

[In the Service of Silence - ANZAC Day Special : Australians in Battle 1950-2000](#)

D.D.McNicoll, The Australian, Edition 1, TUE 25/04/00, Page 012

In the 1950s and 60s, scores of Australian servicemen died in two military campaigns known as the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation. Those who returned, writes D.D. McNicoll, are still battling for official recognition.

THE spread of communism after World War II led to a widespread belief in Western democracies in the "domino effect", whereby country after country would supposedly fall under the socialist yoke as communist "subversives" undermined governments and the rule of law. While the term was originally coined to describe events in Europe, the perceived threat of Red China and the depressed state of Asian economies allowed similar fears to flourish in Australia. It was only a matter of time, the doomsayers predicted, before the countries to our north fell to the "commos" and the laid-back Australian lifestyle was placed at risk.

In this politically volatile environment it was not difficult for then prime minister, the long-serving Liberal Robert Menzies, to convince his parliamentary colleagues that Australia should send forces to help the British defend Malaya from insurgents who were officially known as "communist terrorists". The conflict became known as the Malayan Emergency.

The communist insurgency, mainly among Malay Chinese, first erupted in 1949 and the Australian Labor government of the day, under a defence scheme with Britain and New Zealand, supplied the Malayan forces with arms, ammunition, drugs and food. When Menzies took government in December 1949, he dispatched a squadron of RAAF Dakotas to drop supplies and work as general transport. At first the Dakotas flew from Singapore and often used the Changi airstrip, constructed by Australian PoWs for the Japanese invaders a decade before.

Initially the terrorists had great success -- scoring many victories against the Malayan forces -- and in October 1951 ambushed and killed the British high commissioner, Henry Gurney.

In March 1955, cabinet agreed to send an army battalion, the 2nd Battalion RAR, to Malaya. The battalion had served in Korea and was undergoing jungle warfare training in north Queensland when the deployment was announced. The men, 57 officers and 1152 other ranks, were shipped out of Brisbane in October along with 411 members of the 105th Field Artillery Battery. Australian troops from all three services, some 7000 in all, were deployed in and around Malaya from 1955 to 1960. By the time the "emergency" was declared over, 51 Australians had died, 15 as a direct result of military action.

More than 40 years later, many ex-servicemen -- particularly those from the Royal Australian Navy -- are still fighting for the Government to recognise that they were in a war and therefore entitled to service medals, various benefits and for the names of their dead comrades to be included on the honour roll at the Australian War Memorial. Early last month Army Reserve Major General and South Australian Supreme Court judge Bob Mohr handed the results of his official review of military campaigns in South-East Asia to the Government. A decision on his 53 recommendations is expected within six months.

Australians serving in Malaya enjoyed vastly different conditions. Navy personnel sweltered aboard non-air-conditioned ships off the coast for up to 10 months without a break; infantry battalions slogged through the jungle on two-week patrols, carrying all supplies on their backs. For the duration of each patrol they were unable to wash or to change their clothes. Often the skin peeled off their feet when they finally removed their water-logged boots. RAAF personnel, by comparison, had it relatively easy -- most being stationed in barracks at the Butterworth Air Base or Singapore's Tengah Airfield where some mundane personal tasks such as washing uniforms and polishing boots were done by local servants.

The Airfield Construction Squadron was shipped to Malaya in 1955 and immediately set to work on improving the airstrip at Butterworth. They attacked a hill called Bukit Guar Ipoh in the jungle 18km from the base and in 11 months shifted 150,000 tonnes of granite and loam. This formed the base, up to 2m deep, for the 2.5km all-weather strip used by the RAAF's Canberra bombers and Sabre jet fighters.

Old navy hands reckon there would be mutiny if today's sailors were asked to endure conditions like those aboard HMAS Tobruk during the ship's uninterrupted 10-month tour of duty off the Malayan coast. The ship was on alert 24

hours a day and is said to have been like living in a smelly sauna. Before Justice Mohr's review late last year, these returned servicemen bristled at the government stance that they had never been in a war.

"When you are loading the fair-dinkum ammunition on and not the training stuff we usually carried, it gives you a fair idea of what you are heading for," retired gunner Rick Hannan said before Justice Mohr's inquiry convened. "If you go firing shells into a foreign country, against an enemy of that country, it is a bit difficult to say you are not at war. You are either some sort of illegal pirate -- and I would think the Australian government would have been worried under international law if we had been doing that -- or you are at war."

For the Australian troops slogging through the jungle after terrorists, it was a platoon commander's war -- rather than a war for senior officers to plan in regimental HQ. The men patrolled for two weeks, had two days off, and then headed into the jungle again. It was a new style of warfare as the enemy was rarely sighted. The Australians used dogs -- alsatians and labradors -- to help find the enemy as well as employing native Sarawak rangers as scouts. It was also the first time Australian troops were issued with a semi-automatic rifle, the Belgian-designed FN.

When Malaya achieved full independence from Britain in 1957, the role of Australian forces began to change as the locals took more responsibility for their own defence. By July 1958, most of the RAAF forces had left. The infantry forces remained. Although the Malayan Emergency was declared over on July 31, 1960, Australian forces remained in the area as part of the Commonwealth's Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR). These troops may have been looking forward to a quiet time but fighting soon broke out again -- this time in Borneo between Malaysia and Indonesia.

The formation of the Federation of Malaysia followed by the unsuccessful Brunei revolt in 1962 led to Indonesia launching a policy of "konfrontasi" against their neighbours. The Indonesian Confrontation consisted of incursions into the Malaysian regions of Sabah and Sarawak in northern Borneo. Australian units of the FESR were deployed in 1965 after initially being used for security tasks on the Malayan peninsula. At the end of January 1965, the Australian government agreed to a Malaysian request for active troops and deployed the 3 RAR and a squadron of the SAS. They joined 18 British and Gurkha battalions and three Malaysian battalions.

The fighting comprised ambush and skirmish actions in the jungle and the Australians were limited by not being able to chase Indonesian troops back across the border. The Australian government suppressed all news reporting of the actions and even today there is no official record of any Australian unit crossing into Indonesia in hot pursuit. By the end of 1965 and throughout 1966, the Indonesian terrorists were increasingly replaced by well-trained and well-armed regulars from the Indonesian army. In October 1965, 3 RAR was replaced by 4 RAR and the SAS squadron replaced.

An attempted communist coup in Indonesia in September 1965 changed the focus of the Indonesian army to internal matters and incursions dropped off rapidly. On August 11, 1966, a peace treaty was signed between Indonesia and Malaysia and the confrontation was over. Twenty-three Australians were killed and nine wounded during the fighting.

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