

The RAAF and FEAF

FEAF, the Far East Air Force, was based in Malaysia and Singapore from 1949 until 1971. It was a product of the Cold War, part of the West's opposition to Communist regimes seeking world domination in the post-war era.

FEAF operations were often as much political as military. The surrounding region was much changed by the Pacific War and constantly re-shaped by rapid and unpredictable post-war change. Maps were frequently redrawn as political boundaries and alliances shifted one after another.

It was a time when few grand plans reached fruition. Japan, in particular, had bitten off more than it could chew in WWII. By 1945 it was obviously losing, but still fighting tenaciously with no sign of giving in. Unable to see an end to fighting until at least 1947, the Allies planned accordingly.

This planning did not take into account the atomic bombs, the existence of which was known to very few. The bombs dropped in August and Japan surrendered on 3 September 1945 - at least 18 months earlier than most Allied planners expected. As a result, when Japan surrendered, Allied plans were much more about continuing the fight, than about managing the peace.

The WWII Allies knew, of course, that they would one day have to manage the peace, and drew up plans based on meetings like Potsdam and Yalta. These plans outlined general agreement about who would do what and where, but with few specifics.

Not surprisingly, when the war ended so unexpectedly and abruptly, the smooth transition to peace the Allies had hoped for didn't happen. Instead, there were widespread

decolonisation struggles and Communist take-over attempts – sometimes as separate things, more often as a blend of both, and often violent.

The British return to Malaya and Singapore in 1945 had to cope with both. The return, with its promise of freedom, trade and rebuilt infrastructure, was generally welcomed, but the Malayan Communist Party had other ideas. Having fought with British support against the Japanese occupiers during WWII, they now turned their attention to the British ‘colonial oppressors.’

In *The Royal Australian Air Force, an Illustrated History*, George Odgers tells us that in time they:

mounted a terrorist campaign from the jungles of Malaya in a bid to add that country to the Soviet Bloc by the expulsion of British control....Armed violence became an every-day occurrence in the Peninsula. Terrorists attacked police stations, rubber plantations, tin mines and communications in a bid to create turmoil and destroy law and order. Europeans and Chinese were slaughtered mercilessly to undermine confidence.

The British initially responded with police and troops to maintain law and order in populated areas and restrict terrorist movement. At first, most aircraft used to oppose the Communist Terrorists (CTs) were transports. The British plan, however, included all uses of airpower and in 1946 the forerunner of FEAF, the RAF Air Command Far East, was formed to manage the air effort.

The situation in Malaya was, in many ways, simply a microcosm of bigger things elsewhere. Although not yet labelled as such, these activities were part of the Cold War already underway as WWII drew to a close. Communism was on the march out of Russia and the Soviet Union, as

some East European countries had already found to their detriment.

Early post-war Soviet expansion in Europe was checked when the Berlin Airlift prevented a complete take-over of the city in 1948, but support for Communists in China, Korea and elsewhere - and an oft-stated wish to spread Communism world-wide - continued unabated.

Things came to a head in Malaya on 16 June 1948 when a band of CTs set upon three English rubber-planters and viciously cut them to pieces with machine guns. What became known as the Malayan Emergency had begun.

It would last twelve years, involve over 500 000 police and military personnel and cost 12 000 lives – all to suppress a CT force that never numbered more than about 8 000. Such is the tactical advantage of terrorists and guerrillas with jungle to hide in and some support from civilian sympathisers.

(Of note, it was called an Emergency and conducted as a police action because most insurance policies covered only property damaged or destroyed in a civil emergency, but not in a war. This created complex command arrangements to avoid putting the military in overall charge.)

Malaya was in no way unique in the region. The British were also facing nationalist de-colonisers in India and Burma. The Dutch in Indonesia and the French in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, had similar problems.

With scant Allied planning to guide them the Dutch and French acted independently and soon struck trouble. The Dutch were the first to go. On return to their former colony, they were met by well entrenched anti-colonial Indonesians and after four years of sporadic fighting conceded defeat.

