



## Rebel with a cause

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His stand against the Vietnam War was one of the defining images of the radical '60s, but it changed the course of Andy Blunden's life.

It is a quintessential '60s image: a long-haired youth burns his draft card in a simple act of defiance against conscription and Australia's involvement in Vietnam.

Fast-forward almost 40 years and Andy Blunden, 59, might have lost the facial hair but there's no hint of self-consciousness as he casts a fresh eye over the scene, captured by an Age photographer in March 1966.

"It was the best thing I ever did," he says from his home in Brunswick.

Blunden was a 20-year-old civil engineering student at the University of Melbourne when the Menzies government introduced conscription, using a birthday ballot, to meet Australia's Vietnam commitment. He found his path in life hinged inexorably on his birth date, October 11, 1945.

Faced with two years' military service in a war he didn't support, Blunden hooked up with the Youth Campaign Against Conscription - his first political act in an era when 20-year-olds couldn't vote.

Menzies' successor Harold Holt was holidaying at Portsea when Blunden and two other youths burnt their draft cards outside his Toorak home. Holt later described their actions as "repugnant and unconvincing", telling reporters the demonstrators had "misjudged the outlook of their fellow Australians".

Holt was spot-on. In March, 1966, Australian opinion was still running strongly in favour of the war. When US President Lyndon Johnson visited Melbourne seven months later he was greeted by cheering crowds. Activism was virtually non-existent - even at the University of Melbourne. "My generation had never known anything except Bolte and Menzies," Blunden says.

Some time after burning his draft card, Blunden was speaking at an anti-conscription meeting when he overheard someone call him an anarchist. "I'd never heard the word before," he laughs. Blunden was eventually charged for failing to produce his draft card on request. A sympathetic lawyer helped him escape with a small fine.

Before this, Blunden's university studies had provided a legal avenue to resist the draft. The day after completing his final exam, he slipped away on a plane to Europe, telling no one but his parents and housemate.

The following Monday police knocked on his door. "They had reason to suspect I wouldn't be willing to go [to Vietnam]," Blunden smiles.

He did not return to Australia to live until 1985. In London, he completed a PhD, taught mathematics and became more involved in left-wing politics. Two years ago he retired from his technician role at the University of Melbourne and he now writes about social theory for political journals and co-ordinates speakers for the Victorian Peace Network.

"Australia was a backwater when I left. Every five minutes you'd have some yob hassling you about your long hair."

Things have changed for the better, says Blunden, referring to the people who demonstrated against the Iraq war last year. The only problem, he says, "is people come out and then disappear again".