

656 SQUADRON – THE MALAYAN CAMPAIGN

On 14 September 1945, the Squadron flew in the victory parade at Kuala Lumpur. Squadron Headquarters were then located at Kuala Lumpur with flights at Kuala Trengganu, Ipoh, and at Sourabaya in Java. 'B' and 'C' Flights worked in Malaya for the rest of the year opening up the country whilst 'A' Flight continued to operate against the Indonesians. In January, 1946, the rest of the Squadron moved to Java, Squadron Headquarters being located at Batavia, with 'A' Flight at Sourabaya, 'B' at Semerang, and 'C' at Bandoeng. As there was no H.Q. Royal Artillery the Flights worked directly with the Brigades. Squadron Headquarters themselves gave air support in April, 1946, to 37 Brigade operations in the neighborhood of Buitenzorg. Major Coyle had handed over to Major F. J. McMath, R.A., on 10 November 1945, who handed over in turn to Major H. B. Warburton, R.A., on 10 June 1946, and he now takes up the tale.

'The scale of operations in the Netherlands East Indies after the cease-fire in the Far East was deliberately played down for political reasons. Operations were being continued not against pockets of isolated Japanese resistance in Java and Sumatra, but against a well-equipped and well-organised Communist-directed terrorist organisation, whose aim was simply to unbridle Indonesia from the Dutch yoke, and had used the short period between the war ending and the occupying forces arriving to help themselves to vast dumps of military equipment, and to start organised training on a strict military basis.

The Squadron had moved into Java and Sumatra under the command of Frank McMath and I took over at the end of May 1946, with hostilities in full swing. I had left the Squadron in Malaya less than a year before, and in this time there had been almost a complete change of pilots. Morale in the Squadron was high, and a swashbuckling atmosphere prevailed amongst the pilots, who were allowed their head to great advantage. The aircraft, however, were rapidly becoming tired, having withstood the harsh weather and heavy utilisation of the Burma campaign. Most of the airframes needed re-covering, the fabric having rotted and become brittle; after stripping off the fabric, several aircraft had to be written off as it was found that the airframes had not been sufficiently protectively treated and had corroded to a dangerous degree. Some newly-coated reserve aircraft were called forward, but inspection of these became critical when it was discovered that one aircraft had a large and unexplained hole in the fabric; when this was stripped back, a large chunk was found to be missing from the main spar—a hungry rat had made its nest in the wing, chewing its way bit by bit into the main spar, putting it beyond repair. The Squadron task set a pattern that has continued for over 20 years in the Far East, only the priorities changing. Our main tasks were Air O.P.—in support of campong clearing operations with the guns of the Devon and Dorset Yeomanry and of the Dutch 'U' Brigade. Visual recce—in support of clearing operations, general information of terrorist movement or training. Cover for the main road convoys to prevent ambush, etc. Photo recce—this assumed great importance, as the R.A.F. were not able to complete their P.R. cover of strategic targets, owing to lack of spares for their P.R. Spitfires. The Squadron took over the completion of 4,500 pinpoint obliques (target photographs) within a target time of three months and before the monsoon broke. Some of these pinpoints involved a round flight of 450 miles and this was accomplished by the Squadron Engineer Officer fitting a second tank behind the pilot with a manual rotary pump in between the seats to effect the fuel transfer; this arrangement gave the aircraft a safe five hours endurance with a bit to spare. Captain Tommy Tommis and Mike Cubbage were the two officers who took on this task and completed it before the monsoon broke, much to the amazement of our Air Force Headquarters, as the task was given to us rather tongue in cheek.

As our operations progressed, we found that the terrorists were becoming an increasing menace in taking pot shots at us; they were effective and nearly all our aircraft were hit from time to time. Things came to a head when one of our aircraft flying out of Medan took a .5 cannon shell through the main spar; we now decided to take our own counter-measures. Pilots had their own choice of weapons—some chose the Sten gun, others preferred the Bren gun fired through the camera port; one pilot, Dickie Parker, always used a long-barrelled Mauser pistol, with which he was a good shot. It was not long before the Bad Boys were treating our Austers with more respect.

