I. SINGAPORE: A MILITARY OUTPOST SINCE FOUNDING

Defence had always been an important element in governing Singapore from its founding on 29th January, 1819 till incorporation into Malaysia on 16th September, 1963. A major consideration for selecting Singapore as a trading station had been to serve as a military outpost for the protection of British interests in the Far East. These interests included the shipping in the Straits of Malacca, the protection of the trade route between China and India, and providing a bastion against Dutch colonial expansion in South East Asia. On 6th February, 1819, the very day Raffles signed the formal treaty with Sultan Hussein Mohamed Shah of Johor and Temenggong Shree Maharajah Abdul Rahman, the local Chieftain of Singapore, Raffles addressed this issue. He instructed Major (later Colonel) William Farquhar, the first Resident and Commandant of Singapore, to construct a fort or blockhouse on the hill that became Government Hill and in time, Fort Canning, with magazines and barracks for “the permanent residence of 30 European artillery and for the temporary accommodation of the rest of the garrison in case of emergency.”

In a letter from Bengal to Farquhar dated 11th January, 1820, the British East India Company (BEIC) also categorically stated that “Singapore was to be considered rather as a military post than as a fixed settlement, that artificial encouragement was not to be given to the immigration of natives…”

Representing the British Government in areas where it operated, the BEIC stationed troops in Singapore immediately after the treaty was signed. Led by one Captain J. Seppings, the first contingent, a detachment of the 2nd Battalion, 20th Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry, which was then deployed also in Penang and Bencoolen, arrived in 1819 itself. It also became a practice to station a Royal Navy (RN) ship in the harbour with Royal Marines on board.

The primarily military role envisioned for Singapore was eclipsed by two developments. By 1824, Singapore had surpassed Penang in trade turnover. Also, in the same year, the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty ended rivalry with the Dutch for dominance outside the Indonesian archipelago. Thereafter, the administrators of the island had no concrete enemy to address in their defence planning for more than a century and their defence preparations were directed towards a possible naval attack by European powers with which Britain might be at war from time to time. There was also always the prospect of some kind of pirate attack against the settlement. On the strident urgings of the expatriate community, military emissaries from India or London undertook studies to propose appropriate defence concepts. The practical outcome was that dominating and strategic sites around the harbour were designated as forts and gun emplacements, which might or might not be adequately provided for in terms of weapons,
personnel or ammunition. As Singapore developed, garrison troops were drawn from the British Indian Army or British regiments and elements of the Royal Artillery (RA).

From Buckley’s anecdotes, from the beginning, the expatriate community itself in Singapore were concerned with threats to themselves from both Chinese immigrants and Malay pirates and agitated for the island’s administrators to provide suitable defences against such threats. But although the British tended to separate police powers from the military, there seemed to have been a sense that the police could handle internal security if they were augmented by garrison troops. In the early decades of Singapore’s founding, a small police element working with magistrates would seem to have been considered adequate. The attitude probably derived from the fact that the island was ruled by a military governor who could activate any process he deemed fit to protect the European community, such as calling out the military to quell civil riots. Nevertheless, the availability of additional resources was not guaranteed and the expatriates in Singapore in the 1840s and 1850s decided it was prudent to take a proactive role in their own self-defence. Matters came to a head on 5th May, 1854 when violence broke out between the Teochew and Hokkien communities, ostensibly over an argument concerning an underweight ‘Kati’ of rice, but actually over issues rooted in China. Rioting flared out of control the next day and the deployment of troops and Marines (quartered aboard a naval vessel on station in the Singapore harbour) brought only temporary peace along their immediate line of advance. When it became clear that the police were too thinly spread, several expatriates mounted their own patrols or complemented the police patrols in the worst affected areas. The violence only abated after some 400 deaths and the burning of about 300 ‘native’ houses.4

