

Chapter Eight

Reminiscences

Bill Jones

A Vehicle Mechanic's Story

The life of the troop vehicle mechanic is not the most magical or exciting task within a field troop. FEs have fun with big bangs, etc while I was left to ponder, with our drivers, the best way to keep our equipment ship-shape and stay out of trouble. The troop transport consisted of the following: 5 x Land Rovers 1/4 ton, each with 1/2 ton trailer – one with winch, and one as FFR (fitted for radio): the boss's vehicle. Then the super transport vehicles: 2 x Bedford 3 ton GS trucks, 1 x Commer tipper of dubious age and ability, and 1 x 100 gallon water trailer. All this to be maintained by a vehicle mechanic and the unit drivers – a piece of cake, thought he.

For what I think was one of the funniest times in my long and sometimes inglorious career, the story starts and ends in Thailand, Ban Kok Talat. What a wonderful place, Bing Crosby had allowed me to slink away from the vehicles for a while and work with the troop. We were constructing the Romney huts down by the strip. It was not much fun, but was better than lying under a truck, in two feet of bulldust, trying to keep outdated tippers going.

We had by this time formed a little group, led by the inimitable Cpl Peter Stokes, called the Animals Club. We had two aims in life: make things as unpleasant as possible for the Pommy RSM, and ensure we had sufficient COLD beer to see us through each night. In order to ensure the beer was cold we had a plan. Boy, did we have a plan. To the front of the Sergeants mess was a stockpile of ice, cleverly hidden under a heap of sawdust. At about lights out, two of us would take our galvanized dustbin, purloined from the Q store, place a block of ice in the bin and merrily return to our tent. We would then cover the bin in bagging and leave it for the next day. Whoever knocked off first was responsible to get the bin to the canteen, buy a carton of Tiger cans and place them in the bin so that the beer was crispy cold when the rest of the gang knocked off. Worked like a charm! We would then add to the bin as required all night.



A smiling Spr Bill Jones on the Maxwell Brander.

Now for the good bit. One particular day I was dragged off the Romneys to fix a tipper that had thrown a prop shaft. It was a particularly difficult task because the job had to be done in situ, off the side of the main road. I digress. I finished quite early, about 1500 and decided to get an early start with the beer task. Either Blue Canning, or Jim Kimberly had obtained a carton of West Aussie beer from the RAAF and half of it was in the ice bin. I elicited the aid of one of the Pommies from the soils lab – he owed us – and we positioned the bin with ice and beer in the NAAFI tent. Being a good soldier, I decided to guard the bin in case someone decided to take advantage of our forethought. Of course, guarding it also required sampling it. I can still taste it, bloody terrible! So I only had a few. In due course, the NAAFI opened and I filled our bin with the much more flavoursome Tiger.

On especially hot nights (weren't they all) we would build a can pyramid on our FS table and try to reach the roof of the tent. On an especially hot night, having been joined by about half the troop, we were going great guns to hit the roof with the cans when Moose Sutton decided it was time for a Beatles hit on his wind-up record player. Moose, ever playful, called out 'Stand fast for the British National Anthem' and proceeded to play 'She Loves Me'. To say 'the proverbial hit the fan' would be an

“It was not much fun, but was better than lying under a truck, in two feet of bulldust.”

understatement. Beer cans flew at us from everywhere, our beloved pyramid was knocked down, and a couple of groups decided fisticuffs was the answer. The Duty Officer arrived and attempted to quell the uprising, and indeed called out the guard. I explained that if he didn't depart I would show him what he could do with his piddling little SMG. He was horrified and, in the best traditions of the RE, he placed me under close arrest and had me escorted to the guardroom – another tent, no walls, locked up?

The disturbance apparently continued, and some poor Pommy ended in one of the horrific pits into which we threw our leftover meal scraps. The Duty Officer then decided that the matter required his attention again, so he handcuffed me to a stretcher and left post-haste to quell the 'colonial melee' at the NAAFI – his words, not mine.

Authors' note: Bill fails to mention that he rejoined the 'colonials' in the NAAFI later that night for a few more Tigers, still under close arrest and still firmly handcuffed to the stretcher which was now neatly folded under his arm.

Graeme Leach

Bees

A round of golf with your mates. What else could you ask for?

The first hole at Terendak was a short par 3 away from the club house and over the creek. I have no implanted memories of our start or finish on this hole. However the 2nd hole, a par 4, will remain with me forever.

We had all approached on or near the green and I walked on to remove the flag for our putting. All hell broke loose. I had not noticed that a swarm of jungle bees had adopted the flagstick and, once I was near enough, they attacked me all over the face, head, neck, and other exposed parts.

Flapping and flaying at them increased their effort. Over the edge of the green and a short distance downhill was the small creek that ran through the golf course. That became my target and I hit it flat out with a belly-flop dive. Still not good enough. The water was not deep so I had to roll around like a crocodile in a frenzy trying to rid myself of the bees. The waterhole was like one of those buffalo wallows, but to me it was my saviour.

I have no recollection of how much time this took to remove the swarm but eventually it was strongly recommended by my playing mates that I return to the clubhouse and then make my way to the hospital for some attention.

Of course, this is what I did and, of course, my mates continued to complete their round of golf. What else would golfers do?!

I somehow found the clubhouse and rode my 50 cc step-through Honda bike, trying to see through slits that used to be my eyes, and made my way along the bitumen to the hospital. My next recollection was being dragged out of a shower cubicle where I had collapsed. The British had a policy of patients being free of buffalo dung prior to medication. I do remember being told that the sister had taken 158 bee stings just out of my back and then stopped counting as she pulled them out of my face and arms.

Naturally, my playing mates visited me in the wonderful hospital to tell me their scores. To this day when questioned about being allergic to anything, my stock answer is 'Bee-Stings'.

Alan Pullen

Tasmania to Sarawak

'Bloody Hell! You've got it made, young Pullen – Corps enlisted to Engineers, AND a posting straight to Malaysia!' – comment from my Sgt Instructor, Percy Lyall RAE, during my basic training at Kapooka. From 1 Recruit Training Battalion to 17 Const Sqn at Randwick in October 1964, then late March 1965 to Eastern Command Personnel Depot to process for embarkation to Malaysia with the then Spr Tassie Holloway, who later became the much-admired (and curiously-watched) bomb disposal 'expert' at SME.

Early April, 1965: on board the international civvy Qantas flight to Singapore, by Malaysian Airlines to Malacca, then to Terendak Garrison. OOPS! '2 Field Troop RAE isn't here – it's in Borneo.' 'We'll send you back to Singapore, to Changi, to acclimatise for two weeks, then you can join the Troop.' Tassie and I investigated all of the Singapore tourist attractions, i.e. one pub after the other. Two weeks of 're-hydration' – it was the least we could do to prepare us to 'do our duty' in Borneo.

28 April 1965: We boarded the RAF Hastings aircraft at Changi, then were on the ground in Kuching. Met by gun-toting 'Warries', Peter 'PJ' Matthews and partner-in-crime, 'Flash' Farrell, who proceeded to 'brief' Tassie and me on the 'DS' required – vehicle ambush drill. Very impressed were we!? We – in our 'polys', no weapons, sitting in the back of a stripped-down Land Rover – scared stiff of what we were headed for. Flash and Pete continued to 'brief' us on the more 'deadly' side of this War in Sarawak.

The British had a policy of patients being free of buffalo dung prior to medication

Arrived at Cambrai Camp Bau. Welcomed by Troop Commander, Capt Alan Hodges, and Troop S/Sgt Bing Crosby. Allocated our 'tentage', accommodation for the next four months, sharing with Dave Wicks and Nipper Simpson.

