

TOO MANY - TIGERS?

- by *John Burrows*

MALAYA - NOSTALGIA AND REFLECTION

Dedicated to those who always wanted to do, but never did

return to Malaya.

Extracts from my book:

'THE TURBULENT YEARS OF SOLDIERING'

Just after the calibrations of MERDEKA (Independence) some fifty years on, perhaps it is a time to reflect, and a time for nostalgia.

I have chosen the intervening years between the hostilities and peace. Not the modern metropolis of today with dollar spending tourists, or the Malaysian Grand Prix.

RETURN TO MALAYA - 1975 It was twenty-three years later when I returned to Malaya, (*West Malaysia*) this time with my wife - Mary'. To us it really was going to be a holiday of a lifetime, not what the popular travel agents constantly refer to as 'a holiday of a lifetime'. We have had many of them since, some of dubious quality. This was to be an adventure, and we had three months to do it. The highlights would be Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Cameron Highlands and Penang, but the most exciting and adventurous would be exploring the places I had known, and wrote to her about all those years before. We had both worked hard for a number of years and had very little in the way of holidays. I was then self-employed, and my own boss having just completed a successful assignment. We decided to take time out - three months. Many times, I had longed to return to Malaya, but never really had the opportunity due to other commitments. Let me say - 1975 was before the tourists really descended on the country. Malaya it seemed was in many ways as it was all though years before.

During my service in Malaya, with the Royal West Kent Regiment there were times when I reflected on the beautiful buoyant land of flora, rainforest, jungle and rivers, and of multi-culture peoples of varying ethnic groups, religion and custom. It was a land, which had suffered privations of conflict, both in war and insurrection. I thought in the years to come and in peaceful times. I would return with my wife to explore the country.

This narrative is not intended to be an itinerary of our adventurous holiday, it is just to highlight the aftermath and memories of what had gone before.

We arrived in Singapore, a concrete jungle of mini skyscrapers and hustle of people of many races and religions, prominently Chinese who seemingly dashed around in all directions. Many of whom were immaculately cool looking Chinese executives, and others of many nationalities.

Taking in the sights we only spent the first week in Singapore; although, initially booked through a travel agent to spend two weeks, and a week in Kuala Lumpur, and then with the intension of touring and making our own arrangements. We had an adequate supply of brochures and maps. I was impatient to cross the causeway into Malaysia, a different world to that of Singapore. At that time tourism was not fully underway, at times we were somewhat of a curiosity. Although there had been 'backpackers' and elements of the 'American Peace Corp', both the Singapore and Malaysia authorities were not very tolerant with the longhaired hippy types. There were plenty of former European nationals in the country who had stayed on after 'Independence' to become Malaysian citizens, and there were plenty of expatriates employed on contract, prominently in the offshore oil industry. Many

were British, others Australians and Americans who mainly lived near their place of work, and in the capitals. Perhaps this was the beginning of one of the most successful industrial economies in South East Asia.

We crossed the 'Causeway' into Malaysia; greeted by the sign '*Selamat Datang*' (Welcome). My mind went back to the first occasion over twenty-four years to 1951, when sixteen of us with an escort of Gurkhas soldiers crossed over the 'Causeway' on our way to the FTC Jungle Warfare School.

We each had our deep thoughts of how many of us would return from the jungle campaign, and what lay ahead? *Four did not!*

We drove off in our hired car from Johor Bahru, into the land of lush green and floral beauty, excited and wondering what adventures lay in front of us during the weeks ahead. In the mid afternoon the rains came in a tropical down pour so heavy we had to shout at each other to be heard. The wipers could not cope with torrential rain lashing the windscreen. To stop and pull-off the road was not an option, to do so; could result in ending-up in a monsoon ditch.

It seemed we were the only vehicle on the road, but there was the worry that some erratic lorry driver might hit us from behind. Keep going very slowly seemed the best solution. Eventually as darkness approached the rain gradually subsided. We were hoping to make KL before dark, and probably would have, if it had not been for the rain. Some thirty miles short of KL the police had set-up a roadblock; a police sergeant flashed a torch for us to stop. He said 'selamat petang'. I replied - 'good evening' we are British tourists making our way to Kuala Lumpur. He checked our passports and handed them back. Is there anything wrong sergeant? He replied, keep going and don't stop to pick anyone up. There has been a bandit incident not far from here! As we passed the roadblock, I noticed a GP machine gun trained on us. We did not hang around, with the rain gone, I able to drive at a reasonable speed. 'Bandits' I said to Mary', I thought that was all over years ago, and it is safe to travel. She said - it is probably some kind of local criminality.