One dramatic success was scored by one of our R.A.F. corporal cooks who was acting as observer to Capt. Ken Litt. An Indonesian staff car was engaged; the car ran off the road, hitting a tree, the radiator blowing up with a spectacular cloud of steam. This little action had an immediate effect on the occupants of the cookhouse, the food being better than ever, and from then on we had a constant flow of volunteers, from all ranks, to ride as observer.

One Auster we fitted with a light-series bomb rack, and only the lack of 20-lb. G.P. fragmentation bombs prevented the "Auster Cloth Bomber Mk IV" from going into action before we left Java.

An unusual but pleasant feature of operations in Java was the existence of a non-official truce, which was observed on Sundays at nightfall or during heavy rain. This at least allowed us to relax and enjoy the lavish entertainment which was offered by the various Service Messes and Embassies; alternatively, we could always enjoy the expert piano-playing in our own Mess by Mike Cubbage or Bill Eastman.

The Dutch were most generous and living conditions were considerably eased by the gift of several refrigerators and electric fans; our Mess was comfortable and the food was cooked by an excellent Chinese cook. One asset was a permanent tailoress who was employed doing repairs and making excellent sports jackets out of lightweight blankets. Two Japanese infantry subalterns kept the garden tidy and the drains clear, and there was an ample number of Javanese batwomen to look after us.

The Squadron Mess, which was situated in one of the more doubtful areas of Batavia, was prone to raids by the light-fingered gentry who completely cleared the Mess of all eating irons, pots and pans three times, in spite of the fact that the Mess was wired in by triple Dannert wire, and booby-trapped each evening with wire trip wires and grenades. It was distinctly dangerous to venture out to obey the calls of nature after bedtime, as the slightest movement in the garden would bring forth a fusillade of Sten gun bullets from the bedroom windows.

No short chapter on the Squadron's activities in the East Indies would be complete without reference to the Squadron mascot, a fine white bull terrier 'Jock' and his master Captain Russell Matthews, MC., R.A., who commanded the Flight based at Medan.

Russell was a rough, tough "Broth of a Boy" in those days, who ran an excellent Flight and was held in high regard by all. He was a great character and very aggressive; his proud boast was that he had never needed to put a Gunner on a charge; this, of course, was true—he had no need to charge them, he thumped them instead.

'Jock' "inherited his master's aggressiveness" and had logged quite an impressive score of kills amongst the Far East feline world; in fact, he would tackle anything on four legs regardless of size, which ran Russell into a spot of trouble when he added one of Medan's sacred cows to his long list of confirmed kills. "Jock" had a great loyalty to the Squadron and we were very sorry to part with him later in Malaya, where he was banished by the Station Commander of R.A.F. Kuala Lumpur for biting the R.A.F. doctor; we would have preferred the banishment of the Quack.

In November, 1954, we reluctantly handed over our commitment to the Dutch and by mid-December the Squadron was again concentrated at Kuala Lumpur, shortly to hear of the disbandment of 656 and the formation of 1914 Independent Air O.P. Flight.

To conclude, I would like to apologise to those who did not receive a mention, time being short; they were all a marvelous lot, each one deserving a chapter to himself."

The outbreak of the Malayan Emergency caused the Squadron to be hastily re-formed at Sembawang with a Squadron Headquarters and four Air Observation Post Flights—1902, 1907, 1911 and 1914—and almost immediately the pattern which was to dominate the Squadron over many years started; the Flights were sent out to small airstrips on their own near (and sometimes not so near) towns. It would be impossible to name them all, but Seremban, Taiping, Ipoh, Johore Bahru, Kota Babru, Kuala Trengganu, Benta, Temerloh and Gemas will be familiar to all who have at one time or another been there. At any one time there was always a Flight in Sembawang, and in April 1950 Squadron Headquarters moved up to Noble Field, Kuala Lumpur. Flights changed locations every three or four months.

Unlike the previous operations of the Squadron, the Malayan Emergency was not a plain advance or retreat which could be followed in detail but a guerilla jungle war fought largely out of sight of the outside world, where there were very few safe areas and no front line. The pattern of operations remained virtually unchanged during the entire campaign. The Squadron assisted in nearly every job that could be thought of—target marking, supply dropping, all types of reconnaissance, and even defoliation (until it was ceased due to the hazard to the aircraft by the weight of the equipment). The major task was the observation by the pilots of fixed areas for signs of cultivation or of unnatural movement. Despite the unit title of the Squadron, Malaya is not ideal country for gunnery, and very little artillery Air Observation Post work was done.

