

PATTER, CHATTER AND 'BENCHMANSHIP' DIPLOMACY IN BELIZE 1980*

By Major John Burlison

*Our predecessors, so we find,
At Empire's Table well have dined,
It seems that we have missed that sup,
And have been left the washing up!*

*The water in the sink of time,
Had now run low and left a grime,
So thus we gave a final squeeze,
Of Fairy Soap to do Belize!*

Some years ago I was visiting Fiji as part of the Third World Development work I did with the British Executive Service Overseas (BESO). I was invited to call on the British High Commissioner, HE Mr Michael Peart. When we met I thought I recognised him and he immediately asked if I had been to Belize and had been involved in the great 'Tree Tops' meeting with the Guatemalan army. I said I had and in fact I had engineered that meeting! He had been with the British Embassy in Mexico City and said he had been sent down to Belize on behalf of the Foreign Office to attend the meeting. We had a laugh as we remembered the trouble there had been dressing him as an army officer to conceal his actual FCO pedigree. He recalled the near disaster when some seats collapsed and the Guatemalans appeared to reach for their side arms. He said he thought his last moment had come!

We left it at that and the next I knew was John Bowman this autumn saying he knew Michael Peart's son and he had enquired about the incident at which his father had been present and wanted to know more; could I help. I pointed out that I had put a brief article in Kukri magazine of 1988 with an outline of the event*, without much detail, as seemed expedient for the time. John had himself been in Belize with 1/2 GR B Company in 1979/1980 when the original border incursion occurred and was interested how it all turned out. The story goes something like this:

Belize is usually thought of as a place of sun sea sand, lobsters and cold beer - that's if you think of it at all! But it is not always like that and once was the setting for some minor military shenanigans relating to its history.

The place had been the British colony of British Honduras until independence in 1981. For many years, if not centuries, neighbouring Guatemala, had a claim on the territory dating back to the days of the Spanish empire which would give Guatemala a good stretch of Caribbean coast line.

Britain had maintained a small garrison in Belize which was expanded and reduced depending on the existing threat. Currently (1980) there were two battalions on tours

* Parts of this report appeared in Kukri Magazine 1988 under the title: 'Tree Tops, Pysops and Old Rope'.

for about six months each, one battalion being 1/2 GR from Church Crookham. It had been decided that the garrison should be reduced to one battalion and over the period of run down there should be one rifle company on an extended tour in the south, the area of most likely threat from Guatemala. For this job C Company from 1/2 GR of which I was the OIC, was detailed. We were positioned for nine months in the Camp of Salamanca attached variously to the rotating, and departing, battalions of 1Queens, 1Royal Irish Rangers and latterly the Cheshire Regiment.

Shortly before we arrived in Salamanca Camp in the far south of Belize, our predecessors, B Company, had come across the Guatemalans driving a bulldozer across the border. This incident had been resolved by a cordial meeting with the Guatemalans and agreement that this incursion was a map reading error on their part. However, OPs were established on either side of the now enlarged border clearing, 'Tree Tops', with our and their soldiers eyeing each other from respective bunkers a couple of hundred yards apart.

The nearest village to our camp was San Antonio, whose church I would attend for Sunday Mass. Chatting with the locals afterwards I learnt that they crossed through the jungle to the Guatemalan town over the border for most of their routine shopping, which was easier and better served than the main town on our side, Punta Gorda (which was said by the wits to have been a bit of a one horse town but now the horse had left!).

I saw no harm in asking these locals chaps to tell me if they saw any major Guatemalan military items of equipment, tanks or artillery pieces, on their travels, or a build-up of troop numbers, please to let me know. They agreed, saying that they were equally interested if the Guats had intentions on their country as I was. After a time we had a good flow of information from these locals, all of which, thankfully was negative.

Soon this became more than my company intelligence sergeant could handle and I was sent a very pleasant INT Corps WOII FINCO who ran the whole operation and gave all the locals marvellous names like 'Wood Cock' and 'Pine Needle', etc, together with a filing system to record their information. I do know how reliable it all was, but at least it was something which might give me warning if the Guatemalans were preparing anything.

I was very conscious that if they were going to attack, it would be us who got it first! I had also learnt, from Borneo, that the way to control a border line is to dominate both sides; to certain extent we now had some eyes and ears along in the frontier area to help us.

It then struck me that the 'Tree Tops' OP game of mutual surveillance was fairly futile; could we not turn it to advantage? I got agreement that we could meet with our opposite numbers and that their and our soldiers could actually play volley ball on the enlarged road. This turned into a chatting session between the two teams

after the game, to which we took soft drinks and chapattis! Our soldiers could talk about anything they liked, nothing was off limits or secret, but they were briefed to enquire of the Guats a few pertinent subjects: how often did they go on patrol, for how long (how many day's rations) and how many maps and compasses were carried, etc. All this was passed back to the FINCO at Salamanca camp. I felt we were getting somewhere!