Indonesia thereafter was run by the charismatic and erratic President Sukarno, some elected politicians, the armed forces and police. Officially non-aligned, their liking for Soviet weaponry made the neighbours uneasy and Indonesia became an unpredictable element in the region. Confrontation with the newly-formed Malaysia made Sukarno's Indonesia a major part of the FEAF story fourteen years later.

France too quickly returned to its pre-war colonies in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. But again, local anti-colonial and Communist elements had moved even quicker. On 3 September 1945, the day Japan formally surrendered, North Vietnam communists, led by Ho Chi Min, declared independence of the 'Democratic Republic of Vietnam'.

Though militarily weak, they had strong public support. Unhappy with arrangements for a peaceful transition to greater self-government linked to France, the Communists quietly mustered their forces.

Sporadic fighting began in 1947 and continued until 1954 when they beat the French decisively at Dien Bien Phu. Division along the 17th parallel resulted, followed in later years by the invasion of the non-communist south by the communist north.

FEAF was not directly part of the ensuing Vietnam conflict, but two of its members, Australia and New Zealand, were. Both routinely used FEAF infrastructure during the conflict and Australia's contribution, in particular, would have been much more difficult without easy access to FEAF airbases in Malaysia and Singapore.

And while all this strife was brewing, two major events changed regional power balances for decades to come. In 1949 the Communists won in China and Russia exploded an

atomic bomb. Both events emboldened Communists everywhere and added fuel to the Cold War, especially in Asia.

Now the Cold War is long gone, it is easy to forget how serious it all was. Initially, the Communist countries were united in a quest to spread their chosen utopia world-wide and behaved accordingly. Seen as 'the Communist Bloc' in the West, they were often encouraged by idealistic Western sympathisers blind to the brutal reality of Communism in action.

British authorities, however, well understood the realities of Communism and were very concerned by its seemingly relentless spread. So much so, in fact, that they devoted up to 10% of their GDP – money they could ill afford after massive WWII costs – to armed forces well into the 1950s to help check the spread as part of what became known as The Western Alliance.

It was within this context that British military power built up steadily in Malaya and Singapore from soon after their return in late 1945. These were challenging times for the British, and plans to stop things getting out of hand in Malaya and the nearby region soon emerged.

The resultant plans included strategic planning by the UK, Australia and New Zealand under arrangements called ANZAM – Australia, New Zealand and Malayan Area - and requests for help from Australia and New Zealand, mainly for troops and aircraft. No one expected a quick victory; thinking was in years, not months.

In preparation for sustained air operations RAF Air Command Far East became the Far East Air Force (FEAF) on 1 June 1949. Requests for a squadron of RAAF Dakotas and

some Lincoln bombers had already been made in early April. Both requests were soon granted.

No 38 Squadron, with eight Dakotas, (some with crews recently returned from Berlin Airlift duty) arrived in Singapore on 19 June 1950 and was based in Changi, an RAF transport base on the north eastern tip of the island. No 1 Squadron, with six Lincolns, arrived a month later on 16 July at Tengah, on the island's north western corner.

The decision on the Lincolns was made the day after the decision to commit No. 77 Squadron Mustangs in Japan to help South Korea fight the invading North Korean communists. This meant that only five years after WWII ended, Australia was at war again in two theatres and the RAAF was active in both.

The Emergency was fought mainly on peninsular Malaya in jungle areas and around Kampongs and regional towns. Air transport was an essential element, providing everything from regular courier services and one-of logistics tasks, to leaflet drops and supply drops to police and troops in remote, often mountainous jungle areas.

The supply drops were especially important. Without them, many remote anti-CT operations could not otherwise be re-supplied, making prolonged effort difficult, if not impossible. Even after the Emergency was declared over, in 1960, some CTs still operated in the mountain spine of the peninsular. The police units hunting them down worked from permanent camps – usually called forts – dependent on air supply drops until well into the 1970s.

It was difficult work for the Dakota crews who had to find small drop zones in mountainous jungle areas, often partly covered by cloud or mist. Good planning and map reading

were essential, but circling around in the target area to find the drop zone was still often needed.

