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## High-octane tales of life in Hong Kong's Marine Police in colonial-era commander's memoir *A Small Band of Men*

Les Bird's book about his time in an elite unit of Hong Kong's Marine Police is a humorous romp. Policing priorities have changed since colonial times, and he foreshadows darker issues the city faces today.

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Les Bird with the Marine Police unit before an anti-smuggling patrol, in 1991. His memoir, *A Small Band of Men*, tells high-octane tales of life working as a member of an elite unit during colonial-era Hong Kong. Photo: Les Bird

***A Small Band of Men: An Englishman's Adventures in Hong Kong's Marine Police*, by Les Bird Earnshaw**  
 Books 4/5 stars

*A Small Band of Men* is a page-turning memoir of life in [Hong Kong's colonial-era Marine Police](#), during a time when policing priorities, from dealing with refugees to smuggling and illegal immigration, were very different from those of today. It also frequently foreshadows issues that would come to dominate the city's future.

Written by Les Bird, a former superintendent who commanded the elite Special Boat Unit (SBU), the book tears along at a nice pace, and if some of the anecdotes in the first half are a bit ho-hum, it soon gets much more eventful.

The story starts in 1976, when Bird, driven by a desire to see the world, responds to a British newspaper advertisement for a job as a probationary Hong Kong police inspector on a three-year contract, and gets accepted (on a starting salary of HK\$2,400).



The cover of *A Small Band of Men* shows a training exercise in 1991 in which Les Bird's unit had to board a vessel while travelling at speed. Photo: Les Bird

The book pulls one or two fairly obvious narrative stunts: before the story begins, we have Bird nervously attending a reunion dinner two decades after leaving the force. There's also the usual awed arrival in Hong Kong and the inevitable training school section (in a film, it would be a montage).

Still, it's an entertaining segment, featuring a recruit who secretly keeps an eagle owl in a cupboard in his room, which then attacks a chief inspector; and the mildly astonishing ritual of mess rugby, a rule-free indoor punch-up masquerading as a sport, in which no one ever scores but lots of people get injured. Bird is also forced at training school to confront the issue of being a representative of a colonial administration working alongside local people, thanks to what turns out to be a career-long friendship with Joe Poon, a Hongkonger studying for the inspectorate after making his way up through the ranks.

Once Bird finishes training, the story, like his life, is hijacked for a time by the cartoonishly larger than life, borderline demented figure of his mentor, East Sector commander "Diamond" Don Bishop. Both a highly respected Marine Police chief inspector and an emotionally unpredictable, temperamental, risk-taking force of nature who inspires respect and fear in equal measure, Bishop is a tremendous source of anecdotes.

On one occasion, Bishop boards a pleasure boat in distress and, after trying and failing to fix the engine, throws the owner's toolbox overboard, tells him his engine is broken (that isn't the word he uses) and leaves. He also invites and then uninvites himself to a colleague's home on Lantau for Christmas lunch, then turns up anyway, incredibly late, too drunk to stand, accompanied by an equally paralytic sailor he met in a bar and a stray cat.

Bird's working life during this period is equally lively. On his second day of service he boards an apparently empty ship floating in a shipping lane in the Tathong Channel in heavy fog, on which the captain turns out to have drunkenly tried and failed to kill the entire crew before turning the gun on himself. He's also involved in attempting to stop illegal immigrants swimming across Mirs Bay while secretly hoping that they succeed, struck by the irony of preventing young people from escaping a life they don't want – exactly what he had done when he joined the force.

There's also plenty of irony for the reader, mostly of the dramatic variety. Bishop hilariously dismisses the end of the British lease in 1997 as a non-event, certain that British dominion over Hong Kong will continue ("Hong Kong, as it is now under British rule, is far too useful to the Chinese," he says). He changes his tune after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, in 1984, with the words: "If you think China is going to allow the people of Hong Kong to run Hong Kong the way they want, after the handover, then you are very much mistaken."



Vietnamese refugees on board a ship off Lantau island, in 1979. Photo: Les Bird

There are also numerous signs of the times: for example, the very 1970s attitude to the alcohol consumption of the expat officers, who regularly drink themselves into a stupor while off duty, and are also happy to imbibe while on.

When Bird is put in charge of Tai O district, meaning the entire western half of Lantau, Tung Chung is a fishing village, and the two towns housing Lantau's regional police headquarters, Mui Wo and Tai O, are connected only by dirt track. But his life in the sleepy backwoods is not uneventful; he finds himself on a day off, when Bishop is visiting, bushwhacking to Lo Kei Wan after receiving a call about an unknown incident there, only to find that the Sen On, a ship filled with more than 1,000 Vietnamese refugees, has run aground on the beach.

Bird's work goes into top gear when he's put in charge of the SBU, an elite waterborne unit dealing with terrorism and serious crime that gives the book its title. He soon finds himself one of the first responders when CAAC flight 301 from Guangzhou slides across the runway at Kai Tak airport and partly falls into the harbour.

He's also involved in escorting Vietnamese refugee ships to the deserted Tai A Chau and detaining the refugees on an island with no water or facilities; boarding a boat loaded with 43kg of pure heroin bound for Australia at night from a pleasure yacht with only one of its two engines working; and chasing gangs of cross-border smugglers in purpose-built, high-speed boats that can always outrun the police.

In a fitting culmination, Bird is part of a delegation that goes to Shenzhen in 1995 to discuss arrangements for post-handover policing. One of the issues he and his team raise is the luxury cars stolen to order in Hong Kong and smuggled across the border, which should be easy to spot by Shenzhen authorities as the only right-hand-drive cars on the city's roads.

