THE MYTH OF UNPREPAREDNESS: THE ORIGINS OF ANTI JAPANESE RESISTANCE IN PREWAR HONG KONG

ANNE OZORIO

Hong Kong fell to the Japanese in eighteen days: the wonder was that it took so long. [Hon. Ed. - The doggedness of the resistance and the bravery of the defenders, perhaps? See Lawrence Lai’s article in Vol. 39 of the Journal, pp.115-136.] In the cosy, cocooned world of colonial society, the invincibility of Empire was taken for granted. Despite all that was happening in China, many Europeans in Hong Kong just couldn’t conceive that any Asiatic might challenge their superiority. There were anecdotes that the Japanese planes bombing China were secretly manned by Germans, since Japanese were night blind. As the colonials sat comfortably mocking them, Japanese waiters, barbers, and menials were listening. Many would appear later, no longer servile, in full dress uniform, revealing their true status as high ranking intelligence agents. The overwhelming Japanese victory was a shock to those who believed that Empire was unassailable. They assumed automatically, that if they had been caught off balance, then the authorities too must have been unprepared. This, however, is a myth.

In January, 1941, General Ismay declared that there was ‘not the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong or relieving it. It is most unwise to increase the loss we shall suffer there. Instead of augmenting the garrison it should be reduced to a symbolic scale.’ ¹ Defending a city crowded with a million civilians, little air cover, long supply lines and nowhere to retreat but the sea was a logistics nightmare. What may have been unimaginable for the average colonial civilian was clear
quite early on to professional military strategists. War, when it came to Hong Kong, would have to be waged by means other than conventional warfare. Realistically, occupation would be a foregone conclusion: the challenge was to struggle on by covert means and to develop some resistance mechanism. In short, a new concept of waging war, based on intelligence and action behind enemy lines.

**Military intelligence**

Three years after the outbreak of the Sino Japanese war, [Hon. Ed. - I find it difficult to see how Japan’s unprovoked occupation of large parts of China and the atrocities committed by its army can be termed a ‘war.’] the British Army, Navy and Air Force created a ‘Far East Combined Bureau.’ It operated openly, employed no agents and depended on information volunteered by customs officials, commercial travellers and the like. Its offices, based within the Naval Dockyard compound discouraged visits from casual informants, and much of its work involved monitoring personal reports from China sent by courier, rather than proactive intelligence gathering. Naval Intelligence provided support and maintained a signals station on Stonecutters Island for transmitting information to Singapore. G E Grimsdale, later to become Major General, joined the FECB in its early days. One of his earliest recommendations on curbing Japanese espionage in Hong Kong was to suggest that tourists be banned from using cameras! Later he was to acknowledge that espionage was harmless in a place like Hong Kong where defences were open and unsophisticated - one snapshot photo of a ship leaving the naval dockyard revealed less than its official description in Jane’s Fighting Ships. In any case, Japanese had been known to go to Kelly and Walsh, the booksellers in Central District, to find maps better than their standard issue 1:20,000 series.

In January 1937, Capt. Charles Ralph Boxer, of the Lincolnshire Regiment arrived in Hong Kong. Everything about Boxer contrasted strongly with the stereotype of a colonial in the Far East. Although he came from a family of military men, he was an unconventional individualist. Moreover, he was a scholar, who spoke fluent, literary Japanese, studying Japanese history and culture to the extent that he was welcomed in some of the most influential Japanese social circles. After the war, these values would pit him against bigots for whom any sympathy for the Japanese was anathema. But pre-war, he represented
a new breed of intelligence officer. Grimsdale recalled his admiration with the ease with which Boxer could gain the trust of the Japanese.

When the Japanese conquered Guangdong in 1938, Boxer arranged an invitation for himself and Grimsdale to visit the Commander of Japanese Forces, General Ando, whom he had known socially in London. To Grimsdale’s amazement, Ando showed them round Japanese installations in his own staff car. They were able to inspect troop positions, aerodromes and see the power of the Japanese army at first hand. Perhaps that was Ando’s subtle point, but it benefited both parties. At one stage, the general joked to Boxer that the British should stop supporting the Chinese ‘then we could finish off this bloody war and all go home.’ In the same jesting vein, Boxer answered that the Japanese should stop supporting the Germans.

Boxer and his colleagues made a point of travelling and meeting people. Through personal contacts they were able to extract more information, and get an understanding of context. Boxer and his colleagues were articulate and fluent in Chinese or Japanese, and above all sensitive to the cultures, aware of the place of Hong Kong in the overall Chinese scheme of things. They illustrated the concept that “well informed is well armed.” Nor were they the only ones. In 1937/8, the Japanese Army in central China had agreed to take a young Japanese speaking British officer “on attachment” for nine months. Although his detailed report was misinterpreted (the atrocities in China were deemed a ‘temporary lapse’) the then Military Attache and Foreign Office agreed that a non-confrontational approach was more effective in getting information and defusing potential incidents.

Alert to the nuances of Japanese politics, Boxer sensed in July 1939, a sharp deterioration in Japanese attitudes towards the British. He interpreted this as a move by the Japanese Army to find a scapegoat for their lack of progress in the China campaign. He reported ‘at present there can be no greater error than to assume as is so often done that Japan’s military machine is too bogged down in China to prevent it being turned towards us ...the only thing likely to restrain the Japanese Army....is the fear of possible complications with the United States of America.” His warnings however went unheeded: Europe was itself just about to plunge into war, and to the Foreign Office, Hong Kong seemed very far away. Indeed, the note covering Boxer’s letter
laconically states that, even on what was actually his honeymoon visit, Boxer had not lost his ‘powers of observation.’

