



A VERY BRITISH BOUNDER

Peter Fitzroy Godber will forever be remembered in Hong Kong as the king of bent coppers, symbolic of a world of corruption.

BORN IN LONDON in 1922, Peter Godber joined the Royal Hong Kong Police Force in 1952 and by the 1960s - as a senior police officer in the Crown Colony - he was decorated for his efforts during the suppression of the communist riots. But there was another side to this courageous police officer.

In 1971 Chief Superintendent Peter Godber came under suspicion after being found to have deposited HK\$12,000 with a Canadian bank. It was not the amount that raised suspicion, but his use of a false diplomatic identity and a slight name change to P.F. Gedber.

An initial investigation got nowhere for two years during which Godber announced that he was intending to take early retirement in July 1973.

Corruption in Hong Kong had been endemic since the founding of the colony in 1841. Even in the 1960s both officials on the ground and their masters in Whitehall were, for the most part, prepared to look the other way.

According to author Frank Welsh in his *A History of Hong Kong*, Ernest Thornton a Labour member of parliament first raised the matter in 1960. Asking the House if an enquiry might be mounted into allegations of corruption in Hong Kong he received the curt reply, "No sir."

Attitudes did not change until 1969 with the arrival of Charles Sutcliffe who began cleaning up the force by simply kicking out staff sergeants found to be taking backhanders. Finally, on the watch of Sir Murray MacLehose who became Governor of the territory in 1971, attitudes began to change.

Independent Commission Against Corruption (an organization yet to come into existence) files show that, three months before

Godber's upcoming retirement, Sutcliffe received information that Godber had continued to deposit large sums of money into several foreign banks.

As the money trail began to unwind, Godber was getting edgier than ever and shifted his retirement date forward to June.

But in April a full-scale probe had been launched by the Anti-Corruption office, which unearthed accounts in Hong Kong amounting to HK\$330,000 and an additional HK\$20,000 squirreled away in Canada. This was to prove to be the tip of a very large pile. As the investigations continued, so more ill-gotten gains were unearthed. Further enquiries revealed that, over a five year period, Godber had amassed HK\$624,000 in bank accounts as far away as Australia, Singapore and Canada.

Time was running out: decisive action was needed. By now it was all too clear that Godber was guilty of corruption on a massive scale but where was the evidence?

Section 10 of the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance was cited for the first time and Commissioner Sutcliffe urged by his fellow officers to suspend Godber pending further enquiries.

The police then combined giving notice to Godber of his suspension with a thorough search of his home and car, where they finally discovered the smoking gun they had sought for so long.

The search uncovered three writing cases that turned out to be "bribe money logbooks", documents detailing his financial



transactions and boxes containing dozens of silver bars. Godber's entire fortune amounted to HK\$4.37 million.

The police now had the money and the evidence of how it had been illegally obtained. But Godber had not been idle as the law moved in. Weeks before he had sent his wife back to the UK. Now he was ready to follow her.

A loophole that gave Godber seven days to answer allegations of corruption meant that for that period the police were kicking their heels: unlike the disgraced chief superintendent.

Godber swiftly headed for Kai Tak airport where he was able to board a plane using a special airport security permit issued to police officers. He used the permit to avoid immigration controls and left for England via Singapore on June 8, 1973.

The general public, who had been avidly following the progress of the probe, were outraged when it emerged that the bird had flown.

As had happened many times before, and would happen many times subsequently, the populace of Hong Kong expressed its dissatisfaction in the only way it could: it hit the streets. Hundreds marched calling for the end of corruption and Godber's head.

Eventually Governor MacLehose was moved to appoint a senior judge to set up a commission of enquiry into how Godber had been allowed to give the police the slip, and investigate the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts.

On arrival in the UK Godber thought he was safe and that the arm of the law in Hong Kong would not be long enough to reach him, primarily due to the charge of possessing "financial assets disproportionate to his official emolument" an unrecognized offence in the UK.

But Hong Kong continued to bay for blood and the newly established ICAC was determined to give it to them. The search for witnesses was to be crucial.

According to the ICAC website, its chief investigator Mr Wong Kwok-Leung said at the time, "We did have in our hands a lot of material evidence to prove Godber controlled a huge amount of unexplained assets. It's just too bad that nobody was willing to come forward to testify against him. Perhaps, people were still rather conservative in those days; they'd rather choke with silent fury instead of speaking out. On the other hand, it's also because they were unsure about the newly-formed ICAC. However, we believed time and performance could help us gain their trust."

Through great efforts and over many months the ICAC established a level of trust that would lead to the next major breakthrough.

A former expatriate police superintendent, who had already been banged up for corruption, finally broke his silence, providing evidence that linked Godber to that of a Chinese superintendent who had gained a highly lucrative position as the head of the Wan Chai Police Station – known even in those days as commanding an area well-known for its vice establishments. According to the witness, Godber had pocketed HK\$25,000 for securing the post for the Chinese officer.

As the evidence mounted, the Chinese officer was arrested and



the expatriate policeman continued to "sing like a canary", enabling the ICAC to build a case that would eventually ensure Godber could be extradited to answer the charges.

With the cooperation of the UK police, Godber was arrested at home on April 29, 1974.

Godber fought hard against the possibility of being hauled back to the scene of his five-year crime spree but as the evidence began to mount so the tides of fortune were turning.

Notes found in Godber's handwriting showed that, subsequent to the appointment

of the Chinese officer at Wan Chai, his fortunes had risen by HK\$90,000, including the HK\$25,000 paid for services rendered by the now incarcerated Chinese policeman, in gaining him the post.

After eight months the ICAC was victorious in its efforts for extradition. Godber was put on a plane back to Hong Kong on January 7, 1975, under extraordinarily tight security.

Upon arrival in Hong Kong he was ordered to face trial at the Victoria District Court on February 17. And in another first for the territory the Government appointed a leading council from the UK to act as prosecutor. It was already clear by the time the trial began that not only was the ICAC intent on getting their man, they were also going to use his conviction as a deterrent to others.

Subsequently, both the jailed expatriate superintendent and the Chinese superintendent were later to testify against Godber. Upon conviction Godber served four years in jail. While he was languishing in prison the ICAC filed a writ in an attempt to recover the loot.

The anti-corruption organization is to this day continuing its hunt for the illegal proceedings while Godber lives out his last days in Spain, which seems an appropriate place for him to be. Due to his position as the most senior police officer ever to be convicted of corruption Godber is of course remembered as the ultimate boulder in the whole sorry affair.

But as Walsh recounts, the ICAC was embarrassingly efficient in its efforts to wipe out corruption in the Hong Kong police at this time. In addition to the high profile Godber case, "the ICAC went on to arrest policeman in veritable droves – fifty-nine sergeants from a single division, one senior superintendent dead by his own hand, and three British superintendents in custody – as investigations revealed highly organized corruption on an enormous scale."

Such was the fear of police officers at the time the police staged a mass meeting culminating in an attack on the offices of the ICAC leaving windows broken and staff injured.

With the threat of a complete collapse of law and order, the Governor offered an amnesty but warned that future incidences of corruption within the force would be punished severely.

Writer Nigel Cameron was later to sum up those early efforts of the ICAC thus: "It would appear from the statistics that corruption in the police force has greatly diminished. To what the degree the figures reflect a general lessening in the scope of corruption is an open question. Certainly large-scale corruption has been vanquished, but just as surely small-scale activities have not."