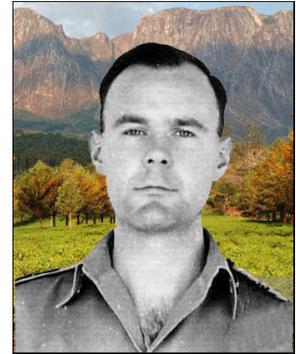


Escape from a District Prison

By Eric Bult

(Note: Reproduced here from Volume 6 of 'Expatriate Experience of Life and work in Nyasaland' by Colin Baker, with the kind permission of Mpemba Books, owners of the copyright.)

Birds chattering in the surrounding trees were frightened into early morning flight by the sudden clang of the bolt as it was withdrawn from its staple on the inside of the heavy door in a prison wall. The remarkable harmony of the untrained singing of the prisoners, which had followed the relative stillness as they consumed their breakfast of maize meal and relish, broke into laughter and shouting as they grouped together beside the door. It was time for their return to the world outside the grey stone place of correction at the base of the mountain near the south-east border of Nyasaland with neighbouring Mozambique.



The year was 1961, three years before the colonial territory was severed from British rule and became the state of Malawi. For more than a century the little Mlanje prison had incarcerated those who had transgressed the law, in conditions which in the course of time had gradually improved until, now lies to Ufulu (freedom), we're truly benign. Only those who had been sentenced to terms of public work not exceeding six months were housed there. The large central prison at Zomba, the administrative capital, was the temporary place of residence of all who served time in hard labour, as it was then known. Even there conditions were relatively attractive to those unfortunates whose only means of subsistence was tilling a patch barren land located at the whim of the sub-chief. Compared with living conditions in most villages in Nyasaland the marked advantages of three daily meals of sustaining food, uniform of strong white material and a mattress with blankets for cold nights was such that the only requirement to work under supervision and the absence of female comforts provided any deterrent to a life of crime. There was even a band, with drums, whistles and a bugle or two, which preceded the marchers to work at the quarry. The dozen or so prisoners who have been selected to work at the

District Commissioner's offices at the Mlanje Boma assembled on the roadway outside the prison, several clicking their finger joints in the anticipatory manner of the Bantu.

Whether seniority was established by age, length of service or, as is most likely, the number of cigarettes presented to the warder, was a matter for conjecture. What is clear, however, that the position of senior prisoner was one of some authority. Only he was sufficiently elevated in the pecking order to be permitted to carry the warder's gun. The warder, believing himself to be of significant authority (otherwise could not possess a gun), followed the universal Bantu custom of transferring anything which needed to be carried to the arms or head of an underling. (Why, otherwise, were women always the carriers?). He was aware too of a standing order which had been issued following an unfortunate incident involving a firearm. A warder had accidentally shot himself in the foot. The order stipulated that weapons were not to be loaded until or unless immediately required for use. His own clip of five rounds was safely in his tunic pocket as he ceremoniously handed over his rifle to the senior prisoner. The party then moved off in the direction of the Boma. Singing did not resume until the house of the Officer in Charge of Police was passed.

The work undertaken by the prisoners consisted mainly of cleaning the surrounds of buildings, grass cutting, and picking up by hand the fallen blooms of the jacaranda trees which, with the lush green of the tea bushes, lent glorious colour to the district. The ability of the Nyasas to undertake such mind blowing tasks for hours on end, chatting and laughing interminably without the slightest trace of boredom, was amazing. Before the working party had covered more than half a kilometre, one of the prisoners leapt into the surrounding bush and run off. This unusual circumstance was immediately drawn to the attention of the warder, who with remarkable decisiveness retrieved his rifle from the senior prisoner. He did not, however, load the weapon, doubtless having in mind the event giving rise to the standing order. Moreover, he remembered having been instructed that non-lethal measures should first be employed in arresting escaped prisoners.

There followed a lengthy discussion during which the warder, in the centre of the group, was assailed by so many suggestions concerning the most appropriate course to be adopted in these most unusual circumstances. There were those of the prisoners who recommended they split up and go in search of the escapee. Others thought we should return to the prison to seek directions. One had the idea of reporting the escape to the Officer I/c Police, but this was rejected out of hand by the warder, who preferred in the circumstances that the report should go through proper channels: first to his own officer, then to the police station occurrence book keeper. So it was that the working party retracing their steps toward the prison. Singing recommenced only when the Police house was passed. Later that morning, at the Esperanza tea state of the British and East Africa Company, the estate manager was working on his production statistics when a shadow was cast across his desk from the open doorway of his office. Looking up he saw a man dressed in prison whites who immediately sprang to rigid attention and threw up a smart salute. The manager, well-versed in Central African affairs, realised his visitor could be none other than a former member of the King's African Rifles, one battalion of which was stationed at each of the southern territories of the Central African Federation, Zomba in Nyasaland and Lusaka in Northern Rhodesia. The only difference between this morning visitor at one of the serving members of the KAR was that his bare feet did not meet the floor with quite the same crash as they would have if he had been wearing boots. Evidently, this man had found himself in some little trouble with the law since leaving the army, nonetheless he greeted the prisoner with a friendly 'Moni. Ufuna nchiani?'

The man revealed a fine set of bright white teeth smiled upon being greeted by the manager. He gave a short, service-style report of the escape, together with a request by the prison officer that he be informed in the event of any sighting of the fugitive. Having been assured that all the estate staff would be told accordingly, yhe messenger saluted once more, turned smartly and marched off along the office verandah.



The sun was lowering towards the mountain in the north-west when women plucking tea leaves on the estate caught sight of the escapee making his way between the bushes towards the road which led eventually to the Mozambique border. They immediately gave chase, summoning other tea pluckers by their peculiar ululating. Soon some dozen or more labourers closed in on the hapless man who put up

merely a token resistance before being frog-marched to the manager's office. The occurrence book keeper at the police station never received any report concerning the escape from lawful custody. The prison officer well knew that the police at Mlanje had much more vital work on hand than prosecution of an escape from public work.