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AUSTRALIAN MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO THAILAND

REPORT BY THE DEFENCE COMMITTEE

BACKGROUND TO DEPLOYMENT OF R.A.A.F. SABRE SQUADRON IN THAILAND

Cabinet, in its decision of 15th May, 1962 to send a military contingent (subsequently decided as a R.A.A.F. Sabre squadron of eight aircraft) to Thailand, in pursuance of our obligations under SEATO, considered it important that.....

"our objectives should be to build up the effectiveness of SEATO and to assure Thailand that its territorial integrity would be maintained. "

The Sabre squadron has been deployed at Ubon, Thailand since late May 1962 with an air defence, but not a ground attack, capability.

2. The British and New Zealand air elements sent to Thailand during 1962 have been withdrawn. The United States ground forces have also been withdrawn and the United States air element has been reduced to half a squadron. United States however are planning a special logistic aid programme for Thailand at an estimated cost of \$25m. which is designed to facilitate the deployment of SEATO forces into the area in an emergency and to provide a boost to the Thai economy. It is probable that the programme is also seen as a compensation for the U.S. forces already withdrawn. It will involve the deployment of some 1200 military engineers who would be combatant troops, in uniform, and capable of fighting. New Zealand is making available two Bristol aircraft to assist in transporting materials under the U.S. programme. Britain has also decided, in principle, to construct an airfield at Mukdahan as a contribution to Thai logistic facilities which, at the same time, would assist the deployment of Commonwealth forces in an emergency.

3. In these circumstances it is necessary to consider whether Australia should continue military assistance to Thailand and, if so, whether this should be by retention of the Sabre squadron at Ubon or by offering some alternative form of military aid.

FUTURE OF THE SQUADRON

4. In addition to meeting Cabinet's objectives the deployment of the R.A.A.F. Sabre squadron in Thailand has resulted in the following military advantages to Australia:-

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- (a) it is deployed at the Ubon base from which, under certain SEATO plans, it would operate in the event of limited war in South-East Asia.
- (b) should war occur, the squadron would need (i) infrastructure, (ii) a clear definition of the command and control system and (iii) practise in operational techniques; deployment at Ubon has enabled a start to be made on all these essential requirements, and some initial difficulties in meeting them have been overcome;
- (c) the squadron has obtained valuable military training directly relevant to its limited war role by operating with the United States and Thai air forces;
- (d) the squadron has supplied a useful, identifiably Australian, military presence in Thailand.

5. The deployment of the squadron has involved the R.A.A.F. in additional expenditure and has required modifications to other approved R.A.A.F. objectives. The 150 personnel required have had to be drawn from establishments approved for other purposes, and additional maintenance costs have been involved. This disturbance to the R.A.A.F. programme could not be continued beyond the end of this financial year (1962/63). To maintain the squadron beyond then would require an addition of 150 to the existing R.A.A.F. manpower strength. Pay costs alone would amount to £268,000 per year and other, maintenance, costs would amount to £124,000, a total of £392,000 per year.

6. From the military point of view there are good grounds for retaining the squadron in Thailand, even at the additional cost involved, particularly as there is still a lot of headway to be made in the field of extending air co-ordination techniques with the United States and Thai air forces. The additional cost, however, would have to be weighed against the needs of other competing demands on the available Defence Vote.

7. Politically, in the context of our relations with Asian and African countries, it is not good policy for Australia to deploy forces into another country except for very good reasons. If deployed, they should be withdrawn as soon as the reason for sending them disappears. The continued presence of the R.A.A.F. squadron is a potential disadvantage to Australia capable of

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exploitation in the international political sphere, particularly in the United Nations. The despatch of the squadron to Thailand was a precautionary measure and the objectives Cabinet had in mind at the time have been substantially secured. There is now no immediate military threat to Thailand so that, in effect, the squadron is being retained there to meet United States wishes and because of the military advantages to Australia summarised in paragraph 4 above. Some of these military advantages could be derived, although to a lesser degree, by participation in SEATO exercises operating from the R.A.A.F. base at Butterworth, Malaya.

8. On balance, then, it is considered that the R.A.A.F. squadron should be withdrawn from Thailand. For convenience, the most suitable time for withdrawal would be during June at the end of a SEATO ground defence exercise in Thailand in which the squadron will be taking part. This would make the withdrawal less conspicuous and would thus make it easier for the Malayan authorities to accept its return to Butterworth. It would also provide a convenient opportunity to leave behind any personnel considered necessary either for maintenance purposes or for R.A.A.F. assistance to logistic support to Thailand.

