

Chapter 1

Lieutenant Colonel John Dalley and the MSS: Early Days

Who was Lieutenant Colonel John Douglas Dalley, Director of the Malayan Security Service (MSS), and what was the MSS?

Dalley was a senior pre-war officer of the Malayan Police who became Commander of Dalforce (named after him), an irregular guerrilla force that fought bravely against the Japanese when they invaded Malaya/Singapore in 1941, and later became Director MSS. An account of Dalforce will be given later in this study.

Dalley joined the Federated Malay States Police as a Cadet Assistant Superintendent of Police in November 1920 when he was twenty. That was the average age for Malayan/Singapore police gazetted officers to join the Malayan Police at that rank. After passing in due course the required Malayan Government examinations for gazetted police officers in police law, colonial regulations, Malayan Government regulations, weapon training and Malay language, Dalley was confirmed as an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) in 1924.¹

How did the Malayan Security Service come into existence? The pre-war Inspector General of the Straits Settlements Police, A.H. Dickinson, provided an official account of the genesis of the early MSS and how it was founded when he included it in a list of British pre-war intelligence organizations that he prepared after WWII for Lieutenant General Arthur Earnest Percival, the ill-fated commander of the Allied forces in Malaya and Singapore who surrendered Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Percival was then writing his dispatches at the War Office on the Malayan Campaign.² Dickinson reported that the MSS was created in September 1939 at the suggestion of MI5, the UK domestic intelligence agency, which then included British overseas colonies within its remit, with the support of the colonial Singapore and Malayan Governments, when it seemed likely that the separate Special Branches in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur would need restructuring and refining to prepare for the possibility of war with Japan. It was established on a pan-Malayan basis as a coordinating and reporting body for political and security intelligence. Its headquarters were at Robinson Road, Singapore, and it had a Malayan branch in Kuala Lumpur, with an MSS officer based in nearly all of the Malayan States and territories. As such, it formed part of what was referred to as the “Singapore Fortress Defence Scheme”, which had both military and civil sections. The former were commanded by a “Military Defence Officer” dealing with the armed forces, and the latter by Dickinson, Inspector General of the Straits Settlements Police, who was appointed as “Civil Defence Officer” in charge of police and intelligence matters, with responsibilities stretching from Singapore through Peninsular Malaya up to the northern Malaya/Siam border area, as well as the central control and registration of aliens. The main function of the registration of aliens was to exercise control over the increasing number of

Japanese visitors to Malaya and Singapore, many of whom were Japanese spies operating under cover as businessmen or other innocuous occupations.

Dickinson candidly admitted, however, that by the time of the Japanese invasion, MSS had not yet become fully operational. Although it existed, the sheer rapidity of the Japanese thrust into Malaya heading for Singapore prevented it from becoming as effective as had been intended.

When the British colonial government returned to Singapore after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the MSS returned with it as the pan-Malayan political intelligence service covering both Singapore and the Malayan Peninsula from its headquarters at Robinson Road, Singapore, adjacent to the Singapore Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID). It was quite separate, however, from the Singapore Police.

A Local Security Officer (LSO) was posted to each of the Malay States except for Kelantan, Terengganu, Melaka, and Pahang, as the MSS did not have sufficient staff to cover all the Malay States, and in these four states arrangements were made for the relevant police CID departments to cover intelligence matters for the MSS. It is not clear why these four territories were selected in this way, but it may well have been that they were not considered to be strongholds of Communist activity.

Be that as it may, it is often overlooked by Dalley's detractors that the MSS, even when it was fully effective (but not at "establishment" strength) in 1948, had only 9 LSOs in Peninsular Malaya and 3 in Singapore, against an approved establishment of 18 and 7, respectively. Dalley was, in fact, so concerned about the situation that he requested the Singapore and Malayan Police Commissioners to provide him with suitable staff to bring the MSS up to strength, but there is no evidence on record that he was able to receive any reinforcements in this way, probably

because the police were so absorbed with the investigation of criminal activities that they were unable to do so.³

The strength of the senior staff of the MSS and its approved establishment, in its early days on 1 May 1946 when the British returned to Singapore/Malaya after the Japanese surrender, was as follows:

<i>Actual Strength</i>	<i>Approved Establishment</i>
1 Director	1 Director
1 Dy. Director	1 Dy. Director
5 Asst. Directors	5 Asst. Directors
11 Local Security Officers	15 Local Security Officers
42 Asst. Local Security Officers	56 Asst. Local Security Officers
67 Enquiry Staff	81 Enquiry Staff
16 Translators	21 Translators ⁴

The imbalance between actual strength and approved establishment is obvious.