Eventually we arrived in KL, but went around the busy city several times looking for the Hilton Hotel. Then suddenly, there it was – yes' we had passed it several times. We confirmed our bookings and checked-in. Nobody took the slightest notice of us bedraggled sweaty individuals. The first priority was to quench our thirst. It was bliss sitting in the lounge sipping ice-chilled lagers in the beautiful air-conditioned surroundings after the adventurous, and perhaps ordeal of the journey from Singapore. Young graceful Malay waitresses attended and served the drinks, I suppose they thought of us as just another couple of middle-aged of westerners. We stayed at the hotel for a week taking in the sights and exploring the city, and then a little further out to the Batu Caves. Where during the emergency there had been several actions.

It was a few days later after arriving in KL; we enquired at a tourist office for directions to the Cheras Road military cemetery. It seemed strange when the young Chinese lady asked her manager if he could give directions to two foreigners. He was helpful, but had scant knowledge of the location, although he knew there was a Christian cemetery about two miles out of the city.

It was a poignant emotional experience looking down on the graves of those of whom; I had soldiered with all those years before. There was one of particular significant had circumstances been different. There were others from my regiment who had died later, after my time. And there were many more from all the services who fought in the Malayan campaign.



Note: I have heard in recent years that many of the military cemeteries were overgrown with little or no maintenance. This was not so, in the case of Cheras Road Military Cemetery in 1975.

It was immaculately well maintained. We signed the visitor's book, thanked the keepers and gave a small gratuity.

Our aspirations were to get away from the city, and into the hinterland, visit some of the locations I had known all those years before, and to explore the ones I had not. We were on an extended holiday; the Cameron Highlands and Penang were on our itinerary flexible enough to do as we pleased. Without further delay we left KL and took the road to Ipoh, and beyond.

Driving through the once notorious 'Kanching Pass' also known as the 'Valley of the Moon'; it was here, the Communist Terrorists (CTs) set-up many road ambushes looking down from the high embankments above the cuttings to the gorges below. Many vehicles and its occupants had fallen victim to a deadly hail of gunfire. Although the menace of ambush long since gone, the terrain seemed less threatening and the pass much shorter. The high embankments and cuttings are still there, and so are the gorges, but now with crash barriers erected.

(The last time, I travelled through that pass was in an open truck with three others; we held our weapons at the shoulder training them on the high ground as the S-bends were negotiated. A Dingo' scout car followed in close support traversing and probing the twin Bren guns. We felt like sitting ducks, the journey was tense, although uneventful. That had been the occasion when I was on my way to catch the night train to Singapore, and then an onward flight to London on compassionate leave).

Then many years later, I travelled through it once again, the once notorious 'Valley of the Moon', the thick jungle no longer came down to the road. At one side about halfway through the pass an area had been cleared and developed into a National Park with picnic sites. Here we stopped and strolled around looking at the happy Malaysian families enjoying their picnics. Here again, I wondered did they know or even cared about the sacrifices made by equally young men in the not so distant past?

We carried on with our journey, passing the Ulu Caledonian Rubber Estate at Ulu Yam, where a platoon of Royal West Kent's were ambushed and put up a heroic fight.

I had a yearning to visit Kuala Kubu Bahru (KKB) and see the old BNHQ; obviously for security reasons we were unable to enter Erskine Camp. It seemed much the same with atap-palm constructed barrack blocks with some substantial buildings newly added. It was with a feeling of nostalgia as I passed by the camp and glimpsed at it once again on our return journey. We proceeded on to 'Fraser's Hill Resort' to spend a few days.

(During the time with my regiment, many operations were carried out in the area. Of particular note were the follow-up operations, after the ambush of the British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney).



Raub -- Kuala Kubu Bahru

We passed the place where he had died, although there was no apparent plaque in memory to this brave man. Perhaps there was, I don't know? In fact it was difficult to see reference to Emergency anywhere, except the memorial in KL, and the military cemeteries.



Although, I did see some rusting armoured vehicles in a police yard. Perhaps the Malaysians had enough of war and conflict, first the Japs' and then the communist terrorists, and a confrontation in Borneo and Sarawak, which had a slight aborted spin over to the Malayan mainland.

