

Military and Political Risk in South-East Asia 1971-1989

Australia's Commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Integrated Air Defence System

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For almost two decades Australia maintained a Mirage fighter force at Butterworth in Northwest Malaysia during the 1968-89 Communist Insurgency War, or the Second Malaysian Emergency (SME). Australians at Butterworth incurred danger from hostile forces and both countries risked political embarrassment. An army rifle company that became known as Rifle Company Butterworth (RCB) was deployed to Malaysia as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) in response to the identified terrorist threat.

Permanent deployment of foreign forces within its borders was inconsistent with Malaysia's non-aligned foreign policy. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) presence was accepted as a necessity because of Malaysia's lack of air defence capacity. The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which allowed the RAAF presence, did not include a permanent army company, this being agreed to later. Political sensitivity meant the deployment's real purpose was hidden from the Australian public. Almost fifty years later the Australian Department of Defence still denies the facts of this deployment and the serious threat posed by the SME thus denying Butterworth veterans their proper recognition and entitlements.

This paper reviews the SME, the development of the FPDA and associated Integrated Air Defence System (IADS). It discusses the military and political risk associated with the Australian commitment to Malaysia. Previously classified high-level security documents accessed from the National Archives of Australia reveal the concerns held by Australia's senior Defence officials and show the secrecy surrounding the deployment of the RCB. The case is made for warlike service recognition for Butterworth veterans.

Five Power Defence Arrangements and Air Defence

In 1968 Britain announced its plan to withdraw forces from Malaysia and Singapore, leaving them without the assurances of the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement.

In response, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Malaysia and Singapore agreed to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). These required all parties to consult on required action should Malaysia or Singapore be threatened with external attack. Both nations had virtually no naval or air defence capability. As an interim measure Australia committed two Mirage squadrons and support units to Butterworth as the mainstay of the IADS to deter external aggression. Under the command of an Australian Air Vice Marshall it became operational on 1 September 1971. The commander had 'emergency powers to employ assigned forces of all five countries to meet a surprise attack'. The FPDA came into effect on 1 October with the formal agreements being signed on 1 December 1971.¹

Twelve months earlier Ench Zain Azraai bin Zainal Abidin, Under Secretary to the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told Australia's Deputy High Commissioner, A.D. Campbell, that 'air defence was the one, and really the only, area where Malaysia's defence forces needed supplementing by visiting forces'.² This was reflected in the Malaysian/Australian agreement of 1 December:

The Government of Malaysia agrees that the Australian force stationed at Butterworth, composed of two squadrons of fighter aircraft and their supporting units and from time to time an infantry company, may continue to be stationed there, so long as that is mutually agreed, in accordance with the purposes expressed in the Five-Power Communiqué of the 16th of April, 1971. With the object of securing mutual agreement, the Government of Australia and the Government of Malaysia will consult together over any proposal to alter the size or character of that force.³

Malaysia believed the FPDA and the RAAF presence at Butterworth was consistent with its non-aligned stand. Reporting on the meeting with Zain, Campbell told Canberra that

For the present, however, Malaysian officials accepted that their proposals for neutralising the region under great power guarantees were unrealistic. In any event, neutral countries as well as others had an inherent right to make purely defensive Arrangements for themselves and this is what the Five Power

1 Carlyle A. Thayer, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 3, 2007, pp. 79-81.

2 A.D. Campbell, Australian Deputy High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, Record of Conversation with Ench Zain Azraai bin Zainal Abidin, Under Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 December 1970, NAA A4359, 221/4/31/4 Pt 2.

3 Five Power Defence Arrangements, Exchange of Notes between Australia and Malaysia, Signed on behalf of both Governments by Y.B Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen Al - Haj bin Tengku Ismail, P.M.K. (Tengku Sri Mara Raja), Deputy Minister of Defence, Malaysia, and H.E. Mr. J.R. Rowland, High Commissioner for Australia, 1 December 1971, NAA A6534, 1971/21.

arrangements represented to Malaysia - a self-defence system for Malaysia itself not directed against any other countries or, indeed, involving any country outside the Five Power group.⁴

The agreement permitted the presence of an Army Company 'sometimes, but not regularly'.⁵ Three months after the agreement was signed, correspondence on behalf of Sir Arthur Tange, Secretary of the Department of Defence, confirmed a permanent army company at Butterworth as a ready-reaction force. Training, he observed, was used to cover its true security role.

... In addition, Malaysian reluctance having been overcome, the ANZUK force will now provide one infantry company on rotation through Butterworth on a full-time basis, ostensibly for training, flag-showing and a change of scene. The presence of this company will provide the Commander with a ready-reaction force which he can use *inter alia* to supplement elements available to him under the joint Malaysian-RAAF Plan, but short of an actual overt breach of security the Commander cannot use these troops for guard or other security duties.⁶

Tange's letter highlighted Australian concern regarding Malaysia's ability to protect Australian assets, acknowledging a higher level of risk than it would normally accept.

