

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACK

*by Ray Burdett ex Suffolk Regt.
A light hearted view on a serious incident*

AMBUSH

On the 3rd March 1951, I am the remainder of 3 Platoon A Company at base camp at that time, (the other guys were already out on patrol), were gently roused from our mid-day slumber by Choter Collins, our very popular CSM.

Choter was obviously perturbed at waking us because he came to every bed and gently shock us, speaking very softly, "now come on lad's duty calls".

Whilst Choter was helping us on with our equipment he explained that a group of nasty Bandits had stolen a load of identity papers from some innocent rubber tappers at the Tarun Estate a few miles north of our camp. "Well we couldn't have that", he said, "you six have been chosen for this important job".

Here we go again, we all thought, the same old build up. It's the important job routine again and we know it's probably another rotten venture into the swamps and we let it be known to Choter that we were going on another fools errand. "No, no " said Choter, "this is a pucker call out, on information received", and he emphasised that, ON INFORMATION RECEIVED.

"Now come on lads", Choter said in a quiet but commanding voice, "Mr Gilmore and the Sakai are waiting for you at the gate, now let's not keep them waiting, there's good lads". We reluctantly made our way to the gate where the lorry already with engine running was waiting for us, with Mr Gilmore in deep conversation with an Officer of the Malayan Police. This looks more promising I thought, we don't usually have a senior Policeman come out on patrol.

When we piled on to the truck I soon realised that the Police were not joining us for a stroll when he and Choter waved goodbye as we left the camp and sped down the road.

The driver of the truck was going at a hell of a lick as if we were on our way to a fire, this wasn't our normal pace. Perhaps it is an important call out after all.

A few miles on we pulled to the side of the road the driver cutting his engine immediately. We disembarked cursing the equipment and the height of the jump from the tailgate to the ground, oh we were happy souls.

Mr Gilmore met us at the rear of the truck, asking us to keep the noise down. Lavender fell in behind Mr Gilmore closely followed by the Sakhi our native tracker.

Bowskill the Bren, Pete Smyth his number two, Dungate, George Applin followed by yours truly, lastly but not least Ivan Harvey.

By the time I had taken a dozen steps the leading section had disappeared around a bend, I was still trying to find the most comfortable position to carry my weapon, when I noticed George Applin in front of me waving his arm about, something was afoot, Ivan said "it looks like an ambush signal, we had better get off the track.

I don't think it was an ambush signal, I said, but I'm with you, let's get the hell out of here. Harvey went to the right, I went to the left and sat down in the remains of an old toilet shed, the creepers had covered the roof and two sides, I got out a fag and lit up.

Seconds later Harvey caught my eye with his gesturing finger pointing ominously down the track, quickly followed with the thumbs down sign for bandits. I made the hand sign back for, hold your horses and stood up parting the overgrowth with my hand to have a peek and found myself looking into the face of one of our enemy. He had not seen me, he was miles away within his thoughts, thank God.

Still with the cigarette between my fingers I assumed the crouch position, in fact it was a very low crouched position knowing what was about to come my way. Stupidly placing myself on the wrong side of the track I was in the (You've got it) direct line of fire from my own mates.

The patrol opened up with all they had taking the roof off my little hut and making pretty patterns with their bullets in the sides. One of the bandits passed in front of the door way and without thinking I stood up and fired at him, my bullet struck his right shoulder of which a large chunk flew in the air, I thought my second shot hit his pack, there was a definite metallic clang. With two rounds in him he still didn't stop, we never did find him.

When the dust had settled so to speak, we found three dead Communists lying on the track, with my claim of a hit and one others claim, it turned out to be a good "ON INFORMATION RECEIVED" patrol. Documents from the packs of the deceased revealed that this was the group responsible for burning the bus on the Semenyih-Broga main road on the 25th February.

After being interviewed by our intelligence section and later by the press it was mentioned that this was one of the most successful IMMEDIATE AMBUSH of the Campaign so far. The press firstly being assured the incident only happened a few yards off the main road insisted on visiting the site.

The intelligence section requested that we take up our positions from the time of sighting the bandits, while the press took photographs of the men crouching behind their particular bush or tree, trying to look menacing. Myself looking around like a lost soul decided to take up a fictitious position between Applin and Harvey. With these two looking at me with grins across their faces as if to say, you lying bugger.

I, in the mean time, gazed at my little hut contemplating what a stupid clod I had been and that I never did finish that fag.