

# My War: The Malayan Emergency

My English family and my close friends have been involved in five wars: the First World War (Uncle Frank), the Third Afghan War (my dad), the Second World War (all of us), the Korean War (my friend Colin) and the Malayan Emergency (me).

In 1955, I was conscripted into the army, as every young man was in Britain at that time. Because of my education, I was automatically called to a 'wosbie', a War Office Selection Board, which I passed, and was then sent to an officer training centre. I emerged a few months later with the Queen's commission as a 2nd Lieutenant. I was posted to the 25th Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery, which was based in Malaya, and formed part of the 1st 6th Gurkha Brigade. All the foot soldiers in the brigade were Gurkhas, men from Nepal, who had volunteered to join the British army. The officers in the Brigade were, of course, all British.

I got on a ship in Southampton and set off on a twenty-eight-day voyage, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, until we arrived in Singapore. As an officer, I was expected to make my own arrangements, so after staying in Singapore for a few days, I hitched a ride in a British army lorry up to the town of Taiping.

Taiping, which is about 200 miles or so northwest of Kuala Lumpur, was where the 25th Field Regiment was based. It was in a 'white area', so the atmosphere was peaceful, and the accommodation was comfortable. The other officers were all welcoming, and I felt that I had a role in life, I was somebody, and I belonged. This was a very big issue for me.

The officers' mess was a brick building, and we slept in 'bashas', huts with thatched roofs and sides. We used mosquito nets, which were rolled up during the day; when we arrived in the evening it was reassuring if there was a gecko on the pillow. They seemed to like the cool whiteness of pillowcases, and their presence meant that there would not be a cobra nearby. If there was no gecko, it would always be worth looking under the sheets and pillows to make sure you did not have a visitor snuggled up. Boots were also worth checking in the morning. I felt strangely safe under the mosquito netting, once I had tucked it in.

Around all the buildings in our battery headquarters, there were concrete ditches, perhaps two feet deep and two feet wide. I wondered what they were for. A little later, out with my senior sergeant in the nearby countryside, I learnt why they had been built.

The sky was heavy with monsoon clouds, and thunder and lightning rolled across the darkening sky. We were standing near a small tin hut, when I became aware of what looked like a wall of water advancing across the rice paddies. Along a dirt track coming towards us were three Malay men, trotting slowly ahead of the deluge, chatting to each other as they came, and clearly relaxed. They passed by and greeted me smiling as they went. The sergeant stepped into the hut, and beckoned me to follow, which was wise, because that was when the water arrived. It landed on the corrugated iron roof with an ear-splitting roar, louder than our 25 pounder guns being fired, and which made

conversation impossible. And there we stayed until it passed. And I now understood why there were deep concrete ditches round the buildings in our battery headquarters.

The ditches were also well known as a trap which unwary subalterns would sometimes fall into after a festive evening in the officers' mess.

But this relaxed, sociable time did not last long, for soon after my arrival, our troop of four guns was sent off to the Cameron Highlands, in the mountains a few hours' drive from Taiping. This was a 'black area' where we would, to quote my militaristic Battery Commander, be "firing the guns in anger". This means, of course, blowing places up and tearing people limb from limb with twenty-five pounder shells.

But 'firing the guns in anger' sounded to me like a fine, manly thing to do.

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On the day we made the journey, I rode in the turret of an armoured car leading the convoy, followed by four quads each towing an ammunition limber and a twenty-five pounder gun, and support vehicles including lorries full of dozing soldiers (our soldiers always seemed to fall asleep in vehicles), Steve Potter's Land Rover, the Pig (an armoured personnel carrier, like a massive steel coffin on solid rubber wheels) and some support vehicles.

We drove through the hot, flat country from Taiping, and finally took the left turn up the long hill to the Cameron Highlands. As we drove into the mountains, the flat rice and farming fields on each side of the road were replaced by jungle, which got thicker as we started up the hill. After half an hour or so, I felt that the temperature was dropping, and the foliage was beginning to change into something less like jungle and more like temperate forest country.

