

# NATIONAL SERVICE WITH THE KING'S AFRICAN RIFLES

By John Clements

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In 1945, when my father's career as Conservator of Forests was coming to an end, my Mother, sister and I left Nyasaland to settle in the UK, and importantly, to arrange our further education. Dad retired the following year and joined us in Devon.

Having passed the entrance exam, I was sent off to Radley College, near Abingdon and although not an academic, left with a School Certificate.

Not long after completing my schooling, I had to present myself, with a great deal of apprehension, to the Wessex Brigade, Bulford, as a new National Service conscript. Now,



as a private in the Devonshire Regt., my life as a soldier had begun, with the prospect of months of basic training. During this period I attended a 3-day Selection Camp and having successfully cleared this hurdle, was sent to the Infantry Officers Cadet School, Eaton Hall in Cheshire. After a rigorous four months of OCS, I emerged as a 2nd Lieut. in the Devons and seeing an opportunity to return to Nyasaland,

applied for, and was granted a secondment to the 2nd Bn., The Kings African Rifles, Zomba; town of my birth.

Arriving in Zomba, I joined Capt. M. Morton, the Adjutant as his assistant; this was an admin. job and not particularly interesting and, on requesting a move, I was appointed to a company as 2 i/c. The Battalion, at that time, was preparing to move to Malaya to join up with the 1st Bn, in the campaign against the bandit activity there. A fair amount of recruiting was necessary for this, and I remember one particular drive to Chief Mbelwa's area in the N. Province. We were anxious to recruit more Angonis into the Bn. hence the reason for this particular excursion, the band came with us and was used to great effect in enticing young Angonis into the Regiment.



Working with the recruits during this time was a pleasure, they seemed to enjoy the life, gained weight and after only a few weeks with a Bn. blossomed into fit and keen young soldiers. Infantry field training was of course very much part of the programme and on one of these exercises, I took a platoon to, I think, David Henderson's Estate, about 12 miles out of Zomba. We marched there to the harmonized singing of these, by now, confident Askaris, an experience I'll never forget. On arrival, a hut was constructed of thatching grass with a bed inside, for me, and for a few special days we worked on the skills required of an infantry soldier. A hyena calling occasionally at night added to the atmosphere during that unforgettable time in the bush.

The Commanding Officer was, then, Lt. Col R.D. Blackie of the Sherwood Foresters. There was only about 3 of us subalterns and during Mess Nights, the 3 of us stuck to egg-nogs as our tipples: how did we require this odd habit? The Regiment decided to form a Sailing Club and because of previous experience, I was detailed to collect our new boat from Reggie Sharp's estate, near Cholo: he had been commissioned to build an SS class, 16 ft dinghy for us - boats in this class were expected to have double names, beginning with S,

and ours was suitably named 'Snap Shot'. For this task I was given extra leave and she was duly loaded onto a 3-ton truck and taken to Palm Beach, where I spent an enjoyable week putting her through her paces. I later sailed her to Cape Maclear.

The big ceremonial parades attracted a colourful crowd including the Chiefs and their entourages. The annual King's (later Queen's) birthday parade, being one such event, and I remember having the honour of being 2 l/c of the Governor's Guard of Honour, at the Zomba Gymkhana Club: The Guard Commander being Capt. Peter Forrest and Jock Corrie, His Excellency's ADC. On another occasion, I think it must have been during the jubilee celebrations in July 1952, the Bn marched through Zomba with colours flying and drums beating – HE, Sir Geoffrey Colby, taking the salute.

I doubt if many would echo my sentiments, but I thoroughly enjoyed my National Service. Not wishing to return to the UK I requested local release and was told it would be granted on production of an offer of employment in the Country. I applied to the Imperial Tobacco Co. in Limbe and was taken on as assistant in their African Affairs Dept. (personnel) under Bill Lane. I suspect that having a little Chinyanja helped me.

My work included welfare, general and wage admin., but another of my duties was to operate cine projector for the workers' Saturday evening film shows. The film was always a Western and the hero, a handsome cowboy who the audience named Jeki. Loud cheering always accompanied Jeki's appearance on the screen: Jekii always wore a white stetson and the chief baddie, a black one. It was impossible to use the sound system owing to the audiences' continuous cheering. Fishing on the Company dam was a great pleasure and during my time in Limbe, I became a founder member of the Mlanje Mountain Club (now The Mountain Club of Malawi).