In accordance with the policy of withdrawing resources to Singapore, supposedly an impregnable fortress, the FECB was downscaled and most of its men and resources moved. Boxer was promoted to Major, with a small staff, which included his close friend and best man, Alf Bennett. Ironically, this gave him greater flexibility to use his own initiative.

Unable to make much headway with London, Boxer flew to Chongqing to see the British Ambassador, Sir Alexander Clarke-Kerr. Boxer then made contacts with key figures in the Chinese military. He was received by none other than General Dai Li, head of the formidable Juntong or Bureau of Statistics and Military Intelligence. After the Generalissimo himself, to whom his loyalty was almost feudal, General Dai was perhaps the most powerful man in China. An extremely shrewd strategic thinker, he was in many ways the power behind the throne. His organisation, fiercely secretive and ruthless, has been described as a sort of Chinese Gestapo, prepared to use any means, including murder, to achieve its aims. Dai was fanatically devoted to Chiang Kai Shek, and shaped the Juntong to be a dreaded political as well as military machine, spying on all perceived enemies of the state, Communists and fellow Guomindang as well as Japanese. The Juntong organisation was highly effective, operating through cells united by family and social bonds, whose members were expected to subsume all private needs to the pursuance of state aims, however lethal. It has been demonstrated that General Dai and his followers modelled themselves on folk heroes from Chinese history who operated through secret societies and who believed that extreme action such as assassination, was justified in the interests of the common good. Dai was known to be anti-western, for he believed that western countries with their imperialist policies were the cause of China’s humiliation, and were exploiting its weakness for their own aims. Many assumed that Dai’s anti-British stance was based on the personal embarrassment of having been mysteriously arrested in Hong Kong, thus conveniently sidestepping questions raised by decades of opium and gunboats. Dai also believed that any western country operating in China should function under Chinese control, an idea anathema to westerners used to extraterritoriality and getting their own terms. Boxer, however, found Dai co operative and willing to...
talk, but was well aware of Dai’s sinister “Blueshirts,” and thought it ‘wise to return somewhat evasive and non-committal replies since terrorist activities would only be a source of embarrassment to us at present.’ Still, he held open the prospect that Dai’s ‘local agents may come in useful later as a check on fifth columnists and pro-Wang Ching Wei activists.’

Boxer also met a Chinese general whom he described as an ‘exceptionally well educated and much travelled individual who speaks fluent German and English in addition to being a famous classical scholar.’ This was General Yu Ta Wei, who had amassed a huge store of ordnance seized from the Japanese, photos of Japanese weapons and bases, other material both of a military and intelligence nature, and chillingly, evidence that the Japanese were using chemical warfare against the Chinese. This he candidly showed Boxer, who was concerned enough to recommend that a British technical officer be sent out to examine them. General Yu, a more cosmopolitan man than Dai, had been trained in the Prussian military academy and was an urbane, well-read man, up to date with the latest developments in Europe. He wanted to develop munitions industry in China and needed foreign help. Boxer was meeting two of the most influential men in the Chinese hierarchy.

On the evening of 10th October 1939, the Double Tenth, that most sacred celebration in the KMT calendar, a date chosen deliberately to signal how the Chinese viewed the meeting, Boxer was ushered into the presence of the Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek. This was an important meeting, for it was perhaps the first sign that the British were making a concerted effort to help the Chinese in their long struggle with the Japanese. Boxer proposed that the Chinese and British set up a joint intelligence network to get a quicker and more efficient system of exchanging information. He proposed that a network of wireless stations be set up all along the Chinese coast from Hainan to Taiwan. Moreover, it would be financed by the British, but independently operated by Chinese to monitor Japanese troop movements. All information was to be ‘equally at the disposal of Chinese and British staff,’ although the Chinese could not enter the British military code system. He compounded the tribute to the Chinese war effort by suggesting that Hong Kong could learn from the efficient Chinese system of predicting air raids, whereby agents reported bombers taking
off from distant airfields and alerted possible targets. Previously the British had depended on runners and letters delivered by junk: the advantages of tapping on to the Chinese system were obvious.

Chiang was enthusiastic, and eager to talk. British policy seemed engineered towards appeasing the Japanese. Protecting trade and British economic interests were paramount, and the fate of China and its people were seen only in the light of that primary concern. In the deafening silence of British efforts to help the Chinese, Boxer's visit, and the recent reopening of the Burma Road, must have seemed like a breakthrough in British attitudes. Boxer sensed that Chiang was 'apparently envisaging a great deal wider form of liaison than we actually had in mind.' Later, British organisations were to claim that it was Chinese hostility and the Americans who stymied their efforts in China. There is plenty to negate this assumption. Dai Li, a shrewd judge of character and not a man to suffer fools, undoubtedly had had Boxer closely observed, and would have smoothed the way for his introduction to Chiang Kai Shek. The warmth of Boxer's reception shows the Chinese were not implacably opposed to the British. Indeed, far from being anti-western per se, General Dai gave enthusiastic support later to Americans such as Captain Miles, and indeed some British SOE related agencies, who were prepared to work with the Chinese on Chinese terms.

The wireless sets were duly sent to China and installed by a Cantonese speaking SOE officer, Major Hector Chauvin, who had been attached to Boxer in December 1939 for this purpose. Chauvin travelled extensively in China setting up the stations and meeting the Chinese personnel involved. This network was a prototype. It was the first serious intelligence system in the Hong Kong region. Most importantly, the arrangement was based on trust: the Chinese had full operational control. Although the Chinese might have a different agenda to the British, it was an implicit acknowledgement that, in China, the Chinese were paramount, and that Chinese could and did run a most efficient system. The arrangement worked: The evening before the Japanese attacked Kai Tak, Phyllis Harrop, a civilian police adviser, was at a dinner party with British intelligence personnel. At 10:30 hours, they were interrupted by a sudden telephone call, advising all staff to return immediately to headquarters. 'Major L left immediately and Captain Bush half an hour later.'x Bush was an expert on extremist secret
societies in the Japanese Army, though in his memoirs he downplayed this role. When Mrs Bush, a Japanese, was later forced to work as a Kempeitai interpreter, she talked to a prisoner who was in American Naval Intelligence about their mutual friend Charles Boxer. Bill Kendall, of whom more below, was told by Boxer that the Japanese were on the move: when he saw the zeros flying overhead, and knew that the attack had finally started.

