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Colonel John K. Lawson, photographed in Ottawa, October 1940.

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# Brigadier J.K. Lawson and Command of "C" Force at Hong Kong

Tyler Wentzell

*"Brigadier J.K. Lawson reported that the H.Q. shelters were over-run, firing into them was actually taking place at point blank range and that he was going outside to fight it out..."<sup>1</sup>*

On 19 December 1941, the Japanese Twenty-Third Army gained the upper hand in the Battle of Hong Kong. The British East Brigade Headquarters had withdrawn after nearly being cut off. The Japanese seized Jardine's Lookout, the dominating feature overlooking the West Brigade Headquarters in the Wong Nei Chong Gap. Brigadier John Kelburne Lawson, commander of the West Brigade, made his final transmission, destroyed his communications equipment, and attempted to withdraw. Popular legend says he died, "with a smoking pistol in each hand,"<sup>2</sup> while more recent scholarship suggests he never had the chance.<sup>3</sup> In either event, he was killed not far from the headquarters, his name forever associated with the manner in which he died, not the way in which he lived.

Few Canadian generals, and even fewer brigadiers, have been the subject of a biography. Like most of them, Brigadier J.K. Lawson, the commander of the Canadian contingent at the Battle of Hong Kong, has been given less than his due. Books or articles regarding the battle offer only a few lines about the commander, most of which are incorrect. Some of these inaccuracies

**Abstract: Brigadier J.K. Lawson, the commander of the Canadian contingent at the Battle of Hong Kong, has been the subject of only a few statements in any work concerning the battle. These statements, as false and misleading as they are, have been referenced many times and are generally taken as fact. This article seeks to rectify this affair by providing a biographical profile of Lawson based on archival data and interviews with his family. Contrary to other accounts, Lawson was a professional soldier with substantial education and experience in his craft and he was extremely well-suited to his appointment to command the Canadian force sent to Hong Kong in late 1941.**

are minor, such as the claim that Lawson emigrated from England to Canada with his family, when, in fact, both of his parents were already dead and his two brothers stayed in England or went to India. Other errors are more significant – Lawson's incorrectly attributed Military Cross, for example. British historian Tim Carew was the first to perpetuate this error in *The Fall of Hong Kong*, in which he stated that Lawson received this decoration for service at Passchendaele. Eleven years later, the same author wrote

that Lawson had won it on the Somme as a subaltern. Even the most recent work on the battle, Nathan M. Greenfield's *The Damned*, stated that Lawson earned it at Passchendaele, "where he had served with the British Army."<sup>4</sup> None of these assertions is correct: Lawson served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) throughout the First World War; he was a warrant officer first class during the Somme; and he did not receive a Military Cross at all, although he did receive two Mentioned in Dispatches and a Croix de Guerre. The gravest factual error emanated from Carew, who wrote, "Lawson, in fact, was not a professional soldier at all... Between the wars he had been a schoolmaster and an executive of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC)."<sup>5</sup> That was entirely incorrect. Lawson had worked as a schoolmaster in England and as a clerk, not as an executive, in Edmonton for the HBC before the First World War. However, by the outbreak of the Second World War, Lawson was, by any definition, as professional an officer as any in the Canadian Militia's Permanent Force (PF). In this article, Lawson's life and military career will be chronicled in order to explain his selection for command of "C" Force and provide



Lawson family photo provided by author.

**The Lawson family manor in Hull, England. This photo was taken in 1910.**

an illustrative example of the nature of interwar, and wartime, officer training and selection.

### Early Life

“Jack,” as he was known to his family, was born in Hull, a bustling English port town, on 27 December 1886.<sup>6</sup> His parents, Edward Arthur and Selina Mary, lived a comfortable existence in a spacious, two-storey home on the edge of town. Edward, a former officer in the East Yorkshire Regiment, worked for the Hull Harbour Commission and then developed a small shipping company.<sup>7</sup> The company prospered enough to provide an expensive education for each of the family’s three children – Kenneth,<sup>8</sup> “Jack” and Colin – at the Worcester Public School.<sup>9</sup> Tragically, Edward and Selina died before their fiftieth birthdays. Kenneth, the eldest, inherited the family home, while the two younger sons looked to more exotic locales for their livelihood. Colin joined the Royal Artillery during the First

World War and served in India;<sup>10</sup> “Jack” worked as a schoolmaster in England for several years and then emigrated to Canada.<sup>11</sup>

