

# *The Royal Australian Navy in Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore, 1948-1971*

an address<sup>1</sup> to the Institute on 27 May 2008 by

**Dr Ian Pfennigwerth<sup>2</sup>**

Naval Historian



*Between 1948, when Australia assumed strategic responsibility for British Commonwealth sea lines of communication to and from South-East Asia, and 1971, when the Five-Power Defence Arrangements came into effect, ships and men of the Royal Australian Navy served with almost unnoticed distinction in defending the newly emerging nations of Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore. In this paper, Ian Pfennigwerth outlines the role the Navy played during the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s, the early development of the Royal Malaysian Navy and Indonesia's 'confrontation' of Malaysia in the early-mid 1960s.*

Veterans of all wars can claim, to varying degrees, that their service to the nation and its interests has been 'forgotten' by the public. Of course, we ought not to forget service rendered in our name, especially when we continue to benefit from it for many years afterwards. Consider then the claims of the veterans of the series of conflicts that I am going to remind you of, and in particular, those of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN).

### **A Post-War Role for Australia in South-East Asia**

World War II solved a few issues but gave rise to a host of others, one of which was the future of former colonial possessions in South-East Asia. A second was the security of Australia in a world where the big powers seemed preoccupied elsewhere. A third was a determination by Australia never again to be excluded from bodies taking decisions on its future, as had been the pattern of the former British Committee of Imperial Defence and later the United States/United Kingdom Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington. With the 1942 Singapore debacle fresh in their minds, Australian strategists, diplomats and service leaders wanted to ensure that there would be no recurrence.

The British welcomed this new Australian assertiveness on security issues. Seeking to lessen its defence burdens, Britain was willing to accept a new role for Australia in strategic planning for the South-East Asian region, but not in Malaya or Singapore, where the forces supporting British policies in the region were headquartered. Britain would continue to speak for her colonies, but agreed that the Australian Chiefs of Staff, assisted by seconded personnel and visits from senior officers, should undertake planning for the defence of the region against external aggression, which was understood to be hegemonic tendencies in international Communism.

In 1948, a regional defence grouping emerged from discussions – Australia, New Zealand and Malaya (ANZAM), with the 'M' meaning Britain.

The Australian Chief of Naval Staff thus became responsible for planning the defence of sea lines of communication to and from the Malayan region. This was only a paper exercise, because the plans needed confirmation and agreement from the other two parties, and the major assets would have to come from Britain. There were, however, two real outcomes – besides the need to develop some strategic planning skills within the Australian naval staff! The first was a decision to shape the order of battle of the RAN towards anti-submarine warfare, which was to influence the Navy for decades to come. The second was the need for high-level liaison between the RAN, on behalf of ANZAM, and the United States Navy to coordinate planning and to delimit areas of national responsibility in the Pacific. Negotiations and discussions were commenced between the United States Commander-in-Chief Pacific and the Australian Chief of Naval Staff, culminating in 1951 in the 'Radford-Collins Agreement', named after the two principals, which operates to this day. Thus, the setting up of ANZAM in 1948, with the defence of Malaya and Singapore as its core concern, had far-reaching consequences for the RAN and Australia.

### **The Malayan Emergency**

While ANZAM was beginning its planning, things were not well for the British on the Malayan Peninsula. Their erstwhile allies in resisting the Japanese occupation, the guerrillas and political cadres of the Anti-Japanese Army, had transformed themselves into an anti-British front organisation led by the Malayan Communist Party which was agitating through the labour unions, and a campaign of political assassination, for the end of British rule. This turned serious in 1948 with the commencement of a campaign to murder plantation managers and to destroy the rubber trees on which much of the commerce of the colony depended. The British banned the Communist Party and declared a state of emergency, labelling the

<sup>1</sup>The lecture was based on Dr Pfennigwerth's recently published book, *Tiger Territory: The Untold Story of the Royal Australian Navy in Southeast Asia from 1948 to 1971* (Rosenberg Publishing Pty Ltd: Australia), 315 pp., 2008, RRP \$29.95. The lecture was attended by 71 members and guests.

