

THE NYASALAND POLICE: MY FIRST SIX MONTHS

Christopher Bean



There I was, sitting on a Douglas DC7B, wearing a thick smart suit, heading for darkest Africa. It was 27 September 1957 and I was 21 years old. I had said goodbye to my mother and father and sister in the morning at Doncaster railway station, wondering if I would ever see them again. In those days, Central Africa was a long, long way away and it took two days to get there, in propeller driven aeroplanes. In fact I was never to see my father again as he died before I returned on my first

leave to England in 1960. Much was to transpire in those three years and I was to have adventures such as I could never have even imagined before that time. How did I come to find myself in this position?

Well, I have to blame my dad! He was a police officer with Doncaster Borough Police. In 1947 he was promoted to Inspector and sent to the senior officers' course at the Police College at Ryton-on-Dunsmore. Whilst there, he came into contact with a number of young men who came from the Colonial Police Service and had been sent by their respective forces to attend the same course. He was impressed with the lifestyle they seemed to be enjoying plus the fact that they all had new motorcars, which they were taking back to their own countries. In those days few British police officers of junior rank could afford cars. He returned from Ryton fully convinced that a career in the Colonial Police was the one his son should follow. His son, however had other ideas and very keenly wanted to become a journalist. Police officers at that time had a very poor opinion of newspapermen, and he was vehemently opposed to my idea. He arranged an interview for me with a senior reporter of his acquaintance and this chap, being thoroughly briefed by my dad, talked me out of the idea.

This then was my dad's plan. Get my GCSEs, leave school and join the West Riding Constabulary as a cadet. There was no way he was having me serve in the same Force as him. When I was called up I was to join the Military Police for my National Service and on completing that compulsory two years, rejoin the West Riding as a constable, serve my probationary period out and then apply for the Colonial Police. And that, more or less, is what happened and how I came to be sitting on that plane.

In those days, probably because the aeroplanes all had propellers, it took two days to fly to Nyasaland. The usual route was to stop in Rome, Athens, Khartoum, Nairobi and then terminate in Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia. Overnight in Meikles Hotel in Salisbury and then fly on at midday the following day by a Central African Airways Viscount (more propellers) to Chileka airport in Blantyre, the commercial capital of Nyasaland.



I eventually arrived in Salisbury at about five in the afternoon, tired and stunned by all the new things I was seeing. I was booked into Meikles Hotel and walking out onto my huge verandah, I was delighted to see that the hotel overlooked a large public garden on the other side of the road. I learnt later that it was called 'Cecil Square'. The thing about this garden,

apart from the fact that it was late September and the grounds were completely covered with a glorious purple blossom from jacaranda trees, of which Salisbury was full, was the fact that the pathways of the gardens were laid out in the form of the Union Flag. The old Meikles Hotel was the scene of many famous and historical meetings and I am glad that I

stayed there for my first night in Africa, and on a number of future occasions. After breakfast I wandered round the city centre enjoying the space and a leisurely pace and looking at the beautiful shops which abounded. I didn't realise then that Salisbury represented the Mecca of shopping for people living hundreds of miles around, especially in neighbouring territories.

Soon enough lunchtime came and I was picked up at the hotel and taken to Salisbury airport for onward transmission to Blantyre in Nyasaland. A short forty-five minute flight in one of the beautiful Viscount turboprop planes Central African Airways flew and I landed at Chileka, the International Airport serving Nyasaland.



As I stepped off the aeroplane I was struck by how much hotter it was than Salisbury had been. It was mid afternoon on a Saturday and there was very little activity. I was met by an imposing looking European man who introduced himself as Toby Teece, an ex-Sergeant Major from the Kings African Rifles. He had come to meet me and escort me to Force HQ in Zomba. An African driver Sergeant took my cases and put them in a Police Land Rover and off we went.

The road from Chileka to Zomba was a strip of tarmac just sufficiently wide for a car to travel along it and when another car came the other way, both had to veer off and put the nearside wheels on the dirt shoulder. This fifty miles or so of tarmac was all there was in



the entire country and we had to learn new techniques of driving on dirt, sand and in mud in the rainy season. The road led through much cultivated land, many banana plantations, many African villages comprising mud huts, and one of the banes of Africa, cattle and goats loose in the road. All the many men we passed seemed to be riding bicycles, many highly decorated with all manner of wire contraptions and carrying enormous loads on the back carrier.

In due course we arrived at Zomba, the capital. It was a delightful small town at the foot of the Zomba mountain. The houses were all colonial style, large, surrounded by trees and plants of all descriptions. Again, every house had a very large, often fly gauzed, verandah stretching right round the house. Here they were called khondes. As in Salisbury, the jacarandas were in full bloom, also a magnificent big tree with scarlet flowers, called a flamboyant. All the gardens had an abundance of paw-paw trees, mango trees and avocados. So many in fact that the gardeners spent their time sweeping up the fallen ones and putting them in compost heaps.

