

## **75 AIRCRAFT WORKSHOP, KLUANG**

### **Kluang (Town of the Flying Fox) Johore, Malaysia** by Brigadier A. W. Reading, OBE, MC, TD

*The airfield workshop site at Kluang in Central Johore, Malaysia, has been the home of units of the Corps since 1946.*

*With the final departure of 75 Aircraft Workshop to Singapore in July 1970 we will see the end of 24 years' association with the town and the surrounding district, some memorable and others interesting but not so pleasant.*

*As many members of the Corps, both serving and retired, have at some time spent at least a part of a FARELF overseas tour at Kluang, it is time to reflect back on events and record a little of the history of the Corps' association with this provincial town in Central Johore.*

The airfield workshop site is situated on the northern perimeter of Kluang and is overshadowed by the feature, Bukit Lambak. The original airfield was constructed by the RAF as an emergency 1,000-yard grass strip on the site of a golf course in 1940 when the threat of Japanese invasion became apparent. There is little known of the use to which it was put during the Japanese advance down the Malayan Peninsula in 1941 except that it was used in the final assault on Singapore. It was during the Japanese occupation that the major airfield developments took place. Australian and British POW labour were used to extend the runway by some 500 yards which included the removal of a complete hillside. In addition, a short, hard strip of 700 yards was added. Permanent hangars were assembled after their removal from sites in North Malaya and stand today as the two major hangars in use. Kluang became an important base for the Nippon Air Force operating over the east coast of Malaya, with Kuantan in the north and Seletar in the south, which gave the Japanese their main air surveillance cover of the South China Sea.

After the Japanese surrender in August 1945 Kluang was first occupied by 1 / 1 Punjab Regiment, but later the permanent garrison for a

time was 5 Infantry Brigade, which had arrived in 1946 from occupational duties in Japan. It rejoined the remainder of 2nd British Division in Malaya. As a result, the airfield site was first occupied by 5 Inf Wksp and so began the Corps' long association with the town and the airfield.

At that time major improvements were made in working installations and buildings, some of a permanent nature, and others of attap construction, to meet the requirements of living accommodation, administrative offices and workshop ancillaries. The aircraft hangars were devoted entirely to vehicle repair and to housing machinery.

It was during the days of 5 Inf Wksp, later called X Brigade Wksp. (renamed due to the transfer to BAOR of 2 British Divisions titles), that the pair of stone 'Chinese Lions' were procured, it is believed, from a Chinese temple at Batu Bahat. These trophies, known to many in the Corps, graced the entrance of the REME Officers' Mess for a number of years. After going astray quite recently, they were traced, and one lion is now securely tethered and in the safe keeping of the Corps Museum at Moat House.

During the Malayan emergency in 1950, Kluang became a major centre of unrest and communist terrorist (CT) activities. This resulted in a considerable military build-up. The garrison at the time became the permanent home of the 63rd Gurkha Infantry Brigade and the airfield site was occupied by the affiliated brigade workshop, 14 Inf Wksp. During this period, the garrison consisted of at least three infantry battalions, an armoured car regiment and additional supporting arms and services, with the airfield housing its first post-war flyers, a Royal Naval helicopter squadron.

Over the long period of the emergency, Kluang and district was classified a 'Black Area'. Numerous CT attacks and ambushes took place around the town, the garrison's perimeter and on the main access roads. A considerable number of

casualties occurred among the Security Forces including several officers and soldiers of the Corps stationed at Kluang. Crews of recovery vehicles sustained most casualties. As a result, the workshop units were issued with modified Daimler scout cars fitted with turrets mounting Bren guns to provide the Recovery Section with its own means of defence. Because of CT activities, Kluang remained an unaccompanied station for some time, with families located in Singapore. The town and the garrison were sealed off by a perimeter floodlit fence. All road traffic was moved in military convoy during daylight and only restricted movement was permitted at night during the enforced dusk-to-dawn curfew.

As the year 1950 passed, the role of the workshop changed first to a station workshop and eventually, by 1955, reverted again to a field force infantry workshop with a civilian increment.

It was during the early days of 1953, when the airfield was occupied by 'C' Company Wksp, as part of HQ Wksp Group, that an enterprising commanding officer, Major Norman Barnes, confronted with the accommodation problem in Kluang, built a residence for his family adjacent to the workshop entrance. This still exists today on its original site facing the Sergeants' Mess. A well-engineered structure which has lasted the years and remains occupied as an official married quarter today.

During the early and late fifties a strong bond had developed between the Corps at Kluang and teeth arm units they supported. Particular mention might be made of such battalions as the 1st Fiji Infantry Regiment, whose fighting successes against terrorists equalled their performance at rugby, which will ever be remembered in Malaya; the 1st Bn. 7th Gurkha Rifles, whose well-known MTO, Major Bond, was a familiar and friendly figure around the workshop—Bondo, a retired officer who served with his battalion without any formal payment, was well known to purchase spares for his unit vehicles from his own pocket when unobtainable from Ordnance; the 1st Bn. The South Wales Borderers, commanded by Lt-Colonel Myers, a unit to which the workshop provided an additional rifle company on an ad hoc basis for curfew and search operations; the 1st Rhodesia African Rifles, whose commanding officer,



*Aerial view of Kluang Wksp*



*A house built by Kluang Wksp CO in 1953 as it is today*

Lt-Colonel Anderson, later became the Chief of Staff of the Rhodesian Army; finally the Federation Armoured Car Regiment (FACR), a close acquaintance over many years whose accommodation and unit lines were situated alongside the workshop.

