

Police life - A Rich Tapestry

by Mike Harper.

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I joined the British South Africa Police in Southern Rhodesia at the age of 18 as I was too young to join the Colonial Police Service. As a Constable I was trained in military as well as police subjects and also equitation and to drive vehicles and motorcycles. After training I was posted to the small town of Gatooma where I lived in a single men's Mess and worked mainly shift duties supervising the African beats and patrols. Crime was low and I dealt with minor thefts, assaults, disputes and traffic duties. After three years I took leave back to the UK but had to pay for my own passages as Southern Rhodesia, being a self-governing colony, entitled you to Rhodesian citizenship but not to travel outside of the country. On my return from leave I was

posted back to Gatooma but after two years a circular was published advertising posts of Inspector in the Nyasaland Police. I applied and was accepted and travelled by train via Beira to Blantyre and thence to Zomba Police Headquarters, arriving in January 1958.

The Nyasaland Police was part of the Colonial Police Service and although a small force compared to the BSAP offered a number of advantages over that force. Starting with a much higher rank and pay, you were entitled to allowances to purchase uniform and to buy a car, something I had not been able to afford in the BSAP. There was also the opportunity to exercise greater authority and to gain a much wider police experience. Theoretically, you could also eventually transfer to another Colonial Police Force. On arrival I was given no extra training except riot drill but was expected to learn police procedures and the law as well as the Chinyanja language within three years and pass examinations in them in order to be confirmed in my appointment.

I was soon posted to Zomba Police Station which lay at the foot of the Zomba Mountain beside the road leading up to the old Government house and to the Government Secretariat. Every day at 4.00 pm the Secretariat staff would race down the road to the Zomba Gymkhana Club to refresh themselves and an officer in charge of Zomba with a sense of humour had a black and white chequered flag made and used to flag the first car past his police station. One day a very senior official, who was not amused, was flagged and ordered that the officer be mentally examined. He was found to be perfectly sane and obtained a certificate to this effect which he had framed on his office wall.

After a while I was made Prosecutions Officer in the Resident Magistrate's court, a large hall with a dais at one end and two large open doorways at the other. The prosecutor's table faced the dais and on one side was the dock behind which was a cell and within the cell was a locked door leading to the exhibit store. One day a convicted burglar was locked in the cell and the next case was proceeding when horrible retching noises were heard from the cell and the Magistrate adjourned to investigate. Inside the cell the burglar was found very drunk having burgled the exhibit store and drunk from bottles of kachasu stored there. The Magistrate declined to complain, saying that it would be embarrassing to do so and the burglar appeared to have suffered enough. Kachasu was a vile smelling colourless



liquor distilled from maize beer with various noxious additives. It was extremely potent and of course illegal. Prosecuting with exhibits of kachasu on the table in front of me was a nauseating experience. On one occasion I prosecuted an elderly African woman for making and selling kachasu and she at once pleaded guilty. The Magistrate said he would fine her or if she did not pay the fine she would go

to prison. She asked for time to raise the money to pay the fine and the Magistrate asked her how long she needed. Quite unabashed she said she needed enough time to make and sell some more kachasu.

A Malawi Congress Party member was arrested during a demonstration outside the Secretariat and I dealt with him at the Police Station and released him on bail. I later prosecuted him in court where he appeared in red robes with a mortarboard hat with the initials PG on it. He said this stood for 'Prison Graduate' although he had not yet been convicted. The court was packed to overflowing with spectators but although I objected to this playing to the gallery, the Magistrate overruled me. When the accused came to make his defence he said he wanted to call me as a witness. I objected because I was the prosecutor but the Magistrate allowed it and the accused asked me if I had seen him after his arrest and given him a chair to sit on and a cup of tea. I agreed and my OC who was sitting next to me asked "Whose side are you on?" The accused was convicted and fined £15 or ten days in prison and opted for prison. However, he did not make Prison Graduate as his fine was paid for him.

