



Recollections of a Police Officer's Wife

By Mary Brill

It was about the end of 1953 when my husband, Reg, was transferred to the Police from the Agriculture Dept during the first political riots in Nyasaland which started in the Cholo district. I was asked to help doing shift work, manning the police radio in Blantyre Police Station and keeping in touch with those down in Cholo. It was only part time, working in shifts with others. These were difficult times for the Federation, but things settled down and Reg decided to stay in the Police.

We moved to a lovely old Colonial house on Hospital Hill in Blantyre. It had a lovely, well established garden overlooking part of the town and the road leading up to a lovely old stoop overlooked the front garden. Now that Reg was in the Police, we made lots of new friends - Bob Mushet and Ray Harper who stayed life long friends and many others. Reg was often on night duty. One early morning I got quite a shock when he came home covered in blood, he and his sergeant had been to arrest a very drunk African who turned on them with a club and struck Reg on the head, luckily he was not badly injured. The sergeant managed to get him handcuffed and I did not enquire what happened after that!

Reg and I both joined the Blantyre Sports Club. Reg played cricket and tennis. His Cricket came first but he was also a football referee. This kept him busy in his spare time. I played golf and tennis, later I took up bowls and we also loved to go fishing in the Limbe ITC dam, This the children enjoyed. They both also learned to swim and the club had a lovely pool which was all so nice as we all loved swimming. What a different life it was after our tour in the Northern Province on the high Vypia Plateau where we lived in a tent - 25 miles from civilization!

Well we were due for leave again. This time we flew back to the UK by what was called the 'Safari Route'. On the Vickers Viscount aircraft this was a most interesting flight stopping every night in a different place - Nairobi, Wadi Halfa, Malta and then on to Heathrow, the end of a most exciting trip home. During the six months leave Reg went to Hendon Police College. I remember him telling me how he went on an advanced driving course there which he really enjoyed and learned such a lot which helped him later on in his Police service.

When went back to Nyasaland this time by sea on the Caernarvon Castle to Cape Town. Then we travelled up by car by the most direct route to Nyasaland, through South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Mozambique - that we had no breakdown in our little Hillman Huskey car quite amazing.

On our return we were posted to Fort Johnston on the Shire River. We arrived just after New Year 1957 which turned out to be a very eventful year. We quickly settled into our new home which was a lovely little bush house. I got busy on my sewing machine and made pretty new curtains for the bedrooms with material I bought in the local Indian store. Handwatch, our houseboy, joined us when we arrived in Blantyre and Lapkin the cook came along later. Reg was just getting himself organized when he was called to join a Police Task force going to the Copper Belt in Northern Rhodesia to help calm down things during rioting there. Supt Jeff York was in charge of the unit (pictured below) which included Inspectors Edmonds, Parker, Wilkes, Harling, Wilkinson and A/Insp Reg Brill together with a company of the Police Mobile Force. However things there soon calmed down and most of those rioting were found to be Nyasaland boys so lots of our Police boys knew them. This soon calmed things down and the unit came back home after about a Month.



So, Reg returned to the Fort and it was nice to have him back. A lot had happened whilst he was away. Robert our son was now 7yrs old and it had been arranged that he should go to St Andrews School, Blantyre, as a boarder. Hard was it for a mother to be parted from her son for the first time and even harder for him. It was my task to take him to Blantyre, via Zomba and over Liwonde Ferry. We called in to see Norma and Eric Bult in Zomba on the way down there. After seeing Robert settled I then spent the night with Bill and Ann Lamborn. Maggie, our 4yr old daughter accompanied me on the journey. We returned to the Fort the next day feeling sad at leaving Rob behind, but soon he would be back for the holidays when had some lovely days out. Going to the Palm Beach Hotel on the Lake shore or to a quiet beach near-by for a picnic. Rob would often go back to school on the Beaver aircraft. I got a job as the representative for C.A.A.(Central African Airways) when Peggy Borley went on leave. Sometimes I would give the pilot lunch and he would bring us up some goodies from Blantyre. On Sundays we would visit our friends Dr. Fitzmaurice or Walter Seymour who was a great friend. The children would love to visit them. Walter had been a big game hunter and had some wonderful stories to tell them. He used to make biltong, which they enjoyed eating. While we were at Fort Johnston I helped with the 1956-57 Census. I had to travel up the lake shore as far as Cape Maclear and Monkey Bay. Meeting the Kemps and the Artist Helen Maclaren and her husband Breg. I remember them inviting me to lunch when we had minestrone soup with grated cheese. I also met all the fishing families one Greek, the other Portuguese which I found so interesting. It was lovely meeting all these lake shore folk who became our friends. I Remember well the couple who owned Palm Beach Hotel at that time -Ted & Pixie Sweetman a great couple so full of fun.



