At a RAND Symposium on counter-insurgency held in April 1962, Brigadier-General David Powell-Jones cautioned allies that ‘too much in the way of generalities should not be deduced from the Malayan campaign’ (Symposium, p. 24). His remarks were echoed by another participant Colonel John White who ‘stressed the relative simplicity of the problem there…thanks largely to the background of British rule and organisation, a loyal police force and the established policy that self-government would be granted as a soon as possible’ (Symposium, p. 61). These observations were repeated by a US Army Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Bohannan who offered: ‘that the relative simplicity of controlling and influencing the Malayan population was atypical and to be explained by the fortunate circumstance that the British were able to count on the loyalty of the civilian as well as military government’ (Symposium, p. 74). These views were prevalent amongst contemporary observers. No less a luminary than the American historian Bernard Fall warned that making comparisons with Malaya was ‘dangerous delusion’ (Komer, p. 78).

Indeed, a feature of this symposium, which attracted some publicity, was a mood of almost apologetic embarrassment on the part of the British. It was recognised by participants that the Malayan Emergency had been ‘simple’ (an often used word) and could not be fairly compared to more intractable insurgencies faced by allies. The British themselves entirely discounted the French counter-insurgency experience in Indochina (offered by a Lieutenant-Colonel David Galula, who would later become a sort of counter-insurgency god), which may at face value have offered lessons, appreciating with wisdom that the situation in Malaya was particular and unique and required its own answers. The ‘Emergency’, in passing, was coined to guarantee insurance payments by Lloyds, showing at least where British hearts and minds were focused.

We can go further. None of the British participants (all military) spoke of winning Malay hearts and minds by military force. In Colonel White’s words – one of the few interlocutors to comment on this aspect of the campaign – ‘it was the consistent show of reasonableness that won over the people of Malaya and the problem was still easier once the country became self-governing’ (Symposium, p. 61). The British military officers did not offer views on hearts and minds largely because the British Army had no mission to win hearts and minds and did not attempt to do so. Neither did the Army attempt to protect the population. This was the job of the police. There was limited contact with Malay civilians, other than jungle aborigines and Dayaks, used as scouts. Good relations were maintained but this was a matter of pragmatic common sense, not doctrine.

It is altogether surprising then that the Malayan Emergency has totemic status in modern counter-insurgency; that winning hearts and minds is so central to the mythology; that modern counter-insurgencies cite Malaya as the exemplar of ‘how to do COIN’; and that this early post-war insurgency became one foundation stone of the Petraeus Doctrine which is the prevailing orthodoxy in modern
Western armies. This article examines the Malayan Emergency, unpicks hearts and minds, and offers some conclusions.

**The Chinese or Communist Terrorists (CTs)**

The enemy was the self-styled MNLA (Malayan National Liberation Army), led by the Chinese Chin Peng OBE and Mentioned-in-Dispatches who fought for the British during the war. The MNLA at its height was around 12,000 strong and fighters were more commonly called CTs – or ‘Chinese Terrorists’. In 1952, a British official changed the term to ‘Communist Terrorists’ to fit the wider Western narrative of the struggle against Communist revolution in the Far East. The worst period was the winter of 1950-51 (around 500 incidents per month), but this quickly collapsed to around 100 incidents per month (Komer, p. 10).

The British loosely categorised three layers in the CT structure: the HQ elements, the deep jungle ‘killer boys’, and the settlement-based ‘Armed Work Forces’ (AWF). The AWF were essentially Chinese that still maintained contacts in villages, and even worked in the fields by day, hence the title. The ‘killer boys’ were criminal gangs or old wartime guerrillas that had disappeared into the hills and no longer maintained regular contact with the villages (see the schematic in the RAND symposium report, p. 94).

This active force was supported by the Min Yuen (People’s Movement), sympathisers that possibly numbered 11,000 (Komer, p. 8 from 1952 British reporting but notes that Miller in *Menace in Malaya* quotes a figure of 500,000, a number which seems ‘far too high’).

