

BORNEO POST - Sunday January 25th 2004

By James Leong © Copyright acknowledged

A Trip down Memory Lane

A former sailor with the Royal Navy who came to Sandakan nearly 44 years ago, returned with his wife for a trip down memory lane recently.

Fifty-nine-year-old. Mike went to Australia after his retirement from the Royal Navy. In his 12 years with the navy, he served on board four ships: HMS Belfast, HMS Wilkieston, HMS Albion and HMS Galatea which were all stationed in Singapore, then a major British Naval base in the Far East. His first visit to Sandakan was as a young 16-year old gunnery seaman on board HMS Belfast on which he served from 1961 to 1964.



HMS Belfast leaving Singapore on the 26th March 1962 At the end of her final foreign service commission. She is flying the flag of Rear Admiral Michael Le Fanu.

Coastal Minesweepers of the Royal Navy, including HM Ships WILKIESTON AND WOOLASTON, together with sister ships of the Royal Malaysian Navy, Tentera Laut di Raja, patrolled the coasts of Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia in 1962-66 during the confrontation with Indonesia.

Mike loved the Far East so much that when he was with the Navy, he used to volunteer to serve in this region. "In fact I was in the Far East every year between 1959 and 1970 except for the winter of one year where I spent it in England," he said. When he retired from the Navy, he went to Australia and worked as a fire Officer in Brisbane for 23 years before calling it a day eight years ago. Sailing is in his blood. Mike grew up in the southern English coastal town of Dover where he picked up sailing at the age of nine. When he joined the navy, he got the opportunity to increase his knowledge and qualifications (on sailing) and travelled to different places. "I bought my first boat when I left the navy. After my son was born, my boats grew as my son grew. They got bigger and bigger just as my son was growing up, 16 feet, 23 feet, 29, feet, 35 feet and to the present on 45 feet. No more," he said jokingly.

Mike and his wife Lyn left Australia and went sailing again, visiting places around the world. The couple stopped in Langkawi where they fell in love with the island. They spent six years there before deciding to return to Down Under. "Malaysians are wonderful people. In all the years we were in Langkawi, we never had a problem with the local folks. They are very honest and friendly," he said. Mike and Lyn who have three children and six grandchildren in Australia, left Langkawi in their SV Gaylor 2 last September. Mike told his wife that they had to go to Borneo to revisit the places he had been during his days with the navy. I suppose you could say this is sort of a pilgrimage trip, a journey down memory lane. Sandakan has changed a lot compared to the time when I first came with the Belfast. I am amazed at all the developments thar have taken place at the places we have visited," he said. The Harveys stopped over in Johor, Tioman Island, Singapore, Kuching, Labuan, Kota Kinabalu before arriving in Sandakan on December 20, 2003.

Mike and Lyn have three children and six grandchildren in Australia, left Langkawi in their SV Gaylor 2 last September. Mike told his wife that they had to go to Borneo to revisit the places he had been during his days with the navy. I suppose you could say this is sort of a pilgrimage trip, a journey down memory lane. Sandakan has changed a lot compared to the time when I first came with the Belfast. I am amazed at all the developments thar have taken place at the places we have visited," he said. The Harveys stopped over in Johor, Tioman Island, Singapore, Kuching, Labuan, Kota Kinabalu before arriving in Sandakan on December 20, 2003.

It was here that Mike came across a crest from HMS Belfast that was displayed at the Sandakan Yacht Club (SYC). It was presented to the club as a souvenir during the ship's visit here.

As a former member of crew of the ship on that visit, he volunteered to restore the crest to its original state. He felt it was his duty as the colours on the crest had faded.

He spent three days working on the crest before handing it back to SYC commodore Victor Ng. He is now in the midst of restoring two other crests given the the club by HMS Wilkieston and sister ship HMS Woolaston when both vessels called on Sandakan. Mike had served in Wilkieston, though he was not onboard for that visit.

Mike and Lyn will set sail for Australia after he has completed his work on the two crests. HMS Belfast is now displayed at the port of London and maintained by the Imperial war Museum. It is open for public visits. Her task in the Far East was mainly to “show the flag” and sail from places to places on goodwill visits from 1959 to 1962. HMS Belfast was saved from the scrap yard by the captain on the ship, Admiral Sir Morgan Giles who had the foresight to preserve one of the last big gun ships of the Royal Navy. He set up the HMS Belfast Trust to help raise money to purchase the ship and move it from Davenport to its present site.



In 1996 Mike visited the ship in London for the first time after having virtually left it 33 years ago. “When I walked back on board, tears were in my eyes because anyone who served on the ship loved it. HMS Belfast was such a magnificent ship,” Mike said.

Refurbished crests at Sandakan Yacht Club.

