

# Chapter Three

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## Thailand and Operation Crown

### The Construction of Leong Nok Tha Airfield

Since the Troop's arrival in Malaya there had been talk that it may be deployed to Thailand for an airfield construction project. The rest of 11 Sqn was to go, but it was thought that 2 Troop, due to political considerations, might have to remain at Terendak. Major H A Stacey-Marks, the OC of 11 Indep Field Sqn, had a high regard for the Australian sappers and was adamant that 2 Troop should accompany the squadron. The green light was eventually given and, at fairly short notice, the troop prepared for departure. Part of the conditions of entry to Thailand was that everyone had to have a current passport. The staff at the Australian Embassy in Bangkok and the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur must have worked overtime as the passports were duly issued, with the appropriate entry visas, in early March. In the interim period, the Australian Military Forces Identity Card (AAF-A129) proved adequate. The only person who seemed to have a problem was Cpl Snow Wilson. Snow was as Australian as anybody; however he had been born at Quetta in India (now part of Pakistan) where his father was serving with the British-Indian Army at the time. The family migrated to Australia when he was only seven years old, and it never occurred to him that he needed to become an Australian citizen. After all, he was in the Australian Army, wasn't he? He wrote to his mother requesting she contact the Immigration Department in Perth to have him registered as an Australian citizen, but was advised that, as he came from India, he would have to sit a test to ensure his grasp of the English language was adequate. Eventually, the problem was solved by the High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur.

In the late evening of 26 December 1963 the advance party, including nine members from 2 Troop, left Terendak with vehicles and plant for Singapore, where they embarked on the *Maxwell Brander* for Bangkok. The *Maxwell Brander* was a 4 255-ton (gross) LST (Landing Ship Tank), which was built by Smith's Dock Co. Ltd. at South



*The Maxwell Brander ready to leave Singapore Harbour with the 11 Indep Field Sqn plant and vehicles, New Year's Eve 1963.*

Bank-on-Tees, England, and was launched in October 1944 as LST 3024. It is not known if she took part in the Normandy landings, but she was transferred on charter to the War Office in 1946 when she was named the *Maxwell Brander*. By the time 2 Troop sailed on her, she was managed by the British India Steam Navigation Company and contracted to the British Army. The troop felt that the LST was well past her use-by date, having already been to the bottom several times. After many years of sailing Southeast Asian waters, albeit slowly, she was bought by Panama in 1968 and then sold for scrap in Hong Kong in 1969.

With no radar onboard the *Brander*, her Captain navigated by following the coastline and, with a top speed of six knots, this made for a long and tiresome voyage. If it was a quiet Christmas and New Year at Terendak, it was positively subdued for the members of the advance party en route to Thailand, some of whom had left wives and children to welcome in the New Year in a strange country alone. From Bangkok, the convoy travelled northeast, spending the first night at the American base at Korat. Next day it was on to Ubon, approximately 400 miles from Bangkok, where they were to meet up with the plant and heavy equipment which had been brought up by rail.

Meanwhile, the main body of the squadron travelled to Singapore by rail, entraining at Tampin station on the morning of 3 January 1964. Several days were spent cooling heels at Gillman Barracks, the Royal Engineer base in Singapore, as RAF Transport Command aircraft were being held in Europe for the possible movement of troops to Cyprus. The break gave the 2 Troop members an opportunity to explore Singapore (even though Singapore had been declared out of bounds to the squadron). Then, after a rather hurried departure from Gillman Barracks (only a half hour's notice) and a fast trip by bus to Changi Air Force Base, the troop boarded an RAF Transport Command turbo-prop *Britannia* for the flight direct to Ubon, Thailand. As well as being home to elements of the Royal Thai Air Force, Ubon became a major operational base for United States Air Force incursions and strike missions into Southeast Asia. Also at Ubon was a flight of eight RAAF Sabre jet fighters detached from 79 Squadron at

Butterworth; their primary role was the defence of the air base and Thailand's borders with Laos and Cambodia. In addition to the 20 or so flight crew from Butterworth, there were around 100 RAAF logistic and support personnel at Ubon and these were rotated directly to Australia after a six-month deployment. The facilities at the base had been erected in 1962 by the Ubon Detachment of RAAF's 5 ACS (Airfield Const Sqn).



*L/Cpl John Barnett exiting the RAF Transport Command Britannia via the emergency escape chute at Ubon Airport. There were no steps available for disembarking in the more conventional manner.*

## Welcome to Thailand

When the aircraft arrived in Ubon, it was discovered there were no steps available large enough to service the Britannia, so the troop was required to exit via the emergency escape chutes. It was already late in the afternoon by the time buses were boarded and the troop was heading north for Ban Kok Talat, 70 miles away over a rough and only partially-sealed road. The local buses were a sight to behold with their fierce dragon emblems and large tail fins, and they were obviously built for the small stature of the local population as leg room was at a premium.

