

## INDONESIAN CONFRONTATION OF MALAYSIA 1962-1966

### AN ADDRESS BY LTCOL (Retd) BRIAN AVERY

#### INTRODUCTION

*Lt Colonel Brian Avery saw active service in the Malayan Emergency with 3 RAR and 1 RAR from 1958 to 1960. He later graduated from the Officer Cadet School in June 1962.*

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#### BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

I have divided this presentation into three major parts. The first part will provide a general background to this undeclared war and how it affected the conduct of operations, the second part will briefly cover the entry of Australian forces into the conflict. The final part will deal with the actual operational defence of Malaysia against Indonesian confrontation.



to be called Malaysia.

It would be a constitutional monarchy with a king elected for a five year tenure by the nine Malay sultans (they appear to have forgotten the Sultan of Brunei).

Initially, the proposal was supported in the UN by the Indonesian Foreign Minister but in 1962, before unification could take place, a revolt took place in Brunei when the TNKU (National Army of North Borneo) rose against the sultan. The revolt was quickly put down by the British Army. The Sultan however subsequently withdrew Brunei from the proposed Malaysia, although he continued to provide support for the new federation. (Later, Singapore was expelled from the federation, but continued to take part as an ally in the campaign against Indonesian aggression.) Dr Soekarno, the President of Indonesia, now reversed the support for Malaysia and in late 1962 declared that it was simply a continuation of British imperialism – neo-colonial imperialism or *Necolim* to use the Indonesian penchant for portmanteau words. He further announced that Indonesia would launch *konfrontasi*, a diplomatic, economic and military campaign to 'crush Malaysia'. This campaign would last until changed circumstances within Indonesia and the obvious failure of the campaign led to peace talks and cessation of hostilities on 11 August 1966. At the end of the campaign, Indonesia had lost at least 1,000 military casualties and received back well over 1,000 POWs and internees. At least two Indonesian Hercules aircraft had been shot down – one carrying paratroopers - while British and allied forces casualties were quite low.

There are some aspects of this campaign which require comment before discussing actual operations. Firstly internationally, the aim of British and Malaysian publicity or propaganda was to provide a picture of tiny Malaysia fighting to preserve its independence against a much larger and more powerful foe, with some assistance from its British Commonwealth allies.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a general reaction against colonialism took place and Britain eventually adopted a policy of handing over most of its empire to self-rule and also adopted a policy of military withdrawal from the Far East. In the period from June 1948 to 1960, Britain had waged a campaign against a communist insurgency in Malaya, a part of its empire which consisted of two crown colonies (Penang and Malacca) and nine states ruled by Muslim Malay sultans. Other British possessions in the region included the separate crown colony of Singapore and three territories on the island of Borneo (Kalimantan to the Indonesians) – the Sultanate of Brunei and the two crown colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo (later retitled Sabah).

The communists in Malaya were ostensibly fighting to rid the country of its British masters. Britain, as a strategic policy, granted Malaya full independence in August 1957 and the Emergency as it was known ended officially in August 1960.

Soon after, the prime minister of Britain and the prime minister of Malaya (Tunku Abdul Rahman) announced that as part of the decolonisation process in the Far East, Malaya, Singapore and the three Borneo territories would be united into a single sovereign nation

If a contact occurred between Indonesian and Malaysian forces, it was reported as such but any other troops involved were simply reported as 'security forces' unless they had suffered casualties (can't hide deaths anonymously). This meant that there was little, if any, publicity about the nature of the campaign in the British or Australian media.

Secondly, many of the operations carried out, such as certain ground operations in Sarawak and Sabah, and air patrols from bases in West Malaysia against potential Indonesian targets in Sumatra, were highly classified and subject to the British Official Secrets Act until 1996. I could not write my history of 4RAR's tour of Borneo until after 1996. More about the nature of these classified operations later in the presentation.

