



Written by veteran journalist Bertha Henson, the biography of Mr George E. Bogaars was pieced together from oral history recordings, essays and interviews. Mr Bogaars, who headed the Special Branch intelligence agency during Operation Coldstore against the communists, died in 1992 at the age of 65. PHOTO: NUS PRESS SINGAPORE

New book chronicles life and career of Singapore's ex-intelligence chief

Grace Ho
Senior Political Correspondent

The life and career of one of Singapore's pioneer civil servants, who survived the Japanese Occupation, headed the Special Branch intelligence agency during Operation Coldstore against the communists and helped set up the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), are chronicled in a book released yesterday.

Mr George E. Bogaars also led government agencies including the Ministry of Finance during Singapore's early and tumultuous years.

Not For Circulation: The George E. Bogaars Story was written by veteran journalist Bertha Henson, who is currently an adjunct professor at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Communications and New Media, and a fellow of Tembusu College at the university.

The book is an initiative by Mr Bogaars' former Treasury colleagues to mark his birth anniversary on Oct 25.

Mr Bogaars – or GEB, as he was known to friends, family and colleagues – died in 1992 at the age of 65.

His biography was pieced together from oral history recordings, essays and interviews.

It details how the hardships of the Japanese Occupation, including a two-year stay in the malaria-infested Bahau settlement in Negeri Sembilan, instilled in the young Mr Bogaars a sense of mission and a stake in a young Singapore's future.

He joined the civil service in 1952 when the institution, as the book observes, was in "chaos".

Organisation structures and priorities were constantly changed to fit local politicians' demands for rapid "Malayanisation", or replacing British expatriates with local-born residents after the war.

From nabbing rice thieves at Tanjong Pagar port as an assistant traffic controller to conducting social surveys for former deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee – then a director in the Department of Social Welfare – Mr Bogaars' broad experience and access to Singapore's pioneer leaders were unparalleled.

When founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew tasked a British intelligence officer with turning the Special Branch from a police outfit into an intelligence agency, Mr Bogaars' name was offered as one of three civil servants who could head the reorganised branch.

In the run-up to 1963's Operation Coldstore, he was privy to heated meetings between parties such as the People's Action Party, Barisan Sosialis – formed by left-wing PAP members who had been expelled from the party – the pro-communist camp, and then Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's government.

Operation Coldstore was a security operation that led to the arrest of more than 100 people on Feb 2, 1963. The Government has maintained that those arrested were communist sympathisers who were plotting to subvert the state.

The Special Branch was put in charge of drawing up a list of those to be arrested, as well as the organisations and publications to be proscribed.

Mr Bogaars said in an interview with *The Straits Times* in 1981 after his retirement: "I did not and do not have any qualms about the operation. I went into the Special Branch with my eyes open. If the Barisan Sosialis and their friends had won, we would all have gone down."

"I did not think the ones detained were innocent. Yes, they might be foolish but they were certainly not innocent."

Mr Bogaars was also one of three civil servants privy to the details of the Separation document ironed out between Dr Goh and then Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 6, 1965.

Mr Lee's 1998 memoir *The Singapore Story* tells of how, in the frantic days before separation became official on Aug 9, he had called in Mr Bogaars, then head of the Special Branch, "to be quite certain he was confident we could contain any threat from the communists in an independent Singapore as long as we did not allow them to rebuild their organisation".

"He assured me that we could," Mr Lee wrote.

On the defence front, Mr Bogaars was most associated with setting up the SAF Training Institute in 1966.

As permanent secretary of the Foreign Affairs and Finance ministries in the 1970s, he was known for putting people at ease and not keeping a distance from his subordinates, unlike some other senior civil servants.

He overhauled the Budget process so that each ministry would submit, together with its annual budget proposal, a review of its key achievements against previous targets, and relate its proposal to targets for the new financial year. This new system became operational in 1978.

He also set up a Treasury Coffee Club (TCC) for senior officers to interact with colleagues and discuss common work issues.

Mr Bogaars' experience with communists and communalists had left him with a keen sense of Singapore's vulnerability, and the need to tread a fine line between achieving political objectives and being a political actor.

In the 1981 interview with *ST*, he described politics as a "fairly unsavoury business", and made a distinction between being politically aware and politically involved. "There is a clear difference here. It is a difference between the practice and science of it. I was interested only in the science of it," he said.

He was one of the first two students to receive a Master of Arts degree from the University of Malaya, a predecessor institution of NUS. His master's thesis was on the development of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, which evolved into Keppel Corporation – which he later helmed.

TCC members and Keppel Corp, through the Keppel Care Foundation, supported the cost of producing the biography. Sales proceeds will go to an endowment fund to support awards for top-performing history students at the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

graceho@sph.com.sg

• Not For Circulation: The George E. Bogaars Story by Bertha Henson (NUS Press) costs \$25.68. It is available at bookstores including Kinokuniya.