

THE BUILDING OF A MALAYAN JUNGLE FORT

FORT KEMAR

1953

By

Dennis Wombell

INTRODUCTION

Browsing one day recently on my computer, I happened to look up Fort Kemar and found a site which describes it as it now looks. I was incensed to see that the site includes a photograph of a wall commemorating the building of the Fort and is inscribed

KUBU KEMAR
DI-ISTIHAR PEMBUKAAN
OLEH SAS REG
PADA TH 1952
PADA MEREKA YANG
TELAH BERBAKTI

The following is account of the building of the fort by the Malays of the Malayan Police 18 Federal Jungle Company in 1953.

THE BUILDING OF FORT KEMAR 1953

1

In the early 1950's when the Malayan Emergency was at its height, the terrorists of the Malayan Communist Party were on the run in both the urban and rural areas of the country. Their supplies, especially of food, had been severely disrupted by the establishment of the defended new villages, where food for the inhabitants was strictly controlled. Life had also been made more tenuous for them by the increase in informers through the buildup of the government intelligence services. As a result, many of their groups had retreated deep into the jungle of the central mountain chain, areas somewhat neglected up to this time by the security forces. In their deep jungle camps the terrorists sought and found the security they desperately needed to grow their own food, to re-group and to train new recruits. They were largely assisted in this by befriending or intimidating the aborigine tribes who roamed the interior.

The aborigines, the Orang Asli as they are now known, were a shy, timid and simple people who lived in the stone-age. They were nomadic and lived as family groups in longhouses raised upon stilts in small jungle clearings in which they grew their staple food crops of tapioca, maize and, in some areas, dry rice. After only two or three seasons, or after a death in the family, they would burn their house and move on to new pastures. They fished and hunted using blowpipes with poison darts and they were skilled in making traps of bamboo and rattan. Their jungle craft was unequalled and their tracking skills made it impossible to move anywhere in their tribal areas without their knowledge.

It requires no stretch of the imagination therefore to understand how valuable these people were to the Communist terrorists and how essential it was for the guerillas to cultivate them; and this they did. The Asli knew nothing of the outside world, of government or politics and they were happy to accept at face value, these, apparently, friendly Chinese strangers who convinced them that they were their friends. It also helped that there had been some contact between Communists guerillas and the Asli during the war when the same men had been seen in association with British officers in the fight against the Japanese. This enabled the terrorists to live and cultivate their own crops, largely undisturbed and to receive from the Asli information of security forces movements in the area.

It was obvious that a government presence was required in these areas and it was decided to establish a chain of jungle forts deep in the interior manned by units of the Malayan Police. These were not to be true forts a la Beau Geste, but well-defended jungle camps, the buildings constructed, as are Malay kampong houses, largely from timber cut from the surrounding jungle. Other requirements required for the construction were to be supplied by airdrop.

The role of the forts was to dominate the area in which they were to be situated by providing a permanent police/military base from which to seek out and destroy communist terrorists and their camps and to compromise their courier routes. An equally important role was to bring government to the Orang Asli by providing them in the areas of the forts with medicine, schools and shops and also, eventually, to provide a base for the Department for the Protection of Aborigines. It was hoped furthermore to persuade the Asli to abandon their nomadic way of life and settle around the area of the fort where land would be made available for the more effective farming of their food crops.

II

The forts were to be manned by the Malayan Police Jungle Companies - independent police para-military units, each identical to an army infantry company in its function and structure and led by both British and Malayan officers. At this time I was a Police Lieutenant and platoon commander in 18 Police Federal Jungle Company, based in a camp on the bank of the Sungei Perak near Grik, a small remote town 15 miles south of the Malaya-Thai border and it was we who were given the task of establishing the country's most northern fort, deep in the jungle in the area of the Sungei Temengor close to the Perak-Kelantan border; and I was selected, with my platoon, to carry it out.

My platoon consisted of 30 Malay constables, all conscripts, except for my sergeant and corporals who were members of the regular police force. We had been together for two years and by this time they were jungle-hardened warriors in whom I had total trust. My sergeant, Mohamed Yusoff, was a sterling character - a first class leader, likeable and highly respected by the men. I had absolute confidence in them all.

We were also to be accompanied by D Squadron of 21 SAS from the British army. This squadron with its 4 troops was to be deployed over a large area surrounding the fort, to supply a security screen during construction. An equally important role was to seek out and make contact with the scattered and isolated Aborigine groups in an effort to persuade them to visit the fort site where they would be acquainted with our intentions and asked to help with the fort construction for which they would be paid.

