

Queen's Gurkha Signals History



The Malayan Emergency and Beyond 1948-1962

On the 1st February 1948 the Federation of Malaya was formed and growing Chinese dissatisfaction in Malaya precipitated the resurrection of the guerilla organization which had been previously set up to fight the Japanese. The Malayan Races Liberation Army was a communist sponsored terrorist organisation which was armed by caches of World War Two weapons and which sought the overthrow of British rule in Malaya. When in June 1948 three British rubber plantation managers were murdered a state of emergency was declared and a twelve year anti-terrorist campaign by the British began. The terrorists were quickly isolated from the rest of the population by the British 'Hearts and Minds' policy, which allowed villagers to be rehoused in 'New Villages' with modern facilities and conveniences. The Terrorists, lacking popular support, were pushed into the Jungle and the police and army strove to fight them on their own ground. The fighting was infrequent but fast and furious, and the Army' tactics changed accordingly, it quickly being realised that the Gurkha made an ideal jungle soldier. Against this background the 17th Gurkha Infantry Division was formed, and the Gurkha Signals rapidly assumed responsibility for all communications to the various Brigades within that division.



Following closely in the footsteps of 48 Gurkha Infantry Brigade Signal Squadron came K (King) Troop raised in November 1951 as the brigade signal squadron for 63 Brigade in Seremban. The next year in November L (Love) Troop was formed to support 99 Brigade in Johore Bahru and in December the squadron at 48 Brigade was renamed J (Jig) Troop so that the three troops could comprise 3 Squadron 17 Gurkha Division Signal Regiment. An independent squadron was raised in December of 1952 in Kluang to provide communications for 26 Gurkha Brigade and 1 Squadron the divisional headquarters squadron formed in Kuala Lumpur in April 1953 provided the last component for the formation of the regiment. The Regiment was officially constituted on the 16th October 1953 as 17 Gurkha Division Signal Regiment commanded by Major L H M Gregory.

The Regiment's first home was Maxwell Road Camp, Kuala Lumpur, which soon became known as Lamjung Camp; Lamjung being the home of the then, and first Gurkha Major, Parsuram Gurung. Parsuram had just returned from the UK where he had been a member of the Brigade's Coronation contingent; asked to describe his experiences at the Commanding officers weekly conference, he said that his mother had told him about heaven when he was a child but it was only now that he really understood what it might be and where it was. Building began in Lamjung camp in 1953 and was finished in 1955, although a lot of self help was needed to make the camp habitable and it eventually acquired a charm reminiscent of a village in the hills. There were no permanent buildings in the camp and from the entrance a narrow road ran through a collection of huts to the Gurkha Officers Mess and Gurkha families lines at the top of a hill. The Gurkha Families themselves lived in EPIP tents and it wasn't until the end of 1955 that huts were eventually built for them in Lamjung village.

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Having a home however, did not mean an end to all the name changes and by the time Lt Col Gregory handed over the Regiment to Lt Col Griffith in January 1956 the Regiment had lost its Royal title and the first sub-unit had left Malaya. The Royal title was dropped when the Regiment was honoured by Her Majesty the Queen in becoming a full member of the Brigade of Gurkhas on 28 September 1955. This made the Regiment unique among signals units in that it appeared in the army list within the Corps of Infantry. The first Gurkha Signals unit to have left Malaya was the signal squadron accompanying 48 Gurkha Infantry Brigade to Hong Kong in 1954. This was the independent squadron raised to support 26 Brigade and renamed for the move. J Troop filled the squadrons' place in Kuala Pilah.

The fighting in the Malayan emergency happened sporadically and no 'European' style actions were fought. The infantry were committed to operations involving long, patient patrolling and there were never enough resources to maintain such a high level of operations. It soon became a matter of course for Gurkha Signals Troops to be tasked to do Headquarters Defence duties; escorting convoys, doing gate checks at 'New Villages', and now and then the odd ambush in a major

operation. All the while radios and signal centres were manned 24 hours a day. The bread and butter radio communications for the Regiment were High Frequency radios which were prone to interference, fading, and noise, being particularly difficult at dawn and dusk, the two most crucial tactical times of the day. The problems of radio communications was exacerbated by a diversity of accents on the radio nets. On 99 Gurkha Infantry Brigades command net it would not be unusual to find operators from a variety of Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Rhodesia, Malaya and Fiji, not to mention from the British army's own Scottish, Welsh and Gurkha battalions. For some reason this never became a problem however for the operators from the Regiment.

