

# Cameron Highlands of Malaya

during the Emergency

October 1948 ---- September 1951

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On this page I shall try and give you some information about the Cameron Highlands and the work we carried out in that area.

The C.H. was an area 4,700ft above mean sea level with the main village being Tanah Rata, (level ground) while all around you was complete jungle and the other highlands around you (Mt.Brinchang went up to over 6,000ft).

Up to the start of the emergency, it was a developing hill resort for planters, tin miners, and government officials (white), who wanted a few weeks away from the heat.

From Tanah Rata to the next village, Brinchang (only a few shacks then and out of bounds), was about four miles away. From there the main road ended and there were only tracks down into the valley.

Between the two villages, it was like a plateau with a 9 hole golf course in the middle and a road running round in an oval shape. Spread around the outer edge were houses and bungalows, built on small hills, with winding roads up to them. Also, a couple of small hotels, an English pub, (Not allowed in, if you were in uniform), called The Smoke House, and a large boarding school for the planters', and government officials' children. However, the emergency soon put a stop to that. Later it was reopened and we used to transport the children in our buses.

The weather in the C.H. was equivalent to an English average summer, but after the sun had gone down at 18:00 hrs, it started to get cold. During the night, temperatures could fall to -4 deg C. Battledress and jumpers were worn and in the NAAFI there was a good old log fire burning. You knew all about the cold in the morning when you had to wash & shave with cold water, while showering was normally done before the sun went down.

During the monsoon season, we had terrific downpours, which sometimes lasted days and washed roads away or the banks would wash down on to the roads. Several times we were isolated from Tapah until the Public Works Department, (P.W.D.), a large squad of male and female Tamils with shovels, cleared the area (no mechanical means in those days). I might add that there were no helicopters then and it was impossible to do an airdrop, as the Highlands were normally completely covered in clouds. To get to the C.H. you travelled from Tapah, a main town on the North to South Route, which was the only road and was 38 miles long. The first 19 miles were reasonable but after that you would twist and climb all the way until you got to our camp and the British Military Hospital (B.M.H), at Tanah Rata. The road was completely enclosed by jungle, which was banked on one side and on the other side was one almighty drop. Nearer the top you passed through one other small village called Ringlet.

This was a "RED ROAD". A notice just outside our camp at Tanah Rata and at Tapah said that no vehicles should proceed beyond these points without an armed military escort. This notice, was also to be seen at the far end of the golf course before you reached the village

of Brinchang. Quite a number of civilian trucks and buses ignored the warning in the early days, and they were ambushed. Passengers were robbed and killed, and the transport burnt out. By the time we got to them, the C.Ts, had long gone and we had the task, with the police, of clearing the road and recovering the bodies.

Each morning around 10:00 hours, a convoy would be formed in our M.T park, to go down the hill, and in the afternoon at Tapah, (at approx. 15:00 hrs), another would be formed to come up the hill. As you can quite imagine, it went down a lot quicker than it came up. When you reached the top, there was a sign post telling you were now at 4,700ft MSL, and beyond that our RASC sign. You then turned left down a slope past the guardroom into the MT park, Workshop, Ambulance and Fire Station, and Nissen huts. The road to the right was a steep incline up to the BMH. This had once been a convent and it was a very well built building of stone. Over on the other hill was our living quarters and the Father's house. Our accommodation consisted of about 8 Nissen huts, cookhouse, dining area, and small NAAFI. The three other units in the C.H. were a company of Coldstream Guards, ( Hopetoun Camp,) and a troop of the 4th Queens Own Hussars. They had HQs. in bungalows and tented areas high up on each side of the golf course. The other unit, was the Royal Army Medical Corps who looked after the B.M.H.

Our job as an RASC company was to keep all of these units supplied with services (food and transport). Workshops did the repairs and recovery service for the C.H., down to the 19th mile stone and into the valleys. The REME did it from there up from Tapah. (Ours was the most difficult task).

A section of trucks from the C.H. were always on permanent duty with the 2nd Batt Coldstream Guards Headquarters, at Tapah. We also had 6 jeeps and drivers that were continually stationed with the Guards company in the C.H. Along with their own 6 jeeps, this was quite a sight to see them speeding through the Highlands fully loaded with Guardsmen, all in jungle green, and fully armed. When they dropped off a patrol that went into the jungle and deep down into the valleys, the drivers had to return on their own without any escort and the same again, when a radio message was sent to pick the Guardsmen up. They became very good drivers and there was no limit on speed.