9. The reactions of the Thai and United States authorities to withdrawal should be taken into account, however, before any unilateral action is taken. As far as the Thais are concerned it has been ascertained that they would not press to retain the squadron and that, at best, they would have no objection to its remaining. The United States attitude is a little more complex. State Department sources advised recently that they would prefer the squadron to remain for the time being. Their thinking on this point, however, seems to be influenced by a feeling that SEATO forces in Thailand are related to the military situation in Laos. This reasoning is unconvincing, as it is unlikely that the intentions of the Viet Minh on remaining in Laos would be affected by the presence in Thailand of eight R.A.A.F. aircraft, although they could be influenced by a Viet Minh assessment that SEATO interest in the area was reducing.

10. It is felt, therefore, that the question of withdrawal of the R.A.A.F. squadron should be taken up on a high level with the United States. The Australian approach should be that

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we intend to withdraw unless the Americans have strong reasons to justify our retaining the squadron in Thailand. It is considered that our withdrawal would be more acceptable to both the United States and the Thai authorities if we were able at the same time to offer some alternative form of military assistance to Thailand, preferably assistance to match in with the planned United States logistic support programme.

ALTERNATIVE MILITARY ASSISTANCE IF SQUADRON IS WITHDRAWN.

11. Australia's general relations with Thailand are excellent, and our record of assistance to her militarily and otherwise under SEATO and the Colombo Plan is good. It is considered that, if it is practicable in the light of other priority Defence commitments, we should continue to assist the United States in measures she is taking in Thailand to increase the effectiveness of SEATO.
12. The question of the nature and extent of the alternative military assistance Australia could offer should be examined in more detail when the United States attitude to withdrawal of the R.A.A.F. squadron has been determined. Preliminary consideration has been given to this and some general principles have been worked out.
13. Firstly, there appears to be no pressing need for Australia to provide military operational training assistance to Thailand. The provision of an Army training team by Australia would react to the detriment of the ready availability of our regular field force. Moreover, if Australia were to deploy additional anti-insurgency instructors overseas, it would be more prudent in the interests of concentration of effort to add to those already serving in South Vietnam than to disperse them in two widely separated areas.
14. Secondly, it is considered that any Australian military assistance to Thailand should be in the form of a logistic support effort to assist the deployment of Australian forces under SEATO limited war plans. e.g. infrastructure and logistic facilities in the Ubon area and forward to Mukdahan, or the improvement of unloading facilities at Sattahip. This, of course, would be a matter for consultation with the Thai

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and United States authorities. We should be prepared to offer our contribution towards projects of this nature which could be linked to the United States Special Logistic Aid to Thailand programme (SLAT). A SLAT label could be attached to our proposal to provide Thailand with initial equipment and staff for a military base workshop, at an estimated cost to Australia of £300,000. This is an approved project for which funds are available in the existing vote for Economic Assistance to Support Defence Programmes of SEATO member countries. It would however have to be made clear to both Thailand and United States that linking our assistance to SLAT would in no way affect the bilateral nature of our contribution.

15. It is considered that any Australian manpower contribution to construction projects would have to be relatively small. It is expected that present plans to expand the Australian forces for direct Australian defence needs will absorb all of the recruits likely to be available who would be suitable for training for engineering tasks. There would be no question, in present circumstances, of sending formed units to Thailand. Our aim then should be to offer projects which would require Australian supervisory personnel only and which would make the maximum use of local labour.

CONCLUSIONS

16. It is concluded that :-

- (a) There are sound military reasons for continuing the deployment of the R.A.A.F. Sabre squadron at Ubon; however, the requirement for 150 additional personnel and the additional annual maintenance costs of £392,000 needed for continuing deployment beyond June, 1963, would have to be weighed against the needs of other competing demands on the available Defence Vote.
- (b) On balance, for the reasons detailed in paragraphs 7 to 9, the squadron should be withdrawn from Thailand.
- (c) For convenience, the most suitable time for withdrawal of the squadron would be during June, 1963 at the conclusion of a SEATO ground defence exercise in which the squadron will be taking part.
- (d) The United States authorities should be informed that Australia intends to withdraw the squadron unless they have strong reasons to justify our retaining it in Thailand.

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- (e) when informing the United States authorities of our intention to withdraw we should advise that, if it should prove practicable in the light of other priority Defence commitments, Australia would be prepared to offer some alternative form of military assistance to Thailand, and that such assistance would, if desired, be arranged to fit in with their own Special Logistic Aid to Thailand programme (SLAT). The United States should be informed that we are agreeable to give a SLAT label to the base workshop project referred to in paragraph 14.

- (f) The nature and extent of the alternative military assistance Australia could offer should be examined in more detail when the United States attitude to withdrawal of the squadron is known; the general principles set out in paragraphs 13 and 14 should be taken into account in that examination.

Department of Defence,
CANBERRA.

14th March, 1963.

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