

Confrontation Develops



Indonesia confronted Malaysia,
who was supported by Britain,
Australia and New Zealand
1962-66



CONFRONTATION DEVELOPS

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Phase Two – Supporting the Army

In 1963, as the army built up its garrisons and forward bases along the rivers and strategic points inland in Sarawak, the coastal minesweepers began to patrol the inshore waters of both the east and west coasts of Borneo and upstream via the major rivers, reaching far inland to towns such as Sibul, Kapit, Kuching and Lundu, some over 100 miles from the sea.

The sweepers ferried troops and stores to these isolated garrisons, prompting one Naval Officer to observe "we sometimes think that the Army imagines that we exist to transport them. I suppose from a soldier's outlook this is understandable and they are quite right in thinking we are the only safe, effective and fast means of moving sizeable bodies of troops operationally in Borneo." It was found that up to 200 troops could be crammed onto a coastal for short passages in calm waters although passenger comfort left a lot to be desired.

In the best traditions of the Royal Navy, the coastals also showed the flag in small towns and village communities along the rivers. The conventional cocktail party for the mayor and local dignitaries may not have been practicable but commanding officers were at pains to meet local government officials and village headmen while ships' companies excelled in holding parties for local children.

There were some interesting cultural exchanges as sailors received invitations to visit Iban tribal longhouses deep in the jungle [photographs]. These "hearts and minds" activities were reminiscent of the counter-insurgency tactics employed to combat communist infiltration in peninsula Malaya ten years earlier and succeeded in persuading isolated communities that the British made better friends than the Indonesian raiding parties. Some of these visits also produced useful military intelligence about movements of insurgents and their Indonesian supporters.

Typical of this support to the army was an incident in February 1963 when four minesweepers made a rendezvous with HMS ALBION off the coast of Sarawak. The commando carrier transferred one hundred Gurkha soldiers to each sweeper for transport to various forward bases upriver. The troops had to squat on the upper decks as there was insufficient room for them all below. After a six-hour passage, HMS FISKERTON arrived at Serikei and disembarked her troops. Thirty minutes later, she was on her way again to refuel and participate in another lift of troops.

Similarly, a lone CMS sometimes acted as an off-shore marker, pointing the way for Wessex troop carrying helicopters making a landfall on a coastline devoid of features to assist navigation.

The rivers, too, posed some interesting challenges to navigation. They were often deep and fast-flowing and carried considerable debris, particularly during the monsoon season. Waterlogged tree trunks, some forty feet long and six foot in diameter, hurtling downstream at five knots made even a night alongside the town

jetty quite hair raising! Sometimes the jetty in small towns did not boast conventional bollards and more than one sweeper had to carry head and stern ropes to convenient trees on the riverbank. [photo FISKERTON at Lundu]

The submerged teak logs were also met at sea, where they did not show on radar and were usually not visible until collision became inevitable. Several of the sweepers suffered damage to the underwater glass fibre sheathing as a result of log strike. The ominous 'clunk' in the middle watch invariably incurred the CO's wrath, not to mention apprehension of those asleep in the mess deck inboard of the point of collision.

In the waters of the state of Sabah off the north and eastern coasts of Borneo, a new menace appeared during 1963 and 1964. For many years these waters had been the focus for a lucrative barter trade centred on the small port of Tawau, close to the border with Indonesia. Here, traders in smuggled cigarettes from the Philippines met entrepreneurs from Indonesia with cargoes of raw sheet rubber and copra (dried coconut husks). Serious quantities of gold were also traded in both directions with the canny middlemen of Tawau taking a commission on the deals. Regrettably, this lucrative commerce also attracted the attention of pirates who would attack a lonely kumpit (a type of motorised junk without masts), killing the crew and making off with the craft and cargo. Sometimes the pirates were emboldened to attack villages on the outlying islands, seizing food and merchandise and brutalising any villagers who resisted.

Prior to Confrontation, the Royal Navy had responded periodically to requests for assistance from the North Borneo government when outbreaks of piracy became particularly rife. A couple of minesweepers or a smaller frigate (Bays and Black Swans from the Third Frigate Squadron) were tasked to assist the maritime police with operations to capture or deter the pirates.

With the onset of Confrontation, it was realised that these lonely and often, lawless, shores were now potentially open to infiltration by Indonesian forces. This resulted in the Inshore Flotilla commencing counter-infiltration patrols around Darval Bay and Tawau close to the Indonesian border.

Tawau became a major point for the entry of troops and equipment to create and maintain a line of forts along the border with Indonesia. Even sailors from aircraft carriers found themselves landing stores and being invited to go up country by their former military passengers.