It was very late and very dark by the time the troop reached the proposed camp site and untangled themselves from the buses. It was then a case of collecting a camp bed from a jumble of stores, which should have been very simple except that a very zealous sergeant, in charge of the stores, decided that everyone should queue up and sign for each item. While he was being quite officious to Captain van Gelder and S/Sgt. David 'Bing' Crosby and others, tired Sappers were removing camp beds under cover of darkness and getting settled for the night. Common sense finally prevailed. Next morning over a breakfast of hard rations and a brew, the sappers surveyed their surroundings. They had been dropped in a paddy field from which the season's rice crop had been harvested and only the stubble remained. There were very few trees but there were a couple of mounds of stores, which had obviously been just thrown off the trucks wherever they had pulled up. Upon the Squadron's arrival at Ubon, Major Stacey-Marks briefed everyone and advised that there would be very little at the camp site. He certainly got that right.

The first task was to get mess and latrine facilities operational and some shelter erected. The piles of stores contained tents and marquees, so over the next couple of weeks the sappers became very proficient at pitching tents, at one stage erecting 15 tents and two marquees in a day. In all, over 200 tents were erected plus marquees for the mess, stores,



*Typically-decorated Thai bus similar to that used by the squadron to travel from Ubon to the Operation Crown site.*



*The first morning in the paddy fields of Ban Kok Talat.*



A 'Pengo' (large-diameter post-hole digger) on loan from the RAF, drilling holes for the latrines.

canteen, and administration. Not only did they have to provide their own shelter, but accommodation also had to be provided for the influx of engineers from other units scheduled to arrive in the near future. S/Sgt Bing Crosby was largely instrumental in the rapid construction of an efficient latrine facility. With a 'borrowed' RAF Pengo (large diameter posthole digger) and a couple of chippies he soon had a framework built over several bottomless pits which served the camp well for the duration. So started OPERATION CROWN.

Water was in short supply and bathing was usually done in a dish. Even shower buckets could not be used due to the acute shortage of water. For the first week the squadron's six 100-gallon water trailers were towed into Ubon each day and refilled, the 140 mile round trip over atrocious roads taking a heavy toll on the squadron vehicles. Each tent of four people received a daily ration of one jerry can and this had to provide for both drinking and ablutions. Eventually a mobile bath unit did arrive and set up a communal shower, something similar to a sheep-spray race: dirty people in one end, clean ones out the other.

Snow's diary 15 January:

*9 tents and 2 marquees today. Jack Brown had gone off sick with a bad cartilage. There is a pirate radio station broadcasting to us from across the Mekong in Laos. We have been listening to 6WF in Perth on shortwave, it's good to hear from home. We have 3 tents left to put up. There is mail tomorrow, well here's hoping. We had our second shower tonight thanks to the RAOC mobile bath unit.*

It was the height of the dry season: hot and cloudless. The paddy fields, after countless years of flood irrigation, were just fine silt, and this quickly transformed into bulldust, particularly where there was vehicular traffic. This dust got into everything, clothes, bedding, and especially food, although in this case it probably improved the flavour. It also made for difficult working conditions and was to be a constant irritant, until the rains finally started some months later.



Spr Peter Glasson enjoys a bath in a makeshift tub fashioned from a poncho. Wonder where he got enough water?

Despite the RAOC mobile bath unit, hygiene was to be a constant problem for the troops throughout their time in Thailand. The poor diet, coupled with limited ablution facilities, ensured almost everyone suffered from some form of skin complaint at one time or another. After the first week or so, limited supplies of fresh vegetables

became available through local purchase, but fresh meat was not seen until the end of January. The troop cook, Spr Tom Abberfield, did his very best but, with little to work with, it was difficult to provide a balanced and varied diet.

Bing Crosby recalls:

*Several members of 11 Sqn, including 2 Troop, paid a courtesy call on the US Base, Ubon. They were made very welcome and, as with servicemen everywhere, the fat (an appropriate term as the reader will see) was chewed over a convivial glass. When it was explained that the scale of rations at Crown was not good, it was not being disloyal because the merit of the British individual and section ration packs was praised by all, especially the inclusion of Cadbury's chocolate.*

*The Crown visitors inspected the huge refrigerated stores for meat. It was obvious that the American 'cousins' had sides of beef in abundance. The question of a trade-off was raised with the currency being beef for Cadburys chocolate.*