A combination of New World allure and opportunity pushed Lawson to leave England. He likely grew up hearing stories about Canada. The city of Hull’s shipping interests, including his family’s firm, prospered from transmigration. Thousands of immigrants from Russia, Scandinavia and Prussia entered England via Hull before moving on to a larger British port to continue their journey to the New World.<sup>12</sup> By the time Lawson turned ten, Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s immigration policies were luring these same groups to populate the Canadian West. Something about the region intrigued young Lawson. First, however, “Jack” set about starting his post-secondary studies. In 1908, he wrote the matriculation exams for London University. In the summer of 1912 – there is no known reason for the delay – he moved to London where he studied at the West Ham Technical College, then part of London University.<sup>13</sup> University rolls

do not record what Lawson studied, but his Second World War file states that he took a “science course.”<sup>14</sup> He left England at the end of the year, before he had graduated, with a job as a clerk for HBC waiting for him. He arrived on the steamer *Lake Manitoba* in Saint John, New Brunswick on 16 April 1914.<sup>15</sup> Lawson made his way to Edmonton and began his new life in Canada.

### First World War

Canadians responded to Britain’s declaration of war against Germany with incredible enthusiasm. The city of Edmonton was no exception. The *Edmonton Bulletin* declared, “Wildest Night in Edmonton’s History,” where “monster processions headed by bands and singing national airs paraded the streets.”<sup>16</sup> Ex-servicemen in the city flocked to the newly-formed Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, and the city’s pipe band volunteered to “pipe the regiment to France and back.”<sup>17</sup> The

city's militia regiment, the 101st Regiment (Edmonton Fusiliers), was inundated with enthusiastic recruits; one man walked 236 miles to enlist.<sup>18</sup> Lawson, working as a clerk at the HBC's retail store on Jasper Avenue, did not face such obstacles. HBC promised to keep positions open for their employees who volunteered. Lawson was among the first to enlist. An estimated 15,000 well-wishers lined the streets on 23 August as the first four companies of the 101st departed for Camp Valcartier. The unit became the nucleus of the 9th Battalion and arrived in England with the 1st Division on 17 October 1914.

The 9th Battalion did not benefit from the 1st Division's intensive training on Salisbury Plain. It was the reserve battalion of the 1st Brigade and consequently did not participate in collective training. However, the men suffered in the cold and the mud with everyone else as they followed a monotonous routine of route marches, drill and musketry.<sup>19</sup> For the men who joined with such enthusiasm, fearing the war may "be over by Christmas," this must have been disheartening. Half of the 9th

Reserve Battalion was designated to reinforce the 1st Brigade. The remaining soldiers, Lawson among them, remained in England until they were needed. Lawson's name is noticeably absent from the unit's disciplinary records. The organization, like most composed of idle troops, had a high rate of soldiers absent without official leave.<sup>20</sup> His performance earned him regular promotions, to lance corporal in January 1915, and to corporal in March.<sup>21</sup>

Lawson was in the fight by February 1915 as part of a distinctive organization, the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade (1 CMMGB). This was an excellent place for Lawson to begin his career. The outfit was a true learning organization and acted as the cradle for the Canadian approach to both the machine gun and motorized operations. Although the unit's "motors" saw little action during the time Lawson spent there, they surely impressed the potential of armoured vehicles on the developing soldier. More important, however, was Lawson's exposure to the innovative application of firepower.

Colonel, later Brigadier, Raymond Brutinel, the founder and commander of the brigade, experimented with massing both direct and indirect fire to support infantry movement, isolate sections of German trenches from their flanking units, and harass re-supply and command functions in the German rear areas. Additionally, Lawson experienced the developing techniques of air defence as the machine guns were deployed to areas along the Canadian front where German aircraft operated.

Lawson excelled in this environment and was rapidly promoted. By 5 July 1916, he was battery sergeant-major (BSM) with the rank of warrant officer first class (WO1),<sup>22</sup> an appointment indicative of Lawson's leadership and skill at arms. He held this position throughout the Somme offensive of 1916 and, by the end of the year, having reached the highest rank for a non-commissioned officer (NCO), took his commission in the rank of lieutenant.<sup>23</sup> He remained in 1 CMMGB where he likely worked as either a detachment commander in charge of four Vickers machine guns or within the headquarters,<sup>24</sup>

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**A column of vehicles belonging to the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade waiting alongside the Arras-Cambrai road, September 1918.**

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Lawson family photo provided by author.

**John Lawson, with his eldest son Arthur John, in 1934.**

until March 1917 when he was briefly posted to the Canadian Corps Training School.

