

AMBUSH! The sixth sense?
by John Burrows 2009

**AN ACCOUNT OF
THE FIRST ACTION BY THE ROYAL WEST KENTS
THE 1st BN QUEENS OWN ROYAL WEST KENT REGIMENT
MALAYA 1951**



Extracts from my book - Yet to be published

'THE TURBULENT YEARS OF SOLDIERING'

First Blood - (2 April 51)

It was the first day after the battalion had taken over from the Scots Guards at Kuala Kubu Bahru; and at the very first co-ordination meeting between the CO' and the District Commander of the Malayan Police. The police had just received some reliable information that a group of Communist Terrorists (CTs) were expected to collect supplies sometime later that day from a Chinese kongsi (*commune house*) situated on the outskirts of the 'Sungie Kalong' rubber estate.

This was red-hot info' that required urgent action. After studying the operational map the CO' decided to task 'A' Company with the operation. No.1 platoon were to deploy in the rubber plantation. The other two platoons to be held on stand-by in instant readiness to follow-up. It was considered better not to flood the area with troops, thus lessening the chance of compromising the operation should word get to the CTs.

The plan was to lay three separate ambushes about 300 yards apart to cover the likely approaches to and from the kongsi. The police said, their informant had stated there was a considerable amount of supplies consisting of rice and tinned food waiting collection. It was estimated at least 20 men would be needed to shift the supplies in one go. Intelligence had it; the CTs were operating at company strength throughout the area, and therefore likely to make one collection to move the supplies to a temporary stash for later distribution.

Time was of essences; the assigned platoon commander (2nd Lieut K. Beale - later MC) gathered his section commanders for a briefing outlining the intelligence and the offensive actions to be put in place. They studied the operational map highlighting the kongsi location - the centre of the operation, and then developed a plan covering the approaches.



The three sections of the platoon were to be deployed in three separate ambush positions tasked to cover a specific sector within the plantation.

The troops (*No.1 platoon*) after the final briefing left KKB fifteen minutes later each travelled lightly with belt equipment,

ammo and weapons. Two open sided 3-ton trucks, tailboards down for quick evacuation, travelled in convoy with a scout car in support at the rear. Caution was paramount; carelessness could screw the operation, imperative not to arrive too soon at the Sungie Kalong estate, thus avoiding being seen by the estate workers, an easy matter for a communist supporter to slip away and warn of the presences of troops in the area. The rubber tappers started work about 6 am and completed tapping by midday when the latex was collected for processing. Work for the day was usually completed an hour or two later.

About a quarter of a mile short of the rubber estate, the convoy slowed allowing the troops to drop-off and quickly disperse into cover. The pre-arranged pick-up at 19.00 hours would be at a Malay settlement situated on the edge of the estate.

If an ambush was sprung early all sections were to remain in position and vigilant, otherwise the ambushes would be aborted starting at 18.30 hours in three phases of fifteen minute intervals. It took about 20 minutes, for the platoon to move tactically through the plantation before each section separated to seek a suitable ambush site in their assigned sector. The platoon sergeant (*Sgt F. Bucknell MM*) proceeded with No.2 section along the south side of the plantation, and No.3 section commanded of (*Cpl R. Lemar*) to the west side; each of these sections were to cover a stretch of the narrow estate road where tracks led towards the river crossing. These were close to where the jungle merged with the edge of the plantation.

No.1 section was somewhat stronger under the platoon commander with (*Cpl J. Burrows and Cpl W. Harris*) made for the river embankment where a path ran alongside the plantation a short way from the river. With each section in place about 300 yards part a rough triangle was formed.

Lieut Beale' sited the ambush in an irrigation ditch overlooking the river; it offered excellent concealment and field of fire to the front. The rear flanked onto the rubber plantation where cover was sparse, separated by a path running parallel. To the front, the river crossing could clearly be seen consisting of a series of stepping-stones in the shallow narrow part of the river. Beyond was the kongsi about 300 yards away, although slightly obscured by some rubber trees. The river curved slightly to the left downstream. At its lowest ebb it was little more than a stream with a gentle flow where it ebbed against the dried mud embankments. In a few weeks time when the monsoon rains came, it would become a raging torrent, almost impossible to cross.

