

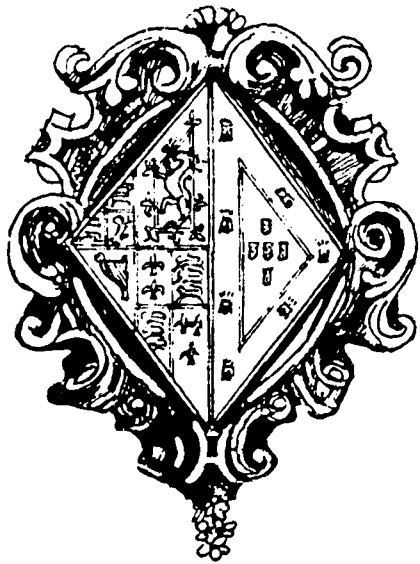
**THE BRITISH  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF PORTUGAL**

THIRTY SECOND ANNUAL REPORT  
AND REVIEW 2005

Quinta Nova  
Carcavelos  
2777-601 PAREDE

## From Macau through China to India and Burma: Hong Kong Portuguese in the Chindits.

by Anne Ozorio



When Hong Kong refugees poured out of Hong Kong after its occupation by the Japanese in December 1941, many were destitute. In Macau those who could claim any kind of British connection were supported by the British Consul, John Reeves, in conjunction with the Red Cross and local charities. Reeves very firmly insisted that the British Government had to accept responsibility, not only for humanitarian reasons but because the alternative would fuel Japanese propaganda. Many of the refugees who found haven in Macau were of Portuguese origin, even if their roots stretched back far in time. The Portuguese authorities and the Bishop of Macau turned no one away. The tiny enclave was flooded with hundreds of thousands of refugees, living on charity, usually without worthwhile work to do. Many of the refugees were men had fought in the fall of Hong Kong either with the regular forces or with the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Forces. Bored and frequently unemployed, many of the younger men among the refugees were fired up with idealism, many wanting to take an active part in the anti Japanese war effort. Many had skills to offer such as communications and weapons training. They spoke many dialects of Chinese and many also knew Japanese. Many had extensive knowledge of China and south east Asia and networks of contacts. Mostly western educated and middle class, they assumed that their skills would be appreciated.

In early 1942 the British Government considered widening the scope of extra assistance given to former civil servants to include those with specialised skills but whose lack of education in Chinese limited their chances of finding work in China, in other words, overseas Chinese and Portuguese. At this same time, the idea of supporting escaped dockworkers was mooted as a means of dissuading them from returning to Hong Kong where the Japanese were happy to offer them work. The Government made funds

available, but responsibility for administration fell to the British military Mission and the British Army Aid Group, an organisation formed to assist escape and invasion from occupied Hong Kong. The BAAG's primary objective, however, was to assist Europeans, and, when the trickle of escapes died down, then that of Indian soldiers. The presence of a very much larger group of other personnel who had entered free China, seeking to join Allied Forces, was a new problem that had to be dealt with. Key positions in the BAAG were filled by Europeans and there was no room for the vast majority of ex Hong Kong men, however qualified. Graduates and trained personnel took menial jobs such as coolies or grasscutters, because that was what was available, but it was not the wisest use of resources. Moreover, the values of the BAAG leadership were more imperialist than those prevailing in the HKVDC and regular military. This did not sit well with men who had risked their lives in the battle and whose motivation was to be part of the anti Japanese action, rather than to restore the old colonial regime. Tensions arose which are mentioned only obliquely in the official record, and men categorised as "unamenable to control" were discharged in the hope that "dissension would die down" as it was "causing caustic comment from local Chinese Officials."

Sending Hong Kong people to India was therefore a neat solution to the problem as far as the British authorities in China were concerned. The real impact of 250 Hong Kong men on the British war effort was negligible from a genuine strategic perspective. Nor was there much logic in sending men whose skills were relevant to China out of China, but the only solution considered was to send them away. Thus was created the "China Unit". The Military Attaché in Chungking wrote on Dec 29<sup>th</sup>, 1943 that it was formed "with the intention of absorbing into useful employment members of the Regular or Volunteer Forces in Hong Kong... who for racial reasons were unsuitable for enlistment into normal European or Indian units. It was never our intention to absorb large numbers of Chinese into the British Army in India nor was it ever intended to make special efforts to recruit men into this unit".