An observation point was established at Nanukan Island, a small island in a bay literally on the border where Indonesian and British observers watched each other and recorded the movements of ships and personnel. A coastal minesweeper was frequently stationed at the observation point to provide a little show of strength. Usually, this was a quiet billet although HMS MARYTON found herself under fire from a shore battery on one occasion.

Offshore patrols now had two aims: to deter piracy and to prevent infiltration. The tactics for these patrols were reminiscent of those employed in the mid-1950s off Cyprus, i.e. a line of patrol craft within visual range of each other with radar-equipped ships at either end and all linked by short wave radio, would make a sweep in line

abreast. In this manner, they covered a swathe of sea up to ten miles wide, intercepting and boarding any craft encountered.

The sweepers, usually operating in pairs and often supported by landing craft and police launches, intercepted suspicious craft, usually kumpits capable of carrying about 15 tons of dry cargo. The vessels were searched for contraband or suspicious persons and, if any were found, handed over to the civil authority for closer examination. Coastal traders did not carry the type of papers such as manifests of loading which might be looked for on ocean-going cargo ships. Boarding parties therefore had to be alert to suspicious circumstances such as hidden weapons, ammunition or overloaded cargo, which might indicate the proceeds of piracy.

It has to be acknowledged that the increase in maritime patrolling had an adverse effect on the barter trade. Much of the business of the traders was on the shady side of commerce. They had no wish to have their affairs and cargoes, legitimate or otherwise, inspected by the Royal Navy so many just ceased trading for the duration. Ashore, the merchants, mainly Chinese entrepreneurs, switched their markets to supplying the army on order to maintain their cash flows.

Occasionally, the intercepted craft would attempt to run or out-manoeuvre the boarders and this began to demonstrate a weakness in using coastal minesweepers for patrol work. This became a serious issue as the conflict moved to the waters off Singapore in the following two years.

The first problem was speed; tobacco smugglers from the Philippines tended to use prahaus. These were sea-going open craft thirty to forty feet long and six to eight foot beam, often powered by three large outboard engines, giving them speeds in excess of 30 knots. When fleeing, presenting a small stern and a jinking target, these vessels proved very difficult to close at the coastal minesweepers' best speed of about 15 knots.

The second issue concerned the guns mounted on the coastals which were unable to traverse fast enough to track a fast-moving prahau. It was also found that the 40 mm Bofors (mounted on the forecastle) and 20 mm Oerlikons (mounted on the deckhouse) could not depress sufficiently to engage targets at ranges closer than about 500 yards.

Naval improvisation came to the fore and Bren guns mounted on the bridge wings and waist provided some of the answer. Later, a Vickers medium machine gun would be mounted right forward, firing through the bull ring. The gunner, lying prone between the anchor cables, had a thoroughly uncomfortable ride as the ship weaved from side to side at high speed.

DUFTON, PENSTON and LANTON of the 8th MCM Squadron were based in Hong Kong to help control illegal immigration. In July 1964, they joined the patrols on the east coast of Borneo and carried out repeated patrols until July 1966. In due course, they were joined by HM Australian Ships TEAL, GULL, HAWK and SNIPE (formerly HM Ships JACKTON, SWANSTON, SOMERLAYTON and ALCASTON, respectively) of the Royal Australian Navy's 16th MCM Squadron.

Tactical control of the 6th, 8th and 16th MCM Squadrons was exercised by Captain Inshore Flotilla in the refitted HMS MANXMAN, which had taken over from HMS WOODBRIDGE HAVEN as Forward Support Ship for the Inshore Flotilla in July 1963.

For over a year the ships of the Inshore Flotilla engaged a series of deterrent patrols off both east and west coasts of Borneo, stopping and searching hundreds of kumpits and kotaks (a roofed launch, often with a powerful inboard engine, favoured by Indonesian fishermen). Apart from the occasional chase and arrest of suspect craft, there with little result or excitement. The routine of these patrols might be relieved by a visit to a small port to 'show the flag' or, on rare occasions, a much appreciated banyan (picnic) on an isolated tropical island, which could have come straight out of the pages of Robinson Crusoe.

Phase Three – Indonesian raids into Peninsular Malaya and action off East Coast of Borneo

The Australian reinforcements arrived at just the right time because, in July 1964, the tempo of the undeclared war suddenly increased with landings of Indonesian forces in the state of Johore on the Malayan peninsula. These landings took place by boat at Pontian Kechil on the west coast and by parachute drop inland at Labis.

