

[The Wild Men of Borneo - Australians in Battle 1950-2000](#)

D.D. McNicoll, The Australian, Edition 1, Tue 25 Apr 2000, page 012

Alf Garland recalls when the Special Air Service Regiment was deployed overseas for the first time ALF Garland was a young major when he took the 100 men of his Special Air Service squadron to Pearce RAAF base near Perth in early 1965. When the men, dressed in civvies, climbed aboard a chartered 707 and flew off to Borneo via Singapore, there was no announcement by the government that our SAS was being deployed overseas for the first time. Even today, 35 years later, there is virtually no official record of the campaign.

Now retired in southern NSW, Brigadier Garland remains rather bemused by the official silence. He has, over the years, discussed the fighting role of his men with their then enemy -- Indonesian regular army troops attacking Malaysia -- and found them "totally relaxed" about the Australian involvement in cross-border actions.

"You find in the ex-service community that you can fight like buggery against someone today and, provided they were honourable, tomorrow, when you are friends, you can talk about it," he says.

Garland remembers the period of the Indonesian Confrontation as being much tougher than the time the SAS spent in Vietnam later that decade.

"It was much more difficult than Vietnam, particularly for the SAS. The only helicopters that were available to us in Borneo were those that lifted us from a base area to a forward landing zone -- and then we were on our own for 14 days. You carried everything you needed on your back and if you got into trouble, there was no Vietnam-style ready reaction force to come spearing in by helicopter to rescue you. You had to walk back to the border because no aircraft would fly over the border into Indonesia. The terrain was also much worse, you were either going almost straight up or straight down -- it was real 'wild men from Borneo' territory."

Garland says the mapping of the area was so bad that when he and his men arrived they were given a map that was just a white sheet with grid lines on it.

The SAS operated four-man patrols into Indonesian territory to report on enemy troop movements and everyone -- officers, NCOs, cooks, medics and radio operators -- took part. Garland says the only man in the squadron who was not operational was the paymaster.

While the public perception of the SAS is of a fighting force, he says the longest patrol his men undertook was a three-month "hearts and minds" operation. A four-man squad provided medical aid to the local tribesmen, many of whom had had virtually no contact with the modern world, in a large central valley.

"Once every two weeks an aircraft would fly over and drop whatever they needed to sustain themselves," Garland says. "When necessary we would drop clothing and boots."

When the SAS arrived, they were regarded as the new kids on the block because it was their first deployment and everyone attempted to tell them what to do.

"We decided to do things our own way and by the time we left, the British general in charge reckoned we were worth half a dozen infantry battalions."

Garland lost only one man during the tour of duty -- and not to enemy action. "The man I lost was on a four-man patrol on the Indonesian side of the border and they were tracked by this elephant for a couple of days -- and eventually the elephant charged the patrol," he says. "They were in single file and the elephant knocked the scout out of the way, knocked the patrol commander out of the way and hit the third man, goring him in the chest. The first two fellas fired at the elephant with their 7.62mm SLRs and hit it in the head a number of times but it just kept on coming. By the time we found out about it and the time we could get him out, he was dead."