Given the division of responsibilities agreed with the Malaysians, the fact that the Base is their property and occupied by them, and the sensitivity of the matter - especially the performance of their personnel - it is recognised that security standards at the base will continue to fall short of those we should like to obtain. We must accept, in remaining at Butterworth, a higher degree of risk than we would if the Base were under the exclusive control of the RAAF.⁷

This deception of training to hide the real purpose of the army deployment to Butterworth under the pretense of training continued as the security situation deteriorated.

4 A.D. Campbell, Australian Deputy High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, Record of Conversation with Ench Zain Azraai bin Zainal Abidin, Under Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 December 1970, NAA A4359, 221/4/31/4 Pt 2.

5 Cambridge English Dictionary, definition 'from time to time'.

6 Arthur Tange, Secretary, Department of Defence, Security of Butterworth, 71/316e, 2 March 1972. NAA A703, 566/2/148 Pt 5.

7 Arthur Tange, Secretary, Department of Defence, Security of Butterworth, 71/316e, 2 March 1972. NAA A703, 566/2/148 Pt 5.



Image 1: Air Base Butterworth with Penang in the distance. RAAF Sabre jets lined up along the main runway also used by the RMAF operational aircraft..

Source: Russell Linwood.

The Early Years

Following their defeat in the 1948-60 Emergency the Malayan communists withdrew to the Southern border region of Thailand. Here, in relative safety, they regrouped, rebuilt, trained, and prepared to renew their campaign to control Malaysia.⁸ The SME commenced on 17 June 1968 with an attack on a Malaysian police convoy close to the Thai border in which 17 police officers were killed.⁹ In the early years they focused on rebuilding their underground networks and supply structures throughout

8 Ong Weichong, *Malaysia's Defeat of Armed Communism: The Second Emergency, 1968-1989*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p. 49.

9 Lim Cheng Leng and Khor Eng Lee, *Waging an Unwinnable War: The Communist Insurgency in Malaysia (1948-1989)*, Xlibris, 2016, p. xxxi.

10 Ong, *Malaysia's Defeat of Armed Communism*, p. 53.

Peninsular Malaysia, testing themselves against Malaysian security forces and used their successes for propaganda purposes.¹⁰ The communist actions, according to Ong Weichong and Kumar Ramakrishna, evolved into ‘a serious security threat’ to the Malaysian government that included ‘assassinations, sabotage and bombings against government personnel ... [and] open bloody battles’.¹¹ Australia’s senior military officers, meanwhile, were considering the security situation before the IADS and FPDA came into effect.

In March 1971 Australia’s high commissioner in Kuala Lumpur, J.R. Rowland, raised the Butterworth situation with Canberra. Concerns over operations against the communists in the nearby border area – about 80 kilometres away – were heightened by the discovery of communist camps near Kulim - approximately 20 kilometres - and evidence they were moving back into what had been a ‘bad area’ during the Emergency. He foresaw circumstances that he believed could make Butterworth an attractive future target. These included reprisals to increasing Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) operations against the terrorists or a politically motivated attack against the Mirages as the enemy considered Butterworth a foreign base.¹²

On 11 March 1971 *The Herald* carried the story ‘Our Defences are Down’, written shortly after the communists had bombed a bridge close to the Butterworth Air Base.¹³ Approximately six weeks later the Canberra News claimed the Base was vulnerable to attack by the terrorists.¹⁴ Both alleged the Base was ill-prepared to cope with the communist threat. Other documents in the Department of Air file,¹⁵ holding copies of these articles, show Butterworth security was under active consideration. Nonetheless these reports, along with one other, are referenced in the first of two reports prepared by Wing Commanders J.A. Downie SR (GD) (Senior Ground Defence) and R.D. Barnes PM (Provo Marshall) as illustrating the publicity given to the situation in Australia.¹⁶ Recognising the available intelligence on file in

11 Ong Weichong and Kumar Ramakrishna, ‘The “forgotten” insurgency that failed’, *Malaysian Insider*, 15 October 2013; www.themalaysianinsider.com/sideviews/article/the-forgotten-insurgency-that-failed-ong-weichong-and-kuma-ramakrishna

12 J.R. Rowland, Australian High Commissioner Kuala Lumpur, Air Base Butterworth - Security, 207/2/2, 11 March 1971, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

13 Up to 30 June 1903 some 390,261 medals and 982,070 clasps had been issued - Hansard; Commons Sitting; 14 July 1903, Vol 125 c572

14 ‘Our Vulnerable Base’ *The Canberra News*, 22 April 1971, pp. 5-6.