After the defeat of the Americans in Vietnam, this gave fresh impetus and a moralising effect to the CTs, who had moved over the border into Thailand. There to

wait for the time when they could once again set out to achieve their objectives, perhaps with the support of the victorious regime's in other parts of Asia. Even in 1975, there were still some insurgent incidents, seemingly not very serious, there had been recent skirmishes, which never made the newspaper headlines for some reason or another. I was informed at that time by the knowledgeable, that the SAS still had some input operating occasionally in the Malayan jungle.

The CTs were never completely defeated. Many were eliminated and many surrendered, although they never laid down their arms in defeat or surrendered as a fighting force. They withdrew to the border jungle areas and into Thailand – but their cause lost.

We reached the Gap Road, and then waited for the gates to be opened; it operated on a half hourly one-way road system for the ascent to Fraser's Hill resort. Whilst we waited, two young Malaysian ladies who worked as nurses at a convalescent home in the resort asked Mary' if we would kindly give them a lift to the resort as their bus was late, and they were afraid to wait because of the danger of **tigers**, and other wild animals from the surrounding jungle. This truly gave us a feeling of really being in the wilds.

The twisting road was narrow in places with jungle close to the fringe. My thoughts went back again, to the time many years before when Sir Henry Gurney' had travelled the same way.

At the resort, we booked into a guesthouse, (*for reasons that will be obvious, I have called it the 'Rest House'*) it still retained the original name since the early colonial days. It was clean, but quite basic, although adequate; after all we were in the wild lands surrounded by tropical rainforest with thousands upon thousands of trees with flora as far as the eyes could see. When we arrived, there seemed some mystique about the place, and even a feeling of extreme unease. Perhaps it was the suddenness of the surrounding and wild environment. (*Reminder this was in 1975*)

On the first night shortly after retiring to our room, there was a sudden crash! Instinctively I knew what it was. A beetle had crashed through one of the small leaded paned windows with the ferocity of a golf ball, and the size of small bird. It had a thick shiny black shell with menacing hooked horns and lay struggling like an upturned tortoise; gently with my foot I pushed it through the veranda door. As soon as it got dark the place seemed to come under a barrage of these flying creatures of many different varieties, seeming harmless to humans unless hit by one.

Three nights were spent at the Rest House, exploring by day. It was during the last night, that I had a strange premonition. Mary' was asleep; I awoke suddenly and looked towards the small shower room. And, there to my utter astonishment, was a strange figure standing to one side and looking towards me. I could not believe what I was seeing? I am sure it was a 'Japanese Officer' dressed in tropical uniform, but hatless, his boots shined, a 'Samurai' sword hanging from his belt. Was I dreaming? It seemed real to me, but then everything about the place seemed strangely mystical. I felt no panic or fright; it just did not bother me. I looked at him, and as the seconds ticked away, he just seemed to fade away. It was weird, was I dreaming? Soon I was asleep again. Scepticism - perhaps! I am not psychic, but I did have another strange experience many years later, when I was staying in an old apartment in Paris' - *that's another story*.

In the morning, I told Mary' about the strange happenings, and if she had heard or seen anything. Not a thing, she said – you must have been dreaming, and that beer you had last night was rather strong? You are probably right, but we had not discussed anything about the wartime Japanese occupation the previous day, so it was not on my mind. Just before leaving the hotel I asked the young studious Chinese girl called Jia', if the Japanese had been billeted there during the war. She said they had, but it was before her family's time. I will ask my farther. He was rather elderly and did not speak English. He told her, it had been a rest centre for wounded Japanese officers, many of whom had died there. He was not there at the time, although he was told their ashes had been prepared for internment to be sent back in Japan. Then with the sudden end of the war, the resistance fighters emerged from the jungle,

and in vengeance smashed the urns scattering the ashes. The old man said - at times in the cool windless evenings just before dark, spirits had been seen arising from the ground in a vapour like mist. The old man seemed to be smiling at me, as Jia' translated his story. Apparently, he went on to say, after the war, red banners were hung around the doorway, and joss sticks burnt to keep evil spirits away. I felt a little uneasy, but did not mention the strange premonition or the apparition of the previous night. We looked beyond the doorway and noticed the family shrine, nothing unusual, it was normal to honour their ancestors. We thanked Jia', and she asked if we would correspond with her when we returned to England, which we did. She painted, and sent us a lovely picture of the Rest House and its surroundings.

We continued our travels, and returned to the resort sometime later to spend a weekend at another Rest House. This time closer to the jungle on a high slope where the building had a veranda built on stilts looking down into the valley. We were not put off by the strange phenomenon of the previous place; it was due a noisy generator that seemed to scare the animals away and spoil the dawn chorus of birdsong and shrieking gibbons.



