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Re-enactment of great escape wins royal seal

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The British government and Prince Philip have expressed support for a local group's plan to retrace part of the route of one of the most famous escapes of the second world war.

It is a journey that started in Ap Lei Chau the day Hong Kong fell to the Japanese and ended 5,120 kilometres and nearly two months later in Rangoon, now called Yangon.

Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, has sent a letter to the Hongkong Escape Re-enactment Organisation, many of whose members are the descendants of the soldiers who made the trek.

'There were many remarkable adventures during [the war], but few can rival the escape from Hong Kong to mainland China of 68 men under the noses of the invading Japanese army,' he wrote.

'There can be no doubt that the success of the escape was largely due to the leadership of Admiral Chan Chak, who had been the representative of the Chinese government in Hong Kong.'

Admiral Chan Chak, sent by Chiang Kai-shek to help the city's British and Allied defenders, led the escape on December 25, 1941, the day governor Sir Mark Young formally surrendered to Lieutenant General Takashi Sakai.

Admiral Chan, who had hidden HK\$40,000 in his wooden leg, refused to give in, and left Aberdeen by boat with 71 officers, dodging Japanese warships as they sailed through the East Lamma Channel at night and headed for Huizhou . From there they trudged through the jungle and caught trains and trucks until most of them arrived in Rangoon on February 14.

This Christmas, up to 100 members of the organisation will re-enact the first part of the journey.

'I am particularly glad to know that the descendants of those who escaped have got together to retrace the escape route in memory of the achievement of their ancestors,' Prince Philip wrote, wishing the 'celebration of the anniversary of the escape will be crowned with complete success'.

Ivan Lewis, Foreign Office minister of state, also welcomed the project.

British Consul General Andrew Seaton has also written to Secretary for Home Affairs Tsang Tak-sing about the re-enactment.

The South China Morning Post reported last year that the descendants of the escape party found one another through a website founded by Richard Hide, son of an escapee, petty officer Stephen 'Buddy' Hide, in 1996.

Mr Hide, with Admiral Chan's sons Donald and Duncan and other descendants, decided to re-enact the escape.

'We are very surprised and very pleased,' Mr Hide said of Prince Philip's letter. 'It gives a lot of credibility to our group, and people will listen up with Prince Philip backing it.'

Mr Hide said group members recently met officials at the Chinese embassy in London and had been waiting for a response.

To coincide with the re-enactment, the group is also organising history seminars and an exhibition co-organised by the Museum of Coastal Defence.

City University political analyst James Sung Lap-kung said it was very unusual to receive royal endorsement for such an event.

'The royal family has been very cautious over foreign policy, so such a gesture is very special,' Dr Sung said.

He said Britain had always been grateful that many Chinese soldiers, whether Kuomintang or Communist, had rescued many of its soldiers kidnapped in war camps in Hong Kong.

Chinese University political scientist Ma Ngok said political factors aside, the re-enactment of the escape would enrich people's collective memory of wartime Hong Kong.

Beijing has yet to respond to Sunday Morning Post inquiries about the re-enactment.