

Tales from the Jungle

"Peter!" my boss said. "You and I are off to Borneo tomorrow morning. We were scheduled on the 0630 CHALK (Changi and Labuan, Kutching) Hastings flight - but instead we are taking 2 aircraft to Labuan via HMS Albion. Do you have any questions?" "No Boss", I said - "Except, how do you land on an aircraft carrier?" So Sqn Ldr Ces Crook, the legendary commanding officer of 209 (Hong Kong) Sqn just said, "Follow me!" I was a newish pilot on 209 Sqn, based at Seletar in Singapore. Because from the day I applied to fly I had said, "single-seat please", after those who trained me as a pilot had their way, putting me on Valiants - first as a co-pilot and then as a captain, the Gods took pity on me and gave me a tour on the Scottish Aviation Single Engine Pioneer. A truly magnificent machine, one pilot and 4 passengers, designed to land on Malay airstrips of less than 200 yds.

The brief had said that HMS Albion, a straight-decked helicopter aircraft carrier would be 50 nms off the coast of Malaya heading east at 10.00 tomorrow. Tomorrow came and we took off. Ces with a ground crew passenger, me on my tod. Good weather could see miles - and after 30 nms there was nothing but the South China Sea in view anywhere. So I followed Ces. "Close up!" he said. I had not flown close formation since Vampires at Swinderby 7 years earlier - but I wasn't going to complain - I always thought it was my only strength. We eventually found the Albion and Ces went in first, telling me to follow him but overshoot and go-round-again. I did. I landed on the deck only to have my aircraft invaded by an 8 foot matelot shouting, "you're on fire, you're on fire, get out! get out!" I had just been through what was for me a very traumatic 5 minutes. So I said to this enormous matelot, "Go away, this is MY aircraft, the engine is still running, and it's my responsibility to shut it down". He just released my seat harness and pulled me manually out of the seat/cockpit, sat me down on the deck and eventually someone else gave me a drink. Moments later my Boss, Ces, arrived and said, "Peter, that was just a fire drill. Get back in that aircraft, take-off, do 2 rollers (land, then put on power immediately and take-off again) and then a final landing".

And I did. Absolute Magic! Doing rollers on an aircraft carrier in the middle of the South China Sea? Could life get much better? Yes, it could - and it did! We were told to report for briefing next morning prior to our launch for the transit to Borneo. On arrival at the brief the ship's navigator gave us a latitude and longitude for our departure. We both unfolded our Borneo maps only to find that the top of the map did not extend to the position from which we were to be launched.

"Simple", said Ces. "Stick a piece of A4 onto the top of the map and extend some lats and longs from the map. Then plot the position of our launch and plan our route from there!"

And it worked!

I was once tasked to take a demolition expert from Labuan on Victoria Island in Borneo, south west down the coast to a little town named (it wasn't Semolina, Tapioca or Rice pudding - but it was the name of the other white, frog-spawn like dessert made from pounded stems) where bulldozers clearing areas for new buildings had unearthed a WW II bomb. The expert was a Staff Sergeant of the Royal Australian Ordnance Corps. "Ok Staff, you don't have any drugs, pornography, explosives, do you?" "Well YES", he said. "I've got this pack of detonators, this explosive fuse wire and this pack of Semtex. That's why we're going, isn't it to detonate this bomb they've dug up with the bulldozer?"

