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## Chapter Two

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# Captive Commission

In 1941, the British Colony of Hong Kong marked its centenary. While mother-Britain was even then undergoing the deprivations of air raids and food rationing, Hong Kong continued to live in the twilight of a tenuous peace.

The effect of the European War was felt only marginally in the Pacific. The German community had been interned at La Salle College in Kowloon, and German assets had been seized. The South China Morning Post "Bomber Fund" raised \$2,671,076 during 1940 and 1941. There were charity concerts for the British Prisoner-of-War Fund held on the Cricket Club grounds, and air raid drills became commonplace. Yet that summer the Colony breathed a sigh of relief as a typhoon passed nearby, and the American Consul-General, Mr. A.E. Southard, was quoted as saying he was optimistic about the Pacific situation and believed there would not be a war with Japan. British Intelligence shared his view and briefed the new Governor, Sir Mark Young, to this effect. The newspaper that summer advertised "tiffin" at the Repulse Bay Hotel, and then "sea-bathing" at the Lido. Another smaller advertisement touted the effects of the "Expert, Electric Hand Massages" given by the affable Miss Takamura on the first floor of 14 Wyndham Street. Patronised by the military, the lady was a patient listener to all their gossip. She was also a Japanese spy.

Yet as early as 1938, the Japanese had landed troops at Bias Bay, 15 miles from the New Territories, and captured Canton. Picnickers around Lo Wu were sometimes surprised by Japanese patrols. On February 21, 1941, a very senior military officer comforted his audience at a Rotary Club lunch by stating that "Hong Kong was impregnable". Yet the Government took the precaution of evacuating 3,474 British women and children to Manila, before an onward move to the safety of Australia. Some thought that this caused the social life in the Colony to reach new heights.

One man who honestly felt that, with the addition of two more battalions, Hong Kong could be held, was a Canadian acquaintance of the Trade Commissioner. The General Officer commanding the local garrison, Major-General A.E. Grasett ended his tour of duty in August, 1941. Grasett returned to London via Canada and stopped off in Ottawa where he convinced the Mackenzie King Government that with reinforcements, Hong Kong could hold out until help arrived from the U.S. Hawaiian Fleet.

The two battalions selected were the Royal Rifles of Montreal and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, both short on weapons and untrained in combat. But, as Sir Lyman Duff's subsequent "Report on the Canadian Expeditionary Force" points out, the whole Canadian Army was short of equipment and at that time any regiment would have been similarly handicapped. Named "C" Force by the Defence Department, they arrived in Hong Kong on board the armed merchant cruiser "Prince Robert" on November 17, 1941. In three short weeks they would be locked in combat, lacking air support, with the seasoned troops of the 38th Division of the Japanese Army.

Paying the price they did, the heroism of the two battalions is an inextricable part of any study on the Canadian presence in Hong Kong. The logistical blunders that attended the outfitting and transporting of "C" Force are infamous. Bad luck plagued the expedition throughout. The transport and water trucks were loaded into the New Zealand troopship "Awatea" and delayed in Manila when the War began. A number of Ford V-8 trucks were hurriedly found by the Trade Commission as a poor substitute. At the same time, there were a flood of telegrams from Ottawa to be dealt with, as the long arm of military bureaucracy discovered that sales tax had been quoted on the price paid for 52 cases of marmalade shipped on the "Prince Robert" and argued that this was not