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Public Enemy Number One

Peter Edwards

The visit of one of our former enemies allows us to travel back in time to the beginnings of the Cold War, fifty years ago.



He looks like a pleasant and unassuming Chinese businessman, the sort of person you would happily do business with in Singapore or Hong Kong. But fifty years ago to many Australians he was Public Enemy Number One. Today he is known as “Mr Ong”, but in the 1940s and 1950s he was Chin Peng, leader of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) during the Malayan Emergency.

The Emergency began in 1948, when MCP guerrillas began a violent campaign to overthrow British rule in Malaya. The party’s military wing had its origins in the wartime resistance movement against the Japanese, but changed its name in 1949 to the Malayan Races Liberation Army. The British campaign against the guerrillas aimed to reduce their support base by improving conditions for the Chinese community, while at the same time systematically attacking their bases and operations in each part of Malaya. It was a policy of patience, and the Emergency was not declared over until 1960.

Australia contributed RAAF squadrons (flying Lincolns, Dakotas, and later Canberras) from 1950, and ground troops in the later part of the Emergency, from 1955 till its end. Fifty-one Australian



servicemen were killed, only 15 of them as a direct result of enemy action, however.

Chin Peng was born in October 1924 to a middle-class family in the Malayan state of Perak. As a teenager studying in Chinese-language schools in the British colony, Chin Peng was fired by patriotism – not for Malaya but for China, which was fighting off a ruthless invasion by Japan. Chin Peng wanted to study at a military academy in China, and then fight for the Chinese Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-Shek, but his parents refused him permission. So he stayed in Malaya, where

he became a proponent of communism, which increasingly appeared to offer the most effective opposition to the Japanese in China.

In 1940 he joined the MCP, which was overwhelmingly Chinese in ethnic origin, and by December 1941, when the Japanese attacked Malaya, he was already a member of the party's Perak State Executive Committee. During the war, as the MCP cooperated with the British forces operating against the Japanese, Chin Peng advanced rapidly in the party hierarchy. After the war, with Malaya in political and economic turmoil, the Secretary-General of the MCP, Lai Tek, disappeared with most of the party's funds. Only then did the party's members discover that their esteemed leader had for years been betraying them to both the British and the Japanese. The young Chin Peng, aged just 22, became the party's new Secretary-General in 1947. Almost immediately the party turned towards a policy of "armed struggle" and

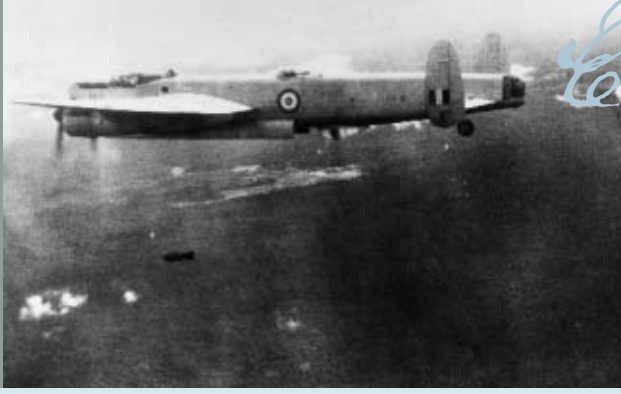
Opposite (inset): An identification portrait of a Chinese communist terrorist. This print was one of a series displayed in 28 Brigade Headquarters in the hope that Commonwealth troops might recognise the insurgents in the course of conducting routine activities. (AWM P1549/07)

Opposite (left): "Public Enemy Number One": Chin Peng, now known as "Mr Ong", led the Malayan Communist Party during the Emergency and agreed to end the communists' commitment to armed struggle only in 1989. This photograph was taken at the Australian National University in early 1999, during a two-day workshop on the Malayan Emergency. (Courtesy Darren Boyd, Coombs Photography)

This page (left): Troops of 2 RAR approach the jungle during an eight-day patrol in the Perak area in 1965. (AWM HOB/480/MC)

Below: The RAAF crew of a Lincoln bomber leave their aircraft after returning from a mission over Malaya sometime in the late 1950s. (AWM MAL1030)





The Malayan Emergency

Above: Two 500-pound bombs can be seen falling towards the Malayan jungle in this photograph of a Lincoln bomber on a mission against communist insurgents. (AWM P1616.003)

in June 1948 the British colonial authorities declared a state of emergency. Twelve years of guerrilla conflict followed.