Access to the rubber estate was restricted after the completion of the days work. Anyone found in the area would be a suspect saboteur and likely to be arrested or even worse. The rules of engagement were strict, an armed enemy could be engaged as a legitimate target, unarmed civilians would be challenged three times, if they ran away, they were at risk of being fired on.

Cpl. Burrows - I was allocated a position with the Bren group on the right flank of the ambush facing the river crossing, and the path leading to the kongsi. We were so sited to have the flexibility of switching to meet any eventuality and to provide a 'stop' in order to contain the enemy within the killing zone. The rest of the section were spread about three yards part with the platoon commander in the centre. Only one man was allocated to cover the rear, tactically we were in a kind of all round defence, but the emphasis was to cover the river and the expected crossing point. It was assumed that the CTs were going to the kongsi to make the collection, but it was possible that they could be returning.

The waiting game had started. I and several others took up position on the steep inner side of the ditch; others slightly lower facing the river. The steeper side probably faired worst, with our

backs exposed to full sun as it moved from the shadows to penetrate our sweat soaked shirts, instantly drying, only to soak again to leave salt stained patches. I had released my heavy belt equipment and laid it in front of me to give some relief to my chafed skin. The water bottle seemed tantalisingly close, so I moved it slightly brushing against the metal part of my rifle heated by the sun that burnt and blistered my hand, the scar was still visible many years latter.

Dehydration was beginning to tell in the baking heat with the overbearing humidity close to the river, our energy drained. Some of the men had foolishly drunk heavily from their water bottles, and there, just a short distance away was the cool inviting river; to go forward to replenish would blow our position. I tried to restrict the men close to me from drinking too much, but control was difficult spread out as we were with silence paramount. Apart from that most were new to the game, training was one thing, experience another. It would be several hours before our thirsts were satisfied.

Two hours had passed since we began the ordeal; the heat of the early afternoon and the exhausting trek had sapped our energy, leaving us in a state of apathy and drowsiness with the danger of dropping off to sleep. One man close-by succumbed and dozed-off. A sharp kick brought him back to reality. I am sure, if it had not been for the constant presence of whining mosquitoes, and the red-ants sharp nip that dropped from the scrub most would have dozed-off.

Then something happened! Everyone came to his senses and wide-awake. There was movement just over the river in a slightly different direction from that of the kongsi which we had been watching. Then there was a sound of laughter, and of chatter, as several young women came in view making towards the river to bathe, perhaps fifty yards away. They were Malays, young attractive women with long flowing dark hair. The Malays are very modest and careful not to expose their selves; much care is taken to ensure their sarongs are held close with one hand whilst they splash with the other. At first, I wondered if they knew we were watching and hid their modesty, obviously not, they were like that even amongst their own.

It was a tonic we all needed to bring us back to reality, everyone was wide-awake with renewed interest. In fifteen minutes they were gone, back to their kampong.

I don't mind saying some the lads were getting hotter under the collar, but in our sober thoughts we reflected that is was no place for the innocent lovely young women blissfully unaware of the horror which could unfold without warning.

Another hour went-by, tiredness and boredom beginning to tell, eyes closing, yawning and heads nodding. Suddenly, I observed movement across the river, a large group of men moving towards the kongsi who appeared to be carrying weapons, the distance was extreme with the sun haze, and it was difficult to be absolutely sure if they were CTs. Only a few of us saw them because the view was partially obscured by some trees. I counted 18 men, perhaps there were more? They entered the kongsi from the right; we anxiously waited for further movement, but did not see their departure from the other side of the building, if in fact they did. I assumed the platoon commander was also observing - silence and concealment was critical until the ambush was sprung or aborted. Our orders were explicit, to stay-put, no movement or follow-up outside our immediate area, and on no account cross the river to engage the enemy. The enemy if they were there would obviously have lookouts posted; there was also the inherent danger from being mistaken for the enemy by the other sections.

Time dragged on, it was about 18.15 hours with just a short-time to go before the ambush was to be aborted at 18.30 hours. Everyone was utterly exhausted, dehydrated and feeling the strain

after the ordeal of being eaten alive by insects, and attacked by mosquitoes. We were obviously not as alert as we should have been, and feeling rather despondent. I had been watching my front for hours straining to see if there was any further movement from the kongsi, with the hope of seeing the enemy emerging again – I felt disappointed and resigned to an opportunity missed.