The altitude and humidity both reduced performance. To prepare for an engine failure at just the wrong moment, drops were always done down hill, usually along a river that could be followed down to an airfield near the coast. This worked well, for although engine failures were rare, they did happen, but no aircraft were lost doing supply drops.

38 Squadron was also used for many regional tasks in places like Ceylon, Borneo, the Philippines and Japan. The associated flying rate was very high, and in response during November four aircraft and crews were deployed to Iwakuni, Japan, for medevac and other tasks supporting the Korean War.

In April 1951, the remaining four aircraft moved to Kuala Lumpur, closer to the action, where they joined with the RNZAF's No.41 Squadron Bristol Freighters to drop some 200 tonnes of stores per month to forces in nearby mountain jungles. Later that year, they joined with RAF Valettas for supply drops in support of a major operation near the Thai border.

In late 1952, overall RAAF transport capability was overstretched and, with other FEAF aircraft now able to do the tasks, the Malayan Dakotas were withdrawn to Richmond to join 86 Transport Wing. During the emergency they had carried 17 000 passengers and some 2000 tonnes of freight, dropped 800 tonnes of stores and evacuated 326 wounded troops.

The Lincolns of 1 Squadron flew day and night sorties from Tengah to bomb and strafe CT camps in the jungle or near potential targets like plantations and railways. In almost 4 000 sorties, only 23 confirmed CTs were killed, but the main

task, to continually harass and keep the CTs on the move, was much more successful.

Bombing sorties were of two kinds: pinpoint bombing against exposed and specific targets and area bombing of jungle areas containing CT camps. Pinpoint bombing required considerable skill and was used less often when the CTs found out how lethal it was, moved deeper into the jungle and camouflaged un-moveable targets.

As a result, most sorties did area bombing. This could be frustrating for the crews who usually had no idea of the results of their efforts. One pilot later recalled that he didn't know if he killed any CT's, but he does have unhappy memories of a direct hit on a young elephant not seen until too late.

Analysis, however, indicated it was definitely not all in vain. Because of the bombing, the CTs were kept on the move, forced to leave established camps and food sources and create new ones, and were at times driven into ambushes. Much of this was hard to quantify, but captured and surrendered CTs often testified to the difficulties and fears resulting from the threat of constant air attack.

The Lincolns returned to Australia in July 1958. This effectively saw the end of Lincoln bombers in the RAAF. They were replaced by the Canberra in Australia, and in FEAF on the new Butterworth airbase, near Penang Island.

Tropical operations at times had their challenges for both Dakotas and Lincolns, but Changi and Tengah proved to be as good as could be hoped in the circumstances. Both bases were well equipped, permanent airfields, with good facilities and accommodation.

The tropical weather aside, life on a Singapore RAF base in those times was pleasant, with gracious colonial buildings and seemingly endless numbers of local staff providing cooking, cleaning, laundry, gardening and everything else to ensure the Sahib did not raise any unnecessary sweat.

That said, many Australians quickly tired of military surrounds and stodgy mess food and could often be found in nearby villages eating Nasi Goering or Gulah Ayam in little cafes and Satay sticks from Makan carts, washed down with Anchor or Tiger beer.

Girl watching too was popular, for in those days many still wore national dress – Indian saris, Chinese cheongsams and Malay sarong kebayas were commonplace – much to the delight of young Australian males reared in mono-culture, meat-and-three-vege Australia. Indeed, many found that the racial stereotypes they had been reared with were seriously challenged by simply sitting in a street café with a beer watching the local girls walk by.

It was exotic stuff to young Australians in those times. Many held fond memories for life of this simple fare and especially the passing fashion parade - sadly much diminished today with the adoption of western fashions and the abandonment of the form-fitting sarong kebaya (except by Singapore Airlines hostesses) in favour of the much more 'modest' dress today's Malay culture requires.

The emerging threat of Communism in the region was a growing concern to many countries. In response, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, France, Pakistan and Thailand, on 8 September 1954, signed the Manila Pact. This created SEATO, the South East Asia Treaty Organisation, to strengthen mutual defence against the spread of Communism by insurgencies, direct military force and such.