II. THE VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT IN SINGAPORE

Successful Asians had begun to make significant contributions to social causes early in the island’s development. These included Tan Tock Seng who funded a pauper’s hospital in 1844, Hoo Ah Kay (Whampoa), who was appointed a member of the Legislative Council in 1869 and Cheang Hong Lim, who contributed a public garden in Chinatown in 1876. But the expatriates regarded themselves an exclusive ruling class in Singapore until the mid-twentieth century. In response to what they saw as inadequate steps by the colonial administrators to provide for the ever-present possibility that the native population could run amok, they felt they should have a contingency to mobilise and arm themselves as necessary. The 1854 rioting by the Chinese triggered the creation of a Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps (SVRC), which Governor W.J. Butterworth duly authorised, with the prior endorsement of Bengal. The Volunteer movement endured, though through many metamorphoses, eventually spreading to the other Straits Settlements and the Malay states. Obviously, it provided a venue for members to hobnob with the upper crust and to see and be seen by the British royalty who occasionally visited the Colony. It was an opportunity to pick up a medal or two by way of recognition. The duties were not especially onerous, being mostly weapons training, weekend camps, snipe
shooting in Farrer Park, ceremonial parades and mess life. But there was also a sense of civic responsibility and a genuine interest in military activities. Nothing significant by way of operations happened from the inception of the SVRC through the rest of the 1800s, which was spent mainly in sustaining membership. Organisationally however, the movement was re-launched as a Volunteer Artillery formation (SVA) in 1888. But at the turn of the century, with the outreach to Asian communities in the Straits Settlements, there was a surge of interest and general growth in numbers and types of units. Ironically, in 1901, the movement that started as an insurance against threats from Chinese communities saw the enrolment of a Chinese Infantry Company. The Sepoy Mutiny of 15th February, 1915 was viewed as a vindication of the Volunteer movement as the Volunteers were instrumental in quelling the mutiny and seen as offering a trustworthy alternative to the hired help. While the Great War atmosphere of the previous decade had triggered off similar movements in the federated and unfederated Malay States, it grew exponentially when the movement was centralised in Singapore as the Straits Settlements Volunteer Corps (SSVC) in 1922. In 1934 a Naval Volunteers element was added and was followed in 1936 by a Volunteer Air Force component. The Volunteers kept the faith during the dark days of Japanese aggression and occupation, suffering many dead, wounded and captured. They disbanded after the war and re-formed again, to participate in communist counter-insurgency operations and later against Indonesian guerrillas attempting to wreck the merger of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak as a single political entity. On separation from Malaysia on 9th August, 1965, those who were from Singapore were reconstituted as the People’s Defence Force. Many accepted permanent full-time service and manned important staff and command jobs in the new Ministry of the Interior and Defence, some to hold key senior appointments in the early days of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), including Director, General Staff (two), the Chief of Navy, Chief of Artillery (two), Chief of Armour and Commander, Singapore Air Defence Command.³

III. AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH FORCES IN SINGAPORE

Initially, Singapore was administered as a dependency of the East India Company station at Bencoolen on the southwest coast of Sumatra, where Raffles, with the title of Lieutenant Governor, was in charge. The first Resident of Singapore, William Farquhar, reported to Raffles, but during the tenure of the second Resident, Dr. John Crawfurd of the Bengal Civil Service, the administration was transferred directly to the Governor-General of India (then a BEIC appointment) who ruled India for the British Crown. In 1826, Singapore, Malacca and Penang were incorporated as the Straits Settlements, one of four Presidencies of India. In 1832, Singapore became the centre of government for the three trading stations, and on 1st April, 1867, the Straits Settlements as a whole became a Crown Colony under the Colonial Office in London. As a component of the Presidency, the chief administrator of Singapore was called Resident Councillor, but from the time the Straits Settlements were constituted, its head of government became known as Governor-General of the Straits Settlements.⁴
The removal of the Dutch threat to Singapore after the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824 did not absolve the Singapore administration from maintaining some sort of protection for the island and the port itself. Security considerations in Singapore began to centre on two issues: the general protection of the settlement from external regional threats wherever they may arise; and the protection of the European community from native uprisings and riots.

Under Indian administration, provisions for Singapore's external defence suffered because of distance, the absence of any immediate threat and, most of all, the lack of funds. Despite Singapore's success, its free port status meant limited revenue to the administrators, whereas the European community on the island was not in a position to take on the burden on its own. Things did not improve when the Straits Settlements came under the Colonial Office in London for pretty much the same reasons, but with one additional impediment: the War Office came into the picture and there was no agreement on the concept of defences. For most of the time, the prevailing wisdom was that Singapore was best defended by fixed fortifications in commanding positions around Keppel Harbour, RN warships stationed in the region and elements of a British Indian Army regiment deployed on the island. Numerous studies commissioned by the Governor or the War Office strongly recommended one scheme or other but proposals were squabbled over or allowed to lapse without action. From around the time the Straits Settlements came into existence to the eve of the Great War, now called World War I (WWI), Singapore's external defence comprised of a British Indian Army regiment, a battery of Royal Artillery, a squadron of Royal Engineers and a small complement of native troops. Whatever was done, such as the construction of Fort Canning and Fort Fullerton, was often counter-productive. For example, the cannon at either of these forts could not engage an enemy man-o’-war in the harbour without sinking some of the hundreds of trading vessels berthed there; in other instances, guns were supplied without the ammunition or personnel trained to fire them; or when British troops were deployed in Singapore they were excused from going out into the sun or the ‘unhealthy’ local environment. In one sense, however, these problems proved academic because the threat assessments were flawed to begin with. The only security issue that was effectively addressed was the perceived lawlessness of the Chinese communities in Singapore and the danger the resident European community believed this posed to itself.\(^7\)

The vacillations over the defences of Singapore were, in the final analysis, rooted in the issue of who would foot the bill (or at least the lion’s share of it): the British Government or the colony itself. There was nothing immediate in the Singapore scenario to threaten any embarrassing development to the British Government and the quibbling over one proposal after another reflected bureaucratic paper shuffling. The formation of a Local Defence Committee that actively monitored and periodically reported on the state of the defences was a positive outcome, as was the commitment of the Volunteers, who after 1901 enrolled Asiatic members and expanded their range of units.\(^8\) Prospects of conflict with Germany drew down RN assets
A HISTORY LESSON THE FIRST BATCH DID NOT GET
in the Far East around 1910. To compensate, land forces in Singapore were increased to about 3,500 personnel including Volunteers. Singapore, however, did not figure significantly in World War I, other than by way of the sideshow of the Sepoy Mutiny.