Thirdly, the Indonesians themselves had little idea of the extent of their losses. Because of the decentralised nature of the Indonesian forces at the time, a divisional commander could easily conceal any embarrassing losses, and in many cases, the casualties in an action would be reversed. In one highly successful ambush in Borneo, Ghurkhas lost two men killed and in doing so killed at least thirty Indonesians. The latter were buried in Kalimantan and the local indigenous people were told the bodies were those of Ghurkhas, while the Indonesian general simply reversed the casualty numbers when reporting to Jakarta! After the conclusion of the peace talks, the Indonesians were completely surprised by the number of Indonesian prisoners and internees handed back.

Indonesians were told that the Malay people wanted nothing to do with neo-colonialism and would welcome Indonesian troops as 'liberators'.

Those troops who penetrated into either West or East Malaysia must have been perplexed when the first Malays they met immediately reported their presence to the authorities.

Soon after hostilities commenced, the British embassy in Jakarta was destroyed and the embassy staff were withdrawn.

The Australian ambassador then took on the role of *charge d'affair* representing the British government. At the time Australian forces were not engaged in military operations against Indonesia and later, when they were committed, this situation continued. Why? Probably because it was in the interests of both the British and the Indonesian governments to keep this diplomatic channel open. By 1964, however, it was an unusual situation at the least when Australian troops were engaged in operations against the Indonesians but full diplomatic contact between the two countries remained in place.

## **AUSTRALIA'S COMMITMENT TO CONFRONTATION**

In 1962, forces available to defend the new nation were quite slim. The Royal Malaysian Navy and the Royal Malaysian Air Force were miniscule, the navy mainly had inshore patrol craft and the air force did not possess any strike aircraft. The Malaysian army consisted of seven Royal Malay Regiment battalions and the equivalent of about four other battalions from Singapore, the former Sarawak Rangers and the multi-racial Federation Reconnaissance Regiment. Some artillery and engineers units existed. The British forces consisted of 17 Ghurkha Division in Malaysia and Singapore and a Ghurkha Brigade in Hong Kong, a total of eight Ghurkha battalions and four British battalions. There was also 28 Commonwealth Independent Infantry Brigade Group (28 Comwel Bde), consisting of a British, an Australian and a New Zealand infantry battalion, part of the Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (BCFESR) and not generally available for internal security operations. In any case, Indonesia was Australia's nearest neighbour and shared a common border with what was then the Australian territory of Papua-New Guinea.

The Malaysian Army rapidly expanded over the next few years to end up with about thirty infantry battalions (with a consequential watering down of its skill standards). To ease the burden, Tunku Abdul Rahman sought military assistance from New Zealand and Australia. Over the next four years, the British reinforced their commitment in Malaysia by deploying their Hong Kong based forces and by bringing troops from the United Kingdom and Germany, including a carrier-borne Royal Marine Commando Brigade. They also strengthened their air commitment, including the deployment to Singapore of their strategic nuclear-capable 'V' bombers and additional fighter aircraft.

After a short delay, New Zealand committed its forces to assist in the defence of Malaysia but for various reasons, the Australian government was unwilling to commit forces to the conflict. Indonesia's proximity to Australia may have been a factor, but also perhaps Britain needed to keep open its diplomatic channels through Australia. Probably the main reason however was the simple fact that Australian military forces were at a very low ebb. Ground forces in particular were scarce, with just three infantry battalions and the SAS Company RAR available. Two of the battalions were located in Australia but organised in such a way as to be incompatible with those of Britain, Malaysia and New Zealand.

By September 1963, the British prime minister lent his weight to Abdul Rahman's request for military assistance. The Australian government reluctantly agreed to limited aid. Small ships from the RAN were dispatched to assist in coastal surveillance and the RAAF fighter force at Butterworth in the north of West Malaysia was authorised to undertake protective air patrolling. The battalion at Terendak in Malacca was authorised to take part in operations on the Malay-Thai border against the remnants of the communist insurgency, thus freeing a British battalion for operations against the Indonesians.

