

# 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 4 ~ Part 1

#### From Zomba to Dedza

The next day both Frank Chivers and I met the Assistant Commissioner of Police, Geoffrey Morton, (who had left the Jenin Division in Palestine the day I arrived there in 1939) and he welcomed us to the Nyasaland Police Force adding that there was a lot to do. He said the Force was way behind the times and needed bringing up to date in every department. He remarked, with a smile, that he hoped to see a mounted section introduced which he could put me in charge of, but he must have known it would never happen. It would not have been a practical proposition because the horses would have had to be kept at a certain altitude, to avoid the tsetse fly and horse sickness. After a weekend in Blantyre, Chivers and I were taken the 42 miles to Police Headquarters at Zomba, the administrative



Police Headquarters, Zomba

capital, to be issued with our accoutrements – including a .380 Webley Scott revolver, belts, boots and buttons and then to be measured for our uniforms by the tailor there. We also met the Commissioner, Mr M L Fraser, as charming a man as I ever wish to know. He was shortly to retire and was, I think, content to let Geoffrey Morton take over the arrangements for the modernisation (Note 1) of the Force, which was certainly needed. We were then duly sworn in as Assistant Inspectors of the Nyasaland Police Force, starting at the bottom of the European ranks.

*Note 1: All of Geoff Morton's modernisations are recorded in his book*

The possibility of Self Government for the Protectorate was discussed and we were asked what we felt about that. I replied that I was prepared to take that chance and would aim to stay as long as possible. Several of us had come from various colonies that had gained their independence and were prepared for a similar outcome in Nyasaland.

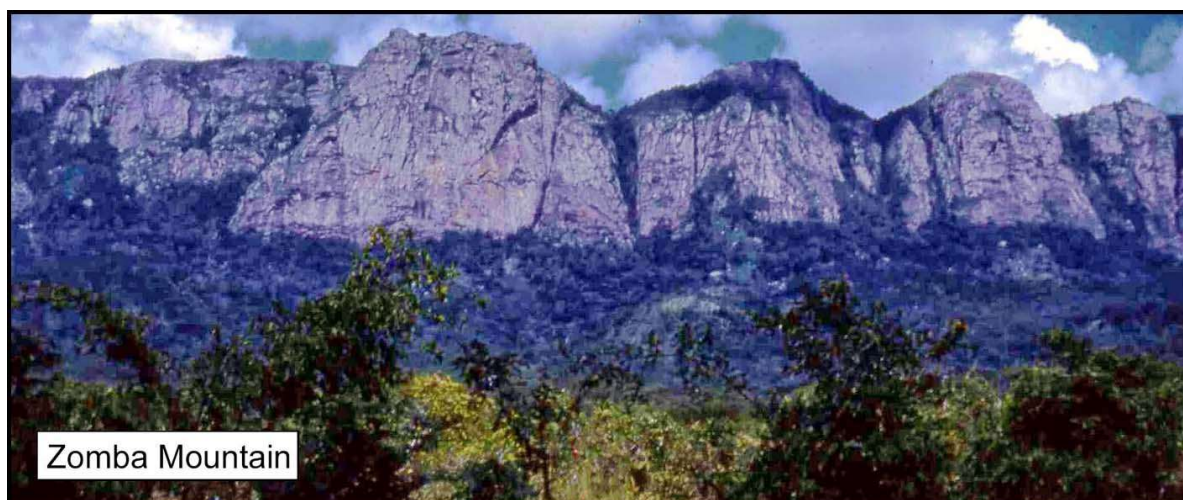
Nyasaland was then regarded as a real backwater of the Empire. It is a small country by African standards and is not rich in natural mineral resources: its major export was native labour and thousands of Nyasaland left the country to seek work in Rhodesia and in the mines of South Africa. The main agricultural exports were tea, coffee and tobacco and a little groundnut oil, agricultural industries that had been developed by European financial investment and settlers in the previous half century. Prior to the development of the tea

and tobacco plantations, there was a very prominent Scottish Missionary presence, which had been inspired by Livingstone, who wanted to encourage alternative trade and economic activities to the slave trade.

**(Note:** From *"The Romance of Blantyre - How Livingstone's Dream Came True"*, by The Rev. Alexander Hetherwick: Late head of the Church of Scotland Mission in Central Africa. Published in late 1920s early 1930s. Chapter XXI The Mission Garden p178-9.

*In 1884 Dr Elmslie, a medical missionary, newly appointed to the Livingstonia Mission, arrived at Blantyre on his way to the Lake. He brought with him a Wardian case with a number of seedlings plants new to the country. Among them were a dozen tea trees from the Botanic Gardens at King William's Town, South Africa. " They were left on the kondi overnight and, unfortunately, rats nipped the tips of the seedlings leaving only stumps. Dr Elmslie did not think they would survive the journey to the Livingstonia Mission at The Lake and left them in the care of the Blantyre mission gardener, Mr Jonathan Duncan. He was able to "preserve the life of the plants, which were henceforward found a place in the (Blantyre) Mission garden" where they prospered. Several years later, when the coffee crop in the Mlanje area failed a Mr Henry Brown came to the mission to ask for seeds of the tea trees feeling that, due to the high rainfall in the Mlanje area, the tea plants might flourish there. This proved to be the case.)*

