

Merdeka



Malaya 1957. A country gains freedom, but deep in the jungle fighting continues....

A Novel by
Lachlan Gunn

MERDEKA

By Lachlan Gunn

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who risked or gave their lives during the Malayan Emergency. Social and political perspective can and does change over the years, as history is interpreted and re-interpreted according to changing social values and beliefs: Yet one thing is certain; each one of us only has one life, and laying down that life for a cause is a sacrifice that cannot be repeated.

Modern Malaysia is a vibrant and successful democratic country. The fact that it is so can be partly attributed to the sacrifices made by those men, women and children from all races that played a part in assisting the transition of the Federation of Malaya from British Imperial rule to an independent nation. Ultimately it is not up to us to judge, especially if we were not there, but to understand.....and never to forget.

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Introduction

From 1948 until 1960, Britain fought a colonial war against the Malayan Communist Army, called the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA). Malaya was then, as Peninsular Malaysia is now, a region with three main ethnic groupings; the indigenous Malays, the Chinese and the Tamils. The MNLA was mainly made up of Chinese people, members of the Communist Party.

During the Second World War Malaya had been occupied by the Japanese, after their defeat of the British Imperial Forces. As it became obvious that defeat by Japan was inevitable, the British organised small stay-behind parties, code named Force 136, to live in the jungle and strike from there in guerrilla operations to disrupt the Japanese Forces and tie up their manpower. The Chinese Communists, calling themselves the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), formed themselves into armed units and also took to the jungle. Force 136 worked with these units, persistently attacking the Japanese forces and infrastructure. The British provided weapons and ammunition for the Communists; some caches had been pre-positioned by the Imperial Forces, as they retreated southwards towards Singapore, and others were put in place by the Communists who collected equipment and stores abandoned during the retreat. The ultimate goal of the MPAJA was an independent Malaya under Communist rule.

After the defeat of Japan several of the Chinese Communist fighters were decorated by the British, and some took part in a Victory parade through London. As the British began to re-consolidate their control of Malaya and Singapore, and after local unrest at an initial plan, their revised aim was to create an independent Malaya under a government democratically elected by all the Malayan peoples; while the ethnic Malays were in the majority, a significant part of the country's economy was controlled by Chinese interests. During this period the Chinese Communist armies in China were sweeping to victory and the Nationalist Armies were retreating towards the sea and Taiwan. The British were determined that the ethnic Malays would have majority control in an independent Malaya and that democracy not communism would prevail.

This was unacceptable to the Chinese Communists who saw that the only way to reverse this process, and to form a Peoples' Democratic Republic of Malaya (which included Singapore), would be by armed insurrection. Thus in 1948 their guerrilla campaign kicked off with the murder of a Scottish Manager in a remote rubber estate. In the ensuing conflict both sides had the same aim, an independent Malaya, yet were fighting from different ideological perspectives. The MNLA was supported by a civilian organization called the *Min Yuen*, or the Peoples Movement, which collected supplies and information for them.

The British never called the conflict a War, but referred to it as an 'Emergency', thereby making it possible for insurance claims to be made by business and commercial interests. The Communists contemptuously referred to those fighting with the British as 'Running Dogs'.

The MNLA lived in jungle or forest camps and by mid-1950 they, with the help of the *Min Yuen*, had acquired uniforms. These were either khaki, or the jungle green British pattern, and they usually wore three stars on their caps, signifying the three races of Malaya. They favoured road or rail ambushes, and initially were successful in tying down the security forces. They maintained an effective supply network by controlling the local Chinese population, particularly in the squatter camps on the jungle fringes, primarily by using tactics of terror and intimidation. From 1948 to 1951 they seemed to have the upper hand and a great success for them in October 1951 was the ambush and murder of the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, on the road up to Fraser's Hill, a Colonial Hill Station.

To deal with the crisis General Sir Gerald Templer was appointed British High Commissioner in January 1952, with both civil and military powers. Templer's tactics against the Communists have since been used as a model for counter-insurgency operations, including in the current war in Afghanistan. He pioneered a new way of uniting races in a common goal stating that: "*The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the people.*" He demanded that the newly built protected villages, where Chinese squatters were being resettled away from the jungle fringes and beyond the reach and influence of the Communist Terrorists (*known as CTs*), be properly laid out with all necessary facilities.

To further gain the *hearts and minds* of the non-Malays, the main source of Communist support, Templer granted Malayan citizenship to over 2.6 million Malayan residents, 1.1 million of whom were Chinese. As well as seeking political and social equality for all Malaysians, regardless of race, he put in place attractive incentive schemes to reward surrendering CTs, as well as those who encouraged them to surrender, or who assisted with the discovery of arms and ammunition.

Strict curfews and tight control of food supplies, including the central cooking of rice, were used to bring rebellious areas under control. As the increasingly desperate and starving CTs grew crops in jungle clearings, these were sprayed with herbicide. The tight restrictions were lifted on so-called 'White Areas', which had been evidenced to be free of Communist incursion, thereby encouraging other areas to back the government, further isolating the CTs.

The success of these measures was quickly evident: by 1953 the MNLA was short of food and its numbers were in decline. Failing in its aim to dominate territory, the Communist Party, along with the *Min Yuen*, worked to influence trade unions and political parties, while the MNLA began to increasingly rely on Malaya's aboriginal population for support. Internment of Aborigines (the *orang asli* indigenous peoples) was abandoned after some deaths, and the government instead adopted a strategy of offering them aid, and of building jungle forts in aborigine territory. Templer's key focus was on intelligence gathering and uniting all the peoples in a common cause.

He left Malaya in 1954 and, although the Communists remained a fighting force, it was clear that they had lost the fight. This paved the way for Malaya's first general elections which took place in July 1955, with Tunku Abdul Rahman becoming Chief Minister. One of his first acts was to declare a partial amnesty with the Malayan Communists; from then, until December 1955, talks took place between Chin Peng, the leader of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), the newly elected Government, and the British. These finally broke down due to inability to reach agreement; Chin Peng wanted legal recognition of the MCP and a return to the pre-conflict situation, while the Government demanded the dissolution of the MCP.

As the increasing successes and dominance of the Security Forces became evident, agreement was reached on 8th February 1956 for Malaya to gain independence from the British Empire; that same day the amnesty with the Communists expired and, despite Chin Peng's attempts to resume negotiations, he was rejected by Rahman in a public broadcast on 2nd April 1956. It was now clear that the Communists had lost the war. Failure to work with the post-colonial government meant marginalisation.

Rahman and the British decided that the official proclamation of independence, '*Merdeka*', would be made the following year on 31st August 1957, at Stadium Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur.

By July 1957 approximately 30,000 square miles, out of Malaya's total land area of 50,850 square miles, had been declared as 'White Areas'. In August 1957, the month in which the beginning of this story is set, Kuala Lumpur and district were also declared 'White'. On Saturday 31st August 1957 the Federation of Malaya finally became independent from Britain and Tunku Abdul Rahman became Prime Minister.

By mid-1958 the MNLAs just held out in Perak and the southern part of Johore, and by early 1959 they had been pushed back to the Thai border. On 31st July 1960 the Government formally declared that the Emergency was over, although emergency restrictions remained in force in the border areas, where active CT numbers had fallen to around 500.

