



# Chapter Two

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## Malay Peninsula - The First Weeks

Departure day from Australia for 2 Troop was Sunday 17 November 1963, a date still well-remembered by Sapper Bob 'Macca' McDonald as it was his mother's birthday. The journey began with an early morning bus ride to the international terminal at Mascot where the troop, including wives and children, boarded a chartered Qantas 707. A refuelling stop at Darwin allowed all to stretch their legs; then the 707 continued on to Singapore, landing at Paya Lebar International Airport in the late afternoon. There, a Fokker Friendship and a DC3 waited to fly the troop on to Malacca: marrieds and their families on the Friendship, the remainder on the DC3. The troop was welcomed at Malacca by Captain Malcolm van Gelder, who would be the Troop Commander for the next 12 months, as he had already served 12 months as commander of the now homeward-bound 4 Troop. Buses transported the troop members to their respective destinations: families, with some very tired children, to their married quarters, and singlies to the barracks of 11 Indep Field Sqn at Terendak, their home for the next two years. As well as the Australian troop, 11 Sqn had two British field troops, and a park troop with more construction equipment than a normal field squadron, as the squadron was designed to operate independently without support from other engineer units. The squadron included a section-strength team (up to 10 people) who were parachute-



*11 Indep Field Sqn lines looking out to the straits of Malacca. 2 Troop barracks in the foreground and NAAFI on the right. Beyond the tennis courts is the ORs mess.*

trained so as to provide sapper assistance in capturing an airfield for insertion of brigade units. It also maintained a diving team of about the same strength.

The first few days were mostly taken up with kit issue and meeting the eight members of 4 Troop who had remained in Malaya and still had 12 months of their tour to complete. Unlike the infantry battalion, 3 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR), which had arrived as a complete unit and brought a lot of its Australian issue kit, 2 Troop was to be fully integrated with 11 Sqn, and kitted out with British-issue field kit and troop stores. There were some early difficulties like learning to wrap ankle puttees so they would stay on, and finding out what hose tops and garter flashes were for; but generally the kit was well received with the exception of the footwear and webbing. The British did have an excellent machete, called a gollock, which was far superior to the Australian issue. The British Pattern 44 webbing looked like it was a leftover from WW2 and was uncomfortable, particularly when heavily loaded. The Australian Army by this time had the lightweight American issue webbing, and there was little to compare between the two. Footwear issue consisted of plimsolls, a sort of sandshoe, for PT, leather ammunition boots similar to Australian issue but made from a much coarser grade leather, and green jungle boots with a black moulded rubber sole, similar to gym boots but with tall canvas uppers that laced up to the calf.

Weapons were issued – the 7.62 mm FN 30 was almost identical to its Australian counterpart and the SLR (self-loading rifle) was already familiar to all the sappers. NCOs, drivers and plant operators were issued with the Sterling 9 mm SMG (sub-machine-gun), a superior weapon and lighter than the Owen, but this meant some familiarisation training was required. The section machine-gun was a Bren GPMG,

which had been modified to accept the NATO 7.62 mm rimless cartridge, and had also been improved so it did not require barrel changes after each 200-300 rounds fired. Australia had only recently phased out the older .303 version of the Bren Gun, so those selected in the machine-gun teams quickly became proficient.

The food served in the ORs (Other Ranks) mess came as a bit of a culture shock. Not many Australians ate kippers for breakfast (most could not even stand the smell), the portions of meat were microscopic and underground mutton (rabbit) was frequently on the menu. Potatoes seemed a staple part of the diet, with spuds being served in as many as five or six different guises (or disguises) at the one meal. To compensate in part, the Australians were paid a 'meat allowance' of 2 shillings and 6 pence per day, and this was a cause of some friction with the Brits. The Australians were already better paid and the Brits could



*Rear Spr Alan Pullen, Spr Michael Holloway; Front Spr John Tomczak, Spr Gary Plumb in ceremonial uniform*

not see why the Aussies should be paid extra to eat in their mess. It was doubtful that the allowance was always spent in obtaining additional protein however, unless it came out of a Tiger beer can. The married members were not paid the meat allowance but received 9 shillings and 2 pence per day as a general family allowance, plus a domestic servants allowance that varied with the size of the family.

