

# **MISADVENTURES WITH COCO-OSCAR**

**A CONSCRIPT'S ROLE IN THE  
MALAYAN EMERGENCY**



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# CHAPTER 3

## DESTINATION TELOK SENGAT

After only five weeks' jungle training at FTC Kota Tinggi, the battalion was considered capable of undertaking its first operation. Tac HQ was launched into active service aboard a Royal Engineers' Z-craft on Wednesday, 30 July 1958. After a 4:00 am Reveille and a remarkably incident-free drive to Singapore, we boarded the Z-craft at RAF Seletar a little before 7:00 am. The vessel was crewed by five sappers<sup>1</sup> and an ACC (Army Catering Corps) cook, all of whom ambled around the craft in absolute shit-order. Instead of regulation berets, the crew wore blue peaked caps with RE (Royal Engineers) badges. The skipper, a corporal, looked more like buccaneer than an engineer. He wore patched-up shorts, crepe soled shoes

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<sup>1</sup> Sapper – archaic term commonly used for Royal Engineers.

instead of army boots and, beneath his peaked cap, sprouted a thatch of crinkly, tightly-curled blonde hair. Life aboard a Z-craft looked enticing — no bull, no loudmouthed Army-style discipline (and the skipper had the voice for it).

The three-hour voyage up the Johore River on an early morning incoming tide was my first opportunity to observe Coco-Oscar in command. Operation *Badak* was his first experience of commanding a battalion on active service and, with thumbstick tucked tightly under his arm, he strode around the deck packed with vehicles trying to look authoritative. He seemed irked that a mere corporal was in charge of the vessel rather than himself. Desperate to take over as we approached the beach where we were to land, he called out to the skipper,

‘We’re not coming in straight.’

‘Allowing for the tide,’ was the gruff reply.

On landing, we unloaded all our stores and rations, along with Coco-Oscar’s vehicles; a Land Rover and a Ferret armoured scout car. In addition, he was to have an RASC

launch at his disposal and, close by, a helicopter at his beck and call. After everything was unloaded, we were driven to the top of a steep-sided hill nearby where we pitched camp in the now pouring rain — 11 large marquees, including one for the sole use of Coco-Oscar, one for the other three officers, and one for the Officers Mess — anyone would think they were on a camping holiday rather than active service.

The rain simply bucketed down the whole time we were erecting the tents — a true tropical downpour the like of which we had never experienced before. The floor of the tent in which we were to sleep was a lake. After a makeshift dinner cooked on the partially assembled camp kitchen, we returned to our tent and, using our basic carbide lamp for illumination, sought refuge in the only dry place we could find – in our beds under mozzie nets.

Thursday dawned to more rain. That morning the Int Section got to grips with establishing the Ops Room, while the wireless operators began setting up the Signals Office. Map displays

were erected as instructed by Captain Pavior and the SITREP system was established before we returned to digging: excavating deep, deep trenches around our waterlogged tent, deep enough to serve as defensible dugouts as well as monsoon drains. Camping on a hilltop one would have expected that water would drain away, but the soil had more clay content than a potter's wheel and water ponded everywhere. This was ameliorated by covering the tent floors with sand trucked from the beach. Even so, the floor of our tent remained a natural reservoir and walking on the sand felt like paddling around the waterline of an outgoing tide. That night, having spent most of the day digging trenches, we were again all pretty creased<sup>2</sup> so, after a surprisingly tasty supper prepared by Les Whitehand, our cook, on his now almost completed camp kitchen, we turned in early once again.

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<sup>2</sup> Tired, exhausted.

Throughout the settling-in process the officers surprised us by mucking in and working hard. Even Coco-Oscar lent a hand spreading sand, and Captain Pavior and Lieutenant Thistleton, the RSO, both worked like navvies loading and trucking sand from the beach in the Land Rover. The only person who contributed nothing helpful was Lieutenant Duff-Cannonier the commander of the Mortar Platoon, another hyphenated officer-class dolt who walked around bleating,

‘Okay chaps, right, are we all happy with that? Okay, right-ho, jolly good!’

