

# Capturing it on film for history

NSF-18/3/2007

LOOKING  
BACK

By Zaini Mohd Said



I LAMENTED the absence of combat photographers and lost photographic images of our history in a previous article.

I had also wished that common people — soldiers, policemen, government officers, teachers, traders, miners, villagers — would have their services and sacrifices to the nation recorded in the picture annals of our history.

That article prompted Ng Chin Yek to email me about his late father. A subsequent meeting and a look at his photographs last Sunday revealed an even more interesting story.

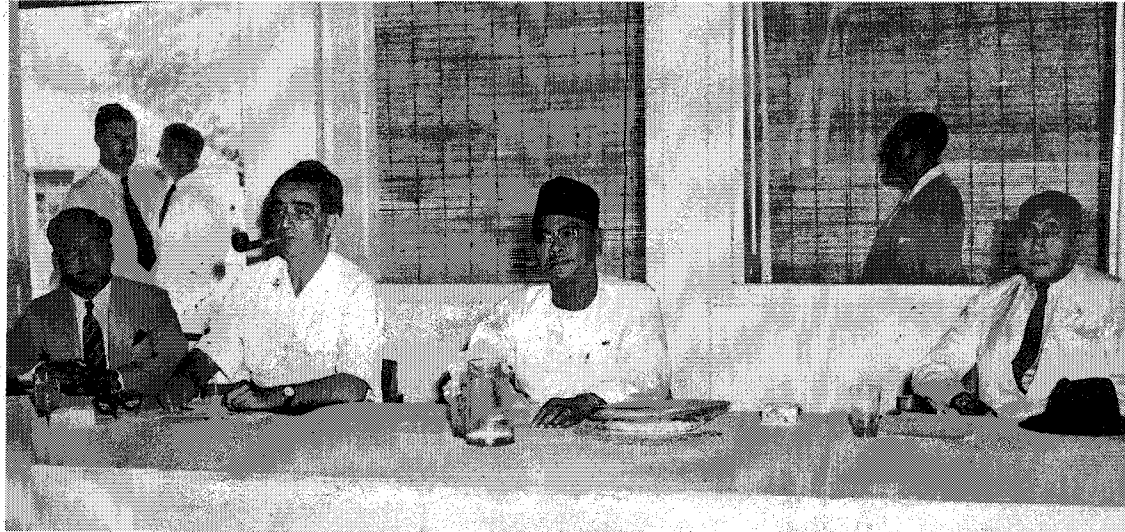
His father, Ng Weng Hong, had worked as a photographer in the Information Department (precursor to the present Ministry of Information) beginning in 1946, when Britain still ruled Malaya.

Weng Hong photographed scenes and events from the Emergency that began in 1948. Some of the photographs indicated that he had accompanied the police and military on offensive operations against the communist terrorists, making him a combat photographer of sorts.

He told his family that during one such operation a grenade was thrown by a terrorist at the Security Forces (SF) but did not explode.

The SF succeeded in capturing the terrorist who threw the grenade. This was photographed by Weng Hong and it appeared in the *Straits Times*.

Other photographs showed the massive effort to relocate people in the rural areas under the New Villages scheme, an idea attributed to



Participants of the Baling Talks, (from left) Assistant Minister for Education Too Joon Hing, David Marshall, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Datuk Tan Cheng Lock. — Picture by Ng Weng Hong

Lt-Gen Sir Harold Briggs in 1950.

More than 500,000 people moved into 440 settlements throughout the country. Weng Hong captured the relocation quite well, with one photograph showing the distress and uncertainty on the faces of those displaced under this unpopular scheme.

There were also photographs of British and Malayan forces in the field, many taken by Department of Information photographers during the Emergency and up till independence in 1957.

The British, with their feeling for history if not empire, appeared to be good at this.

I fervently hope that these photographs or their film negatives still exist and are well preserved. It would be truly tragic if they were lost or irrevocably damaged.

It was also interesting to learn about Weng Hong, who was born in 1923 and eventually rose to become

chief photographer in the department prior to his retirement in 1978.

His was a typical story of his generation: A colonial subject who suffered during World War Two, became a Malayan and finally a Malaysian before his death in 1988.

The Japanese in Penang sent him to work on the Death Railway in Burma. His reappearance at war's end surprised the family as they had given him up for dead.

Of his ordeal in Burma, he had little to say to the family, other than that he had worked as a fireman on the trains and survived many harrowing experiences when the railway line was bombed by Allied fighters and bombers.

As a government photographer he had the privilege to photograph the British High Commissioners of the colonial day, notably Sir Gerald Templar and Sir Donald MacGillivray, the last high commissioner.

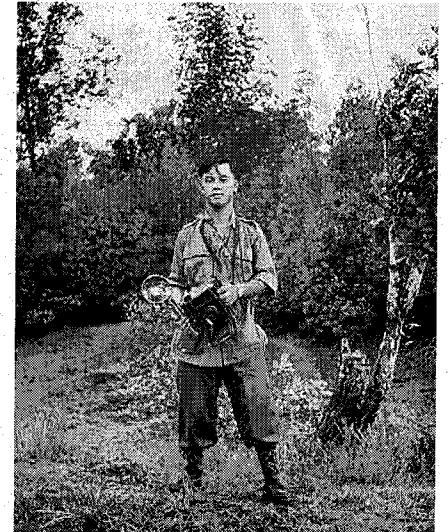
He was also a witness to and pho-

tographed the meeting between Tunku Abdul Rahman and David Marshall and the Communist Party of Malaya secretary-general Chin Peng at Baling, Kedah on Dec 28, 1955. The meeting failed and the communist leader withdrew into the jungle.

Weng Hong and his colleagues photographed the Tunku when he shouted "Merdeka!" at the Padang in Malacca, on his return from London after successfully negotiating the terms for independence.

And during the declaration of independence at the Merdeka Stadium on the morning of Aug 31, 1957, he was one of the four official photographers covering the historic ceremony.

The official photographs of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong after that were also taken by Weng Hong. He struck a personal relationship with the fourth Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Ismail Nasiruddin of Terengganu, an avid photographer, advising him on the art.



Ng Weng Hong in the field. — Picture courtesy of Ng Chin Yek

He helped set up the darkroom in the Istana. On his frequent trips to the Istana, Weng Hong must have met my father, then the King's personal bodyguard.

"What a small world," exclaimed Chin Yek when I told him about it.

Chin Yek regrets that he did not try to find out more about his father's experiences and knowledge. "It is especially unfortunate," he said, "as my father was a witness and photographed many momentous events and important dignitaries in the history of our country."

I could understand that but am nevertheless thankful that Weng Hong did his job well and left some lasting and wonderful images and photographs of the history of the nation for us and future generations.

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