The repair load at that time included three-ton Bedford RL with armoured body known locally as PIGS. This vehicle superseded an earlier QL armoured version mounted on a Ford QL chassis. Both versions were locally manufactured at 40 Base Workshop in Singapore. The familiar Daimler scout cars with FARELF modified turrets were still the main road escort vehicles until finally superseded by the Ferret. The Bedford Armoured (PIG) served as the main conveyance of the infantry but, owing to their weight, imposed heavy demands on recovery resources. The top-heavy

turreted Daimler scout car was regularly a cause of concern because of its tendency to overturn.

As the Malayan Emergency receded and operation pressures reduced, officers and soldiers of the Kluang Workshop assisted the locals to improve their standard of living. The adoption by the Corps of Kampong Paya in 1955 was an example. This new village, on the outskirts of Kluang, received official recognition and members of the workshop gave practical help in reconstruction projects.

As 1957 approached, with the coming independence of the Federation of Malaya (Merdeka), the then District Officer, Inch Zainal Bin Mohd, made a formal presentation of an encased pair of kris to the Corps at Kluang, as represented by 22 Malayan Inf Wksp. This was in recognition by townfolk of all that had been undertaken by the workshop and the Corps for their benefit over a number of years. This gift, suitably inscribed, is now on view in the Corps Museum.

As a result of Merdeka, in July 1957, a change round of units occurred and many of the locally enlisted personnel serving in the Malayan Inf Wksp, Kluang, were transferred to the Federation Army. Some of these men are now officers and senior N.C.Os. of the present Malaysian EME (Jurutera Letrik Dan Jentera Malaysia). They received their early experience and training in the three multi-racial Malayan workshops of the Corps. Their place was taken by the completely British-manned 13 Inf Wksp.

Looking back over the years, many who served at Kluang will remember the numerous formal parades on the concrete apron of the airfield during administrative inspections, disbandment parades, Queen's Birthday, etc. Most of these occasions were held just after first light and in the cool of the morning.

As the 1960s approached and aircraft became a permanent feature of the Army in the Far East, Kluang, with its excellent airfield and installations, became an obvious choice for the deployment of 656 Army Air Squadron from Noble-Field in Kuala Lumpur. The Infantry Workshop moved south to make room for the incoming aircraft workshop and a small detachment remained which later became a station

workshop to meet vehicle and general repairs of the garrison.

By 1961, 656 Aircraft Squadron Wksp moved in and took over, for the first time since the day of the Japanese occupation, the large hangars. So after many years they reverted to their proper use. The station workshop concentrated on vehicle and general repairs in the smaller hangar and elsewhere within the workshop area.

Actual flying is worth a mention in that over the years particularly between 1950 and 1960, many members of the REME Sergeants' Mess spent their off-duty hours obtaining personal pilot licences through the good offices of the Singapore Flying Club. This club ran week-end flying instruction on the airfield and was very much a thriving extra mural activity.

As the British military presence in West Malaysia reduced from 1960 onwards, Kluang, with Johore Bahru, Seremban and Terendak, became the main British garrison. With the approach of the seventies and the decision to run down FARELF, Kluang's days as a British garrison became numbered.

To complete this short history of REME in Kluang a mention must be made of the workshop civilian staff. Of the original strength of around 180 locally employed civilians many have already left the British service with favourable redundancy terms and have found employment either locally in Kluang or in other towns such as Johore and some in Singapore. The workshop foreman, Mr. Ong Chu Hong, is now managing repair premises in town, and of the few remaining. Mr. N. K. Krishnan, the civilian clerk, since 1946, is planning to return to his native India after 24 years' service with REME. Mr. Chen Kuan Chin, civil labour employment clerk, plans to go into business locally.

To all these civilians at Kluang the Corps owes a debt of gratitude for their devotion and loyal service and they will undoubtedly remember their long association with the Corps.

As time passes only a few will remember the years during which the Corps offered employment and friendship to many and helped to bring stability, security and peace to a considerable area in Johore.

## **CORPS UNITS AT KLUANG**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Commanding Officers</b>
1946-47	5 Brigade Wksp.	Major A. G. Low
1947-48	X Brigade Wksp	
1948-50	“C” Company Wksp Group	Capt. H.A.G McAleese
1950-51	14 Inf Wksp	Major R. C. Ballam
1952-55	2 Station Wksp	Major A. A. Hyde Major R. A. M. Stirling-Baker Major N. Barnes
1955-57	22 (Malayan) Inf Wksp	Major W. J. Scott Major A. W. Reading
1957-60	13 Inf Wksp	Major R. W. Butler Major D. J. Meeten
1961	Det. 13 Inf Wksp	Major G. O. Ewing Major G. Dyson
1962-66	58 Station Wksp	Captain C. K. Mabbs Captain N. L. Marks
1964-67	656 Lt Ac Sqn Wksp	Major D. S. Brown Major J. H. Tomkins
1967-70	75 Aircraft Wksp	Major R. Nix Major G. B. Simpson