

The graduates

While thousands of Australians were fighting in Vietnam, a select group was quietly achieving success in PNG. Mark Dapin reports.

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At the height of the Vietnam War, with Saigon battered by the Tet Offensive, and the punch-drunk state of South Vietnam reeling in its aftermath, Australia sent scores of highly educated national servicemen - most of them teachers, or "chalkies" - to Papua and New Guinea. The men who served were an extraordinary, talented group of people whose ranks have supplied school principals throughout Australia, as well as our first deputy chief censor and an ambassador to Russia. And, almost by accident, they helped build the emerging nation of PNG.

As Les Rowe, the former ambassador, says, "We were there to teach them English, we were there to teach them civics, we were there to teach them how not to have a military coup. In that latter experience, you'd have to say we were signally successful." The chalkies were a triumph born out of breakage, both the global fissure of the Vietnam War and the personal ruptures of men such as Wayne Bensley, who ended his teaching career as principal of Middle Harbour Primary School in Cremorne, NSW.

Bensley, a trained teacher, was one of six men from the small NSW country town of Gilgandra called up for national service in 1967. He was happy to go into the army - his father had told him it'd be good for him - and he would have willingly served in Vietnam. As the youngest among the six, Bensley was still in infantry training when his schoolmate Michael Noonan was fighting with the Fourth Battalion in South Vietnam. On Friday September 13, 1968, Noonan's platoon had come across an apparently abandoned enemy bunker system when they were surprised by heavy gunfire. Noonan was shot and killed, a spare-parts manager from Gilgandra finding death 6500 kilometres from home. "I heard it on the radio when I was driving," says Bensley. "They were giving the report, and that was my mate who was killed.

"We were good mates at school. We used to play football together. In this little country town, they had a very large and moving military funeral, the full gun carriage."

Bensley was a pallbearer at the funeral, along with the other four surviving Gilgandra conscripts, and the idea of Vietnam lost its shine for him. "As they were putting him in the ground, I thought, 'I don't want to go there any more,'" he says. "So I asked for a transfer, and I got transferred to Education."

The 1964-1972 national service scheme is poorly remembered. "Selective service" - that is, compulsory enrolment in the army for a percentage of the male population - wasn't introduced to give Australia the manpower to fight the Vietnam War. At the time, prime minister Robert Menzies' government was more worried about the threat from Indonesia. Vietnam became a retrospective justification for a government which, in the judgment of the official history, "appeared determined to introduce and maintain conscription, including a commitment for overseas service, for its own sake".

The birth dates of the men chosen to fill the army were coded onto "marbles" and pulled out of an old hardwood Tattersall's barrel. The ballot gave the army a vast pool of men from which to choose - far more than it needed. In 1967, for example, 103,639 20-year-old men were registered for national service, and only 8416 were taken into the army. Potential conscripts were rejected on medical and educational grounds and, privately, for political reasons. Nor was anybody with a serious criminal record recruited, so the widespread idea that national service might somehow straighten out delinquent youth was a fallacy. The army didn't want the worst of the generation, it needed to secure the best.

The men selected were called up to serve for two years alongside regular soldiers. But those who, at 20, were studying full-time for a university degree, or working in an apprenticeship, could defer their entrance to the army until they'd finished. Teachers were also allowed to complete their first year on the job.

As an unintended result of national service regulations, there were virtually no teachers in the first year of national service, few in the second, and then, by 1967, a deluge. And not only did all the teachers arrive in the same years, they all came in at the same time. There were four annual intakes of national

servicemen - one every three months - but the teachers only marched into recruit training in January, once the previous school year was over. The January intake, according to former chalkie Ray Bassett, were known to the regular army sergeants and corporals as "the f...ing educated c...s".

The military in Vietnam had only limited use for teachers as teachers, so they ended up scattered throughout the army, with a number serving, like Bensley, as privates in the infantry.

Recruit training at Puckapunyal in Victoria was "a bit rugged" for 1.88-metre-tall Les Rowe. "I was the tallest person in the company," he says, "the poor idiot who had to be the right marker for all the drill parades."