It was very hot and sticky in the Fort and after a hot day in the office Reg used to borrow Dr Lamborn's small boat and spent most evenings fishing on the river. I used to accompany him and we would come back most evenings with fish for supper which we all enjoyed. Meat in the market was not very good so we had to mince it. We grew nearly all our own veg as Reg was always a keen gardener, much to the envy of others. Dr Lamborn had his veg garden up in the hills at Chowe. He had a cottage up there and we often visited him. So life in the Fort went on, I am still in touch with the Lamborn family to this day. We made many friends during our stay in Fort Johnston - Walter Seymour, Dr Fitzmaurice and Arthur Dent, who also lent us his lovely boat (left).

Early in 1958 we were moved back to Blantyre. Reg was posted to Divisional HQ and we were allocated a large house in Sunnyside with a pleasant garden. But we missed all those wonderful people on the lake shore I took a job as a cashier at Kircaldy's in the town. The children were now both at St Andrews School. Reg was kept very busy now on traffic duty and the Queen Mother's visit was coming up and there was to be a motor cycle escort for her visit. It was about this time that we became friends with a new young Police Officer called Mike Bowery who was working with Reg. He was one of the lead riders in the escort, so they were all training together for a few weeks before the visit. Later Mike's girl friend Maureen came out to Nyasaland so they could marry and she came to stay with us until the wedding day. On the day Reg gave her away so he was her Father for the big day. Our daughter made a lovely little bridesmaid and I had made her a pretty dress. With the reception at our home in Sunnyside it was such a wonderful day.

This tour had gone so quickly and we were now due to go on leave again back to the UK for six months. We spent our leave in Looe down in Cornwall. The children went to the local school there and they loved it. It made us feel part of the community and we made lots of friends including the local policeman and his family who lived next door to us.

We returned to Nyasaland via Cape Town on the Transvaal Castle (later known as the "Vaal"). We had missed the 1959 Riots and when we got back we found we were posted to Karonga on the lake shore way up in the

north of the country. We drove up to Karonga by car via Lilongwe in the Central Province and we stayed one night at the Lilongwe Hotel - owned by Dave Elder who was ex RAF. The next day we reached Mzimba and then onward to Livingstonia where we had the most amazing view of the Lake with its shining water spread out before our eyes. We then descended the escarpment down some 22 hairpin bends where you certainly needed a good head for heights - I, however, do not and some of the time I just could not look down! We



managed to reach Karonga by nightfall and stayed over night in the rest house. The next day we moved into a lovely old house near the lake shore with a large garden full of lovely flowering shrubs. It was a large two storey house with wire gauze fitted around and both the upper and lower khonde to keep the mosquitoes out. The sitting room was on the upper floor with a wonderful view of the lake. In the evening we sat out on the large veranda to keep cool while watching the moon rising up over the lake, listening to the frogs croaking down in the dambo near the lake shore and the sound of the crickets all around us. Life in Karonga had to be a relaxed style because it was so hot you could not rush around doing things. Entertainment was Dinner Parties and coffee mornings for the women while the men worked in their hot offices.

