

## **Christmas Day in the tropics, by Ray Pearce**

I spent Christmas Day 1954 at the HQ of 35 Brigade at Ipoh in central Malaya, (now Malaysia) but my story begins one year earlier in Crosby. I was home on Christmas leave from my army unit in Sussex and spending it with my parents and brother and two sisters. I had been called up for National Service in July 1953 and was hoping for an overseas posting at the end of my basic training. On about December 29<sup>th</sup> 1953 the front door bell rang and it was a telegram boy with a message for Private Raymond Pearce. The gist of the telegram was “Return to unit immediately sailing for Singapore January 1<sup>st</sup> 1954.” Naturally I was delighted but my parents had mixed feelings. Other neighbours thought it wrong to send someone as young as me, 18, to serve overseas.

Back at camp there was a rush to be issued with tropical kit and to have various injections against tropical illnesses and so it came to pass that on New Year’s Day 1954 I was marching up the gang plank to board the good ship Asturius. On reflection it reminded the words of Kipling.

For its Tommy this and Tommy that and kick the brute outside  
But pleased to know you Mr. Atkins when the trooper’s on the tide.

We sailed through the Bay of Biscay where I was sea sick, into the Grand Harbour, Valetta, Malta where a service man was taken ashore to be flown back to the UK due illness in his family. Then on to Port Said, Egypt where we were entertained by Gully Gully men, Egyptian magicians who entertained passengers on liners cruising the Nile. We passed through the Suez Canal and on to Aden. We went ashore and five of us hired a taxi to take us into the desert to see the Queen of Sheba wells. This territory is now the Yemeni desert and there is no way now that five young British soldiers could make this journey. On then to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Colombo harbour. The waterfront should have reminded me of Masefield’s poem *Cargoes*.

Dipping through the tropics by the palm-green shores.

Finally on January 23 1954 we arrived at Singapore, into Nee Soon transit camp for 2 days then my posting to HQ Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. I loved KL and was very happy there but in August was promoted to Sergeant and posted to Tapah in central Malaya where I was billeted with the Malay Regiment. There were only seven British NCOs in the Sergeants Mess, most were married and returned home each evening but what to do with me at Christmas? It was

decided that I should go to Brigade HQ in Ipoh for Christmas and found myself the youngest person in the Sergeant's Mess. It was my duty as Mr Vice



Chariman, to propose the Loyal Toast to her Majesty at the end of the Christmas dinner. It was a wonderful meal and although most of the other sergeants were veterans of World War 2 they were very kind to me.

On Christmas Day I went to a carol service at St. John's Ipoh. It was built as a Red brick Anglican church in 1912. It was strange singing the familiar carols, Hark the Herald angels sing with the temperature of 32C, 90F outside. I still have the order of service on that Christmas Day. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya in WW2 the church was turned into a noodle factory and the vestry in to a soy sauce factory. The pews were burned for firewood and the piped organ looted. At the end of the war men from the Royal Berkshire borrowed chairs from the then Majestic Hotel for the first service there after the war. The church was fully restored by 1949. I returned to my unit in Tapah, and flew home in July 1955, via Bangkok, Calcutta, Karachi, where the plane broke down, Bahrain, Nicosia, Rome and London. When I got back to Crosby I had been away for 18 months but what an adventure for a young man.



**Ray Pearce 18 Nov 2021**