

Air Base Butterworth, Malaysia

Introduction

Since its formation in 1921, the RAAF has frequently had units based overseas on operational deployments, however only once has the RAAF operated a permanent major air base outside Australia. This was at Butterworth, on the north-west coast of the Malayan peninsula opposite the island of Penang.

Australian airmen actually had an association with Butterworth stretching back to 1941, when the base—then being used for care and maintenance purposes—provided a days respite for the RAAF's No 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.



8 July 1955. An advance party from No 2 Airfield Construction Squadron (2ACS) arrived at Butterworth, on the north-west coast of Malaya, to begin work on bringing the airfield up to jet standards.

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. The base was handed over to the RAAF in 1955 on free loan from the British government although it was not formally operational until 1958.

Accordingly, No 2 Airfield Construction Squadron (accompanied by 478 Maintenance Squadron) was deployed that year to refurbish facilities, and further prepare the base for jet operations. It was not until 12 September that the main body of 2ACS arrived and began work in earnest. Working around the threat of attack by Communist Terrorists, by May 1958 the runway, taxiways, fighter and bomber hardstands were all ready for operational use—a month ahead of schedule.

The Start of a Family Association

Air Commodore 'Phil' Ford and his three sons, Tony, Nick and Simon all members of the RAAF, and all pilots, accumulated a combined total of ten Butterworth tours during the RAAF's association with the Air Base. A comprehensive suite of Oral History interviews with all four RAAF members is held by the Office of Air Force History and excerpts are included in this Snippet.

RAAF Base Butterworth

The inevitable preparatory staff work was required:

„We'll go back to 1955 where I headed a team, myself, senior civilian team, (members of) AMP branch, Air Member of Personnel Branch and two Army officers plus a civilian from Treasury. We went to Singapore and Butterworth and wrote a paper recommending the rates of allowances that we paid to servicemen in the Singapore and Butterworth area, because we were about to send our squadrons and Army battalions into that area. The next time I was there was in 1961, it was purely a staff visit and then I can't remember what for in October 1961.

At the time, I had no idea that I would, on the 1st of January, take Command of Butterworth for the next almost three years. At Butterworth, we had two squadrons of Sabres, we had a squadron of Canberras which I was converted to, and we had a Transport Flight of Dakotas. I also had an RAF helicopter squadron of Sycamores and a transport squadron of Valettas ...”

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 1958. Shortly thereafter a headquarters, No 114 Mobile Control and Reporting Unit, No 78 Wing (Sabre fighters) and No 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 No 2 Squadron in the second half of 1958.

When two Sabre jet fighters of No 77 Squadron collided at 48 600 feet (14 800 metres) over Malaya, nine days before the Malayan 'Emergency' was declared at an end, both pilots ejected from their damaged aircraft at 38 000 feet (11 600 metres) and made a safe landing by parachute.

The pilot of A94-961 was quickly rescued by a group of villagers, but the pilot of A94-976 (Flight Lieutenant Owen Worth) was less fortunate. He was forced to spend three nights alone in the jungle before a ground party was able to reach him.

Contact with the downed aviator was made using the 'SARAH' homing system from an RAF Whirlwind helicopter. Although he could not be seen from the air, owing to the dense jungle cover,



supplies were dropped to him over a two-day period until he was successfully recovered. The altitude of these ejections is still a record in the RAAF.

"... And what do you recall of Butterworth? Fantastic holidays. (He) .. was in Butterworth three times over various periods as OC, but I'm talking early really late 50s early 60s in that period there when I was a 13-14-15 year old kid.

I got there in the back of a Herc once and we flew civvy to Singapore another time, but that's the old regular service was pretty handy in those days with the Butterworth Courier which was wonderful stuff.

But we lived there on the foreshore there at Butterworth and the swimming pool was just down the road and it was fantastic. You could use the squash courts and it was good..."

The importance of Butterworth particularly emerged in the 1960s. It provided aircraft and maintenance personnel in support of the deployment of No 79 Squadron to Ubon in Thailand, along with medical and transport support facilities during the Vietnam War (in which No 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.