The end of WWI brought significant changes to the international strategic balance and the British began to build up the defences of Singapore because of the growing perception that Japan was becoming a serious threat to Britain in the Asia-Pacific region. Britain and Japan had signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 under which there had been considerable technology transfer from Britain to Japan, particularly in the field of shipbuilding. However, it was evident that Japan had colonial ambitions and these would be in conflict with Britain’s Far East interests.

By 1918, the reach of navies—the measure of power projection—had become truly global. Capital ships, i.e. battleships and battle cruisers, unambiguously represented military capability and intent. At the end of WWI, Britain’s overseas possessions exceeded that of all other countries by far, but Britain was financially strapped, with the administration of its empire and its military forces severely stretched. European nations were still in search of colonies in Asia, Africa, South America and the Pacific. But the imperial club now had an Asian aspirant, namely Japan, who had not only defeated Russia—a European power—in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, but had also engaged German troops in China during WWI. At the time, Britain and France had been grateful but the Japanese military mindset was now becoming a serious concern. With the war over, Britain began to reassess its position in the pecking order of nations. She could only conclude that in terms of power projection, she would soon be eclipsed by the United States (US), which had helped to change the course of WWI, and possibly by an increasingly assertive Japan, which was desperate for its own colonial sources of oil and primary products in East Asia.

Once Britain concluded that its best interests lay in accommodating the US—which seemed to be on a collision course with Japan in the Pacific—the Anglo-Japanese Alliance became untenable. From around 1919, the Chiefs of Staff, the Admiralty, the War Office and the cabinets of the different governments in office in Britain went through many iterations of strategic analysis on the best way to defend British interests in its far-flung empire—in the home islands, the Middle East, Africa, India, South East Asia and the Dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The key consideration of how to prioritise expenditure over the period of post-war recovery had been severely exacerbated by the Great Depression of 1929 to 1933. There was also a gradual hardening of positions in the debate on the role of air power versus naval power: the Admiralty had neither compelling evidence nor the inclination to concede that air power was the mortal enemy of capital ships, whereas the Royal Air Force (RAF) was obliged to project a potential rather than actual superiority on the basis of current technical advancements in a new field. At the time, the merger of air and maritime
power in the configuration of aircraft carriers was hardly a blip on the horizon, so to speak. Even if had been more developed, it is unlikely that Britain could have financed the build-up of adequate carrier groups compared to a sparse sprinkling of fixed air bases in the theatre of operations.

The other great problem was that the threat scenario was speculative. Apart from a vague uneasiness about the state of international relations based on spotty intelligence and the interpretation of diplomatic initiatives, there was neither a concrete enemy nor a crisis timeframe to concentrate the minds of the decision makers. In the event, it was agreed that a naval base big enough to accommodate and maintain a main battle fleet should be built at Singapore (as opposed to Sydney or Hong Kong), and such a fleet would be despatched in good time to take up station against a Japanese threat. Beyond that, the debate bogged down over aid from the US, the guarantee of timely intelligence, the expectation of sending a fleet over 10,000 nautical miles in the face of a simultaneous threat to the British home islands, the time that could be bought by military aid sent from India and what form the fixed defences in Singapore should take. There was even a debate on whether the naval base should be Keppel Harbour itself or on the northeast coast of Singapore, though this was settled with the realisation that co-locating the naval base with the commercial harbour would hardly be conducive to Singapore’s port operations, its economic mainstay.\textsuperscript{10}

The withdrawal from the League of Nations by Japan and Germany in 1933 and the withdrawal of Germany the same year from the Disarmament Conference eventually spurred Britain to
make a more concerted effort to build up the Singapore base. This had started in 1926 with the award of a contract to Swan Hunter to build a floating dock that was eventually towed in two halves to Singapore. In 1928, a contract had also been awarded to Sir John Jackson (Singapore) Ltd. to begin work on the graving docks and wharves in Sembawang. By 1935, when Sultan Ibrahim of Johore made a massive donation of £500,000 towards the project, the area between Sembawang and Changi had been transformed from marshland to a sprawling military complex of service installations, gun emplacements, airfields, hangars, workshops, stores, pumping stations, power stations, a hospital, barracks and housing units. An airfield had been put up at Tengah and additional facilities at Kallang to support a flying boat squadron.11 The area between Pasir Panjang and Alexandra had also been developed into army facilities. Altogether, British military installations mushroomed all over Singapore, from Blakang Mati (Sentosa Island) to Woodlands and the whole of the North East, whereas the previous concentrations
had been in Pasir Panjang, Alexandra, Normanton, Gillman and Tanglin.\footnote{12}

