

A veteran of old Malaya remembers

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After more than 50 years, a former British police lieutenant, who escorted communist leader Chin Peng during the Baling peace talks, is still excited over Malaya's historic Merdeka and his days of hunting terrorists during the Emergency.

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SIX months after joining the British army as a private in 1949, 19-year-old Dennis Wombell volunteered to serve in Malaya.

When he was here, he decided to join the British Malayan police.

After about six years hunting communist terrorists, he left the army life but did not return to his native land. Instead he opted to stay on and work with plantation company Socfin in Kedah.

He was working in Kulim when Merdeka was approaching.

He rejoiced with the others during the celebration at the Kulim Club with his fellow planter colleagues but he was also close to tears.

"It was the end of a great period in our (British) history and the end of my life as I knew it.

"At the same time, I knew that it was inevitable and that an independent Malaya would be successful and thrive," he said in a teleconference interview from his home in Yorkshire, Britain.

Wombell went on to live in Malaysia for another 17 years with his wife Valerie, 69. They were married at St Mary's Anglican Cathedral in Kuala Lumpur on July 21, 1960.

Their children, Sarah, 42, and David, 41, were born at Assunta Hospital in Petaling Jaya.

Wombell decided to return home in 1972 for the sake of his children's education.

His son, David, has continued the family tradition of serving in the military and is now a lieutenant-colonel with the British Gurkha regiment.

As for the 75-year-old Wombell, life is always busy for him. He is now an antique and fine arts consultant and auctioneer in Yorkshire.



Yet he still misses his jungle life in Malaya.

It is his family tradition to join the British army. His grandfather, Charles Wombell, fought in World War I (1914-1918). His father, Harry Wombell, and his uncles, Francis and Alec, fought in World War II (1939-1945). It was expected that Wombell, an only child, would follow suit.

He opted to leave Britain with his regiment to Malaya, knowing little about it except as a place full of rubber plantations and tin mines. But the unknown appealed to the adventurous young Wombell.

"When I was a child, Britain had a vast empire and the biggest and finest army in the world.

"It was expected that in those days that if one joined the army one went to places where there were colonial wars," he recalled.

He came during the onset of the Emergency (1945-1960) when the Malayan police were expanding and there was a need for those with military or police experience to fight the communists.

Wombell answered the call.

"The promise of adventure and the prospect of remaining in Malaya appealed to me and I transferred," he said. The police task was to search for communist camps.



Wombell (with beard) and his men with the rations which was air-dropped to them.

"There was no time or opportunity to do anything else.

"I remember we had to maintain complete silence in the jungle so that our presence was undetected by the enemy," he added.

After a few years, Wombell made personal history when he was assigned to escort Chin Peng, leader of the Communist Party of Malaya, to the Baling peace talks held on Dec 28 and Dec 29, 1955.

The talks between CPM and the Malayan government was an attempt for a peaceful end to the communist insurgency in Malaya.

As a platoon leader then, Wombell was eager to meet Chin Peng, whose real name is Ong Boon Hua, the man he and other armed forces had been trying to catch for years.

"I was hugely interested to know what he was like and I had no doubts about my ability to do my job and to ensure that he was taken safely to Baling and then back to the jungle."

He remembered Chin Peng joining him near Gunung Paku after dinner on Dec 29, 1955, an encounter which surprised him.

"Yes, I was surprised but it was a very relaxed atmosphere. We made small talk, chatting about the weather. He asked me if I was married or

whether I had any children.

"He spoke good English and I found him to be very pleasant and courteous. Had I known him better I think I would have liked him.

"I wouldn't have minded shaking his hands but we just didn't," he said.

Less than a year later, Wombell realised that the end of Emergency was in sight, as was Merdeka. He left the police force to become a planter in Sungai Ular, Kedah.

He still visits Malaysia from time to time and he finds the country has become hugely successful.

For him, Kuala Lumpur is "enormously impressive" and sees no signs of obvious poverty. "I hardly recognise KL now. The people are as charming and welcoming as they always were."

He can still converse in Malay, a language he learnt by himself.

"In the jungle, when you have 30 Malays in your platoon who don't speak English, you just learn Malay very quickly.

"They made good, loyal, obedient and courageous soldiers whom I trusted implicitly."

Wombell has lost touch with his platoon officers, except for Corporal Abdul Aziz Bidin, who now lives in Lunas, Kedah.



A 20-year-old Wombell, of Jungle 18 Company, Grik, in front of an armoured vehicle.



Dennis Wombell still holds his experience in Malaya dearly. Here, he is seen with his wife Valerie.