

A denial of operational recognition by F. McLeod-Dryden

Men who served on ships and aircraft which performed logistical duties (and escorts) during the Vietnam War have been denied Repatriation and War Service benefits.

They have found a voice in the newly formed HMAS Sydney and Vietnam Logistical Support Association to plead their cause for recognition.

Mr F. I. McLeod-Dryden, President of the Association states "we set out below the case for recognition of our service, and the exposure of the injustice we currently face".

HMAS SYDNEY, a Majestic Class Aircraft Carrier was commissioned into the Royal Australian Navy on December 16, 1948. After serving with distinction in the Korean War she remained as fleet carrier until replaced by HMAS MELBOURNE in 1955.

On March 7, 1962, she was converted to a troop transport. As a result she was the first R.A.N. ship to see operational service in the Vietnam War when she conveyed the main body of the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment from Sydney to Vung Tua, Vietnam in May, 1965. From then on she made another 21 voyages, completing her last voyage home in March 1972. She made one further voyage to Vietnam in November, 1972, with foreign and defence aid cargo for South Vietnam and Cambodia but this differed from her role as a troop transport because it was considered to be separate to those included with the Australian involvement and her role in the Vietnam War.

From May 1965 until March, 1972, HMAS SYDNEY transported 15 600 soldiers, and with the "Jeparit" and "Boonaroo" (Australian National Line coastal cargo ships commissioned into the Royal Australian Navy for Logistical and Supply trips between Australia and South Vietnam and manned with naval personnel) carried 186 000 tons of cargo and about 2400 vehicles, and steamed some 752 800 miles.

At 0100 hours on May 27, 1965 HMAS SYDNEY sailed from Garden Island, Naval dockyard, Sydney on her first voyage to Vung Tua, Vietnam. She was escorted by the Daring Class Destroyer HMAS DUCHESS. Her captain was G. J. B. CRABB DSC, she had a complement of 40 Officers and 567 sailors. It was obvious that this first voyage was thought to be crucial by the Australian Military hierarchy, because after leaving Australia, HMAS SYDNEY and her escort made rendezvous with a task force in the Pacific which comprised of HMAS MELBOURNE, HMAS VAMPIRE and HMAS SUPPLY. This task group gave HMAS SYDNEY with her cargo of approx. 450 soldiers of the 1st RAR,

armoured personnel carriers, trucks and field artillery a further air and anti-submarine cover to her port of destination (Vung Tua). A still further anti-submarine cover to the Vietnamese mainland was provided by No. 10 Squadron RAAF which operated Neptune aircraft from a base in the Philippines.

On this and future journeys HMAS SYDNEY anchored off Cape ST JACQUES, less than a few miles from land and well within South Vietnamese Territorial waters. For the first few trips unloading at Vung Tua took about three days, but even when crews worked around the clock it did little to ease the concern of her commanding officers who were uneasy as to sabotage from Viet Cong divers. Australian Naval Intelligence Staff had a similar feeling so as from her first voyage in 1967 SYDNEY was ordered to step up her unloading time; if it was to take more than the daylight hours she was to weigh anchor and proceed to sea for the hours of darkness.

A despatch from Naval Intelligence to the Commanding Officer of the Australian Naval Forces in Vietnam, (classified SECRET) and dated July 16, 1968, stated: "SYDNEY should spend as little time as possible in any port in South Vietnam including Vung Tua. Sydney would be a tempting target from a propaganda and political point of view." HMAS DUCHESS was to escort HMAS Sydney on her voyages to Vietnam on six occasions. Other destroyers to escort HMAS Sydney during the Vietnam War period were: HMAS Anzac (1 trip), HMAS Derwent (3 trips), HMAS Parramatta (3 trips), HMAS Stuart (2 trips), HMAS Swan (2 trips), HMAS Torrens (1 trip), HMAS Vampire (3 trips), HMAS Vendetta (3 trips) and HMAS Yarra (4 trips).

HMAS Sydney's voyages in 1967 (known as operation Rumbling) differed from her earlier voyages because more emphasis was placed on troop rather than cargo, carrying. She embarked four Mark 31 Wessex Helicopters from 725 Squadron, Fleet Air Arm. These were used in anti-submarine duties during her voyages to and from, and while unloading at Vung Tua. One aircraft was continually on task during daylight hours while another was on standby as a weapon carrier. On her 1967 voyages also, 89 junior sailors were boarded for training without for-

mal accommodation, this was in excess of the 73 fully trained ordinary sailors allowed by her full peace-time complement.