For example, in September 1964, all leave in No 114 Mobile Control and Reporting Unit (114MCRU) at RAAF Base Butterworth was cancelled, and the unit began a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week operation. The previous day, about 100 Indonesian paratroops had been airdropped into northern Johore, signalling a disturbing escalation in Indonesia's policy of confrontation with the newly-created Federation of Malaysia.

As a precaution against possible air raids, the operations room and the unit's power station were sandbagged. Small arms and ammunition were also issued to technical and operations personnel, as a self-defence measure against possible attacks by saboteurs, and armed guards and area patrols were instigated.

A month later, a detachment of 114MCRU was dispatched to Kampong Changkat, south of Butterworth, to operate an Army Mk 7 light anti-aircraft 'gap filler' radar, but by the following month the alarm created by the Indonesian landings had largely dissipated.



Not only did the Base give both the RAAF and RAF the capacity to conduct air defence operations, it would have been essential in the mounting of offensive operations against Indonesia had that become necessary.

“... I was off to Butterworth but I wasn't posted to a Squadron. I felt really disappointed about that because I felt that I really hadn't achieved an operational tour yet. It was sort of 18 months in 75 Squadron and then instructing. I was posted the Wing Training Officer 78 Wing under the Wing Headquarters.

So up we pack and in those days as I said, the Air Force was just incongruous in so much as my wife and I and my child flew up there first class with Qantas. In those days you dressed to join an aeroplane. I was in a suit and tie, my wife was in an almost a cocktail frock and my little girl was dressed in her best. First class you go there properly.

As a Flying Officer I was 25 and we were put up in the Eastern and Oriental Hotel waiting for a married quarter and then we were given a married quarter on the island a huge two storey place with about five or six bedrooms with of course we then went out and hired a cook and an amah.

But whilst being Wing Training Officer I flew with 3 Squadron, flew 10 to 12 hours a month. But I also went on courses. I went on my Forward Air Controllers course, down in Singapore.

Ground FACs Air Contact Officers the RAF called them or the British Army we were ground FACS and the Sabres came down from Butterworth and 20 Squadron in Hunters provided the close air support and we controlled them in Southern Malaysia in the jungle there

..... but anyway there was two Ghurka Officers British, two Royal Marines and a couple of guards a Grenadier and a Coldstream guard and they'd all been in Borneo, because confrontation was on and it was a really interesting course and they were great blokes.

And I always remember the first Christmas day at Butterworth I may have volunteered, I would have volunteered to be on standby. We had an alert five, two Sabres on standby at Butterworth, hot, they were all ready to go every day seven days a week from seven o'clock in the morning to seven o'clock in the evening.

And in the meantime the family was still in Butterworth? Yes because they had their own war. They had the Malays uprising!

And so I did quite a lot of work as a Forward Air Controller in a Sabre controlling other Sabres in Malaysia then and training them in the different patterns of how to sort out the butterfly pattern or the recip pattern or just the straight dive pattern like we used to do on the ranges....."



A detachment of six Sabres from No 77 Squadron (based in Malaya) arrived at Labuan, in northern Borneo, to take over air defence duties from No 20 Squadron, RAF, during the period of Indonesian confrontation against the new Federation of Malaysia.

As well as maintaining aircraft on alert to respond to any intrusions of Malaysian airspace, the Sabres carried out combat patrols near the border with Kalimantan where Indonesian Air Force aircraft were known to be strafing villages on the Malaysian side. Pilots were authorised to carry out direct armed action with enemy aircraft, though no raiders were actually encountered.

Scrambles were ordered on several occasions, but these were often too late and no interceptions were achieved. The No 77 Squadron detachment was relieved on 27 November by No 3 Squadron, which continued the mission until late December.

"... Yes still single and the posting was just a little over a year. It was an exciting time from the squadron's perspective with such a large number of inexperienced 'bog rats' or Pilot Officers. The supervisors were sweating on looking after the inexperienced pilots in the squadron.

One of the great advantages operating out of Malaysia, you trained, exercised, and fought against different aircraft flown by different air forces. You rarely got this sort of experience flying in Australia.

The RAF had many different types of aircraft based in Singapore Both the Singaporeans and the Malaysians were getting new aircraft so we also fought alongside and against those aircraft.

We had some pretty exciting times because we were all learning, but up in Butterworth I nearly killed myself once, and nearly ran out of fuel on another occasion..."

