

Cameron Highlands: Malaya: 1957 & 1995

Courtesy of a sympathetic MO, a fellow National Serviceman at Batu Cantonment, I was re-posted to the Cameron Highlands on medical grounds (I suffered from athlete's foot!) just after Merdeka or Independence in 1957

The Highlands were a fascinating place to be stationed. Among the many points of interest was a not long completed airstrip for the use of light aircraft. I was told that an inaugural flight had not gone well due to crosscurrents and no further flights had taken place.

I've not been able to verify this and would appreciate information from others who may have been involved in the construction or flight.

Forty years later I was working at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Shah Alam, the new state capital of Selangor, replacing Kuala Lumpur which had become the Federal capital. From there I took the opportunity to revisit the Cameron Highlands, in particular, Tanah Rata, where I had been billeted at Station Lines, which is shown here and still existed in 1995 as a camp for visiting schoolchildren, for by now the area had become a place to study wildlife as well as being a centre of tourism.



Obviously a much-changed town as the photograph shows. Where once it had ended at the small Post Office, opened in 1957 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya's first Prime Minister, with a terrace of shop houses to one side, it had now extended in each direction while the wooden buildings opposite had been removed

A search for the airstrip proved fruitless....or so I thought. I traveled the road towards Brinchang which was still familiar after all this time, locating the point where I had photographed the airstrip in 1957.

It then dawned on me that the buildings I could see now occupied the airstrip, having been built to provide quarters for the Malaysian air force. The gradient of the original strip was clear to see. I guess it was thoughtful of the British army to unwittingly prepare the ground for the buildings even though the original purpose had long since gone.

The curfew warning sign on leaving Tanah Rata for the 60km winding, ambush ridden road to Tapah on the plain below, unsurprisingly no longer exists.

Nuns living at the Covent in Tanah Rata which they had recovered from the Army, it having been requisitioned for use as a Military Hospital during the Emergency, told me the climate had changed dramatically over 40 years. The daily late afternoon thunderstorms having given way to a much drier, warmer weather pattern.

Of course, it is now nearly thirty years since my visit and after two economic crises plus the pandemic no doubt there have been other changes. Is the camp, Station Lines still there, I wonder?

Bob Lamb RE



Tanah Rata Cameron Highlands as it looked in the 1950/60s

