

HENRY GEORGE BAKER (1918-2006)

ROGER CROSTON

Radio Operator Gangtok 1942-45, died January 15, 2006, aged 87.

Henry Baker, who died aged 87 on January 15, 2006, was one of the last half dozen eyewitnesses who travelled to the capital city, Lhasa, of an independent Tibet, before the Chinese annexation of the country in 1950. Born into a Methodist family in Ryde on the Isle of Wight, England, on June 23, 1918, he was the eldest of seven children, having four brothers and two sisters. One brother was to predecease him by a day.

After working as a shop assistant he was enlisted for six years into the Supplementary Reserve of the Infantry of the Line, Hampshire Regiment, in Newport Isle of Wight on September 7, 1936. “One day my grandfather came to me and said, ‘You are coming with me lad!’ He took me down the road into a building to see a gentleman I did not know. The next thing I discovered was that I’d been signed into the army. I suppose it was one less mouth to feed.”

Initially based at Winchester, because he had a private interest in radio and electronics, Baker was re-enlisted into the Royal Corps of Signals, Regular Army, on 1st December 1936 and trained at Catterick Camp, Yorkshire, before being transferred to Aldershot, and on to India in December 1938. When he joined the Royal Signals they were still kitted out in riding breeches. Baker remained loyal to his home regiment and always kept Hampshire Regiment buttons on his tunic.

INDIA AND TIBET

Upon arrival in India, Baker was immediately posted from Karachi to Bannu on the notorious North-West Frontier. A year later, he was posted to Southern Command Signal Company, Jubbulpore, as wireless operator. During this time, he made acquaintance on air with Reginald Fox a former Royal Signals man, now a civilian employed by Government of India, who had operated the British Mission’s radio in Lhasa, Tibet, since 1937. This link was regarded as vital as there were rumours that Chinese troops were becoming active along the Tibetan border.

Baker's army records note that from 20th October 1941 to October 1945 he served in "Sikkim, Tibet, Bhutan for duty with British Consulate, Lhasa Mission." Mr Reginald Fox, a civilian, had taken up duty as wireless operator in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, following the establishment of the British Mission there in 1936 and was using the equipment which had been set up in the Mission's Deyki Lingka residence by lieutenants Sidney Dagg and Evan Yorke Nepean, both of the Royal Corps of Signals. Towards the end of 1941, Fox was taken seriously ill and was sent to Calcutta for treatment and had to be relieved. One of the people with whom he was in daily radio contact was Signaler Henry Baker, then serving with the Corps in Jubbulpore, Central Provinces, India. "One morning my sergeant sent for me and gave me 24 hours leave to consider volunteering to go and take over the radio station – being told if I declined that, as there was a war on, I would be posted there anyway!"

Having 'volunteered' Baker was examined by three doctors who told him how lucky he was, but who would have marked him 'unfit' had he not wanted to go. "I was given a trade test to make sure I could run the station at Lhasa. Needless to say none of the items I was tested on were anything like what I found there." On 20th October 1941, he was posted 'Destination Unknown' on what would be the greatest adventure of his life.

After collecting code and cipher books he proceeded to the Great Eastern Hotel, Calcutta, where he met the Civil Surgeon Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet, Captain Dr. Harry W.G. Staunton of the Indian Medical Service. Staunton proclaimed him "Just skin and bone," and said "You'll never survive a severe winter trek over the Himalayas" – a journey he himself had often made – adding, "We'll send you back in the morning." However, Delhi HQ informed Staunton that nobody else was available and Baker had to go. Next day the pair proceeded to Siliguri by train and from there some 70 miles by taxi to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, where they were invited by Sir Basil Gould – known to all simply as "B.J." – the Political Officer of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, to stay at the British Residency. "I was in my regular issue nailed army boots and went up the highly polished wooden stairs making a heck of a noise to be introduced to Gould in his study. He greeted me with 'What the blazes do you think you are doing! Get those things off your feet!' I apologised saying they were all I had."

