

[AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN, WE WON'T REMEMBER THE - When is a war not a war?](#)

by D.D. McNicoll, Australian Newspaper, January 13, 1999

Old navy men are still trying to find out! For 10 months the Australian navy ship HMAS Tobruk had been stationed off the coast of Malaya without a break. The crew had been on alert for 24-hours a day, almost daily they had fired huge shells at unseen enemy positions in the lush jungle.

Without air conditioning, living aboard Tobruk in the tropics was like living in a smelly sauna. Twelve months after they had steamed out of Sydney, when the ship finally returned to an Australian port, there were no fat men aboard Tobruk.

And, according to the Federal Government, there were no men who fought an enemy for Australia either. Forty years after the hostilities ceased, the sailors who manned the Australian ships during the Malayan Emergency are still pressuring the Federal Government to give them the same recognition and rehabilitation as their Army and Airforce colleagues.

The old sailors all now retired from the Royal Australian Navy, are outraged over the Government ruling that they "were not subjected to danger from hostile forces" the ruling has effectively cut them off from the issue of campaign medals and from a range of veterans' benefits – even their dead are unlisted on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Museum in Canberra.

Between 3000 and 4000 sailors served on 13 RAN ships in the Far East Strategic Reserve during the Malayan Emergency from 1955-1960 and all are now retired from the RAN. The Federal Secretary of the Naval Association of Australia Commander Peter Cooke-Russell says the discrimination against the RAN personnel is "nothing more than a heartless bureaucratic obfuscation" as all Australian Army and Airforce personnel who served during the emergency have received full entitlements and benefits.

Cooke-Russell says the Naval Association has formed a committee to pursue the men's claims on the grounds there should be no discrimination between the three arms of the defence force and that the activities of the terrorists – the "enemy" during the Malayan emergency – were unpredictable and impossible to guard against.

"History reveals that the ships were not attacked, but who would have been brave enough in the mid 1950's to declare that there was no risk of it happening, or direct that precautions against such a risk were not taken by ships" - "Any reasonable person, who would be of the view a risk of danger from the enemy exists in a war or conflict, would have no doubts at all that the risk existed.

Cooke-Russell says that in no other conflict involving Australian troops has there ever been any discrimination between how the three branches of the armed forces had been treated.

Commander Rick Hannan, who first went to Malaya aboard HMAS Tobruk as a 19 year old gunner in 1955, says the officers and crew had no doubt they were heading for war. "When you are loading the fair dinkum ammunition on and not the training stuff we usually carried, it give you a fair idea what you're heading for," Hannan says "We were all aware of the problems with the communist terrorists up there and why we were going, no one was suggesting to us that we were just going on some sort of holiday trip."

"We were going up to join and be a part of the Australian forces." "Later on I was personally in the firing bombardments on the terrorists. 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 that the Australian government would have been worried under International law if we had been doing that – or you are at war!"

Hannan, who served 4 tours of duty totalling almost 2-years in Malay during the emergency, says one tour saw HMAS Tobruk on station off Malay coast for 10 months and away from an Australian port for 12 months – an assignment he believes should probably lead to mutiny if the Government attempted to impose it on today's sailors.

"The governments handling of the whole thing seems a little unfair," he says "No one in the Army or the Airforce spent any more time up there than I did ... and I was in a rotten, non air conditioned hunk of steel off the coast in the tropics, while they sat in shaded houses and had Malay servants to do their washing and cooking and

everything else.” “With no disrespect to the Army at all, somebody spends 24-hours in Malay and gets three medals and recognition and the sailor did two years and get nothing.”

Hannan says most the navy personnel who served in Malaya had full war service pensions and entitlements for service in World War II or the Korean War and a change of mind by the Federal Government would not see a flood of new claims.

“It would right a wrong of yesteryear” he says, “it’s not going to cost them much money. It is basically a moral thing.” Her Majesty’s Australian Ships that served in the Far East Strategic Reserve between 1955 and 1960 were the Anzac, Arunta, Melbourne, Quadrant, Queenborough, Quickmatch, Sydney, Tobruk, Vampire, Voyager and the Warramunga.

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