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**Royal Air Force Historical Society**

**THE PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**Issue No 13**

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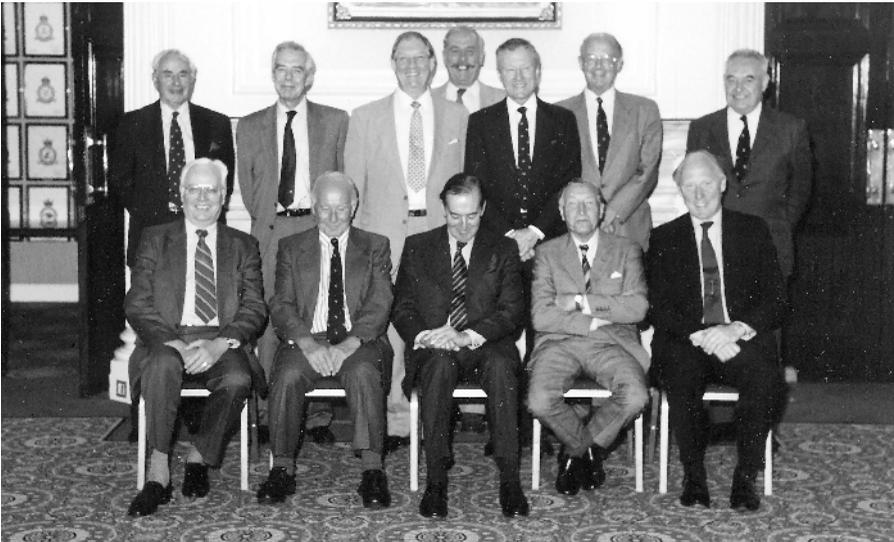
## COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP - A NOTE BY THE CHAIRMAN

This year's AGM marked the end of the foundation phase of the Society. With rising 600 members and a healthy bank balance we remain viable in all senses. A number of Committee Members who have been regular supporters since the very beginning and whose names appeared in Proceedings No 1 have decided that the time had come for them to stand down. Others decided not to stand for re-election and tribute was paid to them all at the time.

The contribution that Committee Members make is to run the Society. They generate ideas; choose the programme; organise the seminars; and transcribe and edit the material for our Proceedings. Along the line, subscriptions are collected; members recorded; covenant income claimed; and deals struck with printers for publishing our output. Ex-committee members continue to help in a variety of ways and are supported by many others. I cannot praise them too highly nor thank them all enough on your behalf.

On a personal note, you will be aware that I was going to hand over to a new Chairman. Unfortunately, this has not been possible and I have agreed to continue for the time being.

Freddie Sowrey



*Some past and present members of the committee. Front 1-r: Desmond Goch, Jack Dunham, Sir Michael Beetham (President), Sir Freddie Sowrey, Sandy Hunter. Rear 1-r: Hans Neubroch, Derek Wood, Joe Ainsworth, Tony Richardson, Ian Madelin, Henry Probert, Peter Montgomery.*

**RAF MUSEUM, 25th OCTOBER 1993  
INDONESIAN CONFRONTATION**

Welcoming Address by RAFHS Chairman -  
**Air Marshal Sir Frederick Sowrey**

Opening Address by Symposium Chairman -  
**Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris**

**SECTION 1 – THE OVERALL CONTEXT**

Political Overview – **Dr Philip Towle**

The Borneo Rebellion & Indonesian Military Confrontation  
Against Malaysia – **Brigadier A E D Smith**

The RAF Contribution – **Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee**

The Singapore Base – **Mr Cecil James**

Questions to Speakers

**SECTION 2 – RAF OPERATIONS**

RAF Operations in Borneo – **Air Vice-Marshal Lamb**

A Station Commander's View – **Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Freer**

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Questions to Speakers

Chairman's Closing Remarks –  
**Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris**

**Air Marshal Sowrey**

## **WELCOMING ADDRESS**

### **Air Marshal Sir Frederick Sowrey**

A very warm welcome to you all from the Royal Air Force Historical Society. Through the generosity of the Royal Air Force Museum they have us here for nothing and our thanks also are due to those contributors who have given generously of their time and their talents in putting together what they are going to say today. The term 'Confrontation' is a misnomer for an eyeball to eyeball conflict which in fact had to be won by the UK. It involved air forces of considerable complexity and advanced technology and it showed how a theatre air force could grow into what became almost an intercontinental air force. Who better to take us through today than the then AOC of 224 Group, Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris.

## OPENING ADDRESS



### **Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris**

Freddie Sowrey has said a little about my qualifications for today's job but I find it a little awkward looking around an audience like this and observing the very high percentage of people who know more about the subject than I do. I would ask them not to sneer and jeer at any blatant errors that I may make. My qualifications were not only being AOC of 224 Group during practically the entire period of the Confrontation, but also having previously done three years in the 1950s during the emergency in Malaya – so I have had quite a lot of jungle experience. One of the interesting things about '*Konfrontasi*' is that nobody has ever heard of it; one often goes on in conversation trying to hypnotise audiences about this, that and the other, but if one gets on to Confrontation they say, 'What?'. The basic reason was that the government in their wisdom decided that although we could join in, and in fact conduct this war, it must remain a Malaysian war throughout and we very rarely referred to anything we, the Armed Forces, had accomplished or to casualty rates or anything else of that nature. I remember a very broad Scotsman, an NCO, once saying to me, 'Could you tell me one thing, Sir? Am I a member of the Malaysian Defence Forces?' I said, 'Yes, you are lad – get on with it' – and he was. We didn't operate as Brits; we operated as backers-up of the Malaysians.

People are very ignorant also about the nature of the war; they usually confuse it with the earlier counter-terrorist operations. We were in fact fighting another country; we were fighting the Indonesians, as well as a number of communist rebels and so on, and to that extent it wasn't the same picture. The size of the area covered by the war always astonished people. I can remember showing Denis Healey an overlay of a map of Europe on an overlay of our area – and I'm not talking about the whole of the operational area, I'm talking about Borneo. If you put an overlay with London on Kuching, Warsaw is about by Tawau. He was amazed as were most people, who were generally ignorant of the area, and of the purpose of the war. I must confess there were occasions when I too found myself extremely ignorant about things that went on, but as always I had an admirable staff and admirable subordinate commanders. But even the command structure was enormously complex. We had the Joint Command;

we had the Far East Command, the Far East Air Force Command and then we had 224 Group, which I commanded, which at one stage exceeded in operational numbers the Royal Air Force of today. But not all operational aircraft came under 224 Group and not all 224 Group aircraft operated in Borneo; they were at Butterworth and elsewhere and it was all thoroughly confusing. I think it confused the enemy but it certainly confused us.

Now this is not a routine compliment. I am delighted to note the calibre and experience of the speakers which Freddie Sowrey and his staff have managed to recruit for us today. They are all genuinely experts. The only thing that may impair their performance is that we have been compelled very much to restrict them for time; also questions will have to be left to the end. Our first session this morning is about the overall context of Confrontation as such and the warfare that resulted from it. To lead into that we have Dr Philip Towle who will explain to us the extremely complex political situation at the time.

## POLITICAL OVERVIEW



### **Dr Philip Towle**

Although we all lived through it, it already requires an act of historical imagination to take us back thirty years to the political situation at the beginning of the 1960s. It was a time when the non-aligned movement was considered extremely important, when figures like Nkrumah, Nasser, Sukarno and Nehru tended to dominate the headlines, a period when the Soviet Union and China were considered still economic, as well as military, threats to the West and when Japan and Germany were still very much recovering from the Second World War. So the political picture was wholly different from anything that operates at the moment. Vibrant, confident states, as we all know, tend to expand until they meet with some opposition and in the early 1960s Indonesia was extremely confident in its external policies and increasingly weak economically and politically; that combination, I would suggest, was a very volatile one. Indonesia's leaders regarded the proposed new state of Malaysia as intrinsically weak and politically illegitimate. They also believed that post-Suez Britain was unlikely to fight another prolonged colonial war. Indonesia's government thought too that they not only had the backing of the non-aligned movement – after all they had played host at the Bandung Conference not so long beforehand – but also the backing, or at least the sympathy, of the USA. This combination of factors I would suggest to you were the ones which led Indonesia's leaders to believe that they could de-stabilise Malaysia and dominate the whole region.

Now a word or two about the racial and political background. Most of the inhabitants of the region came from the same racial stock. The most important exceptions were the Chinese immigrants who had come to the area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for the most part to exploit the commercial opportunities provided by western imperialism. Although states and empires had grown up in the area before the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonialists arrived, such states tended to be more porous, their borders much more indefinite than was the case in Europe. The three great states which emerged after the end of colonialism – the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia – corresponded not to ethnic, religious or geographical boundaries particularly, but to the boundaries between the colonial empires. Thus they had a degree of illegitimacy in the eyes of

some of the nationalists. Both Indonesia and the Philippines were collections of islands so they lacked the geographical coherence which even a state such as India or Egypt had after independence. The Philippines of course had been promised their independence before the Second World War but that had been delayed by the Japanese attacks and the Americans moved very quickly to giving them independence after the war.

Indonesia by contrast fought for its independence against the Dutch, while Malaysia was the third of these states to gain independence and therefore, in the sense of the time we were talking about, potentially the weakest of them. Malaya itself became independent within the Commonwealth in 1957, Singapore in 1959. But as far as we are concerned the crucial date was probably 27 May 1961, when the Tungku, the Malayan leader, proposed a federation of Malaya, Singapore, Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei. His motives, pretty certainly, were to try to balance the Chinese population of Singapore with the non-Chinese populations of Borneo and Malaya, so that the Malays would have a predominant influence in the Federation. The success of his proposal probably took the Tungku himself by surprise but it proved rapidly to be very popular in many of the areas. One thing that's absolutely clear is that it didn't originate from Britain, despite Indonesian suspicions. The Indonesian leader, Sukarno, immediately regarded it as an imperialist plot – in fact it was the Tungku himself who originated it – and Macmillan points out in his memoirs that, after the original proposal, he wrote to the Tungku warning him of the defence implications of what he was proposing and of the absolute importance of making sure that the proposal had popular support in the area. So it wasn't a British proposal in the first instance at all.

Now to move from Malaya and the proposed Malaysian Federation to Indonesia for a moment or two. At the beginning of the 1960s, as I have already said, Indonesia's international profile was very high while Britain was often perceived, and particularly perhaps by the Indonesians, as a declining colonial power in an age in which colonialism was becoming increasingly unpopular. Sukarno stood alongside the other non-aligned leaders like Nasser, Nehru and Nkrumah as a charismatic leader. The British Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, by contrast was an experienced, comforting figure, a typically British one perhaps but hardly a charismatic leader. Britain had been humiliated over Suez and was falling back in economic terms compared with Germany, Japan and even France, although that perhaps wasn't as obvious at the beginning of the 1960s as it was subsequently to become. It had already withdrawn from India, Burma

and Ceylon. Africa, post Mau Mau, was to become independent and the British Government was looking for a way out of its Far Eastern responsibilities. Britain had in fact some years before 1961, mooted the idea of a Federation at least of its Borneo territories, but that proposal had been stillborn because it didn't get the interest in the area which the Tungku did in 1961. Now it is true, as Sukarno claims, that when the Tungku produced his proposal for a Federation there was some opposition in all the proposed federal territories – in Singapore, in Malaya, in Borneo and so on, but the opposition in most of these areas was not very powerful. In Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew cleverly outmanoeuvred it by holding a referendum which produced an overwhelming majority in favour of the Malaysian Federation. In Malaya itself the opposition was disorganised and divided and in Borneo the Chinese, who were initially hesitant about becoming involved in a predominantly Malay Federation, quickly saw that it was going to become inevitable, and probably more importantly to them, it was going to offer financial and economic advantages if it was actually successful. So there was opposition in some areas but it was not particularly important except in the case of the radical Brunei party led by A N Asahari, who was determined to wreck the proposal if he could. In preparation for that struggle against Malaysia he began to train guerrillas in Indonesia and Kalimantan and the TNKU, the guerrilla army numbering some two thousand in all, was established and invaded Brunei in December 1962. That invasion was very quickly defeated and once that happened, as the Air Chief Marshal said, the opposition to Malaysia was led by Sukarno and the Indonesians and it was they who kept the struggle going.

At this stage it is necessary to say a word or two about the internal situation in Indonesia. Sukarno had been increasing his personal power and control for a very long time, gradually suppressing the Indonesian democratic parties, and thereby forcing them sometimes into open rebellion and then destroying them. Like many other new Third World leaders like Mao Tse Tung and Nehru, he was a charismatic figure but also, one has to say in retrospect, a wretched economist. He probably took his economic views from the London School of Economics or somewhere like that. Now this combination of bad internal politics and bad economics which a charismatic leadership and, to some extent, success in foreign policy terms was what caused the difficulties. What Sukarno had to watch in terms of internal power by the early 1960s was not the democratic parties which had been crushed but the Communist party, which was becoming steadily more powerful, and also the Armed Forces. The Armed Forces had become

increasingly strong during the struggle against the remaining Dutch province in the region of West Irian. This was a struggle which had rumbled on through the 1950s but had been brought, from Sukarno's position, to a successful conclusion in 1962. The point was that Sukarno had negotiated a very large arms deal with the Soviet Union, with Nikita Krushchev, which poured weapons into Indonesia and gave him the power, if you like, at least to threaten the Dutch and make it seem that he was capable of waging a major conventional struggle against them. No doubt we shall learn during the rest of the day just how strong, or not strong, the Indonesian armed forces were, or might have been if it had come to a conventional struggle, but it is worth recording that they had a *Sverdlov* Class cruiser, several *Skory* Class destroyers and whole fleets of MiG-15s, -17s, -19s and -21s. So, on paper, it looked a formidable force and it was in those circumstances, with that force behind him, that Sukarno's bluff against the Dutch had worked. In particular the Americans had come in, giving him political backing, and had pushed the Dutch into capitulating and handing West Irian over to him. No doubt he hoped that, if he threatened Malaysia or the proposed state of Malaysia in the same way, the Americans would again back him and the British would back down in exactly the same way. In sum therefore, Sukarno at this time, in the early 1960s, needed another foreign policy success to offset his economic and political failures. He had the military power at least to threaten his enemies; he believed that Britain and Malaysia were politically weak – if not militarily weak – and he probably genuinely believed that Malaysia was an imperialist plot.

Now let me say a word or two about Britain's position in the early 1960s. Again it was subject to conflicting pressures. On the one hand, as I have already mentioned, there had been the trauma of Suez. Up until 1956 – although British governments, as Corelli Barnett has pointed out in his book *The Audit of War*, knew well the economic weaknesses of the country – foreign policy had been very much that of a great power, one of the three great powers albeit the weakest. Indeed if you go back as far as 1946 you can argue that Britain was playing a bigger role at that stage on the international scene than the USA and while India had become independent subsequently, that had been to some extent offset by the development of British nuclear weapons. Then came Suez – a temporarily devastating blow to the self-confidence with which we had emerged from the Second World War. What it showed above all was Britain's dependence upon the USA, because it was US financial pressure in 1956 which forced the British

government to abandon the Suez operation. It was the selling of pounds on the international exchanges and the refusal of the US government to allow international economic support to Britain which very quickly brought the Suez operation to an end and this is very important when you come to consider Confrontation. The USA had to be kept on side and again we have to think back to the early 1960s to pre-Vietnam days when the USA still regarded itself as the prime anti-colonial power. So Britain had to convince the administration in Washington that it was not acting as a colonial power in this conflict; indeed it wanted to hand its various territories in the Far East over to an independent Malaysian Government. At the same time the United States was itself becoming ever more deeply embroiled in Vietnam. It is curious looking back, how vacillating American policy was, caught between its anti-colonialism on the one hand and its anti-Communism on the other. In Vietnam, in the French days, it had given enormous backing economically to the French from 1950 onwards, whereas in the Dutch East Indies it had pushed the Dutch into giving them independence very quickly. So it was torn between those two calls, and the British had to take great care not to offend American susceptibilities. In fact in so far as the Americans involved themselves politically in Confrontation, some of their involvement was not very helpful to us. In the early days they encouraged the Tungku to delay the formation of the Federation of Malaysia and subsequently, after Sukarno had nationalised the Shell oil company in Indonesia, the American oil companies were only too ready to move in and fill the gap left by Shell, which led to a series of rather confrontational letters and telegrams between Macmillan in London and the administration in Washington. So the Americans were a somewhat unknown quantity in this struggle and it was very important for the British to watch them.

