Along the Southern Boundary

A Marine Police Officer's Frontline Account of the Vietnamese Boatpeople and their Arrival in Hong Kong

Les Bird

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Foreword

How Hong Kong's Marine Police dealt with the arrival of tens of thousands of Vietnamese boat people in the late 1970s right up to 1997 is a story well worth re-telling: a story of determination, skulduggery, courage and recklessness. The *Huey Fong* and *Skyluck*, with their thousands of people of all ages who had in fact paid unscrupulous organisers and corrupt officials in Vietnam for their passages. Or a single man in a tiny oval-shaped coracle who turned out to be a Filipino fisherman who had lost his way in the midst of the South China Sea. Hong Kong's Marine Police had to deal with them all. They did so with efficiency, compassion and a remarkable ability to improvise.

One picture is said to be worth a thousand words. The contemporary photographs, which make up a large part of this fascinating account, certainly bring alive, in a way that no words can match, the realities of what it meant to deal with such a massive arrival of people, whether genuine political refugees or those who were reckoned to be economic migrants. Or whether they were ethnic Chinese from South Vietnam, as most of the earlier arrivals were, or ethnic Vietnamese from North Vietnam, as was the case with most of the later arrivals. All were people who had come hundreds of miles, across an often treacherous sea in a vast array of different vessels, to get to Hong Kong in the hope of starting a new life.

From some of the follow-up stories, it is not surprising to learn that many have gone on to build successful lives elsewhere, in the United States, Britain, Canada or Australia. One day, let us hope that accounts of their later lives will be put together to complete the picture of this remarkable story – and the crucial role played in it by the Hong Kong Marine Police.

David Wilson
(Lord Wilson of Tillyorn)
Governor of Hong Kong, 1987-1992

The Photographers

Author **Les Bird** was born in Staffordshire, England, in 1951. He joined the Royal Hong Kong Police (RHKP) in 1976 and served in the Marine Police until June 1997. A good part of that career he spent on the "southern boundary" of Hong Kong, intercepting Vietnamese boatpeople vessels as they came into Hong Kong from the mid-1970s onwards. After leaving the Force, Bird moved into the private security business world. He is a founding member and chairman of Asia's Rhinos Rugby Football Club. He is married with two daughters. He still lives in Hong Kong.

The rest of the team

Born in Singapore, the son of a British Army officer, **Alasdair Watson** was educated in Ireland and read Economics at Warwick University before joining the Royal Hong Kong Police in 1981, transferring to the Marine District. After holding many senior positions in Marine, Alasdair retired in 2014 after 33 years' service. He now lives in Salisbury, England, with his wife and daughter.

John Turner was born in Plymouth. As a child at the start of World War II, the city was bombed and John was evacuated to Shropshire. After completing his national service in the Royal Air Force he joined the Hong Kong Police in 1955. He served the latter years of his police service in Marine District and was the Marine deputy commander in 1979 who oversaw the operational handling of the *Huey Fong* and the *Skyluck*. He started the Police Force Choir in 1976 and was a member of the the Really Big Chorus that sang *Messiah* in Beijing in 1994.

Stephen Tooke is from York. He joined the RHKP in 1985 and spent his entire service in Marine District. In 1989, when Tai Ah Chau was selected as a temporary centre for Vietnamese boatpeople, Stephen was tasked with heading operations on the island. He also served in Marine's Small Boat Unit, Anti-Smuggling Task Force and the Special Duties Unit. In 1997, he became harbour master in Salcombe, Devon. He now runs the innovation technology company Tookie Limited. Stephen is married and has five children.