<sup>2</sup>E-mail: pfennigs1@bigpond.com

agitators 'Communist terrorists' (CT). This did nothing to stop their activities and nor did the tactics of the military forces sent to quell the disturbances. Neither the Chifley Labor Government nor its Liberal successor under Robert Menzies was keen to become involved militarily, although both suspected the British were handling the problem in the wrong way. Politically, Australian governments were reluctant to take sides because of concern that the CTs – now the self-styled 'Malayan Races Liberation Army' – might turn out to be a genuine anti-colonial movement, and Australia had taken a strong anti-colonial position in supporting Indonesian independence from the Dutch. In the end, it was the spectre of international Communism which made up Menzies' mind. Australian transport aircraft and, later, bombers were sent to Malaya after the North Koreans launched their assault on the South in June 1950.

### ***British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve***

Indeed, Communism was popping up everywhere. The Korean War, so close on the heels of the Communist victory in China, suggested to Western strategists a coordinated plan. We now appreciate that this was not so, but it appeared that way at the time, and a number of measures were taken to face the threat. American moves to conclude the occupation of Japan led the Australian government to redouble its efforts to involve the United States in a security treaty protecting Australia, and the ANZUS<sup>3</sup> Treaty was signed in 1951. A multinational alliance directly confronting Communism in South-East Asia, the South-East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), followed in 1954 and the Australian government embarked on a large-scale expansion of Australia's warfighting capabilities. While the British were now beginning to win in Malaya with new leadership, centralised organisation and better tactics, these new defence commitments required a new strategic concept for Australia. Thus was born the 'forward defence' strategy; and to meet possible ANZAM and SEATO contingencies, the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR) came into being in July 1955, committing Australia to maintaining troops, aircraft and ships in the Malayan area.

Not without precedent, the RAN was first in. At the stroke of a pen, two destroyers deployed for multi-national exercises in South-East Asia became the first Australian commitment to FESR. Months later, the advance parties for the Army and Air Force appeared. Once again, the flexibility of warships in diplomatic manoeuvres had been demonstrated. The government also used a secondary clause of the FESR agreement to acquiesce in the RAN ships being used to support the battle against the CTs in Malaya, so the 'reserve' was deployed at once into the front line.

### ***Naval tasks in the Emergency***

What was the naval front line in a counter-insurgency campaign? Some, including the authors of the official history of Australia's involvement in the Malayan Emergency and later Confrontation, suggest there was none. Better-informed examination demonstrates

otherwise. There were occasions when the RAN ships took a direct role, as in bombarding CT positions at the request of the ground forces, a task familiar to those who had fought in Korea. Then they trained, cooperated with and coordinated the operations of smaller inshore patrol vessels in the unceasing naval role of maintaining a blockade of the Malayan coast against infiltration and arms supply. RAN ships carried communications intelligence teams seeking out any unidentified or unsuspected radio activity operating at powers lower than could be picked up by the shore intercept sites in the area and offshore.

Less obviously directed against the CTs, but an important part of the British 'hearts and minds' campaign to strengthen Malayan resolve to resist the terrorists, was the traditional role of 'showing the flag'. On the less-settled and remote east coast of the Peninsula, this was particularly important, but it also had its place in urbanised Singapore, where demonstrations of naval firepower were used to display Commonwealth determination and capability as an antidote to Communist subversion.

Finally, at a strategic level, the Australian government had written into the FESR agreement the need for our ships to show the Australian flag in regional countries. This was to demonstrate that Australia was interested and involved, this time in its own right, and could be counted upon as a friend in need. For many, this was the first they had seen of Australians since World War II. There was a warm welcome in North Borneo, but a more reserved response in much of the Malay Peninsula.

By 1957, the Emergency was running down in intensity and impact. Defeated militarily and politically, and with their liberation credentials trumped by the British decision to grant Malaya independence, the CTs withdrew into the difficult country along the border with Thailand to regroup. Although they did not finally surrender until the 1980s, they were no longer a threat and the Emergency was declared ended in 1960 by the new government of independent Malaya, which had taken over the Emergency response – with continued support from the Commonwealth.

### ***Establishing the Royal Malayan Navy***

The Malayan Government initially showed some reluctance to take responsibility for the naval defence of the country, perceiving that it did not need a navy. The British withheld defence assistance to change this mindset, and the Royal Malayan Navy (RMN) was established in 1958. Unfortunately, the British, initially, did not supply the right kind of personnel to bring this new navy up to effective levels of organisational, technical or operational performance. In 1959, the Malaysians invited Australia to assist, offering the RAN the position of chief of their navy, having previously agreed that Australia and New Zealand should be 'attached' to the agreement allowing British forces to be stationed in Malaya.

