Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Hong Kong, 1941- 1945

China and Hong Kong History, Philately and Culture Society, Hong Kong

May 1, 1999

Friends: It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak to a group of philatelists today. I am not a stamp collector, but have always been interested in the historical aspect of it.

A lot has been said and written about Hong Kong during the Second World War. Today, I am going to speak on aspects of the war years in Hong Kong that may not be that well known to the English reading public. Many English books have been written about the British side of the story, and about the POW camps. So today, I am going to tell you the story about the Chinese in Hong Kong during those years.

Some of you may have read my book Building Bridges, and I know Ingo Nessel has, so please forgive me if some of the things I'm going to say today may sound familiar, but it won't all be familiar.

I will first describe the situation in Hong Kong before the war, and then the life and the involvement of the Chinese population during the Japanese occupation.

When I did my research on the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong, the first question that came to mind was WHY? Hong Kong was an insignificant island, and was not even a strategically important part of the British Empire. The British government didn't really believe that the Japanese would ever invade Hong Kong, and that was the reason why Hong Kong was so poorly defended.

The Japanese government's plans towards Britain were quite different from the belief of the British government. They needed Hong Kong as a base in Asia against the British, as well as a source of valuable materials, as evidenced by their acts of stripping Hong Kong of cars and heavy machinery etc. after the surrender. These materials were continuously shipped to Japan in large containers, the scene of which was described in many books and articles written at the time. Hong Kong had a lot of wealth, and was like a treasure chest to the Japanese government.

When the war was raging in Europe, the War Office in London was quite aware of the deficiencies in Hong Kong's defense, but the island was regarded as expendable. Lord Hastings Ismay, Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Chief of Staff in 1940,proposed to demilitarize Hong Kong, and was accused of being a defeatist. Sir Geoffrey Northcote, Governor of Hong Kong, believed that Lord Ismay was a realist, and wrote to Whitehall that October to urge the withdrawal of British garrison from the colony in order to avoid the slaughter of civilians and the destruction of property that would follow a Japanese attack. No one listened. Northeote was soon due to retire because of ill health, and was replaced by Sir Mark Young as governor.

People in Hong Kong wanted to believe Major General Edward Grasett, the Toronto bom commander of the British troops in China, who didn't believe that Japan would declare war on Britain or the United States. How wrong he was! He did, however, wanted the Hong Kong garrison reinforced, but his request was denied by the War Office. In 194 1, Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, Cornmander-in-Chief of the Far East, requested an increase in the garrison in Hong Kong, but was again denied because Churchill believed that there wasn't the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong, therefore he didn't want to increase the loss of troops. However, Grasett continued to campaign for reinforcements despite Churchill's decision. When he retired from China command in July 1941, he stopped off in Ottawa en route to England where he met with Canada's Chief of General Staff, H.D.G. (Harry) Crerar. They discussed how Hong Kong could withstand an extended siege if it had an addition of one or two battalions. He did not suggest to Crerar that Canada should supply the manpower, but he did make that proposal to the British Chief of Staff. That's how the Canadian troops ended up in Hong Kong like sheep to the slaughter. They arrived in November, 194 1,totally unprepared and without any knowledge of the colony. Information that was supposed to accompany them was sent to Australia by mistake.

Everyone knows that Hong Kong was poorly defended, but most don't know how bad it was. Aside from the two Canadian battalions, Hong Kong was defended by I 1,000 regular British and Indian troops, and 1,387 Hong Kong Volunteers. A single RAF squadron was diverted to Malaya, leaving five obsolete fighters as Hong Kong's air defense. HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse were supposed to come from the South Seas to relieve Hong Kong when necessary, and it was assumed that the US Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbour would be able to contain the Japanese in the event of a major conflict. Well, we all know what happened to the fleet in Pearl Harbour. When the first bombs fell on Kai Tak airport on December 8, the five old fighters never had a chance to get off theground. And within a few hours, the population of Hong Kong heard about the

bombing of Pearl Harbour and the sinking of theHMS Prince of Wales and the HMS Repulse.