'What's your ECN?' 'Electrical Mechanic, Staff.' 'Good, you'll be driving a dump truck!' 'But – I haven't got my military licence.' 'That's OK, most of the other "drivers" haven't got theirs either. Just don't drive them over 30 miles per hour, or the bloody thing will bounce itself off the roadway!'

'Welcome to the Troop.' So began my RAE, and life-shaping, military service.

I had been in the Army less than 12 months. I was in a Theatre of War. I had not been to SME for FE training, in fact I was never to undertake this supposedly essential course for all RAE personnel. (Some years later, as a new sergeant. I did manage to be posted to FE Wing to instruct on two FE Courses.) Further, I had arrived in a Theatre of War without having gone through the dreaded Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, Queensland, again considered 'essential' training to prepare soldiers for war. The 'system' did, however, finally, manage to get me through Canungra before I joined 1 Field Sqn, RAE in South Vietnam in 1968.

"I had been in the Army less than 12 months. I was in a Theatre of War. I had not been to SME for FE training..."

The memories of that time that remain etched on my personality all revolve around the individuals and their unique characteristics that made the long, hot days just bearable:

I can never forget Nipper Simpson and his nightly battles with malaria and how Dave Wicks genuinely cared for him during these spells. I learnt what 'mates' meant.

Tassie Holloway and his 'dossing' down in the first bed he reached as he staggered, (worn out from his daily ventures!?) into the tent – it was usually mine. How could you get angry with big, loveable Tassie?

The children who followed the road, always there for a handout, and with a permanent smile.

The smell of the Gurkhas' cooking pots and whatever it was inside them.

The rice wine at Serasot. Whew! High octane plus.

Listening to the fight between Cassius Clay and Sonny Liston for the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship on Radio Australia, in the middle of the Airstrip at Bau, in May.

Trying to keep that dump truck on the road. And trying to find a comfortable way to sit on it – it was worse than riding a buckjumper.

How beautiful the country and its people were, if you took the time to appreciate them.

The flight by Wessex helicopter from Bau out to HMS Albion miles out into the South China Sea.

The Troop's 'beach landing' at Terendak, just below the Officers Mess, with its attendant wives as humoured spectators. Whoever thought up this tactical exercise?

The basketball games, played in heat and humidity only a Brit would go out in. How bloody good we were, considering we were a hodgepodge of just 50 Australian Sappers.

'A cuppa char and a NAAFI buun!'

The experience that was the Sydney Bar – complete with the Kiwis who you regretted ever responding too. Their 'Eh, you want a drink boy!' a statement, not a request – the signal for alcoholic self-destruction.

Thank God for those gigantic storm-water drains alongside the road back to camp that, once fallen into, guided the most disadvantaged legs back to the main gate of Terendak. Then, you only had to convince those Scots Guards you were an Australian Sapper and not a CT, or worse, a Brit.

I remained with the troop until it returned to Australia in October 1965 and, as I had not yet completed my two-year posting, I stayed in Malaysia with the replacement troop, until selected for Officer Training at the Officer Cadet School, Portsea, commencing there early in January 1966.

Mick Sutton

My Uncle and Me

On our deployment to Sarawak the departure of the *Maxwell Brander* from Singapore harbour was delayed by the late return of several sappers. Here are the facts.

Well, where do I start? There were three sappers doing a bit of a bar crawl and we met a few sailors who were in port. I asked one if he knew a Chief Petty Officer by the name of Curly Sutton. He said he did and arranged for me to telephone the ship and speak to Curly, who is my uncle. I hadn't seen him in about five years, him sailing the seven seas and all, so he came in on the next boat. Ian Tibbles, Frank Sexton and I waited till he got into town, all shook hands, then headed off to a bar for some light refreshment. Before one could say 'whoops-a-daisy', we were late back to the *Maxwell Brander* and to the loving arms of our favourite Corporal, Snow Wilson, who later informed me that I would be put on a charge for holding up the departure of the said ship.

Well I didn't worry. I had a very good excuse, so up we three musketeers went to face the table. First was Tibbles and Capt Hodges liked the story; next up went Frank and again Capt Hodges liked hearing the story a second time – no fine or charges for either of these two fine young sappers; and then it was 'March in the guilty party – having heard the two stories I find you guilty as charged to the tune of three weeks loss of pay.' It was MY uncle, not Tibbles' or Sexton's, and I paid the price.

But it didn't worry me and, to this day, I can still see my Uncle Jim waving his white handkerchief while standing on the wharf, as the *Maxwell Brander* steamed out to sea with Captain Bligh and his faithful corporal by his side.

"I find you guilty as charged to the tune of three weeks loss of pay..."

John Tomczak

My Tour In North Borneo

During the first part of the tour of duty with 2 Field Troop RAE in Bau I was assigned to 3 RAR at their forward bases near the Indonesian border.

My role was to provide adequate showering facilities for the personnel based there. The two forward bases I went to were Serikin and Bukit Knuckle. Serikin was the first and I was there for approximately three to four weeks. This was by far the better base as it was on level ground and had a clear field of fire up to approx 200 yards. Some of the accommodation that we lived in was dug into the ground with some very basic timber shoring and lined with corrugated iron, which was then covered with filled sandbags.

It didn't rain very much during my stay, which was a blessing, as the living conditions were very musty and damp. On the underside of the corrugated iron there was a series of poncho liners to catch the loose dirt falling upon one's luxury five-star dwelling. Not that this did much good for, when the Brit 105 mm artillery started to do its nightly harassing fire from the base, you had to evacuate the bunker because the cordite fumes would just flow right in and create difficulty in breathing, plus the vibration would compound the falling debris.



A Belvedere helicopter above a forward base at Bau where Spr John Tomczak was working.

The task I was sent out to do wasn't an overly big job, but getting the supplies out to me was slow, as they had to be purchased in Kuching then flown into my location. One lot of galvanised water pipe was actually delivered to the end of the existing road by truck, then carried in 11 or 12 miles over jungle tracks by Dyak porters. I used a very basic but effective layout. I built an additional water tower for a secondary storage tank, with provision to store a couple of 44-gallon drums of diesel fuel on a lower platform for fuel to heat up the primary

water storage boiler. I then ran additional pipes and taps to link up with the existing cold-shower plumbing. There were approximately 20 showers connected to the system and, with an effective heating system, there was more than enough hot water for the company of 3 RAR and its supporting elements.

I constructed a similar but smaller system at Bukit Knuckle, as this position had a vastly different layout from that of Serikin. This countryside was very hilly and inhospitable. The entire base was built into both sides of a razorback ridge; the helipad was located on top of the ridge, and the accommodation bunkers were dug into both sides descending down to the general administration and messing area. The bunker accommodation was less than homely as it was continually damp and smelly, with the only light entering into the bunker coming from a small window that was used for our field of fire at 'stand-to' and when we did our nightly guard duty. So with those types of living conditions, people generally spent most of their time in the messing area which

doubled up as a recreation area. I don't recall staying at Bukit Knuckle for more than eight or nine days.

I was a lot more involved in other tasks at Serikin, such as minor base-restoration and reconstruction. I did one night-clearing patrol, and nightly sentry duty, made up ashtrays out of 105 shell casings for those who wanted them, and assisted with gathering up parachute resupply drops that came once or twice a week. (The parachutes made up into great pyjamas.) I found that the 3 RAR guys were very friendly and easy to get along with, and there was a good feeling at both forward bases.

Snow Wilson

First Bush Trip

Our shakedown exercise was a bit of a disaster; we headed out of Terendak Camp to one of the training areas on a map-reading exercise and to get used to operating in the jungle. Great! We had our Brit 44-pattern webbing, our new, green jungle-boots and personal weapons with five rounds of ammunition each. The trucks dropped us off, and we set off in patrol formation into the jungle. We kept moving steadily, deeper, and about 1600 hours we stopped in our harbour position. Everyone got himself organised with hutchies and mozzie nets erected, then cooked our meal, or rather warmed it up. Before final darkness fell we had an 'O' group where we got our instructions for the next day. Then, as it was not a tactical exercise, we turned in for the night.

