

CHAPTER I

CAPTURE

“No one out here minds a war more or less, but travelling in the opposite direction to an advancing army is apt to cause discomfort and delay” – Vare

The air-raid alarm interrupted my shave on that Monday morning, December 8th, 1941. As I clattered downstairs and hurried along the path from my quarters to my office, my first feelings were almost of relief; so the Japs had come at last, and the years of threats and crises were over.

We were all ready for air raids at the Observatory. The underground Seismograph Room made an admirable shelter, our carefully rehearsed air-raid drill went smoothly, and within a few minutes of the sounding of the sirens were assembled in the basement. More too soon, for Jap planes were already over Hong Kong, dive-bombing the airport.

The roll was called; all present. The European staff consisted of B.D. Evans, Director of the Observatory, with myself and Leonard Starbuck as his assistants. The rest were Chinese ... computers on duty, office coolies and household servants ... who had filed in and now stood around the room with self-conscious grins on their friendly faces.



The Royal Observatory in the 1930s



Hoisting No.1 Typhoon signal at the Observatory –
Heywood is second from the right

“It’s a very good practice raid, isn’t it, sir!” said one of the computers to me, as the racket of A.A. fire and falling bombs came faintly to us down the staircase. I had to tell him that I was afraid it was the real thing.

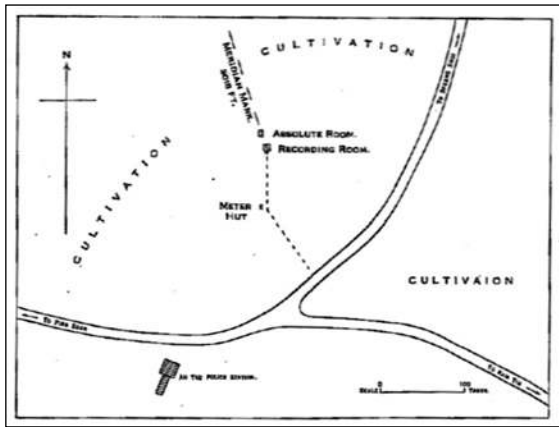
The raid over, I returned to my breakfast, little thinking that it was the last really civilized meal I should eat for years. I was alone, except for Mike, our cocker spaniel. My wife and daughter had been evacuated to Australia in 1940, and my messmate, another Government servant who was sharing my quarters, had already been mobilised with the Hong Kong Volunteers.



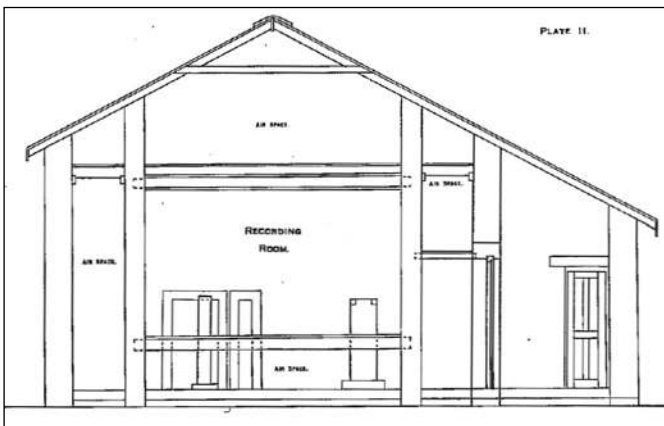
Group photo of the Observatory's staff in 1932 (centre of front row: Mr Benjamin D Evans, Mr Charles W Jeffries and Mr Heywood). Mr Jeffries was Director of the Observatory until he died of a stroke in June 1941. He is buried in Hong Kong Cemetery, Happy Valley.

Hong Kong is at its best in early winter, and it was a lovely morning, clear and fresh, with a few light clouds drifting across the sky. The garden and surrounding wood looked cool and green, and through the pine-trees I could see glimpses of the harbour sparkling in the vivid sunshine and lively with craft of all sizes. Beyond lay the city of Hong Kong, the white buildings crowding the waterfront and thinning out behind the trees on the lower slopes of the island. Behind the city the hills rose steeply, culminating in the familiar sky-line of Victoria Peak. We used to boast that Hong Kong harbour was the loveliest in the world. The Observatory and its adjoining quarters stood on a low wooded hill in Kowloon, a rapidly growing town on the mainland facing Hong Kong Island. It was a pleasant place, Observatory Hill, and I had grown very fond of it, for it had been my home for nearly ten years. Returning to the office after breakfast, I found Evans in his room studying an important-looking file marked "secret", which he had just taken out of the safe. It

contained our emergency instructions. The first item on the programme was to dismantle our magnetic station at Au Tau, and bring in all the instruments and equipment to safety. Au Tau was out in the country, near the border of British territory, some 25 miles from Kowloon by road. It was decided that Starbuck should go out with a lorry to do this job, leaving Evans and myself to carry on with the ordinary routine work of issuing the morning weather forecasts, time-signals and so on.