15 RAAF Butterworth – Ground defence plans, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

16 Security of Australian Personnel and Assets - Air Base Butterworth, 564/8/28, 6/10/1PM Pt1 (53), 27 April 71, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

17 Security of Australian Personnel and Assets - Air Base Butterworth, 564/8/28, 6/10/1PM Pt1 (53), 27 April 71, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

18 Report of Visit by SR(GD) and PM to Headquarters Air Base Butterworth 4th to 12th May 1971, 564/8/28, 25 May 1971, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

Australia was incomplete,¹⁷ a visit to Butterworth in May was arranged to allow a more detailed second report.¹⁸

They noted that the Malaysian political and security situation had been unstable since the end of the 1948-60 Emergency. Riots in 1967 and 1969 had culminated in the formation of the National Operation Committee while dissident action in the Kulim district had drawn attention to the possible vulnerability of Butterworth.¹⁹ While considering the likelihood of Butterworth being targeted was low, they noted 'the possibility of attacks cannot be ignored'. While Malaysia was responsible for peacetime security Australia had assumed responsibility for the security of its own assets as requested by Malaysia. The RAAF relied primarily on its own resources to secure its interests. Other sources, such as the Australian Army element at Butterworth and the Malaysian Military Police (MMP), responsible for 'entry control and part of the normal base patrol measures' could not be relied on.²⁰ The Malaysian Ministry of Defence had advised that the MMP could be 'withdrawn by a higher authority in part or in toto in an internal security situation', something the authors saw as 'a most unsatisfactory situation for the base commander'. The future of Commonwealth forces at Minden Barracks on Penang was uncertain and the presence of an Army Company could not be guaranteed owing to planned and unplanned absences.²¹

The ambiguity surrounding Base defence plans was also of concern. The RMAF and SSP were not integrated into the RAAF plans meaning, in effect, there were 'three relatively unco-ordinated agencies concerned with base defence'. It was essential, they wrote, that 'the base be treated as an entity for the purpose of defence planning'.²² Their recommendations included an Australian or ANZUK army company be available to the OC Butterworth at all times he considered it necessary or, alternatively, two flights of RAAF Airfield Defence guards be permanently deployed to the base; and the finalisation of a shared defence agreement for the base without delay.²³ The shared defence plan, dated 8 September 1971, placed all forces, Malaysian and Australian, under the command of the RAAF Officer Commanding.²⁴

Barnes and Downie believed the Mirages were vulnerable, noting 'the aircraft are lined wing tip to wing tip ... Under these arrangements any destructive

19 Security of Australian Personnel and Assets, A703, NAA 564/8/28 Pt 3.

20 Security of Australian Personnel and Assets, A703, NAA 564/8/28 Pt 3.

21 Security of Australian Personnel and Assets, A703, NAA 564/8/28 Pt 3.

22 Report of Visit by SR(GD) and PM to Headquarters Air Base Butterworth 4th to 12th May 1971, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

23 Report of Visit by SR(GD) and PM to Headquarters Air Base Butterworth 4th to 12th May 1971, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

24 Operation Order No 1/71, Shared Defence of Air Base Butterworth, 8 September 1971, NAA 561/19/21 Pt 1.



Image 2: RCB troops maintain day and night surveillance of the perimeter fence from atop the Traffic control tower.

Source: Russell Linwood.

action affecting one ... could spread to others'. However, they considered 'protective measures such as revetment would be extremely costly and could be misconstrued by the local population'.²⁵ Revetments were constructed a few years later.²⁶

In January 1973 the Defence Committee, Australia's peak defence decision making body, considered the implications of the planned withdrawal of the Australian battalion from Singapore. One decision was to advise Australia's ANZUK partners that the practice of providing an army company from Singapore to Butterworth 'for security duties' would be replaced a company rotated from Australia. The deception, noted by Tange in March 1972,²⁷ would continue with all

25 Report of Visit by SR(GD) and PM to Headquarters Air Base Butterworth 4th to 12th May 1971, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

26 Attached to: AUSTEO, 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', Para 21, attached to Hamilton R.N, A/First Assistant Secretary Strategic and International Policy Division, Review of Butterworth Deployment, 22 October 1976, Reference: DEF 270/1/4. NAA A1838, 696/4/4/5 Pt 3.

27 A.H. Tange, Secretary, Department of Defence, Security of Butterworth, 71/316e, 2 March 1972, NAA A703, 566/2/148 Pt 5.

