

## Chapter 4 National Service

I can remember thinking that the discipline of the Army would be good for me. Little did I know how you would be treated as scum, sworn at and “put through the wringer” in so called Basic Training. Looking back at my army medical examination it appears that my testicles did the right thing when I coughed but there was concern at the lack of spontaneous reaction when a rubber mallet was applied below the knee, despite a series of attempts. I was then instructed to grip hands together – fingers to fingers – and pull hard. This I duly did and the response then became a violent kick. Only later did I realise that a pretence at pulling might have been rewarded with a medical discharge

Things improved somewhat when I was sent to the Larkhill School of Artillery, adjacent to Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain for six months where I was trained as a “Flash Spotter”. The idea was that with a series of observation posts the first flash of an enemy gun would be seen by one or two posts who would give approximate bearing and distance to Headquarters, who would pass on "look in angles" to the posts that had not seen the flash. On the second firing the position of the gun would be located within a few hundred yards and on the third firing a precise location would be found. Part of the training was to direct high explosive shells onto tanks only a moderate distance in front of us. Calculations were done on slide rules and, surprise surprise, we always ranged the first shot too far.

Guard duty had to be carried out at alternate weekends but there was a way by which you could escape. The guardsman adjudged the best turned out was made Stick man. He had the duty of making the tea and could then bugger off. I won this more often than not, which gave me the opportunity to see my fiancée Sheila. I would make the journey back on a very fast accelerating Rudge 500cc four valve motorbike.

On the return trip, at some unearthly hour, I would relish blasting through the narrow High Street of Theale soaking up the reflection of my exhaust roar. I fell off on a corner once. On another occasion a sparking plug blew into the hedge and I had to push the bike the last five miles.

Thirty-five days on the troop ship Dunera to Hong Kong was not the most pleasant means of transport and the final five days from Singapore to Hong Kong were in a big swell with 95% of the troops sick as a dog. (The only good news was that the bromide in the tea had no effect). Nevertheless we were relieved that we did not disembark in Singapore since those that did were going to war in Korea. Arrival at Hong Kong in January was quite some reward for all the discomfort. Sunshine temperatures in the high 60's, and ladies who wore cheongsongs, split to the waist. The poverty was dreadful and whenever we stopped for a snack on exercises, queues would form for any leftovers. The observation posts looking over the border to China were probably all of 2,000 feet above sea level, but young Chinese would drag up crates of Coca Cola in the hope of exchanging them for army ration biscuits. We were told that our job would be to hold back the invading Chinese for 36 hours to give the civilians a chance to escape.

There was a calibration shoot when all the guns in the colony were lined up wheel to wheel, to fire out to sea and have their fall of shot reported. I was at Able Post on a peninsula, high up with my instrument looking down at the target water. As ten o'clock approached (time for commencement), two motorised junks sailed into the firing area. I alerted the C.O. Major Lewis to their presence and he said "what is that behind us?" "A red flag sir" "What do you see on the other headland?" "A red flag sir". "Carry on Rogers".

At ten o'clock the two junks were centred on my cross wires. Over the telephone came 'shot one', a 5.5 inch high explosive shell despatched. Thirty seconds later 'shot two', thirty seconds later 'shot three'. Shot one exploded about two hundred yards short of my cross-wires and the two junks turned to run away from the land, on the line of fire. Three or four shells crept after them staying about two hundred yards behind. I wonder what they were saying?

Our team was despatched to Malaya to carry out a similar calibration exercise there. I was given a revolver and put in charge of the train from Singapore up to Tampin. The train never seemed to go faster than thirty miles an hour and kept stopping for buffalo on the line. This was bandit country during the insurrection and it was a nervous, though uneventful journey.

Carrying out the pure survey for the baseline for the shoot was a joy. Seldom does a land surveyor have the chance to indulge in pure land survey in such wonderful surroundings where trigonometry points do not exist. The baseline was to be set out across the bay and, due to the steep cliffs and jungle the line at right angles, for angular measurement purposes, was set out in the sea. My theodolite for measuring the angles to the three ranging rods was set up in about eighteen inches of sea water and the lapping of the waves on the tripod made the hairline throb. We felt a sense of achievement when the calculations checked out to within a tolerance of point three of a metre (brilliant by standards then, but not so good today).

