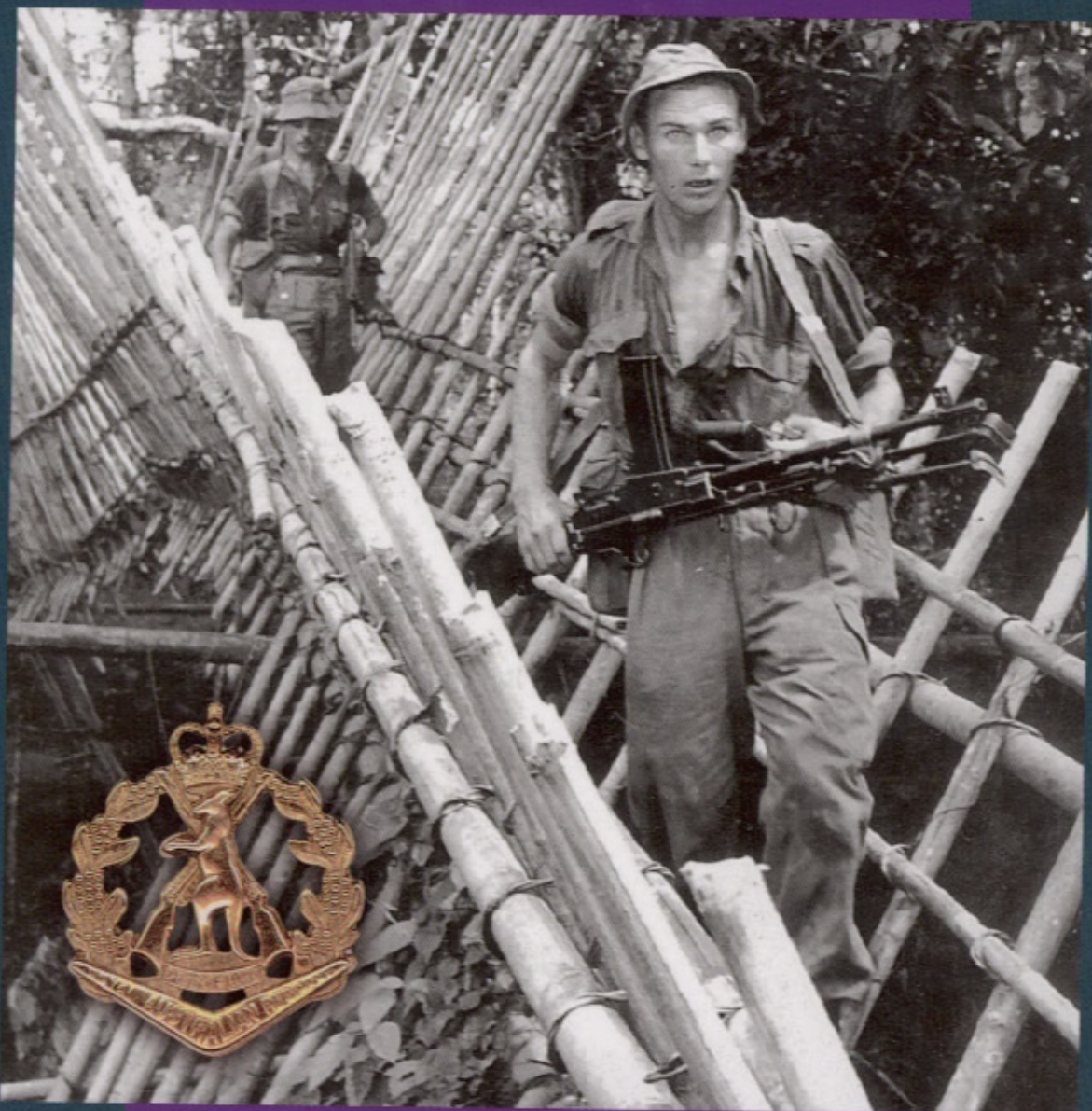


Our
SECRET WAR

THE 4th BATTALION THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT

DEFENDING MALAYSIA AGAINST
INDONESIAN CONFRONTATION, 1965-1967



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PROLOGUE

The year was 1965. The moon shone brilliantly on the scattered mallee of a cattle property near Renmark, in South Australia. It was a crystal clear June night, with frost crackling on the grass, as a section of a rifle platoon shivered in the near zero temperature, waiting for the live firing ambush exercise to break. Their thin green cotton shirts offered little warmth, for the Australian Army in 1965 provided no cold weather clothing to a battalion training for counter revolutionary warfare in South East Asia. In the next few weeks, the platoon would participate in the battalion's final exercise in the hills east of Adelaide, in weather conditions even more severe, just prior to departing in September with the unit's advance company to relieve 3RAR for service with the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (BCFESR), based in Terendak Garrison in the Malaysian state of Malacca.

10 Platoon had come together early in 1964, part of the first Australian Regular Army infantry battalion to be raised on Australian soil. The 4th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (4RAR) was raised at Woodside in the Adelaide hills, specifically for service in Malaysia. Over the next seven years, the battalion would fight against the Indonesians in Borneo and serve two tours in South Viet Nam, with the distinction in both campaigns of being the last Australian combat element engaged. Many of the soldiers who joined the battalion in Woodside remained with 4 RAR for its three operational tours, providing continuity rare for the Australian Army.

This is the story of raising and preparing an infantry battalion for its strategic reserve role, unpublicised in Australia, and its participation in Australia's most unrecognised and secret war, the campaign to defend the newly established Malaysia against Confrontation by Indonesia. Very little publicity was given to the role of Australian servicemen taking part in hostilities against our nearest neighbour. The secret nature of some of these operations meant that, until 1996, no participant was free to write about the CLARET operations, in which infantry and Special Air Service patrols