



Operation Crown

Malacca

Bau

Chapter One

The Raising of 2 Field Troop RAE

The Beginning

In the early 1950s there was international concern about the possibility of Communism spreading in Southeast Asia. As a result, Australia, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United States established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) alliance in 1954 under the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty.

The formation of SEATO was followed in 1955 by an agreement between UK, NZ and Australia to establish a Far East Strategic Reserve in Penang on the west coast of Malaysia. Its function was to counter Communist aggression in Southeast Asia and also to operate against the Communist Terrorists in Malaya. Australia provided, in addition to an engineer troop, an infantry battalion, a battery of artillery, a contingent of signals and other support elements as part of 28 Commonwealth Brigade. A squadron of Sabre jet fighters was based at Butterworth, and there were sundry other military personnel in Singapore.



Troop photo taken on the 11 Indep Field Sqn parade ground shortly before the deployment to Sarawak in April 1965. (Wong Photographer)

The Australian Government had strongly supported the formation of the Federated States of Malaysia and, with a contribution to the Far East Strategic Reserve, it was also providing a tangible means of supporting the fledgling state against the open hostility displayed by Indonesia. It was felt that by guaranteeing Malaysia's sovereignty, Australia was also guaranteeing its own strategic interests in the region.

The inaugural Australian engineer contribution to the Far East Strategic Reserve, 4 Troop RAE, was raised at Casula in 1955 and came under command of 11 Independent Field Squadron, RE (11 Indep Field Sqn) in Penang as part of 28 Commonwealth Brigade. The squadron had a proud history of significant military involvement dating back to the late 18th Century including deployments to the West Indies, Crimean War, Indian Mutiny, Egypt and Sudan, including the relief of Mafeking, and the first and second world wars.

The advance party to Malaya of 4 Troop was led by Lieutenant Peter Gratton, who subsequently rose to Chief of the General Staff and then Chief of Defence Force. In 1957, 2 Troop from 7 Indep Field Sqn replaced 4 Troop, and in 1959 it was in turn replaced by 1 Troop of the squadron. Another 4 Troop was raised, in 1961, by 1 Field Sqn and, after a brief time at Butterworth and a deployment to Borneo, it moved to new facilities at Terendak, 12 miles north of Malacca. 1 Field Sqn was also subsequently



Sprts Trevor Reece, Bob McDonald, Cpl Snow Wilson and unknown. Drilling before blasting, Rylstone area mid-1963.

responsible for raising 2 Troop, the subject of this book. Surprisingly, the replacement troop in 1965 was also called 2 Troop and subsequent replacements kept that title. With the withdrawal of British troops from Malaysia in 1970, 11 Indep Field Sqn departed and left 2 Troop in support of the Australian battalion. In September 2 Troop was disbanded and some members were absorbed by the recently-created 9 Field Sqn. So ended 15 years of continuous service by an Australian field engineer troop within 11 Indep Field Sqn, RE. Subsequently, the British left a battalion group at Terendak and 9 Field Sqn gained a British field troop under command. The Squadron later became 28 ANZUK Field Sqn and, later again, 28 Commonwealth Brigade became 28 ANZUK Brigade.

The beginning for 2 Field Troop RAE (1963-1965) occurred in early 1963 when orders were raised for 1 Field Sqn to form an engineer troop to deploy to Malaya for a two-year period, replacing 4 Troop, which was nearing the end of its tour of duty. It was to be an 'accompanied' posting, married personnel could take their wives and children, so competition for a position, in what was considered to be a prize posting, was fierce.

The troop was formed under the leadership of Lieutenant Barry Lennon, and marched into 1 Field Sqn at Casula on the 29 May. 1 Field Sqn provided the administration, stores, transport, plant and other support that 2 Troop would require until its departure. At the time the Officer Commanding (OC) 1 Field Sqn was Major D J Binney. He was replaced by Major I R Way shortly after 2 Troop's arrival. The bulk of 2 Troop's members came from 1 Field Sqn and from 7 Field Sqn in Enoggera, Queensland, with four members from 20 Field Park Sqn (Plant) at Casula. It was Barry Lennon's job to mould sappers from these various units into a cohesive troop and, to this end, much time was spent in the Rylstone-Gospers area of the Blue Mountains carrying out typical engineer tasks including road and fire trail construction, improvised bridging, and drilling and blasting. A week-long exercise in the rugged Kangaroo Valley near Moss Vale covered some basic weapons training and ambush drills although, given the wet and near-freezing conditions, the troop members could have been forgiven for thinking they were preparing for a posting to anywhere but the tropics.

In hindsight, it seems that, apart from honing engineering skills, preparation for deployment into a region like Malaya was not as thorough as it could have been: there was insufficient weapons training and no period of training at the Jungle Warfare Centre at Canungra in Queensland. During this period, Australian troops were generally deployed with little specialist training for the area in which they were to operate.

In early September, Sapper Sam Scales and another sapper were withdrawn from the troop and were replaced by Sappers Lindsay 'Nipper' Simpson and Dave Wicks from 1 Field Sqn. By late October 1963 2 Troop was fit and rearing to go. Inoculations were brought up to date and the last of the paperwork completed. The troop members were given pre-embarkation leave to say farewell to family and friends, then assembled once more at 1 Field Sqn several days before departure. One of the last tasks before departure for those who were interested and were over 21 years of age was to cast an absentee vote in the forthcoming Federal election. On departure, the troop was 46 strong, and was accompanied by 14 wives and 22 children.



Studebaker 6x6 fitted with tipping body and canopy. Belonging to 1 Field Sqn, it was on loan to 2 Troop.