Five lorries were converted into buses by our workshop section. This was done by giving them permanent roofs, removing the tail boards, fitting steps down, and installing wooden platform seats along both sides.

The buses were mainly used to transport service personnel that had been sent to the BMH for convalescence, or if they had bad tropical skin problems. (We called them the walking wounded). Stretcher cases were transported by ambulance. They came from all branches of the armed services in Malaya, & Singapore, and were picked up from Tapah Road Railway Station, which was approx. six miles, from the town of Tapah. With the exception of troops in ambulances, they all had to carry weapons, so that a bus load with rifles and sten guns pointing out the sides, looked pretty formidable.

Convoys were formed, in the MT park each morning. Normally the 4th Hussars would be the escort as they had armoured personnel carriers, scout cars, and later, armoured cars with 2 pounders and heavy machine guns. They also had wireless contact with the rear of the convoy and the camps at both ends of the road.

Convoys varied in size depending on how many personnel the BMH wanted to move and how many civilian vehicles wanted to join it. One lorry that did the trip regularly was the Ration truck, totally enclosed and clearly marked for some reason or another. (Will tell you more about that later).

The convoy down rarely presented problems. Slower vehicles were at the front to set the speed however, the many "U" bends controlled it best.

One incident that I remember quite well on the down trip, was the transporting of two large baking ovens with a steel outer case and brick lined, that were rounded, and did not have a flat base, which had become redundant and were to be sent down to Tapah. One morning, we got them on two lorries, with the help of the Ford recovery jibs. They took up the full length of the lorries, and almost the full width, and I would say they were nearly over weight for the 3 tonner's. We chucked them as best as possible and told the driver to secure them down, but this was ignored. (Probably we should have got hold of an officer and expressed our fears but we did not). The workshop team were certain that there would be a problem, so we rehearsed in our minds how we would tackle the situation should it occur. It wasn't long before we received the call that one of the lorries, carrying the ovens, had overturned and partially blocked the road. The convoy managed to get past and after picking up the badly shaken driver they carried on to Tapah.

We quickly got together all available personnel and armed them with Brens, Stens, and rifles. We got them spread out aboard the Dodge 15cwt, a Ford recovery, and a Dodge 3 tonner. Captain Harris, i/c A Platoon, decided he would come with us and though he had disciplinary powers over us, he did not control any workshop matters.

It only took about 5 minutes to get to the incident so it was into action first, dragging the oven away from the lorry using the Dodge 15 cwt in four wheel drive. Next we got the Ford recovery in and got the lorry back on its four wheels and whilst it was being checked out, the recovery was lifting the oven back onto another truck, then we all proceeded back to Tanah Rata.

Captain Harris was amazed at the speed we did the job and kept asking me a lot of questions about how we knew how to tackle the job. I said, "Sir it was a lot of common sense". I do not think he believed me and I suspect he smelt a rat, as it seemed to be a put up job. Not so much in Malaya, but in Woolwich where we covered all of London District, breakdowns were arranged so that we would miss the C.O.'s parade and inspection on Saturday morning (Unfortunately, this could not happen every week).

In the C.H, after the morning parade and inspection in the M.T.Park (what a target we were) at 8:00 hrs daily, work continued in the workshops and other duties, while weapons not far from hand. There was the usual morning pause to see the convoy off. At times we would have to visit the Guard's camps at Hopetoun and Tapah, to carry out inspections and repairs at these locations. We would normally finish around 16:00 hrs, so that we could get cleaned up and have an early meal, in case there were any problems in the convoy coming up, or you may have been detailed for guard duty that night.

The night guard was located each night at the M.T. park guardroom, commencing at 18:00 hrs till 06:00 next morning. This consisted of one NCO and six men. One man would patrol the M.T park and the other the living quarters. Time would be two hours on and four hours

off, repeated again for a second time. When you were off patrol you had to stay in the guardroom and try to get some sleep because you did not get any time off next day. The relief patrol for the living quarters had to be driven approx. half a mile and returning to pick him up. It was a long night on guard duties with all the noises from the jungle and you could never tell what was likely to come out, whether it was man or beast. All men sleeping at the living accommodation, would keep guns fully loaded and normally sleep with them under the mattress.

