

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

1-1-1995

A conscription story, 1965-69

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

A conscription story, 1965-69

Abstract

Conscription (National Service) was re-introduced to Australia in November 1964, and ended in 1972. Conscripts were randomly selected by a lottery system for 20-year-old males. While it was not publicly known at the time, 1 in 12 eligible males were actually selected, though this ratio varied according to the number eligible each year and the actual number required by the army; so, for example, in October 1972 the chances of being selected were 1 in 20.1

Whilst historians tend to refer to conscripts as “men”, it should be remembered that in Australia during the 1960s neither the right to vote nor adult status were attained until the age of 21. A 20-year-old in the 1960s was a young, unenfranchised, vulnerable person on the threshold of adulthood.

Keywords

69, story, conscription, 1965

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Cahill, Rowan (1995). A conscription story, 1965-69. *Hummer*, 2 (4), 1-4.

[Home](#) > [The Hummer](#) > [The Hummer Vol. 2, No. 4 – Winter 1995](#) > A Conscription Story, 1965-69

A Conscription Story, 1965-69

Filed under: — SueTracey @ 8:43 am

Rowan Cahill

Conscription (National Service) was re-introduced to Australia in November 1964, and ended in 1972. Conscripts were randomly selected by a lottery system for 20-year-old males. While it was not publicly known at the time, 1 in 12 eligible males were actually selected, though this ratio varied according to the number eligible each year and the actual number required by the army; so, for example, in October 1972 the chances of being selected were 1 in 20.¹

Whilst historians tend to refer to conscripts as “men”, it should be remembered that in Australia during the 1960s neither the right to vote nor adult status were attained until the age of 21. A 20-year-old in the 1960s was a young, unenfranchised, vulnerable person on the threshold of adulthood.

My birthday marble (3 November 1945) was drawn during the second call-up ballot in September 1965. I destroyed my call-up card in May 1966 and informed the authorities; I refused to attend mandatory National Service medical examinations in July 1967, and in February and May 1968.

The last of these refusals resulted in a letter from the authorities warning that I was in breach of the law and could expect action to be taken against me “under the Act and without further warning.” On May Day, 1968, the Minister for Labour and National Service, Leslie Bury, had introduced legislation to tighten the National Service Act, with increased fines and jail terms amongst other draconian measures, in an attempt to crack down on mounting civil disobedience. So, with that warning, I lodged an application for registration as a conscientious objector (C.O.).

During the period I was a student at Sydney University and prominent in the radical student and anti-war movements locally and nationally. The National Service process extended a deferment to conscripted tertiary students so long as they were successful in their studies and until the first degree was completed. In my case this included an Honours year. My time was up at the end of 1968.

Since early 1967 I had been following a plan worked out in conjunction with Sydney comrade Hall Greenland. My aim was to stay free and public for as long as possible, continuing my work mobilising opposition and dissent to the war in Vietnam. I would wait until the authorities got tough, then take up the C.O. option. The idea was to stay out of jail. The two year jail sentence handed out to non compliers created rallying and focal points but took cadres out of circulation. Besides, brief Thoreau-type encounters with life behind bars had shown my total incompatibility with lengthy incarceration.²

To register as a C.O. you filled in form NS22 (Rev 11/64) and in 10 cms of space explained why you should be exempted from military service. As I required more than the allocated space I used the back of the form as well.

I explained my reasons for exemption as follows:

A. I am opposed to War. Wars exist because Man wants them to. They exist because mankind in general has made no serious attempt to study the causes of War and the

reasons why people are willing to kill each other. I believe that the glorification of war, the worship of things military as is apparent in Society, is obscene.

Wars exist because people are willing to fight them. Wars are based on ignorance cultivated by jingoism; respect for, and reverence of, things military; fears and hatreds – conveyed from generation to generation through educational and cultural institutions, the mass media, and by governments.

B. I am opposed to any intervention by the West in Vietnam. I believe that the military intervention of America in Vietnam is unwarranted. I will not aid any military machine which helps perpetuate this intervention or supports the imperialist policy of American capitalism, be it in Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

America's presence in Vietnam is due to that nation's policy of imperialism, one that has its roots in American history. As a socialist I am opposed to this policy and pledge solidarity with all peoples, wherever they are, who are resisting and opposing it.

The Vietnam war is essentially racist in nature. I will not aid nor encourage this racism by participating in it or aiding it in any way.

The action of the allies in Vietnam, the decimation of the people and the land, represents a crime against humanity. I will not be party to this crime. If the West once had something to offer the Vietnamese people, it no longer has.

The militarist role of Australia in Asia, the non-independent perusal of foreign policy, is ultimately to the detriment of the Australian people. I believe in living with Asia and this means understanding the people, their cultures and histories. This does not entail militarist adventures.

I believe that the role of the intellectual is to destroy false rhetorics. American imperialism has been justified in the eyes of the Australian people by lies, half truths, distortions, and occasionally truths. I aim to help destroy these false rhetorics in any way I can.

The idea of Democracy being opposed by Communism, of a Free World versus a Communist Conspiracy, is a fabric of distortions and, I believe, a deliberate misrepresentation of history. Much of the rhetoric advancing this world view emanates from Washington. I will have no part of it, nor aid in its perpetuation by participating in military systems cultivating this outlook.

Under the relevant Act a C.O. was defined as being opposed to all War, and not specific wars – eg the Vietnam war. In the first hearing of my case – one and a half hours before a magistrate in February 1969 – the Commonwealth argued that as I paid taxes, ate animal meat, would defend myself from personal attack and try to stop somebody from killing my family, I did not fully meet the letter of the Act's definition of conscientious objection. Accordingly I was assigned to non-combatant duties.