The MSS had the following Charter: “A Pan-Malayan Headquarters at present stationed in Singapore will obtain and collate all Security Intelligence emanating from MSS branches throughout the Peninsula and collect and collate information on subversive organisations and personalities in Malaya and Singapore.” There was no actual clarification of what action should be taken on intelligence obtained, but perhaps Dalley assumed this would be self-apparent by what he wrote in the following paragraphs:

It is emphasized that MSS should have no executive powers. Actual raids and arrests should be carried out by the regular police acting on advice of MSS, who would thus ensure coordinated action throughout.

- (a) Advise the two Governments as to the extent to which Internal Security is threatened by the activities of such organisations.
- (b) Maintain a Central Registry of Aliens.
- (c) The Defence Security Officers (MI5) would be in close liaison with MSS and be responsible for keeping SIFE (Security Intelligence Far East) [an outpost of MI5] and the Services informed of developments.
- (d) MSS would be staffed by: (i) gazetted officers seconded from the Malayan Union Police and Singapore Police (ii) Inspectors and Detectives seconded from the Malayan Union Police and Singapore Police (iii) Office staff, including translators, confidential stenographers, clerks, photographers and telephone operators, appointed directly by MSS at appropriate rates of remuneration having regard to the security class of work they had to handle.
- (e) The Regular Police should act on the advice of MSS, for the MSS has no executive powers.
- (f) The MSS should co-ordinate action throughout the country; the MSS would obtain and collate all Security Intelligence throughout Malaya. The Defence Security Officers are responsible for keeping SIFE and the Services informed of developments.

The *Malayan Establishment Staff List 1948*⁵ (pp. 90–91) provides the following further details of the MSS organization, including the names of its senior officers in 1948, just before it was closed down:

Gazetted Officers, Malayan Security Service 1948

<i>Name</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Location</i>
J.D. Dalley	Director, Pan-Malaya	Singapore
N.G. Morris	Actg. Dy. Director	Singapore
A.E.G. Blades	Asst. Director	Singapore
C.M.J. Kirke	Actg. Dy. Director	Kuala Lumpur
I.S. Wylie	Local Security Officer	Selangor
W. Elphinstone	Local Security Officer	Johor
D.N. Livingstone	Local Security Officer	Kedah/Perlis
H.T.B. Ryves	Local Security Officer	Perak
K.B. Larby	Local Security Officer	Penang
R.W. Quixley	Local Security Officer	Negri Sembilan
J.E. Fairbairn ⁶	Local Security Officer	Singapore
R.B. Corridon ⁷	Local Security Officer	Singapore
H.J. Woolnough	Local Security Officer	Singapore

Source: Malayan Establishment Staff List 1948, pp. 90–91.

The MSS at full strength was a medium-sized organization consisting of 13 British gazetted officers, 44 Asian inspectors, 2 qualified archivists — both of whom were based in Singapore in charge of the MSS Secret Registry — and locally employed clerical and general staff. For a short time in the early post-war period there was a cadre of British inspectors, too.

The clerical and general staff employed at MSS headquarters then was as follows: 8 confidential European lady⁸ secretaries; 1 financial assistant; 1 senior (Chinese) interpreter; 11 translators; 2 Japanese translators; 7 clerks and interpreters; 2 stenographers; 2 Malay writers; 1 linotype operator; 1 linotype mechanic; 10 Malay constables; 4 special constables (drivers); 4 peons; 5 general clerical service clerks (including 3 in the Chinese

Section); 4 “locally appointed” security officers (including Major J.E. Fairbairn); 12 assistant local security officers; 34 enquiry staff (including 3 sub-inspectors, 2 staff-sergeants, 5 sergeants and 22 corporals); and 3 motor transport drivers.⁹

The confidential European lady secretaries referred to above, who were cleared to handle classified correspondence, included the wife of Singapore’s Chief Secretary, Wilfred Blythe.¹⁰ Vacancies for junior staff such as confidential clerks, stenographers, translators, photographers, drivers and telephone operators were filled by qualified civilians at appropriate rates of remuneration having regard to the nature of their duties.

