

HONG KONG



AFTER 135 YEARS the British Army has moved its Hong Kong headquarters out of Victoria Barracks into a modern skyscraper block on the island's shoreline. The new headquarters building, comprising 23 stories above a five-storey podium, was opened on 4 March by Prince Charles.

The move stems from the colony's 1975 defence cost agreement. Under this agreement the British Forces were to hand over 47 acres of land at Victoria Barracks to the Hong Kong Government while the Hong Kong authorities built the new tower block on the naval base of HMS Tamar at a cost of HK\$65,000,000 (about £7,000,000).

The striking difference is in the amount of land being used. Those 47 acres at Victoria Barracks are in a prime area and Hong Kong land prices are among the highest in the world. The new tower block occupies only eight-tenths of an acre. What the Hong Kong authorities will do with the Victoria Barracks site has still to be decided.

Even in Hong Kong, where rapid development is the order of the day, the breakneck speed of the new headquarters project has been extraordinary. The brief for the building was produced in September 1976, the foundation stone laid six months later and the whole complex completed in two years.

This is a considerable achievement by the Hong Kong building contractor, says Major Paul French, the Royal Corps of Transport officer who has spent his whole Hong Kong tour as liaison officer for the project. Virtually all of the staff involved, from architects and engineers down to labourers, have been Hong Kong Chinese and work went on around the clock.

Major French's task was to prepare the brief and ensure that the Service requirement was met throughout. He also provided the liaison for the orderly move of all the facilities from Victoria Barracks and will remain for the initial maintenance period.

Another aspect of his job has been to act as secretary of the co-ordinating committee to sort out the joint administration of the new building. The naval authorities will remain responsible for administration of the whole HMS Tamar base but this will now contain a predominantly Army organisation and include some Royal Air Force personnel.

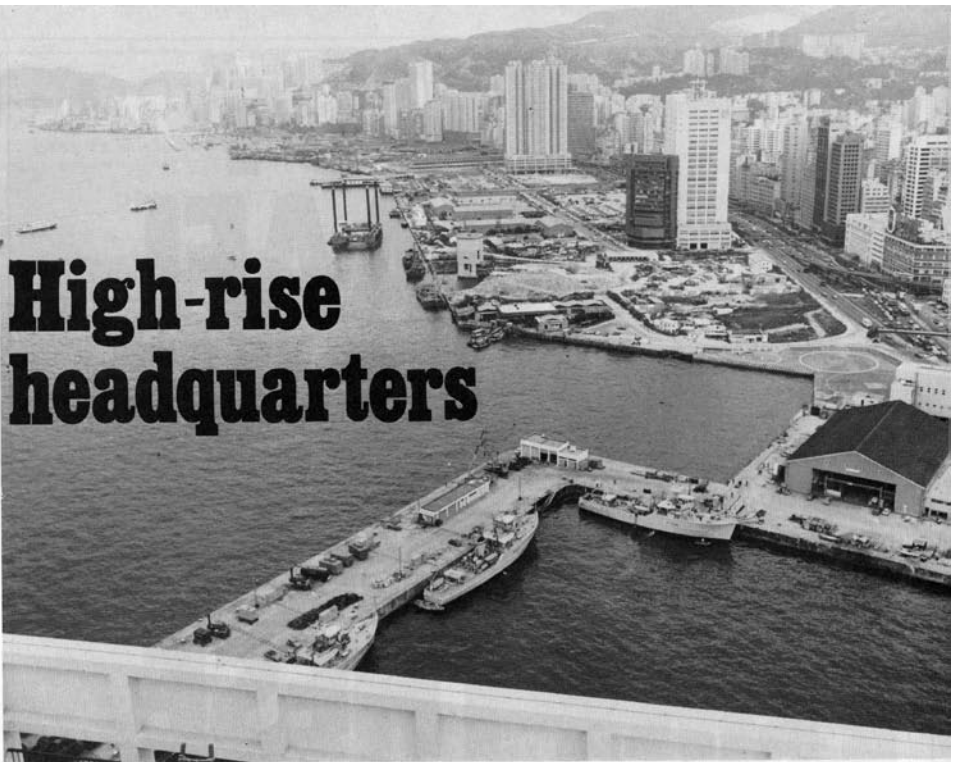
"We shall have to learn to work and live together and the messes will be joint, with joint committees," he told SOLDIER.

The last vestige of British forces' presence at Victoria Barracks will be on a three-acre site to be known as Queen's Lines. It will contain a new community centre and Naafi shopping complex and two high-rise blocks of officers' and non-commissioned officers' married quarters.

At the very top of the new headquarters block is a penthouse flat to be occupied by Captain-in-Charge Hong Kong. Below that are the officers' mess (four floors), the sergeants' mess (three floors), a junior ranks' club and four floors of junior ranks' living and sleeping accommodation.

Much local rosewood and teak has been used for internal panelling and fittings and each floor has been designed so that bedrooms have a panoramic harbour view. Below the junior ranks are five floors of offices and three floors of stores as well as the cantilever structure supporting the main tower.

High-rise headquarters



On the podium roof are two open-air tennis courts. Any lobs over the fence are liable to turn into drop-shots — down five floors to the ground below. “No novices allowed,” commented Major French.

Within the podium are two floors of car parking, offices, stores, classrooms, the communications centre, a massive gymnasium, a library, a miniature firing range and three squash courts. There is also a church which incorporates the stained glass window from the church in the building the block replaces.

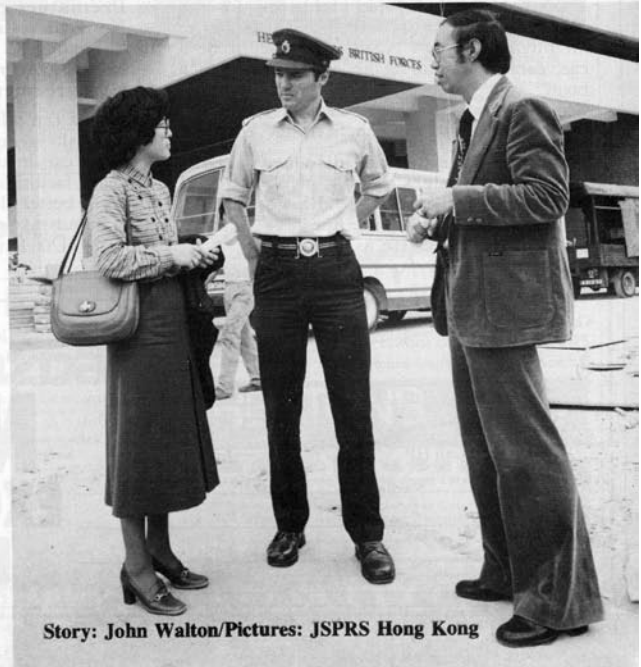
The whole headquarters is a revolutionary concept for the Services. Even the Ministry of Defence's giant Empress State Building in London is only an office block whereas the new tower contains all sorts of facilities.

Says Major French: “If you had an unimaginative soldier it would be perfectly possible for him to spend his whole tour here without leaving the building. He could work and live here and still keep himself pretty fit with squash, tennis or in the gymnasium. This is the Army's first vertical barracks.”

Above: This spectacular view of the Hong Kong island waterfront is from the HQ's top floor.

Left: The new building has joined the forest of concrete skyscrapers typical of Hong Kong.

Right: Major French outside the new HQ with architect Mrs Elza Lau and colleague H W Pun.



Story: John Walton/Pictures: JSPRS Hong Kong