We were now in what was known as a black area, where attacks from the MPNLA should be expected. At one point a lorry full of Gurkha soldiers passed us. The soldiers were sitting in the back of the open vehicle, facing outwards, looking alert, rifles in their hands. Anyone who attacked that vehicle would have immediately received a blast of returning fire. Our own closed vehicles were full of piles of sleeping men, their guns lying on the floor around them.

I hasten to say that on the many trips up and down that road during my time in the Cameron Highlands, we were never attacked. I made some of the trips in the Pig, which felt pretty safe from attack, often to pick up the pay for the soldiers.

We did once hear what seemed to be the crackle of gunfire, and reported this to the regiment when we got in. Our vehicle showed no signs of having received bullets, and it turned out that bamboo was being burnt in the area at the time. Apparently burning bamboo makes a crackling sound not unlike rifle fire. This was never clarified either way, but soldiers are quick to make fun of danger - and of their comrades -, and we became known for a while as 'the bamboo troop', which was annoying.

In the Cameron Highlands, we lived in an open area surrounded by high barbed wire fences, except for the side where the guns pointed, and on that side we maintained a 24 hour guard of soldiers in slit trenches, which we dug when we arrived.

Our gun position looked out over many miles of forest and jungle-covered hills. The four twenty-five pounders were arrayed about 20 yards apart, and behind them was the command post where I, as GPO (gun position officer), received orders from the FO (the forward observer, Steve Potter). The Gurkha infantry were conducting regular raids on real or suspected camps of the MPNLA in different areas, most of which were hidden from us by the rolling hills, and the role of the gunners was to hit the camps shortly before the infantry went in, which we did.

Every few days we were called on to fire the guns, sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for many hours. Steve, my troop commander, spent most of his time with the Gurkhas, and would radio me the target map reference; with that information, in the command post behind the four guns, I would then calculate the range, the height of the target relative to our gun position, and the appropriate charge for the cartridge, which is separate from the shell, and could contain one, two or three charges of gunpowder. The number of charges affects the muzzle velocity, the parabola of the shot, and the range. From the map, I was able to locate any intervening hills which might have interrupted the trajectory of the shells. With all of this information, together with the current air pressure, wind speed and humidity, I calculated the elevation and direction of the gun barrels, and gave the order to fire. The mathematical calculations appeared to me to be complex; I was also aware that they were not especially accurate, which was the second role of the FO. He would observe the fall of shot, and order any required changes, in units of 50 (yards). That was about the level of accuracy that we were able to achieve. We would continue firing, sometimes for no more than a few minutes, sometimes for many hours with different targets.

I had been firing the guns all night, and we were still firing halfway through the following morning, when the Battery Major arrived unannounced. He immediately noticed that I had not shaved, and took me on one side away from the men to give me a good rollocking, making reference, as he always did, to the Guards marching out of Dunkirk with their chins shaved and their boots shining. But when I pointed out that we had been firing the guns at intervals all night, and had not paused long enough for anyone to take a break, he changed his tone, and went from "lad", which is what he used to call junior officers when he was annoyed with them (and which really annoyed us) to "my dear fellow" which he used when he was pleased (which annoyed us even more). Apparently, it was all right not to shave if you were actively engaged in combat. Oh, thanks.

During the firing, we were rarely able to observe ourselves the results of our work because of the range and the intervening hills. I gave little thought for the dead or maimed bodies lying in wrecked camps, their grieving families, orphaned children and weeping widows.

They were the enemy.

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The Malay government, under the protection of the British, tried to starve the MPNLA (we called them CTs, or communist terrorists, they called themselves the Malay

People's National Liberation Army) into submission by surrounding all villages and plantations with high fences and locked gates, and using Agent Orange to destroy any signs of agriculture outside these protected areas. About half a million Malays were shoved into concentration camps (we called them 'new villages'), to stop them from supporting the enemy.

We sometimes fired the guns from our permanent gun position, and sometimes moved to a gun position elsewhere. Driving along a road to a firing position one day as dawn was breaking, we came to a village surrounded by a high fence and a wooden gate on the road, as all villages were. There were no signs of guards, or indeed any people at all. I was in the turret of the leading armoured car, and my driver stopped. It was about 6 am.

