

Memories of Confrontation Feb 1965 – Jul 1966

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Whilst serving a short period (4/5 months) at Fort Southwick W/T September 1964 – February 1965, I received a draft chit to the 'Far Flung' in Singapore; Kranji Wireless Station to be precise, although the draft was officially HMS Terror. What I did not know at the time was that I was about to undergo one of the most pleasing periods of my naval career: that of being a member of the Far East Communications Fleet Pool. If my memory serves me correctly there were 8 buntings and 8 sparkers in the pool. However on the 'flag wagging' side, 4 of the signalman were R.A. and did not want to leave 'Singers', which left us four single men to cover the area of East Coast of Africa to the West Coast of America. If my memory serves me correctly the other three were RO2(T) Fred Leach, RO2(T) Dave 'Ginge' Braithwaite and the late RO2(T) 'Dicky' Dawson. So, whilst the other 4 seemed to remain at the Comcen or Terror MSO, us 4 'victualled in' members covered all the sea going drafts, and in my 18 months there I had no less than 30 different moves which included 'pier head jumps' and several aircraft flights to and from Singapore.

Of interest to the Ton Talk membership was a period at the beginning of May '65 of 6 weeks attached to HMS Mull of Kintyre, then support ship for the minesweepers/hunters including inshores, where it was my duty to send/receive, sort and distribute signals both for internal Mull of Kintyre eyes and her flock. I remember I was assisted by a very capable Able Seaman as a messenger (who later became a postie in Pompey) whose name I sadly forget. However, like all Fleet Pool postings this only lasted until someone more permanent was appointed, and by mid May I was on my 'Bike' again, this time to HMS Cambrian.

A couple of other moves in between, and then another interesting (to T.T. Members) move took me via the 'jungle green' store in HMS Terror to be kitted out for Borneo. We are now at the end of June '65, and transport takes me to RAF Changi for a flight to Kuching. Now despite all the warnings of never let Jack loose with a gun, along with my 'Pussers' grip and few possessions are a Sterling sub machine gun..... Having had a crash course in the operation of such a weapon, must have been all of 5 minutes from a suitably qualified person, probably a G.I. but I don't remember, I do remember being told to load it with 32 rounds only, I am now qualified to carry arms, with a magazine or two, whether there were any rounds in it I don't recall but.....

A 'Sparker' with a gun, doesn't bear thinking about does it ?

So off I go to Borneo. Now having served on the MULL, I am very conversant with 'Confrontation' and the implications of insurgents in Kumpits etc, but what about on the ground? Well after disembarking from the RAF plane in Kuching, we are told that 'this aircraft is grounded' (a Hastings I believe), apparently the day before one had crashed in the UK with 14 paratroopers onboard with no survivors, spooky or what? We are warned that the trip into Kuching could possibly be dangerous and to be alert, apparently an attack had recently taken place at one of the police points en route by 'Indons' (Indonesians) with fatalities.

I was taken to "New Camp" on New Road on the outskirts of the town where I was to spend the next six weeks assigned to JCC (Joint Communications Centre) Kuching. My mess was a 'Basha' or Long Hut, raised on stilts and sleeping those matelot's based there. I don't remember exactly how many, but there were at least six 'Sparkers', four of whom at any one time would man Tanjong Po lighthouse (the smallest naval radio station in the RN). Here is why I found myself with a gun. Those 'Sparkers', when airlifted to the lighthouse were armed including rounds....! Our guns were kept at

the New Camp armoury when not in use, and had to be cleaned and oiled weekly. My duties were to help out with the joint Army/RAF communications team at the JCC.