Finally, on 2nd December 1989, the last of the Malayan Communist fighters laid down their arms at the town of Had Yai in Southern Thailand. Chin Peng and other leaders met there, with representatives of the Malaysian and Thai governments, to sign peace agreements. The fighting that had first commenced in 1948, over 40 years earlier, was finally over.

A glossary is provided at the back of this book to assist the reader with unfamiliar words, abbreviations and terms and a historical map has been provided to give an indication of the locations mentioned; place names mentioned in the book are spelled as they would have been in 1957.

Prologue

The acrid smell of cordite filled her nostrils as the Tommy gun chattered, hurling bullets out towards the enemy position. Peering cautiously over the tree root she could see the slow, placid waters of the brown river meandering around the edge of the swamp she had so recently crossed. The soldiers had taken cover on a small beach, hidden from view by some fallen branches. As they fired at her their red and yellow muzzle flashes were startlingly bright in the fading light of the jungle gloaming, but any illusion of beauty was quickly dispelled by the sound of bullets cracking over her head, accompanied by dull thuds as some of them hit the trunks and branches of trees.

Leaves drifted down slowly from the gloom of the jungle canopy, sliced away from their stems by the high velocity rounds. Her stomach tensed as she gently squeezed the trigger again, aiming at where she knew that she had seen one of the men go to ground.

She tried to ignore the throbbing pain from her injured leg and bit her lip as she forced herself to focus, raising her left hand to wipe away the sweat that was stinging her eyes. There was a sudden movement to her right and, switching her aim, she fired another burst, vaguely registering that the soldier had thrown himself backwards into the swamp to avoid her bullets.

The fire fight continued and, as the shadows lengthened, she realised that this was going to be the place of her death. Emotion choked her and it wasn't just the sweat in her eyes now, tears were also welling. As she stifled a sob she saw a man on the beach raise himself and begin to shoot. The bullets were too close for comfort and, gritting her teeth, she lowered her head and began to return fire. She didn't see the approach of her killer until it was too late. He must have moved along the edge of the swamp and then used the dead ground to her right to get as close as possible. She rolled onto her left side to try to shoot him as he raced towards her, but she could not move quickly enough. As his bullets began slamming into her she saw his face – it was kind and not the face of a killer.

She rolled backwards with her arms out flung.....yet felt no pain. The man's face began to drift away from her. His dark eyes were wet and he seemed to be trying to tell her

something. His mouth moved but she couldn't hear the words. She held his gaze, trying to understand him, but his face began to drift away into a misty haze. She tried to call out to him but no sound came. Suddenly the mist began to clear as light started to dispel the darkness. She heard a woman's voice. A cock crowed and a dog started to bark.

She sat up, realising with relief that she was in a bed, cocooned by a mosquito net. Her mind clearing, she registered that she was in Yong Peng and had just had a vivid dream. The voice that she could hear belonged to Aunt Ma who was outside in the yard carrying out some of her morning chores. The first rays of the rising sun suddenly shot through the slatted shutters on the bedroom window and the sound of happy chickens being fed drifted up from the yard. Glad to be alive and away from the jungle, and still heavy with sleep, she yawned, stretched, and began to prepare her mind for the day ahead.

Chapter 1

24th August 1957 - Saturday

Far East Land Forces Training Centre, Burma Camp, Ulu Tiram, Johore

Struggling to cope with the oppressive humidity in the crowded briefing room Alick Gordon watched the little gecko, known as a chick-chack in Malaya due to its call, as it hunted across the wall above the window frame. It moved quickly to its selected spot and then froze as it waited for a small fly to come within range of its tongue. Outside, the sounds of the military camp drifted in through the slatted shutters, closed to keep out the harsh rays of the afternoon sun; an engine roared into life, and men's voices could be heard debating the best route to take to get to Batu Pahat. Inside, the whirring of the overhead fan was just audible over the monotonous nasal drone of the Brigade Intelligence Officer's voice, as he carried on with the latest assessment of the operations of the *Min Yuen* in the New Villages.

'The whole point of building the New Villages was to cut off supply access to the CTs, and to make it as difficult as possible for the Min Yuen to operate. It's been very successful to date.'

'Elaborate please Henry,' interjected the Brigadier, who appeared to be doing his best not to nod off in the humid heat. It was not normal practice for him to attend patrol level operational briefings but he had chosen to sit in on this one for two reasons: Firstly the patrol was going to span the Malayan independence celebrations, starting under the current administration and finishing under the new one, and he wanted to be fully informed from the beginning in case it attracted media interest; secondly one of the bandits was believed to be a member of the Communist Politburo and, if the mission succeeded, its results would be communicated to the highest levels of the Far East Land Forces Command Structure. At his last conference, the General had indicated that he was looking for good news to report to the incoming government and Brigadier Ewan Ponsonby was keen for 63 Brigade to supply it.

Major Henry Innes turned to face him.

‘When the Chinese squatters were shifted from the jungle fringes into the New Villages, they were allocated plots and given materials to build their own properties. Most importantly they were given ownership of a long-term lease which, at a stroke, took them from land squatter to property lease owner. Perhaps the DSP will explain?’

Deputy Superintendent of Police Arthur Bryant leapt to his feet and turned to face the group. His florid face was pink and slightly mottled and covered in a fine patina of sweat which he attempted to wipe away with a sodden handkerchief. His regulation khaki shirt had dark sweat rings under both arms and a dark patch in the centre of his back. Taking his time he looked round the little group, his hard blue eyes making contact with most of them. It annoyed him that after all these years the military still seemed to think of the New Villages as a new idea, when the success of the initiative had been clear as far back as 1953.

‘Gentlemen, we believe that having ownership of a property lease has turned a lot of the *Min Yuen* away from direct support of the Communist cause. They have realised that they now have a personal stake in the country, a stake that will be there for them after independence; more importantly it’s a stake that they can hand down to their children. Also, for the first time, many of them are part of an organised community, with medical care and the ability to send their children to school. So not only have the New Villages made it well-nigh impossible for the *Min Yuen* to supply the needs of the bandits in the jungle, they have also, in the words of General Templer, won over the *hearts and minds* of former communist sympathisers, thereby significantly depleting the ranks of the *Min Yuen*.’

He paused, thinking of one particular former communist who he hoped to be seeing again that night. In fact it was hard to keep Pek Leng out of his thoughts. Since they had become lovers early in the year, the girl had captivated him, delighting him with her vibrant energy and passion for life. He continued:

‘Due to the success of the hearts and minds campaign the CTs are losing a lot of their numbers to desertion, and increasing numbers of them are turning in their mates to claim the reward. Yesterday we got Siu Lam Peng from the Johore Regiment; his body was brought out of the jungle by the two men who were meant to protect him. Instead they killed him and brought the body to the Ayer Hitam police station.’

A rumble of appreciation greeted this news.

