

## Alexis (Alec) Damsgaard, 1894 – 1971

By Buddy Hide Jr ©



Alexis Damsgaard, late master of the Cable Ship *Store Nordiske (2)* was a 47 year-old Jutlander born in the small village of Bredsten on 27th October 1894. After formal education he joined the Danish Navy aged fourteen. He later transferred to the Merchant Service, serving on windjammers on their 128 day voyages round the Horn to trade with Peru. After the customary five years before the mast Alec qualified as 2nd officer. He later joined the *Store Nordiske Telegraf-Selskab* (Great Northern Telegraph Company) as master of the 1,570 ton *C S Pacific* operating out of Shanghai.

**Left:** Captain Alexis Damsgaard circa 1935

The Danish operated Cable Ships were responsible for the maintenance of the submarine cables in the South China Seas, Dutch East Indies, Singapore and Australia. Alec experienced the full fury of typhoons while pursuing his duties, and, in August 1937 was replacing a submarine cable during the Japanese bombardment of Shanghai.

Alec married a Chinese born English girl, Dorothy Trevor-Smith in 1918. Dorothy's family had been in China for three generations. Her maternal grandparents arrived in 1865. They were missionaries associated with the British and Foreign Bible Society with the China Inland Mission based in Shanghai. Her grandfather was also a physician, and one time Superintendent of the Ningpo American Baptist Hospital. Dot and Alec had four sons, two of whom died very young. Their two surviving sons were educated at the Shanghai American School, qualifying them for further education in the USA. In 1934, when his long leave was due, Alec took his family back to Europe and did the same during the following long leave in 1938, visiting relatives in both England and Denmark before embarking on a transcontinental journey back by road and rail through Finland and Russia, arriving in Stanford, USA, in time for Bent, their eldest son, to enrol with Stanford University. The Damsgaards returned to Shanghai in November where Alec continued his command of the *C S Pacific*.

Bent visited his family in Shanghai during the summer of 1940, and in September both sons left together for the voyage to the United States where Bent continued at Stanford and the youngest son, Kjeld, known by all as Kelly, enrolled with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Both boys went on to have successful careers in their respective fields.

Alec's eldest son Bent was Inducted into the US Army in Nov 1943. After his initial assessment and training he was assigned to the Psychological Warfare Branch in Brisbane, Australia. He was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant while collating intelligence material of psychological significance and presenting it in clear-cut objectives, broadcasting on "*The Philippine Hour*" and the "*Voice of Freedom*." He was responsible for the research library on enemy psychological vulnerabilities, expertly preparing and delivering news summaries and commentaries designed to undermine the morale of the enemy. With the surrender of Japan Bent was posted to Tokyo where he co-authored numerous papers on the Pacific war. Bent retired from the Army in March 1946 and returned to Shanghai to visit his parents whom he had not seen or heard from since 1940. Following his visit he returned to Tokyo to serve in civil affairs as Chief Publications Analyst during the reconstruction of Japan until 1949 when he returned to the USA. Bent had published numerous papers on all aspects of Japanese society while serving there.

Following his return to the US he took up employment with the [Pacific Maritime Association](#) in San Francisco as Research Director. Aged just 37, Bent suffered a fatal heart attack, leaving Patricia a widow with three children, Michael, Peter and Heidi.

Alec's younger son Kjeld (Kelly) received a BS in naval architecture and marine engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1944. He married Dorothy Fanck before joining the navy, in which he served from 1944 to 1946, becoming an American citizen in the process. In April, 1946, he joined Sun Shipbuilding Dry Dock Co, Chester, Pennsylvania in the hull technical department. He was promoted to Vice President of the liquid gas specialty vessel product group in 1972. Kelly suffered a fatal heart attack in 1975 aged 52, leaving Dorothy a widow with a grown up son and daughter, Kell and Ann.

Alec took command of the 1,462 ton C S *Store Nordiske (2)* in 1940 and was in Hong Kong when the IJA invaded. When the Japanese secured a bridgehead on Hong Kong Island during the night of 18/19th December the British Imperial Government in London ordered the return of Admiral Chan Chak and his Military Council back to Free China at all costs. It was most important that Britain preserved some credibility with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Government in Chungking following the Hong Kong disaster. The following morning the 2nd MTB Flotilla was stood down from front line duties in preparation for this task. The Colony finally surrendered to the overwhelming forces of the Imperial Japanese Army on 25th December 1941, Christmas Day, at 15.15 Hrs.