The CTs were weak, a point quickly recognised by the British. Major-General Boucher, the first British commander who actually made a bit of a hash of the job, still confidently reported that ‘that this is by far easiest problem I have ever had to tackle’ (Komer, p. 10 quoting Miller, *Menace in Malaya*, preface). The country was vast and largely inaccessible; CT pockets were isolated and strung out (officially there were 8 MNLA ‘regiments’) (Komer, p. 9); they lacked effective communications; they struggled to resupply; and they faced a Malay, Indian and Chinese population mostly indifferent to their cause. Crucially, the CT command struggled to impose its leadership. Because of the many difficulties adumbrated above, bi-annual conferences were held to settle the strategy for the next six months. The British exploited this by changing the rules of the game which the CT leadership could not react to until the next six-monthly conference (Symposium, p. 26).

The CT strategy hinged on a fantasy: namely, that the Communist victory in China would presage the march of Mao’s Red Army across South-East Asia ‘liberating’ the diaspora of ethnic Chinese. In the middle of the campaign a young Graham Greene was commissioned by *Life* magazine to visit the front (“The War in Malaya,” *Life*, 30 July 1951). He astutely observed that one reverse in the Korean War was worth one hundred successful ambushes in Malaya. The sacrifice of the Glorious Gloucesters at Imjin River was more than just a local punch-up in a desultory UN war – it sent signals as far away as Malaya that the Chinese were not going to win. When it became clear that a Communist China gobbling pieces of South-East Asia was a madcap fancy, CT morale collapsed. Ironically, the fantasy persisted but in the minds of future American administrations, clouding judgements in Vietnam. Greene also smartly observed that whatever the British did, a low-level insurgency was sure to persist after independence and he was right. It took 22 years for the problem to finally die away. (The Emergency was declared over in 1960 but it is difficult to say when it actually ended because Peng was given refuge in Communist China from where he continued to mount subversive activities. In the early 1980s, under Deng Xiao Ping, China sought to improve relations and boost trade with Malaysia, which implied sacrificing Peng. A peace agreement between the Malay government and the CPM (Communist Party of Malaya) was finally signed in 1987-89.)
Winning hearts and minds

The phrase comes from a speech given by General Sir Gerard Templer. It was an appeal: ‘the answer lies not in pouring more soldiers into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the Malayan people.’ In fact, the British did not have to win many hearts and minds in Malaya. It should be recalled that London only directly governed two settlements in Penang and Malacca – the rest of the Federation was governed by Malays. They had to persuade a proportion of the mostly ethnic Han Chinese to stop providing support to the CTs. The label ‘Chinese Terrorists’, rather than ‘Communist Terrorists’, was exactly right – the British recognised the problem for what it was and never became obsessed with Communism in the way that the Americans would in South-East Asia. (An American commentator once famously remarked that his countrymen ‘went psycho’ at the mention of the word ‘Communism’ and seemed to lose all reason. The author believes this was Loudon Wainwright commenting at the time of the My Lai massacres in Life magazine.) They also had to settle the matter of the post-independence constitution which they bungled at first with the proposal for an unpopular Malayan Union, before back-tracking and eventually offering a political settlement agreeable to the majority of Malays. Lastly, they had to fix the economy that had been battered by the war, and address appalling labour and union relations.

The ethnic Chinese represented 10-15 per cent of the total population. The percentage that actively supported the CTs was much smaller (less than one per cent of the total population). Most were indifferent, as long as they had ‘rice and peace’ (p. 73). Specifically, the British had to win over the plantation tapper and squatter communities, a disadvantaged lot, doubly so as a result of a post-war recession. Chinese hearts and minds were won over after a fashion, but by way of their pockets. This was not through modern ‘consent winning activities’, or reconstruction projects (the difficult nation-building in Afghanistan), but rather by offering them better economic prospects on better land and political voice (the vote). There was little need to build schools, fix clinics, or lay roads – all these existed. The problem was that the poorer ethnic Chinese were missing out. The new villages included schools, clinics, and electricity, a novelty for many poor Chinese.

