

## The City of Dragons – A Hong Kong Resident’s Quest

By Geoff Walker

Born in England towards the end of WW2, growing up and life thereafter has been one continuous adventure for me. Although having achieved no major accolades in life, I do, nevertheless believe I have been fortunate enough to have seen more than most in my lifetime thus far, for which I am eternally grateful.

At a very young age, I along with my family left Liverpool and relocated to Hong Kong – my father being a Telecommunications Engineer and my mother an English teacher.

My recollection of all my adventures stem from one cold, rainy January morning when a taxi rolled up at our home in Liverpool, to take us to the city bus depot and the comfort of a quite luxurious motor coach which would take us on the long ride to Southampton. There we were to join the P and O liner “Canton” that would be our home during our passage to Hong Kong.

Most of the trip by road is vague but once having arrived at Southampton I am blessed with absolute clarity. My young eyes feasted upon the majestic gleaming white steamer sporting a creamy yellow funnel and masts, which would be my playground for the next 30 days.

My father, being a senior executive, was privileged to first class travel so we all boarded the “Canton” and settled into our accommodations. My parents occupied an impressive suite on one of the upper decks, complete with large seaward facing window, quality fittings and facilities and of course ensuite. The décor was very tasteful and on a par with at least a five star hotel. My younger brother and I occupied an adjoining double cabin, also very luxurious, well appointed and complete with two tier bunk beds. Being the elder I insisted on the upper bunk, naturally.

The interior of the First Class decks was very plush. Teak veneered bulkheads, highly buffed linoleum tiles on the decks, numerous brass fittings all polished to perfection and everywhere lingered that sweet odor reminiscent of a mix of disinfectant and furniture polish. The public rooms and dining areas were equally impressive. Spotless white linen tablecloths spread upon round tables, silver service and stewards immaculately turned out to cater for ones every wish. Food was endless with enormous choices which included a never ending buffet in addition to a la carte menus. Everything down to the last detail was very well presented.

Outside, the wooden decks were holystoned white, paintwork in the passenger areas was kept like new and the wooden and brass hand rails varnished and gleaming.

The entire ship was an absolute picture and although not new by any means was obviously well maintained.

Eventually we cast off amid crowds of well wishers and as the passenger liner gained headway I recall watching the other ships tied up at the various wharves slip past, as we headed serenely down Southampton water towards the Solent (waterway between the Isle of Wight and UK mainland). The weather was very cold, overcast with drizzle and I remember wondering to myself when I would return. I must admit at that impressionable young age it was all a bit bewildering for me and at the time I didn't realize the significance this departure from English shores would play in my future life. Nevertheless, we soon settled in on board.

For the first few days at sea life was miserable, until we cleared the Bay of Biscay. Continuous seasickness affected most passengers and was very unpleasant but lifted as soon as we approached the coast of Portugal at which point the sea lost most of its vengeance resulting in the ship's motion becoming more stable. The sky turned from overcast to blue and the sun shone brilliantly. Life on board quickly took a turn for the better. The only one of us that had been unaffected by seasickness was my father, he being ex RN with exploits on the "Kelly", "Dido", "Zest", "Cowslip", etc., during the fateful war years. I hold vivid memories of Mom and Dad dressing formally for dinner every evening, long hours in the swimming pool, movies, deck games and most importantly endless ice creams, served on the boat deck, morning and afternoon, which soon became supplemented with our unlimited selection of cream cakes. It was just like a huge holiday camp with ship's staff doing all they could to make life as pleasurable as possible. For the adults and those with an inclination towards gambling there was even a ship's tote, whereby the passenger who came closest to selecting the exact distance the vessel had steamed during the previous 24 hour period received a cash prize. My parents won it once.

One of my most interesting memories early in the voyage goes back to when we had just passed Gibraltar, by this time I guess we had been on board about a week. One evening, I was asleep in my upper bunk, whilst my mother and father were at dinner. Suddenly, something startled me and I awoke abruptly. The cabin adjoining ours was a single and occupied by an attractive young lady schoolteacher bound for Singapore. Being in the upper bunk I could hear faint voices and giggles coming from a ventilator outlet close to the deck head. By standing on the bunk I could just reach it with my ear. Naturally, I did so being an inquisitive youngster. I immediately recognized the voice of the lady passenger and that of "Danny" our cabin steward. Danny must have been in his early twenties and an amiable young man. Having satisfied my curiosity, I thought no more of this and just went back to sleep.

The next morning, I innocently said to Danny "What were you doing in that lady's cabin last night". His face went a paler shade of pink and I earned a stern glare, but I did receive his immediate response – "if you and your brother don't mention this to anyone, you can come to the pantry every afternoon at 3 pm and have as many cakes and as much ice cream as you like"! This was the proverbial carrot and my brother and I exploited this invitation to the maximum for the duration of the voyage, despite my mother's objections. It was not until years later that I realized Danny's motives for such generosity!

We transited the Mediterranean Sea heading eastward. Our first stop was at Port Said in Egypt, and transit through the Suez Canal. It was a one day adventure because this was my first experience of being in a foreign country. Hitherto, my only exposure to foreigners had been the occasional Asian salesman who came to our front door peddling household items from a suitcase – whenever they came I would run and hide under the kitchen table, absolutely petrified.

