Recently, Michael McKernan wrote that it ‘is possible that RSL influence on national life was one of the great myths of twentieth-century Australia’. For somebody of my generation growing up in the 1960s and attending university in the 1970s, when pronouncements from the Victorian Branch of the RSL on every social question seemed a daily occurrence, this seems on the face of it a doubtful claim. One was accustomed at the time to hear the RSL described as one of Australia’s most successful pressure groups. A major study of the RSL carried out in the mid-sixties, The Politics of Patriotism: the Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen’s League, concentrated on the lobbying role of the veterans’ organisation in several spheres — welfare, political and social. It is certainly true, however, that a major critical study of the RSL is overdue. Accordingly, I have some brief suggestions about this proposed study at the conclusion of the paper.

If we are measuring influence on social policy and political direction at the highest national level it is possible that RSL influence has been exaggerated. Yet, returning Korean veterans, for example, felt strongly that membership of the RSL was a highly significant undertaking, for that organisation was at one level the body which would push their claim to entitlements, pensions etc, but at another — and possibly deeper — level it also represented their collective identity as returned men, former soldiers, heirs to Anzac. As Russell Braddon wrote of returning soldiers in the year that the Korean war ended, ‘their only military ambition was to become Returned Soldiers’ for ‘having been a member of the services was and is to an Australian of supreme personal significance’. While one could question this sweeping statement it points towards something essential in the value systems of those who volunteered for overseas service in the armed forces.

In this paper I wish to examine three aspects of the RSL’s role in the context of Australia’s participation in the Korean War. These aspects are: the activities of the RSL as a political lobby group during that conflict; the efforts which the RSL undertook on behalf of the soldiers in Korea, both during and after the war; and the doubtful status which the RSL now has amongst Korean veterans. I shall argue that the relationship between the RSL and those returned from Korea illustrates the ambiguities of Australia’s Cold War conflicts, and also reveals important differences between the leadership of the RSL and its rank and file membership.

Some introductory remarks about the Korean War itself may make the rest of the paper intelligible. As far as the rest of the world was concerned the war broke out when the Soviet influenced regime of North Korea under Kim Il Sung invaded the American influenced South Korea on 25 June 1950. This invasion, the culmination of years of civil unrest on the peninsula following the end of Japanese rule in 1945, involved the crossing of the thirty-eight parallel, the demarcation line between the Soviet and American occupation zones and later the two Koreas. Subsequent to the invasion the US managed to secure Security Council condemnation of North Korea, and, as a consequence, led for the next three years a coalition of UN forces against, firstly,
North Korea alone, and from late 1950 onwards, North Korean and Chinese forces together. Australia responded to the UN/US invitation to participate in the conflict: Australian forces of all three services were sent to Korea, with the result that by the time the armistice came into force in July 1953, this country had suffered approximately 1,500 operational casualties with 339 deaths. Korea was left divided in 1953, more or less around that same thirty-eight parallel, and divided it is today, North Korea having transmuted itself somehow into Communism’s first hereditary monarchy. The death toll from this most political of wars varies according to one’s sources but several million deaths, most of them Korean civilians, undoubtedly resulted, as well as the destruction of just about every city and the dislocation of about five million refugees in the south alone.

The RSL had been militantly anti-Communist for much of its history with this attitude hardening as Cold War divisions settled into place in 1949–50. Communists were prevented from joining the RSL; applicants for membership in the 1950s being required to sign an anti-Communist declaration. For the RSL, who had been calling for greater defence preparedness in the face of potential foreign aggression, Korea represented the chance to say ‘I told you so’. Amongst other aspects of its programme for Australian defence, were a general bolstering of the armed forces, the re-introduction of national service and the need for Australia to further its relationship with the United States as well as strengthening the traditional ties with the Mother Country. Before the Korean War this wooing of the United States occasionally took some bizarre forms. For example, the Victorian State Secretary suggested in the March 1950 issue of Mufti, the journal of the Victorian Branch of the League, that Cape York should be ceded to the Americans as a ‘second Alaska’, a site for military bases and industrial sites, a tangible sign of our support for the United States. Mufti argued that the days of the United Kingdom as the main bulwark of Australia’s preservation were over:

From the march of events in the last twelve months — in Europe, China and Indonesia — it is clear that the security of Australia can no longer rest on the strength of the British Commonwealth, and that America with her huge industrial resources, has become, or should become, the main defender of Australia in time of world war...

