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Australia's Confrontation with Indonesia and military commitment to Borneo, 1964–66

Lachlan Grant and Michael Kelly

In response to the newly formed Federation of Malaysia, in 1963 the government of Indonesia, led by President Sukarno, adopted a policy of '*Konfrontasi*' (Confrontation) with the new state. As a result of this new and dangerous situation, following continual requests by the Malaysian Government, in 1965 Australia deployed troops to the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak in North Borneo to help protect the borders from incursions by Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) insurgents. The events surrounding the Indonesian Confrontation of the Federation of Malaysia occurred against the backdrop of the escalating war in Vietnam, which has cast a long shadow over Australian experiences and memory of Confrontation.

The Vietnam War, lasting from 1955 to 1975 was the defining conflict of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. Australia had sent military advisers to Vietnam in 1962, and then on 29 April 1965 Sir Robert Menzies's Liberal Government announced the commitment of Australian troops. In June 1965, 1 Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) and supporting units arrived in Vietnam; by 1975 some 60,000 Australians

had served in the conflict, and over 500 were killed.¹ Yet at the time of Australia's escalation of commitment to the Vietnam conflict and the dispatch of 1RAR, Australia was most concerned about Confrontation and the possibility of open conflict with Indonesia. In unison, Australia was committed to curbing the expansion of communism in the region, supporting the new nation state of Malaysia and keeping good terms with its closest allies. In doing so, Australia trod a fine diplomatic path to avoid war with its neighbour and the largest state in Southeast Asia. Where Vietnam escalated and demanded a significant Australian commitment, Confrontation would evolve into a small conflict that petered out in August 1966, costing the lives of 22 Australian servicemen.² However, the engagement in Borneo provided important experience for the Australian Army in patrolling and fighting guerrilla forces and counterinsurgency in Southeast Asia ahead of significant deployments to Vietnam.

Creation of Malaysia and Indonesian retaliation

In 1961 a proposal was put forward by the Malayan prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to create a new nation state, the Federation of Malaysia. This would combine the current states of Malaya, Singapore and the British territories of North Borneo (to be renamed Sabah), Sarawak and the Sultanate of Brunei. Britain came to support the proposal. Brunei would later withdraw from discussions, the benefits for the oil-rich territory being less appealing than for its neighbours, and subsequently did not become part of Malaysia. The proposal was opposed by Indonesia, who shared a border with Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo. Sukarno declared the Malaysia proposal neo-colonialism, painting Tunku as a puppet of the British.³ An unsuccessful revolt in Brunei by the 'North Borneo National Army', with clandestine Indonesian support, in December 1962 increased tensions. The instigators of the rebellion were cadres who had received both military training and political indoctrination in Indonesia, and their

1 Ashley Ekins with Ian McNeill, *Fighting to the finish: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1968–1975* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 828, 834.

2 Figures from the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour, www.awm.gov.au/advanced-search/people?roll=Roll%20of%20Honour&facet_related_conflict_sort=16%3AIndonesian%20Confrontation%2C%201962-1966 (accessed 27 June 2018).

3 Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2014), 81–82.

aim was not to overthrow the sultan but to protest Malaysia's federation. The revolt was short-lived and put down by British forces, some of whom were ferried from Singapore by a C-130 Hercules transport aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).⁴

A diplomatic feud ensued, and resulted in Indonesia declaring a policy of Confrontation. This was formally announced by the Indonesian foreign minister Dr Subandrio on 20 January 1963.⁵ What was specifically meant by the term 'confrontation' was not defined, but the intention by the Indonesians was probably to use bluff, both diplomatic and militarily, as it had to wrest West New Guinea from the Dutch. But unlike the Netherlands, Malaysia had strong diplomatic and military support from its allies: Britain, Australia and New Zealand.⁶

Australia's response

Diplomatically, Australia was placed in a difficult position. It wanted to support the new state of Malaysia but avoid war with Indonesia. A concerted approach in partnership with its major allies, Britain and the United States, proved difficult as both had fundamentally different policies.⁷ The Anglo–Malayan Defence Agreement between Britain and Malaya, entered into following Malaya's independence in 1957, ensured Britain's commitment to the defence of Malaysia. Australia came under pressure from Britain to commit to the defence of Malaysia, but had its own regional concerns. It was important to Australian forward defence strategy to encourage Britain and the United States to remain committed to security in Southeast Asia.

4 Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *The official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1975*, vol. 5, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian military operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950–1966* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1996), 175–76; Peter Edwards with Gregory Pemberton, *The official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1975*, vol. 1, *Crises and commitments: The politics and diplomacy of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1965* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin and the Australian War Memorial, 1992), 257.

5 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 258.

6 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 171–73.

7 David Lee and Moreen Dee, 'Southeast Asian conflicts', in *Facing north: A century of Australian engagement with Asia*, vol. 1, *1901 to the 1970s*, ed. David Goldsworthy (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001) 270.