Other preparations went on, but although to many observers a war with Japan for Malaya was a matter of when and not if, a strategy was yet to be agreed. Up to 1935, it was thought that Japan would attack from the sea to take Singapore in a \textit{coup de main} (in the jargon of the time), hence the emphasis on gun defences supported by torpedo bombers and garrison troops, with reinforcement by a main fleet despatched from the Mediterranean when hostilities seemed imminent. But, from the tenure of Major General (MG) William Dobbie as General Officer Commanding, Malaya, in November 1935, his successor Major General L.V. Bond and eventually to Lieutenant-General Arthur E. Percival, it had become an article of faith that the Japanese would attack Singapore from the Malayan Peninsula and not by sea from the south. With Britain already at war with Germany from late 1939, what little could be done to prepare Singapore to deter Japan was attempted. Troops were sent from India and Australia and RAF squadrons to air bases in Singapore and Malaya. Fixed defences were put up in Singapore and contingency plans for operations in the Malayan Peninsula were drawn up. There was even a contingency plan to deny the Japanese a foothold in South Thailand. Japan’s occupation of Tonkin on 22\textsuperscript{nd} September, 1940, and the imposition of sanctions against her by the US and Britain lent urgency to the effort, but it was to prove too late. Raw troops, dated equipment and the distraction of the war in Europe right up to Pearl Harbour and the landings in Singora and Patani on 8\textsuperscript{th} December, 1941, sealed the fate of Malaya and Singapore. Despite all the attention it got, the sinking of the battleship \textit{Prince of Wales} and the battle cruiser \textit{Repulse} on 10\textsuperscript{th} December, 1941 off the east coast of Malaya was irrelevant to the military outcome, though it was a devastating blow to the morale of civilians and soldiers alike in Malaya and Singapore.

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\textit{Map of Singapore showing Singapore’s defences in 1937.}
In November 1941, British forces in Malaya comprised ten brigades with a total of 32 battalions, distributed among the 11th Indian Division, the 9th Indian Division, the 8th Australian Division and the 1st and 2nd Malaya Brigade. They came under the command of three Corps, initially located at Kuala Lumpur. The tanks that had been begged for, never arrived. The air force element comprised 181 dated combat aircraft, but no modern torpedo bombers, dive bombers or transport aircraft. After Prince of Wales and Repulse, the RN was an assortment of minesweepers and patrol craft manned by regulars and volunteers. Singapore was defended by 18 x 6-inch, 6 x 9.2-inch and 5 x 15-inch guns, with various other anti-aircraft and smaller calibre weapons in individually fortified positions. But the ammunition for the big guns consisted mainly of anti-shipping rounds and only 150 and 900 of high-explosive rounds were available for the 9.2 and 6-inch guns respectively. Contrary to sensational post-war analysis however, the deployment of most of the guns enabled them to fire landward as well.\(^\text{13}\)

Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, regarded as Japan’s best field commander, led the Japanese forces against the British. Yamashita’s 25th Army comprised the 5th, 18th and the Imperial Guards divisions, the 3rd Air Group of 450 up-to-date combat aircraft, the 22nd Naval Flotilla with 150 Zero fighters and the Southern Fleet made up of the battleships Kongo and Haruna, six modern heavy cruisers, and numerous smaller vessels. In addition, Yamashita had the 56th Division, which he left at home to conserve supplies.\(^\text{14}\)

Singapore fell on 15th February, 1942. Many in Malaya and Singapore concluded that Britain had sacrificed Singapore in the interest of the home islands, a charge rejected by Winston Churchill, Britain’s wartime Prime Minister. Japan went on to colonise the rest of South East Asia, including the Philippines and was poised to threaten Australia. It was to prove a long and tragic three years and seven months for Singapore as an outpost of Japan.

With the defeat of Japan in the Pacific and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allies, including the Soviet Union, which, at the last minute, had declared war on her, to better stake a claim for the spoils. On 12th September, 1945, Vice-Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) accepted the surrender of all Japanese forces in the area without a fight. As the surrender pre-empted ‘Operation Zipper’ which was to have rolled up the Japanese in South East Asia, Zipper was notionally conducted by way of a logistical exercise.\(^\text{15}\) Yamashita was hanged on 23rd February, 1946 in the Philippines after being tried as a war criminal and an appeal to General MacArthur had failed.

From the time of the surrender, Malaya and Singapore came under a British Military Administration (BMA), which itself came under SEAC, then mainly headquartered in Singapore. The 5th Indian Division secured the Island and the repair of pre-war military
facilities was urgently initiated. By November 1945, all three of Britain’s services were occupying their former facilities in Singapore. RAF HQ was set up in Changi Air Base, which was configured also as the air transportation hub. Tengah was assigned to air defence units and Seletar to stores and maintenance. By March 1946, the Admiralty had definitively concluded that only Singapore was close enough to the region to restore a credible British naval presence and secure British interest in South and East Asia. In April 1946, civil government was reinstated and by November that year, SEAC was disbanded. In the meantime, Singapore’s place in British defence policy was thoroughly reviewed. It was agreed that if Britain was to remain a global power, Singapore was a vital asset. The island was now a well-protected base for all three services and the centre of gravity for the facilitation of Britain’s defence policy in the region. Singapore would provide the main supporting base for the RN and the regional headquarters for the RAF and British land forces, as well as friendly forces for regional operations.\(^{16}\)

The above decisions acknowledged that nationalism was on the march in Asia, making it even more imperative for Britain to exploit Singapore’s strategic location. Events closely following the end of World War II (WWII) prompted this view: Indonesian independence in 1946; Indian independence in 1947; communist victory in China, in 1949; the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), in 1949; and the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953. With the advent of the Cold War, and especially after the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, South East Asia, while a secondary front, was nonetheless a linchpin in the worldwide ideological stakes. Britain was able to make a major contribution to the South East Asia Treaty Organisation, a collective security pact led by the US. During the Malayan Emergency against communist guerrillas, British military bases in Singapore played a pivotal support role, something that was repeated towards the end of the British stay when Indonesia mounted ‘Konfrontasi’ (armed confrontation) against the Malaysian merger.