We tied up to a jetty somewhere, I guess for replenishment of bunkers and stores, and to wait the designated time for the southbound convoy to transit the canal. We stayed there most of the day and of course there were the usual 'Bum Boats', alongside with their occupants peddling their wares. Bartering with hawkers hoping to sell those terrible stuffed camels, leather stools and turquoise trinkets of various assortments, made time pass quickly. One excitement for me was the young urchins that dived to recover coins thrown overboard into the water by passengers. The kids would dive then break surface with the coin firmly gripped between their teeth. For a youngster like me, never having been further than the Mersey Docks, this was marvelous entertainment, as was the "Gili Gili" man with his tricks. However, I was still very cautious of the natives and it took me some time to really feel at ease even though I stuck to my parents like wool on a sheep's back.

I saw my first camel during the canal transit, several of them in fact, all gaping aimlessly at our ship as we passed by. Even at that young age they struck me as being rather dumb looking creatures.

Our passage through to the Gulf of Aqaba was otherwise uneventful except I recall, everyone by now had changed into tropical rig, namely, tropical evening dress for passengers and crispy white uniforms for the officers and crew. By this point in time the voyage had taken on a different perspective. People had forged friendships and life was much more informal, with most being on first name terms at least. Drinking sessions at the Verandah Café or Lido Bar, cards, deck games and competitions were commonplace within the various groups.

Not to be outdone, I met my first girl friend – puppy love I guess. Her name was Alison, and she was on her way to India with her family. She had a terrible younger brother named Simon who delighted in teasing us! We went everywhere together and I was very sad when she eventually left the ship. I missed her pig tails.

Obviously, by this time the vessel had its fair share of somewhat more serious romances and affairs. There were the usual twosomes who never separated or parted company until disembarkation. They were very conspicuous, morning, noon and night. One evening, my brother and I were wandering the boat deck under the watchful guidance of the folks. I received a serious reprimand from my father for annoying a young romancing couple who were really quite oblivious to happenings around them, they being very preoccupied. I do not recall seeing this couple thereafter; I think we frightened them off and they may have sought a more private venue. I believe they disembarked at Bombay. However, other couples were like beacons, being in the same old fixed position, night after night. This activity and presence seemed to dwindle as the voyage progressed, perhaps because flourishing romances had taken a more serious turn which demanded more discrete surroundings.

The climate was, by this juncture starting to change quite dramatically. Long hot and quite humid days, passing squalls and the odd rough patch – seasick again! The passage between Suez and Bombay was the longest stretch of the voyage. The days did not drag because there was always enough to keep one occupied, however it did start to wear a bit thin. The same cannot be said for the ongoing supply of ice cream and chocolate cakes, éclairs and other delights we received from the pantry with daily regularity....even my mother was starting to become suspicious of the amounts being consumed and

went to pay a visit to Danny the cabin steward, to investigate from where we were getting all the goodies. She must have received adequate assurances because it did not have any impact on our daily consumption.

At long last Bombay and the gateway to India. First impression was dusty, dirty and smelly with a sort of heat haze that was so thick it lingered above like an umbrella, most of the day. The crowding was immediately imprinted on my brain and was only rivaled by what I encountered in China, years later. The ship was alongside the wharf at some dock complex, still there were hundreds of urchins milling about and begging. Security guards clad in khaki uniforms each with a long cane had little success in keeping them at bay and the wharf had its share of mangy “Pani Dogs” all scavenging about in packs, yelping and annoying passersby. The air one breathed seemed heavy, rather like taking a gulp of steam from a steam engine as it passes by when standing on a station platform as one is momentarily engulfed in steam or funnel fumes!

My father had been in India during his seagoing years and did venture to alert us two boys as to what we may expect, prior to our arrival. Nevertheless being so young we were not prepared for our encounters. At that age I was shocked to see the level of ‘undress’ by many of the local workers called “coolies”, milling about wharf side. Just clad in a simple loin cloth in most cases. Needless to say we did not take the opportunity to go ashore whilst in Bombay but instead spent most of the day looking at the hawkers and their wares, who had been allowed on to one of the promenade decks, to set up small stalls, obviously under the close scrutiny of the ship’s staff. We bought and bartered and bargained, well at least my parents did. I can’t remember what they purchased but figure it was more a case of buying for the sake of it, mainly to pass the time and bely the boredom.

I have to say, at a very young age my parents always tried to educate we brothers as to the “outside” world and how it ticked! For this I am eternally grateful as it prepared me for later life, especially when I embarked on a seagoing career myself.

We sailed from Bombay early evening with cheering crowds and a large brass band which could not resist playing “Rule Britannia” and other classic marching tunes – all very nostalgic and so much for my first snapshot of India, still coming to grips with nationhood following its recently acquired independence from Great Britain. During my subsequent sea going ventures in later life I had occasion to visit India on numerous occasions and discovered what a wonderful country India really is once past the crowds and squalled exterior. What diverse cultures the Indian people enjoy within their democracy.

The ship headed on a southerly course along the west coast of India but the pungent aromas and odors of the sub-continent still drifted seaward– even though we were miles offshore. These heady airs remained with us for several days at least, until we approached what was then called Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka). Our Port call at Colombo was very brief, only about 6 or 8 hours, I assume for fuel and other consumables. Having departed Colombo, it was back to the usual shipboard routine until arrival at our next destination, Penang.

