Victoria Cross and George Cross awards during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, 1941 - 45

by Martin Heyes

A LEADING HISTORIAN once commented that Stanley Military Cemetery in Hong Kong must be unique in that it is the final resting place of no fewer than five holders of the George Cross, which ranks alongside the Victoria Cross as the highest gallantry award in the British Commonwealth. These men, a mixture of British and Indian military officers and a Colonial civil servant, were executed by the Japanese military in 1943, following show trials and after having been tortured and kept in unspeakable conditions in Stanley Prison.

Captain Mateen Ahmed Ansari, GC

Captain Ansari was born into a wealthy family in Hyderabad, India in 1915 or 1916. He joined the British Army and, unusually, was awarded the King's, rather than the Viceroy's, commission. Posted to Hong Kong with his regiment, the 5th Battalion, 7th Rajputs, his company saw fierce action during the battle both in the Devil's Peak area on the mainland and later in the North Point area on Hong Kong Island.

Capt M.A. Ansari, GC
(courtesy The VC & GC Association)
Having captured Ansari, the victorious Japanese tried to convince him, without success, to turn against the British and to bring a number of his fellow Indian soldiers with him. The Japanese considered that having him on their side would be quite a coup as he was a man of influence, but Ansari remained loyal to the British. Despite being tortured in Stanley Prison from May 1942 onwards, Ansari could not be turned and he was executed by beheading in October 1943 on St Stephen’s Beach, Stanley.

John Alexander Fraser, GC, MC*

John Fraser was born in Edinburgh in 1896. In September 1915 he was commissioned into the Royal Scots Fusiliers and served on the Western Front, where he won the Military Cross in July 1916 and a Bar to his MC in October 1917. Following demobilisation, in 1919 he was appointed as a ‘Cadet’ in the Colonial Service and sent to Hong Kong. He made steady progress in his career, moving up the ranks and serving with numerous government departments, mainly in the New Territories. In 1930 he went to the UK to study law. Upon returning to Hong Kong he served with the Attorney General’s and Crown Solicitor’s Departments becoming Assistant Attorney General. In April 1941, possibly due to war clouds gathering in the Far East, he was appointed Defence Secretary.

During the Japanese occupation and while incarcerated in Stanley Internment Camp, Fraser was heavily involved in the resistance movement. He was believed by the Japanese, probably correctly, to be the main organiser of the movement having a detailed knowledge of escape plans and the presence of radios in the camp. He worked closely with the British Army Aid Group (BAAG) based in Chungking, China, under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Sir Lindsay Ride. In July 1943 he was arrested by the Kempetai (the Japanese secret military police) and tortured. He did not divulge the names of any men or women involved in the resistance movement, even though he knew their identities. He was executed in October 1943 along with, *inter alia*, Captain Ansari.

Colonel Lanceray Arthur Newnham, GC, MC

Colonel Newnham was born into a British army family in India in August 1889. Commissioned into the Middlesex Regiment he was sent to France in August 1915 where he participated in some of the bloodiest fighting on the Western Front, including the Somme and Arras offensives, winning the Military Cross in January 1917.

In December 1941 Newnham was serving in Hong Kong and after the British surrender he worked closely with BAAG agents to arrange escapes from PoW camps. His activities were discovered by the Japanese and he was subsequently arrested together with Flight Lieutenant Gray and Captain Ford (see later). He was tortured in Stanley Prison and executed by firing squad in December 1943.
Flight Lieutenant Hector Bertram Gray, GC, AFM

Flight Lieutenant 'Dolly' Gray was born in Gillingham, Kent in June 1911. He enlisted in the RAF as an aircraft apprentice and by November 1938 had reached the rank of sergeant (pilot) and was serving with the Long Range Development Flight. That year he was a crew member (radio operator) on an RAF bomber that, together with two other aircraft, flew non-stop from Egypt to Darwin, Australia. This feat set a world distance record and Gray was one of a number of men to be awarded the Air Force Medal for this flight.

Gray was later commissioned and was serving in Hong Kong at the outbreak of the Pacific War. While in captivity in a PoW camp he worked closely with BAAG agents, smuggling much-needed medicine into the camps. His activities were discovered by the Japanese and following his arrest and torture in Stanley Prison, he was executed in December 1943.

Captain Douglas Ford, GC

Captain Ford was born in Galashiels, Scotland in September 1918. Upon the outbreak of war in September 1939 he was studying Accountancy at Edinburgh University, although he discontinued his studies to be commissioned into 2nd Battalion, The Royal Scots, and was sent to Hong Kong. His brother James also served with the battalion in the rank of captain.

