

# **HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIA — MALAYSIA DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP**

## **Introduction**

The Australian Defence Force's commitment to the security of Malaysia is longstanding. It began with the Malayan Campaign in World War II, followed shortly after by the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation. Since those conflicts, the defence relationship between Australia and Malaysia has continued to develop under the auspices of the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Malaysia Australia Joint Defence Program. These historical links form the foundation of the continuing close defence cooperation between the two nations.

## **WWII - The Malayan Campaign, Captivity and Liberation**

Japan's devastating opening blows in the Second World War on 7 December 1941 were massive land, sea and air onslaughts on six widely separated points in the Pacific. They were Malaya, Pearl Harbour, Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong and the Philippines. Before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, No 1 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force flew Hudson aircraft into action against a Japanese invasion force at Kota Bahru on the northeast coast of Malaya. The Japanese attack was launched two hours ahead of the Pearl Harbour attack, when they began shelling shore defences at Kota Bahru soon after midnight on 8 December.

No 1 Squadron bombed the invasion convoy, caused heavy casualties and sank the *Awagisan Maru*, a 9700-tonne troopship, the first Japanese merchant ship to be sunk in the Pacific war. However, the success of No 1 Squadron was to be short lived. Next day, Japanese squadrons based in Thailand attacked the airfield at Kota Bahru, destroying most of the Australian Hudsons and forcing the squadron's withdrawal to Kuantan. Another Australian Squadron, No 21, was attacked at Sungei Patani and seven of its Buffalo fighters were put out of action. Later in the same day two Australian pilots were sent to Singora in Thailand but were attacked by 12 Zero fighters and were unable to complete their mission.

On 10 December Britain suffered one of her worst blows of the war at sea when the capital ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were attacked and sunk by Japanese naval aircraft of the Japanese Navy's 22nd Air Flotilla then based at Saigon. The warships, accompanied by the Australian destroyer *HMAS Vampire* and other escorts, had sortied from Singapore into the South China Sea to seek out and destroy Japanese invasion convoys. No 453 Squadron, RAAF, was standing by at Sembawang to give fighter protection to the warships, but they were called to the scene too late. *Vampire* and *HMS Electra* rescued 796 survivors, however 840 officers and men died.

Meanwhile, a three-pronged thrust into Malaya by Japan's 25th Army was succeeding on all fronts as it pressed down the Malayan peninsula towards Singapore. By 19 December, Penang Island was occupied.

On 7 January the Japanese Army destroyed an Indian brigade and crippled a second in a crucial battle on the Slim River, the last natural barrier on the road to Kuala Lumpur. Five days later the Japanese 25th Division entered the city after its defenders were ordered to withdraw. Maintaining their momentum, the Japanese divisions pressed southwards to Johore State, which is separated from Singapore Island only by the narrow Straits of Johore.

The Australian 8th Division was deployed in Johore and on 14 January was sent into action for the first time. Its 2/30th Battalion ambushed and killed a large number of bicycle-riding Japanese soldiers at Gemas. After two days of fighting, the battalion had lost 81 killed, wounded or missing compared with an estimated 1000 enemy casualties. It withdrew in good order. On 15 January, the partly trained 45th Indian Brigade was attacked by the veteran Japanese Guards Division on the Maur River line, and were defeated. Two battalions of the 27th Australian Brigade were sent to strengthen them and at Bakri. The 2/29th Battalion destroyed eight tanks while the 2/19th routed the Japanese force to their front. However, Japanese forces cut their escape route leaving the Australians and Indian forces with no choice but to fight their way out. Lieutenant Colonel C.G.W. Anderson led the breakout with lorries and all available weapons on the morning of 20 January. The column fought southwards overcoming numerous roadblocks but sustaining heavy casualties. To their despair, when the survivors reached the bridge at the river at Parit Sulong on the morning of the 21 January, they found it blocked. Anderson's force held its ground on the northern side of the river, surrounded by the enemy while the British 53rd Brigade made a failed rescue attempt from the South. A request to allow the vehicles carrying the wounded through was rejected by the Japanese. Throughout the night, the force withstood artillery shelling, tank attacks, machine gunning, mortars, snipers and bayonet charges. On the morning of 22 January, Anderson, realizing his force faced annihilation, ordered every man who was able to walk to break out in small groups and attempt to reach the Allied lines. Most of the wounded left behind were later killed by the enemy. The two battalions lost over 75 per cent of their men. For his courage and leadership during these actions Lieutenant Colonel C.G.W. Anderson, commanding officer of the 2/19th, earned the Victoria Cross.

