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Conscription by Ballot

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A Fair and Equitable Method of Recruitment? Conscription by Ballot into the Australian Army during the Vietnam War

Australia's commitment to the Vietnam War drew on the selective conscription of additional manpower through 16 biannual ballots. 20-year-old men were liable to serve if their date of birth was drawn out. The random nature of the ballot was seen as an equitable method of selection for a system of labour coercion that was potentially life-threatening. We investigate the various stages of conscription of these 'national servicemen' to undertake service in Vietnam throughout the war and evaluate the extent to which the processes provided for fair and equitable selection. Comparisons are drawn with a similar process of Vietnam-War era conscription in the United States.

JEL categories: J47, J45, N37, N47, H56

Keywords: Australia; conscription; ballot; Vietnam War

INTRODUCTION

The raising of armies for wartime military engagement has rarely been achieved without some degree of coercion. The sudden increase in demand for military labour with the outbreak of war often overwhelms the supply of labour in small standing armies, and it challenges the ability to extend their ranks sufficiently through improved pay and conditions or patriotic appeals to enlist. Conscription, as enforced military enlistment is normally termed, has historically taken many forms such as the recruitment of serfs and slaves in Medieval Europe, the impressment of coastal inhabitants into the British Royal Navy in the eighteenth century, and the raiding of Egyptian villages to seize recruits in the nineteenth century.¹

Coercion into a service that is potentially life threatening is justified by the ultimate national interest of defence of the realm. However, schemes that extend beyond defence or whose execution is not viewed as fair and even-handed may challenge the legitimacy of conscription. Historically, forced recruitment schemes had their foundations in accepted social and political structures and obligations, such as the rights and obligations of feudalism. Nonetheless, in some cases, the selection process was very arbitrary and resulted in high rates of service evasion. By the twentieth century, perhaps in tandem with the development of notions of individualism and democracy, there was a move towards the use of more systematic and even-handed methods of conscription. Often this has taken the form of universal age-based conscription as was the case for many nations engaged in the two World Wars.

¹ Lucassen and Zürcher, *Conscription as military labour*, pp. 406-9; Lloyd, *British Seaman*, p. 196; Fahmy, *Nation and its deserters*, p.429. Although a recent survey estimated that about a half of the countries with conscription schemes are not at war. Galiani et al, *Conscription and Crime*, p. 4.

Where manpower needs have fallen short of universal conscription but remained above volunteer levels, selective conscription has proved effective in recruiting sufficient manpower. Some nations have also used selective conscription to man peacetime standing armies. To avoid the arbitrariness of the past, selection processes needed to be seen as fair, not discriminating for or against particular groups. Lotteries seemingly provided a fairer method of recruitment – their random selection method meant that all potential recruits within a cohort, normally age-based, have the same probability of being eligible for ‘call up’. As we shall see below, during the Vietnam War, Australia and the United States both used a lottery based on birthdays, the latter having done likewise in World War Two. Other forms of randomisation have been adopted: Argentina operated a conscription lottery from 1901 to 1995 that used the last three digits of the national ID number. Mexico has had a lottery system of selection since 1940 based on withdrawing a black rather than white ball.²

However, in practice there are mechanisms at each stage of the selection process that may violate this sense of fair and equitable treatment. To begin with is the selection of eligible age groups for conscription, a figure that has varied over time.³ Whether the resulting lottery mechanism effectively provided a random outcome must also be considered. Avoidance and evasion strategies are inevitably pursued before and after the ballot result. Following the ballot, only a proportion of those who enrolled would eventually enter active service in a field of combat. This was the result of a further set of selection processes, regarding enlistment and deployment, that were often less transparent and that may have been oriented in favour of particular demographic groups within the age cohort. Since the length and intensity of most wars are difficult to predict, multiple ballots are often required during the years of

² Galiani, et al, *Conscription and Crime*. For an excellent study of the nature and impact of the 1916 conscription lottery in Brazil, see Beattie, *Tribute of Blood*

³ For a discussion of optimal enlistment age see Levy, Optimal enlistment age, pp. 418-25.

conflict. The probability of being called up, and indeed facing active service, can vary significantly between consecutive ballots depending on changing wartime military needs, the size of each consecutive age cohort, and the predictive accuracy of manpower projections in previous ballots.

Thus, while conscription methods may have become fairer over time, in the sense of equalising the probability of being selected in a particular ballot, the lottery system could lead to very different probabilities of active service both within and between ballots. Even if it were possible to equalise the probability of active service between ballots, no recruitment strategy can equalise the context of active service faced by each cohort, which depends on the waxing and waning of the intensity of the war itself. If military service does play a significant role in shaping the lives of its participants, we suggest that, in spite of the use of the ballot to achieve a sense of fairness, war can result in very different economic and social outcomes for erstwhile identical groups of men.

We examine these ideas through the lens of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, drawing comparisons with American experience in the process. The recruitment lottery was designed to bolster Australia's regular army with National Servicemen so that sufficient manpower would be available to participate in the Vietnam War. Sixteen biannual lotteries were conducted between 1965 and 1972. While selection was by a random process that varied little over the period, the probability of active service and its nature and context changed substantially, an understanding of which provides an important basis for any attempt to assess the economic and social consequences of such a conscription scheme. We explain below the evolution of conscription strategies in twentieth-century Australia. Our focus will then be the lottery system of selection, briefly introduced in the late 1950s, but used

more extensively during the Vietnam War. We will describe the dimensions of the scheme through to final selection for Vietnam service and analyse the extent to which it adhered to the random selection principle within and between ballots. Finally, we will assess the variations in wartime service experienced by each of the cohorts that ended up in active service.

1. THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Military conscription in Australia did not begin with the Vietnam War. Table 1 summarises the details of Australia's various twentieth century conscription schemes. In 1903, two years after Federation, the Defence of the Realm Act gave Australian governments the right of compulsory recruitment for the purpose of home defence of men aged between 18 and 55. This right was exercised in three conscription schemes prior to Vietnam. Between 1911 and 1929 a scheme of compulsory universal military training operated. Junior cadets (aged 12-13) trained at school for 90 hours annually. Senior cadets (14-17) trained for 64 hours in more closely organised night and day drills and camps. 18 to 26-year-olds were paid to complete 16 whole day drills in the Commonwealth Military Forces. The junior cadet scheme was abolished in 1922 and the senior cadets limited to 16-17-year-olds. There existed a range of exemptions, particularly for those who lived more than five miles from a training camp, and a relatively high degree of non-compliance occurred with at least 34,000 prosecutions of a total enlistment of 636,000 for the years 1911-15. Since there was no requirement under the scheme to enter the regular army, the Australian Imperial Force in World War One was composed entirely of volunteers. At the height of World War

One, when Australia was under pressure to reinforce its military personnel, the government held two referendums, in 1916 and 1917, proposing that it have the power to compel citizens to undertake military service overseas, thereby extending its home defence rights of conscription. Both referendums were defeated by quite small margins of 6 and 16 per cent respectively.⁴ While the focus was on overseas service, it is also likely that the notion of coercive military recruitment did not sit comfortably with a voluntary tradition of service in Australia prior to confederation as Kuring has noted, “An Australian style of volunteer, part-time, citizen-soldier developed, characterised by enthusiasm, and an independent martial spirit in dress, organisation and training.”⁵

Table 1. Conscription Schemes in Australia, 1911-72

Following the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, universal compulsory service was introduced for unmarried men aged 21. The call up age and duties were revised several times until they were fixed at 18-45, with 18-35 for married men, at the end of 1941. While this scheme involved military service, rather than just military training, the geographic area of deployment was initially limited to Australia and its overseas possessions including New Guinea and adjacent Islands, and then in 1943 it was extended to include Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japanese-held islands south of the equator.⁶ Home defence again appears to be the principle although the increasingly global nature of warfare in the twentieth century may have been implicated in a perceived need to deploy Australian troops beyond the nation’s immediate borders.

⁴ National Archives of Australia. Conscription Referendums. Several analyses have been completed of voting patterns, for example see Withers, 1916-17 conscription referenda.

⁵ Kuring, *Red Coats to Cams*.

⁶ Dennis et al eds, *Oxford Companion*.

Compulsory service lapsed at the end of World War Two in 1945. However, by 1951 several new sources of international political instability had begun to emerge, most notably the increasing tensions following the rise of Communism in south-east Asia and the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union. The consequences of these included the Korean War (1950-3) and the drawn-out Malayan Emergency, both of which received military support from Australia during the 1950s.⁷ In response to these circumstances, Australia reintroduced universal compulsory military training in 1951. All 18-year-old men were to complete five years part-time service in the Reserve Army in Australia beginning with training for 176 days. 227,000 men served in 52 intakes across army, navy and air force until the scheme was abolished in November 1959. Evasion rates were low, reflecting perhaps the different age groups compared with the pre-World War Two scheme. Although 1950s conscripts did not see active service, in the sense of an intention to engage an enemy, some served on naval ships passing through Korean waters during the hostilities, some were present during atomic bomb tests, and some worked on aircraft that flew through atomic clouds.

In 1957 there was a major policy shift from universal to selective conscription, requiring the enlistment of only a fraction of an age cohort. The mitigated risk of major warfare encouraged a focus on fewer but more skilled soldiers who were trained in jungle warfare and the handling of machinery. Selection was by ballot, a process, as we saw in section 1 above, that had already been used in other nations.⁸ The procedure used was to select conscripts on the basis of their birth date in the

⁷ Grey, *Military History*; Kuring, *Red Coats to Cams*, chs 7, 8

⁸ Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes had suggested a conscription lottery in 1917 the same year as the second referendum on overseas conscription was defeated. Inglis, *Conscription in Peace and War*

calendar year. Two years later conscription was again abandoned but it established the model that was to be used in Vietnam over the course of eight years.⁹

2. RECRUITMENT DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

In 1964 Australia significantly increased its commitment to the Vietnam War. Since the foreshadowed manpower needs were believed to be too great to recruit sufficient volunteers at short notice, but were below universal obligation levels, selective conscription was reintroduced beginning in 1965. This time it was applied to 20-year-old males and was restricted to the army.¹⁰ Those enlisted were to complete two years continuous full-time service in the Regular Army Supplement, followed by three years' part-time service in the Regular Army Reserve.¹¹ These National Servicemen ('Nashos') could be called to 'special overseas service' during their full time period, which included combat duty in Vietnam. By the time the scheme was terminated in 1972, 63,735 National Servicemen had served in the army¹² of whom 18,654 served in Vietnam¹³, mostly for a one-year tour of duty, the rest largely remained in Australia.

Following the 1957 innovation, selective conscription was undertaken through a lottery. All males were required to register in January or July if their twentieth

⁹ Shields, *National service training*, pp. 67-75

¹⁰ van Gelder, *Australia's selective national service*, p. 50.

¹¹ In October 1971, this was amended to 18 months in full time and 3.5 years in part time service.

¹² Langford, *National Service Scheme* p. 369. An alternate number: 63,740 is also given in the same source p.370.

