PRESS STATEMENT

MALCOLM FRASER 6 April, 1967

In the last few days there have been some reports in the press concerning the composition of the Australian Army Force in Viet Nam. These reports were sparked by a news report which said that national servicemen had been killed at twice the rate of regular soldiers. This report was not correct, but because this matter is so important I wanted to explain the position.

The present force in Viet Nam is a little over one quarter national servicemen, the relief force that is on its way to Viet Nam will have a slightly higher number of national servicemen, nearer one third. The reason for the lower proportion of national servicemen in the present force in Viet Nam is that when this force was sent overseas, national service training had only been in operation for about nine months.

At that time there were not sufficient numbers of trained national servicemen to raise the proportion to what will be roughly the steady state in a force of this size. The relief force and any future force will have approximately the same percentage. There are some commanding reasons which pretty well dictate the employment of national servicemen in the Regular Army. If you have a serviceman for two years only, there is a limit to the positions in the Army for which he can be trained. If you have a serviceman for six years you can afford to train him for more complicated and difficult tasks. The time element is the factor which limits the positions to which a national
serviceman can be posted. For example, an Infantry rifleman can be very well trained, as well as we know how and as well as any Infantry rifleman in any Army in the world, in a shorter time than a soldier can be trained for many other positions. This means that there is going to be a fairly high proportion of national servicemen in the Infantry battalions and this means that there will be a fairly high proportion of national servicemen amongst those going into action.

Let me explain this in a bit more detail. Present basic training takes 11-13 weeks, infantry Corps training takes an additional 13 weeks. Then there is specialist jungle training at Canungra and Ingleburn with the battalions or on an individual basis. Once we leave the Infantry, longer periods of Corps training are generally required. For example, some national servicemen are trained as signallers for a period of 26 weeks after they have done their basic training, but there are many other more technical positions in signals which require between 42 and 56 weeks training in addition to basic training.

Let me give other examples. Several years training is required in some cases for the Royal Australian Engineers. The Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers require twelve months trade training for people who already have some considerable skills before starting their course. These periods are, of course, in addition to basic Army training which all soldiers must undergo.

Unless a national serviceman already has some apprentice training before entering the Army, a good number
of these positions would be denied him because of the period of training required. It is just not a proposition to spend this amount of time in training a national serviceman for these positions when he is only going to be in the Army for two years. The purpose of having national service has been, and is, to add to the teeth of the Australian Army, to put the Army in a better position to meet Australia's responsibilities and commitments. The national serviceman can only add to the strength of the Army in this way if he has at least twelve months residual service after his training is completed. If we allow for the period required for discharge, it is more preferable for him to have more near fifteen months available after he has completed his training. This again is one of the major factors that has governed this particular position.

It would not be impossible, as has been stated, that on some operations, depending upon the composition of the units and the nature of the operation, up to 50% and possibly more than 50% of the soldiers going on patrol could be national servicemen.

However, overall in the relief task force the composition will be about one third. The Army does not like to discriminate between national servicemen and regulars and in the Army there is no discrimination. When they are doing the same jobs they are given the same training and work under precisely the same conditions. I believe that most national servicemen do not want to be picked out in this way, they prefer to be known as members of the unit to which they have been posted.

When casualty figures are announced, for example, we do not differentiate between national servicemen and
regulars, but if some member of the press or of the public ask 'was this soldier a national serviceman' or 'was this soldier a regular', then this is information that, I believe, the public should properly have.

One of the other factors to take into account in this situation of course, is that those national servicemen who do serve in Viet Nam will do so and then their commitment will be completed, but if this war drags on, the regular Army Infantry man could well find himself in Viet Nam one year in every three.