However, where Prime Minister Menzies was keen to support Britain, the Minister for External Affairs, Sir Garfield Barwick, and his departmental officials wanted to proceed cautiously. They were fundamentally aware that Britain and the United States could abandon the region, and since Australia and Indonesia would always be neighbours, Barwick proceeded on a path to try and avoid risking hostility with Indonesia. The resulting Cabinet decision on 5 February 1963 was to support Malaysia, and make clear to Indonesia Australia's disapproval of its campaign. While pursuing this path of avoiding conflict while expressing disapproval for Confrontation, it was also desirable to improve relations with Indonesia.⁸ Thus, Australia kept its relationship with Indonesia steady and meetings between officials continued – such as cooperating on the demarcation of the border between Papua New Guinea and West Irian – and Indonesian students were still welcome under Australian training programs, and development aid continued to be provided under the Colombo Plan. Notably, during Confrontation a small number of Indonesian army officers remained enrolled at the Australian Army's Staff College.⁹

It was quite a balancing act, which occupied the Australian Government for over 12 months from early 1963 until 1964, in which time Malaysia had officially come into being on 16 September 1963. Barwick, his department and ambassadors in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta worked tirelessly throughout the year, urging restraint on both sides.¹⁰ During this period, Barwick was accused of 'appeasement' by sections of the press and opposition, a word that derived negative connotations associated with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's handling of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.¹¹ Regardless of these accusations in Australia, Sukarno recognised that Australian policy was distinct from those of Britain and the United States. On 16 September 1963, mobs in Jakarta protesting the creation of Malaysia attacked the British and Malaysian embassies: the British embassy was burnt down, but the Australian embassy was left alone.¹²

In contrast to Britain, the United States was concerned by military intervention against Indonesia over the defence of Malaysia. The United States wished to develop long-term ties with Indonesia, and did not want

8 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 258–59.

9 Lee and Dee, 'Southeast Asian conflicts', 273.

10 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 262–63.

11 'Barwick accused on appeasement', *The Canberra Times*, 17 May 1963, 10.

12 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 262–63.

them falling into the communist bloc, knowing that the Communist Party of Indonesia was a pillar of support to the Sukarno presidency (and may become more influential) and that the Indonesian military build-up had been enabled by extensive loans from the Soviet Union.¹³

There was a widespread concern in Australia, amid both government and the general public, as to the extent to which the United States might support Australia militarily under the Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) Treaty if war broke out with Indonesia. The messages from the United States were mixed. When asked by Prime Minister Menzies in a meeting on 7 June 1963 about the application of the ANZUS Treaty should Australian troops defending Malaya come under attack, United States Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Averell Harriman was positive that 'the ANZUS Treaty would, according to the advice given to the United States Administration by its lawyers, come into operation'.¹⁴ United States President John F Kennedy was concerned when he learned of Harriman's statement, and the matter was discussed with Menzies who sought further clarification when he met with President Kennedy during a visit to Washington on 8 July. The ultimate outcome of these discussions in June and July, as the Australian Government concluded, was that the American reassurances meant Malaysia was now considered part of the Pacific under the terms of the ANZUS Treaty.¹⁵

Regardless, US support was lukewarm and included qualifications that the United States would act if there were an 'armed attack by Indonesian armed forces, on the armed forces, public vessels or aircraft of Australia in Malaysia', but only if the attack was 'overt' rather than 'subversion, guerrilla warfare or indirect aggression'. Further, the involvement of American troops was excluded; limiting support to 'air and sea forces and to provide logistics' and any action needed to be 'subject to the constitutional processes of the United States'.¹⁶

13 Lee and Dee, 'Southeast Asian conflicts', 271; Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 258.

14 Report of meeting with Mr Averell Harriman, United States Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, in the Cabinet Room, Parliament House, Canberra, 'Malaysia – Application of ANZUS Treaty', 7 June 1963, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A1209, 1963/6587.

15 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 265–67.

16 Washington memorandum, 'ANZUS – Interpretation – Malaysia', 17 October 1963, NAA: A1838, 270/1/1, Part 1.

Although Australia did not commit troops to Borneo in the face of continued requests by Britain and Malaysia during the second half of 1963, it did hold discussions with the British to plan such a scenario.¹⁷ In December 1963, the British and Malaysians asked Australia to send an infantry battalion and a squadron of the Special Air Service (SAS) to Borneo. At this point, Australia agreed that 3 Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), recently arrived on the Malaysian peninsula as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR), be posted on the Thai–Malaysian border for anti-terrorist operations, so as to free up a Malaysian battalion for service in Borneo. Following a second request in April 1964 along similar lines, Australia committed a squadron of army engineers to Sabah, and two Royal Australian Navy (RAN) minesweepers for patrol duties in Borneo waters.¹⁸ British and Malaysian units in Borneo at this point numbered 10 battalions, and 187 contacts with insurgents had been reported in the 12 months since April 1963.¹⁹

At this time, the Australian Government decided against sending the requested infantry battalion and SAS squadron, as it risked involving direct contact with Indonesian forces. It recognised the possibility of their need in future but felt the British and Malaysian forces present were equipped to deal with the current threat. In May 1964 Prime Minister Menzies wrote to his British counterpart, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, outlining Australia's position. While being 'sensitive to the burden you are carrying in Malaysia', wrote Menzies, 'we face an unhappy choice'. He felt there was 'no pressing military requirement to commit Australian combat forces to action in Borneo at this stage of covert aggression'.²⁰ The following week, the government reaffirmed Australia's position to assist the defence of Malaysia gradually while not giving up on the prospect of 'persuading Indonesia by political means to call off confrontation'.²¹

Throughout 1963 and 1964, Australian foreign and defence policies were dominated by discussion of Confrontation. The situations in both Borneo and Vietnam were monitored closely, but by the end of 1964,

17 Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, 87.

