

Chapter Seven

Views from the Top

Malcolm van Gelder – Officer Commanding 2 Field Troop RAE, 1963-64

At the time that I was posted as Troop Commander of 4 Field Troop RAE, 11 Indep Field Sqn RE in 1963, I was worried that I was fast becoming the longest-serving troop commander in the RAE. My first troop was the MARSU (Maralinga Range Support Unit) troop at Maralinga in 1958, consisting of a mixture of British and Australian sappers. Five years later I was to return to contact with British sappers, but in the more salubrious location of Malacca, with reasonable access to the even more salubrious (and very British) Gillman and Tanglin Barracks in Singapore.

For the record I had come direct from my 5 Airfield Const Sqn RAAF (5 ACS) attachment in Darwin at the beginning of 1963, and departed Malaysia from command of 2 Troop in 1964 for posting to SME as instructor on promotion.

When 2 Troop arrived I was well ensconced in military life in Malaysia having been 'blooded' by the veterans of 4 Troop. Any expectation that I would have to induct and train a new bunch of sappers was dissipated when I was confronted with a well-trained troop led by Lt Barry Lennon as Troop Officer, supported by S/Sgt Bing Crosby. All I had to do was relax and let it happen! Perhaps that might explain why I later indulged myself in so many 'getaways', having great confidence that the troop would be in good hands and shape in my absence.

I shall summarise some reflections:

- Luxury travel from Australia to Singapore by Italian passenger liner. Our family's first and last such journey. With the advent of cheaper and more frequent air travel, the option of such travel may not have been so readily available to later arrivals.



Capt Malcolm van Gelder accompanying Lt Gen Wilton, CGS Australia, on inspection of the Troop, along with Maj Tony Stacey-Marks.

- Our first married quarter in Kampong Bukit Bahru just outside Malacca.
- The assistance of a cook and an amah to make domestic life even in a kampong and later in married quarters in Terendak Garrison much more pleasant with two children under three years.
- Our transition from a 1960 Holden, which we had in Darwin, to a sparkling black Mercedes. The fact that the pride and joy suffered the indignity of being driven into a monsoon drain did not detract from our later enjoyment of travelling throughout Malaya in unaccustomed luxury.
- The cool hill stations which were available for families and for troops generally.
- Visits to Singapore for shopping at 'Tangs' and indulging in the products of 'Cold Storage'.
- Travel to Penang and enjoying the magnificent views from Penang Hill.
- Our quick trip to Japan from whence I returned via HMAS *Quiberon* as a guest of the Australian Navy, and Helen flew back to Malacca to rejoin the children after spending an overnight train trip from Osaka to Tokyo in a sleeping compartment in which she was the only female.
- My short familiarisation attachment to Vietnam, flying to and from Saigon by Pan Am first class, the only time in my life that I have flown internationally first class. Although we have travelled much thereafter, cattle class has remained the travel mode for the van Gelders.
- My involvement in SEATO Exercise Dhana Rajata in Thailand in 1963 in which, while managing the erection of camp facilities for SEATO exercise troops, I encountered some difficulty, even with an interpreter, in explaining to a female building contractor the intricacies of building an Australian sit-up dunny as opposed to a 'squat'.
- Culinary delights not previously experienced in Australia.
- Helen's experience of six-months separation from me during the deployment of 2 Troop at Crown while looking after two children. The period was marked by the youngest, Timothy, contracting a serious bout of measles and pneumonia and being evacuated to a military hospital in Kuala Lumpur at Kinrara.
- The commencement of Indonesian confrontation and rumours of hostile action.
- For me, particularly, the renewed experience of life and service in Thailand on Operation Crown, punctuated by numerous excursions into the hinterland of Northeast Thailand. Highlights of the excursions were visits to the Cambodian border to sight the famous temple of Khao Prau Vivanh, and a flying visit by road to the Mekong River in Laos at Pakse.
- Being bogged in a Land Rover in the middle of a paddy field. The efforts of a Thai farmer in constructing a temporary bund and evacuating the water with his feet were more fruitful than the efforts and equipment of the Australian sappers.
- The poignant picture of a small Thai boy afflicted with elephantitis, as an example of how primitive village medicine remained in the early 1960s.