Gould had led the 1936 Political Mission to Lhasa, which had established the British presence there. He had been knighted for his

good offices when attending the Installation of the current Dalai Lama in Lhasa in 1940.

Taking one look at Baker, Gould sent for the local doctor, Dr. Hendricks, who also declared Baker quite unfit. He also asked for a replacement, but General Villumy at HQ, Delhi, gave the same response as before and instructed that Baker be sent to Lhasa as soon as possible. During a three days' acclimatisation at 8,000 feet in Gangtok he met the Maharaja of Sikkim. 'I still had not been given any details about getting to Lhasa, except my telegram from Delhi which said 'You will fly from Gangtok. Your luggage will go by camel caravan'. Staring at the paper, an incredulous Gould told Baker that he had been told utter rubbish and that he faced an arduous trek over the Himalayas.

Gould arranged a dinner party at the Residency. "The thing that struck me as rather funny was that the British Residency, which was located on a hill, used oil lamps and candles for lighting. It had no hot or cold running water and was approached by a dirt track. A mile away on another hill was the Maharaja's Palace, which had all mod cons and a tarred access road."

Never having ridden in his life, Baker set out on the 21-day pony trek to Lhasa. Dr. Staunton accompanied him half way as far as Gyantse. An inauspicious start was made "As my pony put his head down to drink, I promptly fell over its head into a stream." At Karponang Dak Bungalow, Staunton warned him that the next two days over the high Himalayan passes would prove if he would be going to Lhasa or back to India in a pine box. Baker was immensely impressed by the Chomolhari Mountain Range towering over 24,000 feet. "At the village of Phari, my saddle slipped and my pony suddenly took off. Staunton reprimanded me that I ought not to show off how well I could now ride. I protested that I was not showing off but that I was simply unable to stop the pony." Suffering intense cold at heights of over 15,000 feet, he survived and "With a very sore posterior reached the British Indian Army Garrison Fort at Gyantse."

"After a brief welcoming ceremony, because I was a new visitor I was invited to inspect the Indian Army Garrison's Escort Troops. After which, it was a luxury to sleep in a nice warm bedroom in a very comfortable bed. The following day, another catastrophe – I was informed that I, a simple soldier, would be playing Polo on the team of the Fort Commander! I did pretty well until it was my turn to hit the ball when I hit my pony across his front legs and down we both went. They promptly gave me a second pony and said, 'Keep going'. Needless to say, after that I kept well away from the ball."

"After several days' rest, I travelled on alone with a young Tibetan Christian missionary and his family. No foreigners were allowed to travel beyond Gyantse without government permission. The going was very hard – breathing was difficult crossing the Karo La pass at 16,600 feet with heavy snowfall necessitating frequent dismounting to walk." Baker found the Tibetans most friendly and he slept in village homesteads where he began to appreciate and learn more about the land, its people and their customs.

Arrangements were made for passage across the fast-flowing Tsangpo River at Chusul in yak hide coracles about ten feet square. A 15-mile trip was made downstream. Having spent the night in Nam village, a large group of Tibetan horsemen arrived to escort Baker to Lhasa, and thanks to the missionary who translated for him, he got through the greetings ceremony of exchanging long white silk scarves.

Arriving at the city's outskirts, Baker was impressed with views of the Potala Palace and was introduced to leading government officials and taken to the Deyki Lingka, the British Mission's residency, only to discover that the British Head of Mission, Rai Bahadur Norbhu Dhondup Dzasa, a Tibetan, was a three days' journey away on a gambling spree. Just outside the residence, in the same compound, he was directed to the small brick building containing the radio station that was to become his home.

On the ground floor was an engine that drove the generator which charged the batteries and supplied power to the buildings and the wireless station, which was upstairs in the living quarters. "As soon as everyone had left me, I bolted the large entrance doors downstairs, went upstairs and cried like a baby. To think that I had survived the journey, that I had volunteered for it, was completely alone with no one to talk to, and now realised that the nearest European to me was many a day's journey away. I had no idea what to do other than to keep things going and keep in contact with Jubbulpore. Each morning I transmitted weather reports and sent ciphered messages from the Head of the British Mission."

