Undermanned, untrained, they found themselves beset by a secret outlaw army...

SPEARHEAD IN MALAYA

and fought a desperate struggle in the swamplands and mountains of Malaya
J. W. G. Moran

SPEARHEAD IN MALAYA

With a foreword by
FIELD-MARSHAL SIR GERALD TEMPLER
G.C.B., G.C.M.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.

A Panther Book
FOREWORD

By FIELD-MARSHAL SIR GERALD TEMPLER,
G.C.B., G.C.M.G., K.B.E., D.S.O.
Late Chief of the Imperial General Staff, formerly High Commissioner and Director of Operations, Federation of Malaya.

I have great affection and admiration for the Royal Federation of Malaya Police Force and its component parts. They are the people who have been continuously at the business of fighting militant Communism all through the long ten years of the Emergency in their country. There was no home posting for them, no relief after two or three years as there was for the British Army soldiers who played such a notable part in the long struggle; and even the units of Malaya's own Federation Army had, I believe, an easier time in this respect than did the Police.

The Author's Preface deserves to be read carefully. I wonder how many people realise the extent of the problem which had to be tackled, and I am quite sure that very few indeed have any idea of the part played by the Police.

This is a first-class book. I have enjoyed reading it immensely. It is always a real pleasure to read a story by a junior officer—in this case a Police Lieutenant—who was on such close terms with his men and who writes of them with such sympathy and understanding.

[Signature]
AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I PRESENT this book as an example of what the Royal Federation of Malaya Police Force and its ancillary units, the Special Constabulary and Police Volunteer Reserve, have done and are still doing in the common fight to rid their country of the Communist scourge. I was inspired to write this book when I realised beyond all shadow of doubt that the magnificent role being played by the police is almost unheard of in many countries abroad, including the United Kingdom. I am literally amazed by this lack of public knowledge, and having had the honour of serving in the Malayan Police during its darkest hours, knowing at first-hand its achievements against terrific odds, I am profoundly disturbed over the whole issue. In various literary works there have been references to the weaknesses of the police organisation in Malaya, but when one pauses to think that at the time of the Liberation from the Japanese Occupation there was no such organisation as a police force in Malaya at all—all police forces having been disbanded and scattered to the four winds in the wake of the Japanese invasion—and that in 1948, when the newly formed police force was just encountering its first teething trouble, the present Emergency broke overnight in all its ferocity, even the most cynical persons must be conscience-bound to give a large slice of credit where it is unquestionably due. And furthermore emphasised when the public at last know that for the first two years of the Emergency the Malayan police, a mere token force of some 14,000 men—badly equipped and not yet properly trained—bore the full brunt of the Communist aggression.

I use the word 'aggression' because that is typical of the situation. The reason for the intervention of armed Communist forces, inspired and indeed supported by Russia and Communist China, was simple. The Malayan Communist Party had failed to gain control of the various trades and workers' unions. They were rebuffed and ousted by the multi-racial population of Malaya throughout the peninsula. Unable to stomach this political defeat, the Communists resorted to the only remaining means open to them—domination by force of arms. Subsequently the powerful Communist political and guerrilla military machine was set in motion and, with the murders of three European rubber planters in one day at Sungai Siput in the State of Perak in June 1948, the Emergency came into being. Within twenty-four hours the revolt had spread throughout Malaya, and anyone who opposed the aggressor had his or her life forfeit.
I would like to devote a little space to the Communist set-up in Malaya. They have been described as ‘bandits’, terrorists and many fancy names—giving people the impression that they are just undisciplined hooligans running around in baggy trousers and coloured shirts firing a few obsolete weapons here and there. The plain truth is that the armed guerrillas are nothing of the sort. They are a highly trained and disciplined military force operating under the title of the Malayan Races Liberation Army. Its soldiers—one must call them that—are distributed throughout the Federation of Malaya in regiments, Platoons, companies, sections and independent Platoons; correctly dressed in an adapted uniform—commanded by officers who receive their orders from the Political Commissars—and in the main extremely well armed with weapons of all the latest patterns. Initially, and in addition to other military factions, there were fifteen Communist regiments operating in Malaya. They numbered themselves consecutively, and each regiment was composed of approximately four hundred men. They operated from their bases or camps deep in the jungle, and performed all the functions of a normal soldier, even to the extent of the flag ceremony at dawn and dusk. I have seen one of those camps in the jungle. It had every detail from barracks—some married quarters, compound and school—down to a field hospital. It was considered just one of those things during the first years of the Emergency if a police jungle patrol of about twenty men had the misfortune to encounter a Communist guerrilla force of anything up to four hundred. In the latter years of the Emergency the Communist guerrilla tactics have changed. The big regiments and companies have been split into smaller groups because owing to Malaya’s jungle terrain the smaller force, meaning less men to control in action, has proved to be the best means of obtaining success in operations and also presenting fewer difficulties of supply, chiefly food.

