

RIFLE COMPANY BUTTERWORTH (RCB) 1969 – 1989

15 May 2023

In 1973, Butterworth was merely but another word in the English vocabulary which little me. All that I was advised was that it was an airbase that contained Australian aircraft in support of the Malaysian government in the battles with the Communist terrorist raging at the time. I had just arrived in Singapore and went through the normal orientation of administration and logistics as well as an intelligence brief on the political situation prevalent at the time. We warned about taking drugs and that the penalty was death by hanging. Within a few days of our arrival a number of us who travelled from 1 RAR (First Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment) were flown to Penang somewhere on the Malaysian peninsula.

The trip was very uncomfortable and I could swear that the aircraft (probably a Dakota) was held together by a loose conglomeration of rivets. How it did not fall apart in the air is beyond me. The noise and smell of the engines was not a pleasant experience. We carried with us a complete kit, one would normally take into the jungle such as: weapons (Self Loading Rifle – SLR), magazines, clothing, footwear, hoochies, webbing, anti-mite, water bottles, water purifying tablets, anti-malaria tablets, big pack, bayonets, machete, head gear, sweat towelling, cleaning kits, first aid bandages, camouflage sets, hard rations just to name a few from memory.

Once we had landed and taken to the barracks located near the front entrance to the aerodrome, I remember well being greeted personally by Lieutenant Peter Phillips who was then the three platoon commander. I was glad to see a face that I knew. Peter was my platoon commander during my initial employment training at the Infantry centre at Ingleburn, NSW, back in 1971 – 1972. It was a pleasant start to what we were to face over the next few months. To us young diggers it was a time of tension, intense and rigorous challenges that were only overcome by the constant aerodrome perimeter and aircraft patrolling as well as venturing outside the wire so to speak to clear the jungle within a 100-metre range. This was done to deter any external unauthorised entry into the aerodrome perimeter.

Our Rules of engagement varied from shoot to kill if life and limb were endangered, damage to assets such as aircraft or to personnel to shouting out a warning before firing a shot in the direction of the unwarranted individual. Having said that, we were also advised that should we fire upon the unwanted individual and missed there was also the possibility that the round went through the wire and struck an innocent civilian living in the Kampongs (villages) that were close by. Those familiar with the power of the 7.62 round will know that its hitting power was enormous. A 7.62 round fired at a 44-gallon drum filled with water and or even concrete will destroy the target. Therefore, the onus was on the soldier to ensure that he adhered to the rigid Rules of Engagement, even though it was left up to the individual to decide. Our training was at such a very high level that such matters if they did occur were always within the bounds of the Rules of engagement.

We were always kept abreast of the local situation within Malaysia and especially our own region where we were advised that communist activity was rife. Our intelligence briefings were to our knowledge always current and we were fortunate to also be briefed by the RAAF personnel whose responsibilities were for the collation of HUMINT (Human Intelligence) based on local information, political advice from the Malaysian government and that of intelligence data received from Australian authorities. The reason for this was to ensure that we as young soldiers understood well the significance of our presence and the roles we played as a deterrent to communist terrorism and/or sympathisers to their cause.

There were many times during the hot and steamy evening when we were in our barrack and/or on patrol, to hear of explosions and shots being fired in the distance. Each time we became aware of them, they were reported to the patrol commander or an entry was made by those responsible in the log books being maintained. After a time, we became used to hearing the explosions and firing in the distance and I would not say that we became complacent because we were extremely fit and so highly trained to meet any hostile matter that may have arisen that I guess looking back upon those days, we thought it was what was to be expected when in a region that was being infiltrated by communist terrorists.

Life may have been tough, but were strong, well trained, great leaders from lance Corporals to the Major responsible for the Infantry Company at the time. My deployment in 1973 was repeated again in 1978 and I must say that my earlier experience of Butterworth had not changed much in regards to the threat by communist terrorism. What is of interest is that in both deployments were under War Service conditions and that the Officer Commanding had the powers of a Commanding Officer as being the senior Army Officer on base. The likelihood of casualties was always in the back of our mind and although were advised to expect casualties for some strange reason it did not bother us. I guess in hindsight that our first aid training was superb and that we also had with us experienced soldiers who had been deployed to Vietnam. We were therefore in good hands if I may say so,

As time wore on, we began to realise that there were more reasons for us being there, reasons that we were not advised at the time. Some of those reasons are described below for anyone interested in military history.:

A. We became aware that there were extenuating circumstances surrounding the rotation of highly trained and armed troops to an overseas nation that was struggling with internal divisions caused by communist and irregular forces.

