



Japan invaded Hong Kong in 1941, storming a defence line that prefigured the systems of British pillboxes. After years of aerial photo research and site visits, even as surviving structures disappear, Lawrence Lai, YK Tan and Stephen Davies have compiled a detailed picture of the scene

TO ACTION ON THE GIN DRINKER'S LINE



In the morning of December 8 1941, Japanese troops invaded Hong Kong, then a British colony, from the north. Shing Mun redoubt, a bastion of the Gin Drinker's Line held by the Royal Scots, was a key position. Within the first 48 hours of the 18-day Battle of Hong Kong, at about 3:50 to 4:00 early on December 10, it fell. The ensuing Battle of Golden Hill triggered a premeditated and complete evacuation of the British garrison from the mainland (the New Territories and Kowloon) to Hong Kong Island, the stage for the final phase of the battle.

There has been a resurgence of community interest in Hong Kong's

past, so the post-colonial Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has taken the opportunity to promote heritage conservation, cultural tourism, and research. The Battle of Hong Kong is an important focus of such research.

However, academic and professional discourse on the battle has not been backed by concern for the precise locations of battlefields, routes of attack and retreat, or military installations. Most illustrative materials in books and journal articles were drawn to such a small scale or at such a broad "strategic" or "policy" level, that researchers could make little direct use of them for conservation or tourism planning purposes, not to mention discussing the conduct of battle. Historians have been unable to address many key questions. The Gin Drinker's Line (GDL) is a case in point. There are no accurate "as-built" measured drawings or plans of the defence structures of the line in the UK or Hong Kong archives.

This study aims to consolidate action details, and report our key findings on the GDL pillboxes from field investigations, public records and postwar aerial photo images. We hope to encourage emerging historical debate over the Battle of Hong Kong as a matter of heritage conservation and the proper reconstruction of history

based on solid facts. We shall also discuss the possible relationship between the design of the GDL pillboxes and that of their English counterparts.

Piccadilly to Oxford St

Called the "Maginot of the East," the GDL was a system of pillboxes – machine gun strongpoints – built of reinforced concrete in key hilly and coastal positions, and such related defence structures as command headquarters, observation posts, coastal and anti-aircraft searchlight positions, and bunkers. It stretched for some 18km from "Texaco Peninsula", a headland of Gin Drinker's Bay in the west, to Hang Hau, Junk Bay in the east. The latter is now largely reclaimed as part of Tseung Kwan O New Town. Gin Drinker's Bay, reclaimed in the early 1960s, was named after the many who came by boat to consume a lot of alcohol!

The GDL reinforced the natural line of defence formed by the Kowloon Range, which separates the northern New Territories from the main urban areas of Kowloon. The main lines of advance from the north converged at the west end of the GDL between the Shing Mun (Jubilee) reservoir and Beacon Hill. It was in a dominant position in this gap that the major strong point of the Shing Mun redoubt

Above: The Gin Drinker's Line, built to defend Hong Kong

Opposite top: A post-war housing shortage encouraged people to quarry the line for raw materials

Opposite below: Imprint of a 1937 Sunday Herald on the roof of the Shing Mun redoubt, with details illustrating the line's condition



was constructed. It was encircled by a barbed wire fence, its five pillboxes connected by underground tunnels named after places in London (Piccadilly, Haymarket, Regent Palace Hotel, Regent Street, Shaftesbury Avenue, Oxford Street, Charing Cross and Strand Palace Hotel). There was a separate tunnel system for an artillery observation post (command headquarters with kitchens) on higher ground leading up to Smugglers Ridge. Both tunnel systems have open air sections from which defenders could fire mortars and guns.

Above: One of only two known early pillbox photos (left: the Japanese note says the pillbox was camouflaged as a rock), and Tate's Pass today (right)

Below: Shing Mun redoubt tunnels were named after London landmarks

A very useful guide for tracing the action details of the GDL is Tony Banham's *Not the Slightest Chance: the Defence of Hong Kong, 1941* (Hong Kong University Press, 2005). Information from public records form the basis of his work. We have combined this with our own discoveries (consolidated at www.britarch.ac.uk/BA/ba.html) to show an hour by hour detailing of the pillboxes' vain attempt to defend Hong Kong during the first three days of the Japanese invasion. We confirmed locations by aerial photo analysis, and ascertained PB (pillbox) numbers by study in the field or simply guessing after reading the war diaries.

It is apparent from this analysis that the GDL did not collapse immediately upon the complete loss of the Shing Mun redoubt at about 07:30 on December 10, when PB402 was taken. Rather, Japanese artillery had to tackle the coastal and foothill pillboxes guarding Tai Wai and Shatin Cove to allow their troops to cross that narrow part of Tolo harbour at night by boat, and then climb the Kowloon Range east of the redoubt. In this sector, PB210 was reported still to be actively fighting as late as four in the afternoon of December 10, and the main assault on this part of the GDL commenced two hours later at 18:00, just before sunset.

