

Crerar and the Decision to Garrison Hong Kong

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*"Always remember that events now long in the past were once in the future."
F.W. Maitland*

A crimonious and often virulent debate surrounds examinations of the Canadian expeditionary force dispatched to Hong Kong in the fall of 1941. The tragic fate of the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers in the battle for Hong Kong and their horrendous treatment at the hands of the Japanese following the surrender of the garrison has polarized opinion. Generally, historical treatment has ranged from C.P. Stacey's and J.L. Granatstein's considered assessments of the contemporary difficulties facing the political and military leaders to the *Valour and the Horror's* and Carl Vincent's accusations of negligence among Canada's political and military leadership.¹

Major-General H.D.G. "Harry" Crerar was the Chief of the General Staff, the government's chief military advisor and senior army officer, when the British telegram requesting "one or two" Canadian battalions for Hong Kong was received. [See telegram on page 100.] "[The] Canadian Army," advised Crerar after several days of deliberation with his political masters, "should definitely take this on." The accepted historical perception has been that his strategic counsel was made in ignorance of the conditions of the situation in the Far East. Questions subsequently raised on the state of training of the two battalions chosen for the expedition further enhanced the belief that Crerar's actions were hasty and ill-considered.

Despite criticisms based on the unforgiving perspective provided by hindsight, Harry Crerar's role in these decisions has been subject to only limited scrutiny. A closer examination of Crerar's background and training reveals a carefully constructed logic in his approach. Placing the decision within the framework of Crerar's training and education suggests that the three most important elements in his evaluation were a reasoned analysis of the contemporary strategic situation in the Far East, his long-term objectives for the army, and the reality of the state of the army's training.

Crerar had a broad familiarity with the political and strategic circumstances of Britain's Far Eastern possessions. His Permanent Force career dated from 1920 and international affairs were prominent among his interests. Dedicated and ambitious, he held a number of senior staff positions on the General Staff in the interwar period that required a constant analysis of Canada's political and strategic position within the Commonwealth and the world. Similarly, the interwar educational path that marked him for higher command brought the specifics of the Far Eastern strategic situation, and that of Hong Kong in particular, under his purview.

An attack on Hong Kong and the implications of an Anglo-Japanese conflict were prominent imperial defence scenarios that served as staff exercises at both of the institutional cornerstones of the Canadian army's professional education system — the British Staff College at Camberley and the Imperial Defence College (IDC). Crerar attended the Staff College from 1922-24. Like his contemporaries, Vice Chief of the General Staff Major-General Ken Stuart and Assistant Chief of the General Staff Brigadier Maurice Pope, Crerar examined Hong Kong as a case study. Ironically, he did not refer to this in his testimony to the Royal Commission or in any subsequent recollections.² This was likely due to the fact that in the early 1920s Hong Kong's position as a strategic bastion was altered as the British reassessed their military relationship with the Japanese and their naval position in the Far East. The decision in June 1921 to fortify Singapore as the main British naval base and the restrictions of the Washington Naval Treaty of 1921 forbidding the Pacific powers from upgrading the defences of their naval bases in the western Pacific relegated Hong Kong to secondary status in the British imperial defence scheme for the Far East, not least because the Standing Defence Sub-Committee of the British Cabinet recognized the garrison's vulnerability to a landward assault. The strategic position of the outpost was further altered by the establishment of a "period of relief as an accepted strategic reality in planning for the defence of British possessions in the Far East. It was, in fact, a recognition of Britain's inability in the 1920s to maintain a two-ocean navy."³

More influential in Crerar's assessment of the Far Eastern situation was his examination of Hong Kong in the context of imperial strategy when he attended the Imperial Defence College in 1934. A senior staff school designed to groom candidates for important roles in the strategic and military planning institutions of Commonwealth governments, the IDC was established to correct the perceived inadequacies in strategic vision that emerged during the First World War.⁴ A series of exercises, entitled "syndicate wargames," were used to educate the senior

officers and civilians in the strategic dilemmas facing Britain as well as to facilitate co-operation between the government departments and branches of service involved in modern war.

The third syndicate wargame, in which all students participated, was an elaborate exercise in which the two syndicates, over a period of eight weeks, examined the relative political, military and economic strengths and potential of the Japanese and British Empires from both perspectives. "Exercise No.3," as it was blandly called, reflected the 1934 reality of an increasingly aggressive Japanese policy towards China and Japan's growing estrangement from the western nations. The exercise created a fictional scenario set in 1936 in which the Japanese were forced, through domestic, political and economic pressures created by international censure and sanctions, to expand their possessions in China and increase pressure on British colonies in the Far East. This, according to the scenario, resulted in the steady deterioration of relations between the British Empire and Japan. It was remarkable how closely the exercise mirrored the actual development of events through to 1941.⁵

An examination of the defence of Hong Kong from both an operational and strategic perspective was undertaken by the 1934 syndicate members as a necessary element of the larger exercise. The assessment, as reflected in the 40-page appendix and Crerar's personal notes, included a comprehensive assessment of the defensive requirements of the garrison and its ability to hold out prior to the arrival of the British Main Fleet, the requisite "period before relief." Hong Kong's precarious position was fully recognized. The report concluded that "in the final event the security of Hong Kong rested with the British Main Fleet." Further, it was observed that the existing garrison of three battalions was "inadequate to provide the required degree of security," particularly if its air and ground forces were left unreinforced and the British Empire was fighting alone, to ensure that the Main Fleet had time to relieve the garrison. The final conclusion with regards to Hong Kong, however, was that "the risks involved

owing to the weakness of the defences of the base are unjustifiable in view of the serious issues at stake." The "issues" were defined as the necessity of retaining Hong Kong as a forward base of operations to exert pressure on the Japanese and to maintain British prestige in the area.⁶ This latter point was particularly important for it revealed the context in which the defence of Hong Kong would continue to be viewed up to the moment of the Japanese attack: a naval base designed to preserve British power, its real fate was determined by Britain's ability to project, or at least present the image that it could project, that power.

