

Lifestyle/ Arts &amp; Culture

## Hong Kong smuggling: sea battles, 'car in a condom case' and saving refugees recalled by ex-marine police officer

Les Bird led Hong Kong's Special Boat Unit in the 1980s, tasked with catching smugglers racing to mainland China in specially designed speedboats

He also found himself playing the role of welfare officer to tens of thousands of refugees after the Vietnam war, often seeing boats sink before his eyes

  
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Published: 6:00pm, 18 Nov, 2019 ▾

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Bird on a mission to rescue a capsized junk carrying illegal immigrants.

The Tolo Channel, a waterway from Ma Liu Shui and out to Mirs Bay in Hong Kong's northeastern New Territories, is the perfect habitat for smugglers, with a succession of narrow inlets and hidden jetties offering safe havens for loading up contraband and speeding it across the water to mainland China.

In the late 1980s, "big fliers", or dai fei – grey fibreglass boats specially made to move electronic goods and luxury cars to mainland China and smuggle people into Hong Kong – were the vessels of choice. Capable of 80 knots, with five outboard engines on the stern, containers of extra fuel on the deck and armour-plated bows, they were deadly.

Smuggling was so rampant in the area that a 100-man Special Boat Unit was tasked to chase after the vessels, under the command of British chief inspector Les Bird.

"They wanted to get back to the mainland at all costs," says Bird, who has recently published a memoir of his career as a Hong Kong Marine police officer from the mid-1970s to the handover in 1997. "With the amount of fuel on board, you just needed a spark for them to go up. Very dangerous, and they would be going at such a speed in the dark. I'm amazed not more people were killed."



Bird stands beside a captured 'dai fei' speedboat, circa 1990. Photo: SCMP

Bird took part in night-time operations with a team including long-time friend and deputy, Joe Poon. Once they learned of a smuggling operation, Bird would pilot the intercept boat, while Poon took another pursuit craft to the pier to make the arrests. If the smugglers escaped on their vessels, the chase was on.

In Bird's memoir, *A Small Band of Men: An Englishman's Adventures in Hong Kong's Marine Police*, published in paperback by Earnshaw Books, he recalls the tension as they waited in the darkness. Poon deciphered the Chinese radio chatter, and they would listen for the dai fei's engines.



Former governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten (left) and Bird attend an official ceremony in Hong Kong. Photo: SCMP

Strolling around Tai O, a sleepy fishing village on Hong Kong's Lantau Island where he began his career as a rural inspector, Bird sights the drying egg yolks and a Tai O speciality, shrimp paste. "Never liked that smell," he says. "It used to waft over to the station."

In the book he describes the tragedy of losing one of his men, hit in a collision with a dai fei and killed outright. But there were also lighter moments.

Bird recalls an anecdote not mentioned in his memoir, of a fishing trawler captain who asked him for the Mirs Bay "chain" – which the Marine Police used to snare smugglers propellers' – to be raised so he could pass.

"As the trawler went through, there was something odd about it," Bird says. The bow was too low in the water. When officers asked for the net to be raised, there was a Mercedes-Benz, perfectly dry and wrapped in synthetic rubber, in the net. "It was known as 'the car in a condom case'."



Bird (left) with the then head of the Royal Hong Kong Marine Police, Assistant Commissioner Peter Clarke, in 1980. Photo: SCMP

The Special Boat Unit was formed in 1979 as a small, anti-illegal-immigration unit. Bird and other officers were tasked with forming "a small band of men", hence his book's title, to counter the illegal activity in the territory's shallow bays and inlets.

"Over time it expanded to become a maritime anti-crime and counterterrorist unit. It was this 100-man unit that I took over in 1988," he says.



Former marine police officer Les Bird and his crew. Photo: SCMP

Bird, 68, who still lives in Hong Kong, was born in a Staffordshire village, in Britain's West Midlands. His father had been in the Royal Navy during World War II, and that fuelled his decision to join Hong Kong's marine police.

Bird had arrived in the former British colony in 1976, a year after the Vietnam war ended. It was only then that he learned his father had been in the city to assist in "mopping up" operations after the Japanese surrender in August 1945.

His memories stem in part from his collection of about 500 photographs. "I used to carry a camera, and when time allowed I would take photographs," he says.

Among them are early photographs of his 18 months as an inspector at Tai O Police Station, now a heritage boutique hotel, when he was in his late 20s. "I used to have the whole top floor as my accommodation," he says. His office was downstairs next to the report room, which had two cells.



