

My Introduction to Post Crown Force.

By Peter Richards

My introduction to Post Crown Force was a hurried one, but one that left a lasting impression. Little did I realize that I would later become far more familiar with it. I was the fitter attached to the Royal Signals' Golden Arrow Detachment in Bangkok based in The Grand Hotel, opposite the Thai National Stadium. It was a good place to get home to because we only had to remember 'sanaam gila' (National Stadium) for the taxi drivers. I had a number of 27.5 kva. trailer mounted generators, 3 ancient Bedford O.Y. articulated tractor units, a Bedford RL 3 tonner and about four Land Rovers to look after. We also had the ubiquitous V8 Ford Stores wagon, which defied everyone's attempts at starting it up. I think that one was towed away eventually. Even the Thai fitter I befriended could not get his head around the magneto ignition system on that one and he was absolutely genius on everything else! Our role was to provide the link between FARELF HQ, Singapore and SEATO HQ in Bangkok. We knew of Post Crown setting up, their Movements Liaison Officer and NCO Cpl. Stan Sissons were part of the Grand Hotel team by the time I arrived, but we each had separate roles to play and each unit went its own way. Stan was my drinking partner and buddy, bound together by the fact that he was RE, and I, REME, neither the one of us a 'Jimmy', (Royal Sigs.) What better bond could men have? My adventures with Stan would fill a book but that is not what this is about, even if he was part of Post Crown Force. One day the Forman of Signals announced that he needed to go up to Ubon, they had spares he required, and he had some they wanted. He required a driver, a fitter, and he concluded, a translator. The C.O could not let him take half the unit, so I was designated to drive as the fitter, and as neither the foreman nor I could speak Thai, my room mate came along as interpreter. Bob my room mate was fluent in Thai, having a Thai girlfriend whom he later married. Neither the FOS or Bob could drive, just as neither of them could fix the motor if it broke down. I was not sure I could either, but I gained a little kudos in them believing I was the linchpin of the operation. In those days Bangkok was a very pleasant city, with wide tree lined avenues and klongs, (canals) and very little traffic. It had been planned for us to take a Land Rover, stopping the night in Ban Kok Telat, returning the next day, but by the time we had sorted all that had to go, Movements threw in their ten pence worth, and we finished up taking the RL. That put the block on the overnight stay at Crown, it is amazing how much longer a journey will take at 45 mph compared to one taken at up to 70 mph.

We spent the first night at a small hotel just outside Korat, (Nakhorn Ratchasima) and ate at a small café beside the hotel. Very pleasant, so we decided to return the next night. As we were retiring there was a knock on the door, and Bob, being the interpreter, answered. It was one of the hotel 'boys' with two ladies in tow, part of the hotel's 'extras' services. We declined, even though the girls looked as though they desperately needed our services, and could probably have done more with our money than could we! At breakfast the next day the proprietor of the café next door explained that the hotel was the local knocking shop, but I have since discovered that the culture accepted this as the norm, men away from home were expected to seek comfort, wherever it could be found. We rolled into Post Crown at about midday, and we rolled out precisely thirty minutes later. Coming from the comfort of the Grand Hotel, Post Crown was, to us, like going back to the dark ages, not one of us wanted to be there any longer than necessary. Had we been in a leper colony we could not have moved faster. Even the FOS declined lunch in the sergeants' mess. Little did I realize then that a year or so later I would become rather fond of the place. On the return leg we stopped for the night actually in Korat, parking the truck in the town police compound for security. One part of the trip back involved a rise with a sharp drop to a narrow wooden bridge, at the bottom of a long wide curve. The road at this point was tarmac, unusually, but it was wet and the red laterite from the edges was all over the place. I came over the ridge a touch too fast, saw what was ahead, touched my brakes and went into a slow waltz down the hill, round and round and down we went, ending up rear end first in the ditch! There were several lorries queuing to come across towards us, and they all held back to see what the farang would do next, the FOS and Bob started to alight, but I told them to stay put, engaged 4wd. and pulled up and out, slipped it back into normal gear and drove past them with head held high, relishing their signs and shouts of approval. The rest of the journey passed uneventfully, though I did stop about ten miles further on, just to change my pants, they were getting a wee bit high in the heat! The foreman did not speak to me ever again.

