Simon Roberts joined the Royal Hong Kong Police in 1979 and continued to serve in the renamed Hong Kong Police after the handover in 1997.

During his twenty-two years of service he worked in different departments all over the Territory. These included district crime and anti-triad squads, vice squads, Operational Command, Crime HQ, Crime Prevention, Marine, and even as a court prosecutor. During his time in Hong Kong he kept a diary and was a prodigious letter writer. He still has many of the early letters which, together with accumulated official documents, form the backbone of this book.

Simon was promoted to detective superintendent ten days before the handover. He resigned in 2002 to take up a role in the private sector, and was presented with a valedictory letter for meritorious service from the police commissioner. He is a lifetime member of the Royal Hong Kong Police Association.

Simon continues to work in the security industry and is married with two children. He now lives in England.

HONG KONG BEAT

True stories from one of the last British police officers in colonial Hong Kong

Simon Roberts

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

HONG KONG BEAT

ISBN 978-988-77928-1-9 (paperback)

Cover design and graphics by Daniel Tiller
www.mynameisdan.co.uk

Published by Blacksmith Books
Unit 26, 19/F, Block B, Wah Lok Industrial Centre,
31–35 Shan Mei St, Fo Tan, Hong Kong
www.blacksmithbooks.com

Typeset in Adobe Garamond by Alan Sargent
Printed in Hong Kong

First printing 2021

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my brother Richard for help with photographs, and my wife Elizabeth for having such patience whilst I locked myself away writing this.

This is dedicated to my children Isabella and Henry, and my great-grandfather Joseph Roberts, the first of my family to visit Asia.

All the author's royalties from the sale of this book will be donated to the Hong Kong Police Welfare Fund.

TRIADBUSTER

Mong Kok is a seething grimy hotbed of vice, teeming with prostitutes, gambling dens, drug dealers and illegal immigrants.

Simon Roberts could be just another yuppie as he hovers outside the betting club in a seedy Hong Kong back street. Beneath the garish neon signs his business suit is immaculate, his hair neatly groomed, and his air of contented affluence contrasts strongly with the worn faces of the Chinese workers scurrying around him. Suddenly the steamy night explodes in a shower of glass and crashing debris and Simon springs into action. Gripping his Colt .38 Detective Special revolver he dashes into the betting club to help the latest victims in Hong Kong's battle of the gangland triads. The bomb is a warning for refusing to pay protection money and a second blast is threatened, but Simon is used to life on the edge.

This was how the *Sunday People* newspaper reported my life in CID in Kowloon in 1990, in a double-page full-colour spread supposedly on the real life of the Hong Kong Police.

Sadly it was all complete bollocks.

But the truth was just as interesting.

FOREWORD

I NEVER EXPECTED TO STAY in the Royal Hong Kong Police Force for twenty-two years. Like many of my compatriots I went out looking for a short-term adventure and ended up having a long-term career. I am often asked now: 'What was it like?' And many people assume that I had already been in the police beforehand, or that I had family living in Hong Kong. But the truth is I was single, I was aged twenty-one and I had nothing to lose. I have met many men around my age who say that they were thinking of joining the Hong Kong Police but didn't. Many then added that they now wish they had. In the 1950s there were still plenty of foreign colonial posts for young men from Britain. By the 1970s Hong Kong was one of the last opportunities to become a member of Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service.

From a young age I wanted to see the world and I wanted to do something interesting. Without a skill or a university education, I had to be realistic with my ambition. My opportunities were limited. But leaving 1970s Britain was my goal. Having managed to escape to Hong Kong I almost blew it by messing up my initial police exams. When I survived that early scare I decided to make the most of my opportunity in every way.

Why the Royal Hong Kong Police? Well, my great-grandfather Joseph had left home in Ireland as a teenager and joined the army. He served in Afghanistan in 1879 and later became a policeman in Liverpool. My grandfather Cecil ran away from home aged fourteen to join the army; he was only five feet tall at the time according to army records. He fought in the First World War from the Expeditionary Force in 1914 to the Battle of the Somme in 1916. My father Alec fought in the Second World War and landed in Normandy during the final offensive against the Nazis. So I guess there was always an adventurous spirit in my blood.

I did not have any objective in Hong Kong other than to enjoy life and make the most of it. I met guys who said they had five-year plans. I never even had a one-week plan, yet somehow I thrived. I've never met anyone who ended up doing what they had planned when they left school. I never manufactured opportunities and I went where I was posted. This resulted in me working for the police on land and at sea, in Kowloon and the New Territories, in uniform and CID, and in different staff postings in police headquarters.

Shortly after leaving the force in early 2002 I started to make notes about my experiences. From time to time I would recall a humorous incident and write it down. These notes grew over about ten years. Then one day, when visiting my cousin Alan, he handed me a folder with more than twenty letters I had written in the first few months when I was still at the police training school. I enjoyed reading these letters from thirty years ago. More memories came flooding back. I then remembered I had still kept letters that family and friends had sent to me in the 1980s and I re-read those too. More stories came to mind and I continuously added to my notes. These still sat idly in a folder until I finally decided to get my laptop out and try to make some sense of the assorted anecdotes. I started thinking that I had enough material to put together a story for my children and grandchildren. By the time I was finishing I thought it might make an interesting memoir. I hope I was right.