*Back in Crown, the SSM and the SQMS did the sums on available chocolate. The SSM advanced the view that the CRE would not agree to being helped by the cousins. This would become a matter of national pride, he suggested. 2 Troop members didn't think the venerable SSM was right on this occasion and Capt van Gelder was asked to inform the CRE of the plan. He was to say that even the officers would benefit. Astoundingly, the SSM's view was sustained and national pride kept the meat rations ridiculously low for the work being done in the field.*

*There was one plus. The Americans had a weekly milk run from Stateside. After all, this was an Air Force Base! Cardboard boxes with an insert containing about 20 litres of pasteurized, homogenized milk were available at one per week for (of course) Cadbury's chocolate.*

*Those concerned realized that to prevent animosity between the officers, senior NCOs and ORs, the milk should remain with the senior NCOs – and it did!*

The kitchen facilities, like everything else in the beginning, were basic, just pressure field stoves and one Wiles cooker (the small two-wheel version, at that). A bush oven was constructed of beer and soft drink cans filled with damp earth. When steam developed, as the oven heated, the cans exploded, some landing on the ORs mess tent roof. The Brit who had constructed the oven sustained some injuries and the RSM threatened to charge him.

Sapper Dave Cannon was quite a talented cartoonist and kept 2 Troop



*Spr Tom Abberfield preparing to serve lunch in the gourmet kitchen, while Spr Bill Jones inspects the Wiles cooker. The bush oven in the background exploded the first time it was used.*

entertained with his satirical comment on life at Op Crown, including the exploding-oven incident. During a tent inspection, several of his more irreverent cartoons were confiscated by the inspecting officer who considered them to be 'anti-establishment'. Unfortunately, no examples of Dave's creations appear to have survived to the present.

Snow's diary 20 January:

*Short of water all day again. The meals are shocking, found two pieces of tin in my dinner.*



*Spr Ian Tibbles and 'Guts' a loveable local villager who became a constant companion of 2 Troop.*

Because it was too hot to drink tea in the middle of the day, a cold drink consisting of a lemon- or orange-flavoured powder dissolved in water was usually served with lunch. This concoction was mixed in a large metal garbage can and was so potent it dissolved the galvanized coating from the can. Hence it was called 'battery acid'. When mixed in the correct proportions however, it was actually quite a refreshing drink.

By the end of January 1964 the 'tent city' was completed, and work commenced at the main construction site a couple of miles down the road, and adjacent to the village. The village people were friendly and industrious and soon after the squadron's arrival they were satisfying the troop's needs, be it a cold soft drink or dhobi facilities. The most popular villagers by far were the watermelon vendors from whom a cool delicious melon could be bought for just two Baht (10 pence). The SSM, Tom Thornton, decided to bring the watermelon sellers under 'military control'. He had Tables Field Service set up at the entrance to the camp area and priced each watermelon with a crayon. He became the camp expert judging ripeness and size, but had an occasional argument with the sellers who thought that their fruit was larger and that his pricing structure did not reflect that in comparison to others. He would wave his cane, speak loudly and rapidly and, given his imposing height of 6 foot 4 inches, his will prevailed. What the locals really thought of these visitors from Australia and Britain is uncertain, but it cannot be imagined they were too impressed with losing a large tract of their traditional rice-growing land for an airfield they didn't particularly want or need.



*Soft drink entrepreneurs from the local village under a rudimentary shelter. Even more popular with the troops were the watermelon vendors.*

Water, or the lack of it, was still a grave concern. After the first week all the camp needs were met from the village well, which had been equipped with a pump by the squadron. It was however only a limited supply and, in addition to the camp, it still had to provide for the needs of the village and their livestock. Before the start of Op Crown, the Thai Department of Mineral Resources had conducted a geological survey of the area, and drilling for water was still going on apace, with absolutely no success. There was no way the village well would be able to supply the quantities of water required for the compaction of the roads, helipad and runway. In desperation, the CRE of Op Crown, Lieutenant Colonel Harry McIntyre, agreed to let a 2 Troop member, L/Cpl John Armitage, divine for water, amid much derision

from the geologist and the drilling team. Nevertheless, water was found on the first try, and this bore, along with another also divined by John, provided all the water required for the permanent camp and the airfield construction. John Armitage's divining skills were put to further use on his return to Malaya where he found water on several oil palm plantations, considerably enhancing troop funds in the process.

On 11 February the Troop received the sad news, from station 6WF Perth via Snow's shortwave radio, that HMAS *Voyager* had been sunk in a collision with HMAS *Melbourne* while conducting night exercises in the Jervis Bay training area. A total of 82 crew members lost their lives.