The transfer of industrial establishments from the USA would unquestionably be a helpful contribution to Australian defence needs, but a much better one would be the transference to America of a large slice of the Australian continent (say the top of the York Peninsula) from which she could implement her defence plans without any of the complications involved in the establishment of a foreign pocket in Australian territory.\(^5\)

Surprisingly perhaps, this concession of Australian sovereignty in the cause of the Western alliance found some supporters from within the RSL’s own ranks before the issue fizzled out in the middle of 1950 overtaken by the events in Korea and the need, as the veterans saw it, for the Menzies Liberal–Country Party Government to stand firm.\(^6\) The news of the crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel spurred the branches and sub-branches of the League into a frenzy of support for the government’s backing of the United States and calls for Australia to demonstrate their commitment with more than diplomatic gestures. The Federal Executive of the League bundled all the State resolutions together in informing Menzies that ‘while regretting the tragic march of events which has led to the present situation’, they completely supported ‘the decision of the Commonwealth Government to send troops to Korea in support of the stand taken by the United Nations Organisation in defence of the democratic way of life.’\(^7\) At the same time the Port Moresby Branch of the League, amongst others, expressed ‘great satisfaction’

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\(^5\) C. W. Joyce, State Secretary of the Victorian Branch of the RSL and editor, Mufti, March 1950, 18–19.
\(^7\) Resolution no. 100 of August 1950 meeting of Federal Executive, sent to Prime Minister, 19 September 1950, RSL Papers Series 1, MS 6609, Docket 3578c, Box 223, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), Canberra.
that the Australian Army had finally been sent to Korea. There was perhaps some disappointment that the ground forces sent to Korea never amounted to more than two battalions of infantry at the one time.

From about mid–1951 the Korean War entered a period, sometimes and rather misleadingly called the ‘Static Phase’, in which each side was content to maintain fixed defences in the middle of the peninsula and chip away for minor advantages which could assist the slow progress of the armistice talks. During this period, as I have argued elsewhere, the Korean War lost its somewhat tenuous hold on the Australian public’s attention. From 1951 there was considerable talk in the media about the Korean troops being Australia’s ‘Forgotten Legion’.

The RSL were at the forefront of those who attempted to dispel this apparent apathy amongst the Australian public towards the efforts of our soldiers in Korea. For example, as early as January 1951, when the entrance of the Chinese into the war had sharply altered the strategic balance, and the UN position in Korea was still doubtful, the Victorian Branch of the RSL was stating that its members felt ‘that the public was not as interested as it should be in the men in Korea; some cranks even regarding them as mercenaries’. By the end of that year the situation had only worsened from the RSL point of view. At the Thirty–Sixth Annual Congress of the League, held in Adelaide that year, a lengthy motion, which was also transmitted to Prime Minister Menzies, was passed deploring ‘the apathy and disinterest shown by the people of Australia towards the war in Korea and Malaya’. The League proclaimed:

These men are taking the same risks as were taken by those who fought in the two previous conflicts, which were supposed to be wars to end wars...Fellow Australians ‘Wake up from your apathy’ and prove to the world that we will do our share in the maintenance of democracy.

In a number of practical ways too the national and state leaderships of the League sought to incorporate the Korean veteran into their fold, and to assist him in the same ways in which the soldiers of the two world wars had been assisted in terms of housing, health and pension benefits upon return to Australia. As custodians of the Anzac Day ceremonies, the RSL attempted to give some place of honour to the Korean veteran in the early 1950s. This is demonstrated by newsreel evidence from the period. Their efforts were not rewarded it seems. For example, on Anzac Day in 1952, Private Ronald ‘Nugget’ Dunque, who had won the Military Medal at Kapyong the year before, told the readers of the Melbourne Argus that ‘few of the people seemed to recognise us, or to appreciate fully the nature of the Korean War’. The RSL moved early to formally welcome applications from those who had served in the Korean conflict. The membership files of the national body bulge with paperwork dealing with such requests. Typical of such an application is the letter from John Arthur Williams, RAN in early 1953. In order to approve Williams’ request the Federal Secretary needed to know from the Navy if the subject had returned to Australia, had served satisfactorily and, if he had not yet been discharged, was he a member of the Permanent Forces of Australia. Applicants also had to sign the ‘necessary declaration relative to communism’.

\(^8\) Resolution no. 115 of August 1950 meeting of Federal Executive, sent to Prime Minister, 21 September 1950, RSL. Papers Series 1, MS 6609, Docket 3578c, Box 223, NLA, Canberra.

\(^9\) Mufti, January 1951, 13.

