

# HONG KONG DEBACLE

ONE morning I saw a familiar silhouette in the harbour of Hong Kong. It was the former New Zealand greyhound *Awatea*, which had just arrived with a couple of battalions of Canadian troops. The Canucks marched to barracks ashore in fine fettle; their equipment was to come "later." But that was too late: the Nips beat them to it.

## Pearl Harbour Day

What factors decided the Japanese to strike just when they did? This, I know, is my cue for a bit of "expert" analysis—the state of the war in Russia, President Roosevelt and General Marshal, the temperament of Mr. Kuruu and other little men in top-hats who were speeding by plane to Washington to take tea with Mr. Cordell Hull. At the risk of deflating the experts, let's forget all that and recall a single not unimportant fact in the sailing orders of the U.S. Pacific Fleet—which will, one hopes, be a little less accessible in future than they were in 1941.

There were three main battle squadrons, of approximately equal strength in capital ships, based on Pearl Harbour. Naval policy demanded that only one of these should be in the anchorage at "Battleship Row" at any given time; the other two were to be at sea, on patrol or exercises. Sometimes it happened that two of the fleets overlapped for a few hours, when one came in to fuel or refit before the other left. But *there was only one day in the whole naval year when all three fleets would be in Pearl Harbour together*, and the sailing orders made this clear for months in advance.

Can anybody guess the date? Yes, it was a Sunday morning in early December; and you know that American Sunday breakfast. . .

## The Siege of Hong Kong

Hong Kong was the most exposed of all our Far Eastern positions, and the inadequacy of its defences is now a familiar tale. I don't want to go into all that again; nor do I wish to review the military operations there. It isn't quite the same thing describing a battle in which one has taken part—however insignificantly—as a combatant. Tolstoy knew this; and the chief merit of the unforgettable battle-pieces in *War and Peace* is the way in which the viewpoint shifts, like a clever and sensitive camera, from the plans of the commanders to the little self-centred bit of action seen by any given soldier or officer in the field.

I could fill this whole set of articles with pungent comments on the Battle of Hong Kong, comments as caustic as Tolstoy's when concerned with details of fortifications and ammunition, or the antics of brasshats safely buried in their "battle-box" 50 feet underground. But that is too easy; and the commander has seldom the right of reply. Nobody really expected much from Hong Kong. It held, when all is said, for 17 days—which isn't as good as the three months called for, but is still better than the four days the Japanese gave it. No one would deny the importance of those 17 days, in containing and crippling a couple of divisions of crack Japanese assault



THE SOONG SISTERS outside an air-raid shelter in Chungking. From left: Mme. Kung, Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, and Mme. Sun Yat-sen.

troops who went on from there to Singapore and the Indies: who might (who knows?) have gone on to New Zealand, one bright day in 1942, if the 17 days had been four.

To achieve whatever was achieved at Hong Kong, brave men died and inflicted losses far beyond their own. The credit of the siege belongs to them. The appalling muddle and waste and ignominy of the surrender is a bad debt at the door of something much older and more vicious than any military bonehead: the British colonial system.

## Prophet on a Limb

Meantime, to pick up my own story. I must begin with an abject admission of the downfall of the prophet. After persuading a good many people to clear out of Hong Kong (and the Philippines and Singapore and Rangoon) because the war was coming, I got caught in Hong Kong myself.

Back from Chungking with the China Defence League, I had suddenly come down with typhoid through drinking Dairy Farm milk (the Dairy Farm, any Hong Kong resident will tell you, is the modern European establishment whose pedigree cows and ultra-hygienic plant catered for the Olympian Peak-dwellers. I had travelled for years all over the unhygienic interior of China, and never had typhoid). For a couple of months I languished in the Queen Mary Hospital, next to Sir Arthur Blackburn from the Chungking Embassy, who had been wounded in the leg during the summer bombing. On the floor above, Mickey Hahn (whose *China to Me* will give you all the gossip you want about Hong Kong before and after the Japanese occupation—any number of libel actions pending) was having her wonder baby, Carola, holding receptions like a modern Maintenon while the Peak reeled beneath a blow more shattering than any the Japanese could contrive.