18 Department of External Affairs outward cablegram, 'The military situation in Borneo', 22 May 1964, NAA: A1209 1964/6040, PART 1.

19 Attachment to Defence Committee Minute No. 26/1964, NAA: A1209 1964/6040, PART 1.

20 Message, Sir Robert Menzies to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, 15 May 1964, NAA: A1209 1964/6040, PART 1.

21 Department of External Affairs outward cablegram, 'The military situation in Borneo', 22 May 1964, NAA: A1209 1964/6040, PART 1.

Confrontation was still considered the 'only direct threat to Australia and its territories'.²² Nevertheless, Paul Hasluck, who in April 1964 replaced Garfield Barwick as Minister for External Affairs, was more aligned to the view of the United States that the situation in Vietnam was a more significant threat than Confrontation. Events in the second half of 1964 and early 1965 changed Australia's position leading to the deployment of troops to Borneo.

In August, the Gulf of Tonkin incident in Vietnam led to the escalation of American involvement in South Vietnam, which was to be supported by an increased Australian commitment. The same month, Indonesian paratroopers landed on the Malaysian peninsula. They were quickly rounded up, with assistance from 3RAR. These two separate events had increased regional tensions and Australian commitments to both conflicts.²³

A response to these developments was the introduction of conscription in November 1964 to increase the size of the Australian Army. This saw the passing of the *National Service Act 1964* (Cth) by parliament. By the final month of 1964, Australia and Britain were planning military responses to further unprovoked attacks by Indonesia. These plans included an agreement for the Royal Air Force to use Darwin as a 'strike base' in northern Australia for reprisal attacks on targets in Indonesia.²⁴ On 1 January 1965, Sukarno announced that Indonesia was withdrawing from the United Nations, in a direct protest of Malaysia gaining a non-permanent seat on the Security Council. Sukarno also became more extreme in his pronouncements, and relations between Indonesia and China had firmed, with talk of a 'Beijing–Jakarta axis' or 'Beijing–Jakarta–Hanoi–Phnom Penh–Pyongyang' alliance.²⁵ Such talk linked the conflicts in Vietnam and Borneo, raising US concerns about the influence, or possible takeover, of the communist party in Indonesia. As historian Peter Edwards has stated, 'the Australian government faced its most acute crisis in foreign policy since 1945'.²⁶

22 Edwards, *Australia's Vietnam War*, 99.

23 Edwards, *Australia's Vietnam War*, 98–103.

24 Message, Sir Robert Menzies to Mr Harold Wilson, 'Chronological exchanges of information with UK government on Malaysian confrontation', 8 December 1964, NAA: A1939, TS687/9/3, PART 1.

25 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 340.

26 Edwards, *Australia's Vietnam War*, 104.

During this time, Indonesia had been moving more troops to Borneo and positioning them near the borders of Sabah and Sarawak.²⁷ In December 1964, British intelligence sources estimated that the Indonesians had placed 10,000 combat troops in Kalimantan. They were being reinforced by the equivalent of another six more brigades and it was expected that they would be ready for operations by late January or early February 1965.²⁸ To meet the growing threat to Malaysia and the Indonesian military build-up in Kalimantan, Australia agreed in January 1965 (announced publicly in February) to send 3RAR and an SAS squadron to Borneo.

3RAR arrives

When Confrontation began in December 1962, there was barely a full British brigade in Borneo, but by March 1965, there were some 17,000 Commonwealth troops deployed across four infantry brigades: the West Brigade consisted of five battalions and had responsibility for 290 kilometres of the Kalimantan border; the Mid-West Brigade had two battalions and covered 707 kilometres; the Central Brigade had two battalions and covered 427 kilometres; and the East Brigade, which covered the eastern extremity of Sarawak and all of Sabah, had three battalions covering 130 kilometres. All four brigades were controlled by the Director of Borneo Operations (DOBOPs) from his headquarters on Labuan.²⁹

3RAR was warned to prepare for deployment to Borneo on 13 February where the battalion would relieve 1/7 Gurkha Rifles in West Brigade, located in Sarawak.³⁰ In the lead-up to the deployment, 3RAR had received lessons on conducting operations in Borneo as well as weapons training.³¹ During February and early March, 3RAR's commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Bruce McDonald, and other officers of the battalion, visited Sarawak to

27 Message, Mr Harold Wilson to the Rt Hon John McEwan, 15 January 1965, NAA: A1939, TS687/9/3 PART 1.

28 Joint Intelligence Committee report on the military situation in Malaysia, 'Borneo territories – Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei – Confrontation', 13 January 1965, NAA: A1838, TS696/14/1.

29 David Horner and Jean Bou, ed., *Duty first: The Royal Australian Regiment in war and peace* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 160.

