

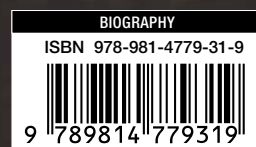
Best known for his role in helping to establish the Singapore Armed Forces Commando Formation and as the unit's first commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Clarence Tan was born on his family's rubber plantation, just ten months before the Japanese invasion of British Malaya in 1941. As with those of his generation, his life spans the dramatic, often tumultuous years of Singapore's evolution from a primarily rural British colony to the world class cosmopolis it is today.

From leading a platoon during racial riots in Singapore to searching for communist insurgents and Indonesian infiltrators in the jungles of Malaysia during the Emergency and the Confrontation, LTC (Rtd) Tan was part of both the British and Malaysian armies before becoming a pioneer officer in Singapore's defence force.

For as surely as there are makers of history, there are those too who are made by history. *Always A Commando* is at once a compelling chronicle of one man's life from kampong kid to red beret and a rich evocation of the country he served through turbulent and uncertain times.

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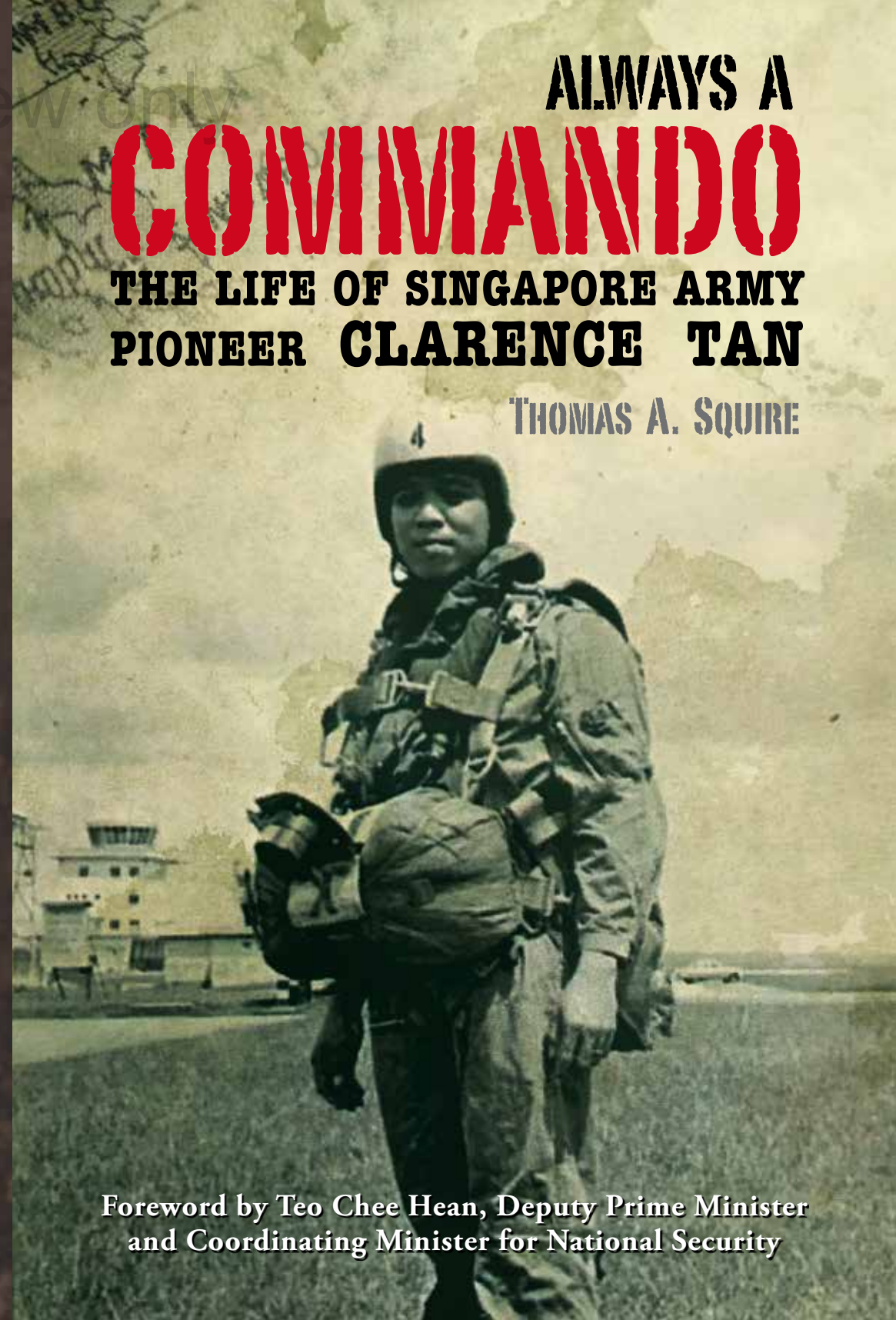
ALWAYS A  
COMMANDO

THOMAS A. SQUIRE

# ALWAYS A COMMANDO

## THE LIFE OF SINGAPORE ARMY PIONEER CLARENCE TAN

THOMAS A. SQUIRE



Foreword by Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister  
and Coordinating Minister for National Security

For Review only

**ALWAYS A  
COMMANDO**

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Clarence meets then-President Wee Kim Wee during a visit to the commando camp in 1986 or 1987.