‘On top of the first RAF bombing raid near Kluang, which took out Goh Peng Tun and most of his Unit in February last year, this is a great success and has probably taken most of the offensive spirit out of the bandits in Johore.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Henry Innes, nodding his narrow face vigorously and keen to get back on stage, ‘without their CO, and with troop levels at well under 50 per cent of their original strength, the CTs in Johore are hardly a viable force anymore and we’ll hopefully soon be able to announce some more White Areas.’

‘Let’s not be too hasty,’ said Arthur, slightly peeved at the interruption, ‘because after failing in his attempt to cut a deal with us, we believe that Chin Peng is consolidating his remaining forces towards the Perak area, and strengthening his bases across the Thai border. He’s well aware that Trengganu has just been declared as the first all-white state, and that this is the first month since 1948 that the CTs haven’t killed anyoneyet! Our sources indicate that he is now trying to activate another of the jungle supply dumps, which were put down to help the CTs when they were fighting with us against the Japs, so that his units can get badly needed rations and ammunition.’

‘Which brings us to the point of this morning’s briefing,’ the Brigadier announced. ‘Thank you Arthur, you can sit down now. Henry?’

Innes stood back up. ‘We’re here this morning to initiate an operation that will follow up on a recent piece of intelligence. Arthur’s lot have been told by a reliable informant, that the wartime supply dump is located close to Kuala Tahan.’

‘Where the hell’s that?’ Richard Nugent, the tall dark-haired commanding officer of the Scottish Border Regiment, was getting restless as he had an O Group with his company commanders in just over an hour and wanted to get back to Tac HQ at Yong Peng.

‘It’s on the Sungei Tembeling Sir, the smaller river which runs into the Pahang River north of the Jerantut crossing.’

‘But that’s *miles* out of our area!’

‘Steady Richard,’ the Brigadier detected the man’s irritation, ‘all will be clear in a second. Carry on Henry.’

‘Yes sir. The dump is located in the area of 28 Brigade which is why young Tom Packer is with us. Tom, could you introduce yourself please.’

The small fair-haired Captain got up, not sure if his regimental nickname of Tom Thumb had got as far as 63 Brigade. At five foot five inches tall, he was only just past the regulation height. Fit and pugnacious, he had found that serving with Gurkhas made his small stature less noticeable; the average height of a Nepalese recruit wasn’t much higher than his own. Moving into a grouping of British troops, however, always made him hugely self-conscious of his height.

‘Thank you Sir. Good afternoon gentlemen, I command the Recce platoon of the Chomrong Rifles based in Suvla Lines, Ipoh. Over the past few months we’ve done a fair bit of patrolling to the East of the main mountain range in the area of the Cameron Highlands. I have been assigned to work with 63 Brigade for this Operation and am down here with my Sergeant and eight men.’

‘Thanks Tom,’ said Innes, his eyes scanning the group. ‘Tom and his men have a good working knowledge of the jungle in the area of interest. Since the SAS ceased operations in the area a few months ago, they have taken over their patch so to speak.’

‘But what’s it got to do with the Borderers?’ Nugent spat out, his tanned face tense with obvious irritation; ‘Why am *I* here?’

‘Because the CTs in question come from *your* area Richard,’ snapped the Brigadier, ‘and because we believe that they will be moving from there to the dump area, as part of an eventual transit to Perak. Captain Gordon will be your contribution to the operation. He has been working closely with Special Branch in Johore and will be responsible for Police Military liaison and intelligence sharing.’

Alick’s head jerked up. He had been observing the chick-chack as it watched a fly approach. The hapless insect moved closer and closer to the motionless lizard until, in a blur of movement, the lizard’s tongue shot out and the fly disappeared.

The Brigadier smiled, noticing the young officer’s start. ‘Now Henry let’s have your detailed brief please, as Richard needs to be off soon.’

Arthur Bryant sat quietly fuming. He was the only remaining special branch officer who had been trained at 101 STS in Singapore before the Japanese invasion. He had served with the Force 136 stay behind parties in the jungle during the War and had actually fought alongside the Communists. He knew Chin Peng personally, as well as several of his key officers. While the CTs had committed terrible atrocities, primarily against Chinese people, he understood that they were mostly deliberate acts designed to intimidate the population, and to keep their supply lines open. He generally didn’t like the legions of former British officers of the Palestine Police, who had joined the Malayan Police since the War. He also had little time for most Army Officers, particularly the pompous ones who looked down on the Police as civilians in uniform and did not properly understand the country or its people. 49 years old he was getting near his pension, really loved Malaya, and had many local friends. Pek Leng drifted back into his thoughts and he realised that, if this briefing didn’t go on too much longer, he might be able to see her tonight.

Innes finished unrolling a marked map, pinned it to the big board mounted on the wall in front of them, and began the brief:

‘Gentlemen, Arthur’s lot have got information from an informant that the supply dump in the King George V National Park, in the general area of Kuala Tahan, will be activated by the CTs a week today, on Saturday 31st August. Rather ironically that is of course Independence Day! It’s not one of the dumps put down by Spencer Chapman’s men in Force 136, but is a dump that we believe the Communists put together themselves from equipment abandoned by our troops in the wartime retreat from the Slim River. That’s most likely why it hasn’t been pilfered yet, the locals know what the CTs would do to the culprits. Because it’s a communist dump we don’t have a precise grid reference, and indeed had no idea of its general location until Arthur’s lot got that from their sources. Just before the end of this month one of their units, led by Hor Too one of Chin Peng’s inner circle, will move into the dump area and construct a temporary camp. They are from the Johore regiment and have been retreating north since we bombed them out of their camp a few weeks ago.

Operation Cobble has been a great success since it was launched in January; as you know its purpose is to deny food to the CTs and we have been getting good results here in Johore. Yesterday I was at a meeting of the Segamat District War Executive Committee, which reports into the State War Executive Committee, and we really do seem to have the backing of most of the Planters and communities in the area.’ He pointed to the map:

‘Since we have now created a White Corridor running from Pahang on the east coast to Selangor on the west, the CTs in the south that we are starving out are now effectively cut-off from those in the north. Therefore to move north, they’ll need to split into small groups to cross the “White” strip. We’ve been led to understand that this new camp will be one of the RV points where they’ll be able to re-group, re-arm and get some rest before going on the offensive in Perak, or before heading for the Thai border. Our mission is to take them out, and to destroy the camp and supply dump.’

‘Whose mission?’ interrupted Nugent.

‘It’s a Brigade Operation Richard,’ the Brigadier said firmly..... ‘Henry?’

‘Yes Sir, the Operation will be 28 Brigade led, with Arthur tagging along to represent Johore Special Branch. It will be a Gurkha fighting patrol commanded by Captain Packer, with Captain Gordon going along to represent 63 Brigade Intelligence, and to act as link with Special Branch. It will be a tight patrol, as insertion will be by helicopter, so there’ll be nine Gurkhas, plus Captain Packer and you two. The maximum number of fully laden pax for the

Whirlwind is officially ten, but due to climatic restrictions the Crabs will only take six, and so we'll need two aircraft.'

'That's not a lot of men! How big is the CT group likely to be?'

'We think 14 Jim,' rasped Innes, turning to address Major James Willingdon-Smythe, the slim, dapper Brigade Chief of Staff. 'In any event we'll have the advantage of surprise, and the CTs will be knackered after so long in the jungle.'

