



A brief history of the Royal Malaysian Navy

Initially it may appear surprising that Malaysia didn't have a proper navy or some sort of maritime protection force until the twentieth century. However this is almost certainly due to the territory now comprising Malaysia not having a formal geographical grouping until this time; up until then some of the states did have limited naval capabilities but often relied on others for the protection of their land and sea routes. This can be put into perspective by considering some of the key events in the history of the country.

Key historical events

Some 10000 years ago migrants, probably from China and Tibet seeking a better place to live, settled in the coastal areas of peninsular Malaysia and Borneo. Later the Cambodian based Funan Empire, Sumatra and the Javanese Majapahit Empire fought for the fertile land they occupied. Subsequently strong trading links with China and India were established. Thus the region became strategically important as Peninsular Malaysia lies between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, and all sea traffic has to pass along the Malacca Straits when travelling from East to West and vice versa.

Around the early 1400s, Parameswara, who was thought to be either a Sumatran prince or ex-pirate, settled in Malacca (now spelt Melaka) and established it as a major trading port. In 1405 the Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho (or Zheng Ho) arrived and established a trading relationship which included providing protection against the Siamese. Later the Portuguese decided they would like control of Malacca, and in 1509 established a trading relationship with the local ruler but they were expelled when their ultimate aims became apparent. Therefore in 1511 they returned and seized the city turning it into a fortress. The Dutch took over in 1641 and they ceded Malacca to the British in 1824 as part of an agreement dividing South East Asia between the two nations, with all property rights to the north of the Malacca Straits going to Great Britain. Malacca declined in importance and influence as the river estuary silted up and more trade went to Singapore.

Other Sultanates and territories in the Malay peninsula were largely independent for many years. British Malaya loosely describes the set of states in the peninsula and Singapore that came under British hegemony or control between the 18th and 20th centuries. They were largely British protectorates but with their own local rulers, and also included the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang, which were under direct British rule after a period of control by the East India Company.

The histories of the individual Malay states is often quite complex and certainly beyond the scope of this historical outline. However it is apparent that in most cases the protection of their trade and assets was considered on a state centred, rather than a collective regional, approach. Sometimes treaties were enacted with adjacent states or even countries, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was probably a general feeling that the state rulers would be able to call on help from the Royal Navy if needed, as they were effectively under British protection.

In 1946 the states in Peninsular Malaysia were unified as the Malayan Union, with North Borneo and Sarawak becoming British colonies in the same year. The Union was restructured in 1948 as the Federation of Malaya, and ultimately independence was granted on 31 August 1957. Then in 1963 the Federation united with North Borneo (with name change to Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore to become Malaysia; however Singapore left the grouping to become the Republic of Singapore in 1965.

Malaysia consists of thirteen states as symbolised by the number of red and white stripes on the Malaysian flag.



Map of Malaysia

Development of naval forces

The first properly constituted naval force in Malaya was a unit of reserves known as the Straits Settlements Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (SSRNVR), which was set up in Singapore at the end of April 1934; the complement was 25 officers and 150 ratings under the command of Commander L A W Johnson RN. Initially sea training was carried out in the Governor's steam yacht SEA BELLE II, 844 tons and LOA 230ft, built by J S White & Co at Cowes. Two years later HMS LABURNAM, a British Acacia class sloop (previously on loan to the Royal New Zealand Navy), was given to the SSRNVR and became their Headquarters ship. During 1937 they were given two 75 ft motor launches for sea training which had been built by Thornycroft, Singapore, the ML PANGLIMA and the ML PAHLAWAN. The Penang 'Division' of the SSRNVR was formed in 1938.

At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, members of the SSRNVR were called up for full time service. Also, to strengthen defences in South East Asia, Britain established the Malay Section of the Royal Navy (often known as "the Malay Navy") for the security of Singapore and Malaya. The SSRNVR became the Malayan RNVR in 1941. Many members of the Malay Navy escaped from Singapore during the evacuation prior to the Japanese invasion; many men and ships were lost but other men went on to serve in a range of roles, including in minesweepers and patrol craft, throughout the war, returning with the liberating forces in 1945. After liberation the Malay Navy was re-formed but due to financial restrictions the British Government disbanded it in April 1947, although the MRNVR was re-instituted.