**Beyond military intelligence**

F W Kendall was a Canadian from Vancouver who had lived in Hong Kong since childhood, and spoke not only fluent Cantonese but other dialects as well. He had had a mining business in China, but after the Japanese occupied east Guangdong and Chekiang his business was cut off. He then moved back to Hong Kong and worked for the Government organising refugee relief, building and running the main large camp at Kam Tin. Early in 1940 Kendall was approached by Col L A Newnham, in his capacity in charge of Military Intelligence, and asked to set up a small unit of civilians and volunteers. Being non-military personnel, they could undertake training in the use of sabotage and “ungentlemanly warfare,” which the official armed services could not legitimately carry out. The unit was given the cover name Z Force. Allocating £1,500 for this ‘unit for independent action behind enemy lines’ had to be done outside normal accounting channels, GOC Hong Kong told the War Office in September 1941, because of the need for ‘absolute secrecy in a small place like Hong Kong.’

The Special Operations Executive, under the Ministry for Economic Warfare, had been established in Europe for some years to assist resistance. They trained agents for the specific purpose of operating behind enemy lines using espionage, sabotage, and guerrilla warfare. Specialist SOE units created miniature code machines, wireless facilities and concealed weapons, known by the cheerful name of ‘toys.’ Where strategically useful, SOE created facilities for specialised sabotage. The whole point of SOE was to facilitate war in situations such as in occupied countries where traditional warfare was impractical. Its methods were ideally suited to the situation in China, where the front was so large and diverse that Japanese supply lines were stretched to vulnerability. The populace was strongly motivated for resistance, and the Japanese, whose control was weak beyond urban areas, were
particularly vulnerable to guerrilla harassment. SOE targeted China in its plans, but had to hold them in abeyance pending the outright declaration of war, since Britain was supposed to be neutral.

Kendall and his friend Eddie Teesdale were trained at the SOE base at Singapore. Kendall also had explosives experience from his days as a mining engineer. Kendall organised a group of hand picked volunteers, who included the talented Administrative Cadet Ronald Holmes, a Russian born businessman named Monia Talan, a PE instructor Cpllin McEwan, Dr Harry Talbot, Bobby Thompson, Hugh Williamson, all to play a role later in underground services. In addition, two police officers trained with them to learn SOE techniques. Intriguingly, with the group was also at least one Chinese, a man recorded only as 'Brigadier Lee of North China.'

Kendall’s men met secretly at a camp near Kam Tin, each weekend, usually trained by Teesdale, as Kendall was often in China. They received training in cipher and intelligence work, weapons, wireless and explosives. They also spent much time literally walking through the scrubland, often in the dark, getting to know the trails and terrain at first hand, in preparation for the day that they would have to work behind Japanese lines. Weapons were stored in Kendall’s bungalow near Shing Mun, where Holmes and Teesdale lived for extended periods. They also set up five hidden stores, for supply in the event of a prolonged campaign behind Japanese lines. In the event, the Japanese found the main store, in a cave on Tai Mo Shan about 1,800 feet up on the south east slope. Another was in an old lead mine at Lim Ma Hang, near the border at Sha Tau Kok. It was later raided by villagers, who would have seen troops of Indian soldiers carrying supplies there on mules. On the outbreak of battle, Col Newnh腿 ordered Kendall and Talan out of the New Territories and into Lyemun Pass, to fix limpet mines to scuttle a ship being used by the Japanese as an observation post. The remaining SOE men in the New Territories, led by Holmes and Teesdale, spent a month behind Japanese lines, crossing back and forth across the border, collecting information, setting up contacts and reconnoitring.

Z Force was by no means the only undercover agency operating in Hong Kong: there are hints and rumours of a much wider, high level series of groups, but firm proof is hard to substantiate. By definition such work would be secret. For security reasons networks had to operate
independently of each other, with little communication. History is written about those who create documents, not by those whose duty was to leave no trail. Nonetheless, it does appear that there were several groups quietly focussing on different aspects of resistance, not all military, should the day come when the Japanese took over.

Using his cover as a businessman working for Butterfield and Swire, where his “manager,” Mike Turner, also seems to have had SOE connections, Kendall also travelled through China, setting up contacts and listening posts, including those installed by Chauvin and Chinese intelligence. Indeed, because SOE tapped into an existing Chinese network, the intelligence it was able to access was far more sophisticated and accurate. SOE continued to fund another Chinese organisation, the RII (Research and Information Institute) throughout the duration of the war. This was a Chinese operated service using British equipment and a small British staff, working for, not in charge of, the Chinese. Many of its reports still exist, showing just how detailed was the information they gathered: exact ammunition supplies and strengths of Japanese units, area by area, names of officers, postings and movements. When, later in the war, efforts were made to amalgamate various British agencies operating in China, SOE managed to insist that RII was to remain separate and unaffected because it was a Chinese force.