Suddenly! I got a strange feeling like a twitching in the back of my neck - call it a **sixth sense**. I felt compelled to turn half left and look over my shoulder to the rear, and was startled to see three CTs just five yards away. Instinctively, I swung to level my rifle, and on doing so started to slip in the sloping ditch. I had no time to take it all in, just brief seconds. The first CT carried a Sten gun at the ready. He wore khaki uniform and the distinctive five-pointed cap with a red-star. He seemed rather tall for a Chinese, I sensed arrogance and cockiness. I glimpsed at the second enemy armed with a No.5 rifle, - strangely' he wore olive green uniform with a floppy jungle hat bearing the orange identification insignia as worn by us, and all the security forces. No time for puzzlement - everything happened quickly. The third CT was much the same as the first, dressed in khaki with a red starred cap; he too, was armed with a No.5 rifle. Alertness showed in their stance, perhaps they too, had some strange premonition that something was about to happen?

It was then, the first CT spotted me, perhaps my sudden movement to engage him - he stopped in his tracks and yelled something in Chinese - *perhaps* - **Ambush! Get the hell out of here!** But in his panic, and perhaps bewilderment he paused to raise his Sten gun, not in an act of bravado, more in utter panic. There were still seconds to go before the ambush opened. No time to diver, I fired first, almost simultaneous mayhem broke out. A brief eye contact, as I levelled my rifle getting off a quick snapshot, but it was high and wide, restricted in my movement as I turned in the sloping ditch. I shouted - Bren gunner enemy right - **Open-fire!** He fired just a single shot; the change-lever had not been selected to automatic. I yelled - **Fire Bursts!** It was too late, the remaining CTs, had turned and bolted or gone to ground.

An opportunity lost; we should have bagged a few more. The firefight was basically one sided with a few rounds exchanged. *Lieut Beale* ordered a search of the immediate area. With bayonets fixed several of us searched amongst the undergrowth whilst others covered. I moved forward rifle held at the shoulder covering the man to my left. A shot rang out; I shouted are you all right? I've got another one - he replied. Reaction was quick - he had stumbled on the terrorist and shot him dead. Just ahead a terrorist was laying and smouldering; a bullet had mashed though his rifle magazine ripping the rounds that ignited his clothing. He was mess and still alive, but no threat - I emptied the remaining contents of my water bottle over the smouldering clothing and turned him over - a sickening mess. *Lieut Beale*' had shot him and came over; the CT was barely alive seemingly in great pain. We did what we could, and took a tube of morphine from the 'jungle pack' squeezing it into his arm. There was little more that we could do; his eyes seemed glazed in terror. I sensed rather than saw a sneer on his blood-smearred lips. I think the morphine helped, he did not last long. It was then; I noticed the hand grenade attached to his belt, although he was in no condition to use it.

Just minutes later a figure darted amongst the rubber trees perhaps 200 yards away to the right, I came into the aim getting off a snapshot, he was too quick, I switched taking a careful aim just in front of where I expected him to emerge. *Lieut Beale*' ordered - **Cease-Fire!** Obviously, he had not seen the figure and was concerned about firing in the direction of the other ambush positions.

It was about 18.30 and almost dark. We had to be diligent; there was the possibility of a counter attack if the CTs had any inkling of our actual strength. Perhaps they were CTs lurking close by -

wounded or otherwise. To swan around the plantation in the dark could invite trouble, if not from the enemy - the danger of running into our own troops waiting to engage them.

The other sections about 300 yards away should have aborted, but with action almost at the close of play, it must have presented a lot of indecision. *Lieut Beale*' shouted (*a prearranged contingency*) for the platoon sergeant to close with his group on our position. They were the furthest away, and the least likely to encounter the enemy who made off running in the opposite direction. The light was fading as his group approached cautiously. Our task was to get enemy dead quickly back to the RV for police identification. The burden of carrying the bodies and equipment was a struggle; the reinforcements were to ensure an all round defence. We cut long poles, trussed and tied the bodies, it was a bodge job - we had a lot to learn - one hung loosely face down, the frequent dropping and changeovers made police identification difficult.

We staggered along with the bodies; the dead weight seemed to weigh a ton. The Chinese are usually small people and probably only weigh 120 to 140 pounds and these were obviously under fed and had probably lived in the jungle for years. I took a turn at one end of a pole as we staggered along with several hundred yards to the pick-up point; the going was not too difficult through the plantation. Already the bodies were beginning to smell and the flies were still buzzing, although it was quite dark. I reflected on what might have happened had I not fired first. Perhaps caught in a burst from his Sten? But' what prompted me to turn? There was no noise to distract me - I had been watching my front for hours, kind of glued on the river crossing - it seemed strange' a kind of *sixth-sense*?