For Britain itself, the military position was also complicated. The struggle against the Malayan Communists from 1948 to 1960, as many of you will know, was really the most successful anti-guerrilla struggle of any waged by a colonial power in the post-1945 period. The French after all lost Indo-China and Vietnam; the Dutch the East Indies and the Americans were later to lose Vietnam; and the British also lost effectively in Palestine, Cyprus and Aden. Malaya was, in a way, the jewel in the anti-Communist, anti-guerrilla crown, arguably alongside Kenya and the Dhofar war at a later stage. The armed forces were therefore anxious above all that the victory against the communists in Malaya should not be thrown away, and that there should be a smooth transition to independent government. At the same time the British government was most anxious that it would not

become embroiled in a long confrontation, a long conventional war against Indonesia. After all, the whole post-Suez defence policy involved a rundown in conventional forces and increasing reliance on nuclear weapons. So there were economic as well as political imperatives to try to bring the struggle to a successful conclusion fairly quickly and to keep the struggle at as low a level as possible so as not to offend the Americans, so as not to bring political pressure from Washington on Britain to end the war in adverse circumstances. It is also true, as Sir Christopher said at the beginning, that we were unlikely to get very much out of the campaign and indeed we really didn't – the man in the street has forgotten to a great extent about the Confrontation struggle against Indonesia. There was little to be gained in terms of prestige, in terms of international kudos. The war had to be fought in as limited and low a key a fashion as possible. Admittedly, as we will go on to hear in the course of the day no doubt, some British actions did threaten the Indonesian heartland, but an actual British air attack against Indonesia would have caused all sorts of international protests from the non-aligned movement, and possibly – ironically, considering what was to happen in Vietnam – also from the United States itself. It was the cleverness, the success if you like, both of the armed forces and of the British government to win the struggle while keeping the campaign very much as low key as possible. The extent of the victory was obscured in many ways by its success; it could have gone so badly wrong in so many ways but the actual outcome was that, combined with the threat from the Communist Party in Indonesia, failure against Malaysia led the Indonesian armed forces to turn on Sukarno and overthrow his government, and produced the Suharto government that we have down to the present. So it was politically and militarily a success. If you look from the vantage point of today, back at the whole period and back to the 1960s, you can argue that of the three post-colonial powers in the region, Malaysia has in many ways been the most successful. Even if Singapore didn't remain very long within the Federation, nevertheless, Malaysia has achieved a great deal in economic terms, far more than either the Philippines or Indonesia, so again looking back to the campaign you can argue that the effort that was made, in military and political terms, was worthwhile. We managed to withdraw from the Far East in good order with a major military victory to our credit, even though that victory, as I say, didn't achieve much priority.

We also managed to leave stable governments behind us. Again if you look at colonial powers like the Portuguese which withdrew after political

failures, they have left in East Timor and also in Africa, chaos and confusion behind them. So if you are looking at it from a Service point of view, you might ask whether it was worth the involvement; – what was the advantage that we gained? I think that what we gained for the people of the Far East was a stable environment, a successful Malaysia. What we gained for ourselves was another one in the run of military victories, albeit not one that has been particularly recognised by other countries.

## THE BORNEO REBELLION & INDONESIAN MILITARY CONFRONTATION AGAINST MALAYSIA



### Brigadier E D Smith

About five years ago I attended a Brigade of Gurkha reunion at Sandhurst. A young officer came up to me and said, 'My father-in-law is an admiral, he knows no one here, would you talk to him?' So the admiral came up and when the young officer went to get some drinks for us, as two strangers we sought to find common ground. Unfortunately for the admiral, he turned to me after a bit and said, 'Have you flown Navy?' I said, 'Yes I have, and the Navy owe me a right arm'. I only tell you that story in case you, as Royal Air Force people, think you owe me a right arm – you don't!

I'm going to turn the clock back to Brunei in 1962. Brunei was a British Protectorate ruled by Sir Omar Lee Sakrotendi, the Sultan, in a benevolent, autocratic fashion and as you have just heard, Malaya was very keen that Brunei should join the Malaysian concept. After a bit, Sir Omar came under a lot of pressure from the British and Malayan governments, so much so that, against his wish, they held elections in Brunei in September 1962 and the People's Party won all 16 seats. Sir Omar's counter blow happened next day when he appointed 17 of his own proteges in order to regain control. So he threw down the gauntlet and it was taken up. Dr Towle talked about the TNKU coming in to invade Brunei. I have to take issue with him; the Brunei revolt was about 95% local people and, during October and November 1962, training and recruiting were carried out throughout the State. By December there were about 8,000 people on the roll. Few had any training and few had any arms but their idea was to take over the State. They had three aims. The first was to seize the Sultan himself, because by the 1959 treaty the Sultan could ask for British help against any aggression – so if they had the Sultan in their hands he couldn't do that. The second aim, since they had only shotguns, was to seize as many police stations as possible so that they could get some arms and ammunition. Their third aim was to seize Seria, the nearby Dutch Shell oilfield, and the Europeans who worked there, and to use them as hostages. The aims were quite good, but not the execution.

I ought to have said that there were no British armed forces on Brunei soil; there was no Gurkha battalion in Seria as there is today. The only

security force in Brunei was the local police force. If the Brunei revolt had gone off as planned they could well have succeeded, but word got to the Resident in Fourth Division in Sarawak, who told the British Commissioner of Police in Brunei that a revolt was planned on 8th December. That information was passed to the Commissioner, Mr Outram, on the 9th and it gave him time to do certain things. First he put a guard on the Sultan's istana and secondly – and that was important – he warned most of the police stations in Brunei that there was the possibility of attack. Why the button was pressed on the morning of 8th December I don't know, because Azahari, the leader, was actually away from Brunei when it happened. That might have been on purpose of course. He was actually in Manila where he gave a press conference and said that he was going to return to Brunei as Chief Minister – he has never returned to this day.

The revolt went off at half-cock; possibly the leaders flapped a bit when Mr Outram took some precautions. It began on the 8th, which was a Saturday, and as we all know in Singapore on a Saturday most people have other things to do! The state of readiness of the Army and the Royal Air Force was pretty low – in fact the battalion which was to go to Brunei if the balloon went up was in north Malaya on an exercise. The 1/2nd Gurkhas were put on stand-by and by the end of the day they had sent some men to Brunei. They used three Beverleys and a Hastings, and a Britannia was commandeered. When the first lot of Gurkhas arrived in Brunei they found to their delight that the airport had not been seized by the TNKU, and that was a very big mistake. I haven't time to go into much detail on the Brunei revolt; all I will say is that there were three major actions. The 1/2nd Gurkhas cleared Brunei town, they took the Sultan into custody and guarded him, and two days later the Queens Own Highlanders made a very daring air assault on Seria itself. In Seria the rebels had seized most of the oilfield, one of the police stations and had got about 50 or 60 European hostages. The Queens Own Highlanders landed first of all at Anduki which is a Shell oilfield. The Beverley landed, did not shut down and as it was still moving the troops had to jump out. The Beverley took off and was hit I believe by one or two shots. At the other end of Seria, two Twin Pioneers landed on very rough ground – and it is very rough as I know since I had a bungalow nearby afterwards in peacetime. Anyway they landed safely; the troops got out and Seria was cleared in two days and all the European hostages were released. The third big action in the Brunei revolt was at a place called Limbang which is up the river from Brunei where the Australian resident was being held. He was seized with his wife and they

were due to be killed on the evening of the actual attack by the rebels. The assault was carried out by Marine Commandos, who lost quite a few casualties but in the end were successful and saved all the hostages. Incidentally, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats was a junior officer during that action. So the Brunei revolt, because the TNKU were basically untrained and had few arms, petered out and eventually we rounded up about 4 or 5,000 people, most of whom didn't know what the revolt was about but had been led into it by propaganda.

The importance of the Brunei revolt was that by the end there was a very efficient Joint Headquarters on Brunei soil. The Director of Operations was Major-General Walter Walker and by the time the thing was over he had a Tri-Service Operational Headquarters working very efficiently and was also bringing the civilian authorities into it. Walter Walker was quite convinced, in early 1963, that the trouble was going to spread in Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) and although he was under pressure from his superiors to cut his headquarters down and move troops back, he was absolutely convinced from intelligence reports and from the vitriolic anti-Malaysian and anti-British propaganda on Radio Jakarta, that it was going to become a very serious thing. A word about Walter Walker; I suppose if you had to have chosen a major-general of the British Army to start off as Director of Operations he would have been the best choice anyway. In the Burma campaign he had won three DSOs commanding a battalion; in the Malayan emergency he again commanded a Gurkha battalion and then a brigade. So he knew a lot about counter-insurgency in jungle environments and was an ideal choice. Although under great pressure, he stuck to his guns, which was good because in April 1963 the first raid came across the border in Sarawak against a police post. It was only a minor affair but a foretaste of what was going to happen in the future. Gradually, the Indonesia-based terrorist camps all along the border began to be built up and incursions on a small scale started.

The border was 1,000 miles long and certainly in Three Division and towards the Sabah area, it was rugged tough country. Often the international boundary was not easily delineated, and in many places there were no maps at the beginning of the campaign. This made it very difficult for company commanders who would say, 'We are the fourth blank square in; can you find us?' The air force usually did find them, but it didn't make life very easy. With a 1,000 mile border, in that sort of territory, General Walker faced a big problem. He had five regular battalions only under his command at that stage in 1963, so it would have been madness to put them

up in penny packets along the border. He therefore held them back and relied on small surveillance groups on the most likely incursion routes. These surveillance groups were formed by SAS four-man patrols with long range wireless sets, by the Gurkha Parachute Company which was operating in an SAS type of role, and eventually, a new concept, the 'Home Guards' – the Border Scouts which were formed in a hurry. Border Scouts were basically Ebans, Maroots, the local tribes who lived on or astride the border. They were given a modicum of training, they had shotguns and the aim of using them was in an eyes and ears type of role. They were to report in any insurgence, any strangers in their area, track them and get the information back. In theory it was a good idea, but in practice at the beginning it didn't work too well as many of these tribesmen were not too keen on following and just tracking people; they wanted to have a go at the Indonesians themselves. The position got worse and worse until the first big incursion occurred in Three Division.

Three Division in those days had few roads, except around the capital Sibiu; it was rugged with 4 to 5,000 foot hills near the border. The only incursion routes really were along the rivers, where most of the longhouses were situated anyway. The first big incursion was against a village called Long Jawi, about 20 miles in from the border. In Long Jawi at that time there was a very small outpost, consisting of a Gurkha corporal and five soldiers of the 1/2nd Gurkhas, two signallers from the Gurkhas with their wireless set on the command net and 21 newly-recruited Border Scouts from Long Jawi itself. A force of about 200 Indonesian irregulars crossed the border, most of them Chinese or volunteers, and they had an even bigger force of porters. This was quite a large force and they attacked the small post early one morning. The two Gurkha signallers who were in the hut with their headphones on trying to communicate with the battalion were both killed, so no word got out to the battalion. The rest of the small force under the Gurkha corporal withdrew to a little hill and played hell with the Indonesians for quite a long time. They lost one killed and two wounded and gradually during the day the Border Scouts, one by one, disappeared to join the Indonesians, leaving but one very loyal Border Scout to stay with the Gurkhas. The corporal, realising they could do no more, withdrew his little force in the late afternoon into the jungle. After they had withdrawn, to his amazement the Indonesians still continued mortaring their area for about two hours before they realised that the Gurkhas had withdrawn. That Gurkha corporal faced a big problem that night. He had two wounded soldiers, he had to get word back, he couldn't take those wounded with

him, and he made a very brave decision. He gave them as much food as they had with them and medicine, strapped them up to the best of his ability, hid them and went off with the Border Scout and one more Gurkha soldier for the nearest longhouse in the rear. It took them two days to reach it – they were living on nuts, berries and anything else they could find – and from there another two days in a boat to battalion headquarters. So it was four days before the 1/2nd knew what had happened. A big operation was mounted, and 845 Naval Squadron Wessex helicopters stationed at Sibuan and Nanga Gaat under direct control of 1/2nd Gurkhas started harassing the Indonesian force. They killed 40 or 50 in river ambushes and eventually the Indonesians withdrew into their own country having suffered grave casualties from sickness, malnutrition and so on.

That was a small but very significant action. First it showed the Indonesians that if they were going to mount an incursion in the very difficult country around Three Division it would be a logistic nightmare – not worth doing. Secondly, they made a very grave error. The leader was a Major Mulchano who had done a course at the Jungle Warfare School at Kota Tinggi when General Walker was commanding the Jungle Warfare School. The Border Scouts who had run away back to their village should have been treated with leniency; instead they were all brutally murdered and word got round the whole of the border area. It was a grave and a stupid mistake. So instead of a lot of these border tribes sitting on the fence and pretending it was nothing to do with them, in the main 95% became very pro the security forces. That was the end of the first serious incursion, but the Indonesians very wisely decided that it was much easier to exert pressure in the First and Second Divisions of Sarawak.

Kuching itself was not that far from the border, ‘five fighting days’ was what General Walker said, and it was much easier to get in, cross the border, carry out their raid and get out again. Moreover, there were pockets of Chinese supporters in the various towns called the CCO (Clandestine Communist Organisations). Many at the beginning had crossed the border and were in the IBG camps undergoing training anyway so they had relatives and friends in the various centres. A big operation was carried out and many of them were taken into custody in First and Second Divisions of Sarawak. Thereafter they did not pose an internal security threat but obviously any incursion that went near them could expect help, such as intelligence, information and food. So General Walker’s problem had increased greatly. The battalions that were trying to defend First and Second Division generally had small surveillance groups near the border,

holding platoons and companies further back, and as more and more Indonesian regular troops began to be involved, initially leading these raids but eventually supporting them, they began to bring in mortars, etc with them so that eventually nearly all the bases had to be dug in with overhead protection.

As airmen you may be wondering why I haven't said what the air force could have done to provide surveillance of these incursions. I can assure you that the terrain, before they started cutting the forest down, would have made it almost impossible to see these small groups. It was bad enough on the ground trying to get information; from the air it would have been impossible. So General Walker definitely relied on these small groups to get information back quickly to the battalion and brigade commanders. It is safe to say that if the Confrontation had continued in that role with the initiative being held by the Indonesians, the outcome could have been very, very different.

But Sukarno made a very serious mistake; he made two incursions against Malaya itself. Up to then the Malaysians had troops in Sarawak but they were not being used in any aggressive role whatsoever. They were fairly lukewarm in their attitude to the war until Sukarno sent his two groups against the mainland. The first group landed by sea, expecting to be greeted as liberators but they were rounded up quickly and presented no threat whatsoever. The second group landed by parachute in the area of Labis, north of Singapore. It was badly planned, they lost one of their Hercules in an electric storm, and the paratroopers landed very haphazardly in the jungle. There was bad luck too; the 1/10th Gurkha happened to be very near that area doing some retraining before going back to Borneo and the 1/10th, with some help from the New Zealanders, rounded up all the paratroopers very quickly. That had a startling effect on Kuala Lumpur in particular and on London also, and as a result it was eventually decided that the initiative had to be wrested from the Indonesians, that those bases just over the border had to be pushed back further into Kalimantan and not left as they were, literally yards from the border.

So a number of cross border operations were authorised but there was strict control right from the start. They were called Operation CLARET and they were bounded by what was called the 'Golden Rules'. These were as follows: firstly, every cross-border operation had to be authorised personally, not by a staff officer, but personally by the Director of Operations himself. That meant General Walker and eventually General George Lea, and I can assure you it was done. General Walker used to

come to the battalion headquarters, and sometimes then to the headquarters of the company that was actually going to carry out the raid. So no battalion or brigade commander could suddenly decide to send troops across the border. The second rule was that in the beginning a maximum penetration of 5,000 yards was laid down. That may seem very little to you sitting here but 5,000 yards, when the camps were mostly within 1,000 yards of the border, was quite enough to begin with; moreover, the country was extremely rugged and thickly wooded. They laid down at the beginning that only trained troops would be allowed across the border. I know I'm biased, but that meant all the Gurkha battalions because most of them had done two tours in Borneo. So all the Gurkha troops were allowed to do these, as were the British troops when on their second tour in Borneo. The difference between the standard achieved by British units on their first and second tours was quite remarkable, because most of the British soldiers were from towns and cities and it took them time to change and become hunters in the jungle of Borneo; it took usually one complete tour before they were working efficiently. There were exceptions of course but that was the general experience. 'No retaliation' was another rule: if for instance there had been a raid against Sarawak, it wasn't good enough for us to say we would go across and do a counter raid, unless the raid had long term objectives. Most of the targets chosen were either the camps themselves or, if we couldn't get to the camps, because they were too deep into Kalimantan, to ambush the rivers and tracks that we knew the Indonesians were using. The most important rule perhaps was that there were to be no civilian casualties. That was a very difficult rule; it meant that targets away from longhouses had to be selected and occasionally when the Indonesians were living within a kampong they had to be left alone but their logistics were attacked. And finally, once they crossed the border they were on their own. There was no question of air strikes, no question of air drops, no question of CASEVAC by air over the border. We did not want to upset the Americans or the Third World by having it announced that we were going over the border, hitting targets from the air and so on. All this imposed a big strain on the units going over the border, it meant that the company commander – they usually were company raids – not only had to work out his route in and out but was under great pressure not to have any casualties himself because any casualty had to be manhandled back, and if they lost anyone killed the bodies had to be brought back as well. So you can imagine the company commander going on one of these operations always went out with some trepidation.

In the battalion that I eventually commanded we had three company commanders, all under 26 at the time and all got the Military Cross. Of course they had commanded these sorts of raids. I will briefly describe a typical one. Usually the route in was a circuitous long route, and on this occasion the 150 Gurkha troops moved eight miles during the hours of darkness. Since there was no question of them having an air strike if they ran into trouble, they had to take their close support weapons with them on their backs. Each Gurkha soldier, apart from carrying his own weapon and ammunition, carried two mortar bombs or two rocket launcher bombs. The mortars and the rocket launchers were also manhandled in and to get 150 men into a place where they could attack took a lot of planning, it took a lot of leadership at all levels. When this particular attack was carried out, the company commander was told that he could only be in the assault area for one hour. That too made sense because if he suffered heavy casualties the problem of getting the dead and wounded back across the border was an immense one. General Walker visited the company first, listened to the company commander's briefing, watched him do a rehearsal on a cloth model, and so was in it right from the beginning. The attack was a complete success but by this time in Confrontation, the Indonesians were using heavy weapons and one Gurkha was killed and two badly wounded from mortar fire. The company commander disengaged his troops after about an hour and a quarter. He was a quarter of an hour over time but that couldn't be helped and coming back by the more direct route they crossed the border again to safety.