As it turned out, the RAF began to wrest the lead role from the other two services and Tengah was upgraded to become the United Kindom’s most up-to-date air base outside the United Kingdom (UK), while Sembawang became the main support base. By 1962, the RAF could airlift one entire brigade to Singapore in nine days. In March 1962, Singapore was designated one of three worldwide tri-service hubs of British military forces together with the UK itself and Aden. It was placed under the command of the unified Far East Command.\(^{17}\)

### IV. PROVIDING FOR LOCAL MILITARY CAPABILITY

While the BMA was in place from 5\(^{th}\) September, 1945, when the Japanese officially surrendered, to 31\(^{st}\) March, 1946, a momentous administrative initiative had been cooking behind the scenes. With the return of the civil administration on 1\(^{st}\) April, 1946, the formation of the Malayan Union comprising the federated and unfederated states of peninsular Malaya with Penang and Malacca was announced and Singapore declared a separate Crown Colony. The Malayan Union scheme itself—which many Malays bitterly objected to because it would have given
non-Malays equal political status, and had led to the creation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which would be the main component of the ruling coalition after Malayan independence—was scrapped within 3 months and replaced by the Federation of Malaya on 1st February, 1948.18

By the early 1950s, the colonial environment was undergoing a terminal transformation. An impoverished Britain, scarred with the stigma of defeat by an Asian power, was neither able nor inclined to hang on to colonial possessions, whereas the colonial subjects themselves were chafing to be rid of the yoke of a foreign rule that had failed to provide even the security that might have been expected of it. Nationalism was gaining ground rapidly in South East Asia, starting with the rejection of the returning Dutch by the Indonesians and spurred on by the success of the Indian independence movement and the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu. There was pressure from many quarters for the British to rationalise their role in South East Asia and the issue had largely become a matter of face-saving but responsible disengagement.

In Singapore, the local population had become increasingly restive for more say in the government, resulting in a provision for six popularly elected members to the Legislative Council. Singapore’s first elections for political office (to the Legislative Council) were held on 20th March, 1948. But the threat of communism forced the British to speed up democratisation and self-government and in 1955, Singaporeans went to the polls for their first Legislative Assembly, to be led by a popularly elected Chief Minister. The Governor still had the right to appoint key members of the Assembly and there were several other members who would be nominated. The first Legislative Assembly negotiated with the British Government for further constitutional changes. Singapore’s first general elections for a fully elected Legislative Assembly under a Singapore Constitution that provided for a Head of State (initially the outgoing British Governor, Sir William Goode) and a Prime Minister, was held in May 1959.19 However, the British, through the High Commissioner to Singapore, retained responsibility for external defence and foreign affairs (except on matters pertaining to trade). An Internal Security Council made up of representatives of the British Government, representatives from the Singapore Government and a representative from the Federation of Malaya (with a crucial casting vote) dealt with issues of internal security in Singapore. In the face of communist agitation, partly because of its strategic location and partly because of its predominantly Chinese population, underlying nearly every political milestone for Singapore was Britain’s long-term view of its role in South East Asia and Malaya’s sensitivities towards the future status of Singapore within the Malayan scheme of things.

The armed insurgency mounted by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), better known as the First Malayan Emergency (1948 – 1960) was at its height while the political scene was changing in Malaya and Singapore. In fact, the changes mooted in both Malaya and Singapore were designed to pull the rug from under the communists, whose main platform was anti-
To help deal with the communist threat, as well as to enlarge the nucleus for a more substantive military capability, an abortive attempt was made to implement part-time national service in Singapore in 1954 (legislated in 1952) to augment Singapore’s volunteer local forces. The scheme was seen as conscription by a foreign power, thereby feeding the communist cause and became hugely unpopular. In view of its failure, local Singaporean leaders including Mr. David Marshall, the first Chief Minister, had pressed the British for the creation of regular Singaporean units in the latter half of the 1950s. The British undertook to provide the officers and finances to raise one infantry battalion in 1957 and the 1st Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment (1 SIR) was formed in Ulu Pandan Camp. In the event, a concerted effort by Commonwealth and Malayan forces under the inspired leadership of General (later Field Marshal) Sir Gerald Templer broke the back of the communist armed insurgency in Malaya. By combining the roles of High Commissioner to Malaya and Chief of Operations, Templer was in a position to institute drastic measures such as resettling Chinese farmers in protected New Villages thereby denying the communists access to both material resources and their network of information and couriers called ‘min yuen’. To demonstrate confidence and to eliminate the anti-colonial agenda, Malaya was granted independence on 31st August, 1957 even before the remnants of the insurgency were mopped up. Britain and Malaya concluded the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) to secure Malaya’s defence. The AMDA provided, among other things, for the British to help raise and train
Malayan military forces. On their part Malaya agreed to Britain maintaining bases and forces on its territory, subject to them not being used in support of the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) to which Britain was committed under the 1954 Manila Pact. Malaya had stipulated this to pursue a non-alignment policy mainly to prevent being dragged into a conflict with China. Since Britain could still use Singapore, this was not a problem.20