In order to avoid confusion every military operation is given its own individual designation and the operation to locate a site for, and to build, our fort was to be `Operation Hardcastle`. The name of the Fort to be decided at a later date.

III

In mid- February 1953 our party, consisting of myself with my platoon and accompanied by our Company Commander Gary Lockington, left our camp on the bank of the Sungei Perak and, following the river, marched for the Sungei Temengor, a tributary of the Sungei Perak, deep in the interior of the jungle-covered hills which run, like a spine, down the centre of the country. We also had with us a small advance party of the SAS, the main body of which was to march in three or four days after us.

This was just before the introduction of troop-carrying helicopters and the march in, carrying a full scale of weapons and packs weighing between 40 and 60lbs was arduous and exhausting. Two words can best describe life in the jungle in these circumstances - wet and stinking. Wet from rain or sweat or both, and stinking because one wears the same clothes day after day for the duration of an operation, changing into a dry set, kept in one's pack, only at night. One of my most abiding memories of life in the jungle, even after half a century, is of changing, upon getting up in the morning, from the warm dry clothes in which I had slept, into my cold, wet and stinking jungle-green uniform, which had hung, overnight, from a dripping bush outside my basha. But God help the man who was tempted to keep his spare dry clothes on!

To march following rivers in the jungle, in hilly country, is especially difficult, and even more so in a country where there is so much rain. The track, if there is one, is invariably narrow and, more often than not, on a steep hillside, often with a precipitous drop down to the river and, for the men in the rear, deep in the mud churned up by those in front. There are massive fallen trees to climb over - not easy when carrying a full pack and a sidearm - and every two or three hundred yards, a stream to wade through, often waist deep. On tracks used by the Asli one would sometimes find a short cut across a long loop in the winding river, but this meant climbing the hill which had caused the river to loop in the first place.

The tracks are also infested with mosquitoes and leeches, the leeches hanging from the leaves of the undergrowth to drop off onto passing man or animal. One became accustomed to the leeches and unconcerned - we learnt not to pull

them off, which often resulted in a nasty difficult-to-heal ulcer. Touched with salt or ash from the previous night's fire and carried in an ammunition pouch, they would drop off harmlessly. In this way it was possible to remove the more obvious leeches on arms, necks and faces on the march, but not those in inaccessible places - they easily penetrated the laceholes of boots for instance - and these were left to gorge themselves until one stripped off at the end of the day and removed them from bleeding legs, back and stomach, and consigned them to the fire. Mosquitoes, on the other hand, gave one sleepless nights and, if one didn't take one's Paludrine religiously - almost certainly, Malaria.

My little Malays took all this in their stride. Not only were the majority of them kampong Malays who were at home in the jungle, but they had also operated in these conditions for over two years and consequently were hardened to it. Not so the SAS troopers and it was by no means the Regiment's finest hour. It is well documented that the SAS, after its revival for service in the Malayan Emergency, had gone through hard times and many of its troopers were well below the standard which would eventually be required of a man with an aspiration to join the Regiment and which would serve in future years to make them one of the finest Special Forces in the world. A majority of them were unfit, they were unaccustomed at this time to operating for long periods in deep jungle and their discipline left much to be desired. Many of them were what was known in those days, as 'Canteen Cowboys'. On the march, several of them collapsed and as my Malays casually stepped over one Irish trooper who lay across the track with his equipment strewn about him, he called out to me "Holy Mary mutter o' God sorr, I'm f...ing-well doyin"!

IV

It took nearly four days to march to the area in which we were to locate the fort and upon arrival we set up camp beside the Sungei Temengor about 12 miles south of Kampong Temengor, an isolated abandoned Malay kampong surrounded by jungle. Our camp site, had, at some time in the not-too-distant past, been an Orang Asli ladang and required little clearing to enable us to receive the much needed airdrop of food on the following morning. We wasted no time and on the morning after the airdrop, leaving the main body to clear a larger airdrop zone (DZ) and a helicopter landing pad (LZ), Gary Lockington and I took a small party and commenced our search for a suitable site for the fort. In fact, the area we had already marked on our maps during the planning of the operation proved to be ideal. It was a flat area on a narrow strip of land between the Temengor and one of its tributaries - the Sungei Kemar - which ran parallel to it for about 3 miles. At one point the two rivers curved towards each other making a bottle neck just wide enough for the fort, but then widening again to provide a large flat area eminently suitable for an air drop zone and a helicopter landing pad. The land was 30 or 40 feet above the two rivers and not overlooked from any side. It was, therefore, easily defended and provided an excellent supply of clean water.