### Construction of the Main Camp

2 Troop's first task at the main construction site after the perimeter fence was the erection of the workshop buildings. These consisted of eight steel Romney huts. Not only were these difficult to assemble due to being badly transit-damaged, but also, with daily temperatures hovering around the 104°F mark, the galvanised sheeting and steel frames became almost too hot to handle. Add to this the glare and the blowing dust, and the working conditions could best be described as difficult. In spite of the adverse conditions, all the buildings were finished by the end of February 1964, complete with concrete floors. Major Stacey-Marks was impressed enough to shout the Troop three cartons of coldies. Also during February, the troop poured the footings for the Braithwaite tank stand for the camp water supply.

Pouring concrete at Op Crown had its own special set of problems. Firstly, the aggregate was more a kind of shale than gravel and very difficult to work with. The parched soil, high temperatures and low humidity meant the mix set almost as soon as it was poured and, to add further to the Troop's woes, it was suspected the cement supplied to them was a quick-setting type usually used for soil stabilization.

In late February there was a dramatic change in the weather with strong cold winds blowing from the northwest, reputedly from the Gobi desert in China. The temperature plummeted and with no warm clothing everyone suffered, and the blowing dust was even worse than usual. Fortunately, the change only lasted for about a week then it was back to the daily 100°F plus. The nearly-completed helipad had its first tryout about this time when a Royal Thai Air Force Westland Wessex landed to evacuate a Brit who had injured his back. The MO (Medical Officer) deemed he could not be safely transported to Ubon by ambulance because of the very rough road.

After the initial requirements of setting up the base camp were met, the troop shifted from a 7-day working week to 5 days. Overnight leave was approved and this was usually taken in Ubon, although there were excursions to Mukdahan on the Mekong



*L/Cpl John Armitage divining for water. (Army The Soldiers Newspaper 14 May 1964)*



*Spr*s Harry Atkinson, Dennis Fitzhenry and Darryl Hess sheeting the first Romney hut with the aid of a 'mobile scaffold' constructed on the tray of a 3 ton Bedford.



*Sgt* Jack Brown and *Spr*s Humphrey Dodd and Darryl Hess erecting the perimeter fence at the main camp site.



*Spr* Ian Tibbles delivering cladding for a Romney in a Rough Rider motorised skip, complete with accompanying dust.

River and other places of interest in the region. Capt Malcolm van Gelder's extensive reconnoitring in the Laos/Cambodian border region was popular with the sappers and he could always be guaranteed to have a full Land Rover each time he went out. Malcolm and a party from 4 Troop had been involved in a combined exercise and reconnaissance of the general area during May and June of the previous year during Exercise Dhana Rajata.

On Sunday 1 March 1964 a team from 2 Troop travelled to Ubon for a friendly game of Aussie Rules against the RAAF. It was a bit one-sided, the RAAF winning 7 goals 11 to the troop's 1 goal 5. Still, a great time was had by all. Members of the squadron had also constructed a wooden volleyball court in their own time and games were played regularly, usually 2 Troop against all comers.

Snow's diary Sunday 8th March:

*What a day; the boys from Ubon came back a bit under the weather, and broke...and Mukdahan...that was a different story. Five of the boys decided to go to Laos over the Mekong, stole a boat and sank it, and all are now in the Mukdahan gaol.*

The Mekong River at Mukdahan was the border between Thailand and Laos. On one visit to the town, five 2 Troop sappers decided they would like to visit Laos, in spite of the fact it was very much out of bounds and would have required a passport and visa anyway. Changing their Thai currency for Laotian Kip, they 'borrowed' a local boat to transport them across the river. The Mekong at that point was about 1 000 yards across and, in spite of it being the dry season, was still flowing quite strongly. About halfway across, the outboard motor stopped, and the



sappers, all experienced in boat-handling, moved to the end of the long, skinny craft to offer advice to the nominated driver. With all the weight in the stern, the boat stood on its end and disappeared below the water. After being rescued from the river, the group was thrown into the local lock-up where they were held until a none-too-happy Barry Lennon arrived late that night to bail them out and reimburse the boat owner for his loss. Several days later all five faced the table and were given seven days CB (confined to barracks with additional duties), no leave for a month, and deductions from their pay until full restitution was made for the lost boat and motor. (A rather different perspective on this event is recorded in Chapter 8.)

Since the start of Op Crown the 11 Sqn plant operators had been busy preparing the foundations for the construction site, building access roads, starting preliminary work on the helipad and main runway, and clearing overburden from borrow pits. They had collected the construction plant from the Warin Chamrap railhead near Ubon, driving the graders and other wheeled equipment the 70 miles to Op Crown. With the tented accommodation now ready, troops from 59 Field Sqn RE and 54 Corps Field Park Sqn RE began arriving direct from Singapore and the UK. With them came their heavy plant, Cat D8s, Gainsborough wheeled dozers, open-bowl scrapers and other specialist equipment, and now the earthworks could begin in earnest. The fine soil and dust were first removed, then laterite from the borrow pits nearby was laid and compacted. Because the land was previously rice paddy and reasonably flat, large amounts of fill were required in some areas to ensure adequate drainage.



