

Hospitalization 1

By Barry Thorne

(Note: Reproduced here from Volume 4 of 'Expatriate Experience of Life and work in Nyasaland' by Colin Baker, with the kind permission of Mpemba Books, owners of the copyright.)



Nyasaland achieved full independence in July 1964, and on Independence Day I acted as one of the Special Branch officers on protection duty to ensure the safety of Prince Philip, the Queen's representative at the handover ceremony held at the main football stadium in Blantyre, but the only untoward event to occur happened to me personally.

I was near Prince Philip during the period leading up to the lowering of the British flag, and the raising of the new Malawi flag, when I felt the most awful pain in my left side. I mentioned this to my colleague, another Special Branch officer, and said that I must leave for a few minutes to find a toilet, to see if the pain could be relieved. I went to the back of the main stand where the somewhat limited public toilet facilities were situated, but one can imagine the state of the single urinal being used by many thousands of happy and beer drinking Africans in the stadium. The pain got much worse and the next thing I knew I was laying on my back with effluent flowing around me. Determined not to simply lie there and die, I managed to turn and get onto my front and crawl to the entrance, where I again passed out.

On coming to, I found that I was once more on my back, but this time instead of seeing only the roof of the urinal, I saw a smartly dressed black gentleman looking down at me, who asked if I was OK. Being somewhat embarrassed, I answered 'yes' and no doubt thinking I was only another drunken European who had overdone the celebrating, he went away.



Fortunately, however, the man turned out to be an American doctor and the fact that he came back most probably saved my life. The next thing I remember was being carried to an ambulance which (although I didn't see the humour of it at the time) was quite amusing. The vehicle was one of the two Volkswagen Kombi ambulances donated by the German government as an Independence gift, but when they tried to load me into it, they found it impossible to close the doors as I was too long, resulting in my legs having to be bent up in order to do so I was rushed to the nearby Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and again have little memory of anything other than the pain which had continued to grow in intensity.

Due to the celebrations, there was only a duty doctor available but no surgeon, and the hospital was staffed only by nuns who volunteered to stand in as nurses over the holiday period. I recall being most embarrassed when, unable to control my bowel movement, I messed the bed, but without hesitation the nuns cleared me up and did all they could to alleviate the pain a little. And so it was not until the following day that I was seen by a surgeon, and as the pain by now was throughout my whole abdomen it was decided to have an exploratory look at what was happening by performing a laparotomy, which was carried out by a large and hearty Dutchman. I recall being given a premed before being wheeled into the operating theatre, still very much awake and surrounded by faces in masks. I was then given an anaesthetic injection and asked to count up to ten, and then

again backwards, but having done so I still didn't 'go under' and was told not to worry as I would soon 'be off'. But I remained conscious, and recalled when a child being anaesthetised by gas to have my tonsils removed which had made me very sick. So when the mask was placed over my face and I was told to take deep breaths and felt the same nausea coming over me, I was none too happy. And still being fully alert, I could hear the doctors talking as if I had lost consciousness, and was afraid they would start operating on me while still being fully awake. The last thing I remember was feeling even more nauseous and reaching up to pull the mask off my face, when next I was being wheeled along a corridor and hearing a female voice behind me say, 'oh, charming I'm sure'. It later transpired that as the young British nurse was pushing me back to the ward I had, in my panic and untypically, said 'get this fucking mask off my face!'

The following day I was told that my spleen had burst, causing peritonitis, hence all the pain, and that I was very lucky still to be alive. I spent the next six weeks in hospital while numerous blood samples were taken every day, but in the beginning this proved difficult as my veins had shut down from the shock and loss of blood.

Having been so near to a hospital when the spleen burst (and not 'up-country') and lucky enough to have been hospitalised quickly and operated on within twenty four hours, I was fortunate to survive.

I was discharged from hospital some six weeks later and was taken to the house of one of my senior officers and his wife, Douglas and Sheila Holmes a Court, who kindly volunteered to look after me. I had known the couple well and had spent many evenings and weekends, together with my flatmate John Pritchard playing bridge with them. Unfortunately, the doctors failed to explain to them that I had been kept on a very strict diet in hospital, which had to be maintained for at least another week or two. The result was that when I arrived at their home, I was extremely hungry, and eagerly accepted their kind offer of a meal, which almost killed me when they served up and I devoured a huge 'fry up', comprising everything, a hungry, young bachelor could wish for. That night, I became violently ill with vomiting and diarrhoea, and was found the following morning collapsed on their toilet seat, resulting in being rushed back to hospital where I spent a few more days under observation.

A short while later I was flown home to England, where I spent a further week under observation and investigation at The Tropical Diseases Hospital in London.

There were still much concern about why my spleen had been swollen, although it was concluded that there had been two likely causes for it to have ruptured

The first was a severe blow in the stomach received when playing hockey for Nyasaland shortly before Independence Day. I played goalkeeper, a position which in those days was given little protection apart from leg pads (like large cricket pads with a small extension over the foot) and in the pre-match knock-up, I was hit in the side by a stinging shot fired in by one of our Sikh stars, possibly making me the only player on record to be carried off injured before the match had actually started. The other possible cause occurred on the morning of the celebrations, when prior to taking over my protection duties a Special Branch colleague and myself were engaged in some horse play, and I sustained a light blow in the area of the spleen

While in London, I was invited to explain the background and circumstances of what happened, to a number of doctors and specialists, and was told later that my spleen had ended up somewhere in the West Indies where it had been examined by the world's leading spleen expert, and where it probably remains to this day on a shelf in a bottle containing some preservative liquid!