The British did believe that Hong Kong could hold out for five months, and the Japanese actually believed that it could be defended for six months. They therefore planned the attack carefully, and the British were totally oblivious of it.

By the end of 1938, after the fall of Canton (Guangzhou) in October, Japanese troops were amassed north of the Hong Kong border. The 38th Army was training daily at Baiyunshan, which had the same topography as the area at Gin Drinker's Line (west side of the New territories). Nightly, there were preparation in Shenzhen for border attack on Hong Kong.Even then, the mood of the expatriate community in Hong Kong on the eve of the catastrophe was that a Japanese attack was unthinkable.

In July 1940, the Japanese infiltrated the colony with spies, under the command of Major-General Ito Takeo. The spies worked as masseurs, hairdressers, barmen and waiters. In fact, the best men's hairdresser in Hong Kong, one who had been in the colony for seven years, and who cut the hair of two successive governors, generals, the Commissioner of Police, the Officer in charge of the Special Branch and the Chairman of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, presented himself to his employers after capitulation on Christmas Day, 1941, in the uniform of a Commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Due to the fact that Britain never expected Japan to declare war on them, the Japanese nationals were not under surveillance. Colonel Suzuki, an intelligence officer, who was exposed by a British agent, was not expelled from Hong Kong by the Foreign Office because Britain was not at war with Japan. When he departed the colony in November, 194 1, barely two weeks before Japan attacked Hong Kong, he had with him the complete details of the British defense plan.

Life went on as usual in the colony despite the mass influx of refugees from China. Many of the Chinese in Hong Kong helped with the war effort in China, and there are many stories about those who went to China to join in the resistance against the Japanese. Many also made a great deal of money because of the sudden increase in population, and therefore a great increase in the demands of manufactured goods as well as services. Many wealthier families began hoarding food, especially rice. Bomb shelters were built, and a segment of the population, especially older school children, were trained as air-raid wardens. Anti-Japanese literature was censored by the government because Britain was not at war with Japan. No one really believed that the attack would happen.

On December 6, 1941, Sir Mark Young attended a charity ball at the Peninsula Hotel. The next day, Sunday, mobilization call went out and a state of emergency was announced over the radio. On the morning of December 8, at 8.30,bombs started to fall on Kai Tak Airport. Within 48 hours, the British defense line was broken. By December 12, enemy guns were lined up along the Kowloon wharves. At 9 am, December 13,a Japanese staff officer crossed to Victoria Pier in a launch bearing a flag of truce, and presented to Sir Mark Young, the governor, a demand for the surrender of the colony, under the threat of heavy artillery and bombardment from the air. This was rejected and the blitz began. During the nights of December 18 & 19, the Japanese effected landings at three different points on the island of Hong Kong, cutting it into two halves. On December 21, the governor was given further instructions from Churchill that "there must beno thought of surrender." However, on Christmas Day, 1941, at6.30 PM, Hong Kong surrendered.

From my own information, the attack on Hong Kong was considered a battle between the British and the Japanese, and the Chinese population were the bystanders, even though they were the majority of the population. The Chinese volunteers were allowed to go home, and only the British and Allied nationals were put into concentration camps. An interesting point was that China was also part of the Allied countries, but the Chinese population was not put behind barb-wire fences. The reason being that Japan was trying to build the "Co-Prosperity Sphere" in Asia, and spreading the believe that it was preferable for Asians to rule Asians instead of by Western Imperialists. Therefore, the co-operation of the local population was necessary. As long as the Chinese cooperate with the Japanese government, they would be left alone. Those who helped the British would be severely treated or killed. Many did suffer this fate.