- Hair-raising travel between Ubon and Ban Kok Talat where the corrugations were worthy of an Australian outback road. It is not necessarily true that a visiting Australian general happened to die of heart attack shortly after his return from Thailand.
- Running with the typically-British Hashhound Harriers (also called Hash House Harriers). This was an exercise in paper-chasing through the Thai countryside to an undisclosed destination where typical refreshments awaited the exhausted runners.
- The unauthorised, but enterprising, 2 Troop canteen operating out of a site shed in defiance of the NAAFI Canteen. It produced a good source of Troop funds.
- The enforced absence of contact between members of 2 Troop and the Australian RAAF contingent at Ubon. There were two memorable visits to Ubon at which the Troop played Australian Rules and rugby games.
- Exercise Raven and the experience of participating in a brigade-strength exercise conducted straight out of a military textbook.
- My experience also of the hazard of playing bridge in a British mess and the subsequent pecuniary loss.
- Recollections of, as examples only of application of skills, particularly the construction of the hospital facility at Crown, the demonstration of water-divining skills also at Crown, and the removal of the huge tree leaning dangerously over the Commander's residence at Terendak.
- The enduring memory of Australian sappers' skills displayed in military, trade or sporting activities and their high level of competence. This was not surprising given the selection procedures leading to the formation of 2 Troop, and the fact that 2 Troop was the only engineer unit or sub-unit outside Australia (apart from PNG) at the time of its deployment.

Barry Lennon – Troop Officer, 2 Field Troop RAE, 1963-65

With the hindsight of forty years, and four distinct and different careers, I look back on the experience of raising the troop to go to Malaysia and then the time in Malaysia, Borneo, and Thailand as the most rewarding of my life. The reward was not financial but experiential. I was, at that stage, a mere two and a half years into my career as a soldier with most of that time in training at Officer Cadet School and at the School of Military Engineering, and only a short time as a lieutenant responsible for the lives and aspirations of a troop of soldiers. Like most 'two pipers' at that stage of a career, I did not know what I did not know. Learning what I did not know came later and, for it, I am very much indebted to the NCOs and men of 2 Field Troop RAE.



Lt Barry Lennon presents Major John Stevens, OC 11 Indep Field Sqn RE, with a commemorative plaque, a gift from the Australian Troop.

After our arrival in Malaysia, my responsibilities to the troop as troop commander were at an end. I handed the troop over to Captain Malcolm van Gelder who shared my view, or perhaps I shared his, that a troop of Australian engineers within the infrastructure provided by the 11 Indep Field Sqn RE did not require both a troop commander and a troop officer. I became, at that stage, the squadron liaison officer. For those not too familiar with it, 'liaison' is army-speak for whatever job needs to be done. Fortunately for me, two of the things that needed to be done were to create a squadron parachute stick and a squadron shallow-water diving team. Doing this gave me many opportunities to visit Singapore for initial and 'continuation' training and to work with both the Royal Air Force at Changi and the Royal Navy at HMS *Terror* at the Straits of Johore. While there is nothing very rewarding about doing a ship's bottom search in the murk of the Straits of Johore, or jumping out of an aircraft at 800 feet, banging down the side of a C47, before releasing into a strong crosswind and landing in trees, the experience of living and working in Singapore was instrumental in my being offered, and quickly accepting, an assignment to Singapore with IBM much later – and spending another 16 years in the Orient.

These, together with assignments as Brigade Plant Movements Officer and Bomb Disposal Officer in Sarawak, engineer-in-charge of the reconstruction of Leong Nok Tha MRT (medium range transport) strip about 15 miles north of Crown, and Squadron Reconnaissance Officer during operations and training on the Malay Peninsular, kept me more than busy. The occasional trip to visit the RAE squadron building the road at Keningau in Sabah and to visit the American training teams in South Vietnam also helped. But the result was that there was not much time to get engaged in much of what the troop was doing. This troop history therefore, for me, fills in many blanks in that detail.

My recollections of the troop are very much confined to the troop members with whom I worked on various squadron operations and projects. A few of the troop were part of the shallow-water diving team and the parachute stick. Elements of the troop were assigned to me for limited operations up the Kuching-Balai Ringin Road in Borneo, and our planties did the bulk of the work at Leong Nok Tha (Crown). It was always a pleasure to work with your own countrymen.

