

# THE COMPLEXITY SURROUNDING RCB AND ITS VETERANS

**Introduction.** As a veteran of Rifle Company Butterworth (RCB), I have come to appreciate the complexity and often overlooked significance of our story in Australia's military history. Deployed to Malaysia during the Second Malayan Emergency from 1970 to 1989, I, along with my fellow RCB personnel, found ourselves at the crossroads of geopolitical tensions, Cold War dynamics, and an ongoing insurgency. Despite the strategic importance of our mission and the genuine risks we faced, recognition of RCB's service has been mired in controversy and debate.

In this review, I will delve into the multifaceted aspects of RCB's deployment, drawing from my firsthand experiences as well as insights provided in the ["RCB - Fair Crack of the Whip"](#) article and the detailed manuscript that outlines our history, context, and the ongoing advocacy for recognition. By examining our operational environment, personal experiences, and the broader implications of military service classification, I aim to shed light on the complexities and injustices we faced as members of RCB.

**The Operational Environment and Threat Assessment.** Our deployment during the Second Malayan Emergency was set against a backdrop of significant geopolitical tensions and a resurgence of communist insurgency in Malaysia. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) led this insurgency, posing a serious threat to regional stability and prompting a concerted response from Commonwealth nations, including Australia.

Reflecting on my own experiences as a veteran of RCB, particularly during my deployments in 1973 and 1978, I can attest to the high-stakes nature of our mission. We were "highly trained, keen as mustard, ready for anything," and we operated under strict Rules of Engagement (ROE) designed for wartime conditions rather than peacetime activities.

The environment we faced was undeniably challenging. Intelligence reports consistently labelled Butterworth Air Base (ABB) as a "probable target" for insurgent attacks, with two hardened Communist Terrorist (CT) regiments lurking nearby. I firmly believe that the assertion "Penang and its surroundings were known to be a hostile environment" is supported by documented incidents of perimeter breaches, security alerts, and direct confrontations between Malaysian forces and insurgents.

Our operational protocols reflected the gravity of our mission. Maintaining a 24/7 Quick Reaction Force (QRF) with a 15-minute response time, carrying live ammunition, and having the authorization to use lethal force all pointed to an environment far removed from a peacetime training exercise. It was clear that we were deployed under War Service conditions, which gave our commanding officers powers akin to those of a Commanding Officer, reinforcing the strategic nature of our deployment.

The manuscript provides compelling evidence for recognizing RCB's service as "warlike." The detailed chronology of threats, incidents, and hostile actions experienced by RCB personnel from 1970 to 1989 paints a picture of an operational environment that was anything but benign. The documented casualties among Malaysian security forces, regular intelligence reports of insurgent activities, and numerous security breaches further underscore the genuine risks we faced.

**The Strategic Importance of RCB's Deployment.** Beyond the immediate operational environment, RCB's deployment held significant strategic importance within the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War and regional security dynamics in Southeast Asia. I believe that any nation deploying a force outside its geographical borders does so for several reasons: to engage in war against a known enemy, to train with allies, to conduct peacekeeping missions in belligerent nations, or to operate in hostile environments.

The manuscript delves deeper into the strategic significance of our presence at Butterworth Air Base. Located near the Thai-Malaysian border, the base was an essential asset for both the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF). Its location allowed us to monitor and respond to insurgent activities along the border, and our role as a quick-reaction force was vital in maintaining regional stability.



I assert that "the host nation was still battling Communist Terrorists while our troops guarded the airfield against known and unknown enemy activity." This is corroborated by the manuscript's detailed accounts of the ongoing conflict between Malaysian forces and the MCP. Our deployment's strategic importance was further amplified by our role in the broader Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), a multilateral defense framework that underscored Australia's commitment to regional security.

The manuscript also highlights how our presence at Butterworth Air Base served as a deterrent against potential insurgent attacks, contributing to the overall stability of the region. While often overlooked, this strategic contribution was a crucial element of our mission and a testament to the professionalism and readiness of the troops deployed.

**The Personal Experiences of RCB Veterans.** The ["RCB - Fair Crack of the Whip"](#) article provides a firsthand account of my experiences as an RCB veteran, offering a valuable perspective on the realities we faced. I vividly recall the "hard training, guarding, and other strenuous activities such as patrolling and sharing an occasional beer with mates during our rest periods." These moments reflect the day-to-day challenges and camaraderie that defined the RCB experience.

The manuscript further explores the psychological and emotional toll of our service. The constant state of vigilance, the threat of potential insurgent attacks, and the need to maintain combat readiness contributed to significant stress and strain among us. I acknowledge that carrying live ammunition under strict ROE added to the weight of responsibility, and any errors in judgment could have had disastrous consequences.

Personal testimonies in the manuscript reinforce the challenging nature of our deployment. Accounts of medical personnel being briefed to expect casualties, incidents of armed confrontations, and the psychological impact of conducting patrols in the face of potential ambushes all illustrate the stark realities we confronted.

