

LESSON FIVE – THE FATEFUL CANADIAN DECISION

SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

Governments make a multitude of decisions in both wartime and peacetime. Those decisions, some brilliant and innovative, others faulty and ill-considered, are arrived at for a host of different reasons by people of influence and power. Without a doubt, decisions made in the course of a war are far more significant in that matters of life and death are involved. Relative to the average citizen, the individuals making those decisions have access to more information, but they do not always have more intelligence. Their decisions can be right or wrong depending on the costs, benefits, consequences, and repercussions of the decision. To be assessed fairly, they must be viewed in light of what the decision makers themselves knew then, not what we know now. Hindsight is indeed 20/20.

However, the Canadian government's decision in the fall of 1941 to agree to Britain's request for Canadian troops to bolster Hong Kong defences was not only naive, but ill-conceived, and little short of disastrous. Today, this decision produces very polar views. On the one hand, there is the more traditional interpretation of C.P. Stacey and J.L. Granatstein that the decision was the best one, given the military and political difficulties under which Canada operated. At the other extreme, people such as Brian and Terrence McKenna and Carl Vincent argue that it was a decision of negligence and incompetence. This lesson will examine that decision, the way in which it was made, the possible motives behind the decision, and the initial consequences of the decision. Students involving themselves in the process will begin to appreciate and understand the decision-making model.

Within six months, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's opinion on this issue completely reversed. At the beginning of 1941, he was adamantly opposed to sending more troops to reinforce the garrison at Hong Kong. He argued that to do so was complete folly, and that if Japan went to war with Britain, there "[would] not [be] the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong or relieving it." However, the British War Office convinced Churchill to alter his thinking. Further, arguing that British troops were too precious to spare, on September 19 Britain formally requested that Canada send "one or two" battalions to Hong Kong to support the British battalions garrisoned there.

Canadian authorities, naively accepted this reversal of British policy in good faith. Nothing in the way of independent investigation was done. No one questioned or challenged the new orthodoxy. Canada simply went along with the British request. To make a bad situation worse, Canada implemented the decision with far too much haste and too little thought. The troops chosen were ill-prepared and minimally trained. Some did not even know how to fire a gun. Their transport and other essential equipment, through bureaucratic incompetence, never arrived.

The tragedy of the Canadian decision to commit troops to Hong Kong in 1941 will be multiplied if succeeding generations fail to learn how it came about. That it was

wrong goes without saying, and hardly needs to be debated. However, we must understand how the decision was made, and thus be on guard should something like this happen again. George Santayana's often-quoted maxim about history applies with devastating force in this situation. "Those who forget their history are fated to repeat the mistakes of the past."

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to have students understand how the decision to commit Canadian troops to Hong Kong came about
- to have students understand the chronology involved in the decision
- to have students appreciate the cause and effect behind the decision
- to have students role-play the decision so as to increase both their understanding and their degree of empathy
- to have students understand the decision-making model
- to have students analyze motives behind historical decisions
- to have students abstract ideas into headline form
- to have students work with and understand both the usefulness and the limitations of primary sources
- to analyze the difference between primary and secondary sources in history

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Form groups of three or four students. Distribute one of the primary source quotes (Reference #1) to each group, and have them analyze it. Who is the source? What is he saying? What evidence, if any, is provided to support the stated view? Can you detect a bias?
2. Reconvene the class and do a brief analysis of primary and secondary sources in history. Provide a definition of each (primary – recorded at a time contemporary to, or almost contemporary to, the event to which it is related; secondary – a source of evidence about an event, person, or issue that is recorded after the passage of time). Provide examples of each (primary – diary, journal, letters, speeches, documents, artifacts, autobiography, newspaper account, interview, etc.; secondary – textbook, encyclopaedia, etc.). Then have students do a cost-benefit analysis of each type of source (i.e., What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of source? Include such factors as bias, availability, reliability, accuracy, etc.).
3. Distribute the timeline of thirty-six events involved in the decision to commit Canadian troops. Refer to Resource One. [Note: This could constitute an entire lesson unto itself.]
4. Instruct students that in groups of three, they should construct a "Critical Path." Each group should develop its own timeline of the six to ten most essential moments in the decision. In addition, the group should compose newspaper headlines of a minimum of twelve of the events (including the six to ten chosen as most critical).