But by far the most pleasurable associations were back at Terendak at the various sporting and social events that happened at the squadron. The Australian troop of 11 Squadron fielded seven of the 15 rugby players in the Squadron team which beat the Australian Infantry Battalion in the rugby final just before we set off to Borneo. Spr Tibbles and I competed in the British Automobile Association Rally through the tin mines and rubber plantations of Malaysia. Tibbles' preoccupation with how high a 1/4-ton Land Rover could leap over rice paddy bunds, rather than on how exactly to get through a rubber plantation in roughly the right direction, cost us first, second, and third place. But fourth, we considered, was 'credible'.

The more I cast my mind back to these days, the more the memories come flooding back. Little things – almost losing a Michigan 280 in the river at Bau when trying to load it on the LST *Teddy*. The poor fellow we mistakenly captured as a terrorist at 17 Mile Bazaar – who was merely out after curfew trying to get a midwife for his wife who had gone into labour. The night 'Little Mess Tin' accidentally discharged his gun while on guard duty at Terendak. The atap beetles at Cambrai camp in Bau. The mysterious

sinking fortified fire-posts at Bukit Knuckel. The Iban longhouses with the piles of skulls in the bush in Sarawak. The police station at Mukdahan. The family of the poor chap we accidentally killed with our plant convoy from Bangkok to Ban Kok Talat. The morning the wash basins froze at Crown and several villagers died of pneumonia. The night a couple of British sappers decided to burn down Ban Kok Talat. And so much more.

But the memories of the troop's preparation time prior to leaving Australia are also strong. This is the time when I knew the troop best. It was also without doubt the greatest challenge of my army career. To be told that you were to raise a troop and get it ready for operations in Asia sounded simple. But when it became apparent that 'raising a troop' was army-speak for 'scrounging', it ceased to be quite so simple. If there was a medal for scrounging, 2 Troop should have been awarded it. We scrounged for people, equipment, accommodation, administrative support, weapons, field kit, transport, the lot. But with everybody pitching in, we managed to get ourselves ready for Malaysia and also put in some valuable time in the Wollombi area – Glen Davis, Glen Alice, Gaspers Mountain – getting to know each other's strengths and weaknesses and getting to work as a team.

I was reminded recently of those days when I heard a news report that someone had discovered in the Wollombi National Park a significant site of Aboriginal cave paintings. This is a part of Australia that 2 Troop knew well. It had some of the thickest scrub within a few hours drive from Sydney that we could find to simulate Malaysia's jungles. And we got to know it very well indeed, even to the point of rediscovering a cairn erected by a group of explorers who had first (they said) found their way up the Glen Davis escarpment to Mt Uraterer. They had left a message in the cairn in 1937. We added another.

On one of our expeditions down the Glen Davis-Newnes gorge, however, we also discovered how quickly a gorge fills with water when a severe storm hits the mountains above it. It was coming on evening and too late to try to clear the gorge in daylight. The water was rising as we watched and the walls of the ravine were sheer. With, potentially, a very dangerous situation, we split the troop to double our chances of survival. One section, led by Cpl Jack Brown, decided to climb the escarpment, while I led the rest of the troop downstream in search of some higher ground on which to see out the night and the rising waters. By morning I thought we had lost Jack and his section. Bits of gear had been spotted sweeping past in the flood. But there was no sign of them.

They eventually turned up – minus gear – but none the worse for wear. It was only when I read the recent report that I came to understand that they probably spent the night drawing pictures on a cave wall.

Those two and a half years for the members of 2 Troop and its families were a very special time. Just how strong is evidenced by the remaining bonds of friendship that bring the troop together every few years to remember past days and past friends. I commend the team that took the initiative to put this history together. I am not aware of any other sub-unit that has retained the cohesion and the interest to be able to do that. Well done!



S/Sgt David Crosby at 'Apache' forward base helicopter landing pad, Sarawak.

