

BADGE OF HONOUR

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS
OF MILITARY EVENTS

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2ND BATTALION ROYAL WELCH
FUSILIERS, MALAYA

1954-1956

"SOMETIMES, WE
WOULD PATROL
SWAMPS IN SEARCH
OF INSURGENTS
– THE WATER WAS
FULL OF LEECHES"



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I was born in Awelfryn, a house my father built outside Llanboidy in Camarthenshire after his Service with the Royal Marines during the First World War.

We were four children: three brothers and a sister and our first language was Welsh.

I did a five-year apprenticeship in my father's building business, but just before the end of it, the Ministry of Labour and National Service summoned me to a medical in Swansea, then ordered me to report to barracks in Cardiff to join the Welch Regiment on 4 January 1954.

There, we had kit thrown at us and were told to learn our number (mine was 22989984). We were known by our surnames: I was Davies84.

After basic training, a group of us transferred to the 2nd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers and in July 1954, at the age of nearly 21, I boarded the troopship *Empire Fowey* in Southampton, Korea-bound – or so I thought.

En route, a peace treaty was signed, which precluded fresh troops from landing in Korea, so the *Empire Fowey* docked in Singapore and 2/RWF prepared for anti-terrorist duties in Malaya, where we would confront the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the armed wing of the Communist Party.

The MNLA, led by Chin Peng, had supported the British Army during the Second World War occupation by the Japanese, and the British had supplied him with arms and food. After the Japanese were driven out of Malaya, the MNLA decided: 'Now we've beaten the Japanese, we can beat the British,' and in 1948, Chin Peng went to war. The British declared a state of emergency and began counter-insurgency military action, aimed at cutting off the Communist Terrorists (CTs) from their civilian supporters and food. In turn, the CTs terrorised rural areas, attacking villagers and troops.

I started out in 7 Platoon C Company as a Bren Gunner; then, after a signalling course at HQ at Port Dickson in Negeri Sembilan, I joined 9 Platoon as a Signaller. Most of my time then was spent in the jungle, on operations. We would go out for two to seven weeks, return to camp for a day or so, then go straight back.

Typically, we would leave camp at around 02.00hrs, having prepared everything before going to bed. I would collect five days' rations, check the radio and gather all necessary codes, and get equipment, personal kit and ammunition together, which usually weighed about 65-70lbs. We needed 20 pints of water

daily and took water-purifying tablets for when we had only dirty water to drink, but staying hydrated was virtually impossible. I remember dreaming about a dripping tap we had in the garden back home.

We were never told where we were going, but always arrived just before dawn. We would move quickly into the jungle with no one saying a word, unless they were close enough to whisper. Sometimes, we would patrol swamps in search of insurgents – the water was full of leeches, which would attach themselves to our legs. Or we would be looking for a CT camp where propaganda leaflets were being printed. One operation involved laying ambushes on a path through a rubber plantation – we slept in thorny scrub for three nights, living on beans and 'dog biscuits', with rubber tappers passing within feet of us each morning.

The jungle is full of waterways, and crossing rivers was difficult – you had to lean against the pressure of water or you'd topple over and be dragged downriver. Feeling the sand shift beneath my feet, with the water over my chin, I always hoped that I'd reached the deepest part. Three days before the end of one operation, I did fall in and the radio got soaked. The battalion had a newspaper, *The Royal Welchman*, and in the following months, there was an article about the drowning of 9 Platoon Signaller. I did not send that issue home.

In the jungle, we relied on our Sarawak trackers. They could tell how old a footprint was, when leaves had been disturbed,



Outside the signals tent at camp



whether plants were poisonous or if a snake was dangerous. They were tattooed, with long hair, and they travelled with a rifle and a parang (machete). In their cases, they carried the shrunken skulls of their forefathers.

Operations could be brutal – if CTs were shot, they were brought back alive so they could be interrogated, but if they were dead, their bodies – or just their heads and hands – were carried back to camp to be checked against photos of known terrorists. On one occasion, a badly wounded CT ran off into the jungle and his body was found buried in a small hole in three pieces – he'd been dismembered by his own people.

Civilians were under pressure to help the CTs, and there were reprisals against those who co-operated with the colonial authorities. Once, we went into deep jungle in search of a village that CTs were using as a source of food. We suddenly saw a man in front of us, crouching with a blowpipe in his mouth. Thankfully, he recognised us before we had to defend ourselves. The villagers were taken to a new settlement, and we poisoned the tapioca so the MNLA could no longer use it. The Malay Home Guard then moved in to replace the platoon. In this way, the MNLA was gradually driven out of its territory.

By 1955, CTs were being offered money to come out of the jungle and rejoin their

“A DAY OUT OF PORT, WE HEARD 9 PLATOON WAS AMBUSHED”

families, and many did. By contrast, the CTs ‘took no prisoners’, as the saying goes, and bodies were recovered showing signs of torture, with teeth and eyes missing. Even in a ‘White Area’ – a supposedly bandit-free zone – the battalion was a target. On 13 October 1955, Capt JMB Davies, who'd taken us on our Signals Cadre in HQ Port Dickson, was shot dead when his jeep was stopped by a fallen tree that CTs had dragged across the road. The guard and the pay clerk who were with him were also killed.

As it got close to my demob date, it was hard watching 9 Platoon prepare to move out on an operation, knowing I would not go with them. On my last night in camp, the Major joined us for a drink and, to my surprise, proposed a toast to Davies⁸⁴. I felt sure later that he expected me to reply, but my celebrating had taken me over by then.

In Singapore, I joined the troopship *Empire Orwell*, which was pointing homewards. A day out of port, we heard that 9 Platoon had been ambushed by 20 CTs, and Cpl Rowlands had been shot in the stomach. The following day, he died of his wounds. I felt shocked as I'd been part of this platoon for most of my national service in Malaya.

After three weeks at sea, I arrived home on Christmas Eve 1955. It was hard settling in. I became a chapel-goer, which helped, but the nightmares continued for decades.

I married and had a family, and after hearing about my experiences, the children suggested that I write some of them down. Not a day passes without recalling some of the memories that have been buried deep. It was always ambushes that my nightmares involved. But writing it down has helped, and there are no ambushes any more.

I must say, it was much more difficult to leave the Army than it was to join. Whether in or out of the jungle, we lived as a family and defended each other always. We parted as true comrades, proud to have helped the people of Malaya and thankful that they now live peacefully in their country of Malaysia.”

From top: William was a Bren Gunner before he became a Signaller; at the main camp in Kuala Klawang