

ORIENTAL ESCAPADES 1945 - 1947

By Gerhard Heilig

We left Lyneham on the 10 September on board a Liberator bomber bound for Malta. The aircraft had no seats and the half dozen or so passengers had to doss down in the bare fuselage as best they could on blankets and assorted pieces of baggage. We stayed in Malta until the 16th when we flew to Cairo, filling in our time sightseeing including an assortment of aircraft wreckage scattered around Luqa airfield from the days of the siege. The next day took us on to Shaibah in Iraq and we were promptly treated to a sample of the famous Shaibah Blues in the shape of a sandstorm which reduced visibility to nil. When we discovered that our aircraft had decided to go unserviceable in this little bit of heaven we sent up a forlorn plea of roll on that blooming boat! Some guardian angel must have taken pity on us, for later on that evening a Stirling bomber, equally bare and uncomfortable, took us on to our destination Karachi.

When we opened the door of the aircraft on arrival at Mauripur airfield in the small hours of the morning, we were met by a blast of hot air as from a furnace and were taken to a tented transit camp on the fringes of the station to await our further fate. Our first move was to visit the clothing stores in order to exchange our UK version of tropical kit for Indian issue. In place of the traditional pith helmets, which had been found impractical and useless, we received Australian type bush hats. The old-fashioned and bulky Bombay Bloomers were replaced by comfortable shorts of local manufacture and we drew snake boots, smart and serviceable suede half-wellingtons.

We made the acquaintance of the char wallah, the local one-man version of the NAAFI van who supplied tea and buns commonly known as char and wads, and the fruit wallah who delighted us with long forgotten luxuries such as bananas. We learned the local lingo: a servant was a bearer, if you wanted to call anyone you shouted *ither ao*, an essential expression in the bazaar was *jao* or 'buzz off', the mid-day meal was *tiffin*, the evening one *khana*, the laundry a *dhobi* and we did our utmost to get our knees brown in order to avoid the deprecating remarks from the old sweats to 'get some service in!' Last but not least we made our acquaintance with a *charpoy*, the Indian wooden-framed bed with a string mattress, and the favourite tropical pastime of 'charpoy bashing'!

At long last we got our posting, to 1334 TSCU (Transport Support Conversion Unit) at Baroda in the north of Bombay Province. There we were to be indoctrinated in Far Eastern flying conditions and the gentle art of supply dropping. A Dakota took us there on the 8 October and it turned out to be quite a comfortable station where we were housed in *bashas*, huts, and another word had been added to our expanding local vocabulary. For our outings to the town of Baroda we would use a *gharry*, a carriage drawn by an emaciated horse and for shorter journeys a *tonga*, a tricycle rickshaw. One day we were invited to visit the Maharajah of Baroda's palace where we were shown around the state apartments, the gardens and given a ride on an elephant. Only the *bibi-gurh*, the womens' house, remained hidden from our curious eyes, much to our regret. Our course lasted some six weeks and 24 November saw us on the next stage of our journey, to Rangoon for further disposal.

There we were housed in a somewhat soggy tented camp near Mingaladon airfield and in the shadow of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda with its huge dome covered in gold leaf. While there I got the news that Ted Sissons, my former roommate at Radio School, had been killed flying over Burma on the 6 September. So near and yet so far. We soon got our posting and three days after our arrival, on 27 November, we were airborne for our final destination of 215 Squadron at Singapore. We arrived there the following day after a nightstop at Penang and a landing at Kuala Lumpur.

I had been very fortunate with my posting. With the end of the hostilities many of the transport squadrons had become surplus to requirements and were being disbanded one by one. Along with a few others such as 31 at Batavia (since renamed Jakarta), 52 at Rangoon and 110 at Hong Kong, 215 had been assigned to carry out passenger and freight operations in the area pending the re-establishment of regular air line services. My flying days were secure and I had every prospect of gaining precisely the kind of experience I required for a future in civil aviation, the career I was by now firmly resolved upon.

