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Cover Page

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Title: Comparing the Canadian Military Experience in Hong Kong and Afghanistan.

Comparing the Canadian Military Experience in Hong Kong and Afghanistan.

On December 25, 1941, the surviving British, Canadian and Indian units who had been defending the British colony of Hong Kong against a much superior Japanese force were forced to surrender.¹ The defence had cost the Canadian force of 1,975 troops 290 dead and 470 wounded.² In addition, 264 soldiers were to die in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps before the survivors were liberated at the end of the war.³

Canada's mission to Afghanistan is currently facing many of the same problems that Canada's mission to Hong Kong in 1941 faced. The Canadian military should use the lessons learned in Hong Kong to carry out the mission in Afghanistan more effectively and efficiently.

An inquiry after the Hong Kong debacle led by the concluded that poor leadership was not the cause of the defeat. Instead, the report faulted the lack of training that the troops received, as well as the use of recruits to fill in the ranks of the two battalions contributed by Canada.⁴ Many people viewed the inquiry and its report as a white-wash, designed to shift the blame for the defeat away from the real causes:⁵ lack of an independent Canadian foreign-intelligence collection capability, lack and obsolescence of equipment, and poor leadership and decision-making in the Canadian military High Command and the Canadian government.

One of the Canadian examples of the lack of equipment in Hong Kong involved the transport of the vehicles of the two battalions sent to Hong Kong. Due to various logistical and managerial problems, the forces' 212 vehicles did not arrive in Vancouver until after the force had departed for Hong Kong. The vehicles then had to be transported on an American freighter to Hong Kong because there were no Canadian ships available.⁶

The freighter left on November 4 with stops in Hawaii and the Philippines on its itinerary before it was due to reach Hong Kong. Unfortunately, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred while the equipment was in port in the Philippines. The Canadian vehicles were requisitioned by the American forces in the Philippines who also had equipment problems and never reached Hong Kong.⁷

Another example of the deficiencies in equipment at the Battle of Hong Kong was with respect to the Allied air detachment assigned to the defence of Hong Kong. The air detachment consisted of 5 airplanes: two Walrus amphibian planes and three Vildebeeste torpedo planes.⁸ Both types of planes were obsolete in comparison to the attacking Japanese forces planes and the number of planes denied the Allied forces any first strike capability. The fate of the air detachment was decided soon after the attack commenced, when a Japanese force of forty-eight airplanes destroyed the 5 Allied aircraft on the ground at the Kai Tak airfield.⁹

¹ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) pg. 198.

² Granatstein, 199.

³ Granatstein, 199.

⁴ Granatstein, 200.

⁵ Granatstein, 200.

⁶ Granatstein, 197.

⁷ Granatstein, 197.

⁸ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 255.

⁹ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 258.

Today, the same equipment deficiencies are evident in the Canadian mission to Afghanistan. An example is that most Canadian heavy equipment (such as most combat vehicles) must be transported by leased aircraft, like the Antonov 124,¹⁰ due to a lack of heavy equipment lift capability in the Canadian armed forces.¹¹

In Afghanistan, there have also been problems with the equipment provided. Canadian troops were initially supplied with Iltis jeeps, which provided no defence against the main weapons of the Afghan insurgents, roadside bombs and suicide bombers, as the jeeps had no armour and no closed top.¹² The Canadians were then issued with the Mercedes Benz G-Wagon, which also does not contain enough armour to protect against these sorts of attacks.¹³ Canadian soldiers are now beginning to receive vehicles like the Nyala and Mamba, both of which are mine-hardened and designed to protect against roadside bombs and suicide bombers.¹⁴

Another cause of the defeat at Hong Kong was poor-decision making in various levels of the Canadian High Command and the Canadian government. A good example of this deficiency was the decision to send Canadian troops to Hong Kong.

In 1941, most units of the Canadian armed forces were not prepared to fight, but the governing Liberals were being pressured by the opposition Conservatives to do more to fight the war.¹⁵ When the request came from the foreign office in London for troops to garrison Hong Kong, it would have been politically dangerous for Mackenzie King to turn down the request. He agreed to send troops to avoid possible political repercussions and not because Canadians were threatened by a Japanese conquest of Hong Kong.¹⁶

The compromise made political sense, but it did not make military sense. Indeed, it had already been decided at the highest levels of the British government that Hong Kong could not be defended if the Japanese attacked it.¹⁷ Once the Japanese attacked, the only reason for fighting for Hong Kong was to encourage other British outposts to fight with the same tenacity and to try to buy time in order to destroy the harbour facilities.¹⁸

The same sort of decision-making led to the Canadian deployment in Afghanistan. Before September 11, 2001, Canada's armed forces were not capable of launching any sort of large-scale operation without causing great amounts of stress on the Canadian Forces, increasing government spending on the military and requiring substantial help from allied nations. However, the decision was made to help invade Afghanistan and, on October 7, 2001, Operation Apollo was initiated.¹⁹

The three reasons given for Canada's involvement in Operation Apollo were that it would defend Canada's national interest, ensure Canada's leadership in world affairs and help Afghanistan to rebuild.²⁰ Although all three reasons are admirable, they are all