It was not an opportune moment for the RAN to loan experienced officers to another navy, as the RAN had a major re-equipment programme beginning to deliver new ships and equipment and there was an associated need for significant retraining. Nevertheless, the new commander, Captain W. J. (Bill) Dovers and staff officers to support him were found and, within a few weeks of being told of their unusual new posting, by January 1960 the new

---

<sup>3</sup>Australia, New Zealand and United States

brooms were in Kuala Lumpur ready to sweep clean. This was the start of a relationship between the two navies which endures still, despite a few storms along the way.



*Captain W. J. Dovers, DSC, RAN, Chief of the Royal Malayan Navy, on the bridge of the RMN minesweeper KD Mahamiru  
[Photo: P. Nettur]*

The needs of the RMN were many, but high on the list were identity, organisation, training and ships. Within an army-dominated defence hierarchy, the new navy had to hold its own in debates over resources and priorities and to establish itself as independent of the Royal Navy. The Dovers team began by developing the administrative framework which would allow the RMN to compete effectively, and to replace British insignia with Malayan themes on ensigns, badges and other symbols. Dovers ruthlessly weeded out non-effectives from the loan and seconded staffs and, to replace them, he asked for, and received, many RAN personnel. In a short space of time, Australians found themselves fighting bureaucratic battles in Kuala Lumpur, operating RMN training schools, reforming the logistics and maintenance arrangements, and commanding RMN ships. This called for many cultural and domestic adjustments, which some found difficult, but most entered enthusiastically into life in the RMN. Dovers moved early to replace the odds and ends that comprised the RMN order of battle. He took delivery of Ton Class minesweepers and ordered a new class of fast patrol boats suited to the maritime approaches of the Peninsula. He also strengthened the arrangements for young Malaysians to attend Royal Naval schools to raise their professional and leadership standards.

Dovers' successor was Captain A. M. Synnot, no stranger to Malaya. He had been part of a 1950 Australian military mission sent to Malaya to study the Emergency and how Australia might assist the British. Now he was in charge of implementing some of the recommendations and developing others. During his watch, the prickly issue of race and its influence on preferment and promotion cropped up. Synnot's view was that ability rather than ethnic origin should determine advancement in the RMN, but this was not government policy, which required Malayan forces to be commanded and led by Malays.

Synnot was succeeded by Captain A. N. Dollard, who had the sensitive task of assisting in the selection of his Malayan successor, a Tamil, who took over command from him on 1 December 1967. For more than six years, RAN

officers were at the helm of the RMN, and many positions of importance and influence were occupied by Australian officers and sailors. During the term of the subsequent RAN 'Adviser' to the RMN Chief of Naval Staff, Malayan ties with the RAN continued to strengthen, with students accepted for training in RAN specialist schools.

The RAN was not alone in supporting the RMN during its difficult first years. British interest and assistance remained strong, and countries like India and New Zealand were also involved in training and maintenance roles. But the RAN 'thumbprint' on the RMN remains, although it has long since become a fully independent service, well capable of meeting its professional and operational responsibilities from within its own ranks. Interestingly, personal links forged in those times remain strong, and Australia has become the second home of many RMN personnel in retirement.

### **Confrontation**

The building of the RMN took place against a background of very significant political activity. In 1962, the Malayan Prime Minister raised the suggestion of a political federation of Malaya and the remaining British colonies in Borneo into a new nation of Malaysia. For the Malaysians, the largely non-Chinese population of North Borneo would act as a counterweight to the admission of the Chinese of Singapore, thus keeping Malays in the majority. It offered the British an acceptable solution to the future of the North Borneo territories, as Whitehall sought to reduce its forces and responsibilities 'east of Suez'. Even Indonesia initially raised no objections. This attitude changed dramatically in early 1963 with President Sukarno vowing to 'confront' Malaysia. It was not quite clear what that meant but, after the proposal had attracted the votes of a majority of the potential new citizens of the federation, Malaysia became a political reality in September 1963. Insurgent activity, which had been commenced across the land border in Borneo, now flared into larger scale incursions.