Despite what seems to have been a working relationship between the SOE and various forms of KMT intelligence, it is evident that Kendall also cultivated strong links in the hinterland of Hong Kong where KMT influence was weak. These areas were relatively remote and fiercely resistant to central government influence. The villagers were clannish, and their communities closed, united internally by family and traditional ties. Many of these villagers had emigrated overseas to work in places like South America and Malaya. They also had traditional systems of defence and security, but piracy and banditry were endemic, almost part of the economy. These regions were alien territory to urban Hong Kong people, European or Chinese, who as outsiders would have been treated with suspicion. Political loyalties varied, and before Hong Kong was attacked, people had no automatic regard for the British who were not yet ‘Allies,’ and whose record in China was not edifying. In many ways, this work was much easier after the occupation when locals and British forces, though humiliated by defeat, shared common ground. Kendall went into these areas, often alone, meeting and talking
to villagers, making personal and individual contacts. He told Endacott how he met farmers and fishermen, Hoklo and Hakka speakers, and gradually won acceptance: at one stage, he had to undergo a "blood ceremony" with some pirate families in the Mirs Bay and Bias Bay area. Trained in SOE tactics, he realised that these close knit communities, with their tradition of secret societies and their sometimes justified tradition of being outlaws, alienated from established government, were an ideal ready made resistance underground. Strategically, the hinterland behind Hong Kong was a critical buffer zone in the event of Hong Kong being occupied. It would be the area through which information, personnel and material would enter and exit. Hence the extreme importance placed on developing relationships with all the local people, whatever their politics, and channelling their interests in support of the British cause.

Shortly after the fall of Canton in 1938, a guerrilla unit was formed, nominally under national government influence, to assist in carrying out resistance against the Japanese in the East River Area, just north of Hong Kong, and along the lines of the Kowloon-Canton railway from Sumchun to Shekling. This unit was commanded by the charismatic ex-seaman Tsang Sheng, whose vision of social change was far closer to communist values than to the increasingly right wing KMT. Because his power base was the region behind Hong Kong, not especially loyal to the central government, he was able to break free and declare his communist sympathies. He consolidated his influence over the area by earning the support of the local populace and by controlling the worst excesses of bandits, many of whom at this period were KMT supporters. Tsang's army of guerrillas, known as the Guangdong People's Anti-Japanese Resistance Unit, or the East River Column formed the strongest, best organised and most aggressive Chinese military formation in the vicinity of Hong Kong. Kendall noted that these men were well armed with Mausers and decent equipment, funded either by the Communist Party, or by the relatively prosperous villagers who had overseas remittances from men working abroad. He knew that many in the KMT were as violently opposed to the Communists as they were to the Japanese, and that working with the Communists would be a high risk strategy, but it was essential in a region so crucial to Hong Kong. It is known that Kendall was involved in negotiations with the Communists. Ronald Holmes, a SOE agent seconded to the BAAG was to refer to this in July 1944 when he prepared a report on
Communists and the China coast for Major Egerton Mott of the SOE. Holmes referred to guerrillas who would be known to Kendall. He was convinced that the expansion of the Communists into British territory in the New Territories ‘was planned in some detail before the Japanese attack on the Colony,’ so working with this group required uncommon discretion and diplomacy on the part of any Britisher trying to win their support. Holmes, working with Kendall before the war and with the guerrillas later, would have been unusually well informed. He identified the Communist leader in the Hong Kong area as Tsoi Kwok Leung, a man ‘formerly connected with minor Chinese industrial enterprises in Hong Kong and Amoy and...consumptive.’

Some form of SOE organisation was clearly in place in China, covertly, awaiting the Japanese attack before becoming fully activated. Col Chauvin had been removed from Hong Kong on 18th December, on the very day that the Japanese landed on Hong Kong Island, and sent to the British Military Mission in Chongqing. As the battle raged around them, Kendall, Talan and McEwan were stood by for special orders. Col. Harry Owen Hughes who had ostensibly been seconded to liaise with Chinese Armies in the 7th War zone, moved back to the Hong Kong area to await the arrival of something important. This was the arrival, in deep secrecy, of perhaps the most important escape party to ever leave occupied Hong Kong.

At the very moment that Hong Kong surrendered to the Japanese, a car was hurrying towards Aberdeen harbour. Inside sat Admiral Chan Chak, the Chinese Nationalist government’s chief representative in Hong Kong, and a number of his KMT assistants. The group was led by D M MacDougall, an official seconded to Hong Kong from London to work on political affairs. He had been assigned to look after the Admiral personally, and maintained twenty four hour contact with the Admirals party during the hostilities. They were to rendezvous with five boats of the 2nd Motor Boat Flotilla, who had been held back in battle. Reaching the pier an hour after the surrender, they found the boats gone. The only functioning vessel they could find was a fifteen foot launch but the party piled in, knowing that the Japanese would be on them at any moment. Hardly had they gone 500 yards when they were fired on by Japanese occupying a post on Brick Hill, opposite, on the southern side of Hong Kong Island. The boat’s engine disintegrated under the heavy fire, killing several men and wounding others, including
the Admiral himself. The Admiral, who had lost a leg in battle in his youth, removed his wooden leg in which he had hidden $40,000 and dived into the sea. Fortunately, his ADC was Henry Hsu Heng, the tall, athletic championship swimmer. Hsu helped the injured Admiral swim through the choppy waters, torn by shellfire, and alive with dangerous stinging jellyfish, until they clambered onto the rocks on Apleichau Island. Still under fire, the party was able to reach the relative shelter of the oceanward side of the island.

