

Queen's Gurkha Signals History



The Borneo Confrontation 1962-1971

The Brunei revolt in 1962 drew 248 Squadron, supporting 99 Brigade, into Borneo to suppress the poorly trained Indonesian backed guerrillas operating in the Sultanate. Although the rebellion was quickly quashed Indonesian dissatisfaction with Malaysia intensified into cross border incursions by Indonesian Regular troops. The Borneo jungle was in many ways similar to Malaysia, although the hills seemed to be twice the size and most of the jungle had not been properly mapped. As in the Malaysian conflict engagements were rare and when they did occur they were fast and furious. Two brigades deployed to Borneo, 99 brigade in West Sarawak and 51 brigade to Brunei. 248 Squadron was based with 99 Brigade in Kluching and 247 Squadron returning from their sojourn in UK and BAOR arrived in Brunei in February 1964 to be based in Bolkoh Camp, four miles out side Brunei town. The difficult nature of operations in Borneo demanded the highest quality of communications possible and 247 and 248 were worked constantly.



Brunei and Borneo

A major problem with Borneo was that the Brigade TAOR's were often huge, notably 51 Brigade's which was the size of Scotland and this presented immense communication problems. The establishment of Radio Relay and VHF radio rebroadcast stations on top of key hills alleviated these problems, but not without considerable effort from the Squadrons, especially as the hills were many thousands of feet high and inaccessible except to helicopters. 247 Squadron was the first to establish a permanent station on top of a hill site at Gunong Serapi (3000') in West Sarawak. Established by **Lt Max Young**, this station eventually received huts and was permanently manned until the end of the Confrontation in 1966 when it was blown up. **2Lt Sam Cowan** of 248 Squadron (now General Cowan, Colonel of the Regiment) was the next to build another hill top station on Gunong Marud (8000') in 1965. This hill top was initially inaccessible to helicopters and the Gurkha Signals Troop had to climb to the top, hacking their way through the jungle, and then establish a helicopter pad in order to be re-supplied. For his efforts in establishing this station, which became operational almost immediately because of the 200 mile coverage of the Air Safety Net rebroadcast from there, **2Lt Cowan** was awarded the coveted Royal Corps of Signals Whistler Trophy, which is awarded to out-standing subalterns. Conditions on these hill tops were extremely difficult. The weather has unpredictable and frequently cold and wet, and the only way to resupply the stations was by air - weather permitting. Yet the detachments maintained good communications throughout their existence and were the key to tactical control of all brigade operations.



One of the most interesting units to be formed during the Borneo Confrontation was the Gurkha Independent Parachute Company raised on 1st April 1963. Soon after its conception its role was converted from a conventional Parachute Company to an SAS type Company in June 1964, in order for more tried and tested long range jungle patrols to be sent out. The Company quickly acknowledged that it could not provide enough

signallers of sufficient quality to cope with this increased amount of patrolling and so the Regiment was therefore approached to form a troop of Parachute qualified signallers who could not only operate on the jungle patrols but who could also train the Regimental signallers up to a sufficient standard to operate on their own. The troop was initially formed and commanded by **Captain Paddy Verdon** who was aided and abetted in this endeavour by **Lt Mike Walker**, who subsequently went on to command the troop himself. There were 29 signallers to begin with, half of whom were already parachute qualified and the other half soon jumped themselves at RAF Changi later in 1964.

In 1965 under **Major JP Cross MBE** the company moved to Kluang and then onto Brunei in the following October. Whilst at Kluang the Company conducted a demonstration jump for Brigade week and could have recruited to a man the 850 recruits who were watching. There was also no shortage of volunteers from the Regiment and the Troop was soon up to its maximum strength of 40 soldiers. Whilst in Brunei the Company was housed in the now famous Haunted House the home of all SAS units in Borneo and from there the Company was constantly on operations. Whilst on operations the Troop used a variety of specialist equipment and developed its own techniques of signalling in the jungle. It was therefore fortunate that when the Company exercised with D Squadron SAS in 1968 it was found that the Troop's techniques didn't differ too greatly from those of the SAS and in some cases were more refined. Before its eventual wasting away in 1968 the Troop had two other OCs **Captains K Ryding** and **Johnny Fielding** and it was the latter who was the last Gurkha Signals officer who served with the Company. The end to the Borneo Confrontation saw a reversion of the Parachute Company back to its conventional role and the decision was taken to waste out the Gurkha Signals from the Company, and so ended an exciting chapter of the Regiments history.

