

4-30-2012

## The Battle of Hong Kong: 70 Years Later

Tyler Wentzell  
*University of Toronto*

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### Recommended Citation

Wentzell, Tyler (2011) "The Battle of Hong Kong: 70 Years Later," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol20/iss3/8>

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# The Battle of Hong Kong

## 70 Years Later

Tyler Wentzell

Seventy years have come and gone since the battle of Hong Kong. The colony, once defended by British, Canadian, Indian, and Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps troops, is now protected by 13 Chinese People's Liberation Army defence establishments. In 1941, the British Crown Colony had a population of about 1.5 million, already ballooned by the refugees pouring in as the Japanese army advanced. Today, the Chinese Special Autonomous Region of Hong Kong has a population of more than seven million. In the place of small towns, towering skyscrapers now stand. Yet, much remains the same. Mount Parker, Mount Butler, Jardine's Lookout and Mount Nicholson, once the site of significant engagements, remain virtually unchanged. The low scrub on the hillsides has been replaced by trees – the result of a massive post-war reforestation effort – but otherwise the modern visitor can walk the hills along well-kept trails and gain a greater understanding of the battle. Morning joggers and practitioners of tai chi now use these hills as an escape from the hustle and bustle of urban living. The Shing Mun Redoubt, the

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**Left: The Sai Wan War Cemetery. A total of 228 Canadians lie here, including Brigadier J.K. Lawson, the highest ranking Canadian killed in the Second World War.**

**Inset: Sai Wan Military Cemetery, 1947.**  
CF Joint Imagery Centre PMR 93-326-2

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**Abstract: Tyler Wentzell, a Canadian infantry officer and the author of a recent article on Brigadier J.K. Lawson, visited Hong Kong last summer. He had the opportunity to range over the former British colony and explore the area where the Canadians fought and died in December 1941. This feature provides a "then and now" look at those battlefields.**

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Lei Mun Forts, Sai Wan Fort, and Fort Stanley all remain (although the latter is garrisoned by PLA soldiers and not open to viewing). The Happy Valley Racecourse, rebuilt and expanded, is still there and as popular as ever. Perhaps most important, the graves of the two thousand Canadian, British and Indian soldiers remain impeccably maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The battlefield, and the war graves, are readily accessible and offer an excellent opportunity for the modern Canadian tourist to visit the battlefield and pay their respects.

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In November 1941, the Winnipeg Grenadiers, the Royal Rifles of Canada, and a Canadian brigade headquarters arrived in Hong Kong. Fortress Commander Major-General Charles Maltby now commanded six battalions: the two Canadian infantry battalions (the 5/7 Rajputs and the 2/14 Punjabis), one British infantry battalion (the Royal Scots) and one

British machine gun battalion (the Middlesex Regiment). The Mainland Brigade, composed of the Indian battalions and the Royal Scots, occupied the Gin Drinker's Line. The Island Brigade, under Canadian Brigadier J.K. Lawson, was composed of the Canadians and the Middlesex Regiment.

The opening shots rang out on 8 December. Japanese aircraft attacked and destroyed the pitifully small Royal Air Force contingent. However, Maltby estimated that it would take weeks for the Japanese to crack the Gin Drinker's Line. Tragically, the Japanese seized the vital Shing Mun Redoubt in less than 24 hours. Maltby was forced to retreat to the island.

