

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 3

From Zomba to Dedza

“Lion” Williams

Speaking of the lion mentioned previously, S.G. (*Sedley George Williams*) then went on to tell me of his encounter with a lion when he was at Dowa, north-east of Lilongwe. A man-eater had settled in the district and had killed several people. The village headman had come in to the Boma (District HQ) to report the matter to the D.C. and ask for help in ridding his people of the beast. SG telegraphed to Zomba asking for the Game Department hunters be sent up to his district to hunt and kill the lion. However, a reply came back stating that all the hunters were engaged in the Lower River Area, in the far south of the country, and SG would have to undertake the destruction of the beast himself. So, with two *askaris*, native policemen, each armed with a service rifle, S.G. made his way to the village near where the lion had made his last kill, a young boy of about 13.

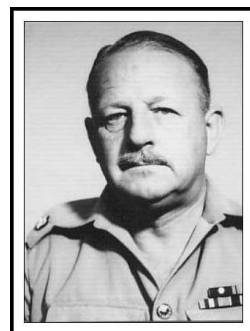
The hunting party then continued on towards the area where it was anticipated that the lion might be and as they walked along the narrow bush path, bordered on each side by tall elephant grass, the lion stepped out of the bush, some 30 yds. in front of them. The two *askaris* fled and climbed nearby trees leaving S.G. to drop to one knee and take aim as the lion approached and prepared to attack. He fired just as the lion sprang, and though it was a perfect shot, clean through the lion's heart, the beast landed on top of S.G. and in his death throes bit S.G. through the left shoulder, while his huge claws ripped open his abdomen. Poor S.G. was in a sorry state as he was carried off to hospital and he would have had quite a journey to get there. Lions' claws are contaminated with decaying flesh and other obnoxious matter and soon S.G. was terribly ill and delirious, with the poison racing through his body, and his left arm in a sorry state. The Medical Officer felt the only thing for it was amputation of the arm. However, the patient would not consent to such a drastic step, insisting that he would rather die than “live as half a man,” as he put it. With the devoted care of the nursing sister, who later became Mrs Smith, S.G. pulled through the crisis, but his left arm was just about useless and locked bent at the elbow, at an acute angle. The skills of the Nyasaland medical men were insufficient to cure and rectify the damage and S.G. was given special leave to the UK in the hopes that a Harley Street expert would be able to improve the situation. The Colonial Office (CO) sent SG to be examined by a specialist, and on returning to the CO to discuss developments he was greeted with the information that, though the specialist felt confident he could restore mobility, the operation would cost £400 and S.G must pay. Our man drew the official's attention to that he had gone after the lion on Government instructions and had received the injuries in the execution of his duty. The official understood but insisted that the CO was only responsible for the cost of medical or surgery treatment in the territory where the officer served.



SG then boarded the train for his home in Dorset, angry, sick-at-heart and at his wit's end as to know what to do, for he hadn't 400d to rub together let alone £400. He had a wife and two children to support and he didn't know what to do or think. He related his tale to a kindly lady who was travelling in the same compartment. She was very sympathetic and told him of a man, who ran a wine and spirits shop in Barnstaple in Devon, whom she had heard had healing powers. So, any port in a storm, SG wrote to this man in Barnstaple asking for an appointment. The reply came back that he did not make appointments, anyone wishing to consult him could just turn up at his business premises and he would see them as opportunity offered.

In due course, on arrival at the premises in Barnstaple, the retailer asked him to take a seat at the back of the shop, and there he joined several other patients waiting for treatment or advice. Whenever the shopkeeper had a few moments spare, between customers who came in for beer, wine or spirits, he would see one of his patients in a room at the back. S.G. edged his way up the bench and eventually it was his turn to go in the consulting room. The healer felt around his elbow, put pressure on certain areas and eased around some ligaments. The healer then told his patient to put his arm out straight and to SG's amazement he was almost able to do so; it was just out a few degrees. After thanking the shopkeeper profusely, SG then asked much he owed as a fee, only to be told by the healer that he, "received this healing gift from God and I give it freely. If you wish to make a contribution there is a box on the counter and anything will be gratefully received." Stories like this restore one's faith in human nature.

