

Lifestyle

The great escape: how Chinese illegal immigrants to Hong Kong found a new life – if they could ‘touch base’

Until October 1980, illegal immigrants from mainland China who made it as far as Boundary Street in Kowloon could register for Hong Kong residency

A former soldier, interpreter, police officer and illegal immigrant recall their experiences of what was known as the ‘touch base’ policy



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Three young illegal immigrants from China caught by a Hong Kong marine police patrol in Deep Bay, in November, 1979. Their raft is made of inflatable plastic cushions sewn together and covered with plastic bags. Photo: SCMP

At the stroke of midnight on October 23, 1980, Hong Kong’s grown-up version of hide-and-seek ended – and it was game over for a huge number of illegal immigrants.

What became known as the “touch base” policy had begun in November 1974. Faced with a growing tide of illegal migrants from China, and concerned about the prospect of roving bands of undocumented entrants scraping a living in the seamy underbelly of Hong Kong, the British colonial government reasoned that if illegal migrants could make it across the Chinese border past the security forces and get as far as the city proper, they might as well be given a welcome.

Boundary Street in Kowloon was designated as the finishing line, and migrants who “touched base” there were registered and given an ID card. It wasn’t a perfect system, but nobody could think of anything better. In the policy’s final weeks, media commentators ranted about the prospect of a tsunami of “IIs”, as they were called for short, flooding the city’s housing and other facilities. As it was, the flood turned out to be more of a trickle.

As the clock ticked on the policy, key players – including a police officer, a Gurkha sergeant-major in the British Army, a military interpreter, and a determined illegal immigrant – went about their business.



The Royal Hong Kong Police's Small Boat Unit intercepts a boatload of illegal immigrants from China in 1977. Photo: Courtesy Les Bird

Les Bird was a 27-year-old inspector commanding the Royal Hong Kong Police's Small Boat Unit in Deep Bay on Hong Kong's northwestern border.

"Deep Bay was not deep at all. In fact, when the tide was out you could practically walk across it, so the IIs came streaming across every night," says Bird, who recorded his experiences in his bestselling memoir *A Small Band of Men*.

Bird's 50-strong detachment patrolled in Zodiac rubber dinghies powered by 35-horsepower outboard motors, and captured as many as 1,000 illegal immigrants a month.

Explainer: how Hong Kong has for decades been a magnet for refugees and migrants



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"By the time we caught them they were hungry, cold and frightened, so we'd give them some food and dry clothes, and try and find out where they'd come from and anything else they knew, before handing them over to the land units," Bird says. "They were shipped back across the border the next day, so they spent less than 12 hours here."

“It wasn’t a job we enjoyed. Most of the IIs were about my age or a bit younger, so we all felt some sympathy for them. But if there had been no restrictions Hong Kong would have been flooded, so we just looked on it as something we had to do.”

In the weeks before October 23, 1980. Bird and his men were put on full alert to stem what was expected to be a last-minute stampede. “As it was, nothing happened. Either the message that the touch base policy was ending had not got through, or they thought it wasn’t worth trying,” he explains.



Les Bird with a boatload of illegal immigrants in Deep Bay, Hong Kong, in the 1980s.
Photo: Courtesy Les Bird

“While we understood the policy’s rationale, it was really quite frustrating for front-line officers, as it acted as an incentive. Run the gauntlet, get past Boundary Street and you’re home, as if it was all some sort of game,” Bird adds.

Interpreter Albert Lam – who joined the Hong Kong Military Service Corps in 1973 – and his multilingual comrades played a key role in stemming the tide of illegal migrants in the second half of 1980. “Some of the IIs spoke Cantonese, some Putonghua, some were Hakka, but there was always someone in our unit who could be called upon to translate,” says Lam, 69, who retired with the rank of captain in 1997 and is now vice-chairman of the Royal British Legion charity’s Hong Kong branch.



Interpreter Albert Lam joined the Hong Kong Military Service Corps in 1973. Photo: Courtesy Albert Lam



A Royal Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force helicopter sweeps past an island during a patrol for illegal immigrants in October 1979. Photo: SCMP

“We were attached to the battalions stationed on the border to question the IIs, so the authorities could try and build up an overall picture of where IIs were coming from and how they were getting to Hong Kong.

“We also quizzed them about what were called ‘aiders and abettors’ – Hong Kong citizens who would lurk near the border to assist the IIs, sometimes out of charity but more often for some financial gain. To be honest, I don’t think that the answers the IIs gave us were always 100 per cent reliable.”