V. THE MALAYAN NAVAL BASE IN SINGAPORE

When Malaya became independent in 1957, there was the curious situation of the Royal Malayan Navy being based at KD (Kapal DiRaja) Malaya in Woodlands and K.D. Pelandok in Khatib, Singapore. At the time, given that Singapore was still British and there were no basing facilities even remotely comparable to Woodlands in Malayan territory, with the prospect of Singapore eventually being incorporated into Malaya, this was not anomalous. But, the creation of the Royal Malayan Navy had a chequered history. In 1934, a Straits Settlements Royal Naval Volunteer Reserves had been created in Singapore, starting with Commander L.A.W. Johnson, MVO, RN (Ret) and an authorised establishment of 50 Officers and 200 Malay ratings.21 The reason for stipulating Malays may have had to do with the prospect of creating a nucleus for a Malayan Navy in due course. It is also unclear at this late date if the numbers represented the actual response or the authorised strength, but in any case it was a very successful Volunteer force that went on to play a respectable role against the Japanese as part of the Singapore Wing of the Malayan Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. However, when the Volunteers were called up in 1939 in anticipation of a Japanese offensive, the Colonial Government in Singapore also decided to strengthen the defences of Singapore by separately raising a Malay Section within the fulltime Royal Navy.22 This group popularly became known as the ‘Malay Navy’, serving mostly as ratings in the communications branch of minesweepers and patrol craft. Like their Volunteer counterparts, they played a heroic role against the Japanese, suffering many casualties in the process. With the surrender of Singapore imminent, all naval personnel were ordered to evacuate and disperse, which they did with varying degrees of success. After the Japanese surrender, about 150 personnel returned to Singapore. They were accommodated in Farrer Park and later at Blakang Mati but due to financial constraints, the ‘Malay Navy’ was disbanded between February and April 1947.23 But in December 1948, the Colonial Government created a Malayan Naval Force as the colony’s contribution to the defence of Malaya and the nucleus came from the ex-‘Malay Navy’. In 1952, the Malayan Naval Force was designated the Royal Malayan Navy; it was still a British entity, controlled and financed by Singapore. In 1958, a year after Malayan independence, the force was transferred wholly to the Malayan Government, where it retained the Royal prefix but under the Malayan King (Yang Di Pertuan Agong).24 As there was no base then available in Malaya, the Royal Malayan Navy (RMN) headquarters remained in Woodlands in KD Malaya until it relocated to a base built in Lumut in 1994.25 (KD Pelandok, which had been the basic training camp, had been handed over to the Singapore Government in February 1982).
VI. SINGAPORE’S MILITARY ASSETS ON THE EVE OF MERGER

In 1962, again with British financial and manpower support, the second SIR battalion (2 SIR) was raised at Tanah Merah Besar Camp in Changi and relocated to Camp Temasek (beside 1 SIR in Ulu Pandan Camp) in July 1963, to be officially opened on 19th August by the Yang Di-Pertuan Negara, Inche Yusof bin Ishak. Thus, on the eve of merger the local land forces comprised 2 battalions worth of Volunteer Infantry, with a Volunteer Artillery battery, a Volunteer Armoured Car squadron, a Volunteer Signals squadron and a Volunteer squadron of Field Engineers, a General Transport Company and the Women’s Auxiliary Corps, plus the two SIR battalions. The Volunteer Navy element, which had originally been part of the Singapore Division of the Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, including personnel of the Singapore Women’s Auxiliary Naval Service, or SWANS, had three ships: Laburnum, a static ex-Japanese mine layer named Wakataka presented to the Singapore Division to replace the first Laburnum which had been sunk in WWII; Panglima, the third of that name, a 35.7m Ford Class large patrol craft built locally by Vosper Thorneycroft; and Panji, a launch used for ship handling training. The wartime Straits Settlements Volunteer Air Force had briefly been revived as the Singapore Wing of the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force providing light reconnaissance and fighter control duties, but with the end of the Malayan Emergency it had been disbanded in 1960. All the Volunteer units were primarily geared towards internal security operations and had seen sundry deployments to release the regular field forces for jungle operations.

VII. MERGER WITH THE MALAYAN FEDERATION

When Singapore, together with Sabah and Sarawak, merged with the Malayan Federation to form Malaysia on 16th September, 1963, the local military and police forces came under the Federal Government. The AMDA was renegotiated to include the defence of Singapore, while the British position on SEATO—now that British bases in Singapore were technically in Malaysian territory—was left unresolved for the moment. The personnel of 1 and 2 SIR were given the option to leave the service or stay, as their contracts had been with a different principal; about 30 percent left and the depleted battalions came under command of the 4th Malaysian Infantry Brigade (4 MIB) headquartered at Fort Canning. 4 MIB also commanded the 4th, 5th and 6th Battalions, Royal Malay Regiment and its area of responsibility was the Singapore-Johor military district. British forces based in Singapore continued to provide support. The Volunteers remained as such as they were nearly all Singaporeans or expatriates and were free to quit. However, the organisation was subsumed under the Malayan Territorial Army structure, with the designations of 10th Battalion Territorial Army, 20th Artillery and 30th Engineers and in the case of the naval elements, under the Royal Malaysian Navy Volunteer Reserve. For the Volunteers, one positive outcome was that they now could deploy for training in the larger territory of Malaysia. But almost immediately the military units were exposed to operations against Indonesian ‘Konfrontasi’
or ‘Confrontation’, Indonesia’s attempt to destabilise Malaysia, which had begun in January 1963. 1 and 2 SIR were deployed for jungle operations and the volunteers were mobilised to assist the two regular battalions in protecting key points and installations in Singapore itself, the Southern Islands and South Johor. The SVC infantry companies and the Volunteer Artillery contributed to jungle patrols against Indonesian guerrillas. The Volunteer Artillery also deployed in Sabah to support the 7th and 8th MIB and 2 SIR.\(^{36}\)