*Capt Malcolm van Gelder assesses the capacity of a bridge to support the Land Rovers while on a reconnaissance near Cambodia.*



*2 Troop Aussie Rules team preparing to play the RAAF at Ubon airfield.*



*Cat D8 and open bowl scraper of 54 Field Park Sqn taking material from the borrow pit for placement on the construction site and helipad.*



*The nearly-completed camp from on top of the Braithwaite water tank. Workshops in the foreground, NAAFI in the distance and ORs mess in between.*

15 miles northwest from Ban Kok Talat at Ban Sawat. Known as the Free Thai strip, it was in fact only a DZ (drop zone) which had been built by Thais opposed to the Japanese occupation in WW2, so that arms and medical supplies could be parachuted to the resistance movement. Included in the nine-man contingent were 2 Troop's Cpl John Bending, and Sprs Dave Wood and Alan Morris. Their total plant consisted of two Fowler light dozers, one Aveling Austin grader, a towed multi-wheel roller, a Foden water tanker, two Commer tippers and a Land Rover. With this limited equipment the team managed to turn an ox cart track into an 15-mile access road and clear, form and surface with laterite a 700-yard airstrip in less than three months. At one stage it took three days just to remove a very large tree from the road alignment with only the light dozers at their disposal.

Dave Wood recalls:

*The road was the width of two dozer blades with about a 20-foot carriageway and side drains to suit prevailing conditions. We camped on site each night just short of whatever village we were going through at the time. After reaching the airstrip site we established a more lasting campsite complete with a sleeping tent and cooking, shower and latrine facilities. As we were without a front-end loader we constructed a chinaman, using timber from an old bridge we demolished. The chinaman proved very effective for loading the tippers but was not so good when it rained as it could only be drained by pumping the water out.*



*RNZAF Bristol Freighter, the first aircraft to land at the newly-completed Free Thai airfield, welcomed by crowds of locals who just appeared from the surrounding bush.*

With the influx of personnel, the mess facilities were being strained to the limit so a staggered shift system was introduced to ease the problem. Reveille for the early shift was 0500, the late shift starting work at the normal time. The shifts were alternated week about.

## The Free Thai Airfield

With the influx of heavy plant and equipment of 54 and 59 Sqns, a small contingent of 11 Sqn plant under WO2 Dixon RE was detailed to begin a secondary airfield project on a site some

*During this time I think most of the crew developed a taste for the local Thai food as we were frequent guests to the local's homes for meals. Some of us were invited to attend the local schools to talk and show some pictures of the countries we lived in. We also carried out some basic first-aid treatment to the locals along the way and also during our stay at the Free Thai strip. Another highlight was the*

*water festival which was held about mid-April after the rains had started – not sure what it was called but do know they throw water on everyone for good luck. We decided to take part in the festivities so we filled the water truck then used the pressure pump to spray everybody, including the local Buddhist monks who, I might say, were not that impressed.*

In addition to the road and airstrip the team also constructed a 9-hole golf course (under instructions from CRE Crown). The first plane to land at the Free Thai Airstrip was a Kiwi Air Force Bristol Freighter with the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr Keith Holyoake, on board. They saw the strip and thought they would 'just drop in.' The 'official opening' by the British Attaché to Thailand, who arrived in a DeHavilland Dove, was several days later. The Attaché's pilot treated the construction crew to a joy flight and an opportunity to see the fruits of their labour from the air. During late April, with the main tasks completed and insurgents becoming active in the area, the contingent returned to the main camp.

Snow's diary, 10 March:

*Hold-ups on road to village by armed locals. If this keeps up someone could get hurt.*

When the Squadron arrived at Ban Kok Talat there were no bars in the village but, with the influx of thirsty troops, bars sprang up overnight, almost as if by magic. The main drink served was Singha, a pleasant lager style beer brewed in Bangkok, but a spirit called 'Mekong Whisky' was also popular with some of the patrons. This fiery concoction, made from grain, juniper berries and various other unknown ingredients was a real 'fighting' drink and also caused temporary blindness if partaken of too generously. The often inebriated patrons walking back to camp for the 2230 curfew sometimes found themselves the victim of a hold-up by armed local bandits. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt in these encounters and a police crackdown and some summary Thai justice during late March all but ended these encounters.

During March, 2 Troop started on the MRS (Medical Reception Station) and hospital building. Timber frames were prefabricated on site, erected, and then clad with corrugated galvanised iron. This building was fully-lined inside and fitted with ceiling fans and even boasted an air-conditioner in the treatment room. The troop also poured the foundations for the power station and built several prefabricated site sheds around the construction site.