The sector from Bombay to Penang interrupted only by our short call of only a few hours at Colombo was particularly depressing for me, since I no longer had my “friend” Alison on board as she had

disembarked at Bombay. She had been my constant companion. I did not even establish her family name, but I sure missed her company. In retrospect I do feel she was of perhaps mixed blood as she was a little dusky in appearance, very pretty, eyes like chocolate drops and spoke with a definite “plumb” reminiscent of most colonials of that era. In addition to which, she was very sophisticated for her age and always ultra polite to my parents

Penang is a small island laying a short distance off the Malayan peninsular in the Andaman Sea. It is in sharp contrast to the sub continent, very different indeed – far more lush, tranquil and extremely beautiful and picturesque; a true tropical delight. Our family went ashore for sightseeing and a long walk through its bustling and historic township, which took up most of the day during which I discovered the delight of drinking chilled coconut milk straight from the coconut husk, ideal for quenching ones thirst in the heat of the tropical day. My father let my brother and I try some local dishes, amongst which were Satays on wooden skewers which was very novel to us, but enjoying them immensely nevertheless, along with a mild curry served delicately on Banana leaves. This was a new experience to us both.

I was struck by the island’s outstanding scenic beauty, very friendly people and I clearly recall seeing many wonderful colonial style villas set in exquisitely landscaped and manicured gardens (still my envy of today), palm groves, Kampongs and the odd Monkey, mostly kept as pets on long chains. Our stay was all too short and soon after our return on board ship it quickly became time for our departure. We sailed early evening and as we all stood on deck the sun was dipping over the horizon, making for one of those wonderful sunsets for which the Andaman Sea is so renowned. We were southbound for Singapore.

The passage from Penang to Singapore through the Malacca Straits was relatively short and I believe we arrived in Singapore sometime late the following day.

Singapore, what a marvel – initial impression of arriving there was so exciting for a young kid. This was my first real inkling of the Orient. The hustle and bustle of Singapore Island instantly aroused my interest, even being so young at the time. Looking back I now realize what a lasting impression my first trip to Asia on the majestic “Canton” was registering upon me. It endorses the significance of how much one’s overall education is gained from outside the class room.

My dear parents had some distant friends who resided in Singapore so next day we joined them for lunch at the Raffles Hotel, even then a splendid Singapore icon. Following luncheon we took a conducted tour of the island (approximately the same size of the Isle of Wight). How different it was then compared to the Singapore of today. Most local residents usually lived in two story shop houses above their place of work and I clearly recall all the wide storm water drains and Nullahs that paralleled the streets. At that time I could not envisage living and working in the Far East as was to be my case later in life.

The place itself has expanded rapidly and is in fact remains one of the jewels of the Orient. Under the inspired leadership and guidance of modern Singapore’s late founding father and mentor, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the people of Singapore have managed to maintain their own style of culture and sophistication, having achieved a level of development which is the envy of many regional countries. At the time of my

first visit however, Singapore was still part of the fledgling Malayan Federation. It was a wonderful place and a real eye opener. The town and surrounds consisting of the two or three story shop houses, narrow streets (save for the main roads) was mostly one big China Town with a lesser number of Kampongs. It had its share of beautiful colonial residences discreetly nestled amongst the most beautiful and scenic surrounds. The few high rise buildings were concentrated on the waterfront and central business areas. There remained a significant British military presence at this time and soldiers and sailors seemed to be everywhere. Orchard Road at that time consisted chiefly of Bars catering mainly for the military, nothing like the Orchard Road of nowadays with its high-end shops and Malls.

Canton cast off from Keppel Harbor jetty and headed eastbound into the Singapore Strait. The outer anchorages as well as inside the stone breakwater were crowded with a variety of ships, large and small. Amongst all this mingled the odd sailing junk with sails flapping grasping for what they could get from the light airs. Everything was so placid and what struck me most was that the sea was literally like glass – absolutely flat calm, not even a ripple. The now familiar sweet scents of Asia were everywhere but nevertheless much sweeter and pleasant on the nose than those of India. We now sped on our way towards the Horsburgh Lighthouse which marks the eastern end of the famous Singapore Strait, which eventually opens out into the South China Sea.

The following morning we passed the mountainous Anambas Islands (distant to port) as we continued north easterly towards our final destination–Hong Kong. The trip from Singapore to Hong Kong only lasted some 4 days or so but nothing could prepare my young mind for what I was about to encounter and the significant role it would play on me for the rest of my life.

Hong Kong, sometimes dubbed “The Pearl of the Orient” was first settled by the Portuguese in 1513, which they used as a staging post for their trade with China. Hong Kong is an enclave completely surrounded by Communist China.

The Hong Kong of today originated from its colonization by the British towards the end of the Opium Wars which ended in about 1841 and Hong Kong became a fully fledged Colony in 1842. Hong Kong was founded and developed by several iconic British shipping and trading merchants who became known as the “Honges” (defined as warehouse or commercial establishment) with their respective bosses bearing the esteemed title of “Taipan” – meaning boss or big shot.