So much for the uniformed guerrilla force of the Communist movement; now a few words about the Min Yuen. This is the ‘plain clothes’ section of the organisation. It comprises chiefly special agents, a kind of ‘cloak and dagger’ force, couriers, sympathisers and those who collect subscriptions—mostly by force—from the population and others who give food and shelter to marauding groups of guerrillas. The Min Yuen without doubt is the largest single section of the Communist Party machine. No one knows their true identity or who they are until some information given betrays them, and it is certain that the unsuspecting person brushes shoulders with Min Yuen agents every hour of the day. Finally, I come to the last branch of the machine—the specialised Killer Squads. By means of their crude printing apparatus situated in sparse, outlying jungle hide-outs the Communist Party regularly compile a list...
of potential victims, and the list goes under the self-explanatory title of Eliminations List. The only crime of the victims is that either they have in some way opposed the Communist cause, refused to give money, food or shelter, or, in duty bound, they have killed a guerrilla, Party official or Min Yuen agent. The Eliminations List is then dispatched from Party Headquarters by foot courier to all local Communist Party Committees. Then it is left for the Killer Squads to carry out their work of elimination. Very few victims escape the Killer Squads, being hounded and finally executed quickly and methodically if it takes days, weeks, months or even years. The Killer Squads usually work in small groups of three or four men, and they show a preference for night operation. They are dressed in black shirts, trousers and rubber-soled shoes—ideal garb for night—and their armament is usually a knife, revolver or hand grenade, sufficient for their deadly purpose. There is no discrimination in the names on the Eliminations List. It can mean a Government official, police officer, soldier, schoolmaster, labourer or even housewife of any nationality.

The drama had begun and the policeman found that he was called upon to play the dual roles of attack and defence. Control of Malaya had been returned to the civil power, and the military forces at hand were hopelessly inadequate to offer any appreciable assistance. I do not suggest for one moment that the police have been guiltless of blunders or that their organisation has been infallible. Errors have been many, but this is not necessarily a reflection on the integrity of the Force as a whole. When the testing time came, the police suffered a number of completely unavoidable reverses. Among the reasons for them were that they were totally untrained for warfare; they did not possess the essential arms and ammunition, nor were they equipped with suitable uniforms for jungle fighting. The first police units, hurriedly drawn together, went into action wearing khaki uniforms, making themselves beautiful targets against the green of the jungle. Therefore it can be justifiably claimed as a defence that errors made in the early stages of the Emergency can be attributed to the fact that the men had been trained, many only partly trained, as peace officers and not as soldiers; it was apparent that the policeman could not immediately adjust himself to the arduous demands of guerrilla warfare. He had to discard his truncheon and other symbols of more peaceful days, and learn to use the carbine, sten gun, bren gun and other lethal weapons, thereby adding to his credit the willingness to adapt himself to an aggressive role.