Part of the reason for removing the Hong Kong men from China had

been to prevent them returning to Hong Kong or from joining other agencies which rivalled the British. After the British enthusiasm for exporting Chinese to India and importing Englishmen to China abated, General "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell approached the British Military Attaché requesting that the Americans be permitted officially to hire Hong Kong people with technical skills. He then received a reply to the effect that "if these men are required by you it would be folly to move them out of China. GHQ India consider that you have much greater difficulty in obtaining skilled professionals than is the case in India and we are prepared to grant you the service of these men". By then, however, it was already 1945 and the men had long since been dispersed. Responsibility was shifted to India, even though the Indian establishment had neither sought nor had plans to use them. Indeed the men did not know where they were being sent until the last moment when they were given papers to sign on departure. But most of the men were destitute and had little choice. In some cases Volunteers were not given the back pay they were due since December 1941 until they formally agreed to go to India.

Nonetheless, many were young and idealistic, eager to fight the Japanese in any way they could and excited by the prospect of adventure abroad. But many were inspired by the prospect of doing something to prove their worth, and the promise of a better life. Many of them, being young, idealistic, and unemployed, saw it as a great adventure.

Statistically there were more Chinese ex HKVDC in the China Group, the majority being overseas Chinese (usually South American) and Eurasian. For the purposes of this piece I focus in detail on the Hong Kong Portuguese though they made up just under a quarter of the group. Hong Kong being what it was, the lines between communities were blurred. The Portuguese had in common with the overseas Chinese and other Eurasians a mixed cultural background. Whatever their racial origins, they were not part of the Chinese community proper: they had no native ancestral village to return to, no place in traditional Chinese society. Some could not read or write Chinese, though all spoke various dialects. Yet these

communities were also excluded from European society, and its racial prejudices. The overseas Chinese, Portuguese, Eurasian and western educated Chinese communities thus had much in common: any divisions being overcome by the fact that most people knew each other socially, from church, school or work. A detailed study of individuals shows how the communities interacted together – who knew whom, who married whom and so on. These people formed an extremely cohesive group which reflected some of the most active, able and articulate men from Hong Kong.

Hong Kong Portuguese knew they had a unique role to play. Reading their applications to join the “China Unit” I was struck by how enterprising these men were and the way the then Portuguese community were ensconced all over China and South East Asia. No wonder they had such empathy with the overseas Chinese, for they lived and worked in the same areas. The pattern of Hong Kong settlement in Asia reflected, not just the overseas Chinese but imitated ancient patterns of Portuguese settlement in Asia. The Macau/Hong Kong community had an ethos of being international and itinerant, with a network of connections right across the region. Carlos Rizola Rocha (b. Hong Kong 1895) had worked for Sassoon, the Jewish magnate in Shanghai, whose business empire spread across Asia. Estylito Simão Rizola Rocha, (b HK 1897), his brother, had been zone manager for General Motors in Saigon, from where he travelled throughout South West China. Later, working for Ford Motors, he spent four years in Japan. He also spent two years in the then wild mountain province of Yunnan. In total he spoke eight languages and dialects fluently. Eduardo Rocha, though only 20 years old, had been educated in St Joseph’s Seminaries in Yokohama and Haiphong. Eagerly he noted on his application that he hoped to be sent to a “military academy”, such were his hopes. George D Abbas (b 1923) is described as “Sino Indian” – presumably as he had Goanese origins. He studied at the Diocesan Girls School, La Salle and Diocesan Boys School in Hong Kong, all schools drawing their intake from westernised non-European communities. Ricardo Laurel is “Filipino Portuguese”. Percy Tonnochy was “Scots Portuguese” with a part Spanish wife. He had worked for Ruttonjee, a powerful Parsee millionaire in Hong Kong and the China Coast who was

legendary. Tonnochy proudly said he spoke “Creole Portuguese”, the patois of Macau.