That was just one of many such raids now going on along the border. Initially, there was nothing dramatic about the whole thing but gradually the Indonesians pulled their forward bases back and eventually the penetration limit was raised from 5,000 to 10,000 yards and even further and by 1965 the initiative was completely in our hands. It is interesting to realise that all of this went on without any stories appearing on television or in the press. I wonder what would have happened if the stories had appeared and news-hungry television reporters had interviewed the company commander before he went, pushing the microphone in front of him and saying, 'Now Major, what are you going to do if you lose 50%; have you all been brainwashed etc, etc?' The one big advantage of the terrain in Borneo was that these reporters couldn't get to the forward areas without helicopter or other support from the security forces so General Walker and General Lea were able to control them to a very great extent. When the Gurkha lance-corporal got his VC, the citation that came out in

the British press said that he had dealt with an incursion force in First or Second Division (I can't remember which) and that they had fought the Indonesians on Sarawak soil before they had been successful. In fact, he won his VC about 10,000 yards into Indonesian Kalimantan. So by 1965, within Indonesia itself their army was beginning to be very disillusioned.

I'd like to pay here, on behalf of the army, a great thank you for all the helicopter support we received from all three Services. Without the helicopters we could not have carried out the initial phase of Confrontation and, although helicopters did not cross the border on these operations, they were invaluable because they helped lift the 105 mm and 81 mm mortars to OP positions, gun positions, astride the border so that if the companies ran into severe trouble they knew they could call on the artillery or mortars that had been sited there before. That was a great bonus and also CASEVAC would have been very, very difficult without helicopters. Operationally, we reckoned that one minute in a helicopter equalled a day's march in jungle; that one hour equalled five days; and that one battalion with six helicopters in direct support was equal to a whole brigade. So you can see how much we depended on them. And although I lost my arm in one, but for another helicopter I wouldn't be here today.

So it was a strange war, an undeclared war and an unknown war. Nevertheless it was a most successful one. It showed that the British Army, and the British infantry in particular, could fight as well as anyone else in the jungle providing they had time to re-adjust. They had to forget their gadgets and learn to live and fight in the jungle. It lasted three years and nine months. At the height of Confrontation there were 17,000 Commonwealth forces, as the Australians and New Zealanders came in near the end, plus 10,000 in support. The security force casualties were 114 killed and 200 wounded. It is difficult to say what the Indonesians lost. We know that they lost at least 600 killed and 700 captured, but as things started to go wrong for them towards the end of Confrontation when our raids across the border were breaking their logistic chain, we know that hundreds more died of malnutrition and starvation. Denis Healey said, 'In the history books it will be recorded as one of the most efficient uses of military force in the history of the world.' I think that is a very apt description although, as has already been said this morning, very few people in this country knew what went on and today look blankly at you when you mention '*Konfrontasi*'.

## THE ROYAL AIR FORCE CONTRIBUTION

### Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee



My task is to paint you a very broad picture of the organisation and resources which were available to the Royal Air Force. We must remember that Confrontation started within three years of the end of the Malayan Emergency, and it was fortunate that the RAF had maintained a pretty strong force in all respects out in South East Asia, which of course enabled us to respond very quickly indeed. That is an extremely important point.

The overall command structure consisted firstly of Headquarters Far East Air Force, at that time under the command of Sir Hector McGregor. The Headquarters was accommodated in former barrack blocks at Changi. This was a pre-war, extremely well-built, Army barracks which had been allocated to the RAF after the war – much to the annoyance of the Army, as you can imagine – because the Japanese had been kind enough to build an airstrip. It was a very bad airstrip, which had been sabotaged by our own chaps who had helped to make it as prisoners of war, mostly in Changi Jail. So it was now essential really that this should become an Air Force station. We covered the airstrip, which was built on a bog, with PSP (pierced-steel planking), and it's amusing to recall that it was so loosely and badly put together that whenever a heavy aircraft landed on it, a ripple of PSP would run down in front of the aircraft. I think the strip had to be put out of action for two days every week while repairs were carried out.

That's where the Headquarters FEAF was situated. Under FEAF we had Headquarters 224 Group, which previously had been Air Headquarters Malaya and had its title changed to 224 Group, which was the old wartime Group commanded by the famous Paddy Bandon. At the beginning of Confrontation 224 Group was commanded by Air Vice-Marshal Headlam, an RAAF officer, and the policy was that command should rotate between the RAF and the RAAF and RNZAF who participated in this campaign. Air Vice-Marshal Headlam was succeeded in due course by our Chairman, who was then Air Vice-Marshal Foxley-Norris.

It became apparent pretty early on that a Joint Force Headquarters would be needed in Borneo, and this was set up extremely quickly in a Girls' High School in Brunei. As you have heard from the brigadier, Major General W C Walker became Director of Operations; his Headquarters was

named COMBRITBOR, one of these awful titles which we often give to individuals and organisations.

We come now to some of the stations and units. It was quite apparent that Singapore, situated 400 miles from Borneo, would have to be the main base for all operations and I will describe very quickly the stations in Singapore. Tengah, in the western part of the island, was the main operational base for air defence and offensive support aircraft. It was a very efficient, well-built station, but like other places out there it had very few facilities in the way of hangars and so on. However, it was the most important station from the point of view of operations. The second station was Changi, situated below Headquarters FEAF, and this was the base for transport and maritime aircraft in particular. It was also the staging post for the termination of Transport Command's Far East service and for onward movements to Australasia. The awful PSP had been replaced by a proper hard-top runway.

The third important station was Seletar, the only RAF station on the island in pre-war times. It was an interesting station, because it was built in the shape of an inverted saucer. The airfield was grass and during heavy rain – I recall this myself – it was surrounded with a string of drains, so well configured that after a heavy storm every one of them would be filling to capacity and taking the surface water off very quickly indeed. Sir Robert Freer will be talking to you about Seletar later on and I will only say that it was the headquarters, particularly, of the Helicopter Force. The Beverleys could use it, with their excellent short field capacity, as could Twin Pioneers and other aircraft if lightly loaded, which was vital because Seletar contained the two Maintenance Units that played an extremely important part in these operations. 390 was the Aircraft Repair and Maintenance Unit and 389 the Stores and Equipment Unit. They were very large indeed, holding a far bigger stock of equipment and spares than would normally have been the case. As you will appreciate, virtually all equipment, spares, and so on had to come from the United Kingdom.

Now I should mention Butterworth, up in the north of Malaya, opposite Penang Island, which was largely used by Australian and New Zealand Forces. It was, again, a first-class airfield and had been extremely useful during the Emergency, but it participated also in Confrontation. Those were the main airfields and we shall also come across Kuching, further south, which was not quite of the same importance.

Now I must say a few words about the squadrons, aircraft and units. Tengah, which provided air defence and air support, had squadrons of

Hunter FGA9s. 20 Squadron was helped out by 28 Squadron, normally based in Hong Kong. 60 and 64 Squadrons flew the Javelin Mark 9, which was the all-weather fighter of the day. In addition, 81 Squadron (Photographic Reconnaissance) played an extremely valuable part in these operations. It had been re-equipped from the old Mosquito PR 34, and the additional speed and performance of the Canberra PR7 were of inestimable value in producing photographs and surveys, very quickly interpreted and sent back to the front-line troops far faster than could have been done in any other way. A very valuable squadron indeed.

At Changi we had the Hastings of 48 Squadron and the Argosies of 215 Squadron, formed at Benson and sent out to Changi when there was the need for additional transport resources. 205 Shackleton Squadron went round and round the sea areas, looking for Indonesian shipping, which they very rarely found. I can think of no more boring task than the one that squadron had, day in, day out, but it had to be done.

At Seletar was based the main helicopter force, 110, 225 and 230 Squadrons (Whirlwind 10s) which spent most of the time deployed in Borneo, as did 66 Squadron's Belvederes, the only twin-rotor helicopter squadron we had in the Air Force in those days. They did sterling work, not only in supplying the troops but also in lifting out a damaged Whirlwind helicopter, returning it to 390 MU to be repaired and having it back in service in a short time. That was of immense value. In addition the Beverleys of 34 Squadron could and did use Seletar, which became a pretty busy and crowded station.

Labuan I mentioned as a base, but it was increased in size many times, and became not only a staging post but was also the airfield to which in general all heavy supplies were lifted for further distribution out to the front line. It was an extremely good station which had the security of being 20 miles off-shore – an immense help.

I should mention too that there was one SAM squadron, No 65, also based at Seletar, which went to Kuching at one time. It was equipped with the Bloodhound but did not have any very active role to play.

We were thus fortunate indeed to have a force as large as we did, one which was able to respond to Plan ALE, the opening plan for Confrontation, within an extremely short space of time. Our very fine main base, Singapore, was within reasonable range of the front, and our force had been largely re-equipped in recent years, so it was pretty up-to-date considering there were various Defence Reviews under way, and it was fortunate that Confrontation did catch us at a favourable point in time.

## QUESTION PERIOD

### **Geoffrey Green**

Did the Gurkha corporal, who did very well indeed I might say, win an award?

### **Brigadier Smith**

He won the Military Medal, and later on he left the Army as a Lieutenant QGA. He was a very good soldier indeed. The other rifleman that went with him was Mentioned in Despatches.

### **Philip James**

When the 1st/2nd were helicoptered back to Long Jawi, to their amazement the two Gurkha soldiers were still alive, and one of them actually crawled out of the jungle. They were crawling up the hill when the helicopter landed. So they both survived although one was permanently disabled, and had to take on a sedentary job. They're a tough race, the Gurkhas!

### **Air Commodore Max Bacon**

One thing that has not yet come out is the weather that applied in the area. It could either be beautiful or atrocious, giving problems with practice GCAs, knowing that in anger they would be impossible. I was operating out of Tengah and we didn't fly if the weather forecast said that all three airfields were liable to thunderstorms. In general that was very unlikely to happen, but it was a serious constraint over operating from our home base, Singapore Island. We also did border patrols from Kuching and on several occasions we suffered thunderstorms in the afternoon, which meant we couldn't land there, and with no suitable diversion on the island of Borneo we would have to divert 300 odd miles back to Singapore, dropping overload tanks and littering the South China Sea with them. The weather was quite different at Labuan, because the thunderstorms built up over the island during the day, and drifted over Labuan during the evening when we were all drinking and the Shackletons were out patrolling the sea. So for daytime operations Kuching could be quite difficult for jet aircraft, whereas Labuan was much better. For the main base, you could suffer huge thunderstorms which covered the whole island, but that was only very seldom. Normally there was at least one airfield open, but weather was certainly a significant factor in air operations in Confrontation.

### **Sir Frederick Sowrey**

I was very interested in the attitude of the Press and the point that was

made that we'd never have been able to carry out such operations today. At that time the Press were still fairly probing in their attitude towards the Armed Services and what they were doing. Was it that you had tame pressmen? I know that you said you kept them well away from the front line, so it was impossible for them to get there. Presumably there were no private helicopters or aircraft that they could hire to bring them across. But there must have been some sort of public relations at the Headquarters, able to keep a degree of confidence with the Correspondents. You can't lie to the Press, or you shouldn't lie to the Press, in my experience of military operations. You can keep the truth under wraps if you need to but there must have been some reasonable degree of co-operation and understanding by the Press to the military operations that were in train. How was it that we managed it in the early 1960s but cannot in the early '90s?

### **Mr Cecil James**

There were two Phoenix Park PR Officers in my time. One I remember very well, an artillery colonel called Charles Lawton, a good actor. He was followed by a sailor whose name I forget. They were both very good and hard-working, and they got the local press with their feet under their tables as often as they possibly could. The only difficulty in that part of the world was that you were not just dealing with British Press 'stringers' – I don't think there was any resident correspondent for a major British paper – your problem was the Australian papers. I know that both those PR Officers took very good care to get alongside the Press.

### **Brigadier Smith**

When we were in Three Division, there were no roads to the border. You had to go by helicopter, or by long boat and the Ibans paddled you. We had a visit from Clare Hollingworth, who was then Defence Correspondent, of *The Telegraph* I think. She came to our Headquarters unannounced, and said she wanted to get to the forward areas where we had two companies sitting on the rivers that came in from Indonesia. My Colonel said that he couldn't allow her any transport whatever unless she showed him what she'd written. She was most 'anti', threatening to report him to the Director of Operations. He then handed the telephone to her and said, 'Right, phone him up.' So she phoned General Walker and got a flea in her ear. Actually she did tour our area and I went with her, and she did give her article to the Battalion before she left. That's the way we did it.

### **Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris**

Perhaps I might touch on an associated subject. The Press, as you've

already been told, were nothing like as intrusive as they became in later times. I think Vietnam taught them to be more intrusive than they had ever been before. However, among other plagues, mosquitoes and so on, were the Members of Parliament, and they used to visit us as often as they were permitted. They could be a considerably greater nuisance than were the Press, because many of them had axes to grind, along the lines of, ‘What are we doing here anyway?’ On one occasion we were briefing six MPs who had managed to get as far forward as Kuching, and I suddenly noticed only five were present. I summoned my PSO and said ‘Please go and find the sixth.’ Sure enough there he was, in the kitchens, subverting the troops and trying to persuade them that they shouldn’t be there, and did they know why they should be there. He in turn was very nicely huffed by an Argyll Sergeant-Major. This particular MP did have the grace to go considerably forward into the firing line, and this conversation was overheard between him and the Sergeant-Major in the Argylls:

‘Now, Sergeant-Major, do you know what you are here for? Do you know why you should be here?’ And the Sergeant-Major said, ‘Yes, Sirr. We are here to keep out Communists and other left-wing bastards.’

But they could be a nuisance and maybe the Brigadier will agree with me that at times they constituted more of a nuisance than the Press.

### **Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee**

I think distance from the UK had something to do with the lack of Press coverage. I say this because some years before I had been in Java, where we had a particularly bloody campaign after the war, yet nothing was known about it at home. It was kept very quiet indeed – of course this was before the days of satellite communications and so on.

### **Air Commodore Henry Probert**

This was true not only of what was happening to you in Java but also of almost everything that happened in the Far East through World War Two. Let me add another comment. While we are rightly talking very much about the role of the RAF in Confrontation it seems to me we ought not to forget that we were operating within the framework of one of the great post-war unified Commands, a very important feature of our post-war history. Could any of the speakers reflect just a little on how good were the relations between ourselves and our Army and Navy colleagues and the top level of the unified command? Before we get on to the detail of what we

ourselves were doing we ought to remind ourselves of our relationship with our comrades in arms.

### **Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris**

In my experience the degree of co-operation was directly inverse to the amount of rank involved. While there was whinging about helicopter lift and so forth, there was never any difficulty whatsoever at unit level, or junior staff level, particularly of course in the field, indeed almost anywhere until it got right up to the top. Then people were scrabbling for their share of the action and their share of the publicity and the decorations and so on, and there was the occasional row among the top Commanders, depending very much on personalities. On the whole, though, I think one might have expected that. Appointments were very much sought after, because there was some action going on, but considering the star quality of people who were serving as joint Commanders-in-Chief it was extraordinary how well they got on together, as far as one could tell one step lower down. There were, of course, enormous allegations of bitter enmity between the Services and indeed between the Services' wives. I never encountered any of that fun at all.

### **Brigadier Smith**

General Walker was a very controversial character, and in fact he got on far better with his Air Force and Navy comrades than he did with his immediate Army Commander in Singapore. He and General Hewitson were fighting a war the whole time. When Tom Pocock wrote a book about Walter Walker, he called it *The Fighting General*, and the blurb inside says that he fought many wars and he also fought his superiors. Well he did.

### **Michael Holton**

During the years in question I was on secondment from the Air Ministry to the old Ministry of Defence in Storey's Gate, where I found I had charge of the Far East and African desks. It was my job to monitor the political implications of military operations in those areas on behalf of the Minister of Defence. On Friday 7 December 1962, at a quarter to five – getting very late – I received a request from Alec Cumming-Bruce in the Colonial Office to move Plan ALE to RED. The plan was actually on my desk – in fact an awful lot was known in London about what was going on. Communications were very good but just a little slow. By about 6.00pm I had managed to hold back various officials. My first thought had been 'thank goodness the Unified Command began a few days ago'. I think David Lewis was in charge and by 6 o'clock we had a Vice-Chiefs'

agreement and a political agreement to reinforce Singapore with the spearhead battalion. They left RAF Lyneham on the Tuesday. Also another battalion was brought to 24 hours' notice, to replace the spearhead. That was done very late at night, I think rather faster than it would be done today. Also on communications, I represented MOD on an official group which met every morning at 9.30 in the Cabinet Office, under an Under-Secretary, and we went through all the telegrams that had come in through the night, so we had a pretty detailed account of what we were being told from the other end. Our main concern was, of course, cross-border operations and this certainly was the main headache. With regard to the Press, it is equally amazing that the whole thing was kept quiet here. Each department had a representative on this committee, and there were one or two nasty moments, but frankly I found Clare Hollingworth very positive. On one or two occasions we had some background briefings, and more than once I had to use her despatches to help draft my answers to Private Notice Questions, which one had to do by about 11.00am. So there was quite a flow of information, but it was a matter of luck, and journalists of those days were, I think, a little more positive in their attitude towards the subject.

### **Air Vice-Marshal Michael Robinson**

On more than one occasion Dr Towle described Sukarno as 'charismatic', and then coupled his name with Nkrumah and others, and didn't feel that Macmillan fell into that category. I suggest that this is not a historical judgement, but a media one, and should we beware of such?

### **Dr Towle**

Yes I think Sukarno's charismatic qualities were to an extent created by the media. On the other hand he was certainly able to keep his audiences spellbound. No doubt if you had known Nkrumah or Nehru or Mao Tse-Tung individually you would not have found them charismatic close to, but if you knew them only as a member of the crowd, then that was probably something rather different. From the journalist's point of view, that's how they tended to see them.