CHAPTER I

West Country Boy

SUMMERTIME IN ENGLAND lasts forever when you are eleven years old. I lay on my back in a farmer's field full of golden barley under a blazing August sun. It was the school holidays and it was my idea of paradise. I lay down hidden from view, listening to the skylarks up above me, and watching a small single-propeller RAF training plane. The pilot was flying with a display of aerobatics among the small puffy clouds in a bright blue sky. I watched it as I squinted through the sunlight, the plane high overhead doing loop-the-loop in my own private air show. Summer happiness, a very bearable lightness of being. The stress of school exams and of adulthood seemed a long way off.

This idyllic view of the world though did not last long. A year later my father lost his job as an electrical shop manager at the age of forty-nine. He spent several months unemployed and then struggled to re-establish himself when he started up a new insurance business. He had been a soldier in the Signals Regiment in World War II and had few skills other than a great work ethic. There were three children and a wife to support. It was the 1970s and we lived in the West Midlands. This was the time of Prime Minister Callaghan, strikes, picket lines, scabs, the three-day week, and large-scale unemployment. As a teenager I looked out of my bedroom window at the row of grey semi-detached houses opposite and dreamed of exotic faraway places. The wet and windy caravan holidays in bleak Welsh fields that we took every year did not inspire any glee or optimism in me. My family were struggling financially, and a university education was never even discussed. We had enough food on the table, but foreign travel was a dream.

I often resorted to fantasising about a life far away from the dull beige English suburbia.

When the sun is shining and you have money in your pocket, most places look good. In the countryside, in summer, Britain is one of the most beautiful places on earth. I had a racing bicycle with five gears that I earned for passing my '11 Plus' exams and getting into a grammar school. I loved riding for miles down country lanes, peering over hedgerows, watching rabbits and foxes in the fields, and seeing lapwings flying overhead. I fished without a licence in canals and ponds; I often stayed out all day from a young age. My mother never expressed concern about where I'd been. When I was fourteen years old I took on a paper round. I got up at 6am every morning in all weather and rode to the newsagents and filled my huge orange nylon bag with newspapers. I would try to finish before 8am to grab a bowl of cornflakes before changing into my school uniform and walking to school. When I started I earned less than £1 per week. At weekends I would often run out to see who wanted to play a game of football. There were not many reasons to stay at home. Children's TV consisted of *Blue Peter* with a dog called Shep, *Muffin the Mule* was still on TV, and was not yet considered a sexual offence. We did not have PlayStations, smartphones or laptops. Kids my age played outside. We put jumpers down for goalposts and off we went. If we did not have enough friends for a makeshift game, we would play three-and-in.

Mum had once been a fashion model and she never liked to cook. She told us this frequently. This meant she successfully avoided it. Before the invention of the microwave oven and ready meals, a boil-in-the-bag Vesta instant meal was considered a modern sophisticated delicacy. I was never convinced by the so-called meat in them which always tasted synthetic to me. We never ate out. We were too poor to have Corona soda pop delivered; I drank tap water and sometimes orange squash.

No one took drugs, except in London apparently, where LSD was fashionable. Going on a trip to us still meant getting on a bus. The most exciting thing in my early life was probably punk rock. I saw the Sex Pistols live in concert in a tiny disco in my small home town in 1977. I was up on the balcony jumping up and down with the

other punks, I thought it was going to collapse. I saw Sid Vicious smash his guitar over a fan's head because he was spitting. I watched as the ambulance men carried the fan out on a stretcher, his head pouring blood as the concert continued.

After failing almost everything at grammar school I had to retake a number of my secondary school exams and try again. I scraped some 'O'-levels together and with no support, and no ideas what I wanted to do, I entered the job market. There was still a depression. Trade unions seemed to rule the country. British Leyland could not make a car that people actually wanted to buy. The TV was full of stories of scabs, unrest and factory closures. The country was in transition. Heavy industry was under attack from abroad. The coal mines were closing. Shipbuilding was failing. Our steel was too expensive. Unemployment was at record levels. Against this cheery atmosphere, yours truly trudged to the job centre. I was not optimistic.

After a few weeks of this I met Adam. He was a pipe-smoking, balding chap in his late thirties. He was from a local water-supply company; he must have felt sorry for me because he offered me a job as a management trainee. I studied on day-release and obtained a few basic qualifications. I was sent on some training courses including one in a completely new field called 'Health and Safety'. We also had a department called 'Work Study' which was supposed to examine ways to make people work better and more efficiently. It was remarkable that in a company of only 400 people we had a team of six 'work-study officers'. It seemed many of them were counting the days until they were sixty-five and could retire. Most of my co-workers seemed to have a three-bed semi-detached house; a wife called Brenda, two kids, and drove an Austin Maxi. They had miserable caravan holidays in Wales and on weekends went fishing.

