



## **RIFLE COMPANY BUTTERWORTH 1970 TO 1989**

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Much has been written about service at Rifle Company Butterworth in Penang Malaysia.

Much more will be revealed as time gathers its store of knowledge and is exposed to a public unaware of its true nature. But like everything in life, certain aspects are hidden from the public for reasons beyond our understanding. This article below called "Justice denied, the truth about Rifle Company Butterworth" is very well written by a former member of the Australian Defence Force who also saw service at Rifle Company Butterworth. (RCB).

There are numerous stories, yarns, some hilarious, some exhausting and others of military and government documentation that would take years and expert knowledge to troll through all the information. Still there are a handful of dedicated men and women working on such a project gathering evidence and additional material to go public as their valiant efforts to have RCB recognised as serving under warlike conditions.

For those of us who have served at Butterworth, let me tell you that life at Butterworth may have appeared as idyllic to some back home, but that is only because we were so highly trained that it did not matter what our conditions were or what rules of engagement were at the time and further still even disciplinary action for offences being considered "Whilst on War Service" did not faze us. We had managed to get an overseas posting in an exotic place of the world. Such postings were hard fought over and if you got a Guernsey it mattered little of the hardship and what we would have to put up with.

Training was extremely realistic, hard, tough, exhausting and very testing of one's inner resources and endurance. Still we always looked forward to returning back to the barracks located inside the barbed wire perimeter and to a little rest and recreation providing we were not rostered for guard duties, Ready Reaction Force or other military operations at the time. To some who had served in Vietnam, Borneo, Sarawak and Malaysia, one can understand their way of thinking that military life at Butterworth was on a lower level of perceived hostilities and danger.

Had I served in such operational areas as my seniors, I guess I would have considered Butterworth as a haven in comparison, but I did not and I was not at their level. But having said that, it would be unfair of me to say that training and operating in such an environment was not without its dangers. The truth be known, the "rules of engagement" were such that it was difficult to come to terms with what we were told and what would happen or did happen on occasions.



Being advised and counselled prior to going on patrol that should we meet up with trespassers, strays, lost, or unwanted individuals within our known perimeter, our first action was to try and identify the individual. Should the individual fail to answer, we would have to try and apprehend them using such force as necessary. Should that fail, warning shots and if required shots that may end with deadly consequences.

The rules of engagement also advised to take precautions about using such deadly force. The reason being is that should the rifle round (7.62 mm) strike the individual and go through the body, striking another individual outside the barbed wire perimeter fence who lived in the nearby kampongs (villages), we would be charged under local civilian law and possibly face the death penalty.

However being young diggers, in our prime with our officers, Senior Non Commissioned Officer and section commanders who had seen active service in a two way firing range, such matters of training did not bother us at the time. We had the utmost faith in their ability to lead us and we would follow them obediently as trained. Such was our spirit de corps, comradeship and Duty First attitude.

There were many times of boredom, some disagreements would break out which ended in punch-ups, but these always ended up in mates being mates and the disagreements quickly forgotten. Occasionally a mate would get a "Dear John Letter" from a wife, lover, girlfriend and it would send the poor bloke off on the deep end. Remember getting one and as soon as I got it I stuck it up on the Company notice board so everyone could see and read it. That was our way of coming to grips with such letters.

Platoons would take in turns to train in the nearby islands or on the mainland, while others would go further inland to an old pre-war jungle training camp called Pulada near Johor Baruh and conduct patrols and jungle training in that environment. The concept behind such patrols were to keep the men at their peak level, remain focused and continually testing their ability to endure any state and/or condition. Yes of course it was tough going and yet our training back in Australia had prepared us well for such conditions and if one took the time to reflect on our earlier training which commenced at Recruit Training Battalion followed by further raining at Infantry Centre, culminating in honing those skills at the Battalion level, it was no wonder we were considered superb in what we as Australians were able to achieve.



Yes there were bouts of fun and games, yes there were stories, fibs and yarns of blokes getting up to mischief. Yes you will hear of some horrific and some sad or sill story of some escapade of one or two individuals playing up, but in the end, it was merely their way of coping with their conditions and letting off steam. The Officers and Senior Non Commissioned Officers were well aware of this and at times turned a blind eye to many of the activities of the blokes.

What the blokes did in their own time was tempered by the hard and gruelling training that followed. I guess on reflection, a bloke got to do what a blokes got to do. Such was the way of life so far from home and any distraction from the training, boredom, flies, heat, and thirst was a welcome sight indeed. Yes even biting the heads of cane toads, eating shit sandwiches, making bets which State of Australia had the toughest blokes and other silly distractions made life bearable.