Silence greeted this statement, as the men digested it, several frowning and shaking their heads. Many of them knew from bitter experience that the CTs could endure terrible hardships, yet still remain effective fighters. The humid atmosphere was becoming unbearable and the fan above them was merely pushing the moist air around, hardly providing any relief. The monsoon season was in full swing and the room had got darker and darker as the clouds gathered, with thunder rumbling from the hills and occasional flickers of lightning. Suddenly there was an almighty crash as a tropical downpour started. The nearly vertical rain drops hit the tin roof of the building like bullets and the noise was deafening.

'Thank God for that,' said the Brigadier loudly, 'that will take the heaviness out of the air for a while.' The smell of rain hitting hot surfaces filled the room and the pressure eased slightly.

'Sir, I'd like to ask the DSP to give us his latest take on the CTs?' shouted Innes, and the Brigadier nodded his assent.

Arthur stood up again, taking a deep breath:

'Our latest estimates indicate that there are now just over 2,000 active CTs left in Malaya, 1,000 to the north of the White Corridor and 500 here in Johore, a lot of them in our area. The rest are scattered in small groups across the country. This is down from nearly 12,000 at the peak of the troubles. Chin Peng is currently believed to be in Thailand coming to terms with the fact that in a couple of weeks his cause will have collapsed. The whole point of the Communist cause is to shove us British imperialists out of Malaya. Well in less than a week our administration will have gone anyway and the Tunku will have formed the first independent government of the Federation of Malaya; so instead of being so-called freedom fighters the CTs will, at a stroke, have become outlaws in their own Malayan state!'

A rumble of laughter echoed around the room, suddenly becoming louder as the rain ceased its incessant drumming.

'Hor Too is one of the war veterans and I worked alongside him for a short time in '44; he's tough, canny and ruthless. He'll be needing all of those qualities right now because we believe what's left of his Platoon, probably less than 15 men, are starving and demoralised by

the fact that they've nearly lost the fight. I've also heard that Ah Sim, another war veteran trained by 101 STS, may be working with Hor; she's small, can change her appearance easily, and appears deceptively docile. Her main role for the past couple of years has been acting as a mobile link for what's left of the *Min Yuen* in Johore and Negri Sembilan. She's a key member of Chin Peng's inner circle. I can't disclose my informant, but I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of the information about next Saturday.'

'Which gives you under a week to get ready,' the Brigadier added briskly. 'Thank you Arthur. Henry, please brief the mission!'

Innes stood back up and turned to face them, glancing down at his notebook.

'Gentlemen, your mission is to search for and destroy both the CT unit and the supply dump. You'll deploy from here at 0830 hours on Thursday 29th August. The helicopters will drop you around 1030 hours at Gedung Camp; it's a small jungle outpost and radio relay station in the mountains north west of Kuala Tahan. You will have rations for eight days and will either extract by helicopter from the same location, or go out by river, the Sungei Tembeling I believe it is. Tom, I'll give you detailed grid references for the known locations after the briefing. Oh yes, and you'll pick up an Abo guide at the drop-off point. Any questions?'

'Yes Sir,' said Alick, 'won't insertion by helicopter give the game away? The CTs will surely hear them and know that something's up in their area?'

'Good question!' responded Innes. 'Gedung Camp was set up by the SAS as an outpost to one of their jungle forts when they were actively trying to win over the Abo's by protecting them from the CTs. The SAS pulled out several months ago but the camp is still manned by the Gurkha Signals; due to its height it is an excellent radio relay station as it's on a sharp ridge able to get signals from both sides of the main range. They get re-supplied by helicopter two or three times a week; you'll be going in at the routine time so it's perfect cover for you.'

'What's their strength Sir?' interjected Tom.

'A Sergeant and eight men: They work three shifts; one is always on sentry duty, another is working the radio and the third is on general duties.'

'I assume that we'll be resupplied from the air as normal, if we are out for more than four days?' Alick immediately regretted asking such an obvious question.

'Of course!' said Innes making a visible effort to stay patient. There was a pregnant pause and then Tom spoke again.

'We are inserting by helicopter and the distances involved must be at maximum range, particularly with such a heavy payload? I assume that there will be a re-fuelling stop on the way north, and again on extraction.'

‘That’s right. The final decision on location will be up to the Pilots as usual, but we expect you to re-fuel at Fort Iskander each way. It’s an isolated post of the Police Field Force located in the deep jungle about 22 miles to the north west of Bahau, just past the border between Negri Sembilan and Pahang. It’s commanded by Police Lieutenant Peter Choi whose main task is to liaise with and protect the *Semelan* aborigines and, yes, we have already checked that there will be sufficient extra fuel drums.’ Innes turned to look at the Brigadier.

‘Any more questions Gentlemen?’ inquired the Brigadier, getting to his feet and turning to face them all. The room was silent.

‘Then I would like to wish you the very best of luck. You’ll see in Malaysian Independence Day, *Hari Merdeka* I think they’re calling it, in the deep jungle. In a way I’m quite envious, I’ll be stuck at the bally stadium!’ He paused, his kindly face suddenly serious. ‘And it goes without saying, but take good care of yourselves and your men. I know from experience that, even with the best intelligence, things can quickly go horribly wrong. You’ll be on your own, right at the limits of the range of our helicopters, facing one of the most dangerous commanders that the CTs have, in one of the remotest parts of the Malayan rain forest.....and he is desperate, angry and trying to escape our net.....be aware that the hunter can quite easily become the hunted, and that while you might think the jungle is neutral.....the bandits know it a lot better than you do!’

Once the Brigadier had left, closely followed by Lieutenant Colonel Nugent, and Tom had obtained the final map coordinates and timings from Innes, the room soon emptied until just Alick, Tom and Arthur were left. They discussed a few practicalities before Tom gave a derisive snort

‘I think I’d rather be quaffing gin and tonics at the *Merdeka* celebrations, than scraping leeches off my legs and arse in the *ulu*. What are you guys up to now?’

‘I’m heading back to our Tac HQ at Yong Peng,’ answered Alick, ‘and I’ll be back here tomorrow night to start the final preparation with you.’

‘I’m going back to Segamat,’ said Arthur, knowing that instead he would be in Kampong Tengah that evening.

‘Well cheers chaps,’ Tom went on, ‘my men get here tomorrow and I’ll start the build-up training. Can we have a planning meeting on Tuesday morning?’

The other two nodded as they headed for the door.

Chapter 2

25th August 1957 - Sunday

Kampong Tengah, near Segamat, Johore

The girl moved slightly to check her watch, her almond shaped brown eyes struggling to focus in the dark room. Noting the time she shook the man next to her.

‘Arthur, Arthur, you wake up now!’

‘Huh?’ Arthur rolled over and became entangled in the mosquito net. ‘What time is it?’

‘Six thirty in morning. You be late if no leave soon.’

