

[FESR by Terry Sweetman : Sunday Mail 17/1/1999](#)

It's high summer, the time you might see them out and about with their sleeves rolled up, airing their fading hula-dancer tattoos. They're the old salts from the Royal Australian Navy who served in that strange period between World War II and Vietnam.

They were our frontline forces where, as ever, Australian governments spoke loudly but carried an exceedingly small stick in the foreign policy field.

These were serious days in the 1950's and early '60s when the domino theory was taken as gospel and many a Top Secret document moved paper divisions, phantom squadrons, and mothball fleets around in response to a theoretical avalanche of Chinese communism.

A bitter Vietnam War behind us and the deceit of successive governments exposed, it is sometimes hard to imagine the climate of the times.

As respected Australian commentator Robert Manne wrote last year: "It requires an act of historical imagination for one age to understand the unrealised nightmares of previous times. During the Cold War the fears of Soviet totalitarianism were real."

So, too, were the fears of Chinese aggression.

It was so real, that on June 5, 1952, the Governor-General, Sir William McKell, declared that "persons subject to military law serving in Malaya, including the waters contiguous to the coast of Malaya for a distance of 10 nautical miles seaward from the coast are on 'active service'."

And it was real enough for Prime Minister Bob Menzies to commit forces to a newly established Far Eastern Strategic Reserve and accede to its British commanders secret request for our ships to be used on anti-terrorist operations.

So for the next five years Australian ships from the reserve periodically engaged in shore bombardments, intelligence gathering and generally serving as a deterrent.

The RAN deployed 13 ships on 35 tours of duty over five years. Two tours were common and five not unusual for individual sailors. Some served a total of two years with the FESR.

Many of these ships, designed for British home service, were bereft of the comforts and capabilities that are now taken for granted in our blue-water fleet.

They didn't fight any major engagements (although one sailor died when his ship was struck by a British starshell) and they were under no threat from coastal artillery or attack from the skies.

But they were doing their bit in a major campaign – and they faced the ever present, even if exaggerated, threat of terrorist attack when they took shore leave.

Now, permanently drydocked, the veterans of the FESR are fighting a new battle. They're trying to have their service recognised with decorations and, more importantly, war service pensions and entitlements, as enjoyed after 24-hours in-country by the army and the RAAF, some of whom faced no more danger and enjoyed the comfort of their families.

Bronwyn Bishop wrote when Minister for Defence Personnel last year that the government in 1955 considered "that the RAN service was performed under circumstances which did not entail operational hazards".

And the 10-mile "active service" declaration? That applied only to soldiers for disciplinary purposes

That hasn't stopped the old salts fighting their way through the courts and in the lobbies of parliament.

They're against the forces of history. As Bishop, the last to examine their cause, wrote: "It is clear...that the Australian Government at the time of the Malayan emergency did not consider the RAN personnel had rendered

active or warlike service...”

However, historical perspectives change and it seems to me those were warlike times in the 1950s and these men did their duty, even if the hazards were not apparent from the bellicose sanctuary of Canberra.

Australian governments have been profligate with the lives and liberties of their citizens and notoriously grudging to demonstrate their gratitude. Menzies was conspicuously miserable with this foreign policy pawns, but it's not too late (or too costly) to show our appreciation to a dwindling company of men.

Sweetwords@ozemail.com.au