

The War We Nearly Had

By John Clarkson – RAAF Armourer – Retired.

Introduction

There have been many articles and essays which have described the Australian involvement in the Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia during the 1960s. Some have called it “The Forgotten War”, a title normally given to the Korean War, and rightly so.

However, this essay is primarily concerned with the involvement by the RAF and the RAAF fighter squadrons during the peak period of September 1964. It has been well recorded that Indonesia began its confrontation with Malaysia during the year of 1962. Several Australian Army units were deployed to the southern areas of Malaysia, to serve alongside many of their British Army colleagues. At this time the RAF had squadrons in Tengah, (one of the three operational bases in Singapore), as well as squadrons on RAAF Base Butterworth, an old wartime base on the mainland adjacent to the island of Penang, which was refurbished and extended by the RAAF in the late 1950s.

This essay has been written partly from the statements given to me by other airman who were on the scene at the time, as well as my own memories of actions witnessed at my own squadron. When I arrived at No 78 Fighter Wing in Butterworth from Amberley in September 1965, many of the tradesmen and other airmen were still talking about the events a year earlier. They were that profound. As a new arrival at the squadron, an intensive training programme ensured that I was brought up to speed with all things Sabre within a short time. This allowed the Senior NCOs to place me on the ORP roster in order to spread the turnaround time making it fair for all concerned.

At the time, the RAF had two bomber squadrons in Tengah, one operating Canberra aircraft, and one operating the Vulcan ‘V’ Bomber. The RAF also had two fighter squadrons in Tengah, one operating the Hunter aircraft and one operating the Javelin aircraft. The RAF also had a fighter squadron in Butterworth operating the night fighter Javelin aircraft. The RAF also had a deployment of two or three Vulcan Bomber aircraft sitting on the tarmac fully bombed up with some 21 x 1,000 pound bombs. These aircraft would be regularly rotated with their squadron at Tengah, always leaving a minimum of two fully bombed and prepared aircraft at Butterworth. The RAAF had two fighter squadrons operating the Sabre aircraft, (Nos 3 and 77 Squadrons) one bomber squadron operating the Canberra aircraft, (No 2 Squadron) and one helicopter squadron (No 5 Squadron) operating the UH-1B Iroquois) stationed in Butterworth. During the period from 1962 to late 1964, all of these squadrons were performing their appropriate roles to monitor the Indonesian activities. The fighter squadrons were supplying an alert capacity, the Sabres during the day and the Javelins during the night.

When the Balloon Went Up!

The following events took place in September 1964. I can’t remember the dates, but it was around the middle of the month. Although the primary event occurred in RAF Base Tengah, I shall describe the events by individual bases from a RAAF airman’s point of view. As one can imagine, news of some of these events travelled by the well oiled grape vine and the reliability or the accuracy was – shall we say – reasonable!

RAF Base Tengah:

Part way through September 1964, a small detachment of Sabre aircraft from 77 SQN had flown to RAF Base Tengah for a combined RAF / RAAF exercise. The squadron operating the Javelin aircraft at Tengah were tasked with providing two aircraft on a five minute alert, similar to the requirement at the RAAF Base in Butterworth. Then quite late one evening, probably around 22.00 or so, the RAF Javelin crews were alerted to intercept an unidentified aircraft crossing the south east coast of Malaysia. So far, their evening was not all that unusual, as these types of alerts did happen from time to time, but mostly the ‘unidentified’ aircraft turned out to be a friendly who forgot to identify themselves!

However, when the RAF crew drew closer to the location, they saw an Indonesian C130 Hercules aircraft flying over Malacca, toward the southern part of Malaysia. This C130 had its rear side cargo doors open and the RAF pilots could see images of paratroops ready to exit the aircraft. The RAF pilots radioed the Indonesian aircraft urging its crew to turn away from Malaysia, but to no avail. The RAF pilots continued to try a number of different methods over the next few minutes to deter the Indonesian crew to abort its mission – but in vain.

By this time the situation became quite urgent and very serious. It was obvious to the RAF pilots that Indonesian Paratroops were about to be deployed into the Malaccan jungle. Radio transmissions were made with their commanders, and a decision was made. One of the RAF pilots fired a Fire Streak missile from his Javelin aircraft and the missile hit the C130 right in the inboard engine on the starboard wing, destroying the engine and severing

the starboard wing. The aircraft was destroyed mid air and it fell into the Malaccan jungle. I am led to believe that the wreckage – or some of it – can still be seen in the Malaccan jungle. The RAF pilots then returned to RAF Base Tengah and immediately began to report all of their activities to their Commander. The RAF at Tengah increased their alert status from that evening onwards.

The RAAF crews from 77SQN, who were deployed at Tengah tell of the sight of the operational Javelin aircraft returning from their flight with the fire streak missile launchers empty, and concluding they must have had some action!

RAAF Base Butterworth:

It was a routine Thursday evening at Butterworth. The workers from the squadrons and other parts of the base not required for after hours or night duties had all gone to their homes, either on the mainland near the base or to married quarters on Penang Island.

Upon hearing the news late in the evening from the RAF at Tengah, the OC of the RAAF Fighter Wing immediately authorised a recall of the fighter squadrons bringing them to an alert status. This action took a few hours and many of the airmen tell of anecdotes between Australian Airmen and the crew of a Penang Ferry when they were trying to get the ferry operator to take them to the mainland, even though it was after normal operating hours. I am led to believe some of the airmen's enthusiasm became rather agitated toward the ferry crew!

During the remainder of the evening, and into the next day, Friday, saw an enormous amount of diplomatic activities in Malaysia. Many senior officers could see some very nasty and potentially dangerous outcomes from the previous evening's operation. After considerable discussion between diplomats, senior officers etc, an agreement was reached. The Indonesian Air Force released a statement saying that an Indonesian Air Force C130 aircraft had crashed due to an engine failure. At the same time, the RAF authorities at RAF Base Tengah issued a statement that its Javelin aircraft had lost a Fire Streak missile in flight and was investigating the incident.

