Malaya’s Secret Police tells the story of the organisation, the personnel, the troubles and the ultimate triumph of Malaya’s intelligence services. Former Special Branch officer Leon Comber provides information inaccessible to most researchers, including comprehensive charts and a wealth of details, especially on personalities. Together these provide a unique insight into the world of intelligence. This book reminds us that generating good counterinsurgency intelligence took time—years not months—careful experimentation, and painstaking acquisition of knowledge of the country and its people, culture and languages.


Leon Comber’s admirable study of the vital role played by the Malayan Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency will undoubtedly become recommended reading for anyone interested in counterinsurgency intelligence. It could well provide, too, the framework for the use of intelligence in counterinsurgency operations in other parts of the world such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Dr Comber is well qualified to write it as aside from being a specialist in South East Asian affairs, he served as a Chinese-speaking Special Branch officer in the Emergency.

—Dr Leong Chee Woh, former Malayan Special Branch officer (1953–84), retired Deputy Director of Operations, Malaysian Special Branch, Royal Malaysian Police.
Other books by Leon Comber

13 May 1969:
A Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations

Through a Bamboo Window:
Fate and Fortune in 1950s Singapore & Malaya
(Singapore Heritage Society book)

The Hui: Chinese Secret Societies in 1950s Malaya & Singapore
(Singapore Heritage Society book)

Chinese Temples in Singapore

The Traditional Mysteries of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya

The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao

Modern Malaysian-Chinese Stories
(with Ly Singko)

Prizewinning Asian Fiction (ed.)

The Golden Treasure Box, Vol. 1

The Golden Treasure Box, Vol. 2

Golden Legends Indonesia

Favourite Stories: The Philippines
MALAYA’S SECRET POLICE
1945–60
The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute’s research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued almost 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

The Monash Asia Institute (MAI) is a multi-disciplinary research unit at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Founded in 1988, the MAI brings together a wide range of Asia-related activities at the university to promote and support Monash’s expertise and interest in the Asian region.

MAI Press is an imprint of Monash University Press, and specialises in books and working papers about Asia. The books represent a range of disciplines, such as politics, history, women’s studies, business and the environment. MAI Press welcomes authors from many countries and diverse backgrounds. MAI Press books are distributed in Australasia, North America, Southeast Asia and Europe.
MALAYA’S SECRET POLICE
1945–60
The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency

Leon Comber
To Jack Barlow, MBE, BEM, CPM (1919–2002)
trusted colleague, wise counsellor, loyal friend
About the Author

Dr Leon Comber is an Honorary Research Fellow at Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Melbourne, specializing in Asian studies. He speaks Malay, Chinese (Cantonese and putonghua) and Hindi. His interest in Malay(sian) affairs extends over half a century and dates from the time he landed on the west coast of Malaya in September 1945, after the Japanese surrender, as a Major in the Indian Army. Thereafter, he served for several years as a Chinese-speaking officer in the Special Branch of the Malayan Police dealing with political and security intelligence. He subsequently had a distinguished career in book publishing.
Leon Comber knows how Special Branch works, knows what happened during the Emergency, what went right and what went wrong. He knows because he was there from the beginning and because he has studied, collected, collated and assessed his material for a large part of his life.

This is a profile of what has been the most successful intelligence agency in Southeast Asia for almost sixty years. For those used nowadays in Britain and America to the subordination of intelligence to political purposes, it all seems rather old-fashioned; a view of intelligence as it was and as it was intended to be. Piece the evidence together. If you don’t know, don’t pretend that you do. Let the professionals get on with their job and don’t tell them what to do or how to do it.

Conventional wisdom now on the Malayan ‘Emergency’—an equally conventional expression for a largely communist insurrection that lasted for twelve years—is that intelligence was the key that locked counterinsurgency in place. Or, more precisely, intelligence was what eventually turned a largely unknown and alien force into numbers, names, locations and capabilities of a recognisable and credible enemy order-of-battle. Before and without that, the army would struggle and sweat all over the country in the hope of generating their own intelligence, the police would offer themselves in their unarmed vehicles as targets in a shooting gallery, and civilians, mostly Chinese, would suffer by far the heaviest casualties.

