

*Near Disaster: Hong Kong, Korea, and the Lessons of History*  
By Jason S. Rider, M. A.  
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In our current strategic environment dominated by such buzzwords as RMA, ISTAR, and other technological marvels, the value of history can seem quaint at best and baggage at most. For those keen on speeding toward the ever expanding future, the past is luggage best left behind. But under the marquee of history also lies the headlines of memory and experience, and few can doubt the power of these assets. Indeed, it would be hard to think of a schizophrenic, who experiences a perpetual NOW as better able to handle the future, let alone able to find his keys, than someone who knows where they've been, where they are, and where they are going. Today I would like to discuss with you the value of experience as it pertains to military deployment in a particular historical period. Because sooner or later all experience is history, and thus left to the historians. So, to begin...

At Hong Kong, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, two ill-trained Canadian regiments, fought hopelessly alongside their allies against an invading Imperial Japanese Army. The Canadians had been sent at the request of her British ally to

partake in an ill-fated attempt to deter Japanese aggression by way of a show of strength. Their job was to bolster the garrison, not engage the enemy.<sup>1</sup> On December 8<sup>th</sup> that choice was no longer an option. The colony resisted until Christmas, and the survivors would then endure years of nightmarish torment at the hands of the enemy. Hong Kong was the first real tragedy to befall Canadians in the Second World War, and the government was required to appoint a Royal Commission to investigate any possible misconduct on their part<sup>2</sup>. Surely, no one would want this episode repeated.

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1950, nine years to the day after the Japanese attack on Hong Kong, Canadian Minister of National Defence Brooke Claxton received an unsigned note that still sits in his files. It regarded the deployment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI), en route to Korea. Canada was asked by the United Nations and the US to contribute troops to the defence of South Korea, which had been invaded by the North that summer. The Canadian Army Special Force, raised for the task, was to be the size of a Brigade. By late October the 2PPCLI, while the most trained of the CASF regiments, were not yet combat ready. But they didn't need to be. General Douglas MacArthur, commanding the US led UN forces in Korea, assured Ottawa that the war was nearly over, and Canada's contribution could simply fulfill garrison tasks. So Ottawa, again, sent an ill-trained unit to stand fast in the Pacific at the request of her allies. But the Chinese, like the Japanese nine years before, had other plans and the 2PPCLI were headed for an active and desperate war zone. The December 8<sup>th</sup> note in Claxton's hand read, in part, "In view of the stir caused by charges that two battalions had been dispatched to Hong Kong without sufficient training in November 1941, there is a great deal of public concern about this situation."<sup>3</sup> Had Ottawa forgotten all the lessons of Hong Kong?

In order to maintain its strategic commitments while going from a demobilized to mobilized state in 1950, the St. Laurent government had a

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of British strategic planning in the Pacific, 1941, see Woodburn Kirby, *et al*, *The War Against Japan, Volume I: The Loss of Singapore*. (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1957). For the Canadian decision to garrison Hong Kong, see Breerton Greenhous, "C" Force to Hong Kong: A Canadian Catastrophe, 1941-1945. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), Paul Dickson, "Crerar and the Decision to Garrison Hong Kong." *Canadian Military History*. Volume 3 no. 1. (1994)": 97-110.

<sup>2</sup> The report of the commissions finding was written in 1942. See *The Royal Commission on the Canadian Expeditionary Force to the Crown Colony of Hong Kong*, 1942. Hereafter this will be referred to as the *Duff Commission*.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of Canada (hereafter referred to as NAC), Manuscript Group (MG) 32 B5 Volume 124. Unnamed Document, December 8, 1950.

selective memory when choosing the experiences to remember from 1941. Hong Kong was in the minds of Ottawa's policy makers in 1950, most of whom served in Mackenzie-King's government during the war. The 2PPCLI would barely avoid the fate of the Royal Rifles and Winnipeg Grenadiers because Hong Kong did not have time to be forgotten. Its ghost was still present in the post war government, and effected its decision making to some degree. That degree was negotiated by current strategic need, that also resembled 1941; that of contributing units to the Pacific with the main focus being Europe. Still, Canada could not afford to miss out on the UN's first real military test. Precautions rooted in the Hong Kong experience would be in place to prevent a repeat of the tragedy, even if the steps that brought the Canadians back to the Pacific were quite similar in 1950 to 1941.