28 Defence Committee, Minute of meeting held on 11 January 1973, Five Power and ANZUK Arrangements and Withdrawal of Australian Battalion and Battery, Agendum No. 1/1973, Minute 2/1973, 11 Jan 1973, NAA 7942, F59.

public references to the need of training.²⁸

A secret minute of the Chiefs of Staff meeting on 28 June 1973 confirmed security as the Army's prime role and concluded it should be placed under the control of the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) RAAF Butterworth:

In noting that COMANZUKFOR [Commander ANZUK Forces] would have no command or control responsibilities towards the Australian Army Company providing security at Butterworth, CGS suggested that the Company be placed under AOC Butterworth. CAS considered that the AOC should have appropriate authority to control the use of the Company for the protection of the RAAF Base, as this was the primary task of the Company.²⁹

In July Army Headquarters in Canberra instructed 'the line to be taken in discussing the role of company, particularly with troops involved, should be that deployment of company provides an opportunity for training and developing the elements of RAAF at Butterworth.' This changed the emphasis then given to security. It further stated that the rotation accorded 'with Australian national policy of deploying troops overseas for training exercises' while making it clear the RCB would 'have a continued responsibility for the protection of Australian assets, property and personnel within the perimeters of Air Base Butterworth'.³⁰ The 'line to be taken in discussing the role of company, particularly with troops involved' was clearly an instruction to keep the troops ignorant of the deployment's true nature. However, the order reaffirmed the primary, but unpublished, role for the 'continued responsibility for the protection of Australian assets, property and personnel within the perimeters of Air Base Butterworth'. This accorded with the decisions recorded in the Secret Minutes of both the Australian Defence Committee of 11 January 1973 and the Chiefs of Staff of 28 June 1973.

Plan Asbestos, issued by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, authorized the deployment of the company from Australia. It required the Army to ensure the deployment met training standards 'required by OC RAAF Butterworth in matters associated with the security duties of the company'. Further, the company was placed under the Operational Control of the OC RAAF who exercised administrative control for transport, leave, off-base movement and general conduct.³¹ This directive ensured the Army was properly trained and available to the OC RAAF whenever

29 Chiefs of Staff Committee, Minute of meeting held on 28th June 1973, Agendum No. 24/1973, Minute 38/1973, 28 June 1973. DMOP File 307-H-2 pt 1.

30 Army Canberra to MILCOMD Sydney, Rotation of the AS Rifle Co at Air Base Butterworth, OPS 24851, 25 July 1973.

31 Chiefs of Staff Committee, Australian Joint Service Plan, AJSP No. 1/1973, Plan Asbestos, File Ref. 71/1511, August 1973, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

required for security purposes.

The sensitivity of the situation was again reflected in an October 1973 report of the unnamed Vice Chief of General Staff (VCGS) on his return from Butterworth.

The deployment of this company to Butterworth has in recent years assumed a real importance because of security. Although the Malaysians may be expected to have assumed that this is the case, publicly and privately the position is maintained on both sides that the deployment is for exercise purposes. [underscoring in original]³²

The VCGS also reported on the difficulties arranging training exercises with the Malaysians. While the host nation 'would be very happy to participate in combined exercises' they had 'no formal training programme of Army training exercises in the area ... however, opportunities will probably come about for the company to take part on an ad hoc basis in a number of minor training activities with Malaysian troops'. The first deployment from Australia took place at the end of August that year and was due to be replaced in December.³³ Clearly the cost of a permanent deployment from Australia for ad hoc minor training opportunities does not add up. It only makes sense within the context of the military threat to Butterworth.

The Conflict Intensifies

Following an acrimonious split resulting in the emergence of three communist factions, 1974 saw an eruption of 'spectacular acts of revolutionary violence as each CPM faction vied for the legitimacy and leadership of the communist movement in Malaysia and Singapore'. Factions 'tried to outdo each other in open battle with the government and among themselves'. By July 1974 Wing Commander J.I. Brough, reported the RCB understood its primary task was the security of Australian 'assets, property and persons' and not training as it had previously believed. Brough noted that for 'political reasons it was not possible to state this in low security classification documents'.³⁵

Increased security measures were introduced at Butterworth following rocket attacks on the RMAF Base near Kuala Lumpur on 31 March and a military

32 Defence Planning Division, VCGS Visit to Malaysia, The Butterworth Company, 11 October 1973. Directorate of Military Operations and Plans File # 307-H-2. Subject Army Detachments to Butterworth.

33 Defence Planning Division, VCGS Visit to Malaysia, The Butterworth Company, 11 October 1973.

34 Ong, *Malaysia's Defeat of Armed Communism*, p. 61.

35 ARA Infantry Coy at But, 11 October 1974. NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.



Image 3: Quick Reaction Force from D Company 6 RAR following a turn out to an alert on the northern end of the Air Base Butterworth.
Source: Russell Linwood.



Image 4: RAAF Mirage fighter in protected revetments built in the mid-1970s to increase protection against CT indirect rocket and mortar attack.
Source: Russell Linwood.



