

The Trip of a Lifetime

National Service in West Africa

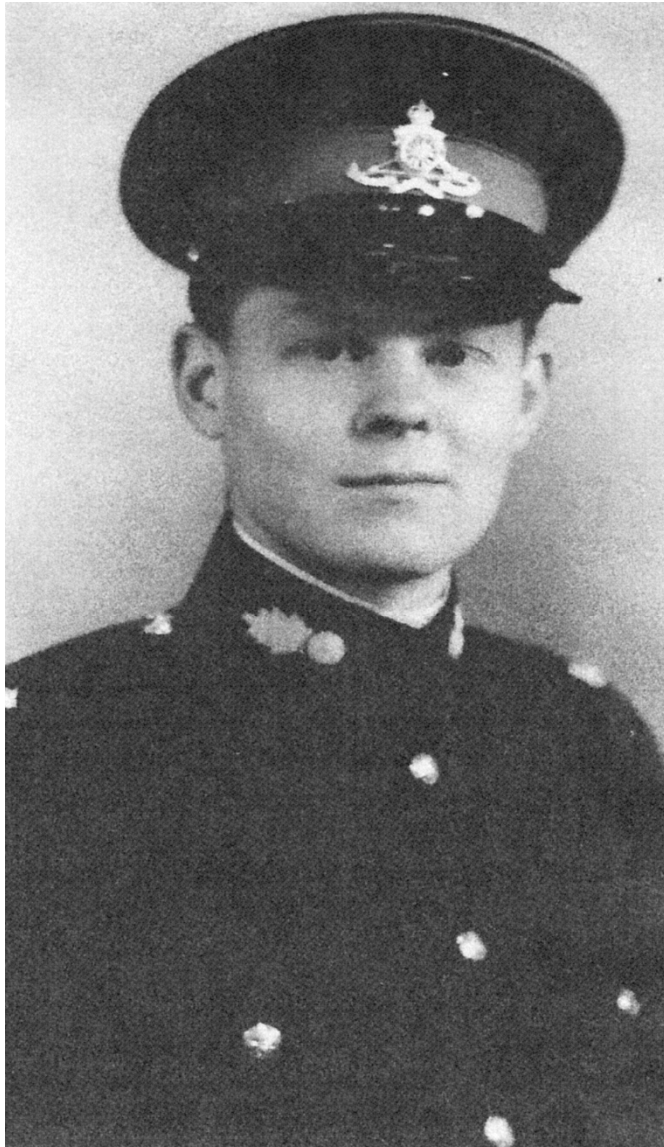
Peter Duggan

Eight days after my nineteenth birthday on 9 January 1951, I passed out of Mons as a young National Service Second Lieutenant in the Royal Artillery. I still remember looking at a noticeboard that listed the 30 postings available where, among those to Britain, Germany and Hong Kong, one to British West Africa stood out. To my surprise, I later discovered that I was the only one to choose it. The traditional requirement for an officer in the Royal West Africa Frontier Force had been to be at least twenty-three years of age and a full Lieutenant but for National Service Officers that seems to have been relaxed.

I had hoped that I might be sent out to Africa by sea - a voyage of some three weeks - but instead I spent three weeks at Woolwich waiting for a flight. Finally a place became available in the 2nd Light Battery, West African Artillery just north of Accra and close to the headquarters of West Africa Command at Giffard Camp. I flew out in a Vickers Viking. The other passengers were all Senior British NCO's and Warrant Officers with much greater military experience than myself but as the only officer on the plane the stewardess addressed all her queries to me.

The flight took four days. I spent the first night in the Rock Hotel in Gibraltar. During the next leg we flew through rather than over the Atlas Mountains as the plane was incapable of flying above 12,000 feet. The second night was very different; we landed at a small airstrip somewhere in French West Africa. The manager, the only European in the area, insisted on my sleeping in his own room. It had four mud walls but no roof. As a result it was comfortable and cool with a wonderful view of the stars. On the third day we set off for Kano in Northern Nigeria but, running into a major thunderstorm, had to turn back to Kaduna where we spent the third night.

We flew on to Lagos the next day with only a brief stop to let off a few passengers before we finally landed in Accra at about 1pm . An officer from the battery was waiting to greet me and take me to the camp. The mess was a single storey building roofed with wooden shingles. It consisted of two long rooms, one a comfortable sitting room, the other a dining room with a small bar manned by very small barman who disappeared completely behind his serving hatch whenever it was time to pray. On arriving I was offered a late lunch - a meal I have never forgotten: it consisted mainly of roast beef so tough that it took me, normally a fast eater, nearly half an hour to chew my way through the two slices



Self, just commissioned, 5 days after 19th birthday

I was then shown my living quarters which were a pleasant surprise. Beyond the mess was a laterite compound containing four or five "gidas" - the local name for a small mud hut - which was where the officers who were single or without their wives lived. Married officers lived in bungalows some distance from the camp. The gidas were whitewashed inside and out and were also roofed with wooden shingles which extended some two feet six inches beyond the walls. They had no ceiling, a concrete floor and two windows made of extruded steel rather than glass with shutters hinged at the top and a wooden stable door.

