My Arrival and First Posting

by Robin Martin

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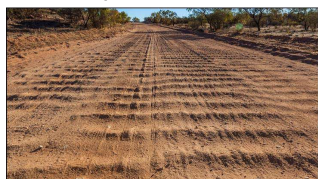
On 12 September 1951 I left Britain from London airport, aboard a British Overseas Airways Argonaut aircraft, dressed in a business suit with tie, as was ‘de rigueur’ in those days. Apart from being thrilled by the sight of Alexandria as we passed over in bright sunshine, I recall little of the flight. When I arrived at Mombasa, I met another newly-appointed officer on his way to join the Nyasaland Police. David Watson had served several years in the Glasgow police and, like myself, he expressed some excitement about starting a new career phase very different from our United Kingdom experience. His father was a medical doctor who had served in Nyasaland. David had been born there, but had been brought up in Britain and remembered very little about the territory.

At Mombasa airport, we met another officer from Nyasaland. He was Superintendent Peter Long, head of the C.I.D. He had been conducting enquiries concerning alleged official corruption by a former Attorney General. We travelled together by Central African Airways to Blantyre, where we were met by yet another police officer, Assistant Superintendent Douglas Lomax, who drove us all in his car from Chileka airport to Zomba, the administrative capital of Nyasaland, where David and I were to report for duty at Police, H.Q. It was my first experience of travel by road in the Protectorate, and it was hair-raising. The corrugated earth roads were traversed at speeds that I thought were far too fast for safety, particularly when approaching the many blind curves, with clouds of red-brown dust following in our wake and still suspended behind occasional approaching vehicles which we almost met in the middle of the road



It required only a day or two after I acquired my own car for me to learn that, owing to the cambered surface of the roads, one needed to remain more or less in the centre to avoid travelling in a constant controlled slide. Corrugations which reappeared miraculously soon after an occasional passage of a tractor-drawn sweeper, dictated a minimum speed of some 45 mph to prevent violent shudder of the vehicle and occupants, to say nothing of extensive damage to the vehicle's suspension. The onset of seasonal rain immediately transformed the roads into muddy skidpans and demanded an excitingly different technique. This required the driver to keep the wheels spinning and spraying mud over anything which passed or was passed, but to ease off the throttle as soon as the car began to slide. The trick was not to allow the vehicle to come to rest in deep mud, or the result could be a long wait for aid. Many times I found myself off the road entirely, but managed to keep going until the car was back among the deep ruts.

Having dumped my kit at the single officers’ Mess (my wife and daughter were permitted to join me only after about six months, when I was allocated quarters at my first station) I reported my arrival at HQ and was given my first duty: to accompany the former Attorney General, who had been released on ‘conditional bail’ until he was able to produce two sureties. He was permitted to travel wherever he wished within the territory, in company with his legal representative - an Indian barrister - provided I as his ‘guard’ was with him. Thus ensued one of the strangest episodes of my career.

The accused, whom I shall refer to as L-S, and a lawyer set off by car from Zomba in the late afternoon of my arrival. I travelled in the back of the car, aware that they would be careful not to say anything in my presence and hearing, which could damage their case, but knowing absolutely nothing about the case, their intended destination, whosoever they met, where we were, or when (or if ?) we would return. I remember however that we

travelled around half the night, stopping at several large houses in the midst of extensive estates where L-S met several jovial friends and enjoyed a heavily alcoholic search for bail

The legal advisor, to my eternal relief since he was driving, had little to drink. I joined him in abstinence, being aware that my career depended upon being able to deliver L-S back into the arms of the law when his search for bail was concluded.

I have no idea what time I eventually retired to bed that night, or to be precise, next morning, but I was certainly very tired having journeyed from Britain within the previous 24 hours. It was a salutary experience for me, as I was later required to remain on duty for periods in excess of 36 hours at a stretch. Indeed, apart from a seldom-experienced joy of a few days' 'local leave', a Colonial police officer at a station in Nyasaland was 'on duty call', literally 24 hours of each day. At the conclusion of each three years' service the occasion never arose when I considered the greeting by friends in Britain - 'what!, You back on leave again?' anything but unfounded criticism of the service ethic.

