

# Three Cameronians Revisit 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Malayan Bases in 2012



**Hugh**



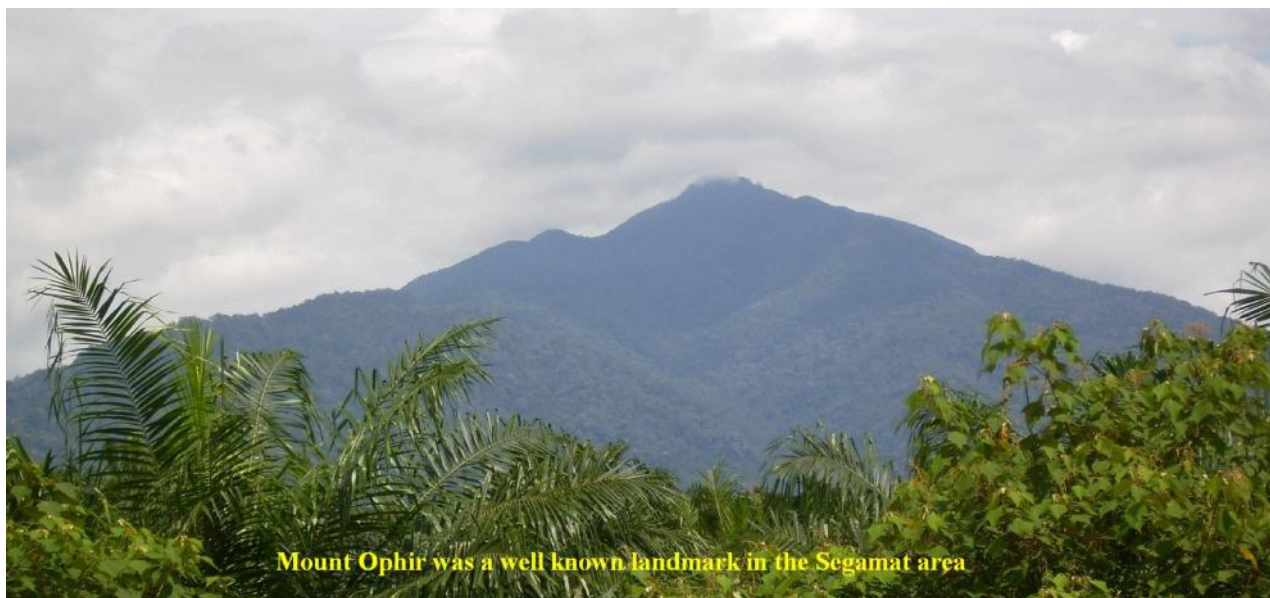
**Ian**



**Donald**



One became a Gurkha



Mount Ophir was a well known landmark in the Segamat area

In January, Hugh Wilmer, Ian Tedford and Donald Cameron (referred to by the wife of one of them as 3GDs<sup>1</sup>) returned for six days to Malaysia to see if they could find bases and buildings used by 1<sup>st</sup> Bn between 1950-53. They had all served together there under their CO, Bill Henning, later to become Hugh's father-in-law. The idea originated with Hugh in 2009; he wrote to the other two who enthusiastically approved. All three wives firmly agreed this was a men-only affair. Ian, having later served also with the Gurkhas, had interests relating to their operations. (The front cover was created with only one Glengarry between them, belonging to Ian!)

They had to put off the trip for a year because of a couple of geriatric medical needs, so they met in Thailand on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2012. Hugh was already at his son Fergus' villa near Phuket in Thailand, and the other two flew from Edinburgh to join him and Philippa, though she still had no intention of going to Malaysia. It was a perfect place to start,



first by getting over jetlag; no military operation has ever had such a pleasant FUP<sup>2</sup> - or such good food!

Serious preparations included a fast launch trip in a bay east of the Thai shoreline. We were driven there to pick up the launch in Boat Bay by Khun Aree, a delightful woman who is in charge of the running of Fergus' holiday villa and several others adjacent to it. There we met Kevin, who runs a boat-repair business and looks after Fergus' craft. His daughter Mia joined us. Kevin raced us out into the bay east of Phuket island to one of the many islets where a pleasant little restaurant provided an excellent lunch.



Later came the first of several caringly prepared Thai meals washed down with wines and beer, and comfortable seating in a choice of open verandas where we could pour over a small scale map of Malaysia, and do some planning. "Some" is the right word, because inevitably as a decision was considered fertile minds recalled amusing or serious episodes within the Battalion in the fifties... and one thing led to another until the dinner gong boomed. We proved the point that the elderly recall times of youth with good clarity...

