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OPERATIONS IN HONG KONG FROM 8TH TO 25TH DECEMBER, 1941

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War, on 21st November 1945, by MAJOR-GENERAL C. M. MALTBY, M.C., late G.O.C., British Troops in China.

SIR,

I have the honour to address you on the subject of the operations in Hong Kong in December, 1941, and to forward herewith an account of the operations which took place at Hong Kong between 8th and 25th December, 1941.

2. In normal circumstances this despatch would have been submitted through Headquarters, Far East, but in the circumstances in which I am now placed I consider that it would be better, after this long lapse of time, to submit it to you direct.

3. Before beginning my account of the operations themselves, I feel it to be my duty, both to myself and the forces under my command, to place on record certain points. Of these you will be fully cognizant, but to compilers of history they may not be so obvious.

4. The defences of this Colony were on a limited scale, with the object of denying the harbour to an enemy rather than retaining the harbour for the use of our fleet. This object, combined with the forces available, necessitated a plan to defend the Island of Hong Kong only. The arrival of two Canadian battalions on the 16th November, 1941, caused me to alter my plan to a certain degree. I placed one brigade, with a proportion of mobile artillery under command, on the mainland to prepare and defend

the so-called "Gindrinkers' Line," with the hope that, given a certain amount of time and if the enemy did not launch a major offensive there, Kowloon, the harbour and the northern portion of the island would not be subjected to artillery fire directed from the land. Time was also of vital importance to complete demolitions of fuel stores, power houses, docks, wharves, etc., on the mainland; to clear certain food stocks and vital necessities from the mainland to the island; to sink shipping and lighters and to clear the harbour of thousands of junks and sampans. It will be appreciated that to take such irrevocable and expensive steps as mentioned in the foregoing sentence was impossible until it was definitely known that war with Japan was inevitable.

5. That war was inevitable seemed clear to me. I had all my forces deployed in their battle positions in ample time, but it was hard to make that definite statement on the information available, with the result that the civil authorities felt that they were not in a position to put into full force all the numerous measures required during the preliminary or the precautionary period of the Civil Defence plan. For this state of affairs I must blame three factors:—

(a) The general doubt that Japan would declare war against the Allied powers.

(b) The weakness of our intelligence system.

(c) The belief that Japan was bluffing and would continue to bluff to the last. The true gravity of the state of affairs was not reflected in the embassy despatches from Tokyo.