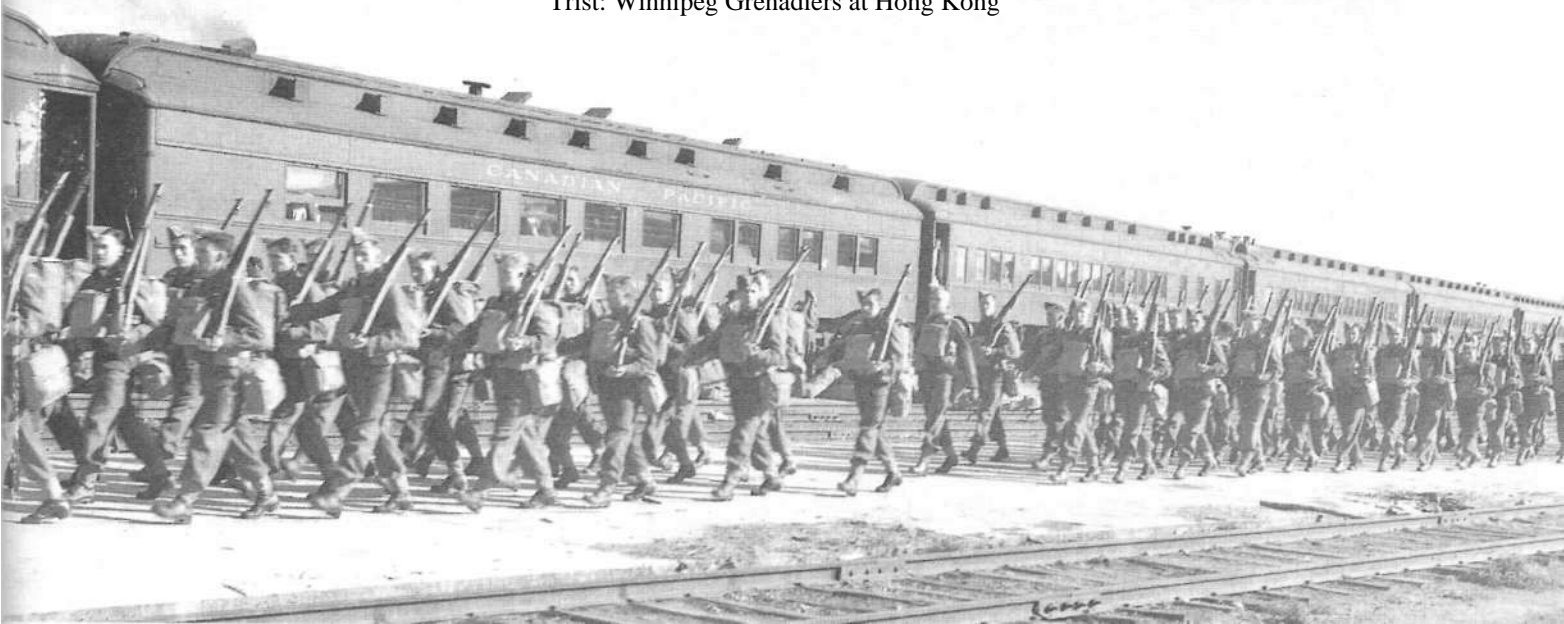
commenced an extensive reconnaissance of the defence positions. One point which struck us very forcibly from the outset was the amount of last minute preparations such as the drawing of extensive mobilization stores and completion of vital field works, wiring, mine laying, and road blocks, and ammunition and equipment to be drawn and distributed. Very little of which was allowed to be done until complete mobilization was ordered one day before the outbreak of war with Japan.

The front covered by The Winnipeg Grenadiers extended from the East end of Repulse Bay to the foot of Mount Davis on the N.W. end of the Island, a frontage of approximately 13000 yds not including Aberdeen Island which was also held by our troops.

The defence scheme was based on five lines of defence. (1) The Navy and off shore lines of defence in the way of mine fields. (2) The Coast defence guns. (3) The Beach defence, Consisting of pill boxes covering all possible landing points,

There can have been no doubt that if the mainland force failed to deny Devils Peak to the enemy a successful landing on the N.E. Coast of the Island was not only possible but very probable. And if the enemy were prepared to sacrifice sufficient troops it became a certainty.