David Crosby – Troop Staff Sergeant, 2 Field Troop RAE, 1963-65

Graduation from the Army Apprentices School in 1953 took me to two units with a definite 'Dad's Army' environment: 17 Const Sqn in Sydney and 25 Const Sqn in Hobart. A posting to 7 Field Sqn followed. The unit had many ex-Malaya sappers and there was much talk about their exploits. Rumours flowed daily as to the makeup of the new troop to go to 11 Sqn with a changeover thought to be at least 10 months away in late-1963. Snow Wilson and I had decided there would need to be a miracle or two if we were to be considered for the Corps' plum posting.

The gods must have been listening because one night I was the Unit Picquet Corporal, and the Duty Officer was the SSM, WO2 Don Stahl, a highly-efficient and respected no-nonsense soldier. I was a little in awe of this immaculately turned-out soldier who

seemed to want to talk. We shared some confidences and I told him that, although I still needed B1 and B2 for Sergeant, I wanted to take 2 Field Troop to Malaya as the Staff Sergeant. I confided that, on the promotion scale, with anything less I would be better off transferring to a construction squadron and ultimately the Works Service stream.

The SSM inspected the squadron parade next morning and paused in front of me saying, 'Be at the orderly room at 1200 hours – you are seeing the DCRE Field Force'. I recall stuttering, 'But I don't want to see the DCRE, SSM'. 'You just be there and tell him exactly what you told me last night.' I duly reported and was introduced to the DCRE by the OC Major Bob Mills who then left for lunch.

Lt Col Ian Gilmore heard my case with a slightly bemused look. I am sure that there were some chuckles between him and Bob Mills over lunch as they discussed this ambitious sapper and HIS plans for his role in the Field Force. The DCRE promised to get back to me in a few days, but there was quite a delay because we were on exercise again. When the information came through, I was paraded eyeball-to-eyeball with Capt Brian Florence, the unit 2IC. 'You must pass a re-examination of all FE subjects. If you pass, you will then join the FE1 course for Sergeant. If you pass at suitable levels, you will be posted to Malaya as the Acting Troop S/Sgt.'

While on the course at SME, I had to 'vet' those who were posted to the Malayan Troop. I met Lt B B Lennon who seemed to be quite unimpressed by those senior in rank to himself. He also seemed to be able to just appear, sign a few papers and everything would be OK. It took me quite a while to discover that BB had skills which set him apart

from virtually all other junior officers and many senior officers. Examples included his ability to delegate, and to recognize that there were others within the rank structure – above and below him – who would ensure that the wheels kept turning. He never seemed to worry and was, in every respect, capable to the point where I doubt that he was ever fully tested either mentally or physically while in the Army.

I travelled to Terendak with the advance party. On arrival I met SSM Tom Thornton who wore a peaked cap in a way which I thought gave him a very narrow view of what was going on. In fact, he seemed to have a crystal ball. We become close friends and resolved many problems quite often before those involved knew there was one. The handover was with S/Sgt Ron Janvrin (Jamtin) and he was very generous with his knowledge of the ‘Pommy’ system. On waking on that first morning I was handed a cup of char which was as black as the smiling face behind it, even with the tinned milk. It was bloody awful.

Quite early in the tour (that word is meant to imply that we really were tourists) the troop had to do a navigation exercise to a pick-up point. Trucks delivered us, minus our troop commander, who had ‘done it all before’ and BB who ‘had important matters to sort out’ and after all ‘that is the sort of thing that troop S/Sgts are meant to do’. I did what others (apparently) had done before me and managed to read the map on to the wrong ridgeline – shades of the map reading at 7 Field Sqn. Quite democratically, it was

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decided to backtrack and stay the night in an unused police hut adjacent to a village. We were picked up the next day by truck after I had phoned for help. Our radios weren't up to the terrain and distance.

S/Sgt David Crosby's paybook showing meagre earnings in Australian pounds and drawings in Malay dollars.

Malaya was a challenge in every regard. I won the guernsey as the Duty Officer on the reopening of the ORs Beach Club. It had been closed indefinitely due to a riot that night. I kept a British cook in the Army, despite his desire to commit hari-kari. Yes, he drew blood, but when told to ‘get on with it’ he eventually handed over the knife, was disciplined in Terendak and served on Op Crown.

Operation Crown certainly tested Malcolm van Gelder's diplomacy with the CRE and his staff. In turn, there was a flow-on effect where he and I developed a relationship based on demarcation which allowed him to be fairly free of troop matters.