A ball was held at the Zomba Police Headquarters Officers' Mess and I attended in full Mess dress of white monkey jacket, dark blue trousers with a buff stripe, blue cummerbund and black half Wellington boots. Foolishly and incorrectly I wore small silver box spurs which led to my downfall. During an energetic samba with the Commissioner's daughter I entangled my spurs and we both fell over. I may be doing the Commissioner an injustice but I was soon afterwards posted as far away from Zomba as possible for the next six years.

I went first to Fort Manning near the border with Northern Rhodesia. Apart from the Boma and the Police Station there were only a few Indian stores. There were eight other Europeans there, including their families, although there were others scattered throughout a district of several hundred square miles in missions, farms and at a leprosarium. There was no electricity or running water and water was supplied to the houses in jerry cans carried by donkeys. Lighting was by paraffin pressure lamps and paraffin fridges converted heat into cold enough to form ice.

The District Commissioner was a great character and never at a loss to make life interesting. When the Queen's Birthday fell due he ordained that we should hold a parade on the open ground between the Boma and Police Station. We had a rehearsal and I provided all my police in line with groups of Boma messengers in red fezzes at one end and Chiefs messengers in black fezzes at the other. The DC duly arrived in white shirt and shorts and sandals wearing a white topee with a red lavatory cloth hanging down the back. Of course the parade rocked with laughter and it was difficult to maintain a proper order. On the Queen's Birthday a large crowd gathered and the parade was duly inspected by the DC, properly attired this time, to the accompaniment of martial music from one of my records played over the loudspeakers on the Boma Land Rover. The time came for the parade to march past and for the DC to take the salute but there was a deathly hush. We marched past in silence and when the parade was dismissed I angrily asked the gramophone operator why he had not played for the march past. He merely pointed to the turntable where my record resembled a flower having warped in the heat of the sun.

I commanded about 40 African police and worked closely with the District Commissioner and Assistant District Commissioner but on the whole it was a pretty quiet district with only a few disturbances to cause excitement. The nearest town of any size was Fort Jameson about twenty miles away across the border in Northern Rhodesia. Here they had all mod cons and some attractive single ladies who we occasionally lured across the border to a party. Lilongwe was about 120 miles away and on one occasion I took a lady from Fort Jameson a round trip of 320 miles in one evening to attend a ball there.

After six months leave I was posted to Karonga at the extreme north of Lake Nyasa near the Tanzania border. Here I was Station Officer or Second in Command of the District.

I was then sent to the small outpost of Fort Hill near the borders of Northern Rhodesia and Tanzania. Neither my Police Station nor my house had been built and I lived in a caravan with the toilet a six foot hole in the ground surrounded by a grass thatched fence. It was the rainy season and there were few visitors. Reported crime was low because my men did not speak the local Misukwa language as it was police policy not to post men to their home districts. One month we only had two cases of arson of grass thatched houses reported, both undetected. An inspecting officer was horrified at the nil detection rate and the policy was changed.

One day a man suffering from severe knife wounds was brought in and it transpired that his four children had all died suddenly from natural causes. The villagers thought this was witchcraft and urged him to consult the Great Chikanga, a famous witch doctor in the hills near Rumpi. He did so and a Great Chikanga told him that his brother-in-law was responsible for his children's deaths and must be brought to him and, for a fee, unwitched. His brother-in-law objected violently and defended himself with a knife. He was charged with wounding and taken before the nearest Resident Magistrate who fined him £1 to be paid to the injured man and advised him at his earliest convenience to see the Great Chikanga as there would always be trouble in his village if he did not. Sound advice but contrary to the Prevention of Witchcraft Ordinance.

There were few Europeans at Fort Hill. The Assistant District Commissioner was young and intellectual and slightly eccentric. He lived in a prefabricated hut with a black cat he called 'Trotsky' – at least until Trotsky started foaming at the mouth and then disappeared into the bush and was never seen again.