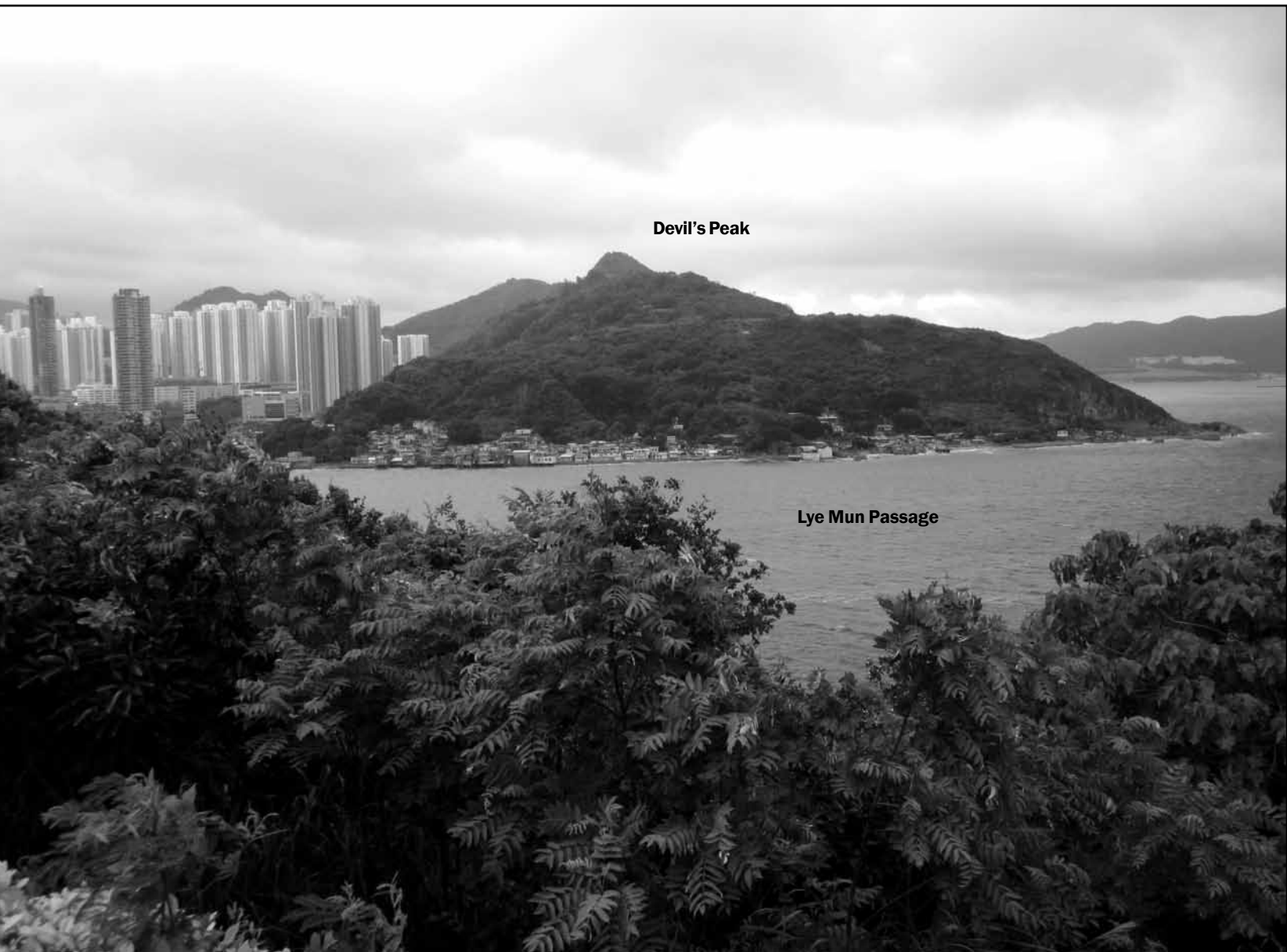
The withdrawal forced a major reorganization of Maltby's forces. Lawson now commanded the West Brigade, consisting of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, the Royal Scots and the Punjab Regiment. Brigadier C. Wallis commanded the East Brigade, composed of the Royal Rifles of Canada, the Rajputs, and the Middlesex Regiment. It should also have forced a significant re-examination of Japanese intentions. The Japanese were not the bungling, malnourished, night-blind troops that many expected. The three regiments that landed on the island were veteran soldiers of a long campaign in China. They were skilled light infantry who were adept at night navigation, the tactics of infiltration, and the physical hardships of fighting

in the hills. The rapidity with which they breached the Gin Drinker's Line should have been evidence enough. Nonetheless, the high ground of the island was largely undefended. Once the Japanese landed, they quickly seized these pieces of key terrain which they did not relinquish.