I looked at them and saw my future. I watched them opening up their Tupperware boxes lovingly packed by Brenda with the triangular pieces of Wonder loaf, processed ham, plastic cheese, and a digestive biscuit. All washed down with instant coffee from a

thermos flask. I watched them, and I made a vow. I would never follow the same path.

If I went out with Graham from Health and Safety, we would plan our day using a large folding route map to organise our schedule. We would pack a lunch, and if it was summer, perhaps a bottle of his home-made elderberry wine. We would make our way out to various pumping stations and conduct our audits. We would have to include sewerage stations too with the smells, toilet paper, and condoms. The occasional foetus too, although fortunately not witnessed by me. The idea was to finish as early in the day as possible. Then retire to a local beauty spot. Preferably somewhere near a lake or river. There we would open the doors of his beige Austin Maxi, stretch out with our impromptu picnic and listen to a cricket match on the radio. It always seemed to be England against the West Indies in the 1970s. The best part of the working life then was that there were no mobile phones. Once I was out of the office there was no way anyone could reach me until I went back the following day.

I earned a salary, so I was paid monthly. The money went into my bank account rather than cash in hand. This was posh. I earned £180 per month after tax. I took my driving test. My father had taught me. I took my test in his Ford Cortina estate. It was quite a large car to take a driving test in. It was like a smaller version of a 1970s American design, and had an odd dashboard with a deep-set speedometer which could not be seen by the passenger. I did forty mph in a thirty limit during the test and the examiner had no idea. I passed. I bought myself my first car, a nine-year-old blue Austin Mini, for £175. I loved it. Every time I drove it, it was flat-out. I never knew a standard Austin Mini could go so fast. I could fill the tank with £4 of petrol. Ah! freedom. Freedom to go to concerts, freedom to go to football games, and freedom to chase girls.

Off to town on a Friday night. The local disco. Abba's *Dancing Queen,* how I hated that song. I would join the lads leaning against the wall watching the girls dancing round their handbags. Seeing if one of us would 'pull'. Lager was new and fashionable. A pint of Carling Black Label, or Harp, was cool. Everyone was smoking. I tried menthol cigarettes, and tried not to cough. It didn't work so

I ended up blowing more smoke out than ever went in my mouth. I ended up standing in my own private little smoke screen. If I tried to chat a girl up, they couldn't see who was talking to them. The plan was always to have a few pints of lager to build up some Dutch courage and perhaps buy a few shandies for a girl I fancied. But even better was when they bought their own. Hopefully my best friend Carl and I could offer a couple of them a lift home. Nothing ever seemed to happen though. Even when we did manage to entice a girl into the car they only wanted a free taxi service.

One night I was out with my cousin Alan. We were in Mr Pews, a small nightclub that we thought was the height of sophistication. I met a girl called Kate. She was from Wales, blonde, with cute dimples. Welsh girls are sexy. Kate had had a boyfriend before, she knew what to do. Perfect. The back of a Mini requires extreme dexterity which even my lithe eighteen-year-old frame struggled with. I needed a different car. I went to check out some alternative models. My father came to help me. Whilst he peered in the engine, I checked out the seats. I found that a Fiat 124 although being one of the ugliest cars in the world, had seats that, unlike the Mini, reclined completely flat. Clever Italians. A small lever flicked up and 'blam', the seat was instantly a flat bed. Perfect. I used to scout around for quiet country lanes and lay-bys. Once after an evening at Mr Pews and a few drinks, Kate and I ended up in the early hours of the morning at the edge of a farmer's field. It had been raining. I had driven in, and switched the engine off, carefully applying the hand brake. Confidently flicking the lever, Kate was flat on her back, and I threw myself on top of her. It's amazing how much stamina you have when you're eighteen.

Sometime later we thought it might be time to make our way home. But we had a serious problem. With our vigorous exercise, and the chassis' vibrations, the wheels had sunk into the soft earth. The car was front-wheel drive. The more I tried to reverse out the deeper the wheels sunk into the mud. We considered our options. We realised we just had to sit it out. After about an hour, we saw a car's headlamps over the hedgerows. I went out into the country lane to wave it down. The car was full of local young farmers on their way back from an institute piss-up. They saw Kate in a little

white lacy mini-dress and were all too eager to help. They quickly pushed us out of the field but unfortunately I revved too hard, and much of the damp earth sprayed up over their best going-out clothes. I felt bad seeing them standing there splattered with mud. But I gave them a cheery wave as I shouted 'thanks chaps' and we were on our way at last. It was then that Kate realised her panties had been lying on the back seat all along.

My semi-retired colleague Gerald Brookes had a caravan in West Wales. Gerald was an ex-police superintendent from the West Mercia Constabulary. He was a great guy, and he taught me a lot about life. After leaving the police he took a part-time job with the water authority taking samples from rivers and reservoirs. He told me he wanted some help with his caravan maintenance. In return he offered it to me free for a weekend.