That afternoon Alec was in Aberdeen with 21 year-old Holger Christensen, a family friend whose father, Ove, had also worked for the *Store Nordiske Telegraf-Selskab* as a Chief Engineer. With them was another officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Harley, late of the *SS Yatshing*, Christensen's former ship, and Sub-Lt Forster, late of *HMS Cornflower* which had been moored south west of Kellett Island since the 1930s as the HQ of the HKNVF, later renamed HKRNVR, with mobilisation. Following orders to blow up the Chung Hom Kok, now Chung Am Kok, Mine Control Station the Warrant Officers formed a Royal Navy Division (RND) for the defence of the nearby Repulse Bay Hotel. Warrant Officer Bill Wright was briefly captured close by the hotel garage before fellow Warrant Officer Benny Proulx shot the Japanese officer holding him and fellow navy captives. They later proceeded towards Aberdeen.

Proulx chauffeured Mike Kendall, the MI9 agent detailed to oversee the MTB escape, when he was ashore so knew about the intended escape. He and Wright were prowling the waterfront in Aberdeen on Christmas Day afternoon hoping to board the MTBs. Bill Wright joined the party working on the *Cornflower's* 25' cabin launch alongside the jetty next to Hope Dock while Ploulx went searching the docks and in the event missed the getaway. Admiral Chan Chak's party arrived looking for the motor torpedo boats that were promised, and were informed that none had been seen for at least half an hour. Accompanying the Admiral's party were a number of civilians and staff officers from Battle HQ bent on fleeing the Colony. Two days earlier Major Goring had told the GOC, General Maltby, that he intended to escape, *"The General informed me that there was a plan afoot for a small Navy party to smuggle out a very important Chinese naval officer, a certain Admiral Chan Chak, provided there was a suitable boat left un-sunk. If I cared to see the organizer there might be room for me; and, since I knew Admiral Chan Chak personally, I might be given the task of escorting him to the rendezvous when the moment came."* Mike Kendall, the SOE leader, agreed at the eleventh hour to Goring's request stating *"I wanted key personnel from Government and military, people who could tell the story of Hong Kong."*

In a letter to his mother, Ted Ross wrote of his experience in Aberdeen. *"Although the white flag had been hoisted nearly an hour before, there was still heavy rifle and machine-gun fire to be heard all around, and an occasional burst of artillery. Jap planes overhead were still dropping bombs."*



The crew, realising this could be their chance also to escape, worked feverishly to get the launch shipshape, others began victualing the craft with tinned food, kerosene cans full of water and arms foraged from shell-wrecked stores. 16 men crammed on board as they got under way. *"We went on board the speed boat and left. It was 4:10pm in the afternoon"* Recorded Adm Chan Chak in his journal.

**Left:** The 1,462 ton CS *Store Nordiske (2)* built in 1922

Damsgaard, a master mariner, was fully aware of the perils they would face in the open waters of the South China Sea in such a small craft as he took the helm, navigating skilfully

through the throng of Junks and Sampans crowding the harbour entrance to Staunton Creek where he saw a more seaworthy vessel, the 150 ton diesel berthing tug Polly built in 1904 and listed as C.410 by the Admiralty, beached on the rocks just past the creek.

As they approached C.410 they were spotted by some Japanese soldiers idling by Pill-Box 12 at the south-west base of Brick Hill.

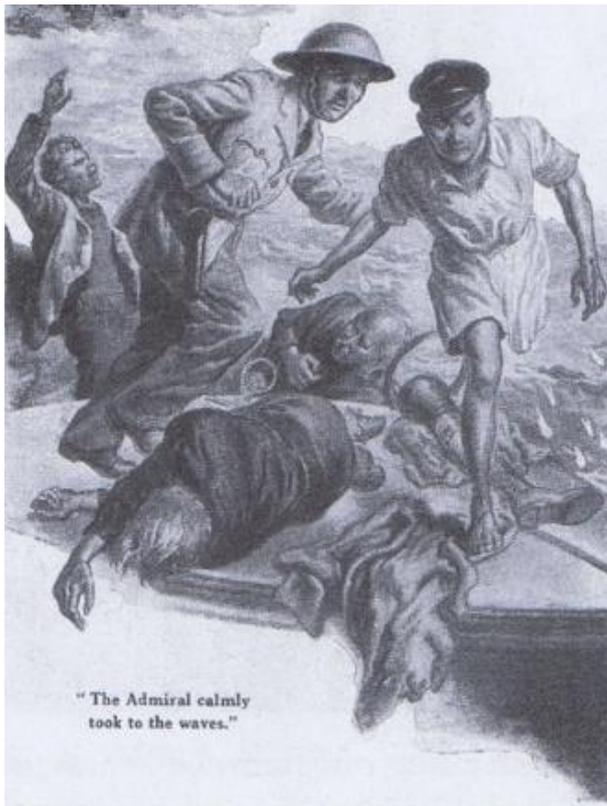
Freddie Guest later wrote *"It was all very quiet except for the throb of the engine and I was beginning to think that we were safe, at least from the land, when suddenly through the stillness of that lovely evening there came a crack of*

