

Mr Lee Swee Thin retired as a police superintendent in 2004 but was rehired as a consultant. In 2012, he decided to set up a firm to train government officials on investigation methods. ST PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONG

The Lives They Live

No retirement for veteran investigator

While the pioneer leaders were the original architects of Singapore, everyday heroes helped build society here. This is another story about such people in the series, *The Lives They Live*.

Toh Yong Chuan
Senior Correspondent

Mr Lee Swee Thin's life revolved around police and criminals.

The 73-year-old grew up in a neighbourhood controlled by gangsters.

He later joined the police force, where he spent 41 years putting criminals behind bars.

As a beat cop, he patrolled the streets after the 1964 racial riots, manned roadblocks to flush out saboteurs during the Confrontation with Indonesia in 1965 and fought rioters after Singapore was declared independent that year.

Among the highlights of his police career is the recovery of 12 guns, 105 bullets and more than \$651,000 in cash that was robbed from a bank.

The decorated policeman became a cop in 1963 and retired as a police superintendent in 2004, when he was 60.

"I rose through the ranks," he said. "When I joined the (Malaysian) police force in 1963, policemen wore shorts. Singapore did not have its own police force."

Mr Lee joined after completing his studies at Victoria School at age 19.

"My parents were hawkers and they had to feed six children," Mr

Lee recalled. "The eight of us lived in a rented cubicle in a pre-war shophouse in Weld Road, near the Sungei Road Thieves' Market."

"I was the second son in the family, with an elder brother and sisters. I had to work to support the family."

At that time, Singapore was part of Malaysia, so he was sent to Kuala Lumpur for basic police training.

"We were known as the Royal Malaysia Police (Singapore Component)," he recounted.

"There were 120 of us, including 30 women."

"My monthly salary was \$132."

The train ride from Tanjong Pagar Railway Station to Sentul Railway Station marked the first time he travelled out of Singapore.

The recruits slept on beds made out of four long wooden planks and used bucket toilets.

He recalled staying with trainees from Sabah and Sarawak.

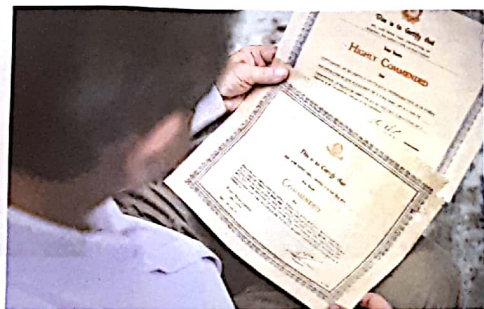
"Some of them had tattoos, while others wore loin cloths."

"A few of them were even armed with parangs while they slept."

"They claimed to be descendants of headhunters," he said.

Mr Lee topped his class in police training and became the best recruit among the Singapore trainees.

In June 1964, the newly minted police constable returned to Singa-



(Top) Mr Lee with two commendation certificates that he received from the police commissioner for cracking two major cases with his colleagues in the 70s. (Above) Mr Lee getting a National Day medal from then President Wee Kim Wee in 1991.

por and became a beat cop at Queenstown police station, doing both foot and car patrols.

On July 21 that year - barely a month after he had returned - racial riots broke out in Singapore between Malays and Chinese over political and communal tensions.

Mr Lee recalled policemen working alongside soldiers to maintain public order.

"I performed 12-hour shifts con-

tinuously for 17 days. "Queenstown police station became our base and home," he said.

"But not long after peace was restored, another racial riot broke out about two months later."

During the height of the Confrontation with Indonesia in March 1965, when the MacDonald House was bombed, Mr Lee

manned roadblocks to flush out the saboteurs.

Although Singapore was declared independent on Aug 9, 1965, he said life did not become peaceful overnight.

"Many people returned home hurriedly (from work and school) for fear of impending chaos and unrest," he said.

Predictions of further riots came true. "Many public properties were smashed and vandalised. I remember a police inspector was badly assaulted by rioters armed with sharpened wooden poles in Kim Tian Road and he nearly lost his eyesight," Mr Lee said.

After about three years pounding the beat, Mr Lee was promoted to be a probationary police inspector in 1967.

After completing his inspector training, he joined the Hokkien branch of the Criminal Investigation Department Secret Societies Division in 1968.

Detectives were grouped according to the dialects that they could speak.

There were also the Cantonese and "Malay and others" branches.

He recalled that the city area was split into South Bridge Road ("tua poh", or big town in Hokkien) and North Bridge Road ("sio poh", or small town in Hokkien) by the Singapore River.

"Most secret society and organised gang members in "tua poh" were Cantonese and (those in the) "sio poh" areas were Hokkien," he said.

These organised gangs were a menace and behind two major cases that Mr Lee and his colleagues cracked in the 1970s.

On Sept 29, 1970, Mr Lee was part of an ambush team that arrested a man suspected of involvement in a counterfeit currency racket at the Cathay Hotel in Dhoby Ghaut.

The man confessed under police interrogation that he had hidden a stash of 12 guns and 105 bullets.

The seizure was reported on the front page of *The Straits Times* on Oct 16, 1970.

Mr Lee earned a High Commendation Award from the police commissioner for his role in the case.

"It was a police record," he said of the 12 guns recovered.

On Oct 30, 1970, three armed robbers targeted an armoured van that was delivering cash to the Chartered Bank in Battery Road, making away with a \$946,000 heist.

Two months later, Mr Lee and his CID colleagues recovered \$651,510 when they arrested one of the suspects.

"The money was kept in a metal box buried underground at a kampong," he recounted.

"I have never seen so much cash in my life."

For his role in that case, Mr Lee received another commendation from the police commissioner.

From 1977 to 1992, he had stints in other police units but mostly remained in the CID until his official retirement in 2004.

However, he was rehired as a consultant for two years to help the CID put together its training and operations manuals.

He has also been hired by the Office of the Public Guardian and the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority to train their officers on investigation techniques.

In 2012, at age 68, he decided to set up a training company called Top Criminal Justice Consultancy, training government officials on investigation methods.

Mr Lee and his wife have two daughters who are married, and five grandchildren.

On why he continues to train investigators years after his official retirement, Mr Lee, who turns 74 this month, said with a wry smile: "Old investigators don't really go away."

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THE LIVES THEY LIVE
Know of a Singaporean born before December 1949 who has lived a storied life? E-mail us at stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg

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