### **Desmond Goch**

Could someone give us further information on the extent and nature of the supply line to the UK over the Confrontation period? It must have been quite a comprehensive organisation.

### **Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee**

All I can tell you is that the two maintenance units were enormous and had to be, because of the length of the re-supply line. But how that re-supply line functioned I cannot tell you, other than it probably creaked quite a bit, if the Squadron Commanders were correct in complaining from time to time about lack of spares.

### **Group Captain Gordon Gilbert**

Brigadier Smith, you gave us a very graphic description of the ground operation in Borneo, mentioning that from the outset we were operating very much on our own because the locals were a bit wary about getting involved. To what extent were they involved later on in the operations and how well did they perform?

### **Brigadier Smith**

After the Long Jawi incident they swung round very much and even when we were winning at the end we did rely on them for intelligence. A lot of the tribes had kampongs on both sides of the border, so they crossed anywhere in peacetime. The border meant nothing to them, really. The only trouble was that the average Iban was inclined to exaggerate, and if he said there were 200 Indonesians in a certain village you always had to divide by four and you'd be about right. But they did play a very big part at the end, and when we left at the end of Confrontation they were genuinely upset. There were tears and everything else. They of course had gained from the material point of view. Helicopters had been going into lonely longhouses, bringing out Ibans who were sick, and taking in things that could be handed to the locals. So from the materialistic point of view they were desperately sad when we left. They also were very suspicious about the Malaysian Government, having had a good deal from the British when they were British colonies. We tended to leave them as they were, looking after them in a paternal manner, and they were afraid that once the Malaysian Government took over properly, after Confrontation, there would be bureaucracy, and their beloved forests would be cut down. As has happened.

### **Air Vice-Marshal John Price.**

Could I just add to that. You spoke about the Iban. I was operating early on with another tribe, one with a great history of co-operation with the British. Tom Harrison had dropped in there, and had roused them against the Japanese. We had nothing but help from them; they were 100% with us, amusingly so, sometimes. The headman at one village wore a 1944-issue

bush jacket as a badge of office, and he'd been awarded a BEM which he wore as genitalia decoration! Again I think we were lucky because Harrison came up and continued the co-operation. Their big regret, of course, was that they could not add to their collection of shrunken heads. We were told they were all Japanese, but some of them had curiously Occidental features when you looked closely at them!

### **Brigadier Smith**

I ought to have mentioned Tom Harrison in my talk. In fact one of the reasons for TNKU in Brunei getting no support from Indonesia was that as soon as the Brunei revolt started Walter Walker got hold of Tom Harrison, who went in to mobilise the locals, and they certainly prevented any help coming in from outside.

### **Air Vice-Marshal David Clark**

May I thank Dr Towle for his very comprehensive and skilful background briefing. There was a difference in view between you and the Brigadier about who constituted the rebels at one point. May I ask both speakers to say a little more upon what the expectations and aspirations of the rebels were and how they changed?

### **Dr Towle**

The point was that the guerrillas were opposed to the concept of Malaysia, to being subsumed in this greater whole with Malaya and Singapore. The people who were opposed to Malaysia were, however, very quickly circumvented. In Brunei they immediately realised, or nearly so, that they were going to have to oppose the Sultan by the use of force, and in a sense, after all, their campaign was successful, given that Brunei didn't come in in the way that they had hoped for.

### **Brigadier Smith**

Can I add one thing? In peacetime I commanded a Gurkha battalion in Brunei, and in those days the CO of the Gurkha battalion was on the Sultan's Security Council. I got to know the Sultan quite well, and he told me that one of the reasons he didn't want to join Malaysia was the fact that he knew that Shell had found a lot of oil offshore. He knew they were going to expand. He was convinced in his own mind that they would be acting as Treasury to Malaysia, particularly the backward countries of Sarawak and North Borneo. They would be paying the money out, but would have very little influence, because they were a small state.

## **Graham Stagg**

At the time of Confrontation I was serving in the RNZAF although later I joined the RAF. I was one of those guys in the Commonwealth Reserve, doing flying operations out of Kuching. One aspect of weather which Max Bacon missed, particularly in the Kuching operations, was the period in the year when they used to burn off the rice crops. We used to joke about pollution in Northern Europe, but visibility in Borneo during that particular time of year was quite impossible, and used to make finding the Border Forts somewhat interesting from the supply-dropping point of view. My question is directed at Brigadier Smith, and it relates to the forts which I spent some rather unusual hours of my life trying to support. You talked about the helicopter support being something you couldn't do without. Having dropped numerous cans of aviation fuel to these helicopters, I'd like your view on the supply-dropping support, which was quite unusual, and a little bit more, perhaps, for those who don't know, about the marvellous organisation of border forts, which we had to keep supplied, primarily from the air.

## **Brigadier Smith**

Yes, I forgot the supply task when I was praising the helicopters. Many of the outlying companies could not possibly have carried on without that supply. There was another point about the weather: when battalions had to change over, involving a very difficult shuttle service to bringing Companies back and take a new one in, these complicated programmes often went for a burton, because of the weather.

## THE SINGAPORE BASE 1963-1966

### Cecil James



I was Financial Adviser and Civil Secretary at Headquarters, Far East Air Force, from September 1963 to July 1966, the responsibilities being largely to do with – rather obviously – money, but also with civilian manpower, both local and UK-based. This turned out to be the more important part of the job, because the civilian workforce was immensely important for the Singapore base. In a memorandum to the Defence Committee in the late 1950's the Chiefs of Staff said, 'a base in other than sovereign territory is only useful in modern conditions if our forces are not under constant pressure to evacuate.'

Wise words; and more wise words, this time from General Keightley, the CinC of the Suez expedition, and spoken after that frustrating experience:

'World opinion has become a principle of war!'

World opinion on Confrontation, at any rate opinion in the UK and the West, was generally favourable to the Anglo-Malaysian position, with a little bit of doubt here and there, as you heard from Dr Towle. The conflict could be represented as dictator-led Indonesia bullying Malaysia, a small and newly-emergent democracy only recently free of an internal Communist threat. This was a somewhat romantic and simplistic scenario – and it's not easy to fit Brunei into it – but sufficiently accurate for Confrontation to be politically respectable. So long as there was obvious unity of purpose between the Commonwealth governments involved and their forces – Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand as well as the UK – world opinion, General Keightley's additional principle of war, would not be a serious worry.

Equally, there would be no worry over what the Chiefs of Staff had said in the 1950s about that much older principle of war, the security of the base. Nevertheless, the main base in Singapore was no longer on British sovereign territory. It was heavily reliant on the local government and people for general support and on directly-employed local labour. When the British had run Singapore there were contingency plans to fly out hundreds of technical personnel from the UK to man major utilities such as power and water if there was serious industrial trouble. But those were 'the dear, dead days beyond recall'. Industrial and political tranquility in Singapore

was all-important for successful Confrontation. But it couldn't be taken for granted.

On any reckoning, the Singapore base was the largest and most complex of all the British bases overseas. All three Services had returned in strength after the defeat of Japan and reactivated most of their old locations. Changi, as you've heard, was an exception. All the Services relied on local resources – for utilities and a wide range of purchases, and manpower. Together, they were the biggest employer in Singapore.

I have no precise figure for the combined total, but it would undoubtedly be substantially more than 20,000. In the RAF case we employed over 3,000 local people in industrial grades, many semiskilled and skilled, and over 1,000 non-industrials. These included some long-serving individuals who had the status and conditions of established civil servants up to the equivalent rank of flight lieutenant, and in my time we succeeded in getting one of our most loyal and able local people promoted to equivalent squadron leader. When the British finally left Singapore he eventually became Permanent Secretary to the Singapore Ministry of Defence – quite a chap. He was one of the senior locals who had been Air Ministry employees since before the war, ie one of the few who had escaped execution by the Japanese.

Ethnically, our labour force was, roughly divided, 45% Chinese, 35% Indian, 20% Malay. Their trade union was the Air Ministry Local Staff Union, with a Tamil chairman who was an MT fitter. They were a strong-minded lot – not our creatures at all. They refused, for example, to change the title of the union when, in 1964, the Air Ministry in London disappeared in name and was swallowed up in the Ministry of Defence.

They also refused, despite pressure from the Singapore Government, to join the Singapore Trades Union Congress. They didn't see the point: they had a British, not a local, employer.

You will have got the point by now, and it bears upon the *obiter dicta* of the Chiefs of Staff which I mentioned at the outset: insofar as RAF and the local workforce were concerned, we had good relations and much goodwill, essential to the security of the base. In the Summer of 1964, when Indonesian pressure might have escalated into operations against Singapore (we were issued with stirrup-pumps and buckets of sand) and without any prompting from HQ FEAF, the union told its members to do whatever they were asked to do, without regard to normal job specifications and demarcations. We were a bit pleased about this.

At this same awkward time a strike was threatened against all the Services. It would have been led by a pro-Indonesian Marxist, and its real objective was to embarrass the Singapore Government. It was due to begin one Monday, but during the previous weekend the Marxist was incarcerated in Changi Jail under the emergency powers Lee Kuan Yew had inherited from the British. The strike never got off the ground. We were a bit pleased about this, as well.

We could have handled it, but it would have been an additional problem at a time when relations between Malaya and Singapore were dangerously disturbed. It was from that direction that any serious threat to the Singapore base and its efficiency would come, reinforced by extreme left-wing elements within Singapore who wanted to get rid of Lee Kuan Yew. Direct military threats to the base could be and were easily countered. Much more worrying were the communal riots, Malay against Chinese, in the summer of 1964 and again a year later, when Singapore was in effect expelled from the Malaysian Federation. Formally they seceded, but in effect they were told to go. Both were dangerous periods. There was loss of life; curfews were imposed – 24 hour curfews for a time – and Singapore's future as a small nation-state seemed pretty bleak and friendless.

The riots and bloodshed were between the two races; I know of no incidents affecting the property or personnel of the base. But with hundreds of Service families in unprotected accommodation all over Singapore Island we were very relieved when things calmed down and our local employees began to return to work.

The effect of the riots on RAF efficiency was that much less, because we had useful numbers of married quarters for local staff within or close to the three station perimeters. Local labour was probably most important to Seletar, where we had the two Maintenance Units. Within the station boundaries was that extraordinary phenomenon – I was fascinated by it – Seletarville: a self-contained village for local staff, isolated and insulated from what was happening in Singapore.

So with only a few hiccups the base functioned pretty smoothly for the whole of the Confrontation period. But you know what they say about swans: serene on the surface but paddling hard underneath; and I'd like to end with a brief sketch of those features of the local scene which were important for good relations between the Services, the workforce and local government.

At the workforce level we had exactly the same Whitley structure as at any major civilian-manned unit in the UK, with separate committees for

industrials and non-industrials. These were meetings of equals, formal but friendly, with agreed agendas and relevant memoranda. At the next level, since the broad policy was for pay and conditions to be in line with local good employer practice, it was important to be on good terms with the Singapore Ministry of Labour. One had to be careful not to give the impression of a lingering colonial relationship. The Minister of Labour was, in fact a most able and impressive man, who had one distinction which Lee Kuan Yew is said to have envied: the British had put him in jail for subversion!

There was a higher level still: with the Singapore Government and of course with Lee Kuan Yew personally. The channel was the British High Commission, where for all the critical period of Confrontation the High Commissioner was Philip Moore, who presided at regular meetings of the three Services. He would brief us on political developments in Singapore and Malaysia, and in turn we would brief him on anything which might affect relations with local government. He was an FCO appointment, but his background was RAF (he was shot down over Germany in 1942) and in defence generally. He returned to MOD in 1965 and then went on to the Palace and became the Queen's private secretary. He made a tremendous contribution to good relations between the Services and local people and to the success of Confrontation. He was very close personally to Lee Kuan Yew and helped him, particularly in the black days, to recover his nerve and political will. They were two remarkable men.

So the Singapore base was immensely important. It worked very well as a co-operative enterprise between the Services, the Singapore Government and the local community and the local workforce; but a lot of people went to a lot of trouble to make sure that it did work well, and was not seriously affected by the difficulties I've mentioned.

## RAF OPERATIONS IN BORNEO

### Air Vice-Marshal Larry Lamb



Memory is a fallible guide, and the events that are the back drop to my presentation did after all occur 28 years ago and I am covering just one year of the saga. Since then most listeners to my reminiscences on the Borneo Campaign have had no part in it and so (happily) my version of events (until today at least) has never been challenged. But it would be presumptuous of me to claim ‘that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’, although I hope it will be as near to the truth as not to offend any present whose recollections of detail differ from or are more accurate than mine.

I was at Cranwell in early 1965, seated in the Assistant Commandant’s chair, when I was alerted to my posting to Labuan to relieve the late Roy Scott of King’s Flight fame, as deputy to COMAIRBOR – AVM ‘Sandy’ Johnstone. First a visit to the Gieves shop at the College, where an understanding manager – having measured me for tropical kit – suggested I send my vital statistics to one Shafi of Seletar who would make it up for about ¼ of the price. Then the moving of one’s family back into the house only recently let. Finally the hand-over of my job to a future CAS and CDS, Neil Cameron, learning in the process how to by-pass the usual channels if one wanted to do in days what we more conventional mortals could only do in months, if at all. And then on 8 March a 23½ hour flight in a chartered Britannia from Heathrow via Istanbul and Bombay to Singapore, where followed some 10 days of briefing and visits by HQ FEAF, 224 Group, RAF Seletar, Changi and Tengah.

Finally on 18 March, aboard Hastings TG 551 (an aircraft I had flown on the Berlin Airlift some 17 years earlier), I flew to Kuching where Roy Scott and the Forward Air Commander, Gp Capt Les Foskett, explained how operations in West and Mid-West Brigade were conducted. They appeared to stress the virtues of parcelling out the few available helicopters amongst the various battalions, one here, one there, with each chopper flying as tasked by the local army CO I met the Brigade Commander, Bill Cheyne, and the taciturn Australian who commanded Kuching – Wg Cdr Geoff Atherton –both of whom appeared to go out of their way at the time to indicate in response to my queries about the helicopter tasking that, whilst glad to meet me, they would not welcome this new broom sweeping

at all, let alone clean. Even today I can recall my distinct uneasiness at this reaction as Roy and I journeyed onwards to Labuan in a Pembroke – but more of this later. So it was on 19 March that I arrived in Labuan to begin once more, under Roy Scott's aegis, a hectic series of meetings and briefings plus visits to Brunei, Jesselton and Tawau until on 26 March he finally said 'It's all yours' and left for UK and eventual retirement.

So what had I inherited? About 1/3rd of the total land mass of Borneo whose interior – virtually every square yard of it – appeared to be covered by tropical rainforest never felled by man. No railways, few roads (500 miles) but many, many miles of river which formed the main L of C. Within this area lived the varied indigenous tribes amongst whom were deployed Commonwealth and Gurkha troops and it was COMAIRBOR's job, despite the terrain and the weather, to transport these troops to and from their operational areas, to supply virtually their every need, to rescue them if injured, to keep the skies above them inviolate from a reasonably proficient enemy based not so very far away, and finally to patrol those areas of coastline where the threat of incursion was thought to exist.

We had two main bases at Labuan and Kuching and a host of forward operating locations many of which needed a constant re-supply of stocks of aviation fuel to support the SRT aircraft using them.

The JFHQ in Labuan and the RAF element of it were small and compact and it fell to my lot to take responsibility not only for overseeing air operations but for many administrative tasks, eg I sat in membership of the SSEC's in Jesselton (Sabah) and in Brunei – bodies where military and civil elements found common ground. A conventional joint operations room, including an ATOC, controlled and tasked the various forces operating out of Labuan. From there Kuching seemed to be not only out of sight, but at times out of mind as well. However each day appeared to pass on well-worn tramlines. At morning prayers the top brass – Army and RAF – listened to their staffs giving potted versions of hours flown, troops and stores airlifted or dropped, problems such as the recovery of parachutes which were in short supply, the occasional aircraft accident or incident, and in closed session cross-border operations under the codeword CLARET. Then came evening tasking meetings in the ATOC where resources were married to commitments. The benign and ever cheerful COMAIRBOR presided over the RAF element with a light touch whilst the DOB Ops, General Lea, and the Army Commander, General Hunt, were most co-operative and accommodating. Tennis, swimming, rugger and cricket helped while away off duty hours, whilst the Shell bungalows and messes

we occupied made the jungle appear remote. But confrontation was barely an hour's flying away from our comfortable existence. I have already referred to some uneasiness in the early days over just who controlled who or what, but as a new boy I was reluctant to challenge the perceived wisdom of those whose experience in the theatre was greater than mine.

It was the dropping into the sea of an underslung Land Rover from a Belvedere shortly after I took over which strengthened my resolve not to take anything for granted, not least because no one – Army or RAF – appeared to take this particular incident anything like seriously at the time.

From what I could see initially, most of the operational flying pattern certainly seemed to be highly effective, but my early visits into all the Brigade forward areas did little to dissipate the feeling that somehow we weren't using what helicopter lift we had to the best effect, although I was conscious that I had little or no helicopter experience to guide me. My log book reveals that in March, April and May of 1965 I flew in no less than 16 differing types of RAF and Army aircraft, logging some 110 hours as I visited locations, some of whose names still roll easily off the tongue, Long Semado, Sepulot, Bario, Balai Ringin and Long Pa Sia. I made trips by long boat down the River Rajang to Nanga Gaat and flew to many LZ's characterised by a letter and number eg (R30) rather than by a name; to describe them as postage stamps would be gross exaggeration. The warmth of my reception everywhere was equalled only by the conflicting advice, from soldiers as to how best the RAF should operate to meet their needs and from some of the aircrews with whom I flew as to the limitations placed on them by JFHQ, ATOC, FATOC, Uncle Tom Cobley and all which inhibited (so they suggested) the successful prosecution of the campaign. Faulty memory or no, I remain convinced to this day that at the sharp end at least, the junior commanders would not have opposed some modifications to the current *modus operandi*, but whether this would make cost-effective sense was by no means clear. Let me make it clear – I inherited no Augean stable.

