

THE DOCTOR'S TALE

I suppose this story is a bit different from most, in that during three years in Malaya, I never heard a shot fired in anger, though I met a terrorist in the jungle one day!

I had managed to dodge National Service for seven years until I was 25, by being a medical student and then a hospital doctor. They caught up with me in 1956, when the dreaded rail warrant for Aldershot arrived.

After turning up at the RAMC depot at Crookham, we were first issued with khaki battledress tailored for gorillas and then half-killed by the TAB injections - I still recall groaning bodies lying behind toilet doors in the 'spider' huts. A few weeks' basic training was a bit of a farce, with cynical doctors reducing drill-sergeants to tears by our efforts at marching. Efforts on the pistol range were equally futile, no one being able to hit a house at ten yards.

It was the time of the Hungarian rising and the Suez crisis and the powers-that-be didn't know where to send us, so they sent us home for a few weeks! Meanwhile, I had decided, in a moment of madness, to sign on for a Short Service Commission and after a short interview in Lancaster House, found myself as a Regular soldier for the next eight years. I only spent a week as a Lieutenant before getting an extra pip on my shoulder, more pay and a grading of 'Junior Specialist in Pathology' on the strength of one year as a junior trainee in a hospital at home.

Eventually, we were called back to the Depot and as a Regular, I got a uniform allowance to buy my 'Blues', so a visit to Moss Bros provided me with an expensive outfit similar to that of the Salvation Army. Next day, I was posted to the Far East, where blues were not worn, so it's been hanging in my wardrobe for the past fifty-two years! Having not long been married, I wanted to stay in the UK, but in typical Army fashion I was sent to Malaya and didn't see my wife for two years, which probably saved my marriage!

One foggy autumn morning, we were herded in civvies aboard a bus and driven to an unknown destination, which turned out to be Stansted, where a very slow Handley-Page Hermes air trooper took us to Singapore, all sitting in backward-facing seats. Today the trip takes about twelve hours - then it was four days, as we stopped at almost every lamppost! Brindisi, Ankara, Bahrein, Karachi, Calcutta and Bangkok. We came down every night and stayed in peculiar lodgings, such as Mrs Miniwallah's Grand Hotel in Karachi!

I still vividly recall the arrival at Paya Leba airport in Singapore. After days in the stuffy cabin, I reached the open door and was hit by a blast of hot scented air and twittering cicadas and knew that this was the tropics!

A fellow pathologist from BMH Alexandra, collected me in his Morgan Sports - he later became Professor at the Royal Free Hospital in London and a world authority on liver disease. A bewildering night-time ride through Singapore in an open car took us out past all the REME and RASC depots along Ayer Rajah Road to Pasir Panjang and up to the palatial RAMC Officer's Mess on the crest of a hill off Buona Vista Road, with a spectacular view out over the islands and fabulous sunsets each evening.

We had been issued with jungle-greens, but this time they were tailored for orang-utang, not gorillas. After jet-lag (or rather propeller-lag) had subsided, I was taken to an Indian tailor downtown to get a couple of sets of greens made at my own expense. The shoulder-flashes were GHQ FARELF, because my unit, 'Path Lab Far East', was a single small building in the grounds of BMH Alexandra. It didn't belong to the hospital which was in Singapore Base District, with the lion-and-palm tree badge, known as 'the dog and lamppost'. We were just a half-colonel, two captains, a staff-sergeant and a few OR lab technicians. Proud of our independence, we refused to join the Orderly Medical Officer rota in the hospital, on the grounds that we were a different unit!

Life was pleasant for the few months I had in the 'big city'. We often hired sampans from Jardine Steps to go round to the empty beaches on Blakang Mati, the Gunner's island, now called

'Sentosa' in modern S'pore. We enjoyed good Chinese food in Albert Street, in spite of the 'Out of Bounds' roundels hanging on wires above the streets. Lots of memories - and miles of cine-film - of the city - the Cathay Cinema, the Asia building, the Bank of China, all skyscrapers then, now look like molehills in the new Singapore. Tiger Balm gardens, swimming in the pool at Gilman Barracks or the RAF Club at Changi – hard to believe it was all over half-a-century ago.