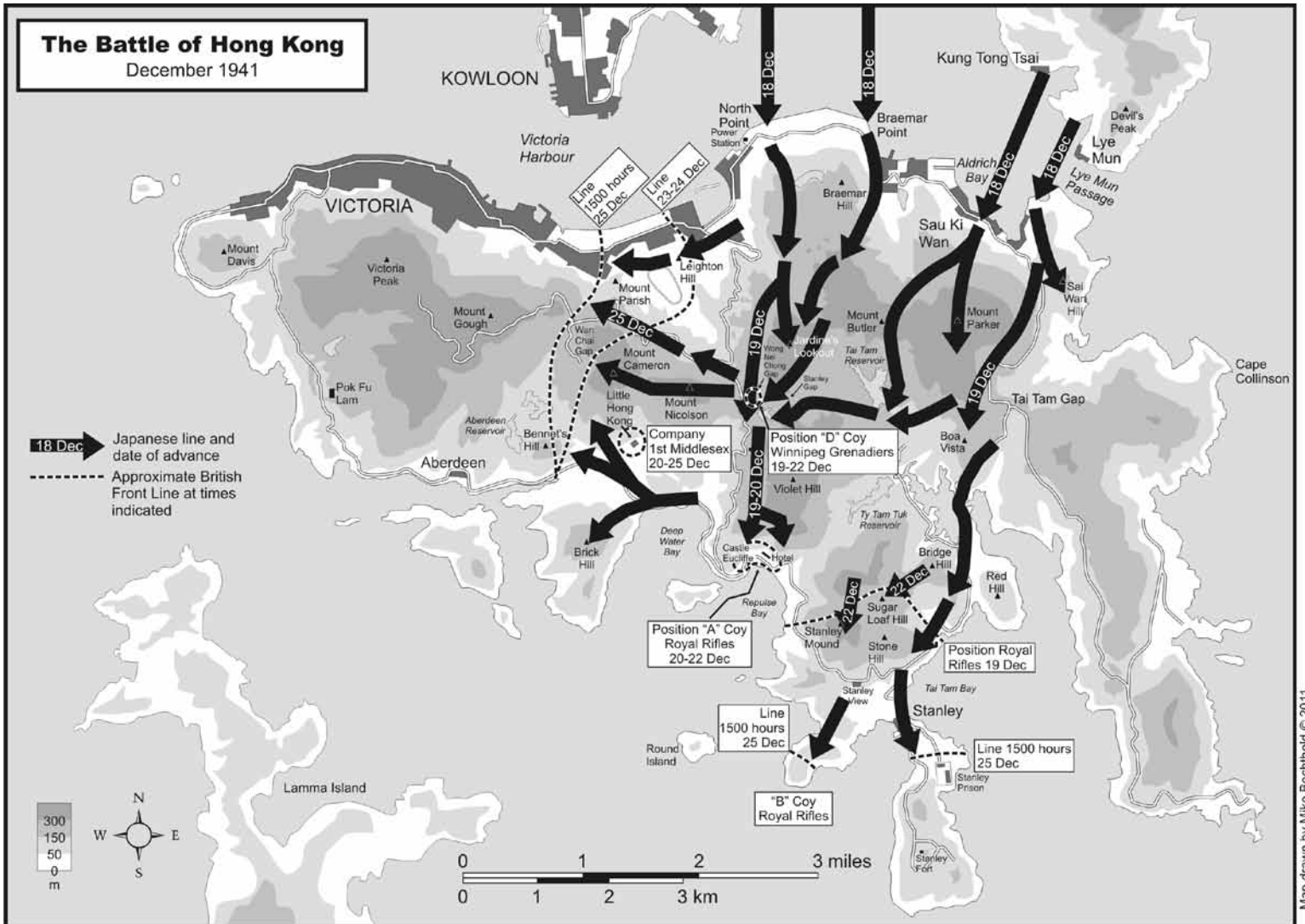
On 18 December, three Japanese infantry regiments made virtually unopposed landings on the island. Under the cover of darkness and