In two significant additions to the Australian forces in Malaysia, a light air defence battery was sent to Butterworth to assist in its defence and an engineer squadron was dispatched to Sabah to undertake road construction tasks to improve mobility and logistics for the security forces there.

In late 1963, the Australian government announced the raising of a fourth infantry battalion, structured to serve in Malaysia and to replace 3 RAR, then serving with 28 Brigade. As confrontation was gradually escalated by the Indonesians, the Malaysian prime minister asked for further assistance, including a second battalion to reinforce, rather than replace, 3 RAR and

also a squadron of the newly-formed SAS Regiment. In the meantime, the Indonesians had undertaken a series of landings in West Malaysia and Singapore.

Approval was given for the battalion in Terendak to be used against any landings in the general area of Malacca. This latter approval was not long in testing. On 28 October 1964, a party of over fifty Indonesians landed at Sungei Kesang, near the border between Malacca and the neighbouring state of Johore. They were immediately reported by a local and a composite force from 28 Brigade was sent to counter the landing. Although this force included British and New Zealand personnel, it consisted mainly of 3 RAR men and was commanded by the CO 3 RAR, LtCol B A MacDonald. The Indonesians were bottled up in a swamp throughout the night and subjected to harassing mortar and machine gun fire to keep them awake. The next morning, 3RAR entered the swamp and captured the demoralised lot without casualties to either side. As a demonstration of the politics of this conflict, public relations film clips showed the captured troops being escorted by Malaysian troops, even though they had not played any part in the operation. In a breach of the official policy, their capture was reported internationally by Reuters as being by the Australian troops, much to the annoyance of the Malaysians. As an aside, the news appeared in the English language newspaper delivered the next morning to LtCol Colin East, an Australian infantry officer attending the Indonesian Command and Staff College at Bandung, much to the amusement of his fellow students!

Finally, the Australian government agreed to a more active role and Australian troops from 28 Brigade were deployed to Sarawak, in particular 3 RAR and 102 Field Battery RAA, in early 1965. In addition, in February 1965, 1 SAS Squadron was deployed from Perth to Sabah and served as part of the British 22 SAS Regt. When 3 RAR was replaced (not reinforced) by 4 RAR in September 1965, the latter battalion in due course would serve in the same area in Sarawak from April 1966 to the end of hostilities in August 1966. 2 SAS Sqn was deployed from Perth to Sarawak in early 1966 and its area of operations included the area assigned to 4RAR.

## **CONDUCT OF OPERATIONS**

The conduct of operations by Malaysia and its allies differed significantly between those in East Malaysia and those in West Malaysia/Singapore. Incursions into West Malaysia and Singapore could only take place by sea or air landings, ranging from small scale raids by commando type troops or infiltrating agents bent on sabotage or assassination, to larger scale parachute or seaborne landings.

Infiltration by small parties was easy because of the proximity of Indonesian islands to Singapore and southern Malaysian territory. Larger landings by necessity were easier to detect. In August 1964, for example, a seaborne landing at three points along the Straits of Malacca, involving 108 Indonesians, was launched at a distance of just eight miles from Indonesian territory. The landing at Sungei Kesang was launched from Sumatra but the distance across the strait at that point is barely forty kilometres. On 1-2 September 1965, two Indonesian C130 aircraft dropped 98 paratroopers into Johore at a place called Labis. All these incursions were successfully eliminated. A party of the troops involved in the Labis landing bumped into the headquarters of a Ghurkha company and killed four of them, including the Australian company commander, before a counter-attack accounted for all of the party. These troops were wearing British uniforms.

Another earlier landing in Johore surprised a platoon of the Singapore Infantry Regiment who had stopped for a swim. After haranguing them at length, they then murdered the Singaporeans. One man survived to tell the tale of what happened.

The security forces in West Malaysia had to undertake a number of tasks. First, constant surveillance by navy, air force and army was necessary to detect incursions, preferably before they could land. Second, there was a need to provide security at vital installations such as ports, airfields, water supply, electricity generation and so on, together with local stand-by forces to react quickly to any detected threat. Third, major infantry units were on short notice to move to counter any larger threat such as the Labis landing.