We were based at the old Kallang airport by the harbour and billeted in a nearby residential area. The sergeants' mess was in a two-storeyed building and we were quartered in adjoining bungalows with several men to a room and some sleeping out on the veranda, anything but a hardship in these sultry climes. The accommodation was of the simplest. Each man had a charpoy with a mosquito net, our belongings in a trunk or two underneath, the odd table and chair but otherwise devoid of furnishings. It was quite comfortable however and when not otherwise occupied we indulged in the gentle oriental art of charpoy-bashing. We had Chinese amahs to do our washing and cleaning, there were some quite good local eating places just up the road in the Katong Road, and from there we could take a bus to the multifarious attractions of the city of Singapore with its shops, restaurants and the amusement parks of the New, Great and Happy World. It had not been many weeks since the British had re-occupied Singapore but things were already ticking quite merrily. The sole hardship was the chronic shortage of beer. Due to transport difficulties we were strictly rationed to one can of beer per man per week. In time the local brewery got going with Tiger Cub, a weak but nevertheless welcome concoction. But they were trying hard, and placards displaying a tiger cub flexing its muscles assured us that Tiger Cub is getting stronger every day!

The Squadron's route network comprised Rangoon, Bangkok, Saigon and Hong Kong to the north and Sumatra and Batavia on Java to the south. At the latter we were able to supplement our alcoholic supplies with the Javanese version of port and sherry and no aircraft ever failed to bring back at least one crate of these after the regular nightstop in Batavia. Soon after our arrival, a crew who had come with us from Baroda was posted away to 31 Squadron and we decided to hold a farewell party. We had saved up two weeks beer ration for our opening gambit, then polished off a couple of dozen of Javanese port. Having run dry, we proceeded to drink the mess dry of whisky and whatever other spirits might be available. At this stage my memory ceased to function properly but I remember one of the boys thumping the piano with myself beating time on the lid with a couple of wooden sticks. Suddenly he stopped dead in mid-tune and exclaimed horrorstruck: "I can't play without music!" Then carried on with utmost

equanimity.

In due course I decided that it was high time for me to beat a discrete retreat to the safety of my charpoy. The route to my bungalow was through the kitchen to the back door, across a narrow plank spanning a wide monsoon ditch, then along a footpath with impenetrable reeds to one side and a slimy pond on the other, to the lawn surrounding my bungalow. This was somewhat tricky at the best of times, but on this occasion I negotiated it all with the supreme confidence of a drunk. But as I approached the wide expanse of the veranda fate played me a scurvy trick - without any warning it quietly slipped away to one side to disappear into the dark of the night. In the best manner of good airmanship I initiated a missed approach procedure, did a circuit to the left and lined up for another run in. Once again the veranda did a snide disappearing trick to the side. After several more attempts I finally made it, negotiated all obstacles in the shape of trunks, chairs and charpoys, neatly stowed my clothes, climbed into my bed, tucked in the mosquito netting - and was violently sick!

Singapore and Malaya were quiet, but Burma was a hotbed of dacoits (local bandits). The Dutch had re-occupied Indonesia but the Indonesians were doing their utmost to get them out again and the French were having troubles in Indo-China. As a result we were classed as being on active service and we carried revolvers on our flights to which I added a kukri as part of my survival equipment. It now adorns the wall in my home. As a result I soon qualified for the General Service Medal to add to my 1939-45 and Aircrew Europe Stars and the War Medal.

