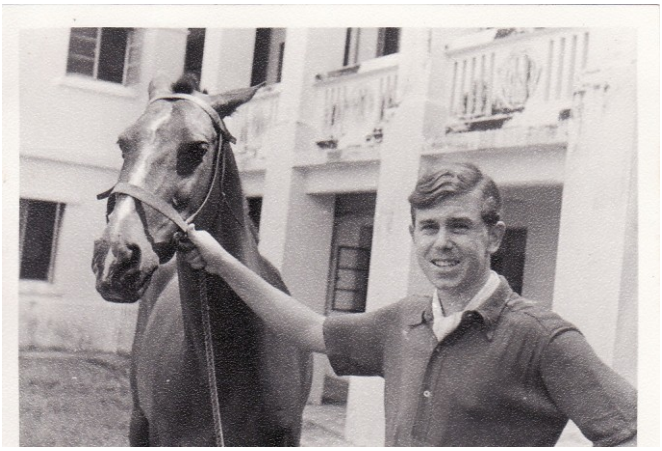
George Ferard

National Service

January 3rd 1951 - October 1952

England



The thought of National Service hung like a black cloud over my last term of school. I had passed my medical in October and had orders to turn up at Oswestry in early January. I had already chosen the Gunners (Royal Artillery) in deference to my father - my maths was good enough, I felt it to be slightly safer than the infantry, and I lacked the social panache and contacts to go into a cavalry regiment. I had disliked the OTC at school. After taking Certificate A, I had signed on for the same one hour per week one term course for 6 terms running - studying the Internal Combustion Engine - which I still didn't understand! This wilful refusal to acquire further military skills meant no promotion in the OTC, although I was given one stripe so I could lead a "house" section on field days!

I duly arrived at Park Hall camp Oswestry to join the 67 Field (Training) Regt R.A. in freezing snow - about a foot lay on the ground and the temperature was minus 5°C. I was still feeling sick after a rough crossing from Ireland! During the next fortnight our intake was broken in - boot camp stuff! We were marched everywhere (starting with breakfast at 4.45 a.m) and continually shouted at. Every second not

marching or training or doing PT was spent "bulling" equipment, polishing boots or cleaning and painting our freezing nissen hut. Two of our lot broke down; they were taken away and never seen again - discharged or liquidated! I was the only public school boy in a working class intake and much greener than most of the lads who had left school 2-3 years before. A number had been miners, and had black scars all over their bodies! I got on OK with my fellow recruits, but they thought me an oddity and called me "The Professor" because I seemed to know everything! On my second day, I was hauled out of parade by a bombardier and marched off to see a lieutenant and then a major. As a resident of Eire, I should not have been called up and was "free to go". But I lacked the moral fibre to grasp this lifeline! What would my father say when I turned up back at home? What would I do for the next 21 months? So I said that I wanted to serve my NS. I was given a form to sign and then marched back to my troop - a window had closed!

After a fortnight square-bashing, we broke up. I moved "down the road" to 24 "The Irish" Battery of 17th Field (Training) Regt R.A. The intake was all School Cert or higher and half public school. Training was still tough, but life was easier. We were no longer marched to meals. We were allowed into town once a week. The Regiment was crazy about cross-country, and I immediately went into the team (and then into the Western Command team to run in the Army Championships). Also I was asked (instructed!) to pull the aniseed bag for the officers drag hunt - pretty terrifying when the hounds got close - but running was worth perks and a bit of kudos.

After 6 weeks, some of us were selected to go down to a WOSB (War Office Selection Board) at Barton Stacey in Hampshire - two days of tests, group discussions and exercises (taking it in turns to lead). We also had to give short talks. I was thankful to pass - about one third of our lot got through, but not always the people one would expect.

After that it was off to Mons barracks at Aldershot. The first part was basic officer training (as for infantry) - we were mainly gunners, sappers, cavalry, and RASC (Infantry regiment cadets went to Eaton Hall in Cheshire) and involved quite a lot of bull and drill (under the famous RSM Brittain). One of the people in my squad was Lord Weymouth - now Marquis of Bath of Longleat erotica and wifelets fame - who was tall thin very good looking and in the Life Guards - see group photo showing us both. He was rather shy with a nervous stammer and seemed then to be totally conventional which shows you never can tell!

