

# HONG KONG RE-VISITED

from

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Our visit to Little Sai Wan (1985) was cleared with a section of the Hong Kong police force which turned out to be their equivalent of the SAS and we drove out to the camp by taxi. We knew that a new direct road had been built from Chaiwan and entered the camp from, for us, a very unfamiliar direction past what had been the MT section and camp cinema. The place was virtually deserted. Two Chinese engineers were taking soil core samples at various spots, no doubt to determine what foundations could be needed for the new high-rise blocks, and a Brit and his Chinese assistant who were clearly associated with the "SAS" said that we were welcome to go anywhere but MUST be off the camp before dusk. Later, seeing bullet riddled outlines of human figures painted onto walls in various rooms and noticing rather large holes blown in other walls we saw what he meant. Walking round the deserted camp, seeing old familiar places and going into buildings and rooms that had been off limits to us, even though we'd both been W.O.P. (A)'s in the 1950's was the stuff of nostalgia.

We walked into the main entrance of the accommodation block by the old parade ground cum car park. It hadn't changed a bit. We could have been just returning from a swim round the point. Turning right we found the room that had been Abdullah's shop where we'd bought flip flops, multicoloured Hawaiian beach shirts, heavily lacquered photograph albums and all sorts of bits and pieces to make life that bit more comfortable. One of the huge shelves was still in position against the wall. Climbing the staircase, nothing had changed unless it was our lungs, thirty years older and not quite as comfortable by the time we'd reached the top floor. Even the small hexagonal mosaic tiles covering all the floors were just the same but not as clean as in the days when all the Amahas scrubbed the place so thoroughly. I tried to chip one out but they'd been well stuck down in the early 50's so I didn't get my souvenir. We were slightly surprised to see that the shower and toilet rooms at the end of the corridor before we turned into Gibson block had been converted into flats. In fact Gibson Wing had been blocked off giving more space to each of the old rooms which had then been converted into flatlets, with access only from the balconies. Our old rooms were easily identified, Gibson 51 and 53. We stood outside on the balcony and looked out across the camp. The long remembered view across Little Sai Way Bay, Lymun Gap and to the distant hills of Kowloon was largely hidden by trees that, in 1957 were scarcely more than saplings at the foot of Gibson Wing. We recalled the many hours on hot and humid days when we had sat on that same balcony and admired the view and debated whether to go round the point for a swim, or catch the gharry to Sheko, or go into town, or leg it up the road and over the hill to Big Wave Bay or simply sit and talk. The strains of Pat Boone singing "April Love" for the umpteenth time in a day seemed to be ghosting over the camp "radio service" and I felt like shouting advice down to the Radio Little Sai Wan's studio as we'd done on so many occasions. Then Chung's voice seemed to come calling along the balcony from the Amah's room at the far end: "Fiediah, fiediah! You get up now! You number hundred boy! Chico number one boy!" Periodically, our Chung ratings would slip or rise depending on her mood or our latest misdemeanour.

We went down by the staircase immediately behind the mess. Just before going outside I turned into a small room that I remembered had been the photography dark room. I'm sure my nostrils picked up that familiar smell of developer and fixer. This had been our short cut route down to the mess, with a monsoon ditch providing a final steep staircase immediately behind the mess. How many times had I, when coming off watch, smuggled mugs of tea and slices of toast up there for mates who'd had a stand down and were still in bed? The mess hall and kitchens had all been gutted and seemed to have been used as operations rooms, likewise the NAFFI on the next floor.

I remembered the rowdy Christmas dinner of 1957 when the mess had been packed with airmen and the occasions when we'd played housey-housey there and watched films before the "Astra" was built next door. More usually the memory was of tired airmen picking at rather boring late night meals laid on for those coming off the evening watch or staggering off to do the 'night bind'. The NAFFI, silent and empty seemed to echo with its memories of more appetising food and long cool drinks of beer or mandarin oranges steeped in chilled orangeade and drunk while sitting on the balcony and wondering whether we should join in on one of Thea's WRVS tournaments or write another letter home. The "Astra", so new and clean in 1958 had shown its last film years ago and was looking very tatty.