Layout of Au Tau Magnetic Station (see map on page 8-9)



Recording room of Au Tau Magnetic Station

But a lorry could not be obtained. Two smaller cars would be needed to bring in all the gear, and eventually we arranged that both Starbuck and myself should go out, driving two private cars.

So I told Ah Bing, my Chinese cook, to pack some sandwiches, and Leonard and I started off about 11 a.m. armed with tool-kit, picnic lunches and incongruous tin hats. It never entered our heads that we should not return that evening, and I have been kicking myself ever since that I failed to provide for our faithful household staff, or for Mike. I hope that the servants helped themselves to the small hoard of tinned goods in the larder.



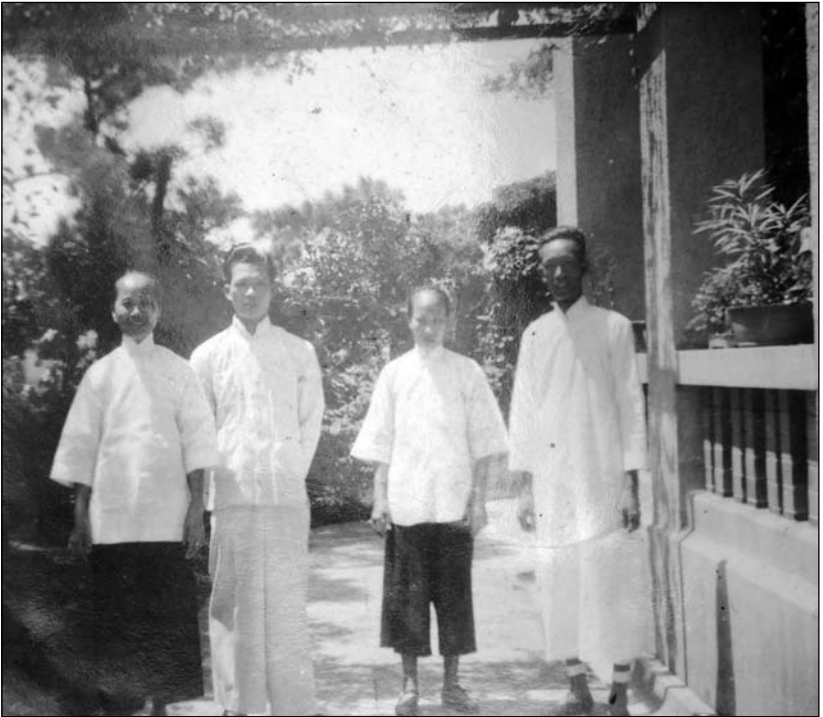
Leonard Starbuck

So we trundled down the drive and away through the streets of Kowloon, which were buzzing with excitement as the outbreak of war. Out in the country we passed some small detachments of troops,... a picket of Royal Scots at a barbed wire barrier, a party of R.E.'s standing by to blow up a bridge, and a Volunteer armoured car on advanced patrol. They looked at our pass and let us through; when asked whether we should find any difficulty in returning that afternoon, they replied "Oh, no, you'll be all right: if there's any trouble you'll hear firing on the border, and there'll be plenty of time for you to get back."

We reached our destination at noon, to find the place deserted; the Chinese caretaker had beat it (in which he showed more foresight than we), but we had brought our own keys, and were soon at work dismantling the instruments. We knocked off at 1 p.m. and sat eating our lunch on a grassy knoll among the pine-trees, with the sunshine warm on our backs. All was quiet and peaceful, and as we looked across the Shum Chun estuary into Chinese territory a few miles away, it was difficult to realise that Japanese troops might be massing there to invade the Colony. But we were soon reminded that the war had started, for while we were lunching



Heywood's quarters and his household staff (Ah Bing on the extreme right) photographed before the war.



a formation of Japanese planes (about 20) passed over on their way to bomb Hong Kong. We returned to work in the hut: if we had had any sense, one of us would have remained outside to watch the approaches, but there had been no sound of firing, so it was obvious, we thought, that no Japs could be near. We were far too light-hearted about it all.

