

National service and war, 1939–45

The outbreak of World War II and compulsory military training

On 20 October 1939, a decade after the Scullin government abolished universal military training, and some six weeks after Australia had entered World War II, Prime Minister Robert Menzies issued a press statement announcing the reintroduction of compulsory military training with effect from 1 January 1940. The arrangements required unmarried men turning 21 in the call up period to undertake three months training with the militia.

In a statement to Parliament on 15 November Menzies noted that the War Cabinet had determined that the militia forces needed to be kept at an adequately trained strength of not less than 75,000 men. He added:

‘there is, I believe, a growing recognition of the fact that military training for the defence of Australia should be a normal part of our civic life, and that if it is to be just and democratic, it should be made compulsory.’

Australian Labor Party policy in Opposition and Government

Opposition Leader and leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), John Curtin, voiced opposition in Parliament to the move by the Menzies Government and reiterated ALP opposition to compulsory military service overseas.

As Prime Minister, and faced with the growing threat caused to Australia by the course of World War II during 1942, Curtin sought to amend the ALP platform in order to allow members of the militia to serve overseas. On 5 January 1943 the Federal Conference of the ALP passed the following resolution:

That, having regard to the paramount necessity of Australia’s defence, the Government be authorised to add to the definition of the territories to which the Defence Act extends the following words: ‘and such other territories in the South-west Pacific Area as the Governor-General proclaims as being territories associated with the defence of Australia’.

On 26 January 1943 War Cabinet approved a bill to give effect to the motion. The Defence (Citizen Military Forces) Act provided for the use of Australian conscripts in the South-Western Pacific Zone

(SWPZ) during the period of war. The Act also provided that this approval would lapse within six months of Australia ceasing to be involved in hostilities.

Records about compulsory training 1939–45 held in Canberra

Records in our collection document several aspects of this phase of military training – the development of legislation, requests for exemption and release from or deferment of compulsory training, the application of the scheme in various industries and the liability of Australians overseas. The items listed here are only a selection.

Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Compulsory military training</u>	1928–42	A1608, E45/1/12, Part 1
<u>Compulsory military training</u>	1928–42	A1608, E45/1/12, Part 2
<u>Compulsory military training</u>	1928–42	A1608, E45/1/12, Part 3
<u>Compulsory military training</u>	1928–42	A1608, E45/1/12, Part 4
<u>Compulsory military training. Authority for suspension and reintroduction of</u>	1937–41	A472, W315
<u>Christadelphian Society. Exemption from military training. Conscientious objectors</u>	1939–52	A663, O214/1/133
<u>Cabinet Minutes 19 October 1939</u>	1939–40	A2697, Roll 1
<u>Re-introduction of compulsory military training</u>	1939	A5954, 276/3
<u>Exemptions from compulsory military training – policy</u>	1940–44	A1608, A45/1/12, Part 1
<u>Exemptions from compulsory military training – policy</u>	1940–44	A1608, A45/1/12, Part 2
<u>Exemptions from compulsory military training</u>	1940–42	A1608, B45/1/12, Part 1
<u>Exemptions from compulsory military training</u>	1940–42	A1608, B45/1/12, Part 2
<u>Conscientious objectors – Sections 61 and 61A of the Defence Act. War Cabinet Minute 237</u>	1940–41	A5954, 429/3
<u>Conscientious objectors – employment in civil work</u>	1940–43	A5954, 429/8
<u>Defence: Compulsory training – general representations</u>	1942–50	A461, AP337/1/4
<u>Amendment of the Defence Act, 26 Jan 1943</u>	1943	A2700, Agendum 438
<u>Defence (Citizen Military Forces) Act 1943</u>	1943	A2863, 1943/2
<u>Book 4 (Original) Part 7 – Political controversy in 1943 – Chapter 33 – The Defence (Citizen Military Forces) Act</u>	1970	A5954, 770/4

For more information

Other fact sheets relating to compulsory military training and national service are:

- *Fact sheet 160 - Universal military training in Australia 1911–29*
- *Fact sheet 161 - Conscription referendums, 1916 and 1917*
- *Fact sheet 163 - National Service, 1951–59*
- *Fact sheet 164 - National Service, 1965–72*