

Not by Bombs Alone

Lessons from Malaya

By JAY GORDON SIMPSON



RAF Hornets being refueled at Singapore.

Courtesy Imperial War Museum

Like other conflicts, the Malayan Emergency offers lessons that have applicability to future wars. It is one of the few examples of a low intensity conflict that was won by the government in power and thus is a favorite subject of case studies on insurgency. In addition, it stands as one of the best illustrations of a coordinated political-military effort that actually defeated a guerrilla force. Such coordination remains essential to the resolution of any conflict on any level of intensity, but it is particularly critical for low intensity conflicts and the growing field of peace operations. Finally, it reveals how military power—or airpower—can support low intensity operations.

The Emergency

The Federated States of Malaya encompassed some of the most rugged terrain in the world. The Malay Peninsula stretches over 50,000 square miles in mainland Southeast Asia. Much of this area is shrouded in jungle that is impenetrable to aerial observation or sensors. It required a major effort to carve out landing zones for helicopters and supply drops. A mountainous chain also runs the entire length of the peninsula. At the time, the country consisted largely of rubber plantations, tin mines, towns, and villages (*kampongs*). Cities were few and road and rail communication was poorly developed. There were six major airfields, only one of which—the Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Tengah—could support medium bombers. Eleven other airfields were suitable for medium transport planes and another 72 for light

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Malaya, 1948–1960

The Malayan Emergency was declared by Britain in response to an insurgent movement launched by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), whose guerrilla forces were labeled communist terrorists or CTs. The British exercised hegemony over the region as the result of treaties of protection that were negotiated with local Malay rulers beginning in 1874. A number of these principalities were banded together in 1896 to form the Federated Malay States. Malaya, like other parts of Southeast Asia, was occupied by the Japanese during World War II. This hiatus in colonial rule had serious implications for Malaya—as well as for French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies—with the rise of communist and nationalist movements. British control was restored in 1945 with an eye toward eventual decolonization. Even though the British initially legalized MCP activities, the communists rejected a proposal in 1947 to establish the Federation of Malaya. When all the Malay states—save for Singapore—became part of the federation in the next year, the communists charged that Britain wanted to exclude them from power by manipulating the independence process.

The MCP leader, Chin Peng, advocated an immediate armed revolt. The insurgency began with the murders of three British rubber planters in June 1948. The Emergency was declared two days later. A force of between 10,000 and 12,000 guerrillas targeted civilians indiscriminately to cripple the ability of the colonial authorities to maintain order.

After initial setbacks, the British adapted a wide range of civil-military initiatives, including the Briggs Plan—a massive resettlement of thousands of people from jungle areas where they were vulnerable to guerrilla intimidation to the relative security of new villages. Britain also prepared the local people for independence, which was granted in August 1957. By 1960, the Emergency was practically over and only scattered remnants of the once formidable guerrilla forces remained, mostly in secluded areas near the border with Thailand. The Malayan government finally declared the end of the Emergency in July 1960.

In September 1963, Malaysia came into being, consisting of the Federation of Malaya, the State of Singapore, and the colonies of North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak. Britain relinquished sovereignty over Singapore, North Borneo, and Sarawak from independence day and extended the 1957 defense agreement with Malaya to apply to Malaysia. In August 1965, by mutual agreement, Singapore seceded from Malaysia and became a separate nation.



aircraft. Sudden storms were hazardous and flying below hilltop level was dangerous and accounted for several fatal accidents. These arduous conditions also led to maintenance problems and low serviceability rates.¹

The Malayan conflict was fought in four distinct phases.² The first ran from June 1948 to October 1949 and was marked by high levels of violence aimed at British security forces and the

local population by the so-called communist terrorists (CTs), the Malayan People's Anti-British Army. The communists achieved limited success during this phase by attacking mines and rubber estates, ambushing vehicles, and terrorizing people in rural areas to forcibly gain their support. However, the insurgency failed to overcome either the security forces or establish effective bases



from which to expand. In October 1949 the guerrillas withdrew to the jungle to reorganize.³