As regards the police force at least 50% of the native policemen could not read or write, but this, as far as I could see, was not such a great disadvantage as may be supposed, as like many illiterate people they had wonderful memories. Then I was later to find that these Regular Constables, as they were known, were excellent old chaps. They may not have been able to read or write but they could certainly do the job. Several Regular Constables I knew would come back from an investigation of a case, bringing with them the witnesses and exhibits, and then stand before the Recording Officer relating to him all that had occurred: that this witness says so-and-so, and the next witness said such-and-such, and so go on right through the case. Then Recording Officer was able to interview all the witnesses and prepare a case file ready to be presented to the prosecuting officer. Now, however, mid-way through the 20th century, it was considered that this state of affairs could not continue. The Regular Constables were kept on but the new recruits had to be literate, at least up to about Standard 4 of elementary school, about the level of learning of a 12 year old child. They were able to read and write not only Chinyanja but also a sort of English, for example, "This man stands six feet up in his socks".



I was posted to Zomba Police HQ, for a week or two. This was a small but pleasant town situated in a spectacular position at the base of Zomba Mountain. It was the administrative capital of the Protectorate. Here was Government House; the Chief

Secretary and Legislature; the Police Headquarters and training school in the Police Camp, Forestry and Agriculture HQ and the HQ and resident Battalion of the Kings African Rifles (KAR). There was also a rather pleasant Botanical Garden, which had been established at the end of the previous century along the banks of an attractive stream that had risen on the mountain. There were a few shops along a main street but nothing compared to what was available in Blantyre. A little house was put at my disposal there, and I was able to purchase a few household items at an auction in Limbe which helped to make the house more comfortable. Here I spent a couple of weeks being introduced to the men and the system. One morning I was sent to supervise police recruits firing their rifle course on the range. I also arranged to have some Chinyanja language lessons from Chitama, one of the African clerks. Of one thing I was convinced, that I must learn the language as soon as possible, for I fully appreciated that I only really began to enjoy my service in Palestine once I had acquired a fair knowledge of Arabic.

The King's Birthday Parade was due and the KAR were rehearsing. Frank Chivers and I were sent to witness the rehearsal and assist in any way. We were introduced to several officers and then advised to stand back in a certain area to observe. The battalion was marched on in review order and paraded before the second-in-command. The parade was called to "attention" to be handed over to the Commanding Officer. The second-in-command called out to one of his company commanders that, "One of your men is still standing at ease". Then I heard one of the most amusing excuses I had ever hear in my life. The company commander replied, "He is urinating, Sir." Guardsmen often faint on parade and are punished for it, but until then I had never heard of a soldier "standing at ease for a piss". Obviously things in Africa were different.

At Zomba I met two more ex-Palestine policemen – Norman Carswell who was stationed at Mea She'arim Police Station in Jerusalem and now serving as Officer i/c Police Zomba,



*Norman Carswell*

and Alec Bowden Stuart, who I had met at the wedding of a friend in Palestine. He was now Staff Officer at Police HQ and both old comrades befriended me well. I was to be posted to Dedza in the Central Province and as a new motor van was to be allocated to Lilongwe, the H.Q. of the Central Province, I was able to hitch a lift in this van and so get on my way. Lilongwe is further north of Dedza from Zomba, but I made my way there first to meet my new Divisional Commanding Officer before going down to

Dedza, where accommodation had been arranged for me in the local Angoni Highlands Hotel.

It was a long journey from Zomba to Lilongwe, in the one ton capacity, box-body Morris van. The springing was awful and the surface of the dirt road atrocious with the bone juddering corrugations sometimes extending, unbroken, for 20 miles and more. It was an



interminable, shattering experience and I was shaken rigid to the backbone. Of course, as time went on, I came to accept and expect such conditions as quite normal. At that time the only tarmac road in the country was the 5 or 6 miles strip between Blantyre and Limbe, the most populous and developed area in the whole country. The road north crosses the Shire River at Liwonde and, while we were crossing the river on the

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whirlwind, which took off the complete grass roof of a native hut, carried it up into the air for about 100 ft and then deposited it, in small pieces, in the Shire. Meanwhile the ferry men were pulling the craft across on cables, singing as they did so, and I almost expected Sanders of the River to appear around the next bend.

After 90 miles we reached Ncheu. Here I had been told to stop and introduce myself to the District Commissioner there, Michael Sharp, as I was to have police responsibility for both Dedza and Ncheu Districts. I found Mike to be the perfect example of what one expected a Colonial District Commissioner to be – a real gentleman with the capacity to accept and deal efficiently and effectively with any eventuality that may arise. He welcomed me with the usual warm hospitality and told me that if it should happen that I had come to Ncheu, and he was out, I should make myself known to his head boy, who would ensure that I was provided with food and accommodation.

After this happy meeting I continued on my way, for there was another 110 miles of bone-shaking road to travel before we reached Lilongwe. On the way through I called in at the Hotel in Dedza, introduced myself to the proprietors, the Hewitts, and left some of my



*Danny Morrison*

possessions in store. Setting off once more we eventually arrived at Lilongwe, just after dark; hungry, tired and very dirty. Here I renewed my acquaintance with yet another ex-Palestine Policeman, Danny Morrison, who became a very good friend, and he introduced me to the Superintendent i/c of the Central Division, Jimmy Tennant, who had started his police career in the British South Africa Police in Southern Rhodesia. I stayed in Lilongwe for two weeks to acquaint myself of the

routine in the Central Division, and then set off for Dedza as the District Police Inspector.

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