

PATHFINDER

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THE RAAF IN 'KONFRONTASI'

In the 1960s the RAAF faced the prospect of becoming involved in a regional conflict in which Australian territory and interests were directly threatened for the first time since World War II. As a consequence, some RAAF fighter squadrons were held on five-minute alert status, and aircraft carried live ordnance while operating in a declared Air Defence Identification Zone—the first time this had happened since the Korean War ten years earlier. The RAAF response in these circumstances not only helped shape and deter the situation, but the RAAF itself was shaped by it.

The cause of so much anxiety was the British decision to grant independence to Malaya, Singapore and Britain's territories of Borneo by incorporating them into a federation called Malaysia in September 1963. This was a step vigorously opposed by President Sukarno of Indonesia, who regarded the new entity as a neo-colonial creation. Rather than provoke all-out war over the issue, Sukarno embarked on a sustained program of political and military aggravation—including limited cross-border incursions—aimed at destroying Malaysia. This policy was termed '*Konfrontasi*' (Confrontation) by Sukarno's foreign minister, Dr Subandrio.

Because Australia (with Britain and New Zealand) had forces stationed in Malaysia as part of a regional stabilising force known as the Far East Strategic Reserve, Indonesia's policy carried risks of wider involvement if there was any miscalculation or escalation in the military levels it employed. Australia's air presence in the affected region was sizeable, with three RAAF squadrons—No. 2 (Canberra bombers) and Nos. 3 and 77 (Sabre fighters)—stationed at the Butterworth base opposite the Indonesian island of Sumatra. This proximity placed Australian air elements in

the immediate front-line in case of any serious outbreak of conflict.

The first deliberate incursion into Malaysian airspace to which the RAAF responded occurred on 17 July 1963 when two unidentified aircraft, thought to be Indonesian MiG-19s, were separately sighted near the Malayan coast about 100 km south of Penang. One of the intruders was pursued back across the Strait of Malacca towards the Indonesian town of Medan. Following this incident, Far East Air Force (FEAF) commanders extended radar

surveillance at key bases, including Butterworth, to 24 hours a day and upgraded the readiness status of air defences.

From October 1963, the RAAF was required to keep two Sabres at 'Alert 5' status during daylight hours, requiring fighters to take off five minutes after an order to scramble, with the RAF's No. 60 Squadron (operating Javelins) taking over this duty at night.

Rules of engagement were initially complicated and only allowed RAAF fighters to engage Indonesian aircraft if a number of, not always well-defined, conditions were met. These rules were changed in October 1964, however, in response to continued Indonesian aggression, and thereafter any positively identified Indonesian aircraft operating in Malaysian or Singaporean air space was to be destroyed.

While the Sabres of Nos. 3 and 77 Squadrons remained on alert for incursions by Indonesian aircraft, the Canberra bombers of No. 2 Squadron prepared for possible strikes against Indonesian targets. Crews familiarised themselves thoroughly with potential targets, such as Indonesian air bases on Sumatra, and regular training flights included simulated low-level air strikes. The need for such operations seemed about to be realised in September-October 1964,



after Indonesian paratroops and amphibious vehicles raided Labis and Pontian on the south-western side of the Malayan peninsula, and Australian troops became involved in operations to mop-up the invaders. The Australian Government even felt compelled at this time to initiate a deployment of RAAF fighters to ward off any retaliatory strikes which the Indonesians might launch against Darwin (see *Pathfinder 48*).

The Labis-Pontian raids also brought to light a radar blind spot over the Strait of Malacca, behind Penang Island, which meant that Indonesian aircraft could approach Butterworth from Medan undetected by 114 Mobile Control and Reporting Unit (MCRU). This created a difficult air defence problem. Until a second MCRU could be established to close the radar gap, a radar-equipped Royal Navy destroyer had to patrol the Strait between Medan and Penang, and RAAF Sabres were required to mount armed dawn patrols to the west of Penang Island.

In conjunction with the armed incursions that were occurring on the ground and in the air, Indonesia was also applying political pressure which carried further implications for the RAAF. On 3 July 1964 the Australian Embassy in Jakarta was informed that two RAAF and eight RNZAF transport flights had been refused clearance to enter Indonesian air space, and a blanket clearance for C-130 courier flights from Darwin to Butterworth which also passed through Indonesian air space was withdrawn. In response, Australia's ambassador to Indonesia, Mr Keith Shann, supported by Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Sir Valston Hancock, proposed to test Indonesian resolve by flying a combat aircraft from Darwin to Singapore via the standard route taking it over waters claimed by Indonesia but regarded by Australia as international. Government procrastination over granting approval, however, meant that the proposal was never implemented, and for more than a year RAAF aircraft were obliged to travel to Butterworth and Singapore via the Cocos Islands to avoid Indonesian air space.

By November 1964 the Australian Government was announcing a range of new measures which reflected its gloomy assessment of the strategic situation in the region, and sought to exercise a measure of deterrence. An increase of 4000 personnel to the RAAF's strength (taking it to over 20,000) was announced in Parliament, along with plans to build new airfields at Tindal, south

of Darwin, as well as Wewak in New Guinea in case problems developed across Indonesia's border with the then-Australian territory of Papua New Guinea. Proposals were also conspicuously debated to upgrade the airfield at Learmonth, Western Australia, to enhance the publicly-vaunted ability of new nuclear-capable F-111 bombers, ordered from the US in October 1963, to comfortably strike at targets as far away as the Indonesian island of Java.

In November 1965, a detachment of 77 Squadron was also moved to Labuan in Borneo to patrol the border with Indonesian Kalimantan. Pilots were authorised to carry out direct armed action against Indonesian Air Force aircraft known to be strafing villages on the Malaysian side of the border. This situation was fraught with danger of accidental encounters, since existing maps were inaccurate and pilots were forced to draw their own maps of the patrol area. Patrols were continued by a detachment of 3 Squadron until late December 1965.

Fortunately, Confrontation soon to come to an end. An attempted coup by Indonesian communists in September 1965 saw Sukarno removed from power and General Suharto installed as President. Tensions gradually eased, and a peace treaty was signed between Indonesia and Malaysia in August the following year. While it has since become history that matters never deteriorated to the stage where worst fears were realised, RAAF personnel in Malaysia had to contend with a tense war of nerves for the period that Confrontation lasted. The conflict has received little media attention and today is completely overshadowed by Vietnam. Of some 3,500 Australians who served during Confrontation, there were only 23 fatalities, including four RAAF personnel.

- *Confrontation presented the greatest direct threat to Australian territory and interests in the fifty years after the end of World War II*
- *Although full-scale conflict was avoided, air power was at the forefront of the Australian Government response*
- *The flexibility provided by air power undoubtedly helped to shape response and deter escalation of Indonesian military activity*



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