Kate and I packed our bags, stocked up on groceries and off we went to the Welsh coast. I can't remember the weather. We did not emerge from the van for forty-eight hours. It was a tiny two-berth caravan. I was nineteen years old now and getting more experienced. I eventually opened the door two days later, pale and skinny and blinking in the sudden blaze of sunlight. I noticed that a young family had moved into the caravan next to us. The husband and wife were standing outside, they simply stared at me silently. I blinked again, smiled, went back inside and closed the door.

Around this time, the BBC started broadcasting a new TV show about the Hong Kong Police. It had a mesmerising theme tune written by Richard Denton and Martin Cook. The scenes were from another world. Young British men were sweating in green uniforms and Sam Browne belts carrying revolvers and trying to enforce law and order in crazy rat-infested concrete high-rises and shanty towns. I made sure I was home every week to watch it. What a life! Guns, girls, and travel. I cannot remember ever thinking it was something I could really do. But one year later I saw an advertisement in the colour supplement of the *Sunday Observer.* A full-page advertisement. It featured a photo of a British police inspector in uniform in a street full of neon signs with Chinese characters. Underneath it said 'Be a leader. Be an Inspector in the

Royal Hong Kong Police'. I looked at the picture and re-read the advertisement. I thought to myself, why not?

I never told my parents. In fact I never told anyone, not even Kate. I went for two interviews. The first one was in Manchester and was rather comical. I'm sure they only wanted to see if I had two arms and two legs and could string a couple of sentences together. I remember them asking me: 'Do you have a problem carrying a gun?' I said I didn't. They then added: 'And what about shooting someone?' I replied: 'If it was necessary then I would be able to do so.' The answers must have been okay as I was invited down to Hong Kong House in Grafton Street, central London for a second interview. Before attending I was told to have a medical in Harley Street. It was the first and probably last time I would ever be able to attend a medical appointment in Harley Street. A very posh doctor wearing a striped shirt and bow tie told me to strip, and then with his hand over my crown jewels he told me to cough.

I then made my way to Hong Kong House in London for my interview. There were about twenty of us, and everyone looked pretty nervous. A Scottish lad asked a couple of questions. We all seemed to be white, male, young, and mostly from similar backgrounds. Generally we were the standard grammar-school boy. We were shown black and white news-reel footage of Hong Kong. We were told it was hot, humid, and rained all the time. We were fed sandwiches, there was even free beer but I didn't see anyone touch any. We were then called individually for interviews, with a board of three interrogators. I don't recall it being too taxing though. There were no aptitude tests. As I walked out of the room one of the interviewers followed me out and asked: 'Could you be ready to fly out in two months?'

They must have been desperate.

CHAPTER II

Escape to Hong Kong

I LOOKED OUT OF THE WINDOW and saw guards in green fatigues waving AK-47 machine guns. The air stewardesses walked up the aisle spraying us with insecticide to kill the mosquitoes. I knew then that I was already far away from home. The previous day I had boarded a British Airways Boeing 747 at London Heathrow Airport with a small group of prospective police inspectors. We had already stopped over in Frankfurt, and Bahrain, and were now in Calcutta. We had been in the plane for seventeen hours. England felt a long distance away.

The previous day, a damp cold morning in 1979, my father had driven me in his beige Ford Cortina to the nearest train station ten miles away from our house to see me off. My younger brother Richard had come along too. He was looking forward to moving into my bedroom. My mother and sister stayed at home. My mother seemed to be upset I was leaving, she actually cried. I suspected though that as they now had the perfect nuclear family of one son and one daughter they would be secretly pleased at the new-found space in their three-bedroom house. I carried a battered soft brown plastic suitcase which had belonged to Edith Roberts, my grandmother. She had always been kind to me. Looking back now at my original passport, which registered currency movements in the 1970s, I had £200 in my possession. This was basically my entire worldly wealth after emptying my Lloyds Bank account. I had no other assets. I had written off the little Fiat 124 a few months earlier by skidding off a country lane on black ice in the early hours of the morning. I had been going round a bend too quickly and had gone off the corner, through a hedge and hit a telegraph pole.

The pole had split the car like it was peeling a banana skin. Somehow I got out unscathed. When I climbed back through the hedge and stepped onto the road I fell flat on my back. The road was an ice rink.

So with my grandmother's old brown suitcase, my worldly belongings, and my £200, I made my way south on the train to London Euston and then over to Heathrow. The ticket cost the equivalent of about four months of an average UK wage. The flight stopped three times and took twenty-four hours to arrive at Hong Kong. There was one inflight movie shown on a small drop-down screen on the ceiling, and we were given pink plastic earphones that looked like a stethoscope. Not familiar with airline seating arrangements I was squashed into a middle seat between two other future inspectors. I tried to make myself comfortable but did not sleep much on the flight.