Rowe feels graduates were picked on by the army NCOs [non-commissioned officers]. In the living room of his Melbourne home, he pulls a sergeant-major's scowl and affects a matching angry growl. "You're supposed to be smart, Recruit Rowe!" he mimics. "God, you're stupid for someone who's supposed to be smart!"

In his beachfront house in Edithvale, Victoria, an army contemporary of Rowe's, former chalkie and now practising psychologist Andrew Remenyi, remembers being "singled out for special treatment as university students" at Puckapunyal. He adopts his own version of a sergeant-major's face and voice: "And so, on behalf of the university students, you'll all do 100 push-ups!" But the graduates were excused the push-ups; they were given to punish the other national servicemen for the graduates' mistakes.

"It was that kind of divide-and-rule stuff," says Remenyi. "Historically, it's always uncertain as to what counts as bastardisation and what is legitimate desensitisation of ... " he pauses and smiles, " ... sensitive people like ourselves."

The graduates stood out because they were older, better educated, usually more middle-class and often more worldly than the other men in their hut. "The thing that really struck me at the time was how young and innocent so many of these kids were in those days," says Rowe. "Most of the country kids would never have been to the capital cities of the states in which they lived."

Former chalkie Ray Nichol had been headmaster of a little bush school in the Strzelecki Ranges, teaching prep to grade 6, before he entered the army. "I was surprised, in my hut at Puckapunyal, by how many of the young men wanted to go," Nichol says. "Some of the boys were reading war comics. They couldn't wait to go to Vietnam and fight. I didn't really share those sentiments. If I'd been told to go, I would've, even though I was not keen on it. I was so socialised to be respectable. I was a very conservative young man who wanted to do the right thing."

Andrew Remenyi was opposed to the Vietnam War, as were Bassett, his mate Peter Porteous, and Rowe, and they were broadly unhappy to be in the army. Remenyi, in particular, felt it was a waste of his time.

"I resented the army a lot in recruit training and infantry training," he says. "I resented the fact we'd been selectively called up with marbles dragged out of the barrel. And I thought that I would never catch up. And that was true, you don't catch up. My contemporaries before I went into the army all got the university positions, or higher positions in industry, and I had to come back and then do my masters and PhD. And I resented the fact we were involved in a war that we shouldn't have been involved in. However, I was grateful for the experience of New Guinea."

That salvation should be offered by the Pacific Islands Regiment in Papua and New Guinea was a surprise to most of the chalkies. The PIR was a bit of a backwoods for the Australian Army and, when national service had first been announced, PNG was held to be an unsuitable place for conscripts because regular soldiers were generally posted there for three years, whereas the national service commitment was only for two.

Also, most Australians in the lower ranks of the PIR had been eased out or moved on to make way for local men. The majority of Australians held ranks of sergeant and above - and most national servicemen were privates.

And if the regiment was small, its Education corps was tiny. In 1964, it only had three members. By 1968, it had, somehow, grown to 60, most of them national servicemen. This 1900 per cent increase went largely unnoticed, as 30 to 40 chalkies every year were quietly flown out to one of the five main army bases in PNG: Murray barracks in Port Moresby, Taurama and Goldie River just outside Moresby, Igam in Lae, and Moem in Wewak.

Most of the teachers were informed of the possibility of going to PNG towards the end of recruit training, when all national servicemen were assigned their corps. But even most of those destined to become chalkies had to complete a further 10 weeks' training as infantrymen. It was important they looked like real infantry soldiers to the real infantry soldiers they'd be teaching, and also - unlike national servicemen who entered, for example, the Engineers, the Artillery or Armoured corps - the army didn't have any worthwhile specialist training to offer them.

Bassett had trained as a primary school teacher before he went into the army. As a whole, he says, the regulars "looked not so much down on us but across at us. We were not regular soldiers. We hadn't enlisted. But there was a sense of accommodation." The chalkies were accepted if they did their jobs.