¹³ Authors' calculations using de-identified data from the Department of Veterans' Affairs Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans. The Department advised that the Nominal Roll is considered a work in progress and that this figure may change. The authors understand that any such changes would not significantly affect the outcomes of this research.

birthday fell in the following six months of that year. Sixteen biannual lotteries occurred over the eight-year period from 1965 to 1972. Lotteries were again drawn by date of birth, with the intention of randomising the selection process. The first lottery occurred on 10 March 1965. Marbles were placed in a barrel, each marked with a different number corresponding in serial order to birth dates in the first half of the year. Successive marbles were withdrawn at random until a sufficient number had been removed to correspond with the estimated manpower needs of the army. 20-year olds whose birth date corresponded to one of the drawn marbles were 'balloted in' and therefore liable to be enlisted in the army. Those whose birth date was not drawn were 'balloted out' and were permanently exempted from conscription. The process was then repeated later in the year using a marble for each date in the second half of the year. The same procedure was used throughout the eight- year period.¹⁴

The new scheme marked some important developments in the principles and practice of conscription. The emphasis was now upon service in the regular army rather than training in the reserves and it involved an expectation of active service in an overseas war. The method of selective conscription had been used briefly in 1957-9, as noted above, but it was now to be used for these broader purposes and to recruit larger numbers. The pros and cons of conscription, the purposes for which it would now be used, and the use of the lottery were all widely debated.¹⁵

The government was conscious of some of the operational implications in that it would put conscripts, often reluctant and only briefly trained, alongside the regular army with potential implications for discipline, morale, and combat effectiveness. Training recruits for a brief period of service was inefficient and was a drain on the

¹⁴ More details can be found in Langford, National Service scheme pp. 356-7.

¹⁵ See Edwards, A Nation at War pp20-25 and Hume, Attitudes of political parties.

army's resources.¹⁶ An alternative approach, supported by the army as late as September 1964, would have been to improve sufficiently the pay and conditions of the regular army to recruit an all-volunteer force.¹⁷ Initially, this was seen as the most likely solution when in June 1964 the Cabinet rejected the introduction of a selective national service scheme.¹⁸ However, by November it had reversed its thinking and introduced a new national service scheme. It argued that it would have been expensive and difficult to achieve rapid manpower expansion in the brief time available, particularly in a period of full employment.¹⁹ Nor was it likely that appeals to patriotism would have much impact on the volunteer rate for an overseas conflict that was justified more by the broader geo-strategic implications of the spread of Communism than by an immediate challenge to Australian security.

Potentially, the biggest drawback of selective conscription was the question of fairness; why some should be expected to serve in preference to others. The 1957 lottery mechanism was revived. Its defence was that it was a form of random selection, meaning that the probability, or, more meaningfully, the 'risk' of being selected for service was equal amongst all 20-year-old males who had not been granted an exemption. Minister for Labour and National Service, William McMahon, observed, "This has the great virtue of being simple, equitable and easily understood by those affected and it does not lend itself to any manipulation".²⁰ However, critics focussed on the inequitable consequences for those balloted in or out rather than the equitable process of selection. In a decade of radical thinking and the rise of youth

¹⁶ Forward, *Conscription*, pp. 86-7.

¹⁷ McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp. 23-5.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* 2 June 1964, p. 2.

¹⁹ Forward, *Conscription*, p. 84. However, Withers, *Wage costs*, p. 337 argued that sufficient volunteers could have been obtained at 'quite "reasonable" net wage-cost to the government'. His estimate amounts to an increase of about five per cent in the defence vote.

²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald* November 12, 1964, p. 9.

cultures, these post hoc injustices were coloured with terms like ‘Russian roulette’, ‘birthday battalions’ and ‘lottery lads’.²¹

The United States achieved its much larger military commitment to the Vietnam War initially through a universal conscription policy that had originated from its entry into World War One in 1917 and was based upon selection processes adopted by local boards.²² Faced with growing numbers of eligible baby boomers by the early 1960s, it had increased the leniency of exemptions.²³ However, when President Johnson expanded America’s Vietnam commitment later in the decade, it was faced with a manpower shortfall and a complex and inconsistent set of exemption practices. The discredited system of notional universal obligation was thus replaced by a random selection process in the form of a lottery.²⁴ The first Vietnam lottery was held in December 1969 for 1970 draftees and was followed by four further annual lotteries during the Vietnam War period.²⁵ The initial lottery covered men born between 1944 and 1950, while the subsequent lotteries were restricted to those turning 20 in the year of their draft.

While using the randomness of dates of birth, it differed from the Australian lottery in several notable respects. Rather than simply drawing sufficient dates of birth in the lottery to determine who would be ‘balloted in’, the American system attributed a number to each birth date in the year in the sequence it was drawn. Thus, the first date

²¹ Speech of Federal opposition leader Arthur Calwell reported in *Sydney Morning Herald* November 13, 1964, p. 1; Hume, *Attitudes*, p. 156; Forward, *Conscription*, p. 106. In 1917 one commentator responded to the abortive lottery proposal by referring to it as, “Lives are to be drawn for on Tattersall principles ...”. Inglis, *Conscription in Peace and War*, pp. 42-3.

²² An earlier conscription policy during the American Civil War exempted many professions and allowed for an active market in buying substitutes. Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, pp. 17-23.

²³ The age of conscription had been initially set at 21 to 31; by the beginning of the Vietnam War it covered 18 to 25 year olds.

²⁴ Earlier lotteries had been held in 1917-18 and 1940-2 to determine the order of entry of men into the wartime military. Fienberg, *Randomization*.