rain, they bypassed many of the hardened defensive positions and pushed inland. They seized the dominating features of Mount Parker and Mount Butler, and surrounded the West Brigade Headquarters at the Wong Nei Chong Gap, an important crossroads. Destroying the headquarters the next day, the Japanese had physically separated the East and West Brigades from each other, and destroyed the

West Brigade's ability to operate as a cohesive force. Bravery by the Commonwealth troops, in poorly supported and synchronized counter-attacks, could not undo this coup by the Japanese. The East Brigade held the line first at the Repulse Bay Hotel, and later on the Stanley Peninsula at the southern end of the island. The governor signed the surrender to the Japanese on Christmas Day.



**Above: View of the mainland from the Lei [Lye] Mun fortifications, now the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence. The Japanese 229th Infantry Regiment crossed the channel here and moved to seize Mount Parker and Mount Butler. The 228th and the 230th landed further west and pushed towards the Wong Nei Chong Gap. Opposite right: A view of the Lye Mun battery and passage taken in 1945. The Devil's Peak is visible in the top right corner of the photo.**



Approximate location of  
the old Kai Tak Aerodrome



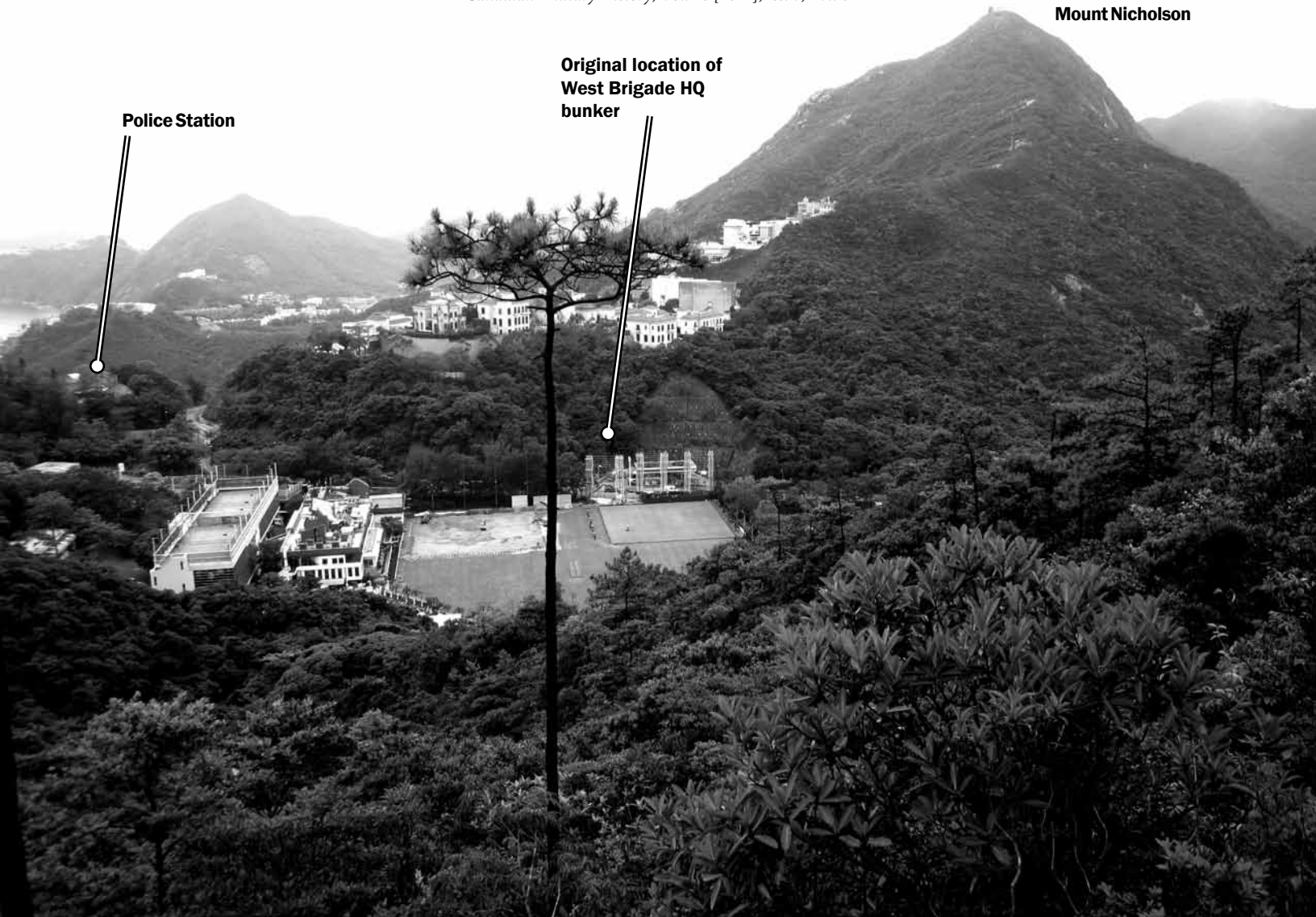
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**Above: The view of the mainland from atop Mount Parker, the highest point on the east end of the island.**