To further bolster anti-Communist forces, Britain, Australia and New Zealand created a Far Eastern Strategic Reserve force to be stationed in Malaya. On 1 April 1955, Australia committed some naval units, an infantry battalion, a fighter wing of two squadrons, a bomber squadron and an airfield construction squadron.

To house the aircraft, the existing RAF airfield at Butterworth, near Penang Island was chosen for a complete upgrade and modernisation. An RAF base pre-war, it was used by the Japanese during the war and again by the RAF post-war, mainly as a home for Sycamore and Whirlwind helicopters and Valetta fixed-wing transports. The new base would be supported from Australia by courier services flown by the new C130 aircraft then on order.

When operational, Butterworth would allow good FEAF coverage of the Malay peninsula and Singapore and underpin Australia's air commitment to SEATO. Although not initially intended for the role, it would also provide invaluable maintenance, medevac, logistics, personnel and other support for Australia's Vietnam efforts.

Work on the upgrade began in late 1955. The job fell to the RAAF's No 2 Airfield Construction Squadron (ACS) who created a modern airfield able to accommodate all Commonwealth aircraft, including RAF Vulcans, on regular visits. This was no mean feat on swampy ground in a monsoon area, but the end result has stood the test of time and is still in daily use as an RMAF base.

(In the 1960s, No. 2 ACS also built the RAAF accommodation and operating facilities at Ubon, in Thailand (mentioned later on) and in Vietnam at Vung Tau and Phan Rang (where they installed the only flush toilets on the base). Now largely forgotten, their work was an important enabler of the Australian regional presence in those times.)

Butterworth would add two fighter squadrons, a bomber squadron and a Dakota transport flight to a FEAF that had grown steadily during the 1950s. A *Flight Magazine* article from 1957 tells us FEAF forces in Singapore included a transport wing with three RAF squadrons of Valettas and an RNZAF Bristol Freighter squadron; two squadrons of Venom fighters; the last Sunderland Flying boats in the RAF (later replaced by Shackletons); the RAAF Lincolns and numerous smaller aircraft like Austers and Pioneers.

This made Singapore a very busy place. As the air transport hub, Changi ran a transit hotel and supported the nearby FEAF HQ 'in handsome red roofed buildings a few miles from Changi airfield, cool and commanding a magnificent view across the straits'. The RAF Jungle Survival School, attended by many RAAF aircrew over the years, was also at Changi.

The Far East Strategic Reserve was building nicely. The fully modernised Butterworth air base was handed over on 1 July 1958 and welcomed 2 squadron Canberra Bombers and 3 Squadron Sabres in November that year.

The Canberras initially bombed suspected CT sites, usually at medium level (4500-6000 metres), either visually or with guidance from a ground radar site. Like the Lincolns before them, they found the thick jungle made bombing effectiveness hard to determine. Missions became fewer as CT numbers fell and the squadron reverted to low-level bombing practice in 1960.

The Sabres of 77 Squadron arrived the next year, the RAF helicopters and Valettas stayed on and a RAAF maintenance squadron, No 478, was now up and running. All in all, as the 1950s drew to a close, FEAF had become a very respectable regional force.

Butterworth soon became a sought-after RAAF posting. Unlike Singapore where the shorter postings were mostly unaccompanied, Butterworth was usually a full tour of two years or more and included families. From the lowest ranked airman to the Air Commodore OC, married personnel all had very good housing, a servant or servants (depending on rank) and good allowances - and everyone had the benefits of duty free shopping for everything from electronics to cars.

All dependants got full health care from fully equipped facilities on Penang Island or the excellent base hospital on the mainland. Schooling was provided in Commonwealth run schools and dependants had access to facilities like golf courses and swimming pools. In all, it was better than most RAAF people had at home, and this was well understood.

Add to that the exotica of Asia, especially for the majority housed on Penang Island. George Town, the island capital, was then a major port peopled mainly by Chinese, Indian and Malay communities whose dress, customs and wonderful food was all new to most Australians. For the majority, especially married couples with children now looked after by an Amah, it was a memorable experience.

But there was a down side for some. Single accommodation was good but not great, and the singlies mostly lived on the base, with all its restrictions, not on exotic Penang. But the worst problems were for those who had to work 'in the midday sun' or outdoors in the tropical conditions at any time of day.