However, I did not escape without a scratch - the back of my left leg was bleeding, possibly caused by a fragment of a spent bullet, or perhaps a stone chipping? It was just a minor injury and had no lasting effect.

After awhile we could see the oil lamps burning at the Malay kampong just a few hundred yards on. The smell of the curry cooking was over whelming; no one had the stomach for food, even our thirst seemed less important. One of the lads had been sick, two others felt queasy. I too, felt much the same with the sticky bloody mess from the CT soaking my trousers. When we got to the kampong, the other section had already arrived. They had not made contact with the enemy, but had seen about twenty CTs moving in our direction. To engage them at that range could have been risky. At the kampong I was given the task of guarding the bodies that had been dumped on the padang (*green*) ready for the police to collect. Some of the Malays were inquisitive and wanted to see the terrorists. They started pushing to get a better view holding oil lamps over the bodies, one started to kick and spit on the dead terrorists. I was having none of that, and ordered the guards to fix bayonets to keep the inquisitive at bay; they were a timid lot, but had reason enough to hate the communists.

The trucks arrived a half-hour later to take us back to KKB; as we passed through the gate the guard turned-out and presented arms. Word had quickly got back before we had, it seems a police Land-Rover had raced ahead to inform the CO' of our success. The bodies were dumped outside the guardroom for display before the police took them away to check against the wanted list of known terrorists.

We drove to the company lines, weapons inspected and ammunition checked. The platoon commander had expended 10 rounds from his semi-automatic carbine; I had fired 4 rounds, and the Bren gunner just a single round, the rest of the section 16 rounds between them, making a

total of 31 rounds spent. The other two sections had not engaged the enemy, and therefore had not fired a shot.

Lieut Beale’ addressed the platoon – *words to the effect* - stating. We have bagged some nasty thugs today, members of the 1st Regiment MRLA; but there should have been more? These, it seems were part of a ruthless bunch, probably their No.4 platoon, who have been responsible for many atrocities and intimidations amongst the Malays at the kampong we have just left. We have done a good job and got rid of some harden killers. The score was disappointingly low, just two gaols, not much for all that effort. Let’s hope the follow-up platoon will find some more bodies tomorrow. The ordeal was a drag, but it was relatively easy, next time it could be different. Mistakes have been made today; tomorrow we will discuss these in detail.

A day later another body was found, and then a few days after, two more CTs were killed in another ambush.

I made my way straight to the shower and stood underneath fully clothed with my equipment on and just let the water wash off the blood and filth of the day. The water turned red as it washed down the gully to the drain beyond. I was too tried and thirsty to take much notice. Later I reflected on the events of the day and felt a little disturbed about the violent slaughter.

We were pleased with ourselves to have been the first troops in the battalion to open the score, and on the first day of operations - First blood to the ‘Royal West Kent’s’ - soon to be known as the ‘**White Horse Soldiers**’ of whom the CTs would come to fear. They had seen our cap badge painted on the vehicles together with the brigade insignia depicting crossed Bayonet and Kukri.



1/RWK
18th INFANTRY BRIGADE



John Burrows

**AN ACCOUNT OF THE COMMUNIST TERRORISTS AMBUSH
OF A PLATOON OF D' COMPANY
THE ROYAL WEST KENT REGIMENT
(Ranking amongst the worst during the Malayan Emergency)**

*by John Burrows
(rev 2009)*



***The place –
The Ulu Caledonian Rubber Estate
Ulu Yam, Selangor, Malaya
22nd October 1951***

Preamble ...

A prelude to the events of that day was a typical CT assassination of a planter and his bodyguard. The magnitude of the terrorists ambush inflicted on a platoon of the Royal West Kent's impacted on the resources available to immediately mount follow-up seek and destroy operations.

No.1 Platoon 'A' Company the Royal West Kent Regiment was based at Tanjong Malim and accommodated in the gymnasium at the Sultan Idris Agricultural College, which was just outside the town. The police provided the security of the college and perimeter.