During basic training we were forced to box and I broke my left thumb which got me off rifle drill - instead I went daily to the hospital in Aldershot where I plunged my hand into a hot wax bath, and then wore a wax glove (and chatted up the nurses) while it cooled - I suppose a bit like infra-red treatment today. Towards the end of the course, there was a 24 hour exercise where you could not afford to foul up - the key was to avoid being made a platoon commander or higher. I was Company Runner - a cushy job with no rifle to carry - but suddenly found myself - to my consternation - made Company Commander. I had very little idea what to do, but in desperation summoned an "O Group" and gave out orders to my (cadet) platoon commanders which apparently sent quite a few of their men to their deaths. When relieved of my duties 2 hours later, the major in charge told me that I had lost nearly a whole platoon by ordering them to attack the wrong hill (faulty map reference), but that "he quite liked my style"!

After passing basic OK (the alternatives were to be relegated or Returned To Unit, which meant the end of officer aspirations - I have only heard of one person ever who got a commission after being RTU -

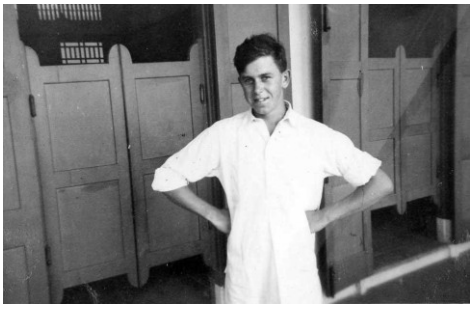
Richard Walker) - I went on to "The Batteries" - also at Mons - to learn gunnery. One person with me here was Ronnie Hampel - a tough officious rugger-player from St Edwards School, Oxford. - now Chairman of ICI - I did not like him much although someone did because they made him a Senior Under Officer and gave him the Stick of Honour. Our paths crossed occasionally in ICI and his brother Peter worked under me at Plant Protection in the early 60's. Gunnery split into Field or Anti-aircraft. I chose (? was allocated to?) the latter and learnt to control and fire the Bofors light AA gun and 3.7 heavy AA gun. Quite a lot to assimilate and much of it in class. We all worked like stink, because there was a significant failure rate at the two hurdles ahead - practice camp and a gunnery theory exam. Practice camp was quite fun. We went to Tonfanaw near Barmouth in Wales, played snooker in the evenings in the officers mess, and raced up and down nearby Cader Idris (timed by our Chief Instructor) - I won. Back at Mons, although top in the written exam, I only managed 6th out of 20 in the final order of Passing Out. This latter was pinned on a notice board alongside twenty postings. We all had to put down our first three choices (with those passing our highest getting first pick) and I thought I was lucky to get my top choice - the only posting to Malaya. That was the end of Mons, except for the nostalgia of the Passing Out Parade (slow march up steps to Auld Lang Syne). I never thought about it at the time, but it has since seemed strange that no-one from the family came to see me pass out.

Some leave in Ireland followed, then two dreary weeks at Woolwich doing nothing much (I attended some court-martials under instruction), then another three weeks of embarkation leave at home. I sailed from Southampton on the Empire Fowey in September 1951 - I was just 19. The EF was a very smart P&O liner which had just been contracted as a troopship (more and more men were being sent to Korea), and standards for first class passengers remained unchanged. The food was superb -

seven course dinners every night. The 2nd Battalion The Welsh Regiment was aboard - going out to fight in Korea. They trained day and night - bloodcurdling cries came from their special areas as they practised with fixed bayonets - and talking to their exhausted junior officers at dinner made me feel rather useless.

As an unattached officer going out to join a regiment, I had nothing to do – except, about twice during the four week voyage, duty as Orderly Officer, which meant wearing uniform and trotting around with a sergeant making sure that (unattached) other ranks were behaving themselves. As I had yet to exercise any authority as an officer, I remember feeling very self-conscious when my sergeant shouted for silence from about 80 men in a nasty cramped hold and then said "The Hofficer will now address you"! The voyage passed quickly. I went ashore at Aden and again at Colombo (to the Mount Lavinia Hotel) after being very sick in the Indian Ocean.

