

***An account of the Communist Terrorists Ambush inflicted on a platoon of the Royal West Kent Regiment, probably ranking amongst the worst during the Malayan Emergency***

***The place –***

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

***Preamble ...***

*There was a prelude to the events of that day, a typical murder of a planter and his guard that could have had some bearing on the resources available for the follow-up operations of above.*

Number One Platoon 'A' Company the Royal West Kent Regiment was based at Tanjong Malim accommodated in a gymnasium at the Malay Agricultural College just outside the town.

The platoon was commanded by *Lieutenant K S Beale, (later MC)* and for a short time *Sergeant F Bucknell MM* was the platoon sergeant until transferred to another company.

Like most platoons at that time it was under strength with only two sections as apposed to the normal three.

*Corporal W Harris* commanded No.1 Section and I (*Corporal J Burrows*).

commanded No. 2 Section

On the fateful day of the 22<sup>nd</sup> October most of the platoon was on a routine patrol in a rubber estate a few miles from Tanjong Malim. I had been left in charge of the base with several others; we had been on an uneventful night ambush and were resting after the ordeal.

It was about midmorning when a Malayan police inspector rushed into the base to report that firing had been heard coming from another rubber plantation a short distance to the west of Tanjong Malim, and there was much concern for the manager and his police guard who had not returned to the estate office. Could our platoon provide support to his jungle squad as there few police available to follow-up and investigate the incident. He expressed concerned about the lack of protective armour to the police Gharry vehicle.

I explained, the platoon was operating in different area and were not due to return until later that afternoon, but I, could provide back-up in the Dingo scout car, and I would man the twin Brens. There was just the driver and I; we kept fairly close to the Gharry, the police, just young men, seemed very nervous, aware it could have been a ploy by the CTs to draw them into a trap. I like to think the presence of the scout car with its menacing Brens probing from side to side may have deterred any attempt at that.

Having arrived at the scene a short time later, the police started their search of the plantation where the manager with his police guard had been carrying-out routine inspections. We in the scout car were able to cover the police from the dirt road as they searched the area. It did not take long before the bodies of the manager and his guard were found, both brutally slaughtered. The police loaded the bodies onto the Gharry and returned to base. I was keen to get back and report the incident by radio to HQ knowing it would be a few hours before I could report to the platoon commander at the at RV pick-up. Had it not been for what had happened almost simultaneous that day, I am sure there would have been an immediate follow-up; the intelligence was good, numerous CTs had been seen in the area and the trail was red-hot.

After returning to the platoon base at Tanjong Malim and making what limited preparations we could for an immediate follow-up, should the platoon commander decide?

***Leading up to the events of the RWK ambush***

It was about an hour later when *Major V Dover MC* from BNHQ arrived at the base, he said it was a matter of urgency to mobilise the platoon for an immediate operation of the utmost priority, although there was over an hour before the platoon was due for the pick-up. I was ordered to make hast to the pick-up location to minimise any delay.

The platoon 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 operation 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 in a convoy of two scout cars, one upfront the other at the rear, with two 3-tonners and the Land Rover between. Only three men were left behind to guard the base with some assistance from 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 at Caledonian estate, the scene of the ambush perhaps an hour later. 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

Lieutenant 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, and not to take any chances, and to fire into any suspect hiding place, bush or undergrowth. The major and the platoon commander waited for the CO to arrive to make an appreciation and issue his orders for the follow-up operations. 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.

It was just after the arrival of the CO when firing broke out from the high ground. He immediately ordered his escorting 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! \*

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 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 resulting in several eliminations, although it was not established if these were the ambushers.

\*NB.

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

*Tony Mansfield' the CO's scout car gunner confirmed he clearly remembers the events of that day; his comment was 'it was a good job the CO' did not order him to open fire?'*

### ***An Account of the Battle at Ulu Yam, Selangor.***

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 (KKB). 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, when all three vehicles were in the embankment. A sudden intensive burst of automatic fire ripped through the vehicles, with the 3-tonner 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 and the rest were wounded. Seconds later more automatics opened up and other small arms and grenades rained down, a distinctive loud single explosion was heard as it struck the scout cars gun carriage 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 to try and grab the weapons from the dead soldiers; several of the charging terrorists were killed.

Many of the occupants of the 15-cwt, returned the fire before jumping from the truck 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 still raining down and exploding in and around the trucks as the troops leapt from the vehicles. 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 they 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. The rest of the ambushers retreated and split into groups.

Towards the end of the battle a planter and four policemen bravely reinforced the surviving West Kent's. 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 that some of the CTs ambushers were involved 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 under strength, the establishment should have been in the order of 600 - 650 all ranks, but in 1951 was probably about 450 strong, '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 to a platoon instead of the normal three. There were new drafts coming-in 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 10% loss in one action is plausible at that time.*

**John Burrows**

2006

### **Foot Note**

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