¹⁰ Canadian American Strategic Review, Background – Airlifters – NATO's Strategic Arlift Interim Solution, <http://www.sfu.ca/casr/bg-airlift-nato.htm> (March 14, 2007)

¹¹ Canadian American Strategic Review, A Modest Proposal - Extending NATO's Salis to North America, <http://www.sfu.ca/casr/mp-an124nato.htm> (March 14, 2007)

¹² Steele, Sean, Truck Utility Light 4 x 4 Iltis Canadian, Military ¼ Ton Trucks, <http://www.m38a1.ca/iltis.html> (March 14, 2007)

¹³ Tessier, Cindy, G-Wagon to Debut in Afghanistan Mission, Department of National Defence, http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Feature_Story/2004/feb04/09-2_f_e.asp (March 14, 2007)

¹⁴ Department of National Defence, Equipment: Nyala and Mamba http://www.army.forces.gc.ca/lf/English/2_5.asp?Offset=1&keywords=NYALA%20AND%20MAMBA (March 14, 2007)

¹⁵ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) pg. 196.

¹⁶ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) pg. 196.

¹⁷ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 254.

¹⁸ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 254.

¹⁹ Wikipedia, Operation Apollo, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Apollo (March 14, 2007)

²⁰ Wikipedia, Canada's Role in the Invasion of Afghanistan, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada's_role_in_the_invasion_of_Afghanistan (March 14, 2007)

primarily political. As with Hong Kong, nothing in Afghanistan was directly threatening Canada.

As a result of this mission, great stress has been put on the Canadian Forces. For example, due to the amount of funding going to the Afghanistan mission, Canadian naval units have been unable to deploy from their bases because they do not have enough funding²¹ and Canadian medical units are stretched thin due to lack of critical staff.²² Canadian troops have also had to rely on allied nations considerably, to provide air support and air transport into and inside the theatre of operations.²³ Steps have been taken to ease the strain placed on the Canadian Forces through the procurement of new equipment and the recruitment of more troops. Unfortunately these things take time and very few of them will have any impact before the Canadian mission in Afghanistan ends.

One final reason for the defeat of Hong Kong that still resonates today is the lack of a foreign intelligence capability in the Canadian government, forcing Canada to rely entirely on intelligence from other nations. Much of the intelligence that was given to the troops when they were in Hong Kong was faulty. For instance, troops were told that the Japanese forces facing them were of low quality, that the pilots had bad aim and were unused to night flying, and that the defences of Hong Kong were impregnable.²⁴ These facts were incorrect, as the Japanese forces were of high quality and well-disciplined, flexible in tactics and well led.²⁵ The Japanese troops were well equipped and had overwhelming air support, which gave them materiel superiority over the Allied troops and helped them to conquer Hong Kong.²⁶

The same situation prevails today. Canada has no foreign intelligence-gathering organ as a part of the military or the government and therefore must rely on other nations for intelligence regarding the initiation and conduct of military operations.²⁷ Only time will tell if this is having a negative impact on the mission in Afghanistan. However if Canada had agreed to send troops to Iraq, they would have been sent there based on intelligence provided by the United States which turned out to have been faulty.²⁸

Many of the lessons learned by the defeat of the Canadian, British and Indian forces in Hong Kong are relevant to the situation faced by the Canadian troops in Afghanistan. Canadian troops should not be sent on an operation to fulfill political goals if the Canadian Forces are not able to support them. Canadian troops need reliable equipment in order to carry out their duties effectively. Finally Canadian troops need their own intelligence service, capable of delivering relevant and factual intelligence to the troops. If these criteria are not met, Canadian troops will not be able to complete their mission as effectively.

A broad solution to all these issues would be to give the Canadian Forces more funding until they are such a size and state that they can carry out any mission given to them by the Canadian government effectively and without causing undue stress to the

²¹ MacIntyre, "Money woes for the military: Majority of Canadian fleet remains in home ports," Vancouver Sun. Vancouver B.C.: Jan 18, 2007. Pg. A4

²² James Gordon, "Medics Short on Personnel, Training," Ottawa Citizen. Ottawa, Ontario. Feb 1, 2007. Pg. A4

²³ Dianne DeMille, Canadian Soldiers in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces Must Rely on Allies for Troop Transport and Evacuation, <http://www.sfu.ca/casr/fi-transport1.htm> (March 14, 2007)

²⁴ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 257.

²⁵ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 257.

²⁶ Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991) pg. 257.

²⁷ Jerome Mellon, The Missing Agency, http://cv.jmellon.com/cfis_2.pdf, (March 14, 2007) pg 5

²⁸ Sumi Das and Suzanne Malveaux, "Bush takes responsibility for invasion intelligence," CNN, December 14, 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/12/14/bush.iraq/index.html>

armed forces. After the defeat at Hong Kong, there were major restructurings in the Canadian armed forces, as well as vastly increased spending. This allowed Canadian troops to effectively contribute in the war against Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. We should learn from the lessons of the past to create a better future, both for the Canadian Forces and Canada, and for the world.

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