We had enjoyed good weather during our stay in Baroda with hardly a cloud in the sky. But now, a mere ninety nautical miles from the Equator and criss-crossing it on our journeys to the south, we found ourselves regularly faced with tropical storms. In the earlier days of the Burma campaign these had caused a number of aircraft to disintegrate in mid-air caused by stresses they had never been designed for until trial and error taught pilots how to deal with these phenomena. There are powerful vertical air currents within and around thunderstorms, strong enough to lift or depress an aircraft a thousand feet or more within seconds and fighting against these could overstrain the structure and cause it to break up. It's like being caught by a gust in a sailing boat when too rigid a resistance against its force can cause the mast to break. So with an aircraft in a thunderstorm. Riding it out with only moderate pressure on the controls, allowing it to carry you up or down as it will, results in a very uncomfortable but safe passage. With only one proviso, that you maintain an adequate clearance to the ground. And the shortest way through a thunderstorm is straight ahead - unless of course you are flying along a line of them, and even then one can usually find a suitable route through the worst of it. I have flown through many a thunderstorm in my time when avoidance would have been impractical, without any trouble apart from the discomfort and the inability of enjoying a cup of tea during the passage. But never in a light-hearted manner and never through a typhoon or similar phenomena.

The Rangoon run was the least popular of our network and I was only too happy to be spared many of these trips. It involved a nightstop, and although the station still boasted the old peacetime brick buildings, it was devoid of other comforts and facilities. Most of my trips in the earlier months were to Indonesia,

either on the direct run to Batavia and back in one day, but more usually via Medan in the north of Sumatra, Padang on the west coast, Palembang in the south and back the next day. We put up in the bungalows of the transit mess near the centre of Batavia where our personal, but not too personal, needs were taken care of by a bevy of Indonesian beauties. There was a picturesque canal running through the town where the idyllic scene of femininity bathing and doing their laundry was only spoiled by passers-by dropping their excrement into the waters - usually just upstream of the frolicking maidens. There was some quite good shopping available and I still have some brightly coloured sarongs I had bought there, not only attractive but cool and most comfortable garments for leisure wear in those parts. And we never failed to stock up on Javanese port and sherry, at least until Tiger Cub beer got sufficiently strong and plentiful. In mid-January the squadron was renumbered 48 in the course of the post war run-down, the policy being to keep the more senior numbers active and re-allocating them where necessary to units which were being kept intact or happened to be in the right place for current requirements. Although many of us had not been on the squadron very long, we were anything but happy about having to give up our old number. I was perhaps particularly conscious of this change, with 215 being so to speak the next-door neighbour to my first squadron of happy memory.

At the end of March I had my first flight to Hong Kong. It was a four-day trip via Saigon, each with a single five-hour leg and terminating in time for a late lunch. We would stay overnight in Saigon, where the Hotel Majestic in the city centre had been turned into a transit mess, and but for the attractive Vietnamese women and other local inhabitants one might have been in a tropical version of the French Riviera. Hong Kong was sheer excitement. The approach to runway 13 began with the port wing tip all but scraping Dragon Rock, then all but brushing the rooftops of tall buildings before finally touching down on the old airfield of Kai Tak on the bay shore with the magnificent rocks towering to the north. The transit mess was in a block of flats off the Nathan Road, I believe it was in Park Road, in Kowloon and only some five minutes walk from the ferry. In those days Hong Kong was not the teeming beehive it is today, but even then it was buzzing quite merrily.

We had all afternoon and evening and the two following days free to go exploring, shopping and enjoying the fleshpots. In all these places the officers had vastly superior facilities. Not only did they get much better overseas allowances, but their clubs were better equipped and they were in a more advantageous position to make contact with, and be entertained by local society, than the non-commissioned and other ranks. These remarks are not in the way of complaint but simply a statement of fact. After all, what's the good of having greater responsibility if there are no commensurate perks attached? No one can be expected to carry the can if he gets nothing for it.

I did manage to get some social contact in Hong Kong in the shape of an attractive girl I got chatting with while browsing around the shops in Kowloon. She was half Chinese and half Philipino, and on a couple of occasions I was invited to her home. Her brother had been in the Hong Kong Militia and had spent the war as a prisoner of the Japanese after they had captured the place. He told me, and I do not think that it was by way of a polite compliment, that

the British prisoners had stood up best to the rigours of their captivity. The Chinese had fared worst, something had been taken away from them which had not belonged to them in the first place. The Americans did little better, they'd been licked by a people who had been held to ridicule in the past and they didn't understand what had hit them. The British took it as an extremely unpleasant but passing interlude, they were used to losing all but the last battle and could see no reason why it should be different this time. This may all sound like some gross oversimplification but there is something in it. The strong roots of a long tradition do help both society and the individual to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

At the end of May Ernie Philips, my old room-mate from Radio School, turned up in Hong Kong having been posted to the locally based Dakota squadron. In fact I kept running into quite a number of fellows from my old units and many a cud was chewed over a beer.

