Title
“The Small Boat War: Stopping Indonesian Maritime Incursions during Confrontation, 1963-65”

Speaker
Assoc Prof Brian Farrell

Day, Date, Time, Venue
Wednesday, 21 May 2008, 3 pm, AS1-04-01

Abstract
One confidential British military postmortem on the Confrontation between Indonesia and the Commonwealth alliance led by the UK and Malaysia described the maritime conflict in blunt fashion: “The enemy was inept at sea.” This was not an unfair evaluation of the main seagoing battle fleet of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia-Angatan Laut. Despite its recently purchased and potentially dangerous Soviet air, surface and submarine assets, the TNI-AL was outclassed in every respect by the formidable naval armada concentrated under the direction of the British Far East Command by 1964. But there was one dimension of the conflict in which Commonwealth naval superiority was reduced to worryingly tight margins: Indonesian efforts to use a miscellaneous collection of small craft, operating in close and narrow waters, to infiltrate raiding parties, agents, and saboteurs into Malaysia and Singapore.

In two particular areas within the large maritime zone Commonwealth navies had to defend this campaign became a constant concern and, for much of 1964 and 1965, an active struggle: the narrow waterways surrounding Pulau Sebatik off the east coast of Sabah, and the southern half of the Straits of Melaka and Straits of Singapore. Because both sides were determined not to be seen by the rest of the world as the aggressor both paid very close attention to the political ramifications of all their actions. Commonwealth governments required their navies to operate under very tight rules of engagement, carefully scrutinizing all plans and operations which might escalate the conflict. This made the firepower of two aircraft carrier battle groups redundant in what became a nerve-wracking nightly game of hide and seek pitting the smaller patrol and coastal vessels of Far East Command against a motley but dangerous opponent. By closely examining the conduct of operations in the narrow waters between Sumatra, the Riau Islands, the Malayan Peninsula and Singapore, particularly from autumn 1964 to summer 1965 when tensions reached their apex, this paper will explain why we can learn much about Confrontation, in all its dimensions, by examining this campaign in which the defenders could not call in their trump cards at sea and had to find other ways to keep the enemy at bay.

About the Speaker
Associate Professor Brian P. Farrell is Deputy Head of the Department of History at the National University of Singapore, where he has been teaching since 1993. His main research interests are twentieth-century military history and the history of the British Empire, particularly the problems of imperial defence. He has published widely on both topics, most notably on the Malayan Campaign and the defence and fall of Singapore in the Second World War. His current projects are a study of Far East Command, the last British military headquarters in Southeast Asia, and a military history of the Confrontation between Indonesia and the Commonwealth from 1963-66.

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