There was or had been ample justification for many of the methods, some of the deployments and most of the tactics I had inherited. How to achieve maximum utilisation and economy of effort, whilst satisfying the soldiers' priorities, filled our waking hours. But the situation on the border – particularly in West Brigade – was still tense and the Army staffs at JFHQ seemed eternally anxious to know how to maximise the degree of support we could give the front-line troops. Air defence, LRMP, photo-reconnaissance, V-bomber deployments to Singapore, etc – although part of

the overall air campaign designed to discourage the Indonesians from engaging in anything other than skirmishing – were of limited concern to the soldier in the jungle foxhole largely because they were out of his sight, whereas air supply most certainly was his concern being under his very nose. To the soldier this meant not only the Hastings, Argosies and Beverleys air dropping fuel, heavy defence stores, corrugated sheets, etc, but also the ubiquitous helicopters which took him forward, ferried him his supplies, redeployed him, occasionally rescued him and finally brought him home again. The soldiers were all too young to remember the Dunkirk cries of ‘where is the RAF’, but if I had any sleepless nights in Labuan, it was that I was going to be the man responsible for having that charge levelled at the RAF in 1965. Hence air transport operations were top of my priority list and the lists of many others, by a long chalk.

But there were other problems inculcating a sense of responsibility amongst the young helicopter pilots without crushing their press-on spirit. The helicopters were so valuable we could not afford the loss of a single one – particularly if that loss was caused by stupidity.

If I needed any evidence that not all was as well as it appeared on the surface, it came from an unlikely source – the Royal Navy – whose Wessex helicopters of No 848 Squadron had established themselves in some style at Nanga Gaat on the River Rajang in Mid West Bde. Here they acted, I have to say, almost as a law unto themselves. My recollection of this is supported by some extracts from the F540 of Labuan and Kuching – and I quote.

Labuan: ‘No 848 Sqn were, it has to be said, unused to centralised control and JAW methods of tasking, and they resisted all attempts designed to make them conform to our pattern of operations.’

Kuching: ‘Numerous difficulties have been experienced in making the best use of the capabilities of No 848 Sqn. The eventual resolution of these is vital if all services are to benefit from their presence in Borneo. Their tour of duty here should give future Air Warfare staffs enough material to teach a very valuable lesson to future commanders’.

They were highly publicity conscious – an RN PRO and photographer made a monthly visit from Singapore – and the world was flooded with pictures of RN helicopters, as it were, carrying the main burden of ‘hearts and minds’ as well as operations. Their activities led indirectly to a visit

from the IG of the RAF following questions in the House of Commons as to what part the RAF was actually playing in Borneo. 848 did of course do much good work but priorities were as perceived by its CO or by local army units and not necessarily what the Brigade Commander in Mid West Bde wanted. Incidents and accidents were frequent but often we were left unaware of what actually went on.

One incident could not be covered up because of the fatalities which resulted. Entering a clearing, the tail rotor of a Wessex snagged on a rock. The young pilot, full of the press-on spirit, in the words of a witness, 'smoothed out' the irregularities of the damaged rotor blade with a knife, took off with several passengers and at 100 ft or so crashed out of control into the river killing all on board. The Board of Inquiry was a completely naval affair and I for one, never saw its findings. But again let me stress, despite this cavalier approach, they did much good work in their areas particularly for 'hearts and minds' and their contribution should not be diminished by their occasional displays of independence.

Was my continuing unease a figment of my imagination or was there something fundamental that really needed changing? The demands for airlift, air drops and helicopter support seemed never-ending. How to get the proverbial quart out of the pint pot! Call it prevarication if you must – but to me it was – or appeared to be – a knotty problem that I was unsure how to solve – not for lack of advice I can assure you. But was I being logical in the face of facts or merely doctrinaire? That was my dilemma.

It was a visit from an old friend and one of today's speakers, Sir Robert Freer – then OC RAF Seletar – which helped crystallise my thinking. He will no doubt speak for himself if I err, but I have the sense today of him expressing at the time not dissimilar reservations. He had recently formed his helicopter squadrons at Seletar into a helicopter wing under a highly experienced chopper pilot, and because the implications behind this centralisation concept appealed strongly to me, he offered to send his expert, Wg Cdr John Dowling, to Labuan to talk things through.

Dowling soon put his finger on the same problem that had plagued me and urged me to impose a tighter degree of centralised control in certain areas rather than dispersing our helicopter effort so widely in penny packets. We agreed some flexibility was necessary – and that a centralised solution was more likely to be effective in West than in Central, Mid West or East Brigades where, in any case, the threat in 1965 was less serious and distances inhibited over-centralisation at Labuan.

It may have been co-incidence but in June 1965 Edward Crew, another

old friend, succeeded ‘Sandy’ Johnstone and I found him very receptive to a form of centralised control of the helicopters, particularly in West Brigade. Let me make it abundantly clear, ‘Sandy’ Johnstone had never been asked by me to change things, let alone had he declined to do so. By the time he left I had only just become convinced that what my instincts were urging me to do was in fact the right thing for the situation we faced. Equally, co-incidence or no, it was about that time that the AOC asked me to move to Kuching to replace Les Foskett as Forward Air Commander and in so doing appeared to give his blessing to the ideas on centralised control I was by now expounding in public. On arrival in Kuching I had first to sell the concept to Brigadier Cheyne and his battalion commanders. Generously, he called them all to Kuching and let me express my views to them.

Opposition by individual battalion commanders to the loss of ‘their helicopters’, and ‘their pilots’ was strong but Bill eventually backed me all the way. The penny packets were withdrawn and concentrated at Kuching, the Battalions passed their demands to Brigade who assessed priorities and the FATOC staffs tasked the helicopters accordingly. All standard SLAW doctrine – no frills – and it worked.

Let the following chart make the point:

<b><u>RAF Kuching 1965-1966</u></b>					
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
<u>Month</u>	<u>Hours</u>	<u>Sorties</u>	<u>Freight</u>	<u>Pax with Kit</u>	<u>Uplift per Sortie</u>
March	600	3119	604,831	5209	611
<b>Centralised Tasking Introduced</b>					
July	916	4779	1,665,500	9613	847
August	963	5266	1,860,335	9628	810
October	807	3754	1,364,493	7961	893
December 1966	790	3821	1,085,524	8204	820
January	851	4555	1,222,295	8772	749
March	693	3514	957,576	7400	799

**Notes:**

- i. Source Forms 540 – RAF Kuching
- ii. Sortie = 1 T/O + Landing
- iii. Pax with Kit = 250 lbs
- iv. Freight totals exclude returned parachutes
- v. Uplift per sortie  $\frac{e \times 250}{c} + d$  lbs

c

Note the figures before and after centralising tasking:-

- (a) In March 3119 sorties uplifted 5209 pax and 604,831 lbs of freight.
- (b) In July the same force uplifted 9613 pax and 1.66 million lbs of freight.

To get comparable figures I have divided the total weight uplifted (columns (d) and (e)) by the number of sorties (column (c)) to give the figures shown in the right hand column (f). This shows that from July onwards each sortie uplifted some 30% more weight. Six months later this figure of 30% was still being maintained. The cynics may say that each sortie only uplifted the equivalent of 3-4 men + kit. The figures make no allowance for carriage of parachutes from forward to rear areas for we needed to recover as many as possible, nor do they show the reality that one flight may involve 5-6 sorties – some flying empty legs, eg after visiting site A to drop troops, flying empty to site B, picking up men/stores for C, empty again to D, then full of parachutes back to base – 2 legs empty + one leg full of a load of parachutes, the weight of which are not included in the figures. Whatever your views of the figures, there is no doubt that the once sceptical battalion Cos were eventually converted. Air lift went where the Army needs demanded and when Bill Cheyne and I went on a lecture tour afterwards to staff and cadet colleges and other learned bodies he was always the first to point out that this change was a turning point in affairs in West Bde – the scene of many vicious little actions bringing in their train a VC and a DFC. The proof of the pudding was surely in the eating.

If I have concentrated on the air transport side of affairs that is because logistics and supplies occupied most of our waking hours. Other aspects of the air campaign will be covered by other speakers later and I wouldn't wish to diminish their importance. But our main enemies were the terrain and the climate. The Indonesian air force had, so we now know, a healthy respect for the RAF – and were not over active. Even their ground forces dispersed from investing one of our sites after hearing the noisy Javelins. We were left in virtual peace from air attack though at one stage we did see fit to deploy Bloodhounds at Kuching where a mobile GCI gave a degree of close control over the local area. Our helicopters were not 'gun-ships' but occasionally we fitted SS 11 – an air-ground wire-guided missile – to a Whirlwind with limited effects. The question of the sanctity of the border was a vexed issue and for most of the time the air forces respected it – but there were occasions when aircraft just had to cross and these were CLARET operations. Our involvement was unusually to rescue injured

soldiers who were operating on the other side for a wide variety of reasons. This in reality involved sending helicopters into unknown – possibly high risk – areas. The RVs often could only be marked by smoke or balloons. To avoid enemy LAA meant flying at tree top height – but this inhibited navigation. How could one maximise the chances of a successful RV but, at the same time, minimise the risk to the precious helicopters?

One day a possible solution hit me as I was flying in the forward area when I saw the sunlight glinting on a helicopter's rotor blades. It seemed like an illuminated golden saucer and as it remained visible to me for 20 miles or more I realised that a 'mother' ship flying high on our side on the border could guide a chopper flying at low level on the other to a site which was visible from on high but was invisible to the rescue aircraft. Tests proved its value and the AOC readily agreed to put it into operation. I personally controlled the first few CLARET rescues and this became SOP. We had no casualties and I felt much easier in my mind when requesting CLARET once I knew the risk from enemy LAA had been reduced. However, let me refer here to the one casualty in my period in Borneo caused by enemy LAA.

I was over in Singapore refereeing the annual Army/RAF Rugby match when at half time, the AOC ambled to where I was standing and said nonchalantly, 'Well done, good game, but one of your helicopters has been shot down. A Canberra awaits at Tengah to take you back to Kuching the moment the game's over.' Sadly a new pilot, tasked to fly to a unit located literally at the end of one of the few roads in the area, overflew the unit, and a few moments later was shot down over the border and killed. It was, I think, our only casualty. The reason for this error in navigation was never clarified – all familiarisation training had been completed; the aircraft was seen to fly directly overhead his destination in broad daylight along a clearly defined laterite road. The only case, so I believe, of the loss of an aircraft due to EA. Let me read an extract from the *Kuching Gazette* on 20 November 1966 – the day after the incident.

'The tragic loss of a Whirlwind helicopter on Wednesday highlights once again the debt which Sarawak owes to the security Forces.

From the first gallant defence of Limbang our own forces showed that they were prepared to make the supreme sacrifice.

But we would not have been able to survive at all if it had not been for the willingness of our Commonwealth and Gurkha friends to come to our aid in our time of difficulty.

The men who have been lost were not supermen or swashbuckling soldiers of fortune but ordinary men doing a skilled professional job well and efficiently.

All security work is hard and dangerous. It would not be right to have a favourite service. Nevertheless for those of us who spend their time working on the ground, there is inevitably a feeling of some special awe for those who cheerfully fly the invaluable helicopters over rough and dangerous country, in fair weather and foul. We grieve that yet another has been lost.'

I think perhaps that says it all. In due course my one year unaccompanied tour was over. I particularly wanted to spend my last night in Borneo in the jungle and so I flew to a forward base and stayed with my Ghurka friends who I had got to know well. It was an emotional farewell and many were the tributes they paid to the RAF. Early next day I returned to base and on March the 26th – almost a year to the day I first saw Kuching – I left there for Singapore where, after a few courtesy calls I flew back to the UK – again on a Britannia charter aircraft. The day after I arrived home, I had an attack of gout – my first – and was greatly amused by a junior MO at White Waltham saying, 'Given your time of life, Sir, and given the good life of continuous wining and dining that someone of your rank undoubtedly leads nowadays, gout is almost inevitable!' 'Continuous wining and dining' indeed!!! My Ghurka friends would have enjoyed hearing that.

## A STATION COMMANDER'S VIEW



### **Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Freer**

I am going to take you swiftly by at least 400 miles behind the lines and you can hardly get more safe than that. Sir David Lee wrote in his book about the few quiet years which followed the long Malayan emergency. With exquisite timing, the Air Secretary posted me to command Seletar as the quietness came to an end. I arrived in August 1963, a little late on parade if one takes the Brunei rebellion as the end of peace, but in time for Confrontation proper. Seletar was a major departure from Freer's previous experience. From being a fighter boy I found it still had flying boat slipways and, in addition to SRT, MRT and helicopters, housed a multiplicity of other squadrons and units, none of which had anything to do with the fighter world. Indeed after passing through the rather distinctive gateway into Seletar, one entered a new world in RAF base terms. It was a truly mixed bag and just grew and grew during Confrontation until it embraced a total population, including dependents, of some 15,000 people.

The first unusual feature was finding an Asian village of some 2,000 souls on the base housing many of our locally recruited employees. Taking pride of place, of course, among our lodger units was the AOC and Headquarters 224 Group. You could say that this tended to concentrate the mind of a newly promoted and appointed Station Commander. Allow me to remind you at this point that if you are to have your boss working on your patch he should, if possible, be one who gives you clear, well informed direction at the outset, followed by timely advice and solid support along the way, and then leaves you alone to get on with the job. At Seletar we were blessed with an AOC who scored, if I may say so, a maximum on all counts. The proximity of the Group staff became accordingly a distinct advantage as opposed to the reverse.

Singapore was an interesting, stimulating and potentially pleasant posting for most people. There was an exciting strangeness about the island, it was colourful, multi-cultural, the sun shone a lot and everyone, irrespective of rank, could live it up a little. But there were pitfalls for the uninitiated and new arrivals had to be fairly carefully briefed.

For the moment I would just emphasise the contrast which existed between the sunny social life in and around Singapore and the tough and

rather dangerous life in the forward areas of Borneo. It was not a contrast to which everyone was exposed, but it certainly became the routine lot for Seletar's aircrews and for the RAF Regiment and the RCT operating on the main forward bases at Labuan and Kuching. I was happily privileged myself to partake of the mixture and stimulus from time-to-time but there were days when a Station Commander could not sensibly absent himself for very long. He could however get a feel for jungle bashing and we Station Commanders, Gp Cpts Brian Bennett, Ted Hawkins and myself, did just show willing. But for most of the time I have to confess I lived on base at Seletar, slumming at No 1 Park Lane.

I should make it clear that Singapore was not wholly a holiday camp. Those who worked on the island and enjoyed its amenities actually worked harder perhaps than they had ever worked before. Moreover they did from time-to-time emulate their colleagues in Borneo by dealing firmly and successfully with those Indonesians who thought there were easy pickings in invading the Malayan mainland by sea and air.

Let me say a little more about my polyglot empire at Seletar. Actually I think that 'Commonwealth' might be a better description because a large part of the station consisted of lodger units not under my command. But be they RAF, Army or Navy, the lodgers all subscribed willingly to an 'all of one company' approach to living and working on the base. It made Seletar a reasonably happy place to serve and I suspect that sharing one huge Officers Mess and the running of it played no insignificant part in it all.

There isn't even time to mention all the lodger units. I have a note somewhere there were 26 at the peak. The principal lodgers were the Maintenance Units. 389 was the main equipment base for the whole of the Far East Air Force. They certainly stocked as much as they could of everything from clothing to furniture to vehicles, munitions and aircraft. The same applied to 390 MU under Bill Dainty and then Keith Jarman, who had to provide all the deep servicing back-up to some 17 different types of aircraft in use by FEAF and Army units in the theatre. The growth in size and complexity of Seletar brought with it also a number of administrative problems. Accommodation was one. A large number of dependents had to be housed off-base and away as it were from 'mother'. In the very different environment of Singapore, Service personnel and their families required many additional auxiliary services to be provided and on a scale well beyond what might normally suffice in Europe. Our inflated station admin establishment reflected this.

The base was divided into an East and West camp by the only runway –

long enough, as you heard, to satisfy SRT & MRT but definitely a bit sporty for anything else, unless very lightly loaded, and generally in that case on its way to 390 MU. Base population and geography required many facilities to be provided in both camps, notwithstanding an on-camp bus service. Major efforts, for example, had to be made to provide adequate schooling for a very large number of children of all ages. We had four schools on the base, kindergarten, infant, junior and secondary, and this did not include the children living in our Asian village who were educated off-base. Another important item, obviously, was medical support and Wing Commander Eddy Ward had some eight or more doctors to help him oversee clinics on and off-base. We also assigned an MO to each flying squadron to encourage more personal liaison with the aircrew. Except for the unwise or careless, health was reasonably good – young wives off-base perhaps requiring more attention and understanding than most other categories.

Taking a certain amount of exercise also helped, and nowhere in the world were there better facilities for all ranks to indulge in the sport of their choice. We had a good golf course on the base and a super swimming pool complex and probably one of the best yacht clubs in the Far East. There is no time to dwell on all the facilities available, but they were a great prop to morale. Among the numerous clubs, one of the most outstanding was the Theatre Club. It was highly professional and claimed by Freddy Westcott to be one of the best drama clubs in South East Asia; he was probably right.