By about 3 p.m. we had finished our task. Len had disappeared round a corner of the path with an armful of instruments for the cars, which were standing at the roadside some 200 yards from the hut. I was standing in my shirtsleeves, keeping an eye on the pile of paraphernalia until he should reappear. It struck me that he was away for rather a long time, so I strolled to the corner to see what had happened to him. There he was, standing with his hands up and a most disgusted expression on his face, while two Jap soldiers in full battle kit searched him. For a wild moment I wondered whether to make bolt for it: I didn't like the idea of deserting Len, and while I hesitated the Japs spotted me, so I reluctantly joined the party. We were soon squatting side by side, tied to a tree on the steep hillside overlooking Au Tau police station.

That morning I had enjoyed a tasty breakfast under my own roof, in the afternoon I was a captive in the hands of the Japanese; it was certainly a rude and sudden change, and we thought it likely that we had the unenviable distinction of being the very first prisoners to be taken in the war of East Asia. But at first we could hardly take in all the unpleasant implications of the situation and our feelings were rather of excitement and amusement than of dismay. It all seemed so incredible and theatrical, it couldn't really be we who were captured in a blitz Such things just didn't happen to law-abiding civil servants in a respectable British colony. It was not until the next day that our adventure began to seem a grim one.

Our Guards were kindly disposed, giving us a drink of water and a packet of cigarettes, the latter ironically labeled "Homeward Bound". They appeared to be an advanced patrol, for they busied themselves setting

up a machine gun, and grinding away at a portable radio transmitter, while their two officers studied maps. Bye and bye more troops arrived in lorries and began to occupy the police station. The junior of the two officers spoke a little English, for he had been educated at a university, and appeared to be a young man of some culture and refinement; he questioned us at length ... the first of many interrogations that we were to undergo. We must have appeared suspicious characters ... found in mufti in enemy territory. Were we spies? Or had we been concerned in the blowing up of a road bridge nearby? We had great difficulty in explaining ourselves, but at last the two officers seemed satisfied.

At dusk we were untied and taken down to the police station where we were allowed to do a little looting on our own account. Additional clothes were welcome, for I had been taken in my shirt-sleeves and was not allowed to retrieve my coat. Providentially my pipe and tobacco-pouch were in my trouser pocket; these, with the clothes I stood up in, were my only possessions. I secured a coat, many sizes too large for me, and a towel. We also helped ourselves to an unappetising meal of cold rice, butter and jam.



Japanese troops advancing in the New Territories [3]

Outside on the grass the troops were cooking their evening meal; the little fires winked in the darkness, revealing the shadowy forms of horses tethered to trees in the background. The column now assembled amounted to perhaps a battalion, with numerous pack-horses, but no mechanical transport. After a while we were marched off with the troops along the road leading to the unfinished airfield a Kam Tin; an affable soldier next to me insisted on walking with his arm around my neck ... was it affection or detention? Probably the latter, though I was reminded of an evening stroll down a country lane in Japan, arm in arm with two slightly tipsy gentlemen who were trying to point out to me the beauties of Fuji in the darkness.

The tramp of tired boots under heavy packs made me think of Churchill's remark about the German hordes, with no liberties of their own, yet always trampling on the liberties of others. The column halted near the airfield; tired out, we lay down on the hard concrete road and slept fitfully. I thought of Evans, and how worried he must be at our failure to return. And what would happen to all our belongings, and our servants, and Mike? "Missing, believed captured" ... and would word reach our families that we were safe?

All armies, the Japanese included, seem apt to follow the Duke of York's tactics, for in the middle of the night we fell in and marched back again by the way we had come. Finally we turned off the hills to the south. The inhabitants had fled; doors were broken open, and grass was spread in the yard in front of the houses. There we slept, huddled among the troops.

It was day when we awoke; the friendliness of the previous evening had evaporated; the officers were un-communicative, and nobody seemed inclined to give us any breakfast. At last someone tossed us a few biscuits, which we munched dismally. The officers were obviously conferring about us, and finally detailed a squad of six armed men to lead us off; it was a nasty moment ... was this a firing party? But no, we were taken

a couple of miles across country to a fair-sized house on the outskirts of a village. This appeared to be a battalion head-quarters judging by the number of field-telephones' wires radiating from it, and by an air of bustle and activity. An air-raid was in progress over Hong Kong, and a soldier joyfully showed me a leaflet luridly depicting the destruction of my home town. I think my spirits touched rock-bottom at that moment, but I was somewhat cheered when we managed to secure a small dish of meat and a sip of water.



