

A BOYHOOD AMBITION

By John Clements

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A boyhood ambition to join the Police, at least, became a reality when, after an interview with Deputy Commissioner, Jack Helliwell, I was appointed to the Force in December 1953, initially to the Police Training School as an instructor. My boss was A/Supt Les Acton, and the Officer i/c was Lou D'Olivera.

Being in the Training School, as an instructor, I was able to acquire valuable knowledge and to pass the required law exams and advanced Chinyanja fairly quickly.

The Force, at the time, had embarked on getting all ranks trained in up-to-date riot drills and crowd control; instruction, in this field, was given by a party of six officers from the BSAP (all members of their equestrian unit). At the successful completion of their mission, a farewell party was given; also attending this function was a certain Joyce (Jo) Oxley. Jo had come to the country as governess to the children of Charles (Chief Secretary) and Joyce Footman. We fell in love and our courtship progressed well, and when Mr Footman



became acting Governor, in the absence of His Excellency, Jo was allowed to have me visit her at Govt. House and I remember having the occasional scrambled egg supper on the upstairs back khonde. Our dating often took us to the Zomba air-strip and during one evening there a leopard strolled by the car. As we had no family present, the Footman's, very kindly filled this void. The wedding took place at St George's Church, where my Mother and I had been christened. Mr Footman gave Jo away and they also hosted the reception afterwards. Scanning the guest list photographs recently, it seems that the upper levels of the secretariat were very well represented. It was very much a Police Wedding and I, and many of

of the police guests were in uniform. My best-man was Bevan Whitechurch, also a born Nyasalander and old school friend, who had come to the Force from the BSAP; Bevan passed on in June 2011.

In 1955 I was posted to Lilongwe as Station Officer (2 i/c), under Supt. Trevor Bevan. Later when Trevor was posted elsewhere, I took over, with acting rank of Insp. Being a busy station with a variety of occurrences and incidents, my experience widened rapidly. One incident, which I will never forget, was the tragic suicide off A/Insp. John Cook who had become a conscientious and reliable member of the Station and a good friend.



A major event, for us, during our time in Lilongwe, was the arrival of our first daughter, Bridget, on the day of the inspection by the officer i/c CID, from Zomba HQ. The inspection got off to an unfortunate start when the station bugler decided to wash the office floor, minutes before the arrival of Supt. Peter Long. As he stepped into the office he slipped; he didn't fall, but his visit was further upset when I told him of my altered status, of fatherhood, and that I was abandoning him to see Jo and the baby in hospital.

The Lilongwe Hotel, under Dave Elder, was the centre of much social activity, and the occasional disturbance, as could be expected of the best known bar in town.

At the beginning of 1956, I took over at Ncheu, the DC being Derek Matthews who had a tennis court in his garden, which provided regular recreation and a centre for socialising.

Our domestic water was delivered by donkeys loaded with paraffin cans carried, pannier fashion, and emptied into a sump and then hand-pumped by prisoners into an attic tank.

It was at Ncheu that I gained my first experience of prosecuting in the lower courts and for more serious cases, before the visiting Resident Magistrate.

The Watch Tower followers kept us busy in the District by constantly refusing to bund their gardens and, when imprisoned, refusing to wear prison clothing - even in the cold weather.

Once, late at night, on returning with an injured child from a mission station in the Kirk Range, where there had been a shooting accident, we hit a leopard as it stepped onto the track, it let out a yelp and disappeared into the surrounding bush. Tragically the little girl died in hospital that night and we later prosecuted the Missionary.

During our long leave, I was required to attend a Senior CID Course at the West Riding Training School in Wakefield - a very worthwhile 3 months.

Our next posting was to Dedza where we spent a whole three year tour and for us it was the most enjoyable of all. The DC was Ronnie Noyce who was later succeeded by Gabe Pollard. The ADC's were Peter, Dommett and John Crossley, my 2 i/c was A/S Insp. B. Kumwembe, a good reliable officer whom I recommended for promotion.

Not long after taking over in 1957, there were an unfortunate series of incidents involving the loss of the Boma safe keys and £200. Other suspicious happening included three safes having to be 'officially' opened within a two month period. Subsequently, nearly all the Boma staff were either sacked, transferred or imprisoned for other offences.

A controversial multiracial society had been formed at a Concert, in the WNLA Hall, early at 1958, black and white performers presented a programme of song and dance. This was the first which was marred by the actions of an inebriated white. Fortunately a nasty situation was averted - I think this was the only function put on by this group.

The political climate began to deteriorate and we were eventually given the date of 'operation sunrise' - midnight on 3 March 1959 - and the start of the state of emergency. After months of Special Branch work, hard-core MCP members were identified; ours were located in the Linthipe area.

On the night, accompanied by a hooded SB man., (who had carried out the preliminary undercover work), 2 Special-Constables, and 5 Constables, the huts of our targets were pin-pointed and the arrests carried out without incident.

During this anxious time, a young officer from the NRP was sent to me but I regret to say his irresponsible behaviour was more of a problem to me than the MCP. On the following morning 'Op Sunrise', the Boma was buzzed by two jet fighters of the Rhodesian Air Force, "showing a flag", and then the following weeks it was noticeable how the population soon returned to normal friendly disposition.

