

Soward!

With the utmost pleasure I greet all the friends of my youth who served in Op Crown. For our mutual benefit, I too would like to add memories of that enriching experience, serving with the British Army in the Far East, from January 1965 to July 1967.

My name is Pete Woods then VM II (E) REME. Major Chisholm, the very charming Scottish OC REME WKSP in Crown noticed the (E) instantly. "So you are an electrician. You will take responsibility for the electrical repairs to all vehicles and plant also the battery shop. We have a heavy work backload, do your best." According to the motto, "you gotta eat", priority was given to the ration truck. It was a challenge. The first day I got 5 vehicles up and running, how? No, not by cannibalizing, the very thought. I "borrowed" shamelessly. Here I must praise the RAOC to the skies. Theirs is an unsung, back office job, each day I dropped some 50 indents on the WO's desk. Batteries, more batteries, rectifiers, magnetos, dynamos, complete wiring looms for burnt-out Land-Rovers, FFR radios, headlamps and fuses. The RAOC got all this stuff and much more up from Singapore or further a field within days. To speed up turn-over I went on borrowing, a habit I quickly developed at Crown! One day a huge and furious RE Corporal confronted me as I found out later he was "Lou" Rex, later he received a well-earned MBE for competently rebuilding Caterpillar engines. "You've nicked 4 batteries from me Gainsborough!!" "When will it be ready"? "Friday, Friday morning you'll have 4 brand new, fully charged batteries fitted"! And so it came to pass. What a great bloke. Meanwhile, Ricky Hoolihan and Dick Durkin set off with another Scammell load to Bangkok, using the Gainsborough batteries "Lou" had lent me.

As I write I can see a whole host of fascinating personalities passing before my minds eye now. We are all agreed the Thais were delightful people. "Hippo" Hall was a big man in every way. He loved the village children and they adored him. They all came into the NAAFI one evening and sang "Frere Jaque" and many other Thai songs for us. Then there was Lenny the cook, he doubled as DJ on the camp radio. A padre came up from the Church of Jocks in Terendak and broadcast to us. It was comforting, in the middle of nowhere by the Mekong, to be assured that God still cared for us. The sermon was simple. "In Kok Talat there is a small Buddhist temple. The Thai people pray to Buddha and can tell you all about him. If they ask, what can you tell them about our own religion?" It was another small step to my becoming a lifelong believer. Op Crown has had a profound affect on all our lives, has it not?

The REME basha lay next to the corrugated NAAFI hut. Close to the perimeter fence was a tiny one-seat toilet used by the Chinese NAAFI staff. You will recall that during the monsoon period rain came down as a solid wall of water. Once I watched a Chinese run through the rain to the toilet and disappear inside. Seconds later he flew out backwards, frightened out of his wits. Poisonous snakes don't like monsoon rain either and this one was in the toilet, nice and dry..... A dark-haired REME fitter named Pete Ascot used to pay the local children to collect snakes. They scavenged the landscape for miles around and Pete used to preserve them in jars of fluid. He presented his considerable collection to the medical centre. Thus, when locals came asking for treatment they could identify the type of snake which had bitten them.

From time to time we were treated to a film night, seated on wooden benches under a starlit sky. The projectionist set up his reels and we were off. The lads clutched their cans of Tiger beer and approved the shimmering glamour on the screen. In one scene the gently intoxicated, blonde heroine collided full-bosom with a glass door. She was impressive. The boys roared. "Stop the film"! The projectionist obligingly stopped and wound it back so we could all enjoy her lovely cleavage for a second a third a.....you get the idea. You don't get service like that with Top Rank.....

The village dogs were a menace to health. It was decided to shoot them. Unfortunately the exterminator wasn't too good a shot. He winged one dog which fled into the cookhouse where we all sat at our tables left and right eating our midday meal. The dog raced down the centre, the squaddie pumped up on adrenaline raised his rifle from the wooden steps and fired into the cookhouse after the fleeing fugitive. We all dived for cover! The din was tremendous! The rifleman was promptly relieved of his weapon and banned to the guardroom in disgrace.

Opposite the welders shop the medical centre did a roaring trade treating the locals of their many complaints. This "hearts and minds" service was much valued by them. The Irish MO was very fond of his Thai patients. The dry local laterite dust which some claimed was seven times finer than talcum powder caused glaucoma and other eye problems. Inevitably when lusty young males meet giggling Thai puyings there are other problems. As the village girls tended to change their names they were photographed and their weekly check results entered in a medical centre book. It is fair to say the lads regarded any infection in a sporting spirit. This attitude was not shared by Colonel Orrell, RE the CO of Op Crown.