Borneo was another opportunity to expand in knowledge and experience and I believe that, under Capt Alan Hodges, the troop performed exceptionally well in that environment.



Capt Alan Hodges explaining engineering works to Dr Tan Siew Sin, Malaysian Minister for Finance, at opening of Bau airstrip.

As I look back, there never seemed to be many average situations. On the plus side, each individual at one time or another stepped forward and was counted. Certainly, being the Troop S/Sgt of 2 Field Troop Malaya was a major highlight of my military career and I thank those with whom I served.

Alan Hodges – Officer Commanding 2 Field Troop RAE, 1964-66

I was deep in the bush at Tin Can Bay in mid-1964 when I received word that I was to be posted to Malaysia. Nothing could have been further from my mind at that time, but I was very excited at the prospect of this posting. I was soon brought down to earth with a protracted battle with the Army Movements bureaucracy, until they finally gave approval for Beryl to accompany me. We left Australia less than two months before our first child was due.

On arrival in Terendak, I immediately took part in Exercise Raven. During the

0300 frantic deployment preparation in 11 Squadron lines, I admitted to Major Stacey-Marks that I really wasn't sure just what was going on. I quickly received life-changing advice to the effect that I was never to be in a position to tell him that again. And I wasn't – in Malaya or anywhere!

On Exercise Raven I met for the first time the troop members who were to become life-long friends. At that time we were sizing each other up, but it did not take long for me to respect the sappers I had the privilege to command. All worked extremely hard, both on deployments and in barracks, and some still suffer the physical consequences. They could also play hard with youthful enthusiasm and without caution. This sometimes resulted in the most outrageous excuses for various military offences, which at this distance in time seem rather trivial. Moreover, the punishments did not seem to have any deterrent effect!

This group of soldiers taught me so much about practical sapping. Each was a true professional. I particularly learned from, and depended on, Barry Lennon, David Crosby and the troop NCOs. I received frequent and unsolicited advice from all levels of the troop on how to solve problems. As a result, I never felt that as Troop Commander that I needed to have all the answers.

Tony Stacey-Marks left shortly after I arrived, and so I came to know John Stevens and Gordon Chave – a formidable leadership team. John was an excellent commander and a practical engineer. I recall that he alerted me to the value of fascines (bundles of tree limbs used to fill holes in road works) in expedient road repair in Borneo. Gordon was

a great enthusiast and had the heavy load of managing the PRI Fund (equivalent to Australian regimental funds). As auditor of the fund, I gladly took Gordon's advice on the intricacies of double-entry book-keeping and readily accepted his assurances that everything would balance – and it did!

After I left Malaysia, I was posted to the Office of the Engineer in Chief in Canberra. During that time I received an inquiry through Army channels in Malaysia regarding the ownership of a Bailey Bridge on the road alongside the lake in Bau. The British Army wanted to recover it, but the locals told the officials that 'Captain Hodges gave it to us'. I was certainly not about to undermine the achievements of the hearts and minds campaign! I hope that the bridge is still standing and serving our friends in Bau.

Twenty-one years after leaving Terendak, Beryl and I revisited Terendak. The former 11 Squadron lines had hardly changed, although there were more flowerbeds and a large aviary. It was home to a Malaysian engineer squadron. The 2 Troop office was as familiar as yesterday, although it did seem somewhat smaller than I remembered. We ended our visit at the Beach Club and had a very refreshing 'gunner' (half ginger ale, half ginger beer and a dash of bitters) and topped-off our nostalgic visit with Gula Malacca (glutinous sago topped with a very sweet palm-sugar syrup).

The reunions have given me a new insight into 2 Troop. I am constantly delighted at the strong bonds that have grown over the past 40 years. The efforts of Snow Wilson in initiating the inaugural reunion in Alice Springs in 1993 and in keeping everyone in touch by regular newsletters have helped



Labourers gathering timber for making a fascine.



Fascine being laid on the Bau-Stass Road, in conjunction with a culvert, on particularly boggy ground, following a suggestion from Major John Stevens.

immensely in fostering the spirit of comradeship and true friendship between us all and our families. There is now a constant stream of phone calls and emails crossing the country between so many of the troop.