Around this time, the Op Crown flag mysteriously disappeared from the flagpole to be replaced by a ladies bra. The CRE nearly had apoplexy and, to add insult to injury, the bra became stuck at the top of the flagpole and a crane had to be brought in to remove the offending undergarment. A little later on, the RASC flag from the FAMTO (First Aid Mechanical Transport Outfit, although usually known as the Fuel and Motor Transport



*Partially-completed MRS and hospital building with the Braithwaite tank and one of the Romney huts in the background.*



*A Buddhist Monk blesses the Cat D8 before the sod-turning ceremony marking the official beginning of Operation Crown.*

Office) store also disappeared, but unfortunately it was lost to posterity many years later when the Wicks family lost their house and all their possessions in Darwin's cyclone Tracy.

The monsoon season was approaching and this would signal the end of major construction work for several months. The first downpours started at the end of March and caused quite a sensation in the tent city, as not only did the tents leak, but also the rice paddies filled and inundated the tents as well. The floors of the tents had been laid with coir matting in an attempt to reduce the dust. (The

coir matting had been 'salvaged' from the packaging in which the tents were originally consigned.) Breeding under the matting were all sorts of nasties including some very large scorpions. As the tents flooded, the nasties moved to higher 'ground', which meant climbing up onto the camp beds. This was particularly exciting when the downpour occurred in the wee dark hours of the night, and it gave added incentive to make sure the mosquito net was tucked in tightly. Thankfully, by this time, several of the accommodation blocks at the main camp were nearing completion and some of the sappers from 54 and 59 Sqns were moving house so the tents could be dismantled, although 11 Sqn, including 2 Troop, remained under canvas for the duration of the deployment.

The sod-turning ceremony signalling the 'official' start of Op Crown was performed on 3 April 1964 by the Thai Prime Minister, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, who named the airfield after the late Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat. There were a 60-strong Thai Army guard of honour and a brass band, and a combined Australian, New Zealand and British ceremonial guard also. Security was tight in and around the construction site with armed Thai Militia everywhere. The Prime Minister arrived by luxury twin rotor helicopter, landing on the recently-completed helipad. After the traditional inspection of the guard, the Prime Minister climbed aboard a Cat D8 (after it had been



*Combined Australian, British and NZ guard of honour for the official start of Operation Crown await the arrival of the Prime Minister of Thailand.*

suitably blessed by a Buddhist Monk) and, with the help of the Kiwi plant operator, pushed over a tree left standing especially for the occasion.

A near-tragedy occurred in the early hours of Good Friday when one of the 2 Troop tents caught fire, probably started by a cigarette carelessly discarded by a passer-by. The entire tent was engulfed in seconds, and the four occupants, Sappers Frank Sexton, Mick 'Moose' Sutton, Arthur 'Geordie' Sinclair and Cpl Stan Limb were lucky to escape with their lives. Little was saved, the heat being so intense that even the aluminium trunks melted and the contents burned. Next morning Moose Sutton displayed his melted radio complete with his grinning denture inside the fused components. Bing Crosby recalls that he told Moose to keep it as a memento/sculpture as it was unique and would eventually be valuable. Unfortunately Moose did not accept that advice. Despite the dogged effort of Malcolm van Gelder to get compensation for loss of personal and civilian effects, the answer was 'they were told to insure property against loss'. On the other hand, the CRE Crown flag thankfully survived, buried safely in an ammo box deep under the coir matting. (Several years later this flag was presented to the Sportsman's Club at 21 Const Sqn Puckapunyal by Moose Sutton.) While watching all he owned go up in flames and wearing only a towel, Geordie Sinclair was berated by the RSM for being incorrectly dressed.

April brought the news that 7 Field Sqn from Enoggera in Brisbane was to be sent to Sabah the following month. Part of Australia's commitment to Malaysia was to provide military support, but it still wished to avoid direct contact with Indonesian forces and, no doubt, saw the provision of an Engineer unit as achieving both objectives.

Also in April, Op Crown had its first two serious accidents, one fatal. A cook from 59 Sqn RE was badly burned while filling a pressure stove. There was no helicopter available to evacuate him so a couple of plant operators, including Noel Butler, worked throughout the night to prepare a section of the main runway to accept a STOL (short takeoff and landing) type aircraft. The pilot was not too happy with the surface but he landed and lifted the injured cook out. On 21 April a Brit electrician, only newly arrived from UK, was electrocuted while working on powerlines within the construction site. In spite of the best efforts of the MO he could not be resuscitated.