All this ended with the toss of a coin. Our CO had orders to send one pathologist to BMH Hong Kong and another to BMH Kinrara, near Kuala Lumpur. My fellow officer, a year behind me in Cardiff medical school, tossed a Straits dollar and I lost (or won?) and was posted to KL.

I had bought a cheap car, a green Austin A70 which was the worst vehicle I have ever owned. I found out later that it been used as a driving school car, which explained its misbehaviour. Putting the brakes on in the rain meant that it turned around and went backwards – and trying to get into bottom gear with the column-change usually caused the operating rod to disconnect! But I packed my bags and set off for Kuala Lumpur across the causeway to Johore, driving through the police road-blocks with some trepidation into the Black Areas. On a lonely stretch between Simpang and Ayer Hitam, I was unwise enough to change gear on a slope and the bloody thing disconnected! I had to get out with a spanner and lie under the car, expecting any minute to be shot in the backside.

Surviving that, I eventually got to Kinrara and settled down in the Mess, living in damp-smelling huts with light bulbs in the wardrobe and silica-gel around everything optical, to keep down the mould.

The CO was an irascible ginger Scot, Lt-Col Mackay Dick. His first words to me were get my FARELF flash off and replace it with the red and gold kris of Malaya Command. He also informed me that I was the worst-dressed officer in the British Army!

I discovered that not only was I to be a pathologist, but also blood transfusion officer, MO to the adjacent Military Prison, Unit Hygiene Officer – and on the rota for the Casualty Department when Orderly Medical Officer!

The prison job was bizarre – every morning I went into the corrugated-iron and barbed-wire compound to hold Sick Parade. This was usually a bunch of hopeful malingerers lined up outside the sick-bay, under the scarring tongue of an abusive MP sergeant. Most were suffering from severe sunburn, from grass-cutting along the monsoon drains – or festering foot-rot.

I had little say in diagnosis or treatment, as the procedure was streamlined by an elderly RAMC corporal, who had each man quick-marched in, slapped his 'crime sheet' in front of me and promptly suggested one of the only two forms of treatment he allowed – either calamine lotion or 'excuse boots'!

Only rarely was I allowed a say, if there was some obvious illness apparent. One day, I was asked to 'operate' on a squaddie who was doing time for manslaughter – he had to serve out his tour in Malaya before being sent home to Shepton Mallet for the rest of his sentence – maybe he's still there.

Anyway, he was locked up in a sort of chicken coop in the compound and to alleviate his boredom, he wanted a small wart removed from his armpit. The Commandant, a fiery Black Watch major, refused to let him out for the operation, so I performed through the door of his cage. He leaned against the bars, I injected a drop of local anaesthetic and snipped off the offending bit with a scissors. Imagine that happening today, there'd be 'Questions in the House'!

The prison was then called the 'MCE', - the 'Military Corrective Establishment' but they later changed it to 'MCTC – Military Corrective and Training Centre'. It was useful in another way, being next door to the hospital, as I kept my Blood Bank there - not in bottles, but in bodies. When a transfusion was needed, I looked down the list of names in my WD notebook and found a prisoner of the right blood group, then had a couple of MPs escort him across to my palm-leaf

'basha' where I sucked off a pint from his veins. In return, he got a bottle of Anchor or Tiger beer, so there was no shortage of volunteer donors – in fact, I had to ration them or they would have bled themselves dry!

It was near KL that I met my terrorist, as part of the jungle north of the city had been designated as both a White Area, free of the 'CTs' and also as nature area, Templer Park. We used to go up there on a weekend to wander around and 'skinny-dip' in the jungle pools and streams – a bit stupid for doctors, given the risk of catching Weil's disease, which laid low so many patrols.