Malaya



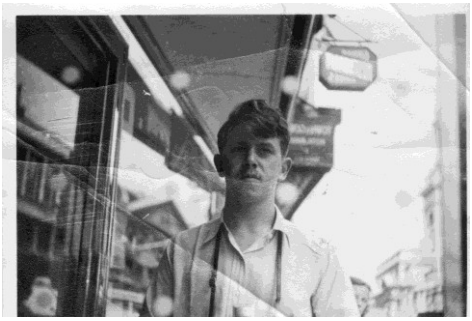
I quickly discovered that I had joined a very odd regiment!

Gunner Regiments normally had 2 batteries and were either Field or Ack Ack. Not this one - it had four batteries, two of them Ack Ack , one Field and one with the great 6" coast guns in permanent emplacements sweeping the Straits of Malacca - but not able to traverse round to stop the Japs cycling down the peninsular. Our equipment was obsolete. Heavy Ack Ack batteries typically consisted of Radar which showed where the enemy plane was, a Predictor which calculated where it would be by the time the shell arrived and guns which received the relevant bearings and fuse timings from the predictor, and hopefully shot the enemy plane down.

The performance of the Predictor in this triumvirate was cardinal. I had been trained at Mons on the electronic No 10 Predictor. My first job in Singapore was running training courses on the original mechanical No 1 Predictor which had been superseded in 1939! However much we practised we had little chance of hitting a plane lumbering across our frontage at 250 mph and 4000 ft, as we proved when we went to practice camp - we nearly did hit the plane, but then we were supposed to be hitting a target towed behind it! We would have been quite useless against Russian attack but the civilian population did not know that, and as long as we were not put to the test, I suppose they slept better because we were there!

The regiment was Malay - everyone up to and including Sergeant -Major, with the exception of a handful of specialist NCOs known as BORs ("British Other ranks") - strangely there were two RSMs - one British, who ran the show, and one Malay who was on token display! All officers were British. Officers spoke Malay (we newcomers got tuition, but had to be able to communicate effectively and lecture a troop in Malay within 6 weeks of arrival). The Malays were lovely people, naturally courteous but without any trace of servility. They were mostly semi-literate and hard to motivate - they took life as it came (the Malay phrase tid(ak)-apa - literally "not what" meaning "no matter" - summed up their approach to life). We recruited up country and if there was any problem in the kampong (village) - most of them had wives there - back they went usually without leave! It was very frustrating to get a good NCO doing this - one had to bust him down to Gunner, and then promote him again as quickly as one could because he was needed!

Strangely although country folk (we did not recruit in towns), they were not good in the jungle where the (Chinese) terrorists were thoroughly at home. They were generally unfit (eating only rice and curry did not help) and terrified of wild beasts and the dark. During my long leave up country I walked miles through jungle forest on my own, which always seemed to amaze Malay parties I met - "takut rimau tuan" (beware tigers sir) was said to me more than once by such groups appalled by my foolhardiness.



