

National Service Medal and Conscription in Australia

by Tony James

"You are hereby called up for national service with the Military Forces of the Commonwealth. You are required to present yourself to Major K Giles at Army Training Depot, Addison Road, Marrickville on the First day of October 1969 at 8.00am". Twenty four months later I received another piece of paper that certified "the discharge from the Permanent Military Forces of 2793528 Cpl A.R.G. James has been duly authorised, the reason being NSA 27(2) Expiration of service in the RAS (NS) effective from 30 September 1971".

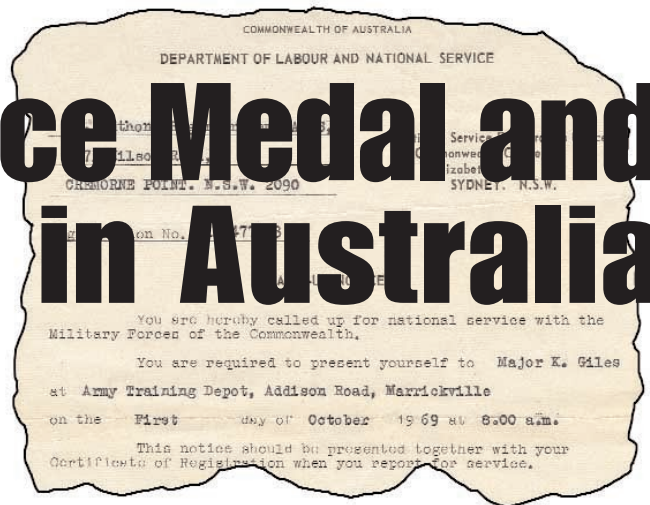
Thirty years later, on April 26 2001, and fifty years after the first post war national servicemen reported to different camps in Australia, John Howard, the Prime Minister announced that 325,000 National Servicemen would receive a commemorative medal. Named the Anniversary of National Service 1951-1972 Medal, this was to recognise the contribution to the nation by young men who completed compulsory military service in terms of the current requirements of the time.

The medal

The Anniversary of National Service Medal (ANSM) features on the obverse a distinctive emblem that represents the Navy (anchor), Army (crossed swords) and Air Force (wings) below the Federation star. It is surrounded by the words *Anniversary of National Service 1951-1972*. A crown forms the mount attachment to the ribbon bar. The reverse features a central device of radial lines overlaid with the stars of the Southern Cross. Surrounding the device is a cog, symbolising the spirit



The Anniversary of National Service 1951-1972 Medal.



of cooperation between the Australian Defence Force and the Australian community.

The medal ribbon colours are drawn from the white, green and light blue representing the then colours of the Navy, Army and Airforce, while the central yellow and dark blue colours represent Australia's national colours of the time, while the outer ochre stripes represent the soil of Australia. The medal is worn immediately after long service awards with the Australian Order of Wearing.

The end of a long road

Conscription or mandatory military service has been a part of Australian history since the early days of Federation. The Deakin government introduced a bill for the introduction of compulsory military training in 1909, and at the same time invited Lord Kitchener to visit and inspect the Australian forces. His report received in 1910, recommended the introduction of compulsory military training. Soon after a Labour government instituted the first scheme of universal training for males aged between 18 and 60 with effect from January 1 1911. This consisted of Militia training within Australia and its territories, the scheme had varied success but provided basic training for NCO and officer selection. Junior cadets were abolished in 1922 and universal military training and the holding of military camps was suspended from November 1 1929 while the government made a review of defence policy. During the Great War 1914-1919, Australian troops enlisted voluntarily. With the enormous casualty lists from the Western Front and no likelihood of an early end to the war, the number of volunteers gradually fell. The government asked the Australian people in a referendum "Are you in favour of the Government having, in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this war, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?" This referendum was defeated with 1,087,557 in favour and 1,160,033 against. A year later Britain asked for a sixth Australian division for active service, which required 7,000 men per month. Volunteer recruitment had not picked up and on December 20 1917 Hughes asked the country again "are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the Commonwealth Forces overseas?" Again the referendum was defeated with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against. This second defeat closed the issue of conscription for the rest of the war.