**ALWAYS A  
COMMANDO  
THE LIFE OF SINGAPORE ARMY  
PIONEER CLARENCE TAN**

**THOMAS A. SQUIRE**

# For Review only

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For Emma and Luke, the raisons d'être

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## **Foreword**

“Always A Commando” is a biography of one of Singapore’s pioneer army officers, LTC (Retired) Clarence Tan. Clarence’s son-in-law, Thomas Squire, has written this as a story for his children, about their grandfather’s life journey.

Clarence’s experience reflects that of our pioneer generation. They had come from all walks of life, and together, helped to lay the foundation for a strong, united and harmonious Singapore.

Clarence joined the Singapore Volunteer Corps in 1959 and contributed to our defence and security during the Malayan Emergency fighting the Communists. He and his comrades from the First Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment were also deployed during Konfrontasi to an island off the east coast of Borneo.

But Clarence is best remembered for his role in developing our Commandos. As the first commanding officer of the Commandos in the newly-formed Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), Clarence worked closely with his colleagues to train new recruits and build a capable and cohesive formation, who wear their distinctive red berets and serve proudly, “For Honour and Glory”. He was a legend in his own time, identified by all in the SAF with the Commandos. He had seen action in the turbulent times of the 1960s and 70s, and was called upon for the Laju hijack incident.

I came to know Clarence as a fellow officer and colleague in the SAF, and his wife Judy. Though Clarence was several years my senior in the service, he was always willing to offer his views, ideas and advice in a practical, direct and useful way, based on his actual operational

# For Review only

experience and closeness to his men and the ground. When he served as our Defence Adviser in Canberra, I spent two days with him, just the two of us, as he drove us from Sydney to Nowra, and then on to Canberra as we visited several defence installations. Several of the stories in this book have a familiar ring to them, as he reminisced about his experiences over those two days. We also spent quite a lot of that time going through all the different things that he had eaten and how to prepare them – told with all seriousness but also with a sense of humour and self-deprecation that is Clarence.

The stories in this book are not only those of a Singapore army pioneer, but also reflect the aspirations of his fellow pioneer generation for Singapore. It was a delight to meet Clarence, Judy and the children and grandchildren as this book became ready for publication. I hope that these anecdotes will inspire his grandchildren Emma and Luke, and more youths to contribute to society and build a better future for all Singaporeans.

**Teo Chee Hean**

Deputy Prime Minister  
and Coordinating Minister for National Security

## **A Letter (and a few disclaimers)**

Dear Emma and Luke,

It was August 1998 when I first met Kong Kong, your maternal grandfather. Mummy had just finished her posting to Wellington and I had joined her on her return to Singapore. We were not yet married so at that stage I simply addressed him as Uncle Clarence. Kong Kong and Mama were kind enough to let me stay under their roof when I first arrived, so from the moment I stepped off our flight from New Zealand I was immersed into a part of Singapore culture.

Some of the most prominent memories of my early days in Singapore were the meals we all shared at their house in Kembangan. Kong Kong, Mama, Ku Ku Mel, and Mummy and I. The food was all very exotic for me, with much that I had never seen before. All of it delicious – though it did take me a while to appreciate bittergourd – and all washed down with copious amounts of water, thanks to the hot, humid weather and all those spices.

After many of these meals, I often found myself remaining at the dinner table for long periods of time, listening to Kong Kong tell me stories of his life: his days growing up as a child, his days at school, his days in the army. He spoke of his own Peranakan culture, his experiences interacting with the other cultures of Singapore, and of many of the changes that Singapore had gone through in his time – politically, socially, and geographically. I always found these stories fascinating.

Most of the time, your Mummy, Mama, and Ku Ku Mel would disappear as Kong Kong started his stories, leaving me alone with him at the table. Once he started his reminiscing, they would all excuse themselves. I asked your mum once why they never hung around to listen, because to me (aside from it seeming rude to just get up and leave the table mid-conversation) it seemed strange that they did not want to hear these intriguing tales. “We have heard it all before,” was her reply.

These post-meal encounters were not dialogues. They were not conversations. They were storytelling time, and Kong Kong was the storyteller. Every now and then I would interject with a question to direct him into an area I was interested in learning more about, or I would say something to indicate my tenuous grasp of the history, but for the most part, he did the talking and I did the listening. Many times, my questions revealed an understandable ignorance of this culture I eventually married into. During one of our early meals, names of relatives like Marco and Giko were being thrown around. So, feeling clever, I said, “Interesting, so you have some Italian blood in the family?” I was to learn, to my humiliation, that these “names” were Chinese terms used to refer to the oldest paternal aunt, Mak Ko, and second oldest paternal aunt, Ji Ko.

