

SPECIAL BRANCH AND INDEPENDENCE

1963 – 1964

In 1963, I applied for and obtained a transfer to Special Branch. I was then posted back to Zomba, only this time as the Detective Inspector in charge of the Special Branch section at Zomba Police Station, which proved to be another interesting period of my life. My duties were varied and included following and reporting on visiting dignitaries from overseas, and on one occasion this involved a leading politician from communist China. In those days, we had no 'Q' car or any official vehicle for such purposes and I had to follow the visitor around and not try to appear conspicuous in my own little Fiat 1100 car. In any event, I wasn't spotted



or identified and the visit went off without any undue excitement. However, as full independence approached, political events began to hot up quite considerably, and at one point there was growing concern at the possibility of some form of revolution or even mutiny in the army (as occurred a little later in Tanganyika, where the army mutinied against the

Government of President Julius Nyerere, a development which had become somewhat prevalent in some other African countries). So another of my duties was to keep watch and report on what was happening among civil servants and more particularly the army, and I acquired sources of information among African soldiers in the King's African Rifles (KAR, which after Independence became the Malawi Rifles). One such contact was a Sergeant Major (Warrant Officer Class II) who was not averse to accepting a few pounds to provide me with information; it was not a terribly eventful duty, but was quite exciting having to go out to lonely places on country roads to meet with the fellow. I would then report on any comments or information he gave me, particularly on whether or not there was any revolutionary talk in the Sergeants' Mess, or indeed anywhere else in the regiment. But the army remained loyal, and my reports (with no names given of course) were sent up to the Head of Special Branch at Police HQ, and thence on to the Prime Minister himself.

A little later that year, I managed to go on what was the only holiday I spent outside of Nyasaland during my first three years in the country. I went to Dar es Salaam, with the idea of going on to Zanzibar (as it was then) and spending two weeks there. I travelled with a pretty young hairdresser from Limbe, but the day after we arrived in Dar, revolution erupted in Zanzibar. Arabs had ruled there for centuries but clearly were hated by the mainly African population in the island, and in the mayhem which followed, many Arabs were murdered. Almost immediately afterwards the army in Tanganyika mutinied and attempted to overthrow the Government there. In the middle of our first night in the hotel, which was a little way out of town but on a major route into it, we were woken up by loud shouting and banging in the corridor. Knowing the situation to be fraught with danger, I did not venture out until all had quietened down, when I was told that soldiers had entered the hotel and arrested a young (African) KAR Second Lieutenant, who shortly before had returned to Tanganyika from Officer Training at Sandhurst. The officer was accompanied by his young Swedish wife, who prior to their marriage had been working as an au pair girl in England, and the couple had arrived in Dar only two days earlier, which turned out to be a disaster for the young woman as her new husband was never seen again.

The airport and much else in the country came to a halt, and we were unable to get away, but the night's events made me decide to move to another hotel in a quieter part of the city. Although activity in Dar had come almost to a standstill, I managed to find a taxi which took us to a small but decent hotel owned by a local Ismaili (a Shiite Muslim sect, led by the Aghan Khan). However, we were again disturbed the following night by gunshots and I went up onto the flat roof of the building, crawled to the edge and peered over the low balustrade. Opposite was a small park area without any trees, the other side of which were some more, larger hotels and I saw soldiers dragging some European men out of one of them. While observing all this, I realised suddenly that I wasn't alone on the roof, and saw that I had been joined by the owner of the hotel who was carrying a shotgun. When asked what he was doing with this, he answered that he intended to 'protect his hotel', to which I quickly responded by asking him to hide the weapon as soon as possible. If it had been seen by the soldiers, they would have opened fire with their far more effective weapons, which would most likely have resulted in both of us, and possibly others in the hotel being shot and killed! When this was quietly explained to him, he had the sense to disappear off the roof and hide the weapon.

I learned later that the men I had seen being taken by the soldiers were press and television reporters, who were driven to another part of the city where other reporters had been collected. When a total of about twenty had been gathered, they were put into a room and told they were to be shot. Then one at a time, they were taken out and those left behind heard shots, creating a great deal of fear as each awaited his turn. But in fact, no one was actually executed, and apart from the amusement the affair had given the soldiers, the whole episode was meant as a threat to the newsmen who were told that if they did not immediately submit positive reports on the 'revolution' to their respective newspapers, radio or TV stations, then they would be definitely be taken out and shot for real!