Even the diminutive, bespectacled Doc Drewitt, the National Service MO, pitched in with the digging. At this stage distinction between officers and ORs was noticeable by its absence, as was the presence of the normally ubiquitous bull.

From the camp we had a panoramic view over the nearby *kampong* to the Johore River, which looked to be almost a mile wide at that point. The *kampong* was located on the edge of a rubber plantation with jungle beyond. Despite the discomforts,

one aspect of camp life that did turn out to be amazingly good was the food. After our wretched culinary experiences at the Training Depot and at Kota Tinggi, this was a welcome surprise, all the more remarkable because our sole cook was producing quality meals out of a camp kitchen in appalling weather. No doubt this was because our meals were cooked together with the meals served in the Officers' and Sergeants' Messes.

Friday dawned fine. The rifle companies were in place and, finally, the Battalion was fully operational. The commencement of operations was marked by our first mail delivery including a 17 Gurkha Division tie addressed to the RSM — an essential accessory for anyone on active service!

Saturday night was the Int Section's turn for guard duty. It was the cushiest guard I had ever done. No formal guard-mounting and the first stag<sup>3</sup> did not go on duty until 8:00 pm,

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<sup>3</sup> Stag – the period spent on duty, in this case two hours.

with two-hour stags through the night. The one aspect of guard duties here at Telok Sengat that I could not fathom was why, now we were operational in a ‘black area’<sup>4</sup>, was the guard not supplied with live rounds as we were back at FTC, in a secure ‘white area’? What we were expected to do if confronted by armed CTs only Coco-Oscar knew. However, that night it was Coco-Oscar himself who provided the entertainment. Striding into the Ops tent like a prize peacock in his full regimental mess kit, complete with miniature medals he turned to the IO and inquired,

‘Do you think I look like Mark Clark, Paul?’

Why he would want to resemble a World War II US Army general remained a mystery. Especially Clark, who had been heavily criticised for ignoring the orders of General Alexander, his British superior officer, by letting the German 10th Army off the hook in his drive to take Rome.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Black Area’ - an insecure area requiring an armed escort to travel through.



It was this apparition that brought home to us that, extraordinarily for an infantry unit on active service, among the stores that we had unloaded from the Z-craft had been some of the Regimental silver, to be used nightly for formal dining in the Officers Mess tent. Meanwhile, we mere privates had been allowed to bring only one kitbag between two. It also brought to light why, among the Tac HQ complement, there were four batmen and an Officers Mess waiter to serve four officers, making a complete mockery of Coco-Oscar's statement before we left Kota Tinggi that 'there will be no passengers in Tac HQ'.

The following week life settled into a routine. Most of the intelligence work was done by Captain Pavior or Sergeant Kaz, and we lower ranks were left with little to do. In our free time we went swimming, played football on the *kampong* pitch or simply had an afternoon gonk. Nevertheless, the powers that be seemed to consider we were doing it hard, because every five days ten of us were taken back to FTC for R&R (Rest &

Recuperation). I went on the first party, and clean sheets (sheets of any kind were non-existent at Telok Sengat), a good shower, a trip to the cinema and a cold drink were welcome luxuries.

It was during this period that Coco-Oscar's letters to impress the Colonel of the Regiment in England became another source of entertainment. Reading the drafts that he gave to Bryn, the Tac HQ typist, we were convinced that he was only semi-literate. He used 'farther' instead of 'further'; was unsure whether the 'a' came before the 'e' in Zealand and spelt the ordinal number 'fourth' without a 'u'. In hindsight, had the condition been known at the time, he probably would have been diagnosed as dyslexic. Bryn, a cadet journalist prior to call-up, tried surreptitiously to correct Coco's spelling when typing his letters, but was often reprimanded and ordered to re-type them with the wrong spelling. Doubtless the Colonel of the Regiment would attribute these spelling errors to Coco's ill-educated typist. Coco also liked to write the SITREPs

himself but, as soon as he was out of the way, either the IO or the RSO re-wrote them.

While life at Tac HQ was pretty cushy, the rifle companies were doing it much harder. Although they had found a few tracks and several food dumps, they failed to find any CTs. This was probably because we had been deployed into the area too late to intercept CTs fleeing north to escape from the 2nd/10th Gurkhas who had them on the run at the southern end of the peninsula.