With merger, British colonial rule over Singapore was relinquished and Singapore’s security became a Malaysian responsibility. However, both Singapore and Malaysia welcomed the continued stay by British forces in Singapore. For Singapore, the British military presence was a major contribution to its economy, as well as an insurance against untoward developments in its relations with Malaysia. Malaysia for its part found the AMDA reassuring as communists were still active in Indonesia, Indo-China and the Philippines and communist cells remained active in the Thai-Malaysian border areas. The practical value of British basing in Singapore had become amply evident as soon as Indonesia mounted armed confrontation against the merger. But, all the same, as the British were now guests in an independent nation, the writing was on the wall.

**VIII. THE SINGAPORE VIGILANTE CORPS**

Another by-product of Konfrontasi had been the creation of the Singapore Vigilante Corps. When the Federal Government in Kuala Lumpur took over responsibility for Singapore’s security, it agreed to a Singapore proposal on 14\(^{th}\) April, 1964 to set up a Vigilante Corps to counter Indonesian infiltration and fifth-column operations in Singapore. A Vigilante Corps (VC) Working Committee under the Singapore Deputy Commissioner of Police was created to look into the administration of the Corps. Registration of corpsmen started on 22\(^{nd}\) April. All male residents of 18 years and above were eligible, and by 16\(^{th}\) May, more than 12,500 had signed up in 100 Community Centres throughout the Island. They were trained by the Police and the first patrols were deployed by 4\(^{th}\) June. Patrols were mounted in the vicinity of participants’ homes twice a week. Corpsmen were issued with identification, armbands, whistles, staves, torchlights and raincoats and the Singapore Government announced a compensation scheme for injuries incurred in the course of duty. The VC operated as individual units from Community Centres under the supervision of the Police.\(^{37}\)

**IX. SEPARATION FROM MALAYSIA**

The parting of the ways between Singapore and Malaysia in just under two years (16\(^{th}\) September, 1963 to 9\(^{th}\) August, 1965) came when it was mutually agreed between key Singaporean and Malaysian leaders that Malaysia would expel Singapore rather than attempt to force-fit incompatible value systems. But hanging over the whole separation was the undeniable fact that the defence of
Singapore and peninsular Malaysia were inextricably linked. Moreover, Britain’s commitment to AMDA remained and on separation, Britain, to all intents and purposes, still expected to occupy its military installations in Singapore as its base of operations for AMDA as well as other regional security interests. Also, Malaysia had its naval base in Singapore with no prospect of re-location in the immediate future. And, to complicate matters, Konfrontasi was still ongoing.38

On separation, Singapore was left vulnerable in nearly every field. Political sentiments being what they were at the time, Singapore’s sovereign independence was tenuous. It was heavily dependent on the presence of the British bases and continued dominance of the political scene in Malaysia of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Malaysian Prime Minister, who had mooted the separation (as opposed to enforced federation sans the current Singapore political leadership). The practical aspects of de-linking Singapore from Malaysia would take time and one of the thorniest areas would be in military matters, given that these had been under direct Federal Government purview.

Under Article V of the Separation Agreement of 7th August, 1965 Singapore and Malaysia were to enter into a treaty of external defence and mutual assistance, subject to the establishment of a Joint Defence Council. The Malaysian Government would give the Singapore Government assistance such as it considered reasonable and adequate for external defence. The Malaysian Government would have the right to continue to maintain the bases and facilities used by its military forces in Singapore and to use them as the Malaysian Government saw fit for external defence. Additionally, neither party would sign treaties with others that would be detrimental to the independence and territorial defence of the other.39

Apart from the two regular infantry battalions (less those Malaysian nationals who wanted to remain with Malaysia) and the volunteer infantry units, all military elements currently under the Malaysian Armed Forces that had belonged to Singapore before merger would revert to Singapore.

At the time of separation, the two SIR battalions were still under operational control of 4 MIB. As had been agreed prior to separation, 2 SIR had been sent to Sebatik Island (off Sabah) for a six-month operational deployment against ‘Konfrontasi’, while 1 SIR was barracked at Ulu Pandan Camp. Meanwhile the 5th Battalion, Royal Malay Regiment (5 RMR), was occupying Holland Road Camp, 2 SIR’s home. The issues that were raised in the course of resolving this problem were to contribute to the priority the Singapore leadership assigned to the creation of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).
The return of the Labour Party to power in the UK in 1964 initiated a review of Britain’s overseas defence commitments, despite the resistance of the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson and the Defence Minister, Dennis Healy. There just seemed no alternative to withdrawal from Singapore to realise the massive cuts demanded in defence cost. Unfortunately, the debates coincided with the breakdown in relations between Singapore and the Malaysian Federal Government and were viewed in some circles as an excuse by Britain to get out of a sticky wicket. By the time the separation occurred, the withdrawal was a foregone conclusion, and in 1967, the schedule was announced. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew was able to negotiate only a nine-month delay till the end of 1971, when general elections were due in Britain. But the outcome of the elections offered no reversal of policy.