30 '3 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, narrative, annexes [1–28 Feb 1965]', Australian War Memorial (AWM): AWM 95 7/3/45, 6.

31 '3 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, narrative, duty officer's log, annexes [1–31 Mar 1965]', 6–7, AWM: AWM 95 7/3/46; Ian Kuring, *Redcoats to Camo: A history of Australian infantry 1788–2001* (Loftus: Australian Military History Publications in association with the Australian Army History Unit, 2004), 309.

gain an appreciation of the area that the battalion would be operating in. At the same time, other battalion officers were being sent to South Vietnam to gain an appreciation of the situation there as well.³²

The main body of 3RAR arrived off Kuching in mid-March, having sailed from Terendak aboard the Royal Marine Commando fast troop transport, the converted Royal Navy aircraft carrier, HMS *Albion*.³³ The Australian companies were flown directly from the flight deck to their forward bases with the Gurkhas being brought out on the return journey. 3RAR was seconded to West Brigade, which was commanded by Brigadier William Cheyne.³⁴ West Brigade was under the most direct threat from Indonesian forces as the capital Kuching was less than 50 kilometres from the border. By December 1964, Indonesia had moved eight regular companies of up to 200 men and 11 irregular companies to the area, which presented a clear and immediate danger to the capital of Sarawak.

3RAR was given the most direct line of advance to Kuching as its area of operations. The battalion was responsible for a zone around 48 kilometres long and 48 kilometres in depth along the border. Three of the rifle companies occupied company bases along the border; the fourth rifle company and battalion headquarters were located south of Kuching.³⁵ 3RAR was considered by the British to be a 'veteran' battalion, with many of its members having served during the Second World War, the Malayan Emergency and the more recent operations hunting Communist Terrorists along the Malay–Thai border and rounding up Indonesian infiltrators in mainland Malaysia. Unlike British battalions, who had to serve one operational tour in either Sarawak or Sabah before being able to conduct Claret operations – top-secret, cross-border incursions by Commonwealth forces – the Australians would take part in these operations after only a month of acclimatisation in North Borneo.³⁶

A Company, which had arrived in Sarawak the week prior, had been sent to Stass, where patrols began immediately. B Company was deployed to Bukit Knuckle and C Company to Serrikin. Battalion headquarters and D Company were flown to Bau. The handover was completed at 11:00 am

32 '3 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, narrative, duty officer's log, annexes [1–31 Mar 1965]', AWM: AWM 95 7/3/46, 5–10.

33 Kuring, *Redcoats*, 303.

34 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 246.

35 Kuring, *Redcoats*, 303.

36 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 246.

on 23 March.³⁷ The seriousness of their task was brought home sharply to the men of 3RAR that afternoon when members of a patrol from 3 Platoon, A Company triggered a mine near the Sarawak–Kalimantan border. Sergeant Reg Weiland was killed instantly and a local Iban tracker, Mudah anak Jali, died of his wounds some 15 minutes later while being carried out of the jungle. Another three men were wounded.³⁸ The same platoon suffered a second fatal mine incident on 17 May when Private Larry Downes triggered a mine and was killed along with Sergeant Vince Vella, who had replaced Reg Weiland as acting platoon sergeant.³⁹

The company bases that the Australians occupied were a key feature of the operations against Indonesia. They were not static defensive positions, rather bases from which patrols could deploy on local tasks and cross-border operations. A full rifle company could be housed there, as well as the supporting artillery or mortars. Corporal Bob Wyssenbach of B Company, 3RAR, recalled that after arriving at Bukit Knuckle:

one platoon had to move out immediately for four days, the other two platoons had to double up at the fort for two days, then one move out ... thus setting the pattern ... four days out on patrol and two days in [Company] base.⁴⁰

The same pattern was followed in the other company bases. The bases also gave the remote border people a sense of security, knowing that any incursion by Indonesian soldiers would be swiftly dealt with. The forward company bases were resupplied by helicopter, as no roads stretched that far south.⁴¹

Following the first mine incident, 3RAR maintained border patrols, including 'hearts and minds' operations. Much like the Malayan Emergency, 'hearts and minds' operations were key to keeping the local populace on side, especially as many of them had relatives in Kalimantan. The Australians were also faced with having to deal with the sizeable Clandestine Communist Organisation (CCO), based mainly around the Bau area. Though the CCO was meant to be handled by Malaysian security forces, the Australians remained aware of the threat they posed.

37 '3 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, narrative, duty officer's log, annexes [1–31 Mar 1965]', AWM: AWM 95 7/3/46, 15.

38 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 266.

39 Bob Wyssenbach, 'Bukit Knuckle (Borneo Campaign 1962–1966)', in *We were there in the R.A.R.*, ed. Bill Parry (Baguio City, Philippines: Immaculate Heart Printhal, 2005), 50.

40 Wyssenbach, 'Bukit Knuckle', 57.

41 Kuring, *Redcoats*, 305.

Australian patrols moved slowly and took care not to use worn tracks. Tracks, it was thought, could be mined or ambushed by the Indonesians. With the border area being mountainous and covered in thick jungle, contact was usually initiated by those in static positions. When patrol contacts did occur, Australian and other Commonwealth forces fired first 70 per cent of the time and inflicted greater casualties at a rate of 1 to 12.7 Indonesians.⁴² But it was the Claret operations that succeeded beyond all expectations by destabilising Indonesian efforts, causing heavy casualties and pushing the enemy back from the border with Sarawak.

