

# PATHFINDER

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## OPERATION TRIKORA – INDONESIA'S TAKEOVER OF WEST NEW GUINEA

In 1962, a military operation on Australia's doorstep resolved a territorial conflict that otherwise could have drawn Australia into a protracted war. Although this operation is virtually unknown outside Indonesia, air power played a decisive role in its conduct.

When the Netherlands government handed control of their former East Indies colony to the Republic of Indonesia in December 1949, they excluded the western half of the island of New Guinea which remained Dutch territory. From 1949 until 1961, the Indonesian government attempted to gain control of West New Guinea (WNG) through efforts in the United Nations. Since these attempts were unsuccessful, on 19 December 1961, Indonesia's President Sukarno announced Operation TRIKORA – the annexation of the territory by force.

The Indonesian operational plan had three phases - infiltration, exploitation and consolidation. The first phase involved the infiltration of troops by sea and airdrop, with the intention of forcing the Dutch to deploy their forces away from major centres. The exploitation phase was the invasion and seizure of key locations within WNG by a combined airborne and amphibious force. The consolidation phase was the gradual expansion of control to eventually encompass the whole of WNG.

Indonesia had been building up its Air Force since 1958 with the acquisition of Soviet MiG-15 trainers, MiG-17 fighters and Il-28 medium-range bombers. Additionally, ten C-130B Hercules transport aircraft, six B-26 Invader bombers and 20 P-51D Mustangs were obtained from the USA. In June 1961, Indonesian offensive capability was further increased by the arrival of Tu-16 Badger long-range bombers (including reconnaissance and maritime

strike versions) and additional MiG fighters of later marks.

The Dutch defence of WNG was founded on a series of strong points that were to be reinforced with reserves from outside the province if threatened. Biak was the air defence hub and overall defence headquarters, with Sorong the second key airbase. The Dutch Air Force in WNG consisted of 12 Hawker Hunter fighters and ten Neptune maritime patrol aircraft. The available air surveillance radars were insufficient to cover the large area to be defended. The weakness in the Dutch defence plan lay in its logistics. By retaining a colonial territory, the Dutch had alienated themselves from most of the Asian countries who were themselves recovering from their colonial past. Dutch naval ships were not welcome

at most Asian ports, making resupply from European ports both expensive and slow.

Morotai in the Halmahera Islands was the major permanent Indonesian airfield in the area, but smaller airfields to the southwest and south of WNG were used as forward operating bases. Early in 1962, Mustang and Invader ground attack aircraft and C-47 Dakota transport aircraft were deployed to airfields at Morotai, Ambon, Amahai



and Kai Islands. C-130 aircraft operated in a covert role from their permanent base in Java, and also used forward operating airfields close to WNG. A small number of MiG-17 fighters were based on Morotai for air defence missions.

On 15 January 1962, the first phase of Operation TRIKORA began, when three Indonesian Navy motor torpedo boats departed the Aru Islands on a mission to insert troops at Kaimana on the south coast of WNG. The boats were detected by Dutch Neptune aircraft and one was sunk by intercepting Dutch frigates. Despite the loss,

seaborne infiltration continued, landing 562 troops on the WNG coast over the next eight months.

From April to August 1962, C-47 Dakota and C-130 Hercules aircraft flew 17 paratrooping missions, deploying 1154 Indonesian troops widely across WNG. These missions were typically preceded by Tu-16 photo-reconnaissance flights. At the time of the drop, close air support by P-51 Mustang and B-26 Invader aircraft and deception flights by Il-28 Beagle aircraft kept the defenders occupied. Despite all the effort expended, the infiltration missions were not a success. Indonesia suffered 94 soldiers killed and 73 wounded in the guerrilla operations, which resulted in minimal damage to Dutch facilities. On 17 May 1962, an Indonesian C-47 was shot down by a Dutch Neptune near Klamono, with the loss of all crew and paratroopers.



*MiG17s and P-51s prepare for operations at Letfuan airfield, in the Kai Islands.*

By mid-1962, the level of Indonesian military activity increased significantly in preparation for the next phase in Operation TRIKORA. Strike aircraft deployed to Morotai and Ambon and began flying missions to probe the Dutch air defences. MiG-17s deployed to Morotai, Amahai and Kai Islands provided air defence cover to the west and south of WNG, but not over the entire area. In early August, a naval task force was assembled to make an amphibious assault to seize Biak Island, the Dutch military stronghold. Two Army parachute brigades (7000 men) were to secure the beachhead perimeter while a 4500 man marine brigade made an amphibious assault. Four infantry brigades (13 000 men) were ready to follow over the beach and secure the island. To divert attention from the amphibious task force, large-scale airdrops were carried out on 13 and 14 August at locations from Sorong in the northwest to Merauke in the southeast. Despite the diversionary tactics, Dutch Neptune aircraft detected the fleet heading for Biak and alerted the Dutch commander.

While Operation TRIKORA was occurring, secret negotiations were underway in Washington. The

Kennedy administration, fearing that US opposition might push Indonesia toward Communism, sided with the Indonesians and applied pressure on Australia to do likewise. Unable to sustain a protracted large-scale conflict, the Dutch government gave in to diplomatic pressure. On 15 August 1962, both sides signed the New York Agreement, which gave control of WNG to Indonesia after a brief transitional period overseen by the United Nations. On the signing of the agreement, the second and third phases of Operation TRIKORA were cancelled and the amphibious task force returned to port.

The infiltration of Special Forces, the threat of air strikes, and the approach of an amphibious task force demonstrated the political will of the Indonesian Government. Whether Indonesia could have annexed WNG is open to question. However, it is clear that the demonstrated intent to use military force influenced the negotiations that ended the conflict.

Operation TRIKORA was primarily based on the employment of air power. The three phases of the campaign were founded on air power's capacity to generate and sustain the military effort. Although the operations did not proceed to the third phase, the ability of the Indonesian Air Force to air drop and support forces on the ground contributed heavily to the diplomatic pressure that was brought on the Dutch government to handover WNG to Indonesia.

- *With supply lines reaching halfway around the world, the Dutch defence plan in WNG was logistically vulnerable.*
- *The demonstrated intent of the Indonesian government to initiate a large-scale air, sea and land campaign made the Dutch military position in WNG untenable.*
- *The use of air power in the three phases of the campaign demonstrated its deterrent capabilities by bringing diplomatic pressure on the Dutch government.*

*The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes.*

Carl von Clausewitz



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