The Long Skirmish: Malayan Emergency, 1948 -1960

The Advertiser, Edition 1, WED 19/04/00, Page 074

THE Malayan Emergency began when the Malayan Communist Party attempted to turn the poverty-stricken local population against the British by crippling the country's economy. Since the end of World War II in 1945, the MCP had attempted to take control of Malaya through constitutional means. Because the MCP had played a major role in the anti-Japanese movement during the war, the British had not banned its activities. But when the MCP began attacking mines and rubber plantations in the late 1940s in a more violent attempt to capture political power, the British declared a state of emergency and officially banned the MCP.

The situation in Malaya deteriorated further with the assassination of the British High Commissioner in October 1951. The government mobilised almost the entire country of Malaya to fight the Communist terrorists. The main aim of the military operation was to destroy the MCP's bases of support in local communities and drive the Communists into the jungle, where it would be difficult for them to receive supplies from supporters.

Australia's involvement in the Emergency began in 1950 with the arrival of RAAF aircraft and personnel in Singapore. In addition to air and infantry forces, Australia also provided artillery and engineering support to the conflict. Ships of the Royal Australian Navy also served in Malayan waters.

By October 1955, when the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, arrived in Penang, the MCP was ready to negotiate for peace. The work of 2 RAR mainly comprised extensive patrolling. Australian ground forces in Malaya formed part of Australia's contribution to the Far East Strategic Reserve, which was set up to deter communist aggression against countries in South-East Asia.

By late 1959 operations against the communists were in their final phase and many had crossed Malaya's northern border into Thailand. The Emergency was officially declared over in July, 1960.

Lasting 13 years, the Malayan Emergency was the longest continuous military commitment in Australia's history. Fifty-one Australian servicemen were killed in Malaya, although just 15 of these deaths occurred as a result of operations.