The airstrip was originally tarmac, intended to be an emergency strip for fighters, but the first plane the yanks sent in was far heavier than your average fighter, and, yanks being yanks, sent in the heaviest freighter they could find, fully loaded with brass for the grand opening. Needless to say, the tarmac could not take it, the plane barely managed to take off again, and the sappers had to go back to square one!

The whole strip was torn up, and reconstructed as an all weather, state of the art concrete runway. It always struck me as being a particularly strange place to build the strip. On paddy fields, with no less than seven individual rivers traversing the strip. But then, what do REME fitters know about construction? 59 Field Squadron started work on the road just before the airstrip was finally completed, 34 Field Squadron relieving them, allowing them to return to Singapore and, in one officer's words, "Learn to be soldiers again!" I stayed on in the LAD workshop for a while, believe it or not, on compassionate grounds! Noot, now there is a name I remember. Whether it is the same young lady or not, I do not know, but there was a 'Noot' in business while I was there, (nothing to do with me Guv!) but one young sapper, overly fond of the Mekong as well as the occasional bit of coke, struck up a very close relationship with Noot. We were allowed to the village until curfew, about 10 p.m., I think, but the surrounding area, about a ten mile radius, was strictly off limits, and with very good reason, as one of our boys was later shot in a nearby village. But I digress. This young sapper entered into this relationship with Noot, quite unconsciously it would seem, as when questioned he could never ever remember where or with whom he had been. It became the camp joke, he was the camp cyclist because he was always riding the camp bicycle! Anyway, they were happy for a while, until he had a long weekend pass in Ubon, we did not know at the time, but it appears Noot went too. Upon his return it was the usual round of questions with all the, by now, predictable answers. "Dunno," "I can't remember," "I was out of it," "must have been good, I woke up grinning!" et al. This lasted till mid-day, then Noot turned up at the guardroom, carrying a marriage certificate and demanding to see her husband! One sapper returned to Singapore, poste haste, one Thai liaison officer with a real job to do, and one more ex-army wife! That same sapper was also in the habit of leaving his return to camp until the very last minute, and frequently missed curfew. NCOs locking up knew this and tried to hang around a bit for him, until a sergeant whom he had upset was on duty! It took a long time convincing the sapper that we had no keys, and that apart from coming over the top the only way in was round by the main gate and guardroom. On this occasion he managed to climb over, but the next night he was as high as a kite, and, not realizing the gate was still open at the side, started running from 50 yards out shouting he could fly over. He believed it, until he hit the gate at full belt. I thought he was coming through as spaghetti! That night he was privileged to be carried in. During my time there, there were two of us married to Thais, the other, a REME recovery mechanic, George, or Geordie, (may even have been a plant mechanic), not sure now,

or that was what he was, had married a local girl, or she at least lived in the village, and it was not an easy time for them because he was required to observe the curfew, just like the rest of us. They somehow managed to have two lovely kids, Timothy and Tiffany. I met Tim some years later in London, and there was no doubt about his lineage, he is the tallest Thai I have ever seen. George was about six foot six or more tall, and Timothy emulated him in every way. My wife came up to the camp from Bangkok as soon as I wrote to tell her where I was at. She came from Chiangmai, originally, and had lived in Bangkok while I was away in England and Singapore. She had stayed in Bangkok because we could communicate better, with her there. Post and telecoms were not what they are today. Now days I phone my nephew at least once a month, and my niece's daughter e-mails from her school regularly. My wife did not like the look of the village, and it was not difficult persuading her to find a place in Ubon, especially in view of the fact that I was subject to a curfew and could not spend the nights with her. She was also deterred by finding some of the village children rooting around in the scrub outside the wire. They were looking for 'meng dah', beetles. When they found one they would show it to the others with great delight, then eat it, LIVE! Now if that turns a Thai off, it can only mean it was a local habit. Mind you, my second wife came from the north east, (Isaan), and she said that meng dha were very sweet, so it could be a wide spread habit. I never tested her on it. Gindha, my wife, found a room in a bungalow close to the airfield. The other rooms were let out to Americans from the base, so it was well furnished and very comfortable there. It was only two minutes walk from the Detachment bungalow, so quite convenient for staying in touch. She would go to the detachment every Wednesday to collect her allowance from the paymaster, and on a Monday if she needed the MO's attention. It was also not long before she had a little job in a restaurant, helping generally, not paying very much, but learning to cook 'farang' food. The owner made a pretty fair living there, cooking up great steaks and, my favourite, pork chops and home fries, American style of course. Gindha soon became great friends with the proprietor, and I was always guaranteed a good feed! I 'negotiated' a deal with Tony Marriot and the rest of the LAD whereby I would do duty fitter every week, Monday through to Thursday, in return being allowed to travel to Ubon Friday evening on the last bus down. (They stopped running at dusk.) This worked well for a couple of weeks, and there were only a couple of minor hiccups, and that was with the busses. One bus threw a prop-shaft centre bearing one evening, a common occurrence, even with our vehicles, the bus shuddering to a halt, miles from anywhere. All the passengers alighted,