The defence force of the Colony consisted of two Imperial Battalions (1 Infantry, 1 Machine Gun) both at Garrison strength, Two Indian Rifle Battalions also at Garrison strength, and two Canadian Battalions. In addition to these there was the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps, (approximately 1500 all ranks) made up of seven companies of Infantry, and Artillery....The Naval units consisted of three small Destroyers (Two



Above: Personnel of the Winnipeg Grenadiers entraining en route to Hong Kong, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 25 October 1941.

Right: Lieutenant-Colonel J.L.R. Sutcliffe, (centre) Commanding Officer of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, greets one of his junior officers prior to the battalion's departure from Winnipeg, 25 October 1941. It is believed the officer on the left is Major George Trist.

of which left for Singapore at the outbreak of war). Three river gun boats and sundry small craft such as mine laying tugs, And six M.T.Bs. Finally there was the air force consisting of three old biplanes and two old seaplanes all of which were destroyed on the ground the first morning of the war.

The estimates of the Japanese Army opposing us vary from Two to Five divisions. A Japanese Officer told the late Lieut Col Sutcliffe and myself that they employed two divisions on the Island and had three more in reserve on the mainland. And that two hundred guns were operating against the Island.

Owing to the fact that all papers of a military nature or of value were ordered destroyed before surrender I have to rely on my own and the memory of those associated with me during the fighting for actual dates and details.

The defence of Hong Kong was divided into two phases. The battle for the mainland, and the actual defence of the Island. The mainland territory consisted of a strip of very mountainous country stretching twenty five miles north of Kowloon known as the New Territories and ending in a mountainous promontory known as Devils Peak across the harbour 400 yds to the



NAC PA 161202

N.E. of the Island. The defence plan was to hold a line known as Gin drinkers line which crossed the peninsula as it narrowed down about five miles north of the city of Kowloon. This was considered a very strong line being fortified by frequent pill boxes on an extremely mountainous terrain. Two roads and a railroad lead from Kowloon to the north border of the territories One road running up the East side. The other along the sea shore and curving N.E. from the

NAC PA 116457



Officers of "C" Force aboard SS *Awatea* en route to Hong Kong, October 1941.

l. to r.: Major C.A. Lyndon, Brigade Major; Brigadier J.K. Lawson, Brigade Commander; Colonel P. Hennessey, Senior Administrative Officer; Captain H.S.A. Bush, Staff Captain.

coast to join the other at Fan-Ling. All of which were heavily mined and prepared for demolition. But which through some error or oversight were not destroyed at the time of the evacuation). It was expected that this line would hold for at least two weeks thus giving time for the complete military evacuation of Kowloon, After which if driven in the line would be re-established across Devils Peak and held. Thus denying access to the narrow channel separating the Island from the mainland, also to the high mountain range which overlooks a great deal of the Island providing wonderful artillery observation and very good gun positions at the closest possible range....

The Island is about ten miles long and seven miles wide and is very mountainous. The city of Victoria lies on a very narrow strip of waterfront not more than a mile wide along the north shore with the main ridge of mountains rising immediately behind to a height of 2000 ft at the peak. These are broken at intervals by a series of gaps, 8 in number giving access to the south part of the Island. From this ridge the terrain slopes sharply down to the south shore with sundry smaller mountains spotting the southern coast. The ground in between is a series of north and south saw-back ridges. There are four small Islands close to the south coast the main one being Aberdeen which consists of one high mountain. The coast line all round the East, South, and West coast is very hilly and rugged and with the exception of a few small beaches

inaccessible except in dead calm weather and even then only be expert mountain troops. The road problem on the Island is very bad. One highway running around the Island close to the shore most of the way. There is only one additional highway running north and south from happy valley (Victoria) on the north shore through Wan-Nei-Chong Gap down to Deep Water Bay on the south coast cutting the Island in half. All other roads outside Victoria are little better than very narrow trails and are in most cases impassable to motor traffic.

Another important feature of both the Island and the mainland were the water catchments which consisted of deep culverts six to ten feet deep running round the mountain sides at high levels to catch the torrential rainfall, and gradually sloping down to the reservoirs. This was the water system and incidentally provided the Japanese easy covered approaches to all the high points on both the Island and the mainland.