Next day both Frank Chivers and I met the Assistant Commissioner of Police, Geoffrey Morton, (who had left the Jenin Division in Palestine the day I arrived there in 1939) and he welcomed us to the Nyasaland Police Force adding that there was a lot to do. He said the Force was way behind the times and needed bringing up to date in every department. He remarked, with a smile, that he hoped to see a mounted section introduced which he could put me in charge of, but he must have known it would never happen. It would not have been a practical proposition because the horses would have had to be kept at a certain altitude, to avoid the tsetse fly and horse sickness.

After a weekend in Blantyre, Chivers and I were taken the 42 miles to Police Headquarters in Zomba, the administrative capital, to be issued with our accoutrements - including a . 380 Webley Scott revolver, belts, boots, and buttons and then to be measured for uniforms by the tailor there. We also met the Commissioner, Mr M L Fraser, as charming a man as I ever wish to know. He was shortly to retire and was, I think; content to let Geoffrey Morton take over the arrangements for the modernisation of the Force, which were certainly needed. We were then duly sworn in as Assistant Inspectors of the Nyasaland Police Force, starting at the bottom of the European ranks.

The possibility of Self Government for the Protectorate was discussed and we were asked what we felt about that. I replied that I was prepared to take that chance and would aim to stay as long as possible. Several of us come from various colonies that gained their independence and were prepared for a similar outcome in Nyasaland.

Nyasaland was then regarded as a real backwater of the Empire. It is a small country by African standards and is not rich in natural mineral resources: its major export was native labour and thousands of Nyasalanders left the country to seek work in Rhodesia and in the mines of South Africa. The main agricultural exports were tea, coffee and tobacco and a little groundnut oil, agricultural industries that had been developed by European financial investment and settlers in the previous half century. Prior to the development of the tea and tobacco plantations, there was a very prominent Scottish Missionary presence, which had been inspired by Livingston, who wanted to encourage alternative trade and economic activities to the slave trade.

As regards the police force, at least 50% of the native policemen could not read or write, but this, as far as I could see, was not such a great disadvantage as may be supposed, as like many illiterate people they had wonderful memories. They I was later to find that these Regular Constables, as they were known, were excellent old chaps. They may not have been able to read or write but they could certainly do the job. Several Regular Constables I

knew would come back from an investigation of a case, bringing with them the witness and exhibits, then stand before Recording Officer relating to him all that had occurred: that this witness says so-and-so, and the next witness said such-and-such, and so go on right through the case. Then Recording Officer was able to interview all the witnesses and prepare a case file ready to be presented to the prosecuting officer. Now, however, mid-way through the 20 century, it was considered that this state of affairs could not continue. The Regular Constables were kept on but the new recruits had to be literate, at least up to standard 4 of elementary school, about the level of learning of a 12 year old child. They were able to read and write not only in Chinyanja but also a sort of English, for example, ‘This man stands six feet up in his socks.’

I was posted to Zomba Police HQ, for a week or two. This was a small but pleasant town situated in a spectacular position at the base of Zomba Mountain. It was the administrative capital of the Protectorate. Here was Government House; the Chief Secretary and Legislature; the Police Headquarters and the training school in the Police Camp; Forestry and Agricultural HQ; and the HQ and Battalion of the Kings African Rifles (KAR). There was also rather pleasant Botanical Garden, which had been established at the end of the previous century, along the banks of an attractive stream that had risen on the mountain. There were few shops along the main street but nothing compared to what was available in Blantyre. A little house was put at my disposal there,

and I was able to purchase a few household items at an auction in Limbe which helped to make the house more comfortable. Here I spent a couple of weeks being introduced to the men and the system. One morning I was sent to supervise police recruits firing their rifle course on the range. I also arranged to have some Chinyanja language lessons from Chitama, one of the African clerks. Of one thing I was convinced, that I must learn the language as soon as possible, for I fully appreciated that I only really began to enjoy service in Palestine once I had acquired a fair knowledge of Arabic.