*a single shot, quickly, followed by another. We stared at one another with startled looks and I yelled; My God! Sighting shots, as indeed they were, and in the next second came the frightening rattle of a machine-gun. The first burst hit the boat and in the second burst the Norwegian engineer (Damsgaard), poor fellow, fell on me riddled with bullets."*

David MacDougall was standing beside the tall Jutlander as he helmed the launch.

*"The man next to me had his knee smashed, another got one in the stomach, the Chinese leader had his wrist shot away, and one or two (I couldn't see how many) collapsed and lay still. We were crouching in the bottom of the boat holding onto our tin hats. Then some immense force struck me a paralysing blow and for a moment I didn't know what had happened until, rolling over, I saw my own blood trickling down the deck. Before I had quite taken this all in another bullet went clean through my steel hat and a third clipped the sole of my shoe. Neither touched me. A few seconds later a machine gun burst silenced the engine and we were thus left drifting helplessly about 200 yards from the shore under intense fire"* wrote David MacDougall in a letter to his wife.

Major Goring shouted for everyone to jump overboard and swim for it. Those that could, leapt overboard and swam for their lives towards an uninhabited islet at the end of the Channel. More bursts followed, with bullets riddling the boat, one going right through the Admiral's helmet just after he had removed his wooden leg containing \$40,000HK (£2,500GBP). *"At that moment, my Coxswain Yeung Chuen walked by my side, Admiral, I can't swim, what should I do? I just handed the life-ring to him. Then my left wrist and my head got shot, fortunately I was wearing a helmet but my wrist started bleeding, I used a handkerchief to wrap around it, then jumped into the sea."* The Admiral's Aide-de-Camp Lt-Cdr Hsu Heng, known as Henry, was a champion swimmer and supported the crippled Admiral and his Coxswain, but after a while Chan insisted on Henry going ahead while he and his Coxswain made their way slowly to the islet.



*"The Admiral calmly took to the waves."*

Damsgaard and Forster were unable to move, and Colonel Yee claimed he could not swim, so they remained on board as the machine-gunners concentrated on the the swimmers. The launch drifted all night and in the morning Yee hailed a Junk, bribing the skipper to take the two wounded Europeans to a hospital. The boat finally drifted ashore with Yee spending some days at Pak Sha Wan before returning to Ap Lei Chau, staying with the Reverend Cheng in the Harbour Mission Church in San Shi Street before making his way to Free China carrying Henry's bible and wearing his shoes. SK caught up with Henry and the Admiral in Kukong early in February, much to the surprise of everyone, SK included. A furious argument ensued over the money allegedly abandoned in the boat along with Henry's valuables.

The swimmers, all bar Harley, who drowned, made it to the islet, where they saw three boats in the lee on the far side, two of which were in the process of making way. Christensen got to the shore as the remaining party came over the hill shouting to the boats and were answered by a burst of machine-gun before two of the boats departed. This prompted Christensen to swim out immediately. The 21 year-old was shouting "There are ten chaps following being machine gunned." But the boat's crew thought he was shouting "There are ten Japs following, with machine-guns." When he reached the lone MTB he was unceremoniously

hauled on board at gun point and questioned by the commanding officer, Lt Parsons HKRNVR. The crew had manned the Lewis-guns thinking the silhouettes on the hill were Japanese. The remainder of the motley party soon followed, all were in no more than their underwear and were kitted out in whatever spare clothes that were stored on board. The remaining boats of the flotilla returned and hove-to after dark. Sub-Lt David Legge, known by all as Davo, was surprised to see Holger, a family friend from Shanghai. Davo's step-father, Jens Elster was the Orlogskaptajn of the *C S Great Northern* operating out of there.

Davo had been on aircraft watch when he heard shouting from the shore, with others coming over the hill in the twilight he had opened fire with his stripped Lewis-Gun, luckily not hitting anybody.

Alec and the critically wounded Forster were taken to hospital in Hong Kong, where Forster succumbed to his wounds. Alec made steady progress recovering from his bullet wounds and was discharged from hospital sometime in February. As a Danish national he was free to leave the colony along with Herr Heisterberg, a fellow Dane. They booked a passage on the first available steamer out, arriving back in Shanghai in the early hours of 28th February 1942. On their arrival they were told by the Danish Consulate General to write a profuse letter of thanks to the Japanese authorities which they did on 4<sup>th</sup> March.