The Island of Hong Kong, together with Lantau and Stonecutters Islands was ceded to the British in perpetuity. However, in 1898 the colonizers realized they needed to expand their territory in order to make their acquisition more viable, so they negotiated an agreement with the Chinese to lease part of the Kowloon Peninsula (subsequently known as the New Territories) together with numerous other outlying Islands, for a set period of 99 years. All was encompassed within the Colony of Hong Kong, which remained intact until 1997 when sovereignty of the Colony was relinquished to China under the treaty.

Arrival in Hong Kong had been during the night. I awoke early, enjoyed breakfast then went out on deck, full of excitement. The ship was secured alongside Kowloon Wharves, just next to the Star Ferry terminal at Tsim Tsui on the Kowloon peninsula. It is an understatement to say that I was awed by the



panoramic surrounds. Most of all the busy port, consisting every conceivable size and type of vessel, dominated by Victoria Peak on the other side of the harbor, shrouded in mist with its majestic presence complete with impressive array of buildings which encroached up the mountain's lower slopes.

The Hong Kong of the 1950s bears little resemblance to the modern Hong Kong. At that time I believe the tallest building was the original "Bank of China" closely followed by the "Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank" located in what is commonly referred to today as the "Central District" of Hong Kong Island, quite close to the Supreme Court and Hong Kong Club building. Nevertheless, this was still an outstanding spectacle for that point in the Colony's development. The main mode of transport between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula was either the strictly passenger "Star Ferry" or "HYF" - Hong Kong Yamatai Ferry which carried both passengers and vehicles across the harbor, in addition to the inhabited outlying islands.

Nothing I had seen this far during our voyage could even come close to the excitement I now experienced. I do believe, even as a youngster, seeing Hong Kong for the first time stimulated something inside of me and triggering the onset of my everlasting love affair with Asia.

In so many ways I was sad to leave the "Canton" lying serenely at Kowloon Wharf, making ready for her return voyage to England. She had been our home for over a month. However, we were to maintain our relationship with the famous white Peninsula and Orient liners that plied the oceans between the UK and Hong Kong. Over the ensuing years we did one further round trip on another of their superb passenger ships, when along with my family, we returned to Britain for home leave. Airlines offering services from Hong Kong to Europe did not become common place until a good number of years later, about 1958 onwards. Even when available the early air passage was almost 2 days from Hong Kong to London, courtesy of four prop piston types and later turboprops such as the comfortable Bristol Britannia or "Whispering Giant" as it was to become affectionately known.

We eventually said our goodbyes and disembarked from the great white liner and headed straight for another well-known Hong Kong icon, the Peninsula Hotel where we were fortunate enough to be allocated rooms with a superb and unimpaired harbor view with Hong Kong Island as a back drop. These magnificent vistas have remained with me since childhood, in particular the "Junks" wallowing in the harbor, seeking a breeze, numerous cargo ships secured to the typhoon mooring buoys and at night the awesome display of lights on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula.

There are so many memories of my early years spent in Hong Kong, far too numerous to record in this short narrative. Nevertheless, most were pleasant by virtue of their nature, remembering that this was the era of the Cheung Sam, Cashmere beaded Cardigans, afternoon Tea Dances, Transistor Radios, Street Letter Writers, Rickshaws, Pigtailed, elderly Chinese ladies with bound feet and European males being widely referred to as "Gweilos" (original meaning – Foreign White Devils). Not to mention Dai Pai Dongs (street cafes) on every street corner. The 1950's ushered in the start of the defining period of Hong Kong's development and identity which spanned through to the late 1970's. This era shaped Hong Kong into the international icon it is today.

It was a cultural shock to me but it all had an electrifying kind of addiction and I always had a real sense of belonging in Hong Kong during all my many years living there. I think Hong Kong was then, and still is a unique environment in which to live, work and play. One is spellbound, excited by something new every day. There exists a great sense of adventure about the place. Hong Kong has a certain something that other major cities within the Orient lack and try to rival but are unsuccessful in their attempts to equal Hong Kong's unique qualities.

At that time, in the backstreets of Hong Kong lined with dingy shop houses with their pillars festooned all over with shop signs and ornate Chinese characters, one could still see the odd Mandarin in traditional Chinese robes complete with skull cap, pigtail, stringy beard and excessively long finger nails. Females in the main wore their drab pants suits, (mostly black or grey) straw hats and wooden clogs. Teenage Chinese girls carried their younger siblings in a hammock like arrangement on their back. Even the Amahs were adorned with their signatory hair buns or pigtails, white apron tops and black pants. The better to do Chinese ladies wore their delightful Cheungsam dresses with high collars and splits up the side. It was said, the higher the neck and longer the splits, the more affluent the wearer – true or not?

It was not uncommon to see coolies with long bamboo poles slung across their shoulders carrying over loaded baskets of goods, or indeed to catch a momentary whiff of Nga Pin (Opium) as one passed by an illegal den hidden in some narrow dark side street or back alley. Crowding was prevalent, especially in the squatter areas or Kowloon Walled City but for expats they could escape to the classier residential areas. Street markets and hawker stalls were abundant selling everything imaginable. In short the influence of mainland China imposed very significantly despite British Colonial Administration. Nonetheless, the Colony fostered a unique quality in so many ways and grasped most of whom visited Hong Kong with a magnetism influencing their desire or wish to stay or soon return. Sailing junks of all sizes frequented the harbor, many of which at that time were still active in the China coastal trades, as well as remaining the main stay of the local Hong Kong fishing fleets well into the late 1960's until replaced by purpose built wooden trawlers.