RMAF Base Butterworth

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.

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.

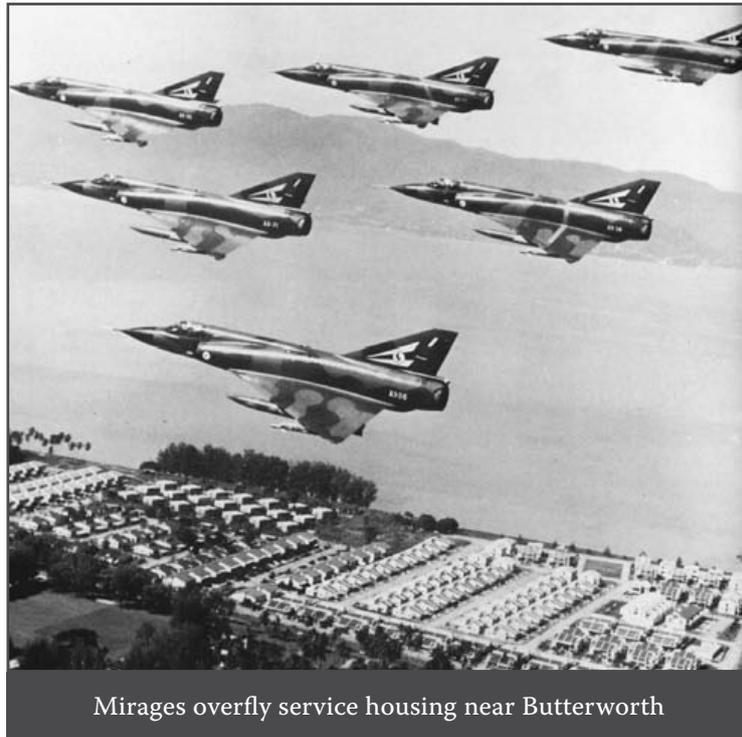
"..Yes my wife worked in the radio station for a while. My brother was an announcer, he had a jazz session going which sounds like him, so that was all going..."

Was your daughter born at 4 Hospital? Yes at 4 Hospital. She and then two of our best friends all had on the same day or within 12 hours, two of our best friends had babies as well..."

The Hospital 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.

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'. The RAAF contribution to this arrangement would remain largely unchanged from the previous 15 years, although No 78 Wing (now composed of No 3 and No 75 Squadrons) had recently been equipped with the Mirage IIIIO. Because the new agreement emphasised air defence, there was no need for No 2 Squadron's Canberras to re-deploy to Butterworth on the unit's return from the Vietnam War.



Mirages overfly service housing near Butterworth

Headquarters Integrated Air Defence System (IADS)

The Headquarters of the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) was formed at Butterworth, Malaysia, to provide for the air defence of Singapore and Malaysia as part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) agreed at ministerial talks in London.

The new organisation replaced the air defence set-up under Britain's Far East Command and which controlled the Far East Air Force.



11 February 1971

Headquarters IADS assumed this responsibility when it was declared operational on 1 September 1971, although FPDA did not enter into force until 1 November. Under the terms of the agreement covering IADS, Australia was to provide the commander and Malaysia the deputy, while the remaining staff were drawn from the UK, New Zealand and Singapore. The first commander appointed was Air Vice-Marshal Ron Susans, RAAF, who remained in the post until 1974.

“... While I was there on attachment, they offered me a posting to SAR Flight Butterworth. A good opportunity. Because I knew all about Butterworth from my brothers as well. At least one of them I think was probably up there.....

In 1973 we had 3 Squadron and 75 Squadron there and we also supported the RMAF - Royal Malaysian Air Force.

I guess I should have mentioned how pleasant it was that I overlapped with my brothers who were up there at the same time initially with Tony when we first arrived and then Nick came and so we handed the dogs on and that sort of stuff to each other.

The Malaysian people in those days were very relaxed and very pleasant and very easy to get on with. Our little blond one year old daughter spent a few nights out on the kampongs with our amah and that sort of stuff...”