The life of a police officer was not easy at that time with political unrest still prevalent, the troubles were mostly up in the Misuku Hills and up as far as Fort Hill. Reg was often called out in the night to African beer drinking

mostly up in the Misuku Hills and up as far as Fort Hill. Reg was often called out in the night to African beer drinking gatherings which could get out of hand at times and ending in violence. He was called out one night to a murder in a village along the lake shore near Kambwe where the MV Ilala would moor just offshore to discharge her cargo of goods for Karonga, Kambwe and other places along the lake shore. On this particular night they had to cross over the Rukuru river where there was no bridge, so this meant wading across. As they sat on the bank removing their boots one of the African constables put his head to the ground and then indicated to Reg and the rest of the men to stay put. Listen, he said in Chinyanja. Wait! We must not cross. Within seconds a large wave of water came rushing down the river. There had been a rain storm up in the hills and surely this man by his native knowledge had saved their lives for there is little doubt but what Reg and his men would have been swept away down into the lake. It was not the first time an African had saved Reg's life. Their knowledge and awareness of all that goes on around them in all situations was amazing - something they learn from their elders from a very early age.

I was now teaching Maggie at home with a correspondence course which came each month from Rhodesia. We planned our school day from 8.00am to 12 noon and a rest after lunch. Then we would do Art, Sewing or Games and Swimming, which Maggie so enjoyed. Ronald's children, two girls aged 6 and 8 would join us in the afternoons. Robert was away at Boarding School in Lilongwe. Coming home for holidays he would fly home on the Beaver. I was the Shell agent while we were in Karonga. I refuelled all the Aircraft that landed there with the help of two African assistants who rolled out the barrels of high octane from a locked wire compound at the side of the airfield. Then the fuel was pumped into the aircraft. The fuel was always tested for water in it, then filtered through two layers of chamois before going into the Aircraft. Before we left Karonga one the late afternoon Maggie was taken ill. The Doctor diagnosed acute appendicitis. Reg got a message through to Police Headquarters and the Beaver aircraft was sent to collect her. It got as



far as Mzimba and set out early the next morning arriving in Karonga at 6.00am. We were all ready to go. My gang fuelled up the aircraft and away we went. We had never flown in a Beaver before, Maggie was feeling so sick and I felt so worried for the whole journey. To help calm me the pilot flew low over the Vypia

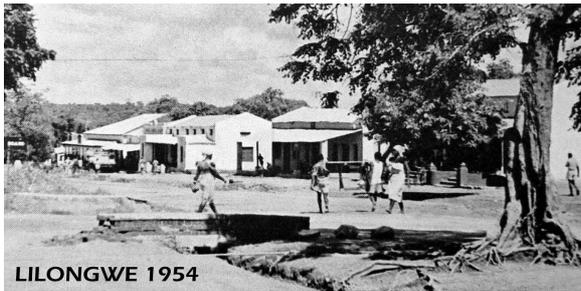
so we could see all the wild game fleeing before us. What a sight!! We landed at Chileka airport at about midday and the operation was over by 2.00pm. I then let Reg know that all was well by way of the Police radio. It was arranged that I stay with the Costello's in Sunnyside, Blantyre, and I was up at the Hospital most of the days Maggie was there. Soon it was time to return to Karonga. Reg managed to get leave to fetch us. On the way back we were able to collect Robert at Lilongwe. Poor Rob had also been in Hospital there with a nasty bout of jaundice which left him unable to eat fatty foods. So, we arrived back with two poorly children but they both soon recovered and life was back to quickly normal. Just before Rob was due back to school the Police Band arrived to entertain the population of Karonga. This was indeed a great occasion for all with a big parade on the football ground. The band played and marched and all were well entertained. With the lowering of the flag and the playing of the Last Post it was all very moving. For Rob it was back to school but before long he was back home again for Christmas.

We all went up to Mzuzu for the Queen Mother's visit where Reg was again on escort duty. Then there was a wonderful garden party and we were both introduced to her by our own DC from Karonga. She chatted about flying over the lake, seeing the 22 hairpin bends escarpment and also asked about life in remote Karonga. Then for us it was back to Karonga and down that dreaded escarpment!