If we were to get a call from the convoy coming up, it would be after they had left the 19th mile stone, (approx 16:00hrs onwards). From our living quarters we could hear the noise of the engines laboring up the hill in low gear, a long time before they reached the top.

When we got a breakdown call we would get together as many men as possible, and fully armed, board the Dodge 15cwt, Ford recovery, and one other truck. We then awaited the arrival of an armoured car from the 4th Hussars. Until this arrived, we would not proceed down the hill, as this would be our only contact with the convoy, broken down vehicle, or the Hussars' base. When a vehicle in the convoy broke down, it was usually by-passed and left behind with a scout car.

Depending where the breakdown was and the position of the convoy, we might decide to wait till it arrived before we proceeded down. This was because the road was so narrow and there were not many places where vehicles could pass one another.

By the time we got to the breakdown and found a suitable place to turn round, it was already pitch black. Towing was a slow job, almost walking pace, and the recovery would be in first or second gear most of the time. To our advantage, it was getting cool so that did help engine temperatures.

Workshops had acquired some good heavy spotlights, that were mounted to swivel at any angle. They were fitted to the recovery, and Dodge 15 cwt, so they gave us a good sight of the road in front.

The number of breakdowns varied. Not many of our own lorries had problems, as they were highly maintained and thoroughly checked each day. Our drivers also got to know the road well but for others joining the convoy for the first time it was a very stressful journey.

You can now probably guess that the C.Ts knew our every movement, with the road winding and "U" turning backward and forward all the way up and with the noise of the engines in low gear, you could not hide that a convoy or patrol was on it's way.

The Royal Marine Commandos devised a good plan. One afternoon they filled the RASC (totally enclosed) Ration Truck, with Commandos. It was arranged that it would breakdown at a point beyond the 19th mile stone. We would do our normal recovery procedure ensuring, that we didn't get there before it got dark. After hitching up, we towed it to a specified location on the road, where it was thought a C.T camp was in the jungle. We stopped there for a few minutes to check the tow line and all of the Commando's jumped out into the jungle (we never did see them). Late next day, we received the news that they had found the camp and had killed several C.Ts. We received a thank you from the Marine's C.O. for our help and assistance.

Sometimes on the way down, you would see the Sakias ( little brown men) coming out of the jungle with their blow pipes, which contained poisonous darts. The women of the tribe didn't wear any clothing from the waist upwards, which was eye boggling to the troops.

Apart from being completely isolated in the C.H, and with the continual threat of terrorism, life was fairly relaxed when you could get off duty. We could wear civilian clothes and go outside the camp providing that we were in a party of no less than five and carried our guns.

The village of Tanah Rata was small with all of the shops, hotel, post office, and police station being on one side of the road. At the bottom right hand was the Padang, equivalent to the English village green. We would stroll up around the golf course and would be made welcome if we went to the married quarters of the senior NCOs and officers and would look after their children, if they wanted to go to the officers' or sergeants', messes.

We sometimes called into the Smoke House, (English pub), but beer was a lot cheaper in the NAAFI. From there it would be back to Tanah Rata via the jungle path and the Parritt Waterfalls, where you could have a swim in the cool mountain water that came from the surrounding hills (Not all of us at one time, for some had to remain on guard). Unfortunately, I understand those conditions were withdrawn in late 1951. Food was good, as the C.H, was a market garden area with fruit and salads plentiful, and you could have the choice of all the local dishes. Steak and chips and a couple of bottles of stout in the NAAFI was a good way to settle down for the night.

Occasionally, the AKC, (Army Kinema Corps), would come up to the CH to entertain us with a film show in the large hall of the BMH.

One incident, after the usual torrential rain which had continued for a few days, was that we received a report one evening that the Cameron Highlands bus and driver, (This was one of the converted 3 ton Dodges), had been buried under a landslide that was blocking the main road between Tana Rata and the Smoke House. This slide had also brought down the main power lines, so that the whole area was in total darkness. Having received the report, we quickly formed a rescue party and using the Dodge 15 cwt we got as many armed men on board as it would hold and proceeded to the Tanah Rata side of the landslide. We started digging (Using the 15cwt's headlights to see) for the vehicle we understood was buried, as we did not know if the driver was still in it. However, after an hour during which time we had to keep making a run for it, more mud and water kept coming down the hill. We decided to go around the back track and tackle the landslide from the other side. This track was very seldom used and came out at the Smoke House end of the golf course. It was very narrow ,twisting, and dangerous, and just the width of the 15cwt.