My gida was divided into two with an arch leading into the bedroom. In the living area there was a comfortable armchair and a table and chair for writing. In the bedroom was an enamel bowl on a wooden stand, a chest of drawers and a hanging cupboard for clothes. I slept on a camp bed with a

mosquito net suspended by four cords from the rafters. At night little bushy tailed creatures rather like baby squirrels ran up and down the cords. It seemed pretty good compared to boarding at a public school.

Soon I acquired a monkey called Fifi. He lived on top of one of the shutters and had a waistband which looped around a rope running from the shutter to the farthest tree and so had a good deal of freedom. He could also come on to the top of the wall in my gida, keeping me company when I was reading or working. On one occasion he escaped and, despite the efforts of everyone in the battery to find him, was missing for three days, finally returning of his own accord.

Fifi came with me to annual bush camp and clearly enjoyed the ride on the front seat of the Landrover with his hands on the open window frame. Twice I was



'Gida' in barracks; my home for 16 months just beyond the officers' mess

stupid enough to release him inside the gida, watching with horror as he careered around the room at lightning speed rapidly throwing everything moveable on to the floor. When I left I was delighted to find that the young officer who replaced me was happy to buy him for what I had originally paid.

In front of my gida was a patch of grass and several small trees. On the other side of the compound were a lavatory and a small shower. Across the road beyond the guardroom was a sick bay where, conveniently, medicines to combat both constipation and diarrhoea were readily available at all times of the day and night.

The battery consisted of two field gun troops equipped with 3.7 howitzers and one light anti-aircraft troop. Altogether there were 350 men and they too lived in gidas, some sharing and some with their wives. All were entitled to be fed from the camp kitchen and on my first evening I went down the lines when they were eating. To my surprise they seemed to be chewing on little more than bone and gristle so I asked if they were enjoying their food. The reply was immediate and positive - "Yessah! Fine chop sah!" So much for my lunchtime beef!

I was to be second in command of a troop of guns. During my training I had been given a list of all the guns in use in the British Army and I had brought it with me. After meeting my new troop commander, a Captain called Gerry Byford, I enquired what type of guns we had. I was surprised to hear that they were 3.7mm

Howitzers which were not on my list. I asked what they were like as I was to take a gun drill parade in the morning and was assured that they were much like a 25 Pounder. I gave the normal orders only to find that the men were unbelievably slow on the sights and, thinking to show them how to work the sites more efficiently, I ran over to one of the guns (no-one is allowed to walk on a gun site unless pacing) only to find that the sight was unlike any I had ever seen and did indeed take longer to set.

As field guns generally fire from one map reference to another it is necessary to first establish your own position by taking sightings on to prominent landmarks and then to calculate the direction and distance of the target. Wind and weather conditions all have an effect on the flight of a shell and so have to be taken into account before instructing the guns. The gun position officer, usually a lieutenant, does this with the help of two technical assistants - 'tech acks'. In my case these were two mission school educated 17 year olds - Felix Odum and Alphonse Cattah.

Some years after my return to England I was watching a film in the Empire, Leicester Square when I spotted a familiar face in the audience. To my delight Alphonse Cattah was on a day's leave from Sandhurst having been selected for training as the first African officer in the West African Artillery.

Originally designed to be carried over difficult terrain by mules, the 3.7 howitzer could be dismantled into six pieces - two wheels, the breech block, the trail, and the barrel in two sections. The West Africans were very proud of their ability to carry the parts on their heads in places that mules could not go - an ability which proved invaluable in the Burma campaign.

The battery were regularly called upon to give displays which always followed the same routine. First we drove up to a wide ditch (there was one round the parade ground to allow the water to run away in the rainy season) where we unhooked the guns from the jeeps and fired them to prove that they were in working order at the start of the demonstration. The guns were then taken apart, each section being carried separately across the ditch, reassembled on the other side and fired again to prove that they had been reassembled correctly. The whole display took a maximum of four minutes. Sometimes we did a joint display with a team from the Royal Engineers in which they built a Bailey bridge over the ditch. Our vehicles then crossed the bridge with the sappers marching behind.

I remember standing alongside an American General who took out his watch and part way through the display expressed doubt that we could complete in time. "Just wait!" I said and was rewarded by his surprise when we did exactly what we had promised.

In total there were six British officers. One, a Sandhurst trained Lieutenant, Ian Crichton, was known by the men as 'Bang Bang' because of his way of banging his boots when coming to a halt. One day he was out in the bush, luckily with a rifle, when he accidentally stepped on a snake. With almost unbelievable speed he shot it dead and brought it back to camp for us to see. Held up it was as long as he was tall. There were also two British Warrant Officers one of whom was in charge of the workshops.

There were two African BSMs, one a Wongara from the Northern Territories, the other a Fulani from Senegal, both impressive and dignified men. Sergeant-Major Wongara had been invaluable to the authorities during the riots in 1948 and had been decorated behind the scenes in return for his help.