From these discussions, I learnt much of what I know about the Peranakan culture, half of your heritage. Most of it was told to me by Kong Kong, but Mama has also provided a significant wealth of information – sometimes while she was still at the table, and sometimes as a corrective interjection to Kong Kong from elsewhere in the house. Your Peranakan heritage is something quite special, and one that you should be proud of. It is a heritage that you share with a relatively small community. Your heritage is more than this bloodline, however. It is also a history that you share with all Singaporeans of other races and creeds who can trace their ancestry back a number of generations on this island, and with those of more recent immigration.

One day, as Kong Kong was finishing yet another story after a Christmas lunch at our old East Grove apartment, I looked over to you, Emma (you were not yet born, Luke), and it struck me how the Singapore that you were growing up in was so different to the one into which your Mama and Kong Kong were born. It was then I first suggested to Kong Kong that we work together to write his stories down for you, his grandchildren. That moment was the genesis for the pages that follow.

As is the case for all of his generation, Kong Kong’s life spans the formative years of the Singapore that you know: from his birth at a kampong bungalow on a rubber plantation in 1941, just a year before the Japanese occupation, in a Singapore that was still a British colony, to the development of the proud, progressive and independent nation that it is today. What makes his life particularly interesting is that he spent his professional life as a military officer, as a pioneer of Singapore’s fledgling army when the nation became independent. Unsurprisingly, a good number of the stories he shared with me came from his military days.

This book is not the story of a man’s involvement in politics or of an independence movement. Kong Kong was neither a politician nor an activist. This is the story of a regular kampong kid, an ordinary rural boy who, through hard work and circumstance, rose to prominence in his career and has now retired to a humble life. One might say he always has been, and still is, a kampong kid at heart. His younger self often emerges when you venture outside with him and he shows you the grasshoppers jumping amongst the grass, the touch-me-nots closing when brushed by a finger, the dragonflies buzzing around the bushes, the armies of ants making their way up the trunk of a tree, and the other fauna and flora around Singapore.

None of us are the result of our acts alone. Our lives are the summation of the world around us and how we respond to it. With this in mind, throughout these pages I have tried my best to summarise the historical events and cultural influences comprising the backdrop to



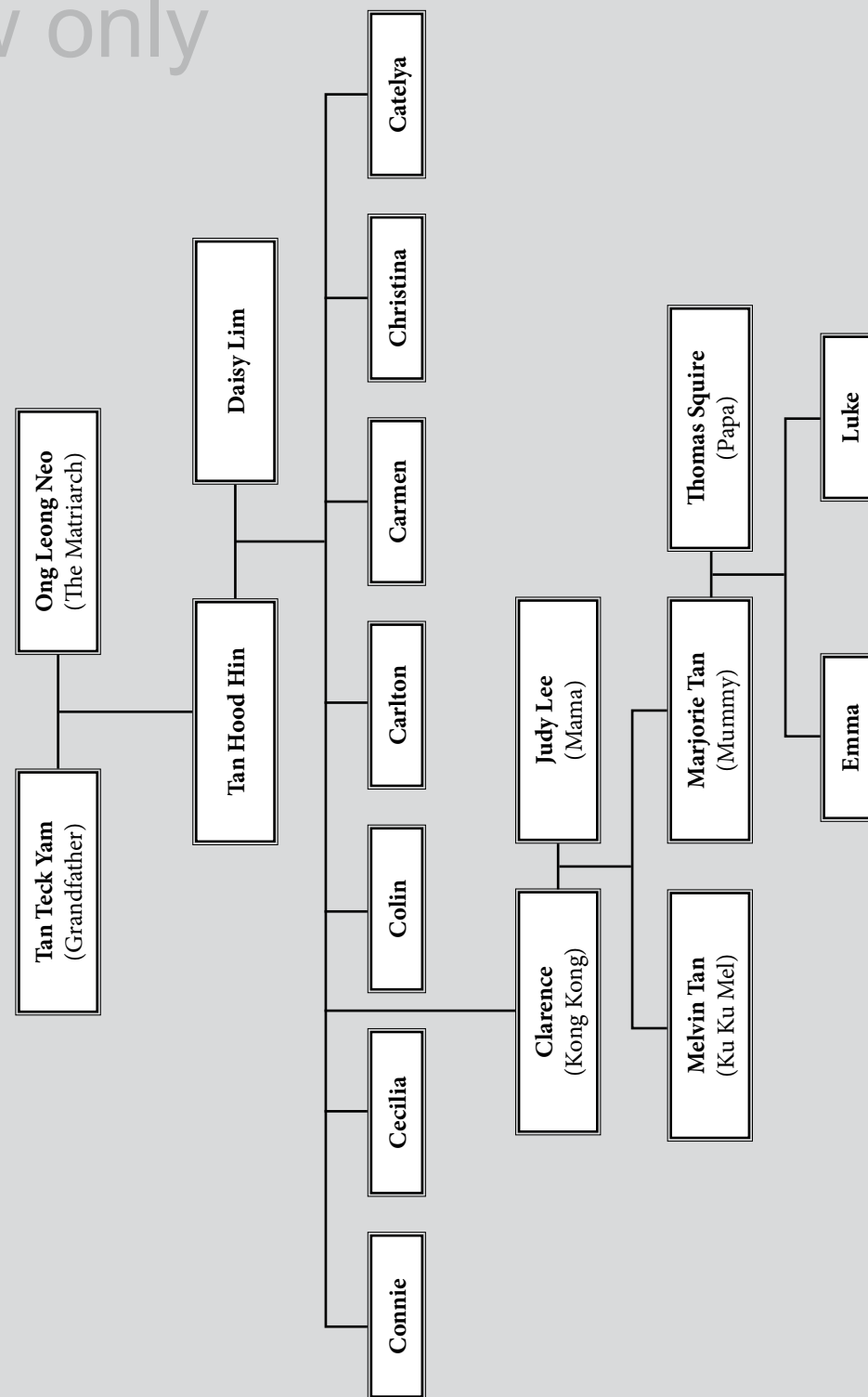
Kong Kong's life experiences. And what a complex world it was. If at times such discussions seem a little long, or divergent from Kong Kong's life story, stay with me, for I do believe it important to understand the historical context behind many of Kong Kong's stories.