I radioed Steve, and he said 'hoot'. My driver hooted several times.

Nothing happened.

After about a minute, Steve radioed me and said: "We can't wait, drive through it."

So I ordered my driver to drive forward, which he did. Something snapped, the wooden gateway gave way, and we drove on through the village and out the other side, where we broke another gate, leaving the village open for anyone to walk in. This all felt strong and assertive to me. We are in charge; you do what we say. I gave no thought to the men who would now have to find more wood, probably new padlocks, and rebuild what we had broken.

On another occasion we were ordered out late at night to take up a gun position in a village square about 20 miles away and fire on a jungle target by map reference. We went down the steep track into the dark, sleeping village, and I lined up the four guns in the village square by the light of the headlights. Steve was on the radio, observing the target.

People started to appear out of the surrounding dwellings, at first a few, then a growing number. Soon the entire village, men, women and children, seemed to be out watching us. They did not look friendly. We did not have supporting infantry, so I told the sergeant to take two men off each gun crew, and make them form a loose circle around us to keep the villagers back.

One of my men let off a few rounds into the air, and the villagers backed off. I was busy doing maths at the command table just behind the guns. Then the order came through from Steve to open fire. The whole square was filled with the flash and thunder of four twenty-five pounder guns. Most of the villagers disappeared back into their dwellings, and we continued firing for about fifteen minutes.

Then Steve radioed and told us to return to base.

We swiftly limbered up the guns, and within a few minutes we were on our way out of the village and up the dirt track to the road, accompanied by unfriendly looks and gestures from those villagers who had remained in the square.

Not all the Malays were on our side.

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It was a strange world, where normal life continued, with the possibility of sudden bursts of violence lurking everywhere. As the only British officer in the Cameron Highlands, I was invited to local cocktail parties which the mainly British tea planters continued to organise in the British Club. My driver would take me the short distance in the Land Rover, and one evening I arrived at the same time as an ancient armoured car, a means of transport popular among the planters.

The turret opened, and out of it climbed two young women in cocktail dresses, one the driver and the other the gunner. They sat for a moment on the turret changing their trainers for high heels, then jumped down, each wearing a gun belt with what was probably a Webley 38 in the holster. We went into the house together, where, as was customary, we took off our gun belts and threw them onto the pile of weapons in the hall, which included Sten guns, shot guns, rifles of various vintages and assorted pistols and revolvers. In an emergency, we could have found our own weapons in about ten minutes.

After a couple of hours of jollification, which was noisy and well lubricated with alcohol, we all left, struggling to locate our weaponry in the pile, a search which was in some cases seriously impeded by overindulgence. I found my driver, who was in the kitchen with some other drivers flirting with the kitchen staff. There was plenty of laughter going on; the fact that they did not share a language did not seem to hinder them. Three of my men caught gonorrhoea while we were in the Cameron Highlands.

I became friendly with a local tea planter, a big, tough, very British traditional colonial, with a bristly moustache. In his bungalow, which was in the middle of extensive fields of tea, there was a cocked and loaded rifle next to every window in the house. It was strange to sit on the toilet, wondering if you might have to jump up mid-performance, so to speak, smash the window and open fire with the rifle. I am not sure whether it speeded up toilet activity or slowed it down.

After I had been in Malaya for the best part of a year, the whole regiment was ordered to return to the UK. We handed over our guns and vehicles to an incoming regiment, packed up our stuff, made our slow way as a regiment to Singapore and onto a ship.

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### *Becoming aware: Glimmerings*

The Malayan Emergency, as it was officially known, could not be called a war because of the insurance. Yes, you read that correctly. If it had been called a "War", the insurance companies would not have had to pay out for any damage caused to businesses in the country, such as the tea plantations, many owned by the British. But as long as it was officially called an "Emergency", the insurance companies had to pay out when damage occurred, as of course it did. Big business rules, with all its customary hypocrisy. We should have called it a 'special military operation', the term currently popular in Russia.

It was a strange war, with no frontiers, no stand-offs between opposing armies, just random violent encounters between groups of soldiers hidden in the jungle and the British, Malay and Australian forces. Ordinary life and a guerrilla war were conducted in many parts of the country at the same time. A Malay could wake up in the middle of the night to find four twenty-five pounders blasting away in the village square.