Youth activities abounded and welfare issues permeated every aspect of life in Singapore. Never was it more true to say that happy wives make for a happy unit or station. So from the outset I encouraged them to look after their own as far as they could. In practice there was a marvellous small station spirit in our large commonwealth of units. There was never-failing emergence of talent and willingness on the part of all ranks to cover the non-established and extra-mural commitments and those activities which contributed to so much to what was high morale.

To encourage and reward all those who distinguished themselves in the life of the base I instituted the Station Commander's Award. This was small beer in itself but it got the recipients, sometimes a husband and wife, a full page write-up in the station newspaper and a suitably inscribed station plaque. The newspaper incidentally was a quality monthly production running to some 16 pages and it did much to create a togetherness among the many disparate units and organisations at Seletar including the Asian population.

Before leaving the admin/welfare issues let me just mention our two bands. You will agree with me I am sure, that a band is a jewel in any station's crown. Two bands is icing on the cake and with one of them a pipe band we had, as it were, lift-off on any and every occasion. I also discovered incidentally that nearly every territory in the Far East at the time had a Scots governor.

Now to operations. The *modus vivendi* for Seletar's squadrons was straightforward enough in principle. At Seletar we were a massive resource and training centre and we sent forward some 400 to 800 miles those capabilities required by COMAIRBOR and the Forward Air Commander in Borneo. As Confrontation got under way, Seletar aircraft of all types were always present in Borneo.

If we take the Beverley first, what a horse for a course this was. To an ex-fighter boy it seemed like something out of the Ark, but as Noel Bennett, who commanded 34 Squadron, will tell you it was a superb supply dropper in the special circumstances of Borneo. It attracted great loyalty from its crews and I personally enjoyed flying it enormously, especially in Borneo – under expert supervision of course. The Bev was not only FEAF's heavyweight load carrier, it was also a tail loader and more flexible probably than the side loaders. It could toss out a ton at a time which amongst other things was more economical on parachutes, and parachutes in fact, became a critical factor. There was, as you can imagine, a high wastage rate, greater than the UK rate of supply, so packing and repair, which was all carried out at Seletar, became a high priority task. This is perhaps a convenient point to mention 3 AASO headed by Lt Col Peter Bainbridge at Seletar and with 55 Air Dispatch Squadron and 21 Air Maintenance Platoon RAOC under command. They really were a vital part of the transport support and supply dropping operations. In July '65 they were renamed the Royal Corps of Transport and they carried on doing the same jobs; they had detachments virtually everywhere.

On now to the SRT force of Single and Twin Pioneers of 209 Squadron under Sqn Ldr Cecil Crook. The 'Single Pin' was a high wing monoplane with an excellent short field performance – better in fact than the Auster and with a much better load. It was particularly suitable for ops in Malaya and Borneo and, with its variant the 'Twin Pin', complemented the helicopter force. Apart from the excellent work they did in their own right, the Pioneers helped reduce the distances over which the helicopter had to operate and this was a major plus. My own most memorable experience of a 'Single Pin', incidentally, was landing on HMS *Albion* in August '65 to

take breakfast with Capt John Adams, now Rear Admiral (Rtd). I think he would have retired earlier after seeing us approach.

I must move on quickly and briefly to the helicopter force. Some would say this was Seletar's most singular contribution to the Confrontation campaign. The helicopter had begun to come of age as a result of the Malayan Emergency but the impetus given by the Borneo operation to the importance of the helicopter can scarcely be exaggerated.

Starting at the top, as it were, it provided the CinC, or Air Commander, Sir Peter Wykeham, with his most effective mode of transport both in working hours and when making a late join up with a weekend boating party. The Sycamore really did a good job.

The helicopter wing did not exist when I arrived at Seletar. However early on I felt that OC Flying Wing, Peter Walker, already had enough on his plate and moreover, like me, knew little about helicopters. To get the best out of our three helicopter squadrons and to provide them with expert supervision and co-ordination required in my view a wing organisation. Happily this was agreed and the obvious man for the job was already on the station in the post of OC Admin Wing. It was John Dowling no less, who was at the time just about the RAF's 'Mr Helicopter'. The wing organisation quickly took shape and soon justified itself, overseeing standards and categorisation, supervising the in-theatre training of reinforcements from the UK and, not least, seeking out early solutions to any operational problems which arose. The heavily committed and widely dispersed helicopter squadrons welcomed the support which the wing headquarters provided. As John Dowling describes it in his book, the situation was rather like Odiham squadrons having detachments as far apart as Aberdeen, Hamburg and Oslo. As well as asking for an OC helicopter wing I also made a plea for as much quality as possible when the Air Sec posted chaps to the helicopter force. Confrontation clearly was going to be an invaluable opportunity for some promising young officers to cut their teeth on real live helicopter operations and in circumstances where there would be unusual opportunities for relatively junior officers and aircrew to exercise leadership, command and control. My elders and betters obviously had their fingers on the pulse and the right people duly appeared, for example John Price who came out to command 110 Sqn.

Without squadrons like 110 the life of the troops in Borneo, as you heard from the Brigadier, would have been virtually impossible. Movement over any distance was really only possible by river or by air. Unfortunately rivers don't always flow in the required direction and when they do, many

would take the air route anyway. For anyone who has experienced a power canoe ride Borneo style, as I once did, like Larry Lamb, up the Rajang river to Nanga Gaat, it was something to savour as a one-off as opposed to the routine. The fast moving rivers in Borneo carry a pretty lethal load of debris and avoiding tree-size floating logs does get the adrenaline going a bit.

Nanga Gaat, which seems to be the popular site today, was a very interesting base located in the fork where the Rajang and Baloe rivers joined. The landing pads were carved out of the steep river banks, giving the whole camp a terraced farming appearance. It was not a five-star location, nor on the other hand bereft of amenities. One of John Price's chaps had produced a hot water shower system using 44 gal kerosene drums. It was a work of art and contributed to a very respectable standard of mass undress in the riverside mess. However, my parting memory of Nanga Gaat struck a more sombre note for the helicopter load the next day was wrapped in a body bag.

So much for the Whirlwinds. The third helicopter squadron was our heavy lifter already mentioned: the Belvedere under first Peter Sawyer and then Bunny Austin. They did a marvellous job. Like the Whirlwinds, 66 Sqn worked in the troop-carrying and supply role but came into its own when awkward loads had to be moved and it scored very much in being able to position, for example, the 105 mm gun. The Belvedere had been in at the start of the Brunei rebellion in '62 and by the time the squadron received its standard in May 1964 it had already lifted some 10,000 troops and a million pounds of freight to and from jungle locations.

Here I had better leave the helicopter story for I don't want to encroach any further on what John Price will be saying.

## HELICOPTER SUPPORT

### Air Vice-Marshal John Price



I realised that I received this morning's briefing 29 years too late; I should have known the big picture when I first went out to the Far East. Many things that puzzled me at the time have become quite plain and I do see that my commanders knew what they were doing.

I am billed to talk about helicopter support but, like many politicians, I am sure if you had realised, you would have asked me to speak about 110 Sqn so that is what I am going to do. Now I think in some ways it was typical of all helicopter operations, but I would like to stress that it was from a Whirlwind squadron commander's point of view. You have already heard about 66 Squadron; there were two other Whirlwind squadrons there both based in Borneo itself, 225 and 230 squadrons.

A quick look at some of the places that I shall be mentioning, Bario, Sibu, Nanga Gaat, Kuching and Labuan. That is really just to locate us in the area. And now to the squadron whose crest amused me; it appears to be very close to the old one of the British Transport Commission and the motto 'No one touches me with impunity' was also quite appropriate. The aircrew whom we had were all based in Singapore and I was blessed in those days to have both officers and SNCOs of mixed experience. The NCOs were generally more experienced than the officers, but they all learned very quickly and as the new boy to helicopters I was very kindly treated and led along the learning curve gently. The crewmen whom we had at first were airmen from the squadron who 'volunteered' to be crewmen and gained an extra two shillings a day, when so employed. They were really excellent; you picked the lightweight ones, you picked the multi-skilled ones and you picked the lively ones, and at two shillings a day they earned it very well. Later on we were joined by SNCO crewmen who had been re-roled from various other forces and were not always happy to come to this rather curious life of descending into holes in the jungle when they had been used to flying off large strips in Shackletons or V-bombers. In some case, I must say, they lacked knowledge of aircraft systems of any kind and again they had to learn quite quickly. The groundcrew, those who were at Seletar, were on accompanied tours but the ones in Borneo, because I had detachments or major detachment there, were on a one year

unaccompanied tour. So although there were some differences of attitude and approach they were all of very high quality. Many were ex-apprentices and therefore you had multi-skills built in right from the beginning.

You also had one or two problems. I had a particular shortage of instrument fitters. My only instrument fitter was a gentleman of strong sexual performance and immediately after pay day each month he disappeared into the local village and came back a day or two later to visit the doctor and was out of action for a day-or-two, but I knew that if I sent him home I would get no replacement and so we put up with an instrument fitter for about three weeks out of four, but he was very good indeed.

Now on the personnel side, I perceived one or two problems. There were different aircrew standards in Singapore and in Borneo and occasionally pilots had some doubt about the correct interpretation; there was also a plethora of orders, after the unfortunate accident of the aircraft and the pilot straying across the border and being shot down. Someone measured the orders that he should have been familiar with and they were really quite daunting. I think that it was there that I first became aware that the Air Force had to rethink its policy on flying orders, and that it was no longer good enough every time we had an accident to issue another order; you had to do some thinking. The categorisation scheme was extremely useful as it gave us a yardstick and I thought that it was very sensibly interpreted and it was tailored to the theatre rather than to Salisbury Plain. I had some questions about the quality of aircrew training because I was getting some young pilots with a view that if it was not prohibited then it was legal. Whether it was safe or not they didn't always judge, so we had to do a bit more training on that.

The aircraft, the Whirlwind, (we had originally had Sycamores in Borneo but they hadn't lasted there very long), pretty obviously single engined and it was slow and had a very restricted payload. With all of the seats out of it and the troops sitting on the floor loosely belted in, I think that you could carry about three fully equipped Australian troops, who tended to be a little heavy, and about seven Gurkhas. The aircraft had a poor all-weather capability – I think that is an exaggeration – it didn't have *any* all-weather capability and neither did it have any night capability, and in fact I carry my notes here today in a clutch-briefcase which all had to buy to carry maps on the coaming in the cockpit as there was nowhere to put any papers or any maps in the aircraft at all. For navigation aids, you relied on the rivers as it had no internally mounted navigation aids. We had about 12 Wessex in Singapore, 8 in Borneo. Later more when the

unaccompanied squadrons, 225 and 230, were absorbed into 103 and 110 squadrons. The aircrew to aircraft ratio, from memory, I think, was about 1.25 to 1 and we didn't think that it was enough, but the training machine just couldn't produce any more for us, so flying experience was full and we had no complaints on that score. Servicing of the aircraft, we did first and second line on the squadron and eventually we established some second line servicing in Borneo; even at Nanga Gaat the Sappers came and built some good field hangers – they had done that previously in Labuan. Third line was done at the MU in Seletar. Spares were always scarce, I don't think that there was a supply chain back to the United Kingdom and it seemed to be if you hadn't got it with you, you would never get it. Luckily in Borneo I had a very good engineering officer, Gordon Candy, who kept a map in his office and he plotted every downed helicopter in Borneo and he knew every bit we had robbed from those and what was available, so we got quite a few spares back from downed aircraft this way. The crews were very well led and resourceful and that, I think, was the message of the time of the ex-apprentices there. There was one attempt at planned flying/planned servicing towards the end of my tour which I counted a failure because it didn't give you any surge capability. It was very good if you wanted two aircraft every day all day. When the army wanted a big lift it was no good saying well we haven't planned that and let us know next month we'll do something. I thought that it was over-managed and that it would do for a training machine or a civilian airline but for an operational squadron reacting to army demands it certainly wasn't the answer.

The bases we had, you have heard about Seletar. Labuan our rear base, certainly I viewed as being very overcrowded, but it improved as time went by: it also, I have to say, had a little bit of a fixed wing mentality in the early days – helicopters were pushed to a far side of the airfield and we were expected to hold-off for a long time if a fixed wing aircraft made its initial radio call, but this improved again as people gained experience. Sibul, 110 squadron moved down there, we had a one-page signal from the AOC and did the job and sent him a one-line signal back at the end of it saying, 'We are here.' It was very much a do-it-yourself base. We acquired various offices and buildings, our accommodation was in flats and houses and we had these temporary hangers. One of the big events of the week was the Wednesday afternoon arrival of the Malaysian Airway's Dakota carrying the girls who were doing the Far East tour before returning to Vietnam and it was very interesting to see who had been brought in each week.

Kuching we have already mentioned, then Bario which was a forward

base in the central brigade. We were uncertain of its position, so were many of the crews who flew around there, different maps had it in different places; it was a totally air supplied base. The Kalabits thought everything came by air as they had never seen a wheeled vehicle until a Land Rover was dropped; they didn't think it was much use because it could only go up and down the airstrip. Bario was quite vulnerable to Indonesian attacks, but it was a comfortable base. It had a beautiful climate, the weather being unsuitable for flying until about nine o'clock each morning, so you always had a good night's sleep and it was very cool in the evenings.

Nanga Gaat we have mentioned quite a lot. Again we were allowed to get on with things; the catering for example, I was given I think, two dollars a day and I hired a Chinese cook from Kapit who fed us very well indeed. We had a hot water system; the chimney was replaced during my time with one made from 105mm shell cases to get a better draught and it was probably the most expensive chimney in Borneo. The Christy system was a generating set acquired from the dockyard in Singapore and brought forward, I thought, in secrecy but the AOC knew about it. The base was liable to floods so you had to climb the hill very quickly at night when the river came up; it could come up about 35 feet overnight. The resupply was largely by boat – fixed wing to Kapit and then by longboat. The squadron had its own longboats which I commissioned into the Royal Air Force as Her Majesty's Air Force Vessels because I discovered that they exceeded the length necessary to give them names.

We certainly had no complaints about not knowing what was expected of us. At squadron level and detachment level there was a pattern. You received the tasking in the evening, you organised it and what you had got on the aircraft and you allocated crews to them who then worked it out. A lot of it was quite routine, which in the more hostile areas worried me because one lesson, I think I learnt quite early on, was that one had to get away from routine and vary the pattern. The army did not always approve of that, but it made sense operationally not to turn up at the same LP at the same time every day. Briefings were largely self-briefing, there was no Met service other than looking out. As I say, in most places you knew it would be fine by 9 o'clock and it got dark at six and you had no night flying capability, so this rather gave you the pattern of the day. The weather has already been mentioned – if you could see through it you could generally get through it, but you had to work a lot of it out for yourself. There was certainly a lack of maps in the area and we were carrying around surveyors who, I believe, after Confrontation did produce some very good maps of

the area. But a lot of aircrew, and I was one of them, put thumbnail sketches on the side of the map to show you the skyline at various places and you flew to that. Also, surprisingly, there were identifiable trees in parts of the jungle and you could use those as useful en-route markers. You were learning the whole time. You started on the nursery slopes under close supervision and when the young pilots got the hang of it you let them get on with it themselves often with their supervisor watching for one or two trips from the ground and then carrying on with it. The LZs which we used (there are some features there if you know what to look for).

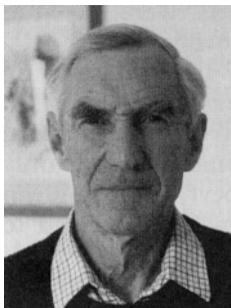
We didn't see much enemy action; on one occasion I was flying fairly low near the border and the crewman said, had I spotted these red birds flying up out of the jungle behind us. They were not red birds at all they were tracer coming. We got a quick fix on the position, debriefed back at base and a few days later an SAS sergeant gave me the breech block from the gun which had been giving us the trouble. A wide range of loads was carried, not only the army loads, but the civilian people; we moved school teachers about and some of the payloads were quite fantastic – iron bedsteads, sacks of rice, chickens, you name it we seemed to be carrying it. We were also operating, as has been mentioned, at times on the mainland in south Johore after some of the Indonesian landings there, and I think that it must have been the only time when an air force headquarters operations officer could look out of the window and see his aircraft engaged in operations on the other side of the water. It was difficult not to give him a true story when he had seen you doing what you were telling him about. There were differences in different brigade areas, I was fortunate in that I operated in three of them and to my memory West Brigade, where Larry Lamb had brought order out of chaos, was much more organised than the others, but if you thought about it that was sensible because that was the threatened area and you had to have rather looser control in the other areas because you were a long way from command headquarters.

As to our effectiveness I think that it is for others to judge, but as a Squadron Commander I thought that it was pretty effective. Our relations with the army, certainly at squadron level, were excellent, my squadron was given its standard there and the Gurkha battalion ask us to accept their regimental march as a squadron march and presented us with a magnificent kukri. We worked with the Gurkhas at Bario. With KOSB and Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, again long term friendships were made. For example, when we moved to Sibu there was a shortage of transport and I was told that I could have the pick of the written-off vehicles at Labuan. I

made a selection from them and took them down to Sibuluan. I then had a lot of problems with the drivers being picked up by the military police because they were driving unroadworthy vehicles, they hadn't got windscreen wipers, they hadn't got this, they hadn't got that. When I went to REME to get them mended I was told that they were not on strength, we can't do anything about you. So I went and saw David Fraser who was the Brigadier and put my problem to him and said either call your police off or ask your REME to mend them and he said it was easier to call the police off. So that is what we did. I sensed that there were difficulties higher up and I understand them, particularly after this morning. The tasking seemed sensible to me and it still does, that you have central tasking as far as it make sense to do it and then you have tactical devolution as necessary to allow for the unexpected locally and to give the forward commanders the flexibility which was very important in the Borneo operations. Whenever the army asked me why we couldn't be more flexible and more like the Navy I just asked them to think about their own gunner and sapper support and weren't they happy with that? The Navy I only saw at Nanga Gaat when I took over from them and again at that level relations were good, I meet quite a lot of those pilots in my life in the off-shore oil industry and they are still as pleasant people as they were then.