Having completed the baseline survey my position (Able post) was at the foot of the straits of Malacca lighthouse, one of five posts ranged along the bay. Artillery teaching was that in setting up the instrument you should take two bearings in the far distance, one in the middle distance and two in the near distance. The further away the point of

bearing the more accurate the set up. In the far distance there was only one clear-cut point, the right hand edge of Sumatra. In the middle distance all that was well defined was a pointed rock on the seashore. In the near distance was jungle and the one thing that stood out was a tree in the shape of a letter Y. On the day of the shoot I went to the lighthouse early to set up the instrument; mist was obscuring Sumatra. Turning to the rock; it had disappeared, submerged by the tide. The prominent tree it had to be then: this was wildly quivering as a troop of monkeys cavorted among the branches. People don't believe me but I promise this is exactly what happened. Headquarters will confirm it, because Able post was 'off bearing' until the mist cleared.

During my time at Tampin I remember the padre was ambushed whilst riding up top in a light armoured car. He gave good account with his machine gun and routed the terrorists. A week or so later I was being driven in a similar vehicle through a Malay village when there was a bump and the driver stopped. "what was that?" enquired a worried Rogers "a chicken" says the driver. Despite my exhortations he insisted on leaving the vehicle in an endeavour to find the owner of the carcass in his hand.

The lighthouse keepers provided us with a scorpion, whose sting they had removed. I remember now the squeal of the unpopular squaddie called Jungle Green when his foot alighted upon the reptile between his sheets.

Back in fabulous Hong Kong I had the occasional duty of marching out the guard. One of the main duties was to prevent the Chinese climbing the sixteen feet barbed wire surmounted fences and stealing the fans; they still succeeded with monotonous regularity.

On one particular night, when I was in charge of the Whitfield Barracks Guard, there was a problem. A WAAF

in the camp was raped and being on guard we were all asked about events that night. Special police said, "you read out standing orders?" "Well as a matter of fact no Sir, they had all heard them before". "Every two hours you marched out the men to their guard posts?" "Well, no, they all knew where to go". Events culminated in an identity parade consisting of the guard. The young lady stopped at the slightly built man standing next to me and he ended up in the glasshouse!!

Chinese New Year, the year of the Rat, took us by surprise. Initial feelings were that the Chinese had come over the border such was the extent of fire crackers which would hang twenty feet long from upper floors giving an endless cascade of minor explosions. The following day the streets were littered inches deep in the debris. New Year was cause for much jubilation for those of us who would be returning home in April. Synthetic San Miguel Chinese beer is bad for the system in large doses. I ended up in hospital with a suspected ulcer, but it turned out to be acute indigestion. In hospital at the same time was a number of soldiers thought to have malaria, which turned out to be poliomyelitis. I think two new arrivals died from the disease, two who had been in the Colony two to three weeks were paralysed and those with mild symptoms, four to six weeks. This became an example to me of the way it is possible to acclimatise to nasty bugs.

I sent my wife Sheila two pairs of silk stockings, which were unavailable in England: they never arrived as the Comet bearing them crashed.

There was a laundry on the camp and I was fascinated with the eating habits of the dhobi ladies. Squatting round a dish of meat pieces, each with a bowl of rice, the chop sticks would flash out lightning fast and the meat disappeared in

seconds. On guard through the early hours there was the constant click of Mah-jong from nearby tenements.

Whilst a lady of the night was available for about five shillings the price would triple when the American Fleet was in. It was well known that an untreated association would result in a dose of the pox and the Army put you on a charge if a soldier contracted the disease without having presented himself to the de-bugging centre. (I remember "Ace" Diamond in the shower finding a pimple and immediately reaching for a bundle of disinfection chitties to make sure he was covered for the events of the preceding night). Whilst a high proportion of soldiers went down this road it was not one that I countenanced for a second. Many squaddies signed on for an extra six weeks service so that they could go home cured. Much envy was expressed towards one charismatic fellow gunner who forged a relationship with the high class and most attractive daughter of a leading local businessman - he caught a dose too!

Hank was tall, good-looking and most personable: he had a relationship with a lady of the street and he would call to see her out of business hours. When I eventually met her I could not believe he would associate with such a wreck.

I developed a body enveloping case of prickly heat: the medical officer prescribed calamine lotion, which was useless. An old stager advised me to go and see Cheong Lon at a shop across the road from the camp and get some prickly heat soap. This cured the problem in 48 hours: it also turned a gold ring green.

As the early months of 1954 passed, those of us due to go home in the spring grew de-mob happy. My friend Paul was due to depart two weeks before me and we waved him off on the Windrush. The ship never made it. Off Algeria they were awoken in the night for what they thought was an

exercise but realised it was serious when they saw paint flaking off the funnel. The troops were evacuated without loss but I believe there were casualties among the crew. The ship sank under tow. Paul was later seen washing out his Leica camera under a freshwater tap in Algiers.

Two weeks later my return was on the Lancashire, a world war one survivor, long and thin. Boy, could she pitch. The Mediterranean was our biggest test followed by the Irish Sea as we made our way to Liverpool. I am not aware that any one of my mates stayed intact.