The escape party reached Kukong on the 6<sup>th</sup> February. Admiral Chan Chak was operated on at the Mission Hospital to remove the bullet lodged in his wrist. Jean Moore, the surgeon's wife looked after the Admiral during his convalescence. *"Mooi (Samuel) had removed the bullet from his wrist but he had haemorrhaged from a gastric ulcer which was no longer quiescent due to congratulatory feasts en route to Kukong. He was given a blood transfusion directly from Peredur Jones, our Welsh missionary, whom he later rewarded with a bottle of whisky."*

The bullet lodged under the shoulder blade of David MacDougall, known as Mac to his friends, had been poked about in Waichow without success. Further attempts to remove it in Kukong were abandoned. A third attempt at the Canadian run "West China Union University Hospital" at Chengtu in Szechwan Province failed and Mac eventually flew out of Chungking on 20<sup>th</sup> February bound for London via Calcutta and Lagos in Nigeria where he stayed with Alexander Grantham, the Colonial Secretary, for several weeks. The British press celebrated Mac's arrival in London in mid-March as the first of the Christmas Day escape party to complete a home run. Mac was successfully operated on and made a full recovery. Following the Japanese surrender in 1945 Mac returned as the first post-war Colonial Secretary, laying the foundation for the colossus that Hong Kong is today.

David Legge came across a helper working part-time in the hospital in Kukong who knew his mother in Shanghai, she wrote a cryptic letter in Chinese to his mother. A translated copy is held in the Danish Consulate archives. *"Dear Mrs. Elster, I am again writing this letter to tell you that I have very safely arrived at my destination. I am now living at this place engaged in teaching a girl in the forenoon and in learning nursing work at the local hospital. I am sure you are very glad to know that David and his friend, Holger have arrived here. I have already seen them several times. They are all very well. They will go westward in the near future. They will send you a letter after they have arrived at their destination. We are glad to be able to meet David and his friend. We are very unwilling to see them leave so quickly. They had very shocking experiences before their arrival here. Please send my best wishes to my friends. May Good have blessing on you. Yours faithfully Eteli (?)."*

Evelyn Christensen, Holger's mother, wrote to the Consulate on the 23rd of March 1942 explaining that she had now received an undated letter from her son in Kunming.

The next record of Alec and his wife Dot is on a Shanghai POW camp list dated 23rd Oct 1942. If they were interned they would have been released quickly being Danish nationals, unlike Dot's siblings and their families who were English and remained as POWs for the remainder of the Japanese occupation.

Alec spent the remaining war years engaged in humanitarian work for the Red Cross in Shanghai.

Alec's nephew Ted recalled "I was in a Japanese camp during the war. I can recall very clearly that Alec would come to our camp, standing on the running board of the driver's side and leading the way in for the UNRRA parcels that were to be distributed. How he managed to get from Hong Kong to Shanghai is not known to me, but he was certainly there as the rep for the Red Cross."

After the Japanese surrender Alec received an award from the Red Cross for his work during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai.

Ted's mother died a few years after her release, and his father disappeared in 1949, leaving Ted an orphan. Alec and Dot took him in, with a view to moving to the USA to join their sons. As Ted was classed as a 'China-born White', it was not straightforward and it was not until 1950, a year after the Communists took control, that they finally got an exit visa for Canada.

Ted recalled *"We then left to go to Tientsin where we took a freighter to Hong Kong. From Hong Kong we travelled on a Maersk freighter to San Francisco to meet Bent and his family. Alec bought a Ford and we proceeded to Pennsylvania to meet Kjeld and his family. We returned to Frisco, and then proceeded via "Peace Arch" into Canada. As a 'China-born White' there were only 100 places to fill, so the alternative was to go to Canada."*



Alec, Dot and Ted settled in Vancouver where Ted still resides today. Alec found employment as master of the 200 ton M Y *Norsal*, a 132 foot motor yacht owned by Gordon Gibson Sr, a prominent business leader and politician in British Columbia.

**Left:** Alec with his nephew Ted & Grandson Kell in Pennsylvania 1950.

About 1954, Alec took a position in Portland, Oregon working for a marine insurance company. He commuted until 1956 when Ted was enrolled at the University of British Columbia. Alec and Dot moved to Beaveton, just outside Portland, where they stayed for the remainder of their lives. Ted continued his education at the University of British Columbia Medical School in Vancouver and still lives there today. Alec carried the bullet in his leg without suffering any noticeable limp for the remainder of his life, passing away at the age of 76 following a short illness just a year after his beloved wife Dot. They are survived by five grandchildren in the USA, with extended families in Australia, Canada, Denmark and England.