Claret operations: Patrolling the border

Operation Claret came about in response to Indonesia's increasingly hostile cross-border incursions into Sarawak, Sabah and mainland Malaysia during 1964. Britain's parliament authorised the cross-border operations in July, following Malaysia's concern that Indonesia's continued attempts to land troops by air and sea on its mainland, as well as the increasing incursions into Sarawak and Sabah, would lead to an escalation of the conflict.⁴³

Major General Walter Walker, as DOBOPs, pushed for permission to cross the border into Kalimantan with the aim of throwing Indonesian forces off balance, thereby gaining the initiative. He understood the application of low-intensity operations, having been one of the key architects of the successful counterinsurgency during the Malayan Emergency.⁴⁴ To maintain operational security and minimise the risk of any escalation of the fighting, Walker drew up a strict set of regulations with which Claret operations would be prosecuted. Known as the 'golden rules', these were:

1. Every operation will be authorised by DOBOPs.
2. Only trained and tested troops would be used.
3. Depth of penetration must be limited and the attacks must only be made to thwart offensive action by the enemy.

42 Bob Hall, Andrew Ross, and Derrill de Heer, *Comparative study: Combat operations in North Borneo (Indonesian Confrontation) and IATF in Vietnam* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2012), 57.

43 Will Fowler, *Britain's secret war: The Indonesian Confrontation 1962–66* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 24.

44 John A Nagl, *Learning to eat soup with a knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 97–98.

4. No air support will be given to any operation across the border, except in the most extreme of emergencies.
5. Every operation must be planned with the aid of a sand table and thoroughly rehearsed for at least two weeks.
6. Each operation will be planned and executed with maximum security. Every man taking part must be sworn to secrecy, full cover plans must be made and the operations to be given code-names and never discussed in detail on telephone or radio. Identity discs must be left behind before departure and no traces – such as cartridge cases, paper, ration packs, etc. – must be left in Kalimantan.
7. On no account must any soldier taking part be captured by the enemy – alive or dead.⁴⁵

The border crossings were authorised by the British Government with an initial depth of 5,000 yards (about 4,500 metres). This was to keep troops within support range of artillery and mortars, but this distance was increased to 10,000 yards by the end of 1964.⁴⁶ Some operations conducted by the SAS went up to and beyond 20,000 yards. The golden rules, including the incursion depths, were adapted as the campaign went on, but the security and planning elements were strictly adhered to, and Walker later credited to them the minimising of Commonwealth casualties.⁴⁷ As 3RAR made ready to deploy to Sarawak, Walker handed over as DOBOPs to Major General George Lea, who was the polar opposite to Walker in demeanour. However, the quiet and considered Lea continued to use the golden rules when planning operations.⁴⁸

During its time in Sarawak, 3RAR carried out 32 Claret operations, which resulted in four major contacts with Indonesian regular forces, all of which were Australian-initiated ambushes. The last of these, known as Operation Blockbuster, conducted by 2 Platoon, A Company and an attached forward observation officer (FOO) party, was the most successful. The total strength of the ambush party was two officers and 32 other ranks.⁴⁹ The operation was authorised after Second Lieutenant

45 Fowler, *Britain's secret war*, 24; Raffi Gregorian, 'CLARET operations and Confrontation, 1964–1966', *Conflict Quarterly: Journal of the Centre for Conflict Studies* 11, no. 1 (1991): 54.

46 Horner, *Duty first*, 165.

47 Gregorian, 'CLARET operations and Confrontation', 54.

48 David Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of war, a history of the Australian Special Air Service* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 78.

49 'Operation Blockbuster' After Action Report (AAR), 16 June 1965, document held in private collection.

Douglas Byers's platoon located an east–west track in Kalimantan that had shown signs of recent use. The ambush party spent three days in position before hearing the approach of their quarry. The Indonesians apparently believed they were safe as they moved openly along the trail and were talking loudly, had their weapons slung and were tightly bunched up.

When about 25 men had entered the killing zone, Byers initiated the ambush by standing up and opening fire with his Owen Machine Carbine at a range of no more than 6 yards. The resulting fusillade resulted in heavy casualties to the Indonesians with at least 12 men killed outright. Three men at the head of the group attempted to escape along the track, but were killed instantly when a cut-off group fired two Claymore mines. The Indonesians responded with small arms, machine gun and mortar fire. The FOO, Lieutenant Stephen Overton, Royal Artillery, called in fire support in the form of artillery and mortars, which silenced the Indonesian mortar and was believed to have inflicted further heavy casualties on the Indonesians. Overton continued to call in fire as Byers called for the withdrawal of the ambush patrol; by the following morning they reached their company base at Stass.

