The birdmen of Tsing Ma Bridge

STANDING atop the Tsing Ma Bridge, some 70 storeys above sea level, Hong Kong is the pearl in the oyster shell.

High above the skyline with kestrels flying around me, I view with awe the magnificent sights of Hong Kong - the massive size of the airport, the panorama of Hong Kong Island and much, much more. Looking down from the bridge, the cars and ships appear as tiny as my child’s toys. In the midst of this tranquillity, I feel I am in command of the world and as free as the kestrels winging beside me.

My job with the Highways Department is the envy of many and feared by others, especially those who suffer from vertigo!

The Highways Department is responsible for the inspection and maintenance of the Tsing Ma Bridge, which is currently the world's longest suspension bridge carrying both road and railway traffic. On the way to Lantau Island, this magnificent bridge, particularly the two high-rise bridge towers and the two main cables of 1.1 metres in diameter, certainly catch your attention. When you take a close look at the bridge, you may even find two Highways Department’s Inspectors - myself and my colleague Inspector Ma - working on these inclined cables.

When working on the main cable, we must have sharp, kestrel-like eyes in order to examine and record every defect we spot so that proper maintenance can be arranged to ensure the bridge is fit for use in the ensuing decades. We must be fully aware of all the safety requirements of working at heights. Although we are familiar with the requirements, we must always be vigilant and never forget to fasten one of the safety belts when we are on the jobs. Hence, crosschecking between the inspection team members is vital to our work.

Apart from the Tsing Ma Bridge, we are responsible for the inspection and maintenance of the Ting Kau and Kap Shui Mun Bridges. To facilitate our work, special access equipment must be used to enable us to reach every corner of the bridge. This includes the working cradles for inspecting the external walls of the 200 metre-high bridge towers, the movable cradle for inspecting the stay cables and the movable platform for inspections below the road decking. Despite the tension and heavy workload, we get a great deal of satisfaction in meeting the challenges of our job.

During the past four years, Inspector Ma and myself are not only working partners, but brothers in arms. Our friendship began in the ‘upper air’ with mutual trust and understanding. I am heartily glad to have made the acquaintance of Inspector Ma.