



AUSTRALIAN ARMY RIFLE COMPANY BUTTERWORTH (RCB) – A CASE FOR RECOGNITION DURING THE SECOND MALAYSIAN EMERGENCY

Controversy continues regarding the nature of service at Air Base Butterworth (ABB), especially with respect to the appropriate recognition for portions of that service. ADF units have been there without break for over sixty years, a record in anyone's books for an armed deployment to someone else's country. The reason has vacillated from definitely "warlike" to maybe "hazardous" to uncontested "peacetime" equivalent training. What is harder to define without the full facts, is the appropriate level of recognition for each period. Add to that a deliberate government deception plan as to the reasons for some Army deployments direct from Australia to Malaysia, and one has an interesting mix to consider.

A research group, representing RCB veterans of the period known as the Malaysian Communist Insurgency, also called the Second Malaysian Emergency (SME) which ran from 17 June 1968 to 2 December 1989, has been advocating- the correction of what many consider to be the inadequate level of recognition for that service.

It is important to see the issue in context. The first Australian service at ABB was principally that of RAAF air operations until aircraft were eventually withdrawn in 1988. From that date, reducing RAAF forces remained in other roles, supporting the Royal Malaysian Air Force. This series of deployments included warlike service during the Malayan Emergency and Konfrontasi (with Indonesia), and then support to South Vietnam (primarily medevac duties and evacuation support). Other commitments under the 1971 Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA) included support to the external defence of Malaysia, a deployment that might have resulted in a shooting match had strategic fears of the time been realised.

Army units served at ABB for much of the same period as the RAAF in air defence, or close protection of RAAF assets based of operating from there, including RAAF maritime air assets staging surveillance missions, primarily over the Malacca Straits and the Indian Ocean between 1980-89, and RAAF operations connected with South Vietnam. Today, only Army remains at ABB, managing the rotation of what is still termed the RCB. Since late December 1989, RCBs have engaged only in training, using the facility as a base for those training activities. But up to that point, the real role of the RCB was quite different.

Most Service personnel have received a level of recognition for service at ABB up until late 1989. The question is: was the level of recognition appropriate? One of the most unfortunate failures is successive Australian governments' persistent refusal to recognise warlike service during the SME.

The Australian government, advised principally by the Nature of Service Branch, Department of Defence continues to refuse to accept there was an SME at all, despite Malaysia's official history unequivocally recording it in detail, including 1,009 Malaysian Government Force casualties. The MAF were on active service during of the SME and were awarded the Pinjat Jasa Malaysia Medal for that period. This was also the case for the Malayan Emergency and *Konfrontasi* when both Malayan and allied troops were so recognised. Clearly, the Malaysian Government regarded its country to be again engaged in warlike operations during the SME.

There is a reason for this extraordinary Australian government position – a deception plan and an unwillingness to correct the wrong which was perpetuated shortly after the change of government in 1972. The new Prime Minister undertook to withdraw Australia's ground combat forces from South East Asia. However, in seeking to do so upon taking office, found himself faced with a major predicament with respect to the situation at ABB.

After the Malayan Emergency and *Konfrontasi*, the RAAF retained a sizable component of its combat power at ABB. Almost two-thirds of the RAAF's fighters and a range of support aircraft were either based there, or dependant on the ABB facilities. After two generations of fighters – the F86 Sabre and the F1 Mirage III - the last aircraft were withdrawn in 1988. The decision was made to *not* position the third generation of fighter-bomber – the F18A Hornet – at risk on foreign soil. Ground staff remained there for many years in support of RAAF aircraft staging through, and the Royal Malaysian Air Force's (RMAF) operation of the ABB itself.



A large portion of Australia's fighter-bomber force lay open to attack; this photo showing increased protection through revetments added in 1976

While the response to the Malayan Emergency was successful, a renewed threat to both Malaysia and ANZUK forces stationed in Malaysia/Singapore arose following Communist

successes in Vietnam. In 1968, hostilities broke out afresh causing the Malaysian Government to declare the SME. ABB was a major strategic asset close to the Thai-Malay border where much of the Communist Terrorist (CT) threat manifested. RMAF aircraft conducted fighter-ground attack missions against the CTs. ABB also remained a strategic asset. Britain at the time needed the base to remain secure for possible use by nuclear-capable Vulcan long-range bombers, as did Australia in pursuit of its ‘Forward Defence’ posture following the British withdrawal. ABB provided a strategic footprint necessary in northern Malaysia. ABB needed to remain in the “right” hands.



RAAF Sabres on the tarmac. Australian aircraft parked like this presented a tempting target

Even after the granting of independence to Malaysia and Singapore, UK, Australian and NZ forces remained, known as the Far Eastern Strategic Reserve (FESR). Some of these were at ABB including RAAF, at times Army Air Defence units, and Infantry staging through on their way to counter-insurgency operations. Along with the RAAF aircraft, even after hostilities were declared over, was the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS). It provided technical control of the defence of Malaysian airspace until the RMAF assumed that responsibility years later. The RAAF continued to provide strategic air defence (the fighter squadrons themselves) under the FPDA, those squadrons forming the backbone of the IADS. Other Australian forces were stationed in Malaysia, primarily 28 ANZUK Brigade, which had re-located to Singapore.

