

PREFACE

The advent of nuclear weapons in the closing stages of World War II forced military planners to rethink Australia's defence capability. Initially, this focused on expanding traditional technology and training more soldiers. Compulsory military training for young Australian men was reintroduced in 1951.¹

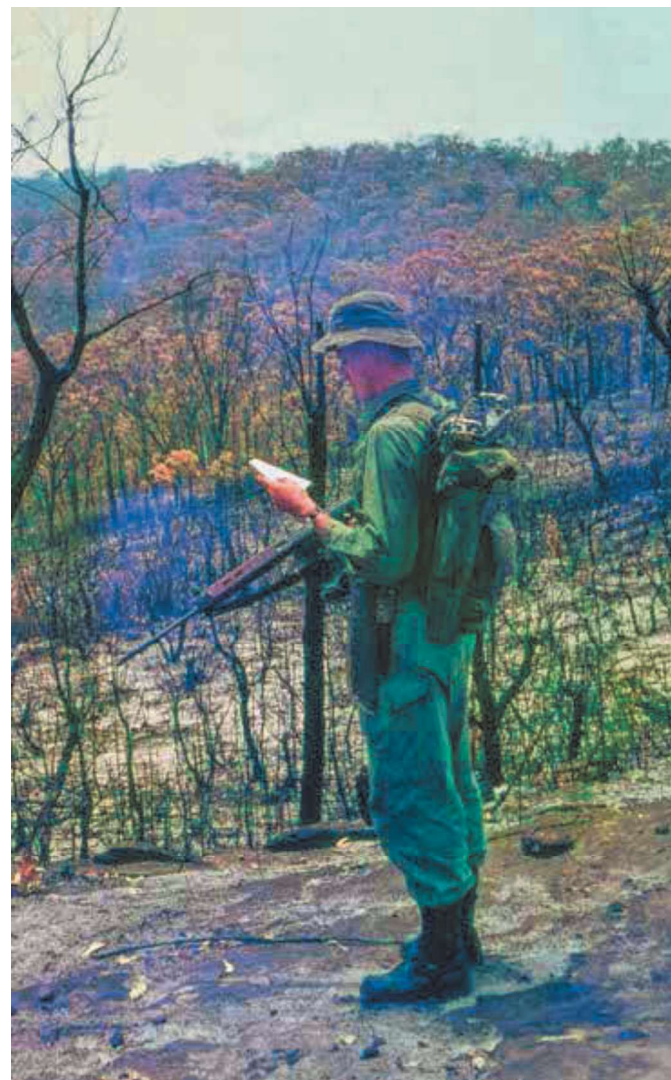
The decision was in response to the global and regional conflicts facing Australia after WW II. These included the Berlin blockade by the Soviet Union in 1948, the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, communist insurgencies in Malaya and Vietnam, communist North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950, the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, the confrontation with Indonesia in Borneo in 1963, and the Vietnam War. These regional and global tensions were overlain with the added threat of nuclear war.

Conscription or National Service in 1951 was the third such scheme to have existed in Australia since Federation. Some 18-year-old men were required to undertake 176 days of military training as part of the scheme. Names were selected by the 'birthday ballot', in which fit eligible men were randomly selected for National Service by their date of birth.

Those who elected to undertake their training in the Army could break up their training requirements into two periods: 98 days in the Australian Regular Army and 78 days in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF), later amended to 77 days full-time service and 3 years in the CMF.²

Those who elected to undertake their training with the Royal Australian Navy or the Royal Australian Air Force had to complete their 176 days in one stretch. In 1959, this third conscription scheme was abolished.

1. The Universal Service Scheme was the first system of compulsory military service in Australia, introduced in 1911 and abolished in October 1929. Compulsory military service for duty within Australia was revived in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. There was to be no conscription for service overseas, but instead, in a bill passed in February 1943 by the Curtin Labor Government, 'Australia' was defined in such a way as to include New Guinea and the adjacent islands. This obliged soldiers in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) to serve in this region, known as the South West Pacific Area. Ref: Australian War Memorial website, citing various sources including Peter Dennis et al., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995.
2. Michael Keats was a National Serviceman from 1959 to 1962.



LEFT: Solitary soldier consults his notes in a burnt-out area on a ten-day training exercise. Putty Training Area, 1968. Photo: David Maiden. OTU Association Museum collection.

Australia's involvement in South East Asian conflicts included the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960). As part of a British Commonwealth initiative, Australian ground forces joined the Malayan Emergency in 1955 with the deployment of the Second Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR).³ Australia was also involved in the Indonesian–Malaysian confrontation (1963–1966) and the Vietnam War (1962–1972).