Lawson returned to France in July, this time as a member of the Canadian Corps Headquarters. His position within the headquarters is unknown – his family recalls that it may have been as a liaison officer<sup>25</sup> – but the experience he gained in that capable and efficient organization proved invaluable to his professional development. He had been in England during the battle of Vimy Ridge, but served in the headquarters during the battles of Hill 70, Passchendaele, and Cambrai. From March 1918 onwards, he served as a staff captain in the Canadian Machine Gun Regimental Pool,

attached to the Corps Headquarters.<sup>26</sup> Again, Lawson distinguished himself, earning a Mention in Dispatches on 7 April 1918.<sup>27</sup> He remained with the regimental pool throughout the Hundred Days and until the end of the war.<sup>28</sup> Lawson returned to England and awaited demobilization at the Canadian Machine Gun Regimental Depot in Seaford, where he received the Croix de Guerre for his actions throughout the war.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Interwar Years in Canada**

Upon demobilization, Lawson faced a number of important decisions. Although he could have

remained in England, perhaps working for the family business, he decided to return to Canada. Similarly, he could have returned to his job with HBC; but, instead, he decided to apply for a commission in the PF. Applications were first reviewed by the Otter Committee, and Lawson's was one of 1200 applicants,<sup>30</sup> So his prospects were anything but certain. Lawson left England for Edmonton in May and received yet another Mention in Dispatches for his conduct during demobilization.<sup>31</sup> Lawson formally demobilized on 14 June 1919 and moved to Victoria, British Columbia to work for the Royal Bank of Canada.<sup>32</sup>

Lawson did not spend long in Victoria. He returned to Edmonton and was back in uniform by November 1919. He joined the 13th Canadian Machine Gun Brigade, a new Edmonton-based unit of the non-permanent active militia (NPAM), as the adjutant and waited for the findings of the Otter Committee. In June 1920, he received notification that he had been accepted into the PF as a lieutenant in the Canadian Permanent Machine Gun Brigade, the peacetime incarnation of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps. Although now a member of the PF, he remained with the Edmonton unit as adjutant until April 1923 when he transferred to the Canadian Machine Gun Brigade Headquarters in Kingston.<sup>33</sup> However, the Canadian Permanent Machine Gun Brigade, an organization of which Lawson had been a member of since its very inception, disbanded on 1 November 1923. Lawson subsequently took a commission in The Royal Canadian Regiment.

The peacetime Canadian army offered the career-minded soldier few opportunities for advancement. Both the militia and the PF lacked money and equipment. The number of organizations to be commanded was few, and the officers who held

these coveted positions were often loath to give them up. For example, district officers commanding often held the same position for more than ten years. Lawson, like the vast majority of PF officers, did not hold a command appointment during the interwar years. Lawson became general staff officer (GSO) 2 at Military District (MD) 1 in London, Ontario. He also served as a GSO 2 in MD 13, in Calgary, and at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) in Ottawa, but in truth, he had little to staff. The MDs were primarily responsible for training the NPAM, and the small, uncomplicated militia exercises occurred only rarely. There were few opportunities to ameliorate one's skills as a manager of violence.

At least the mess life was good. The military community in London had an active social calendar, hosting frequent dinners and dances at Wolseley Barracks for the benefit of the officers and the local elite. At one of these dances, Lawson met Augusta Hawkesworth Wilson, described as, "an attractive, dark-haired woman,"<sup>34</sup> who was "sociable and gregarious."<sup>35</sup>

She was the daughter of Dr. John Dolway Wilson, a prominent surgeon, former mayor of the city of London, and governor of the University of Western Ontario. "J.K.," as Lawson's friends called him, and Augusta attended numerous mess functions and dances together, and whiled away many afternoons playing badminton.<sup>36</sup> In January 1930, the two were married at St. George's Hanover Square in central London, England.<sup>37</sup> They had two children: Arthur John, born in 1934 in Ottawa, and Michael Ivan, born in 1936 in Calgary.

Army training in the interwar years was not good. In 1937, Lawson became GSO 1, in MD 2 in Toronto. The new job came with a little bit of excitement, when Camp Borden held the most extensive exercises in years during the summer of 1938. A brigade, augmented by two reserve units from Lawson's MD, equipped with tanks, armoured cars, and quick-firing artillery, trained for nearly a month. However, as Stephen Harris recorded, "Things did not go well. Doctrine taught but never practised over the preceding eight years had

not been learnt, causing sloppy and ill-advised tactical deployments. At one stage, it was reported, 'field guns at a road piquet were sited so as to face each other, threatening each other.'<sup>38</sup> Such was the state of the Canadian army as it entered the Second World War.

