

The Last Expatriate

reminiscences of an educationalist
in Malaysia



NEIL J RYAN



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PREFACE

This book is a memoir of that part of my working life which was spent in Malaya/sia, firstly, and briefly, as a soldier, then in the Department of Education and finally as an educational publisher.

I was fortunate in being in the country during some important times. I witnessed the beginning of the communist insurgency known as the Emergency. Later, when as a member of the civil service, I saw the successful defeat of the terrorists and the lead up to independence or Merdeka. Lastly, as a publisher, I was involved in the implementation of the new educational policy with its emphasis on the national language.

I hope the contents of the book will be of interest to those who may have a nostalgic memory of that period of history as well as those who just like to read about times past. However as a large part of the book relates to the years I spent at Malay College, I hope also that it may give my former students some insights into what went on behind the scenes. As the title suggests, this is not an autobiography but rather a memoir of Malaysia from the 1950's to the 1970's. Nevertheless some information about my pre-Malaysia background might be useful.

I was born in England in 1930, my mother was a teacher and my father, who was born in Ireland, was the manager of an Irish bank which had branches in England. I was brought up in England and from 1940 to 1946 was educated at Belmont Abbey, a small boarding school outside the city of Hereford. The school would have had roughly the same number of pupils as had Malay College in 1939. I enjoyed boarding school life, playing rugby and cricket for the school but also appreciating the small sixth form subject groups of four or five students. Belmont was a Catholic school and every morning all the students attended church before breakfast. There was only one exception, on the day of an inter-school match members of the 1st XV could sleep in until breakfast. It wasn't too difficult to absorb much of the ethos of boarding school life, the need for self-reliance, the importance of friendship and involvement in many activities not available at home. There was also acceptance of

PREFACE

the structure, the hierarchy of staff, school prefects and house monitors, the division of the student body into houses, the competitiveness of house rivalry, house common rooms, a separate sixth form common room and so on.

I was at school during the Second World War and we were fortunate in being out in the country rather than in a city. The school had its own farm and although we were subject to food rationing like everyone else we certainly enjoyed some extras. Hereford was not a target for German bombers and at school we were spared the danger of air raids. However my home town of Bristol suffered very heavy bombing and the holidays were quite different. We had turned our cellar into sleeping quarters and nearly every night in 1941-42 our cellar was full of family and neighbours. Like almost everyone at school, I was in the cadet corps which was looked on as a preparation for the armed forces, should the war continue. The war did end in 1945 but conscription into the armed forces or national service was still in place largely to keep the forces up to strength at a time when those who had been fighting in the war were demobilized. Every male aged 18 had to do eighteen months national service. This could be done either before or after completing tertiary education. I decided like many others to do it first to get it out of the way so that there would be no interruption between university and a career. It was this spell in the army which first brought me to Malaya.

Chapter 1

EMERGENCY

It was August 1948. I was eighteen years old and sitting in a rather uncomfortable train which was taking me and a number of other national servicemen across the causeway which joined Singapore to Malaya. We had that day disembarked from the troopship Dilwara which had brought us from Egypt. We were now on our way to reinforce the 1st Bn Devonshire Regiment which had been deployed in Johore as a result of the Communist uprising that had started in Malaya in July. Our draft had left the United Kingdom in March and after sailing round the Mediterranean in a troopship we had finally arrived at 156 Transit Camp in the so-called Canal Zone adjacent to the Suez Canal. We stayed there living in tents for two months while the army decided what to do with us. It was then that Malaya beckoned.

Even though it was dusk, the temperature was warm, close and humid. My first experience of the tropics certainly reinforced the greenhouse/Turkish bath comparison. Prior to boarding the train we had been issued with rifles and ammunition and told that the insurgents often shot at trains! So I was alert, looking out into the blackness of the night punctuated occasionally by the lights from houses along the line. We hadn't far to go as the battalion HQ was in Kluang in central Johore. Although the train moved slowly, I was excited by the fact that I had arrived in this country about which I knew almost nothing and had only the vaguest idea of why I was there at all. The communist rebellion had officially started in July 1948 with the murder of three rubber plantation managers at Sungei Siput in Perak. However, trouble had been brewing for some months as there was plenty of dissatisfaction in Malaya and

Singapore as a result of the poor record of the British Military Administration (BMA) which had taken over from the Japanese at the end of the Second World War.