The operation had been entirely successful with 25 Indonesians confirmed killed, but the final tally was thought to be up to 50 killed, due to the accurate artillery fire brought down by Overton. The Australians had suffered two men wounded: one by small arms the other by mortar fire.⁵⁰ Byers was awarded a Military Cross for his actions during the operation. Brigadier Willian Cheyne later stated that 'the perfect ambush only happens once in a while but this is one of those occasions'.⁵¹ After four and half months, 3RAR was replaced by 2/10 Gurkhas. In September they were relieved at Terendak by 4RAR. By the end of its operational tour in Borneo, 3RAR had suffered three men killed, all by mines, and five wounded.⁵²

After several months of training, 4RAR deployed to Sarawak in April 1966; this was the first time that national servicemen were deployed on operations with the Australian Army. 4RAR joined West Brigade and was sent to the Bau area, where the battalion occupied similar positions to those of 3RAR the year before. As the battalion had a high number of

50 'Operation Blockbuster' AAR, 16 June 1965.

51 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 277.

52 Kuring, *Redcoats*, 304.

officers and non-commissioned officers with previous active service, and a number of men from 3RAR who had already served in Borneo in 1965, Brigadier Cheyne considered the battalion to be 'tried and tested'.⁵³ Patrols on the Malaysian side of the border were constant, and 4RAR began Claret operations in early May. At least a dozen Claret reconnaissance operations had been completed by the time cross-border operations were suspended later in the month due to the start of peace talks between Malaysia and Indonesia.

The suspension of Claret operations led to an increase in the rate of Indonesian incursions into Sarawak. In June, Major General Lea authorised Claret operations to recommence to once again push the Indonesians back from the border of Sarawak and keep their attempted operations off balance. 4RAR fought its most significant action on 15 June 1966, when C Company was involved in a series of rolling firefights with a 10-man Indonesian patrol on the Sarawak side of the border. The initial contact was made by 8 Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Doug Byers MC, who had transferred to 4RAR at the end of 3RAR's deployment. During the first contact, the Indonesians broke into two groups of five and began to withdraw, with one of the groups evading the Australians and escaping back into Kalimantan. 8 Platoon pursued the other group and pushed it into an ambush, which was initiated by 9 Platoon. Four Indonesians were subsequently killed and 4RAR's only combat loss occurred during the action when Private Vic Richards was shot in the stomach and mortally wounded. He died from his wounds several days later.⁵⁴ 4RAR's operational tour came to an end on 11 August 1966 when the peace treaty between Malaysia and Indonesia was signed. The battalion left Borneo soon after and was back at Terendak at the end of the month.⁵⁵

Australian SAS operations

The Australian SAS saw active service for the first time during Confrontation with both 1 and 2 SAS squadrons being deployed. Led by Major Alf Garland, 1 SAS Squadron arrived in Brunei in mid-February

53 Brian Avery, *Our secret war: The 4th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment: defending Malaysia against Indonesian confrontation, 1965–1967* (Melbourne: Slouch Hat Publications, 2002), 126.

54 AWM 152 Roll of Honour cards: Sabah/Sarawak, 311512 Private Victor Herbert Richards, 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment; Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 293.

55 Kuring, *Redcoats*, 305.

1965 and served in the border regions of Sabah and Sarawak. 2 SAS Squadron, commanded by Major Jim Hughes, arrived at Kuching in January 1966 and operated in the western side of Sarawak. For their respective deployments, both squadrons were attached to the British 22 Special Air Service Regiment, which came under the direct control of DOBOPs. The SAS's primary role was reconnaissance. Both SAS squadrons adopted the British four-man patrol set-up, which gave them the ability to deploy more patrols and cover more ground. It was thought that smaller patrols would be less easy to detect, and if enemy contact did occur, the 'shoot and scoot' method would be applied, which meant delivering a large amount of initial firepower, followed by rapid fire and movement away from the contact point.⁵⁶

With 1 SAS Squadron based in Brunei Town and 2 SAS Squadron in Kuching, the only way the patrols could be effectively deployed was by helicopter. Patrols would be dropped off at cleared landing sites near the Kalimantan border, after which they would patrol on foot across into Kalimantan. Soon after arriving, both squadrons deployed on lengthy patrols, primarily to familiarise themselves with their operational areas and conduct 'hearts and minds' operations among the border tribes, providing medical aid and gathering intelligence with which to assist planning of future operations. During their deployment both 1 and 2 SAS squadrons conducted numerous deep reconnaissance operations into Kalimantan, which yielded valuable intelligence and identified numerous Indonesian bases, and on several occasions the SAS also conducted ambushes against Indonesian troops. On 21 July 1965 a 10-man patrol by 1 SAS Squadron ambushed a boat with six Indonesian soldiers, all armed and carrying kit bags. All six Indonesians were killed, after which the SAS patrol withdrew. Indonesian soldiers in the area opened fire in all directions in a clumsy effort to locate the Australians, who made it to their exfiltration point unharmed.⁵⁷

The cancellation of Claret operations in late May 1966 proved frustrating for 2 SAS Squadron. Recently arrived in Borneo, they had conducted a number of familiarisation patrols and were preparing to deploy across the border. The squadron did complete a number of Claret operations when Claret was reactivated in June in response to an Indonesian incursion,

⁵⁶ Kuring, *Redcoats*, 308.