The 50s and 60s was a period for the making of popular Hollywood movies that prominently featured Hong Kong as their main theme. Soldier of Fortune, Ferry to Hong Kong, World of Suzie Wong, and Love is a Many Splendored Thing, to name but a few. My brother was engaged as an "Extra" in one of them but I can't remember which one.

Life style for expats living in Hong Kong was very comfortable and sociable and one of privilege by any standard. Of course there was the downside, the crowding, great squatter hut fire at Shek Kip Mei on Christmas Day 1953, which cleaned out the homes of 50 thousand Mainland Chinese refugees literally overnight, which in turn triggered a massive Government Resettlement Housing scheme for small low cost apartments – a huge effort. Other noteworthy occurrences during those years was several bad Typhoons which caused significant damage including the grounding and wrecking of many ships, and the serious water shortages and rationing during 1963 caused by periods of prolonged drought. This required the Hong Kong Government to charter tanker ships to import fresh water purchased from mainland China.



Riots during 1956 between Pro Communist and Chinese Nationalist supporters at time of double “10” celebrations marred Hong Kong, whilst in 1966 and 1967 rioting was again repeated – increasing dissatisfaction amongst the working population over low wages coupled with Police corruption and substandard Policing were the main causes. However, in 1966 the reported collusion by the Hong Kong Government with the Star Ferry and HYF concerning applications for substantial increases in ferry fares was the final straw which triggered the unrest. These events got somewhat out of hand over ensuing days Communist Chinese agitators took advantage to try to cause escalation and destabilize Colonial Rule. The Red Guards and so called Cultural Revolution prevalent in Communist China during the late 60s caused overspill into Hong Kong and Macau. These riots were eventually quelled by the Royal Hong Kong Police supported by the British Military and life quickly returned to normal. On the whole however, life was good for the foreign resident the majority of whom respected the local Chinese with great admiration, affection and reverence.

After about a week in the Peninsula Hotel, complete with its ornate lobby ceiling, magnificent central staircase and.... the first tiny sales kiosk for Cathay Pacific Airways situated in the main lobby, we were relocated to larger accommodations at the Miramar Hotel on the corner of Nathan Road and Kimberley Road, adjacent to the Princess Theatre. Legend has it that The Miramar is said to have been built on the site of the initial staging post for Catholic Missionaries traveling between Europe and China in a bygone era around the time of the opium wars and very early years of the Colony, it being established by the Vatican for this sole purpose. Similarly, Macau (Portuguese enclave about 40 miles to west of Hong Kong) is steeped in history also claiming Vatican connections for pilgrim Catholic Monks and Priests en-route to the Inner Kingdom during the dynasties of imperial rule.

During our ensuing years in Hong Kong the family would occasionally take a trip to Macau, either for the annual Grand Prix (very amateurish affair in those early years) or so my folks could visit the Casinos. During these visits I recall seeing herds of goats and buffalo in the main streets of Macau and when we were allowed into the Gambling Hotels with my parents, I remember standing on an upper balcony watching the gambling tables below. Unlike modern day Casinos, at that time bets were placed in wicker baskets and lowered to the staff attending the gaming tables situated on the floor below in a sort of inside court yard. Primitive security I suppose! Fan Tan seemed to be the most popular mode of betting which was a long established form of gambling in China. The Ferry that took us to and from Macau was something almost straight out of “Ferry to Hong Kong”, save it was a propeller driven vessel rather than by paddle wheels and of course missing Orson Wells as the Captain. The one way trip in those days took about 4 hours, on a good day!

About a month after we arrived in Hong Kong we shifted to a wonderful colonial villa, in Kowloon Tong, located in Somerset Road at the top end of Waterloo Road (with its central water drainage Nullah running the entire length of the road). More or less in the shadow of “Lion Rock” the foothills of which still housed thousands of squatters in their sprawling shanties. Waterloo Army camp was just across the road. The house was huge with wonderfully large shady verandahs, tall French style windows and well manicured gardens with graceful “Flame Trees” which bloomed profusely with their crimson flowers during the summer months. Kowloon Tong was a lovely quiet leafy suburb in which to reside. It was all together delightful and holds very fond memories.

We spent several memorable years in that house, and soon after we took up residence our two new family members joined us, "Ah Kwan" and "Ah Wong". The former was the cook Amah and the latter was the wash Amah and cleaner. They were to remain with our household for 15 years, until their retirement, and were both to become most revered and respected extended family members. It was a very sad day when we all said goodbye and they returned to their original homes in Canton for a well earned retirement. In fact my brother and I owe much to them for our upbringing and guidance during those former years in Hong Kong. They taught us to speak Cantonese amongst other things and rescued me from numerous indiscretions that would have undoubtedly rattled my father's saber and wrath if discovered.

At dinner parties they were very gifted and excelled by turning out the most wonderful spreads with ornate decorative carvings made from carrots, turnips and the like. My parents were always busy with their work and social calendars so my brother and I spent much time with the two "A's". Sadly, the wonderful old house was later demolished sometime in the 1970s to make way for a short time hotel, what sacrilege. I went back to visit it in later years expecting to see the elegant building but I was frankly shocked at the replacement.