Templer’s hearts and minds was first an economic and social policy, laced with political promises that also served a military purpose. Arguably, the ‘silver bullet’ of the entire war was fired by Sir Henry Gurney when he persuaded the Malay government to grant title deeds to landless Chinese (which automatically entitled political votes as well). It took him 18 months. His untimely assassination meant that he never saw the fruits of this enlightened policy. It was based on foundations already well established by his predecessor Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs. Sir Robert Thompson, the Permanent Secretary for Malaya was clear that his task was to ‘establish a free, independent, and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable’, not win wars. There is a strong revisionist camp argument that the hearts and minds campaign was actually greatly overblown and more a political slogan. The main evidence is British internal reporting, well into the war, by Templer’s successor Lieutenant-General Sir Geoffrey Bourne, who judged that the Chinese had not developed loyalty towards the British-Malay government, despite the many generous civic blandishments, but were actually ‘won over’ by the simple fact that the CTs were clearly beaten. The bullet won hearts and minds.

It was the press that seized on the slogan and promoted the myth. (Templer gained the nickname ‘Tiger of Malaya’, a direct steal of Japanese General Tomoyuki’s nickname and an unsuitable way of re-asserting and promoting British authority. British Pathé film footage of the period gives a good flavour of this imperial, self-congratulatory drum-beating.) Templer himself threatened to shoot anyone who made great claims for the campaign (quoted in Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces, 29 no. 4, 2003). At least in his mind, success was being exaggerated by newspapers keen on delivering a ‘good news story’ (a modern commander can only dream about such a supportive media!). In Malay history, the ‘hearts and minds’
were not won by the British but by the Alliance Government (the precursor of the post-independence Barisan National). For example: ‘The turning point came when the Alliance Government, precursor of today’s Barisan National, was able to convince Malaya’s ethnic communities, especially the Chinese, that an independent and genuinely democratic nation where their rights and privileges would be protected was a better alternative to that which Chin Peng offered,’ a view expressed by Datuk Ignatius, formerly of the Malaysian Foreign Service in *The Star* (10/27/2011). There is some credibility to this view as it was Malays talking to Malays that swung opinion, although the British played an important role facilitating this dialogue and maintaining stability. Incidentally, for those who despair at the size of modern HQs, Templer ran the war with an HQ of precisely nine officers: one brigadier chief of staff, four primary staff of lieutenant colonel rank (civil servant, policeman, soldier, airman) and their deputies (Komer, p. 31).

The British had experience of corralling ethnic populations, most notably in the controversial concentration camps of the Second Boer War that caused a great scandal at the time. This unhappy experience was not repeated in Malaya. The Briggs Plan that involved the forcible transplant of as many as 500,000 Chinese and other ethnic groups into New Villages was a success because it was basically a sound economic and social plan (500,000 is the commonly quoted number. A high figure of 600,000 is quoted by Barber, N. *The War of the Running Dogs*, 1971, p. 118). This was not ethnic cleansing, although there were mass deportations and detentions (applauded by the Malays). There was no great resistance because the transplanted communities recognised that they were getting a good deal, not least because the policy increased employment (Eventually, 582 new villages were constructed, of which only 6 were judged to have failed. The keys were: title to land, better quality of life, material and physical support, mutual support, and effective defence. Unclassified MOD Information Note 10/03 *Historical Lessons in gated/protected communities in counterinsurgency operations*.) The protected villages (*kampongs*) served the twin purpose of denying the CTs sanctuaries and food which was a central plank of the counter-insurgency.

Templer did not arrive in Malaya with the intention of winning hearts and minds. He deliberately played the part of the stern imperial master tolerating no nonsense. Only when this message got through did he reverse this persona and then start playing the part of the clement ruler. There were peace negotiations with the MNLA – which Chin Peng attended in person (imagine Mullah Omar appearing on a British doorstep for talks) – but they led nowhere because the Malays themselves knew the British were going to win and saw little reason to compromise with the Chinese guerrillas that had acted in brutal ways. Chin Peng eventually ended up in Thailand, miffed, and would write a book called *My Side of History* but few Malays have bothered to read it. He is alive today and to his great chagrin, the Malaysian authorities will still not allow him to return home. Feelings against Chin Peng also run high amongst some British veterans with one old comrades association offering to transport him back to Malaysia ‘on a pole’ like a dead pig.

