

VETERANS' BIRTHDAY WISH

WHILE the battle for Permatang Pauh is grabbing the attention of Malaysians, another campaign is being fought with just as much gusto in what has been described as the jungles of Whitehall – the centre of British government.

Just as the Malaysian by-election will mark a watershed in the country's colourful history, the struggle by British war veterans to wear the Pingat Jasa Malaysia (PJM) without restriction is seen as signalling a major step forward for the British Foreign Decorations Rules system.

More importantly, it heralds what the Fight4thePJM campaign calls a historic milestone for democracy; a turning point in an era of openness, transparency and accountability in a progressive world.

Above all, the sacrifices and bravery of some 35,000 former British soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought a bitter jungle war against communist insurgents in Malaysia must never be confined to mere history.

Indeed, there is no gracious way to honour these ex-servicemen and women than to allow them to wear the PJM, along with their other medals, with pride and distinction. Frail and fragile they may be, but these old warriors – many in their 70s and their numbers fast diminishing – have been fired up to make just one more final stand – their right to wear the PJM in public.

For while they have been given permission to receive the PJM, they are barred from wearing them by the British Honours and Decorations (HD) Committee based on what they regard as an "antiquated and inconsistent" imperial honours system.

The double-medalling rule states that when a British award has already been given for the same service, another cannot be accepted. There is also the five-year rule preventing the acceptance and wearing of non-British awards for events or service that took place more than five years ago.

Wall of Silence

These rulings, however, have been challenged by campaigners who claimed their applications had been somewhat confusing and anything but consistent.

In other words, the committee had been accused of setting aside the rules to allow

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Carry on marching: A Chelsea pensioner in red ceremonial coat (far left) and other British war veterans proudly wearing their PJM and other medals at last year's National Day parade in Kuala Lumpur. — Courtesy of Barry Fleming from Fight4thePJM Campaign

the veterans to accept the PJM and then imposing them to prevent them from wearing the medals on public occasions.

During the 50th National Day celebrations in Kuala Lumpur last year, the veterans were granted "temporary permission" to wear the PJM while in Malaysia but they had to remove them upon their return to Britain.

Campaigners have wondered how the committee could dictate what British civilians can or cannot wear while on the sovereign territory of an independent state.

"Our questions on the committee's decisions have been met by a wall of silence," said Barry Fleming, founder of the Fight4thePJM campaign (www.fight4thepjm.org), which has received support from over 200 British MPs and peers as well as from veterans in more than 30 countries.

He also questioned the logic of leaving the

decisions on honouring ex-servicemen to a "body that does not answer to any elected authority, seldom meets, and never has to explain or account for its actions".

The campaign received a morale-boosting endorsement from the House of Commons recently through the overwhelming support for Don Touhig's 10-minute Rule Bill.

Even campaigners and MPs themselves were stunned by the unanimous backing for the former Defence (Veterans) Minister's proposal for the HD committee to be made accountable to Parliament.

The solid turnout – some 120 MPs were present – and strong cross-party support for the first reading of the bill underlines the importance the House places on the issue.

At the tabling of the bill, during which MPs called the PJM decision a shame on Britain, the sponsors came from all main



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parties – Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, The Scottish National Party and The Democratic Union Party.

Endangered species

The die is cast. For the first time, elected MPs now want the seven-member civil servants committee to report to Parliament once each year so that their recommendations can be scrutinised.

The success of the first reading has paved the way for the second reading in October when the House will debate the key issues.

If the Bill is enacted, the committee would be made accountable to the House of Commons and be open to rigorous scrutiny, in similar vein to the British Intelligence Services.

In the case of the PJM, the committee's recommendation would be capable of being overturned by Parliament.

But with so much on its plate, the Government may not give much time to the bill after the second reading. And time is a luxury the veterans can ill afford.

As Fleming puts it, "We're fading away at the same rate as the orang utans although we're not likely to be preserved."

Drawing a parallel between the two, he said both had lived and fought in the jungles of Borneo. But while they can do nothing about their numbers inexorably decreasing, they are doing their bit to ensure the same fate does not befall the orang utans.