I was camped with Jock Benson and we chatted on like everyone else until I felt something crawling around on my lower left leg. I asked Jock to find the torch, as by now I was holding the culprit through my trousers. Jock asked, 'What do you need the torch for?', so I told him I thought I had a leech on my leg. Poor Jock went into a flap. He came from Glasgow and was not used to the things in the bush. Well, we overcame that problem and settled down again on our inner-sprung dirt. Within half an hour we heard away in the distance a tiger growling. Poor Jock – that was the end of his sleeping for the night.

*“...we heard
away in the
distance a tiger
growling...”*

Nee Soon

I went to Nee Soon Barracks in Singapore for a six-week Malay language course and got 'E' for effort. On our course we had blokes from a variety of units and amongst them were some members of the British SAS. Because of the security situation in Singapore, we were confined to camp for part of our course. One Saturday night we had been in the NAAFI for a while and were quite cheerful by the time they closed the bar. As we were leaving, one of the SAS blokes decided he would like to take the picture of the Queen, which was hanging on the wall. What he thought was a good idea, members of the Anti-Aircraft Artillery unit took exception to. As I went past him, he handed me the picture while he sorted out the AA blokes. Not a good idea, as I am rather recognisable. Also I didn't know that the Duty Sgt was a Gurkha, and they don't have much of a sense of humour when on duty. I went to the barracks, gave the bloke his picture, and then went to bed. Well, it was not long before the Duty Sgt was giving me what-for about the photo of his beloved Queen. Of course, I forgot where it was and it

was only when I was halfway across the parade ground heading rapidly for the guardroom that my memory suddenly returned. We went back to the barracks, the picture was returned, and so did peace.

Our Hoppy RSM

Operation Crown has hundreds of funny stories. One was when I fell foul of Hoppy, CRE Crown RSM. Like a lot of RSMs he didn't always see things the same way as a digger does. The temperature had been hovering around the 100-109°F and my face and neck were burnt enough to fry eggs. So, I saw the Boss, Capt VG, and asked if I could wear my slouch hat. It was no problem as far as the Troop Commander was concerned.

Sunburn in the Army was considered as a self-inflicted wound and you could be charged for it. Things went well for a few days as Hoppy hadn't seen me. Well, when he did, he gave me a bit of advice as only RSMs can, and told me to 'Get that thing off your head, and get your bush hat on. NOW!' Trying to explain was getting me nowhere, so off to the Boss again, then down to the MO for a chit. The Doctor gave me a chit to allow me to wear my slouch hat without question. I kept it under the headband of my hat, which saved so many more embarrassing situations with other senior members of Operation Crown.

“...one of the Brits had just been reaching for his beer on the bar when he was shot in the forearm

I might add that I didn't have problems from anyone in 11 Indep Field Sqn.

Fire

At about 0400 hours Dodo Dodd rushed into my tent and woke me up with, 'Snow, there is a tent on fire!' I jumped out from under my mozzie net, put on my thongs and raced outside, grabbed the fire bucket in one hand and the stirrup pump in the other and ran down to where Moose Sutton, Frank Sexton, Stan Limb and Geordie Sinclair's tent was on the ground with just a few smoking remains left. Luckily, no one was hurt but most of their gear was lost. Well, all that was above ground was. Over the other side of the tent to me were Geordie and the RSM, who was fairly giving Geordie a dressing down for not being properly dressed. I was lucky someone handed me a towel and I quickly went back to my tent to get dressed.

Canteen Cowboy

Canteen Cowboy is the term we used for the Duty NCO in the NAAFI. I was on duty one night and it must have been an off-pay week as it was rather quiet. A few of 2 Troop were there, playing darts and spending their last dollars on the cheap beer. In the Brit side it was pretty much the same. The NAAFI wasn't segregated but it had two bars. The Brits tended to drink in one and, in the other, the larger of the two, the Aussies drank.

I was watching the dart game when suddenly a shot rang out. I jumped up and raced through the Brit side to find one of the guards outside, with his Sterling SMG, in quite a state. I took the weapon from him and he was taken to the guardroom for further investigation.

It turned out that the guard had forgotten two basic things about the Stirling: the first, it has a fixed firing pin; and second, if you let the working parts forward with a loaded magazine, it will take a live round into the chamber and fire that round. And that is what happened.

In the meantime there was a lot of noise coming from the Brit side of the NAAFI. When I got back inside I found that one of the Brits had just been reaching for his beer on the bar when he was shot in the forearm. The bullet had travelled a distance of about 10 yards, through a timber window frame a couple of inches thick, but hadn't gone right through the bloke's arm. Which was very lucky for our blokes as the dartboard was in a direct line of the shot. The bloke who was shot was taken up to the hospital in the car of one of his mates as the duty vehicle was out on another job. The injured soldier returned to the unit some days later.

My personal weapon was a Stirling, so the next morning I was down at the Q store straight after parade and changed the 9 mm Stirling for a 7.62 mm FN 30, something with a bit of hitting power.

Back from Sarawak and on Leave

After our return on the HMS *Albion* from Sarawak we cleaned up our equipment and got any replacements we needed, then went on leave. Three of us decided to go up to Penang for a few days. Dave Wicks and Murray Avery organised a hire car from some dodgy bloke who hired them without the correct paperwork, insurance, etc. I'm not too sure it even had current registration.

They got the car and the next morning we set off on the trip – first stop, the Sydney Bar for breakfast. When I was climbing out of the back seat, holding onto the centre post, Dave slammed his front door. What a good start, four bruised fingernails and two unsympathetic Sappers laughing their heads off.

After breakfast we headed north to new sights, sounds and smells. We stopped once to look at a local circus, to find a polar bear in a cage on a trailer with a large block of ice in with it. We passed the Batu Caves and their interiors set up as temples. We stopped to take photos of very large tin dredges floating on their own lakes as they ate their way through the countryside and, at last, came to the beautiful city of Ipoh where we stayed overnight.

The next day we toured around Ipoh. In the afternoon we went to the races where we found out that to win you needed to back the horses with the Aussie jockeys on them, and then you needed to know whose turn it was to win. Well that's how it seemed to us.

Then on to Penang Island, where we crossed by one of the large ferries, stayed for a couple of days, travelling on the Peak Railway and did other touristy things. On the



Spr Murray Avery and Cpl Simon Wilson with a dodgy hire car outside the Sydney Bar at the Terendak Garrison entrance.

morning we were leaving, Murray was driving and as we were going into a car park, a group of attractive young ladies were crossing the street. Having good eyesight, we were all (including the driver) admiring the scenery. I was sitting in the backseat. Suddenly I looked in front and yelled, 'LOOK OUT!' Too late – we hit one of the metal lampposts fair and square in the middle. Luckily, we didn't cause too much damage to the car, and none to the lamp-post, but the girls were in hysterics. We managed to straighten out the front so we could drive without causing any more damage, and we eventually got on our way.

We got back to Terendak in time for me to mount guard duty. After taking the pee out of me during the whole trip, the other two had to take the car back. Their reception was rather cool, but their legs were fast. I think that was the last they heard about the matter.

Anonymous

Crossing the Mekong

My name is – well, it really is of little concern what my name is at this time, suffice to say I am writing these few lines to put right a longstanding misconception of a series of events that happened many years ago. I was very close to the people involved and to the best of my knowledge this is the only factual account ever recorded of the often discussed 'Crossing of the Mekong'.

“There was never a thought given to their own health and wellbeing...”

