The Japanese Attack

On the morning of December 7, the entire Hong Kong garrison was ordered to war stations. Canadian troops were ferried across from Kowloon to the island, and by 5 p.m. the battalions were in position and Brigadier Lawson's headquarters was set up in the middle of the island. Fifteen hours before the Japanese attacked, all Hong Kong defence forces were in position.

On December 8, at 8 a.m., Japanese aircraft attacked the Kai Tak airport and easily damaged or destroyed the few aircraft of the Royal Air Force. The nearly-empty camp at Sham Shui Po was the next target, where two men of the Royal Canadian Signals were wounded. They were the first Canadian casualties in Hong Kong. To further soften the island's defences, the Japanese directed heavy artillery bombardment at the island and shelled the pillboxes along the north shore.

That morning, Japanese ground forces moved across the border of the New Territories and met resistance from the forward forces of the Mainland brigade. On December 9, in fierce fighting, and under the cover of darkness, the Japanese captured an area of high ground on the left flank of the Gin Drinker's Line. This night-time victory caught General Maltby by surprise.

On December 10, elements of the Winnipeg Grenadiers went to strengthen the remaining defenders on the mainland. On December 11, they exchanged gunfire with the enemy and became the first Canadian Army unit to engage in combat in the Second World War. By mid-day on December 11 the Gin Drinkers' Line could no longer be held and the mainland troops were ordered to withdraw to the Island. The withdrawal was successful and most of the heavy equipment was saved.

On December 13, a Japanese demand for the surrender of Hong Kong was categorically rejected. On December 17, a second Japanese demand for surrender was refused, however, the situation was very grim. With the sinking of two British relief ships off Malaya and the crippling of the United States fleet at Pearl Harbor, there was no hope of relief, and the Chinese armies were in no position to give immediate aid.