SG, or "Lion" Williams as he came to be known, was a man with much fire in his belly, and he could not stand misrepresentation or hypocritical cant. He told me of time when he was on leave in England and had wandered to speaker's corner in Hyde Park. Here he heard a young African expounding on the iniquities of the British Colonial system. After a while SG became so incensed at the speaker's lies that he spoke up and challenged him. The speaker then suggested that he knew nothing about Africa, or the language and he should "shut up", to which SG replied that he had passed the Government's Higher Standard in Chinyanga. The crowd then turned towards SG and said that he should get up on the soapbox and have his say. A Colonial Police Officer, who was on leave, was standing nearby, and he also encouraged him to speak and offered his support. At this S.G. Took his turn on the soapbox and told the truth of Central Africa, as knew it to be, to considerable applause. There is a sequel to this incident. About 10 years later, Alan Kirkham, a fellow Nyasaland policeman who had served in the Bahamas Police, commented to me one day, "I have just seen S.G. arrive back from the U.K. looking fit and well, and wearing an old rain coat. He reminded me of a man I met one day in Hyde Park, who got up and spoke at Speaker's Corner." "He not only reminded you of the man, he was the man. He told me of your meeting some years ago!" I replied.



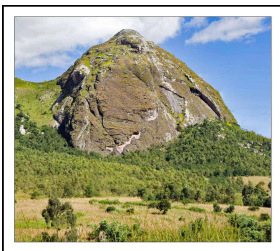
But to return to our first joint visit in Dedza district, after calling at the Ntakataka Mission we went on to inspect a government rest-house that was in the course of construction, and was part of S.G's responsibility. He remarked to me that he had joined the Service too late for in his early days there were no rest houses and when an officer had to go out on duty in his district he had to arrange *tenga tenga* [carriers] to take the loads of tents and camping equipment necessary for a stay of some days out in the bush. He scoffed indignantly at the softness that was creeping into the service. On the other hand the young administrative officers would say, "It is easy for any fool to rough it. One needs a little intelligence and ingenuity to make life more comfortable." In this, as in many things, there are two approaches to the situation.

Cattle Thieving

There had been some cattle thieving in the district and back at the Boma, my policemen had brought in some of the culprits that were responsible. I brought the case before SG who, sitting in his capacity as Second Class Magistrate, found the accused guilty and sent them to prison for stiff sentences, five years each if my memory serves me correctly. SG told me that he had handed out the same sentences some years before and The Chief Justice had frowned on his sentences and reduced them very considerably. As a result the villagers came to the conclusion that the Administration did not regard cattle theft as a very serious offence and started cattle rustling to an alarming degree. Not until the very heavy sentences were re-introduced did the menace cease. At the end of this case SG commented that he did not think the CJ would interfere this time.

In common with most of the European members of the administration SG enjoyed his sundowner, and one evening when we were sitting enjoying just such a drink, he remarked that his wife Doris would be arriving soon and added that he would now have to be careful with his drinking, for she kept a watchful eye on him. "You know," he continued, "one has to get crafty. Whenever Doris leaves the sitting room I have to jump up quickly, top up my glass and have a good long drink, to make sure that the level in the glass is similar to when she went out!" I had to have a laugh at this: here was a real man, who had escaped from Germans and faced a real man-eating lion and killed it; had gone through all that terrible trouble with the arm and was still afraid, or should I say reluctant, to upset his dear Doris over an extra tot of the hard stuff!

Doris arrived in due course and SG finally retired from the service and they settled into the newly built bungalow on the slopes of Dedza Mountain – with its with fine views over the



plain towards Golomoti, and then perhaps to the Lake, which may just have been visible. He had decided that he would like to retire to Nyasaland and was prepared to sell his house in Dorset. However they did not live in the house for long. SG let it to the Doctor for a while and went to live just outside Blantyre where he worked for a company, which had a house that went with the job. Eventually the house in Dedza was sold