I remember that there was a naval office there manned by a Lieutenant and a killick seaman (his name was Mick Killips or similar). Duty consisted of day/night watches involving sometimes very hectic periods when 'hot pursuits' were, or had taken place. 'Flash' signals were commonplace at the hectic times; however, if the night time was slow someone would always go into Kuching on the 'curry run'. Up until this point, I had never been a curry fan, or indeed rice for that matter, for if it was not in milk as in rice pudding I did not eat it. All that changed during this period. The procedure was to acquire a tin (baked bean or pea tin) cut the top off and put two holes opposite one another at the top, and attach a wire loop for carrying. Off would go the designated person to 'Pop's Curry Stall' by the Godowns (warehouses) in town. It was always to Pop's, who made the most delicious curry (as I discovered). Everyone's tin would be filled with curry and the rice was parcelled up individually in a banana leaf, it always arrived hot. One never asked what the meat was, but cats were always scarce.... I remember one half of our Basha was occupied by I think 22 SAS, some of whom would suddenly arrive in the camp and others suddenly disappear. Also based in the camp were a detachment of Gurkhas, so having seen some of the signals made the dots join up! One incident I remember involved one of the soldiers who was guarding the perimeter of the town firing his Bren Gun to shoot one of the feral dogs. A round went through the dog and hit a Chinese man in the arm. The odd thing was no one seemed concerned about the Chinese man, all the questions asked why was the man allowed to shoot the dog? I know he was later to face a Courts Martial, although I never heard the outcome, as by this time I was on my way again.

On the 23rd August 1965 I was off to Kuching airport where a RMAF (Royal Malaysian Air Force) Herald aircraft took me directly to Labuan complete with my trusty sterling. What a noisy aircraft these were, I don't remember flying in anything noisier ever; thank goodness the flight did not take too long. At Labuan it was again into a JCC, and, similar to Kuching I was to work alongside the Army and RAF. I do not remember too much about this time, although one incident remains embedded. I was given diplomatic bag or similar, locked and containing sensitive signals etc and told to make my way to the palace of the Sultan of Brunei. Not literally of course, transport was laid on to take me to the airport, and then I boarded an SEP (Single engine Pioneer) aircraft piloted by an RAF Flight or Flying Sergeant who flew me to Brunei and back. The camp we lived in was only a short walk from the beach, and one of the highlights was to be able to go for a swim after coming off duty. The sand was fine and golden in colour with palm trees at the back complete with coconuts, and all totally isolated; rarely did one see another person there. One evening I had the opportunity to visit the home of the head of NAAFI in Borneo - Mr Paske, I had known of his existence there before leaving the UK, as he was the uncle of my then girlfriend whose family had given me an open invitation to visit him if the opportunity ever arose. Of course I never expected things to work out in my favour at that stage, and probably it might have been for the best if it had not. The relationship with Susan did not last much longer after my visit to Borneo.

Did I blot my copybook during my visit? I remember a meal with his wife and children and me drinking his 'Green Goddess' liqueur, perhaps I overdid the 'Grippe' bit!

The toilets at Labuan were very basic, built by the army I suspect. Constructed over a ravine with a couple of slats to sit on and carry out the business. I was told that they never smelled bad as there

were Iguanas or Monitors that cleaned up at the bottom....! Was it just a story? I also remember that both in Kuching and in Labuan, it was necessary to always use a mosquito net when turning in for the night; otherwise the following days would be very uncomfortable.

I left Labuan on the 5th November 1965 heading back to Kranji Wireless thinking that my time in Borneo was over. But that was not to be because on the 15th April 1966 I joined HMS Hubberston for a 15 day period (had her signalman gone sick or home compassionately – the usual reasons for Fleet Pool back-up, I never found out). Hubberston sailed for a bombardment with her 40mm Bofors somewhere off Borneo, and then subsequently sailed up river to Kuching (avoiding the floating trees etc...!) to tie up alongside the Godowns and within the smell of Pop's Curry stall. Here I tried to convince some of the crew to indulge in a bit of Kuching cuisine, although not too successfully. Whilst we were there many of the crew donated blood (Me included) and one of the proudest stamps in my blood donation card was the one from Kuching hospital, I think the beer and biscuits afterwards helped....!

I also had the opportunity to renew some acquaintances with friends from New Camp, although many of them had been replaced. Whilst us Fleet Pool members did eighteen month commissions out the Far Flung, those directly involved in Borneo only did twelve months and with regular R&R (Rest and Recuperations) periods in Singapore or Hong Kong. Whilst on the subject of Kuching it would be remiss of me not to mention that well known lady of the night "Guns Mary" who ruled the Godown area of Kuching as her domain. Many a serviceman sought her welcoming bosom and boudoir and was rewarded with a toothbrush with their name on it in the morning in readiness of a return visit, or so I am told. Although she ruled the Godown area with an iron fist, she had a heart of gold, just rumour.....

25 October 2022