There was no ‘transition’ or ‘exit strategy’ in the modern sense. Neither did Templer face relentless media scrutiny or the factor of domestic electoral timetables that are features of contemporary counter-insurgencies. A predetermined independence timetable was agreed with the Malays and met. It was in the end a question of lowering one flag and raising another.

**It’s a police problem**

Thompson quipped that it seemed to him that the main job of an Army commander ‘in this kind of war’ was making sure that ‘the troops have got their beer.’ (This comment may in part have been a sideswipe at Army colleagues as Thompson was a former RAF officer.) As far as the British authorities were concerned, it was a police problem. The British Army operated in Malaya in a classic exercise of aid to a protectorate civil power. Even in the very worst areas, authority was always vested in the civilian
authorities, through a series of cascading appointments, ‘and, last of all, the soldiers’ (Symposium, p. 22).

As one officer pointed out, he could take no military action without authority from the District Officer (a Malay); the local police chief (an Indian); and the village Special Intelligence Branch (SIB) officer (a Chinese) (Symposium, p. 61). In ‘black’ areas (dominated by CTs), a British soldier had the right to shoot on sight but that permission had to be expressly sought from the relevant civilian authority before an operation. The permission could be denied and was on occasions. Reciprocally, a British Army officer was entitled to turn down requests for military action from the Malays if he judged that it would be counter-productive. The four nationalities collaborated in a spirit of harmony which was typical of the 200 year old British involvement in this protectorate. The British Army did not have to build relations from scratch – it joined a good and historic relation – even though it found ‘war by committee’ irksome at first. It is too easily forgotten that until the recent past, the British presided over a model of multi-faith, multiculturalism. Even allowing for the biases of a British author, and barring the outstanding example of the imperial Roman Army, no other nation has been quite so successful in persuading local subjects that it was in their best interests to don the King’s uniform and serve the wishes of a government of a damp island in the North Atlantic they had never seen. Men of all colours and creeds died for each other in common and mostly just causes – a point too easily ignored by breast-beating, post-colonial histories. There is a good story to tell.

The rule of law

The Malayan Emergency was fought under the rule of law – British rule of law. This was both sophisticated and fair. Captured CTs who had committed murders faced criminal charges. In this respect, the insurgency was de-glamourized. Some faced the ultimate sanction, the death penalty, for particularly heinous crimes, and this acted as a deterrent to CTs who gradually desisted from predatory behaviour against innocent civilians. For most Malays, the British rule of law was as respected and symbolic a pillar as other British institutions such as the monarchy. This counted for an awful lot. The British did not have to convince the Malays that they were fair – it was part of the fabric of imperial rule. When Sir Henry Gurney the British High Commissioner was murdered, there was outrage amongst ordinary Malays which is very revealing of the respect with which the British were generally held. There were abuses, or ‘unfortunate incidents’ in the euphemism of the time (the slaying of 24 villagers in Batang Kali by Scots Guards in 1948), but these were an exception. The survivors of Batang Kali continue to seek compensation but it is unlikely they will receive satisfaction.

The Home Guard

Where have the British not set up home guards? It was almost inevitable that part of the solution would involve setting up local defence forces or home guards (and special constables). There was a stern, almost public school draconian rigour to the Malay Home Guard which could not be compared to the Popular Forces in Vietnam, for example. All work had to cease at 4pm, lights out were at 8pm and there was strict accounting of all equipment, down to individual bullets. Losses resulted in heavy fines (any ammunition loss automatically attracted the docking of a month’s wages (Symposium, p. 49)) and minor infractions were jumped on. This generated self-respect for the Home Guard which was not viewed as a second-rate ‘Dad’s Army’ but as a credible and serious militia.