YES! I thought, that IS why we are going - and you can't do the job without the right tools. "OK Staff - but can you move the detonators away from the Semtex please!" "Yeah!" said Staff, giving me a peculiar look, "I've got the dets in 'me sandwich box and the Semtex in 'me haversack - yer didn't think I'd mix em up, did yer?" I was just confused by a set of rules that seemed designed to preventing the job getting done! Two hours later of gloriously cool temperatures (10,000' flying altitude brought it down from 85' Fahrenheit to 65'), we landed at Rice Pudding. The Mayor, a Malay, met us and took us to the bomb site. "It's over there", he said. pointing at a pile of upturned earth 200 yds away. "I'll be in the town, there won't be any danger, will there?" "No, cause not!" said Staff. "I'll make sure there's no damage to the village." Staff and I strolled over to the pile of earth, Staff with his backpack full of semtex and detonators in his sandwich box, me now in shorts with pipe in mouth, wondering what we would find. What we found (I thought) was a 1000 lbs HE bomb, slightly dented by the bulldozer blade - but looking just as lethal as the 1000 lb bombs I had seen loaded onto my Valiant aircraft - and had then dropped on numerous occasions off Malta at Filfla and on Libyan bombing ranges for the last six years. "AH!" said Staff, "classic 250 lbs Japanese bomb, I'll just look-up the details". "OH yes!" he said, "lethal area of 100 yds, possible damage out to 200 yds! But the nearest buildings are 400 yds away. A 40 second fuse should be Ok". So we molded the Semtex in our hands. Like putty or plasticine, hand-molding warms and softens it, then you can form it into the desired cone shape - but don't do it too long, it gives you a headache. Having shaped and placed the Semtex and inserted the detonators, connected the fuse - 40 seconds worth! and walked to the end of the fuse, he allowed me to light it. WIZZ! went the fuse. "Run!" I said. "NO!" said Staff, "Never run away from a detonation, you might fall and injure yourself within the explosion area". "Ok!" I said, "Can we walk faster?" At 35 seconds of fuse burn we were abeam a 10 ft pile of earth. My nerves wouldn't

stand it anymore. "I'm staying here", I said. 5 seconds later there was an almighty "CRUMP!" We were showered with earth - then heard all the windows in the village tinkering into pieces!

The mayor's thanks for our efforts were slightly muted - and our take-off back to Labuan was without the waving crowds of natives thronging the airstrip that I had anticipated. About an hour into our trip back I spied a particularly nice piece of Borneo beach and asked Staff if there were any sandwiches in his sandwich box. "Yeah, he said, I've used all my dets!" So we landed on this piece of sand between the jungle and the sea, ate our sandwiches, ate RAF supplied Big Sister cake (can you remember it?), drank coffee from the enormous black thermos - pondered a lot and didn't say much! But I kept my eye on the jungle fringes half expecting elephants, crocodiles, or even head-hunters? You never knew what to expect in Borneo!

I remember when I was a Single-Engined-Pioneer pilot during Confrontation in Borneo in the mid 1960s, being tasked into Kapit, a little airstrip on the river Rajang. The strip was 300 yds long at right angles to the river - which was 150 yds wide. My task was to recover 4 Aussie troops and return them to my base Sibul, a small timber town. My fuel allowed me to load 800 lbs of passengers and luggage. "Easy", I thought, "I should have lots of un-used weight!" Then out of the jungle appeared these 4 supermen! Each must have weighed 210 lbs naked! Each had a 100lb bergan! They were Australian SAS - and they were bushed! I read them the normal blurb - "no pornography, no explosives, no....." "YES!" said the leader, "we've still got 8 hand grenades each and we've still got 50 kgs of amatol - and detonators - but the detonators are in my trouser pocket and the amatol is in Bruce's bergan". (all said with a very tired Oz accent!). "OK!" I said, trying hard to rise to the occasion. "We are a little over weight for this take-off, we will have to do some fancy flying to miss the forest on the other side of the river - but if you are willing, we'll go for it?" "OK blue!" said their leader, "but we might be asleep before you take off". And they were! But we made it.