As the sun came up on that Sunday morning, it shone down fiercely upon a group of young Australian Army Engineers as they left a makeshift Chapel. In the absence of a Padre in the area, each took his turn on Sunday mornings to present a short service by reading selected passages from the good book.

Nothing particularly unusual about this scene, other than the fact that it was occurring in a rice paddy in a remote part of Northeast Thailand. The actual date is a bit fuzzy; however, it was in the first quarter of 1964. The lads in the group of five shall remain nameless; one a lanky Queenslander in the mould of Chips Rafferty, one a red-headed dynamo from Western Australia, a shy and introverted lad from New South Wales and two steady types from Tasmania.

Something set this group aside from the other troops that day – they had all volunteered to work on their day off. They had done this despite the fact that, like all of the sappers at Operation 'Crownseal', they were working six days a week from daylight to dark in terrible conditions: searing heat during the day, and freezing cold at night. These are the types of soldiers you will come to respect, as you become more familiar with their exploits.

A few days before, they had approached their Staff Sergeant (The Crooner) and outlined a plan to drive north from the camp a hundred kilometres or so and seek out and record potential sites for quarries, water and level, well-drained light aircraft strips, etc. It seemed logical to them that their work-free days should be used in a constructive way, seeking out and placing on record such strategic knowledge to facilitate future operations should the need for them arise. There was never a thought given to their

own health and wellbeing, nor to the rest they ought to be having on their limited days away from the workface.

The Crooner, upon hearing their plan, sought approval from the Troop OC, who agreed to authorise the use of a suitable vehicle and wished the group well in their endeavours. He, like his Senior NCO, never ceased to be impressed by the work ethic of the Australian Sapper when the situation warranted it. It may be worth mentioning that the Captain to this day recalls an inner sinking feeling he experienced as he watched the vehicle depart the Camp confines.

The group drove north at a steady rate, oblivious to the severe heat and choking dust along the way, sighting several areas of potential value in relation to road base, water and other sought-after materials. They had decided to photograph and record these sights during their return trip.

Tired and dirty from the long road trip, they were pleased to reach a village of reasonable size that appeared to have one or two rural Thai-style eating-houses: a few chairs and tables, an owner/cook and one or two staff to service the patrons. The lads entered the first one they came across and proceeded to order Earl Greys all around, followed by bowls of red rice and vegies. They were soon settled into their lunch and enjoying the sweeping vista of the magnificent Mekong River. As you might imagine, the presence of the Australians caused a little stir among the locals, as the Aussies were possibly the first they had seen in the flesh. The owner seemed particularly surprised that the group had chosen to drink tea instead of the cold beer and spirits he had quickly placed on the counter upon their arrival. This, however, was the nature of this group: the work must come first and any thought of a cold beer or two would have to wait until they were safely back at base and, even then, not until the de-briefings were completed.

So there they were, knocking back the Earl Greys when one of them sighted, through binoculars, a large foreign flag flying on top of a substantial building on the other side of the river, directly opposite their position. It was jointly decided that the flag in question would look good in one of the messes at Casula. That's all it takes with Sappers, the decision was unanimous, the flag 'had to be got'.

By this time, the Earl Grey was starting to kick in and it was agreed that they borrow a powered longboat, slip across to the other side and bring the flag back. A few problems existed, of course, not the least of which was the fact that the country across the river was led by a communist regime, and there was a fair chance that any government officials present in the building flying the flag would not take kindly to an unsolicited visit by a group of foreigners. You could add to that the fact that the Mekong around this area was almost a mile wide. These minor problems aside, the lads were well aware that each of them was highly skilled in watermanship and, as a group, well-honed in the finer arts of public relations, in particular those required while serving overseas.

Arriving at the river's edge, the group had soon arranged for a local to lend the group his motorised longboat. He was seemingly quite pleased with the idea and even declined the offer of money to offset the cost of fuel, etc. He became so excited about the fact that his boat had been selected from many lying around that, as the group headed offshore, he appeared to be jumping up and down and waving his arms about, obviously overcome by the situation he found himself in.

With the throttle wide open, it didn't take long to navigate the sandbars and several other craft on the river, and they soon found themselves backing off a little to approach the shoreline. It would appear the cups of tea had affected some more than others, and a couple expressed the need to ease themselves as soon as they were ashore. They had no sooner commenced this function when a large group of locals arrived on the scene to observe these strange-looking people from parts unknown and their weird greeting ritual of standing with their headwear positioned over their crotch.

It was at this time that a number of uniformed men carrying firearms were sighted leaving the building with the flag flying above and heading at a canter towards the unscheduled boat arrival. The decision was instantaneous, 'To hell with the flag; let's get out of here', or words to that effect. With that, the vessel, again complete with its crew, was pointed back towards friendly shores and the motor given its head. The (until now) reliable old craft fairly screamed away from the riverbank and the now-present reception committee but, alas, not for long. In midstream, the motor coughed and spluttered a few times and then stopped. It was literally dead in the water.

Hours of training on the wet gap went out the window as all aboard decided to assist in the attempt to restart the failed engine; this had the immediate effect of transferring all

*“It would appear
the cups of tea had
affected some more
than others...”*

of the onboard weight to the blunt end, already struggling with the weight of the motor and the operator. The bemused locals on both sides of the river were, within a few seconds, witnessing the no-doubt amusing spectacle of the boat going end-up and, together with its highly-trained crew, disappear quickly beneath the surface, stern-first! It was, however, pleasing to note that even in these trying circumstances some of the crew's training prevailed and, as the last few feet of the boat disappeared, the cry was heard, 'Lay in your oars', followed closely by a gurgling sound.

It soon became evident to the now-swimmers that the boat and motor were not coming back up and another decision was quickly reached. As JFK and his crew had done, at another time and place, all five struck out towards the distant riverbank, some 500 yards or so through fast-flowing muddy waters. Amazing stuff that Earl Grey, even in these circumstances there was plenty of sparkling conversation until it was noticed that the conversation had become a four-way one, and not five-way as it should have been. They ducked-dived as one, and there he was on the murky bottom, our West Australian friend, no doubt checking out the river gravel as to its suitability for concrete or road-base material. He was dragged back to the surface by his now out-of-breath mates, only to inform them that he was sick of swimming and was going back to the bottom.

As you can imagine, there was quite a bit of animated conversation going on about this time and, after retrieving him again, they managed to convince him that any future he might have lay on the bank ahead of them. I understand that a mental picture drawn by one of his mates of the availability of chilled Earl Grey awaiting them ashore carried the day, and together they pushed on towards the still-distant riverbank. Finally, they waded ashore in anything but Macarthur fashion, but still managed to carry themselves with some dignity towards the rousing reception from the gathered villagers.

A couple had dispensed with their footwear in mid-stream, others hadn't. All were pretty well spent and looking for a place to sit down, dry off a little, and perchance partake of a few more exotic teas. Those with footwear led the way, followed by those without. A couple of attempts were made to purchase thongs from the locals to no avail. Apparently, the sodden one-baht notes offered by the wretched souls with bare feet didn't appeal.

In the village again, they quickly located another teahouse and arranged themselves around a table. Much relieved, they ordered drinks and began reliving their recent ordeal, oblivious to the stunned looks on the faces of the attending staff. Soon they started to dry out a little, and laughter began to fill the small building as the Earl Grey again warmed their souls.

A few minutes later, all hell broke loose – Hollywood came to the village. A number of vehicles skidded to a halt in front of the building and a dozen or so Thai police officers debussed carrying a variety of weapons, some of which were quite nasty-looking arrangements. They pushed through the locals gathered in the doorway and quickly surrounded the visitors' table. They were shouting orders of some kind at the perplexed Australians who, now reformed in the best Aussie tradition, started returning the compliments in kind. More Hollywood – through the door came a thin, pale European male who in an uncalled-for belligerent manner declared himself to be a Major in the British Army, and proceeded to demand the names from all of those seated at the table. Only one name was forthcoming, that of the ever-present Spr Bridge. The others, not at all impressed by this sudden show of bravado, invited the intruder to depart the immediate area and, in so doing, broke their habit of not swearing in public places.