Having escaped from Calcutta unscathed, we eventually approached Hong Kong to great excitement. Although the skyscrapers then were no match for those today, it was still a spectacular skyline. So with Hong Kong Island and the Peak to our right and the New Territories and China on our left, we approached the chequerboard and Kai Tak. We were coming in over Kowloon City, and then after almost removing the laundry on Mrs Wong's washing line we banked sharply down onto one of the most interesting landings in civil aviation. Kai Tak Airport: mention it to one of the older commercial pilots and they become misty eyed. Pilots loved it because it was a real test of their flying skills and required extreme concentration to execute correctly. Our flight captain must have been an old China hand as our landing was smooth and stress free, unlike many of the ones you can view on YouTube. Then it hit us. Phew!, the stench of the infamous 'Kai Tak nullah'. These are the storm drains which washed excess water and raw sewage out to sea. We all looked at each other and wondered who had broken wind. Welcome to Hong Kong!

CHAPTER III

Police Training School

My heirloom suitcase was safely retrieved from the luggage carousel and I made my way through immigration to be met by Chief Inspector Roy, who we later rather unimaginatively nicknamed 'Uncle Roy'. Roy was perhaps in his early forties but to us he was ancient. He was of rather slight build and had a quiff of dark grey hair. He was pleasant enough and herded all of us onto a dark blue police bus. The weather was dull, it had been raining, the buildings looked drab and grey, my first impressions were not exactly positive. To make things worse the bus was not air conditioned and I quickly realised the air quality was not equivalent to the English countryside. We were heading for Wong Chuk Hang near Aberdeen on the south side of Hong Kong Island. When I had received my appointment letter it had mentioned nine months training in 'Aberdeen'. That's not bad, I thought. I could still get the train home from Scotland at weekends before I fly out to Hong Kong!

From Kowloon, we made our way to the Cross-Harbour Tunnel which was still fairly new and charged a HK$5 toll. As we swept down into the tunnel I started to gasp – the windows were open and the bus quickly filled with diesel fumes. I tried holding my breath. With my lungs almost bursting, we emerged at last on Hong Kong Island. The scenery seemed better, the air felt cleaner, and the sun came out. As we made our way past Happy Valley I started to feel better.

At last we entered the gates of the Police Training School which was to be our home for the next nine months. The PTS looked very inviting with its pristine white buildings, green lawns and trees. We

de-bussed and collected our meagre belongings. We were fourteen young men all fairly fit, but all with pasty white skin and looking rather nervous. At the time I joined, recruitment of expat probationary police was male only. A few years earlier female expat inspectors had been recruited, but due to very high pregnancy rates in the first year of appointment it was decided that the welfare cost to the force was too high.

We were led to 'J-Block', a white concrete single-storey building near the middle of the school. Inside it was a large dormitory with tiled floors and whitewashed walls. There was a row of beds on facing sides with grey metal lockers, and a pedestal fan next to each bed. Fortunately I had no notions of what to expect so was not disappointed. I opened my steel locker, and pulled out some wire hangers and switched on the pedestal fan. It was late October but still over 20°C and a lot warmer than in the UK. I put my battered suitcase on the bed and laid it over the grey blanket. I started pulling my worldly goods out and placing a few shirts on the wire hangers. Suddenly Uncle Roy came into the room and shouted: 'Everyone in the officers' mess in five minutes!' I briefly mumbled that we might be allowed a shower and a change of clothes after the twenty-four-hour flight, but was rebuffed and told, 'No – immediately. Commandant's orders!'

A few months before there had been a front-page story in the English national papers about a new inspector having his arm broken in an initiation ceremony that went wrong. Apparently the initiations involved taking the guys straight off the bus and putting them through obstacle courses or waking them in the middle of the night for drill practice. They were very imaginative, and one of the senior squad had once dressed up as a priest and led the new joiners in prayers whilst walking around the mess in a kind of midnight mass. However since the incident of the chap having his arm broken, things had become rather more muted.

When we walked into the mess the commandant was nowhere to be seen. Instead we were greeted by the squad above us at the bar, and handed glasses of cold San Miguel beer. Being tired and

thirsty and still only twenty-one years old I did not mind being given a glass of beer, so I gratefully accepted and we introduced ourselves. The mess was clean and spacious with ceiling fans and lots of police plaques and of course a large framed portrait of the Queen on the wall. Outside there was a pleasant terrace with flowering trees of bougainvillea offering shade and familiar Union flags. Someone put a cassette tape of Steely Dan's *Haitian Divorce* in the stereo, the music played and the beers flowed, and somehow we all ended up in the red-light district of Wan Chai. The objective of the senior squad was to get the newcomers so drunk they would end the evening getting a tattoo. These were usually in Ricky's tattoo parlour near Lockhart Road. We lurched from bar to bar through the red velvet curtains of the girly bars in an alcoholic haze. It seemed a long way from the Welsh border counties.

On the Monday morning we were issued our kit and training uniforms which initially consisted of green shirts, white webbing belts, and short trousers with long socks and black leather shoes. The police uniform then was green in summer and dark blue in winter. We were introduced to our 'room boy' – a small plump jolly chap called Ah Wong. He would do our laundry and shine our shoes for a fixed sum each month. We were also required to swear allegiance to the Queen. This was done individually as we were called in alphabetical order into the commandant's office. He was a handsome fellow called Peter Webb who drove a beautiful old open-top MGA sports car. He also kept two little white Yorkshire terriers. Whenever I was in his office they would run around yapping and trying to nip my ankle. I suspected he had trained them to do this. We were given a Bible to hold and had to stand to attention and read off a card that we would solemnly and faithfully serve the Queen, country, and colony. In doing so I officially joined the other 660 or so expat police officers in the force at the time.