"The large radio batteries were in a bad state – a relay in the charger had been wedged with a piece of wood and they had been overcharged, so I sent for replacements. When new ones arrived I emptied the old batteries into the garden but the acid seeped into the Kyi Chu River and killed a whole load of fish which was not a very bright idea in a strictly Buddhist country."

I also ordered new valves but when they arrived, their cartons had been opened, and they had been replaced by stones – the Tibetans could

be terrible thieves. The Chinese also had a radio station in Lhasa, but of such antiquity, that it was a wonder it worked at all. I intercepted it and obtained and decoded their information before it had even reached China!"

Baker settled into life in Lhasa and got to know several notables including the Dalai Lama's father and the Commander of the Tibetan Army. He was kept company by various nobles who spoke English and was invited to some of the many picnics and parties in which citizens of Lhasa liked to indulge themselves. Baker also taught himself to use a 16mm cine camera that he found at the British Mission and took a reel of film of the spectacular New Year's ceremonies in Lhasa.

Eventually, Fox returned to Lhasa and Baker was posted to the British Residency in Sikkim to work the radio until the war's end, where he used his technical skills to help Gould establish both a Tibetan language broadcasting station and a Tibetan language newspaper. He would often be in radio contact with Fox in Lhasa who lived there until 1950 when he was forced to flee the Chinese.

SIKKIM

Baker was more than fortunate to receive his posting to Sikkim during the war, and lost no time to take trouble to educate himself about the people, their religion and customs as well as something of the local languages.

Although Baker's substantive rank was a corporal, the Maharaja of Sikkim would call him 'Captain' until Sir Basil Gould found out and put a stop to it. In Tibet, he had been instructed by Gould not to wear uniform as he was not to let it be known he was a serving British soldier, but Mr and Mrs Fairchild of the Scottish Universities Mission, Sikkim, wanted a photograph of him in Royal Signals uniform which Baker had taken in Lhasa. When Gould found out he was furious and told him to destroy his kit.

"On one occasion when Lady Clow was staying at the British Residency, Gangtok, Sikkim, Sir Basil Gould had her room painted and decked out in her favourite colour, purple. One morning her aide went to Sir Basil with a complaint. Apparently the cook, who was always up to some sort of trick or other, had gone a little too far this time by having the toilet rolls dyed the same colour at the carpet factory, not realising the dye would come out."

Baker was to be invited by His Highness the Maharaja of Sikkim to a great many events and entertainments. On one occasion, he was

invited to witness the annual War Dance, peculiar to the northern Buddhists of Sikkim. A festival to celebrate the spirit of the War God Kangchen-dzod-nga when Mahakala, the Commander-in-Chief of all the guardians of the faith and overlord of all spirits, orders Dzod-nga to bring peace, prosperity and security to the people. On 1st November 1942, he was invited to the wedding of Jigme Dorje, the son of Raja S.T. Dorji, agent to the Maharaja of Bhutan, Kalimpong, to Tsering La, otherwise known as Tessla, daughter of D.D. Tsarong, Commander General of Tibet. He kept the many invitation cards, embossed with the gold crest of the Maharaja, which, framed and mounted, took pride of place in his later homes alongside a Tibetan ‘Wheel of Life’ thangka scroll.

He was to be given a privilege granted to a very select few – a Permanent Frontier Pass authorising him to enter Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet and he was instructed to have manufactured, and to wear, what were probably the most unusual shoulder epaulets in the history of the British Army, which had sewn into them the words “British Political Service Tibet”. This was for tours of duty in Sikkim, Assam and Bhutan with Sir Basil Gould who needed mobile radio communications. Baker recalled, much to his amusement in advanced old age, that when he came to be demobbed on the Isle of Wight in May 1946 “I was struggling along with a very heavy box and was still wearing the epaulets when two burly Military Policemen caught up with me, one on either side, to ask who I was and what I was up to. Having read the epaulets, they ended up carrying the box for me!”