A new threat developed on 25 January when a Japanese force landed from the sea at Endau, on the east coast of Johore, less than 100 miles from Singapore. Australian Buffalo and Hudson aircraft opposed the landing but were overwhelmed by a force of 50 enemy fighters.

A Japanese column on the east coast was ambushed at Jemalaung on 26 January by the Australians of the 22nd Brigade. The Australians lost 89 killed or missing in this bitter fight but inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.

After the crushing defeat in Johore, all forces were ordered to immediately fall back on Singapore. The withdrawal from Johore took 4 days and was successful. The Australian 22nd Brigade, reinforced by Gordon Highlanders, had covered the approaches to the Johore causeway and early on 31 January, they were piped out of Johore by the only two surviving pipers of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The northern end of the causeway was then wrecked with demolition charges.

Singapore, with its population swollen to a million people by refugees from the North, was now under siege. From January, large formations of Japanese bombers had pounded Singapore's four airfields, forcing the withdrawal of all but a few fighter aircraft. Most Australian Hudson bombers were sent south to Sumatra. Thereafter Japanese aircraft dominated the skies and their long range artillery maintained a constant barrage over the island from Johore. With no serviceable aircraft left, No 21 Squadron was ordered back to Australia.

The Japanese were not long in coming. On 8 February after heavy artillery and air bombardments lasting several days, assault troops crossed the narrow straits in assault craft propelled by outboard motors and attacked the western side of the island defended by the Australian 22nd Brigade. Although they inflicted heavy casualties, the Australian forces were thin on the ground and were forced to retreat. The brigade received reinforcements but by 6am the next day the situation was desperate. Next to come under attack was the Australian 27th Brigade when a third Japanese division, the Guards, also attacked the western area, ignoring the northern area where the bulk of the forces were deployed, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Corps and the newly arrived British 18<sup>th</sup> Division. Thus the main weight of the Japanese attack fell on the Australians.

Late on 10 February, a counter attack was ordered to regain the Krangi line. It was a hopeless mission by numerically weak forces against two Japanese divisions. Inevitably it failed, resulting in further losses. Widespread fighting continued on 11 February and on 12 February, Japanese tanks advancing towards the Bukit Timah Road were turned back. With the enemy enjoying control of the seas and of the skies over Singapore, General Percival withdrew his forces to a 40km arc around the city. A million civilians were in jeopardy and water supplies disrupted. Churchill was consulted on the 'ugly' decision that had to be made. On 15 February, Percival was given discretion to end resistance. Later that day he met General Yamashita and at 8.30pm fighting ceased.

Australia had suffered a grievous blow. Of the 18,000 AIF, 1100 RAAF and 1500 RAN personnel who served in the Malaya / Singapore campaign, more than 1800 men and 33 women were lost and over 15,000 others were taken prisoner to suffer brutal and degrading forms of captivity which, before the war ended, resulted in the deaths of one third of their number. The most infamous example of inhumane treatment of Allied troops by their Japanese captors on what was to become Malaysian soil occurred at the POW camp at Sandakan and on the subsequent death marches to Ranau. Of the 2428 Allied service men (1787 Australians and 641 British) held at Sandakan Camp from 18 July 1942 to 15 August 1945 only six Australian soldiers escaped to survive the War. The remainder were either killed by their captors or died as a result of illness or starvation in the POW camp or on the subsequent "Death Marches" to Ranau.