Sunshades keep the sun out of cockpits and air-conditioners pumped cool air in before start-up, but Sabre pilots sometimes still had to use parasols when parked on high alert and Canberra cockpits routinely reached over 50C

during start-up and taxi . Maintenance crews forced to work outside without cover also suffered, and at times worked in shifts to cope with the heat and humidity.

But in most ways Butterworth was a success, both socially and operationally. From a FEAF point of view, a generally happy workforce was obviously a plus, but more importantly the Butterworth squadrons were soon up to speed and able to operate proficiently in the challenging environment.

In 1960 the Emergency was officially declared over, but that was only true in populated areas. CTs were still being hunted down in the mountains and along the Thai border until well into the 1970s, but by the early 1960s Butterworth and surrounds were much safer. Strong security measures were still in place, but local incidents were rare.

Unfortunately, just as Malaya and Singapore were calming down, the neighbourhood was warming up. The Communists were gaining ground in Vietnam and Laos had fallen into civil war in the late 1950s. One side, the communist Pathet Lao, was backed by the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. Significantly, in late 1959 North Vietnam communists decided to switch from political to military action in South Vietnam and began to do so.

In 1960, major riots in the Laotian capital, Vientiane, broke out, raising concerns in the region that communism was strengthening its hold there and might spread further. Neighbouring Thailand in particular was worried and discussed this concern via SEATO. A number of contingency plans, including the deployment of RAAF Sabres and transport aircraft to Thailand if need be, were discussed.

In 1954 President Eisenhower had expressed concern that should Laos fall, its free neighbours – Cambodia, South Vietnam and possibly Thailand and Burma – could fall like ‘a row of dominoes’. Never a war monger, he nevertheless went so far as to say that if the US sent ground troops into Laos they should be fully supported, including, in the extreme, by the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Thankfully, it never came to that. But by 1961 the potential for serious developments in Laos and Vietnam was obvious to those ‘in the know’ – mostly government people. Communications were much poorer then, with no internet, satellite TV, 24/7 news etc. Most Australians knew nothing about happenings in these ‘faraway countries with strange sounding names’.

But the Australian government knew, and was worried. Following consultation with the Thai government, they decided to send a squadron of Sabres to Ubon, in South East Thailand near the border with Laos. From Ubon, the Sabres could help resist ground force intrusions from Laos and air attacks from Vietnam if need be.

The decision proved to be the easy bit. Malaysia was not a member of SEATO, wished to stay clear of regional disputes and did not support combat air operations from its bases into neighbouring countries.

Commonwealth Strategic Reserve combat aircraft could go to Thailand for SEATO training, but only via Singapore where they had to spend a week before going on. Transport aircraft, on the other hand, could fly troops to Thailand if fighting broke out.

No 79 Squadron was formed from eight Sabres in Butterworth and on 2 June 1962 took off for Ubon via Singapore. It remained in Ubon until August 1968. By then,

the anxious Thais had allowed the USAF to form six major bases in their country, stocked with hundreds of combat aircraft and more USAF personnel than in Vietnam at the height of the war.

SEATO exercises in Thailand were also a regular event during the 1960s. FEAF was a major contributor, at times with combat aircraft, but more often with transport aircraft, flying troops and planning staff around and reassuring the worried Thais that any trouble from across its borders could, and would, get a rapid response from their FEAF allies.

Logistics support to Ubon via RAAF C130s and occasional Butterworth Dakotas was routine throughout 79 Squadron's time there - although sometimes routed via Bangkok to preserve diplomatic niceties. Interesting times indeed, made more interesting by Australia's reaction to Communist gains in Vietnam that eventually saw nearly 50 000 Australians serve there.

The Commitment began in 1961-2 with army instructors and then grew as follows (with a RAAF emphasis):

1964: Caribous – some direct from Canada to form a training flight, become known as Wallaby Airlines and later become 35 squadron.

1965: Combat forces.

1966: Task Force, including 9 Squadron helicopters at Vung Tau to join the Caribous already there.