Postwar aerial photos show evidence that these pillboxes were accurately bombed by the Japanese. After the destruction, the British soon decided to evacuate the mainland at noon on December 11.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that had the defenders held onto the GDL pillboxes in the gaps of



the Kowloon Range longer before evacuation, the Japanese would have suffered heavier casualties, judging from the tactics they employed against Jardine's Lookout on Hong Kong Island, where two thin-walled pillboxes held by the Volunteers inflicted hundreds of casualties before they fell.

Bullet holes

We consulted the black and white aerial photos taken by the Royal Air Force in 1949 and RC Hunting in 1963/64, which remain Hong Kong's best postwar series of aerial photos. Back then, the Hong Kong countryside had not been disturbed by either postwar revegetation or urban sprawl, so these photos contain excellent images of second world war ruins and battlefields. Viewed in pairs through stereoscopes or with portions enlarged, the photos clearly reveal ground objects (such as marker stones, the air shaft of an air raid tunnel or a pillbox). They were also taken at a time when the Hong Kong air quality, and hence, visibility, were excellent.

After examining these photos, we identified some features and exact map locations of the then-surviving pillboxes and followed up with site visits to those that still existed. The layout of the fighting and living compartment of the pillboxes generally came in five patterns, while there are six types of entrance design. Those built into gaps and on slopes had tunnel connections lined with air shafts and multiple entries. The tunnels were rendered with cement or lined with bricks. Those built along the coast were usually supported by searchlight positions nearby.

As the British never used the Gin



Drinker's Line again, most pillboxes were destroyed after the war for various, usually economic, reasons. For instance, the housing shortage in Hong Kong during the immediate postwar decades compelled people to poach steel and bricks. Sometimes this caused the collapse of pillbox roofs and tunnels, paradoxically betraying their locations to aerial photo interpreters.

So far, researchers have found pre-war photos of only two clearly identified GDL pillboxes; both of them (PB125 and 126) were demolished after the war. However, we were able to photograph an intact pillbox along Shing Mun Road, which squatters were using before it was destroyed by road work in 2002. The two air shafts on top of the pillbox can be seen in a 1949 RAF aerial photo.

Site visits also reveal that boxes other than those mentioned in the war diaries consulted by Banham did witness fighting. We have photographed bullet holes or shrapnel left in the roofs of PB313 and 314, which guarded the Kowloon reservoir area. Signs of fighting here suggest that the contest for Golden Hill after the fall of the Shing Mun redoubt covered a much wider area. We have listed on the CBA website a concordance of new place names for key positions in the base map of 1957 produced by the Ministry of War.

Ahead of Britain

We read from General Maltby's post-war dispatch on the Battle of Hong Kong, that the GDL was largely completed before 1938 but subsequently abandoned because of insufficient defenders to man it. It was re-adopted more or less at the last minute when reinforcements became available:

Directly, the news arrived of reinforcement by two Canadian battalions, reconnaissance was carried out by commanding officers only, in order to maintain secrecy. The existing garrison carried out detailed reconnaissance down to the platoon level, and worked out the exact defence plan for holding the Gin Drinker's Line. A considerable amount of work was necessary, for (except for the centre sector) the line was in a partially completed form for three years previously, but then the general policy of defence was altered and the Gin Drinker's Line was abandoned. (Supplement to the London Gazette, Jan 27 1948, part 1)



Above: Traditional Japanese script at tunnel entry to Shing Mun redoubt, reading Conquered by Wayabayashi's platoon: all the survivors of this platoon later died at Guadalcanal

Right and below: A pillbox on Shing Mun Road had been used by squatters before it was demolished during roadworks in 2002

Robin Weir, a Hong Kong pillbox enthusiast living in Australia, tells us that at least one box was completed at the eastern end by December 20 1935 and listed as no 55; there was a major exercise to test the defence of Hong Kong in 1937, and some 90 boxes of the line were ready by August 1 1938. Indeed, we found a facsimile of a 1937 English newspaper on the roof of one of the tunnels of the Shing Mun redoubt, apparently laid under wet cement during construction. This implies the pillboxes along the GDL are over 70 years old, inviting the question of their design provenance and the tactical thinking behind the line's original concept – which presumably predated General Edmund Ironsides' stop line ideas and General Alan Brooke's hedgehog/defensive localities ideas. That suggests the whole conception of the pillboxes predated the British Fortifications and Works (FW3) designs.

If the pillboxes along the GDL were built during the 1930s, then Hong

Kong's defences were way ahead of Britain's. British pillboxes were mostly built in a desperate hurry during the "phony war" interlude of 1939–40 (although there were some left over from the first world war). If the pillboxes in Hong Kong were of the date suggested above, then either their designs were unique, or they were the forerunners of the standard pillbox designs (types 22–28) drawn up by the directorate of FW3 under Major General GBO Taylor in May 1940.

*Lawrence Lai and YK Tan are at the Department of Real Estate & Construction (formerly Surveying), University of Hong Kong. Stephen Davies is director of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. For further detail see *The Gin Drinker's Line: reconstruction of a British colonial defence line in Hong Kong using aerial photo information (research paper with P Yung, obtainable from the authors)*. Thanks to the University of Hong Kong for funding (grant no 200607176092) and to Robin Weir for useful advice*