Apparently as a carnivore I sanctioned the taking of life in a defacto way, regardless of the fact I was not an eater of human meat; hypothetical self defence and protection of IQved ones meant I was a violent person; as I paid taxes I was supporting the war effort in a defacto way. Catch 22.³

Besides, as the magistrate pointed out, over half my original written statement concerned the Vietnam war. Conscientious objection was about all wars; so I was not the genuine article. In reality, I believe, very few young Australians prior to 1964 had thought deeply about war. There was no provision for this in secondary and tertiary education curriculums; we were born into a

society in which the most popular public holiday celebrated warfare in a quasi religious atmosphere. In reality post-1964 conscientious objection had everything to do with conscription and the Vietnam war.

Following these ludicrous and alternately bemusing and numbing proceedings I realised what I had only understood intellectually before. The State had great power, made the rules, established parameters. In court I was subjected to a form of cross examination that was not really an exploration of belief but intent rather on word play and semantic trickery; attempts were made to confine me to 'yes' and 'no' answers and compel me to answer far-fetched hypothetical questions.

While waiting for my case to be heard I sat through a couple of other hearings. Twelve Chinese seamen faced drug smuggling charges; their case was amicably and quickly adjourned, and they went off with minor bail impositions. A businessman who had not paid personal taxes for a decade claimed it was an oversight on his part. His story was accepted pleasantly and he was simply instructed to attend to the matter and off he went. After my day in that same court it seemed obvious to me where the system's priorities lay.

Monopoly-style, the State was presenting me with a number of options: go into the army, go to jail, go into hiding, or go on the run. I did not appreciate any of these.

Upon reflection I reasoned the court system could be beaten, so long as I treated the process as a game, regarded cross examination as tactics to be outflanked, and kept my emotions and anger under control. I appealed the decision and in August 1969, after two hours before a judge, tenacious questioning, and a reserved judgement, was granted full e.o. status.

At the outset I had been prepared to conduct my own case. However, having sought and gained an initial adjournment in September 1968, and realising in the process I was totally out of my depth in this environment, I engaged a solicitor and a barrister was briefed.

My barrister was of great overall assistance, explaining procedures, leading me as I made my initial statement to the court, summing up, and during the interrogation process interjecting and objecting where possible to lines of questioning. I believe, too, that counsel, via adjournments, manipulated the system so that my final appeal was heard by a judge more amenable to my situation than others.

Beyond that, engaging counsel was a psychological help. This experience of court was not like previous experiences of being arraigned on straight forward charges (e.g. resisting arrest) arising from political demonstrations which, because of the volume of people charged at any one time, generated a theatrical, mass process atmosphere complete with rubber stamp fines. On the contrary, this felt a lonely, isolated business. Statistically, that certainly was the case. During the period 1965-72 in Australia 761,854 males turned twenty; by August, 1971, 1012 of these had applied for e.o. status, some 730 being granted total exemption; 63,735 served as conscripts in the army.⁴

Legal expenses were considerable and were in part met from the meagre financial resources of myself and Pam, my wife-to-be. The greater part was paid for by the Committee on Conscience, a student-staff outfit formed at Sydney University in 1968 to help students variously contest the National Service Act.⁵

Had I not been granted full C.O. status, there was "a plan". Supported by the historian and civil libertarian Ken Buckley, and on understanding that I would be supported by a newly formed group he convened (the Committee for the Rights of Servicemen) should the need arise, it was my intention to try to take the anti-war movement into the army. In an August 1969 press release Ken's Committee stated:

Rather than languish in prison a young man may decide to enter the armed forces and continue to fight for his principles there.

The Committee for the Rights of Servicemen has been set up to assist members of the armed forces to know and assert their rights under military law, their civil liberties, and their rights as objectors to war in general or particular wars.⁶

Assistance will be given in various ways – for example advice on military law, a writing service to appropriate authorities, and legal representation.

Along with others, Ken and I had picketed induction centres on National Service intake days, distributed agitational literature and seen the enthusiasm with which it was taken by some raw conscripts. In the Communist Party library in Day Street, Sydney, there was a treasure trove of American literature relating to the anti-war movement in the US Army and I was familiar with this.⁷ So “the plan” seemed a possible next step in the struggle against conscription and the war in Vietnam.

References

1. For an explanation of how conscription worked, and ballot statistics see Ann Mari Jordens, ‘Conscription and Dissent: The Genesis of Anti-War Protest’ in Gregory Pemberton (ed) *Vietnam Remembered*, Sydney, 1990, pp.67-72.
2. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862); wrote the libertarian classic *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (1849); went to jail for a night in protest against the American war against Mexico.
3. A detailed account of this initial hearing was published in *Honi Soit*, 25 March 1969, pp.8 & 10.
4. Statistics drawn from Alan D. Gilbert and Ann Mari Jordens, ‘Traditions of Dissent’ in M. McKernan and M. Browne (eds) *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace*, Canberra, 1988, p.364; Ann Mari Jordens, ‘Conscription and Dissent’, *loc. cit.*, pp. 67-70.
5. For the aims and composition of the Committee on Conscience see *Honi Soit*, 10 September 1968, p.4.
6. Copy of press release in author’s possession.
7. Rowan Cahill, ‘Dissatisfaction in the US Army’, *Broadside*, 10 July 1969, pp.6-7.