The King's Birthday Parade was due and the KAR were rehearsing. Frank Chivers and I were sent to witness the rehearsal and assist in any way. We were introduced to several officers and then advised to stand back in a certain area to observe. The battalion was marched on in review order and paraded before the second in command. The parade was called to 'attention' to be handed over to the Commanding Officer. The second in command called out to one of his company commanders that, 'One of your men is still standing at ease'. Then I heard one of the most amusing excuses I had ever heard in my life. The company commander replied, ' He is urinating, Sir'. Guardsmen often faint on parade and are punished for it, but until then I had never heard of a soldier 'standing at ease for a piss'. Obviously things in Africa were different.

At Zomba I met two more ex-Palestine policemen – Norman Carswell who was stationed at MeaShearim Police Station in Jerusalem and now serving as Officer I/c Police Zomba, and Alec Bowden Stuart, who I had met at the wedding of a friend in Palestine. He was now Staff Officer at Police HQ, and both old comrades befriended me well. I was posted to Dedza in the Central Province and, as a new motor van was to be allocated to Lilongwe, the HQ of the Central Province, I was able to hitch a lift in this van and so get on my way. Lilongwe is further north of Dedza from Zomba, but I made my way there first to meet my new Divisional Commanding Officer before going down to Dedza, where accommodation had been arranged for me in the local Angoni Highlands Hotel.

It was a long journey from Zomba to Lilongwe, in the one-ton capacity, box body Morris van. The springing was awful and the surface of the dirt road atrocious with the bone-shuddering, corrugations, sometimes extending, unbroken, for 20 miles and more. It was an interminable, shattering experience and I was shaken rigid to the backbone. Of course, as time went on, on I came to accept and expect such conditions as quite normal. At that

time the only tarmac road in the country was the 5 or 6 mile strip between Blantyre and Limbe, the most populous and developed area in the whole country. The road north crosses the Shire river at Liwonde and, while we were crossing the river on the ferry, I saw my first whirlwind, which took off the complete grass roof of a native hut, carried it up into the air for about 100 ft and then deposited it, in small pieces, in the Shire river. Meanwhile the ferry men were pulling the craft across on cables, singing as they did so, and I almost expected Sanders of the River to appear around the next bend.

After 90 miles we reached Ncheu.. Here I had been told to stop and introduce myself to the District Commissioner there, Michael Sharpe, as I was to have police responsibility for both Dedza and Ncheu districts. I found Mike to be the perfect example of what was expected of a Colonial District Commissioner to be - a real gentleman with the capacity to accept and deal efficiently and effectively with any eventuality that may arise. He welcomed me with the usual warm hospitality and told me that if it should happen that I had come to Ncheu, and he was out, I should make myself known to his head boy, who would ensure that I was provided with food and accommodation.

After this happy meeting I continued on my way, there was another 110 miles of bone-shaking road to travel before we reached Lilongwe. On the way through I called in at the Hotel in Dedza, introduced myself to the proprietors, the Hewitts, and left some of my possessions in store. Setting off once more we eventually arrived at Lilongwe, just after dark; hungry, tired, and very dirty. Here, I renewed my acquaintance with yet another ex-Palestine Policeman, Danny Morrison, who became a very good friend, and he introduced me to the Superintendent i/c of the Central Division, Jimmy Tennant, who started his police career in the British South Africa Police in Southern Rhodesia. I stayed in Lilongwe for two weeks to acquaint myself of the routine in the Central Division, and then set off for Dedza as the District Police Inspector.

