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In 1985 I was just twenty-four years old, but I already felt like a commando veteran. In the blink of an eye I'd gone from the youngster being looked after by the older commandos to the veteran who was now 'mothering' the new lads. And just when I thought I couldn't be surprised by another overseas deployment, I learned that I was to return to Hong Kong with 3rd Raiding Squadron. It was like Christmas come early. Only this time, instead of sweltering in an observation post overlooking the Yellow river, I'd be zooming around Hong Kong harbour in a powerful SeaRider, a small, rigid, inflatable boat.

The emphasis of our work had shifted pretty dramatically from my earlier tour. Illegal immigration was still a problem, though nothing on the scale of 1979. This time, the problem

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was the feared Chinese gangs, the Triads. The gangs – notorious for their violence and brutality – were making a fortune around Hong Kong on everything from smuggling to gambling, prostitution to drugs. Tackling any aspect of the Triads was a serious challenge, and, even in China, with its draconian judicial system and widespread use of the death penalty, the Triads remained in operation.

The Chinese gangs realised there was money to be made from illegal immigration – firstly they would fleece the immigrants and their families of virtually everything they owned and then they would smuggle them into Hong Kong, Europe, North America or the Far East and effectively sell them as slave labourers. Now, 3rd Raiding Squadron, the Hong Kong police and the Royal Navy faced gangs with access to enormous resources. From a position of detecting illegal immigrants on rafts or homemade boats, we were now faced with hundreds of immigrants being piled on to flat-bottomed, aluminium craft powered by huge outboard engines. Some of these craft were powered by four 700 horse-power engines and were capable of racing into Hong Kong with huge loads. They were unstable and highly dangerous, but they had the speed of a water-borne missile and were extremely difficult to intercept. And they almost always attempted their smuggling runs at night, which made the interception even more difficult.

The SeaRiders we used were capable of 30 knots and more, and they still couldn't catch these craft. So what we had to do

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was hunt them, and try to drive them towards a zone where they could be trapped by the shoreline or shallow water and detained. To do this we had to use three or even four boats, with the entire operation usually co-ordinated from a Royal Navy minesweeper. Once a radar contact was picked up, two or three SeaRiders would surge towards the area. Sometimes they would be supported by a Fast Pursuit Craft (FPC) which had twin 200hp outboard engines and was easily capable of 50 knots. The initial response to an alert usually required a SeaRider or FPC to race towards a distant radar contact, usually in pitch black conditions with zero visibility. It was often a hair-raising experience – trusting completely to radar guidance while the boat reached maximum speed.

One SeaRider would then begin firing Shamoulis, a special flare which, after being fired, slowly descends towards the ground on a type of parachute. It burns brightly and lights up a substantial area below. It was the job of one commando to keep firing the Shamoulis so that the area being searched remained lit at all times. If you couldn't light the area, you'd probably lose the contact. Each SeaRider carried up to a hundred Shamoulis, and sometimes even this wasn't enough, because once the first flare was fired, the smugglers knew they'd been detected and the chase was on.

We worked very closely with the Royal Navy and the Hong Kong Maritime Police, and they knew the local waters like the back of their hand. The Royal Navy had for decades been

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recruiting locals for security patrols in Hong Kong – known as Locally Employed People (LEPs) – and they always remained on station in Hong Kong. Needless to say, they were quickly dubbed ‘Lepers’ by the commandos. After a while, we also learned the smugglers’ favourite routes and channels, and these earned special attention.

Most patrols operated from Victoria Basin where HMS *Tamar*, our base, was located. If you were assigned to night patrols, the SeaRider was usually patrolling the various channels from 8:00pm until 3:00am or 4:00am. Once launched, we stayed on patrol, often eating our meals against the stunning backdrop of Hong Kong’s neon skyline. When it was quiet, and particularly during a summer night, it could be a truly magical experience. I remember one particular night coming back down the narrow passages between cargo terminals on the shoreline with streaks of lightning bouncing off each bank around us. It was a very exhilarating experience and, knowing that our antennae were five metres in the air, we were transmitting to each other for fun saying: ‘Wow, did you see that?’

