

## Penang in the Malayan Emergency 1956/7 – Some Recollections of Fort Auchry and Minden Barracks

My father WO1 Les Hildebrandt of the RAEME Corps was posted to Butterworth airforce base in October 1955 to manage equipment maintenance for the army and airforce serving there. He travelled alone initially and after finding a family billet in Fort Auchry located at the North end of the island of Penang, he called for our Mother, Shirley and his two boys Rob (5 years) and Rick (3 years) to join him. After an exciting trip on a Qantas Super Constellation from Sydney to Singapore (and an overnight stay in Raffles) we completed the journey to Penang on a rickety old Douglas DC3 and arrived in June 1956.

Fort Auchry (now a Malaysian army base near Batu Ferringhi, was our home in 1956. It had great access to the beach shown in the family photographs and was surrounded by Jungle and palms. The water around the beach was dotted with large rocks. On a number of occasions King Cobras were sighted on paths in the fort and we had to call for the village head-man to remove them with his long pole and wire loop. Snakes are very sacred in Malaysia.

Family outings to the Botanical gardens to see the orangutans playing in the trees were a favourite.

So to be nearer to the ferry to Butterworth (there was no causeway bridge in those days) we moved to Minden Barracks in late 1956 and spent almost a whole year there through October 1957. Minden was more modern accommodation consisting mostly of 2 story concrete and rendered dwellings for our NCO community which included Australian and many British as well. We lived in the quarters on the ground floor and I can remember the all round French concertina windows that could provide open air entertainment space and flow through ventilation. The whole Barracks area was cordoned off from the surrounding palm jungle and banana and rubber plantations by a multi strand barbed wire perimeter fence. Regular army patrols were observed at 30 minute intervals crunching their way around the perimeter roads both day and night.

Often (and not realising the danger), my brother Rick and I would slip under the barbed wire and go into the Banana plantations to steal a few fresh pieces of fruit or go to the Rubber trees to watch the latex sap run into the cups wired to the bottom of the trees. There was a great guy who helped out around the house and would climb the palm trees for us and crack the coconuts so we could drink the milk. Rambutan (like a Lychee berry but prettier) trees which with berries in their purple/ red hairy husks were all over Minden in those days and were delectable both raw and roasted.

With modern surroundings came normal expectations of learning, so off I went to the British Army Children's School (BACS) contained in the barracks. A large double story square building painted white at the time. I recollect sitting at little tables on small chairs with probably about 25 other children. I guess I was in the infants school section as it was called. Break times allowed us to go out onto a large outdoor covered veranda on the upper floor to eat our play lunch and drink the chocolate milk.

Most of the time I drew pictures of battleships and dinosaurs and despite all the best efforts of the

teachers, who were very lovely, I did not learn a lot in my year or so at the BACS. All of the children, many of whom were friends and lived in my residential area were very friendly and we had a great time together. I did however over time, acquire a little plummy English accent which quite horrified my grandmother when I got back. It did take a year or so before that accent faded after constant interaction with the Aussie accents back home.

School started early and finished around midday because it got so hot and the theory was that the children could not concentrate in the afternoon. So off we went home for a nap (which we never took) in the boiling afternoon usually punctuated by a tropical rain storm. We went through copious numbers of the waxed paper umbrellas that were sold at the markets.....probably one time use. Our cat Sammy was noted for his capture and extermination of cockroaches which were in such plentiful supply he got tired of them and moved onto Tarantulas. I will never forget the images of him eating a spider with all the legs squiggling from his mouth.

There were many parties and entertainments for the children at the Barracks, including special dress up days and Christmas functions which would be fully catered from social club funds. Ice-cream and treats all around for the children and parents. These were usually held on the grounds next to the NAAFI.

The NAAFI was where we went for all of our supplies and groceries, however usually on weekends we would catch the bus into Georgetown for a shopping expedition. There were copious amounts of cheap Japanese tin plate toys in all the recent designs such as jet fighter planes and warships. They did not have a long life and broke almost instantly just like the cast metal cap guns that we used in our cowboy and Indian games. We would go back the next weekend and replace them.

You could also buy very cheap bespoke clothes in the town and we had many lovely outfits, most of which we quickly grew out of once we got home to Australia. It was never expensive to look nice.

Mum would go off to the Barracks ladies club on a daily basis to play wist with the other ladies and would often bring home prizes for us like Lamps, Camphor Boxes and Chinese Junks many of which returned to Australia with us. Similarly we would go with Mum and Dad in the evening to play Bingo or as it was called in that very British environment Housey-Housey.

The Barracks had its own cinema and most of the films were old black & white British re-runs and horror films. My brother and I were not really interested in the shows so we used to scuttle around the feet of the audience and pick up the glass bottles to collect the deposit from the refreshment shop in the foyer....we got a lot a strange square shaped metal coins and we thought we were quite rich which was NOT the case. My father would sometimes take his two boys over to the Butterworth cinema to watch the latest Audie Murphy film...now they were cool.

My brother and I would often go down to the infantry bivouacs and visit the Ghurkha troop in their lines. It was not usually allowed but if we asked nicely they would show us their razor sharp Kukri knives (legend has it that once drawn they need to draw blood).

One of our glories was our Amah, Valli who was very beautiful and always looked after us and was great fun to be around. She was such a great cook and whenever I smell the aroma of a great Nasi Goreng my mind shoots straight back to her and Minden barracks. She and her husband and daughter, Sondra lived in the quarters behind our house.

My father's assignment finished in October 1957 so with great sadness we packed up all of our accumulated gear and belongings and prepared for the long journey home, this time by sea. The ship "New Australia" had just docked in Penang after transporting and dropping off Australian troops from 3 RAR for service on the peninsula.

We departed 21<sup>st</sup> October 1957 for Singapore and had a great time on the ship although it was hot at night and very stormy by day. Great fun for us kids looking at the Porpoises and Flying fish diving in and out of the waves but most people had their heads over the side.

The ship docked in Sydney on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1957 and after a day or so sightseeing on Sydney harbour there we travelled by train back to Melbourne and home after a great adventure that will never be forgotten.

Robert Hildebrandt

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