The Senior Thai officer stepped forward at this stage and, looking totally underwhelmed by the scene taking place, barked an order to his officers. His intentions were very clear and with the clicking of safety catches ringing in their ears

the boys decided as one to go along with whatever the Senior Police Officer had in mind. On arrival at the Police Station, it would seem the Captain had decided to allow the still-damp and tired visitors to occupy one of his rooms for a few hours in order that they may dry out and rest up a little. His men directed the group upstairs to where the only room of sorts was overflowing with really bad-looking Asian males. This situation was quickly overcome and an officer opened the door to the room and shouted something at the bemused occupants who, en masse, stampeded out of the room and down the stairs in a matter of seconds.

Inside the small room, which was constructed of a series of iron bars spaced about three inches apart, no doubt to facilitate a good flow of air in the tropical conditions, the new occupants examined the spartan decor. The only thing present in the room other than themselves was a very large earthenware jar or urn of sorts, the function of which would soon become obvious to all present. The worst aspect of the room appeared to be the fact that it was no more than about five feet two inches from floor to ceiling. It was impossible for the Australians to stand upright, a serious design fault. In their ensuing attempts to get comfortable, the West Australian somehow managed to knock over the

“...the cry was heard, ‘Lay in your oars’, followed closely by a gurgling sound.”

urn in the corner and its use became immediately apparent. The foul-smelling contents poured forth onto the floor, the stench overpowering.

It was at this moment that old Chips, the Queenslander, decided that the accommodation provided was not to his liking and, as the door was still ajar at this stage, he decided to return to the eating-house down the road. He strolled from the room to the top of the staircase – a bad move in the circumstances. The business-end of a very long rifle barrel was positioned just below his bottom lip by a policeman who gave the impression that he wasn't being paid for his overtime. As he cocked his weapon, the whole floor resounded with the unmistakable sound of rounds going up the spout. Watching the lanky Queenslander somehow cover the distance from the top of the stairwell back to his mates in a single bound (and, in so doing, almost taking out the urn-bandit who had decided to join him) cheered up his mates no end, so much so, they burst forth with a rousing rendition of 'Two Arms'.

“It was at the very start of this meeting that the Captain experienced first-hand the compassionate nature of these rowdy Australians”

Maybe it was the terrible rendition of the soldier's hymn, or perhaps the fact that the contents of the urn had seeped through the floorboards and had dripped all over his desk, that convinced the Police Captain that it was time to have a chat with his new tenants. In any case, the group found themselves standing in front of the Captain's desk in a matter of minutes. It was at the very start of this meeting that the Captain experienced first-hand the compassionate nature of these rowdy Australians. Disappointed to see the Captain had a smoking habit, the lad from New South Wales reached across the desk, picked up the Captain's cigarettes and handed one to each member of the group. He then picked up his Zippo and proceeded to light all of them. He tried to explain to the somewhat bewildered Captain that, in so doing, he was cutting down the number of cigarettes available for consumption, thus cutting down on his (the Captain's) smoking habit. Following this little discourse, the Captain terminated the meeting and had the cigarette-puffing group shown back to their room. On this occasion, the door was closed behind them. The boys soon settled into some more intelligent conversation and, from time to time, attempted to replace the contents of the urn. They insisted that the West Australian sit in the opposite corner, and watched him very closely when his turn came to use it.

Time seemed to fly by in their comfortable surroundings until, before them, the imposing sight of the tallest NCO in the troop appeared at the top of the steps. His driver Sapper Black, who as always had a grin from ear to ear, closely followed him. Try as they may however, the boys could not make out even the slightest smile on the big feller's face. Things moved pretty quickly from that point onwards and the group soon found themselves in the back of a vehicle heading towards their camp at a fair clip. As they proceeded down the road, the effects of too much Earl Grey still lingered and each took his turn to enlighten those in the front of the vehicle with the day's happenings. Of course, these deliberations were laced with much laughter and 'You should have been there!' remarks. Someone in the rear committed a social indiscretion in a very

audible manner followed by the usual comments: 'A bit more choke and that would have started', 'If that's not out, I'm not playing' etc.

It wasn't long before all of this wore a little thin with the 'Tall One' in the front seat. He turned around with a look that conveyed the tacit message that, at that very moment in time, they as a group were in more physical danger than they had been at any stage since leaving on their eventful trip. All five had seen the 'Windmill' go off in the wet canteen the night a not-so-bright Brit had removed the Troop shield from the wall behind the bar and proceeded to stomp all over it. In the ensuing moments, 'The Windmill's flailing arms had, inter alia, cooled the canteen considerably. From that point on, it was a pleasantly quiet trip, broken only by the odd polite request for a comfort stop.

On the vehicle's arrival back at camp, the Sqn OC was understandably anxious to know how the recce group was bearing up after their experience. He had been briefed of course by the British Major who had the pleasure of meeting up with the group in the field and, because of that, had in all probability developed a slanted view of what really occurred during their absence from the camp. He must have indeed been anxious for a debriefing, as the SSM himself was in attendance to 'invite' the boys into the arranged meeting as soon as possible. As the team gathered in front of the polished desk, one of them was heard to express the opinion that he thought it rather rude that no chairs had been provided for the weary travellers. It would appear they would have to stand throughout the proceedings.

In any case, it didn't take long to sort out the unfortunate misconceptions that were formed prior to their arrival, and all present reached a satisfactory conclusion to the matters at hand. All perhaps with the exception of the 'British Major' who departed the area muttering two words over and over. One of the words was 'Colonials', the one that preceded it was not really nice, so much so, that common decency dictates that it not be recorded here.

The group readily agreed to pay the boatman for his loss of the boat and motor,

The group readily agreed to pay the boatman for his loss of the boat and motor, still presumably on the bottom of the Mekong. All agreed that, although it had been a mechanical fault that had caused the problem in the first instance, no blame could be laid at their feet and, as the owner had at the time been good enough to lend his boat, he should not be left out of pocket. They also agreed to an unusual request that they construct a boxing ring in the vicinity of the wet canteen. They even agreed to perform this task outside of normal working hours – a nice gesture, given the circumstances. The group believed then, and still do, that the boxing-ring concept came from the British SSM, a big man in every sense of the word. He was without doubt the most admired and respected British soldier the Australians had met to date on their tour of Southeast Asia.

The boxing edifice was soon completed, and was naturally of a high standard, given that there were two excellent chippies in the group, not to mention a qualified 'tinsmith'. The only lingering concern the lads had was that the SSM might have called upon one of them to join him in the ring for a few rounds in order to test the facility. Thankfully, their fears in this respect were unfounded.

A few days later, the whole team returned to the village and spoke at length with the Police Captain in relation to the events of the previous week. No Earl Grey was consumed prior to or during this trip, with the end result that the meeting was extremely convivial. The Captain gratefully accepted the payment for the lost boat and motor and mentioned in passing that he had received information to the effect that the local had retrieved the complete outfit the next day; however, in the interest of receiving some form of compensation, he had hidden it well away from the village. He stated that, although this was dishonest, he was not inclined to pursue the matter, having regard to all of the circumstances. The lads apologised for the dripping ceiling episode and for their unauthorised consumption of his tobacco products. He made the comment in closing that he believed the whole incident had been the result of high spirits, something that constantly saw him in trouble as a young man. The meeting finished with everyone on good terms. The likely lads were even tempted to invite the Captain down to his 'local' for a couple of Earl Greys, however common sense prevailed – well, either that or a look from across the room.

