

Royal Army Service Corps In Malaya 1948/60

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The Malay States had always presented a good and happy example of British Colonial rule over the years. As a result of the development in the growth of rubber and tin mining, Malaya became one of the richest areas of the Empire.

In 1930 however, the Malayan Communist Party had come into existence; it was outlawed but, following the Japanese invasion in December 1941 it became a resistance movement adopting the title of, "The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army".

The sudden collapse of Japan in 1945, served as impetus to this so-called army, which had by then acquired a vast quantity of Japanese and British weapons and was disbanded in December 1945 on the return of British administration. However, the Communist element and doctrines lingered on.

On February 1st 1948, the new Federation of Malaya came into existence and in the same month there was a revival of the Communist movement, the active element of which, called itself, "The People's Anti-British Army". This was later changed, to "Malayan Races, Liberation Army" an organisation that, in April came out in the open with acts of sabotage, intimidation, and murder of workers at the tin mines and on the rubber estates. By June such attacks had been extended to Europeans.

The seriousness of the situation was such, that a "State of Emergency" was declared on the 16th June 1948. At the start of the Emergency, the infantry component of the garrison in Malaya consisted of one British battalion of The Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry covering North Malaya, six Gurkha Battalions, and two Malay Regiments. In addition, 26 Field Regiment Royal Artillery was stationed at Tampin, to the South, near Malacca, (Which was quickly re-organized, and used in an infantry role), but later returned to use their 25 pounders to shell the jungle. All of these units were redeployed throughout Malaya, in support of the Malayan Police Force, which was not equipped to fight rebellion, which indeed the situation rapidly became. These forces were reinforced in August 1948 by the Seaforth Highlanders stationed at Segamat, North Johore and the Devonshire Regiment in Bentong, Pahang. Both regiments having been part of the Singapore Garrison.

By the end of September reinforcements began to arrive from the U.K

The 4th Queens Own Royal Hussars, an armoured car Regiment their HQ being at Ipoh, Perak. Other Squadrons and troops were also detached to the Cameron Highlands, Kuala Kangsar, K.L, Seremban and Kuantan on the East Coast.

This was followed by the 2nd Guards Brigade consisting of the 3rd Grenadier Guards, stationed at Sungei Besi to the South of Kuala Lumpur.

The 2nd Scots Guards, to the North of Kuala Lumpur at Batu Arang, and KKB (Kuala Kubu Bharu), with the 2nd Coldstream Guards at Tapah, in Perak to the North, and also in the Cameron Highlands in the state of Pahang.

16th Field Ambulance, RAMC/RASC, REME Workshop, RE Field Squadron, 3 Company RASC, (Gen Tpt) covered an area from Selangor south of Kuala Lumpur to as far North as Tapah Perak, and the Cameron Highlands.

At this stage none of these Regiments had been given any Jungle training

At the outset, the Army lacked essential information about the enemy, soon to be referred to as, "terrorists", or "bandits", or CT's, - Communist terrorists.

The RASC element in Malaya was established on a peacetime basis and spread through the army districts. At the time of the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Royal Indian Army Service Corps (RIASC) was undertaking some 50% of the supply & transport. The last RIASC transport unit did not leave Malaya until 11th December 1947, some four months, after the granting of independence to India.

The peacetime build-up of the RASC, really only started after the departure of the RIASC in 1947. At the end of that year the RASC were just coping with all the problems of a large garrison and were very much under strength at this stage.

Gaps were filled by wholesale engagement of civilian clerks, store men, and other grades, to enable the units to keep going.

It was soon realised that with a shortage of British soldiers, the RASC would have to rely on locally enlisted personnel (LEP's) to bring the units up to strength, then changed to MORs (Malayan Other Ranks). Also, the British RASC, officers, and COs, would have to command and administer the Malayan Other Ranks, (MORs) drawn from all races in Malaya.