The troops were confined to barracks for the first week, marrieds excluded, to allow them to 'settle down' to their new environment. During this time, lectures were given on health issues in the tropics, including an entertaining lecture by Dr. Nurse (aptly named) on the dangers of fraternising with the local ladies. A Paludrine antimalarial tablet was issued to everyone on a daily basis, usually on morning parade. There was also some instruction on riot control, Brit army style. Riots were not uncommon throughout Malaysia at the time, and if the Police could not contain the unrest, troops could be called in to assist under provisions of Military Aid to the Civil Power.

On the first weekend leave most sampled the sights and smells of downtown Malacca and the many sites of historical interest. The ancient city of Malacca (now known as Melaka) is on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula about 120 miles northwest of Singapore. Malacca was founded in the 14th Century by Raja Iskandar Shah when Singapore was abandoned due to Javanese attacks. In its early days, the town came under Chinese protection of the Ming Emperor Yung Ho. During the 1400s, the town was the most important port in Southeast Asia and the State of Malacca was a major trading power with exports of gold, ivory and spices. In the late 1400s the Portuguese explorers discovered a sea route from Europe to India, and in 1511 the Portuguese Alfonse de Albuquerque captured Malacca and established a fort there.

Towards the end of the 1500s, the Dutch and English, who each formed an East India Company, challenged the Portuguese traders. These companies eventually broke Portuguese control of trade, but it was the wealthier Dutch company that dominated the region. The Dutch captured Malacca in 1641, with the assistance of a Malay force from Johore, after an eight-month siege. The Dutch remained for nearly 200 years and added their own style of architecture that still stands. In 1824, the British East India Company occupied the area, following a treaty arrangement by which the Dutch exchanged Malacca for the British settlement of Bencoolen in Sumatra, and formed the Straits Settlements, which initially included Singapore, Penang-Wellesley and Malacca. During the Second World War, the Japanese occupied these areas. In 1946 the Straits Settlements Colony was dissolved and in 1957 the British ceded Malacca and Penang to Malaya. The Federation of Malaysia was proclaimed in 1963, with the merging of the former Straits Settlements of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories of Sarawak and Sabah.



*Chief of the General Staff, Australia, Lt Gen J Wilton, accompanied by Maj Tony Stacey-Marks inspecting L/Cpl John Barnett's gollock. Spr Murray Aitken in the background.*



*Downtown Malacca 1963*



*Sprgs Lindsay Simpson and Les McNamara taking a conducted tour of Malacca in a trishaw with local guide.*

Many historical buildings and ruins from the various occupations of Malacca can still be seen. The ancient Catholic Church of St Paul overlooking Malacca was the temporary burial place of Saint Francis Xavier between 22 March and 11 December 1553. One particular attraction of Malacca was Tai Chong, a store better know by its English name of Cold Storage. Here, on hot humid days, strange-tasting but nevertheless satisfying milkshakes could be bought in air-conditioned comfort. The historical features of the city were probably lost on the sappers, at least on this first visit.

An article in the Bukit Bulletin (a fortnightly Brigade magazine of Terendak news) by 'Harry Reyer' captures the atmosphere of a first venture to Malacca:

*My hands were perspiring freely. I knew this was to be a dangerous mission. The hazards I was to encounter on this journey I knew would be many and varied. But, if I was to prove myself, this was the ultimate test. I glanced nervously at the man in whose hands I had placed my future. He showed no concern. His face was impassive; his sinewy hands gripped the controls of his machine. He looked round cautiously and then sprang into action – the great adventure was on.*

*It was worse than I had imagined. The Angel of Death was brooding over my head as the hazards loomed up. Destruction against one of the many obstacles, or a direct hit by the missiles that ripped past us seemed inevitable. We moved relentlessly on, not at a smooth pace but progressing in fits and starts, taking every opportunity that presented itself, squeezing past the dust-covered monsters only to have them bear down on us again, blaring their indignation at being passed. Somehow we evaded them all.*