During the war the British had encouraged, financed and supplied within Malaya a resistance movement against the Japanese. The majority of the members of this movement were Chinese and also communist sympathisers. Their post-war aim was to replace the British and set up a revolutionary government in Malaya. However, although there had been a number of trade union disturbances in 1947-48, the communist movement had been unsuccessful in getting support from the population as a whole. Being Chinese they gained their inspiration from the growing success of the communists in the civil war in China. At the end of the Second World War, the members of the MPAJA (The Malaysian Peoples Anti-Japanese Army) had hidden most of their arms in safe areas and they and new recruits were prepared to return to the jungle to use military means to remove the British, if 'peaceful' means were unsuccessful. Their return to guerilla warfare began in July 1948. Those of us now on the train crossing the Causeway from Singapore were reinforcements for one of the British army battalions which had been hastily deployed in Malaya.

We only stayed long enough in Kluang for the newcomers to be allocated to one of the battalion's four companies which were scattered throughout the state. D company got me and I joined thirty others in trucks being driven in the middle of the night to Rengam, the company HQ. We were then split up into reinforcements for the three platoons which were all based on rubber estates to defend them against possible attack by the communist terrorists (CT's).

My platoon was camped out in and around the manager's bungalow at the Southern Malayan Estate near Simpang Rengam. I say 'in and around' because the house was built in Malay style, with living quarters as it were on the first floor and a large space underneath on the ground. This space had recently been enclosed and was now occupied by the twenty members of the platoon. The garden and estate offices were in the process of being surrounded by a wire fence giving a perimeter about forty yards radius from the buildings. Our job was to defend this area in case of attack.

The Emergency, as this confrontation between the government and the CTs came to be known, had only just begun and the authorities' first

instinct was to use available resources to defend the planters and miners who lived in isolated areas and who were responsible for producing most of the country's wealth, rubber and tin. So at the outset most available troops were dispersed in this defensive role.

Life on the estate was not uneventful. As with most rubber plantations the manager's bungalow was in the centre of the estate, only reached by quite a long drive from the main road with the possibility of an ambush at any time. To me the plantation was a somewhat eerie place, this little oasis of buildings surrounded by thousands of trees – at dusk all the sounds of insects and then as darkness fell the flickering of fireflies among the trees outside the perimeter fence adding to one's nervousness.



A stop on the road to Johore Bahru. Corporal Rowe standing on my left.

We were a small, close-knit group of twenty to thirty people who rather to my amazement managed to get on reasonably well together, although living virtually on top of each other. Initially we spent our time beefing up the defence of the place as well as escorting estate staff off the plantation to Rengam and Kluang. We would also prowl round the edges of the estate to see if there was any sign of the terrorists.

There were plenty of them in the region of Central Johore. They ambushed planters, shot up trains and terrorised the Chinese squatter population living outside the towns and villages. We occasionally, two sections at a time, did sweeps through these squatter areas – I assumed, at the time this was to see if there was any information we could obtain. This seemed highly problematic to me as none of us could speak Chinese and I suspect we were merely showing the flag. After a few months the authorities recruited liaison officers from the Kuomintang and they accompanied us on these sweeps. With their background they were not very sympathetic towards the squatters whom they believed to be all communist sympathisers, so they didn't turn up much useful information.

The routine of guard duty, patrols and escorts was relieved by trips to collect stores, mail, etc. Some time before Christmas 1948, the Planters Association donated a little piglet to each platoon, the idea being that we would fatten it up so that it would provide us with our festive Christmas dinner. Ours duly arrived, we made a pen and run for it and drew up a duty roster for feeding it. We gave the pig a name and the whole platoon became very attached to it – inspecting it regularly to see if it had grown – so much so that when Christmas arrived no one



Southern Malay Estate – A section ready for patrol.

was willing to turn our pig into pork. It seemed as though we might be stuck with a pet rather than roast pork until someone made an executive decision and engaged a professional butcher from Sungei Rengam. We ate our Christmas dinner, with plenty of beer donated by the manager, but with slightly guilty conscience.

