

[01/10/00 President's Special Report - inclusion on Memorial Roll of Honour](#)

Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR) Association  
For Freedom We Served  
Korea-Malaya-Borneo-Malay Peninsula-Vietnam-Gulf-PNG-East Timor-Navy Post WWII  
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1/10/00

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Major General S N Gower AO

Director

Australian War Memorial

GPO Box 345

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Dear General Gower,

I write in response to your suggestion that the Naval Association of Australia make a submission to the Council of the War Memorial relating to the proposed inclusion on the Memorial's Roll of Honour of those naval personnel who died whilst on service with the Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR).

I thank you for this opportunity and will restrict my recommendations to the following naval personnel who served with the FESR during the Malay Emergency (1955-60)

1. Name Robert William Spooner

Rank Able Seaman

Service Number R49694

Ship HMAS TOBRUK

Date of Death 26 April 1957

Cause of Death Killed when struck by a Star Shell fired by HMS COCKADE in the course of an operational training exercise.

2. Name Alan Campbell Cooper

Rank Cook (O)

Service Number R51381

Ship HMAS ANZAC

Date of Death 26 December 1957

Cause of Death Drowning in Singapore Naval Base.

I believe it important that members of the War Memorial Council, in coming to their judgments on this issue, have a clear understanding of the origins of the Far East Strategic Reserve, the Directives under which our three services operated and the states of readiness required of our allied forces. I have no doubt that the Department of Defence can provide that information in great detail but I will attempt to summarize these matters in subsequent paragraphs, confining myself to matters of fact.

On 1 April 1955, as a result of high level discussions between the Governments of UK, Australia and New Zealand the Far East Strategic Reserve came into being as the force to halt the spread of Communism in South East Asia. All three Australian Services were committed.

The roles of the Strategic Reserve were established as follows:

- The Primary Role was to provide a deterrent to, and to be able at short notice to assist in countering further Communist aggression in South East Asia. Within this role, it would form part of the forces required for the external defence of Malaya and Singapore.
- The Secondary Role was to assist in the maintenance of the security of Malaya by participating in operations against the Communist terrorists.

All three Australian Services contributed to those roles in diverse ways and the perceived threat was very real in the highest political and military planning processes of the day. The Cold War was not a declared war, but one in which the visible readiness and operational capability of our deployed forces were essential parts of the ANZAM campaign to deter and ultimately defeat communist aggression.

This is set out in the Top Secret General Directive issued by the ANZAM Defence Committee, which, in addressing States of Readiness, said:

“The Strategic Reserve is to be equipped and trained to a level at least sufficient to enable it to participate in operations at short notice against the forces of a first class Asian Power.”

Such a requirement, which applied to all three Services, dictated a very high level of operational training.

This form of exercising goes well beyond that maintained in normal peacetime, and prepares individuals and units in a material, physical and psychological sense for all the rigours of war.

Even without facing an enemy, such a level of training involves higher risk than similar exercises in peacetime. The safety margins are less, the pressures are greater, and equipment and men are pushed to the limits.

This had relevance to the death of Able Seaman Spooner when on duty onboard HMAS TOBRUK, in the course of an operational training exercise on 26 April 1957.

The General Directive issued by the Commander-in-Chief required supplementary detailed directives for the Australian Forces.

The Naval Directive:

- stated the usual period of deployment (nine months);
- approved the use of HMA Ships for anti-terrorist operations in Malayan waters;
- required the rotation of Australian ships for service in Korean waters under the control of the UN Commander (the Korean situation was not resolved at the time);
- approved the use of Australian warships “in defence of Malaya and Singapore and of the sea communications in the Malayan area against external aggression”;
- required prior Australian approval before ships were used in operational duties of an international character, except as agreed for the protection of shipping – and spelt out the “Conduct of HMA Ships in Chinese Waters” in a Secret Appendix to the Naval Directive;
- emphasised ships of the RAN should form an integral part of the Far East Fleet and be treated in the same manner as their counterparts in the Royal Navy; and
- requested, “as far as possible, that HMA Ships allocated to the Strategic Reserve should be detailed for flag-showing duties in South East Asian waters in order that their participation in the Strategic Reserve may be fully appreciated in the countries in this area.”