When an infantry company or battalion went out to train, armed only with blank ammunition, it also took with it a full first line supply of live ammunition in case it was redeployed from the exercise area to meet a real threat. In Terendak, armed patrols secured the beach at night and a rifle platoon was kept at fifteen minutes notice to move, fully armed and equipped to meet any minor incursion or at least delay a major one. I was reacted with my platoon in the middle of a monsoonal downpour one night when a landing was detected just north of the Terendak garrison. Fortunately, it was merely a party of smugglers going about their perfectly illegitimate business! They were apprehended and handed over to the Malaysian police without the necessity to fire a single shot.

East Malaysia provided a completely different scenario. The border between Sabah, Sarawak and Indonesian Kalimantan stretches over 1,300 kilometres. While in some areas, the border is easily recognisable as it follows a mountain ridge, for much of it the border is an ill-defined line through swamp or lowland jungle, completely indistinguishable. The imprecise border led to an unfortunate incident involving a British Army Scout helicopter which intended landing at Stass, one of the forward bases. Instead, it flew over the border and went to land at a forward Indonesian base, the pilot realised his mistake too late and he was shot down by a heavy machine gun, killing all on board.

At the time much of the island of Borneo – one of the largest islands in the world – was covered in rainforest, secondary jungle and swamp. Parts of it are quite mountainous, the highest mountain in South East Asia is Gunong Kinabalu, in Sabah. There are a large number of rivers which provide a major means of movement in an island with few roads, but along with the swamps are obstacles to foot movement. A significant number of the deaths in the security forces were from drowning, particularly with the Ghurkhas and British troops who tended to be poor or non-swimmers. The two Australians missing in action in Borneo were SAS (their bodies were only recently recovered) who are believed to have drowned crossing a river while evading an Indonesian follow-up. Most of the population are tribal, but with significant numbers of ethnic Chinese in the settled areas and also significant numbers of Malays. While the Malays and indigenous tribesmen were loyal to Malaysia and had little

respect for Indonesia, the Chinese ethnic population included a significant number of dissidents and harboured communists more sympathetic to the Indonesian cause.

In many areas, tribes located along the border were divided from their kinfolk, could no longer engage in cross-border trade and had difficulty in their normal pursuits of hunting, fishing and tending their subsistence, slash-and-burn crops. These people were suffering badly because of Confrontation. Wildlife abounded in Borneo and one unusual death was that of LCpl Dennehy of 2 SAS Sqn who was killed by a rogue elephant.

The problem facing security forces was how to stop infiltration over this porous border, with the scarcity of resources available. About twenty infantry battalions were deployed to Borneo at the peak. The most concentrated battalion, on the most direct approach to Kuching and the settled area around the Bau district, had a frontage of up to fifty kilometres. Some areas were so rugged and mountainous that only SAS and Gurkha troops could patrol in the area.

As an example of the type of activity carried out, an Indonesian RPKAD platoon raided the police station at Tebedu but were driven off. Undaunted, their CO sent them back, reasoning that a return raid would be unexpected.

This time they were successful, killing all the police in the station plus their families. This raid was led by an Indonesian officer who attended the Australian staff college in 1974.

Two major assets to support infantry were also in short supply; air support and fire support.

Helicopters were not available on anything like the numbers we became used to in Vietnam. Even in a period of peak activity, a battalion could expect perhaps two Whirlwind utility helicopters and one Belvedere medium lift helicopter. Sioux observation helicopters were flown by the British on a scale of two in an air platoon (infantry battalion) or three in an air troop (artillery or cavalry regiment). At Brigade level, a recce flight of six Westland Scout helicopters (like a small version of the Iroquois) was available on a limited basis to support infantry battalions. 3 RAR had no organic observation helicopters and needed to rely on the good graces of its British neighbours. In 1966, 4RAR was provided with its own recce flight of two Sioux but these were American aircraft, whereas the British Army flew Italian Bell-Agustas, made under licence, and completely incompatible with the Australian aircraft, resulting in technical support and interoperability problems.