Avoiding the locals

The British Army in Malaya not only did not attempt to protect the population – it deliberately avoided the local population. The Army did undertake population control – stop-and-search, vehicle checkpoints and other internal security operations in support of the police – but this is a quite different thing. In the early days it also protected the plantations, but this was ‘protecting the population’ in the narrow sense of
guarding vulnerable white families. In the uncommon cases where an Army operation was conducted in a populated area, authority had to be sought from the local Malay authority to use a ‘free hand’ in an operation, and he had to warn if there was a likelihood of the use of heavy ordnance such as artillery. Artillery was used minimally – it took ten years for the Gunners reached the millionth shell fired milestone, compared to almost half a million shells fired in the first five and half hours at El Alamein (Komer, p. 51). A British Army officer serving in Malaya would have been puzzled if he had been told that his mission was ‘to secure the people’ in the words of the first commandment of the Petraeus Doctrine. It simply wasn’t. Civilians were a problem for the civil authorities. His problem was the enemy – the CTs. The British Army counter-insurgency manual drafted in 1952 by Colonel (later General) Walker could not have been more explicit on this matter. The preface, believed to have been co-authored by Templer, stated: ‘The responsibility for conducting the campaign in Malaya rests with the Civil Government…the job of the British Army out here is to kill or capture Communist Terrorists in Malaya.’

Units did interact with nearby settlements (the equivalent of the Afghan shura) and they were assiduous in respecting local custom and making an effort to learn the (difficult) language. One sultan refused to meet the local British officer until he spoke some Malay, which he promptly did (Symposium, p. 75). But these were more ‘get to know your neighbour’ affairs. One officer recalled how he would bring along the regimental band to entertain the natives before sitting down for a village feast. There is a wonderful culture of hospitality in Malay culture which the British Army accepted and reciprocated. Another remembered how he would be invited to civic events such as the opening of a new public building. An exception was children. As in Afghanistan, children are attracted by soldiers and the age-old game of handing out sweets and other presents was played deliberately – the one example where it may be stated that the Army indulged in winning ‘hearts and minds’. In at least one case, a battalion set up much-prized scholarships for one Chinese, Malay and Indian child, which continued after the British withdrawal (Symposium, p. 63). This was the empire at its benevolent best.

The operational picture

The Malayan Federation comprised of nine states (the sultanates), each governed by a Malay advised by a head policeman, the head of the Home Guard, a British brigadier and various civilian representatives. Each state in turn was divided into districts with the same division of responsibilities (a lieutenant-colonel usually in the case of the Army representative).

The British operational plan developed in an ad hoc way – as they do. There were thirteen existing Army bases (battalions) and later a number of ‘jungle forts’ were built in especially remote areas. By the end, the Malay garrison was built up to a 30,000 strong force – 23 infantry battalions (Komer, p. 47). Broadly, the plan involved marching from west to east, cleaning up the bigger settlements and coastal areas and gradually tackling the more difficult areas. The aim was to turn all ‘black’ areas into ‘white’ areas and to make the country ‘waterproof’ (never achieved) (Symposium, p. 20). Mostly and pragmatically, the plan developed in opportunistic fashion – if there was good ‘contact information’ it was acted on. If not, the British bided their time. Patience and persistence were virtues. This leisurely progress across Malaya served the unintended effect of down-playing the situation. There was never a sense that the country was about to collapse (although 1950-51 were seen as bad years), or that some precipitate and drastic measure needed to be taken. This was quite different to the claustrophobic atmospheres that developed in Algiers City or Saigon that led to many poor decisions. It paid to light a cheroot and reach for a gin and tonic.

Tactics: as different as chalk and cheese
Afghanistan and (modern) Malaysia are completely different countries. It should not surprise then that tactics in the latter were as different as chalk and cheese compared to tactics in the Afghanistan War. Jungle time is slow time – this factor characterised the entire campaign. It suited the ‘slightly mad chap’ who enjoyed spending days doing nothing much in a warm wood, and was probably hellish for the agitated and easily bored fellow. A typical posting was three years compared to the relatively short operational tours served by modern soldiers.