The Fulanis are a tribe who are found all along the southern border of the Sahara and have aquiline rather than negroid features and their women are considered to be great beauties. They are generally Muslim and one day standing on the parade ground while the Christian members of the battery were attending a service he looked at me and laughing said "He be a funny god, sah, if he like that singing." I could only agree.

The British paid their West African troops more than the French and so many came to enlist from French territories far beyond the boundaries of the Gold Coast. Adamu, my boy, who looked after me doing far more than would have been expected of a British batman, came from Niamey in Niger and was entitled to ten days extra travelling time when he went on leave.

He was illiterate but despite that spoke both French and



Adamu, my 'boy'



Kasimu, the mess gardener

English (or rather the Pidgin English that was the norm) as well as at least one native language. He took great pride in my appearance and my kit was well looked after. He did all my washing and ironing, made my bed, kept my gida and the lawn clean and tidy and generally looked after both me and Fifi. Being illiterate Adamu had a superb memory and when on a shopping expedition never forgot anything or the prices he had paid and was completely honest.

I kept a wallet with £10 in it tucked away at the back of a drawer in case of emergency and I assumed that no-one knew. One day Adamu came to me to say that he thought it was dangerous to leave the money there but "I do check it every day, sah."

I soon found myself asked to take on extra duties. As the Pay Officer I had to check the pay lists once a fortnight including the breakdown of each item so that we had the right amount of change and then collect the money from the bank. In the sixteen months I never found an error in the accounts which were always prepared by the same pay clerk, Julius Gohohoe.

As Mess Secretary I was in overall charge of the mess: the mess cook McKrie, despite his name, was also from French territory. He was reputed to have once picked up a machete and chased around the cookhouse an officer who had had the audacity to complain.

The gardener, an elderly Moshi called Kasimu, helped me break up the bleakness of the laterite compound by planting and looking after a number of banana trees. I collected these trees one by one on a fortnightly basis from the bush.

As Education Officer I had a staff of two, a sergeant and a bombardier, who ran classes every morning, one to teach English to new recruits, the other to teach the men to read and write.

We paraded from 6.30am to 1pm with a break for breakfast and so every afternoon was free. Some of the other officers went to the beach but as a redhead with fair skin my back quickly blistered all over. Furthermore I had chosen the West Africa posting because I was interested in learning about the country, the local people and their customs. I started by visiting the central library in Accra where I was able to read, but not borrow, rare books on the country and its tribes. The chief librarian soon introduced me to a young member of her staff who was a nephew of the Osu Mantse, the title of the paramount chief of Christiansborg, and after some months he arranged for me to visit the Nai Wulomo, the chief fetish priest of Accra.

The fetish priest's house was in the back streets and I was met by a young man who spoke English and took me to the compound. There I found not only the Nai Wulomo himself and his elders seated on a raised concrete platform but also a number of other important local people on seats along the wall. I was offered the last seat but one, the last seat being occupied by the young man who had been sent to fetch me and who now acted as interpreter. I was quizzed for an hour and a half on why I wanted to learn about their customs and assured them that I had no intention of writing a book about them.



The Nai Wulomo at home

I could not help noticing that although the proceedings were conducted entirely in Ga some of those present were listening intently to my answers before they were translated, so clearly some of them spoke English. I found out later that some years earlier an anthropologist from the School of African and Oriental Studies had also asked about their customs. She had promised to respect their confidences and not to write about them. On her return to London, she had gone back on her word and done just that. Although they had ceremonially burned a copy of her book they were still upset by her betrayal.

Eventually they accepted me and invited me to a ceremony that was to take place that Sunday at the Ju Ju Rock which lies just off the coast, telling me that I would have to bring a bottle of gin to be hurled at the rock as my offering to the spirits. I have always rather hoped that the elders drank the gin and refilled the bottle with water.

Before the ceremony I was asked to pour a libation - quite an honour as this is usually done by the most senior person present. It involves taking with the left hand the base of a hollowed out coconut, then bringing your right hand to it so that you can hold it firmly while a liquid - in this case agboteshie which is distilled palm wine and was then, under British rule, illegal - is poured in. You then tip it towards you three times to release three drops on to the ground to appease the spirits of the ancestors and to ask for their blessing, before drinking the rest.

Thereafter I got to know the Nai Wulomo well and always seemed to be welcome whenever I went to see him. He did not speak English and I did not speak Ga so we would eat together or play awari while waiting for an interpreter.

Awari is played in various forms all over Africa. In Ghana an awari board generally consists of two rows of shallow cups and you start with four, or in some versions of the game six, counters. The counters are often the seeds of the odum tree but in any case need to be fairly small as the contents of a cup, often more than four, are picked up and dropped successively into each of the following cups. Attempts to cheat by not dropping all that have been picked up are common and so each player needs to be alert to the number in each cup before his opponent plays but not in a friendly game such as that between the Nai Wulomo and myself.

