

For 12 long years thousands upon thousands of supply packs have been floating down to patrols harrying terrorists deeper and deeper in the Malayan jungle. Behind the packs is a unique, closely-knit inter-Services team of Royal Air Force crews and men of the Royal Army Service Corps . . .

## THE DESPATCHERS

# WHO DICE WITH DEATH

**J**UNGLE covered ridges, wreathed in wisps of cloud, towered menacingly above the Royal Air Force *Valetta* as it flew low over the Malayan police fort.

The pilot's voice crackled over the air: "We have four packs for you this morning. Can you give me your weather conditions?" A pause, then the pilot again: "We will be with you in ten minutes."

At his side the navigator pressed a button and switch. A buzzer sounded in the body of the plane, a red light glowed and four despatchers of 55 Company, Royal Army Service Corps (Air Despatch), in their black track suits, began strapping parachutes to packs.

Tree tops, a bare 30 feet from the wing tip, hurtled past alarmingly as the *Valetta* flew low up the valley. A ridge loomed ahead, seemed to swoop on the *Valetta's* nose like a boiling green sea, then suddenly fell away and disappeared in a craze of revolving hills and sky as the aircraft

**OVER...**

### FAR EAST REPORT 1

This is the first of a series of features on the British Army in the Far East by **SOLDIER** Staff Writer **PETER N. WOOD** and Cameraman **FRANK TOMPSETT** who have been visiting Singapore, Malaya, Nepal, North Borneo and Hong Kong



An RAF plane flies in to drop supplies on a typical jungle clearing. The white dot near the aircraft's wing tip is a marker balloon. Parachutes and packs lie on the ground.

banked sharply in a 180-degree turn. The despatchers, on long-lead safety belts, snatched at hand-holds as the plane heeled over, then steadied themselves as, throttled back, it headed towards a tiny clearing in the jungle.

One sharp buzz from the navigator and the despatchers lifted up a board from which two packs of supplies slid out of the plane's open doorway. Lying flat on the floor and craning his head from the doorway the sergeant despatcher watched the packs, their parachutes open, glide down to the patch of green turf. "Packs away," he reported.

Twin engines roaring at full throttle, the plane lifted its nose and climbed sharply, straining, over the dark green hills directly ahead. Levelling out, it banked to start a second circuit and "double drop" the final two packs before quickly gathering clouds blocked the all-important "escape" route from Fort Brooke.

As the aircraft climbed away, Majayan police down at the fort collected their packs—rations of fresh meat and vegetables.

Valetta 484 had been airborne for an hour, taking off from 52 Squadron's base at Kuala Lumpur, climbing over the town's new multi-storeyed buildings and heading out above meandering rivers and mountain tracks to the cotton wool clouds hanging over the jungle.

From Fort Brooke the aircraft made for Zulu Two Bar. Despatcher Sergeant K. Robinson, on his 76th mission, bandaged a thumb cut while pushing away a pack. The three men in his team, Drivers Carrington, McDonald and Searle, rolled up parachute release tapes and dragged to the doorway the next batch of packs.

Thousands of feet below a second Valetta circled another jungle fort and, 20-odd miles beyond, red balloons floated up from the trees to mark Zulu Two Bar, a jungle dropping zone of the New Zealanders. The Valetta ran in, dropped its packs and climbed away, circling. Seven more times the plane circled, dived and zoomed while the parachutes settled in a Bisley

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



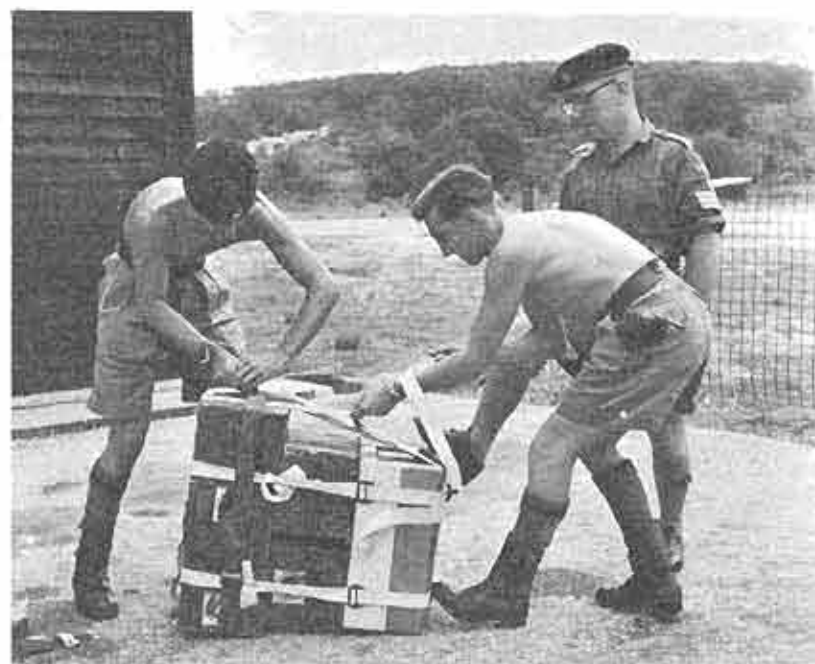
Gurkha soldiers must have their chickens "on the hoof" so they are dropped live in open crates. Here RASC despatchers transfer the birds from their delivery basket. These rations are going to the 2nd/6th Gurkha Rifles.