It was time to move on and head towards Tanjong Malim. I wondered if the road still passed through the cutting about two miles short of Tanjong Malim. It did, but much wider than the original, which was briefly known as 'Panic Pass'.

(It was the place whilst I was travelling in a lone scout car and came under fire in an attempted CT ambush, all be it just a few rounds smacking against the vehicle. We must have been too fast, for them. The driver triggered a smoke screen canister, whilst I traversed the Brens firing a long burst. I am sure the rubber trees bore the brunt – we did not stop to see, it was a case of foot down, and get the hell out of it.

Arriving at Tanjong Malim and passing over the level crossing into the town, which had seen many changes over the years. The old main road had developed into a bypass that skirted the town to meet up with a busy highway heading north. We took the bypass seeking a turnoff to the right for the Sultan Idris Training College and followed the road to the far end. I eventually found the old gymnasium where my platoon had been based back in 1951. The platoon was on detachment from our company base at Trolak some thirty miles to the north. It seemed little had changed over the years. I stopped the car to gaze at the old gymnasium; the memories came floating back of the high adventurous days of action in the surrounding areas, much of it reaching up to the jungle covered hills above Tanjong Malim. It had been notorious in those days for terrorist activities that ranked amongst the worst in Malaya. It was here where Sir Gerald Templer' Supremo and High Commissioner held his historic meeting with the town's officials. He imposed a 22-hour curfew on the town as a punishment for lack of cooperation with the government forces. At the time it had caused world controversy and condemnations.

I did not intend hanging around for long, we were on private property, the Malaysians would not understand it was a nostalgia visit, and would probably have thought; I was out of my head, if I tried to tell them of the events all those years before.

After leaving Tanjong Malim and looking towards the jungle covered hills above, I thought of the many operational patrols my platoon had carried out up in the region and the surrounding rubber estates. There was one of particular remembrance; it was the time when I had led a patrol up to water pump house and pipelines that supplied the town below. The CTs held dominance from above and frequently sabotaged the pump house and its machinery. The repairs were the lot of the Public Works Department who made the hazardous trek escorted by armed police. Although the sabotaging was

infrequent, it had a de-memorising worrying effect. More than once the police had been lured into a trap. It was a few months later when the CTs struck again. The repair party led by two PWD senior engineers Mr Fourniss' and Mr Codnor' were ambushed, both were killed together with many of the police escort, and their weapons seized.

It was after this outrage that triggered Sir Gerald Templer' to take decisive action.

*Mr Codnor' was famed in WW2 when he escaped from a
German POW camp, inside a gymnastic Wooden Horse.*

I wondered if the 52nd milestone just north of Tanjong Malim was still there. It was where a CT assassination squad laid in wait for the early morning bus, foiled by a counter retaliatory action by my platoon. There was also the 44¾ milestone where the CTs ambushed and killed one of our soldiers, and later the site of another action. The original milestone disappeared long ago, a regimental souvenir, but was replaced. During the intervening years, the road had been straightened and widened into a fast highway with the coordinates adjusted, so it was not possible to be sure of these locations. Many of the places I had known were now difficult to recognise, or were hidden from view. Now and again, familiar names of rubber estates, villages and kampongs came into view, these were places where I and others had soldiered and patrolled. There was the Chinese cemetery near Slim River where an operation was mounted to seek the enemy hidden in the cemetery. Further on another location, the site of a brief action. At that time it was covered in dryalang grass, and went up in flames when one of our soldiers excelled with a GF rifle to our utter surprise. (*Grenade Firing*)

There was the sign – 'Trolak', it had been twenty-three years since, when it was the HQ of A' Company, Royal West Kent Regiment, where I was based all those years before. I wanted to stop, but time was short, I resolved there would be time later to back-track. Our destination was the Cameron Highlands with many miles on before turning off to the right for the long drive of some thirty plus miles up the winding road to the Cameron Highland resorts. To one side the scenic views were stunning looking down into the valleys where vast areas were cultivated, vegetables of every kind, it seemed. Exotic fruits and huge tomatoes grow profusely. Beyond were paddy-fields where the sun reflected on the still water and irrigation systems. Distant rivers glittered through the vast backdrop of rainforest and jungle. The road curved and twisted as it climbed into the highlands. On the other side of the road the forest edged the road with jungle ever encroaching. Occasionally a few monkeys dashed across the road in front of us.

