

50 YEARS SINCE THE END OF CONSCRIPTION TO THE ARMY UNDER THE NATIONAL SERVICE ACT 1964

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Australia's National Service scheme, suspended in 1959, was revived by the Liberal–Country Party Coalition Federal government's introduction in November 1964 of the *National Service Act 1964*.¹ Prime Minister Robert Menzies at the time informed Parliament that the conscription scheme was a response to the deterioration in Australia's strategic position², in part requiring an increase in Army's workforce.³ It operated until December 1972, when the newly elected Whitlam Labor government suspended it.⁴ The scheme attracted public protest from a portion of the Australian population.⁵

A deteriorated strategic position

Broadly, the government of the day saw Communism and its influence in South East Asia, the territorial ambitions of Indonesia in the West New Guinea region, and the consequences of Indonesian "confrontation" of Malaysia as the reasons for the deterioration in Australia's strategic position.⁶

In part, according to Menzies this assessment's consequence in the context of Australia's national interest was that "the Regular Army should be built up as rapidly as possible."⁷ To do that, the problem of Army manpower needed to be addressed. The Australian economy was in a period of "more than full employment",⁸ hence voluntary recruitment would likely not achieve the required Army strength in the time needed;⁹ and the related training effort would see the Regular Army "cease to be an effective fighting force and become for some...time...a training organisation."¹⁰ Along with improved pay and conditions¹¹, the scheme was the answer to the problem.

¹ *Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72*, p.1 in Peter Edwards. 1997. *A nation at war: Australian politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965–1975: the official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948-1975*, Volume VI, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW. https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app [Accessed 25 October 2022]

² *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, Defence Review, Ministerial Statement, Speech, Tuesday, 10 November 1964, p. 2715. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;db=HANSARD80;id=hansard80%2Fhansardr80%2F1964-11-10%2F0082;orderBy= fragment number,doc_date-rev;page=21;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221960s%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 October 2022]

³ *Ibid.* p, 2717.

⁴ *Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72*, p.1.

⁵ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/vietnam-moratoriums> [Accessed 27 October 2022]

⁶ *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, Defence Review, Ministerial Statement, Speech, Tuesday, 10 November 1964, p. 2715.

⁷ *Ibid.* p, 2717.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* p, 2721.

The scheme, registration, and the ballot

Generally, the scheme saw a birthday ballot of twenty-year-old men who ordinarily resided in Australia required to register with the Department of Labour and National Service.¹² If balloted in, men were obliged to perform two years' continuous full-time service in the Army (reduced to 18 months in 1971), followed by three years' part-time service in the Army Reserves. Full-time 'conscripts' were potentially liable for 'special overseas service' in areas that included Vietnam and the Malayan peninsula.

The highly publicised registration was conducted bi-annually: in January for those who turned twenty in the first half of the year and in July for those turning twenty in the second half.¹³ Non-registration was an offence. Those who did not register without reasonable explanation were automatically balloted.

The selection for military service by ballot was identical to the procedure used from 1957 for the earlier national service scheme.¹⁴ Around five weeks after the close of registration, numbered marbles representing birthdates were placed in two barrels. A prearranged number of marbles were drawn randomly from the barrels one at a time. Within a month, all men whose birthdate was drawn knew if they were 'balloted in' or 'balloted out' of the scheme.



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National Service scheme recruits in training at Puckapunyal, Victoria in 1967/68.

Deferments, exemptions, and 'Defaulters'

Those who married before 'call-up', who had serious criminal records, posed a security risk, or who had joined the Navy, Air Force or Army Reserves were provided with indefinite deferments.¹⁵ Temporary deferments were possible on the grounds of hardship or compassion, and educational commitments.

¹² *Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72*, pp. 1-2.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 2-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 4-8.

Exemptions were considered after ballots were drawn. They were for either physical or mental disability, occupation, or conscience. Automatic exemptions were granted on occupational grounds to theological students, ministers of religion and members of religious orders. Indigenous Australians as defined by The Act were also exempt; however, they could volunteer to serve.¹⁶

'Defaulters' were those who failed to register at the required time, provide notice of a change of address, attend a medical examination, report for call-up, or provide mandatory requested information.¹⁷ Draftees who obstructed the process or made false and misleading statements were also deemed defaulters. In all 14 men were prosecuted and imprisoned for failing to obey their call-up notice.

Re-establishment benefits and reinstatement protection¹⁸

National servicemen on completion of their continuous full-time service were entitled to re-establishment and civilian employment benefits. Those benefits protected the obligations they had entered before national service, and entitled them to return to their previous employment if they had been with their employer for at least 30 days prior to their service. Benefits included business loans, housing grants and vocational training.

Public protest¹⁹



Melbourne, Vic. 1970. Section of crowd demonstrating at a Vietnam Moratorium march on the steps of Parliament House.

At the time, the Vietnam moratorium protests in 1970/71 were the largest public demonstrations in Australia's history.²⁰ The protestors were generally opposed to Australia's commitment to the war in Vietnam and particularly opposed to conscription. Around 200,000 people took part in the first protest march, the largest in Melbourne attracting around 70,000 peaceful marchers. The second and third protests attracted less participants, the second marred by violence.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 16-18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 12-13.

¹⁹ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/vietnam-moratoriums> [Accessed 27 October 2022]

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Between 1964 and 1972, 804,286 men registered for national service, 63,735 were conscripted to the Army; and 19,205 served in Vietnam, of whom 200 were killed and 1,279 wounded.^{21 22}

Read more in Edwards, P. 1997. *A nation at war : Australian politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965–1975: the official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948-1975*, Volume VI, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

²¹ *Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72*, p.18 in Peter Edwards. 1997. *A nation at war: Australian politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965–1975: the official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948-1975*, Volume VI, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

²² Peter Dennis et al., *The Oxford companion to Australian military history*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995.