For security reasons, none of the Directives spelt out the RAN involvement in the Top Secret intelligence war where enemy signals were intercepted by ships operating in the Malayan area. This intelligence was an essential part of the allied campaign.

On 22 November, 1955, the Secretary of the Navy relayed the Commander-in-Chief Far East Station’s secret request to use “the Australian naval contribution to the Strategic Reserve” on anti-terrorist operations. The Minister for Defence approved the request on 23 November.

Unlike the Army and Air Force, who were largely confined to mainland Malaya, the Naval tasks were,

geographically and operationally, very diverse. Being at sea most of the time, and out of sight, it is not surprising that the myth has developed that "showing the flag" dominated. The reality was that at some stage RAN ships were engaged in every task set out in the Naval Directive, including the patrol of off-shore Malayan waters.

#### Review of Service Entitlement Anomalies in Respect of South-East Asian Service 1955-75

In April 1999, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Honourable Bruce Scott, announced the establishment of a Review of possible anomalies in service entitlements affecting those members of the Australian Defence Force who served in South-East Asia during the period 1955-75. That Review, conducted by Major General R F Mohr, was completed on 9 February 2000 and, in the main, the Recommendations have been accepted by Government. I have previously provided you with a copy of the Report.

General Mohr made three major recommendations in relation to Naval FESR service between July 1955 and July 1960.

The first dealt with whether or not the exclusion of the Navy from the benefits provided by the Repatriation FESR Act 1956 created an anomaly. General Mohr concluded that the exclusion of naval seagoing personnel from benefits provided under the FESR Act 1956 clearly created an anomaly, which was continued by the Veterans' Entitlement Act (VEA) 1986, for which no satisfactory reasons were provided. He recommended that:

"such anomaly should be removed by placing naval seagoing personnel serving with FESR in the period 01 July 1955 to 31 July 1960 on the same basis as other members of FESR and in particular, to grant to them qualifying service so that they will be eligible for the Service pension."

The second recommendation related to medals and badges and stated:

"... that the service of members of HMA Ships' companies who served with the ships attached to FESR between 01 July 1955 and 31 July 1960 be recognized for the award of the NGSM with Clasp "Malaya", the AASM 45-75 with Clasp "Malaya" and the RAS Badge."

The third addressed the Australian War Memorial (AWM) Roll of Honour and recommended:

"..... that the names of those killed while on service with the RAN as part of the FESR be recorded on the Honour Roll at the Australian War Memorial in the appropriate manner."

On Tuesday 29 August 2000 the Minister advised that he had agreed that an area of operations be established in respect of RAN operations off Malaya (1955-60), which would confer eligibility in accordance with the awarding criteria of the Imperial Naval General Service Medal (NGSM) 1915-62 with Clasp Malaya, the Australian Active Service Medal (AASM) 1945-75 with Clasp Malaya, the Returned from Active Service Badge (RASB) as well as qualifying service for repatriation benefits under the VEA 1986. The limit of the operational area was to be 12 nautical miles from the coast of Malaya.

#### The Death of Able Seaman Spooner

Able Seaman Spooner was a member of the ship's company of HMAS TOBRUK when he was killed on duty at approximately 2117 GH on 26 April 1957 by a star shell fired from HMS COCKADE.

This was Spooner's second deployment to the Far East Strategic Reserve in TOBRUK. On this occasion, the ship arrived in the prescribed area of operations of Malaya on 18 April, and then proceeded to Singapore remaining alongside at the Naval Base from 19-23 April, still within the operational area.

HMAS TOBRUK sailed from Singapore on 24 April, in company with a number of RN and RAN ships for Exercise ASTRA, an operational training exercise in the Singapore Exercise Area, centered to the north of Singapore on the Malayan island of Pulau Tioman.