²⁵ Although after 1972 no one was drafted and in the following year congressional authority expired. Angrist, *Lifetime earnings*, p.314

drawn would be number one (known as Random Sequence Number (RSN)) and this continued through to 366 for each day of the year including 29 February. The lowest numbers were called up first and, later in the year, a ceiling was named above which there would be no enlistment. A second ballot on the same day provided a random permutation of the 26 letters of the alphabet to determine, by name, which men with the same birth date were called up first. The use of RSNs and a name ballot provided a degree of ordering absent from the Australian system.²⁶

However, the American system had its faults and critics. This was a single annual lottery with a prolonged decision-making process. The lottery linking RSNs to particular dates of birth was drawn towards the end of the preceding year, the ceiling was first announced in the middle of the year of induction but not confirmed until later in the year.²⁷ This meant a lag of up to a year from the ballot results to confirmed induction into the army. This lag time, together with the descending probability of enlistment as the RSN increased, motivated evasion strategies by those whose numbers fell within an uncertain ‘middling’ range.²⁸ The association between RSN and date of birth was publicly known, which increased the risk of prejudicial treatment in the labour market and attempts to predict the outcome of future ballots. In contrast to American practice, the Australian lottery was conducted in private and the dates of birth drawn were unpublished until 1997 with the exception of the final five ballots. The main reason for secrecy was to discourage evasive action by those who believed, incorrectly, that this information would help them predict the outcome of future ballots.²⁹

²⁶ Fienberg, *Randomization*, pp. 255-61.

²⁷ Angrist, *The draft lottery* pp. 585, 586.

²⁸ The peak number for induction in the first ballot was 195.

²⁹ *Account of the Administrative Processes*, pp. 6-7.

In response to criticisms of the degree of randomness of the first ballot, the subsequent American lotteries were modified to include multiple stages of randomisation (by use of a table of random permutations) and a physical mixing of the ‘capsules’ in public view.³⁰ A further criticism of the American ballot was the role of local Boards in making additional screening decisions about exemptions and deferments. Accusations of nepotism and other forms of corruption resonate with concerns about the earlier conscription schemes.³¹

In total throughout the eight-year period, 804,286 Australian males were registered for the ballot.³² This compares to an estimated 868,605 men who turned 20 years of age in Australia during this period.³³ Published sources do not reveal exactly how many were balloted-in. Based on the number of DOBs drawn in each ballot and assuming men were distributed uniformly across DOBs within cohorts, we estimate that 26% (or 224,706) of men in these cohorts had balloted-in DOBs. However, the probability of being balloted in varied considerably between ballots (Table 2). Thus, in the first ballot 96 of a possible 181 birthdates were called, equivalent to 53 per cent. This fell to 36 per cent for the second ballot and for most of the war, 1966-70, fluctuated between 16 and 26 per cent. Despite not beginning until 1970, a similar downward probability trend occurred in the American lotteries, the probability of being ‘draft eligible’ declined also from 53 per cent in the first ballot to 34 per cent in the second and 26 per cent in the third.³⁴ Contemporaries were conscious of these

³⁰ Statistical analysis of the first ballot identified a lower probability of call up among the early months of the year, which may have been due to the pattern of putting capsules into the deep containing jar month by month leaving the earlier months towards the bottom despite mixing. Fienberg, *Randomization*, p. 29. The shape of the capsules themselves, cylindrical with a curve at each end, appear physically less suitable for random mixing than the spherical Australian marbles, see the following CBS newsclip via: <http://australianinvolvementinvietnam.wikispaces.com/Conscription>

³¹ Tarr, *By the Numbers*.

³² Langford, *National Service Scheme* p. 369

³³ Authors’ estimates from Australian Historical Population Statistics, 2008. and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population by age and sex, 2010*

³⁴ Angrist, *The draft lottery*, p. 586.

intertemporal equity issues, one Australian writer noting, “a boy who turned twenty between 1 January and 30 June 1965 ran two and half times the risk of being conscripted as one who turned twenty between 1 July and 31 December 1966”.³⁵

Such fluctuations in probability reflected the degree of inaccuracy of manpower estimates for previous ballots and changes in the nature and intensity of the war. It is perhaps not surprising that the largest number of birthdates drawn in an Australian ballot occurred in the earliest years of conscription as the government sought to raise the army size quite quickly and may have been relatively conservative about its manpower needs and inexperienced in forecasting the extent of deferments and exemptions.³⁶ As a result, the government found itself with many balloted-in youths who were not needed at the time. They formed part of subsequent call ups thereby mitigating the required number of birthdays drawn. The beginning of the post-World War Two baby boom may also have had some impact by raising the cohort size from the second half of 1966.³⁷ In the absence of the American numbering system, the order in which balloted-in youths were chosen for the current or, indeed, for subsequent call ups remains unclear.³⁸ Moreover, the carryover to later enlistment of individuals absent from the country at the time of their age group ballot or who had previously been granted temporary deferment further reduced the probability of later cohorts being balloted in. It may have been fortuitous for the government that the probability of being balloted in declined in the middle years of the war at a time when the war’s legitimacy and popular support for it were on the decline.³⁹ Somewhat ironically, the balloted-in share spiked to 28-32 per cent in three of the last four

³⁵ Forward, *Conscription*, p. 107.

³⁶ National Archives, *Account of the Administrative Processes*, p. 14 notes that time constraints meant “statistical dissections have had to be kept to barest minimum”.

³⁷ National Archives, *Account of the Administrative Processes*, p. 4.

³⁸ Forward, *Conscription*, p. 107.

³⁹ Hamel-Green, *Conscription and legitimacy*.

cohorts (1951-2). Indeed, the percentage of birth dates called for the two 1951 cohorts (32 and 28 respectively) and the actual number of men balloted in was higher than any previous group excluding those born in 1945. Yet, with the phased withdrawal from the war, no conscripts were sent to Vietnam from the last four cohorts.

Table 2. Probability of being balloted in.