The Hong Kong Portuguese had an ethos of physical sport and training, so were drawn to membership in the Volunteer Defence Force Companies set up along the China Coast when it was set up during the First World War. Some families were particularly identified with the Volunteers. Rufus Rizola Rocha (b 1870) trained, as a police telegraphist in 1892, when telegraphy was the cutting edge of communications technology. Later he became a Junk Inspector for the Harbour Office. But his life revolved around the HKVDC where he specialised in training signalmen, eventually becoming commander of the Signals Section. It was said that the Volunteers were considered “very raw material, youths in their teens too young to bear arms”. Thus, Rocha “was to be seen in the Hong Kong Cricket Club early in the morning and evening putting charges through “Flag Waving” (Morse) or “Wind Filling” (Semaphore). With this background of service and idealism it is no surprise that his family was quick to join in when war came. One son was killed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battery of the HKVOC during the Battle of Hong Kong, a daughter died in bombing in Indo China. His two sons mentioned above and three grandsons, Eduardo, Luis and Carlos all volunteered to go into China, all five ending up as Sergeants. Indeed Estylito’s wife Rachel, who spoke little English – but was an “unlicensed driver” and seamstress – volunteered too, and accompanied the group to India, as did Eva, the 21 year old wife of Luis Rocha. Eduardo has been a dispatch rider for the ARP, as had several Chinese in the group who escaped into China, so they probably knew each other. Intriguingly, shortly before the Japanese attack, a British press photographer was on location in Hong Kong and took a few dozen publicity photos of the ARP men, sitting on their motorcycles and posing in the streets. The photographer left Hong Kong literally before the invasion, so the photos were not lost. By a fluke, Eduardo’s face may be among them.

Henry E. Osmund, 24, lived in the Portuguese enclave of Tung Cheong Buildings. Being a young firebrand, like so many others, he was full of idealism, and joined the anti-Japanese

resistance, possibly the group connected with the Police Reserves, with whom he had served. Coming under surveillance from the Japanese and their agents, one night he stumbled into his brother's apartment with a knife in his back. His brother patched him up and smuggled him out to Macau, for fear the Japanese might take reprisals on the community. In Macau he joined the Police force but was frustrated, seeking more direct action. Together with other men in the Macau Police with Hong Kong backgrounds, A J Xavier, then 24, David Perpetua Hollands, 21, and E H G Lopes, 20, he escaped into China. News of their "adventure" spread. A group of twenty two Portuguese soldiers from the European garrison itself walked into China offering their services to the Allied cause. Because they were *ngau sook* (Portuguese from Europe) and Portugal was neutral, their presence could have created a diplomatic incident, though the Japanese probably found Macau more useful as a neutral for espionage and other purposes and saw advantage in taking it over as they had walked into Timor. Technically, the soldiers having deserted (with the approval of their officers) could not return unpunished so they could not return to Macau.. Eventually some of them made their way to Goa, on their own resources.

Strictly speaking, as a diplomat, the British Consul in Macau was supposed to be neutral, but he interpreted his duties liberally, enjoying the tacit respect of the Japanese consul, Mr Fukui. Told that Hong Kong Volunteers who wanted to go to China should be organised, he delegated the organising of "Boat Groups" to Carlos Rocha and D M Remedios and several others. The groups left Macau by junk from April 1943, the last group leaving in December 1943. Ben Xavier, scion of the Sarrazolla Xavier family whose ancestors had been Portuguese Navy, was himself a member of the British Navy when the Japanese attacked. Held in prisoner of war camp he was told by his senior officer that non whites should escape if they had a chance, so he slipped out unnoticed. Getting a Portuguese passport through the Portuguese Consul in Hong Kong, he soon left for Macau, hoping to go into Free China. He described leaving Macau in a junk, sailing just before midnight. There were 40 to 50 people on this trip, including Duarte Remedios, Bobby Leonard, Defunto da Silva, Percy Tonnochy, the Maxwell brothers and Mrs

Wilson, wife of a Police Officer in Hong Kong whose security connections had led to her being appointed as a holder of intelligence communications in Macau. When she left she handed her duties over to Dr Eddie Gosano, another Hong Kong Portuguese who had escaped from prisoner of war camp. After their trip up river, they landed at the town of Toi Shan from which they were carried in sedan chairs for a while, later on walking or riding in trucks. They reconvened in Kweilin, where they were to remain in a camp awaiting further orders. As it happened, this was to take months.

