

Comber – a special guy indeed

BY CHRISTINA KOH

IPOH: He looks like a typical charming English gentleman but do not let appearances fool you.

Dr Leon Comber is a former Special Branch officer in the Malayan police force during the height of the Emergency and he can speak Cantonese and Mandarin fluently.

He also surprises people with his grasp of Malay, Hindi and French. His linguistic talent served him well during the Malayan communist insurgency from 1948 to 1960.

"After I came to Malaya in 1945 at the age of 24, I started learning Malay while stationed in Kelantan. Then I became interested in Chinese and got myself an instructor," he said.

Dr Comber, now a Research Fellow at the Monash Asia Institute of Monash University in Australia, was here on Thursday to give a talk on the role of the Special Branch during the Emergency.

The talk was arranged by the Perak Academy.

"Every once in a while, Special Branch officers also went for training courses in

basic Cantonese and Hokkien, which were widely spoken in Malaya," said the octogenarian.

Dr Comber, who is also a Melbourne-based book publisher, said that not many people remembered the vital role played by local intelligence officers, especially the Special Branch, in those crucial years.

"Without these intelligence officers and their Chinese language skills, and local knowledge of background, culture and history, the struggle would have gone on longer," he said.

He said Malaysians owed a lot to people like former Perak police chief Datuk Seri Yuen Yuet Leng and retired Special Branch deputy director of operations Dr Leong Chee Woh.

The England-born Dr Comber has led a colourful life.

He pursued a law degree in London but halfway through his studies, World War Two broke out, prompting him to join the military.

At the age of 20, he joined the Indian Army where he picked up Hindi and went on to serve in Siam and Burma.

"When the war ended, I thought to myself, 'How can I go back to such a drab life and



INTEL VETERANS: Dr Leong (left) chatting with Dr Comber while Yuen (second from left) looks on at the Ipoh hotel where the talk was held on Thursday.

start studying all over again in England," he said.

He stayed on in the Indian Army and later applied for the colonial police service which brought him to Malaya.

When he was based in Johor, one of the Special Branch's most successful operations in-

volved the surrender of Hor Lung, reputedly the communist party's highest-ranking member in the southern region.

Hor Lung then became what Dr Comber described as an "unrivalled source of information" because of his willingness to divulge the location of

camp, ammunition and supply dumps.

"To this day, I still find it very hard to understand these men who were willing to trade information and lead our patrols in attacking and killing their comrades whom they have known for years," he said.

He said in the four months which followed his surrender, Hor Lung persuaded 160 fellow guerillas to turn themselves in.

"Actually, he bluffed them by telling them that Chin Peng had given orders for a ceasefire."

Although Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman said Hor Lung should by right be hanged, he in fact received an enormous reward and was allowed to go free.

Over the decades, Dr Comber has written and co-authored books on the Chinese in Malaya including on aspects such as secret societies, festivals, ancestral worship and superstitions.

The Singapore Heritage Society plans to compile these books into a single volume for publication next year.

The Institute of South-East Asian Studies of Singapore also aims to publish his doctoral thesis entitled *Malaya's Secret Police 1945-1960: The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency*.

Dr Comber married prominent novelist Han Suyin in 1952 but they were later divorced. He now lives with his second wife, a Japanese, in Melbourne, and they have a daughter.

Six hurt after car plunges into ravine

PADANG BESAR: Six family members cheated death when the car they were travelling in plunged into a 3m-deep ravine after hitting a tree at Km11 at the Malaysian-Thai border in Wang Kelian, near here.

The six, aged between two and 61, were on their way from Kampung Kolam, near here, to a day market in Wang Kelian to open their stall when the incident occurred at

8.30am yesterday.

Padang Besar deputy OCPD Deputy Supt Che Man Md Dros said the driver, Zakaria Abdul Rani, in his 30s, was believed to have lost control of his car before plunging into the ravine, located 2km from the market.

He said Mohd Khairun Mohd Noor, in his 20s, and his father Mohd Noor Junod, 61, sustained serious head, hand and leg injuries while Zakaria, his

wife Yaradah Husin, 32, and their two children Fauzi Mat Ariffin, 11 and Yasmin Zakaria, two, sustained minor injuries.

It is learnt that Zakaria, Mohd Khairun and Mohd Noor were trapped in the car for an hour before the Padang Besar Fire and Rescue department firemen extricated them. All are warded the Tuanku Fauziah Hospital in Kangar.



HAZY SKY: Visitors enjoying a day out at the Esplanade yesterday afternoon.

Dept: It's hazier in the morning

PENANG: The haze condition in the northern region is bad in the morning compared to the later part of the day due to winds blowing from the hot spot areas.

Meteorological Services Department (Bayan Lepas) director S. Santhira Segaran said mornings were hazier because of the south-west monsoon winds, which bring in a mix of

mist and haze, and that this condition improved by evening.

"It is difficult to forecast how long these hot spots will be around but the south-west winds are expected to last until September," he said.

Santhira said although there was a light shower yesterday morning, it had not done much to clear the haze.

Visibility on the island was at 7km

as at 11am and 4km in Butterworth.

"Generally, the haze condition is not alarming," he said.

State Department of Environment acting director Marzuki Mokhtar said there were no reported incidents of open burning, adding that "DOE officers will be stepping up on their rounds until the haze condition improve."



COOKING ENTHUSIASTS: Visitors signing up for a year's subscription of *Flavours*.

Enjoy free goodies by subscribing to *Flavours*

PENANG: *Flavours* magazine subscribers, make sure you stop by the *Flavours* booth when you visit the iFoodex 2006.

Today is your last chance to receive a tasteful black *Flavours* gift tote bag with goodies worth RM40 for free when you sign up for a year's subscription of the bi-monthly magazine.

Inside the bag will be two bars of Vochele cooking chocolates, a one-litre pack of Vegood Strawberry Beat, one non-woven Ayam Brand bag, one bottle of Maggi Thai Chilli Sauce, one packet of Maggi Black Pepper Chicken Mix and one packet of Maggi Mini Sneak.

Subscription is RM53 (inclusive of postage within Malaysia) for six issues. Readers who purchase just one *Flavours* magazine will get a one-litre pack of Vegood Strawberry Beat free.

Avid *Flavours* reader Ong Shu Yi, 19, immediately got her mother to subscribe when they passed by the booth.

"I like the many recipes inside," said Ong, who has been buying the magazine for the past three years as she loves baking and cooking.

Look out also for sous chef Ismail Ibrahim from Sunway Hotel who will demonstrate how to cook two tantalizing dishes during the expo - five-spice fragrant prawns and braised snapper with garlic and kaffir lime.

There will be two cooking demonstrations during which there will also be a fruit-carving demonstration - at noon and 5pm.

Among the women carefully taking notes during the demonstration was schoolteacher Goh Lay Yong, 50.

"It's easier to learn new recipes by watching demonstrations as cookbook instructions are sometimes hard to follow," said Goh.

She learnt from chef Ismail that the pungent kaffir lime, or *limau purut*, went well with Shaoxing wine (Chinese cooking wine) when cooking braised snapper.

Sponsors for the *Flavours* booth are Intrenasionale, Sunway Hotel, Vegood, Vochele and Maggi.

iFoodex 2006, which is held at the Penang International Sports Arena (Pisa) from 10am to 6pm, ends today.