The clearly hostile intent of Indonesia towards Malaysia posed an immediate problem for the Australian government and armed forces. Strenuous efforts had been made to regain the confidence of the Sukarno government after Australia had backed the losing side in the struggle for control of Dutch New Guinea. Taking up arms against Indonesians in Malaysia and its contiguous waters would negate this work. However, Australia was committed to the defence of Malaysia and *Konfrontasi* was aggression designed to destabilise the new federation. Cabinet dithered over the commitment of Australian troops of the FESR to the fighting in Borneo, but had no compunction in ordering the RAN into the fray. And not just with FESR ships – Confrontation became a very large undertaking for the Navy. The destroyers on FESR service were bolstered by the six ships of the 16<sup>th</sup> Minesweeping Squadron and HMAS *Sydney*, undertaking her first voyage as a troop transport. Maintenance teams were to follow, along with the RAN Clearance Diving Team on its first operational deployment. These joined RAN personnel employed in Far East Headquarters, seconded to the RMN, and the signals intelligence personnel working in Singapore. In short, many more RAN personnel were deployed in the defence of Malaysia than in Vietnam, and for longer periods.

## **North Borneo**

There was a very significant role for naval power in the land campaign in Borneo, which continued throughout Confrontation. Troops were inserted, supplied, reinforced and evacuated by sea, and naval helicopters provided the majority of the vertical lift required. Off the coasts and up the large rivers, which are traditional highways through the jungles of Sabah and Sarawak, naval patrols watched for seaborne incursions or resupply, patrolled on the flanks of the army, and continued to practise the 'hearts and minds' principles learned during the Emergency. At Tawau on the east coast of Sabah, naval ships physically faced and traded shots with Indonesian army positions, and their guns provided bombardment support for land operations. The existence of a Philippines claim to Sabah was a complicating factor which saw regular, but peaceful, encounters between Commonwealth and Filipino warships.



*Indonesian prisoners being transferred to the Singapore Police during Confrontation [Photo: J. Werner]*

## **Singapore Strait**

The border protection task took on a different level of importance in the Singapore Strait, where the proximity of Indonesian territory to Malaysia made incursions across the water boundary easy. Tens of minutes away from their targets in Singapore, infiltrators crossing at night made the work of the patrolling Commonwealth warships very difficult. The infiltrators used as cover: the traditional barter traders; the fishing fleets of both nations; and the international traffic thronging this vital sea route to and

from the Far East. Until the navies developed operational techniques and the correct sensors and weapons to deal with the threat, interceptions were hit and miss affairs. For the most part, the infiltration teams were courageous, well armed and determined, inflicting casualties on the warships, but suffering disproportionate losses themselves. The brunt of this battle was borne by the minesweepers of four navies and the patrol boats of the RMN. Luckily, there were no RAN deaths, but firefights were sudden and lethal, even such 'modern' techniques as suicide bombing being employed. Thanks to the dedication of the crews of these small ships, it was estimated that more than 80 per cent of attempts to cross the straits were detected and either turned away or intercepted. An additional hazard faced by these ships was occasional bursts of Indonesian artillery fire from the Riau Archipelago whenever ships moved close to the international boundary.

## **Straits of Malacca**

The naval problem in the Malacca Strait had similarities and differences. There was a much larger target coast to be defended and the parties attempting the crossing were also larger, but it was possible to use aerial surveillance. The Indonesians routinely used a number of ports from which to mount their attacks, and these were kept under close surveillance by air, sea and land, with submarines used from time to time for covert surveillance. Using this intelligence, the Commonwealth came up with surprisingly accurate predictions on where to station their patrol forces, and to apprehend the infiltrators. But, while the Indonesian Navy operated circumspectly on its side of the median line down the Strait, Indonesian customs boats, used to check barter-trading (BT) boats, often raided craft on the Malaysian side of the waterway. This practice led to several engagements with RMN ships, which discharged their responsibilities with distinction, despite suffering casualties from BT-boat fire.

And it was a series of airdrops by the Indonesian Air Force along the Malacca Strait coast in the latter part of 1964 which raised the temperature of Confrontation almost to the point at which massive retaliation against Indonesian defence facilities was unleashed by the Commonwealth. The Malaysians sought and received assurances that any further escalation of Indonesian aggression would be matched by Commonwealth actions against Indonesian territory. Fortunately, cooler heads on the south side of the Strait prevailed and there were no repetitions. Similarly, after Indonesian submarines had been detected and tracked in April 1964 off the Malaysian east coast trailing a British aircraft carrier, they too appear to have been withdrawn to reduce the possibilities of war by miscalculation.