I do not favour the dry reading provided by quoting statistics but I feel that I can be excused if I quote some important ones in this Preface. Never before in the history of our Colonial Empire has a Police Force been called upon to play such a
role as has the Malayan Police. As the result of decorations granted for gallantry in action and distinguished service, the Malayan Police hold the proud record of being the most decorated Police Force of our time, numbering among its major decorations thirteen George Medals—all awarded for supreme courage against the enemy—to say nothing of the hundreds of other decorations granted to serving officers of all ranks and nationalities. The police have suffered the greatest Security Forces casualties. Official records placed at my disposal show that, up to the end of 1956, 2,890 police have been killed in action alone, against the Military Forces total of 518. During the same period the Communist casualties totalled 11,718 out of which 8,678 were bagged by the police jungle forces. Again, during the same period, total civilian casualties are 6,120, and of that 3,253 were killed and the remainder wounded by the Communists. Many wild estimates have been given regarding the operational strength of the Communist forces. Optimists have declared for years that it is no more than 5,000. The above official figures of casualties alone squash that estimate once and for all time. Only the outlawed Malayan Communist Party could disclose their actual strength, but knowing pretty well the man-power strength of the regiments and their supporters, and adding to that the Min Yuen, Killer Squads and political committees, I would make a fairly accurate assessment of 70,000. At least that is much nearer the mark than the ridiculous 5,000 we are asked to believe.

In this book you will read the true story of a small group of men. It is a record of my own personal experiences and those of others, with one or two I have attributed to myself solely for the purpose of this book in order to present it as a human story. In certain cases, for obvious reasons, I have decided to protect the true identities of some characters by giving them imaginary names. I have chosen Sungei Lambu as the locality for my story because among many things it was there that I learned that the true values of man are much more than skin deep. From time to time I have read, in press reports, magazine articles and books, impressions of those to whom Malaya should be grateful and whom she should uphold as her heroes. Heroes may come and heroes may go, but to me the true hero of Malaya—and of this book—is the ordinary down-to-earth ‘mata-mata’—the policeman.

J. W. G. Moran

July 1958.
CHAPTER I

The driver changed gear and slowed down to negotiate the small hump-backed bridge over the river. Once over, he quickly accelerated, still in the same low gear, and executed a miraculous left-hand turn through the open gateway. Then he yanked the wheel sharp right and braked to a sudden halt, bare inches from a high pile of sandbag defences. I climbed wearily out of the Land Rover; it had not been a comfortable ride.

“Mr. Moran, I presume.” A quiet voice spoke from behind me. I turned round to face the speaker. He was a short, stocky chap dressed in an old khaki shirt and faded blue shorts. A pair of worn leather sandals were casually covering his bare feet. His body was well-proportioned, and I thought that the wide shoulders tapering to the slim waist made him look younger than he was. His face was lean and sun-tanned to a deep masculine brown. His hair was thinning, and had no doubt been more plentiful in his younger days. I think the most striking feature about him was his eyes. They were widely spaced over the bridge of his nose and reflected an impression of deep, clear-cut honesty. They were the brightest blue I had ever seen in a man.


“Where the heck did you spring from?” I asked, withdrawing my hand.

“I came out of the guardroom as you came over the bridge,” he answered. There was no mistaking his Scots accent.

“Well, I’m here at last, so I had best get mobile.” I started to unload my kit.

“Leave that, Sobh will see to it,” he said. He turned to the constable who had been my escort. He spoke to him in rapid Malay. The man nodded and laid his carbine on the ground. Lovie turned back to me and grabbed my arm.

“Come on,” he said, “I expect you could do with a cup of tea?”

“After that ride, the answer is definitely yes,” I chuckled.

I followed him across the compound to a long wooden building at the rear of the guardroom. I noticed that there was very little sign of life or activity about the base. I took in everything with a cursory glance. It rather depressed me. The buildings were old, dilapidated and weather-beaten. They had about them an air of acute despondency, as if they were content to rot away slowly and conveniently forget the better days
they must have known. We went up the steps and walked along the broad wooden verandah which ran along the front and back of the building. We reached the end room and I followed Lovie inside.