Security Nyasaland Style

Near to where SG had built his bungalow a small dam was being constructed, to provide water for a small vegetable plot for the prison. At that time the district police officer was also in charge of the prison and prisoners. A small gang of prisoners, under the care of two armed warders, had been sent down to work on the job. I decided that I would walk down to see how the work was progressing. On my arrival, to my amazement I found that one of the warders was working on the dam wall, with his rifle lying about 10 yds away from him, and a prisoner standing over it. Such was the legacy of my experience and training from my time in Palestine - which had become a very violent place by the time the British Mandate was given up and where all weapons and ammunition had to be very closely guarded, or very severe trouble would have ensued – that I "blew my top". I put the warder responsible on report for a disciplinary charge for "failing to safeguard the custody of his firearm". I believe my superiors at the Provincial level were of the opinion that I was making "much ado about nothing" and in retrospect they were probably right. This incident just goes to illustrate what a peaceful and safe place Nyasaland was at that time, and I have to chuckle when I think about it now. However more violent times were to come as a result of the changing political situation, and the country was to never be so peaceful and safe again as it was then.

Murder at Ncheu

A message came from Ncheu that a child had been murdered in the district and I was required to go and take charge of the investigation. Still having no car, I travelled down on the local bus. Because it was hot all the windows were kept open and as the bus bumped along, churning up the road, we become engulfed in clouds of dust as we passed other vehicles on the way, covering passengers and luggage alike in a thick layer. My Provincial Superintendent, Jimmy Tennant, was also travelling on the road and, knowing my movements, stopped the bus so I could get out and have a talk with him. What a sight I must have presented when, on getting off the bus I shook myself, and disappeared in a cloud of dust. However, this may have been no bad thing, for Jimmy said to me, "Oh my God! We must get you mobile with your own car as soon as we possibly can."



Our conversation being concluded I was on my way again. As the DC, Mike Sharp, was out in the District, I had to take him at his word and, accepting his invitation, ask Pearce to arrange the accommodation. I then borrowed a bicycle, and with a local policeman from the Boma, went out into the district; investigated the murder; arrested the offender; and prepared the case for the Preliminary Enquiry. It was a simple police case to prepare for a demented father had had a brainstorm and beaten the child to death. He was later committed to a mental hospital for treatment, while being detained at his His Majesty's pleasure, for George VI was at that time on the throne. On returning to the Boma, Pearce, having been trained as a perfect Jeeves, put me up, most comfortably, in the guest room. He then provided me with a bath and a very refreshing whisky and soda, while I awaited his *bwana's* return.

On another occasion I had to attend the High Court in Blantyre and I was still without a vehicle. I managed to obtain a lift with someone and, my business at the Court concluded, my problem was then to find someone who could give me a lift back to Dedza: for, if it was possible to avoid it, I did not want to travel back in the dusty bus – though many rural Africans had no alternative but to endure the uncomfortable conditions. I heard that a lorry belonging to the Tobacco Board was going north and obtained permission to travel with the driver. However, it was a far from comfortable trip, being very hot in the cab of the lorry, the engine of which was continually overheating, forcing the driver to stop every so often to allow the engine to cool. At one point, we stopped for a while along the Portuguese border and an old African gentleman, wearing a topee and khaki dress, came riding along on a bicycle. When he saw me, a European Police Officer in uniform, he jumped off his cycle, quickly turned it around and rode off as fast as he possibly could. The African lorry driver and his mate burst out laughing and I asked why they were laughing so heartily. The driver told me that the old man had mistaken me for a slaver and had run away convinced that if I had caught him he would have been enslaved for life. I wonder if this explanation was true. At the time it was certainly a lesson for me to be told that some of the native population still had such a fear, as slavery, per say, was a thing of the past. But thinking about this incident in retrospect, in the past, white farmers and other employers had been known to come to the area to round up labour with the use of force. Also the headquarters of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Administration (WNLA), the organisation that recruited a lot of labour from Nyasaland for the mines in South Africa was at Mlangeni, nearby, half way between Dedza and Ncheu. Although the wages of mine workers were higher than could be obtained in Nyasaland, such a life may still have seemed like slavery, for if they did not like the work they would not have been able to go home before their term of contract ran out, and the mines in South Africa were a very long way away from Nyasaland.