
LI HAK CHI KILL: NZSAS 1957
BURROWS ACCOUNT

Two days before, the Squadron had come out from a 10 week operation in the mountainous Seremban, Kuala Pila, Tampin area, and was on its customary one week's leave. For once I had not chosen to go to Singapore and was happily enjoying a film in down town K.L. To my great surprise the film stopped and a message appeared on the screen for me to contact HQ urgently. I did so and returned to be briefed at 22 SAS HQ by the acting OC of the Squadron, Capt Graeme Boswell.

Apparently the local CT leader Li Hak Chi whom we had sought for many months, had been seen with a small group making contact with unfriendly rubber tappers in a plantation well known to my 3 Troop. It was a cache closely watched by Special Branch who were able to report to 22 SAS in detail, including the identification of the CT leader and 5 followers.

The first problem was to find sufficient NZ Squadron members for the unexpected operation. Graeme had this underway with the help of SSM Noel O'Dwyer. By various means, and indeed various sources, we had 15 all up including Noel and me. It was obvious that the majority were in no condition to be briefed, which would have to wait until the sobriety of the operational area the following morning.

We had enough to fill 2 ambushes, one commanded by Noel and the other by me, i.e. 6 men in each and the other grouping of 3 managing communications.

We were very pleased to hear that Cpl Huia Woods was gathering his Iban team and although a day (plus) behind, would pick-up the CT track at the cache and follow it.

I spent most of the truck ride in the poor light of the front seat, studying the map, and arrived at the final drop-off point a little before first light.

A very welcome cup of tea and it was time for a briefing. We knew exactly where the CTs had picked up supplies and could make a reasonable guess at the general area to which they might be going. The first few days of the CT move would almost certainly be where 3 Troop had been operating for the preceding 6 months. The jungle, "mountainous", as it was known to the CTs was as steep and difficult as any in Malaysia.

One significant area, assuming my other guesses were correct, was where his movement could be channelled between two populated areas. The jungle there was 10 km wide, and bisected by the main divide which averaged about 3000ft. As usual there was a good track on the dividing ridge along which a variety of animals moved, including in this area many elephants. It was the route along which any jungle wise human (or animal) would move. But I felt that while we could not ignore it, the ridge track was too obvious. Li Hak Chi might use it initially to put distance between him and the pick up point, but could soon drop off the ridge where ever it suited him. The question was where?

Noel, as ever, was very good about taking the ridge ambush despite the climb to get to it. Each ambush had wireless communication with our signals base on a limited early morning late afternoon basis, but I had the nagging worry that we had no contact

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with Woods and his tracking team. We knew only, that he would start at the CT cache and follow as best he could.

Both our ambushes were in position by late afternoon that first long day, with about 2 km between us. I had moved about 3 km up a river called the Batu Hampar to a river crossing we had used before. It was approximately 2 ft deep and 20 yards wide at that point. Its disadvantage was a 45 degree slope, which, to hide 2 men in reasonable comfort, needed skilful leafage and meant great care in any change over.

We worked 2 men on full alert changing every 2 hours dawn to dusk. The 4 men in the shelter area were in designated twos, one to the immediate support of the contact area and the other on a pre-recce'd loop to come round on the flank or rear of the CT. Every 2 hours there was a complete "twos" change around.

Late pm on day four, Trooper Ron Pearson and I were doing our turn in the ambush position. It was my turn on the Bren gun. We still had had no word from the tracker team at all.

I guessed that if we were in the right place, the CT were about due, but it was still a surprise to see a heavily laden CT materialise from the jungle on the edge of the river. He was closely followed by another. The two stood talking while they very carefully scanned our side. They were about 30 yards from us directly across the stream and I had an awful feeling that our carefully arranged camouflage that suddenly become transparent.

We passed that scrutiny but then, no apparent reason; the two CT turned and moved back slowly the way they had come. Maybe they decided to base overnight on that side of the river, or maybe they decided to cross somewhere else. The point was that in a second they were gone from view possibly not to be seen again. The odds were that one of the two would be Li Hak Chi himself so, shoulder to shoulder with a very cool Ron Pearson, I gave the word to open fire. Both CTs appeared to go down, and we adjusted our fire to the direction from which they had materialised. Sporadic CT fire from other CTs was briefly returned and then all was quiet.

Our back up support had arrived and we moved as quickly as we could across the river where we found one body. I recognised him as Li Hak Chi from the mug shots I had seen on the Police boards all over the state. (From later reports the other CT died after the action) Our 2 other men on cut-off had made no contact, but returned with 4 extra packs confirming the groups size.

By now we had less than an hour of daylight left. I was concerned that among the 4 CT escapees would almost certainly be Li Hak Chi's wife, who was well documented as every bit as tough a fighter as her husband. There was no telling what she might do in the circumstances.

We quickly sorted out CT diaries and papers etc. and other items of Special Branch interest and made a fire of the remainder. The fire, some 100 yards from our base could prove a useful distraction, and indeed, shortly afterwards, did just that.

We finished our reorganisation and brought the one body back to base just on last light. Then in the last lovely jungle silence we heard several monkey calls – a well known

CT emergency communication. If it was monkeys they were abnormally late, but then there had certainly been some abnormal activity late that afternoon. It was a good bet that it was the CTs trying to reunite.

Lcpl Bill Edwards and I went back to our original ambush camouflage, while the remainder stood too in the base. Suddenly, across the river, in the last flickering light of our fire, we could just make out shadowy figures but there was no chance of recognising whether they were our trackers, or CTs seeking out their leader. One of whoever they were kicked the embers, indicating in the momentary flicker, that there were at least a shadowy three.

Convinced they were CT my back-up Bill was very keen to open fire and it was with difficulty that I constrained him. It was just possible that they were Cpl Huia Woods and his tracker team. Either way did not bear consideration and so, in spite of Bills disgust, I opted to do nothing.

We waited another hour or so until we were sure everything was finished for that night anyway, and then crept back to base. It was a nervous night and I doubt that anyone slept.

We were up and about at dawn the following morning and very quickly checked the tracks in the vicinity of the old fire. To my immense surprise and relief, the issue jungle boot prints were evident, and were headed for home. I still get cold shivers when I remember how close we were to disaster.

Huia Woods and his team had done an amazing job. Having started 24 hours behind the CTs, they had tracked across the grain through some of the most difficult steep country only one hour behind their quarry. If any patrol ever deserved to be in at the final 'kill' it was them, and I am sure there was no better tracking performance. (It is interesting to note that close as Huia was, no shot was heard in that difficult country, and they admitted they were the monkeys).

We finally got down to the jungle edge about midday carrying the body and feeling very satisfied with ourselves. Via our wireless base the long night before, we had been able to notify 22 SAS and the following morning it was good to see Lt Lindsay Williams, and the Kuala Pila Police Chief John West, there to meet us. The latter was able to confirm our ID of the body, and subsequently the death of the second CT.

In the event we had success but, with the CTs, our Iban trackers, and our own NZSAS mixed group all in close proximity in the last of the day and early night, it was near disaster. The dying embers of a small fire did, I believe, provide the necessary lucky distraction.

Finally it was always going to be a unlucky week for CT leader Li Hak Chi.