The feelings of the Chinese population in Hong Kong could not be separated from that of the Chinese in China. China had long suffered from the aggression of Japan on Chinese soil, and therefore, it was not surprising that many Chinese died in helping in the resistance of the British in Hong Kong. I remember reading British comments written at the time that it was surprising that the Chinese, who were a subject race in the colony, would go to the extent of risking their lives to help the British. But they did it for their own reasons.

The ordinary Chinese citizens survived under occupation. There was severe food rationing, with rice rationed at8.46 oz. per person per day, often mixed with sand. The unfortunate just starved to death. Many resorted to cannibalism. The Chinese literature of the day mentioned how the dying in the streets often had their thighs carved away for meat before they were dead. Even though the Chinese population was tolerated, the Chinese were dispensable and often treated

harshly. Any suspicion of acts against the Japanese government could mean torture and death.

At the beginning of 1942, the Japanese military government made an announcement that the population in Hong Kong was to be reduced from 1,600,000 to 500,000, a number which was deemed manageable. The Chinese population was encouraged to go back to China and many, like my own family, did. Life was not necessarily better in China for most people because of the invading Japanese armed forces, but at least, we had the choice not to live under occupation. Another way the Japanese military government managed to reduce the population was by terror and reprisals. In1942, the recorded burials alone numbered 83,435. Another method of reducing the population was by picking people up in the streets by the truckloads to junks in the harbour, which were then towed out to sea and set on fire.

Now, imagine the situation in Hong Kong. The British government was gone, and all the British and Allied nationals were locked up. What did the Chinese do aside from their daily existence? Few, if any, English books tell the stories of heroism of the Chinese resistance in Hong Kong during the years of occupation.

I will now tell you the story of the Chinese guerrillas and the assistance they received from the Chinese population. Some of these people are still alive today to tell the tales. Many have their tales recorded as oral history, and some have been interviewed by journalists in recent years.

I'll go back a little and give you the background of the guerrillas who operated in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation. On October 12, 1938, the Japanese landed in Dayawan (Bias Bay) in south China, and defeated the Nationalist Chinese army. This was considered a national shame by the Chinese Communists, and they decided that it was up to them to save
China. The next day, October 13, a band of 120 guerrillas was formed in the East River (Dong Jiang) area, in south China, under the leadership of Huang Zouyao. By October 2 1, Canton (Guangzhou) was occupied by the Japanese.

Since the invasion of China by the Japanese, many overseas Chinese, including those from Hong Kong and Macao, not only raised funds for the war effort, but also went back to China to join the resistance against the Japanese. My father was one of them. Please keep in mind that the guerrillas were patriots and not necessary Communist sympathizers, because there were also guerrillas under the Nationalist government. Until December1943, all guerrilla forces were under the Kuomintang, that is, the Nationalist government, forming a united front against the Japanese. It was not until December 2, 1943, that the East River

Guerrilla Detachment officially went under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and became known as the East River Detachment, Guangdong People's Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Corps.

At the beginning of 1941, (keeping in mind that Hong Kong was not invaded by the Japanese until the end of that year),the East River guerrillas were already in Hong Kong without the knowledge of the Hong Kong government. They went to the New Territories under the leadership of Cai Guoliang with the aim of infiltrating the area, publicizing their aims and organizing the villagers in preparation for the Japanese invasion.. This became the Hong Kong - Kowloon Brigade.

Banditry was common at the time, and when the guerrillas arrived, they were thought of as bandits and were refused entry into the villages. It was important for them to gain the confidence of the population and the first thing they had to do was to drive out the bandits. They then sent in their political officers and their health workers to educate and help the villagers. Their conduct had to be exemplary. By driving out the bandits and maintaining order, they showed their strength. The centre of their operation remained in the New Territories, and they had their support among the villagers. The New Territories was a sub-area of the East River Detachment, and each sub-area was under three officers - the military command, a political and a liaison officer.