While all were involved in drafting the final reports, Crerar's notes indicate that he was well aware of the requisite period of relief and vulnerability of the garrison.⁷ During the exercise Crerar wrote an appreciation of the course of a Pacific war from the point of view of "a very Senior Staff Officer in the Japanese Army." From this position, he examined Japan's chances in the face of the combined economic, industrial and financial strength of Great Britain and the Dominions. Another scenario examined the possibility of an alliance between the United States and the British Empire in a Pacific conflict.⁸ Crerar concluded that Japan would lose against such a combination. Consequently, Japan's only rational course was to avert a war with this coalition. A key recommendation in the final appreciation, one reflecting the overall calculations of relative strength, was that Britain must court the U.S. as an ally. "We cannot too strongly emphasise [sic]," it read, "the importance of persuading the United States of America to associate themselves with us against Japan." The analysis recognized that an American economic embargo would have a devastating impact on Japan, and that the strategic security that the U.S. Pacific Fleet would provide for Hong Kong and Britain's other Far Eastern possessions was a priceless asset. Co-operation in Anglo-American policy would, so the writers believed, overwhelmingly secure British positions against the Japanese.⁹

Over the next five years, in light of changes in the international situation and



*Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar, CB, DSO
From an oil painting by T.R. MacDonald, June 1944
(CWM 13151)*

exchanges with the Canadian foreign policy establishment, Crerar's assessment evolved to include a greater emphasis on the United States. He had fruitful, if discreet, discussions on Canada and the Far East with a small coterie of academic and civil servants, such as Lester Pearson of External Affairs and Escott Reid of the Canadian Institute for International Affairs. These discussions confirmed the vulnerability of Hong Kong which underlined the importance of the U.S.¹⁰

Prompted by Japan's expansionist policies in the late 1930s, Crerar and the army General Staff began serious consideration of Canada's role in a Pacific war. The planners ranked the maintenance of Canada's neutrality in the event of an American-Japanese war or her commitment in the event of an Anglo-American-Japanese conflict as second in defence priorities.¹¹ Crerar, as the Secretary to the Joint Staff Committee (JSC) and as DMO & I was an important architect of the priorities established by the General Staff. Whether he played a primary role in the final policy formulation, which seems likely, he at least agreed with the informed assessments that Canada could not avoid being drawn into a

T E L E G R A M

From: The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs
To: The Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada

Most Secret

Cypher

LONDON, September 19, 1941

No.162

No. 162. Most Secret. In consultation with the late General Officer Commanding who has recently arrived in this country ("Major-General Grasett], we have been considering defences of Hong Kong. Approved policy has been that Hong Kong should be regarded as an outpost and held as long as possible in the event of war in the Far East. Existing army garrison consists of four battalions of infantry, and although this force represents bare minimum required for depot assigned to it, we have thought hitherto that it would not ultimately serve any useful purpose to increase garrison.

Position in the Far East has now, however, changed. Our defences in Malaya have been improved and there have been signs of a certain weakening in Japanese attitude towards us and the United States. In these circumstances it is thought that a small reinforcement of garrison at Hong Kong e.g. by one or two more battalions, would be very fully justified. It would increase strength of garrison out of all proportion to actual numbers involved, and it would provide a strong stimulus to garrison and Colony; it would further have a very great moral effect in the whole of the Far East and would reassure Chiang Kai Shek as to reality of our intention to hold the island.

His Majesty's Government in Canada will be well aware of difficulties we are at present experiencing in providing forces which situation in various parts of the world demands, despite very great assistance which is being furnished by the Dominions. We should therefore be most grateful if the Canadian Government would consider whether one or two Canadian battalions could be provided from Canada for this purpose. It is thought that in view of their special position in the north Pacific, Canadian Government would in any case have wish to be informed of need as we see it for reinforcement of Hong Kong and special value of such measure, even though on a very limited scale at the present time. It may also be mentioned that the United States have recently despatched a small reinforcement to the Philippines. It would be of the greatest help if the Canadian Government could co-operate with us in the manner suggested, and we much hope they will feel able to do so.

If the Canadian Government agree in principle to send one or two battalions, we sho'uld propose to communicate with you again as to best time for their despatch, having regard to general political situation in the Far East.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs

Pacific war in which Britain was involved, particularly if the "Australasian" Dominions fought.¹² Canada's role in a Pacific war involving Britain and the Commonwealth would be far different if the United States was involved and Crerar was increasingly concerned with American views. He sent Lester Pearson a copy of a General Staff Memorandum dated 23 November 1936 entitled "Memorandum on the Possible Lapse of Article XIX (Regarding New Bases) of the Washington Naval Limitation Treaty." In it the strategic position of Hong Kong was described as "leaving much to be desired" if Britain maintained the status quo. However, an important proviso stated, "Were there a definite alliance between Great Britain and the United States it is possible that this deterrent would more than compensate for the threat which new Japanese bases would constitute to Hong Kong."¹³

Thus developed the second crucial element in Crerar's perception of the strategic balance between the Commonwealth and Japan: the position of the United States. Throughout this period, Crerar was confident that the Americans would join the British in any hostilities with Japan, a confidence that grew through 1941 as the United States became more embroiled in the struggle with Germany and Japan. The British Empire will have unqualified U.S. support "before many weeks go by," Crerar noted in confidential correspondence with Price Montague in June 1941.¹⁴ However, he was also aware of the potential liability of such an alliance, observing before the war that "we must also face up to the prospect that identity in Anglo-American policy concerning the Pacific area might well result in an increase in international friction."¹⁵ Nevertheless, he clearly hoped that war in the Far East might be avoided if the Democracies allied and showed their resolve.