Other RAN ships in company, on sailing, were MELBOURNE, ANZAC, QUEENBOROUGH, QUICKMATCH and WARRAMUNGA. An analysis (provided by Defence) of days served by those ships in the specified naval area of operations, over the course of Exercise ASTRA, shows the following:

ANZAC 24/4 - 2/5  
MELBOURNE 24/4  
QUEENBOROUGH 24/4-29/4  
QUICKMATCH 24/4  
27/4-29/4  
TOBRUK 24/4-25/4  
27/4-29/4  
WARRAMUNGA 24/4

It should be noted that the Singapore Exercise Area was the only operational exercise area available for the required level of continuation operational training needed for ships engaged in the Primary and Secondary Roles of the Far East Strategic Reserve, including the Malayan Emergency; being of sufficient size and remote from the major shipping lanes. It equated to those rear areas used by land forces in conducting operational training on the Malayan mainland. It should also be noted that the Department of Defence has included an area of operations extending to 12 nautical miles around the island of Pulau Tioman for the purpose of qualifying for the active service medals, etc, noted above.

During the evening of 26 April 1957, ships of the Royal and Royal Australian Navies participated in a Night Encounter Exercise (NEX), i.e. a surface action between two groups of ships. Orange Force was composed of the Aircraft Carrier HMAS MELBOURNE, the 8th Destroyer Squadron (HM Ships CONCORD, COCKADE, and CHEVIOT, 1st Frigate Squadron (HMA Ships QUEENBOROUGH and QUICKMATCH) and HMAS WARRAMUNGA. HMA Ships TOBRUK and ANZAC with the Cruiser HMS NEWCASTLE formed the Blue Force.

The Orange Force engaged the Blue Force with 4.5" star shell, CHEVIOT opening fire at 2106 GH and ceasing at 2110 GH, having expended the specified number of rounds. The Blue Force units of NEWCASTLE and one destroyer were illuminated. Blue Force reversed course, placing TOBRUK and ANZAC 2000 and 1000 yards respectively beyond NEWCASTLE and in line with COCKADE, when COCKADE engaged Blue Force with 4.5" star shell at 2114 GH. NEWCASTLE was illuminated with the star shells bursting immediately overhead. The empty star shell cases fell around TOBRUK 2000 yards beyond NEWCASTLE. COCKADE ceased firing at 2117 GH.

One of the empty star shell cases hit TOBRUK, piercing the upper deck, passing through No 3 Mess deck, and striking two sailors in "A" Gun Bay. Able Seaman Spooner died within three minutes due to loss of blood following the loss of his left leg, hip and pelvis floor. His bowel was prolapsed through the wound. The second sailor, Able Seaman J R Stevenson, suffered a compound fracture of the right femur and fragmentation of the right patella and knee joint.

TOBRUK disengaged from the Night Encounter Exercise and proceeded with dispatch at 22 knots until emergency surgery had been completed on Able Seaman Stevenson, then at maximum speed to disembark him in Singapore Roads. After disembarking Stevenson, TOBRUK returned to the exercise area.

Able Seaman Spooner was buried at sea at 1340 GH 27 April 1957 in position 2 Degrees 37 Minutes North, 104 Degrees 26 Minutes E, near the island of Pulau Tioman.

### Recommendation in Relation to Able Seaman Spooner

Able Seaman Spooner was killed whilst on duty in the course of a major operational exercise to hone a range of combat skills, which had relevance to the Primary and Secondary Roles of the Strategic Reserve. The Night Encounter Exercise was pitched at a demanding level of proficiency, necessarily incurring risk, and the training and skills required for the illumination of targets at sea were relevant to the patrol tasks undertaken during the Malay Campaign.

Notwithstanding the advice given by Defence (Navy), that TOBRUK was not in the operational area on 26 April 1957, a National Archives copy of the ship's log for that day has been independently examined by two naval officers with substantial seagoing experience. Both of these examinations have shown that TOBRUK was in the operational area for part of that day. This discrepancy is being taken up with Defence and Defence (Navy).