wondering what to do next, as the next one would not come by till morning. The driver and his crew entered into a grand debate, supposedly on what was wrong, and what to do about it, finally the three of them moved to the rear of the bus and opened the boot, not to get tools or spares, but to wake the young lad who was responsible for maintenance, and who actually lived in the boot. The debate had been about waking him before it was his time to start work. Talk about always carrying a spare! The lad rummaged about under his 'bed' of rice sacks and emerged with a pair of ancient pliers and a length of electrical cable, disappeared under the bus for a few minutes, then reappeared to announce with a grin, "OK, go now!" I forgot to get his name, pity really, we could have used a boy like him in the LAD. On another occasion the bus stopped to pick up five or six Thai squaddies who had been out on anti-insurgency patrol. How long they had been out I could not say, but I don't think they had been very close to any water, they stank! There is no other way to put it, and soon the whole bus was gasping for air, even with all the windows wide open, we were all gagging. A Thai Air Force officer sitting with me went and spoke to the driver, who nodded, and the officer turned and spoke to the rest of the passengers in Thai. For a moment or two I did not understand what was going on, until bags were opened and a whip round of spare clean clothing was made. Added to this were towels, soap and sarongs, and the bus driver stopped at the next river crossing and waited for the soldiers to attend their ablutions. Much cleaner patrol rejoined the bus, their dirty uniforms stowed in carrier bags on the roof, well away from our noses. On arrival at Ubon, the officer then had to accompany the soldiers to their barracks to explain their appearance in 'civvies'. It was great, being able to see my wife again, and being with her. We had already spent far too long apart. Almost eighteen months in all. Apart from the regular required separation period, there had been problems getting her passport, and I had been posted, in the meantime, to Middle Wallop, from whence I immediately put in for a posting back to FARELF., and that was duly granted with me joining 59 Fd. Sqn. (RE) LAD., and Post Crown Force. With Post Crown, I had some idea of what I was going to, but I had no expectation of the rude awakening that awaited me in Ubon, after my first night back with Gindha. As I have said, the bungalow in which she had rented a room was close to the airfield. Too Bl**dy close it turned out. At six a.m. sharp the yanks sent up their dawn patrol, and our bedroom window was right opposite the point where they ignited their afterburners prior to take-off. I awoke, three feet above the bed, with the whole house shaking, dust coming from every crevice, and my loving wife laughing hysterically with tears coming down

her face. She was right though, I would not have believed her had she warned me. Back at the camp I did not get to see many of the films, except the King and I, of all the films, in all the world.....! Nobody would believe me when I told them that it was banned in Thailand, and it still is, belittling the King and being an untrue account by a 'romanticising female'. In a similar manner I did not get to do much drinking, either, being duty fitter four nights a week meant I was lucky to be able to grab a can of Tiger on the way to the shower, just before lights out. Still, we had a gem of a sergeant in Tony Marriot. His 'duty round' always included refreshments for those working late. Cheers Tony, ACE!! Beyond maintenance, servicing was down to Charlie and his two Thai assistants, most of our work involved repairs to suspensions and steering, a result of the terrain we operated in. There were roads, but only of a temporary nature, made up of compacted laterite, which required the constant attentions of a huge fleet of graders operated by the local authorities. You could barely travel a few miles without coming across one somewhere. Such were the distances these machines had to travel that most of the operatives lived and slept with the machines. But, even with constant attention, the roads were constantly becoming pot-holed, and, in the wet season, being washed out. So our workload consisted of broken springs, knocked out steering joints and bent chassis. For a bit of excitement we could find the odd drive shaft bearing or engine mounting. We all worked very hard, but the Unit's BLR and BER count was phenomenal, and, thanks largely to the length of our supply chain, cannibalisation, or as we preferred to call it, borrowing, became the norm. But I must not say too much on that count, as it was not allowed, and never went on anywhere that I knew of, Sir! One day a very new second lieutenant drove into the workshop in one very sick sounding Land Rover. Did we think we could do anything about it? While he was at lunch? Would be very much appreciated if we could. Upon which, he disappeared in the direction of the officers' mess. My mate went and looked in the driver's window, shook his head and walked away. Curious to a fault, I went to take a gander. One look was enough. I made sure everyone else was busy, then went to ask the sergeant to drive it onto the ramp, so I could check the underside. He, obliging as ever, hauled himself out of the office and made his way to the rover, opened the door and stood back in amazement. "How the hell did that get here?" We were in hysterics. And the sergeant would not believe it was driven in, the gear lever was in a position best described as being where your legs would be. Lifting the bonnet confirmed what we already knew, without looking, that every mounting on the engine and gearbox had sheared. The engine was lying in the chassis, unsecured and