Although his attention was firmly fixed on Europe after the outbreak of war in September 1939, Crerar remained well informed on the strategic situation in the Far East. In the fall of 1939, he was sent to London to establish an overseas Canadian military headquarters of which he was

appointed Senior Officer. Initiating the dispatch of weekly and monthly War Office intelligence assessments and strategic summaries to Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) and National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) was an early, and important, achievement. As well, through 1939-1940, he attended bi-weekly meetings on the war situation with the British DMO, Major-General Richard Dewing, which kept Crerar abreast of British attitudes and strategic estimates.

Crerar's appointment as the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) in July 1940 provided the second strand in Crerar's approach to the dispatch and the context within which it was made. He returned to Canada to organize the army's expansion and training based on his experiences in England.¹⁶ As CGS, keeping on top of strategic information was difficult given the myriad duties which accompanied the creation of a national army from scratch. These difficulties were magnified by the need to steer a cautious path through Prime Minister Mackenzie King's fears of repeating the conscription crisis of the First World War. Crerar, however, proved a shrewd politician and maneuvered until he successfully gained the government's explicit, if hesitant, support for a Canadian Army formation of five full divisions and an armoured brigade. He also sought, less successfully, an expansion of the military's position as policy advisors, prerogatives long denied them by successive Canadian governments.¹⁷

The expansion of the Canadian army for service in Europe was the vehicle to fulfil all Crerar's aspirations but this proved an immense task through 1940 and 1941. He established policy for, and directed, the expansion and re-organization of NDHQ, and set training policy for the units raised. The uncertainty surrounding the Canadian army's role also affected the pace of army expansion through 1940 and 1941.¹⁸ Personality conflicts and professional differences within NDHQ further exacerbated the tense atmosphere that informed army reorganization.¹⁹ Perhaps the biggest

impediment was government resistance to army expansion, an opposition led by the plodding, but politically attuned, Mackenzie King.²⁰

Despite his political successes, by the summer of 1941 the inactivity of the Canadian army had created a sour public mood, one which the government leaders and the military were hard-pressed to quell. The army provided a visible target for pro-conscriptionists and others who equated large ground forces with a commitment to total war.²¹ By late July 1941, Crerar was characterized by one observer as "exceedingly worried" over the "insidious campaign" of criticism.²² Faced with the need to maintain a steady flow of volunteers for overseas service, he urged the government, in addition to a government-sponsored national recruitment campaign, to advocate greater involvement for Canadian troops overseas. "I feel it is in the interests of the Corps," wrote Crerar, "if not the country [as] there is a not unnatural desire to see Canadians in the headlines these days."²³ Desperate to quell the pro-conscriptionists, King reluctantly telegraphed Churchill "reaffirming the government's willingness to have Canadian troops serve in any theatre" and then set out on a speaking tour of the country.²⁴ Concrete action, however, was needed to dispel the malaise that was settling over the Canadian war effort.

An opportunity for action soon afforded itself. In August of 1941, as he prepared for the second round of army expansion, Crerar met with an old Royal Military College colleague, Canadian-born Major-General A. E. Grasett. He was the former General Officer Commanding (GOC), British Troops in China passing through Ottawa on his return voyage to the United Kingdom. Innocuous enough that the exact time of the stay was not recorded, the discussions that took place between Crerar and Grasett took on a great importance after the fact. According to Crerar, the situation in the Far East and Hong Kong was broached in "long discussions" between himself, Grasett and Ralston. In the course of the conversations, Grasett forwarded the opinion that two additional battalions "would render the garrison strong enough to

withstand for an extensive period of siege an attack by such forces as the Japanese could bring to bear against it."²⁵ This latter assessment was an important confirmation of the prevailing viewpoint, in some circles, of the viability of defending Hong Kong in the event of a Japanese attack.

Several years later, Crerar recalled that "neither to myself alone, nor to the Minister and myself jointly, did Grasett then raise the question of obtaining these two additional battalions from Canada."²⁶ The truth of this statement has been questioned in light of Grasett's subsequent suggestion to the British Chiefs of Staff that Canada might provide the necessary troops for reinforcing Hong Kong. However, Ralston's cautious reaction to the British request in September suggests that the Minister, at least, was not expecting this initiative despite the fact that he met with Grasett in Crerar's presence. Whatever the truth, stated government policy, reiterated by the Minister only weeks later in conversations with the British Secretary of State for War, was that "the Canadian government was fully prepared to sanction employment of the Canadian Corps in any military operations which the War Office might recommend." In obvious deference to Mackenzie King's concerns, Ralston added that "He did not wish this statement to convey the idea that the Canadian Government was pressing for the active employment of Canadian forces but . . . that there would be no restrictive tendencies on the part of the Canadian government." In other words, not necessarily employment but employment if necessary. It would be surprising then if the deployment of Canadian units in some theatre of war had not, at least, been mentioned.²⁷ Indeed, in the circumstances, neither an initiative by Crerar or Grasett was remarkable.

Grasett's suggestion to Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff that Canada might provide the additional troops he believed would secure Hong Kong for the "period of relief proved timely."²⁸ Months earlier and it might have been dismissed. However, significant shifts in the diplomatic and military situation had taken place in the Far East and Europe during 1941, changes perceived through the filter of



Major-General A.E. Grasett
(NACPA 116456)

Britain's long-standing policy of deterring Japanese aggression and informed by Britain's determination to defend her possessions in South-East Asia. Of questionable practicality even prior to the war, Britain's chances of responding militarily to a major crisis in the Far East had decreased dramatically after the fall of France, the loss of the powerful French fleet and the subsequent necessity of maintaining a presence in the Mediterranean on her own. Nevertheless, British political leaders remained committed to defending the empire in the Far East. In hopes of deterring rather than encountering Japanese aggression, policy centred on the cultivation of American support, the maintenance of Chinese independence and occasional shows of military commitment.²⁹ The doubts in early 1941 about the effectiveness of this policy were reflected in the oft-quoted

Churchillian assessment of January 1941 that no troops should be sent to Hong Kong given its precarious position in the event of a Pacific war that seemed imminent.³⁰ Even as Churchill proffered this opinion, however, he was convinced that greater involvement by the United States and her Pacific Fleet would provide sufficient military might to deter Japan from attacking Western possessions.