Adm Chan Chak later praised the integrity of the steersman Damsgaard for his skill in manoeuvring the craft under fire.

**Left:** The 200 ton M Y *Norsal*

A local Shanghai paper stated on 23rd Nov 194? *"It is a gracious thought which inspires the expression of gratitude to Captain Damsgaard and his voluntary co-workers of the International Red Cross, for the excellent work they did for the internees while still under Japanese control, and this journal wishes to be associated with it. Particularly in the case of Captain Damsgaard who worked undeniably hard for the good of those segregated in the camps, and dealt with all sorts of personal matters, where he could, with a sympathy and courtesy which should always be remembered. His patience must at times have been subjected to a very considerable strain, but his cheery face and inimitable good humour made his monthly visits to the camps something to be looked forward to, quite apart from the good things entrusted to his care to deliver. There are few men in Shanghai to whom the imprisoned Allies owe a great deal, and one of the chief amongst them is Capt Damsgaard. It is regrettable that those in the camps do not even now know all of what was done for them."*

Jardine Matheson had moved their China HQ to Kunming, and it was here that Holger Christensen parted company from the main escape party. Three years later, in March 1945, a vessel belonging to the United States Lines Company, bound for New York, departed Southampton with Holger listed as the Chief Mate. He survived the war, and within a year of the cessation of hostilities, his Australian born, Danish mother, Evelyn, moved to Sydney NSW, with Holger following suit a couple of years later. The last known record of Holger is as a ship's officer on board the 20,565 ton Nederland Line MS Oranje departing Southampton UK on 7th September 1959 bound for Sydney. The MS Oranje was the regular Amsterdam to Sydney passenger service, sailing via Southampton. No further record of him has been found. Holger was only 21 at the time of the escape and it is not inconceivable that he may still be alive today. The hunt for Holger Edwin Burt Christensen born 24<sup>th</sup> September 1920 in Copenhagen goes on.

Alexis Damsgaard played a key part in facilitating the wartime escape of several 'shakers and movers' of the post war Orient:

Adm Chan Chak became the first post-war Mayor of Canton, now Guangzhou, before taking over as C-in-C of the Chinese Navy in 1946.

David MacDougall returned to Hong Kong as the first post-war (Brigadier) Colonial -Secretary, laying the foundations for the colossus that Hong Kong is today.



**Left:** The *Cornflower* launch survivors in Waichow, now Huizhou, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1942.

**Back Row:** Supt Bill Robinson, W-O Bill Wright HKRNVR, Capt Peter Macmillan, Capt Freddie Guest, Coxswain Yeung Chuen, Ted Ross.

**Middle Row:** David MacDougall, Adm Chan Chak CN, Major Goring, Sq-Ldr Max Oxford RAF.

**Front Row:** Holger Christensen, Lt-Cdr Hsu Heng (Henry) CN.

Photo from the Ross collection.

Henry Hsu became an international hotelier and Olympic committee member for Taiwan and was honoured with a full state funeral in February 2009.

Max Oxford returned as Deputy Director of Kai Tak International Airport.

Bill Wright was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Holger Christensen was Mentioned in Despatches for their contribution to the escape: *"For skilful and courageous services which enabled a party to make a daring escape from Hong Kong."*

The DSC is granted in recognition of "gallantry during active operations against the enemy at sea."

Ann Damsgaard, granddaughter of Alexis Damsgaard, expressed her family's thanks for the research conducted by the HERO team in partnership with Frode Z Olsen. *"You have brought Alec's relatives together in this effort. I have now heard from Ted whom I hadn't seen since my grandmother's funeral in 1970, Helle in Denmark -- thank you Frode-- and also Kelly in Australia, as well as our West Coast cousins! We all adored Alec and would do anything to help sustain his memory and learn more about his valor on that difficult Christmas Day in 1941."*

## References

[Escape from Hong Kong](#) by Buddy Hide Jr.

[www.Geni.com](http://www.Geni.com):

[Frode Z Olsen](#) A retired Police Supt & crime writer who researched the Danish Archives and has now written a book on all the Danish nationals in the Colony in December 1941, to be published this coming December, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle for Hong Kong.

Alexis Damsgaard's papers & family correspondence.

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The Palo Alto local paper or the Stanford University paper. 1938 "Captain of Danish Ship Recalls Sea Adventures" Sub-Lt David Legge's descendant Sue Scott confirming authenticity of an English translation of a letter written in Chinese & posted to Legge's mother from Kukong linking Holger Christensen to Sub-Lt David Legge.

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