

[Secret Service: Acknowledging the FESR : The Advertiser, Edition 1, Sat 13/05/00, page 065](#)

Many Australian airmen, soldiers and sailors in the Malayan Emergency, the Indonesian Confrontation and the Vietnam War have been denied entitlements or awards until this week. MILES KEMP finds that for some of them it will be a case of too little, too late.

FOR 33 years, the Australian government told South Australian RAAF veteran Russ Abbey he had never fought in a war zone. Until this week, he was told that, as a 23-year-old in 1967, he had only been on "non-warlike" service guarding the RAAF base at Ubon in Thailand so-called safe territory during the Vietnam War.

Mr Abbey, along with the 3000 Australian airmen who served at Ubon between 1962 and 1968, have always known otherwise. For decades, Mr Abbey has endured his own private nightmares of his war service he was wounded and his best mate was blown to pieces in front of him by communist guerillas during a firefight deep in the Cambodian jungle. On regular patrol well beyond the perimeter of the air base, Mr Abbey and nine other air base guards were sent to rescue two United States Air Force crew after their Phantom jet was downed by a SAM ground-to-air missile.

The two air crew were in safe hands when suddenly the crackle of light arms fire erupted all around the Australian patrol. Contrary to the official federal government version of events, Mr Abbey found himself in what can only be described as a war zone. Bullets ripped into the undergrowth and the Australians quickly returned fire after scrambling for whatever cover they could find. Soon the air was filled with smoke and, as the battle raged, something "you don't stop to look" pierced the skin at the back of Mr Abbey's neck.

But worse was to come when his mate was blown up nearby. "We buried him in pieces," Mr Abbey breaks down as he summons the courage to tell his story publicly for the first time. "He was my best mate and I never got that close to anybody ever again." A medal for valor from the US government after the safe return of their air crew was little compensation for the fact that the soldiers' own government denied the event had even taken place. Angered that his mate's widow had merely been told that her husband was missing in action, Mr Abbey returned to Australia to tell her what he had seen.

So difficult was the memory of the jungle skirmish that Mr Abbey could not bring himself to recount the events when he appeared before a federal government inquiry into unrecognised service, which recently sat in Adelaide.

Headed by World War II Royal Australian Navy veteran and former Supreme Court judge Bob Mohr, the inquiry finalised its findings last month and handed them to the Federal Government for action in this week's Budget.

The inquiry found that more than 4000 servicemen like Mr Abbey, who had served in South-East Asian conflicts between 1955 and 1975, had been wrongfully denied their rightful entitlements and their war service medals. After bureaucratic cover-ups, public apathy and political denials lasting up to 45 years, this week the Federal Government finally acted to rectify these wrongs.

But Mr Abbey spoke to The Advertiser before the Budget announcement that recognition would at last be made. He is still angry that for so many people, including his dead mate, recognition has come too late.

"Up until two years ago, my mate was only listed as missing in action," he says. "They didn't even tell his widow the truth I had to tell her not to bother waiting for him to be found. He got nothing. His name should be listed at the war memorial and his widow should have been given a widow's pension more than 30 years ago."

Similar denials about other conflicts prompted Mr Mohr's recommendation that these soldiers be belatedly recognised, either with war service entitlements or medals, granted in the Budget. The Budget recognised those who served in the Far East Strategic Reserve during the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s and 1960s; on the Thai-Malay border immediately after the Malayan Emergency; on the Malay Peninsula, in Singapore and on naval vessels during the Indonesian Confrontation in the 1960s; as merchant mariners during the Vietnam War; or as Qantas crew members on RAAF charter flights during the Vietnam War.

MANY who had been ruled ineligible will now receive a service pension when they turn 60, rather than having to wait until they are 65 and eligible for retirement pensions.

Over the years, they have also been denied war service loans and, as SA Malayan Emergency veteran Trevor Geyer puts it, "the simple pleasure of passing down to your sons a medal that says you fought for your country".

Like the Vietnam veterans, who were given renewed pride after the welcome-home march of 1987, all these veterans will now be able to publicly say that they fought in the Malayan "Emergency" and the Indonesian "Confrontation", both widely regarded as forgotten wars in Australian history.

The Mohr inquiry found denial of recognition was based on a complex web of public service double-speak and cover-up, which denied the very existence of some aspects of these conflicts.

While the heroics of other servicemen have become etched into popular folklore, few would know that 7000 Australians served in and around Malaya between 1955 and 1960, and that 57 died. Or that during the Indonesian Confrontation between 1962 and 1967, a further 23 Australians died.

Thousands of seamen who served during the Malayan Emergency were denied recognition, even though their army and RAAF colleagues were recognised. Despite two of their number being killed, the defence force hierarchy decided they were ineligible because they could not be described as "allotted" for duty a term which must be used according to legislation before entitlements are allowed.

Perhaps the most difficult denials of justice to come to terms with are those suffered by servicemen assigned to covert Cold War operations throughout the region between 1955 and 1975. Their efforts still remain unaddressed; The Advertiser investigation has found that the Mohr inquiry was allowed access to only a few submissions the rest were confiscated by armed services intelligence.