Sometimes the system worked very well. To avoid the combined forces of the SeaRiders, the minesweeper and the FPC, the smuggler would be forced to make constant course alterations, all the time bleeding speed and getting himself closer to either shipping or shallow water, where he could be trapped. Sometimes they managed to get away – having such enormous power and speed at their disposal was a major asset. Unlike in

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1979, we also knew that the Triads wouldn't lose any sleep over shooting their way out of an arrest. So we always carried weapons and were always ready to use them. We often had warning shots fired at us from a distance, but luckily we never had a major shoot-out where anyone was injured.

Unfortunately, the combination of high speed, aggression and panic did occasionally result in tragedy. Once, a smuggler was identified on radar trying to make a night-time run into Hong Kong. His position was illuminated by multiple flares, and the man panicked. He tried to make a run for it, but the FPC was on the scene within minutes. Despite repeated warnings to stop, the man kept going, with his outboards screaming at full throttle. Eventually, he realised that he couldn't outrun the FPC, so he tried to evade by weaving directly across its path, and fatally misjudged one manoeuvre.

The smuggler cut directly across the bow of the FPC and the commando coxswain hadn't a chance to avoid the craft. The FPC ploughed directly over the smuggler's boat, damaging the FPC, but sinking the smuggler. Unfortunately, the smuggler had been paid to bring a family into Hong Kong and, having been thrown into the water, they all drowned. The smuggler was later convicted and jailed for his part in the tragedy.

There were other nights when tragedy was narrowly averted. One particular night, as an FPC was being vectored by the navy, we came across a coxswain and his corporal who were as white as sheets and pretty shaken up. It turns out that they were

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told to investigate a ship out at sea in the pitch dark. They followed a course that took them between two other marks on their radar screen. But it turned out that the two radar blips were actually one ship towing another, and they hit the tow hawser while they were going almost 50 knots. The heavy steel tow line flipped the FPC clean into the air and the two guys narrowly avoided being decapitated by the hawser cable.

I was enjoying this assignment immensely. But one event almost brought my entire career to a premature end. Inevitably, copious amounts of drink were involved, coupled with a rather tasteless T-shirt. Unlike the Fleet Club brawl six years earlier, this time I didn't escape so lightly.

The trouble all started when the US Seventh Fleet arrived into Hong Kong for their formal birthday ball, to mark the 1775 foundation of the US Marine Corps. Admirals the world over love formality – it's a wonderful excuse for wearing dress-whites, polishing up their medals and basically showing off their warships to the great and good of the local community. One of the features of these visits is always a dinner bash, which ranks as the must-have invitation in town. It is usually hosted in the swankiest hotel available, in this case the Hong Kong Hilton on Hong Kong island. Every local dignitary from the military, political and business worlds is invited. Sometimes a few dignitaries are flown in just for the occasion. But in my case, it would have been better if I'd come down with a 'flu.

The US Seventh Fleet dinner proved to be a who's who of

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Hong Kong society. Those in attendance included the Governor of Hong Kong, the Commander of Hong Kong military forces, the US ambassador, as well as various business and political leaders. The First Sea Lord (titular head of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines) had even flown over to Hong Kong from the London admiralty for the occasion. All the senior Royal Marine commanders in Hong Kong were in attendance, including my sergeant-major and the captain who led 3rd Raiding Squadron, not to mention the officer-commanding, landing craft wing.

That Friday, I had been undertaking a special combat driving course on Land Rovers and was surprised to be told that the invitation to the Hilton hotel party extended to me. The Royal Marines were invited at the behest of the US Marine Corps. Like us, US marines also serve aboard major warships and the invitation was seen as a good inter-service gesture.