Slowly we ascended, passing tribal people with their long blowpipes; our hand waves brought no response from these shy indigenous folks.



They were probably - Orang Asli - Aboriginal people who dwell in the Highlands of Northern Perak, who are hunters and food gatherers.

There are three plateaus on the ascent to the highlands, first the township of Tanah Rata, mainly populated by Chinese-Malaysians, our stop

was brief, we would have time later to explore. The second plateau had a scattering of small hotels and a golf course.

There was one hotel under construction that stood out above all; a large mock-up ‘Tudor’ styled building, later we viewed it with the owner. Continuing on we reached the third plateau, with a golf course and several luxury hotels and fantastic panoramic views. There were many private luxury bungalows, convalescent homes and private retreats.



It was here where we found our hotel, styled like a ‘Tudor Tavern’ that did not seem out of place in the jungle surrounds. It was ‘Foster’s Smokehouse’. We stayed for a few days, the only guests at that time. Mr Foster was also the owner of the other hotel under construction on the second plateau.

He was delighted to meet us; it’s a small world he said when I told him we were from Hemel Hempstead. My brother lives a couple miles away, perhaps you will kindly call on him, and give him my regards when you return.

There were many interesting discussions, he told of how he lived in Singapore and Malaya during the emergency.

I mentioned my service with the Royal West Kent Regiment during the emergency. He remembered them well, and of the disastrous ambush at ‘Ulu Yam’ when, in spite of heavy losses, they fought back gallantly.

During the war against the Japanese, he had been a Lieutenant Colonel on Mountbatten’s staff, and was one of the first to return to Malaya after Japan surrendered. He said - The commies are not entirely beaten, they are over the boarder in Thailand and occasionally pop-over to stir-up trouble. He told how one evening a few months previous, there was a sudden knock on the back door of the hotel, and to his surprise was confronted by a squad of SAS troopers. They had just emerged from the jungle. I was curious; Sorry he said; it is a matter of secrecy, which prevents me from further discussion.



The following day he took us on a tour of the area in his Jaguar car, first a visit to a tea plantation. Then to the highest feature Mount Brinchang at 6,666 feet above sea level; well not actually, the last 66 feet meant a lengthily trek along a jungle track and a climb up a small hillock. Not to be out done, I set out alone the following day.

(He said, if anyone achieved this, they became a member of the ‘Devils’ club, ‘9999’).

Foster and I discussed military matters; *(the difference in our ranks was history).*

I’ll show you something of interest which is a security risk to this area. We drove to a vantage point above a huge dam, constructed to generate power to supply the region. You see what I mean by a security risk. Yes, I said, if that dam was breached, it would be a disaster – like a re-run of the ‘Dambusters’ all over again. Well’ said Foster there is a platoon of Malay soldiers assigned to guard it. Yes’ I can see most of them, playing table tennis, and completely exposed in open view. The dam looks about ten metres wide, and netted each side. Foster said look at those silly blokes, they wouldn’t stand a chance if we were a bunch of terrorists. We could take them out with a couple of Bren guns before they knew what had hit them. Then we could breach the dam. How would you do that? I asked. Easy’ he said; just float a sampan full of explosives down the river smack in the centre. No! I afraid that would not work; look closely there is a boom just under the water line straddling the river. Oh yes! I see it now. Well’ I said, if we could acquire a couple of Brens, surely we could get a 3-inch mortar and half dozen bombs – well placed, that would do it! Good job we’re the good guys. I will have a word with their CO; he often comes into my hotel.

The following day we left for the onward journey to Penang, our intention to holiday for a couple of weeks. We thanked Mr Foster for his hospitality, and said we would like to return, and to stay for a

few more days on the way back from Penang. I said perhaps there would be an opportunity to go on a jungle trek. Not a problem he said, I will get my head boy, and a couple of his lads to lead you along one of the tracks. Great, I look forward to that. Well we went on to Penang, had a marvellous time and visited some of the places I had many years before, such as the snake temple and the 'Ayer Itam' temple of the ten-thousand Buddha's. We met up with an Australian couple who were also on holiday and had some good times. One afternoon, the four of us were enjoying a '**Tiger**' beer session in a lovely cool cellar bar, but unaware of the raging typhoon going on above. Later on much to our surprise, to discover uprooted palm trees scattered over the road. We felt sad leaving Penang, but there were other adventures to pursue.

It was back to the Cameron Highlands to stay at the 'Smokehouse'. Mr Foster was there to greet us, but had urgent business in Singapore. Enjoy your stay, although you are the only guests until the weekend, but there are plenty servants at your disposal.