By the summer of 1941, the British were optimistic that the policies designed to foster deterrence were beginning to pay dividends. The joint American, British and Dutch declaration of solidarity in mid-1941 was one result, one which the British hoped would have the desired effect of giving pause to Japan's ambitions. The main plank in the British policy became reality when, that summer, the Americans became the central players in the Far Eastern drama. They began to reinforce the Philippines, moved the Pacific Fleet to Pearl Harbour, tightened their economic sanctions and issued explicit warnings to Japan. The hardening of American policy towards Japan, and Roosevelt's enthusiastic support for Churchill's agenda at Placentia Bay in September, prompted reassessments of Britain's strategic position in the Far East.³¹ Christopher Thome's observation that "Like Stimson [U.S. Secretary of State], Churchill believed that a flexing of Anglo-Saxon muscle would keep the Japanese in their place" reflects the sum of British calculations.³² The Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee of the Chiefs of Staff (JIC) reports for August and September, informed by self-serving racial comparisons, only confirmed this optimistic misconception.³³

The British government, despite lingering concerns over American equivocation, responded by tightening economic sanctions against Japan and, at Churchill's urging, promised naval reinforcements in the form of the battleship *H.M.S. Prince of Wales*, the battle cruiser *Repulse*, and the aircraft carrier *Indomitable*. Ignoring doubts on the part of the First Sea Lord Sir Dudley Pound, Churchill was convinced of the effect such a squadron would have.³⁴ He believed that the conditions for

providing an effective deterrent were in place and that Britain was required to show her resolve to the Americans and the embattled Chinese. Concurrently, strategic intelligence officers, despite the bloody nose inflicted by the Soviet Red Army on Japanese forces in 1938-39, indicated that the Japanese might turn north rather than south to take advantage of Russian weakness.³⁵ This assessment of the success of the policy of deterrence, and the changes wrought by Russian weakness in the summer, was reflected in the British telegram of 1941 requesting troops from Canada for the garrison at Hong Kong.

Convinced that the moment should be seized, the British government approached the Canadian government on 19 September, informing them of the favourable changes in their assessment of the British position in the Far East. Given these shifts, they enquired if "one or two Canadian battalions could be provided from Canada," implying that Canadian troops in Britain should remain untouched, for the imperial outpost at Hong Kong. The telegram stressed that the "action would strengthen [the] garrison all out of proportion to actual numbers involved" and "would reassure Chiang Kai Shek as to the genuineness of our intention to hold the colony," an important objective given that 40 of the Japanese army's 51 divisions were committed to the Chinese theatre.³⁶ They did not mention that Hong Kong's status as an "outpost" remained the same. Rather, the telegram implied that Hong Kong's position was considered safer than in recent months. Finally, they implied that there was some urgency "having regard to the political situation in the Far East."³⁷

The decision was necessarily a political one. The domestic political implications of a refusal to dispatch Canadian troops to aid Britain were obvious. The arrival of the telegram found Ralston in the United States, thus the note fell under the purview of the Associate Minister of National Defence, Charles "Chubby" Power. Power, in his testimony to the Royal Commission of Enquiry in 1942, recalled that upon receipt of the cable he immediately "telephoned . . . General Crerar and discussed the matter in a broad

and general way."³⁸ Power followed up this call, meeting with Crerar on the next morning.

Crerar, in his discussions with Power, noted that the dispatch of troops was ultimately a political as well as moral decision. Emphasizing the improved Far Eastern situation, Crerar believed that Canada had a moral responsibility to Britain, in the absence of more concrete ties. This was an important link in imperial co-operation.³⁹ The CGS presented this view of the political and moral nature of the Hong Kong decision to Major-General Ken Stuart and Major-General Maurice Pope, the Vice Chief of the General Staff and the Deputy Chief of the General Staff respectively. They were in full agreement with Crerar's assessment.⁴⁰

On 23 September, Power submitted the British request to the Cabinet War Committee for consideration. Decision, however, was deferred until the proposal could be thoroughly examined by the General Staff and Ralston.⁴¹ Because Ralston was in Los Angeles, a brief was prepared on the 24th for his information and as a basis for discussion with Crerar. Written by the DMO & I, Colonel Richard Gibson, after talks with Crerar, the brief gave the impression, wrongly, that the government had already approved the decision to dispatch in principle. Gibson related the Cabinet War Committee's preparedness to accept the proposal and the fact that the CGS saw no "military risks in dispatching Cdn Bns for this purpose."⁴² The inference was incorrect and was absent from the DMO & I's draft memorandum revised by Crerar on the afternoon of the 24th.⁴³ Ralston nevertheless based his discussions with the CGS on the first brief and may have been labouring under the assumption that the War Cabinet had accepted the proposal. After their conversation in the early evening of 24 September, in which Crerar reiterated his belief that the army could accept the responsibility, both were ready to promote the project.