The second phase lasted until August 1951 and represented the peak of communist success as terrorist incidents rose from 1,274 in 1948 to 6,082 in 1951.⁴ While the CTs

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held the initiative throughout this period, the government greatly expanded the police, formed home guards to protect local villages, enhanced Special Branch capabilities (intelligence assets), conducted a psychological warfare campaign, and imposed emergency regulations. Vital changes followed in October 1951. The Malayan Communist Party altered its strategy in an October 1951 directive which argued that indiscriminate terror was counterproductive in gaining public support. The insurgents continued attacks on the police and army but not local people. They also withdrew deeper into the jungle and operated

in small platoons to reduce their vulnerability. As a result, police losses fell from 100 per month in 1951 to 20 per month by mid-1952.⁵

Moreover, British leadership was changed as Sir Edward Gent replaced Sir Henry Gurney as high commissioner and Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs became the director of operations. The "Briggs Plan" harmonized command and control of government forces to provide a framework that endured throughout the conflict. It included a massive resettlement of Chinese squatters into new villages, which afforded protection from CT intimidation, hampered insurgent logistics, and facilitated both psychological warfare and food denial operations. The death of Gurney in an ambush outside of Kuala Lumpur resulted in the appointment of General (and later Field Marshal) Sir Gerald Templer, who was a catalyst to make the Briggs Plan live up to its potential. With control over the country, he refined command and control arrangements, mobilized a political apparatus, laid the foundations for independence, and pushed counterinsurgency into high gear. He also centralized coordination of intelligence under one official, revitalized the police, and revamped the information services and psychological warfare campaign. By the end of his tour the main battle had been won and much of the remaining effort consisted of mopping-up.

The third phase ran until July 1954 and included both a shift in momentum and the breakup of the communist army under the Briggs Plan. Ground forces conducted more effective operations as a result of better intelligence, food denial, and psychological warfare, activities which proved to be valuable in large-scale cordon and sweep efforts.⁶

The final phase ran until July 1960 when the Emergency was declared to be officially over. The government continued the democratization process until Malaya became independent in August 1957 and the security forces underwent a successful transition under Malayanization.

Offensive Operations

The application of airpower in the Emergency was complex. Aviation played various roles in Malaya, including offensive air support, transport, reconnaissance, crop spraying, and support of psychological warfare.

Fighters and bombers were generally used for offensive air support bombing and strafing ground targets, almost always because of contact with friendly forces. The intent of these pinpoint and harassing attacks was simply to inflict casualties. The former operations were aimed at readily

Royal New Zealand Air Force Bristol transport.



Courtesy Imperial War Museum

identifiable targets and were supported by higher grades of intelligence. Targets included enemy camps, cultivated plots, and sites frequented by insurgents. Harassing attacks struck area targets, essentially nondescript swaths of jungle. They were often supported with minimal intelligence and had only a nuisance effect, rarely killing guerrillas outright.⁷ Their impact was “to ‘flush-out’ CTs from areas where they were known to be concentrated into prepared ground force ambushes, or to disturb guerrilla groups, both physically and psychologically, before ground forces moved in to clear a specific area.”⁸ Offensive air was most effective as an escort for ground convoys, helping deter enemy ambushes.

On average fewer than 70 aircraft offered the punch, despite a peak of seven squadrons in 1950, two-thirds of which were Spitfires, Tempests, Meteors, Vampires, Venoms, and Sabres. All others were Short Sunderland flying boats, Avro Lincoln medium bombers, and light bombers such as Beaufighters, Hornets, Brigands, and Canberras. Both Tempests and Hornets were suited to these operations, with good firepower and loiter times and relative resistance to bad weather. Later jet aircraft—fighters and bombers—were less useful. Speed was a liability. Electronics and engines were

more susceptible to climate-induced difficulties, and their range and loiter time at low altitude were insufficient. Finally, the stress on pilots required special measures such as cockpit air conditioning and limiting sorties to one per day.⁹

The best aircraft for offensive air support throughout the Emergency was the Avro Lincoln medium bomber, an updated version of the venerable Lancaster of World War II fame. They were flown by rotating RAF squadrons and Number 1 (Bomber) Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). In addition to cost-effectiveness, Lincolns could deliver much heavier bomb loads than lighter aircraft, and their slow speed and endurance of up to eleven hours when fully loaded made them excellent platforms for strafing attacks.