Accordingly, the RASC School at Nee Soon Singapore was organized, to undertake the training of MORs, both preliminary and trade. It was at this period of build-up and reorganization that the Emergency started in June 1948.

Many of the RASC units at this time were a mixed bag of British and Malay other ranks, and locally employed civilians.

The MORs were still semi-trained and largely an unknown factor. Indeed, cheerful soldiers but only partly understood by many of their British officers and NCOs, both sides having to overcome the language difficulty.

The supply units located in the centres of military populations worked hard and coped well. The main RASC Supply Depots were

- No.1 n/r Batu Caves Kuala Lumpur
- No.2 Taiping Perak
- No.3 Ipoh Perak
- No.4 Supply Reserve Depot Singapore

Regarding transport units there was a shortage of vehicles and those that did exist were well beyond their "sell by date". This necessitated considerable hiring of vehicles from local contractors to carry out non-operational tasks. Even this was not easy at that time for there were few on the market. The problem was partly solved by transferring vehicles from disbanded units, other than RASC, to civilian contractors.

The army provided petrol and spares so you can imagine what happened ! As the RASC build up continued they were withdrawn, and I had the job of getting them back to Johore in March 1949. It took nearly a week with nearly 50% in tow.

The immediate problems of the RASC, on the outbreak of the emergency, were firstly, to maintain the troop carrying requirements of infantry units engaged in jungle operations and supplement the regiment's own transport and secondly, the provision of a suitable ration pack for the Gurkhas and Malays to carry with them on these operations.

Gradually, as the tempo of operations increased with more troops moving into the jungle away from their regimental headquarters.

So the requirements for supply by air became apparent. Air supply was to become the main operational function of the RASC throughout the campaign.

The stepping up of the transport effort by RASC motor transport units was completed by providing vehicles to the battalions to lift patrols in and out of the edge of the jungle.

15cwt trucks were popular for taking patrols along estate roads.

In the Cameron Highlands, No 3 Coy RASC "A" Pltn. provided 6 Jeeps to take patrols down into the valleys and jungle tracks.

6 trucks were converted into buses to ferry army hospital patients from the Tapah Road Railway Station up to the British Military Hospital in the Cameron Highlands; a road some 38 miles long climbing some 5,000ft into the jungle.

At one stage, 3 coy had an amphibious section of 6 Weasels, & DUWKS in the Bentong area of Pahang for river and swamp work.

As the number of infantry battalions increased, more demands were made for the 3 ton vehicles, when it came to moving them up into new areas or getting them back for a rest and retraining. This involved some 30/40 vehicles in convoy with a workshop section in the rear.

Considerable amounts of RASC vehicles were used on the Briggs Plan where squatter villages, families, and live stock, were completely loaded on to trucks and transported to newly built and protected camps.

By 1950, there were 6 RASC transport Companies. Two of these companies, No. 3 and 27, were manned by British drivers and four, No's 24, 29, 52, 69 and 61 were Malayanised, or going through the process of having their BOR drivers replaced by MOR drivers. At this stage, all the officers were still British as were the warrant officers and some of the senior NCOs.

The headquarters of these transport companies were No. 3, 52 and 69, within the Kuala Lumpur area, No 27, at Ipoh, No 29 at Taiping, with No 24 at Kluang and Johore Bahru 61 Coy in Singapore.

Subsequently, the Malayan Army Service Corps was formed with their own officers, NCOs, and men in 1957. Throughout the early part of the Emergency there was always the constant threat of ambushes to small groups of vehicles on roads outside towns, and the training of ambush drill was of supreme importance. In South Malaya, Lieutenant Colonel T W Atkinson RASC established a training camp at Batu Pahat to carry out such training.