Bird on a mission to rescue a capsized junk boat carrying illegal immigrants on February 5, 1980.



Bird pictured this month at the 1881 Heritage shopping complex in Tsim Sha Tsui, on the site of the former Marine Police headquarters compound. Photo: Jonathan Wong

In the late 1970s, he was given a Land Rover to traverse the unpaved roads on his beat, West Lantau, which was geographically the largest in the force.

"I would hike from village to village, and a lot of it was about sorting out a leaky school roof and telling the district officer," he says. "I'd go along to the Po Lin Monastery and see the monks there."

Bird has not been back to see the area's Big Buddha or cable car, preferring to keep his memories of the monastery intact from 40 years ago.

He and an Italian priest, Father Don Giovanni Vigano, were the only Caucasians in Tai O village. Sepia photos show Bird, 1.9 metres (6ft 2in) tall, towering over village representatives whenever he was asked to open a bridge or other piece of infrastructure.



Bird (left) attends the opening ceremony of the bridge across Tai O Creek, Hong Kong, in 1978. Photo: Courtesy of Les Bird

Communication with police headquarters was conducted over a 60-year-old Bakelite phone, which had been used during Tai O Police Station's most infamous incident, when an Indian police constable shot dead his commanding officer in 1918 before turning the gun on himself.

"The phone didn't work when it rained," Bird says.

A recurring theme throughout the book is Bird's troubled work relationship with his domineering superior, Don Bishop, and how the younger Bird has to keep him on-side but also adhere to proper policing.

"There were a number of men like Don Bishop," says Bird, meaning those who had fought in World War II and had a more cavalier attitude to regulations. "I was arriving, having been trained, and men like Don wanted you to throw the rule book away and do it their way."

All the people in Bird's book are real, although certain ones have had their names changed.



A Special Duty Unit training exercise, photographed by Bird in the late 1980s. Photo: SCMP

In the years after the Vietnam war, Hong Kong received tens of thousands of refugees. Bird found himself playing the role of welfare officer – often in emergency situations as boats sank before his eyes as they arrived at Hong Kong's southern boundary, south of Tai O.

The situation became more acute in 1979, when Hanoi began repressing ethnic Chinese in Vietnam.

Hong Kong declared itself a “port of first asylum”, something that Bird takes pride in. But it was overwhelming. In 1979, more than 68,000 refugees arrived, and mostly by sea. As the number increased, he requisitioned boats from other government departments to ensure the boatpeople could be picked up.



Vietnamese refugees arrive at the then southern boundary in Hong Kong around 1979. Photo: Steve Thomas

This part of his memoir is poignant and moving. Bird shows compassion in his work in often impossible circumstances. In 1979 alone, three freighters arrived as the people-smuggling business took off.

“They were all in the hold for two weeks,” he says. “You’d often have a whole boat where many were children under five, and there was cholera.”

The work was relentless and exhausting, particularly as Southeast Asian nations had refused to take in refugees, and other countries stopped accepting boatpeople from Hong Kong.

In the early 1980s, Bird calculates, 400 people were arriving each day on river craft with flat keels, or on old junks and other rickety craft. Then there was a powerful typhoon, “and we had no people arriving for two weeks”, he recalls, adding that it will never be known how many Vietnamese died at sea.



Marine police officers do a headcount of newly arrived Vietnamese asylum seekers in May, 1989. Photo: SCMP



Two little children look out of a port hole of the freighter the Huey Fong in December 1979. It was one of three people-smuggling freighters that year to bring refugees from Vietnam to Hong Kong. Photo: Courtesy of Les Bird.

Bird, an open-water endurance swimmer, would also dive in and literally save people if necessary. One earlier article about him [cites a case of a baby he saved and resuscitated](#). He was unable to save the mother.

He intercepted countless boats and processed thousands of people, many of whom went on to live in third countries. He is in contact with some who were children when they arrived, and who he has managed to help fill in the gaps of their early life coming to Hong Kong.

“We would sit on the southern boundary, the territorial boundary that runs across the south of Hong Kong. We would wait for them to come in because we had no jurisdiction outside the Hong Kong colony boundary, because it was international waters.

“From time to time you would identify vessels that were having difficulty getting to us. They were coming towards us, they could see us, but they were looking like they wouldn’t make it. Then we would go out. For emergency situations, you throw the [rule] book away.”