Offensive air support was not a major factor. It was only useful against an enemy whose position was known and that intended to hold its ground. The communists preferred mobility and stealth. In Malaya, CT positions often had to be checked by ground troops, normally resulting in ground combat or enemy withdrawal. Close air support also required aircraft with extremely short response times, which was not practicable because of the few suitable airfields and limited aircraft loiter times. Ground to air communication was also poor because of jungle canopies. In addition, army radios were too heavy and took too long to set up.



Courtesy Imperial War Museum

**Sycamore 14
helicopter.**

Offensive air support in Malaya was also limited by weather and navigation. Air strikes were often unreliable except in mid-morning, after fog and thin stratus cloud dissipated and before the rapid generation of cumulus and storms, which began around noon and could last into the night. This disadvantage was not mitigated until the introduction of radar target marking in 1955.

Navigation was complicated by a paucity of aids and an unending sea of jungle, which yielded few landmarks. This problem was compounded by weak intelligence, which made it difficult to pinpoint enemy locations on the ground. On one hand, Operation Kingly Pile, an attack in 1956 against Goh Peng Tuan and Number 7 Independent Platoon, was a complete success. Intelligence was nearly perfect. An informer gave detailed information to Special Branch that was confirmed twice by ground patrols. Experts spent several weeks in intense preparation. Target marking was successful, navigation was accurate, and the weather cleared. The strike caught the insurgents by surprise and 98 1,000-pound bombs made 14 confirmed kills.¹⁰

On the other hand, an attack against Teng Fook Loong and Number 3 Independent Platoon took several attempts. In 1956, some 545,000 pounds of bombs were dropped on the apparent site of this unit with no effect. Good information

offensive air operations were far from being decisive in winning the conflict

came to light and a further 94,000 pounds of bombs were dropped by five Lincolns and twelve Venoms. But the bombs landed harmlessly 250 yards from the camp. Several days later, a night strike by five Lincolns, dropping 70,000 pounds of bombs, killed four CTs. Only in October, after continuing harassment by both air and ground forces, did the remainder of the platoon surrender.

Even with precise intelligence and the accuracy of bombing, collateral damage remained a serious concern. Two errors in 1950 resulted in a combined total of 12 civilians killed, 31 injured, and collateral damage to a school, while one British officer and seven soldiers died in 1953 when bombs were released prematurely from a Canberra. Clearance was required prior to any attack to ensure the target area was free of friendly civilians, government troops, and valuable property. Even outside populated areas, precautions were required to protect aboriginal Sakais and ensure that intelligence-gathering by Special Branch was not interrupted. These restrictions prevented much collateral damage.

A final limitation was damage assessment, which was nearly impossible from the air due to the jungle terrain and thus relied on ground sources. But friendly troops often failed to inspect air attack sites because of their inaccessibility or the demands of ongoing operations. Moreover, the guerrillas removed their casualties and were forbidden to speak of them. Coupled with the low mental capacity of the average CT, this lack of intelligence meant that little useful information was collected during interrogation.

Although many insurgents said they surrendered out of fear of air attack, the evidence suggests that air strikes were responsible for less than 10 percent of all enemy dead. Indeed, Number 1 (Bomber) Squadron dropped 17,500 short tons of bombs in eight years, over half the campaign total, yet received credit for only 16 confirmed kills. But air attacks did keep the enemy moving and unsettled and increased the number of successful contacts with ground forces. General Briggs stated that “offensive air support plays a very vital role in the main object of the Security Forces, namely, the destruction of bandit morale and the increasing of the morale of the civil population.”¹¹ In the last analysis, offensive air operations were far from being decisive in winning the conflict, but they did provide significant support.