Lt Commander G H Gandy, commander of the flotilla, was to tell the story of how he had received orders to withdraw from Aberdeen because the boats were coming under heavy fire, but, ‘as I had not got the two important Chinese personages aboard and had no news of them, and as also movement by daylight would be obvious to the enemy, I consulted with Mr F WK with whom I had been told by the Commodore to collaborate in the matter of escape from Hong Kong, and decided to wait.’ It was providential that he decided to honour his original orders, for at 17:30 hours, one of his men signalled that someone was swimming out to his vessel. It was one of the men from the Chan Chak party. The group was rescued. The boats proceeded to Mirs Bay, where on the orders of Admiral Chan they anchored at Peng Chau Island. Kendall went ashore, bringing back with him the local village elder, whom Admiral Chan interviewed. Learning that it was safe to proceed, the flotilla headed towards the mainland at Nam O in Guangdong, where the boats were scuttled. From this point Kendall led the party, linking up with KMT guerrillas, led by a man called Leung Wing Yuen who escorted them to safety. Later, when the communists consolidated their control over all guerrillas in the region, Leung, who had been honoured for helping the KMT Admiral, had to escape the region himself.

Intelligence and politics

Why was so much effort taken to help a Chinese Admiral escape from Hong Kong when, at the same time British Generals were being rounded up and made prisoners of war? Admiral Chan Chak was of such importance to the British that they were prepared to organise an elaborate escape, involving what eventually became some seventy men, including 15 senior officers, at the very moment when all was lost in Hong Kong. Admiral Chan represented the Chinese National Government in Hong Kong. MacDougall acknowledged that his leaving
Hong Kong had symbolic meaning: he could not be ‘seen to desert’ until the last minute. The drama of his escape with such a show of force and British aid was a clear and explicit political statement. The KMT had their own escape network but this particular escape was a means of showing that the British, too, had a credible system for dealing with the exigencies of occupation.

Many reasons were circulated at the time to explain the escape. A smokescreen had to be concocted to disguise whatever the true purpose of the mission might have been. Much has been made of the story of a plot by the triads to massacre thousands of Europeans in Hong Kong during the Battle. The source of this story was G S Shaftain, head of Criminal Intelligence in the Police Force. He said an informant told him of the plot on 11th December to activate two days later. He then claimed that he assembled hundreds of triads leaders in a hotel, where, through the intervention of a senior Shanghai triads leader, they were persuaded to desist, in the nick of time, on payment of a large bribe. This story passed unquestioned and lauded by the kind of European whose racial stereotypes assumed that Chinese were basically untrustworthy criminals, motivated only for money. (Shaftain claimed the triads leaders stole the silverware from the hotel). However, it is, as even Shaftain himself was to admit ‘an implausible and fantastic story.’

As a police officer, he would have known that the idea of hundreds of triads leaders meekly turning up for a mass meeting in the middle of an invasion was bizarre. The triads were originally political secret societies as well as criminal, and many had strong links and loyalties to the KMT. Indeed, the Nationalists had long been working with the triads sympathetic to themselves against the Wang Ching Wei faction and the triads who supported them. A pragmatic police officer would also have understood the sheer logistics of preparing and indeed calling off such a huge plot in the midst of battle. Certainly there were fifth columnists, but violence towards foreigners was minimal, particularly considering the intensity of anti-foreign feeling and riots during the 1920’s and 30’s. In any case, the triads rank and file were gainfully employed looting and extorting in the wake of the Japanese advance. The idea seems to have developed because some of the Japanese propaganda leaflets advocated killing white people, but there does not seem to be any evidence that this was taken seriously, except perhaps by the Europeans, aware of being defeated by an enemy who believed in Asia for the Asiatics. Shaftain must have been delighted at the ease with
which the Police Commissioner handed over $20,000 without question when advised of the plot, though it was claimed that the bribe money came from the Shanghai triads leader Tu Yueh Sheng, then a refugee, albeit wealthy, in Hong Kong. Whatever the truth behind the story, it gained currency as it made the escape of General Yee and Admiral Chan Chak palatable to colonials by portraying it as an honourable act by the British to reward Yee for his assistance in saving them.

It was almost certainly also a smokescreen to disguise the removal from Hong Kong of something important to the British. MacDougall claimed in 1942 that he had not planned to go but had been persuaded at the last moment by senior government officials. MacDougall however was circumspect, careful not to betray sensitive information in an open letter. He could, however, say that during the last two years his work had become increasingly political in character. Officially neutral in the Sino Japanese War, I had nevertheless behind the scenes consistently exerted what influence I possessed toward blocking and hampering the propaganda and other activities of the Japanese and the adherents of the Wang Ching Wei....I had worked very closely with Chinese organisations and did all in my power, consistent with the interests of the Colony, to aid them. It should also be noted that he was not an officer of the colonial establishment but belonged to the Ministry of Information. He was to return to Hong Kong on liberation to reinstate the administration. While no high profile officers escaped with the Chan Chak group, it is probable that some were carrying information. There were men from Army, Navy and Air Force, and they were chosen for the mission, only one man being a “guest.” Major Goring was to spend much of the war attached to various strategic planning groups in the China theatre.