The airfield of Hong Kong as it was then, and would remain until the new runway had been built out into the bay, is worth a detailed description. There are supposed to be 'dangerous airports' where one is exposed to special risks. I have always held this to be nonsense and I have, after all, some 18,000 flying hours as radio operator and pilot to my credit. Airports have of course their peculiarities including obstructions, sometimes very considerable ones, which have to be avoided. But there are approach charts for each, describing approach and departure routes and listing any hazards. Also, there are laid-down minima for cloudbase and visibility suitable for the locality and as long as these are adhered to I can see no difference between the so-called safe and dangerous ones. In fact Hong Kong, supposedly amongst the most 'hazardous' of all, has a safety record to be envied.

The initial approach is to Cheung Chow radio beacon where the safety height is 3000 feet for 100 miles around. There one can descend to 1000 feet, then, provided one is below cloud and with adequate forward visibility, continue north-eastward and descend to 500 feet until crossing the coast west of the airfield. At this point a right turn has to be initiated then, edging as close as possible to Dragon Rock (1740 feet) and, low over the roof tops of the buildings, the landing is made out of the turn. If at any time before crossing the coast, forward visibility or ground contact is lost, break off to the west, climb to a safe height (3000 feet) and diversion for another airfield would then be necessary. The nearest alternate is a long way away and adequate fuel reserves have of course to be carried.

The take-off from Kai Tak was almost as hairy as the landing. Runway 13 was the only one which could be used as the reverse direction, 31, would have taken the aircraft midway through the buildings at the far end. But there was a hill 400 feet high at the far end of 13 and one had to turn right towards the bay immediately after lift-off in order not to transform the aircraft into a would-be tunnelling machine. One could then either continue straight ahead through the south-east gap between the island and mainland, head for the White Painted Cliffs, then climb away on course; or continue the right turn, climb to the Kowloon radio beacon and set course from there. But once one of these variants had been decided upon it was imperative to stick to it, for there was no room left for a change of mind.

One day I noticed on my arrival at Kallang that something special was going on. There was a parked York aircraft on the tarmac, beyond it a guard of honour and by all appearances some VIP must have just arrived. I happened to have a camera with me and, curious, I strolled over to see what it was all about. The VIP, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Barratt, followed by a group of officers all in their best uniforms, was about to inspect the guard and I decided to follow in their wake to take some photos. There was I, without a cap, wearing creased and sweat-soaked jungle-greens and with a revolver on my belt, fully expected to be challenged as to what I might be doing there. But no one took the slightest bit of notice as I strolled along, making my snaps, including a close-up from only feet of the great man, before finally departing with a wide grin on my face. Perhaps they thought that I was a representative of some important newspaper and no one had thought that some unimportant NCO could possibly have the cheek for such a venture.

At the end of April I was promoted to Warrant Officer, my skipper Mac Buchanan left for home and I joined Flight Lieutenant Housby's crew. The Squadron moved its operations to Changi at the eastern tip of the island but we remained at Katong as the new billets at the base were not yet ready.

In July I had my first trip to Bangkok, another favourite run. We were usually there by mid-afternoon and, although officially at the transit mess on the airfield, we usually stayed the night in town at our own, though extremely modest expense consisting of a couple of tins of cigarettes. Bangkok is a beautiful city and the Thais a most pleasant people, their mentality seemingly closer to and better understood by a European than that of their neighbours, the Burmese, Indochinese and Malays. Our favourite stamping ground was the Piccadilly restaurant and dance hall, an airy place open on three sides to whatever breeze there might be, at the end of the six-lane road in the centre of the city and opposite to the Ratnakasindr Hotel where we usually stayed. The Thai girls were most accommodating and seemed to enjoy the proceedings, in contrast to the Chinese and Malays to whom it was just business, to be got over and done with as speedily and impersonally as possible. There was good shopping too in Bangkok and the enamelled Thai silver work was a great favourite.