Transport Support

Behind the screen of fighters and bombers conducting offensive operations, the real aerial workhorses were air transport units. Their role included medium and short range transport, supply drops, airborne operations, medical evacuation, command, and liaison. This force was the

largest component of airpower used during the conflict, with up to eight squadrons flying fifteen types of aircraft. Given the poor state of ground communications and security force mobility, these aircraft were in constant demand throughout the campaign.

The medium range transport function incorporated general transport flights, supply drops, and airborne operations. These tasks were performed by four RAF squadrons, supplemented by RAAF squadrons and the Royal New Zealand Air Force, flying Dakota and Valetta aircraft (with Beverley, Hastings, and Bristol transports being added later on). Most of these planes maintained good serviceability rates throughout the Emergency, with Dakota squadrons averaging 75 percent.

General transportation included ferrying troops, equipment, and supplies. Between 1951 and 1954, the conflict resulted in the movement

available and could not insert troops into some areas because of altitude restrictions and a lack of landing zones. Likewise, plans were developed to use paratroopers to reinforce police jungle forts which were accessible only by light aircraft.

The most critical role played by the medium range transport force was dropping supplies. The scope of these operations grew from just 60,000 pounds delivered over the first six months of the conflict to over 700,000 pounds during a single month in 1954. Peak demand was reached in 1955, but operations remained extensive until nearly the end of the campaign. Air drops allowed troops to penetrate the jungle without vulnerable lines of communication or excessive loads.

Equally important, supply drops were needed to construct the deep jungle forts manned by the police. These posts were key to the government strategy of bringing trade, health services, and proper administration to aboriginal Sakais, who were susceptible to intimidation and often forced to provide CTs with food and warnings of government troop movements. It was common to drop over 70,000 pounds of supplies in establishing such forts, some so remote that they were resupplied by air drop throughout the Emergency.

Drops were made through ten yard holes in the jungle canopy, with flights over 200-foot trees at an altitude of 300 feet. Extreme precision was required, because missing by just fifty yards often meant losing the supplies. Aircrews could lose three pounds of bodyweight through perspiration, and their casualty rate was four times that of the infantrymen they supported.¹²

Other limits on the medium range transport included some 18,000 parachutes consumed per year. Few were salvageable after being stuck in treetops, damaged during recovery, or scrounged by soldiers looking for lightweight mosquito-proof sleeping bags. Another was

the loss of ground forces suffered when resupplied in this manner. The final limit was the lack of suitable airfields. Only 17 existed and most were well removed from the front lines in the heart of the country. This was partly overcome by short range transport aircraft [primarily Austers supported by Pembrokes and Pioneers] which could operate from a growing number of local airstrips. In the transport role, these light aircraft carried troops and supplies, evacuated wounded, and made small supply drops. Auster flights were also extensively employed for command and liaison.

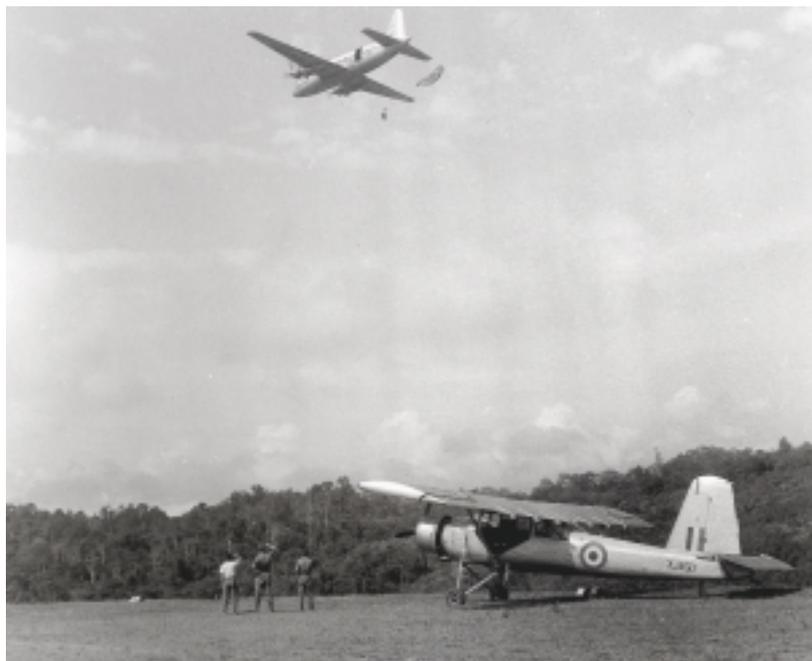


Courtesy Imperial War Museum

Spitfire over Malayan coastline.