On 28th May 1966 the Confrontation was declared over following a conference in Bangkok between the Malaysian and Indonesian Governments which decided that there could be no winners or losers in this conflict. 1966 was also a good year for the Regiment, it won the coveted Nepal Cup, one of six times it has won this highly contested football competition, held within the Brigade of Gurkhas (the other years were 1959, 1960, 1961, 1966, 1972 and 1982). The peace following the official end to the confrontation did not bring an immediate change to the operations of the two active Squadrons but there began a gradual drawdown of both the brigade of Gurkhas and the Regiment, which would eventually lead to the disbandment of 17 Gurkha Signal Regiment.



Various activities occupied the Regiments time between 1966 and 1971. The Coulter Quaich Competition was devised by **Major H M D Paterson** prior to his retirement from the Army, and this was to prove an incredibly arduous exercise. The essence of the competition was to navigate an orienteering course through the Malaysian jungle over a distance of some 30 miles. 10 man teams took part and the competition lasted a day and a half. It was won in 1968 by **Lt (QGO) Jitbahadur Thapa** and was acknowledged by all to be one of the most arduous and testing exercise they had ever accomplished. That same year 3 Squadron left aboard HMS Sir Galahad for North Queensland, Australia accompanying 3 Commando Brigade on Exercise Coral Sands. During this exercise **Lt (QGO) Prembahadur Gurung** aboard HMS Bulwark attempted to establish a ship to shore radio relay link, only to find his efforts frustrated by the swinging of the ship on its moorings in the tide. Undaunted he sent a runner to the bridge to present his compliments and ask if the Captain could stop his ship moving; He was summoned to the bridge for a friendly handshake and a lesson in seamanship. The exercise was a great public success and the Squadron, which provided Umpire, Enemy, and Control radio nets, was invited with the other Gurkhas on the exercise to march through the town of Rockhampton. 300 Gurkhas, mainly from 2 PreviewPage.ashx?PageID=12 Gurkha Rifles and the Gurkha Signals, marched on a cold, damp morning to the resounding cheers of the crowds.

The drawdown of the Brigade spelt the end for the Regiments stay in Malaysia and plans were created to move the Regiment to Hong Kong, via Nee soon in Singapore. On the 15th August 1969 249 Squadron relinquished the Brunei commcen to a Troop from 248 Squadron, which became known as the Brunei Signal Troop and from this day hence all communications to Brunei became the responsibility of the Regiment. 247 Squadron was disbanded along with 51 Brigade in May 1967 and 248 Squadron lost its title as 99 Brigade HQ and Signal Squadron in April 1970 before amalgamating with 1 Squadron at the end of 1970. 248 Squadron was eventually reformed in Sham Shui Po Camp, Hong Kong in July 1971. 17 Gurkha Signal Regiment was disbanded in September 1971 and that year the Gurkha Signal Regiment moved to Sek Kong Camp, Hong Kong, bidding farewell to Sikamat Camp in Seremban which had been its home for 11 years. By the middle of 1970 the withdrawal of the British Army from Malaysia was well under way and the Regiment provided control communications for Exercise Bersatu Padu, a five nation Commonwealth joint service final fling on the East coast of the Malay Peninsula. At the same time the Regiment vacated Seremben and took up residence in Nee Soon Singapore until September 1971 when the remnants of 17 Gurkha Signal Regiment moved to Hong Kong.