

MORE SOUTH EAST ASIA VETERANS 1959 TO 1974 QUALIFY FOR A MEDAL

Background Information

The New Zealand Operational Service Medal (NZOSM) was instituted in 2002. It is awarded for operational service since the end of the Second World War, including for current missions. About 30,000 medals have already been issued to veterans of conflicts such as the Korean War, Vietnam War, Timor-Leste and Afghanistan. Another 15,000 veterans are also eligible but have not yet applied for the medal. The medal can still be claimed by veterans and the next-of-kin of deceased veterans.

Extending eligibility to service in South East Asia between 1 February 1959 and 31 January 1974 qualifies an additional 4,500 veterans. Given that the NZOSM can only be issued once, the 7,000 personnel who already qualify for the medal through operational service in the Malayan Emergency, Thai-Malay border, Confrontation, Thailand and Vietnam will not receive any additional recognition as their service is already recognised.

Today's announcement is the outcome of a reassessment by the New Zealand Defence Force of the 2011 to 2013 review of medallic recognition for service in South East Asia. In 2011, the independent Medallic Review Joint Working Group (MRJWG) was tasked by the then Minister of Defence, Hon Dr Wayne Mapp, QSO, to review the medallic grievances relating to service in South East Asia. The MRJWG reported in late 2013 and recommended that there should be no additional medallic recognition. The Hon Dr Jonathan Coleman, the then Minister of Defence, agreed with the MRJWG's recommendations. In late 2017 Lieutenant General Tim Keating the then Chief of Defence Force agreed to the NZDF undertaking a reassessment of the MRJWG recommendations after requests from veterans groups and the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association (RNZRSA).

The 2021 reassessment was based on the Cabinet approved New Zealand medallic principles and used the NZDF operational threat matrix as a guide to determining operational threat levels. The reassessment found that the MRJWG did not have access to some potentially critical information which may have reshaped some of its conclusions. This information included documents from Malaysia and Australia. The reassessment also identified that there is a need for a wider approach to medallic recognition for South East Asia than has been the practice in the past.

About 11,500 New Zealand Armed Forces veterans served in South East Asia between February 1959 and May 1975. About 6,000 of these veterans qualify for one or more of the nine British or New Zealand campaign medals for specific theatre conflicts (Malayan Emergency, Thai-Malay border counter-insurgency patrols, Indonesian Confrontation, Vietnam). Approximately another 1,000 personnel were already eligible for the NZOSM

only, as the Government had already recognised the period of service in Singapore between 1 February 1959 and 31 July 1960 as qualifying service or the individual completed between 7 and 29 days toward one of the campaign medals which required 30 days service. The British General Service Medal had been closed off for Singapore on 31 January 1959.

An estimated 4,500 New Zealand Armed Forces personnel who served in South East Asia from February 1959 to January 1974 did not previously qualify for any operational medals. They are Royal New Zealand Navy and Royal New Zealand Air Force personnel who served across the entire period and about 1,000 Army personnel who served in South East Asia from 1967 to 1974 but did not serve in Vietnam or have previous service in the Malayan Emergency, on the Thai-Malay border or in Indonesian Confrontation. These persons are now eligible for medallic recognition.

The 2021 NZDF report and 2013 MRJWG report can be read on the NZDF website - <https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/nzdf/medal-and-service-records/medal-applications>

HISTORICAL NOTES ON FESR, ANZUK and NZFORSEA

FESR. In line with the “Forward Defence” policy, New Zealand military forces were deployed to what is modern day Malaysia and Singapore in 1955 as part of the Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR).

“Forward Defence” in Asia in the 1950s and 1960s was part of a major shift in New Zealand’s defence strategy in order to keep communism as far away from our shores as possible. As part of this strategy New Zealand was a signatory to the 1954 South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty, or Manila Pact, which included, among other countries, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. The implementation of this Treaty was effected through the 1955 South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). It covered each of the parties from armed attack, whether direct or insurgent. The main focus was on the threat of limited war with China in which Chinese forces would drive south into South East Asia. From New Zealand’s perspective it appeared to “provide a flexible back-up against conventional attacks and insurgency in South East Asia”.