Image 5: QRF squads from B Coy 1 RAR fully armed with personal weapons and some carrying extra heavy weapons by day in a show of strength to deter CT attack. .

Source: Russell Linwood.



Image 6: Due to the expectation of casualties, every RCB rotation included extra medics and medical evacuation drills were practiced regularly including with the on-base RAAF SAR helicopter flight.

Source: Russell Linwood.

establishment on Penang on 1 April 1975 and advice received from the RMAF regarding 'possible threats to Butterworth'. These included 'controlled access to the base and vehicle search, dispersal of aircraft and patrols on aircraft lines. The RMAF ... also planned dispersal of their aircraft to other bases'. The Chief of Air Staff (CAS), Air Marshall Rowland, advised the Minister that the 'period of tension is expected to last until at least 22 April and probably for another month'.³⁶ Following communist activity close to the Base the Air Office was advised of 'Increased security consisting of 5 standing patrols of half section strength deployed during hours of darkness, one section picket of aircraft lines and AIRMOV (Air Movements) area and normal ready reaction section will continue until at least 8 August 75'.³⁷

On 4 September 1975 the *Straits Times* reported a series of incidents throughout the year. Rocket attacks on military and police bases around the country, targeted assassinations of police Special Branch officers, 'particularly in Perak but also in Kuala Lumpur and further south', the bombing of the National Monument and, the day before, a hand grenade attack on Field Force Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur as the officers assembled for their morning parade.³⁸ These targeted attacks were in stark contrast to the start of the first Emergency when the communists 'unrestricted reign of terror ... proved to be a misjudgment' alienating the population. Prime Minister Tun Razak said the enemy had 'launched a seven-year campaign to seize control' and were building to the next stage of their strategy to 'engage in protracted war'. He believed the "new emergency" could be won before they reached that stage.³⁹

On 7 October Air Marshall Rowland informed the Minister regarding events at Butterworth. He attached the current Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) threat assessment to which Air Office had added its comments. Noted were:

the upgrading in training and military status of the CTO [Communist Terrorist Organisation] ... a significant diversification of, and increase in, the forces available with a capability of launching an attack against Air Base Butterworth ... a marked increase in recent months in the use of modern weapons by the CTO including M16 rifles, 7.62 SLR, 9 mm sub-machine guns, and M79 grenade launchers ... evidence of 81/82 mm mortars

and the fact the 'CTO also appears to have a quantity of 3.5 inch rockets which they have used during the past six months in attacks against military installations'.⁴⁰

36 CAS Butterworth Base Security, 418/4/12, 3 April 75, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

37 HQBUT, Siterep Butterworth and North Peninsular Malaysia, DCR 005/05, 7 August 75, NAA 564/8/28 Pt 8.

38 'Red Strategy', *The Straits Times*, 4 September 1975, p.12.

39 'Red Strategy', *The Straits Times*, 4 September 1975, p.12.

40 CAS Security of Butterworth, 7 October 1975, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

Air Office summarised the situation as follows:

The security situation in Malaysia has deteriorated in the past year, particularly during the past six months. The CTO has become bolder in its actions and has been willing to attack military installations with 3.5 inch rockets for the first time. Malaysian intelligence authorities have commented on the upgrading in training and militant status of the CTO and the CT determination and enterprise in confronting the Malaysian security forces.

There is no evidence to suggest that Air Base Butterworth will be singled out as a target for attack in preference to another military installation in future operations but, equally, there is no reason to suppose that the Base will be excluded from attack in preference to others.

The CTO has demonstrated his capacity to mount operations against the security forces during the past year. Based on these incidents, there is an increased likelihood of attack on Air Base Butterworth - probably by use of 3.5 inch rockets. There is a lesser probability of an attack using mortars.⁴¹

Rowland expanded on the implications of possible rocket and mortar attacks:

The recent intelligence information concerning possible CTO [Communist Terrorist Organisation] intentions to launch rocket attacks on bases in Malaysia increases our concern regarding the security of areas around the base. Intelligence sources consider there is a possibility that CTs [Communist Terrorists] have or are able to obtain 81/82mm mortars to supplement their known supplies of 3.5 inch rockets. Mortars are crew served weapons which are accurate area weapons of considerable destructive force against targets at maximum ranges of 4,700 metres. The attached map shows that at a range of 3000 metres from the Butterworth Base, a perimeter of 16,000 metres is formed. To compound the problem of defence, the area within the perimeter includes a large number of Malaysian houses, a network of roads and several hectares of padi-fields, all of which offer CTO assembly and firing bases.⁴²

He expressed concern at the lack of security surrounding the Base. The 6th Malaysian Infantry Brigade, responsible for off base security, was engaged in operations over an 80 square mile (approximately 210 square kilometre) area with 'no units allotted for the defence of the area surrounding the base' and a lack of any known plan to respond to security threats to it. Although the CAS believed a minimum of two battalions were necessary to provide an effective deterrent, he recommended that the Minister request the Malaysian Prime Minister to 'allocate at least one battalion