## Professional Development Abroad

Lawson's PF career was typical of the time: uninteresting, uneventful, and devoid of professional development. As John English wrote, "The dilettantish nature of the Canadian military establishment, increased by frequent officer transfers, further exerted an amateurish pull on those who chose simply to drift, buffeted by the system."<sup>39</sup> With slow rates of promotion, and little excitement, there was no incentive to do much more than the minimum. "After all," as Jack Granatstein wrote, "they were all paid much the same and, considering the responsibilities

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**Lawson attended staff college in Quetta, India in the 1920s where he received an "imperial" education and was exposed to the workings of the British and Indian armies. Charles Maltby, his future commander in Hong Kong, attended the college at about the same time.**

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Lawson family photo provided by author.

of senior officers, not very well."<sup>40</sup> Essentially, the army's system of professional development was "bottom up." Professional development opportunities had to be pursued, literally chased, by those who desired them. Lawson chased those opportunities. He constantly educated himself in matters of military importance – he owned a collection of 700-800 books, most of them military history.<sup>41</sup>

Like most ambitious PF officers, Lawson strove to go abroad for staff training. The only true staff colleges open to Canadians were the British ones in Camberley, England, and Quetta, India (now Pakistan). Hopeful candidates had to complete the five month militia staff course offered at the Royal Military College of Canada and then write a demanding

competitive examination. Lieutenant-General Maurice Pope recalled in his memoirs that "we had studied to the limit of our strength, and some, notably J.K. Lawson...exceeded even that."<sup>42</sup> These exams challenged even the famously studious Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns, who recorded:

There is an immense amount of work – principally reading – to be done for it; geography of the British Empire, Imperial organization, political economy, a subject called transportation, and the strictly military parts, which involve much practice at writing orders, and working out tactical and strategical problems from the map.<sup>43</sup>

Lawson wrote his exams in Kingston town hall in March 1923. He did well,

and soon departed for Quetta, the first Canadian to do so.

The course at Quetta was hard, challenging work. He spent two years studying historic battles, the capabilities of the other arms, imperial policing, and planning operations at the brigade, division, corps and army level. Additionally, as Douglas Delaney writes,

It was also about learning the common "language" and military method for all armies of the British Empire. Staff College was what enabled a gunner from Montreal to understand a guardsman from London. They may not have liked each other, and they may even have had opposing ideas of how this or that tactical problem should be solved, but they understood each

**Senior Canadian staff officers at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa, ca. mid-1940. Lawson at the time was director of military training and staff duties. Note also Lieutenant-Colonel H.A. Sparling who was author of the infamous list used in selecting battalions for employment in Hong Kong.**

**Front row: Lieutenant-Colonel G.E.A Dupuis, Lieutenant-Colonel K.M. Holloway, Brigadier G.R. Turner, Brigadier K. Stuart, Colonel J.K. Lawson, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H.W. Landon, Lieutenant-Colonel F.C. Hanington.**

**Back row: Lieutenant-Colonel J.P. Girvan, Major E.H. Anundson, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Girard, Lieutenant-Colonel L.F. Grant, Lieutenant-Colonel H.A. Sparling, Lieutenant-Colonel K.G. McCullagh, Lieutenant-Colonel A.W. Hunt, Major D.G.L. Cunningham, Major E.G. Giles, Lieutenant-Colonel K.S. Kennedy.**



Photo supplied by author.

other, and that was important – arguably more important than the adoption of one particular tactical doctrine or another. Armies simply cannot function if the component parts do not understand each other.<sup>44</sup>

Lawson learned the processes, and could speak the “language,” placing him in a very small group of Canadian PF officers. A total of 63 Canadians attended staff college during the interwar years, one-third of whom were infantry. Only 48 graduates were still in the army in 1939.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, as one of 14 Canadian graduates of Quetta – only three of whom were infantry – Lawson was among an even smaller group that was exposed to the British Indian Army. At Quetta, Lawson observed Indian Army exercises which were larger and more complex than anything occurring in Canada. He visited training establishments and he got to know Indian Army officers, including Major-General Charles Maltby, his future commander in Hong Kong who was his classmate at Quetta. In all, Lawson’s staff college experience left him better-suited than just about any PF officer for the command appointment he would later assume at Hong Kong.

