

Tackling security issues in Malaya

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Sir Henry Gurney's death in an ambush during the Emergency demonstrated the importance of protecting police vehicles with armour plates, writes JOHN GULLICK

THE outbreak of the Emergency in 1948 broke the fragile health of the commissioner of police and demonstrated that a very small headquarters, adapted to a decentralised police force, could not direct police operations in a Malaya-wide conflict of arms.

The next commissioner came equipped with experience of such operations in Palestine and brought with him a much larger headquarters staff of officers with previous service there.

As it turned out, however, Palestinian methods were not well suited to Malayan Emergency requirements.

The general body of the Malayan police found the new leadership an unfair reproach upon their own competence, all the more so as they had over the years (1946-48) given warning more than once of the signs of the impending storm, but these had been ignored.

The simmering discontent flared into open recrimination, when two senior officers, with long police service in Malaya, much respected as experts on intelligence and special branch work, resigned in public protest.

Sir Henry Gurney, who had himself come to Malaya from Palestine at the end of the British mandate was in a difficult position over the O'Connell/Duthie resignations and the ensuing public outcry. In an effort to calm things, he asked the British government to send out to Malaya a trio of experts to advise on the current situation of the Malayan police.

They were a former civil service head of the Home Office, a chief constable of a large county force (previously an Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard) and a CID expert who went on to become head of Interpol.

During their visit they conferred many times with Gurney. After they departed, their written report, covering many topics, was published. I was their secretary.

All three members of the British police mission were good listeners, getting on easy terms with all whom they met.

Of the many questions of police activity that incidentally came to view in these interviews (and in public debate), the way to deal with ambushes along the roads was one of the most emotive.

Gurney's death in October 1951 on a mountain road, killed by fire from close range by attackers hidden in the jungle nearby, suffi-



ciently demonstrated that in typical Malayan conditions, Palestinian tactics do not work.

In December 1949, the police mission themselves arrived in Seremban on a day of mourning.

The day before, a dozen Malay policemen had been gunned down by the first burst of fire when their vehicle reached the summit of the Bukit Putus pass to Jelebu.

The necessity for protecting vehicles with armour plate was evident enough, but it took time to import a sufficient quantity of steel plates to protect all police vehicles. Gurney met his death because he had refused to use an armoured saloon car until the police had similar protection.

However, in the Malayan police it was widely believed that because such protection was not needed in Palestine it got low priority or was blocked altogether in Malaya.

Another weakness was the obvious inability of senior police officers new to the complexities of Malaya to master the intricate methods by which criminal intelligence was obtained, evaluated and analysed by those who were versed in these matters.

This was the factor at the root of the O'Connell/Duthie affair.

The 1950 enquiry was not a watershed, such as the advent of Sir Gerald Templer in 1952 and the changes that he made in — among other things — the police high command. But it eased a difficult situation and, as Templer himself admitted, many valuable lessons had been learnt and the appropriate action taken before he arrived.

—MPS

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