Furthermore, two of her RAN consorts, ANZAC and QUEENBOROUGH, participating in the very same operational exercise, are shown as having been in the operational area on the day in question.

The fact that ships were moving in and out of the relatively small operational area around Pulau Tioman, in the course of a twenty-four hour period, is by no means surprising, given the wide-ranging movement of all participants in a dynamic and fast-moving exercise. As pointed out earlier, the Singapore Naval Exercise Area equated to the rear areas used by Army units in carrying out continuation training on the Malayan mainland.

One might speculate what the answer would be if this incident had occurred onboard HMA Ships ANZAC or QUEENBOROUGH. Both ships are shown by Defence as being in the area of operations at some time on the day in question. Both ships took part in the same Night Encounter Exercise as TOBRUK. If a sailor in either of those ships had been killed in the course of this exercise it appears, at this stage, he would have had a greater claim than Able Seaman Spooner to be included on the AWM Roll of Honour?

It should be noted that on Able Seaman Spooner's first deployment to Malaya in HMAS TOBRUK in 1956, he had accumulated 87 days in the area of operations. On that deployment, he had become entitled to the Naval General Service Medal, the Australian Active Service Medal, the RAS Badge and Repatriation Benefits. On his second deployment in 1957, he was killed at sea under the tragic circumstances described above whilst on duty, the purpose of which was to prepare his ship not only for the Primary Role of the Strategic Reserve but also for the conduct of operations against communist terrorists. That TOBRUK was so employed is demonstrated by the accumulation of 124 days in the naval operational area of Malaya during the period 18 April 1957 – 20 January 1958.

It is the view of the Naval Association of Australia that Able Seaman Spooner is as deserving of inclusion on the Roll of Honour as those of his Army and Air Force colleagues who were killed or died while serving in Malaya during the same period. Of the 27 members of the Australian Army whose deaths are listed on the Roll of Honour; seven were killed in action, four died of wounds accidentally received, three died of injuries, nine died in motor vehicle accidents, two died from illness, one fell to his death from the top of his barracks and one is thought to have been a suicide. Nine members of the RAAF are listed on the Roll of Honour. None was killed in action and all are understood to have been accidental deaths.

The Naval Association recommends that the Australian War Memorial Council give favourable consideration to the inclusion of the name of Able Seaman Spooner on the Roll of Honour, for having been killed while on duty undertaking operational training related to both the primary and secondary roles of the Far East Strategic Reserve.

### The Death of Able Seaman Cooper

Full details of the death of Cook (O) Cooper are not available to the Naval Association but these should be available from the Navy.

Examination of the ship's log for HMAS ANZAC when berthed at Singapore Naval Base on 26 December 1957, contains an entry at 2210 hours: "1 sailor reported drowned in harbour by Dockyard Police." Cook (O) Cooper was last seen onboard HMAS ANZAC on 25 December. It is speculated that he fell overboard on that day.

HMAS ANZAC was deployed to the Far East Strategic Reserve in April 1957, arriving in the naval area of operations on 17 April. At the time of his disappearance on 25 December 1957, and until his body was recovered on 26 December 1957, HMAS ANZAC is recorded as being within this area. At this time records indicate that all personnel in ANZAC on this deployment had qualified for the Naval General Service Medal, with Clasp Malaya; the Australian Active Service Medal, with Clasp Malaya; the Returned from Active Service Badge and had qualified for appropriate Repatriation Benefits, including the Service Pension.

It appears that Cook (O) Cooper died of accidental drowning whilst serving on duty in the naval area of operations of Malaya. The similarity between his case and those of the RAAF's and some of the Army's honoured dead noted above is striking.

### Recommendation in Relation to Cook (O) Cooper

The Naval Association recommends that the Australian War Memorial Council give favourable consideration to the inclusion of Cook (O) Cooper's name on the AWM Roll of Honour in accordance with the criteria existing at the time of his death.

Yours sincerely,  
M W Hudson  
Admiral AC RAN (Rtd)  
Federal President  
The Naval Association of Australia