As stated earlier, there are so many stories and yarns out there, that it boggles the mind. I guess in hindsight that governments are merely just waiting for many of us to die off so that any compensation due will be denied despite the overwhelming evidence being produced and unearthed as we speak. I for one wish those response for obtaining recognition all the best for I know that they all mean well and it's for the benefit of those who have served. My advice is for those that bothered to reach the end of this article to read the brilliant article below by Russell Linwood. Acknowledgment to Paul Tyler (6 RAR) and Russell Linwood (1 RAR) for the images.



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## **JUSTICE DENIED THE TRUTH ABOUT RIFLE COMPANY BUTTERWORTH**

Russell Linwood, ASM



Pic: Section of B Coy 1 RAR inside the base Christmas 1981-1982  
Complete to first line ammunition

Australian service at Butterworth Air Base (BAB) was principally that of RAAF operations from 1950 until recently. This included participation in the warlike service during the Malayan Emergency and Konfrontasi (with Indonesia), and then support to South Vietnam (primarily medevac staging).

Other commitments under the 1971 Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA) included support to the external defence of Malaysia. Army units served there for almost the same period, in either air defence, garrisoning or close protection of vital asset roles. Today, only Army stages through, engaged in training as the once-proud major military facility undergoes urban re-development.

Most Service personnel received their appropriate recognition, but others have not. One of the most disgraceful deceits surrounded successive governments' persistent refusal to recognise warlike service during the Second Malaysian Emergency (SME) 17 June 1968 – 2 December 1989. In fact, the government, advised by the Department of Defence's Nature of Service Branch, refuses to accept there was an SME at all despite Malaysia's official history and multiple international publications to the contrary. Almost two-thirds of the RAAF's fighter-bombers were based at BAB for much of that period, the last aircraft being withdrawn in 1988.

Ground staff remained there for many years thereafter to support ongoing RAAF aircraft staging through, and other duties in general support of the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) operation of the BAB. A renewed threat to both Malaysia and its allies (ANZUK forces stationed in Malaysia/Singapore) arose following Communist successes in Vietnam. From 1968, hostilities broke out afresh with violence across the country causing the Malaysian Government to declare the SME. BAB was a major strategic asset, and close to the Thai-Malay border where much of the CT threat manifested. RMAF aircraft operated against the CTs, while co-located at BAB was the substantial RAAF presence.

Under the FPDA, the RAAF operated the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) and provided the technical control of the airfield and airspace until the RMAF was able to assume responsibility. The RAAF also continued to provide a strategic air defence capability under the FPDA. In fact, it was the backbone of the IADS. Other Australian forces were also stationed in Malaysia, primarily the 28 ANZUK Brigade, which re-located to Singapore.

From 1 November 1970, a rifle company group was detached from the Singapore –based battalion (1 and then 6 RAR) on monthly tours of duty to help protect the RAAF assets. Prime responsibility for external defence of the BAB was vested in the RMAF, total protection being a joint responsibility. This formal arrangement was based on the Army rifle company operating inside the perimeter.

One important exception was rescue and protection of RAAF families living on Penang and in the unsecured married quarter area opposite the airstrip. Malaysians guarded the perimeter and operated outside of it. At least two UK, one NZ company and an Australian gun battery also rotated through BAB on security duties until the arrival of a specially designated force to become later known as the Rifle Company Butterworth (RCB).

The security situation deteriorated markedly as numerous ex-SECRET and other documents now available clearly reveal. The Whitlam Government, elected in part on an undertaking to withdraw all forces from SE Asia (except for the RAAF at BAB which it was obliged to retain there under the FPDA), found itself in a dilemma. It was the renewed threat of Communist Terrorist (CT) attack which promoted urgent action by the Whitlam Government in early 1973.

This necessitated the Defence Committee, the highest advisory body to the Government, on 11 January 1973 to secretly recommend a solution that enabled the continued protection of vital RAAF assets including personnel and their dependents at BAB. This involved the deployment of a heavy rifle company direct from Australia under Plan Asbestos.

As for the Malayan Emergency and Konfrontasi previously, Australian Service personnel were normally accompanied by their family, including RAAF personnel during the SME. But not the RCB. These troops were sent on a clearly warlike mission, armed with live ammunition for all company weapons, clear Rules of Engagements and operational tasks. The deployment was subjected to a deception plan known to many RCB veterans as “the Training Lie”.

Despite government denials of recent claims for recognition by an advocacy group on behalf of the rifle companies sent to BAB during the SME, the Australian government deployed those companies to carry out specific warlike duties. These are enunciated in both RAAF and Army directives before written orders were issued mid-1973 to cease referring to such operational defensive tasks in favour of “training activities”.