Returning to Tac HQ after my second R&R at Kota Tinggi, the improvements to our camp made me wonder why we needed R&R at all. Rather than doing it tough, the camp was beginning to look like a holiday camp; all we lacked was cold beer and a cinema. We were now able to keep the water out of our tents when it rained, life had been made comfortable by building wash-stands and tables, the Mortar Platoon had built a shower and laid out a badminton court.

Then, out of the blue, a single incident caused discipline to be tightened, formal guard-mounting parades to be introduced, and live rounds issued to those on guard duty. These changes were in no way due to CT activity, but were solely the result of the antics of Acker, Coco-Oscar's wireless operator and a most unlikely 'hard man'. Acker was in his late twenties, a nine-year Regular soldier with previous service in Malaya, and clearly good at his trade, having been selected as the CO's wireless operator. Around five feet four inches short, he was built like a barrel with matchstick legs, a pukka accent and a quick wit. Since arriving in Telok Sengat he had taken to wearing a large sheath knife stuffed down the front of his Regimental belt much like an Arab *jambiya*.

One Friday, as was his weekend custom, Acker headed for the bar in the nearby *kampong* for his weekend ration of cold Anchor. On his way back, he accosted a villager and had him detained for being unable to produce his identity card. This came to light in the morning when the local Royal Malaya

Police lieutenant visited Tac HQ to report the incident. The hapless villager was freed and Acker was reprimanded by Coco-Oscar, and ordered to be back in camp no later than 8:00 pm in future. However, this was Saturday which, from lunchtime until lights-out on Sunday, Acker considered to be his time, not the Army's. So, undeterred, and in the company of 'Joe Belly'<sup>5</sup>, another old sweat who was rostered for guard duty that night, Acker once more headed off to the *kampong*.

Come eight o'clock, when Joe had not reported for guard duty and Acker could not be found in camp, Sergeant Kaz the Guard Commander set off to find them. He accosted the pair in the village bar and ordered them back to camp. By this time, both men were well into their cups and Acker, one hand on his knife for emphasis, informed Kaz,

'We'll come when we're ready.'

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<sup>5</sup> So-called because he had the word 'Belly' crudely tattooed across his scrawny stomach.

Unable to persuade them otherwise, Kaz drove back to camp returning with two armed guards.

‘Are you ready to come now?’ said Kaz before escorting the pair back to camp where they were placed under open arrest. But that was not the end of it — in fact that was only the start of it. Appearing unshaven on Muster Parade on Sunday morning, Acker was gripped by Captain Pavior.

‘Acker, get that fuzz off your face and report to me, cleanshaven, at 11 o’clock.’ As it was a Sunday, Acker declined, citing the bible:

‘Six days shalt thou labour and on the seventh shalt thou rest,’ he declared.

‘Battalion Orders take precedence over God’s word in this camp. My tent, 11 o’clock, clean-shaven, understood? Now fall out.’

When Acker failed to appear at the appointed hour, a search was mounted and, once again, he was found in the *kampong*, this time sitting in the barber shop sipping Anchor beer from a

small glass while being shaved. Captain Pavior himself drove into the *kampong* to collect the recalcitrant. Had he not been bareheaded and shirtless as he sat alongside the Captain in the Land Rover, cheroot in hand, Acker could almost have passed as a visiting Brigadier as they drove into camp.

By this time Coco-Oscar had been made aware of events. He confronted Acker, demanding that he hand over the knife which, as usual, was tucked into his low-slung Regimental belt. Still shirtless and standing rigidly to attention, Acker refused claiming that wearing the knife was good for his confidence. Infuriated at Acker's defiance, Coco-Oscar unexpectedly lunged for the knife. Despite his inebriated state Acker leapt backwards with alacrity evading Coco-Oscar's grasp. After this brief flurry of action, the two of them remained in a face-off Coco-Oscar gripping his revolver and Acker clutching the handle of his knife. The stalemate was broken by Sergeant Weller, the overbearing Provost Sergeant, recently arrived on the supply launch. Grabbing Acker from behind he placed him

under arrest and escorted him to the launch. Still drunk, but now knifeless as well as shirtless, Acker was fuming at the indignity.