A further very important tactical feature was the large mountainous area the N.E. of the Island about two miles in from the coast line offering cover for thousands of troops which was both unpopulated and with the exception of small bodies of troops on the coastal outskirts not held at all. It was through this area that the main attack on the capturing the west Brigade headquarters. Three companies were allotted to cover out extensive frontage with one company in reserve at Brigade Headquarters, Wit the prime task of assisting the civil powers in Victoria. Its secondary task was the defence of

Brigade H.Q. and the main north and south road across the Island. All positions were section posts and ranged from two hundred to eight hundred yds apart. The majority of the posts were small trench system, High up on the steep slopes above the shore line with access only from the main highway running round the Island in front of their positions, Platoon headquarters were situated with one of the section posts, Communication being by runner with the other posts except in a few cases where we rigged up phone communications of our own, these were very limited owing to the great distance and the shortage of wire. A runner would in most cases have to traverse exceedingly hilly and difficult country to reach the section posts with every possibility of losing his way or being shot at approaching the position from the front. There were very few of the positions which could be reached by runner under 15 minutes. Battalion Headquarters was situated at Wan-Chai-Gap on the line of ridges where a small reserve from Headquarters Company were retained with the transported and administrative personal.

On the evening of Dec 6, 1941, a general mobilization was ordered by the China Command and all units ordered to man their battle positions. The following day Dec 7/41 at about 1000 hrs The Winnipeg Grenadiers left the Hankow Barracks Sham-Shui-Po, And were transported by ferry from Bamboo pier to R.A.A.S.C. Chamber docks Victoria, From where they proceeded to the Company areas under command of the various Company Commanders. All Coy's had reported to Battalion Headquarters as having occupied their positions by 1600 hrs. At about 0430 hrs Dec 8th, Fortress Headquarters advised the Battalion Headquarters by telephone that we were at war with Japan and that hostilities had commenced. At day break Kai-Tak airport was bombed by the Japanese and all our planes destroyed on the ground. They then turned their attention to Sham-Shui-Po camp which was heavily bombed but as this place had been evacuated the previous day by all troops with the exception of the rear party casualties were light. During the day all stored and equipment were removed from there to the Island by the rear party and this camp completely evacuated....

Troops of "C" Force march through Kowloon on their way to the Sham Shui Po Barracks, Hong Kong, 16 November 1941.



The evacuation of the mainland defence force took place during the night of 12/13 Dec. So that in place of holding out as originally planned all defence of the mainland was abandoned just five days after the outbreak of war (including Devils Peak which was to have been held indefinitely at all costs). This led the way open for an attack on the Island from the mainland across the very narrow channel mentioned above, And which was finally effected by the Japanese during the night of 18/19 Dec after a heavy bombardment of the shore defences and under cover of a heavy smoke screen caused by some of the oil tanks being set on fire.

On the withdrawal from the mainland the forces on the Island were divided in two. (East & West Brigades). West Brigade remaining under command of Brigadier Lawson who had in addition to the forces already mentioned one of the Indian Battalions who were evacuated from the mainland who were placed in Victoria for the defence of the city, But lost The Royal Rifles of Canada and two Companies of the Hong Kong Volunteers who were now included in East Brigade under Brigadier Wallace.

During the whole period of the Battle for the Island Fortress Headquarters appeared to have very little definite information in regard to the enemy positions or numbers on the Island. This is evidence by the fact that on several occasions we received orders to attack certain positions

or make certain moves and before they could be carried out they would be countermanded and other and entirely different orders would be issued, And on most occasions when information was requested the reply would be "The situation is very obscure but there does not appear to be many Japanese on the Island". This we knew to be definitely wrong as from contact with the enemy and from observations we know there were several thousand opposed to us. and at the same time they (Fortress H.Q.) seemed very loth to accept any information passed on to them and would question the source or deny the possibility of it being correct. In one instance during the Mount Cameron show four enemy Light Cruisers or heavy Destroyers were observed cruising in a Westerly direction in the Llama Channel within range of the shore defence guns. This was reported by telephone by Major Trist to Battalion H.Q. who relayed it to Fortress H.Q. and the only reply received was that it was impossible for any enemy vessels to be in that locality and to have it re-checked. At the time the reports was made there were two other Officers present who verified the position and it was later discovered that the same vessels had been reported by Major Bailie who was in command of the Aberdeen sector, this situation continued right up to the end as within two hours of the capitulation we received orders for a counter attack and Major Trist was in the course of organizing all our available men including Transport and Administrative staff to carry this

out at the very time that the white flag was run up on the flag staff at the police station on Mount Gough. And I have been informed that the East Brigade were not advised of the capitulation until several hours after it was in effect....

Lynn Hall, Company Headquarters, Winnipeg Grenadiers during the fighting around the Wong Nei Chong Gap. Mount Nicholson is in the background.