Of 224,706 ‘balloted in’ through the period, fewer than 63,735 (28.4 per cent) were enlisted into the army, the rest being subject to exemption or deferment.⁴⁰ As table 3 indicates, this figure varies over time, with the probability of actual service declining as the war progressed. This is a more gradual and continuous decline than we found for probability of being balloted in –from 35.9 per cent in the first ballot to 24.1 per cent for the thirteenth. The largest share of exemptions (99, 926) were on medical, psychological, or educational grounds. The failure rate of the army’s medical examinations was high and rising – over 50 per cent by the later years of the war; whether this was due to opportunism by those balloted in, sympathetic or inexperienced examining doctors, or tougher requirements as the nature of the war unravelled is unclear.⁴¹ Nor were such exemptions evenly distributed across the population, better educated more intelligent men more often avoided service in this manner.⁴² The only occupational exemption was the clergy. Indefinite deferments were granted to married men, volunteers, and serious criminals. Temporary

⁴⁰ The figure of 63,735 is from Langford, National Service scheme, p. 369, It refers to all National Servicemen. This includes National Servicemen men who were not ‘balloted in’, including men who were automatically liable for National Service because they failed to register and men who volunteered for National Service.

⁴¹ Langford, National Service scheme, p. 362. Examinations were often undertaken by casually-employed medical practitioners with limited knowledge of army service expectations. Fett et al *Australian Veterans Health Studies*, p 192.

⁴² Avoidance appears to have been greatest among the medical profession, raising suspicions of collusion. Fett et al, *Australian Veterans Health Studies*, Part I, p. 193.

deferments were granted largely to students, apprentices and trainees. A sharper decline in the remaining three ballots may be related in part to the fact that many temporary deferments remained in existence when conscription was abolished.⁴³ However, it leaves unresolved the question of why, as per table 2, more men were balloted in among the 1951 cohorts if there appeared to be a large backlog of potential conscripts and a declining need for service in Vietnam. No one was conscripted from the final cohort since the Whitlam government came to power and abolished the system in December 1972 before the call up date. The small number of ‘balloted-in’ army servicemen (325) from the last birth cohort appearing in Table 3 were not conscripts.

Table 3. Probability of Enlistment

The selection of conscripts to serve in Vietnam was a complex decision taken in several stages.⁴⁴ Conscripts began their service with ten weeks of recruitment training in general military skills. During this period the army allocated each recruit to a function-based Corps taking account of observed individual characteristics and test results. Recruits were able to indicate their preferences based on a rather limited knowledge of the role and function of each Corp. However, the army’s manpower planning was the major factor in the final decision. Unsurprisingly, there was a degree of mismatch between individual preferences and army needs with some corps, primarily the Infantry, Artillery, Engineers and Armour, needing far more recruits than preferences indicated. In spite of this mismatch, very few recruits appealed the

⁴³ At December 1972, 15,526 men had been granted or were being assessed for temporary deferment, Langford, National Service scheme, p. 370.

⁴⁴ Much of the information reported in this paragraph and the next is taken from Fett et al, *Australian Veterans Health Studies* Part I, appendix 9, pp. 196-208

decision, probably as a result of peer pressure.⁴⁵ Significantly, these were the Corps in greatest demand in Vietnam, so that Corps allocation had a major bearing on a serviceman's subsequent deployment. Certain Corps, such as engineers and signals, required a reasonably high level of intelligence, with the result that those recruits closer to average intelligence were more likely to be clustered in the Infantry.

Following three months Corps training, recruits were then posted to a particular service unit. Posting decisions varied between Corps but the proposed deployment of their unit largely determined whether the recruit went to Vietnam and, as noted above, units in four particular Corps were most likely to go. Individual characteristics could still play a role at this stage, those with professional skills sometimes being retained in Australia for special projects. Units destined for Vietnam experienced further periods of preparatory training including a battle efficiency course at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra. Only if a serviceman passed through these stages would he be sent to Vietnam.

Table 4. Probability of National Servicemen serving in Vietnam

As noted earlier, 18,654 National Servicemen were sent to Vietnam. Thus, overall, National Servicemen faced a 29.3 per cent chance of serving in Vietnam. While it is less obvious what the probability of Vietnam service was for the remainder of the army, it is significant that only 10 per cent of Australian armed forces were located in Vietnam at any one time.⁴⁶ Again, we find that for Nashos these probabilities varied between cohorts (Table 4). The probability rose from about 39 to 53 per cent during

⁴⁵ Fett et al, *Australian Veterans Health Studies Part I*, p. 201

⁴⁶ Grey, *Military History*, p. 249. These figures suggest either that most members of the regular army never served in Vietnam or that, on average, they only spent a smallish proportion of their service time there.

the first three years of cohorts (those born 1945-7), before falling continuously down to negligible levels for the final few cohorts (1951-2). The rise in the early years may be related to the declining surplus of Regulars available for Vietnam, due to the rising total size of the force. As a result, the initial policy that Vietnam units should consist of 50 per cent *or less* National Servicemen was revised in 1968 to man units with 50 per cent where possible.⁴⁷

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF WARTIME SERVICE

The historical evidence suggests that the experience of serving in Vietnam was quite different from deployment in Australia.⁴⁸ Moreover, their Vietnam experience was sensitive to the timeline of the war itself and the serviceman's particular role.

Many of the main differences between the experience of veterans of Vietnam and the majority of servicemen who remained in Australia have been usefully summarised in the *Australian Veterans Health Study*.⁴⁹ The key distinction was the nature of operations, which in Vietnam involved being constantly prepared, the risk of facing combat conditions, and isolation from local society. The social dislocation and stress that this implied led to high intakes of alcohol and tobacco and, subsequently, may have created difficulties re-integrating into Australian society, particularly in light of growing societal opposition to the war. Vietnam veterans were also exposed to

⁴⁷ Fett et al *Australian Veterans Health Studies*, p. 204. The date of change of policy is not clearly stated but appears to be about 1968.