There is a saying here in Germany that the echo out of the forest reflects the way you call into it. In life this is true. A Thai girl had recently arrived in Kok Talat. She seemed not to fit in with village life and was very sad. It transpired she had stolen from her parents and fled. Mamasan assured me she was not a prostitute, but the money was gone, her way home barred. The prodigal daughter? We used to get paid once a week, in baht. I gave her the money, told her to go home, say she was sorry. I never saw her again. But word spread in the village. When I told Mamasan "Me no butterfly any more, find me good girl", she searched diligently the way matchmaking Mamasans do. Proudly she introduced me to Sherry, a dark-eyed beauty from Burma. We rented a little house surrounded by water buffalo and for the next ten months I led a very contented life as a pad in Ban Kok Talat.

The tarred laterite airstrip was nearly complete. Just as well; the Commer Tippers were simply scrap. Many were buried where they stopped. After stalwart service the Cat D-8 engines were giving trouble. The abrasive laterite dust had worn the pistons and bores oval. I have never seen such wear. The turbo-charger bearings were also worn out. Cat D-8 engines being expensive and squaddy labour cheap, it was decided to overhaul them in Crown. This was heavy work. The track pins were worn to a figure "S". Local Thai labour was pumping out a pin hydraulically when suddenly there was a loud report and the 2-foot steel pin flew past an RE Sergeant's head and bent the H-girder holding up the roof. He went white as a sheet. It was his lucky day!!

About this time it was the World Cup. I was fitting hi-load alarms on the Coles Crane. I remember a Sapper climbing onto the jib. The jib was raised as high as it would go. There he

was, sitting up there like a bird, transistor radio receiving well, shouting the goal scores down to all the other football enthusiasts. Magic!

An Argosy from Royal Air Force Far East Transport Command came to visit us. The pilot landed on the new runway and was invited to the Officer's Mess. Some hours later as builders we received the offer of a flight. Many accepted. Certainly, the Argosy was a handsome machine. Next I remember a solid roar of sound and the ground shook. I ran out of the battery shop and threw myself down. The RAF Argosy seemed to scrape the workshop roof. Later when the volunteers descended many were gagging and pewking. The Argosy is such a huge machine to do loops and rolls. Meanwhile up on the strip eleven saffron-robed Thai monks were blessing the new runway. Maybe they had blessed the Argosy too.....A smart troop of Thai soldiers in white quick-marched past the assembled dignitaries to a skirl of Asian music and strange tongues blared from the loudspeakers.

I admired the sappers who had toiled so hard in the boiling sun every day out on the strip. Suddenly a collective feeling of tiredness overcame us. The news that the tarred strip was too soft and would have to be replaced by concrete had little effect other than a shrug. First we must recover. I went down to Ubon with Sherry and ordered a band. Venue was the "Sowardi Bar", colourfully decorated by the girls. Word of the dance spread like wildfire, the music could be heard for miles! I remember a huge plant op. approaching the young Thai guitarist who smiled and offered his instrument. There was an expectant pause, it went very quiet. Then the sapper let rip. "Apache". And how. The guys roared, the excited girls all wanted to dance. What a repertoire this guy had! The Stones "Boney Maroney". Then Elvis. New then, Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazelwood, "These Boots are made for Walking" and "Summer Wine". Remember? Hank Marvin couldn't do better! What a super night!

About this time the communal toilet became too much even for us. Rude comments from the Aussies, those decadent POMS can't even build a shithouse. Their new one was a truly grand affair with a deep, deep hole like the Grand Canyon. Separate seats, neat cubicles, toilet rolls. It was quite something. As the Aussies lived closest they had a vested interest that it worked properly. The regular East Asian monsoons started, sweeping away roads and bridges. The shithouse hole subsided and the proud construction slipped down after it. Sad, very sad.....

Road building commenced using the tarred laterite ripped up from the strip. My application to work in Crown till the end of project was accepted. I was very happy. Unfortunately an Admin Brigadier down in Malacca was peering with a rheumy eye at my faded name buried at the bottom of the board in the chalk dust. "Who's this man"? The OC Sid Thomas answered truthfully, "I don't know, I've never met him. He went to Thailand for six months, that was a year ago". The Brigadier was not impressed. "Get the wretched man back here on some courses!" And that was the end of my time at Operation Crown.