For my Battery Commander, all events involving the British Army end in Victory.

In his mind he had managed to turn the ignominious defeat of the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1940 into a 'miracle', even a 'victory', with the Guards marching proudly out of France with their boots shining like the sun. How he managed to think that, when the Guards and all the other defeated, retreating troops were standing up to their waists in seawater waiting for hours in the queue for small boats to come close enough to shore to pick them up, while being bombed and machine gunned by German aircraft, I am at a loss to understand.

There is a gradient of belief, from I-try-to-find-the-truth-as-far-as-I-can at one end, to I-believe-what-I-want-to-believe at the other end. He reminded me again that we are all in danger of sliding down to the wrong end of that gradient. The recent success of both Boris Johnson and Donald Trump remind us daily how many of us are only too willing to slide down to the I-believe-what-I-want-to-believe end.

Winston Churchill did describe the evacuation of Dunkirk as a 'miracle', which in a way it was, given that the weather remained calm enough to enable hundreds of small boats to cross the English Channel and help in the evacuation, but he also said:

We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. 4/6/1940

Churchill was an imperialist and a racist, capable of making contemptuous - and contemptible - remarks about starving Indians 'breeding like rabbits'; he was also an intelligent, realistic man. My Battery Commander was not strong on realism.

Above and beyond my own small movements, there was a whole world of activity. The Federation of Malaya had been formed in 1946, and was a British Protectorate during my time there. What does 'protectorate' mean? Who or what was being protected? Does it mean protecting Malays, or protecting the interests of the many British companies and individuals who owned the tin mines, the rubber trees and the tea plantations?

The struggle was between the Malayan People's National Liberation Army, which was the military arm of the Malay Communist party, on one side, and the British and Australian forces, supported by the Malay Protectorate government, on the other. It was complicated because the MPNLA had grown out of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, which had fought on our side during the Second World War, and was trained and armed by us.

So an army trained by us, when we and the Russian and Chinese communists were all on the same side against the Germans and Japanese, morphed into the MPNLA, which was against us, and wanted the British to leave Malaya. They were supported

by the communist Chinese government, so we called them CTs, which meant Communist Terrorists. Here is a quote from the Gurkha Brigade Association website:

The Brigade of Gurkhas operated continuously throughout the Malayan Emergency, for twelve years (1948 to 1960) against communist terrorists...

For us that was a good name: we had by now established in our western minds that Communism was a Bad Thing, and Terrorists - well, obviously Bad People.

But the onward march of history was on their side. When I took my troop into that village square, it was clear to me which side many of the villagers were on. I now understand more about the 'low-intensity war' we were fighting. The demographics of Malaya was about 50% Malay and about 38% ethnic Chinese, with a smaller number of Indians and others. The populations did not always get on, and although some people from all the different groups supported the pro-British Malay government, many did not. The MPNLA was mostly a Chinese army, but my feeling then was that the British were not popular. Local opinion was divided as to how an independent Malaya should run its affairs, but independent it should be, and a year after I had left, that is exactly what happened. In 1963, it joined forces with other territories and was renamed Malaysia.

As a soldier on active duty, I thought little about the big world beyond the regiment, indeed beyond Able Troop. I think now of Tolstoy's description of young Rostov with his regiment:

...in the body of the army no-one even thought of wondering where and why they were going ... [but rather] concentrating his attention on the task nearest to hand and forgetting the general trend of events. *War and Peace*

War does something to soldiers; we turn in upon ourselves, and think only of our comrades and the regiment. And we become indifferent, even hard and cruel, to any outsider.

While I was in Malaya, we fired thousands of rounds of twenty-five pounder shells, which must have done enormous amounts of damage. My only vague thought was along these lines: this is war; we are strong; this has to be done for the sake of our civilization.

I can excuse myself for being a part of this war, by saying, 'fighting for your country is a fine thing; that's what all the men in my family did; they are my people, and they are good people'. And also, you might add, we were just 'obeying the orders of our democratically elected government'. These excuses now sound hollow to me.