In the mess all food and drinks were signed for with chits and we settled the bill at the end of the month. Although my starting salary was only slightly more than I had earned in the UK, the top rate of tax in HK was 15 per cent so it seemed okay as long as I did not overdo the San Miguel or the jaunts to Wan Chai.

There was a small branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC) in PTS. We were all led there to open bank accounts so that our salary could be paid directly into them. My starting salary was HK$3,300 per month. Another requirement for the new trainees was to get the dreaded PTS haircut. I had anticipated a short-back-and-sides and had my hair cut short before leaving the UK. However the sight of the Chinese PTS 'barbers' sent a chill through all of us when we lined up for the electric razor shearing we would be receiving. The barbers looked as if they were heroin addicts in rehab. I watched to see if any of them displayed a modicum of ability. But sadly the uniform result was the brutal removal of any style we once had.

We had to train for longer than local recruits as the first eight weeks was devoted to learning Cantonese full time. This was in a language lab where we listened to cassette tapes whilst wearing headphones and repeating phrases ad nauseam. I found it mind numbing. One of our teachers was a middle-aged man surnamed Lee. He told us with absolute authority that there were no Chinese homosexuals. He said it was a Western disease. He also insisted that pornography was non-existent in Chinese society and again this was an unwelcome Western import. We soon found out neither of these statements were correct, but we were all too exhausted after nine hours of daily language lessons to argue. Cantonese is a very difficult language, and I had had problems even learning French. I discovered that as a white Caucasian male I would be forever known as a *'gwailo'.* This translates literally as 'ghost man'. It was not meant to be complimentary but all the expats simply adopted it, and used it themselves so it lost any derogatory connotation. We did not study Chinese characters so we wrote the Chinese words phonetically; for example, *'gai'*, meaning 'street'. However, said with a different tone it could also mean 'chicken' or 'prostitute', with obvious humorous results.

I somehow passed the oral Cantonese exam in front of an exam board in Mid-Levels. Our week in PTS was Monday to Saturday with a parade in our PE kit of T-shirt, shorts and plimsolls at 8am. We had Sunday off, if we did not transgress any disciplinary issues and have gate-guard duty.

Once we had survived the language lessons we were introduced to our local colleagues and placed into squads. We had three squads each with twelve inspectors, both local and expat probationary inspectors. We had two female inspectors in my squad. My course instructor was Roy, the chief inspector who had met us at the airport. Roy was actually a pleasant chap who did later help me a lot with my exams for which I am still very grateful. He drove a Triumph Spitfire which was pretty cool, and talked about his 'girlfriend' who turned out to be a stern woman of a certain age who reminded me of a school matron. It became clear to me during classes that our local counterparts were extremely hard working and very ambitious and not very impressed with their lazy, cheeky, hard-drinking British colleagues. They also did not like the attention we were paying to the pretty young local female inspectors.

I started to find the course very tough. I could handle the drill, and my fitness was good. In the UK I had played rugby, and each evening ran three miles after work. I could handle the weapons, and my leadership was okay. The written exams though were brutal. We had 'fortnightlys'; these were essay-style three-hour exams every two weeks. These were split into the junior, intermediate, and senior stage, and finally level one in our training. We had exams in criminal law, traffic law, gambling and vice, and Police General Orders. Considering there was an enormous amount of studying in only fourteen days from a very large syllabus it's not surprising that people failed. When I say 'people' failed, what I mean is that mostly the British guys failed. Our local colleagues would lock themselves in their rooms and study until 2am whilst we would be drinking in the mess and cramming the night before. Eventually the pressure started to tell. One by one the British lads started failing, getting homesick, getting fed up with the long hours and the discipline. Resignations started. Before we were at the halfway stage of the training three of our original intake had left. It was pretty sad to see them go. I think we all reflected on our own choices when we watched them board the bus to the airport. I failed an exam and received a warning. It was time for me to take stock. Did I really want to return to the UK? I decided I did not. It was time for me to buckle down and start taking things more seriously.

The Royal Hong Kong Police (RHKP) in the 1970s was already a paramilitary force. Early in our training we were introduced to a range of weapons. At the time, only the male officers carried firearms. The secure armoury still had the old World War II Sten gun, similar to the one carried by my father in Normandy in 1944. I tried it, it was a pig to fire, the rounds went everywhere except at the target. The Federal Riot Gun was a useful weapon for firing gas canisters or rubber bullets during riots; in training we fired traditional shotgun pellet rounds. I loved the American AR-15. This is the semi-automatic variant of the M16. Pop, pop, pop, hardly any recoil, 150 metres all rounds in a tiny group in the middle of the target, it wasn't hard with such a firearm. We spent most time with hand guns: .38 calibre Smith & Wesson and Colt revolvers. They were easy, straightforward, and simple; they were tough and hardly ever jammed. They were in use for decades before the force started moving to automatics. The revolvers were effective at close range but did not have much stopping power with the original round. We practised on the range standing up, prone, kneeling, and firing behind various objects. The main problem with a .38 revolver is that it only holds six rounds, so in later years, officers were issued with speed-loaders which held an additional six rounds. The other improvement was the introduction of more powerful hollow-point rounds. This was after several cases of violent criminals being hit by the original rounds and still managing to run away, which was rather embarrassing.