of 3,000 tons of freight and 35,000 passengers per year. Of particular significance was moving reinforcements. For example, 365 army, naval, and police personnel were airlifted by four Dakotas in 38 flying hours in August 1948. Air transport saved 6,150 man hours that would have been required for surface travel. Other flights carried both passengers and couriers or evacuated casualties to hospitals in Singapore for removal to the United Kingdom by the Far East Casualty Evacuation Service.

Although infrequent, airborne operations by the medium range transport force were a vital supplement to helicopters, which were not always



Courtesy Imperial War Museum

Pioneer aircraft at Fort Kemar with Valetta overhead.

The Pioneer fleet mainly resupplied jungle forts. Indeed, one of the first activities in setting up such a fort was to construct a small airstrip. Pioneers carried some 8,000 passengers and over a million pounds of freight during the peak year of 1956 and made weekly flights to eight of the ten jungle forts in 1957.

The main limitation on the short range transport force was capacity. Pioneers could only carry four passengers and were seldom available for missions other than supplying jungle forts. Austers could carry only one passenger. This was a severe limitation in the command and liaison role, for which commanders often sought to travel with at least one staff member. That left the Pembroke, whose capacity was reduced from eight to six so it could carry emergency equipment for air/sea rescue.

Helicopters were used extensively for both tactical troop transport and medical evacuation. Light helicopters were the S-51 Dragonfly and Sycamore HR-14. The Dragonflies were replaced by Sycamores, which could carry a greater load more reliably. Medium helicopters were Westland Whirlwinds and American S-55s. Whirlwinds posed significant maintenance problems and could carry only three troops, compared to five and serviceability ratings of 80 to 90 percent for S-55s. While modifications brought the Whirlwind passenger load to four, the aging S-55s were retained long after the arrival of newer Whirlwinds.

Helicopters could operate almost anywhere, even in rough jungle. Prior to deployment, security forces were hard pressed to carry the war to

the enemy. Foot patrols took considerable time to penetrate an area, and frequently the insurgents were gone after being warned by aborigines. Likewise, outlying police posts and estates were difficult to reinforce and vulnerable to hit-and-run raids. Helicopters solved this problem, allowing troops to be moved into deep jungle before CTs could withdraw as well as rapidly reinforcing beleaguered garrisons. Not only could troops penetrate far into communist territory, but they arrived fresh and ready to fight.

The flexibility of helicopters was also important for removing casualties. They evacuated some 5,000 during the Emergency. Medical attention was also extended to the Malayan people and helped to gain the trust of Sakai aborigines. Helicopters were periodically used to conduct liaison, transport of people and matériel for rapid intelligence assessment, mount ground reconnaissance, and supply jungle forts. These missions were generally avoided because fixed-wing aircraft could normally undertake them more efficiently, especially once the Pioneer was introduced.

Another helicopter role was crop spraying. Food denial became a crucial operation against the guerrillas, who turned to growing crops in the jungle. Helicopters sprayed toxic chemicals on CT cultivation sites. These missions started in 1952, and by the end of the next year 88 sites had been destroyed.

Air Reconnaissance

Most available maps of Malaya were outdated and of poor quality. Parts of the country had never been accurately surveyed and mapped. Photographic reconnaissance supported the revision of old maps and the preparation of new ones.

Aerial photography was also used for intelligence, planning, and briefing forces for ground and air operations. These activities were particularly important to tracking enemy movements and establishing villages. The object of visual reconnaissance was to identify CT locations. Normally one flight of Austers was assigned to each brigade area, and pilots spent nine hours on average to locate enemy positions. But reconnaissance was effective: it found 155 confirmed and 77 possible guerrilla camps as well as 313 cultivated sites, 31 recultivations, 194 clearings of probable terrorist origin, and 21 aborigine farms under enemy control over a six-month period in 1955.