In 1930, Lawson earned a second opportunity to hone his skills, this time at the War Office in London. This said something of Lawson’s dedication to his profession, since exchange officers actually made less money while serving in the War Office. Some officers even feared that being out-of-sight was detrimental to career progression. But it was a good learning experience. James Eayrs, in his *In Defence of Canada*, wrote that an exchange at the War Office offered, “a less formal method of broadening the horizons of Canadian officers than enrolment in British Staff Colleges – but no less educational for its informality.”<sup>46</sup> Lawson’s primary job at the War Office was Canadian chair

in staff duties 2 (S.D. 2), a section of the Directorate of Staff Duties. Again, he crossed paths with Pope who succeeded Lawson on the same exchange. Having done the same War Office job as Pope, it stands to reason that Lawson benefited from the same professional development experiences. Pope wrote, “my tour at the War Office was to me quite as valuable as another Staff College course.” He continued,

The Directorate of Staff Duties had an interest in certain aspects of security of defended ports abroad, of distant oilfields and of course protectorates. At the least, this interest taught me much in the way of strategy, and also of geography. I had occasion to think back to my days in S.D.2 when, in 1941, we sent our troops to Hong Kong.<sup>47</sup>

It is worth remembering that when the Canadian contingent was deployed to Hong Kong, it was supposed to be a token force, likely to do little more than garrison the Crown Colony and act as a symbol of Imperial solidarity. The commander would effectively be a Canadian ambassador, not just to the colony, but to the region. A brigade commander in Europe would not be expected to meet regularly with high-ranking politicians and civil servants. Lawson, as a national force commander in Hong Kong, however, would routinely meet with the governor and might be called upon to make significant, strategic decisions. Lawson’s time at the British War Office, coupled with his staff college experience, enabled him to do exactly that by understanding the geopolitical situation, and approaching strategic problems analytically.

In addition to his SD duties, Lawson served as the secretary on two committees. The first was charged with increasing the number of machine guns held in an infantry

battalion, a task well-suited to Lawson’s considerable experience with the machine gun. The second committee concerned combined operations, those that involved combinations of army, navy and air force elements. Lawson was involved in writing the manual for combined operations and he worked on the design of early landing craft. This job also gave Lawson occasion to observe all of the large exercises that took place in England at the time, some involving aircraft and large numbers of armoured vehicles.<sup>48</sup> Although these exercises have been criticized as inadequate preparation for the British army, the fact remains that they were considerably more extensive than anything occurring in Canada, and Lawson was among the few Canadian officers who had a chance to see the effective integration of the various arms. His military education and experience was not by any means perfect – he never commanded a company, for example – but it was as good as a Canadian PF officer could get.

## The Second World War

As war loomed during the summer of 1939, the soldiers serving in the NPAM and PF prepared for mobilization but Lawson missed most of the preparations. Canada declared war on Germany on 10 September, but preparations had already been under way for a week. Lawson was ready and willing for combat assignments overseas and thus signed up for the Canadian Active Service Force (CASF) immediately, but his health soon failed him, putting his deployment plans on hold. A kidney stone and stomach ailment kept him in hospital, or sick in quarters, from 8 September until 24 November, excluding him from the mobilization of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division and its dispatch to



**Brigadier Lawson with his brigade staff aboard the SS Swansea en route to Hong Kong, October 1941. Left to right: Major C.A. Lyndon, Brigadier Lawson, Colonel P. Hennessey and Captain H.S.A. Bush. Captain Bush was the only one of the four to survive the battle.**

the United Kingdom.<sup>49</sup> Otherwise, Lawson would have likely been in England when "C" Force was hastily put together two years later. In the meantime, Lawson remained in Toronto as the GSO 1 and worked on plans for the defence of the Welland Canal.

Lawson returned to Ottawa in May 1940. Promoted to colonel, he became director of military training and staff duties at National Defence Headquarters, a position that quickly grew in importance. By the time Lawson settled into his new position in Ottawa, the "phony war" had ended, the British Expeditionary Force was driven from the Continent,

and France had fallen. It was clear that Canada's involvement in the war was to be extensive and Lawson found himself in the thick of it. On 21 June, Parliament passed the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA), whose provisions included conscription for military service in Canada. The August 1940 registration identified 802,000 men who were eligible, and Lawson had to provide 30 days of training for more than 240,000 men annually. Lawson demonstrated efficiency, tact, and patience in the discharge of his duties. He spent the majority of his time visiting training centres, ensuring the highest level of training

possible in light of the equipment shortages and limited facilities. He was the strong and silent type. After his death, one obituary described him as "a man of few words on his inspection visits to the training centers, but, as one officer put it, 'he missed nothing.'"