He told me that before the arrival of Europeans his predecessors had been of more importance and had sent the chief, the Ga Mantse, to greet them and bring them to the town. As a result those early Europeans had assumed that the chief was the most important and treated him accordingly. I was therefore surprised and delighted to see during the independence celebrations on television that the man

pouring libations was the same Nai Wulomo that had been so good to me. He and his successors have been the Speakers of the Ghanaian Parliament ever since.

We generally ate groundnut stew made with chicken, lamb or goat in a thick gravy flavoured with groundnuts. It is eaten with fufu which is made by pounding with a pestle in a mortar either yam, cassava or plantain until it forms a glutinous mass from which you twist off a knob with your right hand and dip it in the stew before eating it. This was a meal that I always enjoyed in Ghana but whenever I have tried it in African restaurants in London I have been disappointed.

I also got to know the Labadi Na - the chief fetish priest of a small Ga town further along the coast - and was invited by him to attend Homowo. Homowo is the big annual festival in each of the seven Ga towns when everyone tries to get home, much as we do at Christmas. In Labadi the custom was to sprinkle flour over the largely unclothed body and to greet people by hugging and pressing yourself into them, with a couple of grunts as you did so - a bit unnerving for the only white man making his way to the chief's enclosure where the main ceremony took place. After explaining that I had been invited by the chief priest I was guided to the centre of festivities and found myself seated among the elders next to the Asafohene - the chief of the gunbearers.

The ceremony lasted for several hours during which fetish mediums danced to the sound of music and drums. The mediums who are all female have their hair dressed in traditional styles; as they dance they become more and more frenzied, calling on the gods until possessed when their hair is let down and their clothes above the waist discarded. Half naked and more and more frenzied they dance on apparently, and in some cases certainly, in a trance. Sitting in the front row among the elders one of the dancers came up to me and shook me by the hands and then leant over me to the person behind; I have never forgotten the slap of two pendulous boobs on either side of my face. Another dancer came up to me, took my hands and insisted that I joined the dance. I looked at my companion who indicated that I should and I found myself in the middle of the circle doing my best to emulate the others to the cheers and applause of all the spectators.

Back in my seat I admired the ceremonial sandals worn by the Asafohene. He then invited me to breakfast on the following day and presented me with his sandals parrying my protests by saying that he could easily have another pair made. I still have them - made in heavy black leather, the straps are designed to look like cartridge belts and the soles when fixed on the wall resemble a pair of African heads.

The seven Ga towns are spread along the coast to the east of Accra and each has its own hinterland of small villages. In one of the villages behind Labadi I became

friendly with what we would call a witchdoctor. He was in fact part herbalist and part spiritualist and I have no doubt did a lot of good locally. He allowed me to watch him at work and I remember that eggs and bells seemed to play a large part. At Homowo he too came into the town and saw me sitting with the elders. I did not spot him in the crowd but on my next visit he was clearly worried that I might have told the Labadi Na that I knew him too and had been allowed to watch him perform: he was much relieved when I assured him that I had never mentioned my visits to him and would certainly not have divulged what he had shown me to anyone else.