By now I had been in Hong Kong a few months and had struck up a friendship with a very pretty WREN, who was working in a navy dental surgery. I'd had plenty of relationships over the years, but this was the first time I'd actually felt something special for someone.

Needless to say, all the commandos' wives and girlfriends (WAGs – also known as FADs, 'Families and Dependants') were thrilled at the idea of such a formal dinner – it was an excuse to buy a new ball gown, get their hair done and their nails manicured. For us, unfortunately, it was an excuse to

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drink free booze by the bucketful, courtesy of US President Ronald Reagan. In all, about twenty Royal Marines and their partners attended the bash, and we all opted to wear No. 1 dress uniforms, largely because it saved money on hiring a dress suit. Unfortunately, it also meant we were easily identifiable if anything went wrong.

So we arrived in full dress blues, but one of the lads thought it would be hilarious if he wore an ‘Adolf Hitler – European Tour 1939-45’ T-shirt underneath. As the night wore on, and the more he drank, the more he insisted on unbuttoning his dress jacket and showing off his T-shirt. Grinning inanely, he failed to spot that our commanding officer, who was sitting at a table right beside us, was throwing him dagger looks. But it was too late. To make matters worse, a few of the WAGs had followed the bad example set by their partners and consumed enough cocktails to power one of our Raiding craft.

It didn't help that the Americans' love of pomp and ceremony made them easy targets for our rude and obnoxious behaviour. As the US Marine Corps colour party marched into the ballroom, carrying the stars and stripes and US navy flags, the drunken women started to shout abuse. The famous US Marine Corps battle song, ‘From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli’, was booed by the girls, then one of them decided it would be quite appropriate to use her cigarette lighter to set fire to the miniature ‘stars and stripes’ flags decorating the dinner table. Other guests were horrified, but decided it was unwise to intervene.

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The problem was that having listened for months on end to us running down the US Marines and extolling the virtues of our beloved Royal Marines, they saw no problem in letting their feelings be known. Unfortunately, it was the wrong time and the wrong place. We were embarrassed by their antics.

But it set the tone for the entire evening which, by the strict codes and standards of the Royal Marines, was little more than total anarchy. The Americans were apparently disgusted by our behaviour, and probably by our rampant ingratitude. After all, it was their party, they paid the bill and we insisted on insulting them. The nuclear button was well and truly pressed when the senior British commanders – and particularly the Royal Marine officers in attendance – felt our behaviour reflected badly on them.

I didn't help matters by me breaking a golden Royal Marine rule by unbuttoning my dress jacket and loosening my shirt. Despite the air-conditioning, it was stiflingly hot in the ballroom and the combination of booze, dancing and the amorous attentions of my WREN date were beginning to tell. However, the tradition was that no matter what the heat, no matter what the occasion, dress blues were always to be worn properly. I was out on the dance floor doing my best John Travolta impression when suddenly the crowd parted and I found myself staring directly across the ballroom at the officer commanding 3rd Raiding Squadron. Coincidentally, it was the same officer who'd been my boss in the Falklands three years earlier. Drunk

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as I was, I instantly knew I was in deep shit. I began to sober up there and then. The wisest thing I did all night was leave the party with my date and head down to a bar in Wangchai for a few private beers. But the damage was already done.

The captain took the behaviour of our table as a personal insult, a direct challenge to him and his authority, and felt that when I was out dancing with my dress jacket undone, I was basically taunting him in public. He was powerless to do anything about the rude shouts and flag-burning antics of the British wives and girlfriends, but it was a very different story when it came to me. He had me by the short and curlies, and I was now the obvious scapegoat for the embarrassment at the dinner. Either way, I knew the following morning wouldn't bring happy tidings.

As it turned out, it was even worse that I had feared. My sergeant-major told me, in a comically understated way, 'Things aren't looking too good for you.' I had reported for the next stage of my Land Rover training course at Kowloon, only to be told to report immediately back to headquarters on Hong Kong island. I tried to comfort myself by saying they could hardly sack me for dancing with my jacket undone. I had been mentioned in dispatches in the Falklands and had a pristine record over the previous seven years. Surely, I thought, that counted for something.

