

A Guardsman's Tale

This is how I remember my embarkation to Malaya on the troop ship Dilwara leaving Liverpool on September 8th 1948, and my introduction at active service in the jungle.

This is how I remember it now, because 55 years was a long time ago.

My brother Dick, who was eight years older than I joined the Grenadier Guards during the Second World War. He was my hero and I was determined that I too would follow in his footsteps. Sadly, he was killed in the Anzio beachhead landing two days after his twenty-first birthday. This made me even more determined, though what my parents thought, I never knew – I was their only child now.

After a sheltered education at a Quaker Boarding School I finally enlisted in the Grenadier Guards. It was the second of September 1947 and I was seventeen and a half. At that time conscription was in force and to join the regiment of my choice I had to sign up for five years with the colours and seven years reserve.

I completed three months basic training at Caterham Depot and then onto Pirbright for weapon training. Proudly I obtained a marksman's badge on the Bren gun. (I was to regret this later) Based at Chelsea Barracks, I took up ceremonial duties at Buckingham Palace, The Tower of London, the Bank of England and Windsor Castle. With full ceremonial uniform and proudly wearing a bearskin, (it really was bearskin and made so that every Guardsman was of equal height). I became a man to be reckoned with! But Malay beckoned and in August 1948 the Battalion embarked from Liverpool on the troopship "Dilwara" for a four week "cruise"! The Ship was a Second World War troopship with little comforts. We slept in hammocks below deck until the sea became rough and the temperature rose. A nightly rush to sleep on deck ensued, until it became so crowded that we were in danger of falling overboard. During the day we filled our time with drill training until the Captain of the ship realised that his upper deck was in danger of becoming a lower deck and put a stop to it. We then concentrated on physical and weapon training, but in stocking feet. The Captain being a helpful man had the world news relayed to us over the tannoy twice a day and always began it with music. The radio room had only the one record – The Thieving Magpie by Rossini and after a few weeks of this, feelings for the Magpie were running high, not to mention violent. We stopped in Gibraltar and Port Said for supplies. My first time on foreign soil. On the journey through the Suez Canal we passed an army camp at the Great Bitter Lake. Ribald comments were shouted at us from the soldiers on the Canal side. Little did we realise that we would do exactly the same a few years hence when we were guarding the Suez Canal ourselves.

Upon disembarking from the troopship in Malaya we were transported to Sungei Besi camp. It was just as well that we were not called for active service immediately. After four weeks at sea and the movement of the ship we were very unsteady on our feet for the rest of the day. The camp consisted of a number of four man tents, fortunately already erected. The toilet was a hole in the ground and showers were large tin cans with holes bored in the bottom and suspended on poles. You stood under this and your mate poured a bucket of water into the can. The greatest luxury came with the monsoon season – free showers and lots of them.

The dining room was a Basher (straw sides and a tin roof) and the cookhouse was a tin roof suspended on poles. Cooking was done by both Malay and Army cooks on ovens built of metal and concrete and fuelled with wood (we were surrounded by jungle). You had to admire these cooks – producing decent meals in all that heat and with only tinned food to work with.

Our first parade in the new surroundings was for the issue of mosquito nets, jungle green uniform and hat, and jungle boots. These boots were calf length with rubber soles and canvas tops with laces from top to bottom. Very comfortable, until we went on jungle patrol and found that the eyelets for the laces were just the right size for leeches to get through.

Retiring for our first night under canvas we laid our clothes and belongings out for quick access in the morning. We woke to find our clothes were wringing wet, notepaper and envelopes useless and, worst of

all, cigarettes and matches too wet to be of any use. No one had bothered to tell us about the humidity but we learnt fast! After that we were issued with tin boxes with tight fitting lids.

After breakfast of tinned bacon and tea with condensed milk we assembled for parade. Because I had a marksman's badge for the Bren gun I was directed to the armoury to collect it. A Bren gun and magazines weight four or five times more than the normal 303 rifle carried by the rest of the platoon. Realisation dawned – I would be carrying this weapon whenever we were out on jungle patrol! Upon embarking at Liverpool my mother came to see me off. She was in full nurses uniform. This fact must have been noted by the platoon commander as on the strength of it I was issued with the first aid satchel and informed that I was to administer first aid to any casualties. I had no experience – only a nurse for a mother. Again I learnt fast.

We had two weeks to acclimatise and be introduced to jungle warfare. Fortunately, the camp was near a small local village and for a fee, the women washed, ironed and starched our clothes. Oh boy did they starch it! On my second night in Malaya I was on camp guard duty patrolling the wire fences listening to strange and eerie night sounds. After guard duties at Buckingham Palace etc, this was an alarming experience and one that was kept to oneself. After all we were Grenadier Guards.

We now started our serious training in jungle warfare and survival. Our first few days were daily patrols into the jungle making our presence known to the villagers in the clearings. It became obvious later that a great many of these villagers were supply depots for bandits. It was now that we were introduced to our tracker / guides. These were six Dyak Head-hunters from Borneo plus an interpreter. The Dyaks had a tradition of cannibalism, which, by this time, had all but died out. This did not stop them from trying to remove the heart or to decapitate any enemy found dead. Their prized possessions were shrunken heads, which were carried around the waist. In appearance they were between 4'8" to 5' tall with a basin haircut and wearing only loincloth. They always went barefoot and the body was decorated with black tattoos. I saw the tattoo ceremony on a number of occasions. It was done with a stick with a number of thorns fastened to the end. The thorns were dipped into a mixture of ground charcoal and sap from a local tree. The thorned stick was then tapped by another stick into the skin making a rudimentary pattern. Although it looked painful and was certainly not hygienic (but what was out there?) with blood all over the tattoos the little fellows never flinched. The arrival of the army changed this ritual for the better. Instead of thorns they now used metal needles and pins, which greatly improved the neatness of the designs. After training with the Dyaks we gained a lot of respect for them. Every so often the six would be sent home and six more would replace them. By their own standards they were paid well and a few weeks work in Malaya would keep them and their family for a year or more.

