

# Rotarians served Officers of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps

By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian)

1 April 2016



In the history of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社), there had been 3 Rotarians served officers of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (香港義勇防衛軍團):

- (1) Major Edward Cock (谷克少校)
- (2) Lieutenant Colonel Eric John Reinhold Mitchell (密轍爾中校)
- (3) Lieutenant Colonel Reginald David Walker (獲嘉中校)

## The Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps

The Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC), of the British Crown Colony Hong Kong (英國殖民地香港), was a locally raised, multi-ethnic military militia unit that fought alongside British, Canadian, and Indian regular forces against the Japanese invasion during World War II. Commonly known as “The Volunteers”, they played a vital role in the defense of the Colony during the Battle of Hong Kong (香港保衛戰) in December 1941. The critical details of the HKVDC during World War II include:

### Structure and Composition

- **Diverse Makeup:** Mirroring the cosmopolitan nature of colonial Hong Kong, the Corps consisted of local Chinese, Eurasians, British, Portuguese, Russians, Free Frenchmen, and Americans.
- **Fighting Strength:** Upon mobilization on 8 December 1941, the HKVDC deployed approximately 2,200 personnel.
- **Specialized Units:** They were organized into seven infantry companies, five artillery batteries, five machine gun companies, an armoured car platoon, and auxiliary signal, engineering, and medical field ambulance units.
- **The “Hughes Group”:** A unique platoon within the HKVDC composed entirely of men over the age of 55 (mostly prominent local businessmen and officials) who guarded vital infrastructure like the North Point power station.

### Operational Role in the Battle of Hong Kong

- **Gin Drinkers Line (醉酒灣防線):** Early in the Battle, components of the HKVDC

supported regular troops trying to hold mainland defense positions in the New Territories (新界) and Kowloon (九龍).

- Battle of Wong Nai Chung Gap (黃泥涌峽激戰): They suffered severe casualties on Hong Kong Island, particularly No. 3 (Eurasian) Company, which defended the strategic island crossroads against overwhelming Japanese advances.
- Battle of Stanley (赤柱激戰): HKVDC artillery and infantry units fought desperate final actions at the Stanley Peninsula until the official surrender.

### Casualties and Aftermath

- Sacrifice: Out of 2,200 mobilized troops, 289 were killed or listed as missing, and the majority of survivors became Prisoners of War.
- Escapes & Continued Service: Some members escaped to the Chinese mainland via the British Army Aid Group. A core contingent formed the Hong Kong Volunteer Company, which went on to fight the Japanese during the Burma Campaign as part of the Chindits.

### Post-War Legacy

Following the War, the unit was reconstituted and eventually renamed the Royal Hong Kong Regiment (The Volunteers) (皇家香港軍團 (義勇軍)), continuing to serve as a local auxiliary unit until it was finally disbanded in 1995 ahead of the British regime of Hong Kong handover to the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國) in 1997.

## Major Edward Cock (谷克少校)

Major Edward Cock (谷克少校), MBE, AMICE, MINA, JP, (1884-1969) was an Active Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社) in the 1930-40s holding the Classification "Ships & Nautical Equipment – Shipbuilding" when he was the chief manager of The Hong Kong & Whampoa Dock Co., Ltd. (香港黃埔船塢有限公司). Simultaneously, Edward served the community as President of the Boy Scouts Association Hong Kong Branch (香港童子軍總會) from 1934 to 1940, as well as Commodore of the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club (香港皇家遊艇會) from 1937 to 1940.

Edward Cock joined the Advisory Committee of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps in 1934. He eventually rose to the rank of Major, using his expertise in engineering and administration to assist the Corps in logistical and defense preparations.

Following in December 1941 outbreak of the Pacific War (1941-1945), the British Crown Colony Hong Kong was captured and occupied by the Imperial Japan's military forces for 3 years and 8 months. Both Edward and wife Clementina were interned by the Japanese in the Stanley Internment Camp (赤柱拘留營). Since all members of British and American nationalities were interned, the Rotary Club of Hong Kong has thus to be disbanded.

Not long after their 1945 release, the couple returned to their home in Jersey, in the Channel Islands.

## Lieutenant Colonel Eric John Reinhold Mitchell (密韋爾中校)

Lieutenant Colonel Eric John Reinhold Mitchell (密韋爾中校), OBE, ED, (1893–1970) was a prominent British military officer, business executive, and civic leader in the colonial Hong Kong. He served as the Second-in-Command of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps during the Battle of Hong Kong in World War II, survived years as a prisoner of war, and played a central role in rebuilding Hong Kong's community institutions postwar.

