

## **Tales from Tasmania – A little street smarts & a lot of friendly help Getting along on \$350HK a month (about CAD\$42) by Bob Young**

Starting out on your working life in one of the most expensive cities in the world can be a bit of a challenge. But you can get by with a little bit of street smarts and a lot of help from your friends, even friends you didn't know you had 'til they came to your rescue.

As a poorly paid, teenage cadet journalist starting out on his own in Hong Kong, I soon learned to be resourceful. And saw the good and generous side of many people who gave me help.

I had left school early, having figured out I was never going to be in a position where I needed physics, Latin, trigonometry or indeed even woodworking. I had a grounding in the three Rs - readin', writin' and 'rithmetic – and figured that was all I'd ever need.

### **First a few false starts – then a real job**

After a somewhat disastrous start to my working life – a few months selling mutual funds “to help pay for a college education” and another few months selling what subsequently was to emerge as non-existent magazine subscriptions, I wrote a letter to one of the most powerful women in Asia, news tycoon Sally Aw Sian, asking for a cadetship on her English-language newspaper.

I said rather cheekily in my letter that “I am accustomed to receiving a minimum monthly salary of HK\$350.” By chance there was a vacancy for a cadet, and I was given an interview. I got the job, but was told I would be getting \$300 a month – the same as any other local recruit received. I figured I wasn't in the strongest bargaining position, so eagerly accepted the \$300.

Even in those days that princely sum (about Canadian \$42) was hardly going to pay for accommodation let alone such luxuries as food and clothing. A sizable chunk would go just on keeping one of two suits in the dry cleaners, plus a little laundry at the Laundromat.

### **Fortune favours the brave**

But as they say, fortune favors the brave, and for the first 18 months of a three-year cadetship the paper based me at Kai Tak International Airport. Reporters had a large air-conditioned press room at the airport, with lockable cupboards, a lockable front door, desks, phones and most importantly comfortable couches. And it was seldom in use between about 10 pm and 6 am. Public toilets not too far away, a cheap dry cleaner across the road, in fact all the comforts of home.

That was “digs” taken care of. Next was food. One could eat cheaply at the cooked food stall across the road – a small bowl of dumplings and noodles with a few greens could be purchased for the equivalent of 7 cents Canadian. One could even splurge out for a Sunday lunch on a half duck, noodles and greens in soup for 21 cents Canadian. But I soon learned of the lavish buffets put on by differing business organizations at the Hilton and Mandarin Hotels almost nightly, so I volunteered to check these out for the paper for potential stories in addition to my airport duties.

The stories were few and far between (no surprise). But the sumptuous feasts were something to behold – all manner of seafood, salads, roasts hot and cold savories and deserts. All for free. The drinks as well. There was always way more than could be finished at the function – the hosts seem to take pride in outdoing one another to impress that their business was in a financially strong position. The staff were allowed to take home any leftovers after the functions were over.

After a while the staff came to know me and we became very friendly. So much so when it was time to leave, I'd give one of them a wink and they'd pack a huge box of goodies for me to take "home." I used to take these big boxes of food back to the airport on a trusty old bicycle that I bought very cheaply from a second hand shop.

## **Sharing the goodies**

I'd take the box round to the office where the airport superintendents worked and share my spoils with them – partly to make sure they continued turning a blind eye to me being in the press room overnight, and partly to repay the many times they took me across the road with them for big feasts and drinks at the cooked food stalls.

Our tables at the cooked food stall used to groan with food ranging from braised pigs trotters to barbecued meats and steamed delicacies – all washed down with Chinese beer. Often for about 10 of us the entire feast would cost no more than Canadian \$1.42 each – but that was a big chunk out of my budget, so I was glad when they said they would pick up my share as long as I kept bringing them treats from the buffets at Hong Kong's top hotels.

I'd also save some of the buffet treats for the barman at the airport staff bar, named after an aviation column I'd started in the paper, to repay the many times he would disappear from the bar when there was no-one else around, saying "You look after the bar for 20 minutes." This was a cue that I could lean across the bar and top up my pint of draft beer a few times while he was gone.

And some for another barman at another airport bar who once a week would call me up from the press room at closing time, line up about a half-dozen pints of beer for each of us, and close the bar. "The day's spillages and free drinks for good customers," he used to wink.

I think it was done with his boss's blessings as free coffee and snacks were always available to the local press in the restaurant. All to help ensure no negative reporting in the local media (not that there was much risk of that as the standards of food, drink and service were very high).

I was on to such a good thing that I actually had money left over at the end of the month from my Canadian \$42 monthly salary.

Occasionally when there was a gap between buffets, the possibility was always there to attend a service club luncheon as a press representative checking out whether the guest speaker's comments were worth reporting. There were seemingly endless portions of a choice of chicken a la king or beef stroganoff served week after week.

## **The Duchess and the Commissioner of Police**

I got to meet some wonderful characters at the airport, including a British lady known as The Duchess, who for some reason was working as a public relations officer for one of the airlines. She was an eccentric in every sense of the word and was known as The Duchess because of the television ads she used to do for a major tea producer.

She lived in a fairly remote house halfway up the Peak with about a dozen monkeys housed in enormous cages. She used to hold cocktail parties every couple of months at home, with the most extraordinary cross-section of society in attendance.

At one of these parties I was introduced to the very powerful Commissioner of Police, a steely one-eyed veteran who had been responsible for putting down several uprisings in Africa.

At the end of the party, and knowing I had no transport, our host partnered me off with the Commissioner and his wife for a ride back to the airport, knowing they would pass that way to get home. When we got to the airport I asked the Commissioner if they would like to come in for a nightcap – and nearly fell off my seat when he said yes.

As luck would have it, a young English ruddy-faced and obnoxious policed inspector based at the airport, who had been causing me a few problems, came bounding over. When he saw the official car and the Commissioner, he stopped in his tracks and saluted, saying “Good Evening Sir.”

I couldn't resist saying to him “Be a good chap and look after the car while we get a drink.”

He saluted me – and from that day for some reason I never had anything but the utmost co-operation from him.

After about 18 months, the paper decided to further my journalistic training by taking me away from the airport and the interviewing of politicians and celebrities passing through, and put me on court reporting. This was to last about another 18 months, during which time I continued using the airport press room as “home” and continued dining out in style.

In fact I added some dining-out establishments to my list – one was the local Army Reserves canteen where a few of us lowly paid cadets would share a small plate of fried rice during a lunch break from court. The staff there came to know us and that “small plate to share” became a veritable platter of fried rice for the price of a “small.”

At the end of the cadetship I was offered a full-time position as reporter and trainee sub-editor, at a decent salary and so was able to move out of the airport, and no longer had to rely on the cocktail circuits, the free buffets and the free service club lunches.

They were survival times – character building I think they call it. I'm sure many people – certainly the staff at the functions - knew what the real story was, but everyone was too dignified to say anything. It taught me a lot of positive things about people. And about the value of money.