The key was intelligence, or the ‘contact information’. The best sources were the Chinese Special Branch (SIB) Officers at village level (Symposium, p. 107) but the Army also generated its own intelligence through **patrols and aerial reconnaissance. For example, over one 6 month period, aerial reconnaissance with Auster IV detected 155 CT camps.** Many commentators, and especially Brigadier Richard Clutterbuck, aver that the SIB was the key to security force successes, a point reinforced in the **British Army’s current COIN manual** (CS 5-3, PDF p. 207). This would be ‘HUMINT’ in modern terms.

Long range patrols typically lasted two weeks although some exceeded 100 days. One of the early SAS patrols under ‘Mad Mike’ Calvert reportedly remained in the jungle for 103 days, at the time considered a record. The soldier carried a pack weighing around 90 pounds with all he needed for the duration of the patrol. This would be dumped in a cache and patrols in light order would be mounted from the cache (Symposium, p. 50). The basic unit was three men (it was reckoned that two were sufficient to carry a wounded comrade, a calculation that would be impossible today with the weights carried by an infantryman). After that, any multiple of three was possible although 12 was a popular number (Symposium, p. 34). With the failure of large formation operations at the beginning of the campaign it was determined that company-level operations were optimal (Symposium, p. 20). On rare occasions an entire battalion would swamp an area. Due to the extreme communication difficulties (this was actually the biggest challenge faced by the British Army in Malaya and it provoked much debate and technological experimentation (Symposium, pp. 109-113)), companies enjoyed a degree of freedom that would be unimaginable today. ‘Mission command’ was not theory - it was just the way it had to be. Company commanders were told to get on with it and report back when they could. Some patrols disappeared for days on end before successfully re-establishing communications. **SAS Donald ‘Lofty’ Large’s memoirs include stories of getting lost in the jungle (which would offer a good excuse for a smoke and a brew)!** It was a more relaxed age.

The favoured tactic was the ambush, which could be set for as long as ten days (always collapsing at night when there no requirement to maintain watch). It demanded great self-discipline, especially given the near-universal smoking habit in British soldiers (this, along with Brilliantine was forbidden, but we know from anecdotal evidence that separating the soldier from his cigarettes was a tall order, and the fashion for gelling your hair was not easily broken). Despite the popularity of this tactic, ‘a surprisingly small number of Chinese casualties were inflicted’ (Symposium, p. 32). The overwhelming majority of ambushes yielded nothing. Most CTs were killed in chance encounters or when a camp was discovered. The biggest killers of CTs turned out to be the Gurkha battalions, not the white British regiments. This was perhaps inevitable as 17th Gurkha Division was the largest formation in Malaya. The top British regiment was not 22 SAS, as popularly believed, but 1 Suffolks who killed 196 CTs (a kill only counted if a body was produced unlike modern counter-insurgencies that are prone to exaggerate kill counts). This regiment was awarded nine MCs over the course of its three and half year tour. The post-war SAS, as some may know, was almost disbanded because of poor discipline and soldiering.

The other tactic was the pursuit. If a solid contact was established it was pursued, however long it took, until the CT gang had either been rounded up or killed, or the trail lost. As with the ambush, the truth was
that the CT were ‘hardly ever caught’ (Symposium, p. 39) in pursuits because they were far more fleet of foot than their pursuers. This was not viewed as total failure. Part of the game was simply keeping the CT on the run. Some pursuits lasted 20 days before being called off. The lack of contacts was reflected in ammunition loads – the standard load was just three magazines (60 rounds), including in SAS patrols (Symposium, p. 51). This compares with Vietnam where a GI carried a standard load of 32 magazines of 5.56mm. (The author found this standard Vietnam GI ammo load in an unrelated reading of My Lai testimonies in answer to the question how much ammunition was carried, the defendant answered the standard load of 32 magazines, with one loaded. The author cannot recall which testimony and there are scores of documents to search. If veterans can recall a different standard ammo load, the author is happy to be corrected.) They were quite different wars.

No attempt was made to seal the border with Thailand (across which there was some infiltration), the British recognising the futility of trying to control jungle borders. Political pressure was put on the Thai government to close CT cross-border camps, with mixed success (Symposium, p. 42).