Mitchell was an Active Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong in the 1930s holding the Classification “Insurance – Annuities” when he was Hong Kong Branch Manager for the Manufacturers Life Insurance Company (known today as Manulife Hong Kong 宏利人壽保險). Since all members of British and American nationalities were interned by the Imperial Japan's military forces during the Pacific War (1941-1945), the Rotary Club of Hong Kong has thus to be disbanded.

After the War victory and Hong Kong was recovered, Mitchell undertook to plan a program of events beginning with a meeting which was, in effect, the re-inauguration of the Rotary Club. In January 1946, the first postwar Rotary lunch in Hong Kong took place at the Gloucester Hotel's (告羅士打酒店) restaurant. A motion passed noted that the Club had “been in abeyance” since 1941 and stated that it had now been restarted.

Rotary International's headquarters was contacted with an application for re-admission. The Hong Kong Rotary Club was admitted to Rotary International again on 25 April 1946, and Lieutenant Colonel Eric J. R. Mitchell became the charter president in 1946-1947.

### Volunteer Military Service

Mitchell was born on 11 March 1893 in Hong Kong. He was the son of Edward William Mitchell and Margaret Sarah Lammert. His family had deep roots in the region, with ties extending to shipping, legal estates, and trading. Mitchell married Rose Dorothy Robertson in November 1918, and they had two daughters, Patricia (Pat) and Jean. He later married Sarah Ann Morgan.

Mitchell began his civilian career as an assistant at Bradley & Co., Ltd. (德記洋行) and later became the Hong Kong Manager for the Manufacturers Life Insurance Company (a Canadian firm). Parallel to his business career, he dedicated himself to the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps:

- 1917: Commissioned into the Infantry Branch during World War I.
- 1925–1926: Promoted from Corporal to Second Lieutenant, and then to full Lieutenant.
- 1928: Acted as the Royal Standard bearer when Governor Sir Cecil Clementi (香港總督金文泰爵士) presented the King's and Regimental Colours to the HKVDC. Bearer of the King's Colour represents the army's loyalty to the King and the glory of the Corps.
- 1933–1938: Promoted to Major, and ultimately reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on 18 August 1938.

As the clouds of World War II gathered in 1940, Mitchell foresaw the growing danger from Japan. Leveraging his ties to Canada through his insurance firm, he evacuated his wife Rose and daughters to Victoria, British Columbia, in July 1940. When the Japanese invaded during the Battle of Hong Kong (December 1941), Lt. Col. Mitchell served as the Second-in-Command of the HKVDC under Colonel Henry Rose. Following the British surrender on Christmas Day 1941, Mitchell was captured and spent nearly four years as a Japanese Prisoner of War (POW). During his captivity, his wife Rose escaped from the Portuguese Territory Macao (葡萄牙屬地澳門) through Japanese lines to Allied territory in Kunming, Republic of China (中華民國昆明), alongside members of the British Army Aid Group.

Following the surrender of Imperial Japan and liberation of Hong Kong in 1945, Mitchell stayed in Hong Kong to spearhead institutional recovery. He served as a crucial witness, providing official testimonies regarding the defense of the Colony and POW conditions to the Canadian War Crimes Liaison Detachment.

In the late 1940s, Mitchell personally advocated for and sponsored the creation of new King's Colours to replace the regimental flags lost during the War.

An avid golfer and member of the Hong Kong Golf Club (香港哥爾夫球會), he is commemorated by the [E.J.R. Mitchell Cup], an annual tournament fixture still played at the Club today.

Rotarian Eric John Reinhold Mitchell eventually retired from Hong Kong and returned to England. He passed away on 27 May 1970 at the age of 77 in Poole, Dorset.



*May 1928 -- The Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps was conferred the colours.  
The flag on the left was the British Royal Standard (King's Colour), and the regimental flag on the right.  
The officer on the far left holding the King's Colour was Lieutenant Eric J. R. Mitchell.*



*The group photo is estimated to have been taken in the spring of 1941. The third from the right in the front row is Lieutenant Colonel Eric J. R. Mitchell, Second-in-Command of Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, and the person in the center is Lieutenant General Edward Felix Norton, Acting Governor of Hong Kong.*

### Lieutenant Colonel Reginald David Walker (獲嘉中校)



Lieutenant Colonel Reginald David Walker (獲嘉中校), OBE, MC, ARCS, DIC, MInstCE, (1892-1952), Chartered Civil Engineer, was in 1930-40s an Active Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社) holding the Classification “Transportation – Railway Transport” when he was Acting General Manager and Chief Engineer, Kowloon-Canton Railway (九廣鐵路). Walker served the Club as President in 1937-1938.