The extent of KMT activity in Hong Kong was considerable. Hong Kong was a sort of open house where all factions of Chinese politics from left to right could operate, as long as they were discreet. Overt acts of terrorism and subversion in other colonies, like the Malayan federation, were suppressed. The territory was also the port through which arms and armaments flowed into China. Technically this was in breach of the Hague Convention as Britain was supposed to be neutral, but there were ways of smuggling and circumventing the system. Baileys, the Hong Kong shipyard, built river gunboats that were outfitted with guns once they entered China. The same technology that enabled
Hong Kong shipyards to do marine engineering could also be used to make armour cladding for ships and vehicles. Hong Kong was also the base from which British aircraft manufacturers wanted to penetrate the Chinese market - the Far East Flying School wanted to train Chinese to fly so they would buy British rather than American or German planes. Hong Kong was also a centre for financial transactions both within and outside the banking system, a source for remittances and money transfers, more secure than Shanghai after the Japanese conquest. A large KMT community operated out of and lived in Hong Kong: almost a parallel government. While there was sympathy for the Nationalists, the colonial administration was uncertain how to maintain a balance between the Japanese and the Chinese Government. Riots against Japanese living in Hong Kong had been suppressed, and no protests made against Japanese attacks on the junk fleet. When the St Johns Ambulance wanted to send an ambulance to bombed Canton, the Colonial Office refused permission. Groups of Chinese ‘terrorists’ were arrested and deported from time to time. As late as May 1941 the colony’s police force raided premises at 98 Robinson Road and destroyed a wireless transmitting station which had been operating for three years. The leader of this group was a Chan So, an agent of General Wu Te Ching. When Governor Northcote sought guidance, the Colonial Office was advised by the Foreign Office that British policy had to vary according to circumstances, and support for China should be rendered ‘compatible with the safety of Empire and avoidance of actual hostilities with the Japanese.’ Nonetheless, there was a significant understanding between the Goumindang and the British when it came to matters of mutual benefit. When war officially broke out, their clandestine relationship could come out into the open. When Phyllis Harrop, a civilian consultant working with the police reported for duty right after the outbreak of hostilities, she was assigned to work with the KMT who had already started to occupy offices with the police.

The Japanese were all too aware of the importance of Hong Kong to the KMT. The Japanese Foreign Minister had softly but firmly reminded the British Ambassador to keep the KMT under control. Even before their push to the south, the Japanese had identified KMT activists and targeted educated, articulate overseas Chinese as a threat and source of resistance. In Malaya and Singapore, they were to massacre thousands of Chinese in the wake of their advance, a fact obscured by the emphasis on the sufferings of Europeans interned in camps. In Hong Kong, on
22nd December, in the midst of some of the most savage fighting on Hong Kong Island, the single largest atrocity involving civilians of the entire battle period occurred. Much has been made of atrocities that affected Europeans, but this incident is worth analysing because it gives us hints on what the Japanese knew about Hong Kong. Ma Tso Yuen recounted how, while his family were having dinner, they heard shots and found that their building, No 42 Blue Pool Road, was surrounded by Japanese. The inhabitants of the building and its neighbour, No 44 were systematically rounded up and herded together. Through a door, Ma saw a neighbour being beaten for resisting. The women were separated, many raped, and then killed. The men were taken down near the nullah and bayoneted, with Japanese stabbing the bodies to make sure all were dead. Ma survived, although he suffered nine separate wounds, because he lay hidden. When the danger was over he realised he was surrounded by the bodies of 30 men, including that of his own son. The number of men, women and children killed in other parts of the building is unknown: the buildings were small, low rise apartments, but crowded: in one flat some fourteen people were sheltering. Phyllis Harrop, through her KMT contacts, estimated that at least forty persons in her building alone were killed. No other atrocity against civilians was as systematic, organised or as savage as this. Normal battle mayhem was not the motive. Kempeitai agents travelled with battle units, even though they were not part of the normal military structure. Under cover of fighting they could settle other opposition. Blue Pool Road was targeted because it was where KMT officials and agents lived with their families. It was no random massacre. Among the dead included men from the Ministry of Communications and the Central Trust, a front organisation for the KMT, whose offices had been searched by the British and whose members had been arrested and sometimes deported. Ma himself had been an employee of the Central Trust.

The relationship between the KMT, the colonial government, and individuals involved in undercover work might bear further investigation. Phyllis Harrop mentions in her private diary that 'at the request of Chinese members of the Dai Li organisation who had been left behind in the colony (she) was asked to go to Chongqing with the complete details of the guerrillas' arms and ammunition which was buried in various homes and gardens in the island, to deliver information and arrange for instruction to be given to the men remaining in Hong Kong to carry on their work. My escape was engineered by the Chinese.
The whole plan was discussed with R A C North, Secretary for Chinese Affairs and J A Fraser, Defence Secretary who agreed. When Harrop went to Chongqing the first person she contacted was her old friend from pre-war, Madame Soong Ching Ling.

Madame Soong was the widow of Dr Sun Yat Sen, founder of the Chinese Republic and a former Hong Kong resident himself, and graduate of the Hong Kong Medical School which predated Hong Kong University. When Chiang Kai Shek and his extreme rightist faction won the power struggle for control of the National Government, Madame Soong moved to Hong Kong where she and other supporters of the left wing principles Sun had espoused were able to operate with more latitude. She headed an organisation known as the China Defence League which raised funds in support of the anti-Japanese war effort in China, and had connections with many left wing liberal groups, both within China and among the western intelligentsia in Hong Kong and China. This organisation was effectively a form of interface between the KMT Old Guard and more progressive groups. Agnes Smedley, Rewi Alley, Anna Louise Strong and other westerners with strong contacts with the Communist Party under Mao Ze Dong mixed in the same circles as Madame Soong and her supporters, which included Sun Fo, Dr Sun’s son by a previous marriage. Sun Fo himself, though he lived in Hong Kong, frequently travelled to Moscow, ostensibly for ‘medical treatment,’ often staying for long periods. The league did humanitarian work, organising aid for the millions of refugees in Guangdong and in Hong Kong. Percy Chen, son of Dr Eugene Chen, Dr Sun’s Foreign minister and close friend worked closely with this aspect of the Leagues activities. Chen was a socialist and would later declare for the Communist Party. Significantly, F W Kendall had worked with the league in organising programmes to cope with refugees. He himself was something of a refugee, having lost his livelihood in the same Japanese push in Guangdong. Contacts between this left faction of the Guomindang and British people in Hong Kong of a progressive frame of mind were also significant. Hilda Selwyn-Clarke, known as ‘Red Hilda’ not only for the colour of her hair, but for her politics, was part of this group, rather than a member of the conventional, highly stratified world of colonial society. Her husband may have been a member of the government administration but she did not subscribe to colonial or establishment values. Kendall also worked with Selwyn-Clarke, as did his Chinese wife, who was to be one of the Selwyn
Clarke resistance circle during the occupation. Another member of the group was Emily Hahn, later the wife of Charles Boxer. Relationships between this left wing branch of the Guomindang, with their strong Communist connections, and key figures in the British establishment may shed more light on the relations between the British and the Communists.