When fighting did begin it was fast, furious and unannounced, requiring the fastest of reactions. The Brigades soon adapted to this method of fighting and in Operations Valiant, Commodore, and Boxer the use of the helicopter became an essential part of brigade plans. The Gurkha Signals quickly hit upon the idea of becoming air-portable and ingenious if far fetched methods of operation were planned. The most notable being the idea of Lt (QGO) Prembahadur Gurung to lay line by helicopter, though no record remains as to whether this was ever carried out. One event which did take place highlighting the speed operations were carried out and the professionalism shown by all was the move of the whole of 26 Brigade from Kluang to deepest Pahang, a distance of some 300 miles within 24 hours of informed. The latter part of this journey was completed by rail and the signal squadron had to build ramps to load and unload their communications vehicles and other transports on to and off the trains flat beds. The brigade then carried out over a months operations in the new Tactical Area Of Responsibility (TAOR) before returning to Kluang.

There were some lighter moments whilst in the jungle. A, chance remark by the Commander of the Royal Welch Fusiliers at lunch in some jungle glade with Lt Col Gregory led to some frenzied action by the Gurkha Signals. It seemed the RWF had reached the final of the Malayan Boxing tournament and were facing the 15/19 Hussars that night. Unfortunately the battalion could not watch because they were on operations in the jungle. The Gurkha Signals with the use of the Divisional command net, a cobbled together PA system and an ad hoc commentator covered the final live to the delight of the RWF (despite losing), and made quite an impression on all concerned over what could be achieved with only a few hours work. This episode turned out to be the Gurkha Signals debut into the world of broadcasting; Commentaries from the Nepal Cup matches were soon to be considered a routine task for the regiment. Thus began an association with Gurkha broadcasting which was continued by 246 Squadron and remains to this day.

On 21 April 1956 a considerable honour was bestowed upon the Regiment when Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal presented her pipe banner to the Pipes and Drums. The Pipes and Drums had been pulled together in February of 1955 and by September of that year were playing for the first time in public at a massed Beating of the Retreat. This represented not only considerable hard work on the boys behalf but also hard work from the Royal Scots Fusiliers and our associated regiment the 51st Highland Division Regiment. Her Royal Highness who was Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Corps of Signals presented her banner at St James Palace with the following words;

'It gives me great pleasure, as Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Corps of Signals and also because of my personal connection with the 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles, to present this banner to the Gurkha Signal Regiment. In doing so, I would like to congratulate all ranks on their achievements of the past six years, during which the Regiment has grown up to full stature as an operational Signal Regiment in Malaya and an important member of the Gurkha Division.'

In 1957 Gurkha Signals moved from Kuala Lumpur to Seremban and occupied Sikamat Camp, being joined there by 250 Gurkha Signal Squadron (Training) from the Training Depot Brigade of Gurkhas. Sikamat Camp was a delightful spot, built on a hill side with a spacious reentrant which held the MT park, the Dashera Ghar and a large 'theatre in the round', built of Attap. The officers and sergeants messes were together on the top of the Hill; the Officers Mess reusing an old Planters house and gardens, the latter soon becoming the centre of social activity. The road to Jelebu ran along side the camp and opposite the camp was a Malay Kampong with the Gurkha Family lines next to it. Rahim Bur Kichi, the Gurkha Signals loyal tailor, moved with the Regiment establishing himself in the nether regions of the camp, and continuing his haircutting, tailoring and washing business, all the while housed in the most basic of tent and corrugated iron accommodation.

The enlargement of the Officers mess verandah became another of the Regiments self help projects occupying many hours of off duty time and boosting the bar profits to boot. The project soon however became to big for the enthusiastic amateurs who could not keep pace with the delivery of quarry waste. The Garrison Engineer was called in and he became an immediate Honorary Mess member. In the Mess, the Jeeves-like figure of Bhadre Pun ministered what he considered the every whim of the members. He was a strong character and was very much his own man and in these traits lay his origins as mess waiter. Bhadre had been a driver and had appeared on orders after driving his truck head on.