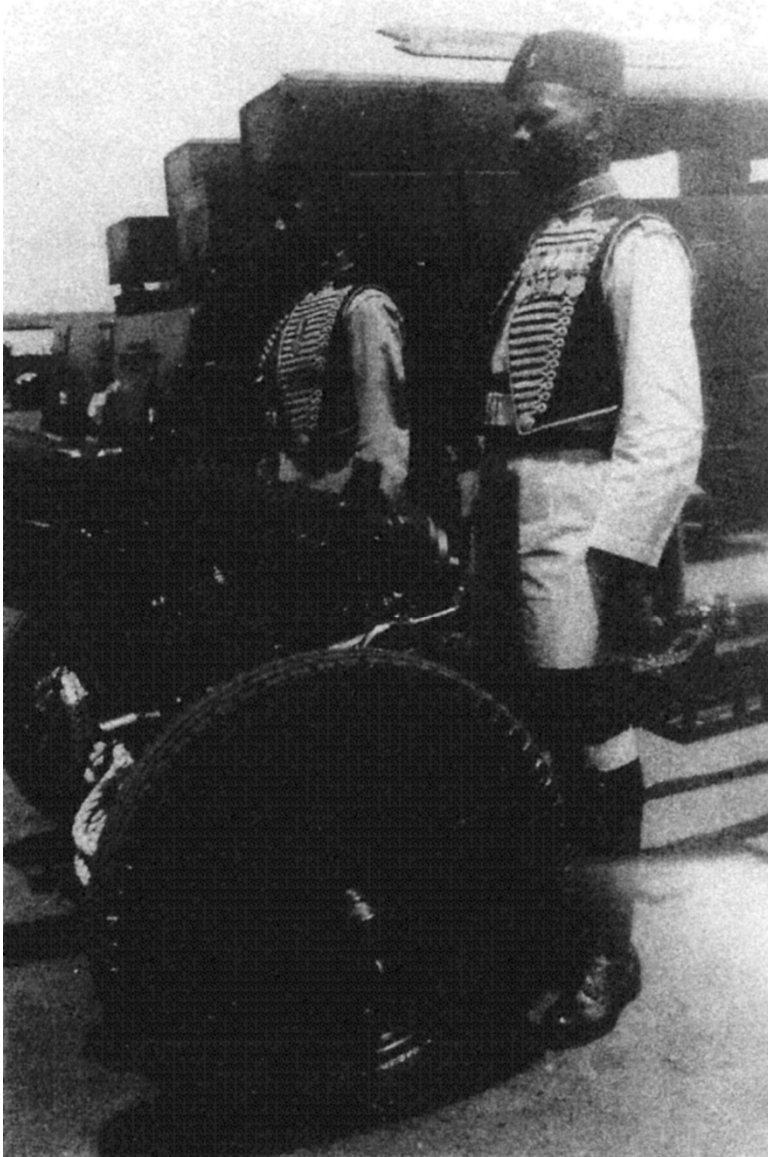


Fifi, my monkey

Nungwa, which sat at the head of a small bay a few miles beyond Labadi, had the reputation of being particularly difficult and hostile to British rule and had, I understood, been the scene of some nasty incidents during the war. However the LAA troop wanted to conduct an exercise firing out over the bay and I was sent to explain this to the chief and to ask him to ensure that his fishermen were warned not to fish on the morning in question. I was shown into his presence only to be told that there could be no question of telling his villagers not to fish and that I should make sure that we did not fire as we proposed. I explained that I was only the messenger and would report back to my seniors what he had said. Next morning there were far more fishing boats than normal in the bay just sailing backwards and forwards. A single shot high into the air and well out to sea was fired, the boats scattered and the exercise proceeded as intended. I have never felt comfortable with our actions on that day. It must have ruined the fishing and left the fisherman without an income for at least a day if not longer.

I am not a strong swimmer but one day I and a friend ventured into the sea at Teshi. The beaches all slope steeply into the Atlantic and there is a strong undertow so I walked out carefully to avoid being out of my depth. When I thought I had gone far enough I took a couple of steps to my right still with my head out of water. Beginning to head back towards the beach I was horrified to find that there was no longer sand beneath my feet and I struck out for the shore but the undertow was too great for me and I was getting nowhere. My friend tried to help but it quickly became clear that while he could cope on his own he could not manage both of us so I told him to look after himself and I would do my best to follow. I was sure I would drown but at that moment two young Africans saw my plight, rushed in each grabbing one of my hands, hauled me out and stood me up on the beach. "How much sah?" they said. They demanded £10 which I did not have anyway and, feeling slightly insulted that I had only been rescued for money, I refused. "Your life no worth £40 sah? We throw you back again." Eventually we

settled for a couple of pints of beer and we parted friends.



Field guns normally fire on targets that are out of sight of the guns. The troop commander, normally a Captain, acts as an observer positioning himself so that he can see, and therefore direct the fire on to, the target. The gun position officer, normally a Lieutenant, is responsible for establishing by map reference the exact position of his guns and then, taking into account weather conditions, firing on to the map reference of the target. He does this with the help of two technical assistants - tech acks. During the whole of my time in the battery my tech acks were two 17 year old mission educated Ewes, Felix Odum and Alphonse Cattah. Some four years after

Gunners in full dress uniform

my return to England while watching a film in the Empire Leicester Square, I spotted in the audience a face I recognised and discovered, to my delight, that Alphonse Cattah had been selected for training at Sandhurst as the first African officer in the West African Artillery.

A gun position officer has absolute authority over the guns and in that regard only cannot be outranked. On one occasion when out on an exercise the guns had been deployed and I was giving an order to the sergeant in charge of my right hand gun when someone walked on to the position and started talking to him; a Hausa he was an excellent sergeant and normally responded immediately to instructions. On this occasion however he did not respond. I repeated my instructions over the wireless and finally the Tannoy. Still no response and still the officer who had walked on to the site continued to talk to him. Finally exasperated by the lack of response I told the intruder to get off my gunsite immediately and he did so. At that point the General's ADC came over, introduced himself and asked whether I knew who the intruder was. "No" I replied. He then told me that he was General Whistler, the Commander-in-Chief West Africa. I am still puzzled that he did not make himself known either directly or through his ADC on arrival. It would have saved an awful lot of embarrassment all round - not least for the African sergeant in charge of the gun.

I cannot remember the reason for my first visit to Kumasi. Some twenty miles north of Accra is a six hundred foot escarpment up which the road zigzags to reveal crashed mammy wagons and other vehicles in the forest below. At the top lies the forest belt which in those days extended for up to some 200 miles from the coast. Kumasi itself is 168 miles from Accra by road and 810 feet above sea level with a pleasant climate. A battalion of the Gold Coast Regiment was stationed just outside the main town and I stayed in the mess. Oddly it was there that my most frightening experience took place. A rabid dog was loose on the lawn and I and another young officer - we were the only two around - managed to trap it under a large cardboard box. I then sat on top of the box for some thirty minutes while he went for help. Sitting on top of a box sounds easy but it is very different when you know that any movement that allowed the dog to escape could be a disaster. I returned from Kumasi by train - a journey which took all day. The compartments in the first class carriages did not have bench seats as in Britain but were each furnished with four comfortable leather armchairs and two small tables. There was no refreshment car but at each stop - and there were many vendors of snacks and drinks came to the door of the compartment.