The escarpment is part of the district and ulendos to the lake-shore area were always a welcome break. These included a visit to the White Fathers Mission at Ntakataka where beautiful furniture was made, the machinery being entirely water powered. There were other interesting characters in the district including two hermits.

The proximity of the town to the PEA border was the cause of a few problems and in this connection, the Dedza Hotel was the scene of the occasional fracas involving the Portuguese and the town citizens, the fisticuffs occurred when the former blocked the latter's access to the bar counter. I once drove to Vila Couthino for a meeting with the Administrator, where, unexpectedly, I witnessed a real chain-gang employed on building a hospital.

Whilst at Dedza our second daughter, Marilyn, was born and I was promoted to A/Supt. It was a busy station with an unusually high number of murders, resulting in more time spent in prosecuting in Preliminary Inquiries and other serious cases before the Resident Magistrate. The RM was Peter Smith, a delightful man who was always helpful to us Police Prosecutors, and it was in Peter's Court that I first prosecuted a case with the defence

Counsel on the other side. The defending Council, Mr Sacranie, arrived with a bearer loaded with books, each one with book-marker slips. All I had was the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code - an intimidating experience.

I think it was following our time in Dedza that I attended a Forensic Science Course, during our long leave in the UK.

Mzuzu was our next posting where I took over the Police Mobile Force contingent with three platoons. Our house was very new with no garden but a magnificent view - the garbage was collected by a two-ox cart led by a cheerful and colourful character. Our weekends were often spent at Chikali Beach, Nkhata Bay, with its shaded beach, crystal clear water and colourful fish.

Apart from a spell at Karonga, waiting for trouble that didn't materialise, it was an uneventful time. A deep-seated belief in the Force was that Karonga was a punishment station – anyway, this was our next posting with the rank of Ag/Supt. Insp. Williams was the Stn. Officer who was later replaced by Mike Harper. The Police house was a typical lake-shore residence – all rooms being on the first floor and entirely enclosed with mosquito netting – the exception being the dining room on the ground floor. As a result, mealtimes were occasionally interrupted by large Monitor-lizards looking for hand-outs.

A Central African Airways Beaver served the town with two flights a week north and 2 south - one of these brought our fresh produce from Mbeya and on one occasion, the south-bound aircraft crash-landed and ended up in the dambo at the end of the airstrip – no injuries, but we lost our groceries.



The district had two police posts – Fort Hill, which I visited by Beaver, and Chisenga. Mike Harper stayed with us before moving to Fort Hill and became a great favourite with our daughters, with his conversion of the Force Christmas card into cartoons with mice-man characters. He was also the proud owner of a sailing canoe which was put to good use during the afternoons and weekends on the beach. The Battle of Karonga (Sept. 1914) war-graves were at the back of our house, one of these being of my Mother's first cousin, Vincent Ascott, of the Nyasaland Volunteer Reserve. Jo took care of our daughters' education by using the Radio School Service and their supporting mail class-work programme.

Blantyre was our next and last move. Being a large Commercial Centre, it was a very different experience with its urban problems that made Police life interesting. One potentially awkward incident occurred when the Traffic Section booked the wife of a senior



judge, following an accident. The judge was incensed by this action, complaining bitterly that Insp. Fred Tomkins was an "impertinent young man". He informed me that the matter would be taken further and that he had "a very long memory". I informed him that the case would go ahead but I have no recollection of how it ended,

There were occasional illegal gatherings and we had to deal with a mysterious leakage of confidential information involving a reporter of the Nyasaland Times. He, somewhat arrogantly, told us that it had cost him a lot of money: I don't think we ever got to the bottom of

this. A suicide was reported in which a school boy, sadly, decided to end his life by climbing into a septic tank. Needless to say, this was a very unpleasant operation owing to the difficulty in removing him through the man-hole.

Just prior to our departure on terminal-leave, an assault occasioning actual bodily harm, by Dr Banda's bodyguard, was reported by a local resident. The victim had, for some time, been trying to get an interview with the Doctor but had been continually denied

this. Finally, they agreed, and told him to meet them near Soche and on arrival he was severely beaten up. Before we could prosecute, the case file was called for by HQ who instructed us not to prosecute - a decision obviously made because of political sensitivity at a critical time, but one which badly affected morale on the station.

The reservoir near Limbe was the home of the Ndirande Sailing Club, where I enjoyed racing an 'Enterprise' dinghy, "Caretta", in some exciting competition.

Very sadly and with the offer of a golden handshake (lumpers) and a pension, we left Nyasaland - the land of my birth - in Sept. 1963, for the UK, expecting to start a new life. But after 4 1/2 years decided instead, to return to Africa and make Somerset West in the Cape our home. Our daughters are happily married and we have four grand- and two great-grandchildren. My Jo died in November 2012, 12 days short of our 58th anniversary and I dedicate this story to her memory and the happy life we shared in that fascinating country.



Finally: Ndikufunira ni anthu ku Malawi zabwino zonse m'tsogolo lawo.

(I wish the people of Malawi all the best for their future)