To say that these diplomats and senior officers prevented an all out confrontational battle between Australia and its allies with Indonesia is a huge understatement! It was that close!

RAAF Base Williamtown – NSW.

On the Friday – the day after the Malaysian incident, news of the previous evening's operation had reached the Operation Command Headquarters at Glenbrook, NSW. It would be fair to say that the grape vine system had not yet succeeded in getting the news to their Australian based colleagues in a mere 12 or so hours. By mid day on the Friday, the senior officers at Operational Command had made a very serious decision – they would deploy a reasonably sizable fighter force to RAAF Base Darwin. A telex was sent high priority to the OC of the Fighter Wing at Williamtown, arriving at his desk just after lunch on the Friday. Basically, it gave a command saying: "The Wing shall deploy 8 Sabre aircraft to Darwin and begin operational patrols of the northern coastline of Australia. The first patrol of two aircraft will depart RAAF Darwin at 1300 hours (Saturday) and will be loaded with two HE Sidewinder Missiles and a full complement of HE ammunition". The telex ended with the words – "This is not a practice".

To the credit of all the crews of the fighter wing at Williamtown, yes, aircrew and ground crews, they rallied together and achieved the task allocated to them. Also, considering that it was on a normal Friday afternoon, the Commanders still managed to round up a sufficient force to support 8 aircraft on a fully operational deployment with such a short warning, they did an amazing job. The aircraft were prepared on the Friday afternoon, and the maintenance 'Fly Away Kits' were checked and packed on to pallets ready for loading on to a Hercules and the squadron was deployed.

We are told that the first patrol of two aircraft fully loaded with HE ordnance took off from Darwin on time at 1300 hours local time.

RAAF Base Amberley – QLD:

At the time, I was an LAC Armourer at No 1 Squadron, Amberley, which operated the Canberra aircraft. Our crews became aware of the urgency of the exercise when our squadron was tasked with providing a 'Sabre Escort' from Williamtown to Townsville and to Darwin. (This was common practice then so the crew in the Canberra flew up to an hour ahead of the Sabres and would relay weather and wind conditions to the Sabre pilots. This enabled the Sabre pilots to make the best of their short range for the trans continent flight).

As the Canberra aircraft was capable of flying from Amberley to Darwin at a moment's notice, it was deemed unnecessary to deploy a flight of Canberra aircraft as they did for the Sabres. At No 1 squadron, an administrative

command was issued which cancelled all Recreation Leave for all squadron members for the next three months. Our squadron remained on an alert basis for some time.

RAAF Base Darwin – NT:

There is little doubt that the Base Commanders at Darwin would have been notified of the deployment of the Sabres at around the same time as was Williamtown. By the time the Sabre deployment of aircraft and men arrived, Darwin was ready. All the logistics including normal base facilities, ordnance requirements, fuel and other aircraft needs were all ready. The Sabre pilots continued to fly their patrols over the northern coastline.

Conclusion:

Firstly for Butterworth, the two Sabre squadrons and the RAF Javelin squadron shared the ORP roster, (Operational Readiness Pad), ensuring there two fully armed aircraft sitting at the end of the runway with air and ground crews on a five minute alert – day and night – seven days per week. The Sabres manned the ORP from 0630 until 1830 every day, and the Javelins manned the ORP from 1830 until 0630 every night. This continued right through until about mid 1968. Each of the fighter squadrons would still operate their normal flying programmes, particularly their ordnance programmes of gunnery, (air to air as well as air to ground), rocketry, practice bombing and air to air missile tactics on a very regular basis. The RAAF Sabre squadrons maintained a very high flying rate with a high ordnance usage during this entire period. Many of these flying days were high pressure for the flight line maintenance crews as they often literally ran between aircraft. Then at least twice per year, the squadron would take part in a high pressure defence exercise, including high ordnance expenditure.

For Darwin, the first crews to deploy from Williamtown were told to take enough personal belongings for about 12 to 14 days. The first crew were replaced with another similar crew some eight weeks later! This was to become for many of the Williamtown people the ‘Darwin Roster’. Entire crews were rotated from Williamtown to Darwin each eight weeks through until around early 1968.

For the Canberra squadrons at Amberley, their flying programme increased to the point where we did considerably more ‘rapid’ bombing deployments to Darwin and more Air Defence Exercises (ADEX) out of Amberley. (These exercises involved a mock bombing mission of another base requiring that base to defend itself given an incredibly short warning.

For the RAAF Fighter Squadron involvement, when one considers the logistics of supporting an Operational Readiness Pad of two aircraft armed with two live HE Sidewinder missiles, and a full load (300 rounds) of HE 30mm ammunition every day for nearly four years, this was an outstanding achievement indeed!

For the maintenance planners, they had to choose two aircraft which had more flying hours than others to place on the ORP for a few days, in order for the other ‘low flyers’ to catch up on the squadron stagger board.

For the Armament fraternity, they were required to maintain an appropriate number of serviceable sidewinder missiles, ensuring they were serviced at regular intervals. They were also required to ensure an appropriate quantity of HE 30mm ammunition was always available, should any of the ORP aircraft begin to fire some of its HE ordnance.

The RAAF proved beyond all doubt that a fully operational fully armed Operational Readiness Pad could be raised at short notice and maintained for several years whilst still operating and flying their normal squadron requirements. Many of these airmen, aircrew and ground crew alike had the view that there was absolutely no reason that such an operational readiness system could not have been maintained in the north of Australia for many years after the Indonesian Confrontation was called off.