By this time I was getting used to the climate (though Christmas dinner at 30°C was very strange), the humid heat and especially the tropical rain which could soak you in a couple of minutes if you weren't already pretty wet with sweat. But the early mornings were marvellous and the early evenings, before dusk and before mosquitoes, were also an antidote to the heat of the day. There were plenty of mosquitoes, wherever we went we took anti-malarial tablets, but we hadn't much precaution against being bitten. By far, the worst of the creepy crawlies were leeches which fastened on to you as soon as you walked through a stream or a marsh or even stopped in a jungle clearing. Leeches got on to your arms, on your legs, in your boots so that when you stopped for a meal or a rest you spent quite a time removing leeches with the end of a cigarette. Touch them with this and they withdrew their heads and dropped off – no wonder nearly everyone smoked!

In the New Year, 1949, the authorities became better organised, a form of home guard had been instituted to provide for the defence of estates and the army was able to be released for more proactive activities like searching out the CTs. The government had already formed Ferret Force, composed of former colleagues of the CTs when they had both been opposing the Japanese. The aim of Ferret Force was to seek out the camps from where the terrorists launched their raids and ambushes. We in the Devonshires also took on a more active and aggressive role, patrolling away from the estate and following up information about CT activities.

It was on one such patrol that I had my first experience of 'action'. We were a small patrol of eight led by a corporal. I was a lance corporal armed with a Sten gun and with another member similarly armed we were the two scouts. Our mission was to follow-up terrorist activity and evidence of their coming and going through a particular area. About ten one morning we debussed from our 15 cwt truck, cut through the edge of the rubber and began following a track into the jungle. We had been going for about an hour through not too difficult terrain, going carefully but not knowing exactly the position of the CT camp, which we were

looking for. We scouts were 15 yards ahead of the other six led by the corporal, when suddenly from either side but slightly behind us there was a burst of fire, directed not at us but at the main patrol. Everyone dropped flat on the jungle path and blazed away in the direction the shooting had come from. Then we realised that the corporal had been badly hit in the leg and abdomen in the first volley. We lay there for a few minutes expecting more firing and I expected to be attacked at any minute by the CTs as soon as they realised how few of us there were. But this did not occur.



Standard transport was the 15cwt truck.

Meanwhile the corporal was not in a good state, we managed to stop the bleeding with our first aid kits but as soon as we tried to move him, the bleeding began again. We decided to send two of our members back to the road and, although we were not expected to rendezvous with our transport for another three hours, try to get medical help (no walkie-talkies in those days). The other five of us remained spread out along the jungle path trying to do our best for the corporal and expecting to be attacked at any minute. It was a very unnerving experience. But there were no further attacks. Medical assistance arrived some two hours later and by then the wounded corporal was becoming very weak. He was

stretched out of the jungle, taken by ambulance to Kluang hospital but unfortunately did not recover. Getting wounded in jungle warfare is highly dangerous, it being extremely difficult to lift injured soldiers out by helicopter.

As I and my companions arrived back at the road, a Ferret Force attack group, led by former Force 136 officers, was getting ready to go in to follow-up. I learned later that we had stumbled on a major CT camp housing 30-40 people. We had triggered off their sentries, who had fired on us, then got back to the camp which had been then hurriedly evacuated, presumably because the CTs had not known how many troops were advancing on them. It was extremely lucky for us that the sentries didn't stay long enough to discover that there were only eight of us.



Funeral of Corporal Rowe in Singapore.

Not long after this incident, came the news that the battalion was being moved from Johore to Pahang. More troops had now arrived in Malaya to try to wrest the initiative from the CTs or bandits as they were now colloquially known. The billeting of troops on estates and mines was over and so we said goodbye to the estate which had been our home for six months. We travelled by train with the rest of the battalion from

Kluang via Kuala Lumpur to Mentakab which was to be the new battalion HQ. D company was to be based at Temerloh where we took over a row of new shop-houses which had been built overlooking the Pahang River. Here all the rifle platoons were living together and we were all now integrated in the company structure. The free and easy life of estate living was over – we were back in the army again. (Though this was not a spit and polish army.)