On leaving Sikkim on 8th November 1945, Baker received a letter from Mr S.J.L. Oliver at the (British) Residency, Gangtok. “On the eve of your departure on leave, I should like to record my appreciation of your work here; and I am sure that the Political Officer would wish to do the same were he here. To have kept the transmitter and generating plant in more or less constant operation over the last four years was a very considerable feat, accomplished in difficult working conditions and bad weather, and in the face of a perennial shortage of spares and equipment. Should regular broadcasting from Gangtok eventually be introduced, it will be on the basis of your pioneering work.”

He had requested six months home leave to get demobbed and intended to accept a job as a civilian wireless operator for the government of Tibet. In 1944, the American and British Indian governments had supplied a limited quantity of radio equipment to the Tibetan Government and had planned the establishment of several wireless stations along the Sino-Tibetan border in an attempt to help

Tibet protect herself from Chinese incursion. During his leave, Robert Ford (author of *Captured in Tibet*), recently demobbed from the RAF, relieved Baker and subsequently set up a radio station in Chamdo on Tibet's eastern border. He was captured by the Chinese and held prisoner for five years.

KENYA AND USA

Baker claimed that after being demobbed he was advised by the Foreign Office not to return to Tibet, as he could no longer be offered British protection. Instead, the newly married Baker took a job at Nairobi airport Kenya, as Communications manager for the British Overseas Airways Corporation where his son was born in 1948. A former colleague relates that he was a first rate radio operator who was always one step ahead of the rest. Returning to England, his parents-in-law had decided to emigrate to the USA and his wife wished to join them so the family crossed the Atlantic.

Baker started a small business making and selling rubber stamps, later taking a job with Eddystone Radio and then Voicewriter Engineering where he worked on developing dictating machines. He moved on to another firm to develop television studio communication equipment and became a technical writer. Leaving the electronics industry Baker joined the New Jersey Police Force at Succasunna in 1963 and then the New Hampshire Police Force, in the meantime running his own electrical repair shop as a sideline. From patrolling areas of high crime he was promoted Major and became a Justice of the Peace in August 1985.

Having been overseas for many years, Baker lost contact with most of his family and in his 70s, following the death of his wife, he returned to live on the northeast coast of England. He was to eke out his final years in worsening health and deteriorating eyesight and had almost lost the will to live when in 2002 it became known to researchers that he, one of the few eyewitnesses of the old Tibet, was still alive. He was only traced after a radio ham friend from his days in Kenya, Tommy Thomlinson, responded to an article about the first British radio operators in Tibet in the Radio Society of Great Britain's magazine "RadCom".

Having been tracked down, Henry Baker was given a new lease of life and he was delighted to be visited and interviewed at length by independent researchers and academics from the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (Sikkim), the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of

Oxford and the daughter of his travelling companion in Tibet, Captain Harry Staunton.

Henry Baker was deeply saddened by the destruction wrought upon Tibet by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. His opinion was that the old feudal Tibet he witnessed needed to change, but to do so from within. At the end of his life he was hopeful that the progress made in recent years by China's rebuilding and restoration of much of what had been destroyed would lead to a renaissance of Tibetan culture.

Henry is still remembered by some elderly people in Sikkim. The photographs he had bought in Sikkim from Tse Ten Tashi (1912-1972) – then Private Secretary to the Maharaja's son, Prince Paljor Namgyal – during the war, where the climate has since destroyed a number of photographic prints, form part of a current photographic exhibition at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim. Many people were thrilled to see long lost images of their parents and grandparents.

Following the death of Heinrich Harrer on the 7th of January and that of Henry Baker on the 15th, there are now only five living Westerners who witnessed Tibet prior to the Chinese occupation, one of whom is British, another in Germany and three more in the USA.

Henry Baker is survived by a son in the USA and three brothers in England.