Since it had been decreed that men ceased to be HKVDC on leaving Macau, but did not come officially into the British establishment until they arrived in India, the men were promised only basic subsistence. In May 1943, no funds were provided for the 156 men already collected. The men were destitute, since they were dependent on handouts, back pay being withheld until they signed the final documents before leaving China. To save them from starvation, Carlos Rocha contributed \$688 per day of his savings, until his funds ran out. The British Consul in Kweilin had to make special arrangements to support the men. Rocha also acted as a sort of unofficial leader, looking after many of the men in Kweilin from other groups. For example, he personally vouched for Peter Maxwell also known as Peter Mak, a Eurasian who had resigned without permission from the British Army pre-war because he needed a better paying job. He was completely candid about this, but the British authorities in China objected even though the Army in Hong Kong had taken no action at the time. Rocha pleaded leniency: Maxwell, who desperately needed the job in China, as he had a large family to support, was accepted.

In addition to the former Volunteers, there was a core of men who had served professionally in the regular Forces, who had military training and experience, and assumed their skills would be in demand when they escaped into China. Rocha looked after four of them, P L Lam of the Royal Engineers, F M Tavares, Royal Navy, Ben Sarazolla Xavier RN and R G Laurel, admiralty clerk, arrived in October 1942 and were billeted in a sampan, which Xavier described

to me as being filthy, leaking and inadequate. Rocha managed to get their allowance raised, and they rented a place in a cheap hotel. Just as they had previously been left without support, by a clerical mix up this group received double funds for a short time, which Rocha had to sort out.

With their knowledge and contact networks in China and South east Asia, their specialist training in wireless telegraphy and the fluency of a large number in Japanese, one might have assumed that these Hong Kong men might have been well utilised in China. However, they were held in a holding camp in Kweilin, some for many months while the British authorities in China pondered what to do with them. While in Kweilin, they were treated as if they were under military discipline even though they were not legally military personnel. It was a curious situation. The men were expected to behave as a fighting unit although they had no real role to play. This was particularly frustrating for the many men who were actually in serving forces, as they were placed under the supervision of civilians with limited military experience. Their skills and training counted for little in these circumstances. They were issued with numerous, detailed orders, but not told the purpose of their mission. Discipline was harsh - men were deducted \$100 of their pay for smoking while on sentry duty or being late for parade. They spent a lot of time marching, or playing football. Meanwhile they saw only too clearly that there was war and deprivation all round them, and the idealistic spirit with which they had set out was not being used. Unsurprisingly, this did develop tensions which the British Army Aid Group obliquely acknowledged. Some realised that they were living in a kind of limbo, and discharged themselves to get better jobs elsewhere, including in the Chinese Army and American military and intelligence agencies. The sojourn in the camp lasted six to eight months, though some had left earlier and were in a similar camp in Calcutta.

When many saw what pay they would be getting in India they balked. In July 1943, out of 34 ratings, only 13 were willing to sign unconditionally. They were seamen and could not see what purpose they would serve on land, and outside China. Altogether of

the 250 or more men in the holding camp, under 100 names appear on the list of the "China Unit" sent to India, though a few went on earlier, to stay in a similar camp in Calcutta. Pay would be 6 rupees a day, better than subsistence. Moreover, those with families had to send payments to China through British Banks in India at official, not black market, rates of exchange through banks in Britain, which lowered the value and complicated the procedure. It became apparent too that allowances were not reaching China, and that families were being left destitute. Wives of men who had gone on ahead were turning up in distress, some reduced to begging in the streets. The men who tried to get an advance to tide their families over were allowed only a maximum of \$1,000 Chinese dollars deducted from their HKVDC back pay, still unpaid after many months. Families that remained in Macau were relatively fortunate as they continued to be supported by the Consulate and Portuguese charities. In China, where there was less support and conditions were more chaotic, some men lost touch with their families altogether.