Fishing Villages

There were not only bandits in the New Territories, the waters around Hong Kong and the New Territories were infested with pirates as well. In order to establish confidence in the fishing villages and to open up marine communication routes, the guerrillas first went in the guise of merchants and friends. Here, the most important thing they had to do was to get rid of the pirates and be able to dodge Japanese patrol boats. Once they had the confidence of the fishermen, they could organize them to help in Japanese resistance. The marine routes were vital for transportation in the smuggling of food in from China and the smuggling of people out to Free China.
The guerrillas were not seamen and had no knowledge of the waters around Hong Kong and the New Territories, therefore, they could not have done without the help of the fishermen and their families. The fishermen helped to sabotage Japanese gun boats and protected the sea routes. In many instances, the guerrillas were saved by them. Whenever the fishermen spotted a Japanese patrol boat coming towards a guerrilla base, they would hoist a basket or a bag onto the mast of their boat. Other fishing boats within sight would do the same as a warning to the guerrillas. Despite their limited resources, the guerrilla Marine Unit gradually gained control of the major sea transportation routes.

Before occupation, Hong Kong imported rice from South East Asia which was interrupted since the outbreak of the war. Rice was abundant in China, but trade with the areas not under Japanese control was forbidden by the Japanese government despite the severe food shortage. Large scale trade developed which was regarded as "smuggling" by the Japanese government, and these "smuggling" routes, whether by land or by sea were controlled by the guerrillas.

Smuggling was legalized by the guerrillas along the routes they controlled. Taxes were charged by them for the support of their operations. Traveling merchants were given introductory documents to take to China where the East River guerrillas on the other side of the border continued to give them protection through the Japanese controlled territories.

Villages

The villages in the New territories were under the elders whose confidence the guerrillas needed. Some of the more prosperous villages had their own armed units for self protection against bandits. As the guerrillas were able to proof effective in bandit control, they gained the confidence of the villagers, and were able to gradually earn their trust to take over the village governments as well as their protection. Many villagers became guerrilla sympathizers despite the danger, for they had a common cause against the Japanese.

The guerrillas took pride in reprisals against collaborators who worked for the Japanese governments, many of whom were Chinese interpreters. After each reprisal, there were counter-guerrilla exercises with curfew imposed by the Japanese. The villagers suffered. Despite that, the resistance against the Japanese would not have worked without the assistance and cooperation of all members of the villages, from young to old. The old provided food and shelter for the guerrillas, escape prisoners and civilians who needed help, and the young did the running.

Children

Children as young as 10 years old were trained as runners. They were known as "Xiaogui", little devils. These little devils were known to have "iron legs, night vision and supernatural stomachs" because of the hardship they had to endure. They knew their territories well, and since they were no different from the other children, in the village or the street urchins in the city, they were often able to carry out errands unnoticed. The intelligence work of the guerrillas could not have been done without them. The boys usually worked on their own, and the girls worked in pairs.

These runners were indoctrinated (with the agreement of their parents) about the importance and absolute secrecy of their work, and were expected to give their lives to the cause if necessary. They were trained with the system of codes of triangles and crosses. A runner with a message with three crosses and three triangles had to run at top speed to deliver it.

Just as important was their training in dressing up and acting so that they could impersonate different characters. At times, they had to pretend to be stupid and gave wrong answers when they were stopped by the Japanese. At times they would cry and pretend to be lost when they were discovered. A little devil named Tie Shalie once pretended to be a cowherd. He started a stampede of cows and chased after them to get away from the Japanese. In oral history and memoirs, there were many stories of the exploits of these little devils.

In the city, the children who worked in espionage were known as "little rats." An example was in the case of obtaining information about Kai Tak airport. The only people who could go in and out of the buildings were these children who went under barbed wires to steal useless building materials. They were considered a nuisance by the Japanese authorities. The guerrillas trained them to measure thickness of walls, to memorize the layout of the entire area in order to be able to draw a diagram. They were also trained to remember the number of planes and the runways inside and the directions for takeoffs. These were passed on to the Allies after clearance by the Chinese Communist Party headquarters.