We entered the Police Camp as it was called and went straight to the Officers' Club, where a number of HQ staff were gathered, it was now being close to 'sundown' time. The Club



was a long, again typically colonial building with a huge welcoming bar. I was introduced to most of those present, including the commissioner, Charles Apthorp, and after a cooling drink was taken to the Mess in which I was to live for the next three months. It comprised the first floor of the small block of flats in the Police Camp and shared between four and five single inspectors, some of whom had not been there much longer than I had. One was CID, another Special Branch, one administration and so on. They explained the set up to me and I learned that each of them took a month to run the mess and take care of catering and so on. At the end of the month the incumbent member reconciled his accounts, divided them by the number of members resident and required payment. We ate well, all the cooking being done by a Nyasa male, the usual in Nyasaland.

I was of course very tired and after a shower retired to my bed, also my first experience of sleeping under a mosquito net. An absolute necessity as malaria was rife. The mosquitoes noise and frustration at not being able to get through the netting almost kept one awake. If there was a tiny hole in the netting, which happened often and the houseboy was supposed to find and repair, they found it. To combat the problem the government issued all civil servants and their families with a prophylactic called Paludrine. This was supposed to be taken daily and normally appeared on the breakfast table in a little blue canister. There was a monthly one called Daraprine which was not as popular because it was more difficult to remember to take. One had to continue taking it even on a long leave in the UK. It was, however, totally effective and in spite of being bitten certainly thousands of times in the future years by vast hoards of mossies whilst fishing or duck shooting in thick swamps, I never had a trace of malaria. I attribute this totally to never ever missing my daily Paludrine.

Back to Zomba and waking up to heat, humidity, a multitude of birds singing, Zebio bringing me a cup of tea in bed (and I didn't and don't drink tea). I really felt I was in Africa.



Getting out of bed I saw what I had not seen the previous afternoon, but the town was nestled at the bottom of a beautiful mountain. A single road which led up the mountain and operated alternate half-hours up and down. Vehicles could not pass each other and the road led through magnificent tropical forests to the plateau on which was a delightful little hotel hotel called Kuchawe. The extra three thousand feet got one away from a lot of the heat and the food in the hotel was very good. The mountain was handled by the Forestry Department and there were big pine plantations on the top plus a number of little streams very well-stocked with rainbow trout - well used by fly fishermen.

So, after breakfast one of the chaps took me down to HQ and there I met the staff officer, Eric Bult, an ex-Metropolitan Police Officer. He attested me, took me over to the Paymaster/Quartermaster, Alex MacDonald, who took me into Zomba to the Standard Bank, opened a current account for me, so I could be paid and then to an Indian tailor to be measured up for uniforms. These took exactly one day to appear and I realised the value of Zebio who already knew how to handle khaki drill, starch and press it. He also knew all about polishing shoes and Sam Brownes, etc - but so did I with my RCMP background and I fear as far as uniform is concerned, I was a hard taskmaster. These people were, however, miraculous in the way they looked after our uniform. There were no electric irons and outside Zomba, Limbe/Blantyre and Lilongwe, no electricity even. The laundry was ironed with an iron heated by charcoal glowing inside it. To keep it hot and glowing the operator would swing the iron around to create a breeze. This sounds hazardous and indeed was. At fortunately infrequent intervals a piece of glowing charcoal would escape and land on a piece of clothing or bedding. In the case of uniform, this

necessitated buying a new item and the ironer was not very popular for a while.

Back to HQ and Eric Bult introduced me to a Nyasa Inspector, Lester Nkomba, the only African inspector in the Force, who was to be my mentor in things African for the next couple of months. I spent two hours each afternoon with him, learning the first elements of Chinyanja, and native law and custom as it was called - non-statutory law. My first few mornings were devoted to sitting in the library studying Standing Orders and the laws of Nyasaland. Since these were based on English law this was not difficult. My first afternoon after work I was taken to the Zomba Gymkhana Club, the hub of social life in Zomba and enrolled as a member. The fact that I played rugby and water polo was especially interesting to the club secretary. The next day I bought my first car on a government loan and I was ready to start enjoying life as a Bwana wa Polisi.

I think at this point I will explain the set up in the Nyasaland Police. Police HQ were in Zomba and situated there in the police camp were all the expected supporting services: CID, Special Branch, Fingerprints and Photography, Accounts, Stores, Transport and the Police Depot which also contained the Police Mobile Force (PMF), a quick reaction riot police trained to deal with civil disturbances. The African members of the PMF were not much trained as police officers, although they were attested and were more in the nature of a para-military force. Many of them came from the Kings African Rifles (KAR). The PMF numbered about two hundred constables and NCOs under the command of a Superintendent, at that time Geoff York and about four Inspectors or Chief Inspectors. It was customary to place new expatriate officers with the PMF whilst they learned the ways and customs of the African policemen. The Nyasaland Police at that time numbered some three and a half thousand members of whom seventy-five were European officers.

My first six months in Nyasaland were packed with new and exciting things to see and do, and people to meet, and I very much enjoyed it all. But there was much more to come as I was posted successively to Mlanje, Kasungu, Bvumbwe, Chikwawa and Chileka until I took early retirement and left Nyasaland, now Malawi, with eleven months' paid leave and a new life and career ahead of me.

Christopher Bean 2008



Note:

Reproduced from Volume 1 of 'Expatriate Experience of Life and work in Nyasaland' by Colin Baker, with the kind permission of Mpemba Books, owners of the copyright.