At the end of the Emergency in 1960, the remaining communist guerrillas retreated to the jungles on the Thai-Malayan border. Chin Peng, however, spent most of the next four decades in Beijing. Finally, in 1989, he signed an accord with the Thai and Malaysian governments, ending the communists' commitment to armed struggle against Malaysia. This has left him free to travel (but not to return to Malaysia). Recently he spent three months at the Australian National University in Canberra, working on his memoirs. It was during this period that I was able to meet him.

An article in an Australian newspaper recently referred to "the fanatical Chin Peng". It was hard to reconcile this description with the softly spoken, conservatively dressed Mr Ong who engaged the historians who met him in Canberra in carefully worded and good-humoured discussions. On the other hand, he showed an astonishing ability to recall details of the Malayan Emergency with great apparent accuracy.

At the time of the Emergency, the Australians believed that, with their Pacific war experience, they had a lot they could teach the British about jungle warfare. Mr Ong did not particularly support this view, as he remembered his British, Australian and New Zealand adversaries as being of similar quality. The troops he particularly admired for their toughness and skill were the Fijians and the Maoris of the New Zealand contingent.

Australian airmen might have drawn greater comfort from his recollections. During and after the Emergency, there was considerable controversy over the effectiveness of using bombers against small groups of guerrillas in the jungle. Mr Ong vividly recalled one occasion, soon after the guerrillas had been mourning the death of Stalin in March 1953. The RAAF's Lincoln bombers attacked the camp in the Cameron Highlands where the headquarters were

located, and Chin Peng himself had a narrow escape: several others in his party were killed or injured. His vivid memory of the incident suggests that the use of bombers was effective, both in disrupting the MCP's movements and in disturbing their morale. By this time British and Australian bombers were directing their attacks against known camps rather than dropping bombs over large tracts of jungle in the general hope of disrupting the MCP-led guerrillas.

Mr Ong also recalled a meeting with the secretary of the Australian Communist Party, Lawrence Sharkey, in March 1948, about three months before the start of the Emergency. Historians have long argued over whether Sharkey used this meeting to convey instructions from the leaders of the international communist movement to the MCP to take up arms. Mr Ong denied this, saying that he and his colleagues were well aware that communist parties were taking a harder line against the West in the Cold War, but that the question of whether to fight politically or militarily was left to the individual parties.

At the same time, Mr Ong made a surprising assertion. When the MCP fomented strikes in Malaya's valuable rubber plantations and tin mines, the employers countered by using strikebreakers. Chin Peng had asked Sharkey for his advice on whether they should use violence against the strikebreakers, and was told that violence was an acceptable tactic. Indeed, Sharkey told the Malayan communists, in extreme cases Australian communists would "get rid of" strikebreakers, especially in mining or other remote areas. Now Sharkey was known for his tendency to exaggerate (in 1949 he was imprisoned for sedition for saying that, if Soviet troops came to Australia in pursuit of an aggressor, they would be welcomed by the Australian working class), and there is certainly no evidence that Australian communists did in fact kill strikebreakers in the late 1940s. Nevertheless, the story suggests that an Australian communist was partly responsible for the increase in the violence associated with the strikes in Malaya in 1948, which directly contributed to the declaration of the Emergency.

The quiet restraint of Mr Ong's demeanour, as he recalled these violent events of half a century ago, only underlined the changes between the late 1940s and the late 1990s, which make it difficult for Australians today to recapture the atmosphere - and the bitter divisions - of the early Cold War.

Dr Peter Edwards is the Official Historian of Australia's involvement in south-east Asian conflicts.