The first British territory in South East Asia to be liberated was Labuan Island. On 10 June 1945, an allied invasion force of 29,000, spearheaded by the Australian 9th Division, landed in Brunei Bay. In securing the Island, Australia lost 34 men. A total of 138 Australians were killed in the liberation of Labuan, Sabah and Sarawak

## **Malayan Emergency**

The Malayan Emergency was declared on 18 June 1948 after three estate managers were murdered in Perak, northern Malaya, by guerrillas of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), an outgrowth of the anti-Japanese guerrilla movement which had emerged during the Second World War. Despite never having had more than a few thousand members, the MCP was able to draw on the support of many disaffected Malayan Chinese, who were upset that British promises of an easier path to full Malayan citizenship had not been fulfilled. The harsh post-war economic and social conditions also contributed to the rise of anti-government activity. The Colonial government was slow to react to the MCP at first and did not appoint a director of operations to counter the insurgency until March 1950. The new director planned to address the underlying economic, social and political problems facing the Chinese community while at the same time bringing government control to the fringe areas where the MCP received much of its support. Before this plan was fully implemented, however, the situation deteriorated further with the assassination of the British High Commissioner in October 1951. The attack galvanised British resolve to meet the threat posed by the MCP, and the Malayan government, in turn, stepped up counter-insurgency measures. Prolonged operations were undertaken against the communists in an effort to destroy their base of support in local communities and to drive them into the jungle, where it would be difficult for them to receive supplies from supporters.

Australia's involvement in the Emergency began in 1950 with the arrival of RAAF aircraft and personnel in Singapore. Dakotas from 38 Squadron were deployed on cargo runs, troop movements and paratroop and leaflet drops in Malaya, while six Lincoln bombers of 1 Squadron provided the backbone of aerial operations. As the capacity of army and police units operating against the communists improved, however, the need for air power decreased and, by 1952, Lincolns were increasingly used as part of combined air-ground assaults against the communists. One of the major military successes of the conflict was one such coordinated operation in July 1954, east of Ipoh in Perak. In Operation Termite, five RAAF Lincolns and six from a Royal Air Force squadron made simultaneous attacks on two communist camps, followed by paratroop drops, a ground attack and further bombing runs ten days later. The operation destroyed 181 camps and killed thirteen communists; one communist surrendered.



Lincoln Bomber A73-33 of No 1 Squadron  
RAAF on a bombing mission over the Malayan jungle.  
AWM P01616.003

By October 1955, when the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR), arrived in Penang, the outcome of the Emergency was no longer in doubt, although a lengthy "mopping up" stage followed, largely undertaken by Australian troops. 2 RAR crossed to the mainland in January 1956 to begin anti-communist operations. Over the next 20 months, as part of 28 Commonwealth Brigade, 2 RAR participated in a variety of operations, mainly in Perak, one of the main areas of communist activity. Their work consisted of extensive patrolling, watching for contacts in the rubber plantations and mounting a perimeter guard on the New Villages, settlements which the government had established to provide infrastructure and services in outlying areas in the hope of denying the guerrillas access to their support base. Contacts were rare, however, and the battalion had a mixed record, killing two communists in an ambush on 25 June 1956 but losing three of its own troops.

2 RAR left Malaya in October 1957 and was replaced by 3 RAR in the same month. After six weeks of training in jungle warfare, 3 RAR began driving the insurgents into the jungle in Perak and Kedah, separating them from food and other supplies. Early successes for the battalion confirmed the growing ascendancy of the security forces over the communists, and by April 1959 Perak was declared secure. By late 1959, operations against the communists were in their final phase and many communists had crossed Malaya's northern border into Thailand. 3 RAR left Malaya in October 1959 to be replaced by 1 RAR. Although operating in the border region, 1 RAR made no contact with the enemy and were forbidden to move in Thailand, even when the presence and location of communists was known.



Malaya, 1960: soldiers of 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR), in the jungle north of Baling, near the Thai border.  
AWM P01306.006

As the threat continued to dissipate, the Malayan government officially declared the Emergency over on 31 July 1960, though 1 RAR remained in Malaya until October the following year, when 2 RAR returned for a second tour. In August 1962 the battalion was committed to anti-communist operations in Perlis and Kedah, completing its tour in August 1963. In addition to air and infantry forces, Australia also provided artillery and engineering support, and an air-field construction squadron built the main runway for the air force base at Butterworth. Ships of the Royal Australian Navy also served in Malayan waters, and Australian ships had occasion to fire on suspected communist positions in 1956 and 1957. Australian ground forces in Malaya formed part of Australia's contribution to the Far East Strategic Reserve, which was set up in April 1955 primarily to deter external communist aggression against countries in south-east Asia, especially Malaya and Singapore.