In conclusion, as Air Chief Marshal Freer has said it was really invaluable training for young leaders and aircrew and I think that we were very lucky to have that. Communications were very important; in the early days we didn't have many. HF came into the Whirlwind and the Belvedere and that made things much better and when I went to Ireland I was appalled to find, I think it was many years later, we still hadn't got that lesson and one of the first things that I did was to get an HF net brought in and we did it two years ago in the North Sea, so we keep learning that lesson. Sgt Ayris, was going in one day with some Gurkhas in the back of a Whirlwind to one of the strips when he had total engine failure before he got there. The Whirlwind descended into the jungle, there was a crashing and a banging and eventually the noise stopped. The blades were all over the place. Fred climbed out, went to the back, opened the door and there were the Gurkhas still there strapped in and they said, 'Not here, 400 metres further on.' On my level it was an excellent foundation for many long term friendships with the army and I particularly remember Frank King. Finally, if I may say so, the commanders whom I was lucky enough to serve – they were supportive, they listened to me, they helped me, they let me get on with it and I couldn't have wished for anything better.

## AIR DEFENCE AND OFFENSIVE SUPPORT



### Air Vice-Marshal Hawkins

I shall confine my talk to a summary of the threat, the build-up of forces at Tengah and a brief outline of the Air Defence Plan and the offensive operations. Humphrey Wynn will cover the deterrence aspects.

The Indonesian Air Force at the beginning of Confrontation consisted of some 550 aircraft of 30 different types. The offensive element consisted of 20 to 30 *Beagles*, based around Palembang and Pontianak, 25 to 30 *Badgers* based at Djakarta, 24 ground attack Mustangs based on Bintan Island, south-east of Singapore, and a few old Mitchells. The air defence element comprised a variety of MiG-17s, -19s and -21s. Serviceability was known to be poor throughout the whole Indonesian Air Force.

Our own fighter and offensive air forces, all based at Tengah, consisted of:

- 60 Squadron equipped with Mk 9 Javelins
- 20 Squadron equipped with FGA 9 Hunters
- 45 Squadron equipped with B15 Canberras
- 81 Squadron equipped with PR7 Canberras

In Malaya there was the RAAF Base at Butterworth with one squadron of Sabre fighters and a forward airfield at Kuantan. In North Borneo we had the forward airfields of Labuan and Kuching. Apart from Changi, these were the only airfields capable of operating jets. All our squadrons were well equipped, well trained and at a high state of operational efficiency.

During 1963 there was a steady build-up in the strength of both strike and defence forces at Tengah. No 14 RNZAF Squadron, equipped with B12 Canberras, was added to the list of resident squadrons, a third flight of Javelins was added to 60 Squadron and in December, 64 Squadron with Mk 9R Javelins, which had an in-flight refuelling capability, further augmented the fighter defence force. The regular V-Force detachments from Bomber Command were enlarged and remained for longer periods. They were also made available for inclusion in the contingency strike plans against Indonesian airfields which were constantly being updated and rehearsed. In addition there were detachments of Canberra B15s from NEAF and B(I)8s from RAF Germany, the latter based at Kuantan.

On the ground, 63 LAA Squadron, RAF Regiment provided close air-field defence and this was augmented by a Royal Artillery Battery deployed from Germany to give cover in depth for the Singapore base. In addition authority was given for 65 SAM Squadron, RAF Regiment (*sic!*), equipped with Bloodhound Mk II missiles to be operationally deployed. Lastly, at the height of Confrontation, two (*sic*) Fleet Air Arm Gannet squadrons, disembarked from HMS *Victorious*, were based at Tengah to assist in the provision of low-level radar cover.

At this point I should make special mention of the outstanding work carried out by 81 PR Squadron in the field of large-scale and tactical mapping. Tactical intelligence could not have been obtained or updated other than by aircraft and this one squadron, with only eight aircraft, served the whole theatre. Gordon Gilbert, the Squadron Commander at the time, is here today and I know will be pleased to answer questions about his squadron's role.

The air defence of Malaya as far north as Kuala Lumpur was under the control of the GCI station at Bukit Gombak in Singapore. In the north of Malaya control was exercised by a mobile GCI at Butterworth. Similar facilities were provided in North Borneo by a mobile GCI at Labuan. The air defence plan was based on the premise that any high or medium level threat to Malaya, Singapore or North Borneo would be detected and successfully intercepted under GCI control, provided that fighter aircraft were kept at appropriate states of readiness. To this end, we maintained at least one aircraft at each airfield and two in the case of Tengah at five minutes readiness, day and night, from one year's end to another. At times of high tension, the readiness state would be raised to 'cockpit' and the numbers on state increased as necessary.

The air defence plan also had to cater for a very real low-level threat, not least from the Mustangs based on Bintan Island, only 150 miles (*actually less than 50 – Ed*) to the south-east of Singapore. As there was no possibility of early warning of an attack from the south and detection by Bukit Gombak was unlikely until the attack was in progress, even 'cockpit' readiness would not have been a high enough state of alert. Low-level combat air patrols by Javelins were therefore introduced when the risk of attack seemed high.

A number of patrol lines covering the approaches to Singapore were drawn up, giving effective cover out to the limit of Singapore airspace. Similar patrol patterns were devised for Butterworth and the Malacca Straits. Because of the nature of the terrain in Sarawak and Sabah, it was

considered that set patterns of combat air patrols would not be appropriate and that random patrols would provide the optimum deterrence.

How did it all work out? Well, on many occasions *Badgers* were intercepted at high level, but they were not attacked since no hostile acts were carried out. On the night of 2 September 1964, when 96 Indonesian paratroopers were dropped by three C-130 Hercules aircraft near Labis in central Johore, no radar contact was made. Indeed, it was only as a result of an immediate telephone call from a 20 Squadron officer on leave in Kluang, that a 60 Squadron Javelin was scrambled. The aircraft made contact at low-level, but the pilot overshot as the target speed was so slow and he failed to regain contact. It was after this incident that low-level combat air patrols were introduced with the two Fleet Air Arm Gannet squadrons disembarked to Tengah to provide cover in the Malacca Straits. To the extent that no further contacts were made on enemy aircraft it would appear that these patrols did deter low-level penetrations.

The Far East Strike Wing emerged in early 1964 and rapidly grew into a remarkable collection of aircraft and weapons. No 20 Squadron's Hunters were armed with 30 mm Aden guns and the old 6-inch rockets. No 45 Squadron's B15 Canberras carried a standard load of six 10001b HE bombs, plus two 'Mighty Mouse' rocket pods with 17 (*sic*) rockets per pod, which were accurate but relatively harmless. No 14 Squadron RNZAF's B12 Canberras were similarly armed. The B8 Canberras of 6 Squadron (*sic*) from RAF Germany, detached to Kuantan, carried four 20mm cannon gun packs and, of the two squadrons-worth of Canberra aircraft detached from the NEAF Strike Wing, about half were B16s, which had a night marking role. They also brought with them a 60ft rocket attack profile, which was very accurate as well as being extremely exciting to fly at 400 knots! Shortly before the end of the emergency 45 Squadron was equipped with the Nord AS 30, a very large wire-guided French missile which mercifully never had to be used in earnest. If the live weapon was as difficult to operate as the simulator, a potential enemy was comparatively safe! The Victor 1As, and later the Vulcan 2s each carried 35 x 1,000HE bombs (*sic*).

At its peak the Strike Wing was quite compact and powerful force. But in the event only three counter-strikes were carried out against Indonesian ground forces during the whole of Confrontation, and then only by a limited number of aircraft. The first was on 2 September 1964 when the 96 Indonesian paratroops were dropped near Labis. The second was on 23 December when a party of Indonesians landed on the east coast (*south west*

*tip – Ed*) of Johore. This time Hunters of 20 Squadron and Canberras of 45 Squadron carried out a combined air-to-ground attack under the control of a Forward Air Controller. The third and last strike was on 31 May 1965 against another small party of 25 Indonesians who landed on the southern coast of east Johore. No 20 Squadron was once more in action with a Forward Air Controller.

In all, there were some 41 incidents of landings and sabotage in West Malaysia between August 1964 and November 1965 and, of the 451 Indonesians who were dropped or landed, 142 were killed and 309 were captured.

As far as I am aware, no live air strikes were made in East Malaysia. This was because, owing to the nature of the terrain and the limited depth of the enemy penetrations, very few targets for air attack presented themselves. Moreover, for political reasons attacks against camps or interdiction targets in Kalimantan were forbidden. Offensive patrols were, however, frequently flown and must have had a deterrent effect.

The projected strike plan against Indonesian airfields consisted of high-low-high sorties by the bombers using delayed fusing at low-level with 1,000 lb bombs, combined with RP attacks on counter-air targets and fuel installations. The aircraft would have operated at extreme range and there was little margin for error. But morale, determination and the state of training were high and I am sure that the RAF and the RNZAF would have given a very good account of themselves had the order been given to attack.

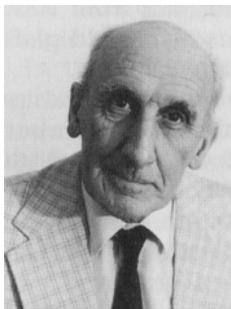
For those of us at Tengah the culmination of years of training and rehearsal came on that critical day in September when all aircraft, both offensive and defensive, were brought to cockpit readiness before dawn. The ground crews had worked twenty four hours a day to make serviceable every aircraft on strength except for those on major inspection. The reason for such a high state of readiness was the passage of HMS *Victorious* and HMS *Centaur* through the Sunda Straits. If any aggressive action had been taken by the Indonesians against these ships, the whole strike force would have taken off immediately to attack the Indonesian airfields. It was a tense and long hour as we waited for the order to go and a strange silence descended on the whole station. In the event, the ships passed through safely and it was with some relief, or perhaps disappointment for some, that the aircrews returned to their crewrooms.

At the height of the crisis Tengah, with its one runway and limited dispersals, housed a total of well over a hundred aircraft. The station complement – including civilians, who were very much a part of the team –

was some 15,000 souls. Quite a target! I should also mention the invaluable contribution made by many of the wives, who not only ran the welfare organisations and the Station Magazine but when tension became high, voluntarily helped the Technical, Equipment and Administrative Sections with great enthusiasm and efficiency. Most had served in the WAAF and WRAF and had been well trained. They were certainly very much a part of the station team.

Finally, and here I am sure the other Station Commanders will agree, we should remember that none of these achievements would have been possible without the supreme efforts of the ever-cheerful ground crews, the excellent teamwork between the sections and the wonderful spirit of co-operation between all three Services. Morale remained high throughout the campaign and we were fortunate at Tengah in having a first class base with every facility, a healthy rivalry between squadrons and, above all, a strong sense of purpose which drew us all together.

## DETERRENCE – THE BOMBER CONTRIBUTION



### Humphrey Wynn

As will have become clear from the papers by Sir Robert Freer and Air Vice-Marshal Hawkins, when Confrontation began the Far East Air Force was basically a tactical air force with day and all-weather air defence fighters, light bombers, reconnaissance and transport aircraft and helicopters. It did not have a strategic pre-emptive or retaliatory strike capability, and during Confrontation this was provided by detachments of V-bombers – Victors and Vulcans – plus Canberras from the Near East Air Force Strike Wing and from RAF Germany to supplement the two resident Canberra bomber squadrons.

Bomber Command began an emergency deployment to FEAF in December 1963, under an Operation Order codenamed ORCHID, the implementation of which was given the codename Operation CHAMFROM. This Operation Order tasked the Command with the rapid reinforcement of the Far East by 24 Medium Bomber Force aircraft. These were to come from the Victor squadrons at Honington and Cottesmore, respectively Nos 55 and 57, and 10 and 15. In practice the Order was filled by deployment of eight Victors, in two detachments of four aircraft and five aircrews at RAF Tengah and RAAF Butterworth. On 5 and 6 December 1963, four Victor 1As of 57 Sqn left Honington and four of 15 Sqn left Cottesmore; they were flight refuelled en route by Valiant tankers of 90 Squadron and by 8 December the Far East Air Force had received a formidable accession of strength – eight V-bombers. Under the Operation Order they were to be deployed in a conventional role, armed with 1,000lb and, in the later case of the Vulcans, with 2,000 HE MC bombs.

There was no doubt about the purpose of these V-bombers in the Far East theatre at that time. Under what was known as Plan ADDINGTON – which was to come into operation should the Indonesian Air Force attack targets in Malaysia and/or Singapore – they were to take part in operations designed to eliminate Indonesian air strike capability. These operations were to be carried out with the assistance of the Australian and New Zealand forces, using RAAF Darwin as a strike base.

Although these V-bombers were deployed in a conventional role there is no doubt that their presence had a deterrent effect. For like the B-29s which the United States sent to Europe at the time of the Berlin crisis (1948-49),

they were known to be ‘nuclear capable’, to use the convenient American term, as were the Canberras from the Near East Air Force and RAF Germany, to which I will refer later.

There were three aspects to the task of the Operation ORCHID/Exercise CHAMFORM V-Force squadron detachments during Confrontation: rapid deployment to the Far East; training from RAF Tengah or RAAF Butterworth; and possible operations – should plan ADDINGTON be put into effect – against Indonesian targets.

The logistic implications of Exercise CHAMFORM were considerable: Bomber Command’s Operations Record Book noted in December 1963, under an item called Special Commitments, that arrangements were made to airlift – by Transport Command, of course, with its Comet 2s and Britannias – servicing parties and spares pack-ups from Honington and Cottesmore in support of four Victor Mk 1As from each of these stations.

During 1963, following the cancellation of Skybolt at the end of 1962, Bomber Command had gone over to the low-level role; and this was the role practised by crews in the Far East theatre during Confrontation. No 15 Sqn, whose detachment moved up to Butterworth early in January 1964, noted in its Operations Record Book that during that month ‘priority was given to the training of crews in the technique of ‘popping up’ to 3,000ft at the end of a low-level leg to make an attack with 1,000lb bombs’. No 57 Sqn, the other Victor B 1A squadron with a detachment out there at the time (like 10 and 55 Sqns), also emphasised the low-level role, recording that during January 1964 ‘a second low-level route was flown . . . this time up the west coast of Malaya, terminating with low-level bombing at the Song Song range’.

A journalist from *Flight International*, Robert Rodwell, who flew in a Victor of 57 Sqn on 13 April 1965, commented in a subsequent article that ‘Bomber Command’s claims to low-level capability were received with some reserve, not least by this journal, when they were first made in February last year. This brief experience of low-level flight, during a medium-level visual bombing mission over the Song Song range off the coast of north-west Malaya, was to prove adequately that a large V-bomber can be flown through a contour-hugging pattern at moderate speed; and it left one ready to accept that the contours would be even more closely hugged and the speed somewhat less moderate, in an operational mission.’

The article went on to comment that ‘crews are rotated between England and Singapore more frequently than aircraft, which tend to remain east and be flown by successive crews. The usual length of a crew’s detachment is

two-and-a-half to three months and the duty may come up twice a year. Ground crews are detached for the same length of time, save for some volunteers who choose to serve for about a year in Singapore’.

Vulcan B 2s of Nos 12, 9 and 35 Sqns took over the CHAMFORM commitment – or MATTERHORN as it came to be named – from October 1964 onwards. This takeover was dramatically signalled at Butterworth on 2 October when the 12 Sqn detachment strength was brought up to four aircraft and five crews, the Operations Record Book recording that ‘at midnight in the Officers’ Mess 15 Squadron’s plaque came down and the fox’s mask of 12 Sqn took its place’.

In their Far East deployment the armament fit for the NEAF squadrons was 2-inch rocket pods for a ground attack role. Again, there were formidable logistic implications. Under Operation DISLODGE of 15 December 1965, 16 Canberra B15/16s were put on 24 hour readiness to deploy to the Far East plus 86 support personnel to be carried in four Britannias.

I have given an historian’s view of these bomber deployments based on Command and Squadron records, but *Confrontation* or ‘War Without Words’ is a two-sided affair and, while we habitually write history from our own national point of view it is valuable and salutary to see that of the other side. For many years now, following a service I was able to give him involving some research into the history of an Indonesian Air Force pioneer, I have exchanged Christmas greetings with a retired Air Vice-Marshal, R J Salatun of the Indonesian Air Force. So I took the opportunity of writing to him about this symposium to ask him in particular what the deterrent effect was of the RAF V-bombers and Canberras during *Confrontation*. His reply, in a charming and friendly letter, was interesting and informative but may perhaps prove discouraging to the Bomber Barons.

