



The escape party comprised 72 soldiers who refused to surrender when the Japanese army stormed into Hong Kong on Christmas Day 1941. They fled from under the enemy's nose to Nanao and then to Huizhou in a five-day hike over mountainous terrain. Photo: Richard Hide

In the epic footsteps of their fathers

Englishman Richard Hide and Nanjing-born Hongkonger Donald Chan On-kwok had never heard of each other until nine years ago. One afternoon in 1999, the two met for the first time in London.

They sat around a table and chatted for four to five hours, without noticing how quickly the time had gone by.

After that, the two men – more than 10 years apart in age – became great friends, almost brothers, because of a unique bonding that outsiders could never comprehend; a bond that will never be broken.

This special connection came from their fathers, the one-legged Chinese admiral Chan Chak and acting stoker petty officer Stephen "Buddy" Hide. They were among the 72 soldiers who refused to surrender when the Japanese army poured into Hong Kong on Christmas Day in 1941, preferring to risk their lives than endure the brutal, slow death of a prison camp.

Their epic trek to freedom took 68 of them as far as Rangoon, Burma (today's Yangon, Myanmar), where they arrived on February 14, 1942. Four of them did not make it out of Hong Kong.

The meeting in London gave birth to the idea of a re-enactment, which has grown into a grand plan nearly 10 years down the road. From around the world, descendants of the escape party will gather in Hong Kong next Christmas to re-enact the first stage of the daring ordeal, from Hong Kong to Nanao (南澳) and then Huizhou (惠州) – retracing the steps of their ancestors who fled Hong Kong under the noses of the Japanese army.

"My father told me the story when I was a kid, but I did not take it in because everybody's dad has a war story. This episode affected the remainder of his life. He did tell me the story about the one-legged Chinese admiral. Then, about 12 years ago, I began getting interested," said Richard Hide, 60, chairman of the re-enactment organising committee.

With his father's belongings, handwritten notes, photographs and newspaper cuttings, he began to put the bits and pieces together. In 1996, with the help of his son-in-law, he set up a one-page website telling his father's story.

Coincidentally, at around the same time and on the other side of the world, Donald Chan, 74, and his twin brother Duncan Chan On-pong began getting interested in the history of their father, who died when they were only 15.

"We rarely saw our father because he was very busy," recalled Duncan Chan.

He was separated from his brother and the rest of the family during the war, and was forced to disguise himself as a girl to avoid being recognised by the Japanese army. The invaders desperately wanted to capture any of the 11 children of Chan Chak – who had been assigned to help the British forces in Hong Kong by Chiang Kai-shek – and use them as bait to trap the Chinese admiral.

A daring escape from Hong Kong after the Japanese invasion on Christmas Day 1941 is to be retraced by the soldiers' descendants, writes **Vivienne Chow**

"We never really cared about our father's stuff," said Donald Chan, who left Hong Kong for England in 1951 with his twin. "But around 10 years ago, having moved around Australia, the US and Canada, we discovered his belongings, like diaries and badges, hidden in this leather suitcase. Then we became interested."

One day in 1998, Mr Hide, who runs his own property refurbishment business, received an e-mail commenting on his internet site. "Very interesting site ... fascinating story ... and by the way, the one-legged Chinese admiral was my grandfather," the writer noted.

It turned out that the e-mail was sent by Donald Chan's daughter, after her son accidentally discovered the site when he was searching for information about admiral Chan. It was that e-mail that connected Mr Hide and Donald Chan.

They exchanged contact information, and the latter threw himself into six months of learning to use a computer, so that he wouldn't have to rely on faxes and pricey long-distance phone calls to stay in touch. They finally met a year later.

"We got along so well and became good friends. There is some kind of connection between us, not the kind of connection or bonding that you would have even if it was someone you went to school with," said Donald Chan.

Mr Hide's website became a contact point for other descendants, including those of Colin McEwan of the special operations executive, and David MacDougall of the ministry of information in Hong Kong, who returned to the city as the brigadier colonial secretary and served as an acting governor between May and July 1947.