**Dogs and Dayaks**

The British made extensive use of dogs in the campaign: guard, ambush, pointer and especially tracker dogs (Symposium, pp. 38-39). They also recruited Dayaks from Borneo as scouts with whom they formed close bonds (the relationship originated in the Second World War when the Japanese massacred Dayaks, pushing them into the arms of the British who offered protection). The Dayaks had natural jungle sense but no human could rival the olfactory sense of a dog. Alsatians and Labrador Retrievers were popular and some dogs gained great repute for the ability to detect and point to CT camps at considerable distances. A typical sub-unit comprised one British officer, ten Dayaks and eight dogs. The CT recognised the abilities of the tracker dogs and used techniques such as crossing water obstacles to try to throw the scent. The relationship with the head-hunting Dayaks only backfired once in 1952 when a Royal Marine unit somewhat over-enthusiastically embraced the practice, provoking a public relations backlash and a prohibition on head-hunting. The offending photograph appeared in the 10 May 1952 edition of the Daily Worker, the newspaper of the British Communist Party, keen to expose brutal, British imperialism. This then provoked a riposte from the right-wing Daily Telegraph. There was not consensus on this matter: some argued that Western values should not be imposed on the Dayaks who should be allowed to continue lopping off the heads of enemies as was their custom.

**The absence of aerial bombardments**

RAF bombers and strike aircraft were primarily deployed to Malaya for political reasons: to send a signal to SEATO allies and potential enemies that Britain was serious about the wider security of South-East Asia (Symposium, p. 103). There was limited bombing over the course of the campaign for several good reasons (operations like Operation Termite 1954 involving 12 Lincoln bombers stand out because they were uncommon). Aerial bombardments were forbidden anywhere near populated areas and restricted to fringe jungle areas (Symposium, p. 103). The problem in these latter areas was target detection – the pilots could not see through the dense canopy, nor could they reliably determine friendly positions (although experiments with balloons and flares were attempted (Symposium, p. 54)). **Mapping was poor, communications were abysmal, the meteorology was unfavourable and airfields were few.** Buzzing likely enemy positions was used (the modern ‘show of force’), and the bombing of potential escape routes was also occasionally practised, but after the war **it was reckoned that a handful of CTs had been killed through aerial bombardment.** The most successful missions came when CT camps were accurately identified but these could take weeks to set up for the reasons outlined above. The bombers and strike aircraft included Lincolns, Brigands and Hornets, and later the jet-engine Vampires, Venoms, Canberras and Australian Sabres. It was a romantic age for pilots but the Army view, disputed
by the RAF that was keen to show off its new aircraft, was that bombing jungle was largely a waste of
effort (Symposium, p. 103) – a stark contrast to the Vietnam War where around 7 million tons of bombs
were dropped, or 600 kilograms of high explosives for every square hectare of South Vietnam. (US Senate
Committee on Foreign Relations (1971); US DOD release 17 Aug 1973: US and allied forces expended 14
million tons of ammunition between 1965-73 almost half dropped by air and about 65 per cent dropped in
S Vietnam). This compared to 33,000 tons dropped in 12 years in Malaya (Komer, p. 52, quoting Air
Commodore RE Warcup).

Aerial resupply was used although 22 SAS concluded that the disadvantage of compromise outweighed
the advantage of convenience (Symposium, p. 54). Light planes were also used successfully for
reconnaissance. The versatile Auster IV in fact flew more sorties than all the other 31 aircraft types
deployed in Malaya (MOD: A Brief History of the Royal Air Force, p. 204). The helicopter became an
increasingly important platform but casualty evacuation (the Dragonflies) remained poor, though not by
contemporary standards and to a generation hardened by a world war. As in modern counter-insurgencies,
the complaint of insufficient helicopters was common.

