

# The Last Expatriate

reminiscences of an educationalist  
in Malaysia



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## Chapter 1

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### EMERGENCY

It was August 1948. I was eighteen years old and sitting in a rather uncomfortable train which was taking me and a number of other national servicemen across the causeway which joined Singapore to Malaya. We had that day disembarked from the troopship Dilwara which had brought us from Egypt. We were now on our way to reinforce the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Devonshire Regiment which had been deployed in Johore as a result of the Communist uprising that had started in Malaya in July. Our draft had left the United Kingdom in March and after sailing round the Mediterranean in a troopship we had finally arrived at 156 Transit Camp in the so-called Canal Zone adjacent to the Suez Canal. We stayed there living in tents for two months while the army decided what to do with us. It was then that Malaya beckoned.

Even though it was dusk, the temperature was warm, close and humid. My first experience of the tropics certainly reinforced the greenhouse/Turkish bath comparison. Prior to boarding the train we had been issued with rifles and ammunition and told that the insurgents often shot at trains! So I was alert, looking out into the blackness of the night punctuated occasionally by the lights from houses along the line. We hadn't far to go as the battalion HQ was in Kluang in central Johore. Although the train moved slowly, I was excited by the fact that I had arrived in this country about which I knew almost nothing and had only the vaguest idea of why I was there at all. The communist rebellion had officially started in July 1948 with the murder of three rubber plantation managers at Sungei Siput in Perak. However, trouble had been brewing for some months as there was plenty of dissatisfaction in Malaya and

Singapore as a result of the poor record of the British Military Administration (BMA) which had taken over from the Japanese at the end of the Second World War.

During the war the British had encouraged, financed and supplied within Malaya a resistance movement against the Japanese. The majority of the members of this movement were Chinese and also communist sympathisers. Their post-war aim was to replace the British and set up a revolutionary government in Malaya. However, although there had been a number of trade union disturbances in 1947-48, the communist movement had been unsuccessful in getting support from the population as a whole. Being Chinese they gained their inspiration from the growing success of the communists in the civil war in China. At the end of the Second World War, the members of the MPAJA (The Malaysian Peoples Anti-Japanese Army) had hidden most of their arms in safe areas and they and new recruits were prepared to return to the jungle to use military means to remove the British, if 'peaceful' means were unsuccessful. Their return to guerilla warfare began in July 1948. Those of us now on the train crossing the Causeway from Singapore were reinforcements for one of the British army battalions which had been hastily deployed in Malaya.

We only stayed long enough in Kluang for the newcomers to be allocated to one of the battalion's four companies which were scattered throughout the state. D company got me and I joined thirty others in trucks being driven in the middle of the night to Rengam, the company HQ. We were then split up into reinforcements for the three platoons which were all based on rubber estates to defend them against possible attack by the communist terrorists (CT's).

My platoon was camped out in and around the manager's bungalow at the Southern Malayan Estate near Simpang Rengam. I say 'in and around' because the house was built in Malay style, with living quarters as it were on the first floor and a large space underneath on the ground. This space had recently been enclosed and was now occupied by the twenty members of the platoon. The garden and estate offices were in the process of being surrounded by a wire fence giving a perimeter about forty yards radius from the buildings. Our job was to defend this area in case of attack.

The Emergency, as this confrontation between the government and the CTs came to be known, had only just begun and the authorities' first

## EMERGENCY

instinct was to use available resources to defend the planters and miners who lived in isolated areas and who were responsible for producing most of the country's wealth, rubber and tin. So at the outset most available troops were dispersed in this defensive role.

Life on the estate was not uneventful. As with most rubber plantations the manager's bungalow was in the centre of the estate, only reached by quite a long drive from the main road with the possibility of an ambush at any time. To me the plantation was a somewhat eerie place, this little oasis of buildings surrounded by thousands of trees – at dusk all the sounds of insects and then as darkness fell the flickering of fireflies among the trees outside the perimeter fence adding to one's nervousness.



**A stop on the road to Johore Bahru. Corporal Rowe standing on my left.**

We were a small, close-knit group of twenty to thirty people who rather to my amazement managed to get on reasonably well together, although living virtually on top of each other. Initially we spent our time beefing up the defence of the place as well as escorting estate staff off the plantation to Rengam and Kluang. We would also prowl round the edges of the estate to see if there was any sign of the terrorists.