

Matey's Memoirs

By Robin (Matey) Martin

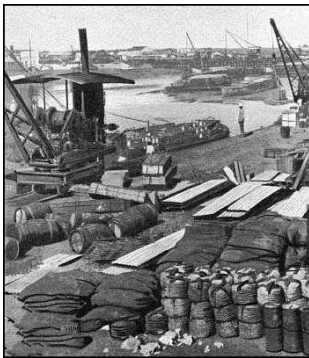
In his above titled book Robin Martin includes the time he spent in the Nyasaland Police in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Courtesy of his daughter, Anne Blackman, these chapters are available on the Nypol website. They are broken down into a number of parts and appear in serial form from month to month until fully available.

Chapter 3 ~ Part 3

Slow Boat to Beira

Beira at Last

After a few days we were once more on our way again, this time to Beira where I was to disembark. Before my journey ended, however, I witnessed a mercy trip made by our ship's doctor. A merchantman at sea had wirelessed for help. The captain was ill with suspected appendicitis, so our doctor was lowered away in one of the ship's lifeboats and rowed to the distressed ship which was hove to awaiting him. His mercy mission complete, the doctor returned to us and was cheered as he came up the rope ladder - some of it a little ironic but all in good humour. A few hours later with a pilot on-board we were steaming up the twenty-mile wide estuary of the river Pungwe to Beira, the



disembarkation point for northern Mozambique, the Rhodesias (Zimbabwe and Zambia) and Nyasaland. We eventually docked that evening and after dinner I took a short stroll along the quay. This was the most dismal and disappointing port of the whole trip. The quay, for some hundreds of yards, was covered with a thick coating of cement dust where innumerable cargoes of cement had been loaded. It muffled the footsteps as one walked along the quay and coated the nostrils as one breathed. The atmosphere was oppressively humid and hot and I began to wonder if Africa was likely to be as welcoming as I had hoped.

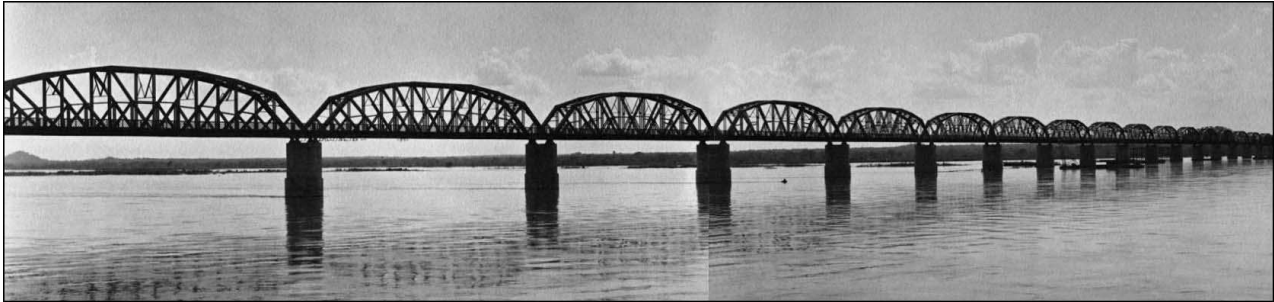
The trains to Nyasaland ran only two days a week, Mondays and Thursdays, and we had arrived on Wednesday. We were permitted to remain onboard until the following day which allowed a few hours to visit Beira Township on the Thursday morning and a little sightseeing. There were not many attractions in Beira, the most memorable objects of interest being a few hulks lying in the estuary – the remains of ships damaged in the war which had run into this neutral port for sanctuary and beached themselves. I learnt that one hotel where everyone stayed was notorious for its cane-seated, veranda chairs. An old acquaintance who had known the port for years later told me that the secret of comfort in those chairs was to return to the same chair having once risen. You could then fit your mosquito-bitten-buttocks snugly into the holes in the seat in more comfort.

