

### **ANOTHER VIRGIN SOLDIER\***

\* "Virgin Soldiers" was a book written about Leslie Thomas' time as a National Serviceman in Malaya in the 1950s, and which was later made into a film.

A few years ago I built a new house. The name I chose for it, 'Hutan', (pronounced Hootan) has often intrigued both neighbours and visitors. For me it was an obvious choice as the plot it stands on was always referred to by my family as the 'Jungle' when we moved to Norfolk in the 1960s. This was because it was overgrown and almost impenetrable. Formerly it had been used as allotments by three villagers, but after they died it had returned to nature before we came to live nearby. My two sons played in the 'Jungle' and I frequently had to search them out at mealtimes. Gradually, with the help of a few village boys on Saturday mornings, the plot was cleared and used for growing fruit. However, the name lived on.

In the early 1950s I had been chasing communist terrorists (bandits) in the Malayan jungle, a job which the Army thought appropriate for the duration of my National Service.

After military training during winter in the Welsh mountains I was on my way by troopship to Hong Kong. I never made it. I was disembarked at Singapore and issued with a rifle and ten rounds of ammunition for the journey up-country to Kuala Lumpur to join a very small Malay unit, which had recently formed to operate in what was known as the Malayan Emergency Campaign to prevent the spread of communism throughout the Far East.

Most of the Malays in the unit had been trained on an island off Singapore and had previously served in the Japanese army! Presumably, as I was to be with them whilst operating with Gurkhas, Fijians, Africans and other Malay units, it was thought unnecessary to train me in jungle warfare. So, now armed with a jungle rifle and fifty rounds, I was soon crossing the Central Highlands of the Malay peninsula on my way to joining a 4.2 inch heavy mortar section consisting of around a dozen Malays. Again, as my training had been on 25 pounder field artillery, it was necessary to adapt the technicalities of gunnery, which I had learned on a special course in Wales, to the demands of my new life at the sharp end. By way of introduction to the journey, my first encounter with the enemy was provided by a patrol of the King's African Rifles who had just ambushed and killed three bandits. Not a pretty sight. It occurred to me that perhaps I had not received any training in guerrilla warfare as there would always be another virgin soldier on a troopship heading this way.

The months went by and my thoughts turned to demobilisation. Not long after I left Malaya the Unit was disbanded and the Malays were incorporated into the expanding Malay Army.

It was some fifty years later that I was thinking of a name for my new house built on what had been my jungle plot.

Yes, you have guessed: Hutan is Malay for Jungle!