He wrote: ‘I have contacted friends who experienced *Confrontation* in the field and who are still around. The stories I have heard, however, do not mention the Canberras, Victors and Vulcans you wrote about except in a single case. A MiG 21 squadron commander stationed at Medan even asked me earnestly whether you deployed any bombers at all. The only incident I heard of involved a Vulcan. A MiG 21 pilot on a routine interception exercise failed to locate his target, a Tu-16 *Badger*; instead he saw a Vulcan flying overhead’. Salatun says that . . . ‘officially, *Confrontation* 1963 to 1966 is now a ‘bygone’, better left unmentioned because of the close friendship between Indonesia and her nearest neighbours. But even in

those days Confrontation was dubbed a ‘war of words’ and the IAF received strict orders not to open fire unless shot at first’. This does not mean that the atmosphere was not tense. As he says . . . ‘we had to watch the other side carefully and were prepared for every move’. Was it that tense an atmosphere? Salatun tells me that an IAF Tu-16 *Badger* bomber pilot has recalled how he was escorted by a pair of Hunters flying wing-tip to wing-tip with him near Singapore ‘just as if we had a joint exercise’. Another Tu-16 pilot recalled that he was once shadowing HMS *Victorious* and *Centaur* south of Java when, in cloudy overcast, he unintentionally got too close with the result that a Buccaneer intercepted him and warned him off. Salatun adds that ‘this is not the end of the story of both these warships during Confrontation. At first they sailed through Sunda Strait to the Indian Ocean and intended to re-enter but no permission was granted by our government which directed them instead to enter Lombok Strait. This is a fine example of how both sides followed the rules during Confrontation’. He further added that while the aircraft carrier and escort were sailing back and were in the neighbourhood of Surabaya ‘our air defences were very embarrassed because mysterious nocturnal visitors (as he called them) penetrated the city and surroundings housing an important naval and air base’. He commented that ‘this jolting experience lasted for a full week and caused our air defence analysts to conclude that it had to do with secret electronic devices launched from the British warships aimed at nerve-racking our personnel’. Air Vice-Marshal Salatun also recalled ‘another harrowing experience’ told him by a C-130 pilot, which may also be the one mentioned by Air Vice-Marshal Hawkins. One month before the infamous communist coup in 1965, he was dropping supplies for an army outpost near the border in east Kalimantan when he encountered a Javelin. He made violent evasive manoeuvres exploiting the Hercules’ slower speed and succeeded in shaking off the much faster jet fighter.

Clearly there was a great deal of flying skill and responsible airmanship on both sides in the aerial dimension of the 1963 to 1966 Confrontation, towards the understanding of which this paper has been a contribution.

## QUESTIONS

### **Air Vice-Marshal Herrington**

I was not in the Far East at the time though I was operating to and from for a while. It seems to me an extraordinary story and even more so because it has been hidden for such a long time. I am sure the audience, whether or not they were there, will have learned a tremendous amount which will have great applicability to the situations we might face in the future in the world in which we now live. I am wondering whether we ought to try to persuade our staff colleges to look at the way we conducted this limited operation. It was the sort of thing our armed forces may again have to face, although the weapons we have and the weapons we may have to face on the other side are rather more advanced. I do believe that this is something we should look at very seriously and try to encourage.

### **Chairman**

My own view is one of extreme pessimism. With the current programme of cuts we are not really in a position to plan anything.

Even if we were to stop right now and the Chiefs of Staff – it must be all three – were to agree that what you suggest were a good way ahead, there are very few undertakings to which we could be committed, particularly a long way overseas. And there is no indication that the cuts are now ceasing, so I would regard your suggestion as admirable in theory but possibly not in practice.

### **Mr Wynn**

As regards the lessons of history, the same set of circumstances rarely recurs so one cannot apply one solution to another set of circumstances. But what has come out is that when we look back at the history of the Malayan Emergency and of Confrontation, the British, with their Australian and New Zealand support, provided a unique example of how to settle local conflicts without them becoming far more disastrous, as happened in Vietnam.

### **John Davies**

Bearing in mind the need for dispersal, I was horrified to see that we had pretty well our entire force of 125 aircraft at Tengah. Would not a determined surprise attack have wiped us out?

### **Air Vice-Marshal Hawkins**

The answer is 'Yes'! That is why we had a very large Javelin force deployed and lots of exercises. I think we would have had quite a good

chance of destroying a high proportion of enemy aircraft attacking at low level. Certainly not one would have got in at high level because we had the performance as well as the weapons. Low-level was a very real threat indeed; we could not disperse aircraft more than we did because we simply had no more space. But it is true that just one Mustang going down that line of aircraft could have done a great deal of damage.

### **Sir Robert Freer**

Coming back to John Herrington's remarks, I think history is something that we ignore at our peril. As Bacon said 'history makes men wise'. So certainly we should study our history; this Society is making its contribution and I am sure the Staff Colleges should do so too. As regards equipment, I have to agree that finance is going to govern mostly what we do, but I suppose that it emphasises the multi-role approach when money is short. When we look back to Confrontation we did – perhaps accidentally – seem to have the right 'horses for courses' at the time.

### **'Dusty' Miller (60 Squadron)**

I would like to make a few observations about the Javelin operations. It had been quite usual to poke the finger of fun at the 'Flying Trowel' as many called it, but I feel that the Javelin in Singapore did an extremely good job. It proved itself in many ways a much better aeroplane than people had intended. Designed as a high level UK interceptor it was called upon, at the geographical limits of the air force's activities, for ground attack operations and low-level air patrols over the jungle and it did them all very successfully. There were problems, but largely because most of the time we had very experienced crews and were able to get round the peculiarities of the aircraft. It should be remembered that, in those days, the Firestreak was still quite a formidable weapon and relatively new, albeit unproved; it certainly had its effect in the enemy's reluctance to operate too close within our range. I can illustrate that by one small incident that occurred rather before my time there. A *Badger* was patrolling the Malacca Straits and got a little too close for comfort. It was intercepted by a Javelin, flying quite high, and the interceptor pilot flew up to make his presence known and noticed that the radar-controlled guns at the rear of the *Badger* were tracking him quite effectively. He immediately rolled the Javelin belly-up and displayed the four gleaming white Firestreaks; the guns promptly returned to fore and aft and skywards again. Encouraged by this he continued to shadow the aircraft towards Sumatra until his navigator warned him 'Hey, fellas, we are inside a SAM zone'. So he closed up

underneath the *Badger* and waited until he had been kindly conducted through the zone and out of the other side, whereupon he beat his retreat. We did learn afterwards (how true it is I do not know, but it is in the Squadron 540 records) that the aircraft had on board the Indonesian Air Force's CAS. A wonderful incident and perhaps another example of what Mr Wynn has called 'war without exchanging blows'.

The Mustang problem I would like to touch on was a very worrying one for us. Once we had enough aircraft to fly low-level patrols we were fairly confident that, given reasonable intelligence to trigger off at the right time, we could make an interception before they actually got over Singapore. It was touch and go as it was a fairly fast aircraft; the problem with it was that, if it came at night, a gun attack was not on and whether or not we could get a missile to acquire on a piston-engined aircraft was a very uncertain question for us. We did ask Farnborough to do some trials with a Harvard or a Spitfire but we never got an answer in time. I personally wonder whether we really could have hacked the old-fashioned Mustang at night on a nuisance raid, if not over Tengah over the wide open, brightly lit centre of Singapore.

There was a final incident of the campaign as far as the Javelin was concerned, the occasion when we achieved something with the aircraft without firing a weapon. I was on the detachment to Kuching in February 1966. We had just arrived, the aircraft had been turned round and I was doing my courtesy visit to the Station Commander, which was why my aircraft was pinched as it was turned round first. We had an urgent call from the army commander of Kuching District: they had had word of an infiltration and could we go and have a look? The Javelin rushed off and roared around and by sheer chance (I acknowledge the luck of the occasion) the navigator caught a glimpse of movement in a jungle clearing. He thought he saw some figures rushing for cover so the pilot turned round and proceeded to beat the place up for as long as his fuel would last, which was fortunately quite a while – about half an hour of diving down and using his reheat on the pull-out. Now as you may know the re-heat on the Javelin was something of a joke; it was designed to produce extra power at height to counter the weight of the missiles hung on it. In fact it used extra fuel from the fuel system that the pumps could deliver but wasn't being used at height. If, however, you put it into re-heat at low level it lit up but gave less power because it robbed the main fuel supply to the engine. Nevertheless it did light up with a most impressive bang and a sheet of flame out of the back. The story was that there were indeed infiltrators in that clearing and

they were so terrified that they were being bombed by this vicious noisy aircraft that they stayed where they were and indeed the army patrol caught up with them and captured six. The colonel in charge had the decency to write to me to say that he appreciated our contribution.

**Sir Michael Beetham**

Humphrey Wynn asked the bomber barons to take note of the lack of effect that the bomber contribution seemed to have on the Indonesians. I wonder whether that does not reflect on the diplomatic channels and our public relations? Could someone comment on what we were doing to get across to the Indonesians what might have happened and what the bombers were there for?

**Humphrey Wynn**

When I used the phrase ‘bomber barons’, Sir Michael, I looked across at you and am not surprised by your question. One doesn’t know where the operation order was inspired. Obviously Bomber Command could have decided to reinforce FEAF but somebody up above Bomber Command must have said our policy must be to have a bomber element out there. This was political and I do not know who inspired the order.

**Sir Michael Beetham**

I was Group Captain (Ops) at Bomber Command when it was decided. It was not decided by Bomber Command: it was by the government, by the Ministry of Defence and by the Air Ministry. Bomber Command were just providing the forces; they were asked to do it. Let me tell you we did not want to let them go. We had a primary job to do and this was just weakening our deterrent forces against the main Soviet threat. We were just told to provide them, but having got them out there it ought to have been very clear to the Indonesians that if they moved they were going to get clobbered! From what you said quoting the Indonesian Air Vice-Marshal, it did not seem to have got across to them.

## CLOSING REMARKS

### Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris

With one possible exception, I think we all agree that *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) and our opposition to it, however successful, was under present circumstances the last of the line. It isn't going to happen again; we aren't going to be in a position to deploy that type of force. I am afraid this applies to a great deal of what is happening to the armed forces nowadays. I was speaking at a dinner the other night about the Battle of Britain and the lessons from it for the future of the air force. The lesson I drew from it was: 'With the air force you've got, don't touch it with a bargepole!' We are not being given the opportunity to repeat this type of operation, however successful it may have been. Nevertheless there are still a few lessons to be learned from it. One must surely be the absolute necessity for inter-Service co-operation. It has never been better demonstrated than it was during Confrontation (and on many other occasions, such as the Gulf). It was a classic example and if there is a message that arises from it to the current chiefs, not Chiefs of Staff necessarily, but decision-makers at any level in the Services, it is that things are bad enough without squabbling among ourselves and weakening our case. I hope this is being hoisted in. I doubt if my voice is reaching Whitehall, but I am sure you will agree that this is a lesson from Confrontation: the great value of inter-Service co-operation.

The second one that might come up is the value of winning hearts and minds. In a sentence the reason why the Americans did not win in Vietnam is that they did not persuade the inhabitants of Vietnam that victory by the Americans was desirable. We did succeed in persuading the inhabitants of Borneo, who I may say did not like the Malays very much, that a victory by us would be far, far preferable to a victory by the Indonesians. Proof of that pudding, I recall, came when we were visited by an American General in Kuching. Our security consisted of two strands of barbed wire round the airfield and two Alsatian dogs with one airmen. He had four battalions of infantry and six batteries defending his airfield and the moral was there. If the locals are on your side you do not have much to worry about; if they are against you, pack it in while you can!

We have had a very interesting series of talks. I am delighted that so many people who were in on the act have been present today and that as a result the question period was of an unusually high standard. Thank you, Air Marshal Sowrey and the RAF Historical Society for laying on such an excellent show.

### **Air Marshal Sowrey**

Could I just say how successful today has been from the Society's point of view. First we have been able to give well worth-while publicity to the 'War Without Blows' which deserves every credit from the UK point of view. Secondly, it has been an occasion when, for the first time, we have been able to get a number of people who were commanders on the spot, from an AOC downwards. In the audience we have had squadron pilots and people who were there working on the ground and in the air. This is because we chose the right time-scale. I think we shall more and more have to do this, particularly if we are to attract the younger serving officers.

Lastly, this is the first seminar that has been organised by a serving RAF officer: Group Captain Andrew Thompson.

## COMMENTS

### **Group Captain Ian Madelin**

The answer to the threat of the hypothetical 'lone Mustangs' mentioned earlier was in fact provided by Humphrey Wynn. It was Deterrence. It is true, as one questioner pointed out, that the overcrowding of our aircraft at Tengah made them very vulnerable to a low-level surprise attack. But not all our attack aircraft were based there. Whereas the first detachments from the NEAF Strike Wing were at Tengah the follow-on ones were switched to Kuantan, 150 miles to the north. The RAAF and RNZAF light bombers were at Butterworth, as were the V-Force detachments.

So Tengah was not the only threat the Indonesians needed to contend with. Moreover even a successful attack by the Mustangs could not have incapacitated more than a proportion of the force which was based there; the rest could have taken off. It would have made no sense for the Indonesians to risk everything on a single sneak attack. To achieve any purpose and to minimise retaliation they would have needed to attack in strength. That would have spelled the end of 'Confrontation' and would have been an overt act of war. At the same time it would have dispelled, very effectively, any reluctance there might otherwise have been in Whitehall to authorise us to strike back.

For a period of years our attack aircraft were held in range of the Indonesian bases, poised, briefed and ready to go. It was Air Marshal Sir Peter Wykeham DSO DFC AFC, the Air Commander, who had charge of this force. I recall him saying during a visit to Kuantan in October 1965 that it was his dearest dream that the Indonesian Air Force would make a move. They never did.

'Confrontation' was the word chosen by Sukarno himself to describe his strategy for this campaign. We played him at his own game, and he lost.

### **Air Commodore Max Bacon**

20 Squadron was part of the Far East Offensive Support Wing at Tengah. Also included were 45 Squadron (Canberra B 15s) and 14(NZ) Squadron (Canberra B(1) 12 – I think). The latter only deployed to Tengah when the NZ Government agreed. When tension was at its highest with Indonesia, RAF aircraft were tasked to be ready to attack targets on the Indonesian islands but, after House of Commons complaints (mainly by Labour MPs) about dropping 1,000 lb bombs on tribesmen up country in Aden, the FEAF planners ruled that the Offensive Support Wing should only use forward facing armament. This meant that 45 Squadron was

unable to use its 1,000lb bomb load and its only alternative weapon was the 2" rocket pod carried under each wing. These were lightweight rockets fanning out over a wide area. On the other hand the Hunter FGA9 could carry up to sixteen 3" rockets, each with a 60lb warhead and were also fitted with 4 × 30mm Aden guns. Although the NZ Canberras had 4 × 20mm forward firing guns I don't think they were at Tengah at the time or had political clearance for such attacks. Whilst the Canberras had a much greater range and bombload, the restriction to forward firing weapons meant the Hunter was the prime weapons carrier for all targets within its radius of action. We were allocated targets in the islands just to the south of Singapore and in Sumatra. However, only the Canberras could reach targets in Java.

My second point is on logistic support. When I arrived at Tengah in the spring of 1964 we were plagued by lack of spares, particularly if re-supply had to be from the UK. However, when Air Vice-Marshal Reggie Harland took over as AOEng. at FEAF, he visited Tengah and called a round table meeting with all the Squadron Commanders to hear their problems. I can remember still how unusual it was to see a senior engineer asking flying units how he could help! The points he could not answer straight away – and he was very adept at calculating establishments in his head – he followed up thoroughly and I had a series of letters from him on various points. From then on the supply of spares greatly improved and I think this was largely through his drive. In general I believe spares were held in theatre but often the UK had to be called on and I recollect about seven days was the response time. We believed that Confrontation units were given priority over all but the Queens' Flight and V-Force (VOG). Supporting the RAF Britannia and Comet Transport Force was a collection of chartered freighters and I remember the interesting story of one of my pilots who hitched a lift back to the UK in an empty Constellation.

### *Note*

The Editor is most grateful to Henry Probert, Edgar Spridgeon, Alan Williamson, Peter Mason, Will Parnaby and Peter Love for their assistance with the recording and transcription of the proceedings of this seminar.

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Into Battle With 57 Squadron** by Roland A Hammersley DFM. Price £7.50 from the author at 4 Hemsbach Court, St John's Hill, Wareham, Dorset.

It is more than interesting to read a book covering much of the Service path that you had followed a couple of years earlier – had training really changed that much between 1941 and 1943? And is the memory really failing to the extent that you have no recollection of some of the service life minutiae or didn't it happen that way in those earlier years? This is really a diary of one individual's war, and very interesting to boot, although a little confusing occasionally in the sequences of names and events. Some of the terms used by Flying Officer Hammersley were quite unfamiliar to me . . . an Air Bomber was always a bomb aimer and a Rear Turret Air Gunner, apart from the rude things that we were called, was more usually just a rear gunner or tail gunner. Despite any failings, it is an important little book in its own right and it is hoped that there are many more similar stories out there being written down. After all THIS is the history of the Royal Air Force.

**AEFR**

## CORRESPONDENCE

Thank you for sending me a copy of the RAFHS's *Reaping the Whirlwind*. The only thing I would say about the difference between Noble Frankland and myself is to repeat that there was a distinction between identifying and locating targets, on the one hand, and, on the other, recommending or choosing which should be attacked, and when. Intelligence was good at identifying and locating; it rarely recommended which should be attacked. This last matter was a question for operational authorities and, in addition, intelligence usually gave no guidance to the relative importance of targets. An exception here was the oil targets from early in 1944, and this was because ULTRA strongly pointed to the fact that they were becoming crucial. Otherwise, as in the quoted case of ball-bearings, MEW tried to influence target policy but the intelligence bodies did not.

**Professor Sir Harry Hinsley**

Vincent Orange of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, intends to write a biography of AVM S O Bufton, and would be very grateful if any of your members who have any memories of 'Buf' would write to him, care of Anthony Furse, Nerquis, Mold, Clwyd, CH7 4EB. Every scrap of information, however slight it may seem, is of real interest and will be promptly acknowledged.

**Anthony Furse**