Pahang was a much less developed part of Malaya than Johore. The latter had a good road network whereas in Pahang the main transport structure was based on the railway and the river. At that time there was no bridge across the river at Temerloh and on the other side there was a dearth of roads. The other important difference in operational terms was that Temerloh was where the first Malay branch of the Malayan Communist Party had been established and Pahang was alleged to be the base of the only ethnic Malay regiment in the communist force – the remainder, in the rest of the country, were still almost entirely Chinese. Our task was to keep Wan Ali and his colleagues under control and if possible eliminate them. Their territory was across the river from our shop-houses well into the jungle behind the *kampongs* which stretched along the river bank. The other main change was in the way the battalion now began to operate. With six months ‘sort of’ jungle warfare experience we were now expected to spend a great deal more time in the jungle. The days of the short four hour patrol were now over and we were obliged to spend up to a week away from base. The aim was for us to seek out and attack bandit camps, to lay in wait and ambush CT couriers and patrols and to be as expert in the jungle as they were. I don’t believe we were but we certainly tried hard! It was hard work as the jungle was not a friendly place.

The jungle in Malaya was even more formidable than the troops had experienced in Burma. In overgrown secondary jungle a patrol might barely cover a mile in four hours. Marching in file along a narrow track, with overhead foliage completely shutting out the sun and the sky, soldiers had to push and if necessary chop their way through dense thickets of saplings and attap palms, festoons of creepers and clumps of bamboo. In primary jungle there would be giant, vine-covered tree trunks with roots four feet high over which a patrol had to clamber. Sometimes there would be a fast flowing river to wade across or vast expanses of foul smelling swamp. The humid heat soaked soldiers in

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perspiration until they were visibly steaming and summoned a thirst which experience taught them to quench sparingly from their water bottles. Leeches sought out their vulnerable flesh and sucked out their blood, there were also vicious, biting red ants which showered upon them from the trees. Worst of all was the mountainous nature of the terrain. As they climbed slope after slope pulling themselves upward by branches and roots, gulping the musty air, soldiers became ever more aware of the weight of their packs, weapons and ammunition.

When it was time to halt for the night the patrol would construct three-man shelters by stretching waterproof poncho capes over frameworks made from saplings. The night's sleep was invariably disturbed by swarms of whining mosquitoes and a two hour sentry duty. Soldiers might be drenched in the late afternoon by torrential rain and they might lie for a large part of the night trying to sleep with streams of muddy water pouring across their groundsheets. And there were plenty of health hazards including malaria, dysentery, prickly heat amongst others.

From John Scurr – *The Malayan Campaign 1948-1960* Osprey 1982



Crossing the Pahang river at Temerloh.

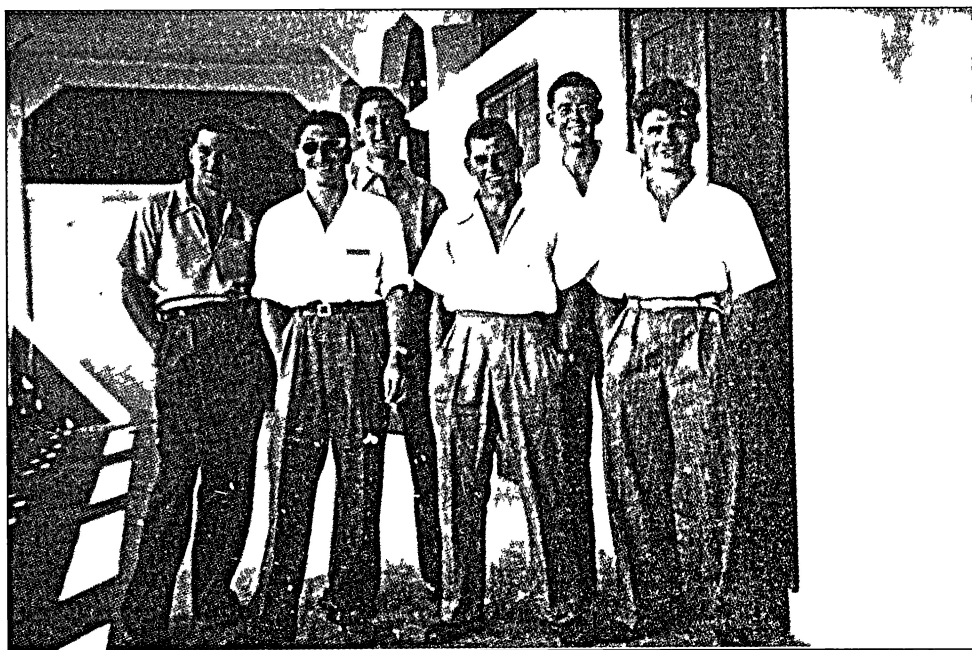
Operations were also on a larger scale, involving cooperation with other troops from the same brigade and also the use of the air force attempting to bomb suspected bandit hide outs. One of the other battalions we worked with was a Gurkha unit, as everyone says marvellous people, always friendly and cheerful (if you were on their side) and excellent jungle fighters. I remember one somewhat unnerving experience. We had been out in the jungle for about a week watching a then deserted bandit camp and the tracks leading to and from it – hoping that it was a temporary emptiness and that the bandits would return. At the end of our stint we were due to be relieved by the Gurkhas and one evening as we lay in our positions the advance section of the Gurkhas suddenly appeared as it were among us grinning wildly and shaking hands with us. I was very glad we were on the same side.