‘Give me any trouble on the way over and you won’t reach the other side,’ he told Weller.

It came as no surprise when, after serving 21 days in detention at Batu Pahat, Coco-Oscar did not want him to return, nor did the RSO. Sadly, Tac HQ had lost it’s one outstanding ‘character’, banished to a rifle company and the prospect of jungle patrols with not an Anchor beer to be had. With his cartoon-like shape, quick wit and penchant for quoting the Bible, Acker had been a constant source of entertainment. But the real price we paid for all this entertainment was a ban on evening visits to the *kampong* and the introduction of formal guard-mounting parades.

The following night I was rostered on guard duty under the new regime and, for the first time since arriving at Telok Sengat, the guard was issued with live ammunition. The reason



for this change being known only to Coco-Oscar. One of the guard's duties was to give Les Whitehand, the camp cook, an early wake-up call. Gently prodding him in the ribs with my rifle butt I announced it was time to get up. Receiving no more than a mumbled response ending in '...off', I prodded Les more vigorously and coaxed him from beneath his mozzie net and left him sitting on the edge of his bed in the pre-dawn gloom. No sooner had I left his tent, than I was stopped in my tracks by a piercing yell from behind me. I swung around, rifle at the ready, but could see nothing untoward. Making my way back to Les's tent, I discovered that, in pulling on his jungle boot in the dark, his foot had encountered a snake nestling inside.

August, was punctuated by a succession of 'flaps.' First, a lad out in the *ulu* collapsed with intense stomach pain which ultimately was diagnosed as a blocked bowel. The MO recommended an immediate Casevac by helicopter but, after the ignominy of having a soldier evacuated from a training

patrol, Coco-Oscar flatly refused to authorise it (bad for what he perceived to be the good reputation of the Regiment to have another Casevac on his first operation). Instead, he ordered that the man be carried out through 4,000 yards of dense jungle to a beach, so he could be evacuated by boat from there.

By the next morning the soldier's condition had deteriorated further. After liaising by radio with the Platoon Sergeant, who had first aid training, the MO was flown to the nearest helicopter LZ (Landing Zone) and had to walk into the *ulu* to treat the casualty who, by this time was delirious. Under sedation he was carried out to the beach from where he was flown by helicopter to BMH (British Military Hospital) Singapore, where a surgeon was on standby to operate.

On his return to Tac HQ, the MO told Coco-Oscar in no uncertain terms that, had the surgeon not been on stand-by, the soldier may well have become the battalion's first fatality. Clearly, the fault lay squarely with Coco-Oscar, who had refused the MO's initial request for a helicopter evacuation. At

the time, the incident had certainly unnerved Coco-Oscar. Following the MO's departure to treat the soldier, he could scarcely sit still for a second and cut a gaunt, chain-smoking, figure pacing up and down the Ops Room tent running his hands through his silver-grey hair which, after three weeks in the *ulu* had taken on a greenish tinge at the tips as if affected by mildew.

Unbelievably, the day after the MO's return, another lad cut his leg to the bone with his *golok*; again Coco-Oscar refused to authorise a helicopter Casevac.

'This man has lost a lot of blood and could possibly lose a leg,' asserted the MO.

Coco was having none of it.

'The man can easily be stretchered back to his Company base camp and evacuated by road from there,' he responded.

This time, Captain Drewitt, the National Service doctor, asserted his medical authority, demanding that Coco-Oscar authorise a helicopter Casevac. Finally relenting, Coco

authorised the evacuation. Only after these two incidents did Coco-Oscar begin to show a little more concern for the lives of his men than he did for what he considered to be ‘the reputation of the Regiment’, and two more helicopter Casevacs were authorised before Operation *Badak* concluded.

By this time, to add some interest to life in Telok Sengat, and to open a new avenue for testing the limits of army regulations, I ceased shaving above my top lip.

‘Why try and cultivate hair on your lip when it grows wild on your arse?’ asked Dan, but I was not alone with Trev, Bryn and, eventually Dan himself, also ceasing to shave above their top lip. It was a new challenge — Army moustaches are bound by strict regulations: they may not extend beyond the width of the top lip, nor allowed to grow beneath the level of the mouth, so moustache cultivation became a constant test of how far you could extend the area of growth before being gripped.