\(^10\) Item 388 of the Thirty–Sixth Annual Congress of the RSL, sent to Prime Minister, 27 November 1951, RSL. Papers Series 1, MS 6609, Docket 3560c, Part 2, Box 222, NLA, Canberra.


\(^12\) Argus, 26 April 1952. For other newspaper references of the ‘forgotten legion’ sort from this period from various Australian centres see the Melbourne Sun, 5 April 1952; the Melbourne Herald, 9 April 1952; the Ballarat Courier Mail, 24 May 1952; the Melbourne Herald, 8 July 1952; the West Australian, 19 August 1952; the Adelaide Advertiser, 29 September 1952; the Perth Daily News, 1 October 1952; the Adelaide News, 21 October 1952.

\(^13\) See General Secretary, Federal Executive, RSL to the Secretary, Department of the Navy, 2 March 1953, RSL. Papers Series 1, MS 6609, Docket 3987c part 1, NLA, Canberra.
join the RSL, there is evidence that they were actively encouraged to do so even while they still serving.14

Thus at a Federal, State and Sub-Branch level there were frequent efforts during the war to sustain interest in the conflict, to provide comforts to the serving Korean soldier and to ensure that the Federal government ‘accorded all rights and privileges which were extended to those who served in the 1939–45 war’ to the Korean veteran.15 The war’s conclusion may have seen a slackening of interest in the Korean soldier as the health and pension problems of an ageing cohort from the First World War, and the demands of the large number of Second World War veterans, took precedence, but the 1950–53 Digger was not entirely neglected.

Yet, for a variety of reasons the relationship between the RSL and the Korean veteran has been an uneasy one. Ray McKenzie, former member of 3 RAR, expressed the attitude of many Korean veterans when he wrote that as ‘it was called [a] Police Action, people at home in Australia did not think of it as [a] war’. Soldiers returning from Korea could ‘not become a member of the RSL in the early days, Police Action, not war’. Kevin Dutton repeated this line when he stated that ‘the RSL were reluctant to admit us to their ranks and referred to Korea as Police action and not a war’. Even the most disgruntled Korean veteran conceded that later the situation improved and many of the respondents to my questionnaire are now members of the RSL, yet the apparent initial reluctance to admit Korea veterans as members still rankles.16

Away from the heights of the RSL executive bodies all was not well. At a local level the reception given to Korean veterans was, on occasions, it appears, quite frosty. This was not always the case, of course. For example, Ron Cashman’s award of the Military Medal in the closing days of the war was described enthusiastically in The Seagull, the journal of the Williamstown (Victoria) Sub-Branch — Corporal Cashman hailing from that suburb.17 However, a current senior figure within the Victorian RSL has stated that, despite the seriousness with which the RSL formally regarded the Korean War, he had been informed that ‘it was generally known amongst Korean veterans that some RSL Sub-Branches turned away applicants for membership whose only active service was in Korea’. Then again it was apparently the same for ‘World War II and Vietnam veterans after their conflict’, established members being reluctant in many cases to admit that the others coming after them had really experienced war. In the end the Second World War personnel grew to dominate the RSL; then the Vietnam veterans seemed to have been welcomed back, at least by the wider community; but the Korean soldiers in many cases have preserved the memories of their original repudiation by their local branches.18 The distinction (which requires further research to finally determine) between leadership and rank and file may also mark the difference between an elite who were politically savvy and sought to establish effective networks with government and potential members, and the mass who sought to preserve their group identity won on ‘their’ foreign battlefields.