In our absence, the working party at the camp had completed the clearing of the DZ and LZ and we were able to receive a second airdrop of food, supplies and tools required for the fort construction on the 25th February. It also enabled Lt.Col. Sloane, commanding officer of 22 SAS, to come in by helicopter on the 26th February to visit his squadron HQ in the vicinity of my camp, the main body of the Squadron having been deployed in the surrounding areas. He returned on the same day taking with him Gary Lockington who, after he had briefed me and after we had agreed on the location of the fort, returned to our camp in Grik.

During the initial stages of the operation, the SAS, commanded by a Captain Dare Newell, experienced considerable difficulties with their wireless sets. Initially, their powerful transmitter, operating from our camp in Grik had overridden our police radio signals and they had had to move it. A few days later, every one of the 62 sets carried by their 4 troops operating independently in the jungle and the 68 set at their squadron HQ in our camp was defective. Not only could the patrols not communicate with their squadron HQ but squadron HQ could not communicate with their Regimental HQ and they were reduced to having to use our police sets and network. This proved to be very difficult since all sets were in constant use during daylight hours, largely due to the weakness of our signals from the area in which our signallers worked and it required enormous patience and persistence on their part to transmit

and receive long messages, usually by morse code, which, although time consuming, was more clearly received than verbal communication, which for most of the time was impossible. New sets were quickly acquired by airdrop to the SAS and the situation settled down. Even so, given the primitive sets of those days communications from deep jungle were always tenuous.

V

Now that we had the essential tools, work on the fort began in earnest and I decided that we would remain in our original camp until the fort site had been sufficiently cleared to allow us to move there. Each day, leaving one section to guard the camp and to continue to make it more comfortable, the fort working party, consisting of my other two sections, marched there after an early breakfast and returned in the evening before dark. It was a demanding regime but it did mean that every man would be given one day of light duties in three.

Our first task was to completely clear the fort area of jungle - a formidable task given the number and size of some of the vast trees and that it was to be done by hand. My Malay boys were completely at home in this environment. Clearing and felling trees, constructing houses of timber and roofing them with attap was second nature to them, but without the large workforce provided by the Orang Asli it would have taken months - but we need not have worried. Within the first few days of our arrival small groups trickled in and the trickle turned into a flood - some led in by the SAS and others, who had heard of it on the jungle grapevine had come out of curiosity - men, women and children, all hugely enthusiastic and keen to enlist in one form or another. They are a very friendly, happy and simple people and it took no time to establish a rapport with them. When we explained that we had to come to build a camp, for which they would be paid to help us, and to provide them with a school, a medical centre and a shop, their enthusiasm knew no bounds. We enlisted those we needed and welcomed their many camp followers.

The day after receiving our first airdrop of food, supplies and building equipment, work started in earnest. My Malays, working alongside the Asli, started to cut, clear and burn the smaller trees and undergrowth with axes and parangs whilst, at the same time, those Asli skilled in the use of the *beliong*, started on the huge jungle trees - some of them 200 feet high and many with large projecting buttresses spreading to a circumference thirty to forty feet and resembling, at the base, the fins of a rocket. The *beliong* is a light axe with a small razor-sharp blade, rather like the blade one sees on a stone-age axe, tied with rattan to the end of a curved 2 or 3 foot long flexible stem, cut from a sapling and carved at the end to form a cylindrical grip. In the hands of an expert it is unbelievably effective and two skilled men cutting with absolute precision and each using his *beliong* like a whip were able to cut down the very largest jungle tree in a remarkably short time. Their technique was to cut the trunk by encircling the tree with a bamboo platform just below the buttresses and for the two men to work on opposite sides of the tree. The problem with this method was that by cutting above the buttresses, a very large stump remained which had to be removed by another method - explosives.