**Below: Mount Parker (left) and Mount Butler (right). For reasons unknown, Maltby chose not to defend such prominent features. The Japanese quickly seized and held these hills. Another Japanese force followed Sir Cecil's Ride, a path through the foothills of Mount Butler, to Jardine's Lookout. Today, these areas remain part of an extensive trail system, free from high rises and commercialization.**

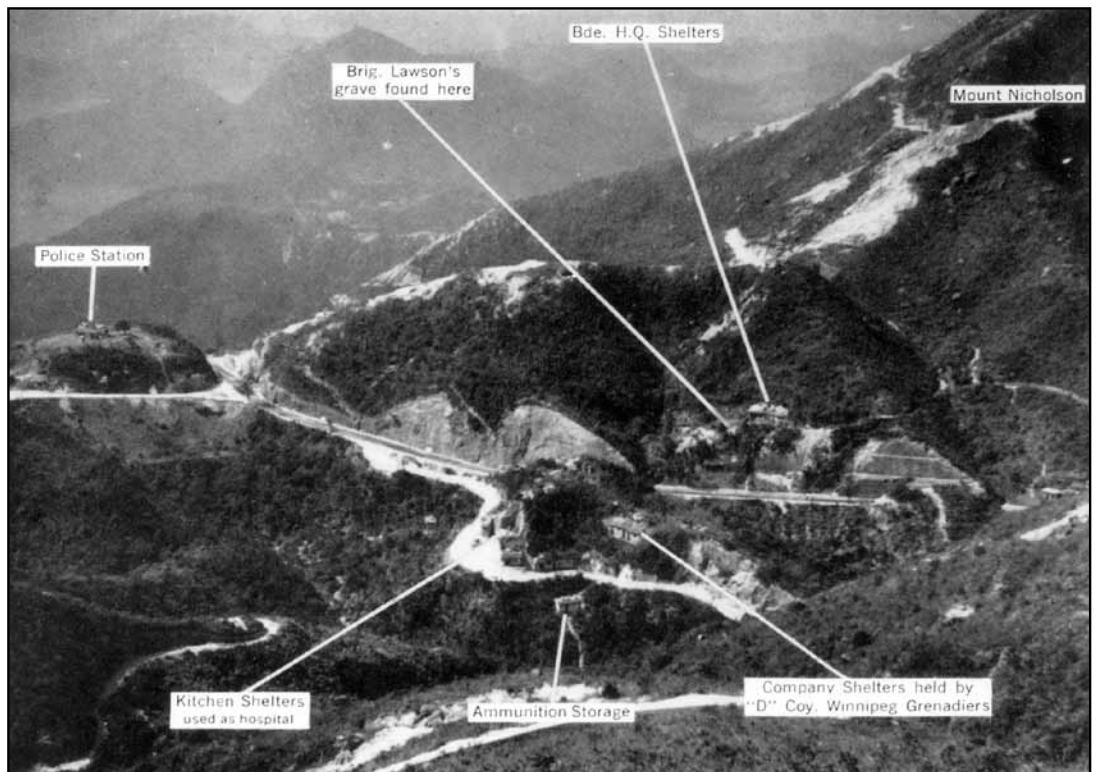
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Above: The Wong Nei Chong Gap, as seen from Jardine's Lookout. The Lookout's defenders, members of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC), were oriented towards the road running north to south through the Gap. The Japanese quickly seized the position, from which they were afforded a dominating position overlooking the Gap, and the West Brigade Headquarters. Today, two HKVDC pillboxes remain at Jardine's Lookout. The police station is still there, although it is now part of a private residence. Lawson's bunker was moved two hundred metres to the north to make way for an expanded gas station.