⁴⁸ Smaller numbers of Australian servicemen apparently served in other south-east Asian nations including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Papua-New Guinea. Several hundred Nashos served overseas outside Vietnam, mostly in Borneo. Callaghan, *Brief History*. Accessed 13.12.2010.

⁴⁹ Fett et al, *Australian Veterans Health Studies*, pp. 208-11.

herbicides, insecticides, infectious diseases, and a wildlife and climate that was challenging even for Australians.

Those serving within Australia faced none of these problems. Boredom and very close supervision may have been more salient issues due to the repetition of basic, often fastidious, combat preparedness tasks as Ham aptly notes, “ten weeks of marching, jogging, ceaseless drill, spitting, polishing, climbing ropes, stripping and cleaning rifles...set in treeless, desolate training camps”.⁵⁰ The principal focus was preparedness for service in Vietnam if required, which included attempts to mimic these conditions particularly at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra. Large scale practice battles were fought that included the use of armour and artillery. About five per cent of each national service intake were identified as potential officers and underwent far more intensive training at the Scheyville Officer training unit.⁵¹ Some men balloted in opted to do their national service in the army reserve (Citizens Military Force) in Australia.⁵² One former reservist describes conditions as similar to the regular army in terms of discipline and exercises, which also included imitating real battle conditions in Vietnam.⁵³ Whether reservists or full time, though, the experience of Australian-based national servicemen bears only limited comparison with that of Vietnam veterans. Tedious and restrictive as domestic national service may often have been, it was neither life threatening nor likely to have been associated with social dislocation or psychological disturbance.

While it is helpful to distinguish among National Servicemen the experience of Veterans against non-Veterans, there was no standard service experience in Vietnam.

⁵⁰ Ham, *Australian War*, p. 173.

⁵¹ Ham, *Australian War*, pp. 175-7.

⁵² This option was available if the individual was already serving in the CMF at the time he was balloted in. Langford, National Service scheme, p. 358.

⁵³ Email from Joe Davidson, 14 October 2010, Vietnam era reservist and now Honorary Secretary of the City of Wollongong sub-Branch of the Returned and Services League.

Their army location and period of service largely determined an individual's exposure to warlike experiences. The infantry stood to endure the most intense combat experience through their direct engagement with the opposing forces. Jungle warfare, mostly alien to Australian experience and difficult to mimic in training, and with its heightened sense of anxiety of surprise attack, was a particular challenge.⁵⁴ From about 1968, the risk of detonating landmines added to the nervousness of the infantry troops in these conditions. Even within an infantry battalion, most soldiers would not be involved in direct combat but instead provided supporting and logistical services. Frontline rifle companies were rotated for duty. Other army Corps were not so directly and dangerously engaged with the enemy particularly signals, ordnance, and medical. However, combat engineers fulfilled dangerous functions such as mine laying and clearing, while field artillery and tank units also faced combat.⁵⁵

The Vietnam experience was equally a function of the course of the war, which oscillated in the intensity and ferocity of conflict. The 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, was despatched in May 1965, to serve alongside American troops. The following March it was replaced by a larger taskforce of two battalions, with its own support services and specific area of operations at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy province, south-east of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). The following three years, 1966-9, were those of the heaviest involvement by, and greatest risk to, Australian troops. This period included the Battle of Long Tan on 18 August 1966, the first significant engagement with opposing forces leading to the death of 18 Australians and the wounding of a further 24. At least 245 Vietcong were killed.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Although Australian wartime involvement in Korea and in south-east Asia during World War Two meant that this type of warfare was not entirely new to Australian forces by the time of Vietnam.

⁵⁵ The contents of this paragraph are taken from a number of sources that detail the Vietnam experience including Ham, *Australian War*, Fett et al *Australian Veterans Health Studies*, Kuring, *Red Coats to Cams*.

⁵⁶ McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 351.

Australian losses, even in the most intense periods of engagement, were relatively few but the impact of combat experience may have been profound for those who survived. Paul Ham wrote of February 1967, "...that terrible month, during which 4,600 Australian men participated in or supported actions that changed their lives irrevocably. Victory vindicated the losses of Long Tan; yet February left the men in a different mood: quieter, sadder...and a hell of a lot older".⁵⁷

In March 1967 Australian troops began laying out minefields but were deeply shocked by the reaction of the Vietcong who removed many of these mines, up to 6 000, to create their own fields despite incurring heavy losses as a consequence. From mid-1968 to the early 1970s mines were estimated to be responsible for about a half of Australian casualties.⁵⁸ During the Tet offensive of 1968 Communist forces based in South Vietnam attacked cities and towns, which included Baria, the capital of Phuoc Tuy province. Several significant battles occurred including attacks on fire support bases at Coral and Balmoral in which 23 Australians died.⁵⁹ While the Tet offensive was largely overwhelmed, it created major doubts among American and Australian forces about their ability to defeat the Vietcong.⁶⁰ Periodic battles occurred in 1969 together with regular pacification operations through ongoing patrolling and ambushing. By 1970 there was reduced conflict in the area – the Vietcong made only limited attempts to challenge Australian control of the vicinity, sensing the latter's plans to withdraw.

While there is substantial and detailed information available on the public record regarding the course of the war, it seems fair to generalise that the Nashos that served in the Infantry in Vietnam between 1966 and 1969 were by far the most at risk.

⁵⁷ Ham, *Australian War*, p. 295.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, p. 191..