Fire support was also very limited. In Borneo, an infantry battalion was usually supported by a British light battery of six L5 105mm pack howitzers. The limited range of these guns meant that over the distances covered by a battalion, the guns were usually deployed as a single gun in a forward company position, sometimes reinforced by a second gun, but rarely within range of any mutual support. When a patrol ventured out of gun range from the company base (an inevitable event), a temporary single gun position would sometimes be established as far forward as possible, but needing another infantry force to protect it. The forward company positions would usually have a section of the battalion's 81mm mortars, but these were most likely used only for local defence, given their limited range (a little over 5000 metres) and lighter projectile. Even the 105mm was limited in its effectiveness in heavy vegetation. The battalion located in the Bau area had the support of two British 5.5inch medium guns. Their greater range (13,500 metres) and much heavier shell were appreciated by those who got their welcome support but unfortunately, it was impossible with the air assets available to move them away from the few roads. Nevertheless, on 15 June 1965, Lt Byers of 3 RAR used these guns in support of his ambush, defeating an Indonesian counter-attack with devastating effect.

Offensive air support was non-existent, insofar as the daily patrols along the border by RAF Hunter and Javelin aircraft looked impressive and probably acted as a deterrent to the Indonesians, but as a platoon in contact on the ground had no way of getting in touch with the aircraft and there were no airborne forward air controllers, they could not be directed onto a ground target. They were effective in intercepting an Indonesian C130 over the South China Sea and shooting it down. The British forces at the time had no helicopter gunships.

How did the infantry and SAS operate in East Malaysia? As in West Malaysia, surveillance along the coast and the provision of ready reaction forces was necessary. The Malaysians also had a very effective police field force, a paramilitary force which could operate in the more urbanised and settled areas. The major focus of infantry operations, however, was to detect, intercept and destroy any incursion across the border. At this point, it may be timely to describe the enemy's forces. It is easy to see the Indonesian forces at the time as being little different to the conventional forces of almost any other developing country. The Indonesian forces were large and had developed from those forces which had fought for independence from the Dutch. Its higher command structure was complex and control from Jakarta was difficult. Local commanders had considerable autonomy and generally operated within a budget which provided scope not only for personal enrichment but also gave them the ability to conceal from Jakarta any possibly embarrassing result.

Besides the regular army, navy and air force, Indonesia also had a paramilitary police force (BRIMOB), some of whom operated in Borneo. Their navy and air force also had Special Forces, as did the army. There were also irregular forces including members of dissident groups from within East Malaysia and Indonesian irregulars. Training and effectiveness were quite diverse, with some troops displaying a high level of tactical competence, while others were almost completely ineffective. There are two organisations I should pick out here. Navy commandos – the KKO or *Korps Kommando Operasi* – were elite troops and tended to operate more in the maritime areas of Sabah. Another elite group was the RPKAD – army paracommandos, who some years later provided the infamous 'volunteer' organisation which invaded East Timor. The major regular army formations opposing us in Sarawak were the Siliwangi Division from Sumatra, originally commanded by general Nasution, a very effective force, and the Diponegoro Division, probably mainly Javanese, not so effective but still capable of fighting. The area also had elements of the RPKAD present.

The arms and equipment used by the Indonesian forces were a mixture of weapons from all over the world, but included the AK47 Kalashnikov and the AR15 Armalite, at a time when the Armalite was the new kid on the block. They also carried obsolete weapons captured from the Dutch and Japanese, and British and American weapons given to them to fight the

Japanese (including Australian Owen guns), in fact weapons from all over the world. A seven-man Indonesian patrol that walked past one of my observation posts in Kalimantan was carrying seven different weapons.