1951 brought the Korean War, and a Flight from U.K. and one from Hong Kong (1903 and 1913) went there to support 1 Commonwealth Division. All reinforcements were provided from the Squadron, and many pilots went to Korea for a change of air before returning to complete their tour. Another event at that time worth noting was the ferrying of the Valetta-worth of stores by Sgt. J.C. Rolley and Sgt. B.A. Horsey from Sembawang to Kota Tinggi in one day, and a police cadet making 20 trips each way. On the debit side was the near-loss of Sgt. E.J. Webb who was found alive five days after crashing into the jungle. The Arnhem Day celebrations were made all the more real in 1951 by the presence of Major General R. E. Urquhart at the parade as G.O.C. Malaya Command. In 1952 Major L.J. Wheeler, D.F.C., R.A., took over command from Major D.P.D. Oldman, D.F.C., R.A., who had in turn relieved Major E. S. Gates, R.A., in 1948. After a year he was relieved by Major A.F. Robertson, R.A., and on 30 October 1953 the 50,000th hour of operational flying was flown. By this time 1911 Flight had become a Liaison Flight, staffed by officers of all arms seconded to the Glider Pilot Regiment, with Glider Pilot Regiment non-technical ground-crew but with Royal Air Force technicians like the remainder of the Flights.

Major Wheeler came back again for a second tour as O.C. in 1956. One of the main events of the year was Sgt. K. G. McConnell's return from the jungle after 21 days on his own. He had survived entirely on what he had with him and the jungle itself—even to this day he is still quoted as an example to the Jungle Warfare School.

1957 found the change-over from R.A.F. to Army Air Corps coming just in time for Lt. Col. B.B. Storey, O.B.E., M.C., R.A. to receive the full brunt of the administrative work. The R.A.F. were all slowly withdrawn and replaced by the newly trained members of R.E.M.E., and a few ordinary airmen were replaced by soldiers. The Squadron, by now called 656 Air Observation Post/Light Liaison Squadron, shook itself and emerged as 656 Light Aircraft Squadron Army Air Corps, with four Flights—2 Recce, 7 Recce, 11 Liaison and 14 Liaison—and for the first time a Light Aircraft Squadron Workshops R.E.M.E. Dispersal was still the order of the day and small formation parades were held in various locations.

1958 and 1959 were ordinary years, during which the Squadron carried out its duties in support of absolutely everybody. A large celebration was held, however, on 28 February 1959, to mark the 150,000th hour of operational flying, believed to be a world record for any one unit. The Squadron was presented with a ceremonial kris by the Director of Operations, Lt. Gen. Dato F.H. Brooke, on behalf of the Federal Government, and a kukri by G.O.C. 17 Gurkha Division/O.C.L.F. The kris is now in the Association Cabinet in the Squadron lines in Dishforth, but the kukri is still at 17 Division. The British High Commissioner (Sir Geoffrey Tory) and senior officers of the Police both armies and both air forces attended.

1960 saw Lt. Col. J.H. Creswell, O.B.E., R.A., assume command and the loss of a pilot in the jungle—Sgt. J. McCammont, of the Cameronians, who was carrying a soldier of the Cheshires with him when he disappeared near Kuala Pilah. This time the wreckage was not found for three months—such is the concealing power of the jungle canopy.

1961 saw the formation of 16 Recce Flight, acting as recce flight for 48 Gurkha Brigade in the East Coast, although based with Squadron Headquarters at Kuala Lumpur. The disappearance of Capt. P H. Hills, R.A., in November 1961 was only explained by the discovery of the aircraft wreckage in Thailand in 1967. In August 1962, as the Emergency was fast coming to a close and nearly all the country had been declared "white," the Squadron concentrated at Kluang, and for the first time Squadron Headquarters and the five Flights were all located at the same place. The peace of the Squadron, however, was rudely shattered by the uprising of one Asahari and some followers in Brunei in December 1962 and 14 Flight and a detachment of 7 Flight were sent to Brunei in support of the hastily dispatched force. Meanwhile, yet another flight was formed, 30 Flight A.A.C., which was to take over the liaison role from 11 Flight being equipped with Beavers and R.A.S.C. pilots in the main. At this time, 16 Recce Flight, which had for some time been manned by groundcrew from the theatre armoured car regiment (Q.R.I.H.) and went to Aden with them in 1961, returned to the theatre and continued supporting them from a distance.