When they reached PNG, all the chalkies were made up to sergeants, which led to a degree of resentment in the sergeants' mess, "because we'd been in the army five minutes and a lot of these guys had been in the army 15 or 20 years to become sergeants", says Bassett. But by the time Bassett arrived in Taurama barracks in 1970, the regulars were used to the teachers. "We weren't exactly welcomed with open arms," he says, "but there was very little hostility."

Bassett taught English as a second language in the army. It was the first time he'd tutored adults and the first time he'd done ESL, and he's been working in the field ever since.

"It gave me a career, and a good one, too," he says. "I thank the army for that."

The Pacific Islands Regiment, to which all the chalkies were attached, had three broad tasks: the defence of PNG against external enemies (primarily, of course, Indonesia); the maintenance of law and order inside the country; and the training of loyal, non-political soldiers.

Sergeant Ray Nichol - today Dr Ray Nichol, with a PhD in anthropology - came to Papua and New Guinea in 1969. "A 23-year-old had this incredible experience," he says. "I was appointed the social studies/civics/citizenship co-ordinator at Goldie River barracks.

"A generation of Papua New Guinean soldiers who identified as *wantoks*, with their primary allegiance to family and clan, were being socialised into the idea that they would be the right hand of a Westminster-style, democratically elected House of Assembly in Port Moresby, representing all the provinces, and that you should not just be thinking that you're from your own particular area, you're representing your nation."

Many of the men from the PIR became important figures in post-independence PNG, but even some locals who weren't in the army were affected by the chalkies' presence. "In the area where I was, the local politician at that time was Michael Somare," says Bensley. In 1975, Somare was to become the first prime minister of an independent PNG.

"Michael used to come to our mess every Friday night and have a drink with everyone," continues Bensley. "He was always saying, 'Too early for independence. We've got a lot more to do yet.' He was very visionary - he didn't want it foisted upon them by others."

Peter Porteous was posted to Taurama barracks with Bassett one year later. He remembers flying into Port Moresby from Sydney. "You opened the doors of the plane and the heat and smells hit you," he says. "And all these native indigenous guys are looking at you through the wire, chewing betel nut."

Most of the time the locals were friendly and eager to learn, and the working conditions were wonderful compared with the jungles of Vietnam. "There were individual rooms and we had a boy allocated to us," says Porteous. "We were the raj out there. We lived pretty well."

But it was always hot and humid. "We all got prickly heat and fungal infections," says Porteous. "And what's come back to bite me is skin cancer. We had to wear the uniform of the Pacific Islands Regiment, which was shorts, long socks, short-sleeved shirts and a beret, juniper green."

The beret gave no protection to the face from the sun, but Porteous has military compensation for the exposure. "The army recognised that was a problem," he says.

Both Wayne Bensley and Porteous had fathers who had served in Papua and New Guinea during World War II, and they were able to visit the places their

fathers had been more than 20 years before, the missions and goldmining towns which they'd only heard about as children.

Remenyi, Rowe and Chris Poulton all went to Lae in 1969-70, along with the late Ken Barton, the man who went on to become the Commonwealth deputy chief censor and who still seems alive in their stories. Remenyi had to translate his lectures from English to pidgin, the patois of PNG. He still has the scripts in his files at home, including a talk he gave about the need to go to hospital if you suspect you have contracted a venereal disease. He recites:

*"Sipos yu putim kok long cum,
Lik-lik sinek i come up long kok bilong yu.
Em I burgerup tru kok bilong yu,
Yu must go long haus-sik."*

When Remenyi performs it, it sounds like poetry. He'd finished top of his course at primary teachers' college and won a scholarship to Melbourne University. There he completed an arts degree majoring in psychology, philosophy and English.

"During my time in the army, I inclined away from what I was really interested in before - which was a career in philosophy," he says. "I decided I would become a psychologist because I was fascinated by human behaviour, my own and that of others. I didn't think I could pursue a career in philosophy any more, because there were so few positions and I'd missed my chance because the army had intervened."

Despite his military training and sergeant's rank, Remenyi never quite absorbed the army's ethos. "I couldn't believe - I still find it hard to believe - that you can shoot someone," he says.

