

MALAYAN MEMORIES – HARRY SMITH 2RAR 1955-57

After National Service 1952, followed by OCS and Platoon Commander 18 NS Trg Bn near Hobart, I was posted to 2RAR Malaya in October 1955, flown up as a reinforcement officer. I was a Second Lieutenant, and posted to 9 Platoon Charlie Company at Sungei Siput. 8 Platoon Commander was Brian McFarlane who was to be the neighbouring Charlie Company Commander in Vietnam. The Battalion Operational HQ was at Kuala Kangsar, and the rear base was in lovely old UK Colonial Barracks on Penang Island.

I recall being told to get a crew haircut and being driven to the Company forward Base in rubber tapper huts in a plantation. Early next morning I saw a young Malay boy walking towards the hut on a track, carrying the usual tapper's pole over his shoulder with two buckets of latex rubber. I greeted this boy with my Malay version of Good Morning – "Selamat Pagi". He looked up at me with his big eyes and bright smile and said "Good Morning Sir" in clear English. That was the last time I used Malay. And all the Bar Girls spoke good English.

We normally spent four weeks patrolling in the jungle hills or searching villages, with a weekend break back at Penang. Married officers were lucky to get a Married Quarter home with a Malay servant, but being the most junior officer I had to wait until 1956 before I could bring my young wife up from Hobart. My eldest Daughter Debbie was born at Penang in June 1956. Most of the officers were from Duntroon, and young OCS officers and their wives were not the flavour of the month, but one or two OCS wives helped my wife when I was away, which was most of the time.

Not long after I arrived I was sent to Kota Tingi just north of Singapore for a four week UK Jungle Warfare Course and we went through the mill with very good UK Instructors. My CSM in Vietnam 1966-67, the late Jack Kirby, was to serve there as an Instructor circa 1963-65. At weekends we were given leave in Singapore, and that was my introduction to "Change Alley"; Bar Girls, and the cheap clothing, where one could have a tailor made suit finished in a day.

On the way back north from the Course on the fast Singapore Express, the train hit a UK Army Saracen Armoured Car which had stalled on a crossing and opened it up like a can of sardines. Army people on the train, like myself, were solicited to walk back along the railway track and pick up pieces of bodies, personal items, and equipment – a grisly task I will always remember, surpassed only by the blood and gore on the Long Tan battlefield.

There was not a lot of action on patrols. On one night ambush placed on a track between two villages, we set tripflares across the track at each end, covering the track with two Bren guns, one each end, firing along it. It was known that CTs (Communist Terrorists) often came into villages at night to collect food and money and visit families. As in Vietnam, villagers were sympathetic or forced into helping the local guerillas, or suffer atrocities.

I recall trying to keep the eyelids open and ignoring the incessant mosquitoes. It must have been about 9-30pm when a trip flare went off, the light blinding us, but revealing a figure riding a bicycle along the track. As briefed, the two Bren gunners opened up and killed the man, who turned out to be a village elder, late home after having drunk too much wine at another village. Next morning the local Police took his body and the next day a group from

the Battalion attended the funeral and paid respects. Unlike all the fuss about killing civilians in Afghanistan, the Law was quite clear – anyone outside the 6pm to 6am Curfew was enemy.

Some weeks later my platoon was ordered to go into the jungle with two Iban (Borneo) Trackers and try to find a CT who had been reported going up a certain hill by local people. I moved up front just behind the Trackers, and after several hours of climbing up the ridgeline track on the hill the Trackers pointed to a figure hiding behind a bush. Armed with a US .30 Cal Carbine, I moved forward to investigate and the enemy appeared to be about to throw a grenade, so I shot him. And I must say that I fired too many rounds, but in hindsight I wanted to ensure he was dead. I can add there was a policy that a dead enemy was better than a wounded man. I guess it was like the US Body-Count Policy in Vietnam – bodies being the status symbol of success. We carried the body down to the local road and it was taken by the Police and hung up outside the Police Station for two days with a sign indicating this is the fate of those who support the Communist push.

It was Christmas 1956 and my Platoon was ordered to be the Duty Platoon to guard Battalion HQ at Kuala Kangsar while most sub-units went back to Penang on leave. Our Adjutant was a strict former Scotts Guards Captain, Donald Ramsay, who used to chastise young officers if their shorts were too short or socks too short. He would actually measure the distances above and below the knees and advise what had to be done to observe the regulations. When I reported for duty at HQ, he gave instructions that one of my main tasks was to try and locate the soldiers who were drinking and gambling after Lights Out.

With my Orderly Sergeant, Alan Seale, we would patrol the lines every night after Lights Out, but could never pin the blokes who were making the noise. They probably had a parrot on duty. But, a week or so later, the parrot must have fallen asleep and we walked right into the hut making the noise and I said “Gotcha, you rats”, and my Sergeant confiscated the grog and cards. That incident earned me a nickname of “Harry The Ratcatcher”, which was to be revised in Vietnam by previous 2RAR soldiers. It wasn’t as has been rumoured, for giving a bonus to my men for catching the large rats that plagued our tent lines at Nui Dat. And after Long Tan it became “Harry the Cong Catcher” for a time. But I am happy with “Ratcatcher”, and a flag to that effect was given to the Museum in 2011 by one of my former soldiers from Bowen, Sting Hornett.

In early 1957, promoted to Lieutenant, I was selected to lead our Charlie Company half-platoon patrol to set ambushes along tracks on the high mountains on the Thai border, as part of a force of five similar patrols, one from each Company including Support Company. It was reported by Agents that the leader of the Communist Terrorist organisation, Chin Peng, was moving from sanctuary in Thailand into Malaya. We set ambushes and made a HQ area well away, where those not on duty could rest, mostly playing cards to pass the long hours. But, when we wanted fresh water, more than rain we could collect off our small poncho tents, we had to patrol down steep hills to locate a creek, fill up our special water bags, then climb back up hand over hand on vines and tree roots.

Apart from signs of tigers and elephants, we saw no sign of enemy in our area, although the Support Company patrol had a kill and Sergeant Des Kennedy was awarded a MM. We were called back to Base after about four weeks, and then the Battalion returned to Holsworthy NSW in July 1957, where I became T/Captain, Vickers Machine Gun Platoon Commander with Des Kennedy as my Platoon Sergeant.