While I am at it, let me add a few disclaimers. I am not a historian, nor am I a military man. I have tried my best to retell the relevant history as I have interpreted it through my research. It will not be perfectly accurate and some may question it, but it should at least provide you with a broad overview of the challenging times that Singapore and the surrounding region have faced. I hope you will read more widely on the historical topics that I have covered. Kong Kong has guided me in much of the military terminology, including ranks and how different army units relate to each other, but even then, I am sure a military expert will find inaccuracies. Furthermore, these words are based on one man's recollections of the past seventy-seven years of his life – inaccuracies in some memories, dates, sequences of some events, and so forth are understandable. On all accounts, I ask that you do not get bogged down by such technicalities, but look beyond them to the collection of stories that this is. Lastly, there is a saying amongst the Peranakan community: "For as many families that identify themselves as Peranakan, there are as many interpretations of the culture." This interpretation is but one.

At the time I first met your Mama and Kong Kong they were living in a house at Lengkong Lima in Kembangan, in the east of Singapore, very near the place where Kong Kong was born into this world. And while not in the same house, as much has changed since then, it is near that same location, in the house on top of Kembangan Hill, where this story begins.

The story that follows is your Kong Kong's. The words are mine.

Love,  
Papa



For Review only



## PROLOGUE

## **The House on Kembangan Hill**

Day breaks over the island of Singapore. From the veranda of the house seated on top of Kembangan Hill, the vista of another tranquil morning dawns. Over the treetops of the rubber plantation stretching out from the house halfway down to the sea, the rising sun begins to light up the green land and the calm waters of the Singapore Strait that kiss the southern coast along Marine Parade beach around two miles away. What had appeared at night to be the scattered lights of lowly populated townships now reveal themselves to have been the lights of a myriad of ships anchored in the harbour awaiting the transfer of goods to and from the port down town. On the other side of the Strait, around ten miles away, can be seen Pulau Batam, the island of Batam. The cumulonimbus clouds that had unleashed their thunderous electrical fury over the southern portions of Malaya, including Singapore, in the early hours of the morning now tower over that Indonesian island, drenching it with the rains its lush green jungles thrive on.

Immediately surrounding the house itself, as if forming a fence between the homestead and the surrounding plantation, fruit trees of numerous kinds provide some shade from the low morning sun. Duku, langsung, chiku, rambutan, durian, quinine, jambu, pomelo. Enough varieties to ensure something is available regardless of the season. Clumps of wild orchids, many nestled in the tree branches, and bushes of azaleas are scattered around the property, their bright colours beginning to come alive with these first rays of the sun, and their delicate scents perfuming the serenity of the early morning.

In the branches of the fruit trees, roosting doves awaken and begin their search for food. Seeking out grass seeds, they quietly flutter around the damp dirt ground, keeping a nervous eye out for potential predators. They are soon joined by a small group of magpie robins, also fluttering around looking for their breakfast of insects and worms. The roosters of the area are also awake and sending out their morning call.

From behind the two large doors that form the main entrance to the house, comes the sound of a wooden beam being removed from the door. Seconds later the doors creak open, letting the first light of the day trickle into the front room of the large bungalow. Out steps the Matriarch of the household. She is already bathed, impeccably dressed, wearing an intricately woven sarong kebaya, her hair neatly tied up in a bun: attention to her appearance is an important part of her morning rituals. In her hands she clasps three smouldering joss sticks. Taking a few steps out onto the veranda, her grace in tune with the serenity that comes only with being the first to welcome these early rays of the sun, she raises the joss sticks above her head and looks up to the sky in quiet prayer, inviting Kwan Kong, the God of War, into her home.

Upon placing the burning joss sticks in the copper urn hanging from the veranda ceiling, she enters the front room that spans the entire width of the house, just inside the main door. There are two altars in the room and she proceeds first to the large one on the right. It is dedicated to Kwan Kong, who had just been invited into the house moments earlier. With this warrior god having now assumed his position on his altar, the Matriarch again raises three new joss sticks, this time in homage to him. Next, she proceeds to the altar of the ancestors situated on the left. For a third time she offers up three joss sticks in prayer, invoking the protection of the ancestors for the day ahead. Upon the altar are four tablets, each representing the soul of a single ancestor. Three are from previous generations, but the fourth is far closer to her heart – that of her husband, whom she bade farewell from this earth some five years earlier.