To begin with, in 1948, post-war intelligence in the shape of the Malayan Security Service was undoubtedly looking the wrong way and had little idea of an impending Malayan–Chinese insurrection. Hardly surprising, suggests Dr Comber, when they were fifty per cent under strength, and only a dozen or so British police officers were able to carry on a simple conversation in Chinese. For the next year or so it was an open question whether the police or the army were in charge of counterinsurgency. Intelligence, which was not always shared, quite often just disappeared and was seldom of immediate operational use. Not until 1950 did the late, great General Briggs produce his master plan in which army, police and civil affairs were totally integrated and in which intelligence began to be recognised as being of supreme importance.
So much, in general terms, is fairly well known. Leon Comber’s outstanding contribution is to embed intelligence in what is, in effect, an additional history of the Emergency, and to show us how Special Branch achieved its pre-eminent position. Changing shape from time-to-time and with one or two unsuccessful initiatives—such as an independent Police Intelligence Bureau—there are some surprising additions to what is, in any case, far more than an administrative history. Arthur Young, as Commissioner of Police, took the major step of separating Special Branch from the CID, but more than one view from below suggests that he didn’t really understand the Malayan situation. Templer, as High Commissioner and Director of Operations, at least toyed with the idea of putting Special Branch and the entire police force under army control. A Director of Intelligence suggested a joint plan to penetrate the Malayan Communist Party leadership in Malaya and Singapore. Surprising, really, considering how different they were, but perhaps a mark of the desperation felt that Chin Peng and the Central Committee were impermeable almost to the end of the Emergency.

In the meantime, from hundreds and thousands of pieces, the jigsaw puzzle of intelligence was taking shape. Techniques were refined, procedures standardised, MI5 and MI6 officers, including a future director, flit in and out, and the army provided Special Branch with military intelligence officers. But for the most part, once they have got their bearings, Special Branch were doing it themselves. Scores of Chinese inspectors were examining documents and defectors. One in five Malayan Police officers was working for the Special Branch.

Putting together this formidable organisation was a remarkable achievement. Putting together this notable account is equally remarkable. In their anxiety to broadcast their surmises and speculations on the latest intelligence failure or success, it is astonishing nowadays how many purported experts just don’t know what they are talking about. This alone makes this book such a shining exception.

This is how the Special Branch and a Special Branch officer should work. By contrast, in another part of Johore, early on in the Emergency, an army raid on the huts of some luckless peasant farmers revealed a framed portrait. The flashlight was rather dim, but the conclusion immediate. ‘Mao Zedong. Definitely. Communists. Round them up.’ Actually, it was Sun Yat Sen. Sorry about that. And a pity Special Branch hadn’t been there.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreword by Anthony Short</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List of tables and charts</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Map of Malaya 1948</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter one</td>
<td>The nature of the Malayan Emergency</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter two</td>
<td>The Malayan Security Service and the evolution of the Special Branch</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter three</td>
<td>The Special Branch takes over (1948–49)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter four</td>
<td>The principles of intelligence collection</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter five</td>
<td>Agents of change (1949–52)</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter six</td>
<td>The rise of the Special Branch (1950–52): Sir William Jenkin</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter seven</td>
<td>The Special Branch and the Briggs Plan</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter eight</td>
<td>General Templer, Colonel Young and the Special Branch: the implementation of the Briggs Plan</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter nine</td>
<td>The Special Branch comes of age (1952–56)</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter ten</td>
<td>‘The weather has been horrible’—the Special Branch and communist communications: a case study</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter eleven</td>
<td>The Special Branch on the Malayan–Thai frontier (1948–60): a case study</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter twelve</td>
<td>Conclusion: the end of the Emergency (1957–60)</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations, acronyms and glossary 295
Note on transliteration 298
Bibliography 299
Index 319
List of tables and charts

Table 1  Communist terrorist, police, army and civilian casualties (1948–1960) page 6
Table 2  Gazetted officers, Malayan Security Service (1948) 33
Table 3  Evaluation of Special Branch information 84
Table 4  Location of MNLA regiments (1948–49) 90
Table 5  Police, army and civilian casualties (1948–49) 110
Table 6  Ethnic composition of Malayan police by ranks 114
Table 7  Rewards scale (1952) 135
Table 8  Police lieutenants employed on Special Branch duties at Malayan–Thai border posts, seaports and airports (1952) 137
Table 9  Communist terrorist contacts and casualties (15 June 1950–14 April 1951) 143
Table 10  Relative strengths of expatriate and Asian gazetted officers (1955 and 1956) 272
Table 11  Breakdown of communist terrorists in Peninsular Malaya (22 April 1959) 275
Table 12  Breakdown of communist terrorists as at 28 August 1959 and eliminations (killed, surrendered and captured) since June 1948 277
Table 13  Communist terrorists eliminated during ‘Operation Ginger’ (February 1958–April 1959) 280

Chart 1  Organisation of Malayan Police: Uniformed Branch, CID and Special Branch (1948–49) 62
Chart 2  Malayan Special Branch federal headquarters under the CID (1948–49) 63
| Chart 3 | Integration of the Communist Party of Malaya: political and military (MNLA) structure | 92 |
| Chart 4 | Federal Special Branch headquarters under Sir William Jenkin (1950–51) | 140 |
| Chart 5 | Outline of government structure under the Briggs Plan (1950–51) | 151 |
| Chart 6 | Interrelationship between the Special Branch, CID, Uniformed Branch and army under the Briggs Plan (1951) | 156 |
| Chart 7 | Map of Malaya (1956): locations of CT’s by state | 163 |
| Chart 8 | Federal Special Branch headquarters under GC Madoc (1952–54) | 198 |
| Chart 9 | The end of the Emergency: Federal Special Branch headquarters (1960) | 211 |
| Chart 10 | Map of the Malayan–Thai Frontier (1948–60) | 248 |
Map of Malaya 1948