*Cane shops in Malacca were popular shopping destinations.*

*I glanced up at the man. He still looked impassive but I noticed he was sweating now and the veins on his face were bulging slightly – the trip was obviously taking its toll. My knuckles gleamed white as my fingernails dug into my sweating palms and then we slipped out of the stream and stopped. In the comparative quiet I felt weak but triumphant. At last it was over. With a shaking hand I passed the coin to*

*the man and moved to the shade. Yes. I had done it – the length of Newcombe Road in a trishaw.*

While the troops were enjoying this first weekend of freedom, the families still settling into their new surrounds, and the Jones family making arrangements for Lorraine's 21st

birthday party, the world was stunned by the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 36th President of The United States of America. The President was struck in the head by two rounds fired from a sniper's rifle while travelling in an open car in Dallas, Texas around 1.30 pm Friday 22 November (4.30 am Saturday eastern Australian time, 2.30 am Malacca time).



*St John's C of E church and the Rose and Crown Inn.*

## **Terendak Garrison**

Terendak was a large modern military base, complete with all amenities and on a much wider scale than provided in Australia. The garrison took its name from the highest hill in the area, Bukit Terendak, which means the hill of the rice planter's hat. The camp area was 1 500 acres with an associated training area of 3 500 acres. The camp housed probably in excess of 10 000 people, including married members and their families. It was the home of 28 Commonwealth Infantry Brigade, of which the Australian units were a part.

The NAAFI (Navy Army and Air Force Institutes) was centrally located in the garrison and was somewhat similar to ASCO (Australian Services Canteen Organisation) in Australia, but with considerably expanded services. It included a supermarket with its own butchery and bakery, hairdresser, electrical, watch and shoe repairers, photographic shop, tailor and a florist. The camp had three churches and a temple, a cinema (the Loewen, showing films twice nightly with additional afternoon matinees on Wednesday and Saturday), a large four-storey hospital, four swimming pools and other sporting facilities, and various clubs with bar and restaurant service. There were also the St. Andrew's Commonwealth Club (a sort of drop-in centre where you could have a quiet cuppa or write a letter home), the Rose & Crown pub, several beach clubs for various rank levels, and a sailing club with a squadron boat.



*Terendak Garrison swimming pool.*

Although the camp had 900 married quarters, it was not large enough to accommodate all the married personnel and so many lived outside the garrison boundaries in comfortable bungalows in purpose-built 'villages' (Bukit Bahru, Tay Boon Seng). The residents usually referred to these villages by English names: Somerset Green, Eden Park, Suffolk Gardens. The married quarters were fully furnished and included linen and crockery. Each item was worth a certain number of points and a monthly points breakage allowance enabled replacement items to be issued. Each married family had an amah, (and sometimes two if the family was large)



*Sprts Harry Atkinson, John Tomczak, Lindsay Simpson, Ian Tibbles and Cpl Simon Wilson lending their support to an Australian food promotion at the garrison NAAFI supermarket.*



*Typical married quarters in the purpose-built villages outside the garrison boundaries.*



*Babu, 2 Troop's ever-smiling boot boy, at work polishing belt-brass and boots.*

to help with the housework and look after the children. Some amahs cooked although there might also be a separate cook.

Neither were the single members left to fend for themselves. The troop had a 'boot boy', Babu, an Indian from Allahabad. Babu not only polished everyone's boots and brass (including spit polishing the parade boots), but also made the beds and swept the floor as well. Laundry and ironing were done by the 'dhobi wallah'. Silver, another gentleman of Indian decent, was the dhobi contractor (although he employed local labour to do the work) and also the Squadron tailor. The cost to troop members was minimal, amounting to only a few shillings a week each. There were no latrine duties, as the ablution block and barrack surrounds were kept spotless by the ever-smiling Malay maintenance man, Baba. Small wonder Malaya was a popular posting.