There was an 'outward bound' area at PTS on which we had to crawl through trenches, swing on ropes, and climb over walls. There was also a gas chamber. The force was well equipped for dealing with disturbances. The colony had been rocked by a serious disturbance in 1967 sparked by the Cultural Revolution in China. There had been exchanges of automatic weapons fire over the border and bombings as well as daily riots and protests against the British rule. The police had handled the situation well and had been widely praised. This was recognised by the Queen when in 1969 the Hong Kong Police was granted the 'Royal' prefix.

We also had a fully trained and well equipped Police Tactical Unit (PTU) stationed up near Fanling in the New Territories which

was on standby around the clock. One of the items kept in all police armouries was CS gas. This was usually fired in canisters from a Remington shotgun during public order disturbances. Some of the more sadistic staff felt that it was important that as new recruits we should know what CS gas felt like. So we were ordered into a pitch-dark smoke chamber wearing ancient and rather useless old rubber gas masks. When in the middle of the smoke chamber we were ordered to remove the gas masks for a few seconds. The gas attacked our nasal passage, our eyes and even our skin. The burning sensation and sense of asphyxiation was unbearable. I stumbled and crawled out the other end of the chamber on all fours coughing and sweating, blinded by the gas. One of our local colleagues collapsed unconscious and had to be rushed to hospital. It took me about two hours of washing and rinsing my face and arms with cold water to partially recover from the ordeal. We were also required to fire guns but we weren't required to be shot to know what it felt like.

I usually enjoyed the firearms training. Over the nine months I fired over 300 rounds of .38 ammunition and became a fairly good shot. Even when it gradually became more difficult, firing from a longer distance, and having to fire from the side of different objects, I was able to pass the training and tests. The range course training all passed uneventfully except on two occasions. Once, one of our older British inspectors called Rupert, a former army officer and then thirty years old, decided that it would be funny to drop a live round of ammunition down the shirt of one of our trainee female officers. Many hours later at around midnight, we were still on the range, now in pitch darkness, on our hands and knees trying to find the missing bullet. We all reflected then that somehow it didn't seem quite so funny.

On another occasion, our young Scottish inspector who had struggled with his Cantonese was ordered to run down a small incline on the range, address the target with: 'Stop, don't move or I will shoot' in Chinese, and then fire off two rounds. Everyone else managed to do this without incident. But Jock became increasingly flustered with speaking the warning, and he forgot everything else. When it was his turn, he immediately drew his revolver with six

live rounds, and ran down the small incline as if he was being chased by a lion while waving his revolver wildly, causing all of us to dive for cover. He slid to a halt, emptied his revolver in a burst of gunfire and then shouted: 'I shoot, stop, caution.' We all rather mercilessly fell about laughing, whilst the poor chap stood embarrassed hoping the ground would swallow him up.

As the new intake we had to be 'dined in' to the officers' mess. We had to purchase mess kits made-to-measure by a force's tailor. These consisted of a short white jacket, black piped trousers, white shirt, black bow tie, and smartly polished black dress shoes. I still have a group photo of my first mess night in which I look very serious with a pale face, and very short jet-black hair swept back. Mess nights were very formal structured affairs. The shortest and youngest members of the new intakes were allocated with special duties such as the 'duck major' who was required to 'parade the duck'. At the back of the mess some live ducks were kept in a pen. I was amazed at how tame the duck seemed to be when it was held under the arm of the young duck major and carried on top of the long tables whilst everyone cheered, shouted and thumped the table. The senior officers were piped in by one of the police pipers. The police band was always excellent, and I felt the quality of the pipers matched anything in Scotland. The band played traditional anthems and songs throughout the evening, wine and whisky flowed and speeches followed speeches. Just like the duck major, speeches were made standing on top of the long dining table. The speeches were made to welcome us as the new intake, and to say farewell to the lucky intake that were 'dining out'.

It was quite normal on these occasions for people to drink too much and for someone to run to the toilet to throw up, but there were only short amounts of time allotted for toilet breaks and it was not allowed to go for a toilet break during a speech. Cigars and pipes were smoked as if the world was about to end. Once the speeches and toasts had finished, the games began. It was squad against squad, and intake against intake, and trainees against staff. British Bulldog was very popular and very violent. This consists of one person carrying another on his shoulders, facing a similar pair with the objective to knock your carried opponent off onto the

floor. There were no rules. I recall playing British Bulldog against the commandant. After a close skirmish I lost the battle. Well, I thought it the best for the sake of my career. No one wanted to be the one to fall, and various aggressive tactics and blows to the head resulted in some frightening scenes, especially when all the participants were inebriated. Mess nights were genuinely messy affairs, and usually finished in the early hours. It was a trial when we had to be inspected at the morning parade a few hours later. Our bedraggled squad was a sight to behold. I really looked forward to Sunday mornings when I could enjoy a well-earned lie-in.