At first the jungle patrols were just 12-hour duration but as we became familiar with the terrain, these increased to 3, 4 and 5 days. Patrolling was done in single file with the tracker to the fore and with the rest of the patrol within sight of each other. The Dyaks would scout ahead and then return to the interpreter who would then translate. A number of the platoon have to thank the Dyaks for their lives. We were patrolling a rubber plantation track when the trackers came back very excited. It turned out to be an ambush ahead. Without the Dyaks we would have stumbled into it. Now it is our turn to ambush the enemy, which we did with no casualties but a few less bandits. Two of them managed to escape and were tracked to a small village clearing where they were being sheltered. They were taken prisoner, escorted back to camp and handed over to the intelligence officers for interrogation. The punishment to the village was to burn it down and so set an example to the others. It was not as serious as it sounds, as the villagers were nomads and the homes temporary. When the villagers burned it was easy to tell if they were hiding ammunition – the villagers left very quickly and so did we!

When we were out on patrol we had to survive on what we could carry with us. Rations consisted of rice, raisins and hard biscuits. Powdered milk, sugar and tea were all in one container. Water was carried but tea was made from stagnant water collected in the jungle. If it was possible to safely light a fire you maybe got one cup of tea per day. Fruit and nuts were gathered 'on the hoof' and made up the remainder of our diet. As long as we had plenty of cigarettes all was fine.

At night we would lay an ambush on a used track. Half the platoon was allowed to sleep. It was 2 hours sleep, 2 hours guard. The ones sleeping had string tied to their thumbs and joined to their fellow Guardsman. In the event of anyone approaching the string was pulled and the sleepers alerted. Very high tech! Very few of us actually slept – mosquito, leeches, jungle noises and not being able to smoke added to the tension.

After days on patrol we returned to camp. The sight of a platoon of Grenadier Guards in jungle green with no change of clothing, no washing or shaving and covered in leeches was not a pretty one but after a shower, shave, change of clothes, a good feed and sleep we were ready for the delights of Kuala Lumpur.

The next few days our duties were camp guard, vehicle convoy to Kuala Lumpur for supplies, more drill training and weapon training.

Between jungle patrols and camp duties we went to train escort duty. The trains ran between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore and between Kuala Lumpur and Cameroon's. The Cameroon's were used as a field hospital. The climate was less humid and wounds healed much faster. Most of the wounds were caused by jungle ulcers. That is, leeches which were left embedded in the skin. The correct way to remove leeches was to either let them fill up with blood and drop off naturally or to burn them off with a lighted cigarette.

In those days the trains were single track with passing places. The jungle came within 2 foot either side of the train. Our duty was to ride on the footplate either side of the driver and fireman. Not much room, so we would stand on the front of the train like a figurehead (or a sitting target). After a couple of minor incidents we were given our own first class tin can on wheels at the front of the train. The tin can was actually an armoured van with a searchlight at night. At the centre and rear of the train were more escorts. All were well armed. Bandits would set ambush by laying a couple of trees across the track. This never worked as from behind our metal plates the jungle on both sides could be strafed by automatic fire. Anyone in the bush could not have survived. The track was cleared and we were on our way. After a while the bandits gave up this futile exercise. We lived in quite decent quarters on the train and were well looked after by the train staff. This was the first time I was introduced to breakfast of fried egg with orange marmalade on it.

When at base camp we were allowed, in our off duty time, to visit Kuala Lumpur. It was just a small town with stalls lining the main street. There were dance halls for our entertainment. Certain areas of the town were out of bounds but this was just to make it easier for the armed military guards to patrol. We were taken into town by heavily armed five-ton trucks and carried weapons with us. One of the bar/dance halls was modelled on a Wild West saloon with swing doors, sawdust on the floor and very little else. The nearest we got to gambling was dominos and draughts. You had to buy tickets to get in. The hostesses were clustered around the bar. You chose one and she was your companion for the night – drinking, dancing, chatting and anything else. You gave her a ticket for every dance and drink. Her drinks were suppose to be expensive cocktails but were just coloured water with fruit in it. This was how she made extra money. Most of the evening was spent drinking, dancing and socialising, but if you were so inclined a price would be agreed and she would take you to her room. The room was nearby and used solely for business. A small box with a hinged lid was placed on the bedside cabinet and, very coyly, the words were uttered, "for my present please". Money was placed in the box, goodbyes were said and you waited for transport back to barracks and started to wonder whether you had caught something! Condoms were supplied by the M.O. but if you did catch anything you were put on a charge.

We discovered the "taxi girls". They had learnt a little English – "good time Tommy, only 2 dollars" and so we nicknamed them the two-dollar girls. The M.O. had lectured us about the danger of going with these girls but one of the lads chanced it. We asked how he had enjoyed his first experience with a two dollar girl, his reply was "Magic, but I wore two condoms just to be on the safe side".

Ken Sutton - Grenadier Guards