HMS Albion - a RN straight deck carrier somewhere in the South China Sea in 1964 at 1600 on a sultry afternoon. "Now hear this, hear this! Beaver crews and Single Pioneer crew report to briefing room at 1700 hrs today". "Great! a further 50 minutes kip!" I thought, laying on my bunk in a cabin the size of a downstairs cloakroom. I had had too many gin and tonics at lunch time (the RN is not dry) and had then stood on deck for 3 hours watching CVA / DDG connecting, transferring and re-fuelling drills. At 1650 I set off, up this ladder, along this passage, up this ladder - and there was the briefing room - closed! "Oih!!" I said to a passing matelot. Why's the briefing room closed at 5 to 5 when there's a briefing at 5 o'clock? "Cos it's 5 to four, mate", said the matelot. "We've just crossed the time line for Singapore time, not Borneo time any more!" Accompanied by that withering look that covered for him not saying, "pratt!" So, back to the bunk, 50 mins more kip. Bit late this time - better run, up this ladder - bloody dark! CHRASH!! Oh my god! what hit me? Two large matelots carried me to the briefing room explaining that as it was now dark, all hatches at the top of stairwells (if that's what they are called) were now covered with their metal lids. I had run straight up the stairway straight into the covering - then slid down to the bottom like a sack of potatoes. Anyway, feeling no more than kicked by two wing forwards, I arrived in time to hear that the 2 Beavers and I would be launched at dawn tomorrow, 0615. "Brief at 0500, eat 0515, on deck 0545 and dinner tonight is in 5 minutes", the ship's navigator concluded Next morning my alarm had barely gone off when a hairy arm shook me and a cockney voice said, "fings ave come forward mate, they want yer quick!" No time to shave! got to have a shower - smell like a sheep shearer, flying suit on, kit in bag, off to briefing. Watch out for closed hatches - god! my head hurts - was that the bruise or the final whiskey? Into the brief. "Gentlemen", said the ship's navigator, "due to unexpected tides, we are closer to the Malay coast than we (note the "WE", not "I!") anticipated. Therefore we need to launch you early". Up stands Cdr Flying, "Gentleman, you launch in 15 minutes, man your aircraft!" Ten minutes later after frantically pulling off our engine covers, carefully removing and stowing the pitot head cover and then removing the chocks and lashing lines securing the aircraft to the deck, it suddenly dawned on me that it was still pitch black! Not a sight of dawn, no pink on the horizon, just tropical black and a hint of infra-red glims from the deck. Into the aircraft, pre-start checks, radio on. "Gentlemen, start your engines!" said Flyco. "Launch in 3 minutes in sequence Army 1, Army 2, RAF, on my command!" Engine run-up, check magnetos, everything OK. Throttle back to idle. Pre-takeoff checks. "Army 1 - Launch!" "Army 2 - Launch!" "RAF - Launch!" Gently up to full power, brakes off, left rudder to keep straight, airborne before the island then CRASH!! My top Perspex canopy had collapsed/blown away and my linen sun sheet with wooden securing baton were flailing round the cockpit. No time to think about that, it's pitch black, onto instruments, maintain a positive rate of climb, get to 45 kts, increase to 60 kts. WHAT IS HAPPENING??

From the right side of my peripheral vision I can see red glims overtaking me - and below me!!! Back onto instruments - quick! Wings level, positive rate of climb, speed still 45 kts - nose down a bit to increase speed - BUT those red glims are still overtaking me!! Then it clicked! I had taken off from a deck travelling at 15 kts into a headwind of 5 kts. As I climbed the wind increased such that at 200 ft the wind was 35 kts, at 300 ft the wind was 45 kts and at 500 ft the wind was 55 kts - slightly faster than I was going - and the aircraft carrier was overtaking me! Having just accepted the logic of this concept I heard Army 1 say, "Peter, do you want to join us in formation back to Seletar?" "Un-authorized night formation with the Army", I thought, after an un-authorized

night take-off from an aircraft carrier. You must be joking! "Army 1, thanks for the offer - but I would only slow you down. See you back at Base". I then turned East into the blackness of the South China Sea, composed myself, removed my still flapping linen sun sheet and 10 minutes later turned West for home. When I finally landed at Seletar, just after dawn, the ground crew that met me said, "there were a couple of Customs Service Police waiting for you but they suddenly got called to the AAC compound. Where do you want that large box taking to, Sir?"

In late 1964 Winston Churchill became very ill. His doctors said he would not recover - and the State realised that a State funeral had to be planned at short notice.