As part of a wider national strategy New Zealand sought to help combat the spread of communism by contributing to the improvement of living standards in Asian countries through membership of the Colombo Plan. This was an extensive programme particularly over the period of New Zealand’s military involvement in South East Asia and which continues today in a different guise.

The FESR was the combined military forces of the British, Australian and New Zealand armed forces based in Malaya and Singapore from 1955 to 1971. It was “equipped and trained to a level at least sufficient to participate in operations at short notice against the forces of a first class Asian power”.

The New Zealand component, from 1959, was one infantry battalion, one or two RNZAF squadrons and one or more RNZN frigates or cruisers. Army and RNZAF personnel usually served for two years in Malaya/Malaysia or Singapore and the postings were married accompanied. RNZN ships spent about six to nine months in a wide range of locations in South East Asia while serving as part of FESR, with Singapore Naval Base being their home port while on deployment.

ANZUK. FESR was replaced by the smaller Australia New Zealand United Kingdom Force (ANZUK) from 1 November 1971 to 31 January 1974. The ANZUK commitment consisted of one infantry battalion, support units, the force headquarters and RNZAF aircraft permanently based in Singapore, with a RNZN frigate also deployed to South East Asia for periods of usually three to six months.

The primary role of the FESR was to provide “a deterrent to further Communist aggression in South East Asia”, with the military units ready to be used in defensive operations in the event of an attack on Malaya, Singapore or the sea lines of communication around it. As originally conceived, the FESR was intended to provide forces that could move quickly forward in southern Thailand and occupy positions on the Kra Isthmus, the best defensive positions in the event of Chinese forces approaching Malaya. The secondary role was to assist when required in the maintenance of the security of Malaya and Singapore. RNZN vessels attached to the FESR were authorised by New Zealand for service outside the Malayan theatre. This included the patrols in the Formosa (Taiwan) Strait and protecting British merchant vessels against intervention from Chinese communist or Chinese nationalist warships or aircraft.

FESR ended because of Britain’s decision to significantly reduce the number of its military personnel who were based in locations east of the Suez Canal, especially those in South East Asia. This resulted in a reduction of resources and manpower to support the FESR and ANZUK troops based in Singapore until a British Headquarters in Hong Kong were all that remained.

ANZUK had a very different role to that envisaged for the FESR and was in practice an integrated command and control force of the three countries rather than a military arm of the FPDA.

In 1974, the British Government announced that it was pulling British troops out of Singapore with the Gordon Highlanders being the last British Battalion to go home.

NZFORSEA. ANZUK was replaced by New Zealand Force South East Asia (NZFORSEA) from 31 January 1974, which was based in Singapore until its withdrawal to New Zealand in 1989. The New Zealand Government made the strategic decision in about 1973 that they would continue to base military personnel in South East Asia but in a different role which was non-operational. From February 1974, 1RNZIR was the sole battalion in Singapore supported by British and Australian administration and support teams. From early 1975, there was no longer a continuous RNZN warship presence in South East Asia.

As it considered there was no operational need for New Zealand to maintain standing forces in South East Asia, the 1972-75 Labour Government decided to follow the lead of the British and Australian Governments and also withdraw their forces. This decision was reversed in 1976 by the incoming National Government because of the infrastructure cost of relocating 1RNZIR and supporting units to a camp within New Zealand.

The role of NZFORSEA was to:

- a. Promote stability in the area;
- b. Enhance New Zealand's political and diplomatic influence in the region;
- c. Implement the New Zealand Government Mutual Assistance Programme, where the New Zealand Armed Forces provided assistance and conducted exercises with the armed forces of countries in the area; and
- d. Assist the development of the Armed Forces of countries in the area.

NZFORSEA did not have an operational role nor were personnel exposed to operational threats apart from in fleeting circumstances. This later service does not meet the threshold to qualify for medallic recognition. NZFORSEA was based in Singapore until its withdrawal to New Zealand in 1989.