A visit by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr Holyoake, and the Commander in Chief, Far East Command, went largely unnoticed by the workers at the construction site, except maybe the Kiwis and those at the MRS and hospital building, which rated an inspection.



*Spr Frank Sexton looking rather forlorn amid the ruins of his fire-ravished tent on Good Friday 1964.*

## Anzac Day 1964

Anzac day was approaching, and in spite of Malcolm van Gelder's best efforts, the Australians were not to be granted a full day of rest. However a contingent of Kiwi plant operators and carpenters had arrived in March as New Zealand's contribution to Op Crown, and the Anzac force, along with the recent visit by Mr Holyoake, convinced



*Erecting the prefabricated wall-section of the FAMTO store requires a solid team effort.*

the powers that be that the day should be accorded the respect it deserved. After a 0400 reveille, a combined Anzac and British dawn service was held at the construction site. This was followed by a gunfire breakfast with some excellent British Navy rum which had been flown in from Singapore as the result of Malcolm's persistence and emphasis on the 'tradition' that the British initially failed to appreciate. The rum was served in waxed sputum cups, compliments of the MRS.

Later, some of the troop repaired to Ubon to celebrate further, and to play a game of rugby union against the RAAF. The RAAF won 6 points to 3. Those who remained at the camp continued on with a gunfire lunch.

Later, some of the troop repaired to Ubon to celebrate further, and to play a

The ORs mess was completed at the main camp by another unit and its first use was the gunfire breakfast after the dawn service. With the weight of the large crowd, the piers supporting the floor sank into the rain-softened earth. It seems that no sole plates or concrete pads had been used under the piers. From the 26th all meals were served at the new mess, the first meal being bully beef. The change of venue and improved kitchen facilities had obviously not improved the menu or its presentation.

The hospital was completed by 2 Troop by the end of April and the MO brought the troop a couple of cartons. (Some wag suggested it was only a couple of cans and a carton of straws.) It must have been very difficult for the MO to have maintained a reasonable

medical service for both the soldiers and the locals amid the blowing dust, with just tents and a marquee for an MRS and hospital, and so he was overjoyed with his new facilities.



*Barrack hut based on a design by WW2 Australian Army Engineer in Chief, Major General Sir Clive Steele. It is doubtful that Sir Clive would have been impressed with the finished product.*

During the previous six weeks, in addition to the hospital, the troop had also constructed the power station and the FAMTO store, using the same prefabrication techniques. Meanwhile, the Brits of 11 and 59 Sqns had erected a Braithwaite tank and stand for the camp water supply, installed three diesel-powered generating sets in the power station and erected the

distribution lines throughout the camp. They had also constructed a range of other buildings including the Sgts and ORs messes, accommodation barracks, and the NAAFI. The accommodation barracks were supposedly based on a 1940 WW2 design by Major General Sir Clive Steele, an Australian Army Engineer-in-Chief. The finished product bore little resemblance to Sir Clive Steele's original design and the workmanship left much to be desired.

By May all of 11 Sqn's designated tasks were completed. With able assistance from 2 Troop the Squadron had established a tent complex to house three squadrons of Engineers, nearly 900 men in all, constructed a permanent camp with all facilities, begun preliminary work on the access roads, helipad and main runway, and completed the Free Thai airstrip and access road. The completion of the Crown airfield would be left to 54 and 59 Sqns who would be joined by the Royal Air Force 5001 Const Sqn, and other support units. After the earthworks were completed the 5 000 feet runway and dispersal areas were covered with a 6-inch layer of cement-stabilised laterite, topped with two and a half inches of hot mix asphalt. The completed airfield was handed over to the Thai Government in June 1965.

Malcolm van Gelder provides an overview of the reasoning behind Operation Crown and some of the design parameters:

*If only in a minor way, Australian sappers were involved in Operation Crown from late 1962 when Lt Norm Griffith (Troop Officer 4 Field Troop RAE) accompanied what was believed to be first ground reconnaissance party of the area.*

*Operation Crown was designed to provide an MRT (medium range transport) airfield in northeast Thailand as part of the UK's contribution to the SEATO program for improving logistical facilities in Thailand. More specifically the purposes of the airfield were:*

- *To deliver troops, supplies and equipment for a Brigade Group (initially).*
- *The deployment of fixed and rotary wing short-range takeoff and landing aircraft.*
- *To provide a means of subsequent maintenance of the force.*



*Boiling the billy during the first weeks at the main camp site Op Crown. Sprs Ian Tibbles and Darryl Hess, Sgt Jack Brown, Spr John White and L/Cpl John Armitage preparing the alignment for the perimeter fence.*

*The airfield location was strategically midway between the two US bases of Ubon and Nakom Phanom, but not too close to the Mekong River, the border with Laos. In fact, the Mekong was 33 miles to the east and 35 miles to the north.*