Right: Wong Nei Chong Gap, photographed in 1947, showing the location of Lawson's HQ and where his grave was found.



C.P. Stacey, Six Years of War, p.482.



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**Top left: Mount Butler, as seen from the saddle between Mount Butler and Mount Parker. With Lawson killed and the West Brigade Headquarters destroyed, the battle descended into poorly synchronized and supported counterattacks. CSM Osborne received the Victoria Cross in one such counterattack here on Mount Butler.**

**Centre left: A view from the southern slope of the Gap shows its significance. In the distance, you can see Repulse Bay. By taking the Gap, the Japanese had taken a major crossroads at the inter-brigade boundary. In one operation, the Japanese destroyed a brigade headquarters and divided Maltby's force.**

**Bottom left: The West Brigade Headquarters bunker in its new location.**

**Bottom right: One of the many water catchments carved into the island. Commonwealth and Japanese soldiers alike used these catchments as covered approaches through the hills. At the time, the hills were only covered in low scrub. The trees we see today are the product of a massive reforestation initiative pursued after the war.**

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Right: The Repulse Bay, a modern condominium building built on the site of the old Repulse Bay Hotel. In an intriguing architectural flourish, the modern Repulse Bay Hotel was built with a hole in it so as not to obstruct the mythical dragon's ability to drink from the sea.

