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New Zealand's response - NZ and the Confrontation in Borneo

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British response: Operation Claret

The British responded to Confrontation in a two-pronged manner. In order to deter the Indonesians from mounting an open attack on Malaysia, substantial air and naval forces were deployed in and around Singapore. The main concern for British military planners throughout the conflict, however, was containing the insurgency in Borneo. Here the security forces were in an impossible situation. They were required to defend a frontier of approximately 1600 kilometres, in extremely dense jungle and against an enemy who could retreat to the safety of Indonesian Kalimantan. Increasingly frustrated, Major-General Sir Walter Walker, director of operations in Borneo, requested permission to pursue the guerrillas across the border. After considerable debate, London finally agreed in April 1964.

The objective of cross-border operations, code-named Claret, was to wrest the initiative from the enemy. Accordingly, starting in May that year, predominantly SAS troops, operating in groups of four, regularly patrolled territory immediately across the border. When a patrol discovered enemy guerrillas moving towards Borneo, it would arrange for them to be ambushed as they crossed the border.

Britain requests support

This strategy, both regarding deterrence and military operations, was remarkably successful in containing the insurgency to a low level of conflict. Nonetheless, it required a considerable deployment of Britain's limited resources and manpower. By early 1965, for example, Britain had more than 60,000 servicemen deployed in the region, together with a surface fleet of more than eighty warships, including two aircraft-carriers. It was not surprising, therefore, that, starting in December 1963, repeated requests were made by the British for New Zealand (and Australia) to send combat forces into Borneo to assist in containing the insurgency.

New Zealand refuses to send troops

In responding to these requests the National administration led by K.J. Holyoake had to weigh carefully certain countervailing policy considerations. On the one hand, there was no disagreement that Malaysia should be supported. In both official and public eyes, Indonesia had committed clear and frequent acts of aggression against the new state. On the other hand, however, Wellington was eager to avoid New Zealand becoming embroiled in a major war with Indonesia. Policy-makers realised that, in the event of considerable bloodshed, New Zealand's relations with its closest Asian neighbour could be poisoned for generations to come. Consequently, the government initially refused to send troops into Borneo, arguing that British and Malaysian forces already stationed there were sufficient to deal with the problem.

NZ drawn in by Malay peninsula attack

Deeply frustrated by the failure of Confrontation to make any real headway, Sukarno decided in mid 1964 to intensify it by extending military operations to the Malay peninsula. On 1 September, ninety-eight Indonesian paratroopers landed just north of Labis in Johore. One of the few available Commonwealth units in the area was 1st Battalion, RNZIR, which, with Wellington's permission, was used to hunt down the infiltrators, most of whom surrendered without a struggle. Later, on 29 October, the New Zealanders were involved in a similar operation to capture a small amphibious force which had landed at the mouth of the Sungei Kesang River north-west of Muar. In addition to these activities, the RNZAF's 14 Squadron,

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consisting of six Canberra bombers, was deployed to Singapore, where it remained as part of the Commonwealth's air power deterrent until the end of Confrontation.

Holyoake agrees to send limited force

Sukarno responded to these failures by substantially increasing the flow of insurgents crossing the border into Borneo. With Britain's military resources stretched to almost breaking point, the New Zealand government believed it could no longer decline the genuine appeals for assistance coming from London. On 1 February 1965 the Prime Minister announced that a small Special Air Service detachment, together with the 1RNZIR, would be deployed in Borneo as soon as possible. In addition, New Zealand crews would man two former Royal Navy minesweepers, renamed HMNZS *Hickleton* and *Santon*, which would join the frigate HMNZS *Taranaki* in patrolling Malaysian waters around the Malacca Strait.

During late February the 1st Ranger Squadron NZSAS, comprising about forty men under the command of Major W.J.D. Meldrum, began its tour of duty. They were replaced by a similarly sized detachment, commanded by Major R.S. Dearing, in October the same year. Both detachments took part in Claret operations alongside Britain's 22nd Regiment SAS. 1RNZIR, commanded by Colonel R.M. Gurr, was not deployed in Borneo until May 1965, when it relieved a Gurkha battalion in Sarawak. In a series of skirmishes, it inflicted substantial losses on the enemy without suffering any fatal casualties. Relieved during October, 1RNZIR returned to its base in Malaya. By the time it was redeployed to Borneo in May 1966, Confrontation had all but ended.

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