While in Kumasi the CO, Colonel Carruthers who had previously served in the Indian Army, asked me to photograph for him the guns in all the forts along the coast. I had a good camera - a Retina 1a - but not much skill and I remain to this



A family

day ashamed of my efforts but it gave me the chance to drive along the coast from Accra to Sekondi and Takoradi in the west, stopping at all the forts on the way, and later to the mouth of the Volta in the east.

I travelled to the Volta with a young architect who owned a small Fiat. Our route took us past Dodowa which was the home of a Paramount Chief. A Paramount Chief ranks above local chiefs and is responsible for a much larger area and my companion thought that as we were passing through his area we should call on him. We stopped at his 'palace' and were ushered into a long room where we were given two seats on one side. At the end of the room was a large armchair on a dais and on the wall behind us I noticed a framed document recording the fact that his uncle, who had also been chief, had been

knighted. Eventually the chief came in, greeted us in perfect public school English, chatted for a while and then suggested that we should drive up to see the new water tower that he had built just outside the town and then, on our way back from the Volta, call in again for a drink. By now feeling very much the junior party we thanked him and beat a hasty retreat to the water tower. The Fiat was unable to climb the slope with both of us aboard so I got out and walked while my companion struggled on to the top where there was somewhere to turn round.

Eventually we reached the banks of the Volta where we watched the hippos and then set off back to Dodowa where we were due at six. Drinks were served and we were entertained by the chiefs daughter - a girl of about thirteen in the standard African blue school dress - who played Chopin on the piano while we drank.

On the 6th February 1952 I was alone in the mess when, at about two o'clock, the telephone rang. On the other end was the Governor's ADC who told me that the King had died in the early hours and that the Governor wanted a salute fired on the Polo Ground at 4pm. There were no other officers around and my training as a National Service officer did not include anything about such formal duties but I thought I remembered from childhood that on the death of a monarch the salute involved firing one round per minute for each year of his life. Luckily the African sergeant major and the British sergeant in charge of the ammunition were both in barracks and soon had ready four guns and their crews - a total of twenty four men - in ceremonial uniform and enough blank ammunition to give us some spare. Everyone swung into action and in a remarkably short space of time we were ready.

The polo ground was close to the sea and a grassy sandbank separated it from the beach. A regular route for pedestrians going into Accra was along the beach and then up over the sandbank and across the corner of the polo ground. There was a long stream of people walking into Accra and, startled, they ran away whenever we fired but a minute was long enough for more to come over the sandbank before we fired again. The result was a series of startled pedestrians running towards the town once a minute. There was nothing we could do to help and had it not been such a solemn occasion we would have been roaring with laughter.

The next day saluting bases throughout the empire were instructed to fire and it was only many years later that I was told that we were only one of two who had done so the evening before.

The Gunners were regularly asked to carry out 'road recce's' because we had transport. These involved setting off for up to four weeks in two Landrovers with trailers to check the condition of roads in the interior. Most were not surfaced and were mainly laterite if you were lucky and sometimes little more than mud tracks which could become treacherous in the rainy season. I had been hoping for my chance throughout my tour but it did not come through until just before my demob at the end of my National Service. I did suggest to my Battery Commander that he should say that I had already set off and could not be contacted but no luck. However I had already had an opportunity to travel to the North so I was in no position to complain.

There was to be a joint exercise between French and British troops just across the northern border in Upper Volta, now called Burkino Fasso. My Battery Commander had put me forward as an umpire as I spoke French but the General said, very reasonably, that they could not have a National Service 2nd Lieutenant as an umpire on an international exercise. Kindly my Battery Commander then

suggested to me that I should take two Landrovers and trailers up to the North just in case we were needed.

Delighted, I set off with my boy Adamu and two drivers, Thomas Kwahu and Tetteh Larteh. We travelled with enough food and fuel for a month and stayed in the mess at both Kumasi and Tamale; elsewhere we stopped at Government Rest Houses which provide both shelter and cooking facilities but little else.

Driving up the first escarpment north of Accra my Landrover was not pulling properly and at one point as we negotiated a lefthand hairpin bend we were almost dragged back over the edge by the weight of the trailer. I glanced at my driver and despite his dark skin he had gone almost white with fear. Once at the top we stopped to check the clutch and found that it had been filled with oil. Odd! but we drained it and carried on without any further problems.

We reached Kumasi that day staying again in the mess and the next day drove on first to Mampong some 33 miles north where we stopped to visit the market and then to the Yeji Ferry another 140 miles north east. A typical chain ferry, it was comfortably able to carry two vehicles at a time including lorries and mammy trucks and was, in those days, the main, if not the only, crossing point for vehicles over the Volta and the beginning of the Northern Territories. It was famous for dried fish and although it all seemed to be covered with flies I bought and ate some with no ill effects - if locals could eat it why not me?