When I was eventually ordered into the boss's office, I got both barrels. He told me I was a disgrace to the Royal Marines,

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I had let him down and I was entirely responsible for the Hilton debacle. I felt this was very unfair, but the captain just did not want to hear any excuses. ‘Marine Nordass, get your kit packed up, you’re being sent back to Poole,’ he said, dismissing me with a contemptuous wave of his hand.

I couldn’t believe it. I still had four months of my Hong Kong tour to complete. Worse still, I had applied for a training course that was entirely dependent on my commanding officer’s approval – the free-fall parachute display team in which the Royal Marines were the current world record holders. I was bluntly told that my application had been shredded, so I could forget all about it. I was worried that having been refused the training courses I could have a problem with future promotions. I was also disgusted that my time with 3rd Raiding Squadron was being cut short. The happiest times I had in the marines were with both Raiding Squadrons and I was heartbroken to leave.

There was also the fact that, by being sent home, my relationship with my girlfriend was also being destroyed. I really fancied her, but I knew if I was back in England, the relationship was pretty much finished because, as a WREN, she had to stay in Hong Kong to finish her tour. I didn’t know what to do, so I talked it over with my mates who were horrified for me and a little bit ashamed that their own behaviour might have contributed to my problem. Another corporal, a good friend of mine, took me aside and advised me to return to my commanding officer immediately and offer a full personal apology.

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By now I was desperate, so I went back to the captain's office, waited to be called and then proceeded to eat humble pie. I apologised for my behaviour and any offence I had caused. I took responsibility for what happened and promised it would never happen again. Royal Marines don't beg, but I came as close to it that day as my honour would allow. 'Please,' I asked, 'let me finish out my tour.' But I was wasting my time. 'Sorry, Marine Nordass, you had the chance to apologise earlier. It's too late for all this now,' he bluntly told me.

I also went to the Officer Commanding Landing Craft, who was still in Hong Kong, and apologised. I was hoping he might agree to have a word with the captain and maybe I'd be allowed to stay on in Hong Kong. But he told me bluntly that the final say was with my commanding officer. The dinner had been an embarrassment and it was felt that an example had to be made. And that was me.

So I was shipped home just five days later. I lost 3rd Raiding, I lost my training courses, I lost the remainder of my tour and I lost my girl. The only little bit of good news from the whole sorry episode was that, a few days after arriving back at Poole, I heard via the grapevine that I needn't worry about future promotion prospects as my punishment was deemed more than sufficient for what had happened. So at least my corporal's stripes were still on the horizon if I wanted them.

Yet, bad as it was, it could have been an awful lot worse. One commando came back from Hong Kong in a body bag that year

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after falling from the sixteenth floor of the building we were based in. To this day, no-one knows precisely what happened, bar the fact that he had been drinking in the pub just a few hours before. I had been on patrol that night and was returning to base when I was ordered to another location and told to remain there with my section until HQ were ready for us. I felt an icy ball form in the pit of my stomach, not least because a few of us had been selling off excess petrol fuel to the local fishermen and farmers who were only too delighted to buy it at knock-down prices – and SeaRiders were so notoriously heavy on fuel that it was difficult for anyone except the boat crew to accurately assess what they were burning. The whole black-market enterprise kept us in beer money and was also a very handy boost to our Christmas fund. Unfortunately, it was also a potential court-martial offence. But, we reckoned, it was worth it – anyway, they'd have to catch us first!

As we waited to be called to base, we pondered over our fate and how the sergeant-major could possibly have discovered our little private enterprise. Then, when we arrived back, we were told that this poor lad had fallen from close to the top of the building and that the circumstances of the tragedy were being investigated. I still feel a little guilty when I recall that my first feeling was one of utmost relief. It was only later that we spared a thought for the poor bastard who was being scraped up from the concrete outside.