The chalkies' job wasn't all teaching. Men who were attached to different companies actually went out on long bush patrols with the infantry.

"Patrols were quite demanding," says Poulton. "You'd be out for a week or 10 days. When we went up in the highlands, we were carrying live ammunition and machine guns, and climbing up really steep hills. Every time you put your hands down, you came up covered in leeches, and your clothes were absolutely saturated.

"But then a soldier would help you out, because they'd build your hootchie [tarpaulin shelter] for you, make sure your hootchie was off the ground. And the whole reversal of roles - who was student and who was teacher - was very effective in terms of coming back to the classroom, them having gained respect because they'd shown the teachers how to survive in the jungle."

The military efficacy of some of these patrols was questionable. Poulton remembers his commanding officer as a prominent ornithologist, and while they were up near Mount Hagen, in what he calls "a cannibal area", Poulton says, "We got miles into the mountains and put up his nets for him to catch his birds, to document his birds."

On patrol at Finschhafen, where Australian and Allied troops drove out the Japanese in 1943, they re-walked the Finschhafen campaign because the same major was "a military history buff". "It took us a few days," he remembers.

For Poulton, a shy, withdrawn Sydney university graduate in pure mathematics, his posting to Lae was one of the best times of his life. "I had an excellent year," he says. "I matured enormously, and came out quite a different person." The army discipline and bullying terrified him initially but he believes it did him "a lot of personal good".

The chalkies' experiences changed their lives in ways that would have been impossible to predict. Porteous was principal at Rose Bay Public School before he was forced to retire about 10 years ago to look after his wife, who was suffering from a degenerative disease that eventually killed her.

He began to march on Anzac Day, at first with the National Servicemen's Association, then among the Papuan and New Guinea Infantry battalions, the aged remnants of units that had fought the Japanese on the Kokoda Track, in Ramu Valley and Bougainville in World War II. It was their battalions which, in 1944, joined to form the Pacific Islands Regiment.

"I saw these guys wearing the regimental tie and the green beret, and I thought, 'This is my mob,' " says Porteous. "They were just the loveliest bunch. They made me feel so at home. They, all but one, have died out. That took its toll on me, too, because my father died and they all became surrogate fathers to me in a way. They had a sort of wisdom there that you just don't get from people who haven't served." Bassett and Bensley marched with

them, too. "We formed lifelong friendships there," says Porteous, "until they all passed away."

When they returned home, many chalkies made use of the government's promise to fund a year's education in their field. Poulton went to Melbourne University to do a bachelor of education, and shared a house with Remenyi for a year. Nichol went to Monash University, the cradle of Australian Maoism.

"The Vietnam War was still being fought when I was at Monash in 1971," says Nichol, "and most students and staff were not all that impressed by the fact that I'd been a soldier, whereas in the general community, I had been amazed by the generally very positive reception to me travelling around in uniform. I hitch-hiked a fair bit and the number of people in favour of young soldiers and being supportive was incredible."

Back at work, he received accelerated promotions, which was, he says, "pretty unusual at the time". He was assessed by two district inspectors who were World War II veterans.

"Their attitude seemed to be, 'You are one of us, you have sacrificed to serve your country and deserve to get ahead,'" he says. They were, "in effect, army people looking after army people, I suppose. Or respecting the fact that you'd served your country."

It seems the chalkies' deployment was one of the successes of the national service scheme, but the fact it happened at all raises certain questions. How was it that, at a time when thousands of Australians were fighting and hundreds were dying in Vietnam, the army could afford to lose up to 40 of its very best and brightest - almost two per cent of the average January intake - every year, to a far from urgent nation-building project in PNG? And why did the work have to be done by conscripts? Or even soldiers?

But, while some gained from national service and others lost, it seems PNG ultimately grew stronger from the chalkies' presence, while the chalkies all took home at least something of value, and Australian society was able to benefit from the chalkies' experience overseas.

Tragically, that was exactly what was supposed to happen in South Vietnam.

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