At the crack of dawn two days later, we were again awoken, this time by heavy gunfire which proved to be the prelude of the assault by British Royal Marines on



Pre-Dar "Bootneck briefing"

the mutineers' barracks on the outskirts of the city. With the appearance of the Marines, who arrived by helicopters, the majority of the soldiers fled into the bush and the only resistance to the attack came from a number of men in the guardroom, but this soon ended when a rocket blew out the door of the guardroom killing a couple of soldiers, whereupon the others surrendered. Some of the Marines then left the barracks in vehicles abandoned by the mutineers, to

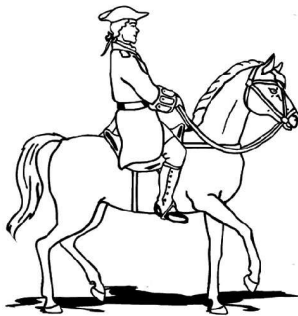
take over the rest of the city and to remove any pockets of resistance found there. On hearing news of the attack and removal of the military, along with what had become their unpopular version of law keeping, thousands of people thronged the streets, and it was quite an experience standing with them as we all waved palm fronds to welcome the British Marines.

It subsequently transpired that news of the army mutiny had reached President Nyerere almost as soon as it occurred. The first act of the mutineers was to arrest (and in some cases kill) all their officers, both black and white. Some British army officers had remained in Tanganyika after independence to take up

appointments as military advisers, including a general who was acting as Head of the Army. Fortunately, the general, having been informed of what was happening, went immediately to the President's Residence, and then remained hidden by friends living outside of the city. They had managed to get a message to the British Government, in which the President called for assistance, and it was then that a small task force set off from Aden, and some days later reached Dar es Salaam. Once off the coast, they opened up with the ship's guns (the noise that awoke us) but not aimed at any target on land but apparently only 'for effect' by firing out to sea, as the marines simultaneously attacked the army barracks.

Soon after the marines' arrival, all returned to normal and we set off for the airport for our return to Blantyre. My friend Margaret telephoned her parents in Limbe, to assure them that she was safe, and I asked that she did not mention me, particularly to the press as the presence of a Nyasaland/Malawi Special Branch officer throughout these historic events could be misinterpreted. But on arrival at Blantyre Chileka Airport, we were greeted by the equivalent of the Nyasaland press corps, waiting to greet the 'local heroine'. The next day the headline emblazoned on the front page of the Nyasaland Times read 'Limbe hairdresser rescued and saved from army mutiny' and the text of the article went on 'local girl Margaret Mitchell together with Zomba policeman Barry Thorne were caught up in the recent revolution in Tanganyika, etc'.

At the time, I had an American Peace Corps girlfriend, who lived in Mulanje, a small town some forty miles to the east of Blantyre, and on the previous 'Fourth of July' US Independence Day, I had visited the Peace Corps residence where Gay and five other members lived and worked as teachers. I had arranged with another American friend that he should run in ahead of me while they were at supper, acting as Paul Revere (the American Revolutionary hero famed for his



ride to warn the colonists of the impending British attack) and shout 'the British are coming', whereupon I marched in with a cricket bat over my shoulder, with a Union Jack was attached to the handle. The bat was a bit special to me, as I had been awarded it when voted 'man of the match' when playing for a Nyasaland XI against a visiting Rhodesian club team. Unfortunately I left the bat in Mulanje, and when Gay read the 'news' of my adventures in Dar es Salaam, she had sawn it into pieces! All in all, a

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Nyasaland achieved full Independence in July 1964, and on Independence Day I acted as one of the Special Branch officers on protection duty to ensure the safety of Prince Philip, the Queen's representative at the handover ceremony held at the main football stadium in Blantyre. But the only untoward event to occur happened to me personally. I was near Prince Philip during the period

leading up to the lowering of the British flag, and the raising of the new Malawi flag, when I felt the most awful pain in my left side. I mentioned this to my colleague, another Special Branch officer, and said that I must leave for a few minutes to find a toilet, to see if the pain could be relieved by urinating. I went to the back of the main stand where the somewhat limited public toilet facilities were situated, but one can imagine the state of the single urinal being used by many thousands of happy and beer drinking Africans in the stadium. The waste outlet was blocked with urine overflowing onto the ground and out through the door, but as I stood on the raised part of the urinal and undid my trousers, the pain got much worse and the next thing I knew I was laying on my back with the urine flowing around me. Determined not simply to lay there and die, I managed to turn and get onto my front and crawl to the entrance, where I again passed out.

On coming too, I found that I was once more on my back, but this time instead of seeing only the roof of the urinal, saw a smartly dressed black gentleman looking down at me, who asked if I was OK. Being somewhat embarrassed I answered 'yes', and no doubt thinking I was only another drunken European who had overdone the celebrating, he went away. Fortunately, however, the man turned out to be an American doctor and the fact that he came back most probably saved my life. The next thing I remember was being carried to an ambulance

which (although I didn't see the humour of it at the time) was quite amusing. The vehicle was one of the two Volkswagen Kombi ambulances donated by the German government as an Independence gift, but when they tried to load me into it, they found it impossible to close the doors as I was too long, resulting in my legs having to be bent up in order to

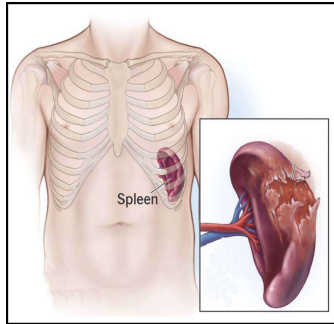


do so. I was rushed to the nearby Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and again have little memory of anything other than the pain which had continued to grow in intensity.