5. As they are completing Task 2, have them address the following question: At what stages could (or should) the decision have been changed? Why? What was the most logical stage? Why?
6. Form groups of five or six. Assign roles to each member (prime minister, defense, external affairs, chief of staff, etc.). The task is to debate the merits of sending troops to Hong Kong. Examine the possible consequences, alternatives, questions that might be offered to the British, etc.
7. Decision-Making Model. All important decisions need to be broken down. Working in the original group of three, students should make a chronological list of the significant questions that lay behind the decision to commit Canadian troops.
8. On the board, take up what those questions might have been. For example,
 - Should troops be sent?
 - What would the consequences be if Canada refused the British request?
 - What situation would the Canadian troops find themselves in if the decision was to go along with the British request?
 - When should the troops be sent?
 - How many troops should be sent?
 - What kind of troops should be sent? What troops are the best choices?
 - What kind of training should those troops receive?
 - What are the benefits – and costs – of sending troops?
9. Significances of the Decision-Making Model. As a class, ask the students what significant conclusions, generally speaking, can be obtained from the Decision-Making Model? Possible answers should be recorded on the board. For example,
 - Normally, options exist.
 - Alternatives should be examined.
 - As much information as possible should be obtained.
 - Options should be examined in light of possible costs and benefits.
 - Nothing should be accepted on naive faith.
 - Questions should always be asked.

[Note: Again, this Decision-Making Model could constitute a separate lesson unto itself.]

THOUGHT, DISCUSSION, RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What do you believe was Prime Minister Mackenzie King's chief motivation behind the decision to commit troops? Did he follow the Decision-Making Model? If not, what steps did he omit?
2. The Prime Minister is often referred to as *primus inter pares* (Latin for first among equals) in terms of his relationship within the cabinet. Do you think that label applies within the context of the decision to commit Canadian troops to Hong Kong? Why, or why not?
3. Since that time, there have been numerous charges of incompetence regarding the decision. What specific examples can you find to support that notion?
4. Pierre Berton, arguably Canada's greatest historical writer, claims that the decision was a "travesty" and "a blatantly foolish enterprise." Do you agree with him? Why, or why not?
5. What protections could have been put in place to lessen the possibility of a future governmental blunder of this nature?
6. If you were a surviving Hong Kong veteran today, how would you feel about the Canadian decision? How would you feel about the Canadian government? The Canadian military?
7. Write a letter to the editor about the decision. How would that letter be different if it had have been written fifty-five years ago?
8. If someone within the government was proven to have acted incompetently in this decision, what should the consequences be? Explain.
9. What is the most effective and fair way to examine alleged government errors? Explain.
10. Is it justified to demand a higher form of accountability – and accuracy – of government officials? Why, or why not?
11. What do you believe is the chief lesson to be learned from the decision to send Canadian troops to Hong Kong?
12. Which type of source, primary or secondary, do you think is more biased? Why? Which is more reliable? Why?

REFERENCES – PRIMARY SOURCES AND TIMELINE

Primary Sources

A/ ' "10. As you know, these units returned not long ago from duty in Newfoundland and Jamaica respectively. The duties which they there carried out were not in many respects unlike the task which awaits the units to be sent to Hong Kong. The experience they have will therefore be of no small value to them in their new role. Both units are of proven efficiency.

11. In my opinion, the balance of argument favours the selection of these two units....The selection represents both Eastern and Western Canada. In the case of the Royal Rifles, there is also the fact that this battalion, while nominally English-speaking, is actually drawn from a region overwhelmingly French-speaking in character and contains an important proportion of Canadians of French descent.” ' (Vincent 1981, 46)

B/ September 19, 1941 telegram from Dominions Office to the Canadian government via the Department of External Affairs:

' “No. 162 MOST SECRET

In consultation with late General Officer Commanding [General Grassett] who has recently arrived in this country we have been considering the defences of Hong Kong. Approved policy has been that Hong Kong should be regarded as an out-post and held as long as possible in the event of war in the Far East. Existing army garrison consists of four battalions of infantry and although this force represents the bare minimum required for the task assigned to it we have thought hitherto that it would not ultimately serve any useful purpose to increase the garrison.

Position in the Far East has now, however, changed. Our defences in Malaya have been improved and there have been signs of a certain weakening in Japan's attitude towards us and the United States.

In these circumstances it is thought that a small reinforcement of the garrison of Hong Kong, e.g. by one or two more battalions, would be very fully justified. It would increase the strength of the garrison out of all proportion to the actual numbers involved and it would provide a strong stimulus to the garrison and to the Colony, it would further have a very great moral effect in the whole of the Far East, and it would reassure Chaing Kai Shek as to the reality of our intention to hold the island.