In Crerar's calculations, the military "risks" were important considerations but he believed the primary risk from a Canadian perspective was the potential impediment to

the organization of formations due for employment in the British Isles. The attendant military risks of sending troops to the Far East were explained in terms of the improved strategic situation, the strengthening of British bases in Malaya and the effect on Chinese moral which implied that Japanese forces would continue to be tied up in China. When questioned about a General Staff appreciation of the tactical situation of the Hong Kong garrison, Crerar observed to the Royal Commission that:

I was not asked by the Minister or anyone else for such a military appreciation, nor did I consider that in the setting of the British request that such a request would be made. The decision for or against the despatch . . . necessarily required to be taken on the highest policy level.⁴⁴

Crerar clearly based his decision on the intelligence provided by the British telegram. According to the testimony of the DMO & I and his senior intelligence officer, Lieutenant-Colonel William Murray, up-to-date information on the defences of Hong Kong was available at NDHQ, but no formal request was made for the information by the General Staff until after the dispatch had been decided upon. Neither was a military appreciation of Hong Kong's defences in the event of a war requested or prepared.⁴⁵ However, as the post-war CGS observed in 1948 "[T]here is nothing . . . to show that the Department of National Defence had a staff which could work out the pros and cons of accepting this proposal . . . the Canadian Authorities were completely dependent on information received from the UK."⁴⁶ An accurate observation. Through 1940 and 1941, despite Crerar's reorganization of NDHQ, no separate general staff intelligence directorate was created. While the number of officers handling intelligence had increased from one in 1940 to seven in 1941, only one of these handled "foreign intelligence." Crerar's acceptance of the intelligence organization at NDHQ was an admission that it was beyond Canada's capabilities to start an intelligence assessment network from scratch.⁴⁷ He was correct but it left Canada dependent on the British for information and, more importantly,

assessments of that information. Limited information on the defences of Hong Kong was available at NDHQ, but such information was not synonymous with intelligence appreciations of the kind that were expressed in the British telegram.

The third element in Crerar's approach to the decision to dispatch troops to Hong Kong involved his knowledge of the state of the army's training. The government did not formally approve the dispatch until 2 October 1941 but the selection of units was already underway. Crerar's choices for the units deployed to Hong Kong, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, derived from the logic that informed his advice to the government — that war with Japan was less likely than previously, that Europe was the main theatre and that Hong Kong was a garrison responsibility.⁴⁸ Crerar's 30 September memorandum to the Minister on unit selection emphasized two general points — that the units "should be efficient, well-trained battalions" and that the selection should not disrupt the training of the 4th Canadian Division, preparing for overseas service.⁴⁹ The CGS's agenda, explicit in the latter point, and the demands placed on an already strained mobilization and training system thus limited which trained units were available. Crerar could not disrupt the organization of forces already slated for Britain nor did the British want these units broken up. Others, including the General Officer Commanding of the 4th Canadian Division, were of the same mind.⁵⁰

Crerar's estimation that hostilities with Japan were not imminent also guided his choice. It seems apparent that he believed, despite the assessment of Director of Military Training, that the two units selected were in need of "refresher" training. They were by his definition ones of "proven efficiency" and would suffer declines in morale if they were kept in Canada for prolonged periods. Similarly, he assumed that the garrison duties of Hong Kong would not differ much from that of the Royal Rifles' responsibilities in Newfoundland or the Grenadiers' duties in

Jamaica, observing that they were capable of "upholding the credit of the Dominion" in "a distant and important garrison." He also believed that the men were of a high standard, based on information obtained from the unit commanding officers and on personal observations on the quality of the troops. Both battalions had proven themselves in the roles allotted them and were among the most experienced of the available units.⁵¹

Satisfied that the units selected were efficient and available, Crerar, for government consumption, noted that the units fulfilled a number of domestic requirements. In addition to representing two distinct regions, attention was drawn to the fact that the Royal Rifles were from a French-speaking region. The unstated message, found in an early draft of the reasoning behind the selection, and one possibly discussed with C.G. Power, was that the Royal Rifles "should serve in a theatre where casualties are not likely to be heavy or sustained." The draft memorandum concluded "Clearly it could not long retain its character and identity in a main theatre of war for it could not be reinforced from its own territory."⁵² Events were to prove this a tragic prophecy.

Crerar's selection of units clearly indicates that he believed that the risks were minimal and that disrupting the expansion of formations earmarked for Europe was far more dangerous. Through the fall, he continued to mirror British optimism regarding Japanese intentions. Visiting London in October 1941, he and Ralston were informed that in the opinion of the British Joint Planning Board, an inter-service strategic planning committee, the "initial Japanese military action would be directed against Russia" and that, for offensive purposes, the "retention of Hong Kong was stated to be of very great importance."⁵³ In the opinion of the Canadian General Staff, based on the assessments provided by British intelligence, war with Japan was more remote than in any period in a-number of months.⁵⁴ The revised Army Programme for 1942, submitted in mid-November 1941, reflected Crerar's focus on expanding the army for deployment against Germany and the

optimistic assessment of the strategic situation in the Far East.⁵⁵ Any doubts he may have had were quelled by British assurances that should war break out "the U.S.A. would join us." British requests for speed lest the opportunity was lost left little time for further second guessing.⁵⁶

Crerar's estimation of the value of a small show of imperial unity was informed by calculations based on the strategic information at his disposal. Sending two battalions of Canadian troops, and later a brigade headquarters, was obviously not going to deter the Japanese from going to war but the cumulative impact of a timely show of Empire solidarity, in combination with increased U.S. involvement and enhanced British naval strength fitted into Crerar's prewar assessment of the impact of Empire resolve and American support. He compared the expeditionary force dispatched to Hong Kong with the British dispatch of troops to Greece to explain his conception of the factors behind the decision to dispatch troops to Hong Kong. "The proposed action," Crerar observed, "whatever the military risks of the enterprise, needed to be examined from the broad view as to its contributory value to the eventual winning of the war."⁵⁷ Confident that the military risks of an actual Japanese attack were minimal, and convinced of the urgency of the situation, Crerar concluded that "the Canadian army should definitely take this on."⁵⁸ His assessment of Japanese intentions was no worse, and no better, than the British or American. Nevertheless, the U.S. belief that the Philippines could be held exemplifies how badly Allied strategists underestimated the Japanese.⁵⁹ The indignant tone Crerar adopted in his testimony to the Royal Commission and when the issue was raised in personal correspondence indicated that he was conscious of having misjudged the strategic situation.