Patrols in the Malacca Straits and off Singapore were added to those off Borneo and the relatively young forces of the Royal Malaysian Navy (Tentera Laut Di Raja) and of the Singapore Defence Force added their resources to the defence of their coastal waters.

In August 1964, HMS MARYTON (Lt Cdr D.Holder RN) left Singapore Naval Base destined for a six-week patrol off Tawau. Off Labuan, where she was calling to refuel, she struck one of the huge waterlogged tree trunks mentioned earlier, badly damaging her port screw and sheathing. This forced her to return on one engine to Singapore where she was docked in record time. After undergoing a screw change and the replacement of 300 square feet of sheathing, she was heading for Labuan again, all within thirty-six hours!

Shortly after entering her assigned patrol area south of Tawau and close to the Indonesian border, MARYTON anchored for the evening to observe local shipping. She came under fire from an Indonesian shore battery. Fortunately the fall of shot was short but MARYTON was allowed neither to enter Indonesian territorial waters nor to return fire, so she hurriedly parted her anchor cable and moved further out of range.

On 16 November 1964, the pace of Confrontation stepped up again when a routine inspection of a prahau off Singapore by HMS FISKERTON turned into a brief but bloody engagement. Three Indonesians sought to engage the sweeper with grenades and sub-machine guns at point blank range. An alert Officer of the Watch and Coxswain killed all three before any serious damage was inflicted. One body was recovered and handed over to the Marine Police, together with hand grenades and a Sten gun taken from the prahau.

During succeeding weeks, similarly deadly games of 'cat and mouse' were played out in the dark of night among the reefs stretching from Horsburgh Light to the east of Singapore to the low-lying islands and mangrove swamps which line the southern shores of the state of Johore on the Malay peninsula. To underline the hazards to navigation in these conditions, it should be recalled that TONs were equipped with simple short range navigational radar and had neither an operations room nor an automated plot. Commanding Officers had to rely on a mental picture of the tactical situation, backed up by whatever fixes or dead reckoning the Navigator could pencil on the chart, very much in the style of corvettes in the North Atlantic in the early 1940s!

The close-contact night time engagements could be dangerous. Interceptions were preferably carried out by two ships, often a TON supported by an armed launch of the Royal Malaysian Navy, Singapore Defence Force or Maritime Police. Pursuers and their quarry often manoeuvred at high speed in congested waterways, sometimes up to the outer anchorage of Singapore harbour. The risks of collision or collateral damage caused by enthusiastic machine gunners to innocent merchant shipping transiting the Singapore Straits, one of the most heavily utilised waterways in the world, would appal a marine insurer.

On 6 December 1964, HMAS TEAL exchanged fire with a boatload of infiltrators in Singapore waters and captured three Indonesian soldiers, including an officer. A week later, she intercepted two more craft. In a brief engagement, she killed three Indonesians and captured a further four, one of whom turned out to be an Indonesian Marine Officer. The ship also seized a large quantity of explosives.

The pace and seriousness of incursions may be judged from an incident at One Fathom Bank on Christmas Eve, 1964. The frigate HMS AJAX intercepted sixty-one infiltrators in an armed Indonesian customs cutter and ten hi-jacked Malaysian fishing boats en route to a beach in Selangor, well into the Malacca Straits.

Attempts at sabotage raids continued into 1965; forty four Indonesian Police and "volunteers" landed east of Kota Tinggi and eighty infiltrators in two groups landed in March. The local populace alerted the security forces who killed or captured all members of both groups. On 13 March, HMAS HAWK, patrolling near Raffles Light close to the entrance to Singapore roadstead, was bracketed by fire from an Indonesian shore battery. Two nights later, she intercepted a sampan carrying five Indonesian saboteurs. The determination of these attempts may be judged from an attack on a French merchant ship being piloted into Singapore's western anchorage. A grenade bounced off the ship's hull and exploded in the attacking sampan.

It became apparent that more patrol craft were needed to maintain control of the seaways so PICTON, INVERMORISTON, LULLINGTON and THANKERTON were brought forward from Singapore where they had been 'arked' in reserve. The seaward defence boats TILFORD and GREATFORD were shipped from England as deck cargo. All six ships were manned by personnel transferred from the 2nd MCM Squadron based at Port Edgar in Scotland. Commissioned as the 11th MCM Squadron in January 1965, they were soon in hot action. By 25 March, a prolonged series of related engagements had developed off the south east coast of Johore when several groups of Indonesian invaders made determined bids to link up with a small guerrilla force that had landed earlier in East Johore.