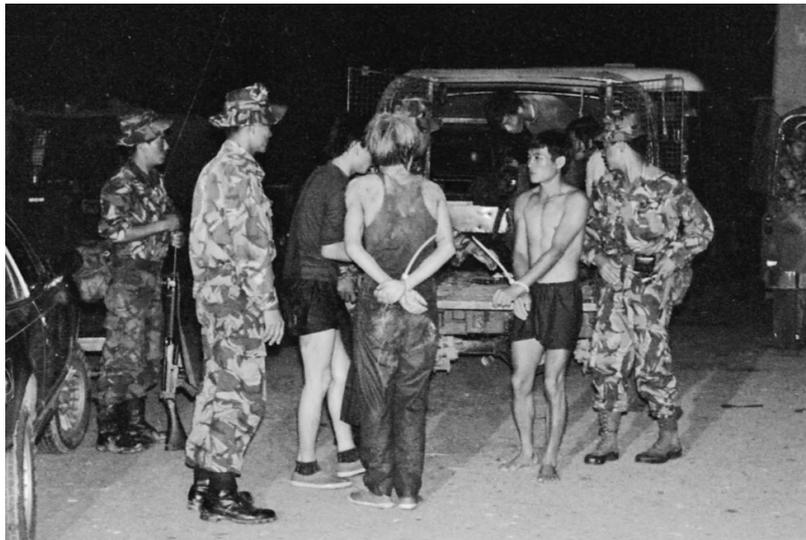
Lam recalls the nights before the end of the touch base policy. “There were so many soldiers and police, we were almost standing hand in hand,” he says. “But it all went quiet afterwards.”

Having been trained to fire 81mm mortars and Wombat anti-tank guns, and having fought hill fires in the New Territories and boxed at flyweight for Nepal at the Olympic Games, by 1980 Sergeant-Major Namsing Thapa had got used to taking on diverse roles while serving in the British Army’s Brigade of Gurkhas.

Border duty was a recurring task, cropping up so often that he sometimes captured the same illegal immigrants two or more times.



Sergeant-Major Namsing Thapa of the British Army’s Brigade of Gurkhas on the Hong Kong-China border at Man Kam To in 1980. Photo: Ed Peters



Gurkha soldiers arrest Chinese illegal immigrants in Lau Fau Shan in May, 1979. Photo: SCMP

“We’d arrested them, they’d be sent back across the border, and then they’d try their luck again – you have to admire their determination,” says Thapa, 74, who retired from the 6th Queen Elizabeth’s Own Gurkha Rifles in 1989 after nearly 30 years’ service.

The Gurkhas were deployed along the border from Mai Po to Sha Tau Kok, keeping watch from seven reinforced concrete MacIntosh Forts (now rated Grade II historic buildings) situated on hilltops, and from more temporary corrugated iron observation posts next to the border fence.

“We’d rest during the day, then move out at night in four-man patrols, setting up ambushes at likely crossing points,” Thapa says. “We were just armed with a stick – and a lot of mosquito repellent. I can’t recall any violent incidents, as the IIs usually just gave up when we arrested them.

“They were very cunning, though, using air pillows as flotation devices, and carrying clean clothes in a waterproof bag. Even using our night vision aids it was quite difficult to spot them.”



Four illegal immigrants who swam from China to Hong Kong are led away by police for questioning at Tai Po Kau in May, 1971. Photo: SCMP



Retired Gurkha soldier Thapa also boxed at flyweight for Nepal at the Olympic Games.

They were fit, Thapa adds, and “could cross a three-metre-high barbed wire fence in a few seconds”.

The end of the touch base policy had little effect on Thapa’s daily duties, but he does recall one incident from the autumn of 1980.

“We caught one II, a teenager, and she was shivering with cold,” he says. “I made her some tea and put her in a sleeping bag to warm up before we handed her over to the police. Forty years on, I hope she ended up OK.”

Cheung, who prefers not to use his real name, was one of the illegal immigrants who managed to touch base. “I still have nightmares” he says. He swam about 16km across Mirs Bay, in October 1980, three days before his 20th birthday.



A group of illegal immigrants who landed at Pak Nai begin the road back to repatriation under the watchful eyes of soldiers of the Seventh Gurkha Rifles in February, 1980.
Photo: GIS

“I was not a strong swimmer, but I had blown up a rubber tube and that helped. At one point something bumped hard into my legs, and I cried out because I thought it was a shark. When I got to dry land I was so exhausted I just fell asleep.”

With days to go before the end of the touch base policy, Cheung knew he had to get to the city to register. He telephoned his only contact – a distant cousin in Tuen Mun, in the southwestern New Territories – who told him he had to fend for himself.

“I wept when I heard his words. I was at a total loss,” he says. “But then a lady came up and gave me HK\$10 and walked off without saying a word. It was enough to get me into the city by bus. I didn’t see any cops. And I got a job in a factory after a couple of days. So I’d made it.”

Cheung was interviewed at length – “they thought I might be some sort of smuggler” – before being given official permission to stay in Hong Kong. He later married and moved to a village on Lantau Island and raised two children, who have both qualified as accountants.



So Yuk-ling (left), one of 1,092 illegal immigrants from China, has her fingerprint taken for her identity card registration at Victoria Barracks in Admiralty in October, 1980.
Photo: SCMP

“It took me some time to adjust, but I settled down after a while,” Cheung says. “I never achieved very much in my life, but I did take the decision to come to Hong Kong, which was quite bold.

“Forty years on, I have fewer swimming nightmares, but they’re still just as frightening. Thank God I’ll never have to do that again.”