Here began my 'fun' for I had come from a large well-organised and efficient police force, equipped with modern wireless communications as well as a whole plethora or armoured vehicles and armaments, and where the police stations were purpose built, like little fortresses. Conditions at Dedza could not have been more different. I now found my 'police station' to be little more than a cubbyhole on the side of the district prison. Having no office I was allotted a room by the District Commissioner in his block. The only phone in the district was in the DC's office, and phone lines at that time were strung along trees in the bush, so they were often down due to storm or white ant damage. A chair and a table were the only pieces of furniture, but in those days empty wooden petrol boxes, which petrol was transported – two tins to a box – were readily available, and several boxes, stacked on end, became a filing cabinet. (These boxes were very useful in houses too – for example two petrol boxes with a board across the top became a lady's dresing table).

I was the first white senior police officer in the district for until then the DC had also been the officer commanding the police. I also now took over responsibility for prisons and immigration (we were close to the border with Portuguese East Africa). I had a staff of about 15 policemen, various ranks, at Dedza, the HQ of the district, and several small police stations and posts in the outlying areas. Assistant Inspector Lanzandu was my right-

hand man in Dedza. There were two or three policemen in each of the little stations or posts, including Salima, Chipoka and Ntakataka down by the lake. Ncheu also came under Dadza district for policing. There were about 12 policemen at Ncheu and several police posts, with additional strength, including one at Balaka Rail Halt.

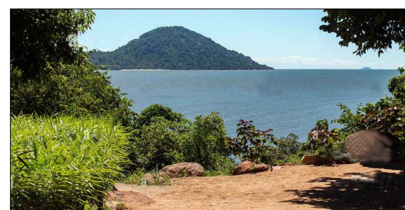
Soon after I arrived in Dedza there was a meeting of the council of local chiefs, which I was asked to address. After I was welcomed, I introduced myself and explained that, as the first white police officer in the district, it was not my job to make any difficulties for them, but to work with them to ensure that the best results were obtained from all the various exigencies that prevailed. I was gratified to learn later that I had made a positive impression on the chiefs.

I was very pleased to find myself in Dedza, which was quite a delightful place. The Boma was a healthy 5,000 ft above sea level with Dedza Mountain towering 2,500 ft above it. I was especially happy to be there when I met the District Commissioner, Sedley George Williams or 'SG' as he was always known, for he was very welcoming and a great companion to me. He had been in Nyasaland since about 1922 but had retired from Government Service due to injury (the cause to be related later) before the Second World War started, and had bought a house and settled down in Dorset. He joined the Air Watch Service before the war and served in that capacity for a while during the war. Then young men in the Colonial Administration Service were called up to the armed forces, so retired colonial officers like SG were called back overseas again. He was still engaged in this capacity when I first met him but was about to retire a second time but was intending to stay and live in Dedza, which he found a very pleasant spot and was building himself a house. When I arrived Doris, his wife, was away in England and I thought he enjoyed my company as much as I did his.

During my first weekend, I went for a walk to familiarise myself with the locality and decided to have a look at the house SG was building, I found him there with some African helpers, attempting to install the water system. He was using dies to cut the thread on the pipes and as I watched I noticed that there was only one thread being cut. 'You have got the die on the wrong way round', I remarked. 'I can't have', he replied. 'The Brother of the mission put them together so they must be right'. 'Well, the brother at the mission knows no more than you then', I observed. He reluctantly let me change them over but then he began to make some progress. I reassured him by explaining that I had learnt about such things as stocks and dies at my technical school and, reassured, he asked me if I could help him the following weekend.

Getting About the District

At that time I had no car and it was very difficult to obtain one, so recently after the war. I had put my name on a waiting list with the car dealers but it took some months to work one's way up the list. As I was unable to travel any distance around my area, SG suggested to me that I should go out with him on some of his business trips. In this way I got to know the district roads and tracks quite well and was introduced to many of the people - including native Africans, white settlers, missionaries, and other government servants, such as the agricultural and forestry officers.



