

3) Creating a Legend 1967-1994

The Royal Hong Kong Police emerged from the confrontations of the 1960s with pride. Beneath the surface, however, grave problems faced both the Hong Kong community and its major law enforcement agency. Many of them could be traced directly to the manner in which Hong Kong had grown so spectacularly, in terms of population and economic might, in such a short time. In the 1930s, the city had been a rather sleepy port, a quiet colonial backwater whose economy and importance were dwarfed by Shanghai. The war brought trade to a halt. Then the communist victory in the civil war, the Korean War and its accompanying United Nations boycott imposed on China had cut off most of her commerce. Hong Kong was packed not only with refugees desperate for work but also canny industrialists from the Mainland who had arrived from the north on ships; packed in the holds was the textile machinery that was to sew a different sort of wealth for Hong Kong. Against this fast-changing, dynamic and fluid background the Force tried to cope with enormous changes.

Despite significant improvements, pay was still low. Policemen were the poor relations, not only of business figures but also other public servants. There were serious shortages in management. Much of the day to day command of the Force lay in the rigorous embrace of the Staff Sergeants, the senior Non-Commissioned Officers who managed with an iron fist. Commissioner Charles Sutcliffe, a resolute veteran of Africa who was inflexibly resolved on reform, went ahead despite great opposition to break the power of the mighty Staff Sergeants. It was widely recognised, universally known but never admitted that corruption was widespread throughout the Force and the community. This was largely due to poor wages. Money from gambling and other rackets helped pay for informants in the underworld whose tips helped greatly in curbing crime, leading to the notion that petty graft, at least, was tolerated.

It was to break the back of graft that Commissioner Sutcliffe changed the rank structure. The most basic change was an influx of young Non-Commissioned Officers to the new rank of Station Sergeant, taking direct control of operations out of the hands of the Staff Sergeants, the "Tigers" as they were known. There was also, following a sweeping review, a general increase in pay. But the biggest boost to fighting corruption came almost by accident, during a

routine enquiry from a Canadian bank about the account of a man called Peter Fitzroy Godber. Charles Sutcliffe, when the matter was reported to him, was astounded; how had a Chief Superintendent amassed so much money? He started enquiries to find out. The results rocked not only the police, but all Hong Kong.

Peter Godber had been one of the heroes of 1967, confronting rioters on the streets. However, when Charles Sutcliffe confronted him in June 1973, with proof of his hidden fortune, Godber fainted. It was a sensational interlude, and one with sweeping ramifications. Godber fled from Hong Kong, causing an immense upsurge of public protest. This led directly to the formation of a new law enforcement body, namely the Independent Commission Against Corruption, which was vested with enormous powers of investigation and arrest. Charged specifically to target graft, it recruited both locally and abroad and went to work with a will.

Inevitably, police were the major targets, simply because they, usually in uniform, had the closest day to day relations with the public. The anti-graft operations were both widespread and intense. There were many arrests. Many, both in the Force and the community, felt things were going too far, and practices that had for many years been either accepted or to which authorities turned a blind eye, were now subject to rigorous scrutiny and prosecution.

In 1977, believing they were being victimised, thousands of police marched on police headquarters or staged meetings to express their anger and distress. The government, conceding a good thing had perhaps gone too far, issued an amnesty for almost all cases in the past, mostly involving petty corruption.

The anti-graft campaign had left scars, some deep and bitter. Out of the experience, a new feeling emerged. Many young policemen felt open relief that the old days were over. A commission of three senior British police officers examined Force manpower and structure, making many recommendations. Key among these suggestions, all of which were adopted, was that policemen should have a realistic living wage. The police system that emerged out of this five-year period of upheaval was better manned, more directly managed and more accountable. It was the Royal Hong Kong Police that could be recognised on those days.

Throughout those difficult, trying years, police never wavered in their duty. The dreadful landslides of 1972, the normal, annual buffeting by typhoons, and crime waves were dealt with by the Force that gained yearly in confidence and experience. Despite investigations, widespread publicity about past corruption problems and a temporary slump in morale, police continued to serve with dedication.

The Force continued to gain wide acceptance and trust from the public. Since the late 1960s, there had been a public relations-information unit designed to inform the public what the police were doing. Junior Police Call, which was an organisation that became the largest youth group in Hong Kong history, recruited youngsters to help in the fight against crime, with significant success. Recruitment figures remained high; a career in the Hong Kong Police was now desirable; the young men and women who marched out onto the parade ground at the Police Training School were better educated, more motivated and vastly better paid than former generations.

The command structure was changing, too. Young men who joined as probationary inspectors in the early 1960s reached senior ranks. Many of them, reflecting changing times, were Chinese whose career structure and prospects had been steadily improving since the Sutcliffe era. As these senior local officers took over the highest ranks, it was a result not merely showing realistic appreciation of the need for Hong Kong Chinese to command the Force after 1997, as laid down in the agreements between Beijing and London, but also the culmination of farsighted career development patterns commenced by police headquarters in the 1960s. Mr. LI Kwan-ha became the first Chinese to hold the post of Commissioner of Police in 1989. Mr. HUI Ki-on succeeded him in 1994.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, a flood of Vietnamese migrants arrived in the territory. The figures soared to over 70,000 in 1979, 7,000 of whom arrived in just three vessels. The problem of housing these migrants as well as the accompanying law and order issues placed a significant burden on the police who were required to guard hurriedly converted emergency refugee centres. Although the situation improved in the following 10 years with the construction of more permanent camps, it proved difficult to reduce the numbers of Vietnamese migrants in the territory, with very few regarded as genuine refugees. Riots and large-scale disturbances in the camps and

detention centres in the early 1990s brought formidable challenges to the Force. It was not until the mid-1990s that the Vietnamese migrant issue was gradually resolved, with the Force taking part in large-scale operations to repatriate migrants to Vietnam by air.

The early 1980s brought a major restructuring and reorganisation of the Force, with the objectives of enhancing command capability at regional, district and divisional levels. The overall philosophy was to devolve authority and responsibility to the lowest practical and acceptable command level. This was followed by a Force-wide implementation of a review of Uniform Branch deployment, which involved a revised sub-unit command structure, improved community policing methods and more flexible patrol and shift systems.

Between 1970s and 1990s, the Force expanded significantly (from 14,500 officers in mid-1970s to 24,700 officers in mid-1980s and 27,500 in mid-1990s) in order to cope with the challenges brought by the rapid increase in population (from 4.5 million in the mid-1970s to 5.5 million in the mid-1980s and 6.1 million in the mid-1990s). This laid the foundation of the contemporary Force, which strode over various challenges in the years that followed.

In early 1990s, the number of robbery cases involving the use of genuine firearms, particularly targeting goldsmith and watch shops, showed an alarming upsurge. The culprits were armed with long-barrel firearms and were indifferent to public safety; shooting indiscriminately in busy streets. Although the Force encountered great challenges under extremely dangerous environment, police officers carried out their duties courageously and established effective liaison with the relevant Mainland law enforcement agencies. Subsequent to the success of the Force strategy to interdict the violent crimes, and the resolute determination of every police officer to protect life, and to preserve the security of Hong Kong, armed robbery cases almost disappeared. The number of robbery cases involving the use of genuine firearms peaked at 66 cases in 1990 and 46 cases in both 1991 and 1992, whilst there were no similar cases between 2007 and 2014.

Bibilography:

1. Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR Government, "Population Estimates", for years 1961-2015.
2. Kevin Sinclair. *Royal Hong Kong Police Force 150th Anniversary (1844-1994)*. Hong Kong: Police Public Relations Branch, Royal Hong Kong Police Force, 1994.