<sup>1</sup> Three geriatric delinquents

<sup>2</sup> Forming up point

In our preparations Ian had been in touch for some time by email with friends of his still in Malaysia, who had been, like him, with the Gurkhas. We owe countless thanks to Ken Downey and Richard Lowe for many hours spent in phoning and emailing hotels to book our rooms and obtain a vehicle and driver— and then making changes because we re-scheduled some routes. We were as ready as we ever would be for our excursion.



Planning Group!

On 13<sup>th</sup> after a morning swim and early lunch we were driven to Phuket Airport to board a small turbojet flown by Firefly Airlines to Penang Airport. There we met Ken Downey, and picked up our six-seater air-conditioned Toyota Land Cruiser driven by Jimmy. We crossed the long 13½ km causeway to the mainland, with Jimmy's "wife" sitting somewhat unexpectedly in the front seat.

On the mainland we joined the toll road to Ipoh, in a tin mining area, which was to be our first night stop. Jimmy informed us that it was the Malaysian centre for criminals and gangs! It's certainly the least attractive town we saw in our travels. Our vehicle had SATNAV, but Jimmy was having problems, mainly because the vehicle was brand new and he had had little chance to make himself familiar with its controls. Having fruitlessly circled the centre of Ipoh, we picked up a teenage Indian lad who led us directly to the hotel, named D' Eastern Hotel. There followed an interesting night.

Booked of necessity at the very last moment, it was definitely not four star, but just about possible for a night's rest. None of us could get the hot water to run in our basins. Donald looked underneath and discovered that both hot and cold taps were piped into the single cold pipe rising from the floor... First, though, food was a priority, and Ian had encouraged us to try one of his favourite meals, a Grouper head curry. One of the hotel staff gave a Tamil taxi directions, and he drove us to a hopeful restaurant. We soon realised it did not have that curry, being a Tamil establishment with its own cuisine—and it was clearly connected to the D' Eastern. Nor did it have any form of beer or other alcoholic beverage. This crisis we stoically endured. While Hugh and Ian did the best they could with the menu, Donald consumed a Tamil curry, of which he is fond. Over the meal we discussed the situation concerning Jimmy's unexpected "wife" (Jimmy had taken her to our hotel as she wasn't feeling well.) Hugh and Donald slept fitfully, Ian didn't sleep a wink. But he made good use of the dark hours, spending a fortune on

telephone calls and contacting Ken about our unexpected extra passenger

14<sup>th</sup>. We lined up with our cases at the hotel entrance for the planned pre-breakfast 7am departure, but Jimmy didn't appear. Eventually he drove up, but "wife" was not with him. He had just taken her to the bus station to return we know not where. He had probably thought that we were three green, ignorant old tourists—he was right about old. Early that morning he had had words from Ian, realised his mistake, apologised for it, and from that moment was an exemplary and very helpful chauffeur, as well as proving to be a safe one. The four of us got on well—even though he never fully mastered the SATNAV!

Our destination was Melaka, known in our day as Malacca, about 340 km away. Jimmy by now had begun a relationship with the SATNAV, and we had a five hour drive with a breakfast stop on the way. The Malaysian highways were new to us, with tolls along their length. They are beautifully engineered two-lane and sometimes three-lane dualling. Where we had known only fairly narrow roads, these were invariably raised above flood level and very smooth.

In Melaka we found our hotel fairly easily – Hotel Puri. It was comfortable, friendly, and somewhat oldy-worldy, which we liked. Lunch of soup with rice and rolls was followed by a kip until about 4 pm. Hugh and Donald shopped locally. Jimmy was given time off.

Later we drove in a taxi for a meal organised by Ian. Amy's Nyonga Restaurant was made famous by Rick Stein in his TV series "Far East Odyssey." It is usually fully booked, however Ian had mentioned something about being a second cousin to Rick Stein and a table was reserved for 7pm. On arrival we were given special treatment, and greeted by Amy herself. We gladly let her choose from the menu and soon enjoyed an excellent meal of dishes which clearly were special. The restaurant itself was clean, simple and unfussy – and to our surprise so was the bill. We returned by taxi to our hotel.

15<sup>th</sup>. The PURI provided a good breakfast. At 0830 we drove to Segamat, which had been the second base for the Battalion, with companies in tented camps on rubber estates. Instead of the direct route, we took lesser roads, often signposted to Lenga and Labis - both villages near company camps. There was still some rubber, but many of the estates had been replanted with palm oil. We had no time to search for old campsites, not knowing exactly where to try, though we must have come near one or two of them. The names of Pegoh, Voules, Labis



and Jementah come to mind. They had left no recognisable signs to follow. So we drove our winding way to Segamat, where we hoped for better success. This was now a far bigger town. We motored through it slowly, and came to two buildings which were most likely on the sites of the old Officers Mess and BHQ. The building on the latter site was clearly government property. At one point we were looking for some elderly local who might perhaps remember. Jimmy went searching but returned to report he couldn't find anyone old enough! If not a bull's-eye, on an outer ring!