After two happy summers, we moved to a very comfortable and modern ground floor apartment in Oxford Road, where we remained for a further two years. This was in the same residential area, known as Kowloon Tong in the Waterloo Road area. Actuality, leading off Lancashire Road, and just up the street from Christ Church. This area, together with Kadoorie Avenue and close by Ho Man Tin, was a favored residential area for Cathay Pacific and Pan American expatriate Pilots who were stationed in Hong Kong, (due to its ease of access to Kai Tak airport). Many friendships were forged with the aircrew and their families. I guess this was the beginning of my becoming enamored with flying. I was often taken on visits to Kai Tak Airport by the Pilots to see the planes and occasionally hitch a ride on a test flight or some such event. I enjoyed every minute of it and naturally never had to be asked twice.

In those days the Hong Kong Airport's runway did not extend to seaward but was purely a land bound affair. One of the runways crossed the Clearwater Bay Road, which required stopping traffic when the runway was active. I recall this happening when I was returning to London for holidays with the family, on a BOAC Bristol Britannia "Whispering Giant" via all points west – Bangkok, Rangoon, Karachi, Tehran, Beirut, Zurich, Frankfurt and London. A journey of almost 2 days but with an aircraft configured to all one class, relaxed and comfortable without the stress of airline security and with cabin crew who actually smiled occasionally. A far cry from today's air travel chaos and misery. In those times the airport terminal at Kai Tak consisted of a small building which was little more than a "Dairy Farm" soda fountain and when embarking or disembarking aircraft one strolled casually across the tarmac, airport security as it is today was unknown (and unnecessary to a large part) in those days. The presence of a few Royal Hong Kong Police in the area was an adequate deterrent to those of ill intent.

There were two approaches to Kai Tak, it being operational only during daylight hours, one hugging the hills under Lion Rock and the other very low over Boundary Road. Both were every much as nerve racking as the notorious "Checker Board" approach over Kowloon City into Kai Tak's single seaward runway used from about 1960 until the mid 90's. I remember well the original Kai Tak as I spent much

time there with my binoculars, Brownie camera and notebook. Equally, vivid images remain of the construction and opening of the seaward runway, the first ever night flight being made by a DC3 and if memory serves me, under the command of one of our Pilot neighbors. I believe the aircraft was operated by CPA. Night flights into Hong Kong only officially commenced in July 1959. This was a much talked about event in the colony and really kick started tourism to Hong Kong in a big way.

Whilst living in Kowloon we spent a lot of our leisure time at the USRC (United Services Recreation Club) located in Gascoigne Road, just across the road from Club de Recreo, relatively close to the Jordan area. Needless to say I spent a lot of time at the USRC. Mostly lounging around the beautiful swimming pool or eating the best lemon sponge cakes.

Our long lasting abode in Hong Kong was to be on the Peak, in actuality Mount Kellet, very close to the British Military Hospital. This remained our residence for the majority of my remaining years in Hong Kong until the late 1970s when I purchased an apartment at Taikoo Sing and later at Academic Terrace in Pok Fu Lam Road. The views from “Kellet Grove” were superlative, overlooking the Pok Fu Lam reservoir, across towards Repulse Bay and East Lamma Channel (southern approaches to Hong Kong to and from the South China Sea, passing Ap Lei Chau and Aberdeen). Access was either by car up the winding Peak Road that originated from Garden Road in the vicinity of the Botanic Gardens, close to Government House, or via Stubbs Road from the Happy Valley area via Wong Nai Chung Gap. Of course for the tourist there is always the the Peak Tramway. The Peak Tram was then, and still is, one of Hong Kong’s icons and is an absolute marvel of engineering. I think the views offered from the tram are without doubt some of the most spectacular in the world. Similarly, the Peak Café was a charming spot to sit and have a beer whilst looking over the Island scapes towards Mount Kellet.

During this period in Hong Kong my brother and I sought our entertainment mainly from the “Rediffusion” radio with ears keenly tuned to daily and weekly episodes of “Riders of the Range” and “Journey into Space”. TV was in its infancy at this time in Hong Kong, only a few hours vision per day until fulltime programming was introduced in 1956; so the term Couch Potato had yet to evolve. We also regularly visited “Diamond Music Store” to buy gramophone discs – mostly 45s, which we swapped with our friends.

We made plastic airplanes and ships bought from Eastern Model Supplies in Nathan Road or the Radar Company Model Shop situated in Austin Avenue. Both were very interesting establishments with lots to see, so many memorable hours were spent in these premises. On the other hand our worst nightmare was long shopping outings with my Mother, which we did our best to avoid, wandering around Lane Crawford, Whiteaway, Evergreen or Wing On department stores.

Our weekends were mainly family affairs with trips to the beach or launch picnics, extravagant boring Sunday lunches with friends of my parents, going to the cinema or a car ride around Hong Kong Island followed by a slap up afternoon tea at the Repulse Bay Hotel. My favorite was a Sunday morning visit to the Luk Kwok hotel for “Yum Cha” where the food was excellent. It was situated next to the “China Fleet Club” building on Gloucester Road. At that time the Luk Kwok Hotel had the reputation of being the best

place on Hong Kong Island for “Yum Cha” – hence it was always totally crowded, on Sundays in particular.