On 26 April 2002 I received an email from Dave Wicks in which he said in part:

Over a few beers yesterday (Anzac Day), Snow and I decided it was finally time to put the Troop history into print while we can still remember some of it. The aim is to have at least the first draft completed for the reunion next year in Canberra, the Troop's 40th birthday.

Compiling this history has been a further binding force within the Troop as information was swapped, checked and corrected. Unfortunately, many of us have gaps in memories that we thought would never disappear. Nevertheless, the book has been written and produced in final form in time for our reunion in Canberra. This feat has required great commitment and persistence by Dave Wicks and Snow Wilson. We are all in their debt for their sustained effort in recording such a significant time in our lives together.

I served in the Army for 38 years, but was never in a unit that has strengthened and nurtured its spirit in the way 2 Troop has. I feel extremely privileged to have been associated with 2 Troop, both with the sappers who served in 1963-65 and with their successors in the replacement troop which I commanded until the end of 1966. What was a challenging and exciting posting for me as a junior captain has become a continuing source of great satisfaction and pride.

The British Perspective

John Stevens – Officer Commanding 11 Indep Field Sqn RE, 1964-66

I was overjoyed to be given command of 11 Indep Field Sqn in October 1964. A squadron independent of a regimental commander was every major's dream and providing engineer support to 28 Brigade with its Australian and New Zealand

components in sunny Malaya was a very exciting prospect. I could hardly ask for more! However, what about the Australian Troop - an integral part of the unit. Now, I did not know many Australian soldiers apart from a few officers attending courses in UK – who were always on their best behaviour. Rumour had it that drinking Tiger beer from unbelievably cold tins was a serious sport! Would I be able to handle 2 Field Troop RAE? How did they fit into the Squadron? Would different pay rates and terms of service be a problem? What about their military and engineer skills – how did they compare with the Brits? How would Norma get on with the Australian wives?



Maj John Stevens presents Capt Alan Hodges with a shield of crossed gollock and Malay parang on behalf of 11 Indep Field Sqn during the farewell parade of 2 Troop.

I need not have had so many sleepless nights! I inherited a group of young, fit, highly-competent Sappers who worked hard and played hard. Under their excellent Troop Commander they were full of initiative, tackled any task with skill and enthusiasm and saw it through to a successful conclusion. The wives too played a full part, with shooting and basketball teams. 2 Troop fitted in well with the rest of the unit and many long-lasting friendships were made. They were always full of fun and a great asset to the Squadron and its social and sporting life.

Above all, our most treasured memory of 2 Troop is its comradeship, epitomised for Norma and me in the Hobart Reunion in 1999. It was wonderful to see so many of our boisterous, Tiger-drinking tearaways of Terendak now senior and respected citizens still enjoying their comradeship more than 30 years later. We only wish we could have joined them in Canberra 2003.

Commanding 11 Indep Field Sqn was the most satisfying and enjoyable assignment of my military career and it was one in which 2 Field Troop RAE made such a memorable and important contribution.

Gordon Chave – 2IC, 11 Indep Field Sqn RE 1964-66

It's a privilege and a pleasure to contribute these few words - that sounds trite, but 40 years on from our time in Malaya that is still the opinion of Vicky and me. There is no doubt that 11 Squadron was the highlight of our years in the army – that is why we have called our present house 'Terendak'. 2 Troop contributed much to the quality of life, both in the way of work and in the social and sporting aspects. It says much for the morale of the unit that there is still an Association and that reunions are so successful, and we Brits are proud to be honorary members of this marvellous organisation.

11 Squadron was very 'family', and it is obvious that 2 Troop (Retired) is still all about families. 2 Troop ladies contributed so much to the overall life of the unit. As I write, I have in front of me a number of photographs. Number one is of the wives shooting team. One day, as I sat in my office, I heard the fire of Sten guns (that dates it!), and enquired of Tom Thornton who was using the range. Reply – the ladies have got a bit bored with .22, so Sgt Edge is giving them a go with SMG! This was DEFINITELY not allowed.

Another nice memory – I am escorting the Commander of Far East Land Forces, Lieutenant General Jolly, on a review of the assembled troops, with Sgt Brown as right marker. To my surprise, the general stopped and said, 'Hello Sgt Brown'. Apparently they had served together in the British army. It certainly relaxed the situation.