His eyes focussing, Arthur held his gaze on her, marvelling at her beauty first thing in the morning; her dark sloe eyes, her high cheekbones and her tanned and smooth skin. He loved her long, straight black hair and the way that it was cut into a fringe at the front; yet fell away over her shoulders. Her figure was slim, almost like a boy’s, a comparison soon dispelled by her pert little breasts and slim very feminine legs.

‘What you look at Arthur?’ she giggled, ‘you naughty man!’

Arthur still couldn’t quite fathom what she saw in him; at 32 she was nearly 17 years his junior.

‘I get you breakfast lah,’ she said as she pulled on a long shirt and moved to the kitchen area of the hut.

Arthur quickly put on a vest and his khaki slacks, and headed to the bathroom to shave. Looking in the mirror he frowned, noticing again the increasing number of grey streaks in his thick red hair. As he lathered his face and began to scrape, the appetizing smell of bacon frying wafted through the door; he’d shown Pek Leng how he loved his breakfast and she now prepared it beautifully.

‘Pek Leng, I’m off on an Operation on Wednesday and will be away for at least a week.....’

‘Where you go Arthur?’

‘Can’t tell you darling, but I can tell you I’m getting there by helicopter!’

‘Helicopter, wahvery exciting, yes?’

‘Great fun!’ he agreed.

‘You go jangal again?’ she asked, ‘catch CTs?’

‘Yes one more time, but things are quietening down now. Soon the whole of Johore will be White, just like this village.’

‘Very good - you eat now, keep strong lah.’

Having finished in the bathroom Arthur sat down at the small table. He wolfed down the bacon sandwiches, swigging a cup of strong black coffee as the girl curled up on a chair opposite him and watched him with a mischievous expression.

‘What is it?’ he asked, ‘you look like the cat that got the double cream!’

Not understanding the expression Pek Leng just giggled.

‘You want good time, Arthur?’

‘Not now you insatiable woman,’ smiled Arthur, ‘but last night was fantastic. Could you get my stuff while I finish this? I’ve got to dash.’

Happily the girl went to the bedroom and gathered together Arthur’s hat, his holster and belt, and his briefcase.

‘Here everything for you Arthur’ she said, placing them by the door.

‘Thanks darling.’

Buckling on his belt and holster, Arthur grabbed his hat and case, and gave her a quick kiss as he headed for the door.

‘If I don’t see you before, I’ll see you next week.’

Leaving the hut he got into his car and drove slowly to the gate of the village. Kampong Tengah was a New Village, or at least the Chinese part was. It had been built a few years previously as part of the Briggs Plan to re-house Chinese squatters away from the jungle fringes and the clutches of the Communist terrorists. The Chinese village, known locally as “50 Ekar” after the size of the overall plot, was completely surrounded by a wire mesh fence and the only gate, always open during daylight hours and controlled by a barrier, was manned by two members of the Home Guard, one Chinese and one Malay.

‘Morning chaps!’ said Arthur cheerfully as he slowed down at the gate.

‘Good morning Sir!’ they both said in unison, used to his frequent visits, and raising the barrier to let his vehicle pass.

‘Keep up the good work!’ he shouted as he passed through the gate, turned right, and drove off in the direction of Segamat.

Shortly afterwards the girl appeared walking unhurriedly towards the gate, her lithe form clearly noticeable underneath the loose trousers and blouse. Both men pretended not to stare.

'*Selamat pagi* Pek Leng,' called out Ahmed the Malay home guard member, 'where you go now?'

She smiled sweetly: 'You always asking Ahmed, you know I always go have tea at Ming Sui's shop.' She glided past them and headed off up the road to the row of Shop Houses, her retreating form followed by both sets of eyes.

Wiping away a tear she tried unsuccessfully to stifle a sob. Soon the person she loved most in the world would be disappearing back into the jungle, and great danger. While she fully understood the reasons, she still wished that the fighting would stop and that they could all live normal lives, or what she dreamed normal lives could be like. She had lost her parents to the Japanese in 1943 during a reprisal for Communist guerrilla actions in Negri-Sembilan, along with many of her extended family. She was spared because the Japanese soldiers had found her attractive and one of the Indian soldiers, taking pity on her, had also argued her case. Shortly afterwards she was forced to work as a sex slave for the Japanese. One day in early 1945, as she was being driven in a convoy from one Japanese camp to another, it had been ambushed by the communists. Having fallen out of the lorry, and lying stunned on the ground, she remembered so well the kind voice telling her that she would be okay now, safe and away from the Japanese.

Wiping her eyes, she stepped out of the sun into the shade of the covered pavement, and entered the busy Tea Shop.

'Good morning Ah Loh,' she said to the hard faced elderly Lady behind the counter, 'where Ming Siu?'

'He in back room!' she sniffed in reply.

Smiling gracefully Pek Leng walked past the tables, most of which were occupied, and pushed through the strings of beads that curtained off the kitchen and back area of the shop from the customers. To the left, sitting at a small table, she saw Ming Siu whose kindly face broke into a smile as he saw her.

'Good morning Pek Leng, how are you?' he asked.

'Okay lah,' she replied, 'has he been yet?'

'No, not yet. Maybe soon hah?'

'Okay, here is latest news,' she said quietly, joining him at the table. He pulled a small notebook out of his apron pocket and began jotting down some of what she was saying. Her voice was so low that they could both clearly hear some of the conversations from the other

room, and the frequent shriek of Ah Loh's voice, either haranguing customers or yelling to her helper for more clean cups.

* * *

Ayer Hitam, Johore

Ah Sim sat waiting at the roadside hawker stall, sipping her jasmine tea. The bustling strip of shops and stalls was well positioned on a major road junction. The heady fragrance of the tea delighted her and was a pleasant contrast to what she was able to consume in the jungle. Having just turned 40 she was beginning to notice the first signs of age, and her joints ached in a way that she had never felt in her youth. In her twenties she had drawn the eye of Chin Peng when he was recruiting from King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore. A trainee doctor, she had quickly been converted to the ways of the Communist Party and its manifesto, and passionately believed in a Malaya freed from foreign rule. As the war developed she joined the Party, gave up her studies when the Japanese landed at Kota Bahru, and was trained as a wireless operator by the British in Singapore at their special training school, 101 STS. After that she became a member of one of the initial Force 136 stay-behind parties, before joining the Communist patrol in north Johore. She quickly rose through the Communist ranks to become a member of the Politburo, as Chin Peng noticed how easily she was able to move around the country during the Japanese occupation without attracting attention or arousing suspicion. At five feet two inches tall, with a slight frame and a flat chest, her plain looks and apparent meek disposition meant that most people walked past her without giving her a second glance. She was also adept at disguise.

At the end of the war she was one of the veterans that had accompanied Chin Peng to London to take part in the Victory parade, and she had been chosen to be one of the select few that accompanied him to the Palace when he was awarded his MBE. She had re-started her medical studies in 1946, but had given them up again in 1948 when the current struggle against the British had started. A trusted member of the inner circle, she had been responsible for maintaining relationships with the *Min Yuen*, the vast army of Communist sympathisers who acted in support of the fighters in the jungle. The construction of the New Villages had made her role harder and harder, and the threat of being betrayed by an informer was ever present. As the British continued to expand and strengthen their White Areas, Ah Sim could see that the struggle was lost; yet the fact that *Merdeka* was imminent filled her heart with joy. She found

herself smiling at the thought. In September 1952 she, along with 60 per cent of the Chinese in Malaya, had become a Malayan citizen under the new citizenship code; now with *Merdeka*, she was going to be a citizen of the new independent Malaya. Would this have happened without their struggle? Ah Sim did not think so.