The first contact came with HMS PUNCHESTON's interception of a thirty-five foot prahau carrying fifteen heavily-armed men. The vessel refused to stop when challenged and was pursued by PUNCHESTON at high speed for twenty minutes. One Indonesian was killed in the subsequent exchanges of fire and the remaining fourteen were captured.

Within hours, a few miles to the south, MARYTON and INVERMORISTON intercepted another heavily armed Indonesian launch en route to the Malaysian coast. This boat also refused to stop when challenged and opened fire with mortars, machine guns and rifles. A fierce fight ensued in almost total darkness as the two sweepers attempted to corner the invader in a pincer manoeuvre and it was an hour before the invading craft sank. Five Indonesians were recovered from the sea and at least six were believed to have drowned.

The impact of machine gun fire weakened the hulls of the invading craft and frequently set fire to the fuel tanks of their outboard engines. The invaders carried spare tanks for their return journey; at their closest point, the straits between Singapore and the Indonesian islands of the Riau Archipelago are only 20 miles wide.

MARYTON had three sailors wounded, fortunately none seriously, when Indonesian mortar bombs bounced off the ship and exploded alongside without causing much damage. The heavy Indonesian fire resulted in over fifty bullet holes to the wheelhouse and bridge structures of both ships.

MARYTON's Commanding Officer commented on the difficulties in engaging small, fast moving targets at close range and also highlighted the problems for a coastal of illuminating a target at night. Attempts to use the ten-inch signal lamp as a searchlight did little more than attract counter fire. The expedient of firing illuminating flares from a hand-held 2 inch mortar (intended for use by landing parties) on the forecastle produced indifferent results.

The following night, LULLINGTON challenged another small craft off Johore. The two occupants immediately jumped overboard and defied all attempts to rescue them from the sea. The bodies were not recovered, despite a long search.

INVERMORISTON was involved in a further incident when she challenged another small craft approaching Singapore. Once again, the Indonesians made a determined effort to fight clear and INVERMORISTON engaged with gunfire. Three Indonesians were killed but so was Midshipman Michael O'Driscoll on board INVERMORISTON when one of her own mortar flares was triggered accidentally.

In April 1965, the Royal New Zealand Navy provided crews for two additional coastal minesweepers, SANTON and HICKLETON. These were commissioned as RNZN ships and, proudly wearing the Kiwi funnel badge, came under the tactical control of the Senior Officer of the 11th MSS. Their arrival brought the strength of the Inshore Flotilla up to twenty three ships.

It was about this time that LULLINGTON returned to reserve at Singapore and her crew transferred to KILDARTON which had just completed a refit.

At the end of June 1965, MARYTON, WOOLASTON and TILFORD were involved in a two-night battle in the Singapore Straits. A determined Indonesian attempt at infiltration was disrupted and seventeen of its members were lost. Regrettably WOOLASTON also suffered casualties when a sampan, from which she had just recovered a badly wounded Indonesian, blew up alongside her. Midshipman Michael Finch was killed and five seamen were wounded including a Royal Malaysian Navy seaman acting as an interpreter and two locally entered Chinese members of WOOLASTON's ship's company. One sailor was blown overboard by the explosion but, happily, he was later picked up unhurt.

It subsequently became clear that the sampan had been booby trapped with a box of explosives and a time fuse already set before the craft had left its base in Sumatra.

One night in July 1965, four sampans came together in a concerted attempt to infiltrate saboteurs onto Singapore Island. They contained 26 Indonesians, 16 of whom were killed or captured during the engagement at sea. One of the sampans, containing ten men, escaped back to Indonesia.

On 17th April 1966, PUNCHESTON was fired on by Indonesian shore batteries while she was in Singapore territorial waters. About 100 shells fell within half a mile of the warship and a similar distance from an unidentified merchant ship in the main channel of the Singapore Strait. PUNCHESTON did not return fire.

By September the Inshore Flotilla's bag of infiltrators captured or killed reach 100, appropriately through an arrest by WOOLASTON who had just returned from refit.

From here onward, the face of the Flotilla began to change as the minehunters BOSSINGTON, HUBBERSTON, SHERATON, KIRKLISTON and MAXTON arrived from Britain and some of the older vessels, CHAWTON, KILDARTON and PUNCHESTON, deployed to the Middle East to form the 9th MSS. The headquarters was moved from HMS MANXMAN to the jetty at 15 West Berth, thus freeing her to contribute to patrols.

Winding Down

Changes in the balance of power within the Indonesian government were opening moves towards settling the dispute and the incidence of infiltration attempts decreased.

HMNZS HICKLETON may claim to have fired the last shot by a warship during the Confrontation. An intercepted sampan fired a machine gun at her and HICKLETON returned fire, sinking the craft and killing all except one of the occupants.