With the sharp increase in CT activity from 1968 onwards, ABB was vulnerable. The CTs were often operating in close proximity, intelligence details of which were known to Australia at the time but kept secret. Armed with a detailed assessment of the CT threat in 1970, RAAF sought urgent help. To provide increased protection and capacity **to deter** such an attack, a rifle company group was detached from the Singapore –based battalions starting on 1 November 1970. 1 RAR and then 6 RAR subsequently deployed on monthly tours of duty to ABB, providing a constant and substantial deterrence force.

Prime responsibility for *external* defence of the ABB was vested in the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), with total protection being a joint responsibility with RAAF. Such an arrangement was appropriate for the sovereign rights of the Malaysians whose armed forces were stretched fighting the SME. This arrangement included the Army rifle company operating *inside* the ABB perimeter. One important exception was the protection of RAAF families living on Penang and in the unsecured married quarter area opposite the airfield.

Malaysians guarded the perimeter, and had responsibility for all operations outside of it. At least two UK, one NZ company and an Australian gun battery also rotated through ABB on security duties, until the arrival of a specially designated force, direct from Australia, on 1 September 1973. The new group, later to be renamed the RCB, was a *special*, and *secret*, arrangement.

The security situation had deteriorated markedly. The Whitlam Government, elected in part on its undertaking to withdraw forces from SE Asia, found itself with a major problem when it ordered the withdrawal of the Singapore-based army combat troops. The renewed threat of CT attack on ABB promoted urgent action by the Whitlam Government in early 1973, as there would no longer be any Australian combat troops to protect Australian aircraft. The Defence Committee, the highest advisory body to the Government, secretly recommended a solution to Government on 11 January 1973.

This recommendation enabled the continued protection of vital RAAF assets at ABB once the Singapore-based Army units left. Government directed the deployment of a heavy rifle company direct from Australia under *Plan Asbestos*. A key extract from Defence Committee Minute No 3/1973 says, at para 28 e:

When the Australian battalion is withdrawn, the requirement for a company for security duties at ABB will be met by providing the unit on rotation from Australia. This could be presented publicly as being for training purposes.

Further evidence of high level knowledge and complicity appeared in a Defence Planning Division brief (not an ADF entity) to the Vice Chief of the General Staff (Army) on 11 October 1973 at para 3:

The deployment of this company to Butterworth has in recent years assumed a real importance because of somewhat increased concerns about possible threats to base 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.

Clearly, there was both a deception in effect and a surreptitious way of implementing it.

As for the Malayan Emergency and *Konfrontasi*, Australian Service married personnel were normally accompanied by their family in Malaysia. However, the RCB was not. These troops were deployed on a specific warlike protective security mission, armed with live ammunition, with most also deploying their standard heavy weapons. With clear operational tasks and well-defined rules of engagement, the RCBs deployed on three month rotations, armed and functioning at Draft Priority 1 (go to war) status. This new deployment was subjected to a deception plan known to RCB veterans as “the Training Lie”.

To this day, many people still do not know of this deception, including some of the junior soldiers to deploy. It was, and remains, a cover up of the RCB’s real purpose, initially to avoid political embarrassment and to enhance operational protective security at the time.



Section of B Coy 1 RAR inside the base Christmas 1981-82, complete to first line ammunition

A reinforced Army rifle company takes a much larger force to overpower it, and its powerful deterrent effect can (and did) deter the CTs from attacking ABB. It can move in all weather, terrain and by day or night, carry substantial firepower, for days on end, making it a powerful combat multiplier to supplement the meagre RAAF protective force. RCB's operational tasks were enunciated in both RAAF and Army directives before written orders were issued mid-1973 to cease referring to those tasks in favour of "training activities". This is further evidence that the deception plan itself had to be suppressed at the time.

As the SME dragged on, the threat level grew, spiking in 1975. Under *Plan Asbestos*, RCBs were detached from parent units in Australia and placed *under command* of Army Headquarters (later, Headquarters Field Force Command) for the entire duration of the SME. The first, A Company 8 RAR, arrived on 1 September 1973 and was initially titled "Australian Army Company". The last to conduct the warlike protective tasks specified in Directives was B Company 6 RAR on the day that Chin Peng, leader of the CT movement, signed the armistice which drew the SME to a close on 2 Dec 89.



The F1 Mirage, the primary RAAF strike fighter at ABB during the SME was constantly vulnerable to CT attack

The RCB was under the *operational control* of the RAAF commander at ABB. Written directives from both the RAAF commander and Army Mounting Instructions clearly listed its operational tasks, the only variation being the wording of later directives which reversed the emphasis from ‘operational tasks’ to ‘training’, further evidence of the deception plan. However, the “Training Lie” during the SME was exactly that; a deception of the people of Australia by its own government. The enemy did not need deceiving; they already knew what they were up against should they attack.