## **Singaporean secession and Indonesian coup attempt**

Although it was not dismembered by the Indonesians, racial and political tensions between Singapore and the government in Kuala Lumpur worsened in early 1965 and in August Singapore seceded from the Federation. This could have caused awkward problems, but both nations agreed to fight on to combat Confrontation and they did. On the Indonesian side, the very concept of Confrontation

was losing momentum in the atmosphere of political intrigue and competition which precipitated the 30 September 1965 coup attempt targetting the leadership of the armed forces. Quickly crushed, the incident brought General Suharto to the position of the power behind the Presidential throne. Diplomatic efforts to end the fighting were resumed and, in August 1966, Confrontation was signed out of existence. Malaysia was intact, the new independent nation of Singapore had been born, and casualties, on both sides, had been relatively light. The contrast with what was happening in Vietnam could not have been starker.

The end of Confrontation and problems at home led to a rapid drawdown of British forces. Although committed to the defence of Singapore and Malaysia, Britain was unwilling to underwrite this with large standing garrisons. Negotiations on a new form of defence cooperation dragged on for five years, with the end result being the Five Power Defence Arrangements of 1971. This saw a small Commonwealth land presence in Singapore, the Royal Australian Air Force taking most of the responsibility for air defence of the two countries, and the three 'outside' powers contributing naval forces on rotation. ANZAM was dead, but ANZUK took its place. On 1 October 1971, the new organisation opened, with an Australian Rear Admiral in charge. Although ANZUK did not last long, the 1971 Arrangements in modified form still operate today, especially in the naval field.

## Conclusion

Looking back on sixty years of RAN involvement in the region, the fruits of those early days remain, as in the cordial relationships between the three South-East Asian countries and Australia. Careful use of naval and air power had ensured that there would be no bitter legacies of Confrontation to taint them. The RAN enjoys the best of relations with the Republic of Singapore Navy and RMN and 'forward defence', once out of vogue, is back under another name. Perhaps the most telling tribute to the service of the Australian armed forces in Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore is that the public everywhere has almost forgotten the Emergency and Confrontation. The conflicts were won, but in such a way that their memory has faded away. For that reason alone it would be fitting to recall and celebrate the service of the men and women who brought about such an outstanding result, led by the RAN.

**The Author:** Captain Ian Pfennigwerth, RAN (Retd), left the Navy in 1992 after 35 years, which included FESR service, two tours during Confrontation and 3 years as Director of Naval Intelligence. He subsequently conducted an international business consultancy. Since 2000, he has pursued a new career in naval history, gaining his PhD (University of Newcastle) in 2005 and writing four books, of which *Tiger Territory*, on which this lecture was based, is the third. Ian lectures frequently on naval history subjects, is the editor of the *Journal of Australian Naval History*, and is researching three new books. His previous lecture to the Institute on 26 September 2006 on "Australian Codebreaking in World War II" was published in *United Service* 57 (4), 25 - 29, December 2006. [Photo of Captain Pfennigwerth: Colonel J M Hutcheson MC]



The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales  
Incorporated

**APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP**

I hereby apply for membership of The Royal United Services Institute of NSW Inc. and forward herewith the Annual Subscription Fee, 1 July to 30 June

- Ordinary Member \$35
- Additional Family member \$15
- Corporate Member \$50
- (please delete those not applicable)*

SURNAME.....

GIVEN NAMES (IN FULL).....

D.O.B..... TITLE OR RANK.....

POST NOMINALS.....

HOME ADDRESS.....

.....POSTCODE.....

EMAILADDRESS.....

TELEPHONE..... FAX :.....

BUSINESS/OTHER ADDRESS.....

.....POSTCODE.....

TELEPHONE..... FAX.....

PREFERRED CONTACT ADDRESS  HOME  BUSINESS

PRESENT STATUS ACTIVE  PRESENT UNIT/SHIP.....

RESERVE  PRESENT UNIT/SHIP.....

RETIRED

*Details (if any) of service with:*

NAVY  ARMY  AIR FORCE

Unit or Ship .....

SIGNATURE..... DATE .....

**NOMINATION**

Introduced by

.....  
*Member's Name*

.....  
*SIGNATURE* *DATE*

*Return to:* Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales  
Level 20 Defence Plaza  
270 Pitt Street Sydney  
NSW 2000  
or  
Locked Bag 18 Darlinghurst  
NSW 2010