Due to the celebrations, there was only a duty doctor available but no surgeon, and the hospital was staffed only by nuns who had volunteered to stand in as nurses over the holiday period. I recall being most embarrassed when unable to control my bowel movement I messed the bed, but without hesitation the nuns cleaned me up and did all they could to alleviate the pain a little. Consequently, it was not until the following day that I was seen by a surgeon, and as the pain by now was throughout my whole abdomen it was decided to have an exploratory look at what was happening by performing a laparotomy, which was carried out by a large and hearty Dutchman. I recall being given a premed before being wheeled into the operating theatre, still very much awake and surrounded by faces in masks. I was then given an anaesthetic injection and asked to count up to ten, and then again backwards, but having done so I still didn't 'go under' and was told not to worry as I would soon 'be off'. But I remained conscious, and recalled when a child being anaesthetised by gas to have my tonsils removed which had made me very sick. So when the mask was placed over my face and I was told to take deep breaths and felt the same nausea coming over me, I was none too happy. And still being fully alert, I could hear the doctors talking as if I had lost consciousness and was afraid they would start operating on me while still being fully awake. The last thing I remember was feeling even more nauseous and reaching up to pull the mask off my face, when next I was being wheeled along a corridor and hearing a female voice behind me say 'oh,

charming I'm sure'. It later transpired that as the young British nurse was pushing me back to the ward I had said 'get this f***ing mask off my face!'

The following day I was told that my spleen had burst, causing peritonitis, hence all the pain, and that I was very lucky still to be alive. I spent the next six weeks in hospital while numerous blood samples were taken every day, but in the beginning this proved difficult as my veins had shut down from the shock and loss



of blood. Having failed to find a suitable vein in my arm they then tried my ankle, but this was also unsuccessful and an attempt to resolve the problem was made by doing a 'cut-down' in my shoulder. I was given a local anaesthetic but the cut was made before it took effect and I felt the razor sharp scalpel slice into my flesh, but although very painful this at last attempt proved successful. The net result of all this (apart from surviving the operation itself) was a

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Apparently, a spleen has to be in a certain state to rupture, usually brought about by malaria or some other horror which causes the organ to swell. Many Africans suffered from swollen spleens mostly from malaria, and in those days many died from bicycle accidents when the handlebar would go into the swollen spleen which would then burst. But having been so near to a hospital when the spleen burst (and not 'up-country') and lucky enough to have been hospitalised quickly and operated on within twenty four hours, I was fortunate to survive.

I was discharged from hospital some six weeks later and was taken to the home of one of my senior officers and his wife, Douglas and Sheila Holmes a Court, who kindly volunteered to look after me. I had known the couple well and had spent many evenings and weekends, together with my flatmate John Pritchard playing bridge with them. Unfortunately, the doctors failed to explain to them that I had been kept on a very strict diet in hospital, which had to be maintained for at least another week or two. The result was that when I arrived at their home, I was extremely hungry, and eagerly accepted their kind offer of a meal, which almost killed me when they served up and I devoured a huge 'fry up', comprising everything a hungry young bachelor could wish for. That night, I became violently ill with vomiting and diarrhoea, and was found the following morning collapsed on their toilet seat, resulting in being rushed back to hospital where I spent a few more days under observation.

Shortly after, I was flown home to England, where I spent a further week under observation and investigation at The Tropical Diseases Hospital in London. There was still much concern about why my spleen had been swollen, although it was concluded that there had been two likely causes for it to have ruptured. The first was a severe blow in the stomach received when playing hockey for

Nyasaland shortly before Independence Day. I played goalkeeper, a position which in those days was given little protection apart from leg pads (like large cricket pads with a small extension over the foot) and in the pre-match knock-up, I was hit in the side by a stinging shot fired in by one of our Sikh stars, possibly making me the only player on record to have been carried off injured before the match had actually started! The other possible cause occurred on the morning of the celebrations, when prior to taking over my protection duties a Special Branch colleague and I were engaged in some horse play, and I sustained a light blow in the area of the spleen.

While in London, I was invited to explain the background and circumstances of what had happened to a number of doctors and specialists, and was told later that my spleen had ended up somewhere in the West Indies where it had been examined by the world's leading spleen expert, and where it probably remains to this day on a shelf in a bottle containing some preservative liquid!