Thus ends her morning prayers for a safe and prosperous day, not only for herself, but also for the entire household of which she is the head. It is a job that belongs solely to the eldest member of the family.

In the rear section of the house, Hood Hin, the second son of the Matriarch, and his wife, Daisy, are beginning their morning. Their two daughters, Connie (three), and Cecilia (eighteen months), are still asleep. Hood Hin bathes himself first in the kamar mandi, the wet bathroom attached to their bedroom. Even in the steamy warmth of the tropics, the water drawn from the bak mandi (a large cube-shaped bathtub) with the ladle is chillingly refreshing as he pours it over his head. While the northwest monsoon is providing plenty of water for the wells at this time of year, bathing is nonetheless a short, simple and manual affair where only the necessary volume is ever used.

As Hood Hin prepares himself for work, Daisy gets ready and wakes their daughters. The bedroom remains dark, though enough morning light is creeping in through the wooden shutters to enable everyone to wash and dress without lighting any of the lamps. It is important to start the day well. Waking up on time, washing, and dressing neatly before presenting oneself to the world outside are considered necessary to ensure a good day ahead.

With all of them ready, the family proceed to the front section of the house where the Matriarch is waiting to greet them. Hood Hin greets his mother first, followed by his wife and their two children. Then, just as the Matriarch had done earlier, Hood Hin and Daisy turn to pay their respects to the ancestors, including Hood Hin's father, at the ancestral altar. And so is greeted the new day. As is every day. The simple ritualised morning prayers and greetings to the gods, the ancestors, to the Matriarch, and to each other, form the foundation on which a successful day can manifest itself.

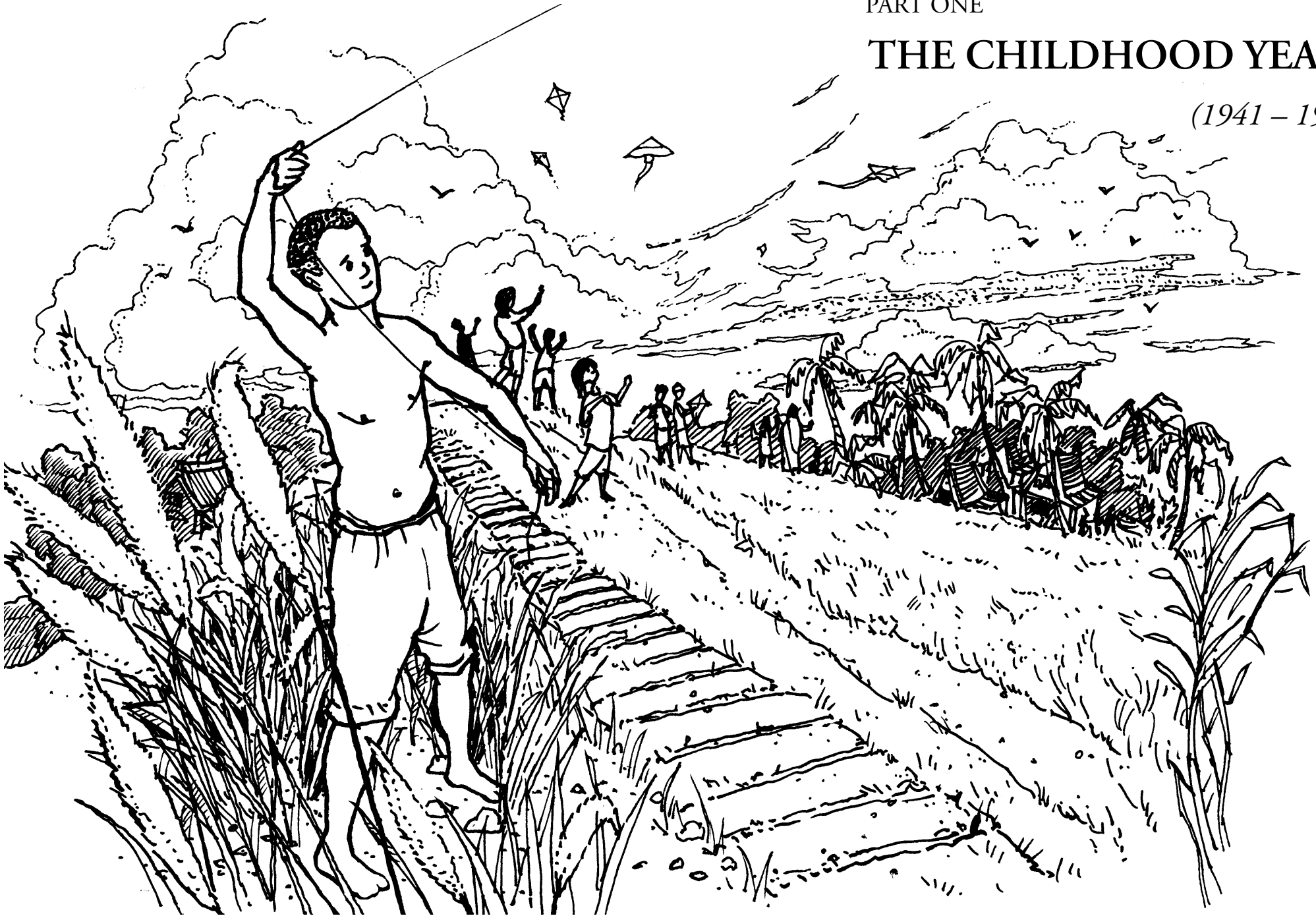
And so also is greeted what will become the first day in the life of Tan Kim Peng Clarence.