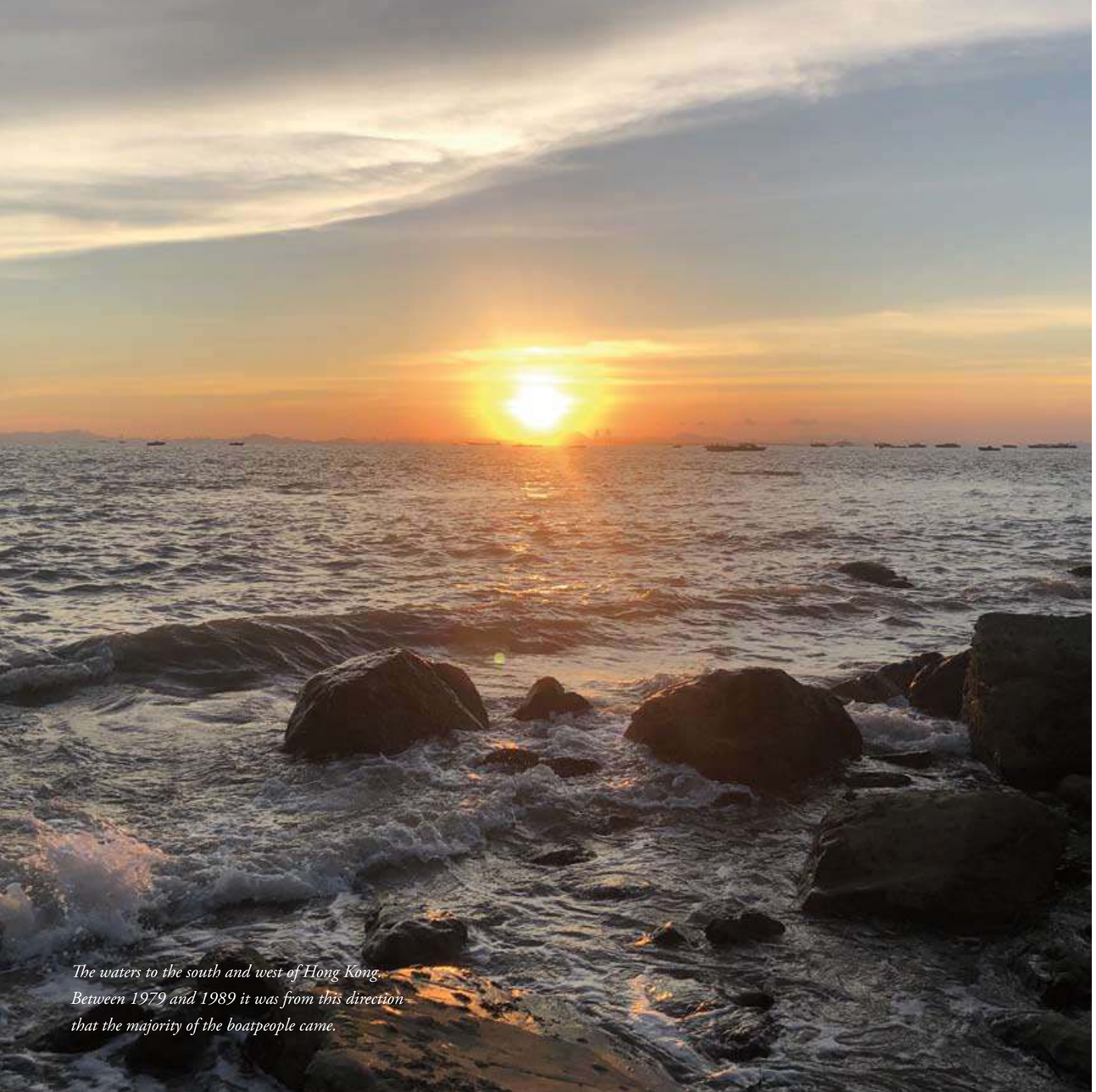
Son of a schoolmaster, brought up in both Yorkshire and on the Isles of Scilly, **Hugh Osborne** joined the RHKP in 1977 aged 22. He spent most of his career in the Police Tactical Unit where he was an instructor. Hugh was also a police negotiator for 13 years of his service. He retired in 1997 and still lives in Hong Kong with his family. Hugh is an accomplished opera singer.

Born in Scotland, the son of a Royal Air Force officer, **Peter Conolly** lived and was educated in various locations around the world, following his father's military postings. Peter joined the RHKP in 1976, spending the majority of his service in the Marine Police, five of which were as a staff officer based at Marine Police Headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui. He retired from the Force in 1997 and returned to the Scottish Borders where he now lives with his wife and family.

Crispian Barlow is a Newfoundlander who has been involved in law enforcement for more than 45 years. After serving in the Royal Canadian Navy, he joined the RHKP and for the next 13 years served in both the Marine Police and the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Bureau. He left Hong Kong in the late 1980s, spending the next 17 years as a game warden in South Africa. He spent two years in Vietnam as a training officer for the Forest Protection Department to set up training for their rangers. Presently he works for WWF Greater Mekong as their regional wildlife crime technical advisor.

Originally from North Wales, **Ian Clark** arrived in Hong Kong in 1985 to join the RHKP. During his 33-year career he managed the Stonecutters Island Vietnamese Boatpeople Detention Centre in 1989 and was involved in the preparations for events in Victoria Harbour in connection with the change of sovereignty ceremony at midnight on June 30th 1997 and the subsequent departure of HMY *Britannia* through Lei Yue Mun Gap to the United Kingdom. Ian retired from the Force in February 2019 and now lives on Lantau Island in Hong Kong.