Taken prisoner in Hong Kong, Ford was incarcerated in Sham Shui Po PoW camp where he soon became involved with the BAAG. He was actively planning a mass breakout of PoWs when the Japanese learnt of his activities. Along with others he was arrested and tortured in Stanley Prison. Ford was executed along with Newnham and Gray, probably at Big Wave Bay on Hong Kong Island, in December 1943.

There were no other George Crosses awarded for actions during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, although in 1946 Driver Joseph Hughes of the RASC was posthumously awarded the GC. The lorry which Hughes was driving caught fire while he was conveying ammunition and explosives from Happy Valley to Lye Yue Mun Barracks on Hong Kong Island for disposal. Despite his best efforts to extinguish the fire his lorry exploded and he died two days later of his injuries.
injuries. He was not buried in Stanley Military Cemetery but in the Colonial (now Hong Kong) Cemetery.

Company Sergeant Major John Robert Osborn, VC

Finally, mention should be made of CSM J.R. Osborn, VC who, while not being the only person recommended for the Victoria Cross for actions during the Japanese invasion and occupation, was the only actual recipient and the first Canadian to win the Victoria Cross in the Second World War.

John Robert Osborn was born of Romany stock in Norfolk, England on 2 January 1899. During the First World War he served in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, seeing action at the Battle of Jutland, and with the Royal Naval Division on the Western Front. After the war he emigrated to Canada and worked in a number of fields including farming and on the railways. In 1933 he joined the Winnipeg Grenadiers, a unit of the non-permanent active Militia. His regiment was mobilised on the outbreak of war in 1939 and was later sent to Jamaica to perform garrison duties, relieving a British Army battalion which was sent to fight in Norway. In October 1941, at the request of the British Government, the Winnipeg Grenadiers was one of two Canadian battalions sent to augment the British garrison in Hong Kong.

On the night of 18 December 1941, six battalions of Japanese infantry landed on Hong Kong Island and by the morning of 19 December they were advancing on the high ground of Mount Butler and Jardine's Lookout. 'A' Company of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, of which Osborn was a member, was ordered to attack Jardine’s Lookout, then Mount Butler, and clear the Japanese from these features. Soon after dawn on 19 December, Osborn mounted a bayonet charge and captured the summit of Mount Butler.

Over the next few hours ferocious fighting ensued, but due to overwhelming Japanese numerical superiority the Winnipeg Grenadiers were forced to fall back down the western slopes of Mount Butler. The Japanese surrounded the surviving members of the company, who by now had been reduced to about 30 men, and started to throw grenades into the Canadian position.

The company commander, Major A.B. Gresham, was killed while attempting to surrender and command then fell to Osborn who by this time had determined the timing of the fuses of the Japanese grenades and was picking them up and throwing them back at the enemy. Finally, one landed at a location that Osborn could not
reach in time. Shouting a warning as he pushed one man aside, he threw himself on the grenade which exploded, killing him instantly.

John Osborn was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously in 1947. It was presented to his widow in London by the King; the final paragraph of his citation reads:

CSM Osborn was an inspiring example to all throughout the defence which he assisted so magnificently in maintaining against an overwhelmingly enemy force for over 8.5 hours, and in his death he displayed the highest qualities of heroism and self-sacrifice.

Although he is not commemorated in Stanley Military Cemetery, he is commemorated elsewhere on Hong Kong. There is a black marble memorial to his regiment, the Winnipeg Grenadiers, in general and to John Osborn in particular, that has been placed on the Wilson Trail, a popular hiking path in Hong Kong which passes close by the spot where most military historians believe he was killed - a stone cairn has been erected (unofficially) on the site of his death. Also, he is commemorated by a bronze statue of an anonymous British First World War ‘Tommy’ which stands in Hong Kong Park. The statue used to stand in the garden of a mansion which belonged to a wealthy Chinese businessman named Eu Tong-sen in Repulse Bay. The grounds of the house were the scene of one of the dreadful atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during the 1941 battle.

Following the demolition of the house in the 1980s, the Eu family presented the statue to the British Army and it was moved to outside the guardroom at Osborn Barracks in Kowloon (named after this warrant officer) where it stood for a number of years. Later, when Hong Kong Park was created in the former Victoria Barracks, the statue was moved there to provide a tangible military link between the present park and the former barracks.

The National Archives' library

Although many members of the Society will be well aware of the records held at The National Archives (TNA), many of which can be accessed online, some members may not be aware that TNA has an extensive research library that can also be useful for researching medals and their recipients. There is no access to the collection at the moment as TNA is closed due to the Covid-19 outbreak but one can search the library catalogue online. The easiest way to do this is by a simple keyword search under title or subject or author if you know who or what you are looking for by going to: https://tna.koha-ptfs.co.uk/cgi-bin/koha/opac-shelves.pl?op=list&category=2

To keep up to date on new records being released from the archive itself see TNA’s website at: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/news/?news-year=&news-type=document-releases