



PETER & MAMMA

Peter Adamis 8 January 2017 Abalinx

This article is long overdue and I am sure that those of who are still around and served in Singapore and Malaya will remember the couple in the photograph. They were with affection, known as "Peter and Mamma". We of A Company, 6th Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR) living in between Delta and Bravo Companies had as our "Chowallah" this delightful couple.

I remember meeting them for the first time on ANZAC Day 1973. We had been driven in from the airport, all tired and hungry from Changi Airport and separated according to whatever Company we had been allocated to. Eddie "Jock" Bryson, myself and a few others were allocated to A Company. We were the reinforcements for the soldiers that had been spirited home back to Australia under unusual circumstances. Most of us were from the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) located in Townsville Far North Queensland. The reason we were selected was because an earlier posting order had us posted to 2 RAR who were told were to return back to Vietnam for another tour. The only reason I know of this is because I found the original Posting Order amongst my records that were being held in the Archives in Melbourne. I still have the Posting Order somewhere amongst my records. Being reposted to Singapore and Malaya was as a result of the Whitlam Labor Government coming to power on the 4 December 1972.

On this particular day most of the Battalion had been stood down to commemorate ANZAC Day, while a skeleton staff manned the sensitive areas such as the stores, transport, ammunition, our intelligence services area (enclosed by wire) and barracks. The intelligence services was later relocated to Darwin when it remains to this day. We were advised that A Company was on a stint for three months at Butterworth on the island of Penang, Malaya; patrolling the Commonwealth Air base and that within a few days we would be flown down to join the rest of the Company. I can still remember my nostrils flaring up at the exquisite and exotic smells that were completely new to me. The heat was not unlike the heat we were used to in Townsville and particular very close to the tropical heat we had experienced in Papua New Guinea the September before in 1972.

I can remember walking around talking with the other blokes who were just as excited as I was to be in Singapore and ready to take on any challenge. The trouble was that the money we had was not in Singaporean dollars and we only had Australian currency. We would be given additional funds prior to going to Butterworth but the problem was what were to do now. We went around to visit the couple mentioned above to see if we could purchase a drink or something to eat before dinner. Their little shop which was located in between the platoons on the first floor, had a counter, refrigerator and cupboards filled with an assortment of goodies, including small food parcels, cigarettes, lollies, trinkets, post cards, photographs and a small stove upon which to make a quick warm meal or a hot drink.

Suffice to say, Peter who ran the shop with his wife was kind enough to accept our Australian dollars and even gave us Singaporean dollars in exchange at a reasonable rate. At that time, one Australian Dollar was worth three Singaporean dollars plus a few cents. If memory served me correctly Peter gave us in exchange three for one, keeping the cents to himself. We felt that was a fair bargain as we had exchanged 100 Australian dollars and received 300 Singaporean dollars in return. We felt rich beyond our wildest dreams, not knowing that it was expensive to live in Singapore. Peter and Mamma on the day and throughout our posting in Singapore would often loan us money until pay day, for being young soldiers that were full of beans, adventure, not afraid of anything and willing to take risks in a country that was alien to that of our own. We wanted to experience everything and quickly.



A Coy 6 RAR 1973

Although the yarns and stories for Butterworth will have to wait for another day, it is important to note for the sake of history that some of the A Coy blokes were also absent on courses and did not manage to be with the Company in Butterworth. I write this because some were contesting that A Company was in fact posted to Butterworth during 1973 and some historical catalogues need to be reviewed. As for the majority of A Company, when we returned from Butterworth after our stint, we settled down to normal training which consisted of training, training, training, exercises, sport, sport, sport and more sport, followed by training and more bloody training. A company was known as the Sporting Company, being the best at sport in most if not all of the sports.

I know that my mates will howl me down, rib me, throw the odd dart and have a go at me, but I do remember were good at Cricket, Football, Hockey, Swimming and any other sport that you can think of with the exception of bloody rugby. Why on earth anyone would want to play rugby is beyond me. It is not even an Aussie game. I always loved hockey and it was natural that I joined the A Company hockey team. We won every game against the other companies losing only to the Malay Defence Force hockey team who were just brilliant. After each game we would return exhausted to the barracks and all head towards Peter and Mammias for light refreshment, something to eat, purchase cigarettes and as normal soft drink as alcohol was prohibited.



If I thought I was fit in 1 RAR then I became a superman in my own mind and thought I was invincible. Such was the high level of training we were subjected to at all times and were ready for any contingency. It is funny to reflect on this as I always thought 1 RAR was the best of the best and in my mind it was and still is my original Army family, despite my love for 6 RAR. I remember discussing 1 RAR with Warrie George Mansford some 38 years later and being advised that 1 RAR when he and I were both there at the same time had been prepared to such a high level of training that they were ready to take on any challenge. Warry George said that he and Blue Hodgkinson (Commanding officer 1 RAR) knew that the Vietnam War was coming to a close and that was why 1 RAR went for an extensive training tour of Papua New Guinea - "Training Exercise Treble Change". Therefore our training 1 RAR held us in good stead when we came to 6 RAR.

What is of interest to note is that after Papua New Guinea, "Warry" George Mansford was posted to 6 RAR, Singapore/Malaya as the Operations Officer and we as young diggers caught up with him again? We recognised him while we were conducting our annual fitness tests near Dieppe Barracks the NZ Battalion. I remember Mick Driscoll (Now in Geraldton West Australia) and I always teaming up for any of the numerous qualifying tests and doing well as a team. On this particular occasion our Officer Commanding happened to be with Warry George Mansford who was observing the training. As Mick and I came down from the last leg of the obstacle course which was the flying fix, Warry George looked up and grinned after recognising myself, Jock and a few others.