This hard evidence, along with a large mass of formal government and military records, is now in the public domain. The “Training Lie” was a deliberate deception plan. It was, and remains, a cover up of the RCB deployment to avoid political embarrassment. As the SME dragged on, the level of threat grew, spiking in 1970 and again in 1975. The RCBs duly carried out their duties, the first being deployed direct from Australia on 1 September 1973.

This was the first of many, tasked to carry out the same protective warlike tasks as their predecessors, the rifle companies deployed from the in-country ANZUK battalion. Under Plan Asbestos, the RCB was detached from its parent unit in Australia for three month tours of duty, *under command* of Army Headquarters and then Headquarters Field Force Command for the duration of the SME.

While in-country, the RCB was always under the *operational control* of the RAAF commander at BAB. Again, formal directives from both the RAAF commander and the Army Mounting Instructions clearly list the operational tasks, the only real variation being the sleight of hand in the wording of later directives to reverse the emphasis from ‘operational tasks’ to ‘training’. In reality, the RCB was there for one reason, and the evidence amply demonstrates that.

The SME was declared over on 2 December 1989, with the signing of a Peace Accord. Subsequent RCBs ceased their warlike tasks, having successfully deterred CT attacks on BAB. RCBs now engaged in a real training role, and do so to this day. However, the “Training Lie” during the SME was exactly that. Numerous records confirm that very little training occurred with the Malaysians due to the latter being fully operationally stretched engaging the CTs for the duration of the SME.

RCB was ordered to conduct specific pre-deployment and then in-country training that was dedicated to being able to conduct their warlike tasks at BAB. RCBs were ordered not to carry out any of their own unit training until the prescribed operational training for BAB warlike tasks was completed to the RAAF commander’s satisfaction.



Pic: F1 Mirages, the primary RAAF strike fighter at BAB, a prime CT target which had to be protected.

Only when that was achieved, and Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) in place (in the numbers and time periods which varied over time) could the deployed RCB carry out any of its own training in accordance with its parent battalion commander's unit plan. Only on infrequent occasions did RCBs actually train with the Malaysians. The risk of contact with the CTs was sufficient for the requirement, even on off-base exercises, for specified individuals (usually senior NCOs and sometimes officers and section commanders, to carry a magazine of live ammunition in red-taped magazines in the event of a clash. Blanks would not have done much good. Every man in the QRF of course carried substantial live ammunition inside the wire.

Coming under the operational control of the RAAF Commander BAB, the RCB and its predecessor rifle companies clearly helped deter a CT attack on BAB. Declassified records now demonstrate numerous operational call outs at times of possible and actual CT threat, with all RCBs maintaining a QRF of a minimum size, and up to two platoons at once, depending on the level of threat. Most junior members of the RCBs will not have known this at the time; their focus was on long, boring and tedious, but very necessary, standby at one minute's notice to move in a guard room, with regular rehearsal callouts and sometimes, real ones.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, service at BAB for both Army and RAAF was recognised with the award of the Australian Service Medal, curiously, for almost the exact period of the SME, the very war the authorities claim did not occur. Since 2006, there have been many individual and five major group submissions to have service during the SME recognised as warlike, deserving of the Australian Active Service Medal and associated benefits.

It is unfortunate that some RCB veterans, perhaps due to the success of the deception plan, do not know to this day that they faced constant danger from the CTs, with some describing their service at BAB in unfortunate terms. However, the great majority, now able to avail themselves of the hard evidence, rightfully regard their service as "warlike".

The evidence is clear. These troops deserve the same recognition as those who served at Ubon RAAF base and seven other operational theatres where service recognition has been deservedly upgraded, despite the threat and other criteria sometimes being less “warlike” than at BAB. RAAF, who were the prime reason for RCB being there at all, have their own story to tell and possibly a claim to make.

For RCB, there is no doubt; the defensive tasks, the rules of engagement, live ammunition and a real enemy who might have attacked at any time, made their service “warlike”. Why then, given the truth is now open to all, is justice still denied? Perhaps a transparent and independent re-examination of the hard evidence will see the Diggers no longer denied.

**Notes on author:** *Russell Linwood was Officer Commanding B Coy 1 RAR at BAB from Nov 81-Feb 82. He stills serves in the Standby Reserve as a military historian and has several books and other publications to his credit. He was awarded both the Ambulance Service Medal (ASM) and the Centenary Medal in 2003 for his services to Ambulance. His research - and others' - into the RCB story has generated a substantial database of evidence which forms the basis of an upcoming book on this neglected piece of Australia's military history.* <C:\Users\Russell Linwood\Documents\AARussell\AAAAArmy\RCB\20160520 RCB Article - M&BVA.doc>