The Indonesians used an early American anti-personnel jumping mine, the M14, a predecessor of the mines used so effectively against the Australian task force in Vietnam, and a Czech mine which we called the chocolate box mine as it was about the size of the old Winning Post chocolate box. This mine was impossible to detect with a mine detector as it contained no metal parts. The Indonesians used these mines by scattering small numbers on trails or in areas they thought security forces would harbour, or scattered them behind them as they withdrew from contact to deter any follow-up. In 1965, 3RAR lost three Australians and an Iban tracker to the jumping mines.

During the Malayan Emergency, native trackers were provided from a unit known as the Sarawak Rangers. These men were trained soldiers, but after unification, they became the First Battalion Malaysian Rangers and were no longer available for tracking duties. Instead, each infantry battalion employed a number of Iban trackers who were contracted civilians, not trained soldiers. I had two attached to my platoon, good trackers but there were language and other problems associated with having these men along on patrol.

The security forces were equipped with the usual British range of weapons, with one exception. The British government purchased 20,000 5.56mm AR15 rifles – the forerunner to the M16 – and by 1965 these almost completely replaced the 7.62mm SLR in infantry and SAS units. The SLR was retained within the gun group of a rifle section so that the ammunition was the same for all three members. The standard British machine gun at the time was the L7 (MAG58) 7.62mm GPMG, similar to the M60, but sturdier and more reliable. Because of its weight and length, however, the MAG58 was usually kept as a defence weapon or carried occasionally for planned operations such as a riverine ambush. In its place, the section weapon was the L4A4 7.62mm LMG, an updated Bren: no spare barrel and a 30 round magazine which could be used on the SLR and the Bren would also take SLR magazines. One unusual weapon which was carried at first was the old two inch mortar, with ammunition made available from the Australian Cadet Corps.

It soon fell out of favour because of its weight and the scarcity of opportunity to use the weapon in jungle. My platoon never carried our mortar after the initial training on it.

Infantry mobility was generally by foot, a tedious process given the terrain and the individual loads being carried, usually in excess of 45 kilograms. Helicopters would be used where distance was too great, although their use could sometimes alert the Indonesians of the presence of a patrol. Given the number of helicopters available, to relieve a platoon at a forward helipad would take half a day. D Company 4RAR was in a blocking position straddling a valley between two mountains. It took five hours to bring the company to a central point with two Whirlwinds, reload them on to a single Belvedere and then ferry them back to our base. Even then, the clouds closed in and we had to leave two soldiers stranded on a mountain top overnight! Riverine patrols were mounted using aluminium landing craft and the British also introduced Hovercraft for patrols in suitable areas.

At intervals set back from the actual border, small fortified patrol bases were set up. Initially some of these bases were held by rifle platoons but after Indonesian attacks on these bases increased and a platoon base of 2 Para Regt was almost overrun, these bases became company bases. Usually, two platoons would be on patrol, leaving one platoon, the mortar section and the gun detachment to defend the base. Troops rested here, re-equipped, were fed fresh rations and prepared for their next operation. Some of the more critical bases also had sound ranging equipment and gun/mortar locating radars. These were used to counter Indonesian mortar and artillery harassing fire directed at forward bases. While my platoon was in base at Stass, we were subjected to fire from two Indonesian 75mm mountain guns. The sound ranging base picked up the first two rounds, the British 105mm gun crew went into action, landing their opening rounds just 50 metres from the Indonesian guns within about two minutes of the Indonesians opening fire. So effective was the counter-battery fire that the Indonesian gun crews abandoned their guns and hastily withdrew!

The normal operations from these bases comprised surveillance of the border to detect movement, and ambushes mounted at likely crossing points or routes likely to be used by border crossers. Australian troops were not allowed to undertake internal security operations but in June 1966, when an incursion of up to thirty infiltrators occurred, 4RAR undertook a cordon and search operation of an ethnic Chinese village, Tundong, in which it was thought some of the border crossers had taken refuge.