virtually on it's side, and further inspection found that both front springs were broken. We never did find out how he did it, nor even how he had driven it back from the road site like it, because, strangely, he did not come back to pick it up after lunch. Our 'Beyond Repair' tally was high, and I had some experience with it even before I had joined Post Crown Force. I had, for a while, been with the Royal Signals' Golden Arrow Detachment, in Bangkok. Now there was a cream posting! Grand Hotel, room service, pool, beds made, do I need to go on? Oh yes, must mention this, NO LATERITE!!! Based in the hotel with us was Crown's Movements Officer and Cpl. Stan Sissons, RE. Stan and I became great friends, initially through the fact that we were neither of us 'jimmys', signalmen. Stan was the only man I know, and I personally witnessed this, that could fall backwards, on a bar stool, pint in hand, crash on the floor, unconscious, bar stool still between his legs and pint still intact, with not a drop spilt. Witnessed, by me, in the Pigalle, Bangkok, and if you expect me to date it as well, you have another think coming! Good trick though, didn't half pull in the puyings! Being the movements control NCO he had met me on my arrival from Singapore, and the first thing he said was "Fancy a BEER?" Silly question! We had a beer in the airport lounge, a much quieter experience than it would be today, and then went to the hotel to check in. Took the time for a shower and to change, and we were off again. That was Friday lunchtime. I did not see that room again until Monday morning, and all I can remember of it was Stan negotiating terms with a couple of the bar girls, and who we did not go with because they would not agree to pay us if they enjoyed it! It really is an unfair world!

My job in Bangkok was to look after the Royal Signals' vehicles and generators, coupled with a stint as duty driver every third or fourth night. Nothing too arduous, as long as one took it easy with the Singha Beer! One day Stan needed some help in the docks with some vehicles that were being back loaded to Singapore via a Ben Line ship. Klong Toey dock yard was not too big in those days, but the vehicles that had to be loaded were parked as far from the quay as it was possible. Most of them were capable of being driven, albeit very carefully, but there were a number of dead'uns along with several trailers of various description, and we soon reached a point in moving everything round to the dock where we were short of 'prime movers'. In fact, all we had left, eventually, was the RL I had driven to the dock with. A little serious thought and some quick working out, and we had a train, my RL, two four wheel trailers, a dead but steerable RL, two more trailers, a dead Land Rover with two water trailers behind that. With this lot lined up across the dockyard all we had

