



# DUTY FIRST

THE ROYAL  
AUSTRALIAN  
REGIMENT IN WAR  
AND PEACE

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Edited by  
DAVID HORNER

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*Duty First*

by the non-replacement of 8 RAR, and it relieved 2 RAR in Vietnam in May 1971. Except for D Company, which returned in March 1972, its tour concluded in December 1971 and it returned to Townsville.

6 RAR returned to Townsville from Vietnam in May 1970 and Lieutenant-Colonel David Drabsch MBE assumed command in June 1970. In July 1971 the battalion relieved 1 RAR in Singapore.

The conclusion of the Vietnam commitment found 1 RAR at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, 2 RAR at Townsville, 3 RAR at Woodside, 4 RAR at Townsville, 5 RAR at Holsworthy, 6 RAR in Singapore, 7 RAR at Holsworthy, 8 RAR at Enoggera and 9 RAR at Enoggera.

During six years of war seventeen officers had commanded battalions of the Regiment in Vietnam. These officers all had remarkably similar backgrounds. All had graduated from Duntroon and all had seen active service in Korea. Some had served in Malaya during the Emergency or in Malaysia during Confrontation. Their average age on arrival in Vietnam was 40; the youngest, Brumfield, was 37, and the oldest, O'Neill, was 43. One of their number had graduated from Duntroon in 1944, three in 1946, four in 1947, six in 1948, one in 1950 and two in 1951. These statistics demonstrate the extent to which the Australian Army had become a professional long-service force during the post-war period. They also show the extent to which the experiences of the previous 20 years had provided a pool of highly trained personnel that could be used if the Regiment needed to expand quickly.

Despite the enormous strain placed upon the Regiment, the fact that it did not suffer any administrative or tactical disaster was a tribute to the excellence of the preparation of the peacetime years and the experience of Korea and Malaya. But it is doubtful how much longer this performance could have been maintained without a serious deterioration in standards. The expansion of the Regiment between 1965 and 1968 and its maintenance to the end of the Vietnam War was an outstanding achievement and one in which all members of the Regiment could be proud.

**Terendak and Singapore**

|| { While attention focused on the Australian forces in Vietnam, battalions of the Regiment continued to serve as part of the BCFESR at Terendak in Malaysia. By the time 8 RAR arrived towards the end of 1967, the future of BCFESR and the 28th Commonwealth Brigade was in the melting pot. During 1966 the British government had discussed a possible withdrawal from 'east of Suez', but senior British ministers such as Michael Stewart, the Foreign Secretary, and Denis Healey, the Defence Secretary, had indicated that the Britain had 'no intention of rattling on [its] existing commitments'.<sup>21</sup> By April 1967, however, Britain had reached a decision on eventual withdrawal, and in July announced that half of the forces deployed in Malaysia and Singapore would be withdrawn by 1971, the rest by 1973 to 1976.

### *A Nine-Battalion Regiment*

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When President Johnson announced on 31 March 1968 that the Vietnam War would be de-escalated, it was clear that the Australian government would have to rethink its strategy in South-East Asia. Colonel Alan Stretton, who had earlier commanded 2 RAR at Terendak, headed a fact-finding mission to report on the future of the battalion group at Terendak, and he concluded that if the Australian battalion were to be 'left in Malaysia there was a risk that it would become involved in any trouble that might break out and Australia would be faced with an open-ended commitment from which she could not withdraw'.<sup>22</sup> If the battalion were to be withdrawn to Singapore, it would reduce the administrative burden.

On 19 November 1968 the Prime Minister, John Gorton, announced that Australia would retain its military forces in the Malaysia - Singapore region until the end of 1971, and on 3 January 1969 it was announced that the battalion would move from Terendak to Singapore. This move was confirmed on 25 February when, in a statement to Parliament, the Prime Minister presented Australia's decision as a contribution to regional stability. Australia would retain two squadrons of Mirages, a naval ship and a battalion indefinitely. They would remain only so long as 'actively desired' by Malaysia and Singapore, and would not be used for the maintenance of civil law and order. The forces would be available

subject to the usual requirement for the Australian Government's prior consent for use against externally promoted and inspired Communist infiltration and subversion of the kind which became familiar during the Emergency and which is judged by our military advisers to be the most likely form of aggression in the area.<sup>23</sup>

Both Malaysia and Singapore were keen for Britain, Australia and New Zealand to retain forces in the area, and the incoming Conservative government in Britain in 1970 reversed its predecessor's decision to withdraw and negotiated the Five Power Defence Arrangement between Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. This took over from the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement on 1 November 1971, and involved an agreement to consult in the event of an attack or threats against Malaysia or Singapore. The three external powers formed a joint force known as ANZUK. Australia took a primary role in this force and provided the first joint commander. The 28th Independent Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group became the 28th ANZUK Brigade.

Meanwhile, in the midst of this controversy, 8 RAR under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Langtry, continued training with the 28th Brigade, which was commanded by Brigadier Peter Tancred. Exercise ALL BLACK, a brigade exercise, was held in June 1968. As well as battalion and company exercises the battalion conducted adventure training, the most notable being a successful 270 kilometre long journey down the Perak River. A party of 33 men led by Second Lieutenant W. Cox took nine days to complete the journey from