## **CLARET OPERATIONS**

The British high command in the Far East decided that, as a deterrent to Indonesian border incursions, they would take the war to the Indonesians by crossing the border in secret operations termed Claret operations. These deniable operations were highly classified, so that information on them even within a unit was concealed within that unit, and no publicity was given. A cover plan reported all troop movements as being within Malaysian territory and the Official Secrets Act was applied strictly so that it was thirty years before participants could disclose the events. Even the citation for the Ghurkha VC was falsified to show that he earned his VC during an attack on an Indonesian position within Sarawak when in fact the Indonesian position was 800 metres inside Kalimantan. One could ask how the Indonesians were able to develop a defended base within Sarawak. In a similar vein, the War Diaries and their supporting documents sent back to Australia for Australian units showed only locations within the cover plan – they are completely useless for any historian using them as a research basis. I was able to access the real documents from the British archives after 1996. Only the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister in Canberra knew of the Claret operations.

SAS were authorised to conduct surveillance operations up to 10,000 metres (and probably further) over the border to detect Indonesian bases, monitor their movements and generally gather intelligence. As British SAS (and the Australian and New Zealand SAS) operated under British doctrine, their patrols were normally only four men in strength so they avoided

contact and would return across the border if they believed their presence had been detected. SAS patrols sometimes lasted up to six weeks or even longer.

Infantry Claret operations, usually at platoon level, were initially authorised to penetrate only 5,000 metres into Kalimantan – later extended to 7,000 metres. That doesn't seem far but at 7000 metres, my patrol in May 1966 was out of gun range and had no chance of reinforcement, casualty evacuation or ammunition resupply.

Any casualties had to be carried back across the border before air evacuation could be provided. Artillery support could not be guaranteed even if within range, while air support was most improbable.

Infantry Claret patrols were carried out only by those battalions deemed to be capable of such hazardous independent operations by the Director of Borneo Operations – the GOC 17 Ghurkha Division. This excluded even some of the British units, although Australian and New Zealand battalions all undertook Claret operations. All Claret operations carried the personal approval of the general. Cross-border operations in 1965 were aggressive, designed to keep the Indonesians off balance by ambushing trails and rivers or by raiding their forward bases. The Ghurkha VC is an example of a raid on an Indonesian base. 3RAR had a number of highly successful ambushes in 1965. In one of these, a couple of diggers were wounded. Questioned by the press at the British military hospital in Kuching, they were astute enough not to reveal where they had been wounded, but one soldier commented that 'it was like shooting ducks on a pond', attracting some adverse comments about the Australian attitude to the enemy! Aggressive operations across the border were usually of a short duration. A target or ambush site was selected and once contact was initiated, the force withdrew back into Malaysia.

Once the peace talks started, an embargo was placed on Claret operations but the risk of continued Indonesian incursions led to their re-introduction in early 1966. These later Claret operations were limited to surveillance and contact was to be avoided where possible. The endurance of these surveillance operations tended to be longer than the more aggressive patrols, perhaps up to ten days. Each rifle platoon of 4 RAR carried out a Claret operation in 1966, limited to surveillance. 4 RAR also countered an incursion by about thirty Indonesians in June 1966, soon after all Claret operations had ceased. 2 SAS Sqn continued its deeper penetration patrols over extended periods.

Claret operations provided a problem for the junior officers charged with carrying them out. Once across the border, maps had almost no topographical information, making navigation difficult to say the least. Radio communications were problematic, given the nature of the VHF radios in use and the terrain. This was solved in part by establishing relay stations on high ground, but there were still extensive periods when communications were impossible, particularly when on the move, further heightening the risk to a patrol. The rations carried by infantry patrols were bulky and tended to limit a platoon's endurance. Lightweight rations were introduced in 1966 but these required significant quantities of water, strangely enough not always readily available even in rain forest.

## **THE END OF HOSTILITIES**

The peace accord between Malaysia and Indonesia came into effect on 11 August 1966. One of the conditions was that all non-Malaysian troops in Borneo had to be withdrawn within twenty eight days, a gigantic task given that almost 20,000 troops were involved.