Soon after the outbreak of moustache growing the Int Section acquired a dog. Osbert, our oddball Lance-Corporal,

asked Coco-Oscar for permission to keep a dog. Astonishingly, the request was granted. As my family had bred dogs when I was a boy, I went to the *kampong* with Osbert to examine a month-old Alsatian pup before he bought it. The pup's mother was a retired War Dog, and the sire an Alsatian from the War Dog Training Wing in Kota Tinggi. The pup was extremely timid and, at first, seldom emerged from beneath Osbert's bed. With a dark coat and muzzle, she was like a young foal, all legs and nothing else. After a couple of puppy pukes we wanted to call her 'Pukey' but, it being Osbert's dog, he christened her 'Joy', a total misnomer given the life that lay ahead of her.

It was around this time the ban on evening visits to the *kampong* was lifted, and Dan, Trev and I decided to explore. Standing outside the local bar comparing beer prices with NAAFI prices, a Eurasian-looking fellow called out to us from inside in exceptionally good English,

'Come in and have a beer with me,' he said, so we did. We soon learnt that he had been in the Royal Engineers in World

War II and had been a prisoner of the Japanese on the Burma Railway for three-and-a-half years, alongside many British POWs. This experience had given him a huge respect for the British which he demonstrated by continuing to get the beers in, refusing to let us buy a round. His name was Edward, and he was the tractor supervisor on the local rubber estate. After several beers, he sent his driver away with \$20. The driver returned a short time later with a bottle of 'Black & White' whisky, sourced from who knows where? Edward insisted we finish the bottle and, not wishing to offend our host, we duly obliged. That was singing liquor and Edward soon launched into *Three German officers crossed the Rhine*, and we continued with everything from *Cats on the Rooftop* to *The Ball of Kirriemuir*. It wasn't long before we had half the village clustered around the bar seemingly enjoying the show. When we ran out of songs our host insisted on buying a couple of large bottles of Guinness as a nightcap. Having downed these,

we lurched back into camp around midnight, waking up most of the lads before falling into our scratchers<sup>6</sup>.

A few days later we visited the *kampong* again and came across a Malay wedding taking place at a big house. The groom's brother invited us to join the proceedings, sat us at a table and fed us savoury pies, cakes and scented tea, making us most welcome. We were a great hit with the kids, who revelled in wearing our jungle hats as we practiced our Malay and taught the kids a bit of English. As we understood it a Malay marriage is a contract between the groom and the girl's father and, if the prospective groom offers the right price, he can marry the girl. We watched as sisters, cousins and aunts of the bride-to-be came forward and scattered flower petals before the weeping girl who clearly did not want to marry the man in question. Meanwhile, across the road in an open *basha*, the

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<sup>6</sup> Scratcher – bed.

heads of the families were negotiating the legal and financial details of the betrothal.

Next day brought big news: eavesdropping on a conversation between Coco-Oscar and the other officers, I learnt that, after concluding our current operation, we were being sent north for two months to relieve the Loyals<sup>7</sup> in Ipoh, while they went to Hong Kong on R&R. Ipoh was reputed to be one of the best postings in Malaya, where the rifle companies operated out of permanent barracks. Rather than having to build our own Tac HQ, as here in Telok Sengat, we would simply take over the Loyals' Operations Room — at least that was the theory but events were to prove otherwise. The move sounded good to me: I'd see more of the country and a change of scenery would help speed up the passage of time.

The day before pulling out of Telok Sengat was spent dismantling and packing up the camp ,the major dilemma

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<sup>7</sup> Loyals – The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment.



facing the officers that night was whether to dress for dinner. In the morning, after another early Sabbath Reveille, it was discovered that the battalion flag, which had always flown proudly over Tac HQ, had disappeared overnight. On muster parade Coco-Oscar was ropeable (so to speak).

‘This is not a joke,’ he thundered, stating that, ‘provided the flag is returned before we break camp, that would be the end of it.’ Nobody from Tac HQ owned up but, by the time we drove to the beach, the flag had mysteriously re-appeared, neatly folded, on the seat of Coco’s Land Rover.

