

MY SIDE OF HISTORY

By Chin Peng

as told to Ian Ward and Norma Mirafior

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Foreword

I went on my first and only visit to the United Kingdom in the summer of 1998. I spent some of that time reading Malayan Emergency documents at the Public Record Office, Kew, and subsequently at Rhodes House Library, University of Oxford. It was part of my personal quest to get a broader picture of the war in which between four and five thousand of my comrades were killed.

Discovering what officials in the late 1940s and 1950s London were hatching to further the cause of their anti-insurgency campaign against the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was, to say the least, an affirming exercise. Finally, after so many years, I was able to evaluate the propaganda that was fed the world as my men and I trekked through the forbidding jungles of our country.

I have, since those reading sessions at Kew and Oxford, gathered a large collection of relevant declassified reports, not just from the Public Record Office, but also from the Imperial War Museum in London and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. These have become part of my personal archives. I now see the wisdom in not having rushed to tell my story as I was coaxed to do by several quarters immediately upon signing the peace accords in Haadyai, southern Thailand, on December 2, 1989. I had two reasons. At the time, I volunteered only the patently obvious one. I said I needed time. I had to adjust first to the new schedules and disciplines brought on by the accords. After a lifetime in the wilderness, I had to make sure that the new concept of peace we had worked out with Thailand and Malaysia would work for everyone.

The second reason was not an easy one to explain. I agreed that our side of the Emergency story had to be told. But, not so soon. From where I had been directing our armed struggle, only vague reports reached me of what was being said, decided and ordered in London and Kuala Lumpur corridors of power. I required documented proof to accompany my re-examination of that war. Without it, intrepid detractors would, quickly and conveniently, dismiss my analysis as a summary of unsubstantiated resentments and bits of fiction or, to borrow Gerald Templer's derisive phrase, 'typical of all communist

muck'. It was important that I remain as dispassionate as any human being could be in the predicament I had been placed.

Reams of propaganda material had succeeded in categorising me as a 'terrorist leader'. The Emergency was a conflict spurred by the continual onslaught of propaganda. I don't in any way excuse our side and claim we did not indulge in campaigns of persuasion. We certainly tried. But the documents at Kew attest to the paltriness of the CPM propaganda arsenal. This can easily be explained by the fact that we were not shackled to desks housed in grand buildings. My army was constantly moving and reorganising and facing food shortages. You could say idealism was the biggest weapon in our stockpile. We had neither the skill nor the sophistication to phrase columns upon columns of elegant prose meant to mislead. We were raw, hot-tempered and inexperienced. Our pronouncements were largely unadorned and straightforward. What you read was what you got.

In early 2000, Ian Ward, whose name I recalled from his byline in *The Daily Telegraph*, London, contacted me. He was by this stage into the 12th year of his retirement and had become an historian. I knew he had been a war correspondent. I remembered his reports from Vietnam and the 'second Emergency'. He didn't have to tell me that our politics differed. He had, for a quarter of a century, represented a staunchly conservative British newspaper. Ward said the Emergency had long interested him and he had, as a matter of fact, been researching it, on and off, for the past many years. By the very nature of it being a guerrilla war, there were aspects of the Emergency that had yet to be revealed and I held the key to this unexplored territory. He wanted to listen to my story. He added that his politics had not changed.

That started a complex and, at times, fiery collaboration. We were, from the very outset, determined that each would not be a 'stooge' of the other. For instance, it took some painstaking effort on my part to explain to Ward why a comrade would not consider setbacks in the movement as being 'wasted time'. Ward, on the other hand, was adamant that the book should not read like a manifesto.

The presence of the writer and editor Norma Miraflor proved more than beneficial to the project that took much longer than anticipated. It was Miraflor – a 'recalcitrant bourgeois' (her words) married to Ward – who kept her cool

and by default became keeper of the peace. But she was more than that. Her contributions to the invariably involved and lengthy discussions led to further insights that were worthy of being analysed and recorded. Like her husband, she knew how to listen and she asked the right questions.

Ward and Miraflor made it plain they were not interested in the history of the Communist Party of Malaya. They were more concerned with the human element of the Emergency story and how large aspects of truth, on both sides of a monumental conflict, could be sacrificed in an avalanche of propaganda. Ward particularly worked at ferreting out episodes that could not have reached the media while the armed struggle raged on. These were discussed and examined. Some he accepted; others he rejected, maintaining it was pointless to chronicle anything based on hearsay or rumours. We concurred.

You may ask, is this book the complete picture, then? It is not, for the obvious reason that it is not the history of the Communist Party of Malaya. Nor do I claim that it represents anywhere near a comprehensive account of the Emergency. It is, simply, the recorded journey of a man who opted to travel along a different road to pursue a dream he had for his country.

Other fears and terrors are now sweeping the world. The Emergency monsters were shaped by the East-West struggle – communism versus capitalism. The world has, of course, changed vastly from the one I opted to challenge. Technological progress transports the art of mass killing to frightening dimensions. But I hold that the smartest of today's 'smart' weapons will still find it impossible to eliminate the human desire for justice and dignity.

I fought in two wars and for many years the jungle was my home. This book is neither a boast nor an apology. It is an invitation to understand how beliefs are formed and how conflicts can start and run unabated. Equally, it is an insight into how peace can be achieved.

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July, 2003