penetrated into Indonesian territory, gaining intelligence on Indonesian dispositions and deterring Indonesian operations against Malaysia. International diplomacy and propaganda played down the role taken by the British, Australian and New Zealand forces in Confrontation - the aim was to give the impression that Malaysia was defending itself against an international bully, with just a little help from its allies. Press releases for the campaign usually stressed the part played by the Malaysian forces: a successful contact involving British Commonwealth troops was usually written up as 'security forces', without revealing the national identity of the troops involved.

In Australia, the campaign being fought by Australian servicemen in Malaysia was overshadowed by the despatch of troops to South Viet Nam and the introduction of conscription for overseas service for the first time in Australia's history. The media gave scant attention to a campaign that was being deliberately played down by the participants. To this day, Australians remain generally unaware not only that Confrontation involved Australian troops, but of the very secretive nature of the campaign.

The soldiers who participated in this secret campaign deserve to have their story told to the Australian people. This book is about just one of the units involved.

CHAPTER 1

THE BATTALION IS BORN

4RAR was born as a practical solution to an organisational problem facing the Australian Army.

Following the conflict in Korea, the Australian Government of the day, along with many others in the Western bloc, was apprehensive about the spread of international communism. Australia already had air force units stationed with the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (BCFESR) in what was then Malaya, a British colonial administration consisting of two Crown Colonies (Penang and Malacca) and nine States ruled by Malay sultans. The Royal Australian Air Force had squadrons based in Malaya as part of BCFESR, while Royal Australian Navy ships stationed in Singapore, a separate British Crown Colony, served with the naval component of the BCFESR. In 1955, the Australian Government committed ground troops to BCFESR. The principal role of the BCFESR was commitment to the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), an anti-communist pact entered into by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Thailand and the Phillipines.