Our expert in the use of explosives was Captain Gordon Smith - a Royal Engineer officer serving with the SAS. and he and I blew up anything which needed to be blown up. It was great fun, and although it was not my function, I wasn't going to miss it. We used Composition C-3, a plastic explosive which looks like sticks of marzipan wrapped in greaseproof paper. It has the consistency of plasticine, is easily moulded into any shape or packed into any hole and it was ideal for blowing large tree stumps out of the ground. It was activated using a bobbin-shaped guncotton primer with a detonator pressed into it and then a length of burning fuse, long enough to keep us out of harm's way when fired. We also used Cordtex - an explosive in the form of a white plastic cable. Using this we were able to make a 'daisy chain', or ringmain, of C-3, rather like an electric circuit, and blow up a number of connected charges simultaneously. The vast explosion caused by blowing up a whole series of large trees or stumps instantaneously, caused huge merriment and awe amongst the Orang Asli who would dance about and scream with laughter like children, as they watched from the protection of trees and trenches. It was also possible to cut small trees by wrapping a length of Cordtex around round them and detonating it.

VI

An interlude in my own work at the fort presented itself on the 2nd March when two Orang Asli came running into the camp from their longhouse down the river to tell me that one of their men had been attacked and badly injured by a bear and they needed our help. It was an incident that was to end in a Buster Keaton farce! The brown bear of the Malayan jungle is not huge - fully grown, it is about the size of a man; it is seldom seen and poses little danger - but unfortunately for him, the injured man had stumbled across a female with cubs, and in this situation the Malayan bear - in common with the females of all species - is very dangerous. I immediately took a small patrol with food for a couple days and we arrived at the Asli ladang by late afternoon and found that the injured man had been almost scalped by the bear's claws. Whilst my medical orderly attended to his injuries and I radioed for a helicopter casualty evacuation for the following day, the men prepared to make camp on a flat sandy area beside the river and below the longhouse, which was a little way up the hill. The wild ginger, which was the only thing growing on the site, was easily cleared and we started to unpack our kit, light fires to prepare our evening meal and settle down for the night. Then, all hell broke loose. Two men tore into our camp shouting "Gajah! Gajah! Chapat, mari ka sahaya punya rumah, lari lari chapat" Elephant, elephant, come to my house, run, run, hurry up! We wasted no time in unceremoniously stuffing anything we could lay our hands on into our pack's, and, with the rest in our arms, fled, like a pack of tinkers, to the longhouse. The men were given an area at one end of the longhouse to sort out their kit and put down their blankets, but I was given a very small room which projected from the rear of the house. Thus far, no elephant. Then, just after I had fallen asleep, I was awakened by screaming and shouting and felt the floor under me trembling as the earth shook beneath the building. It took no stretch of the imagination to know that the elephant had not only arrived, but had arrived at the rear of the building and was very close to my projecting room. Then the entire population of the longhouse, after making flaming torches out of split bamboos which they had plunged into the fire which burned in the middle of the floor on an earth hearth, hurtled out of the building, waving their torches, banging tin cans and shouting abuse at the elephant who, upon finding there was no female elephant to be found after all, retreated back into the jungle. Having joined in the general mayhem, my men and I returned to our blankets for a good night's sleep. Or so we thought! For, about an hour later the same thing happened again - my floor shook, the earth trembled and there was great deal of thudding and trumpeting outside, seemingly uncomfortably close to my room and with the same result. This time however, the Orang Asli appeared rather less interested, even rather bored. Fewer turned out, the flaming torches had become burning stumps and the initial `general mayhem` might be better described as a `shooing away`. Anyway, it did the trick and Jumbo retired. Or, sort of. He continued to snuffle, grunt and thud around for the rest of the night, seemingly much too close to where I lay, but no one could be bothered to get up any more, and, whilst everyone else slept the sleep of the dead, I lay awake for the rest of the night listening to the thud and rumbling of this very large elephant convinced that at any moment he would be joining me in my very small sticking-out-room. I was glad and relieved to seeing the light of the dawn and, after breakfast, I was called by the Asli headman to go down to see what was to have been our campsite, to find everything, including any tins we had left behind, totally flattened. The casevac helicopter arrived mid-morning and our casualty was safely removed to Ipoh hospital. There were times during the night when I thought I might be joining him!

VII

By the end of the first week we had cleared enough jungle at the fort area to enable us to move there and to set up a more permanent and more comfortable camp and we received our first airdrop at the fort itself on the 5th. March. By the 10th we had cleared and levelled the helicopter landing pad and were ready to receive visitors. Life became a great deal easier; it was no longer necessary to split up my platoon in order to leave a section at the camp, nor did we have to endure the daily trudge to and from the fort and we established a comfortable working routine.