To Nyasaland by Rail

Our train duly left on Thursday evening, Frank Chivers and I again sharing a sleeping compartment. This was comfortably appointed with the beds and fresh clean sheets and blankets neatly folded and concealed in the seating, later to be pulled out and assembled by the steward. A washbasin by the window, covered by a lift-up tabletop, completed the amenities. Darkness fell soon after we had passed Dondo Junction - where the line divided, one track going to Rhodesia and other to Nyasaland - so I could not enjoy any view of the surrounding countryside. It seemed to be wooded but I could not tell if it was bush or cultivated country. I took myself off to the dining car and investigated the

arrangements for dinner. This turned out to be remarkably good, considering the conditions the steward and his staff had to work under. The chief steward was MacGillam, who had the catering contract for the service. On later journeys, when Elsie and I travelled with the children as young babies, to get on the train and find Mac there was just like coming home. If you had any special requirements, like hot water, you could be sure it would be promptly attended to.

After a few after dinner drinks, and conversation with fellow passengers to while away the time, I decided to turn in for an early night. We were due to cross the Zambezi at about 5 am, so I asked the guard if he would call me just before we got to the bridge, as I wanted to see the mighty river as we passed over it. I was glad that I did for the sight was well worthwhile. The Dona Ana rail bridge over the Zambezi is two and a quarter miles long,



and spans the river and the flood-plain. At that time it was the longest bridge in the world. The rhythmic rattle of the train, as we rolled over the girders, seemed to go on forever. At that time the river was not in spate as the seasonal rains in central Africa had failed, but even so it was a memorable sight to behold. The river flowed between numerous sand bars on which several crocodiles had beached themselves, ready to catch the first warming rays of the sun. Some years later, during a season of very heavy rains, I saw an aerial photograph of the river at the bridge and the flood had swollen to a width of 26 miles. Then, hundreds of people were made homeless by the flooding, but on this, my first trip, the water was well below normal: the crops had failed and there was famine in the land.

Soon after crossing the bridge we reached Port Herald (now Nsanje) on the banks of the Shire River, where we entered Nyasaland (now Malawi). There was one more adventure in store. The Chiromo Bridge over the River Shire had been washed away the year before,



so it was necessary to “disembark” from the train and board *The Princess*, a stern wheel paddle steamer, to ferry us across the river. Before the building of the Dona Anna bridge, and the railway track from Beira to Nyasaland, this old river craft had been in regular service conveying passengers who were brought up the Zambezi from the coast by boat to the beginning of the Nyasaland railway.

The Dona Ana Bridge, built in 1935 to link coalfields at Moatize in Mozambique, and the protectorate of Nyasaland, with the port of Beira, fell on hard times in the 1980s. It was rendered unusable in the Mozambique civil war, but was converted to a single lane vehicle bridge in 1995. It was closed again in 2006 to allow for work to reconvert it back to a rail bridge again and it scheduled to re-open in 2008.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dona_Ana_Bri)

Once across the Shire we boarded another train and continued our journey up through the foothills to the Shire Highlands, steadily climbing up some 3,000 ft, pulled by two wood-fired steam engines. This was a slow job and took all day, winding steadily up the escarpment. Being up near the engines, one could look out of the carriage window and see the rear guard's van opposite us, but slightly below, as we looped across a valley side, gradually gaining on the contours. It was dark when we eventually reached Limbe, the main station for the Southern Province. A few dim oil lamps illuminated the scene without much success and apparently chaotic hordes of people were milling about and shouting. Frank Chivers exclaimed, "What have we come to?" I wondered but was prepared to take an optimistic view. Then quite suddenly I saw a cheerful, familiar face for an old friend from Jerusalem and Safed days, Luke Hannon, had come to welcome us and take us to



Nashes, a little family run hotel in Blantyre about 5 miles from the station. He had come to Nyasaland some months before and was now Officer i/c Limbe Police. The first thing he did was to take us to his home for a welcoming drink and a chat. He was very pleased with how things had turned out for him as he had recently been promoted Assistant Superintendent. It became clear to me that as far as seniority was concerned I had missed the boat, for I had completed my service in Palestine senior to Luke and was now the start my posting two ranks junior.

My six weeks travelling had, at last come to an end, the length of the journey surprising even my superiors, for when I met the Commissioner of Police, a few days later, he remarked, "We wondered what had happened to you!" (The journey round The Cape to Beira usually took 5 weeks). As my appointment had started the day I embarked on the SS *Llandovery Castle*, a welcome six weeks of pay were owed to me before I began my duties.



Police Headquarters, Zomba

.....*TO BE CONTINUED*