



THE DEFENCE OF DARWIN, 1964

When the Federation of Malaysia was created in September 1963, Indonesia's President Sukarno adopted a policy of 'confrontation' towards the new state that included cross-border military incursions by land, sea and air. As the tempo of these operations progressively stepped up over the next twelve months, the powers underwriting Malaysia's defence in the Far East Strategic Reserve—Britain, Australia and New Zealand—found themselves facing the prospect of having to counter Indonesian air strikes with strikes of their own against Indonesian bases and facilities. Plans for such operations were developed under the codename 'Addington'.

Australia faced an additional complication in that, if matters did escalate to the stage of limited war, then northern parts of the Australian mainland could also become targets of Indonesian attack. This possibility assumed even greater likelihood given provisions under 'Plan Addington' which would see Darwin used as a base for British V-bombers undertaking strikes against Indonesia.

A contingency plan was accordingly prepared in January 1964 to provide for the defence of Darwin, especially its aerodrome complex, radar installations, shipping and port facilities. Under this plan, codenamed Operation *Handover*, two squadrons consisting of a total of thirty-two Sabre Mk 30 jet fighters were to be deployed from Williamtown, New South Wales, supported by four Neptune maritime patrol aircraft and Hercules, Dakota and Caribou transports. A strike/reconnaissance capability from Darwin was to be provided by Canberra bombers from No 82 Wing at Amberley, Queensland.

Despite suspected Indonesian air intrusions into Malaysian airspace, it was only with the insertion of Indonesian paratroops into northern Johore on 2 September 1964 that matters reached a critical juncture. Judging that the implementation of operations under Plan Addington might be imminent, the Australian Government ordered the dispatch of the sixteen Sabres of No 76 Squadron and supporting maintenance personnel from Williamtown to Darwin on 7 September. Although this was only a 'half Handover', it was in fact the total operational fighter force then available in Australia, as No 75 Squadron had been declared non-operational in

preparation for its re-equipment with new Mirage III aircraft and its pilots and ground crew dispersed as reinforcements for No 78 Wing at Butterworth, Malaysia, as well as No 76 Squadron itself.

The deployment began on the morning of 8 September, with the Sabres—accompanied by a Canberra from Amberley—staging through Edinburgh, South Australia, and Alice Springs. Three Hercules included in the move carried the squadron's base support personnel, Sidewinder air-to-air missiles and freight, while another contained an Iroquois helicopter from Fairbairn airbase at Canberra to provide search-and-rescue capability. A fifth Hercules flew direct to Darwin with personnel and equipment.

For the next five weeks, six Sabres were kept at constant operational readiness for take-off within five and fifteen minutes of a warning from the ground radar unit. It was a tense period, but there was only one interception made—and that was of a RAAF Canberra bomber. Aircraft not held on alert undertook a range of training missions. Alert levels were reduced from 17 October, and three days later eight aircraft and a commensurate proportion of supporting personnel were returned to Williamtown. Aircrew numbers were further decreased when pilots were sent to take part in an army cooperation exercise at RAAF Base Fairbairn.

While these reductions reflected an easing in the international tensions that had prompted the deployment, the seriousness of the concerns that prompted it in the



75 Squadron Sabre running up at Darwin, November 1961.

first place should be doubted. The RAAF appeared to have been the only service placed on alert, as naval coast watch stations remained inactive (thereby depriving the Darwin defence system of important intelligence and early warning) and the Army light anti-aircraft battery—although deployed to Darwin—remained non-operational. Adding to the impression that the RAAF deployment had been for the sake of deterrence only, the Area Air Defence Commander at Darwin was deprived of vital intelligence to the extent that he only learnt by chance, from a friend passing through Darwin on a commercial flight, that during part of the critical period the Indonesians had moved their entire force of medium bombers to West Iran.



RAAF Bloodhound Mk I

It was just as well that the situation never advanced beyond the precautionary stage, because the Darwin base was seriously deficient in ground defence measures. There was little protection available to either aircraft or personnel in the event of an air attack, notwithstanding the lessons that ought to have been learnt from the Japanese raids of 1942. The crisis which prompted Operation *Handover* was fortunately short-lived, with Indonesia abandoning its 'confrontation' policy after it experienced a failed communist coup in September 1965. Jakarta signed a peace treaty with Malaysia in Bangkok in August 1966.

Shortfalls identified during the deployment were at least remedied. From June 1965 Darwin received a detachment of the RAAF's No 30 SAM Squadron to bolster local defence from air attack; the detachment's Bloodhound Mk 1 missiles stayed until 1968. The eight Sabres which remained at Darwin after 20 October 1964 became a standing detachment of No 81 Wing and ensured that there was a continuing fighter presence in the north. The need for another emergency deployment to ensure the defence of Australia's northern gateway was subsequently removed by the permanent basing of No 75 Squadron at Darwin from 1983. Five years later the squadron transferred its F/A-18 Hornets to a new base at Tindal outside the town of Katherine, 350 kilometres inland but less than fifteen minutes flying time away from Darwin.

The real significance of the 1964 deployment lies in the fact that it was the first time a control of the air mission had been conducted in the direct defence of Australian security since World War II. It was, in fact, the only time such a mission was carried out in this country until standing combat air patrols were mounted over the Queensland resort town of Coolumb during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in March 2002, and over Canberra during the visit of the US president in October 2003.

- Deployment of 76 Squadron to Darwin due to strained relations with Indonesia during Confrontation
- Exposed significant deficiencies in arrangements for defence of northern Australia
- Only time control of the air operations undertaken in Australia from time of World War II until 2002–03

The value of history in the art of war is not only to elucidate the resemblance of past and present, but also their essential differences.

– Sir Julian Corbett



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