As on all prolonged jungle operations we received an airdrop every 4 days and these initial drops were substantial. In addition to our normal requirements of food and supplies for my platoon, we needed a constant supply of construction tools and equipment for the building of the fort. We also needed a significant amount of rice, dried fish,

salt and tobacco, used as currency to pay our large Orang Asli workforce, to whom, at that stage, cash was of little use. It was an endless list, all to be dropped by parachute from Valetta aircraft. Although, for most of the time, we lived on tinned operational rations, known as `compo` rations, we also received a supplement of fresh meat and vegetables with every drop. These were very popular given the conditions in which we lived. I was also able to order personal items for myself and my men through the civilian Rations Supply Contractor in Kuala Lumpur, who, it appeared, was able to procure almost anything, and I tested him to the full. He obviously saw this as a challenge, and far from showing irritation or impatience, he supplied me with, amongst other things, Dunhill`s curved briar pipes, their `My Mixture` pipe tobacco, and various obscure Turkish cigarettes! The men also were able to order their cigarettes and tobacco and other supplements to enhance their basic rations. An account was kept of all these personal purchases which had to be paid for by the individual at the end of the operation.

There was great excitement and anticipation on airdrop days. The drops usually took place at about 11.00 am, and, after breakfast, a bonfire was prepared at the edge of the DZ, ready to provide smoke to enable the pilot to locate his target from a distance, since, in deep jungle, a clearing can be seen only from directly overhead. The smoke also indicates the speed and direction of the wind. Large translucent yellow cloth recognition panels were also pegged out in the centre of the clearing - in my case in the form of an `F` - to enable the pilot and his despatch crew to identify us. No one, who has lived for any length of time in isolation and cut off from the outside world, will ever forget the drone of an approaching aircraft, or the clopper-clopper of a helicopter, bringing news, food, cigarettes, and, above all, the mail, with letters from friends and family. Initially, the pilot would fly over in a `dry run`, and then, having checked the recognition panel and the wind, would turn in a wide circle and return to commence his drop, one load at a time and circling until the drop was completed. He would then fly over once more, dipping his wings and, with a salute from the despatcher standing at the open door, disappear over the jungle covered hills.

On the ground, the excitement would then begin, as the men, helped by hoardes of screaming, laughing, Orang Asli children would run down to the DZ, cut the straps binding the boxes which made up the loads and carry them back to a central point in the camp where Sergeant Yusoff and I would supervise the distribution, finishing with the men`s personal items - their longed-for mail, their even more-longed-for cigarettes and the various spices which helped enhance their `compo` rations and fresh food allowance. The evening after an airdrop was one of great contentment, when, after the day`s work was finished, the fresh food was cooked, the mail read and the men whose cigarettes had been exhausted, were able to relax in their smoke-filled bashas.

VIII

By this time we had established an excellent relationship with the Orang Asli for whom I had both respect and admiration. They were the most primitive people I had ever met and they had the innocence of children. Very few of them had ever seen a vehicle, an aeroplane, a helicopter, a gun, an explosive or a white man, and witnessing their sheer awe at seeing these things for the first time was a joy. They had nothing which they did not make themselves from materials found in the jungle in which they lived, nor did they have any food which they themselves did not grow, catch or hunt and, because they had nothing, there was nothing to steal and because they were not violent there was no crime. They were, in short, a very happy unmaterialistic people. On the other hand they were the masters of the jungle. Their hunting, trapping, fishing and tracking skills were unrivalled and they were marksmen with their blowpipes armed with poison darts. They were expert house builders and could navigate their bamboo rafts down the fiercest of rapids. The men wore only a small loin cloth and the women were bare breasted, but there was never even the slightest hint of immodesty. Happily, their presence was taken for granted by my men who behaved at all times with absolute propriety. It was sad that, eventually, the Aborigine Department in Kuala Lumpur could not accept this situation, and, having decided that our Orang Asli ladies should have their breasts covered, sent in, in one of our airdrops, a consignment of bras. Worn without a blouse, these made our pretty, innocent Orang Asli girls look like cheap cabaret girls and I ordered the bras to be collected and burnt! Those girls who wished to cover themselves above the waist and had no blouse, were perfectly able to do so in the manner to which they were accustomed, by folding their sarongs above their breasts.