⁵⁷ Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 305.

and though these were predominantly reconnaissance patrols, there were a number of contacts with Indonesian troops. 2 SAS Squadron's tour ended on 21 July, after which it left Borneo and returned to Perth.⁵⁸

The Australian SAS suffered three men killed over the course of two deployments. In early June 1965 a four-man reconnaissance patrol met with disaster when it disturbed a wild elephant in the jungle. The elephant, which had a broken tusk, charged the patrol, goring Lance Corporal Paul Denehey under his ribcage. The limited size of the patrol and the nature of the terrain meant that extracting Denehey, who was a tall man, by stretcher was extremely difficult. With the patrol radio damaged and only able to send signals, the patrol members were unaware if their calls for assistance had been heard. With no helicopters able to enter Indonesian airspace, the patrol commander and another man were forced to walk to the extraction point to find assistance. Along the way they were stalked by the elephant and were forced to evade the animal. The third trooper, after running low on medical supplies, also left Denehey to look for assistance. Sadly, by the time help did arrive, Denehey had died a lonely and agonising death.⁵⁹

Further misfortune occurred during 2 Squadron's deployment. On 21 March 1966 two members of a patrol, Lieutenant Ken 'Rock' Hudson and Private Bob Moncrieff, were swept away and drowned while attempting to cross the flooded Sekayan River in darkness and driving rain. The remaining two troopers survived and made their way out of the jungle. Despite an 11-day search by another patrol, their remains were unable to be located and both men were declared dead on 1 April.⁶⁰ Local villagers had recovered and buried Hudson's and Moncrieff's remains, which were located and positively identified in 2010 by the Australian Army's Unrecovered War Casualties team, with support from the Indonesian Armed Forces.⁶¹

58 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 308.

59 Horner, *SAS*, 110–21.

60 Horner, *SAS*, 158–60.

61 Mark Dodd, 'Remains of SAS diggers lost in Borneo recovered', *The Australian*, 17 March 2010, at: www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/remains-of-sas-diggers-lost-in-borneo-recovered/news-story/13732e3c6ff470ee3ddc088ba983a517.

Australian artillery, engineers and signallers in Borneo

Australian artillerymen, engineers and signallers played vital roles during Confrontation. The regular units of the Royal Australian Artillery had replaced their 25-pounder guns with the Italian-made L5 105 mm Pack Howitzer, which was light and easy to break down, making it ideal for transport by helicopter to remote company bases. Australian artillerymen served at company bases in Sarawak and Sabah, and provided vital gunfire support and FOO parties to Commonwealth troops on local and Claret operations.⁶² Prior to deploying to Borneo, gunners from 102 Battery had served as infantry with 3RAR, hunting Communist Terrorists along the Malay–Thai border, and had also assisted in rounding up Indonesian infiltrators who had been landed south of Terendak in October 1964.⁶³ In the context of Confrontation, Australia also contributed assets to defend installations on the Malaysian peninsula against possible Indonesian attacks, and 111 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery was sent to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Butterworth to provide air defence. The battery did not have to fire a shot in anger, and after 26 months of service the unit returned to Australia.⁶⁴

Royal Australian Engineer Field and Construction Squadrons were also deployed to Borneo from 1964 and were employed on a variety of tasks, which included road and airfield construction and maintenance. Many engineers became friendly with the local people and conducted ‘hearts and minds’ operations, building infrastructure such as schoolhouses and wells. Some of these projects were done during off-duty hours. Engineers also carried out surveying operations, the results of which were used to provide more accurate maps to the infantry and SAS.⁶⁵ Australian signallers served with British signals units at Labuan and Singapore during Confrontation. The nature of their work collecting signals intelligence remains largely shrouded in secrecy, but signals intercepts were used to gain an accurate picture of the Indonesian order of battle in Kalimantan and to plan Claret operations.⁶⁶

62 Alan H Smith, *Gunners in Borneo: Artillery during Confrontation 1962–1966* (Manly: Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company, 2008), 31–102.

63 Kuring, *Redcoats*, 302.

64 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 309.

65 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 311–14.

66 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 248–50.

The RAN and RAAF contributions

Australia's naval commitment to an independent Malaysia had begun during the Malayan Emergency following the formation of the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR). When the Indonesian Confrontation began in earnest in 1964, the Australian Government increased the RAN's presence in Malaysian waters by sending HMAS *Sydney* (III), which by this time had been converted from an aircraft carrier to a fast troop transport, and the destroyers HMA Ships *Vampire*, *Vendetta* and *Duchess*. In addition, 16 Minesweeping Squadron, which consisted of six Ton-class coastal minesweepers, was also committed.⁶⁷ The minesweepers were sent to patrol the coastal waters of Borneo and were involved in many stop and search operations, which led to the arrest of a number of Indonesians, including military personnel.

A notable incident took place during the night of 13 December 1964 when HMAS *Teal* detected two unlit Indonesian vessels travelling together. The vessels separated immediately and made for Indonesian waters. *Teal* gave chase and illuminated one of the vessels with a searchlight. The Indonesian vessel responded with a burst of automatic fire, but did no damage. The Australians returned fire, killing three of the seven Indonesians on board. The remaining four men surrendered and their vessel was boarded. One of the men was later found to be an Indonesian Marine officer. A search of the vessel located and seized explosives, weapons and other equipment.⁶⁸ *Teal's* commanding officer Lieutenant Keith Murray was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross, 'for his coolness and judgement during this, and a previous interception'.⁶⁹ It was the only gallantry award made to a member of the RAN during Confrontation.