The platoon was commanded by 2nd Lieut K Beale. Like most platoons at that time it was under strength with only two sections instead of three. Cpl W Harris commanded No.1 Section and I, Cpl J Burrows commanded No. 2 Section.

It was on the fateful day of the 22nd October when most of the platoon had gone on a routine patrol in a rubber estate a few miles north of Tanjong Malim. I was left in charge of the base with several others; we were having a brief respite after the ordeal of an uneventful night ambush. About midmorning a Malay police inspector arrived at the base, he seemed to be in a flap'-repeating - ***Many bandits!*** – ***Many bandits!*** I said calm down, now what is it all about? He replied bandits had been seen near a rubber estate about a mile to the west, and firing was heard coming from that direction. The manager had not returned to the estate office and made the routine telephone call to the police; they were fearful for him and his bodyguard's safety.

I explained the platoon had gone on a routine patrol in another location. I was left in charge of the base, but perhaps could render some assistance. He said it is to return immediately, and report the situation to the commander. I followed in the Dingo scout car to the police headquarters - about ten minute's driver away. I went straight to the commander's office; who was seated at his desk, saluted and explained the situation and said I could muster four men and myself, if he could provide a couple of additional police to guard our base. Thanks corporal, but

I can't spare anyone because I have just mustered my jungle squad of twelve police constables and a sergeant. Not many, but they will have to do.

Sir, suppose I go to the point where the platoon was dropped off this morning and fire a couple of bursts into the jungle? That would surely draw their attention and bring them to investigate. Unfortunately they are not carrying a radio. He declined the offer and said the firing would only confuse matters. At that point he glanced out of the window and noticed the Dingo' complete with twin Brens. Corporal' you can render tremendous assistance with that scout car of yours by providing back-up to my jungle squad. Yes of course' sir.

I watched his small force climb into the semi-steel clad police gharry' and as they moved off, we followed close behind in the Dingo. Under normal circumstances this would not be the best of tactics, but this was different, their vehicle offered very little protection; exposed from the chest upwards. A grenade or a burst of automatic fire would have been devastating. The whole incident could have been a ploy to lure the police into an ambush. A typical CT tactic employed many times in various parts of the country. Perhaps the CTs were already in position waiting for the easy soft target of the police gharry making slow progress along the narrow winding dirt road?

I like to think the presence of the scout car with its menacing Brens probing from side to side may have deterred any attempt of an ambush.

I felt sorry for these young brave '*Mata Mata*' - Malay police constables who were under trained and under paid; they certainly bore the brunt of the communist onslaught.

Having arrived at the estate compound without incident, the police left their vehicle and proceeded in extended order, sweeping the area where the firing had been heard. We were able to travel in parallel for some distance along the road covering them with the Brens. That was until they moved further into the plantation and out of sight. We stopped and waited on the road, the guns still pointing in the direction of the sweep. Then, rather than remaining stationary I decided it better to kind of coast up and down the stretch of road close to where the police were searching. It was a risky business; the CTs could have been anywhere and we presented a worthwhile prize with two Bren guns, a considerable supply of drum magazines fully loaded, two sub-machine-guns, loaded magazines and a supply of hand grenades, plus some useful supplies and equipment.

It was about fifteen minutes later, when several police emerged from rubber trees carrying the body of the European manager on a sheet of corrugated iron. They carefully lifted the body placing it on the rear level of the Dingo, and then returned to collect his bodyguard.

We remained stationary; body balanced on the vehicle. The driver took-up a defensive position to cover the rear with his Sten, whilst I continued to traverse the Brens covering the surrounding area.

The dead manager lay just a few feet away. I looked down on him, he was about 35 years of age, and had been shot several times. He had probably been killed about an hour and a half before when the firing was heard. Flies were settling and ants crawling over him, and there was a slight sickly smell. Several fingers had been severed, perhaps by a bullet, but more likely to remove a ring. There were two magazines on his belt ripped by a bullet; that cause a gapping flesh wound.

The carrying party returned with the bodyguard, it was sickening, his head smashed, the brutality unnecessary. The police placed a large banana leaf over it.

Several constables went to bring up the gharry' and an estate vehicle to collect the dead men. We formed up for the return to Tanjong Malim, as before I brought-up the rear keeping close, the

police looked very nervous keeping their weapons trained on the undergrowth close to the road, whilst I covered the higher ground.