One Sunday, I was strolling around in civvies with a surgeon friend when the path opened on to a small clearing. I saw a green tent and line of washing strung between two trees. Nearby was the most miserable-looking chap I'd ever seen, leaning on a rifle and staring at the ground. I said 'Good afternoon' and then saw that his green cap had a red star on the front! I muttered some inane apology, turned round and buggered off smartly, hardly believing what had happened and again expecting to be shot up the backside. We raced back to the nearest police post and they roared off in their blue Land-Rovers, but we heard no more about it. White Area, indeed!

After a few months in KL, I was on the move again, this time to command my own laboratory in BMH Kamunting, up north in Perak, near Taiping. It was the hospital serving many units up 'the sharp end', as by then much of the terrorist activity was up towards the Thai border. We had the 28th Independent Commonwealth Infantry Brigade next door, but also served 22 SAS from Sungei Siput, and the Gurkha Depot up in Sungei Patani.

I was there for almost two years until RHE and enjoyed every minute. The hospital was built on an old tin mine and the Officer's Mess was two huts out near the perimeter, looking like a chicken farm set in a desert. A lot of our trade came in by helicopter and I sometimes went up to the Gurkha depot in an Auster, which used to frighten the hell out of me!

Most of the lab work was not combat injuries, but disease, as well as accidents with firearms and vehicles. I had a pathology request form ("F.Med10") one day, asking for a blood test. Under the section for 'Clinical History' it said '*Dragged from tent by a tiger*', so I knew I was in the tropics! Malaria was commonplace, as were every type of parasite known to man. Troops who ate down town often got amoebic dysentery and needed a microscopic examination of their nether ends. I still recall doing this for a pair of troopers from the 1st Royal Australian Regiment. They came into the lab, dropped their shorts and leaned over a bench, still with their turned-up Boy Scout hats on, while I wielded a long tube as I snipped samples from their fundamentals!

A task which told me I really was on active service was doing post-mortems, thankfully rarely on Commonwealth troops, but sometimes on terrorists. I would be Land-Rovered out to some remote location, where the bodies would be carried out tied hand and foot to a bamboo pole, like tigers in the days of the Raj. I would perform an autopsy on the grass verge at the side of the road, then the body would be buried on the spot. The main purpose was to record the killing effects of various weapons, as the FN rifle was then being evaluated.

The hospital still bore a passing resemblance to MASH, especially in the eccentric characters who lived there. We had a weird CO, who shall be nameless, who early one morning had all the medical officers paraded in full kit on the car park, where he arrested us! He was taken away and with a nice new half-colonel, life returned to its pleasant normality.

I volunteered to do the pathology for Taiping Civil Hospital, which had no laboratory then. I got more experience and saw more extraordinary cases than I ever would have done in a decade back in UK. Back in 1957, I was doing diagnostic liver punctures, lifting up the guy's shirt as he sat in bed! Trying doing that today!

The Gurkhas had more than their share of disease, as they had little immunity, coming from the remote Himalayas. I saw leprosy and masses of tuberculosis – I was even summoned to a

troopship in nearby Penang to scrape a sore from a suspected smallpox case in a Nepalese recruit, which I did with shaking hands!

We used to have sublime weekends down at the coast, at Pangkor Island, which is now a millionaire's holiday site.

Then it was still unspoilt and we stayed in simple beach chalets, with the QA sisters next door under the benevolent eye of the hospital matron.

My wife came out for the last year, travelling on the old *Empire Fowey* but all good things come to an end and eventually we packed our boxes and headed for Singapore and the *Nevasa*.

We had previously had an indulgence passage up to Hong Kong on the *Oxfordshire* and although I enjoyed the voyages, all that time on troopships has put me off the modern craze for cruises, especially as on the homeward journey, I had to work as Ventilating Officer and also look after the prisoners going home to Shepton Mallet or Colchester, locked up in cells right in the bow of the ship, which rose and fell about twenty feet with every wave!

Still, those three years in FARELF were the best ones of my life and although occasionally one got brassed-off with the heat and boredom, I am still eternally grateful for the Army giving me the opportunity to see real life-and death- at such an early age.

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