We intended to stay for three days, the following day it was my intention to go on the jungle trek. Foster had gone off on his business trip, but there was no mention about the jungle trek or the guides. I was not very keen to have them along anyway, they seemed a lazy lot. Foster had told us, he dewormed them every few months when they got sluggish, and then, he said they worked like lightning for a time before dropping back into the same old ways. I was determined to do the jungle trek, and decided to go it alone. I did not let on to Mary that I was going alone. It had been quite hectic for her over the last few weeks, so she decided a rest would do her good and stayed in at the hotel.



I put on my old jungle boots, kept for twenty-three years, armed with a small parang purchased a few weeks back for the purpose of chopping papaya's and coconuts. I also had a short length of metal piping used for wheel jacking.

I was ready to go, and drove a short distance from the hotel where I had previously noticed a track leading into the jungle, perhaps a metre wide; off I went into the jungle on a recce patrol

with my cine-camera hanging from my shoulder. It was not the thick almost impregnable stuff, which I had known. In places it was sparse, but it was jungle never the less. (See photo left) The track showed signs of

occasional use, and not too difficult to trek. If it had, I would not have attempted it, armed only with a paretic little parang. On I went for a few hundred metres. I had been swanning around for less than hour, quietness all around except for the incessant hiss of insects.

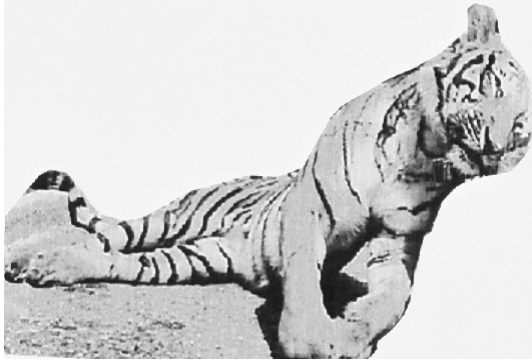


(Self photo in the jungle)

No other sign of life until I noticed a viper coiled along a tree branch. It was then, I realised how foolhardy it was to be trekking alone in the jungle. My imagination was beginning to take over, oh

yes' I was feeling a little scared, no bravo of the past! You are an idiot! I thought, but I must not panic – just get the hell out of it! - It did not take long to turn about, and hurry back to the road.

Some of the hotels occasionally organised walks in the jungle, but there were safe guards and stringent rules for survival - never go into the jungle alone. There were **tigers**, and other wild animals most would steer clear of man, but **tigers** were questionable, especially if they had been previously hunted by man. Mr Foster had shown us some photos of **tigers** that had been hunted locally and killed on some pretence. In fact there was a **tiger** skin rug in the hotel lounge.



He also said, a few weeks back a **tiger** was seen on the golf course close to the hotel. (*Forget about 'Tiger Woods' he was probably not born!*)

Later, I heard about the so-called 'Thai-Silk-Baron' Jim Thompson' (*former WW2 OSS Spy*) had disappeared under



mysterious circumstances a few years earlier near the same location. There had been extensive searches in and around the jungle over a wide area. It seems nothing more was seen of him. The popular belief was a **tiger** had taken him.

We left the Smokehouse Hotel for one last sally back-tracking down the winding road to proceed on towards Trolak; there to perform one last special mission. It was like two worlds as we descended from the highlands. There were Mercedes motor cars driven by Chinese businessmen, rushing past indigenous tribe people carrying long blow-pipes.

At one point we encountered a police Land Rover escorting a Rolls Royce followed by another. It was the Sultan of Pahang going to his Highland residence, and as the tourist guidebook informed us, we were required to stop, place our hands together and bow our heads as a mark of respect. I thought of the 'Gurney' ambush when he too, was travelling in a Rolls Royce to his official residential retreat in the Fraser's Hill resort.

Note. How different it is today, organised jungle walks for the faint hearted, and for others, that is more strenuous. Just go online - log onto 'Cameron Highlands' and 'Fraser's Hill'.