Records confirm that very little training occurred with the Malaysians due to the latter being fully operationally stretched engaging the CTs. Yet this is a prime reason used by the Government to deny the proper level of recognition of the RCB veterans during the SME by claiming the RCB was only there to “train with” the MAF.



An operational QRF callout that officialdom claims never happened

All RCBs so deployed conducted prescribed pre-deployment and in-country training dedicated to their operational tasks. In fact, RCBs were ordered *not* to carry out any of their own unit training until the prescribed operational training for ABB was completed. Only when that was achieved, and Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) in place could the RCB conduct any other Army training. On infrequent occasions elements of some RCBs actually trained with the Malaysians, but these opportunities were rare, and seldom enjoyed due to the MAF’s pre-occupation with the SME.

The risk of contact with the CTs generated the requirement, even for off-base exercises, for designated individuals to carry live ammunition in red-taped magazines in the event of a clash with the enemy, or if a large dangerous animal was confronted. Every man in the QRF also carried live ammunition, including machine guns, while on duty. At heightened periods

of threat, some RCBs had two entire platoons restricted to being at ABB able to quickly reinforce the standard QRF, the size of which did vary over the years.

Declassified records now demonstrate numerous operational call outs to CT threats to the ABB. Most RCB members will not have known this at the time; their focus was on boring and tedious, but necessary, standby at one minute's notice to move, with frequent drill callouts and sometimes, real ones. During some tours of duty, duty officers deployed to the IADS ground defence building while guards slept in the RCB armoury to enable rapid reinforcement of the QRF with further arms and ammunition.

In the early 21st century review of Service awards, service at ABB during this period for both Army and RAAF was recognised with the award of the Australian Service Medal. This, curiously, is for almost the exact period of the SME, the very war that authorities claim did *not* occur as part of their denial of the claim. Since 2006, there have been many individual and group submissions to have this service recognised with the Australian Active Service Medal and associated benefits. Some RCB veterans, perhaps due to the success of the deception plan, do not know that they faced danger from CT attack, including while on leave. However, the facts are irrefutable.

The evidence is clear. RCB veterans, and others, deserve the same recognition as those who served at Ubon and Diego Garcia Air Bases and six other operational theatres where service recognition has been upgraded, despite the threat and other criteria sometimes being less “warlike” than at ABB. RAAF personnel, who were the prime reason for RCB being there at all, have their own story to tell and possibly a similar claim (RAAF were not subjected to a deployment lie).



Internal security checkpoint during a period of heightened tension

Why then, have several applications, a petition in 2014 and two appeals direct to the Prime Minister in 2016 been denied, deflected or downright stonewalled? Several independent reviews of other deployments have enabled the presentation of all the evidence *currently available* to a panel of unbiased scrutineers who were able to consider it. Most of those reviews resulted in upgrades of recognition. Defence often opposes the upgrade sought in those reviews, with its scribes generating the letters for ministers and senior officers to sign. These letters almost invariably end with the dismissive statement that nothing new has been presented and the matter is considered closed, with official staff effort invested in refuting or denying the veteran applicants' presentation of compelling evidence. One would

think a caring organisation might demonstrate an open mind, but this is clearly not the case. Tellingly, officialdom has the same access to the same weight of evidence now unearthed by applicants, but continues to deny its existence, or produces selective and partial “evidence” to negate applicant cases.

The biggest block to a fair and impartial review of the RCB case might only be a lack of knowledge. However, this is inexcusable based on the evidence, with government staff unable, or unwilling, to examine and treat objectively the full range of that evidence. Instead, there is a persistent reliance by Government’s advisors on falling back to outdated, inaccurate and incomplete department briefs regurgitated as “fresh” decision support briefs. The result is a continued recycling of the previous responses in the hope that RCB veterans will just give up and go away.

Veterans of the RCB (SME) period are now either retired, or serving as senior warrant officers and senior officers, including the current Chief of Army. The youngest RCB company commander from the SME period is at least 56 years old. Unless they have seen the full range of evidence, today’s younger military staff and Defence bureaucrats – and certainly the ministers they serve - simply will not know the full story.

Until an **independent** review of ALL the evidence is carried out, stonewalling government and Defence officials will continue to deny examination of the full evidence base. An independent re-examination of the total evidence, readily available to anyone who will simply take the time to look at it, will result in a **fair go** for the RCB veterans of the SME. Such a review is necessary to test their claim, just as it was for the deployments to Ubon (Thailand), RAN off Somalia, Rwanda, Namibia, Cambodia and Diego Garcia. Service recognition in all of these deployments was upgraded once an objective review was conducted. The restoration of respect for and belief in government which so readily deploys Australia’s Service personnel into danger is way overdue for the RCB veterans. There can only be fair closure of this sorry chapter of Australia’s history of warlike deployments through an independent hearing.

Footnote: Extensive public domain references underpinning this paper are available from the RCB Review Group.