We were now in the Northern Territories. There were in those days 33 languages in the Gold Coast as well as many local dialects. Together my party could speak English, French, German, Ga and Twi which is the language of most of the people who live in the forest belt so we were beyond the areas in which we could communicate easily with the local people. English was already the lingua franca of the Gold Coast but most of the local people in the North did not speak it. On one occasion we stopped in a village to try and buy some eggs and were unable to make ourselves understood until eventually an old man who had once served in the army was found.

We then turned north west towards Bole and from there north to Wa. The route took us through the Lobi area. The Lobi live in fortified mud compounds which can be entered only by climbing up a notched log to the top of the surrounding wall. They have the reputation of being hostile and aggressive but seeing two women with a small child by the roadside we stopped and asked if we could take a photograph and they agreed to pose for us. On another occasion, however, a local woman on her own and with only a band around her waist holding a leafy twig over her backside ran away before we could speak to her.

In Wa is a magnificent mud walled mosque outshone by an even larger and older one in Larabanga. Unlike any building I had seen before it sported narrow pointed towers and the wooden beams around which it was constructed stuck out through the walls on both sides to form a regular pattern.

Back then the Gold Coast was administered by a Governor based in Christiansborg Castle to the east of Accra and supported by three Regional Commissioners who were in their turn supported by a network of District Commissioners. Tumu, some 78 miles on from Wa and close to the northern border, was the most remote base of any District Commissioner in the Gold Coast and it was there that the Anglo-French military exercise was to end with a reception and so it was to Tumu that I was going.

I reached Tumu in the late afternoon and settled into the rest house. The next day I called on the District Commissioner who, on hearing that I was there for four days, suggested that I should stay with him. Despite being the only British official covering a huge area he had no telephone and one truck a month, which, already two weeks late, brought supplies of things that were not available locally. As a result there was no flour and no potatoes so we had yam with almost everything, boiled or mashed yam instead of potatoes and sliced and toasted yam for toast.

Just like my gida in Accra his bungalow had a roof but no ceiling and so the top of the interior walls formed a ledge on which things could be deposited. I was told that a former visitor, when sleeping in the same bed, felt a snake drop on to his bedclothes. Terrified he lay still and rigid until the morning by which time he was a gibbering wreck.

White visitors were generally a rarity and in my honour the Tumu Koro, the principal chief of both the town and surrounding district, put on a song and dance evening which lasted some two hours. Being treated like royalty was a novel experience. During the evening he offered me two carvings both traditionally worn on the top of the head by dancers of the Konkomba tribe during traditional tribal dances. One was of a crocodile, the other a cow's head. I was unsure how to react as I knew that I could not reciprocate and looked at the DC hoping for some indication as to what I should do but none was forthcoming so I accepted the cow's head and gave back the other. With hindsight I have always regretted that I did not accept the two.

Lawra is some 68 miles almost due west of Tumu and close to the Ivory Coast border. On each of the four days that I stayed with the DC we drove out to Lawra where the chief, the Lawra Na, proved to be both affable and welcoming. It was the pito season. All the food that had been grown locally had been eaten and were it not for pito there would have been a three month famine. Pito is the local corn

beer. It is pleasant but not particularly alcoholic and so the people were in no sense drunk.

The chief showed me round his house with great pride, explaining that it was the only two storey building for 60 miles in any direction. It was circular but unlike the Lobi houses further to the south had an entrance on the southern side. It consisted of a series of rooms arranged around the inside of the outer wall and connected by an inner passage. I remember passing his son's room where he was making for himself a pair of baggy trousers of the sort in which the crotch is much lower than in ours. We were hurried past the kitchen where some of the wives, wearing very little, were working and then past the summer kitchen which was open to the sky.

Eventually we climbed by ladder on to the roof to be shown the chief's personal quarters - a door opened into his sitting room which in turn opened into his bedroom. While up there the chief presented me with three barbed arrowheads which he explained were magic and would always hit the target - "But" he said "these do not have the usual poison on them as I do not want you to be at risk."

The next day was market day and we processed to the market together, the chief in grander robes than before, myself, the DC and then several attendants. Whenever I saw anything I wanted an attendant was deputed to bargain for me: if I was happy with the price I gave him the money and he returned to collect what I had bought which was then passed down the line to another attendant. Yet again treated like royalty with each of my purchases carried by someone different!

One evening we crossed the Northern border to have dinner with the French DC in Leo. On the way I was surprised to pass two French missionaries travelling on an enormous tricycle for two - a slow and tricky way to travel in the bush. The French DC proved to be very different to his British opposite number. The food was superb and the mangoes bore no resemblance to the stringy variety I had enjoyed outside Accra but his behaviour was also very different. To my astonishment he pinched his servants on the bottom and in other ways displayed a familiarity which seemed entirely inappropriate.

Eventually the day of the reception arrived and the DC suggested that as I was not officially supposed to be there I should put my Landrover in his garage. I joined the reception in civilian clothes and found myself talking to the Brigadier who asked if I had yet travelled in a mammy truck. "Not yet, Sir." I replied and with a broad grin he left it at that.