⁵⁹ Grey, *Military History*, p. 244

⁶⁰ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p. 193

Overall, 198 Nashos died in Vietnam⁶¹ constituting 1.1 per cent of National Servicemen who served there. Given the time lags in enlistment, training and posting, the cohorts balloted in between 1965 and 1968 were the most affected groups. As we have seen above, these were the same cohorts for whom the probability of serving was greatest. Of National Servicemen who served in Vietnam, those who served in the Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) were far more likely to die in service (2.2 per cent) than those who served in other units (0.4 per cent). Indeed RAR veterans from the first half of the conscription period (born in 1945-1948) account for three quarters of all Nasho deaths in Vietnam, whilst more than one quarter of Nasho deaths were from the first cohort alone (RAR and non-RAR combined).⁶²

Table 5. Percentage of men that served as National Servicemen in Vietnam and Number of National Servicemen who died in Vietnam

4. CONCLUSION

In the twentieth century, the lottery became a common means of supplementing military manpower, where the changing nature of warfare, with a strong emphasis on capital-intensive technology, frequently mitigated the need for universal obligation conscription. This was especially the case in limited regional conflicts, such as Vietnam, where both United States and Australia used a lottery system effectively to achieve their required levels of manpower.

⁶¹ DVA Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans.

⁶² Authors' calculations from DVA Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans.

Selective conscription for full military service in an overseas conflict presents particular issues for the legitimacy of conscription. It was during Vietnam, the so-called undeclared war, that for the first time large numbers of Australian conscripts faced active service beyond Australian territorial borders. The right to conscript for home defence had existed since 1903 but extending this to overseas service had been rejected by the World War One referendums and resisted by the Curtin Labor Government in World War Two. While it has been suggested that in most units no one would be forced against their will to serve in Vietnam, many seem to have bowed to peer pressure and accepted their overseas posting.⁶³ Given the growing global reach of strategic planning and military action during the twentieth century, the distinction between defensive and offensive behaviour blurred so that even defence required a more global military deployment.

That a 'chosen few' conscripts were to be sent to an overseas battlefield for the first time meant that the process of selection was vital to the legitimacy of this policy. The aim of the lottery was to achieve random selection in the statistical sense of the identical probability of selection within a cohort, in this case of 20-year-old men. This conveys a strong sense of fairness and democratic behaviour by treating everyone equally, although it should be noted that they were below the normal voting age of 21.⁶⁴ As was pointed out at the time, however, random also has a more pejorative popular meaning in the sense of arbitrariness. It might be argued that everyone should not be treated equally and this was reflected, to a limited degree, in rights of deferment or exemption such as the exemption for married men. Some observers focussed on the lottery mechanism itself, especially in the United States, that is,

⁶³ *Australian Veterans Health Studies*, pp. 205-6. Much of the evidence for this report comes from commanding officers. Ham, *Australian War*, pp. 170-1 notes that Nashos had to sign a form specifically volunteering for overseas service but also indicates that many conscripts could not recall doing so.

⁶⁴ The eligible voting age was reduced to 18 in 1973.

whether a physical lottery could ever be perfectly random. The process was modified in the United States with multiple layers of randomness introduced after the first ballot although this appears not to have been an issue in Australia.⁶⁵ The order of enlistment and deployment decisions subsequent to the Australian ballot itself appear to have been based upon a set of complex and often translucent criteria including appropriateness of skills and individual preferences rather than random selection.

Where the notion of equal probability and ideas of fairness seem to be most at issue, however, was in the changing probability of selection between ballots. In all stages – the ballot, enlistment, service in Vietnam – the probability of being selected declined significantly from the levels of the earliest years of the war. Overestimation of military needs, deferments, absences, and the changing course of the war all help to explain this trend. It may have been fortuitous for policy makers that this probability of service declined at the same time as support for the war and the accompanying policy of selective conscription diminished. Taken as a whole, 6.3 per cent of the first age cohort (first half of 1945) actually served in Vietnam as National Servicemen, declining to less than one per cent by the first 1950 birth cohort (Table 5). All of these servicemen were liable to suffer potentially profound and lasting consequences from the experience of wartime service, particularly the small fraction of their number who actually faced a combat situation.

Irrespective of whether the Vietnam-War era conscription ballots provided a fair and equitable method of military recruitment, they offer an opportunity to study the causal effects of service. The current paper forms part of the early stages of a broader project that utilises the ballot's natural experiment properties to investigate the effect

⁶⁵ Our analysis of the Australian conscription ballot outcomes reveals no significant tendency for dates from earlier or later months to be more likely to be balloted in (results not shown). Close to 3000 individual dates of birth were included in the lotteries and in our analysis.

of army service on conscripts' economic and social outcomes (Siminski and Ville, 2010; Siminski, 2010).⁶⁶

⁶⁶ For comparable work on the US, see Angrist, Lifetime earnings; Angrist, Draft lottery; Angrist and Chen, Long-term economic consequences.

