

SURVIVAL IN JUNGLE WARFARE

By Major(Retd) Frank Clark

The instructor was yelling at us again "your looking for CTs, don't look at the bloody ground, if you gaze at your f...ing feet you won't find the CTs and they will get you first. Now look up and stay alert."

We were picking our way through the jungle. I was an untrained soldier in jungle warfare and was being indoctrinated into the green hell. The jungle training course was for several weeks and I will never forget the humidity, the stench of rotting vegetation, the deprivation of daylight by the greatness of the dark canopy above and its eerie feeling of being enveloped by the gloom

This was my first introduction to the jungle although I was not a raw National Serviceman, just out from UK, poor buggers. At least I had lived rough on the battle field and considered myself a trained soldier. In 1944 I had landed in Normandy and had fought throughout the war. Later, posted to Korea theatre where I spent a year of my three years in the Far East before being sent to Malaya for the last two years. Afterwards, I served a further three years tour this time in North Malaya Sub District based originally at Taiping, Perak and later at Prai near RAAF Butterworth and Penang, thus making a total of five years service in the peninsular but this was in the future. Right now I was as inexperienced as the young National Service lads in my squad. We had all just arrived in Malaya and were all greener than the tropical rain forest about us. The terrorist war in Malaya was the National Service Army's longest and most successful campaign that would leave real life memories of savage victorious jungle fighting for these young conscript soldiers. They earned mine and other regular soldiers respect.

Dark emerald green rain forests covered a great part of the Malayan peninsula. The coastal strip in mainly mangrove swamp which grows on the alluvial soil brought down and silted up by the many rivers and streams. Behind this line rise ranges of heavily forested plains and mountains. This vast mass of vegetation was the tropical rain forest, dark and humid and a place for terrorists to hide. As I travelled north from Johore Bahru by rail along the forest edge, it was just jungle scenery broken by small towns, small holdings, rubber plantations and paddy fields. The there were vast areas of land, stripped by Chinese coolies searching for tin, only to be reclaimed by scrubby secondary jungle, then came more rain forest. Now I detrained and as part of a group of squadies, we travelled by truck part of the way and then marched to a jungle camp in the rainforest. Here we were to be taught how to survive in the vastness of the jungle. At first there was deep apprehension about this prospect but later in some of us at least, in inner aboriginal soul of some distant ancestor emerged and it was possible to feel at one with nature's wonder.

"Right then minutes break", roared the instructor and I slumped down against a massive tree after an hours slog into the enveloping vegetation. Salty rivulets of sweat were running down my face stringing my eyes after a gruelling climb up a slippery jungle track. As I sat on the moist jungle floor I felt a strange itching around my ankles. I unlaced my jungle boot and my grey woollen sock was bright red with blood. To my revulsion I had my first sight of leeches at work. "Gather round", called the instructor to the rest of the patrol as he used me to demonstrate how to deal with leeches. "Never pull them off, he told the course, as their jaws will remain in the bite and it will become infected and become a jungle sore. These are blood sucking little predators and they have a thirst for mammalian blood. That is what you lot are, after the odd wild pig that passes this way you're the next meal. Now how to get them off? You know you can't smoke in the jungle, a good tracker can smell it a mile off but a bit of cigarette ash, or even raw nicotine juice from a damp fag, salt or lime juice will do the trick. It is important that they drop off, so if nothing else is to hand let 'em drip off when they are full". The course let out a gasp of despair when they all discovered a few leeches on somewhere themselves.

A base camp had been established deep in the jungle and that night we sat round a camp fire and swapped yarns. We listened to the voice of the rain forest after dark. Cicadas were singing, a remarkable loud noise for an insect. Most insects make a noise by stridulating that is rubbing one surface of the body against another but the cicada has a built in drum set in its body cavity which acts as a sound box. As we sat one of the Malays who was guiding our party told us "Happy is the cicada – he has a voiceless wife", only the males can sing. Crickets, tree frogs and geckos calling chi cha, joined the chorus making the night air full of an eerie sound. Then added to chock, chock, chock of the nightjar nocturnally hunting for food. At night the tropical rain forest is alive with reverberations. No wonder the local people believe that it the home of ghosts and spirits. So the conversation eventually arrived at the subject of the jungle spirits, the Hantu Hantu. It is easy to understand why the indigenous people believed in them with the cacophony of jungle noise at night. There is the powerful Jin Tanah, the Earth Spirit, there are Were-tigers, invisible folk, spooks, goblin and bogeys of all kinds. The Malays always considered themselves intruders when they enter the rain forest and never forget their awe and reverence for it.

"If you live in the jungle long you start to believe in ghost too", our instructor told us. "Next time you go into a Malay Kampong (village) you will see houses with sharp objects like thorn bushes, barbed wire on roofs. That is to protect them from a special hantu, isn't it Ismal? The old Malay nodded his head as he told the tale, "The Pontianak very powerful. I had a friend who knew a man who was married to one.' (most of these stories were not about the teller's own experiences but about someone who knew someone else) "One night, related Ismal, "this man came home late and found his wife leaning against the wall of this runah and her head was gone. She was a Pontianak. In the morning her head came back and she was a beautiful young woman again." It is believed that the spiked objects are put up so she will catch her entrails on it. This will discourage her from visiting the house," Although she is a Pontianak she can sometimes live like a normal woman as did Ismal's friend's wife. "My cousin had a friend who owned a motor scooter", now related Osman or other tracker, "and he saw a beautiful girl standing at the side of the road near the jungle. He offered her a lift and she sat behind him side saddle but when he got to where they were going there was no one there. The girl had vanished. There was a gentle sigh from the other Malays, they believed him, for it was a form of Hantu without a doubt.