At that time fatal ambushes did occur and on the 2nd March 1950, 1 officer, and 4 other ranks of No 3 Coy RASC were killed and many wounded when they were road ambushed, just beyond the village Kampong of Brinchang in the Cameron Highlands. They were:

393609 2nd Lt. W. J. Richards, Officer i/c A Platoon,
T/141188039 Sgt. C. R. Ritter, i/c Workshop Section,
T/21181957 Cpl. F. Hand, A Platoon, Died of wounds.
T/2548873 L/Cpl. N. Hoggett, Workshop Section,
T/22202119 Dvr. R. H. Jones, A Platoon,
Also killed in the ambush was Mr B.B.Gates, a Engineering civilian of the Malayan Electricity Board.also a badly wounded Special Constable Che Wan Karmaruddin who died later

Next day, four were taken down the hill and buried in the Christian Cemetery at Batu Gajah, near Ipoh in the State of Perak.

Cpl Hand died of wounds on the 5th March, and was buried at Batu Gajah on the 6th March. The remains of 2nd Lt Richards and Dvr. Jones were exhumed and cremated on the 15th September 1969 at the Sek Ken Cheng Crematorium Kuala Lumpur and the ashes returned to the UK.

Comment from one of the survivors was, "There seemed to be hundreds of bandits come down on us from the jungle". Another survivor had only a few days of his National Service left before being shipped home. Bandits very rarely carried out road ambushes unless they were far superior in numbers and were certain to have a kill. They always held the advantage, by lying in wait for days behind the foliage of the jungle, which usually came down to the road on both sides. They would pick a narrow road that was steep with bends, and with high jungle on one side and a big drop on the other side. At this stage vehicles would be down in a low gear, thus being very slow and easy to pick off from set positions.

In the Cameron Highlands you could hear vehicles long before you saw them due to the labouring of their engines. Security was not good, and though civilians working in camps were screened, many remained sympathetic to the communist cause.

It wasn't unusual for us to go into the village of Tanah Rata in the evening, and they would be telling us that we would be involved in a screening operation of the area in the morning even before we were told. So, as

you can guess, it had to be called off, as there would be no surprise. The main battle at that time was to win the hearts and minds of the people or otherwise get them on our side.

In 1950 there was still a shortage of infantry so other arms and services were called upon to act in an infantry role.

No 3 Company RASC provided a jungle squad that was trained by the 1st Battalion Suffolk Regiment. The squad, consisting of all ranks, was some thirty strong and after training was based at Bahrang, in an area made famous in 1942 when the Argylls and Leicesters fought a gallant rearguard action against the Japanese.

Sergeant Gordon (Sammy) Samson, of 3 Coy RASC, was a member of this squad, and recalls his experiences in the jungle at that time. It is important to note that he served in Malaya from 1948 to 1954, with one break home in the middle).

They were placed under the command of No 2 Coy Coldstream Guards, which was commanded by Major Sir Ralph Anstruther, MC, and were quickly given an operational task.

They were sent out to locate and destroy a bandit camp and were soon aware of the difficulties of moving through the jungle. Leeches proved to be a considerable irritation as they could reach the most awkward parts of the body, where the standard procedure for removing them, burning them with a lighted cigarette, could be somewhat hazardous.

The patrol succeeded in finding a bandit camp but no doubt their inexperience in jungle movement had given the occupants adequate warning of their arrival and they had fled. There was plenty of evidence of recent occupation of the camp, including hollow bamboo ducts for caching their water supply, food, and beds and bedding. After destroying the camp the patrol commander, Lieutenant Johnson, decided that the patrol should be split up, he taking a third and Sgt Samson the balance, with the aim of pursuing the bandits. Samson's party discovered two further camps but these were disused and again destroyed.

Returning to the original camp, they took the wrong track and eventually came across another camp, which had clearly only just been vacated and showed signs of being a rest camp for wounded.

Although they heard movement nearby, Sgt Samson was not sure then, of the whereabouts of Lt Johnson's party and felt that any indiscriminate fire might endanger them. By now they were behind schedule, and the network of tracks used by the bandits made the selection of the right one for their return to base a difficult decision.