Much of Dedza district was included the 5,000 ft high plateau that surrounded Dedza Mountain, but some of the area comprised the lakeshore plain, about 3,500 ft down the escarpment. On one occasion SG and I went down to an Indian (Asian) trading settlement

at Ntakataka down by the lake one day, where we heard how, two days before, a lion had been attacked by a tribe of baboons. The creature had been so badly mauled that it appeared to have lost its reason. It wandered into the trading settlement and then walked into one of the shops where it lay down to rest in the cool and dark. The shopkeeper and

his customers had hurriedly left through into one of the shops where it lay down to rest in the cool and dark. The shopkeeper and his customers had hurriedly left through the doors and windows, leaving the lion in charge of the shop. After about half an hour the lion seems to have recovered his senses, for he arose, bruised and still breathing, and made his way out of the shop and disappeared into the bush.

This visit was followed by a courtesy call to a mission station, where we took some refreshments with the Father Superior and had a discussion on local affairs. On leaving, SG told me a story about a white lay brother who had been at the mission and had had an affair with a local native girl, who, in consequence, had found herself pregnant. The lay brother, after agonising over the matter for some days, decided that the best thing he could do would be to confess his sin to the Father Superior and throw himself on his mercy. The Father told the young man that he was only human and could receive forgiveness, but he was not sufficiently mature to stay on at the Mission and it would be better if he left. With a sad heart the young brother left and obtained a job at a local sawmill. Some months after this, SG met the young man at the sawmill and enquired after his health and well-being. The ex-lay brother replied that he was fine and enjoying his work in the outside world, but added, ‘I was a fool to have confessed to the Father Superior for the girl had a miscarriage’. Obviously he thought that ‘honesty was not always the best policy’.

Cattle Thieving

There had been some cattle thieving in the district and back at the Boma, my policemen had brought in some of the culprits that were responsible. I brought the case before SG who, sitting in his capacity as Magistrate, found the accused guilty and sentenced them to prison for stiff sentences, five years each if my memory serves me correctly. SG told me that he had handed out the same sentences some years before and The Chief Justice had frowned on his sentences and reduced very considerably. As a result the villagers came to the conclusion that the Administration did not regard cattle theft as a very serious offence and started cattle rustling to an alarming degree. Not until the very heavy sentences were re-introduced did the menace cease. At the end of this case SG commented that he did not think the CJ would interfere this time.

In common with most of the European members of the administration SG enjoyed his sundowner, and one evening when we were sitting enjoying just such a drink, he remarked that his wife Doris would be arriving soon, and added that he would now have to be careful with his drinking, for she kept a watchful eye on him. ‘You know’, he continued, ‘one has to get crafty. Whenever Doris leaves the sitting room I have to jump up quickly, top up my glass and have a good long drink, to make sure that the level in the glass is similar to when she went out!’ I had to have a laugh at this: here was a real man, who escaped from Germans and faced a man-eating lion and killed it; had gone through all that terrible trouble with a mauled arm was still afraid, or should I say reluctant, to upset his dear Doris over an extra tot of the hard stuff.

Doris arrived in due course and SG finally retired from the service and they settled into the newly built bungalow on the slopes of Dedza Mountain - with its fine views over the plain towards Golomoti, and then perhaps to the Lake, which may just have been visible. He had decided that he would like to retire to Nyasaland and was prepared to sell his house in

Dorset. However they did not live in the house for long. SG let it to the Doctor for a while and went to live just outside Blantyre where he worked for a company, which had a house that went with the job. Eventually the house in Dedza was sold.