His Majesty's Government in Canada will be well aware of the difficulties we are at present experiencing in providing the forces which the situation in various parts of the world demands, despite the very great assistance which is being furnished by the Dominions. We should therefore be most grateful if the Canadian government would consider whether one or two Canadian battalions could be provided from Canada for this purpose. It would be of the greatest help if the Canadian Government would cooperate with us in the manner suggested and we much hope that they will feel able to do so.” ' (Vincent 1981, 29)

C/ King – September 5, 1941 – ‘“The Government should have much clearer information than is yet available of the war operations planned or intended by the British and Allied governments. It is not enough to simply get suggestions from the British as to what Canadian action would be most effective without at the same time having the information in question, so that the Canadian government can form their own judgement whether the Canadian action suggested would in reality be the most effective.” ’ (Vincent 1981, 31)

D/ Mackenzie King’s prime concern in the decision was the issue of conscription – “It must be clearly understood that the troops were available and that this further commitment would not contribute to the creation of conditions which would make conscription for overseas service necessary in order to meet our obligations.”

E/ King, writing in 1948, sanitized his involvement in the decision – “[I] strenuously opposed sending troops to cross the Pacific.” As Berton writes – “There is no evidence that he had.” (Berton 2001, 336)

F/ February 1948 – King in his diary – “never been able to understand why the people of the Defence Department were so anxious to send the men they did in such a hurry except to make a name for themselves and the dept.” (Berton 2001, 337)

G/ Grant Dexter (journalist writing in a letter to John Dexter during the hearings hosted by Chief Justice Lyman Duff) – “On the one occasion when we had to organize an expeditionary force – Hong Kong – the General Staff, the Quartermaster and the Adjutant General made a mess of it....The only word for them is incompetent!” (Berton 2001, 338)

H/ Private in Winnipeg Grenadiers – “The whole thing was disorganized confusion. Nobody was prepared for it. There was no communication. We didn’t have transportation. You carried everything on your back.” (Berton 2001, 341)

Timeline

1. January, 1941 - British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on the issue of sending reinforcements to Hong Kong. “ This is all wrong. If Japan goes to war there is 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 increasing the garrison, it ought to be reduced to a symbolic scale.... I wish we had fewer troops there....”
2. July, 1941 – Major-General A.E. Grassett, having retired as commander-in-chief of the Hong Kong garrison, informally tells his old friend, Harry Crerar, then Canadian CGS, (Chief of the General Staff) that an additional regiment or two provided the Hong Kong garrison would enable them to hold the colony for an extended period of time against virtually any Japanese force.

3. July, 1941 - Grasset travels to England and convinces the War Office (in particular, Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brook-Popham) and Churchill that there is little danger of a Japanese attack, and, in the unlikely event of an attack, an increased show of force might scare the Japanese off.
4. Prime Minister Churchill reverses his earlier position and naively accepts the altered attitude.
5. September 4, 1941 – At a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff, Major-General Grasset argues in favour of two additional battalions for the Hong Kong garrison and for the first time in writing suggests that Canada would be willing to supply them.
6. September 19, 1941 – Britain formally requests that Canada send “one or two” battalions to Hong Kong to support the four British battalions garrisoned there. This is the basis for the Canadian decision.
7. Major-General H.D.G. “Harry” Crerar (Chief of the General Staff and Canada’s chief military advisor and senior army officer) notes that Canada “should definitely take this on.”
8. October 2, 1941 – Canada agrees to send two battalions.
9. Canadian authorities, believing that the battalions would be engaged in nothing more strenuous than garrison duty, decide not to expend two trained battalions destined for the European theatre. Rather, they choose two battalions just back from similar duties in Newfoundland and Jamaica. The geographical and ethnic balance – the Royal Rifles from French Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers from the West – appear highly convenient.
10. Because of the international situation, Canadian officials believe it is necessary to organize the force as quickly and as secretly as possible.
11. Canadian HQ labels the two battalions as “in need of refresher training or insufficiently trained and not recommended for operations.” (Berton 2001, 337)
12. In “an atmosphere of incredible confusion” the army hastily organizes a force of 1,975 infantry soldiers. (Berton 2001, 337)
13. October 16, 1941 - The situation in the Far East changes for the worse. The Japanese government is replaced by the war party under the leadership of the highly aggressive Hideki Tojo. The U.S. put its Pacific forces on immediate alert. Canada does nothing.
14. October 24, 1941 – Two cables from the Canadian office in London indicate growing concern about events in the Pacific. One advises an armed cruiser escort for the *Awatea* “in view of the altered circumstances.”
15. October 27, 1941 – The contingent sets sail. It is discovered that fifty-one soldiers

who should have been on board have deserted, and that there are twenty-three soldiers on board that should not have been. They have been added as reinforcements, even though another battalion has rejected them as medically unfit.