I was a very junior captain on Valiants at Marham. Being an ex-Brat I had been given the secondary duty of Officer i/c Ceremonial Flight - and thank goodness we still had the old Mk 4 Lea Enfield. It was decided that Marham would provide two officers for the lying in state part of the funeral together with 28 airmen for lining the route of the funeral procession. Work began immediately, drill practice every morning - many of the Ceremonial Flight were ex-Brats and I think we quickly reached a good standard. Fortunately for us the Valiant had just been grounded due to the main-spar cracking on one of the Gaydon OCU aircraft. We had been going through mission preparation, start-up, taxi, start the take-off run until 100 kts - then abort, for a month or so. We did still hold QRA - 2 US nukes strapped to the aircraft for 2 days per week for each crew, but that was on the other side of the airfield, behind barbed wire with US Snowdrops guarding us. The idea was that when the US officer came with the word from the President to each of the 4 aircraft he would shout, "drill! - or God forbid, "Launch!" If it was Launch, our Snowdrop would jump out as the engines were starting! So a bit of deja vu regarding 2 Wing's square, filled in some spare time. Remembering back to that 2 Wing square, I can still hear W/O Carter shouting at me, "Van Heusen, where did you get that shirt?"

Back to Marham my flt cdr and I were warned to be ready to move to London as soon as the fatal news was announced. Meanwhile we had been practicing sword drill daily after the Ceremonial Flight's daily drill practice. Within days the fateful announcement was made and my flt cdr and I set off for St Jame's Hotel with orders to check-in then report to Westminster Hall at 4pm. On arrival we found the Hall, about twice the size of a standard hangar, almost in total darkness but with around 2000 officers from every arm of the Services. Only a couple of lights shone, focused on a superbly uniformed Guards officer, in long cloak with tall plumes adorning his helmet standing alone on a dais on a large raised platform. Once everyone had arrived and stopped muttering, the spot-lit one said, "Gentlemen, I am the Brigade Major of the Brigade of Guards. I am going to tell you how this funeral will be conducted. I would like you now to move into your Service groups. I want the Brigade of Guards in front of me, I want the Royal Navy on my right and I want the Royal Air Force on my left. The Army can stay at the back". The rest of the briefing went well and our 5-officer Bomber Command team were briefed for a stint of 20 minutes every hour for 8 hours, standing at the corners of the coffin. Our 8 hours were between midnight and 0800, daily and our first stint was due in 7 hours. We were between the Life Guards and the Royal Marines, sharing a room full of marines whitening their officers' pith helmets and guardsmen combing their officers' plumes. Just as well the public couldn't see the RAF officers' brasso-covered hands - we wore white gloves. We had neither batmen or washing facilities!

I must admit that the Royal Air Force best blue, even with swords and highly bulled shoes, could not compare with the sheer glamour of tall ostrich plumes, scarlet cloaks and the 'clink' of spurs. However, our drill could not be faulted and the 20 minutes per hour standing at the corners of the coffin, resting on swords reversed in almost darkness, gave lots of time for contemplation despite the constant shuffle as the public paid their last respects. The only relief came on our final stint shortly after dawn when a slight 'cough' told me that my wife was passing the cataphalque. The constant stream of people had continued day and night from the first night of the lying in state until the coffin was removed for the state funeral.

I missed the funeral on TV. I was 'sleeping off nights'.

About 6 months after Churchill's funeral, I found myself on the Single Pioneer Flight of 209 (Hong Kong) Sqn stationed at Seletar, Singapore.

After a co pilot's - then a captain's tour on Valiants I was ready for a real change. I wanted Hunters in the Gulf, I hoped for TSR2, I had always put "single seat" on my application for next tour - and this was the posters' little joke. Single crew seat but 4 pax seats behind!

Anyway, as I've mentioned before, the aircraft was magnificent and well capable of fulfilling its task of landing on mountain strips only 200 yds long. Before departing England I imagined sitting in my cockpit in shorts and sandals, pipe in mouth!