Christmas 1960 - this was our last in Karonga and I was certainly going to miss all the friends we had made over the past two years and I had loved the life living on the lake shore. Reg was posted to HQ Blantyre, so it was back we went to Blantyre to live. Being quite near to Saint Andrews school Rob would be home again and it was lovely to all be together where Maggie could go to school as well. She loved it and did very well. We were allocated a very nice three bed-roomed house in Nyambadwe. Reg was in charge of traffic at Divisional HQ in Blantyre. It was a job he really enjoyed. He was able to play cricket again and I joined the Bowling section of the Blantyre Club. The children both loved swimming so quite a few evenings were spent at the pool at the club and Rob became scorer for the cricket team. In 1961 I became pregnant and Kenneth Edward was born April 26th 1962. At the end of June we went on leave again. How quickly those three years had gone. This time we went home to the UK by sea via the Suez Canal. This was first class on the SS Uganda where I had lots of help from the stewardesses. They loved having such a young baby on board. Rob spent lots of time with the young Cadets and Maggie made lots of friends so it was a wonderful trip for us all. We spent the whole leave down in the west country staying in a lovely flat overlooking the Harbour - it was just perfect.

In November 1962 we returned to Nyasaland by sea on the Transvaal Castle, sailing from Southampton to Cape Town. When we arrived and disembarked our car, an Austin shooting-break, was large enough for all our Luggage. We travelled up to Nyasaland taking the N1 through the Karoo to Bloemfontein where the country-side now became more fertile. The following day we passed through Johannesburg and Pretoria, up and over the high velt with much colder nights. We reached Messina on the border after leaving the Kruger National Park to the east - it was pity we had no time to stop and visit the Park. Soon we were over the border and into Rhodesia with its infamous strip roads.

just miles and miles of them to Salisbury. We then had a night stop before crossing the Great Zambezi River in Mozambique by way of a small ferry towed by an equally small motor boat. It seemed most hazardous at the time. The river was wide and fast flowing. As we travelled on through Mozambique the roads got worse, they were earth roads, rough and corrugated with stretches of it being reconstructed. So there were lots of diversions which got worse with boulders and stumps. Suddenly we heard a loud bang and had hit a hidden stump. Oh dear! We were in trouble finding we had cracked the sump and oil was leaking out. This was serious, we were miles from any help but luck was with us and within about ten minutes a lorry drew up beside us. It was bound for Blantyre and Reg knew the driver - how lucky can you get? He even had spare oil with him! So with the help of some Chewing Gum and Blue Soap that we bought at a little roadside shop. We limped along with the Lorry staying just behind us until we reached the border where we got help from the Public Works Dept who repaired the sump for us. How very grateful we were to them and to the driver of the lorry who we never saw again. But that is Africa! So wonderful. We were on our way again and we arrived at Ryall's Hotel in time for dinner.

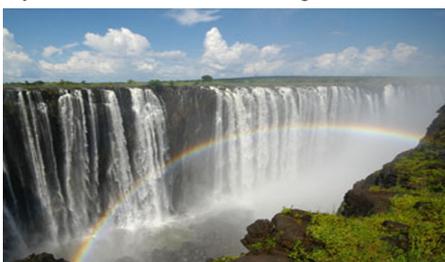


This time we are posted to Lilongwe in the Central Province. It was our first posting to there, a fast growing township (later to become the capital of Malawi on independence). Much to our surprise Bill and Ann Lamborn with their two boys had moved there from Blantyre to manage the Mandala store. It was really nice to have old friends around us again. Mike Fraser, another friend from Blantyre who Reg knew well was the Officer in charge of Police. We also met with John Le Mesurier and his wife who we had known in Zomba. They were just about to

retire and go back to the U.K. (When we returned to the UK we visited them in 1964 at the Royal Chelsea Hospital while we were staying in London).