16. The *Awatea* is not large enough to carry the entire contingent. One hundred and fifty men have to be crammed aboard the *Awatea's* escort, the CNR's merchant cruiser, *Prince William*.
17. Neither vessel can carry the expedition's transport – 212 vehicles. Only 20 “priority vehicles” are shipped cross-country from Montreal to Vancouver in the hopes that they can be crammed aboard the *Awatea*. The order for the rest of the vehicles is simply cancelled.
18. October 28, 1941 -The twenty “priority vehicles” arrive in Vancouver the day *after* the expedition has departed.
19. October 28, 1941 – Mackenzie King, speaking in Ottawa, says that “any day we may see the Pacific Ocean as well as the Atlantic the scene of conflict.” But, as Berton notes, “nothing was done.” (Berton 2001, 339)
20. November 4, 1941 - Eventually all the support equipment is loaded onto an American freighter that sails for Hong Kong. However, it never arrives, having been diverted to the Philippines after the attack on Pearl Harbor.
21. December 15, 1941 – Defence Minister J. L. Ralston becomes aware of the equipment fiasco for the first time.
22. The two battalions are told of their final destination only after they leave Hawaii.
23. November 16, 1941 – The *Awatea* docks at Hong Kong.
24. December 8, 1941 (December 7 in North America) - The Japanese attack.
25. December 13, 1941 – The Japanese take the Kowloon peninsula, and make their first demands for surrender.
26. December 17, 1941 – British and Canadian troops refuse further Japanese demands for surrender.
27. December 18, 1941 – Japanese troops, numbering 7, 500 men, attempt a landing on Hong Kong island in pitch-black conditions.
28. December 19, 1941 – The Japanese capture Canadian Brigadier J.K. Lawson's headquarters at Wong Nei Chong Gap, a critical location in the heart of the island.
29. December 25, 1941 – The official surrender of the colony takes place at 3 p.m. on Christmas Day.

30. December 25, 1941– At St. Stephen’s College, being used as a hospital, there is a terrible massacre as seventy wounded allied troops are bayoneted in their beds and the nurses are repeatedly raped, often to death.
31. Because of the public and political pressure – the latter largely from George Drew of the Ontario Conservative Party – King calls a commission of investigation headed by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Lyman Duff.
32. March 2, 1942 – The Commission meets for the first time. Hearings last twenty-two days and are " a clear whitewash." (Berton 2001, 347)
33. July 11, 1942 – George Drew writes Mackenzie King a thirty-two-page letter outlining where the Commissioner's findings did not match the evidence. Drew also writes in *The Globe* – ' "Actual facts brought out in the evidence were so blood-curdling that the public have a right to know what did take place..." and "evidence of inexcusable blundering, confusions and incompetence had been hidden from the public." ' Berton 2001, 348)
34. January, 1948 – Major General C. M. Maltby’s official report, written in 1946 to the British War Office and finally released, raises more public and political protests. Maltby, who was in command in Hong Kong in 1941, says that because of their lack of training, the Canadian troops should never have been sent to Hong Kong when it was obvious that war was about to break out.
35. In 1948 – King tables Hong Kong information and evidence in Parliament. However, he does not table either the incriminating Drew letter or the two cables of October 24, 1941 from London. Further, he does not indicate that the Maltby report had been watered down for political reasons.

LESSON SIX – THE BATTLE FOR HONG KONG

SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

The actual battle for Hong Kong was many things - short, intense, disorganized, and tragic. For a number of reasons, the 1,975 Canadian troops were thrown into an impossible situation. Virtually every aspect of military planning and strategy worked against them. They were badly out-numbered, ill-equipped, and poorly trained. If that was not bad enough, their leaders were motivated by racist assumptions about the inferiority of the enemy being faced. And finally, against this backdrop, the Canadian troops were ordered to hold an indefensible position. The result was as tragic as it was inevitable – complete defeat.

British intelligence estimated the Japanese strength at about five thousand troops with little artillery support. In reality, the number was ten times that many. In addition, they were battle-hardened troops with considerable fighting experience. And they were fully equipped. Poor planning had resulted in none of the 212 Canadian military vehicles that had been included ever arriving in Hong Kong. The two battalions selected, the Royal Rifles and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, had been on garrison duty, in Newfoundland and Jamaica, respectively. They had absolutely no combat training or experience, and, in fact, had been labelled “unfit for combat” by the high command. The Canadian authorities, deciding that time was of the essence, hastily assembled these troops with very minimal experience. Many had less than five weeks training and several could not even fire a gun. The Allied leadership operated under racist notions about the fighting ability of the Japanese. They believed them to be inferior fighters, unable to see at night, and afraid of the water. As events would sadly prove, nothing could have been further from the truth. The Japanese troops fought with a savage fury and a fearless dedication. Once the Allied position on the peninsula around Kowloon fell in a matter of days, the garrison was forced to try to hold the island of Hong Kong. That would prove to be an impossible task.