All this training only led us back to our barracks collapsing on beds and struggling to make it to Peter and Mamma for a cool drink or something to eat. Peter and his wife were always to be found available throughout the day. Day or night they would be there at the Chowallah shop and sometimes I would wonder whether one of them slept there. During our posting, I got to know Peter and Mamma well and through Peter I found out that he had also worked closely with the British Army throughout the Malayan emergency. I cannot bet on it but I was led to believe that Peter was operating a shop or the equivalent at the Jungle Training Centre located at Pulada on the Malaya side of the border and when the emergency was over, Peter moved to Singapore and made his home amongst the newly created Commonwealth Force named Australian New Zealand & United Kingdom (ANZUK). I don't know how he managed it but somehow using his considerable resources managed to run and operate a Chowallah for the Australian Battalion in Singapore.

I guess because of his Chinese origins it was natural that he chose to live in Singapore under the newly created island nation under Lee Kuan Yew. At times his children would be found at the shop being cared for by Mamma while Peter went out and brought additional stock for the shop. Peter showed us numerous letters of references from British and other Commonwealth countries describing his honesty and services to Commonwealth nations and he would always proudly display them to new visitors to the shop. I was but one of many who had the pleasure of having known Peter and Mamma during our posting.



It was a sad day when we left Peter and Mamma as they were not sure what they were going to do. Although that I knew was that they had an apartment in a government housing area called Commonwealth Gardens and that the address they gave me would come in handy five years later. I am the belief that Commonwealth Gardens like Bugis Street no longer exists and that Singapore had developed to such a high degree that it was the leader in Asian prosperity. In any case we returned back to Australia and back to the normal training exercises. Nothing had changed for us.

Whilst posted to 6 RAR in Brisbane, I kept in touch with Peter and his family through letters and that was how I was able to find him again when I was posted to Penang, Malaya for another three month stint in 1978 as to what is now called Rifle Company Butterworth. (RCB). The trip was a good one from a training and peace keeping point of view but it also had its tragic moments.

In 1978 I was posted to Bravo Company as the Company Clerk. I had visions on learning more and educating myself further and the only way I could achieve that was through education and changing streams from regimental to the administrative side. Mind you that did not excuse me or take me away from doing everything a regimental chap had to do. It was different in those days as you were expected to be a rifleman first and then an administrator or logistics soldier. Suffice to say the parachute injury to my back on my last descent made it final without me having any say in the matter. I had about 18 months at Battalion headquarters where I learnt all the ropes and then the Chief (Peter Stammers) asked whether I would like to go to Butterworth again. Too right I wanted to go. That is what I was being trained for. So, it came to pass that sometime in September 1973 Bravo Company under the leadership of Major Bruno Wallis, ex SASR would take us to Butterworth. There were late nights in preparing the company to go, administratively and logistically it was almost a nightmare, but our training did not let us down and we were soon found our way to Penang.



Our time in Penang has been recorded in dribs and drabs, but I shall keep that aside for another story. All that will say about the trip is that we lost a good mate in Mills, a good friend of another good mate in Bob Peoples who has since passed away. Each of the three platoons have their own story to tell and I best leave it up to them to tell their own yarns. After our three months were almost over we managed to get the opportunity to go to Singapore for a few days.

I scraped enough money for a hotel, took some Army rations, hexamine tablets and a few spare dollars that I had left. I had a family back in Australia and most of my money was left with them. In Singapore, I kept my meals to the absolute minimum as I had spare cash. I lit the hexamine tablets in the hotel bathroom and ate the Army rations to sustain me. Having fed myself I made contact with Peter and Mamma who I found by visiting them at their apartment at Commonwealth Gardens.



Over the next two days, Peter took me all over Singapore and spoke to all the merchants who gave me the best price possible for the gifts that I had purchased for my wife and two sons, David and Paul.

Peter took me to Chinese restaurants and paid for all my meals, not wanting anything in return. I felt very humble at his generosity. Peter advised me that his family was doing well and that his son was for a higher education.

When we parted we promised to remain in touch as much as possible. However life being what it is promises are hard to keep no matter how hard we try. I remember receiving a letter from his son who had now grown up and was telling me how life was for the family. I tried to keep in touch but failed to keep the correspondence up over the years. As I grew and changed over the years, going from one posting to another, my mind always returned back to Peter and mamma and the kindness that they had demonstrated to us all who had the pleasure of meeting them.

As the years went by and life changed course a number of times, I finally was able to settle down to some form of stability and make plans for the future. I had gone through a bitter divorce, left the Army, raised four sons alone, remarried, suffered a number of major illnesses and then throughout all of that managed to travel to my place of birth Greece a number of times. On each occasion that I went through Singapore I made a point of trying to find Peter, Mamma and their family. Despite numerous taxi rides and telephone calls including website searches, I had lost track of Peter and Mamma. If I appear guilty and remorseful for not having tried harder, it's true. But within me I will always remember their kindness towards me. I am quite sure many others would add to this story. This is my tribute to Peter and Mamma of a bygone era.

As always, apologies to purists for my poor grammar and savagery of the English language. I wish you all well and hope that this article does not cause ambiguity in the minds of those who read it.



Peter Adamis is a Journalist/Social Media Commentator and writer. He is a retired Australian military serviceman and an Industry organisational & Occupational (OHS) & Training Consultant whose interests are within the parameters of domestic and international political spectrum. He is an avid blogger and contributes to domestic and international community news media outlets as well as to local and Ethnic News. He holds a Bachelor of Adult Learning & Development (Monash), Grad Dip Occupational Health & Safety, (Monash), Dip. Training & Assessment, Dip Public Administration, and Dip Frontline Management. Contact via Email: abalinx@netspace.net.au