



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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The Colours



**A moth-eaten rag on a worm-eaten pole,
It does not look likely to stir a man's Soul;
'Tis the deeds that were done 'neath the moth-eaten rag,
When the pole was a staff, and the rag was a flag.**

Sir Edward Hamley

(Photo from *Serving Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Volunteers* produced by the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence, 2004)

The verse quoted above was written by Lt.Gen.Sir Edward Bruce Hamley, KCB, KCMG, MP (1824-1893), noted Victorian soldier and military writer, Professor of military history and later Commandant of the new Staff College at Sandhurst. He wrote it on seeing in a church the laid up Colours of the 43rd Regiment. It sums up very well the symbolism of the Colours.

Colours typically comprise a King's (or Queen's) Colour as a symbol of a regiment's loyalty, and a Regimental Colour as a symbol of the honour and traditions of that regiment. They embody the regiment's spirit and service, as well as its fallen soldiers. They are always treated with reverence, and when not encased require to be saluted. While never capriciously destroyed, they may be deliberately destroyed if they are in danger of falling into the hands of the enemy. On presentation, they are consecrated in a religious ceremony, and when no longer usable they may be replaced and laid up in a church or other religious place, failing which they need to be deconsecrated.

Colours were first presented to the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) in May, 1928. These Colours were buried in December, 1941 to prevent them from falling into the hands of the invading Japanese. Those who buried them died as POWs and did not reveal the hiding place. Attempts to find them after the war were unsuccessful.

In February, 1951 new Colours were presented. These were described as “replacement Colours” and so were presumably intended for the HKVDC to replace those lost in 1941. Unfortunately, the HKVDC no longer existed, having been disbanded in 1948 and succeeded by the Hong Kong Defence Force (HKDF). So the replacement Colours were formally entrusted to the HKDF and handed over to its infantry component, the Hong Kong Regiment, for safe keeping. From that point they were, for all practical purposes, regarded as the Colours of the Regiment.

The question may be asked why the Colours were not presented directly to the Regiment from the outset. The answer is not known, but it may be that the grant of the Battle Honour “Hong Kong” to the HKVDC was anticipated. This could only be emblazoned on the HKVDC’s Colours, and so if the new Colours had been granted to the Regiment rather than to the HKVDC as replacement Colours, the Battle Honour could not be displayed. But this is entirely conjectural.

Remnants of the original Colours were eventually found during site formation work for the American Consulate on Garden Road. They were literally remnants of the poles only, with nothing left of the fabric. These remnants were paraded by veterans in the 1958 Annual Review of the RHKDF. It was at that parade that the Battle Honour “Hong Kong” was worn for the first time on the Queen’s Colour. The remnants were then laid up in St. John’s Cathedral, but it is understood their whereabouts to-day are not known.

In 1963 the Regiment became a cavalry reconnaissance unit and it was no longer appropriate for it to retain the Colours. They were replaced by a Guidon, and the Colours were laid up in St. John’s Cathedral.

It is apparent from the illustration at the beginning of this paper that the Colours are in a very dilapidated state. So much so that in the excellent book **Ruins of War** by Ko Tim Keung and Jason Wordie the same illustration bears the caption “The Regimental Colour and King’s Colour of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, which were buried after the British surrender and recovered long after the war ended. These are laid up in St. John’s Cathedral.....”

This is, of course, a mistake as these are the *replacement* Colours presented in 1951. Their poor condition is a reflection of either the harsh Hong Kong climate or the poor state the Colours were in at the time they were laid up. But whatever the reason for their sad condition, it should be borne in mind that on being laid up Colours are never reconditioned or refurbished; they should be left to disintegrate over time. Notwithstanding the appearance of the HKVDC’s Colours they should not be removed as was threatened a year or so ago. Like old soldiers, they should be left to fade away.