



# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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### The Ablong Family and the ARP



*Uniformed wardens at air raid pen shelters (copyright with Imperial War Museum)*



The Ablong family was resident in Hong Kong for several generations with strong ties to the Eurasian and local Portuguese communities, having arrived from Australia late in the 1890s.

The patriarch, John Ablong, had moved from China to Australia where he married Eurasian Emma Ah Ken, born in Bombala, New South Wales. Emma and John Ablong had a large family including Alfred Ernest, the father of Audrey, known to us as the wife of Vasco Rodrigues, a member of our Association of long standing. Audrey's mother was Mabel Agnes Cotton and her maternal grandmother was a member of the Pereira family prominent in the local Portuguese community.

With the threat of a Japanese attack on Hong Kong, the Ablong family became involved in war preparations. Alfred Ernest Ablong early enlisted as an air raid warden, together with his two eldest daughters Constance and Patricia. His two eldest sons Reginald Sidney and Alfred Ernest (Junior) volunteered for service in the HKVDC – R.S.Ablong was a Sapper in Field Company Engineers while A.E.Ablong was a Corporal in the No.6 (AA) Company. Two of Audrey's uncles also joined up – Gnr J.A.Cotton in the 5<sup>th</sup> Battery, HKVDC and Telegraphist J.T.Cotton in the HKRNVR.

The need to prepare schemes of air raid precautions was recognised as early as 1938 when, according to G.B.Endacott's **Hong Kong Eclipse** (Oxford University Press. 1978), a nominal sum for the purpose was included in the estimates of public expenditure. In September, 1939 retired Wing Commander A.H.S.Steele-Perkins was appointed Director of Air Raid Precautions with overall responsibilities for such schemes, including the construction of air raid shelters and tunnels.

Strangely, having regard to the reason for his appointment within the overall context of war preparations, Steele-Perkins was accompanied to Hong Kong by his wife and two infant daughters. They were not there for long however, before being evacuated to Australia in July, 1940. Steele-Perkins himself departed from Hong Kong before the Japanese attack in December, 1941 to become DARP in India.

During his tenure of office the ARP Department became, in the words of Endacott, “the subject of grave scandal”. Endacott writes, “*The huge sums involved and the urgency of the work afforded fertile ground for graft and irregularities.....These were brought into the open by a Commission of Enquiry appointed in August, 1941.*” The Commission completed its work, but with the intervention of war its report detailing its findings was never published. Barbara Anslow, who was Steele-Perkin’s secretary, has this to say in an email posted on the [www.gwulo.com](http://www.gwulo.com) website: “*For the record, Wing Commander Steele-Perkins.....was completely cleared of any collusion re ARP building contracts at the end of the Enquiry. He was a man of great integrity in my view and experience.....*”

Alfred Ernest Ablong (Senior) was killed during the battle, on or about 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1941 Little is known of the circumstances, but the family believes that he became aware of some ARP personnel, including his two daughters Constance and Patricia, stranded in a friend’s house. He attempted to reach them with some food, but he was caught in uniform by the Japanese and killed. His body was never recovered. The house may have been near the Wong Nei Chong Gap, or possibly in Wong Nei Chong Road in Happy Valley, but Patricia Lim in her published book **Forgotten Souls** (Hong Kong University Press, 2011) writes: “*(Alfred Ernest Ablong) was divisional ARP warden for North Point on the night of 19 December (sic) when the Japanese invaded and was killed by sniper fire*”. His two daughters remained in their friend’s house. While they were there, a party of Japanese soldiers arrived. The girls, with two others who were also in the ARP, were well hidden and the soldiers left dissatisfied, but not before venting their anger by beating the friend’s son with their rifles.

The younger members of the Ablong family, with their mother, were billeted with other Volunteer families in May Road during the battle. After the surrender they avoided internment and later sought refuge in Macau. However, two of Alfred Ernest’s married sisters were interned in Stanley Camp together with their husbands – they were Beatrice Rose Kew, wife of Arthur James Kew, and Alice Maud Gibson, wife of James S. Gibson. Also interned in Stanley was the latter’s son who worked for Hong Kong Electric Co.Ltd and who served as Pte L.Gibson in what was popularly known as the Hughes Group, HKVDC.

According to Endacott, the plan was to recruit some 9,600 air raid wardens. But recruitment was slow, and in November, 1940 applications were invited for 5,000 wardens additional to the 2,500 then already appointed. Thus, many of the wardens were late appointees. This placed a strain on training facilities, and uniforms and equipment were also in short supply. Some ARP personnel were issued with uniforms (see photo above). but older residents recall that many wardens were issued only with a whistle, a tin hat and a respirator in a brown card-board box which was slung over the shoulder with a length of string.

There is apparently no full list of the thousands of men and women from all walks of life who joined the ARP. A very few are known, including for example Noel Croucher, an eminent philanthropist who became an ARP warden, and Ahmed Bashir a University student who served as a despatch rider in ARP headquarters. Bashir was executed by the Japanese with 32 other BAAG agents in 1943. Two members of the ARP were killed immediately after the enemy landing on the Island on 18<sup>th</sup> December. William Petrie Seath, an air raid warden, worked for the Tai Koo Sugar Refinery. His body was found near the junction of Mt Parker Road and Sir Cecil’s Ride. Close by was the body of Alice Adeline Baldwin, an ARP telephonist. Another ARP warden killed on duty on 25<sup>th</sup> December was Harold Gordon Eales. All three are listed in the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.