The following are extracts from "Standing orders for Vietnam Voyages - HMAS Sydney and Escorts" dated November 26, 1967 by Captain E. J. Peel, DSC, Captain of HMAS Sydney from December 18, 1966 to January 14, 1968.

Lighting: Ships are to be darkened at night when within 150 miles of Market time area.

Terminal Port Instructions:

(i) Vung Tua Anchorage: The Vung Tua Anchorage is an open anchorage in the Mekong Delta which provides access to Saigon. Much of the Mekong Delta is infiltrated by Viet Cong who are in a position to mount underwater or clandestine surface attacks. The anchorage may also be within range of shore mortars. Sydney is considered to be the prime RAN target due to her size and role but the possibility remains that escorts may be selected as alternate targets.

(ii) The threat at Vung Tua: Attacks may be made by: Surface or underwater swimmers, Floating charges, Drifting mines, Boats or surfboard type craft, Shore Mortars.

Threats are to be countered by Sentries, Boat patrols using scar charges and diving teams.

The Repatriation (Special Overseas Service) Act 1962 determined Repatriation and War Service benefits for servicemen and women who served during the time of the Vietnam War. This Act states to obtain these benefits a person or unit must perform "Special Service" which is defined in the said act as: "In relation to a person, means service of the person as a member of the Naval Military or Air Forces during a period comprising:

(a) A period when he is outside Australia and he or his wunit is allotted for "Special Duty" in a "Special Area" and (b) (Determines when the duty ceases.)"

The Act defines "Special Duty" as: "In relation to "Special Area" - means relating directly to warlike operation or state of disturbance by reason of which the declaration in the respect of the area has been made in accordance with section 4.

(Section 4 states that Regulations in relation to the Act will determine the "Special Area".

Repatriation (Special

Area) regulations pursuant the above Act of Parliament declared that as of July 31, 1962 (as per first schedule) the Southern Zone of Vietnam was a "Special Area". These regulations state that on March 1, 1967 (as per 5th schedule) all land and waters of the southern zone of Vietnam to 100 miles to sea (following the shore line) was a declared "Special Area".

It appears that a declaration of a "Special area" followed similar lines to the definition given to "theatre of war" as used in previous Repatriation Legislation.

As indicated by the above legislation it would seem that to gain these benefits one would have to serve in Vietnam (Special area) on duties directly relating to warlike operations (Special duty).

HMAS Sydney, her escorts, Jeparit and Boonaroo did serve in a "Special Area" (Vung Tua and Cam Ranh Bay).

No one can deny that the operations they were conducting were anything other than "directly relating to warlike" - that is non-one, except the Departments of Repatriation and Defence. They say HMAS Sydney's duties were not warlike as defined in the Act. The Special Overseas Service Act does not define warlike. How do they come to this very illogical decision?

The Defence and Repatriation Departments claim that because it states in the definition of "Special Service" in the Act that a unit is "Allotted" for Special Duty in a Special area, this entitles some person(s) in either or both their departments to make the decision in relation who is entitled to the Repatriation and War Service, and the nature of the duties they performed is (to them) irrelevant.

The Repatriation (Special Overseas Service) Act does not provide for a Department or person to make the judgement as to the "allotment" of service. "Why are servicemen performing Logistical and Supply functions during the Vietnam War denied these benefits when they meet the requirements of the Act," Mr McLeod Dryden asks.

To further support their case that HMAS Sydney, her escorts, Jeparit and Boonaroo were not eligible for Repatriation and War Service entitlements, the department concerned used a Parliamentary Cabinet decision made on July 7, 1965. These departments stated this directive excluded these

Conference delegates support the call for Repatriation benefits



Morwell delegate to the Annual State Conference, Mr Mal Bugg (left) spoke to the motion.

"That R.A.N. personnel who served on HMAS Sydney, the Jeparit and the Boonaroo on logistical support operations to South Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 be fully eligible for Repatriation benefits."

Mr Bugg made points which lend weight to the case outlined here by F. McLeod-Dryden.

He asked delegates: "What is the difference between a ship performing logistical and supply duties to those performing escort or naval gunnery support? It would appear that the former would be a more highly prized target because of its cargo and function," he said.