to do was get the coolies, working between us and the ship, to sit down and have a smoke break. This they were all too willing to do, especially as there was to be a farang floorshow! We, Stan, Jerry Paul and I, mounted our respective vehicles, with me doing the work at the front, I sounded the horn and started to crawl gingerly forward, taking the strain, then on Jerry's signal gave it a little gas. It all started to move together, beautifully. But, as any fitter knows, anyone can make something move, but it needs a cleverer chap to stop it! We were 'steaming', headed forward at all of three miles per hour. Steering for the space between the go-downs, lunch back at the hotel was a definite prospect, and we were ready for it. There were no char wallahs in the dock, and no food vendors, not that that was what we wanted! As we neared the gap, with interest among our audience intense, a small green M.G., the only one I have ever seen east of Dover, sped in the gate, across the yard, and screeched to a halt yards in front of me. I hit the brake pedal and waited for whatever might happen next. At the same time I also hit the horn, leaned out of the window, banged on my door and issued forth a stream of abuse, the like of which I had never used before nor since. Where it all came from, I could not even hazard a guess. The audience cheered and clapped, then went very quiet, some started to turn away, not wanting to see what came next. Fortunately, Jerry was on the ball, he had seen the car before I had, being further back with wider view, and had hit his brakes a second before I had, and Stan had been pumping a largely ineffective brake pedal, and between us we managed to avoid a major catastrophe by inches. As I sat, and reflected, re-gaining breath and composure, it occurred to me that for someone to have an M.G. in Bangkok had to be important, somehow, having money, probably had been to England, they certainly were not sold in Thailand, in fact there were, to my knowledge, just two expensive English cars in the country at that time, one Rolls, a present, I believe, from the King to the Queen, and one E-Type Jag., the property of someone related to the Grand Hotel. There were possibly more, but with Thailand's restrictions in imports, I would imagine there were not very many. These thoughts flashed through my mind, and I started to feel a degree of regret, how does that famous line go, from the 'Horn-blower' series, an instinctive action instantly regretted, sir. (or something like that!) The M.G. was a convertible, with the roof up, so I could not see the driver, but I did not have to wait long. The door opened, and the first part of the driver to appear were two very shiny pips on a khaki shoulder, very soon followed by the rest of the torso, clad in a British Army officer's uniform. My heart sank, now I really was for it. Visions of 40 base workshops and Depot REME flashed

before my eyes. I had never imagined that getting drummed out would be so easy! At that point in time, the sight of a drummer would have been a relief. Drawing himself to full height and placing his hat squarely on his head, he came around to my door to look me up and down in the manner that must be taught only at Sandhurst. I looked at him, he at me, melting in the heat of the day and moment. He noticed I had no visible rank, stepped back and looked down the line and saw Stan's stripes hanging out the door. He was Thai, and I half hoped he could not speak English, which was a stupid and vain hope with regard to the uniform he was wearing. "Corporal!" says he, addressing Stan, "Are you responsible for this man?" "Nothing to do with me, sir", replies Stan, with a shrug and a grin that I could see in my rear view mirror. He was enjoying this! Even as far away as he was, I could see Jerry shaking his head and grinning from ear to ear. I was out on my own. Taking a deep breath, he drew himself up to full height and started to berate me for demonstrating such a lack of self control etc. etc. Unfortunately, he said one thing, in such a manner and tone of voice that was guaranteed to get me going. This may be poor, they have customs and practices that are quite alien to westerners, but I personally hold them in the utmost respect, and he referred to them as 'these people' in such a tone and in such a manner that left me in no doubt about how he regarded 'them'. My back went up, and caution went to the wind. "Beg pardon, sir, but with all due respect sir, these are *your* people, and, your dangerous and inconsiderate driving is hardly a shining example to them, is it? Sir!" There was a deathly hush, I thought he was going to blow a gasket. Not being able to find the words to reply, he turned to Stan, who had by now come up with Jerry and they were standing a couple of yards back, well out of the line of fire. "Corporal, who is in charge here? Where is your officer?" "On the ship, sir, with the skipper," replied Stan, barely controlling his mirth. "Take me to him, now," then to me, "you have not heard the last of this, I am going to have words with your C.O. Come along corporal, show me where your C.O. is." "Very good sir, this way please," says Stan, and to me, as he passed, "HO HO HO!" very quietly. Jerry then jumps in, "Excuse me sir, permission to move your car sir?" indicating the MG, still inches from my front bumper. "Oh yes, very well corporal, but be careful, please!" as he handed Jerry the keys. With that he turned and disappeared in the direction of the ship with Stan. The car was shifted and parked over the back of the yard, where all our 'returns' had been, and I got out, and, on very unsteady legs, checked our 'train' over. Stan soon returned and we set about completing our tow, which we accomplished in double quick time. Tow bars and everything else was thrown into the back of the RL and we were off!

I never did hear anymore about the event, and, after a few bebies, it was very much forgotten, till now! That same officer turned up later, at Post Crown Force, as liaison officer, if he remembered me, he never let on. Privilege of rank and money, be it earned or inherited, counts for nothing with me, especially if those in possession of that rank or money belittle those that earned, or on whose behalf it was bestowed

Like I said, there is more to come, if you still want it! Best regards,

Peter.