



Japanese troops cross into Hong Kong in December 1941

Canada and the Battle of Hong Kong

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Introduction

In the Second World War, Canadian soldiers first engaged in battle while defending the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong against a Japanese attack in December, 1941. The Canadians at Hong Kong fought against overwhelming odds and displayed the courage of seasoned veterans, though most had limited military training. They had virtually no chance of victory, but refused to surrender until they were overrun by the enemy. Those who survived the battle became prisoners of war (POWs) and many endured torture and starvation by their Japanese captors.

In October 1941, the Royal Rifles of Canada and they were ordered to prepare for service in the Pacific. From a national perspective, the choice of battalions was ideal. The Royal Rifles were a bilingual unit from the Quebec City area and, together with the Winnipeg Grenadiers, both battalions represented eastern and western regions of Canada. Command of the Canadian force was assigned to Brigadier J.K. Lawson. This was also a good choice because of Lawson's training and experience; he was a "Permanent Force" officer and had been serving as Director of Military Training in Ottawa. The Canadian contingent was comprised of 1,975 soldiers, which also included two medical officers, two Nursing Sisters, two officers of the Canadian Dental Corps with their assistants, three chaplains, two Auxiliary Service Officers, and a detachment of the Canadian Postal Corps. There was also one military stowaway who was sent back to Canada. Prior to duty in Hong Kong, the Royal Rifles had served in Newfoundland and Saint John, New Brunswick while the Winnipeg Grenadiers had been posted to Jamaica. In these locations, both battalions had received only minimal training.



In late 1941, war with Japan was not considered imminent and it was expected that the Canadians would see only garrison (non-combat) duty. Instead, in December, the Japanese military launched a series of attacks on Pearl Harbor, Northern Malaya, the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island and Hong Kong. The Royal Rifles and the Winnipeg Grenadiers would find themselves engulfed in hand-to-hand combat against the Japanese 38th Division.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his chiefs of staff recognized that, in the event of a war with Japan, it would be impossible to hold Hong Kong. Churchill and his army chiefs designated Hong Kong an outpost, and initially decided against sending more troops to the colony. In September 1941, however, they reversed their decision and argued that additional reinforcements would provide a military deterrent against the Japanese, and reassure Chinese leader Chiang Kai Shek that Britain was genuinely interested in defending the colony. Canada was asked to provide one or two battalions for that purpose.

To defend the colony, British General C.M. Maltby had only a total force of some 14,000 soldiers and a token number of naval and air force personnel.

The Invasion

The Japanese attack did not take the garrison by complete surprise; the defence forces were prepared. On the morning of December 7, the entire garrison was ordered to war stations. The Canadian force was ferried across from Kowloon to the island, and by 5 p.m. the battalions were in position and Brigadier Lawson's headquarters was set up at Wong Nei Chong Gap in the middle of the island. Fifteen hours before the Japanese attacked, all Hong Kong defence forces were in position.

Japanese invasion in Hong Kong 1941

Japanese takeover of Hong Kong started on December 8 and was completed by December 25



That means 84% of Hong Kong's defenders were made casualties of the battle.

At 3:15 p.m. Christmas Day, General Maltby advised the Governor that further resistance was futile. The white flag was hoisted. On the east side of the island, a company was just moving forward for an attack when word of the surrender arrived. After seventeen and a half days of fighting, the defence of Hong Kong was over. The battle-toughened Japanese were backed by a heavy arsenal of artillery, total air domination, and the comfort of knowing that reinforcements were available. In contrast, the defending Allies, with only non-combative garrison experience, were exhausted from continual bombardment, and had fought without relief or reinforcement. The fact that it took the Japanese until Christmas Day to force surrender is a testimony to the brave resistance of the Canadian and other defending troops.

Aftermath

The fighting in Hong Kong ended with immense Canadian casualties: 290 killed and 493 wounded. The death toll and hardship did not end with surrender. Even before the battle had officially ended, Canadians would endure great hardships at the hands of their Japanese captors. On December 24, the Japanese overran a makeshift hospital in Hong Kong, assaulting and murdering nurses and bayoneting wounded Canadian soldiers in their beds. After the colony surrendered, the cruelty would continue. For more than three and a half years, the Canadian POWs were imprisoned in Hong Kong, Japan and other parts of the Japanese Empire in the foulest of conditions and had to endure brutal treatment and near-starvation. In the filthy, primitive POW quarters in northern Japan, they would often work 12 hours a day in mines or on the docks in the cold, subsisting on rations of 800 calories a day. Many did not survive. In all, more than 550 of the 1,975 Canadians who sailed from Vancouver in October 1941 never returned.



Canadian Prisoners of War in Hong Kong