Outside the gates of PTS and next to Ocean Park, the popular theme park, was Brick Hill. One of our fitness tests was the Brick Hill run. We all mustered on the parade ground in our PE kit, and on being given the order, we would run out of the gates and make our way up a path and up several hundred steps next to the cable car. The steps led all the way to the top of Brick Hill and then down the other side towards Aberdeen, where we would turn right, through Wong Chuk Hang and back through the gates next to the public housing estate. Even for a fit young person the first time is a killer. But it was one of the events that the young British inspectors excelled at. As my fitness improved I could complete the run in about twenty minutes which was amongst the three fastest in my intake. Each year there was a force-wide Brick Hill race and I recall some super fit guys doing it in about sixteen minutes. Back in the gym we had rope climbs, star jumps, push ups, sit-ups and military-style fitness training. I did forty press-ups, forty sit-ups, thirty-four squat thrusts, a twenty-inch standing jump all within a set time period and even then I only got a score of 63.2 per cent.

We also did self-defence combat training with an instructor called Button. He used to tell us to try to punch him. We never did, most of us would throw some weak half-hearted slow punch which of course he intercepted and then threw us over his shoulder. We already knew what was going to happen. One day though, Rupert, again in rebellious mood, decided to punch Button hard in the face. It connected, Button recoiled holding his face, we all winced. Rupert's satisfaction lasted about two seconds before he was put in an arm lock and his wrist bent back and almost broken.

He fell to the ground screaming with pain. Normal service was resumed. For the rest of the course we all bowed to 'Mr Button, sir'.

Leadership training mostly consisted of us put in trucks and taken up to the New Territories where we were given maps and compasses and set various objectives. Sometimes though a Wessex helicopter would come to pick us up. It landed on the cricket pitch, and we would pile on, dressed in our jungle kit of camouflage fatigues, green floppy hats, rubber-soled canvas ankle boots, with water bottles, and a small knapsack with a sandwich lunch. We would be flown over Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and dropped off on the top of some remote hill. One of us would be told that he or she was the exercise leader and that they had to get the whole squad to a particular grid reference within forty minutes. Of course the first objective was to find out where the bloody hell we were, which was not easy surrounded by scrub on a featureless hillside. We would be out for the whole day, and the heat and mosquitoes made the task more unpleasant especially for the least fit amongst us. I did not mind these exercises though, as it was a break from the discipline of PTS.

On one occasion we were taken to the border and shown Sha Tau Kok which had been the scene of fighting and bloodshed during the insurgency in 1967. There was a fence built along the Hong Kong–China border, although in Sha Tau Kok the town straddled the border itself so one side of the street was British Hong Kong territory and the other was the PRC. It was confusing and on a few occasions British soldiers or police officers had accidentally strayed across the street and been arrested by the Chinese. I was fascinated by the place. This was only a few years after Chairman Mao had died and China was still a closed and mysterious place. I came to stand a few feet away from a member of the People's Liberation Army, a border guard dressed in the Mao uniform, green cap with red star, carrying a long, old-fashioned rifle, with a bayonet. When I looked down I noticed he had a cheap pair of white canvas plimsolls on his feet. He stared at me for a few moments in a very unfriendly way and then ambled off. It was a

memorable trip and when I got back, I was still excited and wrote a letter to my parents describing the adventure.

After a couple of months in J-Block a few private rooms in the main accommodation block became available. There was an impromptu lottery and I won my own room. It was room twenty on the first floor, near the mess and facing a hillside and trees at the back. It was only about ninety square feet. It had a single bed with a brown and white patterned blanket, a small desk, a wooden upright chair, a dark leatherette armchair with wooden arms, a small dark wood wardrobe, and a fan. My own room! Although ablutions were still communal, I was over the moon. It took me five minutes to move my old suitcase in from J-Block. I still did not have an air conditioner so relied on an electric fan. In the summer the room became very hot and the mosquitoes feasted. To keep the little buggers off us we burnt mosquito coils. These hard grey coils burnt slowly and did keep the mosquitoes away but I wondered about the chemical fumes that I was breathing through the night.

We had room inspections. This was similar to army movies, where we had to stand to attention whilst one of the instructors carrying a swagger stick came in and checked everything was in order. I decided to brighten up my room by purchasing a calendar which had photos of pretty girls wearing very little. During the next inspection, the instructor went over to the calendar, thumbed through the months of the year, tried to hide a smile and left. A great result for me, as he hardly even glanced at my kit neatly folded on the bed. I also bought a small Hitachi MI stereo cassette player; it cost HK$2,200 which was a huge sum then – I think I was ripped off. A similar one would cost much less now. I still could not find cassette tapes of my punk rock favourites, The Stranglers, The Clash and Ian Dury and other legends and had to rely on friends in the UK to post them out to me.