Professional considerations were also important, if implied, factors in the evaluation, factors that informed Crerar's perception of the political and strategic stakes of his decisions in the fall of 1941. In Canada,



Soldiers of the Winnipeg Grenadiers aboard the Awatea heading for Hong Kong.
(CFPUPMR 79-179)

attention was firmly fixed on Europe and the static role assigned the Canadian army. With Dominion troops in North Africa and Britain's resources stretched beyond the breaking point, a refusal to aid in such a seemingly costless manner would have been unthinkable. Crerar was also determined to maximize Canada's army effort and place it on a more efficient basis to fulfil Canada's responsibilities, as he perceived them. In the long term he was determined to use the window of opportunity provided by the war to broaden the prerogatives of the Government's military advisors, to enhance their influence in the defence policy making process. He believed that the military profession's future prestige and position were intimately linked to an effective and visible army effort during

the war. The request for a high profile, and, according to strategic assessments, low-risk Canadian army contribution fit the bill.

Crerar should be faulted for his failure to make the potential risks inherent in garrisoning Hong Kong absolutely clear to the government. This was his responsibility. However, Lieutenant-General Charles Foulkes observation that the failure to call for intelligence assessments in the fall of 1941 would have led to a court-martial in II Canadian Corps does not account for Canada's non-existent intelligence capabilities and Crerar's professional knowledge.⁶⁰ Neither does it capture the urgency felt by all participants lest the chance to deter the Japanese and avoid a Pacific war fade. Indeed,

subsequent revelations indicate that the British were correct in their assessment of the importance of maintaining Chinese morale at this critical juncture, and thus tying down the bulk of the Japanese army, even if their intelligence miscalculated the magnitude of Japanese irrationality. The Americans made the same mistake. Crerar followed suit.⁶¹

NOTES

1. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume I: Six Years of War, The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa, 1955); C. P. Stacey, *A Date with History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa, 1982); Granatstein's opinion has most recently been offered in *Mutual Hostages: Canadians and Japanese during the Second World War* (Toronto, 1990), co-authored with Patricia Roy, Masako Iino and Hiroko Takamura. He calls the decision "inevitable" and accepts Crerar's testimony to the Royal Commission that he did not believe that hostilities were imminent. Granatstein's interpretation has also appeared in *Conscription in the Second World War 1939-1945: A Study in Political Management* (Toronto, 1969); with Desmond Morton, *A Nation Forged in Fire: Canadians and the Second World War* (Toronto, 1990); Carl Vincent, *No Reason Why: The Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy - an Examination* (Stittsville, Ontario, 1981); Kenneth Taylor, "Defeat is an Orphan: The Defence of Hong Kong Reconsidered," in *Proceedings of the First Conference of the Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War*, 1977; Reprinted in *Men at War*, Edited by Tim Travers and Christian Archer, 1982; The question of the performance and training of the Canadian troops was raised in 1946 when the Garrison Commander, Major-General C.M. Maltby, expressed the opinion that the poor showing of the garrison was attributable to the state of training of the Canadian troops. This commentary was to be published in the British Official History but was retracted in response to strong protests by the Canadian government and CGS. See C.C. Mann to Crerar, 15 August 1946 and attached telegrams, "Enclosure" 1(3), Volume 24, H.D.G. Crerar Papers (CP), National Archives of Canada (NAC); Some works that followed Taylor's critical line included W.A.B. Douglas and Brereton Greenhous, *Out of the Shadows: Canada in the Second World War* (Toronto, 1977); Oliver Lindsay, *The Lasting Honour: The Fall of Hong Kong* (London, 1978); Ted Ferguson, *Desperate Siege: The Battle of Hong Kong* (New York, 1980); An excellent review essay is Major W.A. Morrison, "Book Essay: The Hong Kong Tragedy," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Volume 13, Autumn 1983, 54 - 56.
2. Testimony of Major-General Ken Stuart and Major-General Maurice Pope, "Proceedings, Volumes 1-5," pp. 186-191, 251-253, RG33-120, NAC.
3. Malcolm H. Murfett, "Living in the Past: A Critical Re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy, 1918-1941," *War and Society*, Volume 11, Number 1, May 1993, pp.76-79.
4. Imperial Defence College, Public Record Office (PRO) WO 32/3878; "Notes on the Imperial Defence College," 958C.009(D212), Volume 10, CP, NAC.
5. Imperial Defence College Exercise No. 3, 1934, PRO WO 106/5136. Courtesy of Galen Perras.
6. Imperial Defence College Exercise No. 3, pp.291, 330, WO 106/5136, PRO; Crerar's IDC Notebook, Crerar's Vertical File, Massey Library Archives, Royal Military College of Canada (RMC).
7. Crerar's IDC Notebook, Massey Library Archives, RMC.
8. "Confidential Address on the "IDC," to the Canadian Artillery Association, February 1935," 958C.009(D431), Volume 15, CP, NAC.
9. IDC Exercise No.3, pp. 153-154.
10. Crerar to Pearson. In "Correspondence Crerar, 1936-1942," Volume 3, MG26 N1, Pearson Papers, NAC; Crerar to Escott Reid, 7 January 1936, "Comments on Draft Report on "Canada and the Pacific,"" 958C.009(D222), Volume 12, CP, NAC.
11. File: "Minister's Secret Letter to Cabinet," November 1936, Volume 29, MG27 III B5, Ian A. Mackenzie Papers, NAC; JCS Minutes, Volume 2684, 3823, RG24, NAC.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Crerar sent this to Pearson in November 1936. In "Correspondence Crerar, 1936 - 1942," Volume 3, MG26 N1, Pearson Papers, NAC.
14. Crerar to Montague, 9 June 1941, 958C.009(D7), Volume 1, CP, NAC.
15. Crerar to Escott Reid, 7 January 1936, "Comments on Draft Report on "Canada and the Pacific,"" 958C.009(D222), Volume 12, CP, NAC.
16. Crerar was suggested for the post by long time supporter and friend, Lieutenant-General Andrew McNaughton, GOC 1st Division. "CGS Files - Matters Relating to app't as VCGS," 958C.009(D 15), Volume 1, CP, NAC; "Ralston Staff Appointments," 4 July 1940, War Cabinet Committee Minutes, Volume 1, RG2 7C, Privy Council Records, NAC.
17. See, for example, Stephen Harris, "The Canadian General Staff and the Higher Organization of Defence, 1919-1939: A Problem of Civil-Military Relations," *War and Society*, Volume 1, May 1985, pp.83-98; M.A. Hooker, "Serving Two Masters: Ian Mackenzie and Civil-Military Relations in Canada, 1935-1939," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Volume 21, Spring 1986, pp.38-56; CP. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1970), pp. 110-115.
18. The inability of Munitions and Supply to equip Canada's rapidly growing armed forces was one factor that