Everybody makes mistakes, including governments. However, the consequences when governments make them, particularly in wartime, are far more serious. In this lesson, students will understand and appreciate the results of the Canadian decision to send troops to Hong Kong. Such decisions made in boardrooms by the high command play out with devastating human consequences on the hard ground of reality. Pierre Berton, writing in a recently published book, *Marching as to War*, called the entire enterprise “a travesty...[and] a blatantly foolish enterprise.” Carl Vincent echoes his sentiments. “There was no reason why Canadian troops should have been despatched to the doomed outpost of Hong Kong – but through a combination of British cynicism and Canadian thoughtlessness, they were sent anyway.” The greater tragedy may well be if succeeding generations fail to know and applaud the courage of those Canadian troops sent into an impossible situation.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to increase students' knowledge of the actual battle of Hong Kong
- to have students appreciate how distant decisions play out in reality
- to have students improve their media literacy skills
- to have students understand the human side of war
- to have students improve their map analysis skills
- to increase students' sense of empathy

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Show a twelve to fifteen-minute clip from the McKennas' "A Savage Christmas" that depicts the start of the actual fighting.
2. The first time the video clip is shown, put the VCR on mute and have students take notes solely based on what they see.
3. Rewind the tape and show the exact same clip, this time with audio. Have students add to their notes.
4. At this point, have students analyze both the quantity and quality of information obtained. Which way is better? Why? Can you suggest other reasons why you obtain more – and better – information on the second viewing? What do you think would have happened if the process had been altered so that the first viewing had both video and audio and the second time just video (or just audio)?
5. Map analysis. Begin with an overview map. (Page 12 of Terry Copp's article, "The Defence of Hong Kong, December 1941" contains a map titled "Hong Kong: Troop Positions.") In groups of three or four, have students devise an Allied military strategy (i.e., How and where and how many troops are going to be deployed? What considerations would have to be taken into account [land elevation, Japanese position, location of water, defensible sites, weather, equipment...etc.]?).
6. Then provide students with a second, more detailed map that depicts the actual fighting (the Granatstein/Morton map from page 45 of the text entitled *A Nation Forged In Fire*). Individually, the students are to write daily intelligence briefings (maximum three lines each) from December 19, 1941 to December 25, 1941.
7. Have students put themselves in one of the following positions:
 - a. It is war's end and you are returning to Canada. You are writing a letter to the family of a comrade who died in the defence of Hong Kong.
 - b. Imagine that it is more than sixty years later and you have returned to the battlefields of Hong Kong. You are writing a letter of your impressions and feelings to your grandchildren.

THOUGHT, DISCUSSION, RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. The Battle of Hong Kong has been compared to a much better-known Canadian military disaster – Dieppe. Is that a fair comparison? What are the similarities? What are the differences? Why is Dieppe, generally speaking, much better known than Hong Kong?
2. What, in your mind, was the single greatest disadvantage faced by Canadian troops at the outset of the Battle of Hong Kong? Explain.
3. Research the role played by John Osborn.
4. Was the defeat of the Allied soldiers inevitable? Why, or why not?
5. Should the allied troops have been allowed to surrender earlier?
6. How might the Canadian troops have held Kowloon? Was it possible? Explain.
7. Could the Japanese have been prevented from crossing Lye Mun Passage? Explain.
8. What was the significance of Wong Nei Chong Gap?
9. Do you think the outcome would have been different had the troops been properly equipped? What if well-trained combat troops had been sent?
10. Research what contemporary Canadian newspapers wrote at the time. What position did they take? Can you suggest reasons for that position?
11. Imagine you are the military officer in charge of writing the wording for the telegram that is sent to families of soldiers killed in action in Hong Kong. How would you word that telegram?
12. Imagine that you are a Canadian soldier trying to hold Wong Nei Chong Gap, but you realize that it is a hopeless struggle. You have two options. Either you will be killed or you will be taken prisoner. You have ten minutes before one of those two eventualities takes place. Write a letter home explaining your predicament and your feelings.
13. Songwriters such as Mike Ford and John Spearn are becoming well known in Canada for taking events from Canada's past and telling a story in song. Write a song about Canadian soldiers in Hong Kong.
14. Create a collage of Hong Kong visuals, obtained either from texts or from the Internet.
15. You have been appointed chief Canadian military investigator. Your task is to write a one-page executive summary report of the Battle of Hong Kong.