The Chan brothers, on the other hand, got hold of the only living survivor of the escape party, Henry Hsu Heng, 96, who now represents Taiwan as a member of the International Olympic Committee.

Mr Hsu was admiral Chan's right-hand man and took care of the admiral when he was shot in the wrist during the escape. He also managed to convert Chan Chak to Christianity, because the admiral had promised to convert if he survived the escape. The Chan brothers were also friends with Mr Hsu and his family.

Donald Chan said about 20 to 30 per cent of the descendants had so far been found. He hoped that more people could join their network.

"We see other descendants as like our brothers. We feel very close towards each other. I don't know why. We feel that someone is guiding us to do this project.



Richard Hide with Donald and Duncan Chan in Hong Kong in October. The three are sons of escape party members. Photo: Richard Hide

The great escape: route taken by the 68 soldiers who left Hong Kong



No one gets paid to do this, so it's like a miracle," Donald Chan said. "[The escape] was a life-changing period of their lives. Everybody [the descendants] now lives in various parts of

the world ... they've all got the story and shared similar background," Mr Hide said, adding there was a unique bonding that tied everyone together.

"It's like a big family now. Because of

"Over the past 12 years, from the correspondence I've had, all these guys had the greatest respect for the Chinese people. They travelled through bandit country. China was very fragmented at that time, with lots of warlords.

"But these poor people gave up everything to feed the escape party when they passed through. I have these reports and diaries, and they all come up with the same thing."

Donald Chan said: "At that time, it took six Chinese men to beat one Japanese soldier. But one western soldier could fight 1½ Japanese soldiers. Therefore, the villagers were very grateful for the foreign soldiers. They offered half of their bowls of rice to them. Many of the escapees expressed gratitude towards the Chinese soldiers."

Mr Hide added: "I don't think the westerners would've lasted one night without the admiral. Without my father, [Donald Chan's] father wouldn't have got out of Hong Kong; and without his father, my father wouldn't have survived in China."

He pointed out that the ties went beyond race and culture. "Although [the British] were the colonial power, they were interacting with the local people to quite a high degree, and they had huge respect for them. Whatever the thinking was at the government level was irrelevant," he said. "The descendants would love to pick up the spirit and see the liaison and the relations between the Chinese and the allies; some were Canadians, some were Australians, mostly British. It was a great bonding."

Last week, English couple Tim and Alison Luard, the daughter of McEwan, set off along the escape route using McEwan's war diary. They planned to hike through mountainous terrain over five days – the same amount of time the escapees took – tracking the villages where the men received help, accommodation and food on the way. Their experience will serve as an important reference for next year's re-enactment.

The escape story had also taught the descendants about the futility of war, Mr Hide said. He and the Chan brothers hoped that memories of the feat could be kept alive through the younger generations.

"We are already in our 70s and we don't know for how much longer we will be around. Now we want to brainwash them so that they can carry on even when we are not around," said Duncan Chan with a smile. Mr Hide said he had been educating his children and his grandchildren on this aspect of their family's history.

Duncan Chan said some of his offspring had grown up in the United States, and it was a greater challenge to educate them. "Their Chinese isn't even that good. I told my daughter-in-law to make sure that my grandchildren know Chinese and learn about the history of their great grandfather. I want to bring them back one day, so that they can keep their roots," he said.

Additional reporting by Annemarie Evans

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Richard Hide, son of acting stoker petty officer Stephen "Buddy" Hide

this, we've got a common thing and everybody is keen to make something of it and to remember this."

According to Buddy Hide's account, everyone in the party supported each other throughout the rough journey. And they not only bonded with each other but felt a special connection with the local Chinese they met on the way.

"My father, up until the day he died, always had these little Chinese sayings. He always knew what was going on in China. My dad didn't have anything bad to say about the Chinese," Mr Hide said.