At the appointed departure time of 7:15am, all our vehicles were lined up on the beach ready to board, but no sign of the Z-craft. ‘Hurry up and wait’, again! An hour passed before it was finally sighted. Crewed by the same motley band of sappers who had ferried us here a month ago, it ran aground something like two cricket pitches short of the beach. Observing the expanse of shallow water, the skipper bellowed to Coco-Oscar in his Cockney foghorn of a voice,

‘Ain’t enough water.’

‘Yes, the tide is going out,’ confirmed Coco-Oscar.

‘Yer wot?’ bellowed the skipper, cupping his hands around his ears.

‘The tide is going out,’ repeated Coco-Oscar.

‘Yeah, have to wait for tonight’s tide now,’ replied the skipper before lighting a smoke and ambling back to the bridge.

On the beach we were in stitches at this scruffy corporal, again in his patched-up shorts, crepe soled shoes and blue peaked cap addressing Coco-Oscar in that manner. The prospects for the rest of the day, however, were less amusing. Here we were, marooned on an open beach with only our vehicles for cover, and only the rounds in the magazines on our rifles to defend ourselves. All the other ammunition was stowed away somewhere on who knows which lorry? Absolute sitting ducks if any of the MNLA’s 9th Independent Platoon, who we had failed to even sight, let alone capture or kill, ventured this way. With this in mind sentries were rotated

throughout the course of the day which was spent swimming and sunbathing, with little concern over the prospect of a surprise attack.

For *tiffin* we were taken to 'B' Company's base camp in a three-tonner driven by 'Ton-up Trev'. It was a hair-raising drive as Trev barrelled over decrepit log bridges running cycling rubber tappers off the road and clipping a stray chicken, which he collected to supplement that night's tea. On the return journey he ran a tractor and trailer off the road — 'Ton-up Trev' was in a class of his own.

While at 'B' Company we learnt how the battalion flag had gone missing. During the Tac HQ guard mounting the previous night Freddie Miner, the 'B' Company CSM, had arrived in a canopied Land Rover. While one of his corporals had kept the Orderly Officer talking, two other 'B' Company lads crept out of the back of the Land Rover, cut through the halyard with a *golok*, hauled the flag down and driven off with it.

Back at the beach, chatting with one of the crew I discovered that Z-craft's delayed departure from Seletar was due to a big demob party in their NAAFI the night before — have to get your priorities right, partying comes before early morning sailings. Meanwhile, the Z-craft's late arrival was causing considerable anxiety among the harassed Gurkha engineers who were onboard with a bulldozer and large supply vehicle to offload. Onshore, Coco-Oscar was equally anxious about getting all our vehicles, plus a huge Aveling Barford grader, boarded before the tide ebbed again.

The tide finally peaked a little before sunset and the crew tried once again to nose the ramp into the sand but, even on the high tide, there was still water between the ramp and the shore. Consequently, we had to use battens stored onboard to extend the ramp. With these in place, the Gurkha driver gunned his dozer up onto the ramp before crashing down with the blade digging into the sand under the battens, lifting and snapping them as the driver kept going at full throttle to avoid getting

bogged in the sand. Coco-Oscar who, true to form, was trying to direct operations from the beach was sent scuttling for safety much to the amusement of all.

The makeshift ramp extension was reinstated to allow the other heavy wagon to be driven off, snapping yet another batten in the process. Off-loading completed, it was our turn: as each of our vehicles was driven aboard the tide kept washing the remaining battens away and we had to keep replacing them in position before another vehicle could drive onto the ramp, again at a furious pace, to avoid becoming bogged in the sand. The last vehicle to be loaded was the grader by which time the tide was beginning to ebb. With a roar and a plume of exhaust smoke the grader rumbled up the ramp onto the deck miraculously pulling up inches short of the already-loaded vehicles. With all aboard it was time to depart and the ramp was raised at seven o'clock.