RAN vessels were also involved in shore bombardments against Indonesian forces. On 28 July 1965 Indonesian troops crossed the border onto the eastern side of Sebatik Island. In response to a call for assistance most likely by Malaysian troops, HMAS *Yarra* conducted three runs and fired

67 Jeffrey Grey, *The official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1975*, vol. 7, *Up top: The Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian conflicts, 1955–1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1998), 8, 60.

68 'Reports of proceedings, HMA Ships and establishments, Class 339 – HMAS *Teal*', June 1964 – December 1965, AWM: AWM78 339/1, Part 2, 81; 'Incursion into Indonesian Waters by HMAS *Teal*', NAA: A1813 1623/202/28, 54–55.

69 Grey, *Up top*, 61; Honours and awards – Gallantry awards (operational) – Award: Distinguished Service Cross; Recipient(s): RAN Lieutenant Keith Murray, NAA: A2880, 5/5/7, 3.

70 rounds to harass the Indonesians as they withdrew. In early July *Yarra* was twice called on to fire at Indonesian targets, which on both occasions were in Sabah.⁷⁰ At the end of Confrontation, the RAN maintained its presence in the region as part of FESR as well as its commitment to the escalating war in Vietnam.

Though the RAAF was not involved in Claret operations, No. 36 Squadron, flying C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, ferried troops and supplies between Malaysia and Borneo. During the same period of time, the squadron supported Australia's commitment to Vietnam. The RAAF also flew in support of operations along the Malaysia–Thailand border. One unit that made a particularly interesting contribution was No. 5 Squadron, Detachment C, flying the UH-1 Iroquois. This is noteworthy as it is the first RAAF deployment using helicopters. This squadron flew operations in support of 28 Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group, including ferrying soldiers to the Malaysia–Thailand border where they would search for Communist Terrorists, hold-outs from the Malayan Emergency. The unit was disbanded in 1966 and its personnel redeployed to Vietnam.⁷¹

The end of Confrontation

Indonesia's efforts to destabilise the Malaysian Union ultimately failed. Much like the Malayan Communist Party's efforts failed to win over the populace by acts of brutality during the Malayan Emergency, so too did Indonesia's efforts to win over the border tribes between Kalimantan, Sarawak and Sabah, for much the same reasons. Indonesian operations in Kalimantan were further negatively impacted in October 1965 when members of the military attempted to depose Suharto. The failed coup led to a purge of communist sympathisers in the government and military, paving the way for a change in leadership. With the ascension of General Sukarno to the Presidency of Indonesia in March 1966, there was still no immediate guarantee of an end to Confrontation. However, the goal of destabilising Malaysia was now unattainable and it was thanks in the

⁷⁰ Grey, *Up top*, 70.

⁷¹ Chris Coulthard-Clark, *The RAAF in Vietnam: Australian air involvement in the Vietnam War* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 8; John Moremon, 'No 5 Squadron', *Wings: The official publication of the RAAF Association* 69, no. 1 (Autumn 2017): 25; 'No. 5 Squadron (RAAF)', Australian War Memorial, at: www.awm.gov.au/collection/U60467 (accessed 10 March 2019).

main to the Claret operations conducted by British and Commonwealth troops that Malaysian sovereignty was defended. Facing the prospect of a drawn-out conflict, as the nearby war in Vietnam was clearly becoming, Sukarno's government began peace negotiations with Malaysia in May 1966. Much like the Korean War, negotiations between the parties dragged on and the fighting in Borneo continued. On 11 August 1966 a peace treaty between Malaysia and Indonesia was signed in Bangkok, bringing hostilities to an end. The following day an order was sent to all British and Commonwealth units to cease operations in Borneo.⁷²

Conclusion

The Malaysia–Indonesia Confrontation was a challenge for Australia, as it maintained diplomatic relations with the Indonesian Government while conducting a low-intensity conflict against its military. Australia risked and avoided outright war with its much larger neighbour. In courting the United States to shore up regional security and help stop the spread of communism, Australia also became increasingly committed to the war in Vietnam. As that war escalated in the second half of the decade and into the 1970s, it would become Australia's largest Cold War conflict, rapidly overshadowing Australia's commitment to Malaysia. But at the time of Confrontation, it was events in Borneo and the risk of war with Indonesia that caused most concern for the Australian Government.

The British and Commonwealth response to Indonesia on both political and military fronts, especially Operation Claret, remains a model of conducting a successful low-intensity conflict while maintaining diplomatic relations with the opposing nation. Australia's armed forces, particularly the Royal Australian Regiment and Australian Special Air Service, learned many valuable lessons in the jungles of Borneo, which were then applied for future service in Vietnam. Despite their skilful application of low-intensity warfare, the success of Borneo did not necessarily directly translate to Indochina, where different local circumstances in Vietnam led to a different outcome.

72 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 298.

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