Both photographic and visual reconnaissance were initially flown by Number 81 Squadron RAF with Spitfires and Mosquitos, and also Number 656 Squadron RAF with Austers. They had a difficult mission. Aside from weather,

the main limitations on air reconnaissance were unreliable aircraft and the danger of compromising ground operations. Although the Austers of Number 656 Squadron were the workhorses, Number 81 Squadron flew aging Spitfires and

reconnaissance aircraft conducted low level flights, which made the insurgents more wary

half the conflict. But problems persisted after the arrival of replacement Meteors, Pembrokes, and Canberras. While reconnaissance aircraft had to avoid endangering security forces, they conducted low level flights over suspected enemy positions, which made the insurgents more wary.

Psychological Warfare

Aircraft were extensively used for psychological warfare, including leaflet and loudspeaker operations. By the end of the conflict there were few insurgents who had not been showered by leaflets or heard a message to surrender broadcast from aircraft. Indeed, psychological warfare was key to the campaign and sought to convince local people of the value of government services and of the promised independence. It was equally important in destroying insurgent morale.

Dropping leaflets from aircraft remained the most common method of dissemination. During the peak year of 1955, 141 million leaflets were dropped, including safe conduct passes, parodies of the enemy leadership, reports of the deaths of key communists, and even enticements to pregnant female terrorists to surrender so their babies could be born in a government hospital.¹³ But leaflets took time to develop and deliver, often arriving after the events which they described had occurred. They also had to be picked up and read, which was easily observed by enemy leaders, who strictly punished their followers for reading them.

Aerial loudspeaker operations were less problematic. Dakotas and Austers had speakers to broadcast continuous loop messages to insurgents. CTs had no choice but to listen to the bulletins, which could be produced within 24 hours of a request. Tapes were targeted to individuals and groups by name and language. Interrogations revealed that many captives considered loudspeaker aircraft highly effective in inducing surrenders.

The effectiveness of airpower in the Malayan Emergency was mixed. From the standpoint of defeating guerrilla forces, "the air campaign could hardly be judged other than a colossal misuse of

resources."¹⁴ Yet in terms of taking the war to the enemy both psychologically and physically, it must be considered a success. It was a force multiplier, maximizing efforts to both eliminate the insurgents and win hearts and minds. When considered as a component of a joint team, airpower was crucial. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Malcolm R. Postgate, *Operation Firedog: Air Support in the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1992), p. 29.

² For details on counterinsurgency, see Robert G.K. Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945–1969* (New York: Taplinger, 1970), pp. 4–5, and Robert G.K. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), pp. 50–58.

³ Richard L. Clutterbuck, *Riot and Revolution in Singapore and Malaya, 1945–1963* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 169–70; Julian Paget, *Counter-Insurgency Campaigning* (New York: Walker, 1967), p. 48.

⁴ Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), appendix.

⁵ For details see Richard L. Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 63.

⁶ For an account of operations during this period, see J.B. Oldfield, *The Green Howards in Malaya, 1949–1952* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1953). To get an appreciation of the early food control operations, see the description of Operation Hive in M.C.A. Hennicker, *Red Shadow over Malaya* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1955), pp. 131–54.

⁷ Postgate, *Operation Firedog*, p. 40.

⁸ Peter Dennis and Jeffery Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo, 1950–1966* (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996), p. 34.

⁹ Postgate, *Operation Firedog*, p. 49.

¹⁰ Richard Miers, *Shoot To Kill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 56–75.

¹¹ Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, p. 38.

¹² Postgate, *Operation Firedog*, p. 79; Clutterbuck, *Long Long War*, p. 159.

¹³ For a discussion of psychological warfare, see Archie Derry, *Emergency in Malaya: The Psychological Dimension* (Latimer, UK: National Defence College, 1982).

¹⁴ Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, p. 43.