Table 1. Conscription schemes in Australia, 1911-72

Scheme	Years operating	Universal/selective	Age of conscription	Training/active service	Length of service	Domestic/overseas service	Numbers involved
Universal compulsory training	1911-1929 Juniors abolished 1922	Universal	Junior cadets (JC): 12-13 Senior cadets (SC): 14-17 (16 & 17 from 1922) In Commonwealth Military Forces (CMF): 18-26	Training	JC: 90 hours per year SC: 64 hours per year (four whole day drills, 12 half day drills, 24 night drills) CMF: 96 hours annually (16 whole day drills not less than eight in camps)	Domestic training but many trainees joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as volunteers	Total enlistment: 636,000 during 1911-1915
Compulsory military service	1939-1945	Universal	Unmarried men turning 21 in year ending 30 June; July 1940, extended to single males to 24 years; December 1940, extended to single males to 33 years; December 1941, single men 18-45, married men, 18-35 called up for full-time duty	Training: three months with the militia plus three months service for unmarried men ('national service personnel')	Three months; February 1941, training period doubled	Service within 'Australia', which included New Guinea and adjacent islands, and in 1942, the South-West Pacific Zone; many volunteers transferred from CMF to AIF (205,000 over the war period)	Not available
National Service Training	1951-1959	Universal to 1957; selective afterwards	18	Training	176 days (98 full time training, remainder on a part time basis over three years with CMF). Reduced to 140 days in 1953	Primarily domestic service	227,000 men called for training; 500,000 registered, 52 intakes
National Service	1964-1972	Selective	20-year-olds, but liability could remain till 26 and 30 in some cases (with deferments)	Training and active service	Five years: two years full time military service, plus three years in Regular Army (RA) Reserve. 18 months full time service plus 3.5 in the RA Reserve from August 1971	In theory overseas service voluntary	804,286 registered; 237,048 balloted in; 63,735 conscripted; 18 654 served in Vietnam

Sources: Australian War Memorial, 53rd Battalion, West Sydney Regiment, http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_11966.asp, accessed 24.8.2010; Forward, Conscription; Inglis, Conscription in Peace; Langford, National service scheme; DVA *Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans*; "Conscription" in Dennis et al *Oxford Companion*. Accessed 30.7.2010; State Library of South Australia, Conscription & enlistment; National Archives of Australia, Conscription Referendums.

Table 2. Probability of being balloted in by birth cohort

birth cohort	number of days in cohort		Percent of birth dates balloted in by cohort
	days out	days in	
1945.1	85	96	53
1945.2	117	67	36
1946.1	134	47	26
1946.2	146	38	21
1947.1	137	44	24
1947.2	145	39	21
1948.1	136	46	25
1948.2	149	35	19
1949.1	130	51	28
1949.2	154	30	16
1950.1	151	30	17
1950.2	143	41	22
1951.1	123	58	32
1951.2	132	52	28
1952.1	131	51	28
1952.2	142	42	23

Source: Langford, National Service scheme, 371-9.

Table 3. Probability of enlistment in the Army amongst balloted in men

Birth cohort	Balloted-in Army servicemen	Balloted-in men	Percent enlisted
1945.1	8,920	24830	35.9
1945.2	5,752	16786	34.3
1946.1	3,878	12361	31.4
1946.2	3,816	12175	31.3
1947.1	4,179	13819	30.2
1947.2	3,429	11555	29.7
1948.1	4,117	13518	30.5
1948.2	3,231	10291	31.4
1949.1	4,353	14764	29.5
1949.2	2,648	8982	29.5
1950.1	2,597	9234	28.1
1950.2	3,407	12830	26.6
1951.1	4,302	17851	24.1
1951.2	3,511	16082	21.8
1952.1	2,462	16004	15.4
1952.2	325	13625	2.4
Overall	60927	224706	27.1

Note: Available databases do not identify all National Servicemen who remained in Australia, so we cannot determine the proportion of balloted-in men who were conscripted by cohort. However, this can be approximated by calculating the proportion of men with balloted-in birthdays who served in the army. Most army servicemen with balloted-in birthdays were National Servicemen and most National Servicemen had dates of birth which were balloted in (see the discussion in Siminski, 2010).

Source: Authors' estimates from an (unpublished and de-identified) Vietnam-War era Database of military personnel records obtained from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, combined with Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). Australian Historical Population Statistics, 2008. Canberra: ABS Cat. No. 3105.0.65.001 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Population by age and sex, 2010](#).

Table 4. Percentage of balloted-in Army servicemen that served in Vietnam

Birth cohort	Balloted-in Army Vietnam servicemen	As percent of balloted -in Army servicemen
1945.1	3,517	39.4
1945.2	2,351	40.9
1946.1	1,724	44.5
1946.2	1,939	50.8
1947.1	2,052	49.1
1947.2	1,811	52.8
1948.1	1,956	47.5
1948.2	1,355	41.9
1949.1	1,571	36.1
1949.2	683	25.8
1950.1	421	16.2
1950.2	210	6.2
1951.1	158	3.7
1951.2	96	2.7
1952.1	30	1.2
1952.2	2	0.6
Overall	19876	32.6

See notes for Table 3.

Source: Authors' calculations from an (unpublished and de-identified) Vietnam War era Database of military personnel records obtained from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, combined with data from the *Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans*, obtained from the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Table 5. Percentage of men that served as National Servicemen in Vietnam and Number of National Servicemen who died in Vietnam

Birth Cohort	Men in birth cohort	National Servicemen served in Vietnam	Percent	National Servicemen died In Vietnam
1945.1	46,816	2,952	6.3	53
1945.2	46,099	2,139	4.6	20
1946.1	47,601	1,629	3.4	18
1946.2	58,953	1,897	3.2	29
1947.1	56,847	2,010	3.5	12
1947.2	54,517	1,836	3.4	21
1948.1	53,483	1,912	3.6	21
1948.2	54,103	1,422	2.6	14
1949.1	52,397	1,521	2.9	7
1949.2	55,091	698	1.3	0
1950.1	55,709	408	0.7	1
1950.2	57,578	125	0.2	2

Source: Cohort sizes are authors' estimates from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) and [Australian Bureau of Statistics, Population by age and sex, 2010](#). National Servicemen served in Vietnam are from the *Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans*. In addition to those included in the table, there were 71 older and 33 younger National Servicemen who served in Vietnam, who presumably volunteered for National Service, none of whom died in Vietnam.

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