I felt emotional passing places and names remembered of rubber estates with extensive plantations as they came into view. Nothing much seemed to have changed over the years. Then with others, I had soldiered and patrolled those estates. We approached the point where the Trolak Forest Reserve once commenced. It had been partly cut back from where vast swaths of trees had been desecrated to supply the ever-growing demand for timber in the world markets, and soon, the paper 'crunching computers', and then the junk mail ever-flowing through our doors. Areas had been burned off leaving just tree stumps. This again was where we soldiers had patrolled for hundreds of hours, day after day, seeking out an elusive enemy, and bent on mutual destruction. My mind went back to the time in the forest reserve when I and two others, quite by chance walked into a deserted camp hidden in the jungle, estimated to house about 200 of the enemy. And then, I reflected on the strange encounter with a 'hairy beast' in a hostile evil foreboding place. There have been many such accounts, before and since of strange creatures reputed to be 'Ape men' that lived in the region. In our case, it was probably some kind of large primate - I don't know? We drove on; passing the 88 milestone. This was close to the location where a 'CT assassination squad' was ambushed, and the subsequent follow-up of a blood trail; aborted due to heavy rain.

We nearly missed the turning to Trolak altogether; no longer did the road pass the turn-off. Cut off by the then new highway. Perhaps it was more by chance that we found a slip road, it somehow seemed familiar, so I drove on for about a 100 meters and noticed the remnants of the old main road gradually being engulfed by the ever-encroaching undergrowth.

On for about 500 meters, and then, as they were - the old shanties with corrugated roofs, that seemed exactly as they were twenty-three years before. Even the Chinese occupants seemed to be the same. It was as if time had stood still. The people did not seem surprised; they just looked at us pokerfaced. These were probably the generation of pot-bellied urchins that I remembered who use to stand staring with bulging eyes and picking their noses, as we soldiers drove-by. Now with their own little siblings, staring at us, as their parents had done before.

A few meters beyond the shanties there was the turn-off that led to the Trolak Rubber Estate. The road had been improved and continued through the plantation for probably half a mile, and then, there was the enclosure where 'A' company was first based. The barbwire fencing, and two double gates chained and padlocked seemed much as I remembered. Everything was basically the same, except of course; the tented camp had long since gone. There was the - latex drying shed standing tall, where some of us soldiers were accommodated for a time. I remembered the stench of drying latex that was sickening. Other out buildings seemed the same, perhaps with a few more added. The bungalow that had served as the operational room, and the officers quarters could be seen. There were a few vehicles parked, but not a person in sight.

It was mid-afternoon, work had probably ceased for the day. We did not stay long; after all it could be construed that we were trespassing. I had one last task to do, perhaps more of a ritual, and that was to hang my thirteen pair of jungle boots outside the gate. I had retained and returned them to the place of issue some twenty-three years before - a kind of homecoming.

Often I have wondered what the workers had thought when they found them hanging from the gate, and hoped the boots would have been taken to the plantation office, where perhaps much head scratching and speculation had taken place.



We arrived back at the 'Smokehouse' and got our luggage ready for departure the following morning. We paid a rather extortionate bill and set off on our journey into the hinterland towards the East Coast. Thick jungle either side of the road for much of the way. Occasionally a few monkeys dashed across in front of us. In places the rainforests took over from the tangled jungle with huge majestic trees that dwarfed us below. Here and there, open patches of land with sparse growth mingled with marshland. On the fringes the ever encroaching tangle, in places the sunlight filtered through the jungle canopy where beautiful huge butterflies fluttered in abundance.

During the early part of the journey, we encountered several huge lumber trucks emerging from side tracks cut into the forest. These soon became scarce; we presumed felling operations had not then penetrated deeper into the interior. It seemed much of the wilderness would soon be lost forever, together with the peace and tranquillity. In higher regions fantastic scenes of floral beauty could be seen, and in the distance silvery sparkling rivers threading through the dense evergreen carpet of varying shades of thousands upon thousands of trees and tangled jungle. The road twisted with sharp bends to navigate, and there were frightening sheer drops into the valleys below.

After a while we were in need of a rest and stopped by an open area. It seemed strangely uncanny and silent, not a sound anywhere; *(have you ever heard nothing? And then the tiniest of sounds, like the beat of a fly's wings)*. It was devoid of trees, just odd patches of scrub and belukar. I had saved a half bottle of well watered down gin. It was bliss just sitting in the car sipping the refreshing, but warm drink. When the bottle was empty I tossed it into a patch of marshy swamp. The crash must have

awakened millions of creatures from their slumbers, for suddenly the whole area opened with a crescendo of insects and bullfrogs.

