

South East Asia 1955

The scars of the big World War Two battles in the Pacific were beginning to heal, the uneasy truce ending the Korean War in 1953 was just holding, but fighting still continued in South East Asia.

It was Communism versus Imperialism and it invoked the fear of the domino theory; Malaya/Singapore today, Australia tomorrow.

What was happening in Malaya was described as an "Emergency", it could not be declared a war as that would have rendered null and void the insurance coverage of British firms, including the owners of the lucrative rubber plantations, yet the conflict resulted in nearly 10,000 battlefield deaths and 4,000 civilians killed, wounded or missing.

The British and Malayan Security Forces had been locked in this struggle with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) since 1948. The enemy was well trained; in fact they were initially armed by the British to harass the occupying Japanese forces. When Japan surrendered in 1945, the Communists saw this as only a partial victory; they also wanted the British out.

The Communist Terrorists (CT's) colloquially dubbed "the bandits", were a difficult enemy. Like the Viet Cong, who employed similar tactics in South Vietnam some five years later, they were school teachers and students, but drivers or farmers, but by night they carried out attacks on Government installations or disappeared into the jungle to ambush the British/Malayan forces, only to melt back into their villages or communities by day.

Britain began to lose patience with this persistent foe, the cost of maintaining troops, air and naval forces was draining the Defence budget and Whitehall thought it was time for others to help.

A call went out to the United States and to Commonwealth nations. It fell on deaf ears in Washington, but as to be expected the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, would not let the 'Motherland' down. After all there was the domino threat and hadn't we, in the previous decade faced invasion by an Asian nation when the Japanese rolled through the islands to our North and attacked our shores with air-borne naval forces.

What Britain proposed was the raising of a special force to protect Singapore/Malaya from external threat and at the same time to wipe out the CT's. It came into being as the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve.

WARSHIPS, PLANES IN FORCES FOR MALAYA – TROOPS WILL BE READY TO FIGHT.

But how was the Government able to justify its decision to send Australians to fight again in Malaya with the memories of the disastrous fall of Malay and Singapore in 1942 still fresh in their minds? Robert Menzies knew the value of the propaganda of the "reds under the beds" syndrome. He gave reports their second headline, **KEP WAR FROM OUR SHORES** – and called on the nations to realise "the basic truth of defence against Chinese communist aggression was to defend Australia on a front as far from our own soil as possible".

The RAN was listed first in the Order of Battle, our ships were to join the Royal Navy fleet with two destroyers or frigates on permanent attachment and one of the aircraft carriers, HMAS Sydney or HMAS Melbourne, on an annual deployment.

The RAAF was already operating in the area, a Dakota squadron and Lincoln bombers were carrying out operations from RAF airfields in Singapore. Under the new commitment, two fighter squadrons and a bomber squadron were to join them.

The Army was to send an infantry battalion with supporting arms.

It took another five years to end the fighting, the surviving CT's fleeing north to the Thai border, but it was not until 1987 that the Communist forces finally abandoned their dream of revolution and accepted a peace package, brokered by the government of Thailand.

In his book 'Mostly Unsung – Australia and the Commonwealth in the Malayan emergency 1948-1960' Lt/Colonel Neil Smith wrote; "about 7,000 regular Australian Navy, Army and Air Force personnel served in the Malayan

Emergency, but their deeds were eclipsed by the carnage of World War One, the magnitude of World War Two, the major powers confrontation during the Korean conflict and, subsequently, the media coverage of constriction and Vietnam.”

Not quite so, The Army and Air Force were to receive the campaign medal, the General Service Medal with the clasp Malay on its ribbon. They also received the Returned from Active Service (RAS) Badge, repatriation benefits, war service home loans and the names of their casualties listed on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

The Australian sailors got none of these not even the Naval General Service Medal, which was issued, to some 10,000 of their Royal Navy counterparts.

Attempts were made by the RSL, naval organisations and individuals over the next three decades to have the medals issued and the benefits extended to give members of the RAN parity with their brothers-in-arms. Successive governments and Defence bureaucrats found it easier to put the claims in the too hard basket. In an attempt in 1990 to permanently close the door, the government nullified two Federal Court decisions, which had ruled in favour of naval personnel, by amending the Veterans’ Entitlements’ Act.