2 Troop in the jungle – a radio message that Spr Clem Finlay has put a machete into his knee, and was being flown back to Terendak by helicopter with an



*L to R Front row: Bobby Thornton, – , Norma Stevens, Jan Leach, Jean Slessor
Second row: Vicky Chave, Mary Reece, Margaret Strokes, Judy Crosby, –
Rear: Sgt Peter Edge
(Jan Leach won the 1994 Ladies Small Bore*



Maj Gordon Chave crossing a bamboo bridge near Bau when visiting 2 Troop.



Part of the 'Grand Fete and Military Display' on 3 July 1965 at 11 Indep Field Sqn playing fields held to raise funds for the Army Benevolent Funds of the three Commonwealth countries in 28 Brigade.



Squadron SSM, WO2 Tom Thornton.

escort. John Stevens and I met them, to be told by a furious pilot that the escort (Spr Greenslade) firmly believed that if you could catch a snake, you should take it back to show a doctor – what the rules actually said was that if you were BITTEN by a snake, you should try to catch it for identification. Shortly after the helicopter had taken off, another sapper opened a sand bag and enquired of the pilot whether he had ever seen one of these – it was a pit viper! Later in the evening I enquired what had happened to the snake, and was told that Spr Osman, who lived in Malacca, had taken it home strapped to the pillion of his motorcycle. The next morning he brought it back in a jar – pickled.

I have in front of me a copy of the Bukit Bulletin, and also a copy of the programme of the Grand Fete (held while 2 Troop was in Borneo) that was known to most as the fate worse than death. It was held up on the playing fields near the 2 Troop social club. (Incidentally, we have good memories of the club, and have a Qantas tie pin presented to all the ladies by 2 Troop, to prove it.)

I am now looking at the photograph of the Alice Springs Reunion. I see a few changes, but oddly can still recognise a few faces.

It was great chaps - thanks for the memories.

Tom Thornton – SSM 11 Indep Field Sqn RE 1964-66

In many ways I am sure that I had the best deal when I joined 11 Indep Field Sqn as the SSM. I was posted in on a three-year tour and this was where my 'best deal' commenced – I caught the back end of the 'Janvrin first troop 1961-63' then the whole of the 'Crosby troop 1963-65' and finished off with the relieving 'Janvrin second troop 1965-67'.

The most relevant leveller in my time was when the Australian and New Zealand Governments decided to allow their resident infantry battalions to serve outside Malaysian mainland. Prior to this decision, British troops had fulfilled all the commitments. 2 Field Troop RAE was in support of the Australian Infantry Battalion when the Brigade or Battalion Group deployed. Not that the 1963-65 Troop had a great deal of time to familiarise themselves in their support duties, because we all marched away to Thailand on the Squadron's first 'works' task of 1964.

On second sight the timing was perfect: on first sight it did not make for a happy New Year. But, small things pushed to one side, the rainy season ended about four hours before our aircraft touched down at RAAF Ubon. Someone worked that one out correctly. It 'almost' seemed as if the military

were not involved in our reception, but the civilian contractor bus drivers had been well briefed. Beside ourselves, our kit, our rations and other sundry items were all loaded. We put our faith in the leading driver and took off on the bumpy, dusty laterite road to ?, at that time we did not know where. Our eyes and minds were soon to be opened, for Operation Crown was about to commence and Ban Kok Talat was about to grow up and blossom out.

The first sight of our new home for the next four months looked suspiciously like a dried-out paddy field, but our drivers turned off the main road with all confidence and there we were: soldiers, kit, rations, sundries and buses. Minutes later all the buses had gone, as had the daylight, and we were stranded right there – IN IT. It was a case of INIT, INIT dark, INIT dusty, INIT hard to find a torch, INIT hard to find a toilet, etc, etc.

The next morning we set about militarising the paddy fields. This was achieved with an item of British Army Equipment from another era – the IPEP, Indian Pattern Equipment Personnel – a six-man tent no less. These were something of a puzzle for the uninitiated but, having lived for three years in them in Egypt, I was able to offer some advice and a few hints and we set about constructing our canvas city, which was to house 730 all ranks with an Officers Mess, Sgts Mess, Dining Room, NAAFI, Field Kitchen, MI Room, Offices and Stores Compound.