When the War Office authorised the creation of a Chinese Machine Gun Unit, it pondered where the men for this group would come from. Who did they call on for advice? None other than Rewi Alley, the journalist who had lived in Yenan and knew the Chinese Communists well. He even went so far as to suggest that the War Office consult a Communist guerrilla leader from the north on setting up the unit, and recruiting men from China. This was tantamount to establishing, in Hong Kong, a unit of left influenced fighters. Even more significantly, the unit was designed specifically to be a Chinese unit with minimal British input. The first batch of trainees were supposed to form an elite officer corps in what eventually might be an all Chinese unit. The War Office was prepared to go along with this idea and detailed Chauvin, who had set up the wireless network, to organise the unit. This was in line with SOE's record of training and arming local men for a resistance and sabotage role, although the details of the training these men received is unknown, and officially they were a 'machine gun company.' By this stage, SOE had two separate guerrilla training units in China itself: the Danish Commando Company staffed by Danish businessmen under cover of Danish neutrality, and another force known as Mission 204, a much larger scale and better established organisation created to assist specifically in the Chinese war effort and operate in the hinterland of Shanghai. Chauvin was able to recruit and train fifty men for this Chinese battalion. Whether he used men with Communist leanings or men recruited through his contacts with KMT guerrillas is unknown. Photographs of the passing out parade of the unit show that they were unusually tall men, possibly northerners. Unfortunately, they graduated from their training barely a week before the Japanese attacked.

Just as war is an extension of politics, so is politics essential for the continuance of war. In a situation like Hong Kong, the political aspects of resistance were even more complex than in other places because of the proximity and the supremacy of China. No amount of intelligence gathering and sabotage skills would have counted without
political understanding. Boxer's approaches to Chiang Kai Shek came at an opportune time, and might have developed into more, had circumstances so evolved. By spiriting Admiral Chan right from under the noses of the Japanese the British were making a political statement that they, too, could deliver. This was important as the Chinese had perfectly effective escape and intelligence systems of their own: General S K Yee, for example, was able to escape from Apleichau Island, even though the Japanese were almost certainly not in pursuit and there appeared to be no means of escape for him when he was left behind, believed killed, as the two MTBS flotilla sailed away. Nonetheless to retain their credibility and their claim on Hong Kong, the British had to demonstrate their own ability to create a functional resistance and gain the respect of the Chinese.

Being realistic about defeat meant that British military strategists could plan pragmatically for occupation and resistance. It was those who clung to colonialist values who could not envisage that there might in fact be quite sophisticated planning behind the scenes. Quietly and unobtrusively, the British developed a comprehensive and effective network ready to activate as soon as the Japanese attacked. They were not “caught on the hop” by defeat by any means, nor unprepared. The groundwork was developed and networks in place and in some cases already operating. Support was brokered with the Chinese National Government and also with the Communists, and with the influential left wing faction of the KMT as well. The hinterland behind Hong Kong had been surveyed and alliances were in place to support any resistance in occupied Hong Kong. The British military may have surrendered Hong Kong on Christmas Day, but the next phase, war by other means, was poised and ready to unfold.

Change of direction

Just as refugees had poured into Hong Kong to escape the Japanese conquest of south and central China, refugees began pouring out of Hong Kong within days of the Japanese attack. Throughout January 1942, people were pouring out of Hong Kong by any form of transport they could find: some villagers reported 100 or more passing through each day. At first, the Japanese neither had the inclination to stop them, nor the apparatus in hand to organise an orderly evacuation. Even in POW camps it was easy enough even for men to discreetly remove
themselves and slip outside into town, claiming neutral or non-combatant status. Many Europeans were able to stay out of internment or leave if they could: Professor Gordon King escaped with sufficient materials to try and restart a medical school in Free China. There were even escapes from Stanley Internment Camp, including of women civilians. Within the Prisoner of War Camps, there were very strong feelings that, while individuals might choose to escape, it was the duty of senior officers to remain with their men at a time of crisis. Escapes were of extremely limited military or strategic value. Even men like Col Newnham, Major Boxer, Lt Bush (who was a MTB officer) and others, whose sensitive work gave them more reason than most to need to get away, remained as prisoners. It was no failure of courage to choose to remain behind and help others. Newnham was later executed [Hon. Ed. - I think I prefer the term murdered.] and both Boxer and Bush imprisoned. Senior officers in camp expressed grave offence at the tone of the messages sent into camp. Nonetheless, the need to escape is a human trait, and the right of an individual to decide whether he was more useful in or out of camp was acknowledged. At least four parties of European servicemen escaped from POW camps in the first few weeks of internment.