In 1975, a C-130 (A97-160) took off from RAAF Base Butterworth, Malaysia, bound for Saigon (the then capital of the Republic of Vietnam), to join an international relief effort for tens of thousands of civilian refugees displaced during a major Communist military offensive which would ultimately collapse the southern regime.

In response to this humanitarian crisis, Australia formed Detachment ‘S’—an ad hoc transport force of C-130s from Richmond, NSW, and two Dakotas from Butterworth—to assist with the distribution of Red Cross supplies and other non-military tasks.

Within two weeks, the detachment had grown to total eight C-130s, which used Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Airport as their base. When the general security situation in Saigon deteriorated in mid-April, the detachment was forced to shift its base to Don Muang Airport at Bangkok, Thailand, and operate daily into Saigon for the last week of operations.



Refugees fleeing Phan Rang on board a RAAF Hercules, April 1975

"... After six months as a flight commander in 77 Squadron, in mid-1977 I was posted to 3 Squadron Malaysia as a flight commander. This frustrated me a little but I thought at least I will get to be a flight commander in Malaysia. This was my third tour in Malaysia, and my second tour in a Mirage Squadron.

Had the world changed much from earlier? it was like stepping back into an old home. All the locals greeted me like a long lost friend. Kissed me on both cheeks. It was quite stunning in fact, because it was like having a family reunion. ... Just back up a bit to explain. Some of the locals had not only known me from the two previous tours, but had also known me as a teenager when I came up to Malaysia to visit my father and mother. So some of the locals were seeing me for the fourth or fifth time.

After spending six months as a flight commander in 3 Squadron, Malaysia I was posted again, to Headquarters IADS, as a staff officer. IADS managed the air defence of Malaysia and Singapore and ran two major and, to minor air defence exercises every calendar year. The military forces of the five powers provided aircraft for these air defence exercises. The five countries were: Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

Air Vice Marshal Jim Fleming was the Commander of the headquarters. He had a Malaysian Air Commodore as his second-in-command. There was an RAF Wing Commander who ran all the operations of the headquarters. He had a Squadron Leader staff officer from each of the five nations. I was Australia's staff officer.

And at this stage, the Malaysian and Singaporean air forces were growing fast, and learning lots.

...What changes had you seen in Malaysia and the involvement of the Royal Australian Air Force in it? ... I suppose the biggest changes were in the Malaysian society. In the first tour everyone was riding bicycles. We went up there on the second tour and everyone was riding motorcycles. Went up there on the third tour and everyone were in cars. During all this time the annual growth of Malaysia's GDP was between eight and 10%. This wealth was flowing down to the community and was reflected in their mode of transport. .

With each tour you could see the locals gradually moving up in these organisations ready to takeover. And that was interesting because it wasn't a revolution if you know what I mean. It was evolution..."

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 Nos 75 and 478 Squadron were withdrawn from Malaysia (the latter being disbanded), while three years later No 3 Squadron was transferred to Williamtown.

The same composite unit No 79 Squadron 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 No 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 No 79 Squadron completed their deployment in May 1988, and the following month both the headquarters and base squadron at Butterworth departed.

Air Base Butterworth and Beyond

In April 1999, the RAAF suffered one of its worst peacetime accidents when an F-111G from No 6 Squadron crashed on Pulau Aur, a tiny island in the South China Sea lying 65 kilometres off Mersing, on the east coast of Johor, Malaysia.

The aircraft (A8-291) was one of two making a simulated night-time strike against British, Australian and Singaporean warships during a FPDA exercise, when it struck tall trees on a ridge line of the island's peak. The aircraft tumbled through the air for a further mile before crashing into the jungle.

Owing to the inaccessibility of the site, most of the wreckage of A8-291 was left at the scene, with a memorial established to the two crew members—Squadron Leader Stephen Hobbs and Squadron Leader Anthony Short—who were killed in the accident.



But that was not the end of the RAAF presence in Malaysia. No 324 Combat Support Squadron and a detachment from No 92 Wing remain at Butterworth today, providing support to Australian operations in the area and conducting maritime patrols as part of Operation Gateway. In addition regular deployments of other RAAF aircraft are made as part of the Australian commitment to FPDA exercises.

Note: Pathfinder No 35 available at:

<http://airpower.airforce.gov.au/Publications/List/41/Pathfinder.aspx?page=8>