For Review only

PART ONE

# THE CHILDHOOD YEARS

(1941 – 1959)





The stone at Bukit Brown Cemetery containing Clarence's name, Tan Kim Peng, etched in under "Grandsons".

## Chapter 1

### A Name Etched in Stone

The bicycle was ready to go. Each morning for the past few weeks Hood Hin had made sure that its tires were pumped up and its gears were well oiled. So when the call finally came, he ran out the door, down the stairs, grabbed the bike from under the old wing, and cycled off as fast as his legs could go. Out the driveway, then a sharp right on to Lengkong Tiga Road, the rear wheel almost skidding. Leaving a small cloud of dirt in his wake, he hurtled down the unsealed road, then right onto Changi Road. Kampongs rolled past him in a blur. He sped past a karung guni man pushing a bicycle loaded high with flattened cardboard boxes and made a left down Joo Chiat Road.

A few hundred metres later he braked sharply in front of a terrace house at Joo Chiat Place, jumped off his bike, and ran up the stairs to the main entrance. Panting, he gasped to the lady at the front desk, "Madam Chye Neo must come quickly. Daisy is ready to give birth!"

Madam Chye Neo was the district midwife. Every birth in the area she delivered, or at least knew about. Although Kandang Kerbau Hospital (more commonly known now as KKH) was the main maternity hospital at the time and had been delivering babies since 1924, Daisy had no interest in this modern approach and chose home births with the assistance of Madam Chye Neo, who also delivered her first two children. Some women chose not to go to Kandang Kerbau for superstitious reasons, preferring their own traditional medicinal practices over a Western approach. Daisy simply saw no need for the hospital: to deliver at home was perfectly natural and convenient for her.

Motorised transport was not so commonplace at the time, and people generally walked, cycled or rode in a trishaw to their destinations. With the house on Kembangan Hill being a good two miles away, there was no time for walking so the midwife and her assistant hailed a trishaw from across the street and made their way to the family home. Safe in the knowledge that help was on its way, Hood Hin raced ahead on his bicycle to return to his wife, who was fast becoming more than ready for their newborn's arrival.

Soon thereafter, on Saturday, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1941, in the room that the family slept in, Clarence made his entrance into this world.

---

The months leading up to Clarence's birth had been an interesting time for Daisy, and those around her. Though, of course, for them it was just the way things were. Ever since it was apparent that her third child was on the way, much of Daisy's life had been governed by numerous rituals known as pantang. The Malay word for taboo, pantang refers to superstitious behaviours that are said to affect health, business deals, success in exams, and luck in all things. They have been an integral part of people's lives in Singapore and Malaya and the non-observance of them will quite likely bring ill luck upon transgressors.

It is said that once aware of a child in the womb, evil spirits are eager to put an end to a successful birth and will try anything to harm a mother and her child. As a result, an endless number of pantang specific to pregnancy have been handed down through the generations to ensure the safety of both mother and child. To limit the chance of encounters with these primarily outdoor spirits, Daisy had to be particularly careful whenever she left the house, especially at dusk when the spirits are at their most active. In the final months she would have rarely left the house at all. Iron nails are particularly useful in warding them off, so she had been wearing an iron-nail-shaped hairpin to hold her hair in place.

The occasional visit by wild monkeys to the property will have been of concern as well, lest a glance at one of them results in her child being born looking and acting like one. Such terkenan, or afflictions, would be a great embarrassment to the family and would surely send tongues wagging about how careless she must have been regarding these pantang during her pregnancy. Luckily, no eclipses had been visible in Singapore in the preceeding nine months. The sighting of such an event by the pregnant mother would surely have resulted in a birthmark appearing on her child's face.

Hood Hin and the family's maid would have been caught up in it too, busy pampering Daisy and satisfying her cravings lest the child inside come out grumpy and drooling. In the last days Hood Hin was additionally busy after work, ensuring that all the drawers and cupboards in the house were unlocked, as well as clearing all the blocked drains around the property. Even neighbours and strangers will have played a part, for to reject any requests from a pregnant woman, even one you do not know, would be a grave mistake and leave them with the shame of being responsible for any imperfections in the child. So, should a pregnant woman walk past your house and request some fruit from your tree, better you give it to her.

