

## COMCAN Signal Squadron. Pasir Panjang, Singapore. 1958-59.

I was fortunate to be posted to the most modern barracks in the world where the NAAFI was described as being like a millionaire's bungalow in Florida.

As a musician I naturally joined any band or group that was available and as a double bass player I was in some demand, being the only recruit daft enough to encumber himself with such a stranded whale of an instrument in that difficult climate. I still have that particular bass today, among several others.

Skiffle was very much in vogue at the time and I was recruited into a group called the Chain Gang whose members were entirely bedded down in my barracks. We were really quite good, as we were able to practice a lot, and played on Radio Malaya and Radio Singapore.

Week-ends were usually occupied by performing at dances in Sergeants Messes around the Island, transport always being laid on, and the military tradition of all drinks on the house was most welcome.

We once had a gig in the local lunatic asylum for women, as the Governor wanted to see the effect of the music on the quests. We met one lovely Indian lady there who thought she was Winston Churchill's secretary. Apart from that I don't know what was wrong as she was very well spoken, well dressed, bright and intelligent. I was quite put out by her predicament.

Band practices took place in our large and white tiled ablutions as the acoustics were magnificent and a crowd of fellow servicemen would often gather to listen as they did their laundry and other chores.

One of the duties required of us all was to paint buckles and other brass items of apparel in jungle green or red oxide. This was better camouflage, and in any case bright brass would very soon tarnish in the oppressive climate. A band member and another lad were performing this duty one evening when the rather stiff paint brush wielded by one of them caused some paint to flick onto the other chap. As we were all in buoyant mood the victim flicked his brush back at the accidental perpetrator and one thing soon led to another.

We were dressed in nothing but flip-flops with a towels around our middles, as was normal practice. Soon several of us were well covered in green and red paint, there were streaks of paint down the walls and across the ceiling. We managed to encourage the two main protagonists to get to hell outside while the others panicked and tried to clean up. Those two idiots, each with paint tin in one hand and brush in the other, one flicking red and the other green, chased each other down the main road through the barracks losing their flip flops and towels on the way.

Unfortunately there was a dinner in the Sergeant's Mess that evening and a large limousine cruised up the road with a certain Sergeant Major and his wife on board. The two streakers blazed past in the opposite direction and nothing more was heard about the incident.

Weeks passed, and the Chain Gang were playing at a Mess on the other side of the Island. A very senior NCO engaged us in conversation during the interval and on informing him that we were from the Pasir Panjang Barracks he related to us that he and his dear wife experienced a traumatic incident there several weeks before. I nearly choked on my free John Collins, and though I tried to play innocent I think he had a hunch I knew something about it.

I've been involved in some mad happenings in my time but that one must rank among the craziest. This story gives the impression that life there was just a bowl of cherries. In fact we were a hard working unit on active service during the state of emergency, and have the gongs to prove it, though we did not get a hard time like some of the chaps up-country in Malaya.

Bourke Le Carpentier (Taffy, would you believe it?)  
from Aberdare in S.Wales. National Service, 57-59.  
Royal Signals. Written, August 2004.