Patiently she sat waiting for Ming Tee. One of the few active *Min Yuen* members left in the Police, he was going to update her on the latest developments, hopefully giving her the final pieces of information that she needed.

A military convoy went past, the rows of long-nosed soldiers in the back of the Lorries looking mournfully at the shops as they passed. The risk of ambush meant that they were denied canvas sides on their vehicles, so they were permanently exposed to the heat, dust and rain. One of the smaller vehicles pulled over at her stall and a young officer got out. She noticed he was a dark-haired Captain in the Scottish Border Regiment; around six feet tall and fit and well built. He stepped onto the rickety Veranda, tripped and stumbled before regaining his balance. Looking around he caught her eye, and smiled sheepishly. Stumping past he ordered a cold drink and knocked it straight back, before vaulting back into his vehicle and heading off towards Yong Peng. She watched him disappear, wondering what role he held in the Regiment.

‘Ah Sim, how are you?’ said Ming Tee, who had come up behind her, out of uniform and dressed in an open-necked shirt and slacks.

‘I’m fine thank you,’ she replied before pouring him a cup of tea and sitting back to listen to his report.

* * *

Scottish Border Regiment Officers Mess, Yong Peng, Johore

Alick tossed and turned on his canvas camp bed feeling the oppression of the humidity and irritation that, once again, several mosquitoes appeared to have got inside the mosquito net for a midnight feast.

It didn’t seem like three months ago that he had last stood on the platform at Errol Station, saying goodbye to Sally: The sun had been shining on a fine clear day, and a gentle west wind had kept blowing her fair hair into her eyes, eyes that had glistened with tears; the fertile flat land of the Carse of Gowrie surrounded them and, in the distance, the Sidlaw Hills were in

perfect focus, houses and outbuildings standing out on their slopes between the greens and the browns. The fresh wind carried various smells with it; the scent of flowers from the Station Master's garden, mixed with the rougher odours of the livestock in a couple of the nearby fields, and the ever-present railway smell, a mixture of soot and metal rising from the steel tracks.

It had been a great leave yet, like all leaves, it had been like living in a bubble: the joyful homecoming, the wonderful middle period, and then the poignant final week as the last day loomed. Since joining the Army straight from school in 1947, and apart from the first couple of years, he had not spent more than a few weeks at a time in Scotland. After officer training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, he'd joined his regiment as a raw Platoon Commander in C Company. The Scottish Border Regiment was then stationed at Redford Barracks in Edinburgh and he'd constantly been in awe of the officers and soldiers who had served with the Regiment during the war.

Life then had been a halcyon period of parties, balls and social outings, and making the best of all that Edinburgh had to offer. A highpoint was the provision of the King's Guard at Balmoral, a duty that Bill McLetchie, C Company Commander, had taken very seriously indeed. Their lives were increasingly dominated by drill practice and in ensuring that their turnout was immaculate; yet no one seemed to mind as the King and Queen held a special place in the affections of the Jocks, and there was always the chance of a smile from one of the Princesses.

Having grown up in the Carse of Gowrie, Alick was not a natural fit for the Scottish Border Regiment and the general opinion was that he should have joined the Perthshire Regiment. Yet his mother's family, the Lawsons, farmed in Berwickshire and over the years several of the men had served with distinction in the Borderers. As his father came of sea-faring stock, it was his mother's connections that had helped Alick to secure his Commission. He clearly remembered the interview at the historic Barracks in Berwick-upon-Tweed. The then Colonel of the Regiment was General Sir George Walker, who had recently retired after a career that spanned both world wars, as well as a number of colonial interludes.

'Now then Gordon, tell me why you want to be a Borderer?' the General had asked, leaning back in a large wooden chair, and framed by the sash window behind him which offered an excellent view of the old fortifications and the clear blue sea beyond.

'Well sir, all my life I've wanted to be a soldier,' stammered the young Alick, 'and my family on my mother's side have always served with the Borderers. Her maiden name is Lawson.'

The General had said nothing, puffing deeply on his pipe and keeping Alick transfixed with an unblinking stare. He eventually broke the silence.

‘Lawson? Lawson?are you related to Peter Lawson?’ demanded the General, waving his pipe in the air.

‘Yes sir, he’s my grandfather,’ Alick had replied.

‘Splendid chap. Served with him in the Twenties in Ireland, Egypt and Hong Kong. Those were the days. Capital chap, life and soul of the party!’

Another silence had then ensued while the General reflected on his memories.

‘Where did you go to school, Gordon?’

‘The High School in Dundee,’ Alick had answered.

‘Dundee High..... Good school academically and good at rugby! Angus Guthrie went there and he was one of the best Company Commanders in the Seventh Battaliongot decorated at Arnhem. One of my Uncles on the maternal side went there too. Are *you* good at rugby Gordon?’

‘Well sir, I played in the First XV during my last year.....’

‘Capital, capital,’ exclaimed the General, ‘you’ll do Gordon, you’ll do!’

And that had been that. Alick was accepted for the Regiment.

During the time in Edinburgh he got to know his platoon, a mixture of hardnosed war veterans and young new national service recruits. Some of the veterans were still waiting to be demobilised and the firm, steady and reliable hand of his Platoon Sergeant, Bill Duthie, had been of immense value in helping him to feel his way into his role and responsibilities. Then in 1949 the battalion was posted to Hong Kong and Alick’s life changed forever.

The wonder of that sea voyage on the troopship had captivated him, and he began to understand why his father’s calling had been the sea; the lumpy crossing of the Bay of Biscay, the dramatic sweep past Gibraltar, and the heavenly summer passage through the Mediterranean. An engine fault had necessitated an unplanned stop in Malta and a rugby match against one of the Navy’s teams was quickly arranged. As a result Alick got a short leave pass and was able to quickly explore the dramatic city of Valletta. Though severely bomb damaged the city still proudly displayed its glories; the stately beauty of the main buildings constructed by the Knights of Saint John, the fantastic fortifications, now pock-marked by shrapnel and bullets from the war, and the lovely Barracca gardens with their stunning views.

From Malta the ship had passed Alexandria at night, before transiting the Suez Canal. It had been a weird experience standing on the deck of an Ocean Liner while sailing through sand dunes.

As the ship neared the Equator, the fierce heat of the Middle East gradually gave way to the balmy and humid heat of the Pacific. Singapore passed in a blur of activity: The Colonel and some of the more senior officers were whisked ashore for a short introduction to the top brass at Headquarters Far East Land Forces in Fort Canning and other passengers, for whom Singapore was the final destination, disembarked. Nobody else got shore leave and the junior officers had quite a job keeping the troops happy, fit and drilled.