The climate was probably a bit trying at first due to the high humidity, but in fact was quite equable. The sun rose and set at around the same time all year round. There was lots of torrential rain carried away by large open monsoon drains, but there were no distinct wet and dry seasons. The temperature rarely exceeded 85°F, dropping to around 70°F at night. The barracks and married quarters were open and airy with ceiling fans and shutters rather than windows, designed to take advantage of the sea breezes. Each of the barrack rooms housed eight people with NCOs in individual rooms at the end of each block.

The Troop's first 'acclimatisation' task was to construct a volleyball court between the barracks. This was followed by a 'gentle' march in section strength into Jungle East, a training area adjacent to the garrison. Phase three of the

acclimatisation period was to be a three-day exercise in full kit, including hard rations, into the jungle proper. Day 1 passed without incident until, preparing to 'hutchie-up' for the night, the deficiencies of the Brit issue kit, particularly the bedding, became even more apparent. Then, while chopping down some bamboo for his hutchie, Sapper Nipper Simpson disturbed a nest of wasps. Not wishing to seem a selfish fellow, Nipper ran toward a group of his fellow sappers, sharing his largesse. Nipper was always well liked in the troop, but he would not have won many votes in a popularity contest that night.

Day 2 also left a bit to be desired. After the troop had marched well into the afternoon, it was decided the troop had become 'temporarily misplaced' and they had to backtrack, arriving at an isolated police outpost, a remnant from the days of the Malayan Emergency, just on dusk. It had been a long, hot, trying day for little or no gain, but the troops were too bushed to whinge too much, rolling their groundsheets out on the concrete floor and sleeping like the dead. (In Chapter 7, S/Sgt David Crosby bravely acknowledges that he managed to read the map on to the wrong ridgeline!)

Day 3 saw a return to camp, most of the way by truck, after a morning road reconnaissance exercise. Nearly all of the troop returned to camp footsore, and from then on seldom wore the jungle boots, preferring instead to use the ammo boots with their Australian issue gaiters.

About this time, several members of the troop were issued with a new Australian design boot for user trials in the field. It was an all-leather boot with welted rubber soles, and laced up to the calf. This was the prototype of what was to become known as GPs (General Purpose), complete with steel innersole for protection against anti-personnel mines and panji stakes.

Meanwhile the plant operators, Cpl John Bending, L/Cpl Noel Butler and Sappers Dave Wood and Alan Morris were working with Park Troop constructing a grenade and rocket range adjacent to the garrison. It was their first experience on a Vickers Vigor dozer, with its unusual track design (similar to a tank), and the all-hydraulic Aveling Austin grader. Being experienced plant operators, they did not take long to master the unfamiliar equipment.



*Pouring concrete for the volleyball court, the Troop's first task after arrival. The assault course and 25-yard range are in the background.*



*2 Troop members enjoy a friendly game of volleyball on the newly-completed court.*



*Sprts Trevor Reece, Bob Rawson, Cpl Bruce Parsons, Sprs Les McNamara and Peter Glasson, relaxing after a one-day acclimatisation exercise in the Jungle East training area adjacent to the garrison.*



*Typical Malay kampong (village) similar to many the Troop encountered on their first acclimatisation march*



*Lt Barry Lennon doing his once-a-year table service duty, Christmas lunch in the ORs mess 1963. L/Cpl Brian Cribbs gracefully accepts a beer.*

2 Troop's first Christmas in Malaya was a fairly low-key affair with the single members, in particular, having thoughts of home. Christmas dinner (lunch) was served on Christmas Eve by the officers and senior NCOs as tradition dictated, and after a few beers everybody's spirits improved.

Peter and Margaret Stokes held an open house to usher in the New Year. It was the first time many had seen a bath tub filled with cans of beer and ice, and it was just as well most of the troop attended otherwise Margaret would not have been able to bathe for several days. (See Margaret's perspective in her reminiscence in Chapter 8.)

An extract from Cpl Simon 'Snow' Wilson's diary dated 1 January 1964 reports:

*Saw the New Year in at Peter and Margaret Stokes'. A terrific party. Mounted guard at 0900 and was not feeling very fit. We were notified that the move to Thailand had been brought forward, leaving here for Singapore on 3rd Jan.*