A decade after the abolition of universal military training in 1929 and six months after Australia entered the Second World War the Menzies government announced the reintroduction of compulsory military training to take effect from January 1 1940. This required unmarried men turning 21 in the call up period to undertake three months training with the militia. The Labor party again opposed compulsory military service overseas and it was only as the war continued and Labor became the government that amendments were made to the

statutes to allow the Defence (Citizen Military Forces) Act to provide for the use of Australian conscripts on the South-West Pacific Zone during the period of war.

Post War and the deepening of the Cold War in Europe was mirrored by Communist insurgency in the Far East. The Korean war saw the Menzies government sponsor the National Service Act 1951 which provided for compulsory call up of males turning 18 on or after November 1 1950 for service training of 176 days and remain on the Reserve of the Commonwealth Military Forces for 5 years from original call up. Those called up could nominate the service in which they wished to be trained however those in the Navy and Airforce were only considered if they volunteered for service outside Australia. From 1951 to 1959 over 500,00 men registered and some 227,000 men were trained. In 1957 service with the Navy and Air Force was discontinued and intake to the Army cut by two thirds by means of a ballot for selection. Then on November 24 1959 the Cabinet decided that National Service call ups should be terminated and the arrangements for the January 1960 intake were cancelled.

The National Service Act passed on November 24 1964 authorised a scheme of selective national service which required 20 year old males to serve in the Army for a period of 24 months of continuous service followed by 3 years in the Reserve. In May 1965 the Defence act was amended to provide that conscripts could be obliged to serve overseas and then in March 1966 the Prime Minister Harold Holt announced that National Servicemen would be sent to Vietnam to fight in units of the Australian Regular Army. From 1965 to 1972 more than 800,000 men registered for National service and 63,790 men were called up for service. This was to bolster the Army from four to eight infantry battalions. A further 34,970 exercised their option to enlist in the CMF for 6 years to enable them to fulfil their national service obligation. National Servicemen saw active service in Vietnam with a total of 19,383 being sent overseas, where 200 lost their lives while on active service. A further 1279 were wounded or injured.



Route Marches do not change no matter what the decade.

My service

This 'Nasho' being a British subject was included in the call up, there was an option, should I have decided that the military life was not for me. I could defer call up until the end of my two year period as an Assisted Passage migrant to Australia and take my chance. I could accept the ballot and go in the draw or if I wanted neither I could leave Australia at the end of the two year period but not darken the shores of the land until I had reached the ripe age of 26 years, otherwise I was due to serve no matter what.

The only lotteries and raffles in which I have been successful have been meat trays in pubs and this occasion was no different, I took the chance along with others who were working in the bank and yes the marble came up. I reported to Marrickville and proceeded to basic training at Kapooka near Wagga Wagga.



*Recruits mess at Kapooka during basic training.
"See Mum we are all clean and tidy".*

My eyesight and banking experience appeared to be the reason that I was assigned to the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers as a storeman. Therefore I went on to be trained at the RAEME Corps Training centre at Bandiana in Victoria. Here the importance of typing requisitions, handing out wrenches, other automotive specialised tools and learning how to keep count of the new and old instruments was impressed on me, in no uncertain terms.

At the end of six weeks of Corps training we were let loose on the unsuspecting Australian Army to run equipment stores in the RAEME workshops around the country. The lucky unit who inherited me had the designation - 16 Transport Company Workshop at Randwick NSW. Here I was responsible for typing a huge number of requisitions as the unit was being upgraded



Officers of the 19th National Service Training Battalion 1951. Leslie Allen Smith second from the left middle row.