### The Ghost of Hong Kong

Hong Kong was not a distant memory to the St. Laurent government. In 1942 St. Laurent had been the Minister of Justice under King and responsible for the appointment of Sir Lyman Duff of the Supreme Court of Canada, the one man Royal Commission investigating possible misconduct over Hong Kong<sup>4</sup>. Brook Claxton had been Minister of Health and Welfare under King, but was as astute as anybody over the Canadians in the Pacific colony. During the December fighting in 1941, the politically astute Claxton wrote to King to express the need to have the Royal Rifles, a Quebec raised regiment, portrayed as fighting for Canada or else "it [could] be represented as a needless sacrifice of Quebec lives in a foreign war."<sup>5</sup> Both Claxton and St. Laurent shared an enemy in Conservative leader George Drew. Drew was a fierce critic of Duff's "white wash" handling of the investigation. When the Commission cleared the government of any wrong doing Drew sent a letter to King insisting the government had foreknowledge of Japan's intentions<sup>6</sup>. But even after the war Hong Kong would not die. In 1946, British Major General C. M. Maltby, the commanding officer of the Hong Kong garrison, including the Canadians, finished his assessment of the December fighting for London. His regard of the Canadians' fighting abilities and state of training brought the Duff assessment into dispute. Norman Robertson, then part of the Canadian High Commission, worked on

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<sup>4</sup> Dale Toumas. *Louise St. Laurent: Canadian*. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1967): 126.

<sup>5</sup> NAC. Microfiche. C11050, file 255940. Mackenzie-King Papers. December 16, 1941.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Bercuson. *True Patriot: The Life of Brooke Claxton, 1898-1960*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 192.

having the assessment “moderated.”<sup>7</sup> Even with this moderation, the published version that hit the British Press in January, 1948, painted a damning picture of troops who were not trained “for modern war under the conditions existing in Hong Kong.”<sup>8</sup> Under Secretary of State Lester Pearson wrote Claxton not long after Maltby’s summation, keen on knowing what had and had not been censored<sup>9</sup>. So then, when North Korea invaded the South on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, the controversy and political debacle of dispatching troops moderately trained troops to into a strange theatre were alive in the minds of the policy makers in Ottawa.

### Post-War Reality: The More Things Change...

Canada’s response to the attack was anything but the swift, ten-day deliberation of 1941. Three destroyers and a transport squadron were sent to stave off UN and US pressure to send ground troops, which could not be immediately realized thanks to two issues that also paralleled the Hong Kong experience. St. Laurent did not have battalions lying around for an Asian expeditionary force, and the units he did have were to face a different enemy.

The half million strong Canadian army of 1945 had been sliced to 15, 563 by 1947. The active force that made up this total had been given the role of continental defence, entitled the Mobile Striking Force, and was designed to plug a Soviet continental breach in the North, allowing Canada and her allies time to mobilize and deploy for Europe.<sup>10</sup> Canada’s contributions to NATO had been assigned in 1949 but were thought of, at least to Ottawa, to be only for planning purposes in the alliance’s early days. With the outbreak of the Korean War those plans became *de facto* commitments. Under the Medium Term Defence Plan, Canada was now asked to provide a brigade group and nine squadron of aircraft.<sup>11</sup> The parallels with Hong Kong are intriguing. In 1941, there were 23, 449 men conscripted for home defence under the National Resource Mobilizations Act, some of which were even

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<sup>7</sup> Bercuson. *True Patriot*. 193.

<sup>8</sup> NAC MG 32 B5 Volume 7. Supplement to the *London Gazette* January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1948 in file “Hong Kong Debate.”