I assert that "there is sufficient known and secret intelligence to demonstrate that RCB conditions were war-like." This sentiment resonates throughout the personal narratives shared by RCB veterans, whose experiences often contradict the official classification of our service as "peacetime." This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive reevaluation of how our contributions and sacrifices are recognized.

**The Ongoing Struggle for Recognition.** A central theme that emerges from both [the "RCB - Fair Crack of the Whip"](#) article and the manuscript is the persistent struggle for recognition faced by RCB veterans. Despite the strategic importance of our deployment, the operational challenges we encountered, and the personal sacrifices we made, our service has been classified as "peacetime," denying us the accolades and benefits typically associated with "warlike" operations.

As I reflect on this classification, I feel a palpable frustration. It is echoed in the manuscript's assertion that "applying Non-War Like conditions to RCB is scandalous and tantamount to seriously undermining our nation's military ethos." This sentiment is woven throughout the manuscript, which explores the complexities and obstacles we face in our pursuit of recognition.

The manuscript highlights the bureaucratic hurdles and institutional resistance that have impeded the reclassification of our service. The pointed question, "Why cannot our politicians and ADF do the same [as New Zealand]? Why are Australian veterans treated differently?" underscores the perceived injustice and inconsistency in how different nations recognize similar deployments.

The ongoing advocacy efforts by RCB veterans and our supporters, as documented in the manuscript, emphasize the importance of this issue. Our dedication to gathering evidence, engaging with policymakers, and raising public awareness illustrates our determination to ensure that our contributions and sacrifices are rightfully acknowledged.



I call to action with the sentiment: "As always, be strong, never give up and fight the good fight. With some luck, we may obtain the recognition we so richly deserve before we all die." This reflects the broader narrative presented in the manuscript. Our pursuit of recognition is not merely about medals or benefits; it is about justice, validation, and honouring the service of those who risked their lives to maintain regional stability and security.

**Broader Implications and Considerations.** The case of RCB and its veterans extends beyond the immediate concerns of military recognition. It raises broader issues of institutional accountability, transparency, and the importance of accurately documenting and acknowledging military service. The implications of this ongoing struggle extend far beyond us veterans, impacting the very fabric of military culture and public perception.

I believe that the potential impact on military morale and recruitment is significant. Applying Non-War Like conditions to RCB is not just an oversight; it undermines our military ethos. This sentiment echoes throughout the manuscript, emphasizing the broader ramifications of denying appropriate recognition to those who have served.

The manuscript further explores the political and diplomatic implications of the ongoing debate surrounding our recognition. The potential for public discontent and criticism from advocacy groups, alongside the impact on historical narratives, underscores the need for a comprehensive and transparent approach to military service classification.

Additionally, my reflections raise questions about the broader criteria and processes used to recognize military service. I contend that "there is no such category as serving peacetime on the soil of another especially when that nation is constantly on alert or engaged in sporadic battles with known and unknown insurgents." This challenges traditional definitions and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of military operations.

The manuscript's analysis of the legal and historical context surrounding our deployment emphasizes the importance of accuracy and fairness in military recognition. It discusses legal precedents, international comparisons, and the evolving nature of threat assessments, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the complexities involved in this issue.

Ultimately, the case of RCB and its veterans serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges faced by those who have served our country. It underscores the need for institutional accountability, transparency, and a commitment to accurately documenting and acknowledging the diverse experiences of military personnel. By addressing the injustices faced by RCB veterans, we can work towards a more equitable and just system of military recognition, ensuring that the sacrifices and contributions of all who have served are honoured and remembered.

The story of Rifle Company Butterworth and its veterans is a complex and often overlooked chapter in Australia's military history. The combination of the ["RCB - Fair Crack of the Whip"](#) article and the detailed manuscript provides a comprehensive understanding of our operational environment, the strategic importance of our deployment, our personal experiences, and the ongoing struggle for recognition.

My firsthand accounts, coupled with extensive research presented in the manuscript, paint a compelling picture of the genuine risks and challenges we faced as RCB personnel. The operational protocols, threat assessments, and personal narratives all point to a deployment that was anything but a peacetime training exercise.

The persistent struggle for recognition faced by RCB veterans underscores broader issues of institutional accountability, transparency, and the importance of accurately documenting and acknowledging military service. The implications of this ongoing debate extend beyond us veterans, impacting military morale, political and diplomatic considerations, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of military operations.

As our call for justice and recognition continues, the case of RCB and its veterans serves as a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made by those who served our country. It is a testament to the resilience, dedication, and unwavering spirit of those who stood ready to defend the stability and security of the region, even in the face of adversity and official neglect.



Ultimately, the story of RCB and its veterans calls us to action. It demands that we, as a society, reevaluate our approach to military recognition, ensuring that the contributions and sacrifices of all who have served are rightfully honored and celebrated. By addressing the injustices faced by RCB veterans, we can work towards a more equitable and just system that truly reflects the values of service, courage, and unwavering commitment to protect our nation and its interests.

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