

OFFICIAL AWARENESS OF THE THREAT TO AIRBASE BUTTERWORTH

The following is a selection of primary source documents collected by the Rifle Company Butterworth Review Group, which includes contemporaneous intelligence that show the Australian Government, Defence Commanders and Departmental Secretaries were aware of the threat posed by CTs, who had been assessed by Australian Intelligence agencies as having the capability (personnel, weapons and training) to attack the airbase and cause harm to RCB and RAAF personnel and their families, and Australian property at Air Base Butterworth.

Australian High Commission Memorandum to Depts of Foreign Affairs and Defence, dated 11 March 1971:¹

The Malaysian “*DDMI (sic: Deputy Director Military Intelligence) said the threat to all RMAF bases was now very seriously regarded: they were attractive targets and any success against them, apart from material damaged caused, would be a good moral victory for the CTO; the military effect of such a successful operation would be to reduce the air support (particularly transport) essential to the Malaysian security forces*”. “*He assessed the Air Base Butterworth as a “probable target”, basing his assessment upon the recent increase of enemy strength and activity in the area and the large number of supporters (some 27,000) assessed as being in the Penang/Province Wellesley area, some of whom could be included in the locally engaged labour on the base;...*”

ANZUK Intelligence Group Note No 1/71 – The Threat to Air Base Butterworth².

Para 30: “*In January 1971, groups of between four and seven CTs were sighted about two miles north east of Bukit Mertajam in Province Wellesley about eight miles from the Base*”.

Para 31: “*On 5 March the railway line spanning the Sungei Jarak about a mile south of Tasek Glugun about seven miles east of the Base was damaged by explosives*”.

Para 36: “*in mid September, 1971, two Malays were seen on a platform in a tree outside but close to the perimeter fence near the bomb dump. They were apprehended and handed over to the SSP and then to the Malaysian Police. Special Branch in Penang have informed RAAF Butterworth that they believe that those apprehended were engaged in surveillance of the Base*”.

Para 48: “*The use of the Base as an airfield from which anti-terrorist air operations were being flown might prompt CTO reaction*”.

Para 50: “*The possibility of a “reaction” attack by the CTs in the Kulim area acting on their own initiative, or by supporters or sympathisers in the*

¹ RCBRG Document Ref: 19710311A

² RCBRG Document Ref: 19711130

Penang/Butterworth area, particularly if RMAF aircraft are increasingly used against the CTs in Kulim, could not, however be excluded”.

Para 62: *“The Officer Commanding, RAAF Butterworth, has drawn attention to serious weaknesses in the current defences”.*

Sub Para 72 (d): *“...sabotage is by far the most likely, although covert penetration and surprise attack by a small group should not be discounted, and a mortar attack would be likely if the CTs acquired this capability”.*

Sub Para 72 (e): *“ a sabotage attempt, if made by suborned LEC/contractor personnel or members of subversive groups, might well be directed against those Vital Points outside the perimeter fence or protected by SSP patrols and dim lighting. If an attack was carried out by CTs as a result of a CPM/CTO policy decision, or by local CTs acting on their own initiative, however, we would expect Vital Points within the perimeter, especially the aircraft, to be priority targets, whether the attack were carried out by mortar, surprise attack or sabotage”.*

Letter from Sir Arthur Tange, Secretary of the Dept of Defence to the Secretary of the Dept of Air dated 2.3.1972:³

“It will shortly be necessary for us to brief the Minister for Defence on the outcome of various examinations that have been made of the security problem at Butterworth. The measures that have been or are being implemented and the risks and shortcomings that might still exist thereafter”.

“The ANZUK Intelligence Group assesses that there is a “definite risk” that one or more communist terrorists or agents, acting on his own initiative rather than in accordance with the current policy of the Malaysian Communist Party or its military arm, might attempt an isolated attack on the Base, most probably from within it”.

“The Shortcomings of the Malaysians have been pointed out to them and will continue to be pointed out to them,...”

“....Malaysian reluctance having been overcome, the ANZUK force will now provide one infantry company on rotation through Butterworth on a full-time basis, ostensibly for training, flag showing and a change of scene. The presence of this company will provide the Commander with a ready-reaction force which he can use inter alia to supplement the elements available to him under the joint Malaysian-RAAF Plan..”

³ RCBRG Document Ref: 19720302

Brief for the DCAS (Deputy Chief of Air Staff) Concerning Security of Butterworth:⁴

“Following a series of rocket attacks in Malaysia against Minden Barracks Penang and RMAF Kuala Lumpur, FAS SIP recommended “recent developments and incidents must significantly reduce confidence in the security of aircraft, especially against rocket attacks from outside the base”.

“There are only four major airbases on the Malay peninsula: Muautan, Sempang (Kuala Lumpur), Butterworth and Alor Star. Muautan is relatively isolated from CTO groups and the principal threat, therefore, exists against the remaining three bases. A rocket attack was launched against Sungai Pattani on 24 September and it is quite possible that either Butterworth or Alor Star will be the target for future attacks”.

JIO Study No 13/75 Oct 1975:⁵

“There is a potential threat to the Base from the CTO and related communist subversive organisations” – sub para 56 (b) refers.