Lasting 13 years, the Malayan Emergency was the longest continuous military commitment in Australia's history. Thirty-nine Australian servicemen were killed in Malaya, although only 15 of these deaths occurred as a result of operations, and 27 were wounded, most of whom were in the Army.

### **Confrontation with Indonesia**

Between 1963 and 1966, Indonesia and Malaysia fought a small, undeclared war which came to involve troops from Australia and Britain. The conflict resulted from a belief by Indonesia's President Sukarno that the creation of the Federation of Malaysia, which was declared on 31 August 1963, represented an attempt by Britain to maintain colonial rule behind the cloak of independence granted to its former colonial possessions in south-east Asia.

The term "Confrontation" was coined by Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Dr Subandrio, in January 1963, and it has come to refer to Indonesia's efforts at that time to destabilise the new federation, with a view to breaking it up. The actual war began when Indonesia launched a series of cross-border raids into Malaysian territory in early 1963.

The antagonism that gave rise to Confrontation was already apparent in December 1962, when a small party of armed insurgents, with Indonesian backing, attempted to seize power in the independent enclave of Brunei, only to be defeated by British troops from Singapore. By early 1963 military activity had increased along the Indonesian side of the border in Borneo, as small parties of armed men began infiltrating Malaysian territory on propaganda and sabotage missions. These cross-border raids, carried out by Indonesian "volunteers", continued throughout 1963; by 1964 Indonesian regular arm units had also become involved.



Malaya, 29 October 1964: captured infiltrators emerge from the jungle near Sungei Kesang, South of Terendak. D Coy 3 RAR troops guard them  
AWM P01499.003

Australian units which fought during Confrontation did so as part of a larger British and Commonwealth force under overall British command. Australia's commitment to operations against Indonesia in Borneo and West Malaysia fell within the context of its membership in the Far East Strategic Reserve. At first, the Australian government kept its troops from becoming involved in Confrontation, not least because of fears that the conflict would spread to the long - and difficult to defend - border between Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Requests from both the British and Malaysian governments in 1963-64 for the deployment of Australian troops in Borneo met with refusal, though the Australian government did agree that its troops could be used for the defence of the Malay Peninsula against external attack. In the event, such attacks occurred twice, in September and October 1964, when Indonesia launched paratroop and amphibious raids against Labis and Pontian, on the south-western side of the peninsula. Members of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR) were used in clean-up operations against the invading troops. Although these attacks were easily repelled, they did pose a serious risk of escalating the fighting; the Australian government relented in January 1965 and agreed to the deployment of a battalion in Borneo.

The military situation in Borneo thus far had consisted of company bases located along the border between Indonesia and Malaysia to protect centres of population from enemy incursions.

By 1965 the British government had given permission for more aggressive action to be taken, and the security forces now mounted cross-border operations with the purpose of obtaining intelligence and forcing the Indonesians to remain on the defensive on their own side of the border. Uncertain where the Commonwealth forces might strike next, the Indonesians increasingly devoted their resources to protecting their own positions and correspondingly less on offensive operations, although these continued on a much reduced scale.



Sarawak, British North Borneo, 1965: soldiers of 3 RAR board a Belvedere helicopter to search for Indonesian infiltrators  
AWM P01706.003

The first Australian battalion, 3 RAR, arrived in Borneo in March 1965 and served in Sarawak until the end of July. During this time the battalion conducted extensive operations on both sides of the border, were engaged in four major contacts with Indonesian units, and twice suffered casualties from land mines. Its replacement, the 28th Brigade, 4 RAR, also served in Sarawak - from April until August 1966. Although it had a less active tour, the 28th Brigade also operated on the Indonesian side of the border and was involved in clashes with Indonesian regulars. Altogether, two squadrons of the Special Air Service, a troop of the Royal Australian Signals, several artillery batteries and parties of the Royal Australian Engineers were involved in Borneo, in addition to the two infantry battalions. Ships of the Royal Australian Navy served in the surrounding waters and several RAAF squadrons were also involved in the Confrontation.