They were lost! A study of the map showed that if they marched west they would eventually reach the main road. This they did, after making camp for the night.

Eventually, they reached the road as planned, having marched on a compass bearing and ignoring any tracks that did not go west.

Although they had water, their food had been finished the previous evening. Through the efforts of the interpreter whom was accompanying them, they were glad of the coffee provided by a local coffee shop at mid-day the following day. He had up to then been regarded with some apprehension, as he was on the bandits' wanted list and was no more at home in the jungle than those he accompanied.

Major Anstruther and Lt Johnson, who had returned to the base camp with his party the previous night, were concerned about the safety of the patrol and were duly relieved at their return. Although late, the party had achieved much. The discovery of the camps confirmed information that the Police required and for the squad it was to be a significant learning experience. The lessons learnt were to prove invaluable when they moved to the Cameron Highlands where there had been considerable bandit activity, and where, five men of 3 Company had been killed. The squad was to serve in the infantry role for three months, during which time they were employed in a number of operations, gaining confidence as they acquired jungle skills.

Although they laid a number of ambushes they were unable to claim any kills but they harassed the bandits and discovered a number of camps. When they returned to their driving duties, and they were much needed, with their new found skills and experience and certainly with a wealth of stories, they had the satisfaction of knowing that they had achieved, in their temporary role, a standard which they had every reason to be proud of.

With regards to the supply side of the RASC, men of 55 Company RASC(Air Despatch) prepared and dropped supplies to men in the jungle and isolated areas.

One of the problems at the start of the emergency, on the supply side, was to provide suitable ration packs for Gurkhas and Malays on jungle patrol. Equivalent to the British 24 hour 'Compo' Pack. HQ RASC Malaya undertook this task and eventually came up with a pack that consisted of 50% rice. The remaining items were chiefly a question of proportions, i.e., need, against weight. The main problem in this respect was to provide a meat or fish element that would conform to the observance of religious customs. However, a selected canning firm was found that was able to produce curried mutton or goat from animals specially slaughtered according to Muslim or Hindu customs.

RASC drivers, mainly National Servicemen, were involved very much throughout the Emergency. They drove many thousands of miles around Malaya on very rough roads and tracks, where an ambush could occur at anytime.

They were classed as non-combat troops, and often travelled without an escort. They had to highly maintain their vehicles, and this was overseen by the monthly AF406, & AB412, inspection by workshops platoon and it was normal for the inspection team to go and visit them on location.

The RASC supplied many trades: butchers, bakers, clerks, store men, drivers, driver mechanics, vehicle mechanics, electricians, turners, coppersmiths, coach trimmers, coach painters, and many others. They all played their part. They carried out guard duties on their camps and workshops and escorting on recovery jobs. Also, we must not forget the RASC drivers attached to the RAMC, who drove the ambulances and other vehicles at hospitals and in the field and the men of the RASC Fire Service (a forgotten lot). They can all look back with pride in being involved in the struggle to defeat the Communist Terrorists during the Malayan Campaign.

Regiments came and went, but as far as I can find out No 3 & 27 RASC Companies, remained to the end. Mid 1951 saw 3 Coy move from Rifle Range Camp, which they had shared with 69 Coy, to a newly built one in the Ampang Road in Kuala Lumpur. Sometime in 1952, they changed over with 27 Coy and moved to Ipoh where they were then part of the 48th Ghurkha Infantry Brigade and later to be with the 28 Commonwealth Brigade.

Finally, we must pay tribute to the men of the RASC who did not return. I could find the names of 40 who are buried in Cheras Road Kuala Lumpur,

7 Batu Gajah Christian Cemetery

20 Kranji Military Singapore

9 Terendak Military Cemetery and plaque for those who have no grave

10 Taiping Kamunting Road Christian Cemetery.

2 Penang Western Road Christian Cemetery.

29 were cremated or repatriated these included Malayan other ranks.