- limited the pace of expansion. See Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn, *CD. Howe: A Biography* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 121-141; See also Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 26 July 1940, Volume 1, RG2 7C, NAC; Murray, "British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War," pp. 111-129; David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London, 1988), pp.77-88; See brief summary of "Tactics" in *Handbook of the British Army*, pp. 187-188; For an example of how the uncertain role hindered army expansion see "Memorandum ACGS Pope to COS, 8 September 1941," and Handwritten Note, CGS to ACGS, 13 September 1941, Kardex Collection, Crerar, General H.D.G., 112.1(D33), File "Corps and Army Troops Policy," Director General History, DND.
9. Memorandum, "Creation of Staff Duties Directorate of the General Staff," 9 August 1940, E.L.M. Burns and Memorandum to the Minister, 10 August 1940, HQC 8664(i), Volume 2853, RG24, NAC; See also "Memorandum on A Canadian Organization for the Higher Direction of National Defence, First Draft, 8 March 1937," 958C.009(D218), Volume 11, CP, NAC; Victor Sifton's, the civilian Master-General of the Ordnance, antipathy was documented by journalist friends in Ottawa. See Dexter's "Memo: Conversation with Sifton, March 25, 1941," Series I, Section C, TC2, Folder 19, Dexter Papers (DP), Queen's University Archives (QUA); Malone, *A Portrait of War, 1939-1943*, pp.61-63; For problems with Browne see Crerar to McNaughton, 9 September 1940, 958C.009(D12), Volume 1, CP, NAC; Ralston became increasingly concerned that Crerar was seeking personal aggrandizement as a virtual commander-in-chief. Memo of Conversation with Sifton, March 25, 1941, Series I, Section C, TC2, Folder 19, DP; Memo, June 12, 1941 and Memo October 10, 1941, in Series I, Section C, TC2, Folder 19 and Folder 20 respectively, DP, gUA.
 0. The CGS's 1941 Army Programme elicited a caution from the Prime Minister. Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 1 October 1940, Volume 1, RG2 7C, NAC; Crerar's presentation also prompted an apprehensive note in King's diary. Diary Entry, October 1, 1940, T153, MG26 J13, NAC; Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 3 and 10 October 1940, Volume 1, RG2 7C, NAC.
 1. J.L. Granatstein, *The Politics of Survival: The Conservative Party of Canada, 1939-1945* (Toronto, 1970; 1st Edition, 1967), pp.73-74.
 2. Crerar to McNaughton, 26 June 1941 and McNaughton to Crerar, 19 July 1941, 958C.009(D12), Volume 1, CP, NAC; "Talk with Major-General Crerar, Memo July 28 1941," Folder 20, TC2, Series I, Section C, DP, gUA.
 3. Crerar to McNaughton, 19 May 1941, 958C.009(D12), Volume 1, CP, NAC; Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 20 May 1941, Volume 4, RG2 7C, NAC; Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, pp. 152-153; The journalistic rumour mill had it that Crerar also urged the recruiting campaign on Ralston. See "Memo: June 12, 1941," Folder 19, TC2, Series I, Section C, DP, gUA.
 24. Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, p. 153.
 25. Crerar's Testimony, Telegram 1000, Crerar to W.K. Campbell, Secretary to the Royal Commission Enquiring into Hong Kong Expedition, 11 April 1942, "Telegram-Crerar," Volume 3, RG33-120, NAC.
 26. Crerar to C.P.- Stacey, 23 October 1953, 958C.009(D329), Volume 21, CP, NAC.
 27. Crerar's War Diary of conversations with the British Secretary of State for War, London Trip, 20 October 1941, Volume 15, CP, NAC.
 28. Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff vehemently opposed the idea when it was suggested in January 1941. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, pp.438-439; Douglas and Greenhouse *Out of the Shadows*, p. 104.
 29. See Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1941-1945* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) and Guy Wint and John Pritchard's revised version of Peter Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard, *Total War, Volume II: The Greater East Asia and Pacific Conflict* (London: Penguin Books, 1989; First Edition, 1972), pp.233-340; David Dilks, "The Unnecessary War'? Military Advice and Foreign Policy in Great Britain, 1931-1939," in Adrian Preston, éd., *General Staffs and Diplomacy Before the Second World War* (New Jersey, 1978), pp.98-131.
 30. "Prime Minister to General Ismay, 7 January 1941," Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume III: The Grand Alliance* (Boston, 1985; 1st Edition, 1950), p.157.
 31. The British VCGS recorded Churchill's optimism after his return from the Placentia Bay meeting with Roosevelt in late August 1941. "Winston was very pleased at the intimate and friendly contacts he had established with Roosevelt...Roosevelt is all for coming into the war." See Brian Bond, éd., *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall, Volume 2* (London, 1974), pp.37-38.
 32. Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, p.4.
 33. F.H.Hinsley, *British Intelligence and the Second World War, Volume 2* (London, 1981), pp.73-75; Reports from Japan on the changing Japanese domestic political situation reassured the advocates of deterrence even further; See John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986).
 34. Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London, 1962), pp. 174-175.
 35. Calvocoressi et al., *Total War, Volume II*, pp.292-309; Marshall Brent, "Khalknin-Gol," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, Spring 1993, pp. 80-89.
 36. Calvocoressi et al., *Total War*, p.454.
 37. Cypher 162, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, September 19, 1941, Exhibit 1, File 5, Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC.
 38. Testimony of C.G. Power, pp.269-270, "Proceedings of the Royal Commission, Volumes 1-5," Volume 1.RG33-120, NAC.

