

Six train journeys in eight hours by Ray Pearce.

These journeys came about in the summer at my regimental memorial service at The National Memorial Arboretum in June this year where I had the honour of laying a wreath on behalf of the fallen in the regiment. After the ceremony and lunch the Colonel of the regiment spoke to me about my time in Malaya. He said I was one of the few veterans, and the last one they knew of, who served HQ Malaya, Kuala Lumpur in the time of General, later Field Marshal, Sir Gerald Templer. He was General Officer commanding all military personnel in Malaya and also High Commissioner. He was appointed in 1952 by the then Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. My service there started in January 1954 until July 1955. The Colonel then said the regiment wanted a full record of what I could remember in those times. It was arranged that I should meet with the military historian Helen Fry and make a 45 minute podcast with her in our regimental museum in Bedfordshire.

And so it came to pass that one Friday in September we arranged to meet. In earlier times I would have driven to Bedford but went by train instead. This meant driving to Coleshill for the 09:07 train to Leicester, then the 10:13 to Kettering for the 10:38 to Bedford. This arrived at 11:09 where I met up with historian Helen and we drove to our depot in Bedfordshire. She had arranged with a former BBC man to set up the recording equipment and off we went.

I won't go in great detail to what I said but Helen asked how I came to be in Malaya. I was called back from Christmas leave at the end of December 1953, sailed on the Troopship Asturius arriving at Nee Soon Transit camp Singapore on January 23rd 1954. Two days later I was posted to HQ Malaya and told to report to the guard room to collect a rifle and ammo. As I would be one of the many soldiers guarding the Night Mail train from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. For operational reasons the train went at 20 mph behind a Bayer Garratt tank engine. We then went on to talk about my service and postings in Malaya together with the names of senior officers I could remember. By 1:30pm it was time to get the three trains back leaving Bedford 1:56 arriving back at Coleshill at 3:58 pm.



On the way back to Bedford station, in the village of Cardington we passed the former RAF camp with two huge hangars. These were for R101 and other airships of the 1930s. On the morning of 5th October 1930 R101 had just crossed the French border on the way to Paris when it crashed, burst into flames and all passengers and crew perished. 48 in all including the then Air Minister Lord Thomson. That was the end of airships as far as Britain was concerned. Germany, however, continued with this form of airship until the Hindenburg disaster. This was the largest ever built but on the 6th May 1937 it caught fire, 35 people died, the survivors were 62 in all but this accident finally brought about this form of air travel.



It had been a busy day for me going to Bedford and back but the feedback has been good. Helen was kind enough to say I was fabulous but I put this down to having a good memory.

Ray Pearce 19.10. 2022