In late August, on arrival in Hong Kong, the Battalion had occupied Sham Shui Po Camp and quickly settled into a routine that was largely social. For the officers it had revolved around the stalwart colonial institutions of the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, the Cricket Club, and the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club on the Island; and the United Services Recreation Club and the Peninsula Hotel Kowloon-side. Despite the hardships many of the civilian population had endured during the Japanese occupation, there was a real feeling of vibrancy in the community, a community that was rapidly swelling due to the major influx of people from Shanghai. The Communist advance had driven the Nationalists towards the coast and onto the island of Formosa, or Taiwan as many were now calling it, creating a flood of refugees. Many of these were ending up in Hong Kong, constructing vast shanty townships close to the built-up areas on the main land.

The Battalion worked hard, conducting patrols in the hills of the New Territories and along the border. It had a designated sector to defend in the event of a Chinese attack, and was responsible for maintaining the trenches and look-out positions. The hills reminded Alick of parts of Perthshire, particularly in the higher glens or valleys until suddenly, cresting over the summit of a ridge, the blue waters of the South China sea, dotted with small islands and criss-crossed by sailing and motorized junks of different shapes and sizes, would appear to dispel the illusion.

There was a wonder too in stumbling across small walled villages that were only accessible by footpath or by sea. The simple terraced houses had a single long room with partitions on the ground floor. A wooden sleeping platform was reached either by ladder, or by lovingly crafted step chests. The centre of the community was normally a temple, from which the aromatic smells of joss sticks and other incense would waft lazily in the humid air. Leaving a village behind, the coastal track would plunge into sub-tropical woodland and the soldier at the front of each group, the Point Man, quickly learnt to spot the webs of wood spiders. These spiders had a black and yellow torso, about the size of a man's thumb, with legs up to six inches long and they liked to spin their webs across the path at approximately head height. Swinging round a

sharp bend the Point Man would often end up with web and spider wrapped around his face and the tactic of holding a rifle barrel up in front of one's face was quickly adopted.

Alick tracked the developing situation on the Korean Peninsula through the pages of the South China Morning Post: The Chinese Communist Army had reached the Korean Border and was now actively working with sympathisers in the part of the country north of the 48th parallel. War broke out suddenly on 25th June 1950 and troops from North Korea invaded the South. After being driven right back to Pusan, and with American help, the forces from South Korea went on the offensive and drove the Northern Army back to the border with China. This was too much for the Chinese to swallow and so Chinese troops joined the fight. Commonwealth troops joined the Americans and full scale war ensued. In December the Regiment was placed on a high state of readiness and embarkation orders were received on 9th April 1951. Two weeks later they were disembarking at Inchon!

That same day they went into action, moving through Seoul in vehicles to a forward area just south of the 38th Parallel. Five days later Alick was hit in the back and legs by shrapnel from a mortar shell and taken out of the line. His injuries were extensive and, after evacuation to a hospital ship and several months of convalescence at the British Military Hospital in Hong Kong, he was shipped back home for an extended sick leave before being placed on light duties at the Regimental Depot in Berwick.

It was there that he had met Sally. One sunny spring day in 1952 he'd been walking down Marygate when a young woman coming the other way had stumbled, accidentally dropping some groceries from her basket. Instinctively Alick had stopped to help her pick them up and, as she thanked him, she had blushed engagingly her blue eyes shining. Before he knew what he was doing, he had blurted out that there was a dinner dance for the officers at the Depot coming up the following week and had asked if she would be interested in going with him?

Looking at the debonair young Officer, smart in his tartan trews and khaki jacket, Sally's heart had flipped as she accepted.

Their relationship swiftly blossomed so that Alick often found himself wondering as to whether or not he should propose to her. The old Indian army adage kept coming to his mind: *'Colonels must marry, Majors should marry, Captains may marry and Subalterns may not marry.'*

As a 23 year old Lieutenant Alick was unsure whether or not he would get the blessing of his regiment, and had held himself back. They had a great social life for the rest of the year, maximising the time that they were able to spend together.

The Battalion returned from the Far East in time for Christmas 1952 and, after a well-earned leave, reformed and moved to Ballykinlar in Northern Ireland. There Alick re-joined them in early 1953, taking over command of a Platoon in B Company. From that time he became a well-known passenger on the Ferry from Belfast to Stranraer, making regular trips to meet Sally on free weekends. She also came to visit him on several occasions and they enjoyed exploring Belfast and the dramatic coastline around the Lecale peninsula.

Then everything changed. In January 1955, at the age of 26, Alick was promoted to Captain and took on a new role as Regimental Intelligence Officer or IO. Almost immediately he was caught up in a planning process that led, on 25th August 1955, to the departure of the Battalion from Northern Ireland to Singapore. Earlier that month he had said goodbye to Sally on a final visit to Berwick. It had not been easy!

On arrival in Singapore the Battalion moved into Selarang Barracks and, after an initial warm up period as Internal Security Battalion, was soon deployed up-country into the Malayan jungle, taking up the fight against the Communists. Alick's life was hectic and he spent most of his time shuttling around between Brigade Headquarters, Tac HQ, the Company locations and Police Special Branch. From time to time he accompanied jungle patrols on specific tasks, often with a Police Liaison Officer.

In January 1957, after 18 months without a break, Alick was sent back to Scotland on home leave. He spent it at the family farm close to Inchtute and, as often as she could, Sally came up from Edinburgh, where she was now working as a secretary for a firm of Solicitors. On one late afternoon walk, as they stopped at the picturesque ruin of a small Church to admire the view and the setting sun, Alick had finally asked her to marry him. To his surprise she had hesitated, breaking down in tears.

When he had asked why she was so upset, she had replied that it was hard trying to live a normal life in Edinburgh with her man half a world away. Although she had eventually accepted, Alick detected that she had changed in some way since her move to the capital city, but was unable to pin point exactly what it was.

In any event their distant relationship seemed to have endured, despite the almost two years of separation, and Sally's letters had certainly been a great source of comfort to him during tough times in the jungle. The wedding date was now set for 15th December 1958, a few months after the battalion's planned return from Singapore.

And then his leave was over, the final few minutes rushing by until a plume of smoke in the direction of Longforgan indicated the imminent arrival of the Perth bound train.

‘Well Sal, this is it again,’ he had struggled manfully, as she threw herself into his arms and gave him a long wet kiss, flavoured with her tears.

‘Please be careful Alick,’ she had begged, ‘don’t let anything happen to you now.’

As if in slow motion the train arrived at the platform and a few people got off. Alick threw his kit bag into one of the compartments and turned to give her a last hug as the seconds ticked away. This time he could not hold back the tears. As the train pulled away from the station, he stuck his head out of the window of the compartment and watched her lonely waving figure grow smaller and smaller, until a slight bend in the track hid her from view.

Suddenly aware that he had just been bitten Alick smote the last of the mosquitoes that had been whining in his ear and, holding on to that image of Sally’s face, finally fell asleep.

Chapter 3

26th August 1957 - Monday

Rifle Range, Burma Camp, Johore

‘Bloody well done MB!’ Squinting through his binoculars, Tom Packer noted the tight grouping on the target achieved at almost 200 yards: the little round holes where the bullets had penetrated the paper were clearly visible and Tom guessed that the group was less than three inches in diameter. Manbahadur Gurung was one of the best shots in the Brigade and a qualified sniper. Tom turned to the man at his side

‘What do you think KK?’