Map©Monash Asia Institute
Acknowledgments

There are many people I would like to thank for helping me in so many ways in writing this book. The first and foremost is Professor Marika Vicziany, Director of Monash Asia Institute, Monash University. She encouraged me to finish what I had started researching and writing several years ago as a doctoral thesis, and sent a copy of it to General David Petraeus, the supreme American commander in Iraq, to see whether a study of the recent past might be of some use in the shaping of the intelligence war in Iraq. Her comments, criticisms and suggestions were of great value and without her advice this study could not have been completed. Dr Gale Dixon and A/Professor Kevin O’Connor, of the Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, too, gave me much of their valuable time and advice in the early stages of the project.

Dr Justin Corfield and his father Robin, Dr John Leary and Dr Tony Donaldson provided useful comments and encouragement over several years. At Monash Asia Institute, I would like to thank Juliet Yee, Administrative Officer, Emma Hegarty and Jenny Hall, MAI’s Publications Officers and, especially for help in solving computer problems, Anthony Mays, Sanjeev Veloo, and Dr Guibin Zhang.

There are many other friends and colleagues I would like to mention including: Helen Semadjio formerly head of the Asian Book Section of the Monash University Library; Marie Sexton, Principal Librarian, and Andrew Gosling of the Asia Collection, National Library of Australia; George Miller of the Southeast Asia Collection of the Australian National University Library (who kindly drew my attention to books that would have otherwise escaped my attention); and Flight Lieut. Anne-Marie Pope, RAAF, who supplied hard to get material from the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra. In Singapore I am indebted greatly to Ambassador K Kesavapany, Director ISEAS (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), who invited me to spend two months (May/June 2006) in Singapore as an ISEAS Visiting Research Fellow, thus providing me with ‘breathing space’ and
an opportunity to conduct further research connected with this study. Ms Ch’ng Kim See, Head, ISEAS Library, was extremely helpful in making available library resources and offering assistance in so many other ways. Mrs Triena Ong, Managing Editor and Head, ISEAS Publications, and her staff were also of great help.

I would especially like to thank all the persons who consented to providing me with information and gave up so much of their precious time in doing so, and even read parts of my study in which the information they provided appeared.

The following persons went out of their way to provide me with information that I might otherwise have missed: Jack Barlow, to whom this study is dedicated, a fellow Special Branch officer who served with me in Johore during one of the most turbulent periods of the Malayan Emergency and participated with me in many adventures, Douglas Weir, Dr GED Lewis (my former housemate ‘in another existence’ in Kuala Pilah, Malaysia), and Peter Elphick in the UK, Dr Leong Chee Woh and Dato’ Seri Yuen Yuet Leng in Kuala Lumpur, CC Chin of Singapore and Macau, Dr Yong Ching Fatt of Adelaide, as well as David Brent in Sydney and Ian Morson in Bangkok, who were both former comrades-in-arms during the Malayan Emergency. A/Professor Karl Hack, then of the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, was always helpful with his stimulating ideas. I am indebted also to the distinguished Australian foreign correspondent Denis Warner, CMG, OBE, for allowing me to consult his papers relating to Malaya, and the late Brigadier Ted Serong, DSO, OBE, (Australian Army, retired), with whom I spent many interesting hours conversing about tumultuous times in Malaya and South Vietnam.
The Malayan Emergency: a war that lasted 12 years

The Malayan Emergency was a name given by the British colonial government to the uprising of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) which lasted from 1948 to 1960. The objective of the CPM was to establish a Communist People’s Democratic Republic of Malaya. In all but name, it was a War remarkable for the fiercely-fought counterinsurgency operations fought in the Malayan jungle between the government security forces and the CPM’s guerrilla army, the Malayan National Liberation Army. The jungle fighting was waged concurrently with the political struggle for the hearts and minds of the Malayan people. Coming so soon after the end of the Second World War, the Emergency had wide-reaching effects and shook the country to its very foundations. Throughout the campaign, the Malayan Police played a vital part and, indeed, paid heavily for it as the police suffered more casualties (killed and wounded) than any of the other security forces.

The intelligence branch of the Malayan Police, the Special Branch, was recognised by the government as its supreme intelligence organisation. It was tasked with providing the government with political and security intelligence and made responsible, too, for providing the army with operational intelligence on which counterinsurgency operations could be mounted.

This is the story of the critical part played by the Special Branch in waging the intelligence war against the Communist Party of Malaya, which led to its defeat in July 1960 and the withdrawal of the remnants of its greatly-shattered forces into southern Thailand.