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Memories take flight for Changi airfield veterans

Visiting old haunts, ex-British airmen based here recall the turbulent 1950s and 60s - plus Changi Village bars

By Goh Chin Lian

IT LOOKS no different from any other HDB coffee shop now, but to former Royal Air Force (RAF) technician Mike Smith, the Airfield Restaurant at Changi Village was once a bar where he had spent his 21st birthday, thousands of kilometres away from his home in Coventry, England.



A quiet meal at a bar was how Mr Smith celebrated his 21st birthday away from home in England. That bar is now the Airfield Restaurant next to Le Meridien hotel, where some 40 others from Britain are gathered. -- CHEW SENG KIM

'We had a quiet meal and a drink, just eight of us,' said the 67-year-old Briton, who was posted to an airfield at Changi between 1956 and 1959. 'I didn't miss home. I liked it here, the camaraderie, the people, the variety of shops.'

He visited Changi Village last Wednesday with more than 40 RAF veterans and their wives, on a trip arranged by the Bristol-based Royal Air Force Changi Association.

This is the fourth trip to Singapore that the association has organised since 1998 for its members to visit old haunts and re-live their memories. It's done once every two

years.

Mr Ray Rowley, 73, part of the latest group, recalls ferrying soldiers wounded in the Korean War in 1950 in an ambulance from Changi to Alexandra Hospital, after they had been airlifted here.

He said: 'It was rather frightening. Some of them were groaning, and each time the ambulance rocked, it upset them.'

He was also here during the Maria Hertogh riots in December 1950. Crowds had attacked Europeans because of a legal tug of war for the custody of a girl between her Muslim foster mother and Dutch parents.

He and other motor transport crewmen carried light automatic guns when they picked up aircrew from all over the island and took them to Changi for flying duty.

'But we were lucky and didn't encounter any riots.'

Mr Beverley Steed, 65, was pelted with bricks and bottles once by some people when patrolling the streets in a Land Rover in 1964, at the time of the Konfrontasi (Confrontation).

Indonesia had opposed the formation of Malaysia, which then included Singapore, and Indonesian saboteurs had sneaked into the island.

'The curfew was on. We had to make sure all the people were off the street. When you came, they disappeared. When you left, they returned.'

It was especially disturbing to be on guard duty at the Changi airfield at night, armed with just a rifle, he recounted, as the saboteurs had planted bombs there.

'I'd be standing there and I'd hear all these noises.'

Though the bombs went off, they did not hurt anybody, he said.

Grass fires also used to break out two to three times a day at the airfield, said Mr John Dicks, 68, a fireman from 1957 to 1958.

The fires were sometimes so big that more than 200 people had to be activated to beat them out. They would use worn-out hoses and 'we'd be all black when we were finished'.

On some occasions, the firemen were so bored they got their friends to start a fire, so they could get out for a breather, he said.

Some favourite ways the crewmen had of relaxing was to sit at Changi Point and watch ships, hold barbecues at Changi Beach and visit the bars at Changi Village.

They also used to play football at the Padang, eat at Stamford Cafe in Bras Basah Road and enjoy cabaret shows in Chinatown.

'We were all single, carefree and arrogant. Sometimes we would even take taxis and refuse to pay for them,' said Mr Dicks.

It was to keep such fond memories alive that Mr Mike James, a former RAF Changi communications operator, formed the association, after a visit here in 1996.

It started with 150 members and now has 12,000 who live all over the world from Britain to New Zealand to Saudi Arabia.

Ironically, said Mr James, not one lives in Singapore.

He is disappointed that a lot of the RAF Changi's past has disappeared. Many

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of the old barracks in Changi were demolished last year, he said.

'We have half a brick from Billet 121,' said Mr Dicks, the association's archivist.

He also has 3,000 pictures of the RAF Changi days, some taken as early as 1927 when the camp was still being built near Changi Village. The pictures were given him by former veterans and their relatives.

The association has passed copies of some pictures to museum officials here for their records.

Once, it had helped a Singaporean trace a picture of his coffee shop in Changi Village when it was a bar run by his grandfather.

Mr Dicks said: 'We'll eventually die, so we've made arrangements for all the photographs and archives to go to the Royal Air Force museum in Britain. Hopefully they'll be around for many years after.'

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