41 CAS Security of Butterworth, 7 October 1975, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

42 CAS Security of Butterworth 554/19/33 (87), 7 October 75, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

to the area immediately surrounding Butterworth for area defence'. A week later Air Vice Marshall N.P. McNamara, the Deputy Chief of Air Staff (DCAS) informed the DJS (Defence Joint Service, a high level Defence committee) that

base planning has taken into account the requirement for blast shelters should the situation deteriorate further. The requirement for blast protection of aircraft against ground burst weapons and small arms fire together with aircraft dispersal is currently under review.⁴⁴

The DCAS also warned that to 'ignore the threat of attack is to risk an extremely high loss in terms of assets with attendant military ignominy, and in terms of political, psychological gains for the CTO'.⁴⁵

Interestingly, a draft brief prepared for the DCAS regarding Butterworth security observed an 'increase in the level of defence preparedness including signs of defensive works against rocket attacks' could result in '[a]gitation for the withdrawal of RAAF units from Butterworth; or at least dependent families ... Such a "withdrawal" would be politically advantageous to the CTs and potentially damaging to Australia's prestige in SEA'.⁴⁶ The October 1975 JIO study, 'The Security of Air Base Butterworth', identified a 'distinct threat ... to Australian personnel and their dependents' from 'the use of booby-traps and minor acts of sabotage'. RAAF married quarters next to the Base were identified as likely targets.⁴⁷ Despite concerns both in 1971 and late 1975 over the construction of defensive works the October 1976 draft 'RAAF Presence at Butterworth' noted: 'Action has recently been taken to construct revetments to give some protection to the Australian aircraft at Butterworth against attack'.⁴⁸

These increased concerns regarding the security of Butterworth coincided with the eruption of terrorist activity. It also exposed Australia to the potential of significant political embarrassment. It was 'well into 1977', according to Weichong Ong, that the Security Forces began countering the terrorists 'at the tactical level' while the enemy stubbornly pursued 'all-out armed struggle' into 1981.⁴⁹ As late as 1983, historian Richard Clutterbuck believed, a potential threat remained from a disaffected 'Chinese population which could arise from the strains of an economic

43 CAS Security of Butterworth, 7 October 1975, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

44 Butterworth Security, 14 October 1975, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

45 Butterworth Security, 14 October 1975, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

46 Brief for DCAS Concerning Security of Butterworth, 564/8/28, which appears to be an attachment to SRGD-AF Security Butterworth, 554/9/33, 3 October 1975, NAA 564/8/28 Pt 8.

47 'The Security of Air Base Butterworth', JIO Study No. 13/75, October 1975, NAA 696/4/5 Pt 3.

48 Attached to: AUSTEO, 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth,' Para 21, attached to Hamilton R.N, A/First Assistant Secretary Strategic and International Policy Division, Review of Butterworth Deployment, 22 October 1976, Reference: DEF 270/1/6. in NAA A1838, 696/4/4/5 Pt 3.

49 Ong, *Malaysia's Defeat of Armed Communism*, pp. 65-66.

recession, or from political exasperation caused by excessive discrimination against the Chinese, or from an explosion of racial trouble such as occurred in May 1969'.⁵⁰

Political Risk

Australia's commitment to the FPDA was intended to show its support for the region and a willingness to be involved in regional security. That included a preparedness to expose its troops to danger.⁵¹ In 1976 the Department of Defence developed a paper in preparation for a review of the Australian presence at Butterworth by the Australian and Malaysian governments at the end of that year. The paper acknowledged that political developments in the region and the significant development of Malaysian and Singaporean defence capability meant the Mirage deployment had largely achieved its objectives. Its continuing presence exposed Australia to what may have been unwanted risk.⁵²

Butterworth was considered to be a potential communist target. Used by the RMAF 'for counter-terrorist operations' it was also the 'closet major airbase' to their bases.⁵³ The risk of attack, especially a surprise 'one of short duration by light mortars or rockets' was deemed possible, if unlikely.⁵⁴ Two-thirds of Australia's tactical fighter force, or around 20 per cent of the RAAF's operational command was exposed.⁵⁵ If an attack occurred or was expected, Malaysia's priorities may have been determined by operational requirements and not necessarily the protection of Butterworth.⁵⁶ Malaysia had the option of moving its aircraft to other bases - an option not available to Australia - and may not have sought the same level of protection for their own fleet.⁵⁷

This situation would likely have caused concern in Australia, including public pressure on the Government. Australia could have been in a difficult position. Malaysia was highly unlikely to accept more Australian troops given their staunch opposition to the involvement of foreign forces in the insurgency. Australia likewise wanted to avoid being drawn into the internal security situation 'without assurance of significant support by other allied forces and with unpredictable consequences'. The situation may have been beyond Australia's capacity.⁵⁸

Any withdrawal in the face of a military threat or political pressure may have

50 Richard Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence In Singapore And Malaysia, 1945-1983*, Graham Brash, Singapore, 1984, p. 288.