39. "Memo - Canadian Battalions Hong Kong, 24 September 1941," File 1-44, Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC
40. Testimony of General K. Stuart and General M.A. Pope, "Proceedings of the Royal Commission, Volumes 1-5," Volume 1, RG33-120, NAC.
41. Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 23 September 1941, Volume 2, RG2 7C, NAC.
42. "Record of Conversations on Important Subjects, 23-9-41, DMO & I"; "Canadian Battalions - Hong Kong, 24 September 1941," Exhibits 1-44, PO-1, Volume 2, RG33-120; Testimony of Brigadier Gibson, "Proceedings of the Royal Commission, Volumes 1-5," Volume 1, RG33-120, NAC.
43. Testimony-Brigadier Gibson, Volume 1, RG33-120, NAC.
44. Telegram: Crerar to Campbell, April 11, 1942, Volume 3, RG33-120, NAC.
45. Testimony of Lt-Colonel Murray, "Proceedings, Volumes 16-20," pp. 1768-1775; Testimony of Colonel Gibson, "Proceedings, Volumes 1-5," pp. 10-24, Volume 1, RG33-120, NAC.
46. "Military Comment on Drew and Duff Reports, February 1948," Kardex Files, Foulkes, Lt-General C, 111.13(D66), Directorate of History, D.N.D..
47. See F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 1* (London, 1979), pp.3-11; For Crerar's re-organization of the General Staff Branch of NDHQ see H.g.C.8664(f), Volume 2853, RG24, NAC.
48. The state of training was the nominal issue that prompted the Royal Commission Enquiry of 1942. The resulting Duff Report cleared the General Staff of negligence. See Right Honourable Sir Lyman Duff, *Report on the Canadian Expeditionary Force to the Crown Colony of Hong Kong* (Ottawa, 1942); The question was raised again in 1942 when the Garrison Commander, Major-General CM. Maltby, expressed his opinion that the poor showing of the garrison was attributable to the state of training of the Canadian troops. This commentary was due for publication in the British Official History but was retracted in response to strong protests by the Canadian government and its questionable basis. See C.C. Mann to Crerar, 15 August 1946 and attached telegrams, "Enclosure 1(3)", Volume 24, Crerar Papers, NAC.
49. Memorandum to the Minister, 30 September 1941, Exhibit 13, File: "Exhibits 1-44," Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC.
50. Major-General L.F. Page, GOC 4th Canadian Division, Memorandum on NDHQ. File BDF., 26 September 1941, Exhibit 10, "Exhibits 1-44," Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC.
51. Crerar to the Minister, 30 September 1941, Ex. 1-44-.10-1, Volume 2, RG33-120; Crerar to Campbell, 11 April 1942, Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC; Stacey, *Six Years of War*, pp.444-460.
52. Draft Memorandum to the Minister, Exhibit 11, "Exhibits 1-44," Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC.
53. War Diary, London Trip, 21 October 1941, Volume 15, CP, NAC.
54. Stuart's testimony confirms that this was the predominant professional conviction. Testimony of Stuart, "Proceedings, Volumes 1-5," pp.186-191, Volume 1, RG33-120, NAC.
55. "Army Programme, 1942-1943," 958C.009(D1), Volume 1, CP, NAC; Reference to Chiefs of Staff "Monthly Appreciation, HQ.S.5199, 5 November 1941," Appendices, Volume 6, RG2 7C, NAC.
56. War Diary, London Trip, CP; Dominion Office to NDHQ, 9 October 1941, Volume 2, RG33-120, NAC.
57. Telegram: Crerar to Campbell, April 11, 1942, Volume 3, RG33-120, NAC.
58. Crerar deleted several references to the urgency he felt was implicit in the British request, and explicit in the later requests, from his testimony before the Royal Commission. In one testy response to Drew, Crerar wrote "Special reports were not asked for [nor indeed could special reports of any value have been obtained within the time available]." the latter part was absent from the recorded testimony. 958C.009(D55), Volume 1, CP, NAC.
59. Louis Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines* (Washington, 1953), pp.61-61, 161-66.
60. Foulkes to Minister of National Defence, 9 February 1948, Kardex Collection: Foulkes, Lt-Gen.C, "Hong Kong Enquiry: Miscellaneous," 111.13(D66), Director General History, DND.
61. Chan Lan Kit Ching persuasively argues that the rapid collapse of British power in the Far East, particularly the fall of Hong Kong, quickly disillusioned the Chinese about the strength of her new allies. It also reveals, however, how important were shows of British determination to take the fight to the Japanese. Chan Lan Kit Ching, "The Hong Kong Question during the Pacific War (1941-1945)," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Volume 11, 1973.

Paul Dickson has written a biography of Crerar for his Ph.D and is currently developing it for publication as a National Defence Post Doctoral Fellow at Wilfrid Laurier University. He is a graduate of Acadia University and the University of Guelph.

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