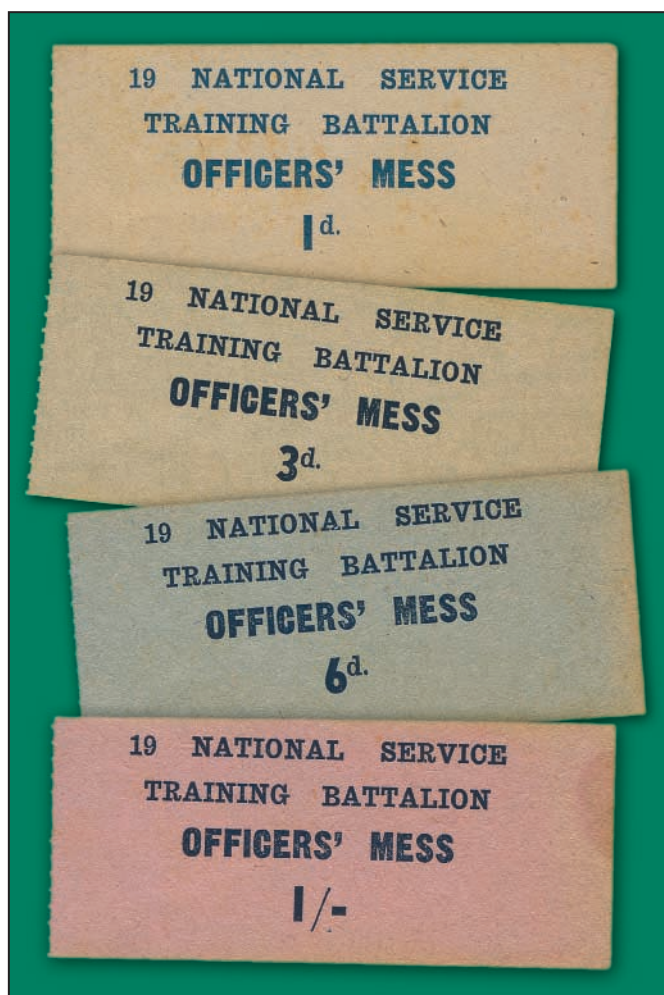
and although it was a headquarters unit, mechanics were often transferred to the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in Queensland prior to service in Vietnam. Then when I had just a month or so to complete my service, the new Labor government advised that I could apply for my immediate discharge and go back to the bank. This was of course too late—arrangements were already in place so I waited out the month or so and had a holiday at government expense.

The other side to the training of nashos

While the National Service Medal has been an acknowledgment of compulsory service, there needs to be recognition of those in the Regular Army who had the job of training the huge influx of new recruits. While there are some more mature members of Australian society who appear to have the idea that National Service will cure all the social ills of our country, it should be remembered that the size of the Military Forces today cannot support the instruction required for the number of recruits that would be received. One such member of the Regular Army was Leslie Allen Smith who had enlisted in the Militia back in 1933 and transferred to the Permanent Military Forces in 1937. Service in the Royal Australian Artillery saw him promoted to Staff Sergeant in 1941 and commissioned in July 1942. His war service was mainly in New Guinea until his posting to Albury Ordnance Park in 1944. Post war he transferred to the Royal Australian Ordnance Corps serving at various depots until in February 1950 he joined the Warrant Officer Australian Instructional Corps, and in July 1951 he was posted to the 19th National Service Training Battalion at Ingleburn as Assistant Adjutant.

In 1957 he was posted to the 13th NSTB and in 1960 moved to Quartermaster Area Command at Liverpool NSW from which he retired as Major in 1974.

An interesting aside to this officer's service is the set of Officers Mess chits that I located that were in use at the 19th NSTB. These chits from the 1950s were in use as an accounting system for the officers mess.



*19th National Service Training Battalion
Officers' Mess denominations 1d, 3d, 6d, 1/- 1950s*

Retrospect

An article entitled "Conscription is of no service" belaboured the point that it is the older generation that claim that conscription will fix the youth of today. The arrogant assertions of a fix for unemployment, social policy or character building for the undisciplined youth, are placed in historical context and the reality that today and also in the past the Australian military forces were ordered to increase the size of the army with this method and train the new recruits they must. Post WWII there were fortunately a good number of experienced NCOs to act as instructors. The local requirements of service during 1951-59 were relatively undemanding, unless the Nasho decided to volunteer for Korea and he had to change the terms of enlistment.

By 1965-72 the goalposts had been moved and while most of those caught up in the ballot thought it was a bit of a lark; the protesting anti-war faction did not let the Nashos forget that not all was sweet in the political land of Australia.

Field Marshall Sir Richard Hull said of the British universal national service scheme: "Conscription may have been good for the country, but it damn near killed the army".

Those who served overseas had many and varied experiences and suffered in ways that other people can only guess. The quotation in the book "We also served" is a fitting end to an era that is no more. Today's Army is too hi-tech and conscription as a manpower solution is rejected by those forces in the field in modern combat. Michael Howard—The Franco-Prussian War "The military system of a nation is not an independent section of the social system but an aspect of it in its entirety".

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Mostly Unsung research notes on L.A.Smith

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