At that time, there was some stupid directive, stating that police should travel in open un-armoured vehicles and if attacked, take the fight to the CTs. Many brave young Malay policemen died unnecessarily due to the lack of armoured plating.

It was a few months later when a police jungle squad from Tanjong Malim were lured into a trap, and ambushed whilst escorting several engineers to carry out repairs at a sabotaged water pump sub-station, situated in the hilly region above the town. The engineers and many of the police escort were killed. It is highly probably that these were from the same jungle squad as described above.

I was in a hurry to get back and send a situation report (*SITREP*) to HQ knowing it would be several hours before the scheduled pick-up of the platoon at the RV.

I am sure, an immediate follow-up would have taken place, the intelligence was good - numerous CTs had been seen in the area, and the trail was red-hot. Had it not been for what had happened almost simultaneous that day?

Leading up to the events of the RWK ambush

It was a short time later after arriving back at base that *Major V Dover MC* suddenly arrived from BNHQ. He said - it is a matter of urgency to mobilise the platoon for an immediate operation of the utmost priority, although there was over two hours before the platoon was due for the pick-up. I was ordered to make haste to the pick-up location to minimise any delay. Meanwhile preparations were underway to replenish rations and equipment made ready. The platoon briefly mustered at the base for immediate operations.

First, the major addressed the platoon and stated he had grave news. This morning No 11 platoon of 'D' Company had been ambushed on the Ulu Caledonian Estate at Ulu Yam. The battle lasted for over an hour and a half; and there had been many fatalities with the rest wounded. Medics had already been despatched to the scene with some supporting troops. But you of No.1 platoon are the nearest available troops to carry out the follow-up operations to search out the CTs and bring them to battle. He went on to say - The CTs did not have it all their way; they left a number of their own dead.

There was no time to lose; we left for Ulu Yam in a matter of minutes. The convoy moved off with two scout cars front and rear, two 3-ton trucks and a Land-Rover between. A few men remained to guard the base assisted by the police.

The events of the estate murders were of low priority compared with the magnitude of the West Kent's ambush, and unfortunately there were no resources available for a follow-up operation.

We arrived a half-hour later at the Caledonian estate and on to the scene of the ambush. The drive along the twisting road had frustrated our urgency to get to the scene, but caution prevailed as the opposing forces could outnumber us, and perhaps try their luck again.

The ambushed vehicles, a 3-ton and a 15-cwt truck, with a scout car remained stationary where they had been shot-up - holed and bloodstained. The casualties had already been evacuated; in fact we had passed an ambulance and truck on our approach to the scene. The Brens on the scout

car were still in place, but the support carriage had been hit, causing the guns to slew and swing to one side

2nd Lieut Beale at once ordered the platoon up the slope above the dirt road and into the CT ambush positions. We found two CT bodies; others had been recovered on the road where they had been killed during the attack. We were ordered to spread out and mop-up, not to take any chances and to fire into any suspect hiding places, bush or undergrowth.

The major and the platoon commander waited for the CO to arrive to make his appreciation before issuing orders for the follow-up operations.

It was just after he arrived firing broke out from the high ground. He immediately ordered the escort scout car gunner to train his Brens in the direction of the firing, but to hold fire. He shouted. Who's firing? I replied not knowing it was the CO. We are mopping up! No enemy in sight! *

He was an embittered and worried man, he had lost nearly a tenth of his operational fighting force in just one battle - dead or wounded. **

Lt. Col. A. Martyn
CO 1/RWK



The initial operation lasted for two days following the tracks and blood trails left by the retreating terrorists; then the rain came to obliterate any further signs. Our Iban trackers had all but refused to assist, they had lost all confidence. Three of their comrades had been killed in the ambush. Stubbornly they believed there had been a bad omen, and their lucky charms had not saved them. The following day our platoon was ordered back to the base at Tanjong Malim leaving the depleted 'D' Company' to seek out and avenge their lost comrades. Other units assisted in the operations, supported by heavy concentration of mortars and air strikes over a wide area. There were a few brief contacts with the enemy that resulted in several eliminations, although it was not established if these were the ambushers.

**Note*

More than forty-five years later an article appeared in a Malayan Veterans News Letter relating to this action, letters were exchanged.

Cpl Tony Mansfield' the CO's scout car gunner confirmed he clearly remembers the events of that day; his comment were – "It was a good job the CO' did not order him to open fire".