Down the road we walked, curving right around the fence which still protected the old communications block. There, at the front was the same covered entrance and, with doors wide open, nothing to stop us going in. I half thought that somebody would ask to see my pass but we were free to walk in. Memories came flooding back. I'd forgotten that there was a ramp up the central corridor — It used to seem hard work walking up it to work but so easy coming down six or seven hours later. Neither of us could remember exactly where the little kiosk used to be where we'd bought our mid-watch tea and grub. Even the big set room had been partitioned off into smaller rooms but we could still remember exactly where we had sat for so many hours tuning into signals legitimate and, when not so busy, illegitimate, all those years ago. What has happened to all those AR88's and 1475's? One was on display in the Science Museum until a few years ago but are the others still being worked, delicately teasing barely audible morse out of the ether? Can the Dragon Lady's voice in Taiwan still be heard berating the Communist Chinese if you find the right wavelength? And how excited we were to catch the monotonous but historic "bleep" of the first Sputnik!

We wandered through what had been the Sergeants' and Officers' messes, admired an abandoned swimming pool which had certainly not been there in 1958 and walked past the overgrown site of the firing range. Round the point and standing on the rocks were we used to sunbathe and from which we swam in the sparkling clean sea I was struck by the quietness of it all. A new sea wall had recently been constructed, stretching right across the mouth of Little Sai Wan Bay. They'd started to infill the area behind it and soon there'd be no more sign of that idyllic bay where the sampan men had fished for sea urchins each evening, their lanterns twinkling across the water. One old man stood high on the rocks with rod outstretched, patiently waiting for a fish to bite. Had he, thirty years previously, been one of the fishermen chugging past our swimming spot in his sampan? I wondered whether, amongst all the flotsam, there could still be any fish or whether sea urchins could still survive down there waiting to prick the feet of unwary bathers. Did anyone ever try to swim there now? I thought of having a nostalgic dip, looked across the water to see whether the mid-channel buoy was still there providing a challenge for me to swim out to it. I couldn't see it and changed my mind about the dip when I realised how much debris there was in the water. So I climbed up onto the path that still led to the lighthouse. There, at Cape Collinson would be a better spot. Would I still dare to leap off the high rocks into the deep bay beyond the lighthouse? A barbed wire fence half way along the path was easily overcome but a heavily defended gate just before the lighthouse prevented all entry and a large sign announced that the light was now fully automatic. What had become of the two young sons of the lighthouse keeper? Are they tycoons in Hong Kong Central? Are they scratching out an existence somewhere in the colony or have they joined so many more and moved to work in a chinese takeaway in the UK — maybe even in Carlisle? So, my courage wasn't put to the test.

I walked back to the camp and in through the original gate. Dumped on the ground next to the old posts that had carried the sign board announcing the camp's name and badge was a more recent sign with just discernible letters "COMPOSITE SIGNALS ORGANISATION STATION" and underneath in bold letters **LITTLE SAI WAN**. I propped it up against the posts and took a photograph. I felt that the old place deserved to keep its name a bit longer. The guardhouse, hospital block and admin block were still there. For the first time ever, I walked along the first floor balcony running alongside the admin block and into the room at the far end. It was still signed "COMMANDING OFFICER". There he had sat and tried to keep his eye on all those airmen living across the road in Gibson and the other wings, I wondered if he had enjoyed his stay in Sai Wan as much as we had.

Back through the gates and up the long hill to the Cape Collinson road junction I walked. this road was just the same, narrow and steep. I looked back through one narrow cutting and half thought that I could see the Royal Navy's Far Eastern squadron lined up in review in Junk Bay as they had been one sunny day in 1957. No, it must have been a mirage.

At the road junction, to my surprise, I easily found the path that climbed over the hill to Big Wave Bay. It was more clearly marked than in the 1950's and had been widened and graded in places to ease the passing of all the hikers who now roam those hills which used to be our private domain. I took a last nostalgic look behind me down onto a very sad looking Little Sai Wan, rapidly being encroached on by the building project. So soon our 1950's idyll would be turned into just another of Hong Kong's teeming suburban sprawls. I walked on and down the steep path to my warm, clean "swim in the pond" smooth waters of Big Wave Bay.

Dusk was just coming on and I had the bay to myself.



" I SAY HAS THAT FELLOW  
GOT PERMISSION? "  
Vous croyez que ce type  
a une autorisation ?

**HEY MAN! I CAN SEE  
MY FIRST COMMUNIST!**

*hé les gars! j'ai vu  
mon premier communiste!*

