



**Outside the tunnel beneath Government House, Hong Kong, on the morning of December 25, 1941.** Wally Skinner, myself and Vivian Garton. Both the men were employed by the Public Works Department and were working on Rescue and Demolition during the war. Japanese troops were about a mile away at that moment. We didn't know then that Hong Kong would surrender in the afternoon.

# TIN HATS AND RICE

*A diary of life as a  
Hong Kong prisoner of war  
1941-1945*

Barbara Anslow

**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**

*Tin Hats and Rice*

ISBN 978-988-77927-4-1

Published by Blacksmith Books  
Unit 26, 19/F, Block B, Wah Lok Industrial Centre,  
37-41 Shan Mei Street, Fo Tan, Hong Kong  
Tel: (+852) 2877 7899  
*www.blacksmithbooks.com*

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Layout by Pete Spurrier  
Index by Mark Rossi

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## FOREWORD

**B**arbara Anslow shouldn't have written this book. In 1940 she set sail for Australia as part of the wartime evacuation of Hong Kong. Her father stayed behind to continue his work in the Naval Dockyard, but Barbara, along with her mother and sisters, should have spent the war years safely in Australia.

Instead, during a stopover in Manila, they received shocking news. Barbara's father had died of a sudden heart attack shortly after they'd left him. The four women managed to find passage on a ship leaving Manila and returned to Hong Kong. Once back, they decided they'd stay.

It was a strange time. On the surface, daily life for Hong Kong's expatriates carried on unchanged, with the usual social round of dances, dinners, movies and sports. But as the evacuation shows, Hong Kong was well aware of the dangers it faced. The daily newspapers were full of the war in Europe and the growing tensions between Japan and the United States.

Barbara's diary entries from November 1941 show the tension building:

**12th:** "Churchill says if Japs and USA come to grips, Britain will follow USA 'within the hour.'" She added the prescient note, "I'm a bit afraid that Xmas won't come."

**14th:** "London (radio) news says that tanks are massing in the Canton area. Blackout. I am frightened."

**30th:** “Topper says we are as near war now as we have ever been, that Japan with her militarist Govt. can’t very well back down now.”

On the 8th of December, Barbara’s fears were realized:

“Was raked out of bed this am at 6.30 – to be at office at 7am. When I got there Mr Bevan, Deputy Director of ARP, said war had been declared between Britain/America against Japan. Just after 8 o’clock air raid sirens sounded.

“It’s hardly worth writing diary because I can’t visualise us ever getting out of this, but I want to try to believe in a future.”

Fortunately for us, Barbara did carry on writing her diary. She leads us through the fighting and surrender, the uncertain time that followed, then the move to Stanley Camp. She didn’t know at the time, but she was to spend the next three and a half years there. Her diary records the dramatic incidents of internment like the bombing of the camp by American aircraft, but more often it details the daily activities and the ups and downs of life in cramped quarters. Struggles with roommates, hunger and sickness, and the worry that the Japanese wouldn’t let the internees leave the camp alive all play a part.

I first read these diary entries in 2011, when Barbara posted extracts to an internet group about Stanley Camp. They started me thinking about how to get this valuable resource out to a larger audience. I thought I could use email to send daily extracts from wartime diaries. Subscribers would receive one email each day for the three years and eight months of the Japanese occupation. They’d re-live the diarists’ experiences at the same pace they originally happened. Barbara kindly agreed, and I launched the first series in January 2012. Since then I’ve started a new series each December, and now the day’s diary entries are sent to around 400 subscribers each morning.

The feedback from subscribers has been very positive, especially from those who had family members in Stanley:

- *MH from Australia*: I love to read them every day... I find them SO interesting. They give me much insight into a part of my father's life that he never spoke about. My adult children also are finding out about their beloved "Pa" and what his life was like during his time in "Stanley".
- *John Bechtel*: My father, also named John Bechtel, was in Stanley but we could never get him to talk about it. I took him back to Stanley several times but he found it difficult to discuss details with me. After reading the diaries I now am able to knit together the facts with his experience and life. Wish he could have read the information before he passed in 1981. Thank you so much.
- *Robert Millar*: I read the diaries every day. I don't contribute to the daily chats as being only 16 months old when I went into camp with my mother Doris and sister Gillian, and coming out soon after my 5th birthday, I don't unfortunately have much to offer. However from the diaries and also from various books I've been reading I have gained a lot of information about what went on around me in my early life.

Several subscribers asked if they could have a copy of the full diary to read, instead of the daily email format. So in October 2015, at a book launch for the wartime diary of Graham Heywood, I mentioned this to the publisher, Pete Spurrier. I put him in touch with Barbara, and I'm very pleased to see that the end result is this book!