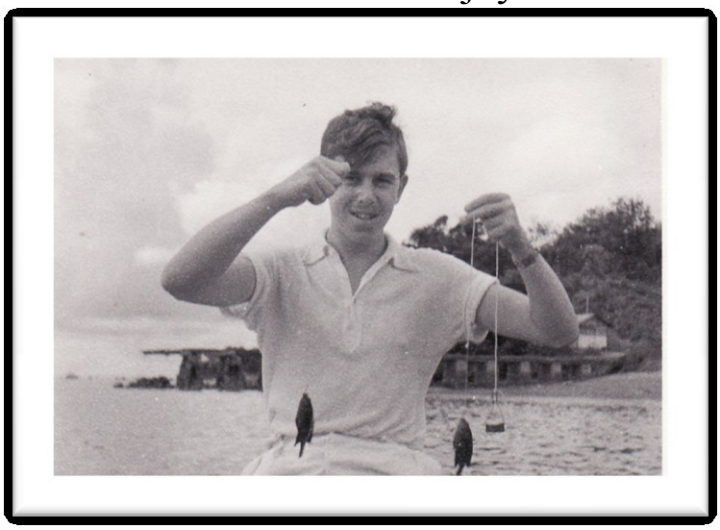
The regiment was not what I was expecting socially. Married officers kept to their own circle, and there was no tradition of their wives looking after the young subalterns I thought I would be asked to tea parties and maybe play tennis with the lovely young daughters of the senior officers. There were no lovely young daughters, and I don't think I even knew all the officers wives by the time I came to leave. My life revolved around the mess which doubled as the social centre of the regiment and the living quarters of single/unaccompanied officers - 2 majors (plus one doctor major), about 7 captains (plus one dentist captain) and maybe eighteen subalterns. The latter included regulars (Sandhurst - the youngest 21 or over) and national service (mostly 19 like me). The Sandhurst officers tried very hard to put us NS lot down - I was ignored in mess for several weeks after arriving. I noted that two older NS officers (about to go home) seem to have been accepted, but I found myself with 3 fairly recent NS arrivals and these became my main friends - Jimmy Girling, Iain McIntosh and Alec Grant. We shared a dormitory (and 2 batmen) and eventually left on the boat home together (all early release for Oxbridge). One of our problems was that we were very poor - we got 65p/day - and didn't have much left after mess bills, whereas some

regulars had private means & polo ponies. After about 2 months the regulars became much more friendly and in the end I got on well with all of them.

Pulau Blakang Mati (The Island Behind Death – now transformed as Sentosa) was a gorgeous place to live and work - it was about 3 miles long just south of Singapore town and separated from the main liner dock by a half-mile channel. The regiment ran a ferry service every half-hour from Jardine Steps to the mainland and one could be in the centre of Singapore in less than an hour. We had a lovely mess with a snooker table, squash tennis and badminton courts, a sailing club, a "paga" (shark-proofed section of sea to swim in) and beautiful gardens. The regimental offices, barracks, and gun parks were all within a few minutes walk. The rest of the island was a tropical paradise - like Malaya in miniature. There was a kampong (village), with shops and typical old Malay wooden houses, some built out over the water. The island was surrounded by a coral reef which usually kept the sharks at a safe distance. In places there were dense mangrove swamps crawling with fascinating life but the beaches were mostly white coral sand. And the rest of the island was covered with tropical forest full of fruit bats and monkeys (lesser fruit-eating) with white orchids in the trees. The food in the mess was excellent - rambutans, pomelos, paw paw and pisang mas (the local banana) for breakfast before a magnificent cooked selection under entree dishes (a la country house). There was a four course dinner at night, and on Sundays an enormous curry lunch which we used to sleep off afterwards .On mess nights, dressed in our bum freezers (tropical mess kit) and wearing medals, we played rough horrid games after dinner which used to scare me rigid. One night our doctor major was uncovered from a scrum and I shall never forget seeing his foot pointing the wrong way with the bone sticking out! We took

Paludrine against Malaria, and I was never ill. The temperature was usually 80-85°F which suited me fine.

We had lots of time to enjoy this existence. Training started at 7 a.m. but we knocked off at 1 p.m, and had the rest of the day to swim, fish on the reef, play games and drink Orange Crush - and in the early months, mug up our Malay. I learnt squash (I had only played fives at school) and played a great deal - I was fit and fast, and could usually wear down my opponents in long rallies since I could retrieve anything - the high temperatures meant it was hard to kill the ball. I ran three races in the Regimental Sports (half-mile, mile and three miles) and by winning the two longer ones became Victor Ludorum. I never ran again so it was nice to go out on a good note! None of us took girls out - we had neither the money nor the confidence and there was too much competition - nor frequented the brothels of Singapore.