An exception was made for the Australian engineers constructing roads in Sabah. On the night before they left their company base to return to Terendak, a platoon of D Coy 4 RAR was called out to the nearby village when a local reported that a party of Indonesians had entered the village. Hastily refilling magazines and priming grenades, the platoon moved to the village at midnight, returning to the base just in time to get on the helicopters evacuating the base. It turned out that it was merely a party of smugglers getting in early once normal cross-border traffic was permitted. Coincidentally, it was the same platoon that arrested the smugglers near Terendak earlier that year.

One other point, the role of National Servicemen. It is often claimed that the first National Servicemen to see active service were with 5 RAR on its first tour in Vietnam. In fact, the engineer squadron that went to Sabah in March 1966 included a number of National Servicemen on its strength. A party of forty National Servicemen were to join 4 RAR (a completely regular battalion at the time of its move to Sarawak) in April 1966, but first they had to complete a month of training at the British Jungle Warfare School at Kota Tinggi in Johore, finally joining the battalion in early May, where they were also joined by three National Service officers. Two of these officers and a number of the soldiers extended their service to accompany 4 RAR to Vietnam in 1968.

## **CONCLUSION**

I published my account of 4RAR's tour in Malaysia in 2001. Even though twenty Australian lives were lost in Confrontation, very little is generally known about this campaign. In part because of the Official Secrets Act, in part because of the general down-playing of publicity during the campaign and probably the focus of the Australian media on the widening conflict in Vietnam, little has been written about it and also possibly because of a reticence on the part of the Australian government to upset a large and powerful neighbour.

The amazing thing about Claret operations is that the soldiers complied with the directions not to discuss them with members of other platoons or companies, or even with their families. When I interviewed veterans, many of them assured me that they were in the only platoon to cross the border. In hindsight, I now know why at times I seemed to sit near the border for days on end with no apparent purpose. My task would have been to cross the border if directed to reinforce another platoon already there if it needed help. Similarly, while I was in Kalimantan, another platoon of my company would have been twiddling their collective thumbs in a prolonged ambush on the border.

The Queensland connection to Confrontation; 3 RAR moved to Malaysia in 1963 from Enoggera; 4 RAR returned to Australia in 1967 and was based in Enoggera while it prepared for its tour in Vietnam and then returned to Enoggera in 1969. 24 Construction Squadron RAE, based at Enoggera for many years, undertook a tour with the road construction project in Sabah. The CO of 3RAR in Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 was LtCol B A MacDonald, later Major General B A MacDonald DSO, who retired to Brisbane and was President of the Legacy Club of Brisbane in 1989 when I became a member of that Club. The officer attending the Indonesian college at Bandung was LtCol C H A East MBE, of the McDonnell and East family business.

One of just two National Service officers to serve in both Borneo and Vietnam was 2Lt P B Sheedy, MID, originally from the Granite Belt but now resident in Brisbane (it was Sheedy's identical twin brother who was ordered by the RSM of 4 RAR in Vietnam to grow a moustache as the RSM was 'sick of saluting private soldiers'. one of the RAAF fighter pilots flying air patrols out of Butterworth over the Straits of Malacca was Wing Commander Peter Smith, DFC, also retired to Brisbane and later became a president of Brisbane Legacy.

#### **FURTHER READING**

B Avery, Our Secret War. Defending Malaysia Against Indonesian Confrontation 1965-1967. Slouch Hat Publications, McCrae, 2001. **Available from the 4 RAR Association Qld Inc, \$45.00 plus \$10 postage, (07) 3273 7973**

P Dennis and J Grey, Emergency and Confrontation, Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950-1966. Allen and Unwin (in association with the Australian War Memorial), St Leonards. 2006.

N C Smith, Nothing Short of War, With the Australian Army in Borneo 1962-1966. Citadel Press, Hawthorn, 1999