



MEMORIES OF LIMBANG

December 1962

Lima Company, 42 Commando, Royal Marines

Sergeant Bob Rawlinson M , RM

These notes were compiled in 2012. Sadly Bob Rawlinson died shortly afterwards. He had been retired from the Corps for many years and worked as a Carer, looking after children with disturbed backgrounds in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

Bob was one of nature's gentlemen and is sadly missed.

Sergeant Rawlinson was awarded the Military Medal for his part in the action at Limbang.

At about 0300 hours in the early morning of Wednesday 12th December 1962, the engines of two requisitioned landing craft reduced revolutions and changed course, placing their bow doors into the river bank. The harboured up alongside each other , just a couple of miles from their objective, the small town of Limbang, in Sarawak, North Borneo. In the blacked out cabin of the lead craft Captain Jeremy Moore RM gave his plan of attack to rescue the hostages to Lieutenant Davis and the Section Commanders of 5 Troop: 4, 5 and 6 Sections, each containing 8 Marines, plus HQ Section, numbering 30 Marines in total.

The atmosphere was very tense, but the orders were clear. The aim was to rescue some eleven Hostages, thought to be held in the Police Station. It was believed that the rebels proposed to execute the hostages later that morning.

My Section (No.5) was given the task of carrying out a frontal assault along the 25 yard jetty to the Police Station and liberate the hostages.

Corporal Bill Lester's 4 Section was to engage the rebels and make their way to the rear of the Police Station as a Cut Off Group, with Sergeant McFarlane's 6 Section giving support, as required.

Intelligence reports had indicated the opposition to be approximately 40 rebels. Our two craft moved out into the river just before first light. The mist over the river gave us some cover. Eventually the lights of Limbang came into view and the alarm was raised; it was like an eruption in an ant's nest. What appeared to be hundreds of armed rebels were running in different directions, taking cover in houses and monsoon drains. Someone pulled the generator switch and the town was plunged into semi-darkness.

Our lighter was about 200 yards in the lead and approaching the jetty when an incoming fusillade of small arms fire burst onto our craft with a deafening noise. I was unable to hear myself shouting orders to my Section, knelt next to me. At last there came a lull and we began to return fire.

At this point it became obvious that we were heading past the jetty – the bridge had taken incoming fire and the coxswain had been wounded. For a short while the craft ploughed ahead with no-one at the wheel, the Lieutenant Willis heaved the wheel over, bringing the bows to rest against an overhanging tree.

At this point it became obvious that we had casualties: Lieutenant Paddy Davis, the Troop Commander, Marine Powell and Marine Kierans, both members of my, 5, Section.

Corporal Bill Lester's 4 Section was first over the side, followed by my now depleted 5 Section. With bayonets fixed we attacked and cleared the rebels from their prepared positions and then moved towards the Police Station.

On the second craft Marine Daker's Vickers machine gun was putting down welcome covering fire directed at the Police Station. Unknown to us, the rebel leader, Salleh bin Sambas, a former policeman, who was trained to operate a Bren gun, was firing a captured Police Bren from the roof of the Police Station and causing much damage. The rebels had also captured some automatic Armalite rifles from the Police and were using them against us.

Counterfire from the Vickers silenced the Bren but my section was engaged by incoming fire from both the edge of the jungle behind some houses and from a house close to our position.

At this moment I was hit by an incoming round which struck the tip of a clip of five rounds within a bandolier across my chest, followed by a heavy gauge lead ball which passed through my thick webbing belt into my lower back, luckily without serious injury, thanks to that belt.

Shortly after exchanging fire with both positions, we approached the Police Station to find 4 and 5 Troops engaging the rebels inside.

During the Assault phase, the current had moved our craft off the bank and it had drifted some distance down stream before Lieutenant Willis regained control of the craft. He landed 6 Troop past the hospital, together with Captain Moore and his tactical HQ.

Sergeant McFarlane took 6 Troop straight towards the hospital from where he could hear the hostages shouting and singing to attract our attention. Dick Morris, the District Officer and senior hostage, advised that the rebels were withdrawing into the jungle behind the hospital. 6 Troop moved to follow them and immediately made contact with heavy fire from shotguns, that killed Sergeant McFarlane and Marines Formay and Jennings, who at that time were helping the wounded Marine Caress into shelter.

Corporal Jones, the Section 2 I/C, organised a counter attack and the rebels fled.



An NCO of the Royal Marines, wearing Jungle Green in Borneo 1965

From a painting by Frank Scott, now in the Royal United Service Institute, London.

Cover illustration for "The Royal Marines" by Major General J.L Moulton, 1972

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Warrant Officer Brian Downey

Brian was an 18 year old Marine Rifleman at Limbang, trained as a Bren Gunner.

He has grouped his memories as a series of Spot Points.

Brian completed his career with the Royal Marines as Company Sergeant Major at the Commando Training School.

- **Prior to departure we knew that we would have no support**

The battle would be fought and won with what we carried on our backs, consequently we sacrificed rations for ammunition.