Logging our visit with some photos, we then took a different and more direct road back, as our next town was to be Muar, the first Bn location on coming to Malaya. On the way there we passed through Jementah, through which Donald had often motored when with B company under



Peter Bryceson. And he had been camped near Lenga a year earlier.

Muar was a disappointment. Instead of a village we had to drive through a fairly large town. Our aim was to find the old airstrip and BHQ, which we knew were located near the mouth of the Muar river. Enquiries revealed that the airstrip now lay under a high school. We drove around and found the school – we think. Further prowling on the side roads produced some older houses that might have been there in the fifties. Hopefully we took photos of two that sort of resembled our recollection of the original Officers Mess.

Instead of returning to our hotel, we stayed on the coast road out of Melaka, travelling north and looking for the village of Tanjung Kling. We motored over the river on the road leading to Melaka, where before there had been a ferry. Bill Henning our CO had stayed in that village with his wife Mavis and their daughter Philippa in a government hiring. The village had virtually disappeared in one long ribbon development by the sea.

Hugh had memories of the house, and was searching carefully as we drove to the northern boundary of Tanjung Kling. No luck, so we turned back to go to our hotel.



Suddenly something clicked, and Hugh had high hopes that a building we passed on its own on government grounds overlooking the beach was the one he was after. A police guard spoke with Jimmy, and we were allowed to go into the grounds and up to the building, and take photos.



Later Philippa confirmed from our photos that it was the right building.) We had lunch in Melaka, then returned to our hotel for a rest, and ate out locally in a nearby bazaar.

16<sup>th</sup>. Reveille was at 0615, breakfast at 0715 and at 0830 wheels rolled. We admitted varying degrees of sleep deprivation in the night, but agreed the hotel had been a good choice of



Ken's. Ian had a fairly severe head cold, but was game for the trip to the Cameron Highlands. It proved to be a long, slow 6½ hour journey, despite the fact that two thirds of the route was on the excellent E1 toll road. We passed through Seremban and through Kuala Lumpur by means of a complicated spaghetti junction of motorways. KL is now huge, no longer the town with a main road through. Many tower blocks have a distinct resemblance to those in Hong Kong and Singapore. We also passed near Batang Berjuntai, a few miles north of KL, where B Company under Peter Bryceson (Donald included) had been seconded for three months. At least, it was about that length of time. The Battalion War Diary records: "11 Dec 51 B Coy leave Bukit Serempang Estate for Kuala Lumpur via Segamat." There is no record of it ever returning!

Eventually we had to come off the motorway at Tapah for the junction to the Cameron Highlands, and our destination the Planters Hotel at Tana Rata. The area was discovered in 1885 by William Cameron, a government surveyor, but it was not developed as a hill station until 1925 by Sir George Maxwell. Tea was planted in 1931. Our road was well-engineered. It shows signs of continuous repair and improvement, but was not designed with the modern heavy lorry in mind – though we met or passed several! We made reasonable progress until we drew up behind a large carrier with a heavy excavator strapped on board. The rear

portion had eight wheels on two axels, and one of the rear side wheels was shredded and virtually coming off. We saw that deflated wheel for the next fifty minutes, when eventually we were able to overtake, and make frantic signals to the driver as we passed him. After five minutes the penny seemed to drop and Jimmy saw in his mirror that he had pulled aside.

Around half way up to Tana Rata we crossed one of numerous culverts with buildings and shops nearby. What was different was that one building, advertising the usual beer, was owned by Ramasamy Cameron! Donald was delighted to discover a Malaysian kinsman...

Near our destination we stopped for a break at The Lake House Hotel. Ian had earlier been in touch with the Nepalese man who ran it, and he had some connections with the Gurkhas. He gave us a potted history of his hotel. It was definitely five star with five star prices. Jimmy was looking at the menu for tea and sandwiches along with us, and seeing the price of them fled from the building down to the shops below... Having ordered, we had to eat, and the sandwiches were pretty large – larger as the thought of supper next came to mind...

On the walls were old pictures of Cameron Highlanders, and we learned of William Cameron after whom the district is still named. It is one more example of the way past colonial British influences have been absorbed into the Malaysian nation. Another useful little one is that every hotel bedroom has both two-pin and UK 13 amp sockets! Tourism is popular.