<sup>9</sup> NAC MG 32 B5 Volume 107. File: Hong Kong Debate. Memorandum to the Minister of National Defence, 2 March, 1948.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Maloney, “The Mobile Striking Force and Continental Defence 1948-1955,” *Canadian Military History* Volume 2 no. 2 (1993): 77-78, see also David Charters “Five Lost Years: The Mobile Striking Force 1946-51.” *Canadian Defence Quarterly* Volume 7 no.1 (1978): 44-48.

<sup>11</sup> Sean Maloney. *War Without Battles*. (Whitby: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1997): 16-17

deployed to forestall the tiny Japanese entrenchment at Kiska in 1943<sup>12</sup>. The troops Canada had on hand were committed to defeating the primary threat in Fortress Europe. The geography of Canada's strategic interests had not changed in nine years despite new enemies. In 1950, Canada set to work to recruit volunteers for the CASF Brigade Group, initially for Korea. But there was debate on what was the more critical theatre, the active East or the threatening West, and only so many commitments Canada could live up to.

Claxton and Chief of the General Staff General Charles Foulkes were Europe first men. Both believed that Korea was a Soviet invented quagmire intent on draining NATO resources to give Stalin's forces easy pickings in Western Europe. Both men were concerned that the bulk of the CASF would be seriously needed in West Germany. Foulkes, crafty as ever, had drawn up possible deployment schemes, all of which were so risky or dangerous for Canada, like sending the MSF to Europe, that there was only one real choice: A volunteer force with no yet fixed destination<sup>13</sup>. While the CASF was being raised and trained, Foulkes kept the pressure for Europe first. He reminded the Prime Minister of the costs involved in winter lodging the entire brigade in Korea, money that could be saved in a European deployment scenario.<sup>14</sup>

Secretary of State Pearson, on the other hand, was keen to have Canadians in Korea. He reported to St. Laurent in August of 1950 after meeting with US Secretary of State Dean Acheson that it would be important politically and effective militarily to have even a single Canadian battalion involved in Korea<sup>15</sup>. The demands for troops in Europe and MacArthur's reversal of the war's momentum after Inchon in September 1950, made the idea of reducing Canada's contribution to Korea much more attractive.

By October, the war's complexion had changed dramatically. It seemed that there would be no end to the American Caesar's successes and the war would probably be over by Christmas. Brigadier F. J. Fleury of the Canadian Military Mission in Japan reported to Foulkes that MacArthur "indicated a Canadian Brigade would be of no REPEAT no significance

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<sup>12</sup> C. P. Stacey. *Six Years of War Volume I: The Army in Canada, Britain, and the Pacific*. (Ottawa: Queen's Printers, 1966): 500-505.

<sup>13</sup> NAC RG 2, 18 Volume 167. File K-10, Korea 1950. August 1 land Forces for Korea

<sup>14</sup> NAC RG 2 Volume 2748. Cabinet Defence Committee Conclusions

<sup>15</sup> NAC MG 26 Volume 35 File "Korea" August 1 Memorandum to Prime Minister.

from the view of current operations,” and that a “token” force could come to wave the flag<sup>16</sup>. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff concurred. Canada could now contribute its hastily raised volunteer forces for two theatres. But with Korea winding up, their “token” force had to hurry lest they miss a chance to even “show the flag” before the war was over. The unit selected was the 2PPCLI. They had completed most of their training, but were not yet combat ready. Not to send any troops seemed unthinkable, but to wait until they were trained for combat that they seemed unlikely to see was not politically expedient, either. Canada, flexing her small muscles on the world stage, would not be left behind even if it meant contributing small numbers to what many thought was a sideshow theatre. So, despite the fact that nearly everyone associated with the deployment saw the parallels of 1941 coming into view, the 2PPCLI were to ship off in November.

Thankfully, General Foulkes took at least one measure to deflect a repeat performance. The command instructions he gave Lieutenant Colonel Jim Stone, the units CO, stated that if hostilities were in progress when they arrived, they were not to take part except in self defense. Only when Stone was satisfied that the unit’s training was complete would they start their participation in operations. Foulkes instructions also stated that MacArthur had been informed of these orders<sup>17</sup>. With these measures taken the unit set sail for Korea on November 25th. On November 26<sup>th</sup>, the Chinese began there massive offensive in Korea. The war was alive and well and Stone was asked to put his men into action as soon as his boots hit the shore on December 13.

