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Old Special Branch hand recalls rough days and a 'lousy job'

FORMER Special Branch Deputy Director Datuk Yaw Kong Yew, 70, was born to a very poor family in Ipoh. He had seven siblings. His father, who ran a small business selling ice blocks, could barely feed them.

To lessen the family's burden, Yaw was sent to Teluk Anson (now Teluk Intan) to help an uncle run a foodstall when he was eight years old. An elder brother was sent to another uncle in Taiping who ran a sundry shop.

Yaw went back to his family in Ipoh when his uncle died three years later. He made money selling the Kin Kok evening Chinese newspaper.

"I'd get 20 copies, run as fast as I could to sell the newspapers. People were keen to buy newspapers because they wanted to know when the War would end. I made enough to have savings."

Then the War came to an end and as competition got keener, Yaw switched to selling chocolates and cigarettes smuggled out of the British military establishment.

"I parked myself in Ipoh Central with two baskets of chocolate and cigarettes. I was making good money because people were desperate for chocolates and cigarettes. They had not had any for years."

Yaw had his primary education at Yuk Hwa Chinese primary school. As luck would have it, Yaw became a good football player and he was talent spotted by a Brother Eugene who paved the way for him to study at St Michael's Institution.

"Brother Eugene helped me to jump from primary six to Form Three. I studied like mad. It was very tough. I got zero for essay writing everytime."

He completed Form V with Grade III which was not good enough for the Civil Service. So, he took up a post to teach English at Tanah Hitam Chinese School, in Chemor, Perak.

To supplement his income, he got the headmaster to allow him to teach all five periods of English in the morning so that he could rush to the Tun Sambanthan private school, in Sungai Siput, to teach in the afternoon.

He would rush back to teach evening classes at Tanah Hitam Chinese School.

"Because there were no English classes in the evening, I taught Mathematics and singing of Chinese songs. These classes were attended by overage students. There were 20-year-old rubber tappers in Standard Three.

"To the annoyance of the other teachers, my singing class proved very popular. The other classes would be disrupted because everybody wanted to join in the singing."

After teaching for one year, Yaw resat his Senior Cambridge as a private candidate and passed with a Grade II and a credit in English.

This allowed him to join the police training centre in Kuala Lumpur in 1955. After completing his training, he was posted to Bukit Aman police headquarters under two very experienced British Special Branch Officers, M.H. Day and T.H. Mooney.

"I didn't want to join the Special Branch because we were all very proud of wearing the police uniform and you couldn't do that in the Special Branch. Nobody knew who you were.

"It was considered a lousy job. Then I got into interrogation which was the lousiest of lousy jobs.

"But I didn't have a choice because there were 36 people in the squad, but only six were Chinese, and only two were Chinese-educated.

"I couldn't have got better mentors. For one whole year, they taught me how to do basic things like report writing and assess intelligence reports."

A year later, Yaw asked to be transferred out because he wanted to do some ground work.

He ended up in Kuala Lipis, which was a one-street town at the time, and spent what he called the happiest four years of his life as a Pahang State footballer.

This was followed by a two-year stint in Malacca where he interrogated many communists and China student returnees.

He was very thorough in his work. Whereas other officers wrote 10 pages of observations in their reports, he wrote 40. This drew the notice of headquarters and he was selected to join a centralised specialist interrogation unit based in Bukit Aman.

The unit which comprised six Chinese and two Malay officers was headed by a very experienced specialist from the Colonial Office in London.

"Our job was to take on senior hardcore communists and train up interrogators in the States. After three months of intensive training, our skills were put to good use because the Confrontation began.

"I became very proficient and got promotion early as section head. One case can take a year to complete. I had to study him, know his character, mentality, likes and dislikes. Then I had to interrogate him and rehabilitate him. In the end, I would know him as well as I know my own hand."

Between 1966 and 1970, Yaw was placed on attachment in the Sarawak police force because of the intensification of communist activities in that State.

As a highly active sportsman, Yaw thought he had an iron constitution and could as such take on any challenge. But the stress of his work began to show and he was diagnosed with the heart condition, angina, at the age of 36.

"I landed in hospital for three weeks and was on medical leave for three months. When I went back to work I was given administrative duties, including training.

"The advantage was I was lecturing senior people and when they became state directors they remembered me. So every time they needed an interrogator, they would ask me to take charge of the interrogation."

In the 1970s, Yaw was recalled to do intelligence reporting and liaison work. This proved to be a Godsent because the contacts that he developed during this period were to be a great help to him when he was tasked by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and former Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Rahim Noor to persuade CPM leaders to come forward for peaceful negotiations in 1987.

"My network of contacts was ready-built. I just called up my contacts. Those who couldn't help introduced me to those who could.

"General Kasem, head of the Thai Special Branch, is an old contact and a very good friend of mine. He was the one who introduced me to General Kitti, Fourth Region Army Commander who was in charge of the whole of southern Thailand.

"General Kitti was very important. He gave me a lot of help. He also acted as chairman and arbitrator during negotiations between the CPM and the Malaysian Government in Phuket in 1989."

Yaw retired in 1992. A divorcee, Yaw keeps himself busy playing golf, going hiking, climbing mountains and spending time with his three children and two grandchildren. His daughter and eldest son are lawyers. The other son is a pilot.