I can't say I enjoyed living in the jungle for a week or month at a time. For one thing we had to carry a great deal more equipment and rations, though these were sometimes air dropped to us. But sleeping on a ground sheet on the jungle floor with mosquitoes and other insects for company, put me off camping for the rest of my life. It was always good when we got back to our shop-houses for the three 'S' – shit, shower and shave. Not that our accommodation was high class but it provided some reasonable comforts plus access to a canteen, the ubiquitous *char wallah* (as in the TV comedy, 'It ain't half hot Mum') and the occasional film show. There was not a lot to do in Temerloh itself.

At about this time there was a battalion draw for some leave in Hong Kong – to travel there from Singapore on a troopship, spend a week in Hong Kong and then return on the same ship. A friend and I put our names into the draw and we were successful in winning two of the twenty or so places. It was a marvellous twelve days break away from jungle patrols and something of an experience to be in a city for a change, wearing civilian clothes. Hong Kong in 1949 was very different from today. It then had a population of only 1,600,000 and was still recovering from the war. A civil war was being played out in China and as the Communists looked more and more the likely winners, the trickle of refugees into Hong Kong soon became a flood. But that was later. We were actually in Hong Kong at the time of the Yangtse incident in April 1949.

The local papers were full of what became known as the Yangtse incident, a British frigate, the Amethyst steaming up the Yangtse to

Nanking to evacuate British and Commonwealth citizens caught up in the civil war, was fired on by People's Liberation Army shore batteries. The ship was badly damaged and the crew suffered numerous casualties including the death of the captain. The ship had lost its steering and had run aground. Relief attempts by other British warships failed and it seemed the Amethyst was stranded. All this took place while we were in Hong Kong and was widely reported in the South China Morning Post. Three months later after fruitless negotiations and the appointment of a new captain and after makeshift repairs to the ship, the frigate slipped anchor and under fire, at full speed, made a 100 mile dash for the sea. However by this time I was back in Temerloh but closely following the successful escape of the Amethyst.



The winners of the battalion draw on leave in Hong Kong.

After my holiday in Hong Kong I suppose I should have returned refreshed and ready to go but the prospect of more time in the jungle was not enticing. National service at this time was for two years and I faced the prospect of this life until the end of 1949. When I had first joined up the length of service was only eighteen months and I had started well before my eighteenth birthday so that I would be out in time



Between 1948 and 1977 the author worked in Malaysia for twenty years, firstly in the British army during the Emergency, then, after university studies, in the department of education and finally, for an educational publishing company. He was fortunate to be able to witness the defeat of the communist insurgency, the achievement of Independence and the growth of a successful economy. Almost half of his time in Malaysia was spent at Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, the last six years as headmaster where he was the last expatriate to hold this position. After leaving Malaysia he became managing director of a publishing company in Australia where he now lives in retirement.



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