In early 1963 the detachments in Brunei spread and changed over, until by April the principle of "roulement" had been established, with 7 and 14 Flights changing over every three months in Sarawak, 11 Flight and a detachment of 30 Flight doing the same in Brunei. Lt. Col. R. M. Begbie, A.A.C., the first A.A.C. officer to take command of the Squadron, found his resources fully stretched, and so in 1964 10 Flight was loaned from the U.K. to rotate with 11 Flight and release the Beavers to assist in Brunei and in the Tawau district of Sabah. At this time the distinction between recce and liaison flights (always virtually meaningless) was dropped, and

the Squadron became 656 Squadron A.A.C. 30 Flight A.A.C. moved down to Singapore later on in the year to act as a theatre Beaver Flight, being based with 15 Air Dispatch Regiment R.C.T. on Seletar airfield.

By now the advent of the helicopter and the principle of integration of aircraft into units began to have its effect and the fleet increased twofold with many teething troubles. 16 Recce Flight kept its Austers until the very last, even when changed to an Air Squadron with 4 R.T.R., and was the only Auster-mounted unit throughout the campaign except for a detachment lent from 20 Independent Recce Flight in Hong Kong. The unit air troops were all equipped with Sioux, while the A.A.C. flights were equipped at great speed with the Scout. By now it is well known what the effects of introducing this unreliable and untried aircraft into an operational theatre were—it says a lot for the pilots and groundcrew that so much flying time was in fact achieved. The tragic loss of Capt. D. B. deV. Jacot De Boinod, of the Guards, and W.O. II W. J. Hutchings. A.A.C., in 1964, due to a technical failure did much to spur efforts to improve the Scout.

In 1965 Lt. Col. P. E. Collins, R.A., took over. By now an officer had been appointed from Squadron resources as Commander Army Aviation Borneo with the headquarters in Labuan, and now no more than two Flights were in Kluang at any one time. On October 1965 the principle of integration was finally put into effect, with a farewell parade and presentations to the local schools.

The newly formed headquarters for the Theatre Aviation Commander in Tanglin was called H.Q. 4 Wing A.A.C., and Lt. Col. Collins moved there to await the arrival of Colonel D. Bayne-Jardine, T.D., who was to take over as Commander Army Aviation FARELF; 20 Flight A.A.C. in Hong Kong and the Air Troops there were now brought within FARELF Army Aviation. The Workshops, which had reorganised on to a R.E.M.E. establishment and were now called 75 Aircraft Workshops R.E.M.E., took over the task of closing down the Squadron's links in Kluang. A small Flying Instructional Element was set up with a few aircraft to teach new pilots (and old) to fly in FARELF. 7 and 14 Flights, when not in Borneo, were now based at Terendak supporting 28 Commonwealth Infantry Brigade, and 10 and 11 were rotating between Brunei and Kluang, acting as Theatre Flight when not in Borneo. 30 Flight, now called 130 Flight R.C.T., was fully committed as the Theatre fixed-wing flight, with detachments in Brunei and Sabah.

The title of 656 Squadron A.A.C., and virtually nothing else, moved with Lt. Col. Collins across to Labuan in March 1966 to relieve the officer acting as Commander Army Aviation, Borneo. Although by now the Flights were all supporting Brigades, it was generally agreed that whichever Flights were in Borneo came under command of the Commander Army Aviation, Borneo, and so the link was maintained. August 1966 saw the formal end of confrontation and the short life of 78 Aircraft Workshops R.E.M.E.

The Squadron and REME Workshop also supported 3 Flight AAC who brought their Scouts out from Tidworth in support of 5 Inf Brigade in Sibu, Sarawak, from September 1965 to September 1966.

The REME Workshop and the Squadron also supported the four Airtroops of 3 Commando Brigade in Singapore from formation in 1966 until the Brigade was withdrawn to UK. The Airtroops were 95/29 CDO Lt Regt, 40 CDO, 42 CDO and 3 Commando Brigade HQ, each having three Sioux.

I have compiled this record from a number of sources, and although I have had it checked I cannot verify its accuracy. If you find an error please inform me, John Heyes or John Bennett.

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