

CHECKING IN AFRICA - AN EVENING WITH TORCH BENNETT

"Its easy" said Duncan one night in mid 1980, "If you are going to Africa you must look up Torch Bennett," he even produced a P.O. Box address. Three weeks later, it didn't look quite so easy, Bennett did not live in the P.O. Box at Kloof near Durban, nor had the GPO heard of him. The telephone directory contained three Bennett T's, from the first there was no reply, the second was a university academic who had never visited Asia, whilst the third became somewhat incensed at the mention of Hash. Duncan's simple suggestion conceived at the KL Hash beer truck at about 11.00 p.m. on that recent Monday evening was not looking so good, but then two or three days later came one of those incredible "small small world" situations. Whilst having dinner with an old legal eagle mate in Peitermaritzburg, Peter Alan and his Kiwi wife Mary, after a few excellent glasses of Needurburg, Mary pops up with "Exactly whereabouts are you in that mysterious orient" (we'd been exchanging X-mas cards for 5 years or so but I did not remind her of this). "Kuala Lumpur" I replied expecting the usual "Where is that," or "Isn't that part of Singapore?" However to my surprise came the response "My father was an accountant there before the war." Now Torch Bennett was also an accountant, "Yes indeed" said Mary in reply to my immediate question "My father often used to mention his name." Paper was found after one of the Hash world's longest checks, but the trail still had a few severe back checks and false trails. Attempts to ring Mary's father in NZ failed on realising he was on holiday, checking again. Peter, muttering into his brandy glass, suggested a cousin living on the south coast may be of assistance, but he was also away until Sunday, three days down the line and two days prior to my ETD, so back to the brandies and more mundane matters. Then three days later, the said cousin was summoned by telephone, and indeed "Yes" he could produce a Durban telephone number and an address of Mr. T. Bennett, but he also advised that Torch was in Capetown for a few days, checking again. However with the ONIN in sight, airlines were summoned and directed to reschedule flights and on Monday September 29, 1980 a telephone conversation produced an affirmative in response to the question "I believe you may recall Messrs Cecil Lee, Gispert, Horse Thompson, and Morris Edgar?" After a short conversation, an invitation was issued to visit for tea two days later.

The in trail to Torch Bennett led 50 miles down to Durban for 4.00 p.m., where a spritely 71 year old gentleman and his wife Joy greeted me with afternoon tea. For two hours many fascinating tales of pre war Malaya and the origins of the Hash were recounted, beginning with Torch's arrival in Singapore in 1934, where Gispert greeted him off the ship, both being accountants with Evatt & Co. (now Price Waterhouse). Two years later he moved to Kuala Lumpur, where G was already ensconced (no 747's, leave was on a 4 yearly cycle), even in the formal colonial lifestyle Gispert's character had impinged on society to where he was simply referred to as "G". Somewhere around 1937/38, G was Evatt's manager in Malacca, where Bennett often also visited on audits. Frequently the pair would join the Springit Harriers, who followed a paper trail format through the nearby rubber plantations, such activity having been a local feature since about 1935. From this origin, was to develop one of the world's zanier forms of escapism, "THE HASH". Later in 1938 G and Torch frequently debated at the Selangor Club Long Bar the need for a similar running club in K.L. but men only was a firmly agreed principal (dreadfully, the Malacca club was mixed). Finally in September 1938, gestation was completed and the Hash House Harriers became reality. Modestly, Torch conceded that he was actually on leave at the time of run No. 1 but on his return the "organisation" was firmly established.

Sharp at 6.00 p.m., tea became sundowners, followed by an invitation for dinner at Durban Country Club, I still recall clearly scoffing the world's largest captured crayfish, with more Neederburg, crepes and brandy, then a final invitation for a nightcap at home with more tales of early hashes. The senior British diplomats Ross & Hay who set trails on horseback with disastrous results due to the difficulty of judging distances (a trend retained even today by TT Chung and his cohorts); attempts to introduce ladies which were thwarted by evil hares who forced a major swim over a flooded river; the great bog roll debacle at Run No. 100 when the pack ran up and down the aisles at the Selangor Club AGM dinner encapsulating D.J.'d guests with every bog roll they could find in the club; G's wedding which reportedly cost 200 pounds in a settlement to a third party. "She was an expensive wife" G supposedly remarked, however this didn't last long since the lady decided a Mr. Nobby Land was a more suitable partner. Torch recalled being at the Long Bar with G shortly afterwards when Nobby approached, and being a diplomat Torch warned G, whereupon G summoned three large anchors with the remark "Nobby and I may not be on speaking terms, but that does not effect our drinking terms." Regrettably, as is well known, G died in early 1942, whilst defending his post on Bukit Timah in Singapore, clearly a pragmatic personality, who presumably is still setting trails in the big plantation overhead, more recently being joined by another early stalwart Philip Wickens. The final nightcap at midnight left the 50 mile return journey home and time to ponder that the efforts to locate Torch Bennett had all been very worthwhile. Since that night we have corresponded regularly, and in particular Torch's memory was invaluable in tracing the early Hash history. Now 77, he was still in fine form when I met him and his wife for a second time last year. My only regret is that he continually declines invitations to join us for a run.

Colin Snow was On Sec, KLH3 in 1977.
Also Joint Master, KLH3 in 1978 and
Hash Music, Bangkok Hash 84/85.

ONON COLIN SNOW

"We carried on till the War, and it was really Torch Bennett, who joined soon after we started, who put us on a business basis, with his tidy mind, and indeed we were a bit too dedicated to the idea that there should be no organisation. After the War, we were indeed forced to register as a Society, which would have made our original members turn in their graves."

Extract from Cecil Lee's letter (23/04/63) to John Vincent, JM KLH3