

Arthur Pittendrigh 1902 - 1968

A man of interest

by Buddy Hide Jr ©

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Lt Pittendrigh RNR
In Guiyang 1942

Arthur Pittendrigh was born in Hong Kong in 1902. His father, William McKenzie Pittendrigh, was listed as a merchant in Des Voeux Rd, Central and died prematurely aged 52 in 1936 leaving his wife Elizabeth a widow.

After four years studying in high school Arthur joined the Merchant Service, progressing rapidly up to Master Mariner.

In 1935 Arthur married Miss Josephine Eleanor Reynard, 12 years his junior, in the USA. Three years later they departed New York on board the 19,000 ton Cunarder RMS *Scythia* arriving in Southampton on 21st November 1938.

Arthur was formerly in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service when he was mobilised into the Royal Navy Reserve on 1st November 1939.

During the latter days of the battle for Hong Kong he was based in the dockyard at Aberdeen as 1st Officer of the yard under Commander Hugh Montague RN (Rtrd). Just after 14.00 hours on Christmas Day Arthur took command of the 150 ton diesel powered berthing tug Polly, AKA C.410, beached on the rocks close to Staunton Creek in Aberdeen Channel. Under sporadic machine-gun and sniper fire the Polly was refloated at high tide and proceeded to the dockyard where Arthur received the news that Hong Kong had surrendered.

Commander Montague declared that he was going to attempt an escape after nightfall in the Polly, with the aim of catching up with Admiral Chan Chak's escape party. Montague, with Lieutenant's Pethick and Pittendrigh, both master mariner RNR officers, along with a motley crew of four ratings, proceeded out of Aberdeen Harbour under cover of darkness to rendezvous with the Chan party who had departed earlier in a small motor launch in search of the MTBs. Not finding them at the agreed rendezvous near Magazine Island, Montague presumed the Chan party had made contact with the MTBs and made good their escape to Mirs Bay.

Monty then shaped course for Mirs Bay navigating a circuitous course south of Lamma Island, through the West Lamma Channel, thus missing the MTBs which were still in the lee of Ap Lei Chau, in the East Lamma Channel. As the Polly entered the mouth of the bay they were discovered by a Japanese warship, the IJN Tsuga, an old Momi-class destroyer now used for escort duties, in company with the IJN Kasasagi of the 15th MTB Squadron, Canton. As a spotlight swept round Montague ordered the helmsman to go about. The Polly proceeded away to the southwest from where she had come, her yellow funnel possibly being mistaken for the sail of a sampan or junk. Much to the relief of the crew the light was switched off after ten minutes. With both his Master Mariner officers resting below Montague took the helm for the final stage of the voyage up the bay, whose waters he knew well, having patrolled there on many occasions while in command of the MTBs mother-ship, HMS Robin. Nearing the coast Montague finally succumbed to fatigue, and once again the Polly foundered on a rocky coastline.

The crew of the MTBs spotted the beached tug close to their destination, the small fishing village of Nanao. As the MTBs closed in there ensued a colourful exchange of nautical greetings before the crews set about scuttling their vessels. Once ashore the MTB crews formed into navy divisions to

operate as a guerrilla force guarding Admiral Chan Chak and his party as they were deep behind enemy lines on the Dapeng Peninsula.

Following four days and nights of tortuous marching through mountains the party reached Free China. The following morning on the 30th December 1941 they assembled for the iconic Waichow photo. Arthur, with one sleeve of his jacket hanging by a thread sat next to Sq-Ldr Max Oxford, who just four days prior to the surrender had succeeded the wounded Major Charles Boxer as chief intelligence officer in Hong Kong. It looks very much as though Max swapped his tin hat for Arthur's navy cap in the photo.

On arrival in Kunming Lt Pittendrigh, along with two Sub-Lieutenants flew back to Chungking for intelligence work at the British Embassy. Just over five weeks later on the 8th March 1942 Arthur was seconded into the British Indian Army with the rank of Lieutenant, rising to the rank of Major by the end of hostilities with Japan. On being demobbed Arthur returned to Hong Kong where he joined fellow Christmas Day escapee David MacDougall's team of administrators and took command of the now independent Hong Kong Maritime Police Force with the rank of Colonel, the highest rank to have commanded the service. On his retirement Arthur settled in the small coastal town of Safety Bay in Western Australia, a place I am familiar with, having stayed there in recent years, indeed I married there. Arthur died in 1968 aged 66.

Arthur was gazetted "*For skilful and courageous services which enabled a party to make a daring escape from Hong Kong.*"

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www.hongkongescape.org