*“Upon reflection,
one might say
they could be
likened to
a group of young
children in a
Thai Pagoda,
innocents
surrounded
by guilt”*

The whole matter ended there, well almost. It would appear that these rather unusual events had been whispered about in the hallways of Canberra, in particular the rumour that serving Australian soldiers had indeed set foot in a communist country. The discussions centred on the diplomatic problems that could ensue from such an occurrence. It was apparently decided at slightly below executive level that 'it did not happen'. Confirmation that the hallway discussions did in fact take place was forthcoming after the troop returned to its base in Malaya. A visiting General while addressing the assembled troop mentioned in passing that he believed all members of the 'Mekong Sailing Club' were present in the ranks. He was discreet enough not to seek personal introductions.

Well, that's the way it happened – at last a credible account of what transpired on that day back in 1964. It's a pity that rumours grow in the absence of facts. I know of one in particular that really hurt those involved. It was the outrageous suggestion that they had consumed copious amounts of Mekong whisky prior to and during their unfortunate misadventure on the mighty Mekong.

Upon reflection, one might say they could be likened to a group of young children in a Thai Pagoda, innocents surrounded by guilt.

Ben Trovato (nom de plume)

Trish Farrell

Men just don't listen

Like all of you, we have many fond and humorous memories from Malaya. One we often relate to our friends is the time Tony arrived home from work a little hot and bothered as usual from the bus trip from Terendak, and proceeded to the fridge. I told him there

was a man in the roof. To which he responded ‘Yeah, sure’ and proceeded to sit down on his favourite chair and empty a can of Tiger in his usual fashion. He was on the second one when a pair of hairy legs appeared out of the manhole above him. He almost spilt his beer in adopting an aggressive stance beneath the manhole. He was relieved to find a friendly British neighbour from across the road who had come to my assistance when the hot water tank in the roof had somehow overflowed and leaked down the walls and onto the floor – something Tony had failed to notice before settling into his arrival home ritual. He wears glasses now.

Swarming

Swarming is not a new idea. It was alive and well in the 60s. Unbeknown to Tony and me, some considerate person placed a notice on the troop noticeboard to the effect ‘*Open house at the Farrells’ on Saturday night. All welcome. BYO*’. On the Saturday morning we returned from a shopping trip in Malacca to find a stack of cartons on the front porch. Our normally calm, pleasant Ah Moi said in a very quiet yet knowing voice, ‘Master’s friends come. I go sleep at parents’ house tonight’. (She was a mother of nine and her husband worked in Singapore).

The ‘guests’ started arriving early for the ‘big party’. As usual, the towers of empty cans were constructed and photographed. We were eaten out of house and home by ‘the singlies’. Soon, the cans collapsed all over the floor, leaving a considerable mess for all sleepover guests to clean up next morning.

Before light, a truck screeched to a halt outside the house. The driver announced, in the usual ‘voice-to-wake-the-dead’, the untimely news of an air-portability exercise. All present were bundled into the truck and taken back to Terendak. Tony was informed that a vehicle would return for the married men at 0400. Somehow he managed to get himself up and was making more than the normal noise associated with getting ready for work, so reluctantly I decided to investigate before the truck arrived and I could get some sleep. The scene in the lounge was not to my liking at all. There was Tony holding a large box of empty beer cans that he had picked up, no doubt in the hope of leaving home on speaking terms. The truck arrived from the camp to another screech that probably woke the whole neighbourhood. Another yell and knock at the door. Then the crash – the bottom of the box, now limp and sodden from the beer from leaking beer cans, split and the contents spilled out onto his boots, uniform and all over the lounge. One word was spoken: ‘OUT’. I closed and locked the door and went back to bed until Ah Moi and I cleaned up the mess made by the party animals. We also found several cartons of beer, which some guest or tenant had stashed away. As I have never been a beer drinker and have always been generous in giving it away to friends, I decided to get rid of the horrible stuff and have a party for the other wives who lived in the street.

*“Open house
at the Farrells’
on Saturday night.
All welcome.
BYO”*

It was wonderful to see the look on the faces of the DPJFs (‘Deep Penetrating Jungle Fighters’) when they returned, thinking they had been very smart and there would be a ‘coldie’ at the Farrells’!

Picnic at Port Dixon.

Shortly after their joint purchase of a motorcar, Peter Matthews and Phil Macklin were good enough to invite Tony and me along on a picnic. We were happy enough to go, provided my little dog Mandy could also attend.

Peter reluctantly went along with this and panicked all of the way, in the fear that the poor little thing might not be car-trained and might wee in the back seat, which we shared as the invited guests. Almost there, no mishaps as yet; then the dog that came from a disadvantaged background and had never travelled in a car before was carsick. She made more noise than Peter ever could. Peter was mortified and did his usual 'rave'. Phil was as controlled as ever, while we continued the journey in uncontrolled fits of laughter. A short, but nonetheless pleasant, picnic (at least Tony and I thought so) was followed by a whiffy return to Malacca. That was the only ride we had in their new car, which didn't last long as a new car anyway after bone-shaking punishment on the Terendak-Malacca road. Funny about that!

Tony vs. Mandy

Mandy was very much my dog. I didn't like dogs in the house. However, as we lived outside of camp, the dog was a companion and very protective of our space. She tolerated Tony and he returned the favour. We still get a good laugh when we recall the day Tony arrived home, unexpectedly, after a two-week exercise only to be greeted by a sharp nip on his behind by my beautiful little dog. Tony responded by throwing a punch, missing Mandy completely but somehow smashing a very beautiful and expensive radio, which had been purchased from our Indian Trader. It was going to be a showpiece on our return to Brisbane. Mandy survived the incident. I think Tony's pride suffered a little.

The Cameraman

After a very long day at the Singapore Zoological Gardens, we decided that Tony had taken enough magnificent snaps (with our borrowed camera) to show our family and friends back home. Tired and complete with the photographic record of our one and only visit to this wonderful place, we returned to our room at the 7th Storey Hotel. On arrival at Malacca early next morning (you guessed it) when he examined the camera to remove the film for development, he discovered the lens cap in place where it had been for the duration of his photographic safari. Men!

Beryl Hodges

Our arrangements for the Brisbane birth of our first baby in 1964 were hastily changed on our surprise posting to Malaysia. After hurried injections, packing and a farewell trip to our families in Melbourne, we excitedly made our first overseas flight, via the heavily-guarded Jakarta airport, to Singapore. With an overnight stay at Raffles in Singapore, we flew then on to Malacca, wide-eyed at all the unfamiliar and fascinating sights (and smells) of Southeast Asia.

Within a couple of days, Alan had left for Exercise Raven and I was 'put in' to the Westernhay Hotel, a Somerset Maugham-style boarding house on the Malacca Road, where I mostly spent the time taking afternoon tea with the owner, Mrs Zoe Benn, an English gentlewoman from Malaya's colonial past. This set the pattern of our life for the next two and a half years of our wonderful posting at Terendak – Alan away for long

periods in Borneo and Thailand, as well as all the never-ending jungle exercises, while I spent a great deal of time at morning and afternoon teas (by no-means an unpleasant experience) as wives from 2 Troop and other units in the Brigade formed a strong support network for each other. I have great admiration, developed from that time and over the many years since, for the competence and independence of Army wives in dealing alone with family life while their husbands are away.

The times between our separations were happy, enjoyable and great fun. It was easy to slip into a comfortable lifestyle so different from life in Australia.

Our daughter Lisa was born at the new British Military Hospital in Terendak, run with an iron rod by the no-nonsense British Army nursing sisters, one of whom sternly answered Alan's enquiry about me with: 'I'll ask the questions, Captain!' I was bemused by the fact that we patients were all required to read the Standing Orders, make our beds and stand to attention during rounds by the CO (I hope I was right in assuming that this latter instruction didn't apply to the Maternity Ward).