Lawson was keen to integrate the lessons of recent fighting into training. In November 1940, he returned to England to visit British and Canadian training establishments throughout the country in order to enhance training in Canada. As Yves Tremblay wrote in *Instruire une Armée*, Lawson's reports emphasized the traditional mainstays of military

training: hygiene, physical fitness, discipline and knowledge of routine administration. Other observations proved to be quite prescient. Lawson focused on the decentralized nature of modern warfare, requiring highly trained and agile junior leaders, and the importance of integrating air power with ground operations. Lawson believed that the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan held great potential for developing what is now called air-land integration. Pilots and aircrew needed to develop the skills necessary to coordinate with army units, and vice versa. His plan was never adopted, but it was an innovative solution that might have paid impressive dividends. Lawson also observed that each soldier, non-commissioned

officer, and officer required a higher level of training than they had needed in the Great War. Put simply, "each unit must be prepared to fight their own battle," and only highly trained leaders at all levels could achieve this result. Officers needed more exchange opportunities with the British army, and the theory and practice of platoon-level operations had to be taught at officer training centres that were to be established in Canada.

Lawson's directorate received an additional task in September 1941. The Canadian government had received a request from the British War Office to send one or two battalions to reinforce the garrison in Hong Kong. The destination remained a closely guarded secret,

but soon H.A. Sparling, a staff officer in the directorate, had the task of finding two battalions suitable for garrison duty in a tropical climate.<sup>50</sup> Sparling created the infamous "list." This list, often credited to Lawson himself, divided available battalions into three groups: fully trained, additional training required, and not suitable. Lawson passed the list to the chief of the general staff (CGS), Major-General H.D.G. Crerar, who selected the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada for "C" Force. Both units were drawn from the "not suitable" category.

Lawson's plans for the Canadian training system were interrupted. The War Office appeal for two battalions was followed by a request for a brigade headquarters. Crerar

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**Brigadier Lawson meets with Sir Mark Young, governor of Hong Kong, soon after his arrival in the colony, 16 November 1941.**

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appointed Lawson as the commander of "C" Force, and promoted him to brigadier. Although the low level of training in the two battalions has attracted much attention, Lawson's selection as commander has not. No written record survives explaining why Crerar selected Lawson, but certain facts seem clear. First, considering the PF had only 450 officers at the beginning of the

war, that Crerar and Lawson were among a very small group of officers who had attended staff college and completed an exchange at the War Office, and that their time at Canadian Military Headquarters in London had overlapped, they most certainly knew each other, at least by reputation. Second, Crerar knew that the commander of this mission had to be able to integrate easily into a British

command structure, and ideally have knowledge of the British and Indian Armies. Lawson spoke this common staff college "language," with a slight Yorkshire accent to boot. The commander had to be able to make decisions of strategic significance and represent Canadian interests in the Far East. Lawson's posting in the War Office, as Crerar well knew, gave him essential experience. Only attendance at the Imperial Defence College could have made him better suited. Finally, Crerar had knowingly selected two ill-trained battalions for the garrison, focusing his efforts on the Canadian forces being assembled in England and believing that war against Japan was unlikely, or, at