Conference delegates lent overwhelming support to the Morwell motion which had been seconded by Mentone.

units because of the "transitory nature" of their duties a situation of "Continuous Danger" did not exist with ships performing Logistical and Supply functions. The Parliamentary decision was:

"The services be directed that the allotment of "Special Duty" should be made at a time when personnel are exposed to potential risk by reason of fact that there is a continuing danger from activities of hostile forces or dissident elements; in the present circumstances allotment should therefore be confined to personnel specifically allotted for duty in relation to Indonesian infiltrators or Communist terrorists in circumstances where the task has been clearly defined."

A Minute Paper dated December 5, 1984 by Rear Admiral Knox, Deputy Chief of Naval Staff stated:

"The degree of potential risk and 'continuing danger' appears to be a matter of judgment. Nevertheless the precautions adopted during Sydney's visits to Vung Tua from the outset indicate that attack on RAN ships was considered a real possibility. There is also little doubt that this perception was engendered in all personnel involved."

The following examples were given:

EXAMPLES OF THE THREAT AT VUNG TAU

● In formulating HMAS Sydney's program December 1967-July 1968, the Fleet Commander in a signal to Australian Commonwealth Naval Board on October 27, 1967 stated "Turn around in Vung Tau has been limited to one day to avoid remaining overnight in hostile anchorage. Bad weather or enemy activity could increase the time."

● DNI advice to CNS dated July 16, 1968 regarding Vung Tau stated "... Sydney should spend as little time as possible in any port in South Vietnam including Vung Tau". In

his penscript to this advice CNS wrote "I could not agree that the benefit of Sydney remaining off Vung Tau for longer than the minimum time required to complete her prime task justifies the possible risks involved".

● The Viet Cong attacked Vung Tau with rockets from Long Song Island in April 1968.

● In June 1968 an intelligence report stated that an unidentified enemy platoon moved onto Long Song Island to reportedly shell Vung-Tau with 122 mm rocket and 82 mm mortar.

● A sampan carrying Viet Cong was ambushed near Vung Tau in March 1969. Further Viet Cong were killed when their sampan was ambushed in June 1969 north of Long Song Island.

● Enemy swimmers/sappers were found in Vung Tau harbor in May 1969. An improvised mine containing 60 lb of explosives and Russian mines were located.

● In June 1970, a black plastic bag containing explosives was found slung on a line between the wharf and the USS Meeker County, berthed at the De Long pier in Vung Tau harbor.

It should also be noted that the area to which ships performing Logistical and Supply duties (Vung Tua harbour) were anchored or berthed, was where the Australian Naval Diving team (Clearance Diving team No. 3) conducted an anti-sabotage operation known as Stabledoor. In a period from 1967 to 1969 they carried out 7441 underwater searches in Vung Tua and other Vietnamese Ports. This team had the distinction of receiving a citation from the Commander U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam. The citation was for attending to 130 emergency calls in Vung Tua harbour between February and September, 1968.

HMAS Sydney (3) was decommissioned and sold for breaking up in 1975. HMAS Syd-

ney (4) an American Built Guided Missile Frigate now carries the battle honours of previous ships of her name, although HMAS Sydney (3) made in excess of 22 trips into a war zone playing a vital military role as a troop transport, she is unable to mention her involvement in the Vietnam War as an honour despite the fact other Australian Naval ships on deployment with the United States Navy were able to claim their involvement in the Vietnam War as battle honors.

The precedent set by leaving this situation as it exists is that it may result in units performing duties of a similar nature may be denied war service entitlements and recognition in any future war or conflict. Royal Australian Navy ships performing duties of a similar nature prior to the Vietnam war were awarded entitlements without question. In the more recent Falklands war, H. M. Ships "Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram" performed identical tasks to that performed by HMAS Sydney. A person can not deny that their tasks were any less dangerous than ships performing other duties in the fleet.

Another anomaly existed when army personnel embarked on HMAS Sydney were awarded full benefits while on board the ship when navy personnel were not. An example of how unfair this situation was is cited in "An Independent Enquiry into the Repatriation System" by the Honourable Mr Justice T. B. Toose (Judge of the Supreme Court of NSW) dated June 1975 which stated:

"A soldier and sailor both of whom were injured in the same accident while assisting with the unloading of HMAS Sydney in a South Vietnam port. The soldier having been allotted for "Special Service" was covered by Repatriation Legislation whereas the sailor was not."