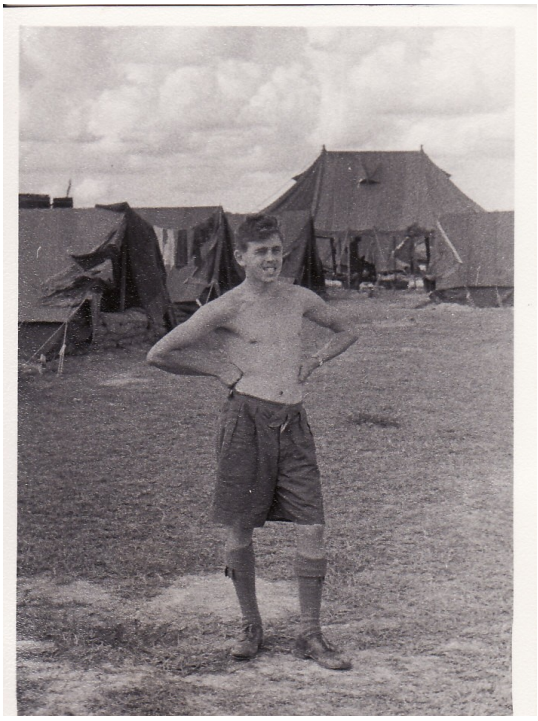


The gunnery was not hard - standards were pretty low and I quickly discovered that trying to be too keen did not go down well with the senior officers, who thought one was trying to show them up! Training apart, I remember paying the regiment (starting by collecting the money with armed guard from Barclays DCO - my first experience of air-conditioning) and also about five trips to Kuala Lumpur “commanding the train” up and down. This was a worrying job, as the train was regularly ambushed by terrorists - one was supposed to take charge of the situation, leap into action and counter-attack (I was allowed a sergeant and two men who I used to meet for the first time on the station

just before leaving) - but I knew that there would certainly be a cock-up and probably a court martial! Really, the situation was ridiculous. Fifty miles to the north of us, our army was involved in a savage war. A few miles away at Kota Tinggi in Johore there was a jungle warfare school which we once visited as observers, but not for actual training. I think we should have been put through our paces and then seconded to operational units. A few weeks with the Gurkhas would have made us all much better officers!

One other role which we practised was to "support the civil arm" in the event of riots in Singapore.. The regiment had been called out before I arrived during the Maria Hertzog riots, and one of our captains had got into trouble after badly wounding a girl who he said he thought was going to chuck a grenade at him. I am thankful we never had to perform for real - the principle was "minimum force", but in practice one either did too little or too much!

Not much of note happened to me at Blakang Mati. My worst "black" happened one night when I was on my rounds as Orderly Officer and had gone into the regimental cinema for a rest, sitting for a few minutes in the dark next to Mike Grove, a regular full lieutenant friend of mine. Some Malays came in while the film was on (they were not supposed to but we all turned a blind eye) and Mike turned round to me and said to my surprise "George, stop those people coming in" to which I said "sugar off" or something similar. What I did not know was that our CO Colonel Salaman was sitting on the far side of my friend, and the instruction had come from him! In the morning he sent for me, and I got the most awful rocket - disobeying an order from a superior officer.



Practice camp - April 1952 - confirmed what rotten soldiers we were. We went up to a derelict airport site in Johore on a jungle road half way between Kluang and Mersing to fire our heavy Ack Ack 3.7/3A Guns. The area had been under the control of the Gurkhas and nice and quiet for months - one reason why I think it had been chosen - and we were temporarily given their anti-terrorist responsibilities as well.

Unfortunately for us, word must have got out that the Gurkhas had gone, and as soon as we arrived, we were shot at continually from the jungle and rubber plantation surrounding the site. This did nothing for our gunnery - we nearly knocked down a plane. We dug trenches and our trigger-happy Malays fired enormous fusillades at random into the woods. One of my bombardiers had an arm shot off, and then Major Josh Ward, the regimental second in command in charge of the camp decided that we should send patrols into the jungle at night to get our own back and chose me to lead one of the first two - I had a sergeant and about nine Malays, all terrified.

The patrol was a shambles. After an hour in the dark, I realised I had lost half my men, and when I saw a campfire (almost certainly terrorist), I thought discretion the better part of valour and backed off. I was thankful to get back to our trench lines (without being shot by our own sentries), and even more thankful when the rest of my patrol turned up. The other patrol did no better and that was the end of excursions in the dark!