Soon we reached Tana Rata, the main town in the highlands, and booked in at the Planters Hotel for one night.

We had two distinct reasons for going to the hill station. One was to collect tins of tea labelled Cameronian Tea processed at the local Boh tea gardens. The other was that Donald wanted to see the Highlands again, having had a good week's holiday playing golf with Donald Sinclair in 1952 when stationed at Segamat. At 5000 feet it has a delightful climate.

The hotel had a bag with six cans of tea waiting for us, which we thankfully took and paid for. It was only later that Hugh took one out and noticed it wasn't labelled Cameronian Tea, but Cameron Tea, after the other estate nearby. We tracked down the shop and after a bit of discussion the shopkeeper agreed to make a free exchange. A good local wine shop sold us two bottles of wine – the first to be drunk by us in Malaysia. We found a local restaurant where Ian encouraged us to have a "steamboat" meal. Unfortunately he didn't feel well enough to start it and retired to bed. Hugh and Donald made a valiant effort to do justice to the large selection in front of them, and then also retired. It had been a very long day.

17<sup>th</sup> Our hotel served breakfast in a café next door, but it wasn't that good. However, we were soon on our way to our next objective, a Malaysian Army military camp in Sungei Patani. We drove down from the Cameron

Highlands on a new and much better road to the north-west of Tana Rata.

The first part of our journey was through fields and plots of all types of vegetables and fruit, including strawberries, all beautifully laid out and evenly spaced to make full use of every square inch of soil. Fruit and veg are exported throughout the country and beyond.

Eventually we rejoined the toll road, and reached Sungei Patani. Our first stop was at a golf club where we waited to meet Richard Lowe (ex-6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas), who had made arrangements with the military for us to visit the camp. Ian had been Adjutant for two years, and had had a family quarter there. The Camp Commandant, Lt. Col Salamudin, was waiting for us at Brigade Headquarters nearby, but eventually he arrived with some of his officers at the main gate. We climbed into his minibus and he took us on a tour of the camp. We were impressed with its tidiness, cleanliness and general layout—the camp, not the minibus. We found what Ian was looking for – the office he had used, and the quarter he had lived in. This was our second bulls-eye!



Ian's office and family quarter



We then went to what had been a Gurkha boys Training establishment, but was now the brigade headquarters. Looking round at artefacts and photos, including four notebooks that were carried in our day by “bandits,” and

the building itself, we were impressed, and also by the excellent tea and small eats provided in the officers mess,

air conditioned and with marble floor. The whole impression was of a well run military base. The three of us thoroughly enjoyed chatting to the Commandant and the officers who were With him, and it seemed clear that they, too, enjoyed meeting 3GDs, despite the fact that compared to their smartness we rather looked as though we had emerged from the ulu ... Recruiting for the Malaysian Army is not a problem – those that join are able to remain until retirement at about 45 – there is no short service provision as in UK.



The Commandant and officers

We crossed the long causeway back to Penang, but before going to our hotel went to a main shopping area where Ian collected two pairs of spectacles that he had ordered on arrival on 13<sup>th</sup> – at a much better price than he could have got in UK! Our hotel was the Hydro Majestic, smarter and more expensive than any we had slept in, but very handy to Ken Downey's flat. Following a shower and change we met up again with Ken who led us to his flat in a high rise two blocks away. Richard Lowe and his wife joined us. Bernadette, Ken's wife, had prepared a delicious curry, and we enjoyed a good evening with them.

18<sup>th</sup>. Ken met us at about 10 am in the hotel, and Jimmy drove us to Penang Airport.



The return flight in the Firefly aircraft was smooth, but disembarkation took time as another large aircraft had landed at the same time. Khun Aree met us and we were soon relaxing in the Villa. Hugh and Philippa's son Fergus had arrived from HK along with his wife Jennifer and their

young son Cameron. They were joined with others for a holiday there.

We relaxed, downloaded each other's photos, and enjoyed the rest. As GDs we found it had been more tiring that we realised – but are unanimous that it was a worthwhile and enjoyable jaunt.

Salaams from the three GDs

P.S If anyone who reads this ever goes to the Cameron Highlands, do consider stopping off for a beer at Ramasamy Cameron's bar...

*A CT am I, it's a life you should try,  
We live in the jungle free!  
We come and we go, we pay homage to Joe (Stalin),  
Come, away to the ulu with me.*

*A favourite with us is to burn out a bus  
On the highway from Lenga to Muar,  
And a job that's well paid is to throw a grenade  
At the Governor when he's on tour.*

Anon

<sup>1</sup> Communist Terrorist



... then play tennis in Thailand...



.. and swim in an infinity pool.

