

Brian Catley remembers growing up in the War, and then National Service



Nineteen and a half of my first twenty years were spent in Bradford; the result of an army and a war that sent my father to the Far East only to have to remain there until I was five.

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At some point [in my early years] my father, having fled Singapore, and travelling direct from Australia, appeared unannounced in Bradford. Grandmother rapidly directed him north. It was July and my mother and I were holidaying in Scotland. My Aunt Joan was married to a vaval doctor stationed at Invergorden and had invited us to stay. I dimly remember descending the North British Hotel in a lift, emerging onto a Waverley Station

platform and catching the train north. The intimidating rumble and roar as we crossed the Firth of Forth made a lasting impression. The coaches were with corridor and a central clerestory, a slightly raised narrow row of windows running the length of the roof. Streamlining was not an issue in those days. Dad telephoned from Bradford and my mother took the call. Five years is a long time. 'Are you really my father' I piped up at the barrier of the Inverness Station where the reunion took place. But it was all forgiven.

Time moved on. ... National Service was still on the agenda. Now that was a shock at first. From handing out 'write out Hymn 56 ten times', or perhaps more constructively: 'list 50 7-letter words' to ineffectively deter juniors running in corridors, to getting up at 5.30am to apply spit and polish for a 7.30 inspection rudely rerouted my life.

Having survived 8 weeks of square-bashing, I have to say the next 22 months were strangely enjoyable. It was the Far East Air Force Command for me. Soon I was supposed to be the only known expert in servicing aircraft radios in the Malayan Highlands. Air-crewing was available. Crammed into a two seater Auster: 'Take the doors off, I can see better!' Shouted the pilot as we prepared for take-off. I nursed a large box of supplies on my lap. 'Chuck it out when I drop my arm' he said as we skimmed a Gurkha camp. The box burst on landing, sending packets of curry and dog food flying in all directions.

My pilot's obsession for low-flying occasionally got the better of him. Travelling down to Kuala Lumpur we would find the daily mail train and wave to passengers as he sped by. Inevitably he overdid it. On approach to KL an overlooked bundle of surrender leaflets, supposed to have been scattered over terrorist camps, was discovered. Much to the surprise, rapidly followed by irritation, the Governor of Malaya, hosting his annual Garden Party, saw his guests picking bits of paper off the immaculate lawns asking them to defect to the nearest British army post. The Bar of course.

..... As is the custom, my Commanding Officer commenced demob with a formal interview. 'Left right, left right, halt. Now then Catley, what are you going to do when you leave the Service?'; 'Go to university, sir' Surprised pause. 'How long were you at school?' Surprised pause. 'Good God man' haven't you had enough of that sort of thing!

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