

BORNEO PATROL

By Mike Halliwell

It was a normal day on patrol, July 1966. I was in the Commonwealth Brigade based in Malacca. WE however were several hundred miles away protecting the newly formed Malaysian Federation Border with Indonesia. The Indonesian President Sukarno seemed to have some beef with the new Malay state and Communist terrorists, insurgents were wandering back and forth shooting up both Malay and Indonesian villages, trying to foment a war. So far this wasn't a war, it was a confrontation. We had already had the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the fifties and the Malayan Emergency. We had yet to discover the Falkland Conflict and the Irish troubles. It was only later that I discovered the purpose of those Nommes de Guerre. To call anything a 'War' was a legal definition that involved the Queen's proclamation and affected commercial and insurance interests not to mention calling up reserves and so on. These niceties were neatly sidestepped, not to mention a public debate in Parliament by not talking about a war!

So here I was, a British Gunner Forward Observation Officer, on Patrol with 11 Australians, who on completion of this little exercise were to go up to a proper war, Viet Nam.

We had been out for a week or so on ambush patrol. There were tracks along the high ridges of the Raya mountains which were the easiest way to get through the Ulu (jungle). We were waiting for an enemy patrol. 'Watch and wait' at night and 'potter' during the day. Normally in camp we ate very well with the Australians, steak for breakfast, lunch and dinner, but on patrol we were issued with the new American light weight 'C' rations. In the absence of anything to do I composed a ditty extolling their virtues. The Soldiers were also totally bored as we had no books or personal papers to read. Thus I amused them with renditions of my incomplete education, extracts from Shakespeare, Coleridge and the rather more popular Eskimo Nell.

Our patrol leader, a National Serviceman, was not in favor of digging slit trenches until I explained that I had given our own position to the guns for an emergency, in case we were overrun then we would stand a better chance in a hole than the enemy above ground. We had also been on radio silence since the moment we left camp, not to be broken until contact was made with the enemy.

Then one night we heard some action, couldn't see a thing, pitch black under the dark jungle canopy. They must of heard us first, some shots rang out, we returned fire down the track, silence. Stand up Aussies !!more shots fired, at this point I decided to bring down some gunfire from my 5.5 Howizers some ten miles away. A 5.5 makes an impression. They cut down everything a meter above ground for a hundred yards. Makes a very useful emergency Heli Pad. Unfortunately it had a two hundred yard probability zone, (where the shell will probably fall). It also assumes that my map reading was ok in an area that was not very well mapped and every feature looked the same.

Thus I called down fire some way down the track hoping that it would send the enemy into our 'killing zone'. That was it really, we did not move until first light as we would have only ended up shooting each other in the dark. No sign of the enemy or any bodies, just a beautiful emergency Heli Pad. We had been on radio silence for a week, not a word from the outside world. Now however, we could report in 'Contact lost, return to base'. As we had no casualties this meant 'yomping' back (except yomping didn't become part of the military lexicon until the Falklands). Our lovely Heli Pad was going to waste.

Then there followed a most unmilitary transmission, 'we've beaten the Bloody Germans!! We knew that the World Cup was on but even back in Malaya we had no television or even Forces Radio. We relied on week old newspapers and gossip picked up from the world service and fed into the weekly Garrison newsletter. The Aussies weren't very impressed either as their idea of footie is more like our rugger, so I had to chuckle to myself for a day or so until I got back to base and found some very serious hangovers. But that wasn't all. Ten days later President Sukarno was overthrown and the 'confrontation' was declared over. Yet another party, this time lots of 'tinnies and a steak barbeque. Then still with our hangovers we had to dig up all the mines defending our camp that had been laid some three years before by Sappers who had long gone.