As a Bren Gunner in 1 Section, 4 Troop, L Company, I carried 25 Bren magazines, with 28 rounds per magazine, plus 800 rounds in bandoliers, Six mark 36 Grenades and six mark 80 (white phosphorous) Grenades. My no 2 (Loading Number) carried a similar load.

- **Once Contact was made, we began taking heavy incoming fire**

As I was engaging targets, I heard a tapping sound behind me, going up and down the firing line along the side of the craft. Lieutenant Peter (Soapy) Waters RM, Company 2 I/C, had been wounded in the leg on the bridge of the craft and was using a broom as a crutch. Beside him was Sergeant Baron Wakeling, i/c the Heavy Weapons section, directing the fire of the two Vickers Medium Machine Guns as if he was on a firing range.

Both were totally oblivious to the incoming fire.

As our craft approached the bank the order was given "Royal Marines, Prepare to Assault, Fix Bayonets !".

5 Troop was in trouble and we were coming to assist. Second Lieutenant Targett-Adams RM ordered " Royal Marines, Follow me !".

We disembarked over the side into the river, knee-deep in mud, for some with water up to their necks or beyond. Than God for the Royal Marines battle swimming test !

- **We crossed a track and re-organised in the monsoon drain on the other side**

5 Troop left, 4 Troop right. 5 Troop were to advance north towards towards the Police Station. 4 Troop to swing right and clear the area towards the mosque and the hospital. Sergeant Russell, our Troop Sergeant shouted "Straight at them 4 Troop !" and we followed.

- **This is where the training and tactics hammered into us by J.J. Moore really paid off**

We were supremely confident; everybody knew exactly what to do and did it. We trusted each other and worked for each other. Speed, skill and a ruthless determination were our hall-marks.

The quality of our N.C.O's was of the highest standard. Sergeant Russell and Sergeant Finch were superb, as were the Section Commanders.

- **As we fought through, Marine Rod Taylor, a Bren Gunner with 5 Troop, was seen to be engaging the enemy in spite of being wounded in both legs.**

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Sergeant Bickford of 5 Troop appeared. He picked up Rod in a fireman's lift ran through enemy fire to where SBA Terry Clarke had set up a First Aid Post. This was an example of bravery and leadership which inspired us. We gave him a thunderous cheer, as we provided covering fire. Sergeant Bickford dropped Rod off, then calmly ran back through the fire to 5 Troop.

Ginger Underwood, the smallest man in the Company, was shielding a wounded Marine with his body and engaging the enemy, despite having a wound in his chin.

4 and 6 Troops fought past 5 Troop and went firm on the edge of the bazaar

- **At this point a runner arrived from the CSM, ordering me to the hospital as the building was under heavy attack from a force of rebels hiding in the jungle**

With the CSM, Sergeant Major Cyril Scoins, acting as my Loading Number and Spotter, the enemy positions were neutralised. I went into the hospital and saw our dead laid out. The wounded were being treated by the Company Medic, Sick Berth Attendant Terry Clarke; a great guy. A sailor who spent his whole service attached to the Royal Marines.

- **I returned to the Troop and our next task was to clear the Bazaar**

During this time we were under constant fire from enemy strongpoints in the Bazaar. The market complex was like a rabbit warren, so it was decided to enter through the roofs and fight our way down, drawing the enemy into our killing ground.

There was a slight problem, as the roofs consisted of old corrugated iron sheets, not capable of holding the weight of heavily-laden Royal Marines.

- **I was on the apex, breaking through the roof, when there was an almighty crash**

I was just in time to see Roy Clarke, the Troop Signaller, disappear through the roof. He went through three of the attap floors and was badly injured by the fall, as were Marines Smith and Whitchurch.

- **At this time a speedboat loaded with armed rebels was noticed heading upriver at a rate of knots**

One of the Vickers opened up and we could see the tracer tracking up to the craft. It was caught in the cone of fire, which resulted in the speedboat spinning over and over as the rounds hit it. Nothing surfaced; a brilliant piece of machine gunning.

Shortly after I found a young couple dead in a building I was searching.

By mid-morning (10.00 hours, perhaps) AE Troop and Mortar Troop arrived as reinforcements.

We continued house clearing until about 16.00 hours, when Captain Moore decided to go firm for the night. 4 Troop's perimeter was the first East-West cross street. My Bren was at the point covering the road heading South east. Throughout the night sporadic fire was sent into the Company area but we took no casualties.

- **Next morning we continued to clear the bazaar until it was all in our hands**

During the afternoon, K Company arrived and took over perimeter defence.

After almost 96 hours without sleep and 48 hours without food, Lima Company took a well-deserved rest.

Little did we know that this was just the start of almost four years of Confrontation and many of us would return to Borneo again, some several times.

Subsequently Lima Company took the title Limbang Company and "Limbang" became a Unit and Company Battle Honour.

When the Company is in Britain, the anniversary of the engagement is commemorated with an All Ranks Mess Dinner at their base in Bickleigh, Devon. Sailors from HM Ships FISKERTON and CHAWTON, who crewed the landing craft, are invited to attend.

For their parts in the action, Captain Moore was awarded a bar to the Military Cross he had previously won in Malaya and Corporals Bob Rawlinson and Bill Lester were awarded the Military Medal.