On 11 June 1966, Malaysia and Indonesia agreed the terms of the Treaty of Bangkok which led to the end of Confrontation and Royal Navy patrols ceased off Borneo and Singapore during August.

In September 1966, HMS DARTINGTON (Lt Cdr S.G.Campbell) formally handed over responsibility for security of Borneo waters to Lt Cdr Malcolm Alvis Royal Malaysian Navy, the Commanding Officer of KD MAHAMIRU (formerly HMS DARLASTON) at Kuching in the presence of the Governor of Sarawak, Tun Abang Haji Openg and Captain R.D.Mc Donald RN (COMNAVBOR).

Later in 1966, some of the sweepers returned to the waters of Sarawak for a mine countermeasures exercise and visited Kuching on completion, but gradually ships of the 8th, 11th and 16th MCM Squadrons returned to their home bases, leaving HMS MANXMAN and eight ships of the 6th MCM Squadron in Singapore.

When the analysis of military operations during Confrontation was compiled, it was established that there had been forty-one attempted incursions into peninsular Malaysia by Indonesian forces, comprising 740 soldiers and para-military police, of whom some 450 had landed by boat or parachute. 142 infiltrators had been killed and 340 captured, many of them wounded.

In Borneo, after the failed rebellion in Brunei, the incursions had largely been carried out by regular units of the Indonesian Army and Air Force. These were well trained and well equipped troops, experienced in jungle warfare and practised in the skills of ambush. However, they failed to build much rapport with the civilian population who most often reported their presence to British and allied units.

In peninsular Malaysia, the forces who arrived by parachute were trained soldiers but those who came by sea were much more of a mixed bag. Lightly armed and lightly clad, under interrogation the survivors mainly identified themselves as 'students' (would-be political agitators), junior NCOs or policemen. They were not equipped for a long stay and appeared to believe that they would be welcomed as liberators and receive support from the local populace. Most appeared highly motivated, as it takes some determination to attempt a night time crossing of 20-50 miles of seaway patrolled by the opposition, but many lacked even rudimentary navigation skills and equipment.

Clearly those who had devised these missions and briefed the infiltrators had not studied the lessons of the recent history and in particular of how the experience of occupation by Japanese forces in World War Two and the rigours of the Malayan Emergency, had strengthened the commitment of the peoples Malaysia and Singapore to their own self determination.

Honours

The following honours and decorations were earned by individuals serving in the Inshore Flotilla during the period of Confrontation. However, all ships and their companies share the credit for the prolonged efforts made to preserve the peace in the waters of East and West Malaysia.

December 1962

Lt Cdr J.J. Black	HMS FISKERTON	MBE
Lt D. Willis RN	HMS CHAWTON	DSC
POME Kirwan	HMS CHAWTON	DSM

Capt J.J. Moore RM	Lima Coy 42 Cdo	Bar to MC
Cpl R.C. Rawlinson RM	Lima Coy 42 Cdo	MM
Cpl W.J. Lester RM	Lima Coy 42 Cdo	MM

August 1965

Lt Cdr C.D. Prentis	HMS FISKERTON	DSC
Lt P.S. Bromley	HMS FISKERTON	MBE
Lt K. Murray RAN	HMAS TEAL	DSC
CERA J.T. Smith	HMS FISKERTON	BEM
PO Richardson	HMS FISKERTON	BEM
Mechanician F. Abel	HMS CHAWTON	BEM

December 1965

Lt Cdr K. Holder	HMS MARYTON	DSC
Lt Cdr M.A. Twiddy	HMS INVERMORISTON	DSC
Ldg Sea L.W. Boylan	HMS MARYTON	DSM
CPO S. Keane	HMS MARYTON	BEM
ERA I.B. Pickering	HMS WOOLASTON	BEM
Mid M.B Finch - RIP	HMS WOOLASTON	Mention in Dispatches
PO J.A. Barrett	HMS PUNCHESTON	MID
Lt Cdr M.C Clapp	HMS PUNCHESTON	MID
Ldg Sea T. Davenport	HMS TILFORD	MID
Lt G.A. Eades	HMS GREATFORD	MID
AB A.A. Pawlett	HMS INVERMORISTON	MID
Lt P.L. Pisani	HMS TILFORD	MID
Lt Cdr M.J. Rivet-Carnac	HMS WOOLASTON	MID
Ldg Sea D. Wilson	HMS GREATFORD	MID

May 1966

Cdr J.A de M. Leathes	HMS PICTON	OBE
Lt Cdr M.A. Stockton	HMS DARTINGTON	MID