“....it is unlikely that the CTO would try to discriminate between RAAF and RMAF targets, and Australian personnel and equipment would be endangered.” – paragraph 45 refers.

A list of incidents involving CTs in the Butterworth area were addressed at Annex E.

Possible day and night approaches of a CT attack on the Airbase were addressed in Annex F,

Director Airforce Intelligence Briefing Note dated 28 Apr 71.⁶

sub para 1. b. The threat in Butterworth area identified a CT presence in the Kulim area 12 miles East of ABB. It was estimated there were 27,000 sympathizers in the Penang/Wellesley area *“the work force (sic. at ABB) could contain an element of these supporters”*. *“Enemy has the ability to use explosives in an attack”*.

Countermeasures to Security Threat at ABB - Report dated 24 Dec 71.⁷

Para 5: *“...there is definitely a risk that one or more Communist Terrorists (CTs) or members of subversive groups, acting on their own initiative will attempt an attack on or within the airbase at any time”.*

Sub para 14.d. *“...sabotage is the most likely, although covert penetration and surprise attack by a small group should not be discounted, and a mortar attack would be likely if the CTs acquired this capability”.*

⁴ RCBRG Document Ref: 19750915

⁵ RCBRG Document Ref: 19751001

⁶ RCBRG Document Ref: 19710428A

⁷ RCBRG Document Ref: 19711224

Para 13: *“there is a potential threat to the base...the CPM/CTO have an estimated 60 terrorists armed with rifles, machine guns and explosives in the Kulim and nearby forest areas approximately 15 to 25 miles from the base”.*

Intelligence Summary dated 8 Apr 75.⁸

- Given the “*necessarily thin defences*” ABB assessed as an “*attractive target*” for an attack by the 8th Assault Unit using 3.5 inch rockets.

Director of Air Force Intelligence: Security Situation – Air Base Butterworth Report No 32 dated 30 Apr 75.⁹

- Five attacks on MAF bases on 31 Mar 75, including, a RMAF airbase, using 3.5 inch rockets.
- Malaysian security force convoys ambushed by 60 to 80 CT.
- Booby traps reported used against security forces reacted to such attacks.

FAS SIP Minute dated 27 May 1975.¹⁰

Confirms the presence of a CT cell at Penang and that it was “*was quite capable of mounting similar attacks on Air Base Butterworth*” flags the political implications for the Government in the event of an attack on RAAF aircraft.

Director of Air Force Intelligence: Security Situation – Air Base Butterworth Report No 34 dated 4 Aug 75.¹¹

- Air strikes mounted against CTs from ABB and that the “*threat to Air Base Butterworth must be considered to be slowly increasing*”

Chief of Air Staff Minute to MINDEF dated 7 Oct 75.¹²

- **Para 2:** *“...possible CT intentions to launch rocket attacks on bases in Malaysia increases our concern regarding the security of area around the base. Intelligence sources consider CTs have or able to obtain 81/82mm mortars to supplement their known supplies of 3.5 inch rockets”.*
- **Para 4:** *“RAAF and ARA (sic: RCB) personnel are used off-base to protect dependents in times of civil unrest”.*
- **Annex A para 16:** *“there is an increased likelihood of attack on Air Base Butterworth – probably by use of 3.5 inch rockets”.*

⁸ RCBRG Document Ref: 19750408

⁹ RCBRG Document Ref: 19770430

¹⁰ RCBRG Document Ref: 19750527

¹¹ RCBRG Document Ref: 19750804

¹² RCBRG Document Ref: 19751007

- **HQ Butterworth Cablegram dated 30 Oct 75.**¹³
 - Reports additional security patrols outside the perimeter.
 - Reports movement of large calibre mortars into Malaysia.
- **SIP DIV review of Butterworth Deployment dated 22 Oct 76.**¹⁴
 - **Para 21:** Acknowledges the possibility of acts of terrorism in the Butterworth and Penang areas and that “*Australian personnel – including dependents and equipment would be endangered*”.
 - **Para 22:** “*The Malaysians, being committed to operations, would not necessarily seek for their deployments in Butterworth the same level of security that would be sought by the Australian Government in respect of RAAF personnel and equipment*”.

**Submission 115 by Wing Commander Gary Penny
Ground Defence Officer at RAAF Base Butterworth 1979-1981**

“I was left in no doubt that the CT did pose a real threat to RAAF Base Butterworth; the threat did not include a large-scale attack, rather smaller acts of interdiction and terror aimed at interrupting airbase operations..... through off-base direct and indirect fire weapons, or penetration of the base defences by small groups to attack vital points e.g., aircraft, fuel, ammunition/bomb storage, aircrew, aircraft maintenance facilities, personnel quarters, navigational aids, command posts, etc”

- CIA Intelligence Report – Peking’s Support of Insurgencies in South East Asia dated April 1973, reflects the Malaysian Communist Party had received support from the Chinese Communist Party commencing in 1947. Subsequently, following China’s rapprochement with the USA in 1972 the Democratic People’s Republic of Vietnam, following on from its success in South Vietnam, provided arms, rockets, mortars, mines and training in insurgency tactics in support of CT operations in Malaysia.¹⁵

¹³ RCBRG Document Ref: 19751030

¹⁴ RCBRG Document Ref: 19761022

¹⁵ RCBRG Document Ref: 19730401