Lieutenant-General Walker of the US Eighth Army, who Stone and his men were fighting under, ordered the Canadians to act as part of the reserve of the 29<sup>th</sup> British Independent Infantry Brigade Group behind the Imjin River Defenses north of Seoul<sup>18</sup>. Stone produced his orders from Foulkes to Walker’s staff, to no avail. It seems something had been lost in the transmission. Stone then contacted Ottawa. The Vice Chief of the General Staff informed Stone that he had his orders, the proper channels had been notified, and that this would be all he would get out of the Canadian government on the matter<sup>19</sup>. He was on his own.

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Fairlie Wood. *Strange Battlegrounds: The Official History of the Canadian Army in Korea*. (Ottawa: Queen’s Printers, 1966): 42.

<sup>17</sup> MG 32 B5 Volume 124. November 13, 1950. Command Instructions to Commanding Officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Fairlie Wood. *Strange Battlegrounds*. 54

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Stone then flew to Seoul to deal with his American superior directly. The usual tension of a smaller power fighting as part of a coalition materialized for the Canadian and the American. Stone had a national duty to his men, but he was also supposed to treat his US superior as if he was the Canadian equivalent<sup>20</sup>. There is a small controversy of how Stone handled the meeting with Walker. Stone and the official history of the Canadian army in Korea portray the Canadian standing firm against his American COs reasoned argument that US occupation troops from Japan, with less training than the Canadians, had been fighting tooth and claw since the war started<sup>21</sup>. Despite this, Stone, so goes the official account, stood his ground for his men. Historian David Bercuson has noted that Stone's own report to Ottawa over this meeting showed nothing of this tension; and was, in fact, rather amicable<sup>22</sup>. However it happened, Stone convinced Walker that the eight weeks he needed could be granted. This probably saved Canadian lives. The Chinese had taken Pyongyang by December 5<sup>th</sup>, pushed the UN forces behind the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel on Christmas and engaged UN forces in the position that the Canadians would have held if Stone had seen the military necessity of following his superiors orders rather than following his national ones<sup>23</sup>. National orders that, had it not been for the experience of 1941, may very well not of been written at all. At least some lessons were learned. Perhaps it was just too soon for them to be forgotten.

Terry Copp once noted, sardonically, that before we judge harshly the conduct of ill trained troops sent off to fight, that it may be crucial to ask if our government today would do such a thing as they did in 1941.

If we are certain that such a situation will never exist again we can congratulate ourselves, the lessons of Hong Kong and a host of other imperfect military operations have been learned, at least until the next international crisis explodes out of control<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> NAC MG 32 Volume B5 108. File, Korea. 29 MAY 1952. Chief of Staff to Minister of National Defence concerning splitting up of Canadian Forces. See also MG 32 B5 Volume 124. Command instructions to Brigadier Rockingham, November 14, 1950.

<sup>21</sup> Wood. 55.

<sup>22</sup> David J. Bercuson. *Blood on the Hills: The Canadian Army in the Korean War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999): 50.

<sup>23</sup> Max Hastings. *The Korean War*. (London: 1987): 439-40.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Copp. "Canadian Command Decisions I: The Reinforcement of Hong Kong, September 1941." Manuscript from the *Guy Simmonds Memorial Seminar*.. Canadian Command and Staff College, (Kingston: September 23-24, 1999.)

The lesson of Hong Kong did not have time to be forgotten by 1950. The ghost was alive and well and moved from the King to the St. Laurent government up until and including the departure of the 2PPCLI. As such lessons as these leave the minds of policy makers and enter into that nebulous realm we call history, perhaps we should remind ourselves regularly that in any age, from that of stone axes to space stations, experience should not be casually dismissed. Indeed, experience may be the greatest of all force enhancers. I thank you for your time.