

A former 55 Company serviceman remembers

The Sun - 20/7/2007

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WITH a Lee Enfield rifle and five rounds of ammunition, 17-year-old Brian Osborne was not at all ready to gun down enemies in a foreign country.

"I arrived in Singapore in April, 1957 and was informed that I was to join the British army air despatch 55 Company Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) in Kuala Lumpur," he said.

"I was not alone in my predicament. There were a number of fresh-faced young servicemen not knowing who the enemy was or indeed, how many. Five rounds of ammunition seemed insufficient," the 67-year-old reminisced in an e-mail interview from his home in Lancashire.

Those were the early days, when Malaya - on the cusp of independence - was in the grips of an emergency that had been declared in 1948 by the British to quell the communist insurgency.

After arriving, Osborne was transported to the Sungai Besi Camp, where he settled into a busy life in an eight to five job. Every third day, he would be on night duty; which involved operating a teleprinter, and receiving signals for possible resupply missions for food, clothing and ammunition.

Osborne's company was also part of the British crackdown of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), led at that time by Chin Peng.

"We were not personally involved with Chin Peng. He was only a common enemy, almost a ghost who very rarely came into contact with the security forces," Osborne remembered.

His company's task, though a fairly simple one of resupplying police forts in the jungle, was still a dangerous one.

"We lost 42 men over a period of ten years from accidents, ambush, and eight air crash incidents. As an observer in a clerical position at that time, I can say with all modesty these men were brave, often flying three or more times a week for up to three years.

"Many of us were very young men, some conscripted for national service. Two of the survivors from a 1957 air crash still keep in touch with me, Alfred Downes and Ray Travis, and we wonder if anyone remembers us from those days," said Osborne of the company which was honoured by the Malaysian government with the Silver *Keris*



Osborne and Ng.

in 1960. It was one of six units given the award at that time.

Like all foreigners who visit Malaysia, Osborne, too, was introduced to local cuisine during his service here.

"A good friend, Abdullah Abbas, whom I worked alongside in the ops room introduced me to *nasi lemak*. I also stayed at Kampung Baru in Kuala Lumpur for about a week with his family, and we went to a local river to harvest *siput* for that evening's meal of curry.

"It was quite an experience for a *mat salleh*," he joked.

Love in Malaya

It wasn't just local food Osborne developed a love for while he was here.

The young Briton also fell in love with a Malayan woman who eventually became his wife.

"We met over a telephone call. She rang and I made a date," he said of Agnes Ng Kum Yeng, who then worked at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital.

"It was not an easy romance. The British forces were not encouraged to marry anybody at that time but were instead expected to return home to mum and dad in England without

attachments. Culturally, the Chinese frowned on mixed-race marriages and we had a visit by mostly female members from Agnes' side, who made it quite clear to me that my marrying into their family was not a welcomed idea.

"But like all young people, we took very little notice of their advice."

Without permission from Ng's father, the two eloped and were wed on March 21, 1960, a few days before Ng's 21st birthday.

"Fortunately, I was blessed with a wonderful mother-in-law, who with other members of the family, persuaded my father-in-law to accept us back after two years of being estranged," said Osborne who has two children, and is a grandfather of five.

"My children and I have the same love of good food as Malaysians and, in my eyes, are very good looking. I think they have the good manners and hospitality of Malaysian people. Whether that is nurtured or nature, I am not sure."

The Reunion

Osborne is organising a reunion for the 55 Company RASC, which is to take place in Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, on Feb 13, next year.

With him will be about 30 air despatchers who served in the Sungai Besi airfield between 1951 and 1960, including 1957 Commanding Officer Colonel Thacker, Colonel P. Blythe from Australia, and David Southall from New Zealand.

Osborne hopes to contact Adrian David, or some other crew member, who might be able to assist him with the reunion.

"Fifty years is a long time to wait to see the old airfield once more and reminisce of what might have been. We all remember Malaysia with great fondness because of the hospitality we received in the days long ago."

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Small numbers of Dayaks were employed mainly as trackers in the jungle for the combined regular police and military forces in action against bandits. This October 1948 picture shows Sgt R. Beaumont, of the Malay Regiment, instructing a Dayak in the use of firearms and in jungle fighting.