1967: 2 Squadron Canberras to Phan Rang from Butterworth.

Although not part of FEAF, the RAAF in Vietnam was well supported by use of FEAF facilities, much to the benefit of other Australian forces as well. C130s and Dakotas flew regularly from Butterworth to Vietnam, carrying cargo both ways and personnel back and forth on posting and leave.

The personnel often included 2 Squadron maintenance people and spares supporting a Canberra being ferried to Butterworth for a major service at 478 Maintenance squadron, or returning to Vietnam when the servicing was complete.

Such activities are well remembered, but less so is the vital work done at Butterworth by No 4 RAAF hospital in readying medevac patients for the long flight back to Australia. Most patients came from a front-line hospital in Vung Tau where they were prepared for the flight to Butterworth, usually by C130.

The recently acquired C130E could fly direct Butterworth to Australia. Medevacs could now be flown in a single flight, albeit a long one. To better care for serious cases on these long flights, the C130E could be fitted with a special intensive care capsule made by the aircraft depot at Richmond.

Specialist staff at 4 RAAF Hospital readied patients who needed to travel in the capsule and sometimes flew home with them. It was pioneering stuff in the history of medevacs - and no doubt well remembered by those who made it home thanks to 4 RAAF hospital staff and the capsule.

But well before these pioneering flights took place something memorable happened to FEAF. It was at once bizarre and serious, and today is remembered as

Confrontation with Indonesia - or if you are ex-PM Kevin Rudd and prefer Bahasa, Konfrontasi.

RAAF forces involved included the fighter and bomber squadrons already in Butterworth and a detachment of four Iroquois helicopters from 5 Squadron in Canberra.

We know what happened, but just why it happened is a bit obscure. Some facts, however, are clear. What was then Malaya (essentially the peninsula states), Singapore and the North Borneo states now known as Sarawak and Sabah all agreed to unite as a new country, the Federation of Malaysia.

This threatened no one, but some neighbours were unhappy. The Philippines objected, citing long-past sovereignty over a part of Sabah and the nearby Sulu Sea, but took no aggressive action. Indonesia was less reserved. Some senior figures there described the plan as 'neo-colonialism' and their opposition to it as 'Confrontation'.

The thinking behind the declaration of Malaysia as a new form of colonialism is hard to understand – in fact, it seemed the exact opposite: a transfer of power from the colonial ruler to a new self-governing state. Malaysians today seem to agree and celebrate the occasion each year as Merdeka, or Freedom Day.

But it doesn't matter what others thought. What matters is that some powerful Indonesians saw it otherwise and were strong enough to influence events. A good account of this confusing time can be found in Alan Stephen's book, 'Going Solo', in which he wrote:

'Konfrontasi was an untidy policy directed by Indonesia's mercurial President Sukarno against the proposed Federation of Malaysia...Sukarno's aggression appears to have been motivated by a combination of political opportunism and

genuine anti-colonial sentiment. Some elements of the political forces he had to balance to retain power in Indonesia were strongly opposed to the Federation.'

Knowing their armed forces had only limited capability, Indonesia avoided an all-out war and relied instead on political and diplomatic manoeuvres, and small scale military action to keep tensions high.

Alan Stephens tells us that these actions: 'included parachute drops near Johore; small unit raids and armed skirmishes throughout the new state, but especially Borneo; the incitement of riots and civil disobedience and deliberate incursions of Malaysian airspace.'

The incursions into Malaysian airspace were a big worry for FEAF, especially the air defence forces. Just what they might lead to was impossible to tell. FEAF HQ was taking no chances and in July 1963 ordered air defence coverage to be increased to 24 hours a day. Bob Richardson was a Sabre pilot on 77 Squadron at the time and later wrote:

In October two Sabres armed with Sidewinder missiles and 30mm cannon were placed on 5 minute scramble alert from dawn to dusk from operational readiness pads at either end of the Butterworth runway. Two seven hour shifts were used, changing at noon.

Rules of Engagement required clearance from FEAF HQ before any shots were fired, but no intruders arrived and clearance was never needed. If the Indonesian aim was to create considerable reaction at Butterworth without firing a shot, they had achieved it.