Defence Force Academy Professor Jeffrey Grey says the British-based Australian medal system is responsible for much of the veterans' anger, and the confusion felt by the veterans over the "anomalies" now being addressed. In contrast to the United States armed forces, where significant awards are given to every serviceman, the Australian system is based on achievement while serving and is far more selective, Professor Grey says.

For decades, the loudest calls for compensation have come from navy ex-servicemen attached to the Far East Strategic Reserve during the Malayan Emergency. Rather than a new set of rules, they argue, the Government should adhere to existing rules without the exclusion of certain groups. These veterans, organised through the FESR Association, were finally given limited repatriation benefits in 1997 but their remaining log of claims led to the creation of the Mohr inquiry and full benefits in this week's Budget.

SA veterans who served on HMAS Tobruk have told The Advertiser of being constantly ready for attack and on the alert for enemy frogmen armed with underwater mines, describing how they bombarded communist positions from the battle fleet and, unlike other servicemen, were absent from their families for up to 10 months.

Nothing has fuelled the veterans' anger towards the federal Department of Defence more than the death of Able Seaman Bob Spooner, killed by a 4.5inch shell from a British navy vessel while on a training exercise on the Tobruk in 1957. His death, the permanent disability suffered by another sailor hit by the same shell, and the accidental death of another sailor during service, give the lie to a government ruling that they were not engaged in the conflict, veterans say.

Mr Spooner's sister, Pat Williams, says she won't rest until her brother's name is on the roll of honor at the war memorial in Canberra. "He was buried at sea. We had no grave, no memorial service, and I have always felt that the whole incident was unfinished," she says. "I will never give up until the name Bob Spooner is on the war memorial. I have even written to the Queen."

Bob Spooner's mate and the association's SA delegate, Bill Jarman, was also on the Tobruk when Able Seaman Spooner died. His account of the incident might have been expected to have been enough to jolt any Defence Department bureaucrat out of the belief that the men on board were not in mortal danger. "I remember it was a 4.5-inch shell and when we found him in the gun bay, it had hit Bob in the back and it had blown his leg off and blew his guts out on to the deck," he recalled.

Mr Jarman has only been granted a pension because what he went through that day destroyed his life. Perhaps the most damning evidence against the armed forces hierarchy during the Mohr inquiry came from one of their own.

For retired vice-admiral Sir Richard Peek, the cover-up of the dangers faced by his men became too much to take when the Repatriation Commission tried to cast doubt on his evidence that there were dangerous operational activities faced by his men. Sir Richard gave evidence to the inquiry about the bombardments of communist positions from the ships under his command, including the Tobruk. As the captain of the fleet's destroyer squadron

between 1956 and 1958, Sir Richard can still remember receiving orders to bombard a communist camp near the coast on the Malayan Peninsula.

Bureaucratic claims to the inquiry that this could have been target practice provoked outrage from Sir Richard, who threatened legal action. "We were bombarding people I was horrified when they tried to say we hadn't," he says. "We fired the first salvo while a British army plane circled over the target to spot us on to the target. He told us 'You are on the target, fire for effect'. If I wasn't on active service I must have committed attempted murder, because I was trying to kill people."

His anger is partly fuelled by regret that he was not able to do more as a senior officer, and as Bob Spooner's commanding officer, to get proper recognition for his men, because of Defence Department cover-up.

Adelaide RAAF veteran John Byrne is one of those for whom any federal government assistance is too little too late. He served in the Malayan Emergency, but at 64 he will soon be eligible for an aged pension and will have lost the security that the war service pension may have brought him.

Navy radio technician John Currie, 60, another SA veteran, is bitter that he was denied a war service loan decades ago. His case raises the interesting issue of compensation, which already has been foreshadowed as a court battle by some veterans' groups. "I struggled to bring up a young family when interest rates were 18 or 19 per cent look how far I am behind now," he says.

Mr Jarman estimates that by January next year the date set in the Budget for entitlements to start 10 more Malaya veterans will have died.

RUSS Abbey also will not forget that his brothers-in-arms at Ubon before 1965 have still not been recognised only the period from 1965 to 1968 was deemed to be warlike. As Mr Abbey has until recently, many of these people will continue to shun public Anzac Day services, unacknowledged and comforted only by their own private memories that they served their country when it called.

"My wife can answer what I have been through better than I can I used to wake up at night screaming and yelling, in cold sweats. A couple of times I nearly throttled her because I was asleep with nightmares," Mr Abbey explains. "I didn't want anything to do with Anzac Day or the service they treated the men so badly."

As with the Vietnam veterans who were officially recognised with the 1987 welcome-home march Mr Abbey and many other veterans of the forgotten conflicts between 1955 and 1975 may now be able to look forward to a brighter future.

Perhaps next Anzac Day, the words of the Ode of Remembrance won't have a hollow ring to them: "At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them".

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