‘Very good Sahib,’ said Sergeant Krishna Kumar Pun, known to the regiment as KK Pun.

‘Yes *thulo syavash*, really well done MB!’ Tom continued. ‘Carry on Sergeant!’

‘Patrol look to your front! Watch and shoot! Watch and shoot!’ bellowed KK, and the eight men on the Firing Point stiffened and waited intently. As targets began appearing at various ranges, the crackle of small arms fire rippled around them.

Tom looked at his men and tried to keep his concerns at bay. A patrol of 12 men, the ten of them plus Alick and Arthur, was cutting things fine in the *ulu*. They’d have to move in three groups of four. Their firepower was the two Bren guns, six SLRs, his M2 Carbine, and one of the new SMGs, held by his wireless operator Lalbahadur Gurung. He assumed that Alick and Arthur would also be carrying SMGs. For the Ambush there would be a killing group of six men, including the Bren gunners and cut-off parties of just two men each. This left just two men in support to secure the withdrawal route. It was tight!

Tom loved working with Gurkhas and had a slight disdain for the British regiments, particularly for national servicemen. He loved the unflappable nature of the Nepalese, as well as their unflinching sense of humour, and their dogged determination to achieve whatever task they were given.

‘Cease firing! Cease firing!’ yelled KK, and the soldiers on the Firing Point cleared their weapons and held them open for inspection.

Tom trotted along checking each one and shouting ‘Clear!’ before moving onto the next. Once they had all been checked, he watched the Gurkhas moving off down the range to examine their targets, small tough men in Jungle Green, each wearing his floppy jungle hat slightly differently; some had one side up, some the other, and some had the front raised, swearing that it gave them a clearer field of high-level vision when checking the trees ahead for snipers. Wearily he raised his hand and brushed the sweat out of his eyes.

‘Bloody monsoon,’ he thought, hating the humidity and then with a sigh he followed them down the range.

* * *

Shop House, Yong Peng, Johore

Ah Sim smoothed down her skirt and adjusted her shirt. She looked in the mirror, liking the way her thick-rimmed glasses made her look studious and severe. They were not sighted as she still had near perfect vision and Wing Poon, the local optician, had made them with clear glass lenses to aid her disguise. Satisfied with her appearance, she left the bathroom and went to find Aunty Ma in the kitchen.

‘Aunty, thank you again for your help.’

‘No need lah.’

Nearly 70 years old, Huang Joo Ma was one of the founder members of the *Min Yuen* and like a mother to Ah Sim. Her white hair was always plaited into two pigtaileds and her lined face was hard, but caring.

‘Go quickly, he waiting for you!’ she chided. ‘He take big risk, you take care huh?’

‘See you later Aunty,’ said Ah Sim, leaving the shop house by the front door.

Outside Henry Pang was waiting in his old Hillman van. A supplier of imported goods to Chinese shops across the south and central parts of the country, Henry had the required permits to travel with ease through checkpoints. Ah Sim’s cover was that she was assisting him to sell a new washing powder to sceptical store owners. They would stop at various locations before Jerantut, their final destination.

There Ah Sim would change at a *Min Yuen* house, before heading off up-river to meet Hor Too in the jungle near Kuala Tahan. She had committed the most recent intelligence from

Ming Tee to memory and found it difficult to contain her excitement: he had been able to give her detailed information on the planned insertion of an Army patrol, information she now needed to urgently communicate to Hor Too. If she could get it to him in time he would be able to plan a counter-ambush, hitting the patrol shortly after it arrived in the jungle. She knew where and when the patrol would arrive and she knew its destination. If Hor Too could get close to the insertion point, he would almost certainly be able to set up an ambush on the likely route. Due to time pressure and the increasing risk of compromise, she could not trust the message to the remote mail drop system, better known as the 'Jungle Post Office', that had served them so well over the years. No, she needed to pass this message in person. She had, however, sent Hor Too a coded message, letting him know that she would be joining him in the jungle on Tuesday. Aunt Ma had got it away for her and she felt reasonably sure that Hor Too would get it.

As the battered Van chugged along the winding roads, Ah Sim looked at the thick jungle on either side and shivered. She had spent so many years living in the green gloom that the thought of going back in always made her stomach knot. These past few years things had got tougher and tougher, the additional hardships making jungle life even more difficult to endure. Passing through the rubber plantations near Labis she remembered Ah Kwee. He had been the head of the Bandiran estate workers and had refused to cooperate with the *Min Yuen* in the early days of the struggle. A well respected and cheerful man, his intransigence had affected the other estate workers living in the squatter camp on the jungle edge and, despite repeated threats from visiting jungle fighters, very little food was being passed to the jungle army.

Early one morning in 1949, while the tappers were out working the trees, Hor Too and several of his men had quietly appeared out of the jungle. Silently Hor Too had seized Ah Kwee and tied him by his chest and legs to the rubber tree he had been tapping. Some of his men had then appeared from the direction of the squatter camp, dragging Ah Kwee's wife and children with them.

'I will help you,' Ah Kwee had yelled in shock and terror. 'Please, I will help you!'

Ignoring his desperate cries, Hor Too had taken out his razor sharp *parang* and quickly and clinically sliced off both arms above the elbow. Leaving the mutilated man tied to the tree in front of his wailing family, he and his men had then silently returned to the jungle. That squatter camp had immediately started to generate a steady flow of supplies and, as the news spread, other camps began to quickly cooperate.

Another party piece of Hor Too's, to ensure unquestioning support, had been to cut open the stomachs of pregnant women in front of their husbands. Ah Sim shuddered; while she

understood the necessity of keeping the supply lines open, she had never felt comfortable with such brutal measures. By creating the New Villages, and by properly organising and protecting them, the British had started a slow process of strangulation for the Jungle Army. Their hold over the people was gradually broken because, as people felt safe from reprisal, the majority no longer had any wish to take risks and help the cause.

As they passed through Kampong Tenang, she thought wistfully of the hot springs at Ayer Panas and wished that she could have the opportunity to stop there and bathe again. She remembered the bliss of sinking into the different pools and feeling the hot natural mineral water soothe her skin and ease the dull ache of her tired joints. On her last visit, after a delightful bathe, she had enjoyed a filling and tasty meal at nearby *Min Yuen* house; that night she had slept for nearly 13 hours!

They drove into Segamat and headed to the main street. Henry pulled up next to a row of shop houses, which had living quarters located directly above the covered pavement and the stores.

‘First stop Tang’s Store,’ he said, ‘you no need come in!’

He got out of the Van, went round to its rear doors and took out a cardboard box with several cartons of the washing powder.

Getting out to stretch her legs, Ah Sim nearly jumped out of her skin as she saw a police car turn out of a side street and head her way. Years of experience kicked in and nonchalantly she moved to the back of the van, opened the rear doors and began sorting the boxes. As the car passed she looked out of the side of her glasses and realised that she knew the white policeman in the passenger seat, the three stars of his rank clearly evident on his shoulder straps.

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