I now think that all wars are started for reasons which range from very poor to utterly appalling, and the argument from self-defence can sometimes be true (as in Ukraine today), but is often the way politicians present the case to a public which is all too willing to support a patriotic myth, a story of foreign foes, of people out there who 'wish us harm'. All through my youth, the patriotic flame burnt strongly in my breast, although I had no conscious awareness of it; it was simply the way things were.

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The gradual cause of that war dates back to the British takeover of Malaya as a crown colony in 1867, and the steady exploitation of its two chief exports, tin and rubber, and later, from 1929, tea in the Cameron Highlands, where I was stationed. These generated huge profits for the English companies which managed them. To supply workers for the rubber plantations, we imported thousands of people from India, and the mines and docks were served by workers flooding across from China. Chinese investors also moved in, to both mining and banking. The result was a mixed population, partly Malay, partly Indian and partly Chinese. The three groups did not form a united national population, but were largely divided, and not always friendly.

During the Second World War, we created and armed the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, the MPAJA, which was intended to help the Allies drive the Japanese out of Malaya. The army was heavily influenced by nationalist and communist ideas, which would inevitably have regarded their long-term aim as the ejection of the British imperialists and the establishment of an independent Malaya. At the end of that war, the British government was anxious to disband the MPAJA as fast as possible, as they were linked to the Malayan Communist Party, about which our suspicions were growing. Ironically, the leader of the army, Chin Peng, had been awarded an OBE by the British government in recognition of his service in the MPAJA.

Our attempts to disband that army were unsuccessful. It reinvented itself as the MLNA, the Malayan National Liberation Army, and disappeared into the jungle.

As a combatant, I was involved in what must have been one of our last attempts to hang on to something which did not belong to us. The British government has always tried to give the impression that we won that war (sorry, Emergency) but a year or so after I left Malaya the country attained full independence, on 31 August 1957. Three years later, British and Commonwealth forces finally left Malaya. Three years after that, on 16th September 1963, Malaya joined forces with other territories, and was renamed Malaysia. Since then, it has been an independent country with which we have friendly relations. So I am not clear as to exactly what it was that we won.

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Twenty-five years after I left the army, I was in Lancaster University, studying for an MA. On the course were a range of people of different nationalities and ages; at 42, I was not the oldest.

On the course was a man of about my age from Malaysia. Tony was the name he used at the university. He was a senior official in the Dept of Education of the Government of Malaysia, concerned with the teaching of English, which was why, like me, he was doing a master's degree in linguistics. We were both catching up on the education we perhaps should have had before being given our jobs. I was director of the British Institute in Guadalajara, Mexico. He was a pleasant, well-educated man with a broad range of interests. Early in our acquaintance, I said to him

- I was in Malaysia in 1956.



- Oh yeah, what were you doing?

*[I later thought that he would have known the answer.]*

- I was in the army.

- Yeah, so was I.

*[Long silence.]*

- You were on the other side, weren't you.

- Yep.

*[Long stare.]*

- Well, it's a bit late to say this, but I now think we shouldn't have been there.

- Oh, well, thanks for that. But we did pretty well.

We could have - should have - discussed that extraordinary subject a whole lot more: how often do soldiers have the chance to meet, and even apologise to, the soldiers from the other side? But we didn't; I think we were shy. In a way, it was almost too big a subject to discuss. Ordinary life intervened, and we never talked about it again, although it has come back to my mind many times since.

Tony was an official in the government of Malaysia (its name since 1957, the year after I stopped trying to kill as many of the Malay People's National Liberation Army as I could). It is now an independent country, and has friendly relations with the United Kingdom. I was the director of an Institute whose main aim was to increase understanding between peoples by extending people's language knowledge and sharing our culture. Tony's work was to improve the teaching of English in his country, and thus advance international relations.

I spent a year trying to kill him and his friends, just as he did. The only difference I can see is that his reasons for wanting to kill me were somewhat more defensible than my reasons for wanting to kill him. By the way, he seemed to be under the impression that they won.

I am the last member of my family to fight in a war. I hope and dream that I will forever be that last person.