At the end of my stay, I managed to get four weeks local leave, and took myself off (in mufti but with my revolver) determined to really see Malaya. I could not have done it without fluent Malay. I travelled by hitching lifts on military convoys, by bicycle, by canoe, and at the end by aeroplane and train. I did a lot of jungle walking (using tracks not roads), and received some great hospitality from Malay kampong penghulus (village headmen). The local police and military (who I always reported to) were helpful, but did not approve of a British officer swanning around on his own! I "did " Malacca and then headed north to Perak and Kedah (where I took in Penang for three days) and then Perlis on the Thai border - very wild country.

It was here in one day that two incidents befell. I had walked from dawn through the mountain forest to get into Thailand, and was on a track just over the border when I saw a party coming some way off. I hid about ten yards off the path while six armed terrorists passed me. I then decided it would be safer to return "off piste" in the woods (the forest was open and full of tree ferns) but was attacked by a swarm of bees in a vicious stinging mood. I just ran and the next thing I knew I had fallen over a small rock cliff, deeply gashing my right knee (the scar stayed for about 20 years) - I was very lucky not be disabled, which could have had fatal results. Anyway, I found I could walk, I squashed the last of the bees in my hair (I had about 20 stings) and got back in one piece.

After Perlis, I went back down to Kluang in Johore and hitched a ride to Mersing, where I planned to go north to Kuantan, following the coast tracks - I wanted to see the east coast. There was a road to Endau, and then just tracks, and I made my way by bicycle, crossing the rivers by canoe ferry. The beaches were magnificent, there was little active terrorism in the east (nothing much to sabotage), and all the Malays were very friendly. One day I lost my revolver - it fell out of its holster strapped to the front of my bike - and was thankful to find it about five

miles back where it had fallen - several Malays had seen it, but had wisely left it alone since being caught with arms was a capital offence!

My problem was time - I planned to get to Kuantan in three days (it was about 150 miles) but it took me four - and when I arrived I found the train not running. I was now stuck and out of leave. I cabled the regiment, and then as luck would have it, ran into a gunner officer with an air spotter plane - an Auster - who offered me a lift to Kuala Lumpur. We set off in fine weather but ran into a storm over the Cameron Highlands - my pilot friend kept on going down through the clouds to see where he was, and then pulling out steeply when nearly in the trees - the clouds went down to the forest - I was thoroughly scared! He then said that we weren't going to make it, but knew a deserted strip where he thought we could get down. Magically he found it. It was terrorist country and we both ran for cover. He guarded the plane with his automatic while I went for help. After running through a rubber plantation, I stole a tapper's bike, and rode about 8 miles into Temolah, returning with a police escort who guarded the plane (see photo). We then went off to a Kings African Rifles mess, where the officers entertained us royally.

In the morning, they ran me to Mentakab on the main railway line to Singapore. I arrived back at Blakang Mati three days late, to be told that I had been booked with my friends on the Bibby Line steamer SS Cheshire, leaving the next day, but had now lost my place. With a lot of special pleading, I managed to get it reinstated, but it meant I had no time to say my regimental goodbyes, which was a pity as I had made some really good friends during my year.

We enjoyed a quality of comradeship - whether standing on our chairs in the mess to sing Kipling's "The Screw Guns" or fooling around on the beach - which I never quite recaptured. We relied on each other both at

work and play, but we did not compete. There were no women to impress. Promotion was automatic or (for NS officers) non-existent. Although I had a great crowd of chums in Plant Protection, we were always looking each other over wondering who was going to get promotion. My friends and I were quite emotional watching Malaya slip away as the sun went down - a chapter in our lives was closing.

The boat trip back was fun. I have photos of the four of us afloat and ashore in Colombo and Aden. Our colonel, John Salaman, was also going home with his family and became very friendly. I won the ship's table tennis competition and was presented with a metal hot water bottle which I kept for years. I got photos of myself taken in uniform on arrival in UK, and then went home for some pre-discharge leave before starting at Univ.

I was glad I had done NS, and thought myself lucky to get to Malaya. In August 1953 I was duly gazetted a full lieutenant in the Royal Army Reserve of Officers (residence in Eire meant I avoided the Territorial Army). I never wore my uniforms again, and (much to my annoyance) my mother threw them all away. But I have my medal somewhere!

GF 15th January 1999