

## Hong Kong, HMS *Tamar* and the Royal Observatory.

By Cdr Mike Channon OBE RN

With my wife and two young toddlers, I arrived in Hong Kong in early December 1979. We had rented our UK house, and taken on a married quarter in Hong Kong with a live-in 'amah' (Chinese maid) to do general household and babysitting duties, and a fairly generous overseas allowance to supplement my Lt Cdr's salary. Family life was instantly wonderful and worry-free!



Royal Observatory 1979

I was appointed to *HMS Tamar* for duty at the Royal Observatory, Hong Kong (ROHK) where I would be a senior forecaster in a watch bill with four other senior forecasters, all Chinese. The morning watch was 0500 - 1300; afternoon, 1300 - 2100; and night, 2100 - 0500 but the senior forecasters only reported for night shifts when a tropical cyclone was within 100 miles. At other times we were on call at home. The HK localisation policy meant there were only three British staff members left at ROHK. The Director, Deputy Director and Head of Research who would all be replaced by Chinese personnel as they retired. The experience of working with the Chinese staff and the professional side of the job were extremely rewarding.

Of course, I had RN duties too. The new *HMS Tamar* (the fifth) was very impressive as shown below with magnificent views from the wardroom near the top of the Prince of Wales building, which was officially opened in 1979.



HMS *Tamar* 1980

The former *Tamar* building can be seen at the base of the new building, on the left next to the water, with the Bull's Nose jetty, containing two iconic banyan trees, beyond.

There had been two IO posts in Hong Kong in the mid-70s, but the Education and Resettlement job had been discontinued and so I was responsible for that aspect too. Fortunately, there was an excellent Petty Officer Wren Ed in *Tamar*. I was also a member of the Chief Education Officer's Conference which met periodically, chaired by a Colonel, and comprised senior Education Corps officers and the headmasters of the service schools.

When typhoons threatened or when the Captain-in-Charge (CAPIC) wanted me, I would be summoned for briefings. If I happened to be on watch at ROHK when this happened, a standby Senior Forecaster would be called in to release me. The Staff Operations Room, where I delivered my typhoon briefings, was on the first floor of the old *Tamar* building. My audience would be CAPIC and his staff, the HK squadron (five Ton-class minesweepers at that time; *Monkton*, *Beachampton*, *Yarnton*, *Wasperton* and *Wolverton*), and any visiting warships. Hong Kong means "Fragrant Harbour", but the harbour was certainly not a safe place to ride out a typhoon and not particularly fragrant! Larger ships needed to sail in plenty of time to get out of the harbour and gain precious sea room, while the HK Squadron and other small ships needed to be lifted out of the water and safely secured before conditions became too hazardous.

Other METOC duties included forecasts and briefings for the HK Marine Police and the RN Hovercraft Unit on Stonecutters Island. These were tailored for illegal immigrant and anti-smuggling patrols. I also taught sea and swell forecasting and tactical meteorology aspects to the Chinese forecasters and gave presentations on typhoons to schools, military families, and various societies. As an ROHK duty forecaster, I provided aviation forecast information to the met office at the airport (manned by ROHK staff), public interest weather forecasts for radio and TV, plus scripts for the weather presenters.

Working with my Chinese colleagues and superiors was fascinating and enjoyable, and I learned much from them. Most of them were westernised having gained PhDs at British or American universities. Even so, cultural differences caused me to tread carefully at times so as not to unwittingly give offence. Loss of face is a crucial area that can create very awkward situations. Fortunately, foreigners are expected to be unaware of such subtleties, so a "gweilo" (foreign devil in Cantonese) would usually be tolerated if he got it wrong. This proved to be very useful when forecasting. Often the Chinese person that I was relieving, would be grateful that it was me, if the forecast was going horribly wrong. An amendment issued by him might cause loss of face to the previous forecaster. However, if I issued the amendment it was accepted or even expected.

Hong Kong provided a captivating family and social life. The freedom offered by our amah, Ah Ho, was amazing. She cleaned, laundered, cooked when we wanted, and looked after the children, who adored her.

We lived in Kowloon in army Majors quarters (apartments) and were the only Navy residents which meant we were a bit of a novelty. I was invited to be an honorary member of a number of army messes which proved useful as most were on the Kowloon side of the harbour. There were a couple of RN Lieutenants doing Chinese Language courses with the army, also living on the Kowloon side. Tamar staff, jokingly, began referring to me as Senior Naval Officer, Chinese Mainland! Gun Club Barracks, which housed the Gurkha Transport Regiment, was within walking distance and also hosted the post office (BFPO 1). The curry lunches in the mess were not to be missed. The army was so much better than the navy at these events. Children were welcomed, rather than tolerated, and were escorted to a separate area with games and toys, fed child friendly food, while the adults enjoyed a superb, uninterrupted curry.