14 For example, see the Report on Visit to Japan and Korea by Brigadier Eastick, member of the RSL Federal Executive, March–April 1951. Eastick reported on a number of topics including potential members: The trip has done much to enhance the prestige of the League in the eyes of its members at present serving in Japan and Korea, and created a very favourable impression in the minds of those who will, I feel, become members of the League on their return to Australia. RSL Papers, Series 1, MS 6609, Docket 3560c, NLA, Canberra.
15 For the RSL sponsored activities referred to here see chapter two of my thesis where they are dealt with at length. The quotation comes from a successful motion from the Brunswick and South Melbourne Sub–Branches at the State Conference of the Victorian Branch of the RSL, 25 July 1951, Victorian RSL Papers, Minutes 1951–1952, RSL, Melbourne.
16 Questionnaire responses, Ray McKenzie, Kevin Dutton. Also see questionnaire responses from Albert Merrick, Phillip Greville, Leonard Best, Mervyn Weckes and Les Foote.
18 Brigadier K. V. Rossi, State Senior Vice President, RSL (Victorian Branch), to author, 27 February 2001. The emphasis (underlining) is in the original. The unfortunate state of affairs in regard to Korean veterans was not assisted by a line drawn between those who had enlisted in the first part of the war for K Force, ie. specifically for service on the peninsula and those who were members of the Permanent Forces. The former had to wait until discharge from the Force before being permitted to join the RSL; the latter could join whilst in the forces. One example is the case of Donald Herbert Lanyon of 3 RAR who as a member of the Special Force had his original application for membership rejected. See J. R. Lewis, State Secretary, NSW Branch to J. C. Neagle, Assistant Federal Secretary, 11 September 1952; Neagle to Lewis, 15 January 1953, RSL Papers Series 1, MS 6609, Docket 3987, Part 1, NLA, Canberra.
The indeterminate nature of the wider ideological conflict of which Korea is a part is also a contributing factor here. Peace, when it finally came, certainly sent the soldiers home but the outcome of the war, despite the thwarting of the original North Korean incursion, was in some hard to define way rather unsatisfactory. As John R. Gillis has argued, the wars of the 1950s and 1960s altered the forms of public memory, for the "blurring of the old distinction between war and peace meant that it was very difficult to define the beginnings or endings that had previously been the focus of memory". He concluded that the "Korean, Algerian, and Vietnam conflicts proved extremely difficult to commemorate, except on a private basis". And commemoration on a private basis seems to many to be inadequate; commemoration implies community and conspicuous acts in the public sphere. The RSL shared — at certain levels of the organisation anyway — this perception that the Korean War was legally, existentially, not quite the "real thing" as far as wars were concerned.\textsuperscript{19}

Governments as well as citizens struggled to place Korea properly. Even when shortly after the war the Australian Government attempted to commemorate those who had died in Korea with the issue of a Memorial Scroll to their relatives, it had to argue hard with a British Government who felt that this conflict was of a lesser status than the world wars. Prime Minister Menzies felt impelled to attempt to restore Korea to some honourable place on a scale of conflicts. In so doing he touched — perhaps inadvertently — on what was to remain one of this war’s most significant problems as far as public memory was concerned:

\begin{quote}
[The] scale of operations should not be an essential criterion on which to base a decision on whether a Royal Message of Condolence might be despatched to next of kin of servicemen killed on active service. It seems to me that whether the scale of operations is large or small the sacrifice is equal. I would not wish it to be assumed that we in Australia consider the action in Korea or even in Malaya of little importance simply because it is not of a scale comparable with the 1939–1945 war.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

I said at the start of this paper that a major critical analysis of the RSL is overdue. Such a study could, I think, proceed in several directions and could usefully include comparisons with similar veterans’ organisations overseas and with other associations of veterans within Australia. The latter group includes organisations with close relationships with the League such as unit associations, organisations that cater for different categories of service personnel such as the Australian Legion of Ex–Servicemen and Women, and organisations such as the Korean Veterans’ Association which fulfils for many Korean veterans the role they felt the League should have occupied in the first place.\textsuperscript{21} It would also be useful to look at the different objectives which the various State branches of the League have pursued. Another major task would be to investigate why former soldiers joined the League, or equally significantly, why they chose not to. As the older membership of the RSL dwindles it is important that such a study be mounted while it is possible to interview ageing veterans and seek to understand the processes of internalisation and identification within this classic example of a reference group.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] Prime Minister to High Commissioner, London, 19 January 1954, Department of Defence, ‘Suggested Issue of Memorial to the Relatives of Service Personnel Killed in the Korean War’, Series A 5954, Control No. 1528/6, National Archives of Australia, Canberra. The scroll was finally issued (to Korean veterans only as operations in Malaya were still continuing) in April 1956. \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 16 April 1956.
\item[21] The Legion’s membership is open to ‘all serving and ex–service personnel, not only those who were returned from theatres of war’ and thus includes ‘personnel who had served on the mainland’ and ‘in other places where little or no danger of enemy action seemed likely’. E.T. Lynes, \textit{For All Who Serve: a History of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Legion of Ex–Servicemen and Women} (Melbourne: Published by the Victorian Branch of the Legion, 1996), 2.
\item[22] ‘[W]e often select our reference groups because they share our attitudes, and then our reference groups, in turn, help to develop and to sustain our attitudes’. Rita L. Atkinson, Richard C. Atkinson, Edward E. Smith and Daryl J. Bem, \textit{Introduction to Psychology} (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, tenth edition, 1990), 759.
\end{footnotes}
of the forward engagement policy pursued between 1950 and 1972 — Korea, Malaya, the Confrontation and Vietnam — provide a fresh context in which to carry out such studies.

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