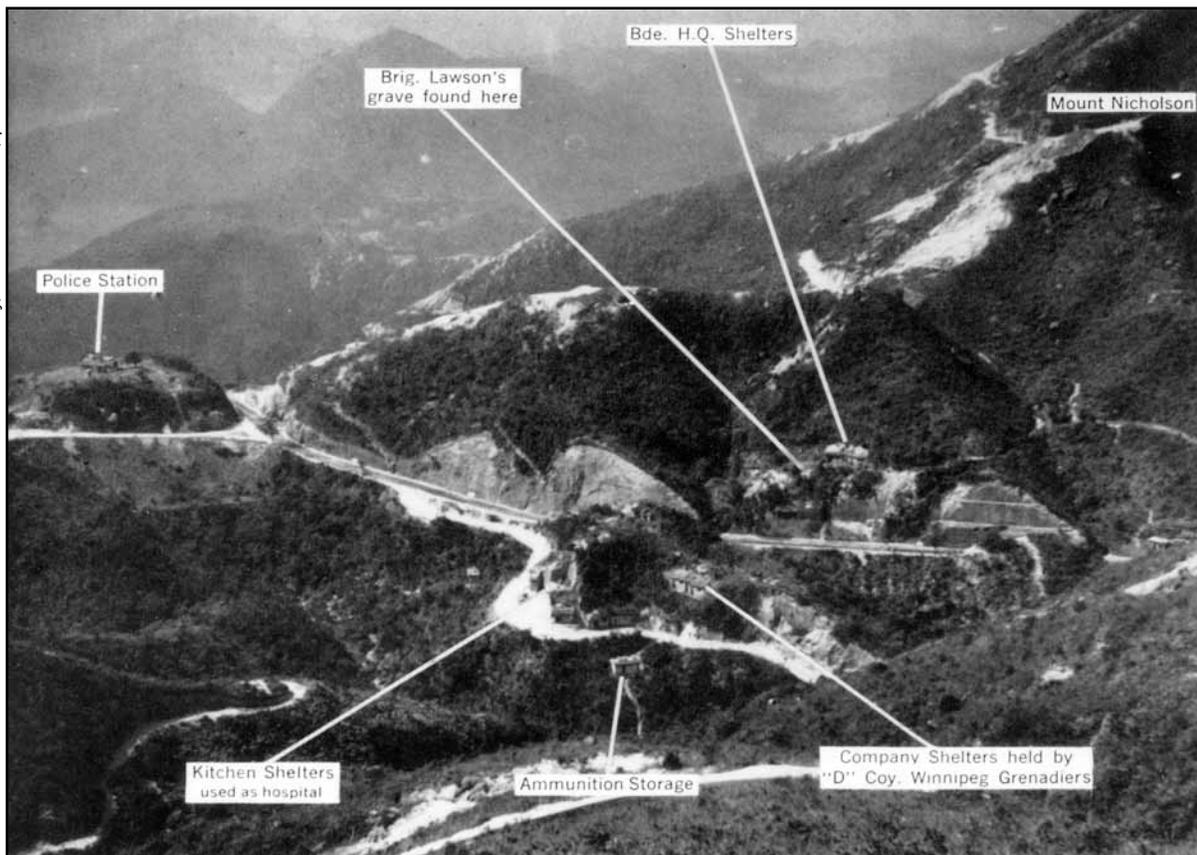
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**Left: West Brigade HQ as it appeared in the 1990s. Lawson was killed nearby.**

**Below: Photograph of the Wong Nei Chong Gap showing the location of Lawson's HQ and where his grave was found.**

C.P. Stacey, Six Years of War, p.482.



least, not immediate. Whatever the rationale for Crerar’s decisions, the two battalions required considerable training, and the commander would have to be an expert trainer of men. Lawson’s experience as an NCO, his tenure as director of military training, and his recent visit to England, all combined to make him one of the most expert trainers in the Canadian army. In short, Lawson was not only a well qualified professional, but a professional of unique background that made him well-suited to this particular task.

### Conclusion

The opportunities for professional development available to a PF officer in Canada during the interwar years were inadequate. Only the most ambitious pursued professional development opportunities abroad, and this group provided the cadre for Canada’s commanders in the Second World War. Lawson pursued staff college and an exchange position at the War Office in order to develop himself as a manager of violence. His career was impressive, but his 22 years of uniformed service have been all but forgotten. Tim Carew wrongly asserted that Lawson was “not a professional soldier at all,” implying that Lawson was unsuited to command the Canadian contingent in Hong Kong. Carew had his facts wrong, confusing Lawson’s pre-First World War work experience as a schoolmaster and clerk, with his interwar experience. Other authors have followed suit, or simply ignored Lawson. Yet Lawson stood out as one of the most professional officers available in the Canadian army at the time. His career was all too typical of the unsung heroes of the interwar years – a consummate professional who tirelessly prepared for the next war.



**Brigadier J.K. Lawson’s grave in the Sai Wan War Cemetery, Hong Kong.**

### Notes

1. Major-General C.M. Maltby, “Operations in Hong Kong from 8th to 25th December, 1941,” Supplement to the *London Gazette*, 20 January 1948, p.63.
2. Tim Carew, *Hostages to Fortune* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), p.39.
3. Nathan M. Greenfield, *The Damned: The Canadians at the Battle of Hong Kong and the POW Experience, 1941-1945* (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), p.110.
4. Ibid.
5. Carew, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 133.
6. Library and Archives of Canada (LAC), RG 150, attestation papers of John Kilburn [sic] Lawson.
7. Michael Ivan Lawson (telephone interview with the author 18 January 2011) still has two decanters given to Edward Arthur as a retirement present from the Harbour Commission. John Arthur Lawson (telephone interview with the author, 18 January 2011) had his grandfather’s commissioning scroll in his possession until it was destroyed by fire in 1991. The 1901 census listed Edward Arthur as a steamship agent.
8. Kenneth’s middle name was Arthur. He is listed as Lawson’s next of kin in his First World War service file as Arthur K. Lawson.