We were well looked after by our wonderful amahs, Ah Lan, who did the laundry and upstairs cleaning, and Mary followed by Chai, who were cooks and who also cleaned downstairs. The kebun cared for the garden and cleaned the monsoon drains along the driveway. These were deep, and essential for the rainy season, but provided a constant driving hazard, especially with a curved driveway such as we had. However, wives lived with the reassuring knowledge that if you drove your car into a monsoon drain in camp, it was quite possible that a couple of cheerful Maori MPs would be passing and would lift it out, by hand! At the same time, you were careful not to sit behind those big MPs at the Loewen Cinema, or you wouldn't be able to see the screen.

Very good pay allowances and lots of free time made shopping, at the NAAFI, in Malacca and in some of the smaller nearby towns, a regular pastime. Learning the intricacies of bargaining has since been useful during numerous trips to Asia. I also became very adept at playing Mahjong.

Of course, most of the dramas happened while the husbands were away, such as when I found a snake crawling around our dining-room floor while our baby girl was sitting nearby. By the time husbands heard by letter about such events, they were old news. Telephones were simply not part of our lives. Communication with families at home was also usually only by letter. However, for quick messages there was an interesting Australian Army system of sending telegrams economically. Set phrases such as 'Greetings to the best of fathers', 'Good show' and 'Many happy returns' were coded by number, and so we sent and received cryptic messages on telegrams which had the typed code, with a handwritten translation added by the receiving post office staff.

Alan, Lisa and I really enjoyed exploring multicultural Malacca, with its history, buildings and people, and made many trips around Malacca and beyond, south to Singapore and north to Kuala Lumpur and Penang. We loved watching the seasonal changes in the padi fields and seeing glimpses of the daily life of the beautiful and

If I had to use one word to describe 2 Troop, 'irrepressible' would come to mind.

graceful Malays in their kampong houses. Just as fascinating were the Chinese and Indian temples, festivities and shops.

When I look at photos of 2 Troop, I marvel at how young we all were and what fun it was. If I had to use one word to describe 2 Troop, 'irrepressible' would come to mind. They were a lively bunch who made life interesting for everyone. Just before 2 Troop left for Borneo, one of these lively sappers and his friends arrived at our house with his gramophone and a pile of LP records. He thought that I might be lonely while the Boss was away and I might enjoy playing his records. I was touched by his thoughtfulness (and it didn't occur to me how much safer they would be at our place than left in the empty 2 Troop lines). I played those records endlessly during the long evenings and became very fond of them all, even 'I'm Going Back Again to Yarrowonga' and 'The Pub With No Beer'. So I was very grateful, and sorry to have to give them back on 2 Troop's return. Shortly after, Alan told me that he had to heavily fine the sapper as a result of a charge for some incident in Kuching (he didn't tell me what the incident was) and that he (the sapper) was going to sell his records to raise some money. Guess who bought them – and I still love listening to them!

Our 2 Troop posting is a cherished memory. The wonderful life and experiences have compensated for the separations and loneliness, and perhaps our young age made us more resilient when coping with the difficulties than we might have been at a later time.



Lorraine Jones and daughter Sharon.

The soldiers and wives of 2 Troop and 11 Indep Field Sqn, and so many other Australians in Terendak, became lifelong friends – our friendships succinctly summed up by the words: 'we were in Malaya together'.

Lorraine Jones

Lorraine's Malaya Story

The date was the 28 February 1963 and I was going on this big adventure to Malaya. I was excited about it and nervous at the same time – Bill and I had been married for four months and he had left in early January. I was expecting our first child so I couldn't leave with him because some of the needles would not be given before I was three-months pregnant.

This was the first time I had been away from home and my family, and they too had mixed emotions about my leaving. Anyway, the day arrived that I was flying out to meet Bill in Singapore and the whole family came to see me off: my parents, my brother and all five of my

aunties. I can remember that there were two soldiers on the same flight, and one of my dear aunties went to them and asked them to look after me. I was so embarrassed! I was well looked after on our flight and I eventually arrived in Singapore where I was met on the tarmac by our movements corporal, Bruce Glossop. Bill had advised him to look for a pregnant lady – that would be me.

Bill and I were booked into a hotel for the night, but they had put us into a room with one single bed, and the bathroom consisted of a shower and a hole in the floor for a toilet. I had a lot to learn about Asia and toilets!

Malacca airport was closed, so the next morning it was on to the train to Tampin – lots more to learn. On arrival at the railway station, we were met by a driver from 11 Sqn and driven at breakneck speed to our married quarter at Klebang Bazaar. The troop wives had been shopping for us and we had food, and a couple of the ladies were there to meet me. The shock of seeing the married quarter, everything the same colour, all the furniture the same colour, caused me to collapse in tears. This was to be home for the next two years, and sometimes Bill even shared it with me (when the troop didn't need him).

So the months progressed. We had employed an Amah so that I didn't have to wash and iron uniforms – too hot and too pregnant. And Bill was home sometimes. The other wives were wonderful. Some had babies born in the tropics and knew what I was going through. We had to make our own fun. I couldn't play basketball, but played a lot of bingo at the Beach Club and we had dinners at each other's houses when the boys were away.

The big day dawns: I get up to make Bill's breakfast and feel strange. While busying myself in the kitchen, I casually remark 'I think I'm having the baby'. Bill goes into a blind panic: no suitcase is packed; no arrangements made to get to camp; the baby is not due for another three weeks. Half-dressed, Bill darts across the street to where Lucy and Billy Broughton live. Billy is a S/Sgt clerk of works with the CRE at Terendak but, more importantly, he owns a car. Billy agrees to drive us to the MRS (there was no hospital in those days) as I throw some clothes into a suitcase. We arrive at the MRS and a very officious Sister takes over, 'Go to your unit young man', she scolds Bill 'and do not ring before lunch time'. Unable even to get a kiss goodbye from Bill, I am whisked away.

Our gorgeous baby girl arrives, Sharon, weighing six pounds. Gone are the days of rest and trying to find something to do. Bill rings and is allowed to see me. When he arrives I am taken on a wheelchair to the entrance to the next ward. The sister says, 'Your bed is the second on the left. Away you go.' Now I've learnt the British way to have a baby. There sure is a lot to learn in this country!

“I had a lot to learn about Asia and toilets!”



11 Squadron ladies basketball team. Rear L to R --, Yvonne Richardson, Judy Crosby, Jan Leach, Bobby Thornton. Front L to R --, Mary Reece, --, --, Lily Butler

Jan Leach

Memories of Terendak

When we were asked if we would like to contribute an article for this book, I thought, 'What did we have to write about?', and then the memories came flooding back:

Walking down the steps of the Boeing 707 at Singapore airport and that strange, heady 'Asian smell' mingled with the humidity wafting up to greet us; arriving at Terendak at night; and getting up the next morning to find our clothes had been washed, starched and hanging on the clothes line.

The excitement and expectation turning to horror on my first visit to the markets in Malacca. 'What have we done?' I thought when I saw the meat and those red ducks hanging from hooks with no refrigeration, and the horrible foul-smelling storm drains that the locals seemed to use for everything.

Pat Hup, the bus company, and how one never caught 'the bus'. It was always 'Pat Hup.'

Memories of the sentry box having to be moved because evil spirits had invaded it.

Graeme and I both on our Honda 50 cc step-through motor scooters, carrying a set of golf clubs each.

Later, buying a black Austin A50 with rust holes in the floor and most of the lining pulled out, driving to Singapore, arriving at the Goodwin Hotel, and the uniformed doorman parking it amongst all the shining new Mercedes.