We spent two thirds of our time deployed to Borneo. When not in Borneo we would take leave, carry out continuation training and fly tasks within Malaya. Someway north of Singapore was a British Army base, Paroi. It consisted of two rows of wooden barrack huts with a 200 yds by 50 yds parade ground between them. I was tasked to go there and deliver a package. The deployed troops were the Lifeguards - with armoured cars. Thinking back to Churchill's funeral a few month earlier I wondered to myself if they still wore their ostrich

plumes. I asked my compatriots if there were any problems at Paroi and was told to make sure I took my KD with me. "They don't allow flying suits in the mess."

Came the day and at 2 miles finals I could see 3 different platoons of soldiers drilling on the parade ground. At one mile, expecting to have to overshoot, I saw a bugler dash out and presumably blow his bugle - because immediately all three platoons fled! After landing and being marshalled under a canopy, I was told to report to the mess and await the CO.

So I got changed and wandered over to the mess which was empty. I had a look at the notice board and was surprised to see a chinagraphed message on a sheet of A4 pinned in the middle of the board. "I expect all my officers to have at least one dead language. CO".

Half an hour later about 6 army officers had arrived and I eventually handed over my package to the CO. "Come along", he said, "We're going into lunch now". And we walked into the dining room, set for eight. To say that I was overwhelmed is an understatement - each place was set with more silver and more glasses than the RAF uses for 5 people. There were two waiters per place setting and unfortunately, as the guest, I was served first for all the courses and had to guess which tools to use, how to eat it - and which bits to eat and which bits not! - I was first to dip fingers in the silver rose-water bowl after the chilli crab and so on and so forth - I briefly wondered if I should drink it!. After coffee in the anteroom (that was pretty simple!) the CO said they were all going to play polo and would I like to join them? "That's very kind of you Sir, but I'm expected back at Seletar. But thank you for the invitation".

Back in my sweat-stained flying suit flying in the cooler air at 5000 ft on the way back to Seletar, I decided the RAF was quite enough for me and I was grateful that, usually, I was doing a job that I would have paid to do anyway.

The next time I met the Lifeguards was during a major air/ground exercise in Malaya. We, two Single Pins and two pilots had deployed to a small laterite strip surrounded by thick jungle. We were in the airborne forward air control role. Between us we provided a dawn to dusk presence over the exercise area, directing Hunters of 8 Sqn and New Zealand Canberra's from Tengah with Australian Sabres from Butterworth onto ground targets provided to us by radio from the attacking troops. We refuelled ourselves from pre-positioned 60 gallon drums with a hand pump, we fed ourselves from 24 hour ration packs and slept in Australian one-man combined mosquito net/sleeping bags slung between the tail plane and wing struts of our aircraft. It was good fun, hard and thirsty work with no water for shaving let alone showering. We had enjoyed two nights of this, each of us getting around 8 hours flying daily with airborne handovers, when the Lifeguards arrived at the strip. I had just landed at dusk and was putting up my mosquito net/sleeping bag. My Flt Cdr, Pat Goodband was cooking up 2 ration packs for supper when along came this flying-suited army lieutenant. "Hello! we'd like to invite you two to dine with us. There's just we two helo pilots and we have stacks of food". "Do you have any cold Tiger?" I asked. "Oh yes, I'm sure my man has brought some in the cold-box". "Right, we'd be delighted to join you as soon as we've put out our meths-tablet stove".

Well! Un-noticed by us 'cos it was now dark, at the other end of the strip were not only two 2-man bubble-shaped helos, a 5 tonner lorry, but also a large table with 4 chairs. The table was covered with a white starched linen table cloth and there were two silver candlesticks on the table. Behind the table food sizzled on a small field kitchen attended by a cook while a uniformed waiter rummaged in a cavernous cold box.

It was a super meal with lots of cold Tiger.

After coffee, the Lt said, "Well, got to earn my living".

He then climbed into one of the helos, started up, took off vertically into a starless sky - the candles had blown out but the cook had turned on the lorry's headlights - and disappeared for 15 minutes. On his return - which blew the candles out again, he unfortunately just hit a thin sapling with his blade tips. He landed safely but there were traces of the contact on the ends of his rotor blades. "Oh dear!" he said, "I knew I should have done my night flying before dinner!"