The only bottles dropped are those containing medical supplies, which need careful packing (left, below) and rum. Right, coconut oil, for Gurkha cooking, comes from NAAF1 in beer bottles and must be transferred to tins.



Fastening up packs for dropping the following day. The green straps (popular in the jungle as belts) hold the pack together; white straps are for attaching the parachute in the plane.

Right: Men of the RAOC air maintenance supply platoon harnessing a "packets easy" (185 lbs of bulk explosives for jungle clearance) held at half-hour readiness for rescue operations.



Below: Every pack has to be manhandled on to a lorry, taken to the airfield, unloaded and lifted into its proper position in the plane. In the hot Malayan sun this is a gruelling task.



## 30,000 TONS FROM THE AIR

A special supply pack floated down to the Malayan jungle on 8 December, 1959. It carried a letter stating that 55 Company, Royal Army Service Corps (Air Despatch), with 52 and 42 Squadrons, Royal Air Force, had despatched a total of 25,000 tons of supplies during the emergency. Today the total is about 30,000 tons.

A commemorative shield, promised in the letter, was claimed by Fort Chabal, a Malayan police outpost.

Another landmark, also in 1959, was the despatch (with a ten-dollar note gift, claimed by a Sapper) of the 3,000,000th 24-hour ration pack.

Outside its routine work of re-supply 55 Company has undertaken some unusual tasks, including the parachuting of a tractor to Royal Engineers at a police fort and drops to the Oxford University expedition in Sarawak.

A Royal Air Force doctor, medical team and equipment, were dropped in a stricken Borneo village, and on several occasions relief supplies have gone to Malayan kampungs marooned by floods.

Sarongs, lipstick, bras and cigars for aborigines; iced beer for New Zealanders; birthday cakes and Christmas fare... nothing has ever been too much trouble for 55 Company.

## SOLDIER to Soldier

THE War Minister, Mr. Christopher Soames, has been investigating recruiting problems and ways of keeping the Army in the public eye after the last National Serviceman has gone into the Army at the end of this year.

No other War Minister has been faced with quite the same problem. Over the past 21 years almost every family in Britain has been closely linked with the Services through conscription and every fit young man has had personal experience of one of them.

Soon, all that will change as the call-up ceases and, unless close contact between the public and the Services can be maintained, a generation will grow up unaware of the Services' needs and the excellent careers they offer.

How is this close contact to be achieved?

Obviously, the Army must keep pace with the best that industry and other professions can offer. Advertising, recruiting posters, public relations, exhibitions, public ceremonies when the Army shows itself off and careers masters at schools will all play an important part.

But much, too, will depend on the individual soldier. If by his enthusiasm and pride he can persuade his civilian friends that soldiering in the 20th century is still an honourable and worthwhile profession, he will achieve more than all the other recruiting devices put together.

Self advertisement, unlike self praise, is the highest recommendation.

☆ ☆ ☆

SOLDIERS of Britain's Strategic Reserve shivering on the bleak Yorkshire moors one day may find themselves 24 hours later in action under a tropical sun. And because of the rapid change of climate they may not be able to fight efficiently.

This problem is now being tackled by the War Office and the Medical Research Council. They have organised field trials in Aden in which three groups of soldiers will take part: one from Britain, un-acclimatised; another naturally acclimatised in Aden and a third artificially acclimatised by daily exposure to heat in climatic chambers.

If artificially acclimatised men can fight as well as those who have been naturally conditioned, the day may not be far distant when every soldier can be prepared for service in any part of the world at a moment's notice.



On a signal from the cockpit the despatchers lift up the board and a pack slides out into the slipstream. Note the long-lead belts and manifest. Track suits allow the despatchers to move freely and safely in the plane.

grouping on the tree-cleared dropping zone. And seven more times the closely-knit team of crew and despatchers diced with death.

Ten packs had gone down to the jungle patrol—a week's rations for 25 men of the 2nd New Zealand Regiment, seven Malaysians and 12 aborigine porters, five yards of "four-by-two," candles, soap, six pencils, two small combs, a map sheet, cigarette papers and a jar of hair cream . . .

Away again to the final task, but the cloud had closed in and the *Valetta* broke off to land at Ipoh for refuelling and to await an improvement in the weather. In an hour it was airborne again, heading for Tango Three.

Four runs here, each in a figure eight, with the sheer rock face of a spur slipping to starboard as the *Valetta* banked and climbed. "It's frightening at times, but it's exhilarating," said the pilot.