Later I served under a British Lt. Col, who swore that as a young officer on a jungle night patrol, he saw lights coming through the trees. As he watched he saw a procession of young boys dressed like Buddhist monks walking through the trees carrying lanterns and suddenly they were gone. It was odd he explained as they were miles from habitation. Floating lights are not unknown in Malaya. I think they are natural phenomena like floating gas balls similar to a Will-o-the-wisp or St Elmo's fire. None the less frightening when confronted on a dark night in the jungle.

Lying in my hammock under my mosquito net the following morning, I was awoken by the sound of the Wak-wak swinging through the trees. These were the White-handed Gibbons that we heard every morning loudly and musically shouting at each other as they swung in groups through the high canopy of the forest trees.

The gnarled faced instructor told us from personal experience, "the CTs have been in the jungle a long time. You have to learn to see him before he sees you. Don't shoot from the shoulder, shoot low at the undergrowth and shoot at every blade of grass that moves." This was an intense jungle training course where the term shoot to kill had to be learnt, along with how to fight the terrorists, we had to survive in the jungle.

One incident was humorous in reflection but not at the time. Our lead scout came charging back through the undergrowth running as fast as he could shouting what sounded like "Bandits, Bandits." We rushed off the track and laid down ready. What he was really shouting

was "Hornets, Hornets". There were the dangerous Slender Banded Hornet that makes its paper like nest hanging by a short stalk. These are more aggressive than other hornets found in the jungle and will attack anyone who approaches their nest. The sting is painful and multiple stings can be dangerous. Hornets attack moving targets, so without knowing it by lying down still we did the best thing. Our poor lead scout was badly stung and ended in sick bay. The other problem was supposed to be snakes but we saw few as most snakes prefer to glide away when approached by man. Later in my tour of duty as someone always interested in animals, I studied Malayan Natural History. Unwittingly I built a reputation as a snake authority, but that is another story.

So I learnt jungle survival, how to adjust to the tropical rain forest environment, how to cook food over smoky fires, to find water inside bamboo, to use nature's food such as ferns, taro or tapioca. To make sure that the jungle fruit was safe to eat. I learnt to watch monkeys and birds for if they did not try them, better leave them alone. So I was trained to know the friendlier side of the rain forest. I learnt to live in the jungle for weeks without being able to wash properly. To only cross a river or stream above any human settlement, because of the risk of leptospirosis carried by rats. And I knew what to do when it pelted down with monsoon rain. When one talked about movement through the rainforest it was by yards not miles. We as a squad learnt not to consider movement in a straight line. All sorts of obstacles needed to be circumnavigated, Bamboo clumps sometimes miles deep, rivers and streams, boulder, fallen trees. Movement was generally at a snail's pace and yet the training school was easier than the real jungle patrols performed afterwards. The jungle can be a hard taskmaster but there are also striking moments of beauty watching butterflies congregating around a moist spot or round some special tree or bush. Then at the end of the day there were exquisite sunsets like nowhere else on earth, even if over in a few minutes. After a few months I was sent to Singapore for a spell to act as an instructor in a technical capacity. I occasionally returned north to Malaya for special tasking until my tour ended.

By the time I returned for my second tour of duty I was jungle trained and this time worked closely at Sungai Patani with the Training Depot of the Brigade of Gurkhas and 1st / 7th Gurkhas stationed at Grike near the Thai border. I was privileged to be able to fly into a jungle fort, where I met and worked with some of the Malayan Aboriginal people. I was attached for a few weeks to the newly developing Malaysian Army Engineers. We took a bridging company by boat from Alor Star in the northern state of Perlis to Langkawi Island. This was when it was still a fairly primitive place, long before it became a tourist resort. While there we searched for evidence of the white crocodile that is supposed to have taken Japanese soldiers in the war years. Here we met an old British miner who was running a mining company excavating Malaysian marble for a new National mosque to be built in Kuala Lumpur

When a man lives in the rain forest it steals a small part of his soul. Its cruelty and natural wonder, its mysteries, vastness, wild creatures and its supernatural spirits, will remain in my psyche for ever more. Putting aside the hardship of the arduous jungle patrol searching for CTs, my modest understanding of its enormity and secrets the jungle held will always strengthen my affection and reverence for this place. I therefore hope that this glimpse of the jungle may show others some of the experience which enlightened me. Even with the often harsh, gruelling and horrendous conditions of living in the jungle, yet the Rain Forest of Malaysia was the most enchanting fascinating phenomenon of my military service.

It is with pride and gratitude that the British Commonwealth soldiers, many who lost their lives sloggng against the CTs in the green hell, are remembered. My last visit before I returned home was to the Commonwealth War Cemetery, Taiping to say goodbye to friends that I would be leaving behind to sleep on in Malaysian soil for ever. Their legacy was defending Malaysia's right to be free and through their sacrifice, Merdeka (Independence) was achieved.