

# HONG KONG ESCAPE RE-ENACTMENT ORGANISATION

## 香港突圍羣英協會

### INTRODUCTION

During World War II, the British Colony of Hong Kong surrendered to Japanese invading forces on Christmas Day 1941 after a hard-fought battle that lasted 18 days. The British effort was supported by Chinese allies. Within hours of the surrender, a party of British and Chinese officers and men, together with the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla, evaded capture and made a daring escape from the island by sea. Despite several men being wounded by Japanese fire, and the loss of two lives, the party of 68 men landed at dawn on the Japanese-occupied Chinese mainland at Nan Ao in Mirs Bay. From here they walked for four days and nights, covering over 115km on foot, before crossing Japanese lines and reaching the relative safety of free China in Waichow (Huizhou today). Here a group photo was taken, which has proved a vital connection for the families of the escape party in later years. Three Special Operations Executive (or Z Force) members of the escape party remained in Waichow, and helped to set up the British Army Aid Group (BAAG), aiding many POWs to escape from Hong Kong to safety along the 'escape corridor' proven by the initial party. From Waichow the Christmas Day escape party travelled by river and road to Shuikwan, where it split up, with senior members flying to China's wartime capital, Chungking, for debriefing and the Naval party continuing on to Rangoon in Burma.

The international press celebrated the 'thrilling escape' as an heroic event during a desperate period of the war, though details of the route were kept secret for many years. Fortunately for us, some of the participants kept vivid diaries ("*It was only when granddad died that I discovered his diary and found out about this miraculous escape*"), whilst others wrote letters to relatives describing the battle for Hong Kong and the escape afterwards.

Using these diaries and letters, as well as official reports, the **Hong Kong Escape Re-enactment Organisation** (HERO), led by an executive committee of founder members (see below), re-traced, so far as was possible, the steps of our forefathers at Christmas 2009.

### HERO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

Donald Chan (son of Admiral Chan Chak) - President

Richard Hide (son of Petty Officer Buddy Hide) – Chairman

Sheena Recaldin (daughter of David MacDougall) – Secretary General

Andrew Chan (grandson of Admiral Chan Chak)

Emma Oxford (daughter of Squadron Leader Max Oxford)

Alison McEwan (daughter of Major Colin McEwan)

Russell Joyce (grandson of Able Seaman Lesley S. Barker)

David Hide (son of Petty Officer Buddy Hide)

### BACKGROUND

As far as we are aware, this was the first time in history that the Chinese and British joined forces against a common enemy. The escape was planned by Allied intelligence agents, and the party was led to safety by the Chinese government's senior representative in Hong Kong, Admiral Chan Chak. Without his courage and leadership,

and the aid of local Chinese people and resistance fighters, who willingly put their own lives at risk, the party might never have survived. The events led to King George VI awarding the Admiral an honorary British knighthood (KBE) – an exceptional occurrence, as only one other had been awarded to a Chinese national 22 years previously. Today, the Chinese and British governments are working to foster ever closer relationships between our countries, a process to which our forefathers contributed and which we hope to continue.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS – DECEMBER 2009 RE-ENACTMENT**

Thanks very largely to a website ([www.hongkongescape.org](http://www.hongkongescape.org)) created by Richard Hide in 1996, a group of descendants came together to form HERO in early 2009. The founding Executive Committee organised the re-enactment and reunion of descendants that took place in Hong Kong and Guangdong in December 2009. HERO worked with a mainland China partner, the China Culture Development Association, and received valuable support from the British and Chinese governments.

Over 100 descendants gathered in Hong Kong to celebrate the opening of a special exhibition at the Museum of Coastal Defence, "Escape from Hong Kong: The Road to Waichow", and to commemorate their forefathers at a Christmas Day dinner aboard the Jumbo Floating Restaurant – at exactly the time and place where the escape began under Japanese fire in 1941. Relatives of 15 escapers, ranging in age from 2 to 90, travelled from four continents – Europe, Asia, America, and Australia – to participate in the re-enactment. Nearly 80 HERO members continued on from Hong Kong on December 26 to retrace the escape route into Guangdong province. In the spirit of Sino-British friendship, the group enjoyed an official reception in Shenzhen, a visit to Nanao, the coastal village where the MTBs landed, exploration of temples and villages along the escape route, meetings with descendants of the East River Column, and a farewell banquet with officials in Waichow.

HERO's 2009 re-enactment marked a major step towards achieving our original objectives, which are set out below. Participants went home with lasting friendships and memories of China. The media in Hong Kong and mainland China covered HERO's program extensively, informing a new audience about the events of 1941.

We are committed to building on the success of the 2009 re-enactment. Below we reaffirm the mission of HERO, and set out our updated objectives.

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

The Mission of HERO is to honour the comradeship of our forefathers and foster strong new friendships among their descendants; hoping that this will forge strong ties between Britain and China for the 21st Century and beyond. By creating a forum for sharing knowledge, we aim to raise interest in, and appreciation of, this unique episode in Sino-British history and to commemorate the 1941 escape with a series of memorial stones at Aberdeen, Nanao and Huizhou.

## **OBJECTIVES**

HERO has achieved three of its original objectives, namely:

- to plan and execute at Christmas 2009 a re-enactment of the escape involving descendants of the original escapees
- to establish a long term exhibition at the Museum of Coastal Defence, Hong Kong.
- to accurately plot and follow the original route as closely as possible

Accordingly, our objectives are now:

- to commemorate the 1941 escape with memorial stones, which will be placed at Aberdeen, Nanao and Huizhou
- to plan and execute a 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event at Christmas 2011, which will also coincide with the end of the long term HKMCD exhibition
- to continue to promote closer relations between Chinese and British people, in recognition of the co-operation and friendship developed during WWII
- to continue to share information and maintain the website (<http://www.hongkongescape.org>) as the main information portal
- to continue to gain recognition, support and sponsorship from official bodies and interested organisations/individuals, particularly with a view to the acquisition and placement of the memorial stones
- to continue to support and promote the existing exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence, and to consider the possibility of exhibitions at other locations

## **MUSEUM OF COASTAL DEFENCE**

We will continue to promote the exhibition at the Museum of Coastal Defence in Hong Kong, and to ensure that all exhibits lent by HERO descendants are safely returned to them when the exhibition closes in December.

## **MEMORIALS**

We would like to establish a series of memorial stones to be placed at Nanao, Aberdeen, and Huizhou. It is hoped that these memorial stones would also act as an on-site reminder of the part that local residents played in the escape. Descendants of the original escapees are now found all over the world, and we believe a trail of this sort could attract international interest to an area whose population gave so much to our fathers at such great risk to themselves.

## **ROLL OF HONOUR FOR PAST DISTINGUISHED HEROs**

### **Duncan On-pong Chan [29.11.1934 – 02.11.2009]**

Duncan was one of Admiral Chan Chak's twin sons, a Founder Member of HERO and our first Vice Chairman. Despite being very ill when HERO was formed in 2008 he worked tirelessly both before and after its formation to help achieve its aims. He spread the HERO story whenever and wherever he could – and was a ready volunteer of time and effort to all who came for assistance.

### **Henry Heng Hsu [06.12.1912- 03.02.2009]**

Henry Heng Hsu was Admiral Chan Chak's ADC during the time of the escape and was, as far as we know, the last surviving member of the original escape party. We were very proud when Henry agreed to support us by becoming Honorary President and Commander-in-Chief of our Organisation