Following the start of the Malayan Emergency in 1948, the Malayan Naval Force was re-formed and operated various vessels in support of the defence of peninsular Malaya against the communists. In 1953 HM Queen Elizabeth awarded the Force 'Royal' status to become the Royal Malayan Navy. Following negotiations with the British Government after independence, all naval assets were transferred to the Federation of Malaya in 1958; it remained as the Royal Malayan Navy but the 'Royal' now referring to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong or King of Malaya. Upon the formation of Malaysia the title of the force changed to the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) or in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), Tentera Laut di-Raja Malyasia. The RMN badge (pictured) incorporates a Malaysian crown with the words Allah (on the right) and Mohamed (on the left) in the Jawi script in the upper two sections of the crown, and the national flower, the bunga raya or hibiscus at the bottom of the badge. The naval motto in the scroll below the badge is 'Sedia Berkorban' which translated means 'Ready to Sacrifice'.

On formation the rank and rating structure in the RMN was effectively the same as the Royal Navy, but about 1970 the ranks were Malaysianised and equivalent army ranks were adopted, for example Lieutenant Commander became Mejar (Laut), literally Major (Sea). However, later they reverted to Malaysianised versions of Royal Navy ranks, Lieutenant Commander becoming Leftenan Komander; but they have an additional rank of Leftenan Madya or Lieutenant Junior Grade, signified by one and a half stripes. The rating structure is the same as the Royal Navy but with different insignia.

The first two Chiefs of the Navy were both Royal Australian Navy Commodores. However, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Malaysian Prime Minister, and his colleagues then decided that the top post should be held by a Malaysian. Firstly the post was offered to an Army General but was declined as he felt he was not professionally qualified and also did not want to jeopardise his army career. After some deliberation it was decided to take a risk and appoint a 31 year old RMN officer, K Thanabalasingam, to the position. Once identified as the potential Chief, he received accelerated promotion and was appointed to the post on 1 December 1968 in the rank of Commodore; he transformed the Navy from what was effectively a coastal force into a full ocean going navy. He retired in 1976 having attained the rank of Rear-Admiral. Subsequently there have been 12 Chiefs of the Navy, including the current Senior Officer, Admiral Tan Sri Mohd Reza Mohd Sany.

Ships

The vessels transferred to the Royal Malayan Navy in 1958 were 1 LCT, 2 Ham Class minesweepers, 1 coastal minelayer and 7 motor launches. Arrangements were in place with Singapore to continue using the facilities at Woodlands on Singapore island as the RMN operational base, which was renamed HMMS MALAYA. Woodlands is just over 5 km to the west of the site of the original British Naval Base at Sembawang.

Following the formation of the RMN, 14 Keris class 103ft coastal patrol boats were ordered from Vosper and these were the principal seagoing assets for many years. These were supplemented by an offensive capability of four Perkasa class patrol craft from Vospers, whose design was based on the RN Brave class, and were in commission for about 10 years from 1967. Their armament was four 21-inch (53 cm) torpedoes, one Bofors 40 mm gun forward, and one 20 mm cannon aft, and they had a maximum speed of 54 knots. In 1964 the Loch class frigate HMS LOCH INSH was transferred from the RN to the RMN, renamed KD HANG TUAH and became the flagship until the 1970s. (Note, KD is the equivalent ship prefix to HMS, and means Kapal Di-raja or literally royal ship).

The 1970s saw various new ships joining the RMN. These included a replacement KD HANG TUAH (previously HMS MERMAID), KD RAHMAT (initially named KD HANG JEBAT), a Yarrow 2300 ton seacat missile armed frigate, and various missile boats from France and Sweden. There were also two Korean designed offshore patrol vessels and some World War II LSTs from the United States.