It seemed strange not to encounter another motor vehicle until reaching Kuala Lipis, and then on to Jerantut, where a few vehicles appeared and gradually increased journeying towards Kuantan. Here the landscape changed giving way to coconut palms, banana groves and cultivated areas of vegetables. Kuantan' is situated on the east coast of the South China Sea. It has a thriving community, a typical Malay town with its *passar* (*market*) and *kampongs* on the outskirts. The population were prominently Malays with some Chinese Tokays (*merchants*). We stayed two days in a reasonable, but basic hotel.

Our adventures took us up to Kuala Terengganu, and then on to Kota Bharu near the Thai-boarder where we spent many days exploring and staying in various motels. Near Kuala Terengganu there were several road blocks manned by Malay soldiers. It seemed there was still the threat of insurgency, possibly attributed to the rout of the Americans in Vietnam, giving the communists fresh impetus to re-emerge from the jungles over the Thai-boarder. The Malay soldiers seemed lacking in basic tactics as they had at the Highlands dam. They appeared complacent to the extreme, and did not impress me. Tactically, it seemed an easy matter for a bunch of terrorists to creep up and take them out. But' for all that, the soldiers were a friendly lot, and after establishing that we were bona fide tourists waved us on smilingly with a friendly hand wave each time we passed through the roadblock.

The time had come for our return to Singapore, and then on to the UK. We had done the east coast run to Singapore with just one stopover night at the Twin Island Motel.

It had certainly been a holiday of a lifetime, we had been lucky to do it before the main impact of tourists arrived to open up the country and spoil the beautiful tranquil land and perhaps some of its customs. At times we had been regarded with curiosity in some of the remote places, but as we neared the causeway leading to Singapore, things suddenly changed for we were back amongst our own kind. There was time to divert and take a look around Johor Bahru and Kota Tiggie where I had done my jungle warfare training at the FTC. Then a brief stop at a Chinese café called 'Mei Fhart' for a cool drink.

The last phase: I parked the car outside the immigration office at the causeway. Mary' waited in the car whilst I went into the office to present our passports and complete the formalities. There were several customs and immigration officials together with some Malay police. The police inspector politely returned my salutations and looked at our passports examining the entries and official stampings; he looked puzzled and showed them to the Shiki superintendent. Who turned on me and said. We had exceeded our permitted stay in Malaysia by over four weeks! I said, I don't understand. The British Embassy informed me that it was permitted to stay in the country for up to three months. That is correct he said, but you have to get your passports officially stamped every two 'veeks. That's news to me, I said. 'Vait' a minute! Goodness gracious me! He re-checked the date stamp. You have exceeded your stay by eight 'veeks and that is 'vhot I am saying. You have broken law! That is a very bad thing to do! Very bad indeed! I don't understand, we are British subjects on holiday, and we have spent a lot of money in your country. We have a flight to catch back to the UK in three days time. He said, 'vhy did you not understand that your passports had to be stamped; you seem to be an intelligent man? That is 'vhot I am a saying! I told you, I checked with the British Embassy before we left the UK, and I assumed everything was all right! After all it's only a technicality. I 'vill have to detain you; and you 'vill go before magistrate in morning. For doing such a very bad thing! I don't believe what you are saying? We are British subjects! The last time I was in your country, you needed me, now it seems things are different! 'Vhat are you a meaning? You 'vere - here before! Yes - during the emergency! You needed me then! He looked puzzled - 'Vhat unit? 'The Royal West Kent

Regiment' based at Kuala Kubu Bahru, Tanjong Malim and Trolak. Yes! he said. Goodness gracious me! I remember your regiment 'vell - I 'vas also operating in that very same area as you 'vere sahib. Please be excusing me sahib, 'vhilst I telephone my chief. I was surrounded by four or five curious officials, each picking up the passports in turn. The superintendent had a lengthily discussion on the phone, turned towards me. I thought - this is it! - a spell in the nick overnight! He smiled, stamped our passports and handed them to me. I looked surprised? You are free to be a going sahib' and thank you very much for your services in the past sahib! He extended his hand, and then saluted. Several Malay officials smiled and said - Terima kasih. (*Thank you*).

I walked back to the car; Mary' asked what kept you? I'll explain in a minute' - let's get the hell out of here; we nearly got chucked in the nick for the night! The barrier was lifted by a constable who gave a friendly smile, waved and saluted.

I said – “It seems some one remembers us old soldiers after all, for the part we played in freeing their country from anarchy”.

- END -

That's my story?

John Burrows

2009

*Have I been back since? Well I did attend several conferences in Singapore, some years back regarding the Vietnam offshore oil field developments. 'The White **Tiger** Oil Field'. Time did not permit further venture.*



CHEERS!