They then upped the ante in early 1964 by restricting RAAF flights over Indonesian territory. This forced the regular Australia to Malaysia C130 courier flights to go via Cocos Is

and around the tip of Sumatra, adding further to the RAAF effort and cost.

The RAF had twin-seat Javelin night fighters in Singapore and Hunter ground attack aircraft that could quickly take on an air defence role. In combination with the Sabres, this meant FEAF was well placed at both ends of the peninsular to counter any Indonesian air threat. But for months little happened, and Bob Richardson recalls that:

For the first 12 months or so RAAF involvement was light and sporadic, being confined to what we pilots felt was rather a nuisance of being rostered on regular pre-dawn or afternoon shifts on a seven day per week basis. Those of us who lived on Penang Island had to spend quite a few nights in the Butterworth mess....

Several RAF Vulcan bombers were also deployed to Butterworth...and were surrounded by special RAF guards and brightly lit at night, leading us to speculate about some very big armament indeed.

Events came to a head on 2 September 1964, at night, when three Indonesian C130 aircraft tried to drop paratroops into Johore state, just north of Singapore. The drop was something of a shambles, with some troops dropped in the wrong place and one aircraft believed to crash en-route, but this was the most aggressive act to date and a clear indicator of intent.

Bob Richardson remembers:

We pilots were later told that a RAF Javelin ...had shot down an Indonesian C130 that night, that a complete security lid had been put on this incident, and that the pilot concerned had promptly been returned to the UK. In hindsight...it was

wise to restrict public knowledge of it... to avoid escalation into a much wider conflict.

A state of emergency was declared in Singapore at 2200 hours, 2 September 1964, and the Butterworth Sabre pilots were all recalled to duty asap. The aircraft were serviced, armed and ready to go at dawn. Nothing happened, but a few days later intelligence advised of a high likelihood of an attack on the base by Badger bombers from Medan, in nearby Sumatra.

A state of heightened alert was declared. Canberra navigator Lance Halvorson later wrote (*Wings, Spring 2016*):
2 SQN Canberras were 'bombed up' with 6 x 1000lb bombs on numerous occasions ...for attacks on the Indonesian Air Base at Medan....Low level bombing tactics were to be employed with multi-aircraft co-ordinated strikes with 30 seconds between each aircraft over the target.

No bombing missions against Medan were flown, but a good deal of effort was put into preparing to do so if need be. The Sabre force, on the other hand, did fly to defend the base. But they did so without radar detection and guidance where it was most needed.

The air defence radar was then on the mainland, not on top of Penang Hill as in later years. This created a large radar shadow area to the west of Penang Island, the very area the Sabres needed to operate in to intercept bombers from Medan. The need to switch off the Butterworth non-direction beacon, that could otherwise have been used by Sabre pilots to locate the airfield, added to the difficulties.

Still, something had to be done, and a system of low-level combat air patrols was developed. Bob Richardson recalls that:

This involved several pairs of Sabres with external tanks being vectored about 50 miles seaward of Butterworth before first light to patrol across likely Badger attack routes. This was pretty hair raising, because the weather at the time was bad, with frequent heavy showers and thunderstorms....We had to fly out to sea at low altitude in pitch darkness in pairs to a given point, separate ourselves by 1500 feet vertically, then fly timed legs back and forth...

No one had trained for such work, nor had they trained for similar challenges, yet to come, in North Borneo a year later. Soon after the Badger scare - that happily came to nothing - the Sabre force contributed, almost full time, to the air defence of Singapore as well as Butterworth.

Meanwhile, the 5 Squadron helicopters had been busy. Originally sent to Butterworth to support army activities against the CTs, they now flew army units to coastal areas where Indonesians were thought to have landed, or might land.

This presented few new dangers – flying helicopters in hilly tropical areas is always a challenge – but the unexpected was always on the cards. Laddie Hindley, then CO of the helicopters, describes one particularly bizarre event in his biography, *Hostage to Fate*:

One task took us to Singapore to take 24 Singaporean/Malaysian troops to a small island nearby where Indonesian forces were thought to have landed. We dropped them in a small grassed area and arranged to return next day to pick them up. What happened next was something of a tragedy.