Perhaps the most publicised escape occurred on 9th January 1942 when three university officials left Sham Shui Po camp. Lindsay Ride, a physiologist, said he had planned the escape very early on and realised he needed a Chinese to facilitate it. Fortunately in camp he found Francis Lee Yan Piu, a resourceful clerk who had worked for him as a clerk. Lee arranged for the three Europeans to get Chinese clothing and to cross into the New Territories, where they laid low during the day, planning to explain to any Chinese who found them that they were Germans, as they feared the Chinese might be hostile. How being German made a difference is unclear. To their surprise, when they did encounter Chinese, the Chinese were not only delighted to help but appeared to know exactly what to do. These were guerrillas who had previously been in contact with someone with British connections, for they knew just where to bring the strangers. When the party arrived in Shaukwan (Kukong) over the border in China, they were met by MacEwan and Talan, members of 'a mysterious Hong Kong organisation known colloquially as the Cloak and Dagger Boys, who had received what appeared to be some sort of guerrilla training formerly in Hong Kong.'
Significantly, this party was the only escape group without a regular military officer in their midst, and to have a Chinese to organise their escape and travel with them. All three Europeans were academics, without experience of up to date, modern military thinking. Moreover, given the nature of colonial society, they were used to being treated with deference. It would not have occurred to them to question why the Chinese along their escape route had been so helpful, or why they were met by Europeans in this very remote area, still bandit country, where few ventured, who were not only expecting them, but ‘who were quite conversant with the route back to Kowloon and were assistants to FW Kendall, another member of the same organisation whose address... was c/o Col Chauvin, British Embassy, Chung King.’

Lt D F Davies, formerly a Lecturer in Physics, solemnly advised that he understood ‘Col LT Ride of our party was to attempt some sort of underground railroad back to the Camp...(and) if they could be persuaded and/or allowed to carry out this work, I would suggest that the Cloak and Dagger Group be approached.’ Since the Cloak and Dagger Boys they met were Z Force, this was in fact one of the jobs they had long been trained for.

The trip from Hong Kong had been stressful, not least because a commanding officer had told Ride in no uncertain terms before departure that he should be court-martialled on arrival in Chongqing for deserting his troops. From Lt Davies report, we know that the group had talked with Z Force members about their organisation. Grimsdale was later to refer to Ride blaming Kendall as a ‘complete failure’ for delaying his departure from Kukong, then a safe town with Chinese Army presence. Ride himself makes no mention, describing the men later as mere escapees with the Chan Chak group. While still in Kukong, after meeting MacEwan and Talan, the group met Col Chauvin and Dr Wan Yik Shin, a doctor who had served both in the Chinese Army and in the British RAMC. It was at this stage that Ride appears to have outlined his proposals to set up an elaborate escape and evasion organisation. By the time he arrived in Chongqing a few days later, he had formulated an elaborate proposal. Operational details were sketchy, to be left to others to sort out, naming Dr Wan and General Yu Mo Han, commander of Chinese forces in the area. On one point he was unequivocally adamant: that ‘the section should be under the command of Lt Col Ride.’ It was ‘an absolutely essential prerequisite’ that the British authorities provide him with a letter confirming his
status, since there were 'so many other senior officers working in the area,' and he saw it as 'axiomatic that all branches of the service will cooperate and pool their information.' The new section was to have 'full authority to control the movements of all Europeans whether military or civil who had escaped.' Having left Hong Kong less than a month earlier, having by his own admission no knowledge of escape and evasion organisations, he was now to command, and to 'have authority to add to his strength such British or Chinese as are available.' The full story of the BAAG is too complex to tell here, but the transition was not seamless. By 16th May 1942, Ride was given the letter he wanted stating 'from the time of escape until they reach Chiyang all escapees of whatever rank and whatever service will come under your command. This should be made clear to them at first responsibility,' xxviii This included the men who had spent so long setting up the groundwork, who had met the Ride group and brought them to safety.

Another even more fundamental change in direction was the change in emphasis from a general resistance function to an organisation primarily for the escape of Prisoners of War, and particularly of Europeans at that. Ride consistently thought in terms of mass escapes from camp, larger scale and more spectacular than the Chan Chak escape. In the summer of 1942, he planned the escape of 500 or more POWs by junk, and as late as September 1943 proposed paying millions to guerrillas to conquer Canton so an airborne assault of paratroopers could descend on Hong Kong to free the POWs. xxx The gathering of intelligence and support of other forms of resistance were corollary to this basic function. An analysis of why the escape of POWs became the central focus of British activity in the Hong Kong region when it was not of paramount military strategic value in the overall conduct of war in the theatre is again beyond the scale of this piece. However, it illustrates that the plans British military strategists had developed to challenge Japanese occupation and to continue the struggle by alternative methods had to adapt to new conditions. SOE and SOE related agencies were by no means silenced in China but continued to play a very important role, even around Hong Kong. The chrysalis opened, but what emerged had to shape itself to a new situation.
NOTES

1. Quoted in Endacott and Birch, *Hong Kong Eclipse*, Hong Kong 1978 p 56
2. Grimsdale *Thunder in the East* MSS
3. ibid
4. FO 371/22153
5. FO 371/23573
7. WO 208/2049A
8. ibid
9. private diary CO129/23
10. Endacott’s notes, HKPRO.
11. WO 208/716
12. WO 208/457, 12th July 1944
14. ADM 199/1287
15. Police Files G56(4)
16. Although there are rumours of an incident in which some 400 fifth columnists were reported killed.
17. Letter to SS colonies 3/2/42 WO 208/733A
18. Alfred Peveril Guest who attached himself after hearing about the mission from an unknown source.
19. FO 371/22160
20. WO 311/543
21. CO 129/591/23
22. WO 208/727
23. ADM 199/357
24. ibid.
25. WO 208/3260 p 41, also Ride, *British Army Aid Group, Hong Kong* 1981 p 44
26. CO 129/950/23
27. WO 208/3260 appendix 1
28. ibid, appendix 2
29. ibid. appendix 4
[Hon Editor - I have added this photograph of Richard Pflederer Charles Ralph Boxer. born 8th March, 1904, died 27th April, 2000. After World War Two, Mr Boxer returned to Great Britain and pursued a distinguished academic career at the University of London.]
[Hon Editor - I have added this self-explanatory photograph taken at Waichow (Huizhou) on 29th December, 1941.]
I have added this photograph of Sir Lindsay Ride (died 1977) taken in Australia in 1967.