Member of 4RAR cleaning a Bren gun at a camp near the Sarawak/Kalimantan border, 1966. The marks on his legs are an antiseptic applied to mosquito bites sustained on jungle patrols  
AWM P01654.008

Continuing negotiations between Indonesia and Malaysia ended the conflict, and the two sides signed a peace treaty in Bangkok in August 1966. Twenty-three Australians were killed during Confrontation, seven of them on operations, and eight were wounded. Because of the sensitivity of the cross-border operations, which remained secret at the time, Confrontation received very little coverage in the Australian media.

### **The Five Power Defence Arrangements**

In 1967, as part of its 'East of Suez' policy, Britain announced its intention to withdraw its military forces from Malaysia and Singapore during the 1970s. The announcement caused considerable concern for Malaysia and Singapore as they had relied heavily on Britain to guarantee their security. Britain's subsequent decision to complete the withdrawal of around 26,000 troops by the end of 1971 gave greater urgency to find a solution. Those efforts would lead to the formation in November 1971, of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), involving Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. The cornerstone of the FPDA was the Communique in which the five powers agreed that in the event of any form of armed attack externally organized or supported, or the threat of such attack against Malaysia or Singapore, their Governments would immediately consult together for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately in relation to such an attack or threat.

The longevity, relevance and evolution of the FPDA is well illustrated by Australia's commitment of forces under the arrangement. On 11 February 1971, Headquarters Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) was formed at Butterworth with Australia providing the Commander. On 1 September 1971 IADS assumed operational responsibility for the air defence of Malaysia and Singapore.

Under the FPDA, an ANZUK force of some 7,100 men, including 3,400 Australians with 1500 stationed at Butterworth was established to support the defence of Malaysia and Singapore. In line with the changing strategic and defence environment in the region, including the end of the war in Vietnam, ANZUK force was disbanded in 1975 and the function of IADS has subsequently evolved. Although the number of Australian defence personnel in Malaysia has also reduced during subsequent years to its current strength of 186 personnel, Australia's commitment to regional security under the FPDA is today still evident in its strong support of IADS, its permanent P3-C maritime patrol aircraft detachment and the Australian Army Rifle Company at Butterworth, and its strong commitment and participation in frequent multi-lateral Exercises.

The FPDA arrangements were intended to be transitional, providing security for Malaysia and Singapore for a few years while they developed their own national capabilities. Instead, while there have been fluctuations in the level of involvement of its members, FPDA, as the only multi-lateral security arrangement in South-East Asia, is still in good shape. For over thirty years the FPDA has progressively evolved to form a key element of relations between the five members and continues to provide a stabilising influence in the region.

### **Malaysia Australia Joint Defence Program**

The last major development in the history of Australia's close defence relationship with Malaysia occurred in 1992 with the signing of the Malaysia Australia Joint Defence Program (MAJDP), aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the bi-lateral defence relationship between Malaysia and Australia. Under the program, ADF officers have the opportunity of undertaking long-term attachments with the MAF while similar numbers of Malaysian officers are attached to ADF Units. Significant numbers of MAF personnel also undertake military training courses in Australia at institutions such as Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, Australian Command and Staff College, Australian Defence Force Academy and the Duntroon Royal Military College while Australian officers attend the Maktab Turus Angkatan Tentera. Australia and Malaysia also conduct frequent bi-lateral exercises to improve interoperability, promote understanding of each other's unique operational environments and to strengthen the military skills and capabilities of both forces.

### **Summary**

Australia's strong historical defence ties with Malaysia, cemented on the battlefields of WWII, the Malayan Emergency and the Confrontation, and further developed through the FPDA and MAJDP agreements, have matured to become one of Australia's most long-lasting and strongest defence relationships. This strong mutual history forms the bedrock of the Malaysia - Australia defence relationship today, and will continue to do so in the future.

Materials Extracted from:

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