We had a very nice house in Lilongwe which had a large garden and we were quite near to the Golf Club. I became their secretary and helped run the bar buying all the stock etc. This was mornings only but I did find that I had to be on hand if we had functions when extra stock was needed for the bar. The bar staff were all Africans, but quite often when it got very busy Harold Wrigley, a committee member helped out. Then the committee decided to have a Bowling Green, so with with a lot of hard work and digging, done by African prisoners, the green was laid. Harold Wrigley did a lot of the planning and organizing with the help of a young chap called Dave who worked for CAA. I still have a photo of myself bowling the first bowl up the green. Reg played his cricket and I played golf and bowls in our leisure time. Reg was kept very busy with his police work. 1963 became one the most difficult years when we had to make so many decisions in our life. Dr Banda had taken over the running of the country and great changes were being made. There was talk of changes to be made in education with concern that it would only lower standards etc. We made the very wrong decision to send Robert back to school in England to a private school in Norfolk which sadly went bankrupt. Robert was writing to say he was getting very little food and practically no education and my mother was sending him food parcels. At this time everyone in the Police force seemed so unsettled and unhappy at the way some things were happening and many felt unable to carry out their duties properly. When we got the choice of staying on two more years or getting compensation for loss of office we decided, rightly or wrongly, to take early retirement - with hindsight we should have stayed on.

However we knew so little of what lay ahead of us or the country we had come to love so much and which had been our home for the past fifteen years. Our children had grown up in a country they loved too and its people who we admired for all their determination and hard work over the years that we had known them. There was such a great bond between Africans and the colonial whites but this seemed then to be splitting apart. The day we left Nyasaland forever was the saddest I had known. Saying goodbye to Handwatch and Ronald, Handwatch, in particular, for all the years of faithful service. He was only fourteen when he first came to us fifteen years before at Rivi Rivi. They wept saying their goodbyes to baby Ken and just not wanting to be parted. We set out on our journey south to Cape Town leaving Nyasaland via Fort Manning, Lusaka and then on to the Victoria Falls. We all felt so sad and wondering what lay ahead



for us. We arrived at the Victoria falls where we planned to stay for two days. It was a wonderful experience, the most amazing and impressive sight from the very first glimpse. Then to walk along the length of the falls an experience that remains with you the rest of your life. Perhaps the same wonder and amazement David Livingstone felt when he first saw them. We then drove on down to Cape Town via Durban where we visited old friends on the way down the coast. We then boarded the S.S Vaal for a wonderful cruise Home to the UK.

Life back in the U.K.

We decided to rent a house in Looe, Cornwall, while we we looked for a place to buy. Robert and Maggie both went back to school there. We collected Rob from my Mother's home in Chesterfield where he had stayed after leaving the school at Bacton in Norfolk. It was wonderful to be all together again. After a few months we found a place to buy. It was called Stewards House, a three bedroomed bungalow set into the hillside with store rooms beneath it overlooking Talland Bay between Looe and Polperro with six acres of land and steps that lead down to a stream running into the sea. The land had been neglected so it was hard work reclaiming it and for Reg it was back to his farming skills again, plus having to find himself a job. This was not easy but he managed to find himself a position with the agricultural firm of Gibbs & Huxley in Liskeard travelling all around Cornwall selling agricultural machinery which was something he knew a lot about from his days in agriculture.

So life went on for the next ten years in this lovely Cornish home with plenty of really hard work for both of us. We kept pigs, chickens and 200 New Zealand white rabbits. I was left in charge of this small holding but I did have to get some help. When Ken was five he went to the local school at Pelynt, a few miles away, and I used to drive him there along the very narrow lanes in a little red Mini - ideal for those narrow Cornish lanes! Robert went to the school of navigation in Plymouth doing very well in his last year to become 'Cadet of the Year' and leaving to join the Merchant Navy. In November 1969 he married Val Graham at our local church in Talland Bay. Maggie left school and went to go to college in Liskeard. She went on to do her training to become a nurse in Plymouth. So much happened in the next ten years. We sold Steward House and went to help manage a Holiday Camp for a few years near Polperro. Then after a few years we moved to Dorset. Maggie married in 1975.

It was in October 1976 when we got the dreadful news that Rob had lost his life in a freak accident at sea off the coast of Mexico. The shock and having to come to terms with our loss was hard to take - but your life has to go on.

A Final Thought

I remember when we lived high up on the Vypia Plateau how after our evening meal we would put out the Tilly Lamp, creep into our bunks in the Caravan and lay listening to the cough of the leopard as he sneaked through the bush breaking the deep silence of the night. The night air was chilly and clear and the sky was lit with up by millions of stars. - This was the Africa as I like to remember it.

Mary Brill

