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FESR Submission

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### First Reunion of Sailors Who Served in Malaya

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First Reunion of Sailors Who Served in Malaya: 300+ to Attend

Vice Admiral Sir Richard Peek, Now in His 80's, Coming to Brisbane to Lead His Men Once Again

### **Denied and Forgotten, They Join Up After 45 years**

Forty five years after they were first sent to Malaya, to check the spread of communism, the men of the Royal Australian Navy, who served in the Far East Strategic Reserve, will hold their inaugural reunion in Brisbane between 22nd and 25th April. They will fall-in behind their former Commanding Officer, Vice Admiral Sir Richard Peek, KBE, CB, DSC, RAN (Rtd), who is now in his 80's, and who is travelling from Canberra for the event. They will take part in several memorial and social events. The culmination will be when Admiral Peek and the National President, Mr Noel Payne, embark in a jeep to lead the group of 300+ past the dais on Anzac day.

The Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR) was formed in 1955 and continued until 1971. Ships of the Royal Australian Navy, serving in the FESR, took part in operations, against various enemies, during the Malaya Emergency, the Borneo/Indonesian Confrontation, the Malay Peninsula crisis and the war in Vietnam. They are, in many ways, 'the forgotten force'.

Australia interchanged two destroyers/frigates and two minesweepers in the FESR, continuously, for 16 years. There were visits by a RAN aircraft carrier at least once per year, and periodical attendances by Australian Submarines. Australian navy personnel were also employed in intelligence operations through the region during these times.

Treated terribly....

The FESR Association National President, Noel Payne, said: "The FESR represents the greatest number of Australian Navy service men and women to serve continuously in operations, in our country's history. They are indeed, 'the forgotten force'. They have had to fight Governments for recognition at every turn. It took our Vietnam people 30 years to receive full recognition, with the issue of medals and entitlements. 1999 saw the completion of the Mohr/Kennedy Review, which has recommended full recognition of those who served during the Malaya Emergency 1955-1960. This particular group have been treated terribly by successive Governments. The names of the dead are not on the Honour Roll at the Australian National War Memorial, and our people still await full equity, in relation to medals and entitlements, with our Army and RAAF colleagues".

Vice Admiral Sir Richard Peek, KBE, CB, DSC, RAN (Rtd)

In 1957, then a Captain, and the senior Australian Naval Officer in FESR, Richard Innes Peek wrote to his Admiral and recommended full recognition for his men, in line with that afforded the Army and RAAF. He informed his Admiral that he was concerned that his men were not being treated correctly. His requests were denied, and his recommendations ignored.

He has been a tireless worker for his men over the years. In December 1999, Admiral Peek attended the National Convention Centre, Canberra, and delivered the final plea for his men, when he rose and presented the closing submission to the Review into Service Anomalies 1955-1975 which, was conducted for the Government by Major General, the Honourable, Justice Bob Mohr, RFD. Justice Mohr recommended full recognition by way of the awarding of medals and entitlements.

## Killed Sailor's Sister to Attend Reunion

In April 1957 HMAS TOBRUK, under the Command of Captain Richard Innes Peek, was struck by a shell fired from a British warship during an operational night encounter exercise off the coast of Malaya. The shell passed through the ship's side, it struck and killed Able Seaman Robert Spooner who was standing at his Action Station in one of the ship's gun-bays. The shell then struck Able Seaman John Stevenson, who sustained injuries that brought his navy career to an end. John Stevenson carries the legacy of those injuries today. The day after the incident, Robert Spooner's body was committed to the deep, with full naval honours, off the Malaya coast.

On Christmas Eve 1957 Cook Alan Campbell Cooper was lost overboard from HMAS ANZAC while in the operational area of Malaya. His body was recovered two days later and interned in the military section of a Singapore cemetery.

The names of Robert Spooner and Alan Cooper do not appear on the Honour Roll at the Australian National War Memorial. The reason is; Governments and authorities, both at the time and since, did not believe that they were on Active Service at the time of their deaths.