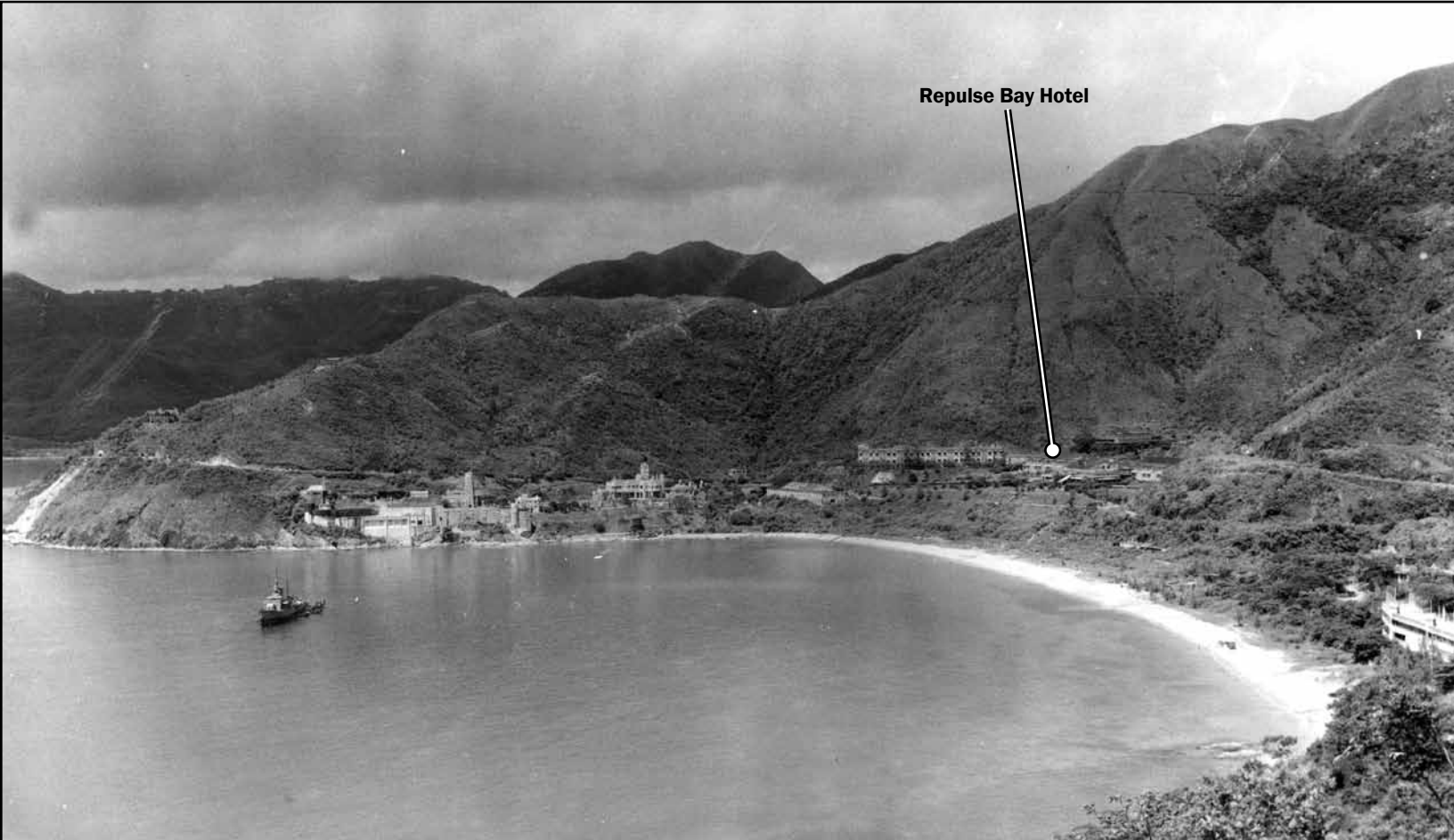
Below: Repulse Bay, 1945.

Bottom: The East Brigade withdrew to Stanley Peninsula, pictured here. The photo was taken from Brick Hill, now home to Ocean Park, a theme park with roller coasters and giant pandas.

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**Above: The Stanley War Cemetery. Fighting took place in the cemetery itself during the last Commonwealth offensive on Christmas Day, 1941. Many of those who died during their imprisonment in the Japanese camp are buried here. Strangely, the cemetery is now a popular location for wedding photos.**

**Below: The Stanley Police Station. This police station was a standard design at the time of the battle and one of the few remaining on the island. Today, it is a supermarket.**

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Photos taken by author unless otherwise noted.

The author would like to thank Dave Macri, Kit and Candy Ng for their invaluable linguistic, navigational, and culinary assistance.

Tyler Wentzell recently completed his MA in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada. He served as an infantry officer with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry from 2006-2011, acting as a platoon commander, an observer controller trainer, and a company mentor for the Afghan National Army. He is currently serving with the 48th Highlanders of Canada and studying law at the University of Toronto.