---

Selecting a name for a newborn can be an arduous task for any parent, and perhaps even more so for those of Chinese lineage.<sup>1</sup> With Clarence's birth however, it was a simple task for Hood Hin and Daisy. His Chinese name, Tan Kim Peng, had already been determined well before he was born: it had existed on his grandfather's tombstone since his death in 1936. His grandfather had passed away before the grandchildren were

---

<sup>1</sup> One common technique was to engage the services of a geomancer who, using details of the time and date of the child's birth, will refer to Chinese astrology to come up with a list of auspicious names from which the parents can choose. In many cases, the grandparents or other relatives will be given the responsibility of naming the child.

born, so the predefined names of four of his descendants, two grandsons and two granddaughters, had been etched into the tombstone. Therefore, the name Tan Kim Peng was literally cast in stone, waiting for its rightful heir to be born.

---

It was Clarence's grandfather who was responsible for the house and its surrounding estate that contained rubber plantations and farmland. Obviously a man of wealth, Tan Teck Yam had made his early money as a rice trader. Most likely an immigrant to Singapore, he probably originated from Burma, but no-one remembers for sure.

The estate itself was large. Rectangular in shape, it extended from Changi Road at its southern boundary to Kaki Bukit in the north, a distance of a little over a mile. Its width was around one thousand yards, running from the Kembangan canal on the western border through to Chai Chee on the eastern side, covering an area of roughly 400 acres<sup>2</sup> – around 160 rugby fields.

Rubber was one of the great money-spinners of the time (and would become even more so from 1939 as war began to rage in Europe). So once he purchased the land Tan Teck Yam immediately set about turning most of it into a rubber plantation. Many landowners in the area had done the same.

The workers on the plantation were mostly a mixture of Malays, and Boyanese from the Indonesian island of Bawean. The Boyanese lived in a pondok, or communal lodging house, in the southern section of the estate. Language-wise this was a benefit to the family, both the adults and the kids. While the family's bloodline was very much Chinese, they had been in the region for a couple of generations now, and Malay was now their first language.

A small section of the land, down in the valley near Chai Chee on the eastern side, was rented out to Chinese farmers and their families. They ran a vegetable garden and farmed pigs, ducks, and chickens. Along with the children of these families and the kids from the Boyanese pondok, the grandchildren of Tan Teck Yam and his wife, including Clarence, would have more than enough playmates in the years to come, and the large property was to provide plenty of space for them to run in.

The family could have sourced much of their food from the Chinese farmers, but there was no need. At the back of the homestead, not too far from the house, their own pigpen and pond provided more than enough meat and fish for the entire extended family. As was common on farms all over Malaya, the pond and the pigpen were next to each other, creating their own contained ecosystem. On the surface of the pond water hyacinth grew in abundance, with pretty purple flowers, helping to oxygenate the water for the fish. When boiled with coconut fibre, the hyacinth provided feed for the pigs. Water from the pond was used to wash the pigs and their dirt-floored pens. The ground of the pens had a slight incline so that this cleaning water could flow back to the pond, taking with it leftover food scraps and porcine excrement that provided nutrients and food for the fish living in the pond. The fish in turn kept the mosquito numbers down, and provided food for the family.

The house itself was divided into two sections. The back portion, the old wing, was the original wooden house. Typical of most rural houses of the time in the area, much of the design was focused on ensuring it remained as cool as possible in the tropical heat. The floor was raised off the ground, supported by wooden beams, allowing air to flow underneath. The ceilings were very high, providing another natural mechanism for cooling the place. Household electricity was still more than a decade away so there were no fans. But the natural ventilation provided by the louvered windows was enough to keep the place cool in the day. There were no glass windows, as they would have prevented

<sup>2</sup> In those days Singapore – and most of the world – was using the imperial measurement system, so everyone was familiar with terms like miles, yards, feet, and acres. It would not be until the 1970s that Singapore, and many other countries, began the transition to the metric system.



the flow of air. The interior structure was entirely hardwood, whose dark colour provided further cooling benefits.

It was common in this part of the world for a number of generations to be living under the same roof, and family in the house on Kembangan Hill was no exception. Hence Tan Teck Yam had a second house built in front of the original to accommodate the expected arrival of numerous grandchildren. Similar in shape to the first, the new house was larger and made of brick with cement plastered over the top, then painted blue. Brick and cement were far more modern materials than what had been used for generations past. A small bridge was constructed to provide easy access between the two houses. The two large altars that had originally resided in the large front room of the old wing were moved to the large front room of the new main house. Behind these main rooms of both houses were the bedrooms – all very large, with their own bathrooms, and each able to accommodate one young family. Some of the families, including Hood Hin and Daisy's, had access to two rooms.

The furniture in both sections was primarily made from rosewood and blackwood, with intricately carved designs and complex mother of pearl motifs inlaid into the wood, and a gleaming varnish finish. Aesthetics took precedence over comfort here: as elegant as they were, the firm and neatly fitted red cushions placed on the chairs could do little to remove the discomfort of the solid wood seats.

