

Dragon boat team shipshape for night on the town

Jolly sailors drop anchor for fun and fund-raising

Dan Kadison

The highest-ranking official of the Liechtenstein Princely Navy e-mailed a "top secret" document to the *South China Morning Post*, discussing plans for a party.

Admiral Silvan Colani said the event "promised to be the highlight of the social calendar", and pledged that funds would be raised for Operation Santa Claus.

Funny thing, though: landlocked Liechtenstein, a tiny European country, has no admirals or official navy.

The Liechtenstein Princely Navy is in fact a Hong Kong dragon boat team, though you wouldn't have known it by the sight of the crew on Saturday night in Lan Kwai Fong.

Gathered on an upper floor of Stormies bar and restaurant were more than a dozen men, with full naval dress and assigned ranks.

There was Lieutenant Charlie Riding, 43, of England. There was Sailor Cesar da Silva, 37, of Brazil. There was Captain Rolf Widmer, 45, of Switzerland. Those men, and the rest of their dragon boat team, stood as one—proud of their efforts, both in the water and out of it.

"As a landlocked country with a population of only 35,000 people, Liechtenstein is easily underestimated as a competitive naval force," Colani said in his "top secret" missive. "However, thanks to a unique combination of fun and determination, our proud navy is a dragon boat force to be reckoned with."

Saturday's three-hour event was welcome on deck, raising at least HK\$25,000 for Operation Santa Claus and its 13 beneficiaries. The funds were collected in inventive ways.

Teammates had to fork out money if they were missing white gloves, they failed to polish their shoes or if they placed the wrong number of



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bars on their naval uniforms. The men could also bid on "entitlement" cards, giving them the right to forgo one of 10 tough exercises that are part of their training regime.

Furthermore, there were trivia questions about rowing and Liechtenstein. Those who were unable to answer a question had to pay up.

In one instance, a photo was shown on a screen. Some of the crew were unable to identify the man as Crown Prince Alois of Liechtenstein.

"The knowledge of this navy is disgusting," Colani quipped.

The Liechtenstein Princely Navy team began in 2000, said Colani, a 35-year-old Swiss man who works for LGT Bank, owned by the royal Princely Family of Liechtenstein.

Colani said with a smile: "I used to paddle with the Swiss, but that team was too serious."

Now, there are about 30 members of his navy. Only one is actually from Liechtenstein. "We have lots of mercenaries," Colani joked. "We're a multicultural force."

The uniforms the navy wears were created to surprise Colani during his wedding in December 2006.

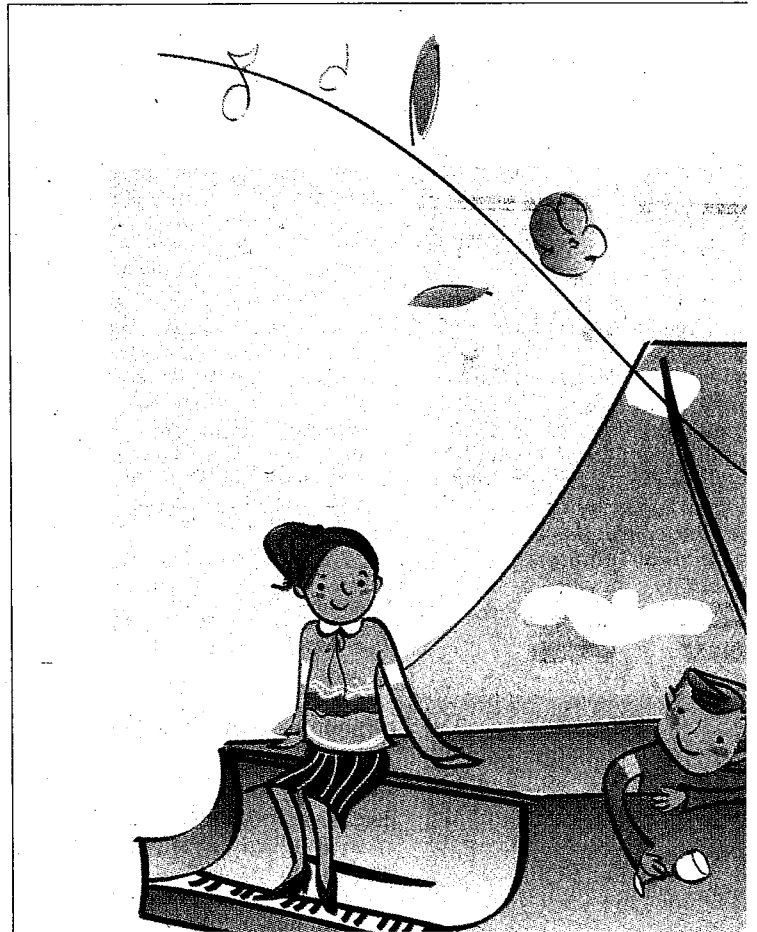
"The team showed up in these white uniforms, which made the wedding really special," Colani recalled. "We said we have to keep using them, so we started having this Christmas party every year," he added. "And I figured instead of just having a party and getting drunk, let's do something for charity."

This was the navy's third year supporting Operation Santa Claus.

The party was fun and festive, and participants looked like they had just left the set of *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Asked if he was going to recreate a scene in the movie by carrying his wife out of the bar in his arms, Colani said: "If I still can. We have an open bar for three hours."



The 'sailors' enjoy their Christmas party in Lan Kwai Fong while raising fu



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