51 Five Power Arrangements: Command and Control - Departmental Working Paper, NAA A4359, 221/4/31/4 Pt 2.

52 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

53 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

54 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

55 'Review of RAAF Presence at Butterworth', 10 Sept 1976, NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 3.

56 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

57 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.



Image 7: Warning signs that left no doubt what would happen, complementing the decisive Rules of Engagement were positioned along the entire airbase perimeter
Source: Russell Linwood.

had negative consequences for both nations. The withdrawal of Australian forces or a refusal to allow them to be used in an operational deployment would be seen as a failure to honour an agreement. Australia stood to lose credibility in the region. On the other hand, a withdrawal may well have undermined ‘international confidence in Malaysia’s ability to handle its security problems’,⁵⁹ a lose-lose situation for both nations.

RAAF Presence Valued

As the review was being prepared, Group Captain J.R. MacNeil, Defence Advisor in Kuala Lumpur, presented his views on the matter to his superiors, the High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner, for passage to Canberra. He believed Malaysia valued the Australian presence at Butterworth and ‘might wish the force to stay, under present conditions, because of the assistance it gives to Malaysia’ in different ways. The RAAF, he wrote, assisted

... the RMAF in running the largest of the four RMAF bases in West Malaysia
... Because of its location and size Butterworth is very important to Malaysia in its efforts to contain the CPM [Communist Party of Malaya] forces, and withdrawal of the RAAF, or significant reduction in its size, would markedly reduce the effectiveness of the base and/or require large diversions of RMAF effort to Butterworth from other bases. The general level of achievement of

58 ‘The RAAF Presence at Butterworth’, DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

59 ‘The RAAF Presence at Butterworth’, DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

the RMAF would drop if there was any large reduction in RAAF strength at Butterworth.⁶⁰

Australia's presence at Butterworth enabled the Malaysian Air Force to more effectively conduct operations against the enemy from the base.⁶¹ The Shared Defence Plan protecting Australian and Malaysian assets was under the command of the Officer Commanding RAAF Butterworth.⁶² The QRF provided by the Australian Army Company was activated as required to respond to possible enemy threats, including picket duty and being deployed as standing patrols.⁶⁴ This was of real benefit to Malaysia.

Was This Qualifying Service?

In 2014 the Rifle Company Butterworth Review Group petitioned the House of Representatives Parliamentary Petitions Committee for a review of their service. In response, the Department of Defence's Nature of Service Branch (NOSB) developed a paper for the Committee's information. It claimed a senior researcher had conducted extensive and thorough research into RCB service. This included 'all available official documentation held at the War Memorial and National Archives Australia'. While Defence acknowledged a level of threat existed, it assiduously avoided high level previously classified secret documents showing the company's prime security role. NOSB downplayed the threat, emphasizing the 'training' role in what can only be described as selective use of data.⁶⁵ Colonel Murray Thompson, Acting Director General Military Strategic Commitments, told a Committee hearing into the matter on 29 October 2014:

There was a communist insurgency, but it was extremely low level. It was actually along the border areas of what is now Thailand, and certainly by the mid-seventies it would be described as banditry more than a comprehensive insurgency. There were very limited attacks on any Malaysian constabulary,

~~because it was a police action. The military were not deployed against them –~~
 60 'Review of RAAF Presence at Butterworth', 10 Sept 1976, NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 3.

61 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

62 Shared Defence of Air Base Butterworth, Operation Order No.1/71, NAA A703, 565/19/21

63 Commanding Officers' reports – Monthly reports unit history sheets (A50) – Base Squadron, Butterworth, 1944-1988, NAA A9345, 75.

64 HQBUT, Sitrep Butterworth and North Peninsular Malaysia, DCR 005/05, 7 August 75, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

65 Background Paper, Parliamentary Petition, 3 March 2014, Rifle Company Butterworth 1970-1989. Nature of Service Branch, 28 April 2014, Para. 19.

66 Testimony of Colonel Murray Thompson, Acting Director General Military Strategic Commitments, VCDF Group, Department of Defence. Canberra, 29 October 2014.