Kowloon under air raid in 1941, showing Sacred Hill (see also photos [18] and [19]) to the right of the bombing, Kai Tak airport and the three-storey residential buildings of “Kai Tak Bund” between Sacred Hill and the airport [4]

An officer came out of the house and gave instructions to another squad, pointing to us and making significant gestures with his hands about his throat. As we were lad off, we looked apprehensively around for ropes, and convenient trees with low branches, but it turned out that

we were merely to join a party of stretcher-bearers and coolies. We were given a pole and a load between us to which our unfeeling guards added heavy bits of equipment from time to time. A thin rain had begun to fall, and we had a horrible march across country, urged on by the rifle-butts of our guards. We began to wonder if we should lose our identities and become coolies in the Japanese army for the rest of the war. We passed a number of troops on the path; we were used to being stared at by now, but we did not like a mounted officer who said rude things about us, with a look of hatred on his face ... it seemed uncalled-for.

We passed Fanling golf course ... its greens forlorn with broken bottles and overturned rickshaws ... and finally halted at Sheung Shui, where we sat down dejectedly on the road, and felt that we were nobody's babies. Later three guards took us on foot and by lorry to Tai Po, a large village some 15 miles by road from Kowloon. We noticed that, although it was only the second day of the invasion, and enormous road demolition had already been made good for traffic. We reached Tai Po after dark and were led to the G.H.Q., a row of large Chinese houses over-looking the wrecked railway bridge.

One of these houses was occupied by the Intelligence section, and here we underwent another inquisition, this time by interpreters with a fair knowledge of English. Hitherto we had been questioned together, and Len had done most of the answering, speaking very slowly and emphatically in his best pidgin English, while I had only chipped in occasionally. But now we were summoned into the room one by one. Fortunately, the partition was thin, and each of us could hear everything the other said, so we were able to spin a consistent yarn. This was necessary, for we did not wish to disclose any of the war-time activities of the Observatory. As for military dispositions in Hong Kong, it was soon obvious that our questioners knew a lot more about them than we did. They were very suspicious at first, but finally we managed to persuade them that we were harmless scientists. The leading interpreter, a Mr. Mianti, was a villainous-

looking fellow with one eye; he turned out later to be a University lecturer and quite a friendly individual.

They gave us supper . . . our first square meal since yesterday's breakfast. Feeling somewhat revived, we were taken to a squalid little room in the coolie quarters. Immediately outside the door was the closet; its drain, as is usual in the back regions of Chinese houses, was blocked, and the little yard was half flooded. Some miserable half-fledged chicks were dying of dampness and starvation. We were too weary to bother about the smell, and were soon asleep.

The following morning we felt we were going to go up in the social scale, for we were taken to see the General next door. He was a cheerful, tubby little man, dressed in tunic, breeches and white open-necked shirt. He waved us affably into chairs, and talked to us through an interpreter, while we sat sipping tea and smoking.

After a few questions, he suddenly said "If I set you free, where would you like to go?"

When we had recovered from our astonishment, we replied that we would like to return to Hong Kong.

"Why?"

"We want to join our friends."

"Very sorry; you cannot go through the fighting; it would be too dangerous. But soon Hong Kong will fall, then we send you back to England." . . . presumably when the war was over and the Far East cleared of Europeans.

Like all the Japs to whom we spoke, he was completely confident that the fall of Hong Kong would not be long-delayed, and we were bound to admit that he had good reason. He was obviously anxious that we should think well of the Japanese forces; we could truthfully say we had seen no cruelty, and had been treated on the whole with some consideration.

That evening, December 10th, British and Indian prisoners from a captured pill-box at Shing Mun redoubt began to arrive, weary, disheveled

and disheartened; we were not allowed to communicate with them. They underwent a much more searching interrogation than we. The Indian soldiers were questioned by two particularly smug and unpleasant Indian interpreters; one of these, as we learned subsequently, had been connected with a military outfitting firm in Hong Kong. We admired one Indian N.C.O., who for half the night was subjected to intensive anti-British propaganda, but refused to budge an inch in his allegiance.

Next day we managed to get a little fresh air and exercise in a narrow yard at the side of the house; a heavy battery was firing at regular intervals somewhere near. In the evening Mianti and his fellow-interpreters burst into our little room shouting "Kowloon is freed". Oozing with affability, they sat on our bed and celebrated the occasion with a bottle of saki, which they wished us to share. I felt far from festive; now, I reflected the yellow blight which had been spreading for years over the Far East had settled on Kowloon; it too would be brought to misery and starvation, like so many other places in the "Co-Prosperity Sphere". We had made friends with the Japanese quarter-master and cook, a cherubic young conscript, whose large glasses and moon-like face gave him a most unwarlike appearance. He shared our view that the whole business of war was absurd, and seemed quite unmoved by the news of victory.

We did not have long to cultivate this new acquaintance, however, for the following afternoon all the prisoners were packed into a lorry at a moment's notice, and whisked away to a new place of captivity. The cook, looking less martial than ever, waved us an almost tearful farewell.