Rod Colson hails from a Royal Navy family. His father, Commander David Colson RN, also served in Hong Kong in the 1990s. Rod joined the RHKP in 1976 and other than a few years in the Police Tactical Unit, served his entire 33 years' service in the Marine Police. A keen ocean sailor, he retired from the Force in 2009 and now lives with his wife and family in Thailand.



The waters to the south and west of Hong Kong. Between 1979 and 1989 it was from this direction that the majority of the boatpeople came.

Introduction

A couple of years ago, when I was writing my memoir, *A Small Band Of Men: An Englishman's Adventures in Hong Kong's Marine Police,* I was able to recall much of that time by looking at the photographs I had taken. Each picture had a story attached to it, and by looking at the photos my memories came flooding back.

During my Marine Police career I always carried a camera and would take a few shots when circumstances permitted. But this collection of photos sat in a box for more than 30 years and some of them had not seen the light of day since the late 1970s. Among them: freedom swimmers attempting to cross the cold waters of Mirs Bay from China to Hong Kong; rescues during typhoons; and the face of a mother with babe in arms after she had sailed 1,000 miles across the South China Sea from Vietnam in a boat more suited to a river.

Although I used many of these photographs to jog my memory, I only used two in that memoir – on the front and back covers. So I contemplated putting a second book together with some of those photographs from my time in the Marine Police on the frontline of Hong Kong's southern sea boundary, when tens of thousands of refugees arrived here after fleeing the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

The "Vietnamese era" was an extraordinary time for Hong Kong. From the mid-1970s, when the first refugee vessels from Vietnam began arriving, right up until the late 1980s, I was often out at sea meeting these vessels as they arrived. These photographs portray our work as Marine Police, the ramshackle vessels coming in, the sheer resilience of people literally putting their lives on the line and facing not only starvation and the dangers of bad weather conditions, but exploitation by people-smuggling rackets, and the pirates who preyed on them.

In 1979 alone, almost 70,000 Vietnamese arrived in Hong Kong by boat. This represented one third of all those that were to arrive in the territory between 1975 and the late 1990s. No one knows for sure how many tried and never made it. I recall that in July of 1979, refugees were arriving in Hong Kong at a rate of about 500 each day. That is until the territory was hit by Typhoon Hope on August 2. After its direct hit on Hong Kong, Hope went on to sweep across the South China Sea. For two weeks there were no arrivals of refugees in Hong Kong.

It was also in 1979 that Hong Kong declared itself a "Port

of First Asylum" for all refugees from Vietnam. It was a brave move, and while there were controversies to follow, I and everyone else that was involved at the time was proud to be a part of this decision. With other countries in Southeast Asia closing their doors to the boatpeople, with some resorting to escorting overcrowded, dilapidated boats back out to sea, the tiny territory of Hong Kong did the opposite. It opened its doors and offered help. Of course, it was a tough decision for a territory that was at the same time returning illegal immigrants back over the border to China.