And who could forget the Magnolia boy? Malaya's ice cream man. Even when we were on a trip to Port Dickson for the day, he seemed to materialize from nowhere when we arrived, peddling as fast as he could and ringing his bicycle bell.

Apart from platitudes, I have two vivid memories from Terendak. The first memory was the snobbery among the wives. One's social standing depended very much on your husband's rank. I had been told I could expect this among the British wives but never in my wildest dreams did I think that this class distinction would exist among Australian wives. The first time I was put in my place was on the golf course. After our tee shots my partner asked me, 'Who are you with?' 'I'm with the beginners', I replied. The conversation then went something like this: 'No, what unit are you with?' 'I'm not with any unit, my husband is in 2 Troop, 11 Field Sqn.' 'What rank is he?' 'A corporal', I replied. 'Oh.' was the answer and that woman never spoke another word to me for the rest of the game except when the etiquette of the game forced her to. This came as quite a shock to a naïve 21-year-old who thought she must have had leprosy. I later learnt that this woman was an RSM's wife. On many occasions it was made known to Graeme and me that we were the 'lowest-ranked' couple at the Terendak golf club. Later, and to Graeme's disappointment, I resigned from the club.

My strongest memory of life in Terendak is of loneliness and living apart for months at a time. Like many other wives I played a lot of sport, did a lot of shopping and tried to immerse myself into local life, but this still did not compensate for, or fill, the lonely void in one's life, of living apart. As a soldier's wife I expected to spend some time on my own, but never did I envisage having to spend so many months alone. After Thailand, there were the usual short separations and then came the tour to Sarawak. Once again, the loneliness set in. Month after month of putting on a happy face, looking forward to going home towards the end of 1965, where perhaps we could spend more time together.



Letter-writers in front of Stadthuys, the oldest Dutch building in Malacca. It was erected before 1660 and was used as a government office in 1963. It now houses the Malacca Museum.

Little did I know what 1966 would bring – Vietnam.

Trish Lennon

Posted to Malaysia

We all knew about Malaysia – a country in South East Asia, the capital Kuala Lumpur, and the city of Singapore. Our perception of Malaysia came from books and movies as few of us had ever travelled outside Australia in the 60s. It was an exotic land of jungles, rubber plantations and British plantation owners who wore pith helmets, lived in large bungalows with servants, and who drank gin and tonics at sunset.

On our landing in Singapore, reality hit us – the smell, the heat and the humidity. Strangely though, the smell somehow faded after a few months. And the heat and humidity were manageable. We discarded our old, fashionable clothing and adjusted our daily routines. We exchanged the waisted dresses, the petticoats, and the stockings for cotton shifts, bare legs, and sandals. Shopping in Malacca was rarely done in the middle of the day.

When we arrived in Malacca, the reality of servants appeared in the form of Ah Eng, a black and white amah. Quite frankly, she terrified me. Fortunately, after six weeks we moved to Klebang Besar, closer to Terendak camp, as the men were off to Thailand. From then on, the household included Ah Keng the cook amah and Ah Lan the wash amah. The latter never ceased to amaze. In the most primitive of conditions and in the heat of the day, she washed and ironed our clothes to perfection. She somehow managed to starch Barry's uniform so well it could stand to attention on its own. I always thought that that was British army regulations – but perhaps not.

The new house at Jalan Tay Boon Seng was one of a number of duplexes where all the other occupants were young families from 3 RAR – a great support group. The houses were typically Chinese, built on cement slabs and all gaily painted in blue, green, yellow, and pink. In the wet season, the water table was level with the floor, so, through

capillary action, the moisture was drawn up through the cement to form interesting large 'splodges' on the walls.

Rather to my regret, I never did take the time and effort to explore the intricacies of the different cultures that had shaped the town of Malacca. Of course, at a superficial level, we knew that Malacca had been colonized by the Portuguese, that the Chinese has arrived as traders, and that the British civil servants had brought large pots of red paint to cover all of the administrative buildings with bright red exteriors.

The indigenous Malays lived in kampongs, wore sarongs, and were buried under small headstones facing in the direction of Mecca. The Chinese lived in rather more centralized areas in their cement houses, visited the exotically-decorated temples, and were buried on the hillsides in semi-circular graves that represented the womb. We all vaguely knew the traditions of the local people – there was the Muslim Ramadan and the Haj to Mecca, mostly followed by the Malays. The Chinese celebrated Chinese New Year and other festivals such as the Night of the Hungry Ghosts. We found out about this when the large tree at the end of our street had packages of sticky rice tied to its branches to appease the ghosts. The other troops in the Malacca-Terendak area were the Gurkhas who had their own rituals which, every New Year, included the ceremonial beheading of a bullock for good luck – all very intriguing.

*“The reality was
that our men’s
lives were at risk
and no amount
of wishing
otherwise could
alter the fact
that there was
a very real
threat to our
loved ones”*

During our two years in Malacca, the wives tended to live a somewhat idyllic life. We had more money and more time on our hands, so we enjoyed our freedom and spent many a happy hour at the Beach Club. There was also time to socialize during the day and enjoy visits from the linen man, the camphor-wood chest man, or the occasional visit from the travelling gem trader. Buy a Burmese ruby at your own risk though – it could just as readily be a piece of coloured glass.

But during these years we were also cocooned from the reality of what was going on around us. I think this was because there was little sense of immediacy. There were no tele/photo journalists in those days, so the impact of a number of life-threatening incidents occurred in another dimension. Some of the more serious were: the invasion of the Indonesians south of us at Muar, the bombing of the theatre in Malacca, the explosion in the electrical pylon at the end of our street, the killing of young 3 RAR soldiers on the Malaysian-Thai border, and the assault on the 17 Mile Police station that involved our own 2 Troopers. These were ongoing throughout the two years and cast a pall over all our lives. The reality was that our men’s lives were at risk and no amount of wishing otherwise could alter the fact that there was a very real threat to our loved ones.

But I doubt that any of us would have foregone those two years. I like to think that we all somehow ‘grew up’ while we were in Malaysia. The long separations from husbands made us more self-reliant. The differences in the cultures that surrounded us made us

more tolerant. We had to get along with others – we lived so closely together and under the same sort of pressures. We shared so many of the same joys and heartbreaks. We returned to Australia different people from those who had left just a short two years before and – I like to think – better people.

Margaret Stokes

Malasia, what do I remember?

The flight to Malaysia for me was horrible: four kids, the eldest five, the youngest 18 months. Peter wasn't with us as he was in the advance party. He did, however, meet us at Malacca airport with a minibus.

We played basketball, squash, went swimming and joined the rifle club. Shopping became a good pastime. The three older children, Peter, Debra and Michael, started school at the Seaview British Army School while Janelle stayed home with me.

A couple of memories from the kids: the MPs came into the area and shot a mad dog in front of them. They told the kids to get inside the b... house. They also remember chasing the fog machine when it came into the area to spray the mosquitoes. It was probably DDT – we didn't know then that its use was going to be severely restricted years later. The other memory that stands out with Peter is that we were going to be invaded by the Indonesians.

I also remember that one Christmas we had a couple of single chaps come in for the day. We all went to a Christmas Eve 'do' in camp, getting home at 3 am. Pete and his mates went to bed while I had to finish two bridal dolls and didn't get to bed until 4.30. The kids were up at 5! When the fellas got up they could not remember where they were. Peter had to go in and tell them that they were at our place.

When we came back to Australia, we were put in a private hotel in Kings Cross. Boom boom da boom boom went on all night. The next morning when we went out the kids made for a small advertising photo cabinet. Yes, you've guessed it – the 'Pink Pussy Cat' was the source of the music. Their comment was rather loud, 'Look at the rudies, Dad.'

Hope this gives a little insight into this family's tour of Malaysia.