Dalley was assisted at pan-Malayan headquarters in Singapore by an Acting Deputy Director (Nigel G. Morris), and another Assistant Director (Alan E.G. Blades)¹¹ was in charge of operations in Singapore. C.M.J. Kirke, the Acting Deputy Director based in Kuala Lumpur, was responsible for MSS operations in Peninsular Malaya.

As will be described in due course, the MSS lasted until it was officially disbanded on the 23 August 1948, not long after the start of the first Malayan Emergency in June 1948, most likely due to the “turf war” which had developed between MSS and MI5, the British domestic intelligence service based in London, which had the ear of the Colonial Office and had opened in 1946 an outpost in Singapore known as SIFE (Security Intelligence Far East). The difference, however, was important, as the MSS was largely a “local” intelligence organization based in Singapore and reporting to the colonial authorities in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, whereas SIFE reported to MI5 in London, the centre of power of the British Empire, and other more widespread recipients.

Nothing very much is known about Dalley’s family life except that his wife Margaret Capel Layard (b. 8 December 1895) had

predeceased him. She is briefly mentioned in Mubin Sheppard's *Taman Budiman: Memoirs of an Unorthodox Civil Servant*.¹² It is known, too, that they had two daughters, but unfortunately all efforts to contact them after Dalley's death have been unsuccessful.¹³ Dalley's only son, Captain Peter John Layard Dalley, Royal Artillery, who was attached to the British Army Air Corps, was tragically killed in an air crash in February 1958 in Taiping during the Malayan Emergency after Dalley had retired on pension to the UK.¹⁴

In fact, it is often overlooked by Dalley's detractors that the MSS was seriously handicapped by having only 9 LSOs in Peninsular Malaya and 3 in Singapore against an approved establishment of 18 and 7, respectively, for the two territories, which would have seriously affected its operations.¹⁵ Dalley was, in fact, so concerned at one time about the shortage of qualified staff at his disposal that he approached the Singapore and Malayan Police Commissioners to provide him with suitable staff to bring the MSS up to strength, but there is no evidence on record to show that this was done.¹⁶

Under this system, how would intelligence obtained by the MSS be distributed? LSOs would provide copies of their intelligence reports to the Chief Police Officers of the states concerned in addition to MSS headquarters at Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. In turn, the Malayan and Singapore MSS headquarters would ensure that the Governors and Commissioners of Police in Malaya and Singapore were kept informed of the situation in their territories, while the overall pan-Malayan Director MSS in Singapore would coordinate information from both territories to prepare what he called his "comic cuts", the *Political Intelligence Journal (PIJ)*. The MI5 Defence Security Officers (DSOs) in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur for their part would maintain close liaison with the MSS Singapore and Kuala Lumpur headquarters. One of their main

functions was to ensure that the Services were kept informed of political and security matters.¹⁷

While it was reported that some of Dalley's detractors considered him to be "overambitious" and an "Empire builder", these adjectives would appear to be to some extent due to the inter-agency rivalry which soon developed between Dalley/MSS and the British intelligence service/MI5 under Sir Percy Sillitoe in London. As Sillitoe himself, however, was inflexibly determined to establish a branch in Singapore to be known as "SIFE (Security Intelligence Far East)" under Major Winterborn, it would appear the same adjectives that were used for Dalley could just as easily have been applied to Sillitoe.

Notes

1. ASPs were the equivalent of commissioned officers in the British Army.
2. See Report by A.H. Dickinson, CMG, OBE, former Inspector General of Police, Straits Settlements (1939–42) to the Colonial Office dated 12 January 1946, entitled "Organisations in Malaya concerned in the period September 1939–February 1942 with Political Intelligence and Security", BAM Collection, Royal Commonwealth Library, Cambridge University, pp. 1–4.

In his paper "MI5 and the Cold War in South-East Asia: Examining the Performance of Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE), 1946–1963" Alexander Shaw refers to MSS having been established in 1946, but in actual fact in its earliest form it was established by A.H. Dickinson, Inspector-General, Straits Settlements Police in September 1939.