*The 5 000 foot design length of the airfield was to cater for Hastings, Argosy and Beverley aircraft. Parking areas were to provide for up to 10 MRT aircraft, six helicopters and a fuel area for two 10 000-gallon pillow tanks. The design glide angle was 1 in 50 with 15 degrees splay.*

*Following an example such as the Nakom Phanom airfield, the pavement was to have been constructed to LCN (load classification number) 30 based on 10 inches of compacted laterite, with the top 3 inches mixed with bitumen. Surfacing options considered were using PSP (pierced-steel plank), a conventional bitumen prime and seal or concrete.*

On 4 May 1964 the main body of 11 Sqn, including most of 2 Troop, packed up and said farewell to Ban Kok Talat, travelling by local bus once more to Ubon. There, a chartered British Eagle Britannia waited in the hot sun to fly them to Singapore. This time there were actually stairs to board the aircraft. Following the landing at Singapore, the troop was hustled on to a train for the overnight journey to Tampin, (with sleeping compartments, would you believe?) and 24 hours after leaving Op Crown, the bulk of 2 Troop was once again 'home'.

Meanwhile, the transport party loaded their vehicles and plant on to the train at Warin Chamrap, the railhead near Ubon, leaving Op Crown on the 8 May 1964 for the last time. An overnight train trip to Bangkok followed and then to the *Maxwell Brander*, which was waiting to be loaded before sailing for Singapore. By now the *Brander* had been fitted with radar and other navigation devices and the return voyage only took

three days. The transport party finally straggled into Terendak on the 14th arriving in dribs and drabs due to numerous vehicle breakdowns. A rear party of 11 Sqn personnel stayed at Camp Crown for several more weeks to provide finishing touches to the MRS and to strike the remainder of the tents and ready them for transport.

### **Operation Crown Postscript**

The following is an extract from *The Royal Australian Engineers, 1945 to 1972 Volume 4*, by Brigadier P J Greville, CBE about the subsequent involvement of 11 Indep Field Sqn and 2 Field Troop in Operation Crown:

*The Squadron (with the new 2 Troop under Capt Alan Hodges) returned to Operation Crown in Thailand from December 1965 to May 1966 ... Crown airfield had been completed in late 1965*



*Lt Barry Lennon and S/Sgt David Crosby discuss the works program outside the 2 Troop site office.*



*but water penetration during the wet had led to the failure of the pavement. The redeployment of 11 Independent Field Squadron was part of a major operation to correct the problem. It involved stripping two inches of bituminous macadam surface, repairing the laterite base and laying eight inches of quality concrete on the 5,000-ft runway...The squadron was part of a larger British force of engineers, plus transport, workshops and stores, totalling 418 men. About 150 Thai nationals were employed. The squadron was relieved in May by 59 Field Squadron RE and the task was completed by December.*

Twenty years after 11 Sqn's involvement in Op Crown, John Stevens returned to Loeng Nok Tha and recorded his visit in *The Royal Engineers Journal*, Vol 104, No 4. Some of John's observations were:

*Ubon airport turned out to be a shadow of its former self ... One Thai Airways flight a day and a small RTAF presence is all that is left.*

*However, Ubon town has grown out of all recognition – wide streets, modern buildings, a population trebled in size, a new bridge over the meandering Moon River.*

*Off on the road to Loeng Nok Tha– a wide straight metalled road, raised above the surrounding paddy has replaced the laterite ruts, standing water and endless dust of the dry season. After a coffee stop at Amnat Charoen – remember the 16 foot tall Buddha image – the local village of Ban Kok Sannam and the entrance to Crown Airfield was reached in a little over an hour.*

*The approach track leads to two concrete plinths on which brass plates in English and Thai commemorate the opening of the airfield. The English version has been used for target practice and now contains no less than fourteen bullet marks.*

*The pavement quality concrete of runway, taxiways and apron appears in excellent condition, though one must remember it has received very little use by aircraft and a Thai water buffalo is hardly LCN30.*

*Crown Camp has returned to the bush. The only clearly recognisable features are the swimming pool ... and a concrete slab containing sixteen large holes. – Polaris silo or perhaps something more mundane?*

*A stroll down the main camp road and up the nearby village – no beer tins or Mekong bottles now define the route – revealed a transformation. Ban Kok Samnan is now a model village – neatly laid out, tidy houses with a metalled road and mains electricity...*

*Perhaps not a lot to show for all the Sapper, REME and RCT 'blood, tears and sweat' which went into Operation CROWN but the airfield is there, intact and with very little work could quickly be made operational once again. With the emphasis on tourism in Thailand it might even become MUKDAHAN INTERNATIONAL!!*