Out went the last packs—rations, including live chickens, Chinese cabbage and curry powder, and two pairs of size five hockey boots for 20 men of the 2nd/6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles.

Back to Kuala Lumpur and a perfect landing at the end of four hours' typical "milk round" flying. *Valetta* 484 was last in, but of the day's five tasks only this one had been completely success-

ful—no "candling" of parachutes, no packs brought back undropped and none landed off target.

Master Pilot Tommy Owen, a veteran of 4000 hours' flying, took off his helmet and mopped his forehead. Tersely he summed up the sortie: "It was bloody uncouth."

Five such tasks as these, dropping mixed packs to police and Commonwealth troops, represent a typical day's flying for the air despatchers of 55 Company, Royal Army Service Corps, and the crews of 52 Squadron, Royal Air Force, two units which have been inseparably and uniquely linked for the whole of the 12-year emergency in Malaya.

At first the demand for air supply was small but as patrols penetrated deeper into the jungle and police forts were built to harry the terrorists still further, the air drop increased to a monthly average of 650,000 lbs. But peak loads are now a memory and supply dropping has resolved itself into a more regular and more amenable pattern. As one despatcher put it: "We're working office hours now."

Nevertheless both crews and despatchers still work as hard at a task which has always provided its reward in the all-round acknowledgement of its efficiency and essentiality.

Company and Squadron still face, too, though happily to a much lesser extent, the inherent and unavoidable risks of low flying in the jungle hills. They have enjoyed life side-by-side—and fearlessly met death together.

From 1950 to 1955 a sergeant, two corporals and 14 drivers lost their lives. In 1956 a sergeant, four corporals and ten drivers—and their Royal Air Force crews—were killed. Fifteen despatcher casualties in that year represented a tenth of the Company's strength and totalled three more than the fighting casualties of all the other British, Commonwealth and Federation troops in Malaya.

It was from one of the four disasters in 1956 that Driver Thomas Lee dramatically re-appeared after being posted as killed. When a *Bristol* freighter crashed in the Cameron Highlands the three Royal Air Force crew, three despatchers and two Malayan Film Unit cameramen lost their lives. Driver Lee, the only survivor, wandered for 12 days alone in the jungle until he was found, 7000 yards from the wreckage, by an Infantry patrol.

Now, jungle survival courses and rigorous standards of training for pilots and aircrews have cut casualties. The Royal Air Force recognises that it takes six months' training before even an above average pilot can successfully drop supplies on a 30 yard wide strip or zone.

The despatchers—all volunteers—average ten sorties a month. For their air despatch wings they must complete 20 operational or 40 training flights, or a combined total of 40 flights, each operational task counting double.

During the peak period of the emergency 55 Company was organised in three platoons. Now one supply platoon does the work, in alternating sections. Ordnance items, rations and NAAFI supplies are packed by the platoon and early on the

dropping day taken by lorry to the airfield and loaded in the planes. A *Valetta* carries two tons of packs—and at every stage the packs are man-handled by the despatchers.

Each pack, of locally-made wooden cases, has to be fitted with green holding straps, white parachute straps and calico percussion heads filled with coconut fibre to break the fall.

The only bottles dropped are those used for rum and medical supplies. Jungle boots, hockey boots for the Gurkhas, and clothing, are dropped in sacks without parachutes.

Ordnance stores are provided by 21 Air Maintenance Supply Platoon, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, which lives with the Company and holds 400 items representing almost every section of a Base Ordnance Depot. The Platoon has supplied clothing, ammunition, equipment, vehicle spares, stationery and a host of odd items from outfits, fingerprint and lighters, petrol to soap, yellow, bars and chinagraph pencils.

One item, "packets easy" (bulk explosive, primers, fuses and detonators) is held on half-hour readiness for dropping to jungle rescue teams to clear a landing strip for helicopters.

For over a year now 55 Company has been training the Armed Forces Maintenance Corps of the Malay Federation Army in the art of air supply—already many Malaysians have earned their despatch wings—with a view to the Royal Malayan Air Force and Malayan despatchers taking over part of the supply commitment. The jungle area and police forts on the Thailand border will continue to be the responsibility of 55 Company.

Officially, the emergency has ended, but 55 Company, Royal Army Service Corps (Air Despatch), is still very much in business—as it has been for 12 long and hard years.

**55 COMPANY, Royal Army Service Corps (Air Despatch), was formed in 1944 as 799 Company. The despatchers supplied resistance forces on the Continent, took part in the Falaise Gap operations, flying in Dakotas (the Dakota is still the emblem of the "Dak and Dagger Boys"), and suffered heavy losses at Arnhem.**

In May, 1945, the Company went to Borneo operating with Fourteenth Army, then to Java and Batavia. After working as a transport unit during the evacuation of British troops from Burma, the Company re-trained in Singapore, became 55 Company and moved to Kuala Lumpur.

A detachment based on Changi Royal Air Force Station, Singapore, trains units in air portability and undertakes supply tasks in Burma.