Rescues

One of the most important work done by the guerrillas in Hong Kong was in rescue. The guerrillas were vital in helping in the escape of POWs and that of important Chinese nationals during the first part of the occupation.

Immediately after Hong Kong surrendered, important Chinese nationals were brought to China by the Communications Unit of the guerrillas dressed as refugees. Important people such as Liao Chengzhi escaped on January 5, 1942.

The fact that the guerrillas controlled the major communications routes was vital in the smuggling of British and Allied POWs and airmen shot down by the Japanese during bombing raids.

On January 9, 1942, the first group of POWs escaped under the leadership of Lt. Col. L.T. Ride with the help of Francis Lee Yiu Piu. Lee made arrangements with the guerrillas and guerrilla sympathizers in order that the escape was made possible. They went by boat and on foot, and were hidden,

housed and fed by the villagers in the New Territories. They were led to Free China by the Communications Unit of the guerrillas. Subsequently, Lt. Col. Ride established the British Army Aid Group (BAAG) in China to help escapees and to smuggle medicines into the POW camps in Hong Kong.

Just talking about the BAAG could take hours, if not days, but I would like to point out that BAAG could not have existed without the guerrillas and the guerrilla sympathizers because they were the link for the POW camps with the outside world. That feeling was expressed in writing many times by Lt. Col. Ride in his diary and in his report written for the War Office in praise of the guerrillas, whom he referred to as "our guerrillas. "The POWs as well as the Allied airmen shot down by the Japanese were amazed at how people popped up from nowhere to help them. This was the work of the guerrillas.

From the oral histories recorded, there were many other rescues that were assisted by the guerrillas, such as in Jan. 1942, at the request of BAAG, British soldiers who were incarcerated at Kai Tak Airport were contacted by guerrillas impersonating as hawkers selling cigarettes. Escape arrangements were made through the sewer to be met by the guerrillas at the other end. In the first attempt, only two soldiers came, to the great disappointment of the guerrillas. The second time, another two soldiers came. The third day, when the guerrillas went to meet the escapees, they saw Japanese gun boats patrolling the area. The Japanese had discovered the escape route.

After 1942, there were few attempts of escape by thePOWs because of fear of reprisals, especially of those who were left behind. From then on, the co-operation between the guerrillas and the Allies were mainly in espionage, sabotage and in smuggling of medical supplies into the POW and civilian camps. They continued to help civilian refugees who fled from HongKong into Free China.

By 1944, rescue missions were mainly of downed Allied airmen who were bombing Hong Kong. There were many stories such as that of Lt. Donald W. Kerr of the 14th Squadron of the U.S. Air Force whose plane was shot down during a bombing raid of Kai Tak airport on Feb. II 9 1944. He was rescued by thirteen year-old little devil Chen Zai, who brought him to Tan Tien who worked as a translator. The three of them spent more than 20 days dodging the Japanese and hiding in caves. Lt. Kerr was brought to safety to the guerrilla headquarters in Huiyang,China.

The guerrilla assistance was considered so important that in March 1945, the U.S. Navy sent personnel to consult with the East River Detachment in preparation for an Allied landing in south China,. and guerrilla Brigade leader in

Hong Kong, Zhen Sheng, was highly praised for his contribution to the Allied cause.

Women

Women guerrillas played an important role in Hong Kong. Some worked in the military units, but most worked in radio communications, intelligence, propaganda, hygiene, as runners and took care of the necessities for the military units.

Communications of the female guerrillas with the locals was of utmost importance because they worked with the villagers every day, whether it was planting in the fields, cutting straws in the hills, or digging clams by the seaside. In this way, they ensured the complete co-operation of the villagers, and it was the most effective way of recruiting other females into the guerrilla force. They held performances in the villages to spread propaganda. The women recruited in the New Territories worked as runners. They usually worked in pairs and carried their messages hidden in their hair or in gift or food baskets.