Considerable expansion and modernisation of the RMN fleet started in 1994 with the purchase of two British guided missile (Lekiu class) frigates. There has been investment in various types of vessel, including two French Scorpene Class diesel electric submarines which were commissioned in 2009. The current RMN Fleet consists of the following:-

No.	Type	Main armament
2	Attack submarine	Black Shark torpedoes & Exocet missiles
1 *	Maharaja Lela frigate	57mm Bofors gun, naval strike missiles & torpedoes
2	Lekiu class frigate	57mm Bofors gun, Seawolf & Exocet missiles and torpedoes
2	Kasturi class corvette	57mm Bofors gun, Exocet missiles and torpedoes
2	Laksamana class corvette	76mm Oto Melara gun, missiles and torpedoes
6	Kedah class offshore patrol vessel	76mm Oto Melara gun
2	Keris class patrol vessel	30mm H/PJ gun
18	Fast attack craft	Mainly Bofors guns of various sizes. 8 have Exocet missiles.
17	Fast interceptor craft	Machine guns
4	MCM vessel	
2	Support ship	
3	Auxiliary ship	
1	Submarine rescue ship	
3	Training ship	
3	Hydrographic survey ship	

* The Maharaja Lela frigate is the first of six of the same class to be delivered.

The Maharaja Lela and Keris class ships are all designed on the 'Littoral mission' concept. This concept originated with the US Navy in about 2002 and to some extent appears to have been influenced by experience in the Gulf area. The Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) is a fast, agile, mission focused platform designed for operation in near-shore environments yet capable of open-ocean operation. It is designed to defeat "anti-access" threats such as mines, quiet diesel submarines and fast surface craft. The purchase of these vessels is part of the so called '15 – 5' transformation plan, which aims to reduce ship types in the RMN from fifteen to five by 2030. The purpose of this is to cut operational and running costs by retiring older ships and having a more manageable range of vessels but still achieving strategic commitments.



KD MAHARAJA LELA

Bases

In 1979 the Woodlands base ceased operating and the main base for the RMN became the purpose built facility at Lumut on the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia in the State of Perak, some 85 km south of Ipoh the State Capital. In 2017 the RMN Fleet was divided into the Western and Eastern Fleets which aimed to give extra focus to the maritime security in Sabah and Sarawak. Currently the main naval bases are at:-

- Lumut, Perak (HQ Western Fleet)
- Kuantan, Pahang (HQ Naval Region I, covering South China Sea side Peninsular Malaysia and lower end Straits of Malacca)
- Langkawi, Kedah (HQ Naval Region III, upper half of Straits of Malacca)
- Tanjung Pengelih, Johor (Recruit Training Centre)
- Sepanggar, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah (HQ Eastern Fleet and HQ Submarine Force)
- Sandakan, Sabah (HQ Naval Region II, East Malaysian waters)

There are other bases in both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, as well as some offshore ones in the area of the disputed Spratly Islands.

The administrative headquarters for the Malaysian Navy, Army and Air Force is at the Ministry of Defence in Kuala Lumpur.

Other naval units

In addition to the normal seagoing assets, the RMN also has a naval air wing, a special forces unit (PASKAL) and runs the National Hydrographic Centre based at Pulau Indah at Port Klang, Selangor. The air wing is equipped with the following:

- 6 – Lynx anti-submarine warfare helicopters

- 6 - Fennec helicopters for surface surveillance
- 12 – Scan Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles for patrol purposes

In 2005, in order to help combat a rise in piracy in the Malacca Straits, the Maritime Enforcement Agency was formed as a separate entity from the RMN and was essentially part of the Civil Service under the Prime Minister's Department. As well as their role in suppressing piracy, they are also responsible for coordinating maritime search and rescue, and to be more in keeping with international practice were renamed the Malaysia Coast Guard under the Ministry of Home Affairs. During any conflict or emergency they could be put under military command.

The present RMN is recognised as having its origins in a reserve unit, the SSRNVR, and reservists are still well represented by the Royal Malaysian Naval Volunteer Reserve or as it is more generally known locally, the PSSTLDM (the acronym of its Malaysian name). There are a number of reserve training units throughout the country, and there are approximately 3500 reservists.

Capability and development

Whilst there may be some aspects of the RMN that require further development, overall they have achieved a well-equipped, and capable navy that is suitable for the nation's location and economic and commercial status. They have a good reputation both in the South East Asia region and internationally, often exercising with other navies. However, like the defence of many countries, cost has become a significant factor in future development of the service, although to some extent the '15 – 5' transformation plan could see benefits in this respect in the longer term.