Commonwealth of Australia, Official Committee Hansard, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Petitions, 'Petition on reclassification of service by the Rifle Company Butterworth 1970-89'.

only very occasionally.⁶⁶

Thompson's statement is clearly false as demonstrated in this paper. The eruption of violence in 1974 was followed by attacks on military and police installations and the targeted assassinations of Special Branch police officers throughout Peninsular Malaysia. This period saw increased security concerns at Butterworth, including the building of revetments to protect the Mirage fleet. Contrary to Thompson's claim the Malaysian Army conducted ongoing operations throughout the country for the duration of the war.⁶⁷

Thompson was introduced to the Committee by the Hon. Stuart Robert, Assistant Minister for Defence, 'as a subject matter expert'. Robert said Thompson could 'speak first hand on what was like to be there at the time' because he had lived at Butterworth with his parents.⁶⁸ Ignoring the fact it was called Thailand at the time and apparent confusion over on the meaning of 'constabulary', what qualifies a child to speak with authority on military and security matters? Further testimony supported this evidence.

Vice Admiral David Johnston, Vice Chief of the Defence Force repeated this line on 16 December 2019. He denied any 'state of war or military emergency ... in Malaysia after ... 11 August 1966', claiming defence personnel at Butterworth 'did not incur danger from hostile forces'.⁶⁹ Malaysia's armed forces were clearly engaged in operations against communist insurgents for the 21 years of the SME,⁷⁰ including operations from Butterworth.⁷¹ Australia's JIO recognised the vulnerability of the Base, service personnel and their families to communist attacks.⁷² Senior Defence officials knew they needed to act to save Australia from military ignominy⁷³ and to avoid unnecessary embarrassment to Australia and Malaysia diplomatically.⁷⁴

Justice Robert Mohr completed his 'Review of Service Entitlement Anomalies

67 Sharon Bin Hashim (ed.), *The Malaysian Army's Battle Against Communist Insurgency 1968-1989*, (trans. Mohamed Ghazemy Mahmud). Originally published in Malay as 'Tentera Darat Menentang Insurgency Komunis 1968-1989', Army Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, Kuala Lumpur, 2001, p. 113.

68 Commonwealth of Australia, Official Committee Hansard, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Petitions, 'Petition on reclassification of service by the Rifle Company Butterworth 1970-89', Testimony of Colonel Murray Thompson, Acting Director General Military Strategic Commitments, VCDF Group, Department of Defence. Canberra, 29 October 2014.

69 Letter, David Johnston, AO, RAN, Vice Admiral, Vice Chief of the Defence Force, to Mr Kenneth Marsh, EC19-006588, 16 December 2019. Personal File.

70 Hashim (ed.), *The Malaysian Army's Battle Against Communist Insurgency 1968-1989*, p.113.

71 Air Base Butterworth - Security, 207/2/2, 11 March 1971, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 3.

72 'The Security of Air Base Butterworth', JIO Study No. 13/75, October 1975, NAA 696/4/5 Pt 3.

73 Butterworth Security, 14 October 1975, NAA A703, 564/8/28 Pt 8.

74 'The RAAF Presence at Butterworth', DEF 270/1/4, in NAA A1838, 696/6/4/5 Pt 5.

in Respect of South-East Asian Service 1955-75' on behalf of the Australian Government in February 2000. He concluded that veterans qualified for the service pension or warlike service when the presence of an armed enemy is proven, or the troops are told they will be endangered by an enemy.⁷⁵ The Honourable John Clarke, QC, was tasked by the Government to take into account the development of repatriation legislation including historical and current provisions, parliamentary statements and court decisions.⁷⁶ In the 2003 'Review of Veterans' Entitlements', he concurred with Mohr, stating that

If then, the military authorities consider that a particular area is vulnerable to attack and dispatch armed forces there, they are sending forces into harm's way, or danger. This was the second point made by Mohr - that veterans ordered to proceed to an area where they are endangered by the enemy will not only perceive danger, but to them the danger will be an objective one based on rationale and reasonable grounds. In these circumstances, what the historian says he or she has learned since the war about the actual intention of the enemy is hardly relevant.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Australia's commitment to the FPDA incurred political and military risk from a resurgent communist insurgency. Additional security measures were implemented to protect the Mirage squadrons and Australian personnel at Butterworth as the communist threat intensified. These included the permanent deployment of an Australian Army infantry company as a quick reaction force. Owing to political sensitivities at the time the real purpose of the deployment was hidden under a pretense of training. While the Base was never attacked, possibly owing to the company's deterrent effect, the fact remains that personnel at Butterworth and their dependents incurred danger from the communist terrorist organisation. Based on available evidence, and contrary to Defence Department claims, Butterworth operated under warlike service conditions and veterans from the era are deserving of such recognition.

75 'Review of Service Entitlement Anomalies in Respect of South-East Asian Service 1955-75', 2000, pp. 8-10.

76 Review of Veterans' Entitlements, Appendix 1, Terms of Reference, 2003.

77 Review of Veterans' Entitlements, Chapter 11:60, 2003.