In 1955, Malaya was in the throes of the Emergency, operations against an armed insurrection by the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA), a communist movement led by one Chin Peng. Chin Peng had been decorated by the British for his leadership of the MRLA's predecessor, the Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA), during the Second World War. The MPAJA had been a communist-based guerilla army which had operated against the Japanese occupiers and had been supplied with arms and advisers by the British. After the liberation of Malaya, the MPAJA did not surrender its British-supplied arms but secreted them in the jungle, ready for the inevitable revolution. From 1948, Chin Peng led a force which peaked at about ten thousand guerillas, or bandits as British propaganda preferred to call them, in an armed struggle to free Malaya from its colonial rule.¹ This cause suffered its political demise when the British in 1957 handed over independence to the Federation of Malaya, although the communists persisted with their struggle well past the official end to the Emergency in August 1960.

The first Australian ground troops, a force of 1300 men built around an infantry battalion and a field artillery battery, were based in North Malaya, where the guerillas were at their strongest and most persistent. The Australian force was authorised to take part in the military campaign against the MRLA, a campaign that was still staggering along after the first battalion, 2RAR, was relieved by 3RAR in 1957. The rotation of the three regular infantry battalions of the Australian Army through BCFESR continued every two years, until 1963, when 3RAR once again relieved 2RAR. By this time, the force was located in the new garrison at Terendak, on the coastline of Malacca, a small, economically backward state on the Straits of Malacca separating the Malay Peninsula from the large Indonesian island of Sumatra. Terendak had been selected as the site of the

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new garrison largely on the basis of the boost it would give to the economy of Malacca, which lacked the resources of the other Malayan states. In addition to the direct and indirect employment of thousands of locals in support of the garrison, the official and private spending of the garrison would pour millions of dollars annually into the local economy.

The Australian battalion in Malaya was organised on a structure similar to the British and New Zealand battalions which also served in 28 Commonwealth Independent Infantry Brigade (28 Comwel Bde), the major ground element of the BCFESR. In the jargon of the day, the battalion structure was called Tropical Establishment (TE). A TE battalion was on light scales of vehicles and equipment and numbered around 750 all ranks. It had four rifle companies, each of three rifle platoons of one officer and thirty three men, although during the Emergency, one rifle company had been restricted to a small cadre and served as a training company. The battalion also had a Support Company, which initially had a signals platoon, a machine gun platoon equipped with Vickers medium machine guns, a mortar platoon equipped with six three-inch mortars, and an assault pioneer platoon. The latter was structured similar to a rifle platoon but was trained to undertake simple field engineering tasks. By 1961, the Machine Gun Platoon had been disbanded when the Australian Army replaced the Vickers and the Bren light machine gun with the GPMG M60 General Purpose Machine Gun. Support Company also included an Anti-tank Platoon, which in 1961 was equipped with 120 mm recoilless anti-tank weapons for its conventional war role, but for its counter-insurgency mission during the Emergency, the platoon had been organised as a Tracker Platoon, usually with two teams each with tracker dogs and attached Iban visual trackers.

The Ibans (or Sea Dyaks) were tribal forest dwellers, animists from the jungles of Sarawak on the large island of Borneo. They had a reputation as fierce headhunters before the calming influence of British law put an end to that pastime. During the Emergency, they were enlisted into the British Army and formed a unit called the Sarawak Rangers, which provided trackers to all British Commonwealth infantry units and also provided tracking instructors to the British Army Jungle Warfare School at Kota Tinggi, in Johore State, near Singapore. After the formation of Malaysia, this unit was transferred to the Malaysian Army and became a Regular infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion Malaysian Rangers (1 Renjer). The Ibans' connection with the Australian Army was renewed during Confrontation, when these sturdy little jungle people provided Border Scouts (contract trackers) during operations in Borneo in 1965 and 1966.

After the Malayan Emergency had officially ended, the three infantry battalions of 28 Comwel Bde at Terendak, one each from the United Kingdom, Australian and New Zealand, had spent most of the tours training for conventional warfare, preparing for the Strategic Reserve's major commitment. This was to provide the British Commonwealth's first ground troops for the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) plans for the defence of the region against Chinese communist aggression, specifically the defence of Thailand. This mission for the Australian forces, like the RAAF commitment at Ubon in Thailand, was given very little publicity in Australia. To liven up their tour, each Australian