Of course, shopping was a great therapy, particularly for wives, and there were real bargains to be had in those days. There were numerous markets, mobile stalls, factory outlets and shops to suit all. My wife would tirelessly tramp the back streets, never ever feeling threatened and soon knew the shopping areas better than the taxi drivers!



*A typical HK street, 1981*



*A favourite shop in Kowloon, 1980*

Another particularly enjoyable family pastime would be the weekend banyans (picnics or barbecues on a deserted, tropical beach).



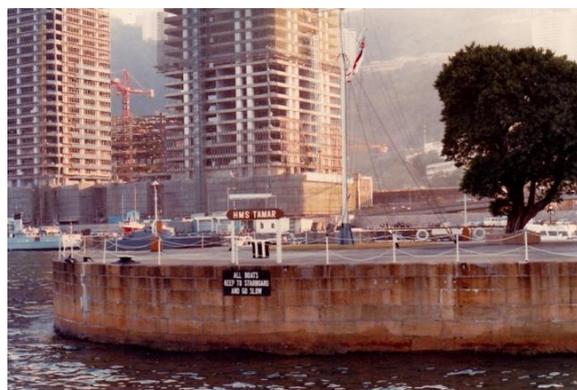
*One of the HK Sokos Islands, 1980*

Using one the Tamar T-boats (personnel ferries) we would set out from the Bull's Nose with food and drink to one of the more remote HK islands where we would anchor. The plants immediately adjacent to the sandy beach in the picture (above) are pineapples. Banyans were a great day out. Men normally built the bonfire for the barbecue, other adults prepared food while the children played together.



*Family fun on one of the many HK Islands, 1981*

"Bonfire Beach" was another favourite spot. The RN T-boat can be seen (above) anchored close to the beach. We'd eventually return, pleasantly exhausted, to the Bull's Nose with one of its two appropriately named Banyan trees visible in the picture below.



*The Bull's Nose, HMS Tamar, 1980*

As well as with military personnel, I socialised with many of the Service Children's Education Authority (SCEA) teachers, ate out occasionally, with my Chinese co-workers, ran regularly with the Hash House Harriers, and played a variety of sports whenever the opportunity arose, and watch bill permitted. More unusual events included Rickshaw and Dragon Boat races.

Eating out was a wonderful experience. The variety of restaurants was huge. Local HK food was predominantly Cantonese, but there were Szechuan, Peking, Shanghai, Malaysian, Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, European and more eateries to suit all tastes and budgets. I personally enjoyed the incredibly cheap street food cooked freshly in one of the many “dai pai dongs” (open air food stalls).

Another enjoyable duty was being the Naval Member and Wine Caterer of the United Services Recreation Club (USRC) in Kowloon. The USRC was a wonderful oasis that had three swimming pools (adult, junior and toddler), tennis and squash courts, a large children’s playground, poolside bars, satay and casual food stalls, and even a bowling green. There was also a bistro, an upmarket restaurant and a smart bar overlooking the main pool. That it was only a short walk from our quarters was the icing on the cake. My family practically lived there, and I would often join them after my morning or before my afternoon shifts at ROHK.



*The USRC from our apartment balcony, 1980*



*Relaxing after lunch at the USRC, 1980*

Hong Kong had some breath-taking sights. Escaping the throngs in the many mostly deserted hills and parks of the New Territories, which were far less built up than they are today, provided peaceful respite. Exploring the remoter villages and small walled cities was absorbing and we would wonder at the great contrast of wealth and poverty that existed everywhere. Even so, due to the border with China being closed, Hong Kong could seem confining at times.



*Part of the USRC playgrounds, 1980*

In recognition of this, the military provided the equivalent cost of flights to Singapore to enable a family to have a holiday away from Hong Kong once during their tour. We went to Singapore before renting a car and driving through Malaysia. We drove up the east coast staying at Mersing and Kuantan, seeing miles of rubber plantations, palm trees and deserted, unspoilt beaches, visited the Cameron Highlands, and finally ended up in Penang for a week. All these places are so much more commercialised today.

I left Hong Kong at the end of November 1982. By that time the observatory had erected a new building adjacent to the old one, with the satellite dish moved to the roof. The old building was retained, and the grounds are relatively unchanged to this day.



*Old ROHK building and the new extension, 1982*

In the three years after I left, the five Ton-class ships of the HK Squadron, were gradually replaced by new, bespoke patrol corvettes, the *Peacock* class. These were air-conditioned and were capable of going to sea when a typhoon threatened.

Prior to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, *HMS Tamar* moved again, this time to Stonecutters Island, the 6<sup>th</sup> and final *Tamar* in Hong Kong. The Prince of Wales building and surrounding real estate was taken over by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China. Land reclamation means the site is now landlocked.

I shall be eternally grateful for being part of Hong Kong’s Naval history. That three-year experience is the source of some truly wonderful family memories.