We got about halfway there and heard one almighty rumble. It was an avalanche of mud, stones, and trees, and it was coming down on us, pushing the truck off the road. It trapped two men, (One being, Roy South, who injured his leg), and we had to work quickly, with our bare hands, to get them out. We then pulled the Dodge back on to the track with the use of the winch. We proceeded to the Smoke House where we found the driver and vehicle safe and well. Fortunately, the telephone lines had not been knocked out from the Smoke House, so Roy telephoned Cpt Harris, explaining the situation, but the first words from him was, "Is the vehicle alright?" at which point Roy said something unprintable and hung up. It now meant that two vehicles could not get back to camp so we set off on foot carrying Roy, totally soaked, covered in mud, and very weary, back up to the landslide on the main road

where we were picked up by a truck on the other side. We took Roy to BMH, which also had no electricity or water, where he was stripped, dried off with towels, and put to bed. Next morning there was dried mud all round his bed with multi-coloured sheets. Fortunately his leg was only bruised so he was returned to duty next day.

One fatal day for 3 Company RASC "A" Platoon and Workshops section in the Cameron Highlands, was the 2nd March 1950. They had been asked to recover a Malaya Electricity Board truck that had gone off of the track and it had slid down deep into the jungle. This had happened deep down into the Blue Valley during the morning. In the afternoon, a recovery and escort group of RASC personnel was formed and in three vehicles, Jeep, 3ton Ford Recovery, and a 3ton truck, they proceeded to the Blue Valley. Sorry to say that they never got there for just beyond the village of Brinchang they were ambushed. The C.Ts had picked an ideal place. After a sharp bend, the road was straight but had a large incline, which slowed down the vehicles.

The road was banked to the right with jungle overgrowth hanging over, and to the left it dropped away. Towards the top left was a large mound, where the road had originally been cut through. From there you had a good view of the road downwards. Just after the 3 ton truck got round the bottom sharp bend and it was a long way back, all hell was let loose. In the front Jeep Lt.Richards, and Sgt. Ritter, were instantly killed. In the front of the Ford Recovery, L/Cpl Hoggatt, and Mr. Gates, official of the MEB. were also instantly killed. In the front of the 3ton truck, Driver Jones was instantly killed and Cpl Hand died 5 days later from wounds. Most of the group were wounded, some seriously. Two managed to get away to raise the alarm but by the time help came it was too late. All that was left to do was to clear up one bloody great mess. First priority being to get the wounded to the BMH

The following day the dead were taken down the hill and buried in the Christian cemetery at Batu Gajah, Nr. Ipoh. In all, 9 RASC, along with many other servicemen, are interned there and it is affectionately known as, "Gods Little Acre". As usual, the investigation after the event revealed many follies.

Complacency was one of the biggest factors. You must be on your guard at all times, and expect trouble where-ever you went. Though it was known that CTs lay in ambush positions for days waiting for an appropriate target, they were certainly well prepared for this one. This road was generally quiet with only vegetable lorries, some planters, and patrols of the Guards, using it. The Cts had been given too much time to prepare and must have been tipped off. We had a large number of civilians that lived, and worked in our camp area. Telephone communications were very open and general security was poor. The call for the recovery vehicle came in during the morning but they did not go out until the afternoon. Assistance from the Coldstream Guards or the 4th Hussars, who had camps in the area, had not been requested.

In the RASC guardroom/armoury, there were no less than 12 Bren light machine guns, and not one had been taken out. Also RASC, had no radio Communications.

About six months later we completed the recovery, of the MEB truck under totally different conditions. We were well armed with Brens and had an escort of Coldstream Guards and armoured cars of the 4th Hussars, with radio. One visit we made to the Guards' camp at Hopetoun, we saw the Dyak head hunters that were brought from Borneo as trackers. They would show us the human heads that they had

shrunk to a very small size. We did take photos but they were confiscated, as it was thought they might get back to the British press. There were many other incidents that at the time were all part of the job, and the memory is fading, and some I would not like to repeat.

That's all for the moment but I shall be telling you more about our involvement in the Briggs Plan, convoy work, moving the Regiments around the country, and our trips out to the various units to carry out inspection and repairs.