Walker arrived the British Crown Colony Hong Kong in March 1934 to take up his appointment as Acting General Manager and Chief Engineer, Kowloon-Canton Railway (K.C.R.) British Section, receiving the substantive appointment on August 11 following.

Walker also held many public positions in Hong Kong, such as member of the Tourism Association, and inspected the Canton-Hankow Railway (粵漢鐵路) in 1935. When China and Japan went to war in 1937, the Canton-Hankow Railway and the Kowloon-Canton Railway were important routes for the Chinese Nationalist Government to import strategic materials from the outside. At that time, Walker was in charge of the operation of the Kowloon-Canton Railway, which contributed to the Chinese war effort. In 1938, the KCR also helped with the procurement of locomotives and trucks for the Canton-Hankow Railway. After the outbreak of the War in Europe in 1939, Walker also helped Hong Kong to gear up for war by serving as a member of the War Supply Board that studied ways to produce war materials in Hong Kong.

### Battle of Hong Kong

Walker was a keen Volunteer, and was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, commanding the R.O.D. cadre.

The Battle of Hong Kong (8–25 December 1941), also known as the Defence of Hong Kong and the Fall of Hong Kong, was one of the first battles of the Pacific War (1941-1945) in World War II. On the same morning as the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, forces of the Empire of Japan attacked the British Crown colony of Hong Kong around the same time that Japan declared war on Britain. The Hong Kong garrison consisted of British, Indian and Canadian units, also the Auxiliary Defence Units and Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps.

When the war started, Walker, who was 49 and a Lieutenant Colonel, was the commander of the Field Company of the HKVDC. His company assisted in the demolition of sections of the Kowloon-Canton Railway and the tunnel at Lion Rock (獅子山) as the Japanese forces invaded. It is difficult for us to imagine how he felt about these actions. After the defenders withdrew to the Island, Walker and the members of the Field Company joined the Royal Engineers sappers to reinforce Wong Nai Chung Gap (黃泥涌峽) in the early morning of 19 December 1941. Wounded in the fighting, Walker was later rescued by Canadian soldiers. After the fall of Hong Kong, Walker was then interned by the Japanese military forces at Argyle Street camp (亞皆老街中營) and later Sham Shui Po camp (深水埗集中營) until the end of the War in 1945.

Walker's health apparently did not seem to recover from the War, and he died in 1952 at the age of 60.

A KCR engine was named after him in 1957 (see photo below) and a "Walker Road" (獲嘉道) is named after him in Hung Hom (紅磡), Kowloon Peninsula (九龍半島), commemorating his contributions.

The British Government awarded 11 medals of honour and commemorative medals to Walker at different times, in recognition of his various contributions. His medals and honours can now be seen at the Museum of Coastal Defense.



#### 04 頒予香港義勇防衛軍野戰工兵連中校獲嘉(1892-1952)的勳章(左起)



Medals Awarded to Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald David Walker (1892-1952), Field Company Engineers, HKVDC (from left)

- (1) 大英帝國官佐勳章
- (2) 軍功十字勳章
- (3) 英國戰爭勳章
- (4) 勝利勳章
- (5) 1939至1945年星章
- (6) 太平洋星章
- (7) 防衛勳章
- (8) 1939至1945年戰爭勳章
- (9) 英皇佐治五世銀禧紀念章
- (10) 英皇佐治六世登基紀念章
- (11) 輔助部隊軍官績效勳章

香港義勇防衛軍自成立以來，積極吸納成員，當中不乏身居要職之人士。以獲嘉為例，他是二戰前九廣鐵路(英段)的經理及總工程師。

- (1) Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE)
- (2) Military Cross
- (3) British War Medal
- (4) Victory Medal
- (5) 1939-1945 Star
- (6) Pacific Star
- (7) Defence Medal
- (8) War Medal 1939-1945
- (9) King George V Silver Jubilee Medal
- (10) King George VI Coronation Medal
- (11) Efficiency Decoration

The HKVDC actively recruited members since its establishment, many of whom held prominent positions in society. For example, Walker was manager and chief engineer of the Kowloon-Canton Railway (British Section) before the Second World War.