Out of hospital but still feeling the effects, I worked hard to get out a C.D.L. Report for 1941: this went to the printers just over the week-end the war broke. Meantime, Mme. Sun had had an urgent cable from her brother, T. V.

Soong, in Washington, telling her to get out of Hong Kong. We had always had an arrangement with the friendly head of the Kaitak Airport to keep a plane for this emergency; and I wanted Mme. Sun to go then—to my mind, her safety was worth more than Hong Kong, though here I admit to being prejudiced.

We talked it all over with Vincent Sheean—a man of deep responsibility in this last decade, for it was the phenomenal success of his *Personal History* that first started journalists writing their memoirs. Sheean left Hong Kong on the last Clipper that made it before Pearl Harbour: before the plane left I sat up all night with him in his room at the Peninsula Hotel, drawing sketch-maps of Chinese guerrilla zones and making a very poor effort to keep up with his Special Correspondent's capacity for whisky-sodas. Though one may not have the greatest respect for his political judgment, there is a romantic touch in all Sheean's writing that is rare in modern journalism, and an occasional limpidity of vision that is very appealing (see his portrait of Mme. Sun Yat-sen and Hankow in 1927.) He was very excited about China at this time and was taking his report straight back to President Roosevelt, with a not-too-serious notion of himself returning to Chungking as U.S. Ambassador. All visiting American publicists, including Henry Luce and Ernest Hemingway, seemed to have had this same idea.

## Ascent of a Balloon

Against our advice, Mme. Sun did not go; and I slipped off for the week-end to Lantau, the bare hilly island with its Buddhist monastery where the missionaries go for the summer holidays. I came back on the Sunday night, so tired that I went straight to bed in my lodgings with a North China family near the university. Next morning I was having breakfast, brought by a large and friendly *amah* with bound feet, when the sirens went. I hadn't heard the early morning radio, with its news of the declaration of war.

"Ai-yah, Mr. Po! Japanese planes!" she shrieked suddenly from the window,

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as our guns began a meagre barrage. Paralysed over a grapefruit, I watched the silver planes with the red markings swooping gracefully over Kaitak. That famous delayed-action balloon was up at last.

## Night Flight

My first thought was of Mme. Sun, who was living over on the Kowloon side to be near the airport. I couldn't get through to her on the phone, so I went down to the C.D.L. office to bang out my own story on the war. The typewriter keys felt good; curious the reassurance one finds in the tools of one's trade, in moments of crisis! Then the telephone rang.

A familiar quiet voice came over the wire (contrast, please, with some of Emily Hahn's comments about Mme. Sun's nervousness during air-raids in Chungking). She had been at the airport—first main objective of the Japanese in their attack—to meet her sister, Mme. Kung, who had flown down from Chungking that night; and they had been right in the middle of the bombing. I got her eye-witness account of this, and a strong general statement on the war that was very important for Chinese consumption. So the *South China Morning Post* on Tuesday had a scoop, in a rare signed article by Sun Yat-sen's widow on China as an ally of the United Nations.

After that, of course, it was more important than ever that the Soong sisters should get out, for Mme. Sun's statement had told the world that she was in Hong Kong. But the raid on Kaitak had been very effective; not only the total air strength of the R.A.F.—a couple of ancient Wildebeestes—but the two CNAC commercial Douglasses had been strafed and burnt. The only chance of a plane out was if something could get through from China by night.

Meantime the sisters were stranded in Kowloon, for the ferry service had closed down for Chinese passengers; and there were enough Fifth Columnists about to make it highly unwise for them to return to any Soong house. Through Dr. Selwyn-Clarke I managed to arrange for a private launch from the Hong Kong Government; but that evening they got across by ferry, and took rooms quietly in the Gloucester Hotel. The air situation was doubtful until the CNAC Douglasses, beautifully piloted by veteran American fliers who had learnt during the China war to feel their way in and out of Hong Kong through the Japanese blockade, made the airport safely and left again without accident.

That settled it: we had an emergency meeting of what remained of the C.D.L. Committee (mainly Chinese members) and it was unanimously decided that the Chairman should leave Hong Kong. Mme. Sun didn't like going that way, but it was obviously the only thing to do. The Committee records, with all the lists of supporters of the League, were

(continued on next page)