

Memories of Karonga Airport & The Vipya Plateau



By Mary Brill

Refuelling Beaver Aircraft at Karonga.

When Reg was stationed on the lakeshore at Karonga I was the Shell Oil agent at the local Airport. Twice a week I would drive out to the Airport to meet and refuel the Beaver Aircraft which flew up from Blantyre and on to Mbeya in Tanganyika. With the help of two Africans we would fill the aircraft with high octane fuel pumped from a drum. This had to be tested with a paste on the end of a dipping stick for water before it could be used. Then, to be sure, no water got into the fuel tank it was filtered through a large funnel which was lined with two layers of chamois leather. This also stopped any dirt or water getting through into the fuel tank. These drums of fuel came up to Karonga on the lake steamer and was offloaded into the lake, floated ashore and then rolled up to the airfield.

For security we kept the drums locked up in a wired compound and I had to keep records of all fuel used and every month order new stock making sure that we never ran out. Sometimes there was the odd private plane which landed there and once a Helicopter which used a different type of fuel. Luckily there was a drum in stock but it had been there quite a while and when tested it was found to contain water so extra filtering care was needed. All in all it was a most interesting job with always time to chat to the passengers and pilots.

The petrol for cars was also delivered by the lake steamer, this fuel was in two gallon tins and in boxes containing two of these tins. When empty these tins were so useful to the Africans. They used them to carry water from the lake or the river for domestic uses - cooking, washing and more. The African women would carry them full of water on their heads for many miles having made a small ring of grass to put under the tin to protect their head. This was something the children would practice at an early age carrying firewood or their books to school and many times I saw the women on their way to church carrying a prayer book on their head and a hat in their hand!

I realised how different life was in the heart of Africa, it had a magic of its own, the people were so kind and friendly and always smiling. I feel very privileged to have been able to spend fifteen years living and working with them.

Vipya Plateau 1951

The Vipya plateau was not the large rolling upland like the Nyika, it was more a series of steep highlands. Travelling from Mzuzu, we had to climb three escarpments - the first was Likula only some fourteen miles from Mzuzu. There the road wound steeply into the mountains with many twists and turns before reaching the top. It was then level for about six



miles. Then commencing to drop into a valley and, once more, steeply winding, but the surrounding views were magnificent. The next drop down was the Vizuzu Escarpment and after a few more miles the road climbed again up the Luzina Escarpment. Bottom gear was needed there to get up the extremely steep ascent and to negotiate the many acute hairpin bends over a very poor road surface. Once more up in the heavens with such magnificent views for many miles around. Indeed for the sheer general beauty of the landscape I do not think we had seen or been to a better place than this in Nyasaland. The bright blue sky and lovely glow of the fleecy clouds that floated above us made it all really incredible. All around us there were masses of flowers of every kind and some were very new to us. There were plants four to five feet high with leaves like those of a dead nettle, at intervals along the stem there was a glowing orange globe of blossom the size of a tennis ball with odd shaped spikes along the stem. There were masses of yellow rose like flowers and carpets of blueforget-me-nots, clumps of mauve flowers and lots of pink and white protea. In some places we saw some very British type flowers - blue Scabious, Love in the Mist, Salvia and lots of everlasting daisy like flowers. Tree Lupin and bracken all made a colourful display all around us. *(In 1958 the Queen Mother was taken to this incredible part of the Vipya Plateau to show her the magnificent scenery. A small hut with a WC was specially constructed for her 'just in case' - the PWD named it the 'Royal Flush' but she never used it).*

Continuing our journey over the Vipya plateau there was quite a good earth road to Mzimba which rolled up and down between about five or six thousand feet. Sometimes passing bare



granite hills and then on other occasions mountains that were covered in dense forest. Dropping down into Mzimba these natural forests became plantations of coniferous trees planted and cultivated by the Forestry Commission. These plantations darkened the hillsides around us looking, I'm sorry to say, somewhat out of place and artificial but of course the timber was so useful for

buildings, furniture and the like. Arriving in Mzimba, we stayed the night in one of the two rest houses there which were well looked after. The next day we returned to our old camp on the Vipya south of Mzimba where the Luwawa lake looked particularly good. Vernon Gifkins was the warden there at that time and it was hoped to stock the lake with rainbow trout.

Thereafter Reg and I continued our journey to Kasungu where we were to spend a few months before going on leave at the end of 1951.

Mary Brill

February 2016