Barbara – as well as congratulating you on the publication of your diary, let me thank you. First for being so generous in sharing your diary with us, as a diary is a private thing, and second for your endless patience in answering all my questions about it over the years. Thank you!

David Bellis  
Gwulo.com



The three Redwood sisters: Olive, Barbara and Mabel, February 1940.



## INTRODUCTION

I lived with my parents and sisters in Hong Kong from 1927 to 1929. In 1938, when I was 19, we returned there.

We Redwoods – my mother Mabel Winifred, 46, my sisters Olive, 25, Mabel Anne, 18, and myself, 23 – were living in a flat in Happy Valley when the Japanese attacked on 8th December 1941. My father William had died the previous year.

Olive was engaged to Sam (Topper) Brown, R.A., Mabel Anne's boyfriend was Sidney Hale of the Royal Scots Band to whom she was unofficially engaged. I had a comparatively new boyfriend (unserious) – Arthur Alsey, violinist and deputy leader of the Royal Scots Band.

Olive and I worked as stenographers with the Hong Kong Government, she in the Food Control Dept, I in the Air Raid Precautions Dept. Mabel Anne worked in an Army office. Mum had just started a job looking after six-month-old baby Jean Martin, whose mother had died.

During the battle, my mother was an auxiliary nurse in a wartime hospital, my younger sister was a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse in the Military Hospital; I worked with the Air Raid Precautions Dept, my elder sister worked with Food Control.

After the surrender of Hong Kong to the Japanese, all four of us ended up with some two thousand others in the civilian internment camp at Stanley, seven miles from the city, in cramped accommodation: camp beds with little bedding, no hot water for washing ourselves or our clothes. Food consisted of rice, vegetables and sometimes minute quantities of meat or fish; no desserts. Like most internees we had lost

our homes and possessions through bombing and shelling – or looting after the surrender on Christmas Day.

Most of us survived three and a half years of hunger and deprivation, boosted by optimism, amateur concerts, talks, language classes and so on, and our tireless doctors and nurses; also our captors often allowed us to swim at a beach within the camp. Apart from the execution of several internees whom the Japanese found had wireless sets, most of the time the Japanese authorities did not bother us.

After VJ Day in August 1945 we were deliriously happy to leave Hong Kong for repatriation to the UK – yet a year later my mother, sisters and I were all back in the colony again!

Barbara Anslow  
Kirby-le-Soken, Essex  
July 2018

## 1941

### **12 Nov 1941**

Churchill says if Japs and USA come to grips, Britain will follow USA 'within the hour.'

I'm a bit afraid that Xmas won't come.

Reply from Home Government about evacuation – no chance of people coming back yet.

### **13 Nov 1941**

The rumour today is that the Japs are coming on Saturday.

### **14 Nov 1941**

London news (radio) says that tanks are massing in the Canton area. Blackout. I am frightened.

### **15 Nov 1941**

Newspaper says Japan is calling up her reserves.

### **16 Nov 1941**

The Band came in from camp to play in two Canadian Battalions which have just arrived on grey ship and another. Arthur (Aalsey, Royal Scots Band Sergeant) and Sid (H.S. Hale, pianist and clarinettist, Royal Scots Band) arrived about noon, and we went to King's Theatre – 'Buck Privates.'

**17 Nov 1941**

Once again Japs look like business, and they can't call it off every time. Mary Taylor phoned me about a possible new job, so at 5pm I went to 3rd floor, Hong Kong Bank Building, and met Elsie Cholmondeley, tall and fair, very blue eyes, employed there (Stabilization Board of China.) I was there until 7pm and everyone still working – wouldn't like that continuously.

Mr Fox interviewed me, he sprawled over a table... said he couldn't take anyone till he got more room. (*I seem to think he was American, and I don't think he was in Stanley Camp... none of the people on the Stanley list named Fox sound like him. Perhaps he got away before 8th Dec, he certainly spoke about going 'on a trip' when he interviewed me shortly before.*)

**18 Nov 1941**

Arthur came in from camp unexpectedly, and we had tea in Cecil Hotel.

Mum started work at Mr. Addis Martin's today. (*Mum had been interviewed by Mr Thomas Addis Martin the previous week. She had applied for the job of a live-out supervisor of his baby daughter Jean, then 7 months old. Mrs Addis Martin had cancer and died when Jean was about 5 months old. There were amahs in the house to do all the housework, washing, etc., but Mr A M wanted a motherly figure to supervise Jean's care. Mum loved the job from the start, she went there daily.*)

**19 Nov 1941**

Jap/USA situation isn't looking any better, it really doesn't seem as if anyone can bluff any longer, so I typed a long letter to Margaret (*a friend in the UK*), whatever happens here I want her to know I'm happy these days.