Pretty well all living things were food to the Asli and the ladies were especially adept at catching rats. Their technique was to make a squeaking sound by sucking between a finger and thumb over an area of rat holes and to listen for the young rats` squeaking reply. Upon hearing from where the sound came, they would plunge a pointed stick into the ground and catch the rats in their hands as they ran out of the holes. They cooked them as they did all their meat, by throwing them onto a large fire, and, after scraping the burnt fur off the skin, would pick off and eat the meat. I occasionally took large groups of the men down-river for a fishing trip, using, I am now ashamed to say, explosives. These were either in the form of a couple of sticks of our C-3 plastic explosive with a lighted fuse or a hand grenade. Either of these, thrown into a large deep pool would result in the eruption of hundreds of dead fish floating on the surface to be collected by the hoardes of cheering, screaming Asli men and children leaping into the river to scoop up baskets of fish. I had a slight problem with the hand grenades which had two types of fuse, one which detonated the grenade 5 seconds after throwing it, and the other a 7 second fuse which enabled the grenade to be fired from a rifle attachment and required the extra 2 seconds before exploding. Unfortunately, when we ran out of 5 second fuses, I found that the 7 second fuse frightened the fish away before exploding. My technique in this case was to pull out the pin of the grenade, and, holding it fizzing in my hand, count up to three before throwing it. This technique was successful, but decidedly unpopular with those in my immediate vicinity who were inclined to disappear behind trees until they heard that the grenade had exploded in the river and not in my hand! These fishing days, seen as rest days, were days for great celebration and not a great deal of work was done by either my men or the Asli, all of whom gorged themselves on the most delicious fresh fish - manna from heaven for the Asli!

The most rewarding aspect of the whole fort-building operation was, to me personally, the medical help we were able to bring to the Asli, who, up to that time had only their own, largely ineffective, native herbal treatments. Initially we had only our own platoon medical orderly, but even he was able to make a huge difference to the Asli by treating the simpler ailments, the usual wounds, fevers and septic sores. He was able to clean up the very large wounds but lacked the courage to stitch them up. I took on this role myself with an ordinary sewing needle and boiled strong thread, the patient being held down by two of the beefier members of the platoon.

But the greatest scourge among the Asli at that time was Yaws - a flesh eating disease closely related to Syphilis but not sexually transmitted. It resembles leprosy, in that large areas of flesh are eaten away, causing disfigurement and eventually death. Some sufferers had large septic craters in their faces and I remember one little boy brought in to the fort with most of his backside eaten away. And yet, this dreadful disease was easily cured by the M & B tablets which we carried on operations at all times and were seen as a cure-all. They were produced by May and Baker in 1936 and were the first effective sulphanomides in the treatment of infection prior to the discovery of penicillin and to soldiers in the field they were a lifesaver. Once we had spread the word we soon had a daily queue of yaws sufferers at our medical hut and within a very short time theirs sores were seen to be healing. Within months of the completion of the fort, yaws had almost disappeared from the Asli community in the area. After finding that one Asli lady had made a paste of her tablets and rubbed it into her sores, I attended the daily yaws parade myself and ensured that the tablets were swallowed on the spot by all!!

IX

Meanwhile, we were making good progress and on the 11th March I was able to report on my radio that "Work on Fort going well. Everybody happy. Men moral high and no complaints" The clearing of the trees on the site, however, was painstaking work and it was not until the 20th that it was completed and we were able to start erecting the buildings. Once we had started, and given the skill of my own men, coupled with that of the Orange Asli, these went up in quick succession and I was able to report on the 4th April `All buildings completed. Only clearing and wiring one side of perimeter remains.` In 3 weeks we had built an Admin Block; a Main Dining Hall/Cookhouse; an Officers` and Orderlies` Quarters and Kitchen; 3 large Barrack Blocks; a Canteen for the men; a Shop and School for the Orang Asli; a Medical Room; an Orderly Room/Office; and, in the centre of the fort, a strongly defended Command Post for use in the event of attack. The buildings were constructed in the Malay style

and raised upon stilts. Small trees were used for the main frames which were covered with attap roofs laid upon split bamboo laths. Split bamboo was also used for the walls and for the raised sleeping platforms which ran the whole length of one side of the barrack blocks where the men slept and kept their kit. We had also constructed the defences, consisting of slit trenches with sandbag ramparts on all sides and at the corners of the fort and within the barbed wire perimeter which had the added protection of a wide barbed-wire `carpet`.