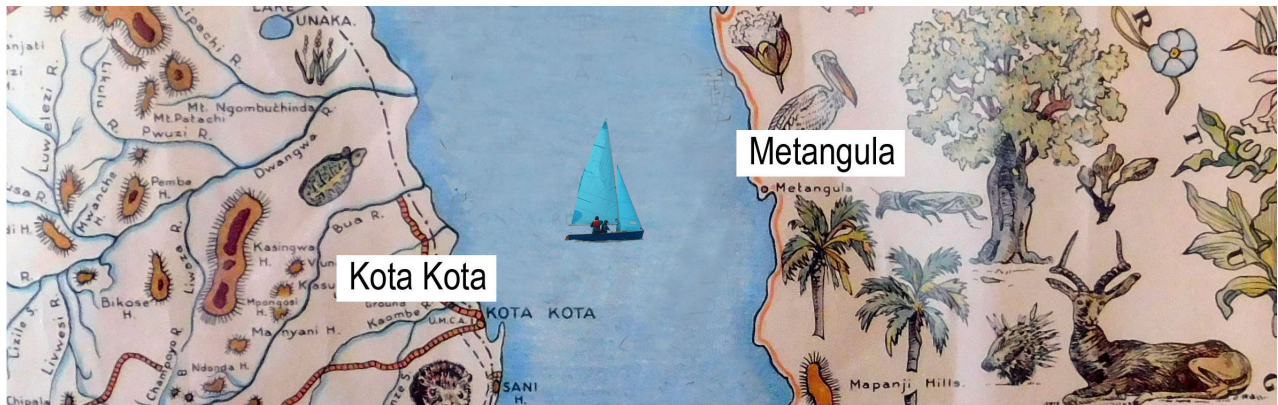
The main business at Fort Hill, apart from being a border post was the recruitment of African labour for the gold mines in Johannesburg. This was run by WNLA or the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association. They had an unsurfaced airstrip which ran slightly uphill. In wet weather the planes, both two and four engined, would make decidedly risky landings and take-offs, skidding on the muddy surface.



To amuse himself the ADC had made himself a four hole golf course on the airstrip which had to be abandoned when flights were using it and he used to run what he called a pack of hounds but which were only local mongrels.

After six months I was promoted to Assistant Superintendent and posted in charge of Kota Kota district on the lakeshore about the midpoint of Lake Nyasa. It was a large district, much of which was game reserve but had a very big population strung out along the lakeshore. Hence we worked lakeshore hours from 7.00 am until noon unless called out to some incident. This left much time for swimming, sailing and fishing in the beautiful fresh waters of the lake. A Scottish PWD builder was building houses for government staff there and had built from plans and local timber an Enterprise sailing dinghy in one of the houses. He made an excellent job of it but had to knock down a wall to get it out. One Easter he and I set sail across the lake towards Metangula on the Portuguese shore about 40 miles away. We had a crate of beer either side of the centreboard for ballast, and a small outboard motor. We eventually reached Metangula where we were welcomed by an elderly Portuguese with the shakes, who said he was the Chef Maritime. The "cantina" was

opened in our honour and we listened to a hockey match on the radio between England and Portugal. Every time a goal was scored it was drinks all round, accompanied only by spicy smoked ham to eat. Next morning we did not feel good but set sail. With little wind we made a slow passage back and after dark we could not pinpoint Kota Kota. However, the lake steamer Ilala arrived and we followed her lights in.



The Ilala was a fair size ship of nearly 150 feet in length and used to visit Kota Kota every ten days on a round trip of the lake. She had a first class deck and many of the small European community at Kota Kota used to board her for a night out with good food and drink and a chance to meet her officers and any passengers she might be carrying. Many an enjoyable evening was spent on her and I once went on the round trip on her which was a pleasant break from routine.

During my next leave in 1964 Nyasaland became Malawi and on my return I was posted as Staff Officer Police Headquarters, Zomba. A few weeks later I left Malawi for Hong Kong.

Mike Harper 2008