‘Be a bastard if we can’t get off now,’ observed the skipper to Coco-Oscar. Failing to get a reply, he repeated his

observation, again without response. Coco was clearly having difficulty dealing with an NCO who seemed to be unaware of the word ‘Sir’ and had evidently not been introduced to the practice of saluting. After further gravel-voiced orders to the crew, the anchor was raised and the Z-craft went hard astern. We were midstream before anyone noticed that the tender had come adrift and was drifting away on the tide. The skipper manoeuvred the Z-craft closer to the tender before ordering a deckhand to dive overboard to reclaim it. With the tender secured we headed downstream for Singapore — only 12 hours and one high tide behind schedule.

Arriving at Seletar a few hours later, all vehicles were driven off the Z-craft without mishap and we arrived back at FTC at midnight where the usual ‘chooks without heads’ routine resumed. First, we were sent to ‘D’ Company arms store at the top of the central hill to hand in our weapons, then on to ‘C’ Company cookhouse at the far end of the camp for a meal where we were fed a surprisingly appetising late-night supper.

After finishing our supper, we were hustled along to the nearby QM's store to draw bedding where the unloved Acting Sergeant Brannock was rewarded with a rousing chorus of *Why was he born so beautiful?* as he grappled with the task of handing out mattresses, mozzie nets and bedlinen. To conclude our 20-hour day we then had to hump our bedding all the way back to our *bashas* in 'D' Company lines, before collapsing into our newly made beds. But there was no respite. After not getting to bed until well after one, we were roused at sparrow-fart<sup>8</sup> to unload the vehicles and store all the Int Section gear while the signallers and Mortar Platoon did likewise.

That evening in the NAAFI we chewed the fat with the Orderly Room lads and the Pay Corps clerks, who were over from Batu Pahat to sort out the paperwork for our move to Ipoh. It wasn't long before we were joined by a few blokes from the

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<sup>8</sup> Sparrow-fart – colourful British Army term for very early in the morning.

assault pioneers and rifle companies who had already returned to FTC. This was when the unofficial post-mortem on the Notts and Jocks' first operation commenced.

As the night wore on the reasons for the Battalion's lack of success became evident. 'Westie' a 'D' Company NS Lance-Corporal kicked off,

'Our prick of a platoon commander was a total 'Nancy', couldn't, or wouldn't, do anything for himself. Even had one of the squaddies erect his *basha* and cook his meals for him and the medical orderly constantly inspecting him for tinea, footrot, leeches and bites of any kind.'

Sputnik from the Orderly Room chipped in,

'Yeah, not surprising, his father's a Foreign Office diplomat.'

'Nancy's' pedigree and cut-glass public school accent probably explained how he passed his WOSB but the wonder was that he had completed officer training.



‘He had no fucking idea how to organise patrols,’ continued Westie, ‘and he was scared of crossing swamps for fear of footrot.’ An accomplished pianist he might have been, as he had demonstrated at the ship’s concert on the way over, but a soldier he was not – lucky Daddy was an ambassador.

On CO’s Orders the following morning, three of ‘Nancy’s’ Lance-Corporals were stripped of their rank for incompetence or insubordination. In giving evidence, the platoon sergeant did not hide his contempt for his platoon commander and, apparently, came perilously close to being charged himself by reporting the platoon did not do half as many patrols as recorded in its SITREPS. His account of false SITREPS was corroborated next day when six Lance-Corporals from other companies appeared on CO’s Orders and were stripped of their ‘tapes’ when evidence of similar falsified SITREPS came to light. Several other men lost up to 28 days’ pay for sleeping on guard in the jungle, accidentally discharging weapons or refusing to obey orders. In reality, Company SITREPs were

made up mostly of half-truths at best, making the battalion's impressive sounding performance little more than a load of hogwash. If other battalions operated like ours, it truly was a wonder that the campaign was going as well as reported.

All told, the Notts and Jocks contribution to Operation *Badak* amounted to three-quarters of five eighths of bugger all. Rather than eliminating the remaining 73 terrorists believed to be at large in the Pengerang Peninsula by Merdeka Day, as foretold in the *Straits Times*, the Battalion had returned to FTC a week early having not clapped eyes on a single terrorist. This record did not bode well for our move up north to Perak State where the terrorists were much more active.

**First operation survived, 379 more days to push.**