Chemical warfare
The British used Agent Orange in Malaya, but for the very British reason of cutting costs, but not
especially trees (Connor, S., “How Britain Sprayed Malaya with Dioxin,” New Scientist, 19 Jan 84). The
alternative was employing local labour three times a year to cut the vegetation such was the fecundity of
the Malay jungle. British stinginess over this matter in one respect helped to avoid the controversies
provoked by the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. The original intention was to crop spray but even this
was deemed too expensive by the protectorate authorities (helicopters were used and 88 suspected CT
cultivations were sprayed). Eventually someone struck on the idea of simply hosing the jungle from the
back of bowser trucks and this is what the British did, in limited areas and to no great effect. This happily
amateur effort at chemical warfare undoubtedly saved future British governments from the litigation
suffered by post-Vietnam US governments. In 2010, a former New Zealand soldier won a compensation
case for Agent Orange poisoning (in Sarawak). It is believed that this is the first such successful case from
amongst former Commonwealth soldiers.

Psychological Warfare
British psychological warfare (modern ‘Influence Operations’) took a carrot-and-stick approach
(Symposium, p. 74). The carrot involved measures like sending out medical patrols that were greatly
appreciated by jungle communities with little or no access to health care. Medical care was also offered to
wounded terrorists through village intermediaries, which some accepted rather than face gangrenous
deaths. The stick involved many ruses. A popular ruse was taking emaciated CT prisoners and feeding
them on a stodgy 50s British diet (one can only sympathise). Leaflet photographs of the now plump
guerrillas would then be distributed to former colleagues in air drops (Symposium, p. 79). Photographing
former CTs reunited with their families was another one – the family being central to Chinese culture.

Conclusions
The British Army was deployed to Malaya to support the civil authorities in the period leading to
independence. Hearts and minds was a civil, political and economic policy. The Army had no mission to
win hearts and minds, or to protect the population, and it did neither. Its role was to kill and capture CTs.
By the end, it got pretty good at this. If revisionist histories are accepted, then there is some doubt
whether the British actually won hearts and minds anyway (any more than in Iraq or Afghanistan), or
whether the phrase amounted to a political marketing slogan inflated by the press. Malay history stresses
Malay political dialogue as the key, not British hearts and minds.
Debate over whether the British Army ‘won in Malaya’ is misleading. It was a British political, economic and lastly military success. Mistakes were made in the beginning but corrected. The best British characteristics came to the fore: reasonableness, pragmatism and common sense. The best Malay qualities were also on display: industriousness, equanimity and patience. The advantages were almost all on the side of the authorities: British-Malay relations were harmonious; governance was good; the judicial system was fair; the police were loyal and competent; and the Federation was excited at the prospect of independence – in short, the Malays wanted the British to succeed. Anti-colonial British sentiment stoked by some American commentators who sought to portray the insurgents as patriots and rebels (echoing the American War of Independence) was foolishness. This narrative was soon abandoned anyway when the Korean War broke out and Communism became the global Beelzebub. They were neither. The CTs were a marginalised gang of ethnic Chinese who never enjoyed broad support and whose chances of success were remote.

Regardless of whether or not it was ‘simple’, the British should still be proud of the Malayan Emergency (and not neglect to honour the over 500 soldiers who died securing the protectorate’s independence). It was well handled. A twelve year war cost the Treasury £84 million, or £1.7 billion in 2011 prices (Komer, p. 23) – a snip compared to the cost of modern counter-insurgency wars. Modern day Malaysia (and Singapore) are two hugely prosperous Asian countries – they owe a debt to Britain for the gracious manner in which independence was managed. To this day there is a monarchy, a Westminster-style parliamentary system, and English Common Law (in a Muslim country). English remains the language of business and is embedded in the educational system as the language used to teach the sciences. These are not small achievements in a multi-ethnic country of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, Christians and aboriginals. It was never going to be a Vietnam, or to express this more precisely, there was no realistic chance that the success of Malaya might be replicated in Vietnam which was an altogether different situation.

But Malaya as the exemplar for modern counter-insurgency is a dead letter. The casual use and misuse of the phrase hearts and minds should be guarded against. The unique conditions of the Malayan Emergency are unlikely to be repeated.

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About the Author

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