Security Nyasaland Style

Near to where SG Williams had built his bungalow a small dam was being constructed, to provide water for a small vegetable plot for the prison. At that time the district police officer was also in charge of the prison and prisoners. A small gang of prisoners, under the care of two armed warders, had been sent down to work on the job. I decided that I would walk down to see how the work was progressing. Oh my arrival, to my amazement I found that one of the warders was working on the dam wall, with his rifle lying about 10 yds away from him, and a prisoner standing over it. Such was the legacy of my experience and training from my time in Palestine - which had become a very violent place by the time the British Mandate was given up and where all weapons and ammunition had to be closely guarded, or very severe trouble would have ensued - that I 'blew my top'. I put the warder responsible on report for a disciplinary charge for 'failing to safeguard the custody of his firearm'. I believe my superiors at the Provincial level were of the opinion that I was making 'much ado about nothing' and in retrospect they were probably right. This incident just goes to illustrate what a peaceful and safe place Nyasaland was at that time, and I have to chuckle when I think about it now. However more violent times were to come as a result of the changing political situation, and the country was never to be so peaceful and safe again as it was then.

Murder at Ncheu

A message came from Ncheu that a child had been murdered in the district and I was required to go and take charge of the investigation. Still having no car, I travelled down on the local bus. Because it was hot all the windows were kept open and as the bus bumped along, churning up the road, we became engulfed in clouds of dust as we passed other

vehicles on the way, covering passengers and luggage alike in a thick layer. My Provincial Superintendent, Jimmy Tennant, was also travelling on the road and, knowing my movements, stopped the bus so I could get out and have a talk with him. What a sight I must have presented when, on getting off the bus, I shook myself, and disappeared in a cloud of dust. However, this may have been no bad thing, for Jimmy said to me, 'Oh my God! We must get you mobile with your own car as soon as we possibly can'.

Our conversation being concluded I was on my way again. As the DC, Mike Sharpe, was out of the District, I had to take him at his word and, accepting his invitation, ask Pearce to arrange the accommodation. I then borrowed a bicycle, and with a local policeman from the Boma, went out into the district; investigated the murder; arrested the offender; and prepared the case for the Preliminary Enquiry. It was a simple police case to prepare for a demented father had had a brainstorm and beaten the child to death. He was later committed to a mental hospital for treatment, while being detained at His Majesty's pleasure, for George VI was at that time on the throne. On returning to the Boma, Pearce, having been trained as a perfect Jeeves, put me up, most comfortably, in the guest room. He then provided me with a bath and a very refreshing whisky and soda, while I awaited his bwana's return.

On another occasion I had to attend the High Court in Blantyre and I was still without a vehicle. I managed to obtain a lift with someone and, my business at the Court concluded, my problem was then to find someone who could give me a lift back to Dedza: for, if it was possible to avoid it, I did not want to travel back in the dusty bus - though many rural Africans had no alternative but to endure the uncomfortable conditions. I heard that a lorry

belonging to the Tobacco Board was going north and obtained permission to travel with the driver. However, it was a far from comfortable trip, being very hot in the cab of the lorry, the engine of which was continually overheating, forcing the driver to stop every so often to allow the engine to cool. At one point, we stopped for a while along the Portuguese border and an old African gentleman, wearing a topee and khaki dress, came riding along on a bicycle. When he saw me, a European Police Officer in uniform, he jumped off his cycle, quickly turned it around and rode off as fast as he possibly could. The African lorry driver and his mate burst out laughing and I asked why they were laughing so heartily. The driver told me that the old man had mistaken me for a slaver and had run away convinced that if I had caught him he would have been enslaved for life. I wonder if this explanation was true. At the time it was certainly a lesson for me to be told that some of the native population still had such a fear, as slavery, per se, was a thing of the past. But thinking about this incident in retrospect, in the past, white farmers and other employers had been known to come to the area to round up labour with the use of force. Also the headquarters of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Administration (WNLA), the organisation that recruited a lot of labour from Nyasaland for the mines in South Africa was at Mlangeni, nearby, half way between Dedza and Ncheu. Although the wages of mine workers were higher than could be obtained in Nyasaland, such a life may still have seemed like slavery, for if they did not like the work they would not have been able to go home before their term of contract ran out, and the mines in South Africa were a very long way away from Nyasaland.