Most of the extended family – the Matriarch's children and their own young families – lived in the old wing, while the Matriarch herself lived in the main house along with her as-yet-unmarried daughters. In the large front room of the main house, three doors opened out to the veranda. The central one was the grandest with its huge doors, the doors through which Kwan Kong, the God of War, entered each morning. The large veranda encircled the main house. Two sets of stairs then led down from the veranda at the front to the dirt yard. This yard, encircling both houses, together with the fruit trees on its perimeter,

provided a buffer between the domestic residence and the tall trees of the rubber plantation.

As both houses were raised a good twelve feet off the ground, the space under them made for perfect storage areas. A treasure of baskets containing paper offerings, earthenware, and all sorts of junk could be found there. The ground under the old house was dirt and it had no walls and was open to the breeze and the rain. The main house had a concrete floor with a wall around it, so the more important and fragile items were stored there. For the kids, these areas would provide great places for chasing and hiding games, and exploring the treasure trove held within.

Over the years, the kitchen and dining room in the original house had become too small for the growing family, so a separate larger one was added at ground level on the western side of the main house when it was built. All of the families ate there, either together or separately, as coincidence and circumstance determined, but the room could seat up to forty people, such as in times of festivals like Chinese New Year.

Hanging on the veranda of the main house, in addition to the copper urn containing the joss sticks, was a large paper lantern with the family name displayed on it. At night a burning candle was placed inside. Like many rural properties around the world, indications of property tenancy required something far simpler than a street name and number. The lamp informed anyone approaching the homestead that this was where the Tan family lived.

Yes, Tan Teck Yam had no doubt been a wealthy man. But over time he, and subsequently the Matriarch, did have a lot of people to support too. When he passed away, Tan Teck Yam left his wife with three sons and four daughters, and a growing brood of grandchildren to look after. As tradition dictated, the sons continued living in their parent's home after marriage and raised their families in the ancestral home, while the married daughters moved out and joined the families of

their husbands. Although the sons were working and bringing in their own salaries, Tan Teck Yam's wife, who had assumed the role of the great Matriarch, used the proceeds from the rubber plantation and the rentals from the Chinese farmers to provide for the entire household. For the next 30 years she was the focal point for the family. To the many grandchildren who would come to live in her home, she was known as Mama. To outsiders she was Madam Ong Leong Neo. She was a loving and strong woman who provided for all under her care. She also knew that she alone was the link to the past and that upon her rested the responsibility to uphold, and pass on, the Peranakan Chinese traditions within the household.

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After getting married,<sup>3</sup> Hood Hin worked in the civil service as a clerk with the Public Works Department, and Daisy was a homemaker. Being a family of comfortable means, they had the luxury of employing an ama chay. Sometimes called a "black and white" because of the colours of their uniforms in households throughout Malaya, the ama chay was primarily the cook and the maid around the house, and when time permitted, the nanny to the young children. However, as the families within the household grew, looking after all the kids became well beyond the capabilities of a single person, so Daisy and the other mums of the household remained the primary caregivers of their young children.

In a culture where the oldest son was greatly esteemed, Hood Hin would normally have stood to gain very little by being the second oldest boy. However, when his older brother married a second woman

following the death of his first wife and this new couple decided to move out to their own home, Hood Hin became the most senior man about the house (though, of course, the true boss was always his mother, the Matriarch). While the family inheritance always followed the line of the most senior son, and there was substantial wealth to inherit due to the property, Hood Hin was not in fact the benefactor of the estate. The benefactor was to be Tan Kim Peng Clarence.

Yes, perhaps quite justifiably, tradition had figured out that giving the family inheritance to the immediate son just caused laziness and complacency to develop in the next generation, who, more often than not, would whittle it away. To safeguard this wealth, wisdom dictated that the inheritance skip a generation, as if to keep each alternate generation keen. Which is quite possibly how Hood Hin ended up as a clerk at the Public Works Department instead of becoming a wealthy landowner himself.

So, with his birth as the first son of the alternate generation, Clarence was set to become the benefactor of the estate with its plantations and farms and houses upon the passing away of the Matriarch. However, the immense changes that Singapore was to face in the years ahead would severely deplete any benefits that he might otherwise have looked forward to given this position.

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<sup>3</sup> Hood Hin had been dating Daisy at the time of his father's death. Given the importance associated with the mourning period for someone so close, they had to make a very quick decision: tradition dictated that a couple must wait 12 months after the death of a parent before they could celebrate their nuptials, or get married within one month of the demise. Non-observance of this would surely bring bad luck to their marriage. In fact, such was the bad luck associated with death, that often the bereaved family would not even be invited to anyone else's wedding for the next 12 months. The couple chose the latter.



Thomas A. Squire was born and raised in Wellington, New Zealand, where he met his wife, a Singaporean working in Wellington at the time. Upon following her back to Singapore, he immediately became fascinated with the history of his new home. It was conversations with his father-in-law, a retired army officer, about his life that was the genesis of this book. A pilot and mathematician by training and a tech worker by trade, he has lived in Singapore for more than twenty years.

*Always A Commando* is his first book.