Now and then perhaps we would be taken on a day trip to Rocky Bay or Silver Strand Beach or occasionally we would be entertained by a drive to the New Territories (crossing the harbor from Hong Kong Central to Jordan Road area in Yau Ma Tei via the HYF vehicular ferry). We sometimes ventured close to the border at Lo Wu and peered across into communist China, or went to Castle Peak visiting the Dragon Inn at the 19.5 mile stone.

The New Territories were a step backwards in time from the rest of crowded Hong Kong and Kowloon. The traditional Chinese way of life was still evident, old Chinese ladies with their black outfits and straw hats, sometimes smoking long pipes. These elderly Chinese people could still be seen quite regularly throughout the 1960s, especially about the old walled villages and hamlets, working in the paddy fields or tending their water buffalo. Their faces looked so kind and were like weatherworn road maps, full of wrinkles, depicting a life of hardship and poverty. Many of these folks had come across the border from Communist China when the United Kingdom leased the New Territories. These rural activities were in sharp contrast to the sophisticated lifestyles of Kowloon Peninsula or Hong Kong Island. On the way home we generally stopped off at the Sha Tin Heights Hotel for refreshments or so my Mom and Dad could attend the afternoon tea dance.

My parents became members of various clubs which offered tennis, swimming and a variety of other sporting and social activities, so my brother and I spent much time at these venues as junior members. The LRC (Ladies Recreation Club) in mid-levels Hong Kong Island being our most frequented. We both learned to swim at the LRC under the tutorage of the well-known, BillyTingle. The late Mr. BillyTingle was both a legend and celebrity in Hong Kong and he used to conduct swimming classes on a Saturday morning at the LRC. He was very popular with the parents and adored by the kids. Tingle was an Australian and started his career as a Boxer but was interned in Shanghai during WW2. He relocated to Hong Kong in the late 1940s where he soon became renowned for his Physical Fitness and Swimming classes. I seem to recall he also used the Hong Kong Cricket Club as a venue for his other classes, but I never attended.

Soon after we arrived in Hong Kong I was enrolled in Kowloon Junior School, close to Boundary Road and co-incidentally conveniently situated right on the flight path for aircraft on approach to one of the Kai Tak runways. I enjoyed superlative views of the landing aircraft right from the class room desk! It was a major but enjoyable distraction from class activities.

There was not much choice in those days in respect of schooling, there basically being only a few “International” elementary and senior schools and a couple of others reserved for the military kids as there still remained a substantial garrison in Hong Kong. It later changed in the mid to late 1960s but in those early days of Hong Kong’s development education options were, it must be said, somewhat limited. Junior school was a breeze for me, I did exceedingly well in most subjects and regularly ranked in the top places at exam time during those early years. By the time I had progressed to 11 plus exams I was losing my edge as school was taking a very secondary place to my other interests and activities –

planes, ships and sports. I managed to scrape through the exams to grammar school and went up to King George V School at Ho Man Tin in Kowloon, where I admit to becoming a very average and unproductive student but rather an enthusiastic sportsman.

KGV was a good school with excellent facilities for its time, the only real alternative to KGV was to attending Boarding School overseas, but like most schools is only as good as the willingness of its pupils to learn. The majority of students were the offspring of British or European expats but also with a few American and a handful of overseas Chinese. Oh and a few offspring of military types (mostly Admiralty or Royal Fleet Auxiliary based in Hong Kong). The teaching staff was all expatriate and of a very high standard. I struggled academically, mainly because of my lack of application, not through lack of personal ability. I excelled at sports and at the age of 14 became Captain of 1<sup>st</sup> X1 Cricket. I believe my name is still to this day on the role of honor in the lobby of the school's main entrance. Many former pupils went on to establish distinguished careers in business, literature and the sciences. The School motto was - "Honestas Ante Honores" (honesty before glory). KGV is now a truly international school and still going strong.

My mother being a school teacher seemed to have little if any influence over my studies. Between the years of 11 and 14, I was never out of trouble with my father over my poor scholastic results. Typically, school reports used to feature comments such as "It's impossible to help this student as he is seldom here" or "This pupil knows more about the rigging of a Four Mast Sailing Ship than he does about French verbs". The sort of personal comment a teacher would not even contemplate making today. Nevertheless it was all absolutely true, I would regularly skip school and instead sit the day out at Kai Tak plane spotting or indeed by HMS Tamar Naval Dockyard, right on the Hong Kong waterfront, watching the ships sailing in and out of the harbor.

I well remember my favorite ship; she was a classical small vintage tramp that had certainly seen better days. Her cigar like funnel (usually casting out volumes of dense black smoke from her coal fired furnaces), rigid lines and counter stern with propeller blades often awash as she slowly steamed through the Harbor, captured my imagination. She was named "Juno". From later research I learned that she was lost with all hands during 1964 in the South China Sea whilst on passage from Hong Kong to Brunei. 1964 was a notoriously bad year for devastating Typhoons. Sadly she just disappeared without trace after radioing she was engulfed in a severe Typhoon. The "Juno" was an ex Australian vessel originally named "Cardross" built in 1927, and sold to Madrigal Shipping Company of the Philippines in 1955. She wasn't a very large ship, only about 1385 gross tons with a length of about 70 meters. I guess she would have been classified as a low powered steamship, even in those days, and at best I suspect producing a speed of only about 9 or 10 knots in favorable conditions. Obviously, for a small ship of those characteristics it was fraught with danger to be caught in open Ocean amid raging Typhoon conditions with little prospect of taking remedial action or outrunning the storm, such a situation could quickly become catastrophic.