Account of the Battle at Ulu Yam

It was during the morning at about 10.00 hours of 22 October 1951. No.11 platoon 'D' Company 1/RWK had completed a three day routine patrol. Transport had arrived at the rendezvous to pick them up for the return to Kuala Kubu Bahru. As they drove through the Ulu Caledonian rubber estate at Ulu Yam they entered a defile with a high embankment. There were three vehicles, the first a 3-ton truck, the second a 15-cwt, and the third, a scout car at the rear. It was when the vehicles were in the embankment; intensive bursts of automatic fire ripped through the vehicles with the 3-ton truck taking the initial full blast of the attack. It was thought that the company commander and the platoon sergeant were instantly killed together with several men, the rest were wounded. Seconds later more automatics and other small arms opened up, and then grenades started to explode amongst the troops. Minutes into the attack a distinctive loud single explosion was heard as a projectile struck the scout car's gun carriage that effectively rendered the twin LMG's useless. The gunner brought out his Owen gun and kept firing from the scout

car. Suddenly eight CTs charged down in an effort to grab the weapons from the dead soldiers; several CTs were killed.

Many of the troops in the 15-cwt returned the fire before jumping into a ditch at the side of the road. It was difficult to fight back firing up the steep embankment.

The CTs had chosen their site well. Heavy firing continued with grenades raining down, exploding in and around the trucks as the troops leapt from the 3 Ton truck. The platoon commander was wounded twice. Some of the surviving troops managed to take cover under the embankment, others were pinned in and around the vehicles, few men were able to return the fire, and those who could were directed by the only remaining NCO, a lance corporal, until he too, was wounded. A senior experienced private (*37 years of age, Johnny Pannell a former NCO*) took command and rallied the men to fight back; he personally repulsed several enemy attacks with his Sten and grenades, although he too had been wounded four times. He undoubtedly saved a complete annihilation of the young men around him. All the time the CTs were yelling obscenities, some in English at the soldiers below.

Victory was clear-cut or so they thought? But, they had underestimated the sheer guts and determination of the 'White Horse' soldiers from Kent.

As the battle continued, denying the CTs a chance to capture a haul of weapons, including five LMG's and an assortment of other small arms. In their attempt they left six of their dead, and when they withdrew carried several wounded comrades with them. They had charged down the embankment to capture the weapons from the dead and wounded soldiers but were cut down by withering SMG fire. It seems they lost the will to press home the attack, although the initiative was theirs. They pulled back in retreat splitting into groups.

Towards the end of the battle a planter and four policemen bravely reinforced the surviving West Kent's, but they too, sustained casualties.

The casualties of the Royal West Kent's were, one officer and ten other ranks and three Iban trackers killed, and one officer, eleven other ranks and one civil liaison officer wounded. This was amongst one of the bloodiest battles of the Malayan Emergency.

It was sometime before any Ibans were prepared to join the affray again, they were convinced that, there was some premonition, a warning of a lurking death; the lucky charms of their fallen comrades had failed them.

Conclusion

Private J. L. Pannell was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal

Lance Corporal J. C. Martin was awarded the Military Medal.

The CTs failed to achieve their objective to capture weapons and took heavy casualties in the attempt, but they did learn a lesson.

'Not to mess with the West Kent's'.

It was later established some of the CTs ambushers took part in the ambush, and killing of Sir Henry Gurney, the High Commissioner - just a few weeks before. They failed then to achieve their objective to capture badly needed weapons, and they had failed again.

*** The battalion was well below strength, the establishment should have been in the order of 600 - 650 all ranks, but in 1951 were probably about 450 in total with 'D' Company the lowest in numbers. Base personnel in support reduced front-line operational troops, and sickness could run at 10% due to environmental and jungle conditions.*

Most companies operated with just two sections in a platoon instead of the normal three. There were new drafts arriving that needed training, thus giving an operational force in the order of 250 – 300 personnel.

*The ambush at Ulu Yam cost the Royal West Kent's 27 casualties dead and wounded; **therefore a 10% loss in one action is plausible at that time***

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Foot Note

Tanjong Malim was one of the most notorious areas for terrorism in Malaya at that time – 1951/52. Just a few months later it would reach worldwide headlines when General Sir Gerald Templer' the new High Commissioner was so outraged by recent ambushes of security forces and murder of civilians. That he imposed harsh, but effective measures to counter the communist terrorists.