“Well, here we are. An Englishman’s home is his castle. This is yours, pal.”

He stood in the middle of the small room and spread his arms. It was light and airy, but its compensations stopped at that. The furnishings were pathetically cheap and simple. A single wardrobe which also served as a larder. A small writing-table pushed under one window; a bedside locker which looked as if it had been salvaged from the Boer War. A bed tucked away in a corner and two stiff-backed chairs.

“Pretty bloody,” I said, unbuckling my gun-belt.

“You’ll get used to it,” Lovie assured me with more confidence than I had. “It doesn’t compare with Sungei Siput I admit. I’ll go and get the tea.”

He went out through the back door. I tested one chair gingerly before I sat on it. It surprised me when it took the strain. The constable whom I knew as Sobh brought my kit and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor. I gave him a dollar for his trouble, and he gazed at it as if it wasn’t enough. In the end he touched the brim of his floppy green hat and went away. I lit a cigarette and inhaled gratefully. I needed something to steady me. I had been warned that Sungei Lembu was grim, but the warning was considerably understated. Lovie came back and handed me a glass of tea. I sipped at it and felt better. He sat on the edge of the bed and placed his glass on the floor. I offered him a cigarette. He took one and lit it off mine.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

“It doesn’t matter much what I think,” I ventured. “Judging by the little I have seen, it’s bloody awful. Still, as you say, I’ll get used to it.”

Lovie slapped his knee. “That’s the spirit. It shook me at first, but now I think nothing of it.”

I shot him a quick disbelieving glance. I took another swig at my tea.

“Who’s the O.C.P.D.1 around here?”

“Norman Rodway. He hangs out in Bukit Mertajam. You passed through it on your way here.”

“I noticed that much,” I grinned. “It’s after we left the main road that I noticed sweet Fanny Adams.”

“Whom did you see in Penang?”

“I saw Chief Police Officer Wylie and Deputy Lawrence.”

“I suppose they genned you up on Sungei Lembu?”

1 Officer-in-Charge Police District.
“Yes, they painted a pretty accurate picture. I think Deputy Lawrence was a little over-optimistic. He really tried to sell me the dump,” I answered dryly.

“Did they say anything about me?”

I looked across at Lovie. He was rolling a cigarette between his fingers. I wondered what he was getting at. I chose to tread carefully.

“They told me that you were a very sick man. That you had been asking for a transfer. And finally they were of the opinion that you have done your fair share of jungle-bashing since the Emergency started,” I replied briefly, leaving out a lot.

“Nothing else?”

“No. Should they have?”

“I suppose not.”

He rose and paced up and down the room. Suddenly he had become a changed man. All the laughter and sparkle had melted from his eyes. A haunted expression passed over his face, making the leanness more intense. I began to see the trouble and why he was sick. His outward appearance rather masked the fact till then. I had seen the symptoms many times before. During the war the Americans had put their finger on the trouble. They had called it combat fatigue.

“Your tea’s getting cold,” I remarked casually.

He didn’t say anything but ceased his pacing and returned to the bed. He sipped slowly at the tea, miles away. I might just as well not have been in the room. He was staring straight down at the floor. He replaced the glass and wiped his mouth. He looked across at me queerly, and a smile flickered over his thin lips. He handed me a cigarette, and I accepted it without comment. There was a long pause.

“What’s your Christian name?” he asked suddenly, out of the blue.

“Bill will suffice. I acquired it somewhere during the war. What have you been doing since the war?” The going was getting easier.

“I joined the Palestine Police. When the British pulled out and handed over to the Yids, I came to Malaya.”

“You must have been one of the original European police sergeants.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“A great body of men. I hesitate to think what the police would have done without them.”

“They treated us dirty, all the same.”

“But they made amends,” I remarked in a friendly way.

“They made us up to officer status, if that’s what you mean. But it took the Police Mission inquiry to do that,” Lovie said crossly. “I believe you know some of the chaps around here,” he added, brightening up. The haunted look faded from his face.