



## THE RAAF EXPERIENCE OF NATIONAL SERVICE

Australia has used compulsion to help fill the ranks of its armed services on four occasions during its history: in 1911–1929 (the universal military training scheme); 1940–45 (wartime conscription), 1951–57 (the first national service training scheme) and 1965–1973 (the second national service scheme). Of these, only the third occasion involved the Royal Australian Air Force.

In 1950 it was proposed, largely in response to a deteriorating international situation, that 15,000 Australian men aged 18 would be trained annually for the Army, along with 1000 for the Royal Australian Navy and 5000 for the RAAF. It was not envisaged, however, that this scheme would be implemented before 1 January 1952. The government was actually preparing to withdraw its forces involved in the occupation of Japan since 1945, to help provide the regular instructors needed for the new training scheme, when the Korean War began in June 1950.

The RAAF already had a transport unit assisting Britain to deal with the Malayan Emergency, and indeed a fresh commitment of a bomber squadron was made to that theatre at the same time as No 77 Squadron joined the fighting in Korea. Despite the pressures this created in terms of finding an adequate supply of training staff, during September 1950 the decision was made to bring forward the start-date for introducing the National Service scheme to 1 May 1951, in line with government fears that Australia faced the prospect of becoming involved in a third world war within three years.

The *National Service Act 1950* establishing the scheme required all 18-year-old males who were British subjects resident within Australia to register for National Service in one of the three armed services. Trainees could nominate in which service they wished to do their training, but those going to the RAN or RAAF had to volunteer to serve outside Australia if necessary. Initially, trainees were obligated to undertake an active training commitment of 176 days, and those joining the RAN or RAAF had to complete this in one continuous block. After their initial training period, all trainees would be transferred to the Reserve of their chosen service for five years after their call-up date.

The scheme underwent several adjustments after its commencement. In September 1953, the total period of

training was reduced to 154 days for the RAN and RAAF, and 140 days for Army trainees. In May 1957 compulsory training for the RAN and RAAF was discontinued, while the Army's annual intake was more than halved and drafts were decided by a ballot system based on random selection of birth dates. Those actually called-up into the Army received only 77 days full-time training initially, and were then required to serve three years in the Citizen Military Forces.



*First National Service intake undergoes drill training at RAAF Garbutt, Townsville, August 1951.*

By the time the scheme ended in 1959, some 227,000 young Australian men had passed through the services—the great majority of these through the Army. It is not possible from surviving records to determine the precise number who performed their National Service in the RAAF. Calculations that the RAAF's two intakes annually produced only about 3300 trainees once the scheme reached maturity suggests that the figure would not have exceeded 20,000. Based on the number of intakes, and the fluctuating size of these, the actual number was more likely between 15,000 and 18,000.

And what did the National Service experience mean for the RAAF as a whole? The declared objectives of the scheme were twofold: to contribute to the defence of Australia by providing a resource of trained manpower for the armed services; and to develop national discipline and physical fitness as part of a wider preventative and remedial health strategy. Commendably 'humanistic' as the second objective was, it patently had little to do with the primary role of any of the services.

Did the scheme contribute significantly to the efficiency and readiness of the armed services? Probably not in the case of the RAAF, which—like the RAN—had greater need for technically-trained personnel rather than simply men in the ranks. Five or even six months was too short a period to usefully impart skills to new trainees, let alone reap any economical return from their training in terms of useful service.

Roughly 20 per cent of trainees in each intake might have been third or fourth year apprentices with sufficient prior training to be employed at aircraft depots, or had first aid experience sufficient to become medical or dental orderlies, or the necessary aptitude and academic qualifications to be considered for pilot training. (It is claimed that each year up to 175 National Servicemen were trained to private pilot licence standard at RAAF expense at selected aero clubs.) The rest, however, were rated as general hands—virtually unskilled recruits—and employed in a variety of menial and non-productive activities, like painting kerbs, stripping down obsolescent aircraft, or digging firebreaks. Many found themselves allocated to aerodrome defence, where they were used as the equivalent of the Army's basic infantryman.

The question of employment quickly became a significant problem area. One CO even took to ordering 'nashos' on his base to stencil silver stars on the back of their blue overalls—so that he could identify at a distance an idle permanent airman from an idle nasho (it being okay, of course, for the latter to be caught being idle). This deficiency in the NS scheme very quickly attracted adverse publicity for the RAAF, with press reports appearing in May 1953 of trainees 'wasting their time' and being 'left to idleness', denied even organised sport to improve their physical fitness. The RAAF leadership had little to say in the face of this onslaught, hinting only that the solution lay with government policy makers. It was not surprising, though, that major changes were instituted within a few months.

Not only was the length of the initial commitment of continuous training reduced in September 1953, but the conduct of this training in the RAAF—previously carried out within existing base units—was transferred to newly created National Service Training Units. Five such units were raised in November–December 1953, at Amberley (No 1), Canberra (3), Laverton (5), Point Cook (6) and



*Minister for Air, W. McMahon, hands out awards to NS trainees on completion of initial training, January 1952.*

Pearce (7); two more—at Richmond (No 2) and Wagga Wagga (4)—followed in March and May 1956. All closed in the last days of June or first week of July 1957.

The reality was that the scheme posed a significant drain on the RAAF, which was already a relatively small service (15,200 in 1958) heavily stretched with maintaining its operational commitments, and with little in the way of compensating benefits. For example, it was found that few RAN or RAAF trainees joined the permanent forces as a result of their experience. Because the RAAF simply could not find all the extra 850 bodies needed to train and administer the National Service scheme, some of the instructional work had to be sub-contracted out to civilian entities in Sydney and Melbourne. Small wonder, then, that the scheme was quietly buried in favour of increasing the ceiling for the regular forces and lifting recruitment by improving conditions of service.

***Air warfare cannot be separated into little packets; it knows no boundaries on land and sea other than those imposed by the radius of action of the aircraft; it is a unity and demands unity of command.***

**- MRAF Lord Tedder, 1949**



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