It must have been about this time that we had a VIP on board and as far as I can recall it was the Bishop of Singapore on his way to Rangoon. He was wearing a snow-white tropical suit and before boarding the aircraft we advised him to empty his fountain pen. "Oh no," he said, "my pen is of the best and the reduced air pressure cannot affect it." When he disembarked he had a bright blue badge on his breast pocket.

On 21 August we had Air Commodore Earle on board for a tour of inspection through Sumatra and Jakarta. As we were about to board our aircraft for our departure from Padang on the west coast of Sumatra, a Jeep carrying an armed party arrived to inform us that some unfriendly locals had been reported near the take-off end of the runway and that they were going out there to give us covering fire. We got airborne and away without incident, but later heard that we had indeed been fired upon, though fortunately without effect.

At the end of August we were moved to temporary quarters at the Crescent Flats near the Singapore Swimming Club which had already been available to us and,

being only just up the road, now became even more popular. We only stayed there a month, and at the end of September we moved into our new quarters at Changi.

Our accommodation there consisted of a number of long wooden huts right by the beach and was pleasant and airy. About twenty minutes walk through the bundu would take us to Changi village with its shops, cafes and restaurants and the beach nearby was ideal for bathing. One night Stan Mellor, a particular pal of mine with whom I am in contact to this day, and I were walking across the empty stretch for a meal in the village. We always carried torches to light us the way, making periodic flashes ahead to check that nothing was obstructing our path. In one of these we suddenly espied something large and sinister looking and we strove apart to avoid it. Meeting up again on the further side we shone our torches back to see what this object might be and discovered it to be a large python, curled up and peacefully asleep. We preferred not to think how it might have reacted had we stepped on it. Later, on our way back from our excursion, we were particularly alert but there was no sign of it any more.

As the year wore on I had some trips to Calcutta where I walked down Chowringhee and sampled the smells and attractions of an Indian Bazaar. Christmas 1946 turned out to be a memorable occasion. The first WAAF (Womens' Auxiliary Air Force) girls had arrived some weeks before and had brought with them new standards of social life. Most of them were snapped up by the officers, but not a few of them remained available for the likes of us. Stan Mellor had lately spent some leave at a rest camp near Kuala Lumpur and had established contact with one of these desirable creatures. This of course led to other contacts and on Christmas Eve we made up a party with his crew, each of us of course with a suitable appendage. We had a slap up dinner in Changi village, then retired to the moonlit beach to indulge in beer and other pleasant pastimes. The girls returned the compliment by inviting us to their mess for Christmas Dinner the following day and we reciprocated once more by escorting them to our own mess in the evening for yet another Yule feast.

My social life was only just beginning to take real shape when, in the third week of February, it was rudely interrupted by being sent on detachment with some other crews to Rangoon, where we were to join similar ones from other squadrons in order to take part in a mission of mercy. The Karen tribe, who had particularly distinguished themselves in their resistance to the Japanese invaders, were suffering a famine and we were to fly supplies of rice to some of their villages. For a month we were based at Mingaladon airfield and on each operational morning did the hour's trip to the operating base of Toungoo to the north, returning to Mingaladon in the afternoon. At Toungoo we would load up for the short hop to the dropping zones, doing about half a dozen sorties per day. The local dignitaries expressed their appreciation by inviting us all to a lantern illuminated al fresco slap-up Burmese dinner at the end of the exercise which turned out to be a most enjoyable occasion.