A fourth period of National Service commenced in 1965, and the government introduced new powers that enabled it to send national servicemen overseas. These events polarised the electorate. Further pressures, both political and societal, were compounded by a decision to change the way Australia fought in South East Asia, based on the American Pentomic Experiment. The Australian version, known as the Pentropic Experiment, is described below and in Chapter 4. Consequentially, it is also the story of the Australian Army exercises on the wilderness lands in what is now the Wollemi National Park.

On 29 April 1965, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that he had received a request from the government of South Vietnam for further military assistance and, in consultation with the United States of America, decided that an infantry battalion would be dispatched.⁴ The Menzies government wished to raise the army's numbers rapidly to 40,000 in order to meet these overseas commitments.

A knock-on effect of this decision was a need to expand the number of junior officers beyond the capacity of the Royal Military College (RMC) and the Portsea Officer Cadet School (OCS) that led to the establishment of the Officer Training Unit (OTU) at Scheyville, another important decision affecting the story of the lands that are now part of the Wollemi National Park.

In 1965, all 20-year-old males had to register with the Department of Labour and National Service, and their names were again selected by the 'birthday ballot', in which men were randomly picked for National Service by their date of birth. Those who were selected for National Service were required to serve for two years full-time in the Regular Army and three years part-time in the reserves.

3. *Malayan Emergency, 1950–60*, Australian War Memorial (AWM). Archived from the original on 3 May 2008.

4. Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (House of Representatives), 29 April 1965, p. 1060.

Exemptions were given to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander people, the medically unfit, and theology students. Young men were granted exemption on the grounds of conscientious objection if they could prove their objection to war was based on religious beliefs. A temporary deferment of National Service was granted to university students, apprentices, married men and those who could prove that National Service would cause them financial hardship. The fourth National Service scheme was abolished on 5 December 1972.⁵

The Pentropic Experiment

In 1962, as part of the Pentropic Experiment⁶, Australia mounted one of its biggest combined services exercises. It involved collaboration between the Army, the Navy and the Air Force (Exercises Icebreaker and Nutcracker), and a year later, a collaboration between the Army and the RAAF (Exercise Sky High 1). All exercises were driven by a United States initiative (The Pentomic Experiment) and adopted by Australia (where it was renamed the Pentropic Experiment) to equip the country to be a more effective partner in supporting our allies in tropical warfare.

Exercises Icebreaker, Nutcracker⁷ and Sky High 1, key parts of the Pentropic Experiment, saw more than 15,000 Australian defence personnel mobilised; active participation by a battalion of overseas military personnel; big investments in new equipment, new roads and airfield construction; and the random invasion of hundreds of square kilometres of NSW virgin wilderness. Later military training operations conducted from Scheyville involved more than twice as many personnel and were spread over eight years.⁸ In all cases, there was no pre-audit of animal, reptile or bird species, so we can only guess the losses.

Ground preparations for Exercises Nutcracker and Sky High 1 were spread over several years. They were located in wild country north west of Sydney broadly bounded by Kurrajong, Bells Line of Road, Lithgow, Rylstone, Jerrys Plains, Bulga and the Putty Road, known by the Army as the Putty Training Area.

5. Dennis, Peter; Grey, Jeffrey; Morris, Ewan; Prior, Robin and Bou, Jean. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, monograph.

6. Lt Colonel Brian Avery comments that the correct title should be the Pentropic Establishment. Personal correspondence to Michael Keats, 19 November 2024, p. 2.

7. Greville, Phillip, 2002, *The Royal Australian Engineers 1945 to 1972*, Vol. 4, p. 234–235: *Exercise Nutcracker was conducted from 22 October to 10 November 1962*.

8. See Chapter 8.

The Defence Department already held a renewable Permissive Occupancy for such purposes over several hundred thousand hectares granted by the NSW government. After Exercise Sky High 2 in 1965, the Army continued to use the area for multiple training activities, including officer training, up to December 1973.

It took some years for the conservation movement to realise what national treasure was being destroyed and for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to respond to increasing pressure to protect the area for future generations of Australians.⁹

A trigger for effective concerted action was not fired by the Army but by the NSW Electricity Commission, notifying the National Parks Association of NSW in September 1977 of its intention to build a 6,000-megawatt power station complex that would have flooded 45 kilometres of the majestic Colo River gorge.

Whilst mainly focusing on the Army use, this book is also about some of the tensions at the time surrounding the future use of the lands that are now a significant part of the Wollemi National Park. Contenders included the NSW Forestry Commission for commercial timber harvesting, the Mines Department for coal extraction, the NSW Electricity Commission for cooling water for a planned power station, the Australian Army for a major permanent jungle training base and artillery range, 4WD clubs for extreme off-road activities, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (together with various conservation groups) that wanted to conserve the last significant area of unique wilderness country through advance proposals for national parks and/or nature reserves in the area.

The message in this story is important. We must be forever vigilant to protect the wilderness and the vulnerable, irreplaceable landscapes and plant and animal species that define Australia. 🌟

9. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service was established in 1967.