9. Lawson's attendance at Worcester Public School is recorded in his various obituaries. The Lawson family held several documents regarding his attendance at these schools – including a certificate for top marks in English class – but these were destroyed in a fire in 1991. In the late nineteenth century, there were three public schools in Worcester: the Royal Grammar School, the Alice Ottley School, and the King's School. The Royal Grammar School and the Alice Ottley School have since merged into RGS Worcester and have been able to confirm that the Lawson sons did not attend either institution (Jill Gaynor-Smith, PA to the Headmaster, e-mail to the author, 26 January 2011). It is therefore likely but not certain that the Lawsons attended the King's School.
10. John Arthur Lawson, telephone interview with the author 18 January 2011.
11. In LAC, *Passenger Lists, 1865-1935*, RG76-C, Lawson lists his previous career as "schoolmaster."
12. See Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon, *A History of Hull* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) for more about the living conditions in Hull at the time. The story of transmigration through Hull is explored in Nicholas J. Evans, "Indirect Passage From Europe: Transmigration via the UK, 1836-1914," *Journal of Maritime Research* (June 2001).
13. University of London Archive, Index of students 1900-1937, reference CR 2.
14. LAC, "Lawson, John Kilburne [sic], Second World War Service File," R112, Vol.30553.
15. LAC, *Passenger Lists, 1865-1935*, RG76-C.
16. "Wildest Night in Edmonton's History," *Edmonton Daily Bulletin*, 5 August 1914, p.2.
17. David J. Bercuson, *The Patricias: The Proud History of a Fighting Regiment* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001), p.29.
18. "Walked 236 Miles to Enlist for Army Services," *Edmonton Daily Bulletin*, 18 August 1914, p.1.
19. LAC, *9th Canadian Battalion*, RG 150, Volume 65.
20. Ibid.
21. Department of National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHist), Service Record of J.K. Lawson.
22. LAC, "Lawson, John Kilburn (sic), First World War Service File," RG 150, Box 5471-20.
23. Ibid.
24. Captains were placed in charge of eight Vickers; he normally had two lieutenants working for him.
25. John Arthur Lawson, interview with the author 18 January 2011.
26. LAC, "Lawson, John Kilburn (sic), First World War Service File," RG 150, Box 5471-20.
27. The decoration itself remains in possession of the Lawson family. It was awarded for actions on 7 April 1918, and signed into effect on 1 March 1919.
28. LAC, "War diaries - Machine Gun Officers, Canadian Corps, 18 April 1919," RG9, Volume 4981.
29. LAC, "Lawson, John Kilburn (sic), First World War Service File," RG 150, Box 5471-20.
30. See Stephen J. Harris, "A Canadian Way of War; 1919-1939," in *The Canadian Way of War: Serving the National Interest* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006), pp.195-211.
31. The decoration itself remains in possession of the Lawson family. It was awarded for actions on 16 March 1919, during demobilization.
32. LAC, "Lawson, John Kilburn (sic), First World War Service File," RG 150, Box 5471-20.
33. "Capt. Douglas will succeed Capt. Lawson," *Edmonton Bulletin*, 29 March 1920, p.1.
34. Ted Ferguson, *Desperate Siege: The Battle of Hong Kong* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1980), p.13.
35. Michael Ivan Lawson, telephone interview with the author 26 January 2011.
36. John Arthur Lawson, telephone interview with the author 18 January 2011.
37. Lawson received a silver cigarette box commemorating the event from his fellow officers of The Royal Canadian Regiment, a regimental tradition.
38. Stephen Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p.198.
39. John English, *The Canadian Army in the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command*, (New York: Praeger, 1991), p.56.
40. Jack Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), p.17.
41. John Arthur Lawson, telephone interview with the author 18 January 2011.
42. Maurice Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p.53.
43. LAC, Macbeth Papers, Volume 5, Burns to Macbeth, 27 October 1925, quoted in J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals*, p. 123.
44. Douglas E. Delaney, *Corps Commanders: Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-45* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), p. 298.
45. John A. MacDonald, *In Search of Veritable: Training the Canadian Army Staff Officer, 1899-1945* (Kingston, ON: Royal Military College MA Thesis, 1992), p.97.
46. James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada, From the Great War to the Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p.89.
47. Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians*, p.76.
48. "Man of the Week: Director of Military Training," *The Standard* (Montreal: 18 October 1941), p.14.
49. LAC, "Lawson, John Kilburne [sic], Second World War Service File," R112, Vol. 30553.
50. J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p.196.

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