

## Drop Zone Borneo

### The RAF Campaign 1963-65: The Most Successful Use of Armed Forces In the Twentieth Century

By Roger Annett

Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2006

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Just as Pandora released the woes of the world, the 1939-1945 war let loose huge, interconnected themes that played out in a worldwide arena over at least the next half century and, in some cases, play on. Because these themes are so daunting study and summary of them at a level other than generalisation frequently becomes an exercise in simplification in which one example stands as proxy for a genre of similar themes and events. Thus, in respect of South East Asia the transition to post-colonialism, the emergence of nationalism, the spread of communism and attempts to contain it, and the growing employment of asymmetric warfare are frequently accessed through the single example of Vietnam.

Understandable though this tunnel-vision may be, through the sheer weight of material, the strength of contemporary images, and the impact of the war and its aftermath, it nonetheless has consequences. Not only does this tend to limit understanding

of the US experience itself by a process akin to microscopic analysis in a vacuum, it also sweeps to the margin many almost-forgotten events, policies and campaigns, some of which had significantly different endings. The Korean War, SEATO and CENTO as younger and frailer siblings of NATO, Dutch withdrawal from Indonesia, French defeat in and withdrawal from Vietnam, are but some examples of exclusions that can be forgotten if a world view is polarized to NATO in the north west and Vietnam in the south east. This chapter of discarded histories also includes the lengthy but successful British campaign (1948-1960) against ethnic Chinese guerrillas in the Malayan jungle, which not only etched a template for the conduct of what subsequently became known as low-intensity operations but also preset conditions for the creation of Malaysia. This, in turn, was followed by the brilliant defence of Malaysia's constituent territories (Brunei and, notably, Borneo) between 1962-1966 against incursions by elements of the 330,000 strong Indonesian Army. This defence, accruing 496 gallantry awards including a VC, was mounted by vanishingly small ground forces supported by equally overstretched air transport assets using airdrop and airlanding techniques pioneered in Burma in 1944/45. There are, almost certainly, lessons here of great relevance to counter insurgency, expeditionary operations and the application of the manoeuvrist approach to asymmetric warfare.

This is the territory which Roger Annett explores in *Drop Zone Borneo*, examining with the benefit of personal experience, the overall contribution of the RAF to the Indonesian Confrontation and concentrating particularly on the efforts of No 215 Sqn between 1963-1965.

The main body of the book is very much a period piece and highly successful as a memoir of a young man's personal introduction to conflict and its pressures. This was an age when Southeast Asia was still eurocentrically known as 'The Far East' and the RAF was still large enough for its in-theatre forces, resplendent in starched khaki and white sharkskin mess dress, to be identified as the 'Far East Air Force'. Roger Annett takes us, inter alia, to the Temple Hill Officers' Mess at Changi, to

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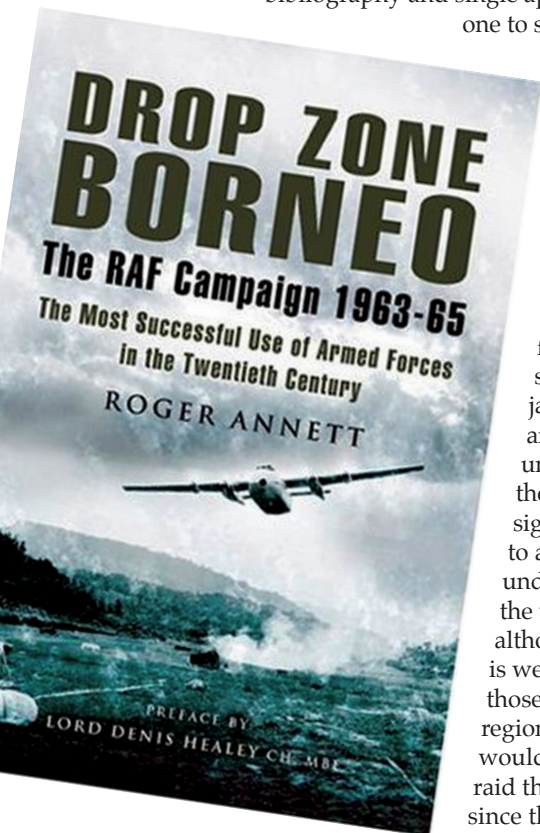
the tailors and fast-food stores of Changi Village, Singapore itself, and on furlough in up-country Malaya. He also ushers us into ringside leather seats on the flight-deck of the idiosyncratic but entirely British-built Argosy as he and his colourful 215 Sqn colleagues battle, generally successfully, with a series of uncomfortably tight drop zones, irascible Army liaison personnel with an obsession about waste disposal and often-legendary incidents, such as the Argosy with the dinghy wrapped around its tailplane. This is a wonderful snapshot of a pre-C130 Air Transport fleet plying its trade skilfully with a motley selection of aircraft that included not only the Argosy but also the Hastings, Twin and Single Pioneers, Beverley, and the Belvedere. Unsurprisingly, the book rather neglects analysis of the campaign's context and conduct. It is extremely difficult to write history simultaneously on two different levels and the somewhat thin

bibliography and single appendix, lead one to suspect that it

was never the author's intention to do so. Readers unfamiliar with the background would be well-advised not only to read the final chapter first, but also to study the dust jacket, Foreword and Preface with unusual care, since these all contribute significantly to an overall understanding of the whole. Equally, although the book is well-illustrated, those not aware of the regional geography would be advised to raid the map store, since the reproductions

of aeronautical charts that are provided add verisimilitude but little enlightenment. It is also, perhaps, unfortunate that the description of the 'RAF Campaign' as 'The Most Successful Use of Armed Forces in the Twentieth Century' is picked out of Lord Healey's authoritative preface and elevated to the front cover. The claim is justified simply by assertion and no substantive argument is produced in the text of appendix to justify it or argue its merits in contrast to other candidates. A similar dissonance occurs within the dust-cover, where comparability is suggested with Burma, north-west Europe and the Berlin Airlift. The last of these is predictable, since all subsequent airlift operations have studied (and often mangled) the statistics in order to prove superiority to Berlin. Again, however, the information on which the claim could be judged is not reproduced within the book.

Overall, given these criticisms, it would be all too easy to write off *Drop Zone Borneo* as a rather pretentious study of air power that failed to live up to the ambitious self-advertisement in its 'blurb'. This would be unkind and largely untrue, since it would be based on an unfortunate mismatch between the author's text and intentions, and the surrounding editing and production. At its heart, the book is worthwhile as a brilliant and charming little cameo of the men of No 215 Sqn 'doing their bit' during the 'Indian Summer' of Far Eastern colonialism that lasted from Suez to Healey's 1969 Defence Review and lingered on, in the RAF's Air Transport Force, until Sir Andrew Humphrey dismantled its strategic assets in 1975. It should be read as such, by those who were there and also by those who weren't. It should not, however, be regarded as a definitive and considered campaign history since it lacks the necessary depth and breadth. It should be viewed as an aperitif or illustration for a campaign that urgently requires renewed examination and as a successful and salutary reminder that air transport, even at the 'sharp end' may be less than totally enthralling but that if you cannot get there, cannot supply yourself when you are there and cannot subsequently get back, the prudent course is not to go.



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