Strange how the deployment worked out. 3 Troop was based at Korat and hosted by a US Army Base camp. They were responsible for 200 miles of road and bridges north of Korat carrying the largest and heaviest loads, Scammel prime movers, low loaders and Size 8 bulldozers, for instance. 1 Troop found their lodgings at RAAF Ubon and looked after 200 miles south of Ubon and 50 miles to the north. They unloaded all items from the railhead terminus and moved it north to Ban Kok Talat. 2 Field Troop lived in the tented camp and made a start on a permanent hutted camp nearby. Their other duties were to look after Squadron Headquarters and Park Troop.

Every flight into Ubon brought in more and more personnel who set up and manned HQ CRE Troops and we also had the company of 59 (Antrim) Field Sqn Royal Engineers and, best of all, the mobile Bath Unit of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

There was no natural source of water in Ban Kok Talat or the next village or surrounding area. 50 miles away was a lake and very quickly a water point was set up and manned by a small detachment. 400-gallon galvanised tanks were secured on flatbed Bedfords and they worked hard to keep up our water levels in the canvas city. Not much could be spared for the showers at the bath unit. The system was simple – whistle blew, water came on, minimal time to soap up and wash off, whistle blew, water off. If you were slow, tough luck, you got dry skin, unless you learnt to hurry yourself up. The short walk back to the tent lines, through the paddy field, did not enhance your complexion a great deal either.

The soldier's life took on better shape when the beer bar opened. Some time later when we were a little more settled in, the beer bar took on a role of more importance and I took it upon myself to build a boxing ring adjacent to the NAAFI tent where exponents



Tent lines at Op Crown as organised by SSM Tom Thornton

of the fine art were allowed to enter the ring and do their best or their worst, whichever way you looked at it, without let or hindrance. No fisticuffs were allowed in the NAAFI tent, much to the relief of the manager.

With all the required stores and equipment on site, 1 and 3 Troops joined us in Tented City and Operation Crown began to show signs that the main objectives were progressing. Early shifts and late shifts were introduced to achieve as much as possible before the wet season was upon us again. It could be said that it was extremely hot, so that the fellas from Tassie must have suffered a bit. It was much different at night though as the temperature did drop to a relative cold.

During this period, 2 Field Troop came into its own with its overall high standards of trade skills and the experience of construction squadron work. By the time we came back to Terendak there was a blacktop airfield runway and most of the hutted camp complete.

Not everyone liked Operation Crown – like the Brit wife who hid her husband's passport – but, surprisingly, even some of the soldiers were not overly enthusiastic on it either. I used to think of my three and a half years in the Middle East and count my blessings. That reminds me of the time I overheard three of my fellas moaning about our conditions early on after our arrival. One of their comments was 'I did not join the Army to live in a b... tent. I got hold of the three of them and made them move out of that luxurious tent and suffer the discomfort of living in a paddy field. Three days and nights were enough for them to realise that perhaps there might be some small advantages in a canvas cover – as I said: 'Count your blessings'.

Those four months set a pattern for the Squadron that turned out to be competitive, and the strong rivalry that thrived there did much for the wellbeing and the good humour of all.

To me there was little or no difference in the troop personnel, except probably the various accents amongst the Brits. Each Troop would have their joker (verbal), joker (practical), the mickey-takers (and those who bore the brunt of their cruel humour), the quiet ones, the talkers, the action men, the moaners, the scruffs, the smart ones and, of course, the sportsmen. Within all these personalities was the strength of the troop, woven together to make one material which could be as soft as silk or as hard as armoured plate, just depending on the daily requirement.

It was a good thing for the squadron to return one year later and to participate in the completion of the concrete runway and also be part of the Guard of Honour for the official handover to the Thai Services.

Incidentally, do you remember the Thai Army Band that played at that ceremony? They got through two choruses of the National Anthem before I realised what they were playing – not their National Anthem but OURS.

Service with 11 Indep Field Sqn, Royal Engineers was one of the best tours of my 37½ years service and that can only be attributed to the people I served with. With that thought in mind, I will take this opportunity to say 'Thank you one and all'.