Singapore received a British aid package worth about £50 million, defence technology transfers including the operation of air defence facilities, the Bloodhound surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) deployed in Singapore, several Hunter trainer aircraft plus training for pilots in Britain and generous terms for the transfer of British facilities in the island to the Singapore Government. The AMDA was replaced by the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which provided for consultations among Singapore, Malaysia, Britain, Australia and New Zealand in the event of any external threat to the local partners. An Integrated Air Defence System linking the radar facilities in Singapore, the air defence missile umbrella and interceptor aircraft of the FPDA partners, was set up under an overall Australian commander based at Butterworth. The 28th Commonwealth Brigade was redesignated the ANZUK brigade and relocated from Malaysia to Nee Soon Camp in Singapore. A contingent each of helicopters and maritime patrol aircraft continued to operate out of Tengah. There were also arrangements for RN and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) units to rotate through Singapore. Britain formally terminated the Far East Land Forces (FAREF) structure on 29th October, 1971. This was followed on 31st October by the Far East Air Force, bringing an end to the whole Far East Command. By March 1976, all Australian and British troops stationed in Singapore were withdrawn. The New Zealand battalion stayed on till 1989.

The term Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) per se came into use only after separation from Malaysia. Prior to that, there had been several similar terms representing the military organisations set up in Singapore, namely the original Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps; the Singapore Volunteer Artillery; its eventual successor the Singapore Volunteer Corps; and in 1954, the Singapore Military Force. Under Malaysia, the regular units, 1 and 2 SIR, were parts of the Malaysian Armed Forces (renamed 1st and 2nd Battalions, Malaysian Infantry Regiment), while on mobilisation, the
Volunteers, as part of the Malaysian Territorial Army, would have come under command of the designated Malaysian headquarters that had operational command of the forces from Singapore.

The SAF was forged in the crucible of the heightened political sensitivities that a historically unprecedented event had created, namely the expulsion of a state from a federation by the central government. The fact that the central government had overwhelming military forces and legal prerogatives at its disposal as well as other alternatives such as suppressing the divisive elements in the ‘renegade’ community only made recourse to expulsion more intriguing. However, for the outcast state, the possibility that this was a shrewd political gamble, which, if successful, would see it crawling back on its hands and knees, willing to accept any terms of reconciliation, was a reality. But that prospect also carried the corollary that if the gamble failed, then the deferred chastisement could yet be applied.

**Endnotes**

1. Buckley 1965, p. 43
2. *ibid.*, p. 59
3. *ibid.*, p. 60
4. *ibid.*, pp. 585-595
5. Brigadier T.J.D. Campbell (DGS); Brigadier Kirpa Ram Vij (DGS); COL James Aeria (Chief of Navy); COL Mancharan Singh Gill (Chief of Artillery); COL Kwek Boon Yong (Chief of Artillery), LTC Seah Peng Yong (Chief of Armour); COL Ee Tean Chye (Commander, Singapore Air Defence Command)
6. Murfett, et. al., p.56
7. *ibid.*, pp. 87-112
8. *ibid.*, p. 108
9. *ibid.*, p.124
10. *ibid.*, p.151
12. Winsley 1938, p.195. Tanglin Barracks had been completed in 1868 for occupation by British troops; prior to the barracks, it had been a 1,600 acre nutmeg plantation belonging to one William Willan and included Mount Harriet which is the site of the building which used to be the Officers’ Mess.
13. Murfett, et. al., p. 167
14. *ibid.*, pp. 177-180
15. *ibid.*, p. 281
16. *ibid.*, pp. 282-283
17. *ibid.*, pp. 297-298
18. Lau 2003, pp. 4-5
20. Huxley 2000, p. 3
21. Winsley 1938, p. 115
23. *ibid.*, loc. cit
24. ibid.
25. Mindef records.
31. Huxley 2000, p. 5
32. Mindef records
33. Huxley 2000, p. 6
34. The Singapore Armed Forces, 1981, p. 42
37. Singapore Year Book 1964, p. 180
38. On 30th September, 1965, the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), attempted to take over openly by eliminating the key military commanders opposed to it. Forty-four year old Major General Mohammed Suharto, Commander of Kostrad, the Army Strategic Reserves, (Komando Strategis Angkatan Darat) counter-attacked to smash the coup. Many communist sympathisers were rounded up and either executed summarily or incarcerated indefinitely. In the aftermath of the failed coup, General Suharto eventually took over as President and subsequently ended the Konfrantasi campaign.
40. Murfett, et. al. p. 316
41. ibid., p. 323
42. ibid., p. 324
43. ibid., p. 326
44. The 42nd Battalion, Singapore Armoured Regiment, took over the historic Selarang Barracks, which General Yamashita had used temporarily as an operational HQ (as well as a POW detention centre), from 6 RAR.