Espionage

In the area of espionage, guerrillas infiltrated into different aspects of the Japanese government, such as agent Li Cheng, who worked for the occupation police force as an investigator. By the end of 1943, he was able to join the headquarters of the Intelligence Department of the Kempeitai, (Japanese Military Police.) Even after the bombing of the No.4 railway bridge by the guerrillas in April 1944, Li was still able to pass an enemy map of Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories to the headquarters of the East River Detachment, who in turn passed it on to the Americans.

On July 13, 1945, an emergency order came from the Intelligence Headquarters to seal off all roads and shipping in order to eliminate the Inner City Unit of the guerrillas. Li was able to get the warning to the members of the unit in time. Li Cheng worked for a total of three years and eight months for the Japanese, which was the entire period of the occupation.

The Allies depended on the information gathered by the guerrillas in Hong Kong, such as the story of Ya Wen, who was instructed to observe all movements of boats in the harbour with a pair of binoculars smuggled to her. The binoculars were taken apart, and brought to her on two separate trips. She was instructed to mark down all the buoys and label them and observe the type of boats. The information she gave was transmitted to her own unit and forwarded to the U.S. Air Force for the bombing of shipping in the harbour.

Sabotage

This was started in 1943, both in the inner city and in the New Territories. The aim was to infiltrate every aspect of production by the Japanese in order to sabotage or slow down production and performance. In 1944, with the excuse of American bombing attacks, the agents in the Kowloon Dockyard sounded air raid sirens at least once a week, in order to disperse the workers and slow down productions. They caused so much confusion that even the Japanese supervisors didn't know whether these emergencies were real or not.

Bombs and explosives were brought into the city, piece by piece, from their hiding places in the New Territories, often by women guerrillas dressed as hawkers selling firewood. Sometimes these were transported by children dressed as cowherds, hiding explosives in hollowed bamboo sticks. This was how the No.. 4railway bridge in Wong Jiao (Kowloon) was bombed in April 1944 by a civil servant, (agent Liang Fu), of the Department of Water Works.

Propaganda

Another important aspect of the work of the guerrillas was propaganda. Anti- Japanese propaganda posters were printed at night behind closed curtains and distributed on the streets, in -factories, in all public places as well as in front of the offices of the Japanese military. Copies of Qian Jing Bao were posted at the Kowloon Huangpu dockyard. Because of the fear of some workers, the flyers were often taken down which prompted one guerrilla, He Jiari, to add the words "those who take the flyers down will be shot", which solved the problem. In Saojiwan, flyers on the failures of the Japanese in the Pacific War were posted on the front door ofthe Japanese Census Office, which caused a great flurry of investigative -activities among the Kempeitai (Japanese military police), but then they discovered that the paper and the ink camefrom them. These were stolen from the Zhonghua Publishing house in Kowloon which was taken over by the Japanese when they occupied Hong Kong.

In 1945, the guerrillas decided to publish an 8 page newspaper named Di Xia Huo. The first issue came out in May followed by a second issue.

The End of the War

On August 14, 1945, at 23.30 Tokyo time, the Emperor of Japan formally surrendered to the Supreme Command of the Allied Forces. All of a sudden, there was a void in the local government in the New Territories. In September, a British representative went to Shatoujiao to meet with the East River Detachment

(guerrillas) to ask them to remain in the New Territories to help maintain order. They agreed and remained until June 30, 1946, when all the guerrillas withdrew to Shandong province.

At the same time, in Sept. 1945 the colonial government, together with the Hong Kong - Kowloon Brigade, setup a temporary hospital at Dapu, mainly for the treatment of injured guerrillas. This hospital operated until March 1946. This was evidence of the good, though unofficial, relationship that existed between the British and the East River guerrillas in Hong Kong.

As we all know, from the end of August, 1945, Hong Kong entered another period of its history.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.