At Mingaladon we were housed in brick bungalows with three or four of us sharing a room. It was not unusual to hear the evening's or night's stillness disturbed by the sound of firing within the camp's environs, as groups of dacoits tried to supplement their supplies by raiding one or other of the station's stores. It was therefore our usual practice to sleep with a loaded revolver under our

pillow in case we should receive an unwelcome visitor. One night I had to get up to attend a call of nature. I crept out on tiptoe so as not to disturb my roommates, and as I crept back in a similar fashion there was a gasp from one of the beds. "Christ, I nearly shot you. I thought you were one of those worthy gentlemen trying to do the dirty on us!" On another night I awoke to find some shadowy creature moving stealthily about the room. I took my revolver from under my pillow and tried to get a bead on the intruder. It turned out to be Pete returning from a mission to satisfy a call of nature, and I had all but fired at the lad who had had me in his sights but a few nights before. Phew!

We delivered our final load on 9 March, the control tower, a Jeep trailer, was loaded onto one of the aircraft and we returned in formation to Rangoon. As we parked our aircraft, some loose Bythess, a kind of heavy tarred paper to cover the frequently soggy ground, was caught up in our slipstream and damaged the tail cone and starboard elevator of our aircraft, making it unserviceable and leaving us stranded there until the necessary repairs could be completed.

When I returned to Changi on the 21 March I found myself posted home for release from the Service. A week later I was cleared from the Squadron and sent to the transit camp at Tengah, another Singapore airfield situated near the centre of the island. This was a dismal place with decrepit and leaking tents in a soggy field. Here I again met up with Ernie Philips who had come down from Hong Kong and we were to travel home together. We were pretty free to come and go as we pleased as long as we remained contactable and we spent a good part of our time in Singapore and with my friends at Changi. After only a week at Tengah we embarked on the SS Otranto homeward bound.

Our mess deck was a little above the waterline and consisted of a bare hall with rows and rows of long tables and a minimum of space for our belongings. Our food, which was not particularly appetizing and never seemed sufficient to meet the demands of healthy young men, was brought to us in containers from the galley. During the day we could roam the decks and at night we played sardines in hammocks slung from the ceiling. The Indian Ocean was calm as a millpond and on 13 April we entered Bombay harbour for a three-day stay.

The following afternoon Ernie and I donned our best KD (khaki drill) and went ashore to do the town. In the evening we discovered a services club and went in for a beer, a luxury, for the ship was as usual dry. Here they had the real stuff. After many months on Tiger Cub (still getting stronger every day!) a couple of bottles of Bass Export had us floored and with some difficulty we finally managed to find our way back to our floating doss-house. When we awoke the next morning with a stinking hangover there was a small parrot sitting on the end of Ernie's hammock.

"Where the hell did that bloody thing come from," he moaned.

"You bloody well insisted on buying it from some wallah on the docks last night, said you'd always wanted one", I replied.

"Well, I'd better get rid of the thing before someone sees it or there'll be trouble," he said, and proceeded to shoo the poor little thing out of the porthole.

Two days later, as the troopship was leaving Bombay harbour bound for dear Blighty Shore she was met by a gentle swell. There was an immediate rush for the railings and for the first time of our journey I was able to eat my fill. On the

19th I celebrated my 21st birthday with a bottle of South African sherry I had smuggled on board, the following day we passed Aden and another five saw us through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean. All was well until we reached the Bay of Biscay but then this unquiet corner of the Atlantic Ocean truly lived up to its turbulent reputation. A granddaddy of a storm made the vessel plunge wildly as it headed into the foaming seas and left very few passengers on their feet. I revelled in these capers and, well protected against the rain and blowing spume, walked the heaving decks with gay abandon. Not only could I eat my fill, I was able to pick and choose the best titbits (relatively speaking as far as troopship catering was concerned) and still leave mountains of eschewed victuals to spare.

We docked at Southampton on 3 May. I had been overseas for some eighteen months and it was good to see the green fields of England again. In a few days I would be returning to civilian life to set about making my career in civil aviation.

Source : Gerhard Heilig