

WARTIME SNAPSHOTS

The Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation

During the 1950s and 1960s, Australian forces were engaged in two conflicts involving Malaya (now Malaysia). British Commonwealth forces played a key role in combating a twelve-year long Communist insurgency, known as the Malayan Emergency, between 1948 and 1960. Then from 1964, Australians served in support of the newly federated state of Malaysia. This second conflict, known as the Indonesian Confrontation, ended in 1966, by which time Australians had been involved in operations within Indonesian territory and on the Malayan peninsula.

Australian War Memorial FIL/66/0241/MC

Australian War Memorial HOB/56/0749/MC



WARTIME SNAPSHOTS THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY AND THE INDONESIAN CONFRONTATION

Background – The Malayan Emergency

The Malayan Emergency was declared in June 1948 when three European estate managers were killed by Malayan Communist Party (MCP) guerrillas. Denied the opportunity to gain Malayan citizenship, Malayan Chinese members of the MCP sought to use violence to overthrow British colonial rule after Japan's defeat in the Second World War. The MCP's assassination of the British High Commissioner in October 1951 made Britain more determined to meet the communist threat.

Australia's involvement began in 1950 when Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aircraft and personnel arrived in Singapore as part of the Far East Air Force. The first Australian ground troops, the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR), arrived in Malaya in October 1955 and were followed in 1957 by 3RAR and by 1RAR in 1959. All were engaged in patrols, ambushes, and in guarding villages. Australian artillery, engineers, and an airfield construction squadron also served in Malaya, and vessels of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) served in Malayan waters.

With limited support, the MCP was poorly resourced and lacked the numbers to succeed. By 1959 operations were winding up and many members of the MCP crossed the border into Thailand. The Emergency was declared officially over on 31 July 1960 but anti-MCP operations continued into 1963.

Australia's involvement in the Malayan Emergency was one of the nation's longest continuing military commitments. The Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour lists the names of 39 Australians who lost their lives during the Malayan Emergency, the majority of whom were in the army.

Background – The Indonesian Confrontation

In early 1963, small parties of Indonesian troops began infiltrating Malaysian territory on the island of Borneo to conduct propaganda and sabotage missions. Indonesian President Sukarno believed that the creation of the Malaysian Federation was an extension of British colonial rule in south-east Asia. In 1964 Indonesian regular army units became involved in the conflict. In September and October of that year, Australian troops stationed on the Malayan peninsula were used in mopping-up operations against external attacks.

In January 1965, Australia agreed to send a battalion to Borneo under overall British command. In the same year the British Government permitted highly secret cross-border operations under the codename Claret. Uncertain about where the Commonwealth forces might strike next, the Indonesians devoted more of their resources to protecting their own positions and less on offensive operations. 3RAR arrived in Borneo in March 1965 and served in Sarawak until the end of July. They conducted extensive operations on both sides of the border involving some major contacts and landmine incidents.

Between April and August 1966 4RAR also served in Sarawak and operated on the Indonesian side of the border. In addition to the infantry battalions, two squadrons of the Special Air Service (SAS), several artillery batteries and parties of the Royal Australian Engineers, and ships of the RAN were involved in Borneo and in surrounding waters. Several RAAF squadrons were also involved in the Confrontation.

The Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour lists the names of 21 Australians who lost their lives during the Indonesian Confrontation. Because of the sensitivity of the secret cross-border operations, the Confrontation received very little coverage in the Australian press. Indonesia and Malaysia signed a peace treaty in Bangkok in August 1966, ending the conflict.

References

- Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1996
- *Roll of Honour*, Australian War Memorial, awm.gov.au/people/roll-search/roll_of_honour/
- *Australian involvement in South-East Asian Conflicts*, Department of Veterans' Affairs, se-asia.commemoration.gov.au/
- *Indonesian Confrontation*, Australian War Memorial, awm.gov.au/atwar/indonesian-confrontation/

Teaching Activities

1. Look at the two Remembrance Day posters on the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation. What do the images on the posters tell you about the nature of these two conflicts that Australians were involved in?
2. Locate Malaya and the island of Borneo on a world map. What is their proximity to Australia? Why is this significant?
3. Using the background information, construct a timeline of events of the Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation.
4. Using the website, *Australia's involvement in South East Asian Conflicts*, research one Australian unit involved in the Malayan Emergency or Indonesian Confrontation (SAS, RAN, RAAF, RAR, engineers, artillery, and medical personnel). Explain their role and contribution to the conflict.
5. Research one of the major engagements that Australians were involved in during the Malayan Emergency or Indonesian Confrontation. Explain the role and contribution of the Australians during the engagement. You may wish to research Operation Shark North, Operation Termite or Operation Claret.
6. Watch the short film *On the Border* at the web link provided below. Explain the importance of the Iban people and the use of helicopters during the Indonesian Confrontation.
7. What other conflicts was Australia involved in during the 1950s and 1960s? How were they similar or different to the Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation?
8. In what ways can we remember the service and sacrifice of Australians involved in these two conflicts?

Websites

Use the links below to answer the teaching activities above.

Department of Veterans' Affairs

- Q1 anzacportal.dva.gov.au/teachers/resources?field_resources_tid=32
- Q2 se-asia.commemoration.gov.au/emergency-and-confrontation/index_map-malay-indo.php
- Q3 – Q5 se-asia.commemoration.gov.au/
- Q6 se-asia.commemoration.gov.au/australian-operations-in-indonesian-confrontation/claret-operations_video-f04666.php
- Q7 awm.gov.au/atwar/

Australian War Memorial

- Q3 – Q5 awm.gov.au/atwar/malayan-emergency/ & awm.gov.au/atwar/indonesian-confrontation/

Other

- Q8 nmbvaa.org.au/docs/Hubagan_17_Nov_2013.pdf