X

On the 7th April all work on the Fort was complete; we were able to clear our temporary camp and move in, and, at the same time, the SAS, who were no longer needed, were taken out by helicopter. A few days earlier I had received a signal to inform me that the Deputy High Commissioner, Sir Donald MacGillivray, was to visit the fort on the 10th and was to stay the night. The officer who was to replace me was also to come in with his platoon by helicopter on the same day and I would leave on the 12th. This meant tidying the place up and attempting to ensure that my men, who had been in the jungle for two months, looked reasonably presentable. I had also to prepare for our departure. A couple of weeks earlier the Asli headmen had put it to me, that they were able to take us the entire way back to our camp in Grik by raft - an offer too good to be refused! The journey was to be in two stages - the first down the Sungei Temengor on small 2-3 man rafts and then down the much bigger Sungei Perak on 6-8 man rafts. After negotiating a price it was agreed that the rafts were to be built and made ready for our departure on the 12th April.

The 10th then, was a busy day. My replacement, John Abercrombie (later to be killed on an operation in South Thailand) arrived early and I was able to show him round and then leave him to conduct the arrival of his men and settle them in. Sir Donald arrived in the afternoon with his entourage and after inspecting the guard, was shown around the fort and introduced to our Asli population who had arranged an entertainment for the evening. This consisted of our sitting around a bonfire in the centre of a large circle of our entire Asli population and watching a group of the men dance on a low split-bamboo platform. They were accompanied by the girls who sat in line on one side of the platform, singing and beating out the rhythm with short tube-like sections of bamboo, each of a different length, which they pounded on a long length of thick bamboo which lined one side of the platform. The dancers wore only their loin cloths and crowns of mengkuang, whilst the girls, who had beautifully painted faces, wore sarongs and covered their breasts with strings of interlaced mengkuang necklaces. As it went on, the dancing became increasingly frenetic, the tempo increased and the dancers worked themselves into a trance, believing themselves to be possessed of spirits of the dead. As the exhausted dancers fell out one by one, the evening gradually drew to a close and we all retired to bed. It was a Grande Finale and I felt, as I retired wearily to my quarter, that our job was done and our Fort Kemar was now well and truly established!

The following day, after bidding farewell to Sir Donald, I handed the Fort over to Abercrombie and on the morning of the 12th we loaded up the bamboo rafts which lay waiting for us on the river beneath the Fort and set off for home - our camp on the bank of the Sungei Perak. The Temengor is quite a small river and so the rafts for the first stage of the journey could be no more than about 4 feet wide and could take only 2 men who sat on a raised bamboo platform bound to the centre of the deck with their kit tied on beside them. Each man had his personal weapon tied to his waist with a long piece of rope, enabling him to use his weapon if required but ensuring that it could not be lost in the event of the raft capsizing. Each raft was navigated by two Orang Asli who stood, one at the bow and the other at the stern and steered with long bamboo pole. We pushed off in convoy and embarked on a never-to-be-forgotten journey. The Temengor descends steeply downhill from its headwaters in the hills through a myriad of narrow gorges of cascading, foaming, white water, and I shall never know how we managed to stay on our rafts - as did the Asli `drivers` - but stay on we did, and not a single man nor a piece of kit went overboard. The Asli `drivers` were remarkable. As they navigated the rafts down the rapids, they screamed at each other and to the spirits of the river in a state of great excitement stabbing their poles against the rocks to either side and, as we plunged into the water at the foot of each gorge, we were submerged up to the waist until the raft shot up again to the surface like a cork. By late afternoon we emerged onto the calm waters of the Sungei Perak and disembarked

onto a large sandbank, where we found waiting for us another group of Asli with the five larger rafts we had ordered. These rafts were able to take 6 men and, again, had a crew of two, but this time the man at the stern had a bamboo rudder with which to steer the raft. After camping for the night and drying off, we embarked again on the following morning for the final stretch home - something of an anti- climax after the wildness of the Sungei Temengor as we floated gently along on the Perak River. By late afternoon we were home and our adventure was at an end.

FOOTNOTE

I have to pay tribute to my undervalued young Malay conscript boys, most of them unworldly young men taken from their kampongs to engage in an experience they would never have dreamt of and which they handled, as they did in all operations we undertook, with tenacity, courage and loyalty. I pay tribute also to my NCOs of the Regular FMP - especially my Sergeant Mohamed Yusoff - who guided and led these young boys with sympathy and understanding and behaved like older brothers to them. I trusted them all totally and am proud to have led them.

Menthorpe
Selby
North Yorkshire
United Kingdom
November 2011