B. The nation in question was Malaysia. A time of civil unrest, uncertainty and certainly a period of ethnic animosity amongst the conglomeration of its citizens. Communist irregulars and terrorists began their trail of destruction and mayhem during the period 1969 to 1989. A time when the Vietnam war still in progress in the sixties and early seventies.

C. The Government of the time in Malaysia, was hesitant to call the internal strife a war within its borders, because the insurance companies located in the United Kingdom would not pay compensation for such acts of violence to Malaysian citizens and the nations assets.

D. The Malaysian government introduced a policy at creating a harmonious environment that included all ethnic groups, built new infrastructure, employment, housing, laws, law enforcement, education facilities, strong and stable political government and attracting international investment.

E. The creation of a viable and deterrent Police and Defence force trained by the British SAS and followed up by the New Zealand. SAS. (Special Air Service). Australia's contribution included the location of aircraft at Butterworth (along with their families) as well as an infantry company size group of highly trained and armed troop on a three-month rotational basis. This was part of the ANZUK agreement at the time involving the three nations. (Australia, United Kingdom and New Zealand. F. Political inferences, political aspirations and political double speak by consecutive governments of Australia began with the change of governments in 1972.

The government of the day wishing to keep its promises of withdrawing from the Vietnam War, did so, without compromising their agreement under the three-power agreement of ANZUK and that of the Malaysian government. The Australian government to ensure it kept its end of the bargain maintained its presence in Malaysia because of the ongoing threat of the growing threat of

communism and the uncertainty at the time. The Australian presence was certainly a deterrent. G. The Department of Defence in accordance with political influence at the time, watered down the threats to those troops deployed by renaming or using language such as calling it normal peace training, peace keeping and, in some cases, "extraordinary" training.

They were careful to avoid using language (words) such as hostile, police action, warlike and/or even hazardous in the event it attracted recognition as such. H. All troops who were deployed to Malaysia did so "Whilst on War Service" and carried live ammunition during their deployment period. The troops were provided with intelligence briefs before and during their deployment to envisage casualties, advised of their Rules of Engagement responsibilities and that loss of life could be expected. There are a number of such action reports that have mysteriously disappeared from Department of Defence archives, making it difficult for the Tribunal. However, to their credit, the Tribunal is scrolling through numerous oral and written histories of those troops who were deployed during that period.

What is of interest, is that the Malaysian government has acknowledged that a war existed within its borders, that it was battling the communists, that a treaty was made with the guerrilla leader and that medallic recognition provided was issued to its combatants. The Malaysian government had also approached the Australian Government and New Zealand governments to issue medals to veterans, but consecutive Australian governments have refused to recognise Australian troops that they were deployed to a warlike environment. The New Zealand government on the other hand took the unprecedented step of recognising its troops deployed during the same period.

It is oblivious to many that the spirit of ANZAC was lacking amongst certain corridors of the Australian Defence Department. It has been alleged that the Department of Defence found a loop hole during the war in Afghanistan and other regions where our troops were deployed. It appears that some took advantage of this by attending one day briefings, remaining overnight, near airfields and/or visiting centres far from "hostile and warlike" environments. Yet somehow and miraculously were awarded the AASM. Such practices attracted the ire of one embarrassed high-ranking officer who realised the erroneous and errant methodology being used and put a stop to it.

Although I have merely scratched the surface, there are better qualified individuals than I to present the case for recognition. Furthermore, there is a huge collection of material yet to be considered which is stored away in archives and not available to the public; which some would say, it is because of national Security, political and not in the interests of certain parties. If such material becomes public in the future, it will be far too late to make amends as most of the veterans involved would have passed away. I pay tribute to all those who have submitted their submissions to the Tribunal for their well-structured and wonderful memories of a time where the environment was hostile in nature and casualties were expected. I also pay tribute to the leadership of the day who ensured that all troops involved were in a high state of readiness and battle ready to meet any threat.

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