Robert Spooner's sister, Mrs Pat Williams, will travel from Adelaide and join John Stevenson at the reunion. This will be the first occasion on which Mrs Williams will meet many of her brother's shipmates. She has been a long time supporter of the campaign for recognition.

## Bronwyn Bishop's contribution

Mrs Williams wrote to, the then Minister for Defence Personnel, Bronwyn Bishop, in 1997 and asked if a plaque could be erected for her brother, who was killed in Malaya. Mrs Bishop replied that she was unable to comply with the request, as the Department of Defence declared that Robert Spooner was not on active service at the time. 'Mrs Williams would have to pay for a plaque'.

## 'A Grateful Nation?'

Sadly, many of the people have passed-on, and will not see the rewards for their service in the defence of Australia. Besides, the veterans must wait on the Government to approve the recommendations of Justice Mohr. After 45 years they must wait for the 'bean counters' and bureaucrats to deliver the 'nod of approval' on behalf of 'a Grateful Nation'. In 1998, Minister Bronwyn Bishop, acting on the advice of her Department, dismissed the claim with the words, 'the matter is now closed'. Her replacement in the Defence portfolio, the Honourable Bruce Scott, a Queenslander, showed the courage to appoint Justice Mohr to review the case. Justice Mohr's findings and recommendations leave no doubt that these men were badly treated, and that bureaucratic incompetence and ineptitude have served to continue the injustice for 45 years.

We will remember them...

A memorial service will be held for Robert Spooner and Alan Cooper at Anzac Square on Monday 24th March commencing at 1030AM. Admiral Peek will address those present.

FESR Association National President, Noel Payne, said: "We have chosen Anzac Eve so as not to interfere with Anzac Day. As our people are not considered by the Government to have rendered Active Service, they are not among those honoured on Anzac Day. The RSL allows us to use Anzac Square for our ceremony. This will be our fourth such event in Brisbane".

## Surrendered for war crimes.....

Mr Payne went on; "On the occasion of the first service in 1997, after completing formalities, we surrendered to Federal Police for war crimes. Our proposition was that; if we were in another country, killing people, and we were not part of the force engaged in active service, then we must have been war criminals. Our National Secretary, John Carlyon, was taken inside Federal Police Headquarters, and interviewed for some time. He was later released and told that he would hear more. Later, Minister Bishop allowed our people the right to claim Disability Pensions for injuries sustained while serving in Malaya. Not much, but a step in the right direction".

I hope the people of Brisbane will support us.....

Mr Payne continued; "We are so much looking forward to this event. Our people will march as a legitimate group in their own right. Their former commander, a man who is respected and admired by people from all ranks and classes, will lead us. This will be our 'welcome home parade'. I hope the people of Brisbane will support us at our Memorial Service on Anzac Eve and at the March".

The events...

The FESR veterans will meet on Saturday 22nd April for a welcoming get-together. On Sunday the 23rd they will hold a Formal Dinner/Dance at the Grand Ballroom at Lennox Hotel, Brisbane. Monday 24th will be the Memorial Service at Anzac Square to commence at 1030AM. On Anzac Day they will march proudly behind their banner. After which they will undertake a river cruise before dispersing for home. There are people coming from every State to attend.

May the denial of our defence service people never happen again....

Mr Payne comments; "It is a shame on our Nation, the way these people have been treated. They have to prove that they were worthy of recognition, after they did what the Government of the day ordered them to do".

"We are delighted that the Timor veterans have been treated the way they have. This is how all veterans should be treated. As a Nation we have failed, in many ways, our veterans since WWII. Denial of our Vietnam Veterans was a terrible betrayal of our youth and a denial of their service".

"In the case of the Navy in Malaya; The Government should act now to bring the recommendation of Justice Mohr into law, and end this disgraceful blight on our Nation's Military History".

" I hope the people of Brisbane will show their support for us on Anzac Eve, Anzac Day, and during our reunion."

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