Thus the men from the RAN became the only Australians ever to serve overseas, in an operational area, to be excluded from entitlements and the recognition that comes with active service.

This burned deep and has left the naval veterans bitter. They had carried out, with some distinction, the dual roles under the terms of their attachment and the prescribed ‘rules of engagement’ by:

- * Maintaining the balance of power in the region as part of a highly mobile force.
- * Protecting Singapore/Malaya and other countries from external threat.
- * Keeping open the sea lanes and lines of communication.
- * Escorting Allied merchant shipping making passage in the South China Sea.

They had also;

- * Enforced a highly successful naval blockade that deprived the Communists of the resupply of food, ammunition and replacement forces.
- * Bombarded Communist Terrorist positions with their heavy guns.
- * Patrolled Malayan waters to intercept enemy signals, this intelligence gathering role providing vital information on locating enemy movements and targets.

Australia’s warships had carried out a front-line role, so why was their service ignored? There are several schools of thought.

Cabinet documents at the time show a massive over-run in the cost of establishing an airfield and barracks at Butterworth, The building program also included married quarters for the Army and RAAF personnel who were able to go on “accompanied service” ie. to take their families with them.

The bill continued to rise, with costs not previously budgeted for;

- * Return travel to/from Australia for Army and Air Force wives and children.
- * Family subsidies for education, food, holidays travel, medical and dental costs.
- * Servants (amahs), at least one per married quarters home, in many cases two.

Others believe it was a classic case of a bureaucratic bungle.

The Naval Board in 1955 handed control of the RAN warships to the Royal Navy. In doing so, it asked the Commander-in-Chief, Far East Fleet to advise of any occasion when our ships had qualified for the Naval General Service Medal.

That advice never came and now when the Royal Navy is questioned about the Malayan Campaign it says it has not retained its records of what occurred between 1955-1960. Be that as it may, the Office of the Second Sea Lord has twice in recent times given approval for the issue of the medal to RAN personnel who served in Malayan waters for at least 28 days “in support of operations against the bandits.

Had this medal been issue to the sailors, as the General Service Medal was to Army and RAAF (after 24-hours in the operational area) then the current hiatus would not have developed. It would have resulted in the flow on the RAS badge and the same repatriation benefits awarded to the other two services.

It would also have redressed one of the saddest legacies of the campaign.

In April 1957, HMAS Tobruk was hit by a star shell fired by the British destroyer, HMS Cockade. Able Seaman Robert Spooner was killed and his shipmate, Able Seaman John Stevenson was critically injured.

For John Stevenson, it meant the end of his naval career. After months in hospitals in Singapore and Australia he was discharged medically unfit. It was not until 1996, some 39 years later that he was taken in by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and given a disability pension. What a terrible indictment on the system.

Equally, Robert Spooner's family has been left out in the cold. He should have been awarded the NGSM posthumously and his name listed on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial with the Army and Air Force casualties of the Malayan Emergency. It seems that it means nothing to lay down your life for your country, or to be left lame for life, if the paperwork is not in order.

How simple it would be for the Government and the Department of Defence to rectify this, with just four steps required.

- 1 The relevant Minister or the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, or his delegate, to raise written instrument of retrospective allotment for the 13 ships which served in the Far East Strategic Reserve between 1955-1960.
- 2 The Department of Defence to notify the Department of Veterans' Affairs of the allotment, clearing the way for naval veterans of the Malayan Emergency to receive Service pensions at the age of 60, thus bringing equity with repatriation entitlements.
- 3 The medals (NGSM and AASM) and RAS badge issued under existing regulations and Admiralty Fleet Orders.
- 4 Navy to supply the Australian War Memorial with the names of RAN personnel who were killed or died on HMA ships during the campaign in order to commemorate naval casualties on the Roll of Honour.

How wrong it is in a nation raised on the tradition of "a fair go" that these inequities have survived for more than four decades, mainly out of ignorance of what took place on the other side of the equator in the mid-1950's.

There is certainly a moral obligation, and probably a legal one, to bring justice to these men and the memories of those who have since passed on. An act of good faith now would end the discrimination; these dreadful anomalies must not be carried into the next millennium.