

# Destination: Malaya

David Wicks and Simon Wilson

A History of 2 Field Troop Royal Australian Engineers 1963–1965

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*Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill made low.  
The crooked roads shall become straight,  
the rough ways smooth.*

*Luke 3:5*

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## Preface

This book covers a two-year period in the service of 2 Field Troop Royal Australian Engineers as a sub-unit of 11 Indep Field Sqn Royal Engineers. From 1963 to 1965 the Troop served on the Malay Peninsula, Thailand and Sarawak.

This was an active period of training and operations, which prepared many of the troop members in a very practical manner for subsequent service in South Vietnam and other countries.

Not only are details of the practical aspects of military engineering described, but there are also descriptions of the social aspects of living in Southeast Asia and anecdotes of events that have become akin to folk law. Accompanied families were an important part of life in Malaya and so there are stories about their experiences in Malacca.

Although this book is primarily directed towards the former members of the Troop, the professional and social aspects narrated provide a unique perspective on the life of a soldier during a period of Indonesian Confrontation and on the tensions associated with countering the potential spread of Communism in Southeast Asia.



*Cpl John Bending, Sprs Alan Morris, Bill Jones and Tom Abberfield*



**Foreword**  
**from**

**His Excellency Lieutenant General John M Sanderson, AC, RAE (Retd)**  
**Governor of Western Australia 2000 -**  
**Chief of Army 1995-8**

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This book is going to invoke many happy memories for the Sappers who served in the Royal Australian Engineers throughout the 1960s and early 1970s – particularly those who were fortunate enough to join the Australian contingent based at Terendak as part of the British Far East Land Forces (FARELF).

I can recall a sense of envy when the 2nd Field Troop of 1 Field Squadron was raised to FARELF establishment to head off on what most of us thought was the only foreseeable military adventure for young Australian servicemen at that time. Little did most of us realise that we would also find ourselves on British rations with the meat allowance before much time had elapsed.

Before 2 Troop's tour of duty in South East Asia was completed in 1965 the Australian Army had become engaged in conflicts in both Malaysia and South Vietnam and we were all confronted with opportunities for adventure. During Confrontation most Sappers serving at the time were going to have some experience of service in Asia. 2 Troop itself was to be a part of this expanded effort, with operational deployments to Thailand and Sarawak.

When 2 Troop journeyed back to Australia it returned to a vastly expanded and changing Army. It would never really be the same again. Members of the Troop were to serve with many other units in equally exciting places, and to make their professional contribution to the expanded Army. But what should be of great interest to all students of the military ethos is the fact that, despite its members having many different and stimulating experiences, the two years from 1963 to 1965 has bound them together in a spirit of camaraderie that has endured now for four decades.

A part of the reason for this must be due to the fact that it was an accompanied tour, ensuring that it was a total family experience as well as a professional military journey. Being part of a larger allied unit and formation would also have something to do with the esprit of the time and the strong memories it has left. 2 Troop was always on its mettle to prove that it was better than the Brits (which it was), making each achievement a triumph in some way.

Produced by the 2 Field Troop RAE (1963-1965) Association, this book does justice to that memory. It is also timely in that it captures the precious memories before they grow dim, or virtual! It is both interesting and stimulating and will, I am sure, be a major contribution to the many reunions to come. I congratulate the authors for their success in capturing the spirit of an experience shared by a select group of the RAE family and a job well done.



**Governor**



The members of 2 Field Troop RAE (1963-1965) Association

greatly appreciate the financial support for this

publication from the Corps Committee of the

Royal Australian Engineers.

## Acknowledgements

When 2 Field Troop RAE deployed to Malaya in 1963 many of the members were accompanied by their families. An attempt has been made throughout this book to recognise the contribution made by these 'associate' members. For the wives and children it must have been a difficult and, at times, lonely posting in a foreign country, far from the support of family and friends, yet they have done their families and the Troop proud.

Also, throughout the book there is mention made of events unrelated to 2 Troop. These events have been introduced in an effort to fix the history of the Troop in relation to the world events of that period. Imperial units of measurement were used in 1963-65 and so they have been retained in the text.

Although the Federated States of Malaysia came into existence shortly before 2 Troop's deployment to the region, the posting was generally known as Malaya, rather than Malaysia, and both the title and text throughout the book reflect this terminology.

This book could not have been written without the help of a great many people. We express our appreciation to the friendly and helpful staff at the Mitchell Library in Sydney and the National Library in Canberra, David Sibley, editor of Army The Soldier's Newspaper, and all the troop members for their contributions and input. In addition, special mention needs to be made of a number of people: Barry Lennon, for his clear and concise advice at the very beginning of the project, and continued valuable input throughout its development; Dave Wood and Bill Jones for their countless hours spent in consultation on all topics, and their assistance with endless research – the book would not have been finished without your selfless contributions; Alan Hodges, not only for considerable material content, continuous support and encouragement, but also for his editing skills, taking a fairly ordinary document and turning it into a manuscript fit for publication; proof reader extraordinaire, Beryl Hodges, thanks Beryl; and Alan's friend Bill Laing of Spectrum Graphics in Canberra, who donated his valuable time and considerable expertise, and that of his staff, to produce the finished product. Just saying thanks hardly seems adequate, Bill – perhaps we could make you an honorary 2 Troop Sapper.

Finally, every care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of all material contained within the book and if there are errors or omissions they are entirely the fault of the authors.

*David Wicks and Simon Wilson*

*August 2003*

## Abbreviations and Glossary

ADF	Australian Defence Force
ANZUK	Combined Australian, New Zealand and UK Force
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier
ASCO	Australian Services Canteen Organisation
CB	Confined to Barracks (a form of punishment)
Const	Construction
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers
FAMTO	First Aid Mechanical Transport Outfit
FARELF	Far East Land Forces
FE	Field Engineer
GPMG	General Purpose Machine Gun
MO	Medical Officer
NAAFI	Navy Army and Air Force Institution
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
OC	Officer Commanding
OR	Other Rank (Sapper etc.)
PT	Physical Training
QM	Quarter Master
RAE	Royal Australian Engineer
RAOC	Royal Army Ordnance Corps (British)
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps (British)
RE	Royal Engineer
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SEATO	Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation
SLR	Self-Loading Rifle
SMG	Sub-Machine Gun
SQMS	Squadron Quarter Master Sergeant
SPR	Sapper
SSM	Squadron Sergeant Major
Amah	Female domestic servant

Dhobi Wallah	Laundry boy (or girl)
Dyak	Dyak is the name applied to aboriginal inhabitants of the island of Borneo, particularly to the peoples of the interior of the state of Sarawak. The Dyak are divided into six groups including Ibans.
Garter Flash	Elastic garter used to keep hose tops in position with small attached flag in Engineer red and blue Corps colours.
Gollock	British Army issue machete.
Hose Tops	Long sock without a foot. Used in conjunction with puttees and garter flashes.
Hutchie	Lightweight one- or two-man shelter. Sometimes called a 'Donga'.
Iban	The Ibans, also known as Sea Dyaks, are the only Dyak group that inhabits coastal areas.
Kampong	Native village.
Laterite	A high-iron clay and gravel deposit suitable for use in road and airfield construction.
Padang	Open space, village common, sports oval.
Panji	Stakes set in holes or under water as anti-personnel traps.
Parang	Malay machete of variable design and shape.
Puttees	A strip of woollen cloth wound around the top of the boot and ankle for protection and support.