In an article in the *Straits Times* (12 January 1946, p. 6), René H. de S. Onraet, who was Dickinson's predecessor as Inspector-General of the Straits Settlements Police (1936–39) and recalled from retirement by the Colonial Office after the Japanese surrender to advise the British Military Administration on the constitution

- and re-organization of the Singapore and Malayan Police Special Branches, also adverted to Dickinson forming the MSS in 1939 to amalgamate the work of the Singapore and Malayan Special Branches. See, too, “Second Supplement to the London Gazette of Friday, the 20th of February, 1948”, no. 38218, 26 February 1948. Section 1: Pre-War Preparations / Operational Efficiency of Units in Malaya, available at Britain at War <http://www.britain-at-war.org.uk/WW2/London_Gazette/Malaya_and_Netherlands_East_Indies/html/operational_efficiency_of_unit.htm> (accessed 28 October 2002).
3. See Roger Arditti and Philip H.J. Davies, “Rethinking the Rise and Fall”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 2 (2014): 292–316. See also Dalley’s letter dated 13 July 1948, after the Malayan Emergency had started, to the Commissioner-General’s Office Singapore: “...the MSS had to attempt to carry out the duties of MSS in spite of being desperately short of staff”.
 4. See Brian Stewart, *Smashing Terrorism in the Malayan Emergency: The Vital Contribution of the Police* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk, 2004), pp. 329–32, in which Dalley expressed his frustration at the futility of having an organization for the collection of political intelligence if that intelligence was not made use of. He considered that an Inspector General of Police was required for the whole of Malaya “whose primary duty would be Security Intelligence” (p. 331).
 5. *Malayan Establishment Staff List 1948* (Singapore: Government Records).
 6. J.E. Fairbairn was an LSO appointed directly to the MSS and had not served in the police previously. When the MSS was disbanded in June 1948 he was transferred to the Singapore SB as an acting Cadet Assistant Superintendent of Police after further training.
 7. Richard Corridon remained with the Singapore Special Branch for several years after independence before retiring to the UK, and was employed on intelligence assignments allocated to him by Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore (author’s notes).
 8. The words “European Lady” were part of the job title.
 9. See *Malayan Establishment Staff List 1948*.

10. W.L. Blythe (b. 1896) was the author of *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya — A Historical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). He joined the Malayan Civil Service (MCS) as a cadet in 1921. Unlike most MCS officers, who had an Oxford or Cambridge background, he was a graduate of Liverpool University.
11. Alan E.G. Blades (b. 1907) joined the Singapore Police as a Cadet Assistant Superintendent on 21 February 1930. He was sent to Amoy (Xiamen) in 1932 to study Hokkien, the predominant southern Chinese dialect spoken in Singapore, and in 1939 to Japan to study Japanese. He escaped to India during the Japanese invasion and worked in intelligence in New Delhi from 1942 to 1945. He was a member of the Far Eastern Bureau, Ministry of Information, New Delhi, as Head of the Japanese Unit, Translation and Broadcasting, dealing with long-term and long-range political warfare (see CO 825/38/8). He returned to Singapore after the war and was appointed Director of the Singapore Special Branch on 1 January 1953 and was the last Caucasian Singapore Commissioner of Police, from 19 September 1957 until Singapore's independence. He was the only Caucasian police officer in the Singapore/Malayan police allowed to maintain a neat, closely cropped, white beard, which was probably due to a skin ailment from which he suffered. When the author was in the Johor Special Branch (1949–50), he acted as liaison officer between Johor and the Singapore SB and he used to meet Blades regularly. See "Blades, AEG", in *Who's Who Malaysia 1963*, edited by J. Victor Morais (Kuala Lumpur: Solai, 1964), p. 38.
12. Mubin Sheppard, *Taman Budiman: Memoirs of an Unorthodox Civil Servant* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books [Asia], 1979).
13. Email to the author from Kenneth Foo dated 29 August 2017. See also Sheppard, *Taman Budiman*.
14. Information provided by Justin Corfield and Michael Thomson. See Cornfield and Thomson, eds., *The Corian 1998* (Corio, Victoria: Geelong Grammar School, 1999), p. 420.

15. Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–60* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975). Reprinted as *In Pursuit of Jungle Rats: The Communist Insurrection in Malaya* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000), p. 34.
16. Arditti and Davies, “Rethinking the Rise and Fall”.
17. Dalley handed a complete set of the MSS *PIJs* for the period 1946–48 to the Bodleian Library. See Stewart, *Smashing Terrorism*, p. 316.