Our Platoon Commanders found this quite informative and I was happy to let chaps from opposite ends of the Third World chat amongst themselves; it took time to get beyond football! When asked: "How many men have you killed?" the Gurkhas were told to think back to what they had heard of Borneo Confrontation and come up with a reasonable number!

We then had the idea collecting Guatemalan Army badges and FINCO arranged to get us a collection of insignia from UK as swaps. We were sent a large box of World War Two Royal Signals TA badges which the Guats snapped up and in no time we had a board of their current formations and regiments.

I would go along occasionally to meet my opposite number from whom I learnt that they had no interest in invading Belize, so long as we stayed here! Their main concern was to keep a grip on the drug smugglers for which the British presence served to secure their East side. If they thought we were leaving they would rattle sabres to hold our interest! They agreed that we should keep up these meetings and low level dialogue and that each should inform the other if there was to be major training exercise; or if there was to be an attack!



Gurkhas and Guatamalans at a Border Meeting

We were to live in Salamanca Camp for about nine months and so made the place as comfortable as possible. We blocked the river at the back to form a large swimming pool, we set up a farm of ducks, geese and some pigs, all acquired from the locals, and we had a flourishing vegetable garden which provided fresh produce to enhance the *bhat* rations. Every month we set off into the jungle for a monster picnic at which some of the Company were allowed to get smashed on the local beer and some not, and we had regular football matches with the locals on our large sports

field (our successor company of Nigel Wylie Carrick and D Company introduced polo on local ponies instead!).

The CBF at Force HQ, airfield camp outside Belize City, Brigadier Anthony Vivian (a Royal Welch Fusilier) was kept informed about what went on at Tree Tops and was most interested. "Why can't I meet my opposite number?" he asked. Next time I met mine I asked about his CO and area commander. In due course the Guat CO met me and we agreed that a meeting between his commander and our CBF would be a good idea. And so the great Tree Tops jungle meeting was conceived! But not all went according to plan!

The idea was that each party would arrive by their own means: the Guats driving to the road head, our CBF by helicopter. They would then move to where we would have built a jungle hut containing a long table with bamboo benches each side for the formal meeting. We would also have prepared an ancillary area for coffee, biscuits and cold drinks and a loo place. It was all very friendly and there was no question about how many escorts or guards each side could bring, nor talk of weapons, ammunition, radios, and such like. In any case both 'sides' had platoons manning the OPs overlooking the road head not far away.

On due day Brigadier Vivian and CO of the Cheshires (Lt Col Charles Percival) in whose battalion area we were, flew in accompanied by a hand full of officers, some of whom I later discovered were FCO chaps from the British Embassy in Mexico City, identifiable by their ill-fitting jungle garb! Then the Guatemalan team arrived and we all introduced ourselves over the coffee and biscuits. One of our soldiers was heard to comment in Gurkhali that 'that' one must be a General he is so enormous! A percipient observation that should have been attended to!

Easy conversation flowed in Mexican-accented English as from some 'B' grade cowboy movie; indeed the whole setting was as from Hollywood with characters in camouflage dress, some packing 'pearl handled' pistols, some chewing cigars, others more elegantly poised and politely smiling but all guffawing at each other's jokes in a stage-like manner under an *attap* hut in some anonymous jungle clearing!

We all moved to the meeting hut and sat down across our jungle table. The proceedings opened with statements from each side about how they had no quarrel with the other and were delighted to be here to talk about it all. And so it went on for a bit. Then disaster struck! The large Guatemalan 'general' stretched across the table to put out his cigar in an ash tray. This shift changed the dynamics of the bench he had been sitting on, which then collapsed and all the Guats tumbled onto the muddy floor! One visiting FCO man confessed afterwards that he felt his last moment had come and that the Guats would assume this was an ambush, reach for their weapons and mow us all down!

In fact they all got up, roaring with laughter, the 'general' apologised for being so fat, our Gurkhas moved in to repair the damage, I apologised for the short comings

of our furniture, the CBF was profuse in his remorse for the incident. Whatever 'ice' there may have been earlier in the atmosphere now vanished and more coffee and biscuits were produced. We stood around for a bit and made remedial small talk; one Guat officer joked: "Well after that how can we ever trust you lot! We had better stay standing!"

Everybody resumed their seat, which stayed solid, and the meeting, such as it was, restarted. There was little more say and a somewhat light hearted air prevailed. Photographs were taken, addresses, swapped and farewells made. The CBF and I walked the Guat party back to their transport home and then he and his team flew back to Belize Airport Camp.

Subsequent meetings with my opposite number were very jolly and the collapsing bench incident was often referred to in amused terms. I felt that this gathering of our bosses had at least cleared the air of any possible misunderstandings between us now or in the future, even if the bench had collapsed! What I never discovered was whether the Guatemalans twigged that our soldiers had been milking theirs of low level military information or about our cross border 'shoppers': or who was kidding whom! It was all good simple stuff which was both useful and amusing to think of, and provided a bit of spice to our otherwise routine nine months in Salamanca camp!

(However when I was next in Belize none of this had been heard of nor given any credit!)