They have adopted a two-year-old orang utan named Koyah and contributed to the World Wildlife Fund's efforts in Borneo.

And with a week to Malaysia turning 51 next Sunday, the best birthday gift would no doubt be for the war veterans to receive formal permission to wear the PJM.

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Security footage that could have nabbed a killer

THE unsolved serial killings in Perth 12 years ago have emerged to haunt the police, who are under attack for refusing to reveal that they have security camera footage showing one of the victims talking to a mystery man minutes before she vanished.

The footage, which was shown only to about 700 people, including families, friends and patrons of a Claremont nightclub where the victims were believed to have been abducted, is regarded as vital evidence in the murder investigations.

Yet the police have refused to release the footage to seek public assistance to identify the mystery man after none of the 700 people could provide any clue.

Last week, amid growing controversy and criticisms of the police tactics, they admitted that the footage had been kept under wrap since June 1996, but refused to justify the reasons for the secrecy.

The police also refused to give details of recommendations and findings of what is supposed to be the most sophisticated and most expensive review by the Macro Taskforce and of other reviews on the murders conducted from time to time.

Ironically, the promotion blurb for a TV programme titled *Hunt for the Killer: The Claremont Murders*, to be shown on pay-TV Foxtel this Thursday with a phrase saying "new information never before released to the public", is believed to refer to the footage as well as other details also with-



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held by the police.

The blurb adds that "the time has come to release" some of the most sensitive information that might "spark" someone to come forward and provide a new lead.

But can this really happen after all these years? If the police hoped that the show would lead to a breakthrough in their investigations and the identity of the mystery man – as indeed they think it would – then they could be sadly mistaken.

This is because the revelation, as it were, is not being shown on the wider-audience TV stations or published in the print media.

And also since the event occurred more than a decade ago, its showing now, even on the free-to-air TV stations, is unlikely to get anyone positively recognising the mystery man, whether or not he is the killer.

No wonder renowned forensic expert Robin Napper asked, somewhat cynically: "Who's running this investigation – the commercial TV company or the West Australian police?"

"If this is crucial information, it should have been in the public domain years ago. They

should be looking to identify this man immediately when this poor girl went missing.

"Not doing that is a huge mistake because subsequently Ciara Glennon (the third victim) went missing."

The other two victims were Jane Rimmer and Sarah Spiers. All three women disappeared separately within 13 months after they had left the nightclub at the Continental Hotel (now known as Claremont Hotel).

The bodies of Glennon, 27, and Rimmer, 23, were found in the bushes months later – one in south of Perth and the other north of Perth. The body of Spiers, 18, has never been found despite extensive searches.

Mystery man

The mystery man was seen in the footage talking to Rimmer, the second victim, outside the nightclub on June 9, 1996, minutes before she was believed to have been abducted.

While Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan defended the decision of his senior investigators for withholding the footage, he has, nevertheless, asked them to justify their reasons.

His special crime squad officer Det-Sgt Jim Stanbury said the information would be released at a time that best suited the inquiry and the public of Western Australia. "When that footage is (digitally) enhanced and we are operationally ready, it will be released."

This statement was supported by Deputy Commissioner Chris Dawson, who explained

that releasing the footage publicly would have led to "a narrow focus on the mystery man".

But State Attorney-General Jim McGinty doesn't believe that withholding the footage makes sense in this case.

"More than a decade after the event doesn't seem the best time to come back to deal with that issue to try and get people to identify someone," he said. "It would be a very difficult thing to do so long after the event."

And what staggers Opposition spokesman Rob Johnson is the fact that police had largely focused on one man, a public servant, who was under intense surveillance for 10 years.

The 51-year-old man who lives with his parents had hidden phone taps and listening devices in his house and his car had tracking devices until three years ago. The electronic surveillance was stopped when the police could not justify to a Supreme Court judge why the constant monitoring should continue.

It was a nightmare, said his mother last week. Her son's mental state had deteriorated, resulting in breakdowns and visits to hospitals. And it was a shock to her that all this time the police had kept secret a footage showing a mystery man talking to one of the victims of the serial killings.

The mother, who wants an apology for her son, has called for a parliamentary inquiry into the police handling of the case.

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