

Readers,

In response to a request by my university Alumni Society to document student life during my student days, I canvassed the Qld Chalkies group regarding their recollections of the study year following our two year National Service commitment. A dozen or so questions were asked to help recall events of 50 years ago. Collectively a full picture was created. For many of us being former teachers, tertiary studies followed the familiar paths of Arts, Education and Science. However, some deviated from this mould. Like everything we have done, this is another story in itself!

National Service Vocational Training Scheme following Discharge.

In November 1964, the Menzies Federal Government enacted legislation to compel all Australian 20 year old males, born 1945, the Baby Boomers, to register for National Service for two years duration. This scheme operated until 1972 and for some of those called up, tertiary institutions as well as colleges provided a year of transition back into 'civvy street' thanks to a government subsidised training scheme.

National Service was a response to Indonesian hostilities and a perceived Communist threat, known as the 'Domino Effect' to Australia's north. Young men, after registration were balloted into military service on the 10th March 1965. This initial group attained a 52% chance of selection and recruit training commenced in July of that year. Deferments were possible. Students were permitted to finish their course prior to enlistment. Subsequent ballots were held biannually with four intakes each year for the next seven years.

The military emphasis moved to Vietnam in April 1965 with Australian society in general supporting the move. Dissenters were few. Australian regular army troops supported by the newly recruited National Servicemen joined American servicemen in South Vietnam to fight North Vietnamese Communist forces who in turn were supported by Communist forces from northern countries.

By 1967, Queenslanders who deferred from previous ballot selections, entered recruit training at Singleton NSW (3RTB). Other states filled 1RTB at Kapooka for basic training for New South Welshmen and 2RTB at Puckapunyal for all remaining state recruits. First degree, teachers' college and those completing apprenticeships predominated in this group. Medicine, pharmacy, dentistry and other long running course candidates were approaching call-up. The Army did use qualified people in their respective disciplines but the emphasis was on Infantry soldiers and the related fighting arms of Artillery and Engineers.

Upon the completion of the two year conscription period, a return to civilian life scheme was available for many soldiers to up grade their qualifications. Various tertiary institutions received many soldiers who undertook one year of full time study, provided that their application for training was received within 12 months of discharge by the relevant authority. Life style changes such as marriage or other pressing factors at home might distract the candidate from applying on time. From my knowledge, no exemptions were made. Those who were selected after discharge, received a fully paid recognised course for one year with a book allowance and a travel-living allowance which approximated the basic wage of that time, tax free.

University students were enrolled in Education, Arts, Commerce, Science and Law, to name a few. TAFE colleges also benefited by an influx of mature aged students. Some students came almost directly from Vietnam battlefields, others returned from instructional duties in Papua New Guinea (the Chalkies - of whom the author was one), and the remainder came from military postings around Australia. By enlarge, these mature aged students continued with their previous studies with only a 20% movement to more exotic courses. Some former teachers did move to commerce or law.

By 1969, these educational institutions had many mature aged ex soldiers studying full time in various faculties. Many full time students benefited over the seven year conscription timeline. Part time and external students also swelled this figure. Most had the maturity to succeed in their chosen

field. At the conclusion of this year's study, candidates returned to the workforce, completing their degree part time. For others, full time study continued unfunded unless a Commonwealth Scholarship was secured. Many returned to former employers. Now with a degree in hand (or in sight), promotions followed for those who sought it. For the teachers returning to the classroom, principal-ships and other higher duties became available for both State and private school sectors. A few have become tertiary educators.

One of our group at UQ studied Computer Science One in its inaugural year in 1971 as part of a science degree. He rejoined the Public Service and has recently retired as Chief Scientist-Computing at a Brisbane public hospital. His ground breaking work in pathology processing is a vital forerunner for today's computer run health system.

Returning to campus, it was most unlikely that this cohort of students joined the University Regiments regardless of their previous Army rank although some participated in sporting teams and university clubs. Campus life became punctuated with student demonstrations and marches. Dissent increased Australia wide. Public sympathy for cessation of the war was moving the students' way especially when the body bags were returning from Vietnam.

In late 1972, the Whitlam government swept to power. In December, all draftees were exempted from military call up. For those already in the Army, their tour of duty was curtailed. However, to be eligible for the aforementioned NSVTS, one had to complete the two year duty which many educated soldiers did.

This NSVTS study grant enhanced qualifications, confirmed a chosen career path and gave students the best possible opportunities. These ex-military Baby Boomers are now settling into retirement. However, career disruption and the obstacle course of a two year Army Career in war circumstances is a path that young men might well resist today.

Terry Edwinsmith, Conscript 1967-8