When orders finally came to move, the men were taken from Kweilin to Kuming in trucks, in small convoys. The roads were rough and dangerous, and conditions primitive. On one convoy, Sergeant Peter Quah (a St Joseph's educated Malayan Chinese) reported that nearly all the men came down with fever en route. Reaching the borders of China, they were flown "over the Hump", over the Himalayas, until they reached India. The planes were small, planes were small, unheated and had a few wooden benches for seating. In India, men were assessed. Some went straight into military training, others were assigned where their professional training might be useful, as some had engineering and docks backgrounds. There was no overall plan, because the idea after all had been generated from China, not India.

Fortuitously, in India, General Orde Wingate had been preparing a specialist guerrilla force called the Chindits to harass the Japanese in Burma. They operated in the jungle, supplied only by airdrops. Harassing the Japanese behind their own lines, and then quickly disappearing back into the jungle, the Chindits tied the Japanese up, preventing them from fully committing to the front.

Indeed, before the war, British military strategists had visualised carrying on the war in China along these lines, starting training schools in China and in Hong Kong itself. Fortunately for the Hong Kong men, their presence in India became known to Brigadier "Mad Mike" Calvert, a charismatic, unconventional man who had developed jungle warfare techniques. He had himself been in Hong Kong before the war, spoke broken Cantonese and appreciated the spunky character of the HKVDC. He also saw the advantage of using men who looked more like Japanese than Burmese in the jungle, since local tribes were by no means uniformly anti Japanese. Thus he invited the Hong men to join his unit, the 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade. There is an interesting parallel between Calvert's belief in Hong Kong men and in General Wingate's advocacy of Jewish independence in Palestine. This was in sharp contrast to the more colonialist British attitudes prevailing in China. Calvert's personal batman was Lance Corporal Young, an "Anglo Chinese" who accompanied him into action in battle reminding him to "be careful Sir". The men were warned that jungle warfare was dangerous, and that the unit was purely voluntary, but many kept to the challenge and joined. Some of the men in the Hong Kong Unit had, in fact, been trained in a small elite brigade organised by the British Special Operations Executive to operate in the Hong Kong region, and one had in fact been transferred from the British led guerrilla training school in Chekiang. However, within the British forces in China there was much rivalry so men connected with groups other than the dominant group sought prospects outside China. After a period of training in jungle warfare techniques, the Hong Kong men went into action in the jungle, participating in the Second Chindit Expedition of 1944.

For men who had grown up in an urban environment with servants, cushioned in middle class comfort, the Hong Kong group did remarkably well in the jungle. They were on their feet most of the time, always moving to avoid detection. The jungle was dense and they had to hack their way through where there were no trails. The terrain was mountainous, with steep uphill climbs followed by sharp, slippery descents. Sometimes, they went without food or water for days as their supplies depended on air drops which could

not often be reached in time. They suffered tropical diseases with a ferocity unknown in Hong Kong, in a climate even hotter and steamier. All the time, they were trailing the Japanese, suspicious of villagers who might betray them. Their previous experience in the New Territories was no preparation for the snakes, leeches and poisonous insects of Burma. Perhaps there was something in the Hong Kong background that had fostered adaptability and endeavour; for many it was the formative adventure of their lives. Nonetheless, for many men; this was the experience of a lifetime. They were young, and filled with the excitement of travel and adventure. Many were infused with idealism and the need to do something for the community in any capacity. The spirit of Jesuit schooling had far reaching effects. Theirs was a generation brought up on tales of heroism and service to a higher cause. The idea of going to war in distant lands was a challenge they could not resist. Many of them were keen sportsmen and physically fit, despite having been impoverished refugees. For the Hong Kong Portuguese the adventure had echoes of a deeper tradition. Their ancestors had come from Europe centuries before and had created mixed race, polyglot communities all along the coasts of Asia. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, Portuguese, or mixed blood Portuguese adventurers had served in ancient Burma, fighting for both the kingdoms of Pegu and Ava. How ironic are the subtle tides of history.

---ooOoo---