Two of Patsy's pups taken to Mrs Hogg today.

**21 Nov 1941**

In morning, Mr Bevan (Michael Lee Bevan, Deputy Director of Air Raid Precautions) took Mrs. Marjorie Cook (stenographer) and I in Bevan's car to Bacteriological Institute to have blood tests. They won't take the actual blood until it is wanted. (*Mr Bevan is the artist whose Stanley sketches appeared postwar in 'London Illustrated' magazine.*)

**23 Nov 1941**

All to 9.30am Mass at St Margaret's. We still seem to be doing well in Libya, but I'm so afraid we may be crowing too soon.

**24 Nov 1941**

China Fleet Club dance. Some Canadians there.

**25 Nov 1941**

News from Cairo is rather more cautious.

**27 Nov 1941**

Asking myself what am I waiting for? i.e., starting new story. In a way, it's the political situation, but I will begin tomorrow morning. Mum and I went shopping tonight, I bought shoes for HK\$12.50.

**28 Nov 1941**

Arthur phoned, he might get in on Sunday, but they will be 'manning' up to Christmas from now on.

**29 Nov 1941**

Arthur rolled up at 5pm. We had tea at home, then I went to office. Although Saturday there was a Defence exercise, we were working shifts and I was due for evening 6-11pm. I told Tony Cole of predicament, and he said he would do my shift for me! (A. Cole of Senior & Accounting Staff, HK Govt.) Arthur and I took Mum to see 'Sun Valley Serenade'.

Because of Exercise, there was blackout and no trams or buses during 'pretend' raids, so we had to walk most of the way to Central and back because air raid sirens blew from time to time. Saw a plane drop a 'pretend' parachute.

### 30 Nov 1941

Mum on practice duty as an ANS (Auxiliary Nursing Service) nurse at Jockey Club (designated as a war-time convalescent hospital.) They had real convalescent patients brought out from main hospitals – in this cold weather. Sid was in from camp yesterday but had to go back ready to play at camp church services – riding round on back of lorry with piano.

Arthur had to leave early today to play at the Officers' St. Andrews do. He gave me 'Human Being' by Christopher Morley for my birthday.

Topper says we are as near war now as we have ever been, that Japan with her militarist Govt. can't very well back down now. I don't know what to think, but I'm afraid – because I recklessly bought myself chocolates today at \$2.30... perhaps as a treat lest it's the last of treats. (*Topper was Sam Brown, Army, Olive's fiancee.*)

### 1 Dec 1941

My 23rd birthday. Mr Bendall (Senior & Accounting Staff, HK Govt.) gave me a Roget's Thesaurus, Olive and Topper stockings; Mabel – eau de cologne; Sid – hanks; Mary (Taylor) eau de cologne.

New girl started at work, Lily A. Medina (Portuguese).

Malaya mobilised. Even Mr Cole thinks there will be war this time. (*The Mr Cole referred to here is not Tony Cole, but Lieutenant George Reginald Cole, R.N, a colleague of my father's whose wife and son had been evacuated to Australia. When we Redwoods had to leave our Dockyard flat after my Dad died, Lieut. Cole had us live with him until we found a private flat. He was killed at Aberdeen on 16 Dec.*)

Even if this place isn't involved by 5th Dec. when the R.S. (*Royal Scots*) Band should be in, I don't expect... can't see that they will be allowed in under present circumstances.



At the Civil Service Club, Happy Valley, early in November 1941. Back row, left to right: my sister Olive; her fiance 'Topper' Brown, R.A.; my mum; Mr V. Garton and Mr W. Skinner (both Govt. servants). Front row: H. Hale ('Sid') of Royal Scots; my sister Mabel; Arthur Alsej of Royal Scots; myself.

Government advising further evacuation. Only hope seems to be that Japs now say they will keep on talks with USA in hope that USA will change viewpoint – that isn't thought likely. Began writing 'Vacation in Hong Kong.'

## 2 Dec 1941

Libyan news isn't so good. Germans 36 miles from Moscow.

HMAS 'Sydney' presumed lost, having sunk an armed raider merchantman, then no news. 700 men, apparently no survivors.

Japs now want to resume talks with USA 'until the last moment.' Suggestions are that Japs must continue talks for 2 weeks by which time their war preparations will be complete.