



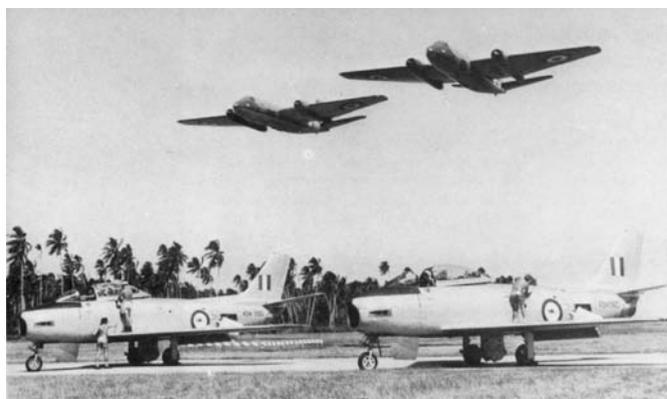
BUTTERWORTH: THE RAAF'S ONLY OVERSEAS BASE

During its 84-year history, the RAAF has frequently had units based overseas on operational deployments, but only once has it had a permanent or long-term base outside Australia that it ran and administered as a RAAF station. This was at Butterworth, on the north-west coast of the Malayan peninsula opposite the island of Penang. Formerly a Royal Air Force airfield, the base was handed over to the RAAF in 1955 on free loan from the British government, which then administered Malaya as a colonial possession.

Australian airmen actually had an association with Butterworth stretching back to 1941, when the base—then being used for care and maintenance purposes—provided respite for a day for the RAAF's 21 Squadron (equipped with Brewster Buffalo fighters) as it fell back before advancing Japanese forces. Japan took control of the base for the duration of the war, but the RAF reclaimed it after the surrender of enemy forces in 1945. Butterworth thereafter became an important refuelling point for RAF aircraft deployed to Singapore, and was essential to the maintenance of the imperial lines of communication. During the Malayan Emergency of 1948–60, the base went onto an operational footing and hosted a variety of RAF units launching attacks against communist terrorists in their jungle camps as part of Operation *Firedog*.

In the mid-1950s Britain, Australia and New Zealand agreed to set up a 'Commonwealth Strategic Reserve' on the Malayan peninsula with the primary aim of countering a growing communist threat across South-East Asia. It was the reserve, rather than the need for additional forces to support 'Emergency' operations,

that prompted the British government in 1955 to offer Australia the use of Butterworth. Accordingly, 2 Airfield Construction Squadron (accompanied by 478 Maintenance Squadron) was deployed that year to refurbish facilities, and further prepare the base for jet operations.



RAAF Canberras and Sabres operated from Butterworth from 1958

On 15 January 1958 the RAAF Butterworth Base Squadron was formed at Amberley. It commenced duties in Malaya on 1 May despite the fact that work was still being undertaken on the construction of the control tower. The RAAF formally took control of the base on 30 June. Shortly thereafter a headquarters, 114 Mobile Control and Reporting Unit, 78 Wing (Sabre fighters) and 2 Squadron (Canberra bombers) were deployed. These units would enjoy a much longer, and fortunately less harrowing stay at Butterworth than did the first RAAF users of the base. The only operational experience the squadrons would gain while there came, in fact, by way of four *Firedog* missions undertaken by 2 Squadron in the second half of 1958.

The importance of Butterworth particularly emerged in the 1960s. It provided aircraft and maintenance personnel in support of the deployment of 79 Squadron to Ubon in Thailand, along with medical and transport support facilities during the Vietnam War (in which 2 Squadron was also committed from 1967). The base became especially crucial between 1963 and 1966, during the period of 'Confrontation' with Indonesia over the creation of Malaysia. Not only did it give both the RAAF and RAF the capacity to conduct air defence operations,



RAAF Base Butterworth, May 1965

it would have been essential in the mounting of offensive operations against Indonesia had that become necessary.

The end of Confrontation allowed the British government to announce plans shortly thereafter for the withdrawal of its forces from the east of Suez. In line with an earlier Anglo-Malayan agreement, ownership of Butterworth was transferred to the Malaysian government in 1970, but the RAAF was immediately given joint control over the base. After a change of government in London it was decided that some units from Britain, Australia and New Zealand should remain in Malaysia/Singapore following the signing of a 'Five Power Defence Agreement' (FPDA). The RAAF contribution to this arrangement would remain largely unchanged from the previous 15 years, although 78 Wing (now composed of 3 and 75 Squadrons) had recently been equipped with the Mirage IIIIO. Because the new agreement emphasised air defence, there was no need for 2 Squadron's Canberras to re-deploy to Butterworth on the unit's return from the Vietnam War.



Mirages overfly service housing near Butterworth

Despite the fact that Butterworth was of less strategic importance than in the previous two decades, the base reached its peak strength during the 1970s. The number of personnel at Butterworth in this period was approximately 1200, excluding some 3500 dependants accompanying the RAAF servicemen. Another 1000 local Malay, Indian and Chinese employees also worked on base at this time. The recreation/support facilities for servicemen and their families—including a school, hostel

(the hostie), radio station (RAAF Radio Butterworth) and hospital (No 4 RAAF Hospital)—were a central feature of life at the base. The latter was particularly important in view of the fact that it reportedly facilitated the delivery of 150 babies in one year.

But the continued economic and political stabilisation of the region partly removed the requirement for a permanent RAAF detachment at Butterworth. On 31 March 1979 the base was transferred to the Royal Malaysian Air Force, although it continued to be controlled through Headquarters Operational Command situated at Glenbrook, Australia. In 1983 both 75 Squadron and 478 Squadron were withdrawn from Malaysia (the latter being disbanded), while three years later 3 Squadron was transferred to Williamtown. The same composite unit that was deployed to Ubon in 1962 also returned to Butterworth in 1986, but was equipped with only eight pilots and ten Mirages formerly belonging to 3 Squadron—which was then converting to the F/A-18A/B Hornet. The end of the RAAF association with Butterworth was sealed the following year with the release of a new White Paper that stressed defence of Australia over forward defence.

For the next year and a half the base was progressively drawn down. The hospital was closed on 1 July 1987, followed six months later by the celebrated RAAF Radio Butterworth. The Mirages of 79 Squadron completed their deployment in May 1988, and the following month both the headquarters and base squadron at Butterworth departed. But that was not the end of the RAAF presence in Malaysia. A detachment from 92 Wing remains and continues to conduct maritime patrols, while regular deployments of other RAAF aircraft are made as part of the Australian commitment to the FPDA.

...there is the need for some sort of thinking department. Often and often throughout the war when some development occurred, we wondered why we hadn't thought of it before, and nearly always came to the conclusion that there was no real reason. It was only lack of foresight. This applied particularly to air warfighting.

- Air Vice-Marshal H.N. Wrigley (1928?)



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