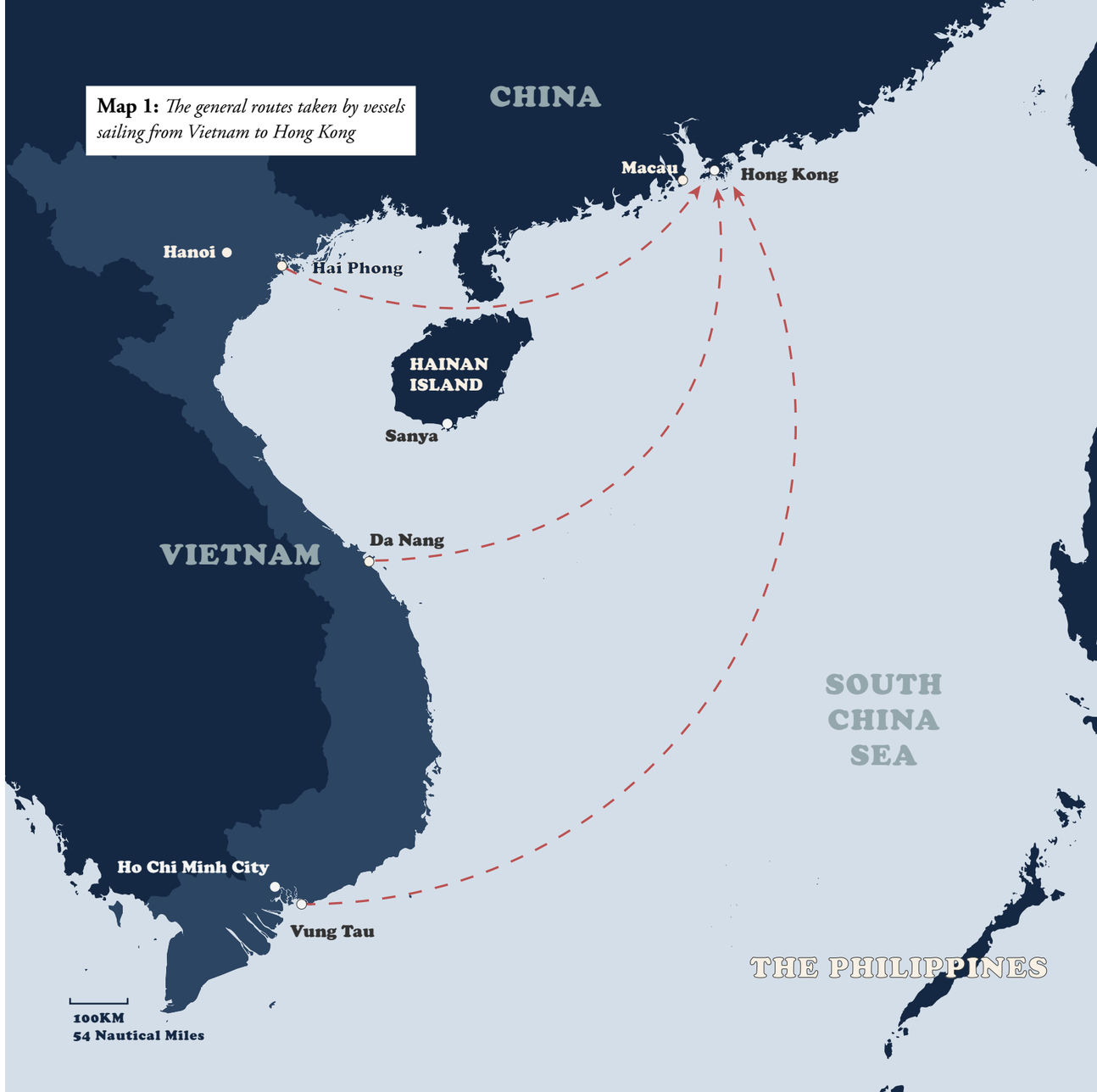
In the late 1970s, our vessels and equipment were nothing like the ones that can be seen today. They were small and slow and not suitable for handling hundreds of people day after day far out at sea. But the Marine Police are a resilient lot and are a tight-knit group: a group who have each other's backs. We were determined not to fail those in need. When I told them about my photo project, some of my former colleagues – the young men who'd been on the police launches helping with rescues and escorting the boats in – started searching out their own photos. They produced photos and stories of daring rescues at sea, and dealing with thousands of desperate people who arrived in Hong Kong during those years. Just like my own, their photographs and their memories of this time have been waiting for a chance to see the light of day.

Photographs have also helped forge new friendships in the most unexpected circumstances. A former soldier in the South Vietnamese Army, who escaped and travelled to Hong Kong on the people-smuggling freighter the *Sen On*, contacted me after seeing the Polaroid photo I took of the ship aground on Lo Kei Wan beach. He figured that he and I had stood together at that same moment in time and now he wanted to reconnect. There was the family in London, the father of which had passed through Hong Kong in 1984 aged 20. The family were looking for photographs of their early life, of which they had none. I was fortunately able to help them find photographs of their boat and of them in the camps in Hong Kong. These photographs, the only photographic record of their youth, are now framed and hang in one of their shops in east London.

The two little girls you see on the front cover are grinning through a porthole of the freighter, the *Huey Fong*, a people-smuggling ship that arrived here in 1978. They can't have been more than four years old, enjoying a moment of levity. I wonder if they now speak English with American accents and what their memory of this experience is, if any. They'd be nearing 50 now.

In this book, I'm joined by former refugees who tell me about how they got across the sea, leaving their families behind, and arriving in Hong Kong, plus former officials who talk about some of the decisions made including choosing the island of Tai Ah Chau as an ad hoc camp. Through my photographs and those of my Marine Police colleagues, this is the Vietnamese era told from out at sea.

Les Bird
Hong Kong
August 2021



Map 1: *The general routes taken by vessels sailing from Vietnam to Hong Kong*