Around this era of unrest in China, during the lead up to Mao's so called Cultural Revolution, it was not uncommon to see ships arriving at Hong Kong from Chinese Ports with graffiti painted on the side of the ship by Red Guards. It was politically unwise to try and remove the slogans whilst the ships remained in

China. Far better to wait until arrival at the next port of call then employ ship's crew or a side party to over paint it. It did not take much provocation, especially by foreigners to trigger conflict with the groups of Red Guards. These groups varied in size from 10 or 20 agitators up to thousands. They were very intimidating and made one feel very unsafe since it appeared there was no Law and Order amongst their ranks.

Mau's Little Red Book, this was a "gift" for all visiting the Peoples Republic of China during the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution. It was not unknown to have some shabby looking official Chinese Commissar, rant and rave in hotel lobbies or other gathering places, with quotes from the booklet. These sessions frequently lasted more than an hour and were designed to inconvenience and annoy foreigners rather than indoctrinate because few really understood, or was remotely interested, in what was being said.

I became an expert on planes and ships, being able to quote yards of factual information right off the cuff, but when it came to the school books...well there was always tomorrow. Hence in later years, I had to spend many hours of hard study to catch up just to qualify for professional examinations. Nevertheless, this was a vital part of my worldly education and unlike many other teenagers of the era in Hong Kong, I knew very early exactly in which direction I was to go in terms of career path.

Up until the age of 14 or so I had always intended to be an airline pilot (I later did learn to fly and have gone on to log a noteworthy number of flying hours over the years) but a close friend had just been accepted into one of the principal nautical colleges in the UK. His stories, letters and photos of what it was like and the exciting career opportunities offered in the Merchant Navy stimulated a profound influence in my thinking at that point in my life and consequently it started to fire up and stoke my imagination. Hence in later life – flying became my passion but seafaring my bread and butter!

It is also true to say that whilst at grammar school a few pals had close family connections with the sea which also impacted hugely on my nautical aspirations. One close chum, his father was Master of the "Canada Fir", a tramp ship that was Hong Kong owned and based; another pal's father was Master of a ship belonging to one of the principal Hong Kong shipping conglomerates; whilst yet another was Danish who I accompanied when visiting a very smart cargo ship, the "Michael Jebsen", engaged in Asian regional trades; his father was Captain. Finally, there was my closest friend whose old man was Engineer Superintendent for a large Dutch shipping company that had many vessels frequently calling Hong Kong – needless to say at weekends I was often found in mid harbor aboard one of their ships, by invitation of course. This was not to mention various other school friends whose parents had nautical connections, such as Shipyards or through large trading firms.

It was not unexpected therefore, that my career preference started to progressively deviate away from aviation and begin to focus more towards one in the Merchant Navy.

I approached my father about this change of heart; he hit the roof and did his best to talk me out of it. The more he tried, the more determined I became. Eventually after some 4 or 5 months he finally agreed to send me to the same nautical college as my pal in the UK (if I could pass the entrance examination that is...and was accepted). My course had now been set and from that juncture onwards I



studied much more diligently and eventually passed the entrance examinations into the nautical establishment, although I still made time for my other social activities.

My father was happy because he had put pay to my notions to sign on some Panamanian Tramp Steamer as a Cadet, but rather, had reached a compromise, as he put it....sending me to sea well equipped and in the correct way. I respected my father for his change of heart and foresight. So without delay I went off to the Hong Kong Marine Department at Kennedy Town Praya for my mandatory Sight Test and Lantern Test (vision requirements needed to be verified as color blindness ruled out Merchant Navy entrants for Deck Officer Cadets). The accompanying Medical Examination was also very comprehensive.

Eventually that magical day came for me to depart Hong Kong and to fly to the UK to receive my nautical training. I boarded the shining BOAC Comet 4 airliner (yes progress had been made by this time from turboprop to pure jet). We took off on the newly constructed seaward protruding runway and I was in London only 24 hrs later. Little did I realize for the next few years it was the end of my comfortable and privileged life style? Future life at nautical college became something of a shock to my system and sometimes difficult to endure.

So, I had cast my future path in life. I joined the Merchant Navy and progressively rose through the ranks until finally becoming Master. I enjoyed the way of life, the adventure and excitement experienced; especially because in keeping with my ambitions I spent most of my seagoing career in the Asia region. I continued to reside in Hong Kong until the mid 1990s when I sold up and relocated to Australia. The only reason for making this decision was the political unrest and uncertainty that hung over Hong Kong, resulting from the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989.

In retrospect, I do not regret any of my decisions in life. The only disappointment I experience is that I am no longer a resident in Hong Kong. My continued passion for Hong Kong is never-ending. I miss the daily excitement of living there and the unique working environment, but have to do with regular visits. Needless, to say, Hong Kong continues in its passage of change and is a far cry from the Hong Kong I once knew as a former resident.