Fifteen Indonesian troops were indeed on the island. They waited until the helicopter had left and then challenged the Malaysian troops to throw down their arms and surrender. The Malaysian NCO in charge responded unwisely, shouting

for his troops to open fire despite being out in the open with the enemy hidden in the jungle. Seven Malaysians were killed.

Things then took a bizarre turn. Realising that they had no way of getting off the island, and that if Malaysian radio calls were not sent back to Singapore more troops would arrive, the Indonesians surrendered. News of the surrender was radioed back to Singapore and we went back the same day and flew the Malaysians and Indonesians back to Singapore.

In many ways this incident demonstrates the confused nature of Confrontation and the lack of commitment some Indonesians, at least, had to the whole idea. This confusion is further demonstrated by the fact that diplomatic and trade ties with Australia continued throughout Confrontation.

Australian attendance at Indonesian military staff colleges also continued - because, as an Australian Army officer attendee in those times told me: 'The Indonesians understood that we would wish to support our friends, that Confrontation would end one day, while the geography that made us neighbours would last forever.'

But that said, Confrontation was still on. The mixed messages from Indonesia and strange happenings on the ground near Singapore didn't affect Butterworth's Sabre force. For them, high-threat responses, like daylight combat air patrols and scramble alerts were still required.

For these activities, the pilot was either in the aircraft ready to go, or close by ready to jump into a combat ready machine in just minutes. The scramble alerts were very demanding on pilots who had to wear g-suits and life jackets during high states of readiness, and often could last only an hour at most until serious heat-stress set in.

Again, despite the potential for serious trouble, none eventuated. Then, in 26 October 1965, a detachment of six 77 Squadron Sabres was sent to Labuan, North Borneo, to replace an RAF Hunter squadron providing air defence against Indonesian forces in Kalimantan posing a potential threat to Sarawak and Sabah.

Intelligence reported that Indonesian Mustangs were harassing UK and Australian army elements in the border regions. The Sabres deployed via Singapore and on arrival Bob Richardson and the other pilots found:

Our area of operations along the Kalimantan border was 'tiger country' by anyone's definition. There were no reliable maps...and we were also required to patrol southward some 100 miles along the Sarawak border. This area is mountainous and covered in the tallest and densest rainforest in the world.

The Hunter pilots gave them some hand-drawn maps, which they constantly updated. Patrols were done with drop-tanks fitted, at only around 180 knots, 200 to 500 feet above the jungle canopy. This gave them little time to react to an enemy or an emergency - but fortunately, despite all the things that could go seriously wrong, nothing did and they all survived.

Although they didn't know it, Confrontation was almost over. A failed coup by local Communists led to a regime change, the killing of many thousands of Indonesian communists, a rapid fall-off in Indonesian activity and the official end to Confrontation in August 1966. Transit by RAAF aircraft over Indonesia was again approved and readiness states in Butterworth and Singapore were relaxed.

The FEAF order of battle soon after changed significantly. In Singapore the Javelins were replaced by super-fast

Lightnings. In Butterworth, the 2 Squadron Canberras went to Phan Rang, Vietnam, and two squadrons of Mirages, Nos 3 and 75, replaced the Sabres.

In 1971, as part of a UK policy to withdraw all forces stationed 'East of Suez', FEAF ceased to exist. In its time it certainly made a difference, providing air support during the Emergency, a major contribution to SEATO and enough combat air power in Singapore and Butterworth to deter the Indonesians behind Confrontation from doing even sillier things.

Gone but not forgotten, it's legacy lived on - most importantly in the FPDA, the Five Power Defence Arrangements, under which UK aircraft returned regularly for exercises and RAAF aircraft still deploy today; by a continued RAAF fighter presence at Butterworth, well after it became an RMAF base in 1970; and IADS, the Integrated Air Defence System staffed mainly by Australia, Malaysia and Singapore.

It also lives on in the memories of all who served it during the turbulent and worrying Cold War times - times now long gone thanks in part to FEAF and its contribution to the fight against Communism, and with it the much better world to Australia's near north today.