The next day I left Tumu and, wanting to return by a different route, set off for Bolgatanga a further 78 miles to the east. Bolgatanga market is famous throughout

the north and I wanted to see it for myself. Huge, it was by far the biggest market I had seen. Not only were there stalls selling the basic essentials but also many devoted to hand made items from miles around and I bought four extraordinary figures of fetish mediums as well as a simple bronze ring and cylindrical gong worn by dancers on the first finger and thumb.

We then set off south for Tamale. Behind me in another Landrover was a more senior member of the battery, Rowly Caufield, a Captain who commanded the other field gun troop. He was aiming for the airstrip at Tamale as the Brigadier had offered him a seat in the plane in which he was returning to Accra. Still some distance from Tamale he saw a plane take off and assuming it to be the Brigadier's plane he was furious and overtook my Landrover at speed just as the track narrowed to cross a dried up waterhole. When driving fast, trailers sway violently and as he passed me his trailer hit the front mudguard of my Landrover which spun off the road and into the waterhole. As we fell my door flew open and it seemed as if providence was offering me an escape. I leapt out as the vehicle carried on past me, only realising afterwards that I was lucky not to have been hit by the trailer as I fell. My driver and my boy Adamu who was sitting in the back under the canvas cover remained in the vehicle as it rolled over and eventually came to rest some 20 feet down on the bed of the waterhole. I suffered no more than a graze on the knee which in that area it could have resulted in tetanus and Adamu and Tetteh no more than shock and the Landrover had not been damaged. We sorted ourselves out and drove the Landrover back on to the track to find that Rowly Caufield and his vehicle, presumably oblivious to what had happened, were nowhere to be seen. Before setting off again I took photographs of the tyre tracks.

Some time later Adamu, who was sitting in the back and therefore closer to the trailer shouted out to me that something was dropping regularly on to the road. We stopped and found that the hub cap must have come off in the crash and ball bearings were falling out. The trailer was unhooked and I and the driver set off to Tamale leaving Adamu, clearly terrified at being left by the roadside in a strange area, to guard the truck. The battalion came up trumps sending me back with a truck on which to load the trailer and we finally got back to Tamale at 4 o'clock in the morning.

Staying there for another night I heard that there were crocodiles in a nearby waterhole and set off to find them. The waterhole was peaceful with no sign of life and, disappointed, I turned to leave at which point a large piece of mud to my right rose and slid into the water. I waited for another ten minutes or so and again turned to leave when another piece of mud right beside me also rose and slid

forward. I had been standing beside a crocodile for about half an hour and am told that I was lucky to return unscathed.

That evening there was a dinner night and to my horror the CO asked me to conduct the band in my regimental march. I had no idea how to conduct nor was I sure of my regimental march. I got up and looked at the band who, realising my plight, smiled and indicated that they knew what to play and after a shaky start I recognised the tune as the one that had been played on every passing out parade at Mons. Little do they know how grateful I was.

The next day we set off again for Kumasi where we spent two or three days. Having my own transport this time I was able to do some sightseeing. Lake Bosumtwi is in an ancient meteorite crater which could be reached by climbing the paths that led up over the sides of the crater and then down to the lake itself. In those days it was thought to be a holy place and as such no metal was allowed to touch its waters so the fishermen rode astride wooden logs. The fish were clearly plentiful as we passed a regular stream of woman coming up with baskets on their heads.

I was also told of a wood carver in a village near Kumasi. He used a soft wood, probably balsa, carving in delicate detail. I bought two pieces - one an akwaba which is a stylised representation of a person in which the large and circular head is the most prominent feature. It is carried by pregnant women as they would a baby on their backs. Traditionally the mother-to-be asks the carver to include the features that she hopes for in her child. If she wants a girl she will ask him to include breasts, if a boy the male organ. A big sloping forehead is considered beautiful and most seem to have that feature accentuated while the legs are often reduced to a simple stand.

The second piece was a carving of a sasabonsam. The sasabonsam is a much feared forest spirit. Its home is at the very top of the canopy and from there its legs hang down finishing just short of the forest floor. The legs themselves make a complete turn at the knee and the feet point straight down and it is served by tiny people whose feet point backwards. It is thought that if any part of a human being brushes against the sasabonsam's legs then that part of their flesh will turn putrid. My sasabonsam had two small horns and a goatee beard rather like Pan.

I returned home this time on a plane that could do the journey in one day and I remember standing under the shade of the only tree while refuelling took place again somewhere in the Sahara. It was so hot - I was told 120 degrees in the shade - that when a small drop of petrol leaked on to the concrete it instantly burst into flame.

I brought all my treasures home and the Akwaba and Sasabonsam lived at each end of the mantelpiece in a basement flat in London. One evening I returned home to find that the sasabonsam had gone. There was no sign of forced entry and nothing else had been disturbed. Some fifty five years later I described this experience to a retired District Commissioner who had served much of his time in the Gold Coast. "Odd," he said, "I too had a sasabonsam, I too brought it home to England and one day I too returned home to find that it had disappeared."