



THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY APPRENTICE (initial research by Norm Wells – 14th Intake Vehicle Mechanic)

On 2nd August 1948, the Australian Regular Army (ARA) opened a trade training school outside Melbourne in Victoria to meet the growing technological needs of the post-war Australian Army. A system similar to a British Army boy training scheme was adopted. Under-mature-age soldiers aged from 15 to 17 ½ years, from across Australia, were enlisted after a challenging selection process to undergo a live-in, three-year trade qualifying course at the Army Apprentices School (AAS) located at Balcombe Army Camp, Mt Martha.

After Apprentices graduated from AAS, a further period of supervised on-the-job-training (OJT) in regional military static workshops, where possible in the soldiers' home states, followed before employment in an appropriate trade position in Army field force units. AAS training was initially three years followed by one year OJT but, from 1976 for all trades except Electronics Tradesmen, two years' OJT followed only two years' training before AAS graduation. The initial service commitment for an Army Apprentice was a 9-year ARA enlistment.

The 1948 Australian Army Apprentice Training Scheme replaced an earlier live-at-home limited scheme titled the Workshop Apprentice Scheme for fitters and turners that commenced in 1939 and operated in Army static workshops within Australia.

In December 1982, AAS was relocated from Balcombe to new, purpose-built facilities with single room accommodation in NE Victoria at Latchford Barracks Bonegilla, near Wodonga.

From 1984 onwards, female Apprentices formed part of the annual intakes.

In 1991, following an employment restructure of the civilian staff trade instructors, the AAS was retitled the Army College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). This period also saw the growing social expectation for teenagers to remain at school to complete senior high school. The trend greatly affected the suitable preferred age (15 years) Army Apprentice applicants. This brought about the decision to close the under-age soldier trade training scheme and open the school facilities to train Army Adult Trade Trainees.

The last Army Apprentice graduation parade was conducted on 8th April 1995 and the College closed after graduating some 7500 Apprentices into the ARA as architectural draughtsmen, blacksmiths, bricklayers, carpenters and joiners, clerks, electrical fitters, electricians, electronics technicians, fitters and turners, motor mechanics, musicians, plumbers and gasfitters, radio and telecom mechanics and welders.

As the Army Apprentice 49th Intake completed their OJT phase in late 1998, it brought the Army Apprentice Training Scheme to a close after 50 years of training under-age enlistees to the ARA.

Across the years, graduates of the Army Apprentice Scheme were credited with being the backbone of the maintenance of mobility and firepower of an ever-increasing, technically-oriented Australian Army providing electrical, mechanical and construction engineering expertise to every area in which the Australian Army has served, at home or overseas, on peacekeeping duties or on active service, from the Korean campaigns to current deployments.

Many Apprentice graduates went on to commissioned rank with some achieving senior and general rank in the ARA while many others chose to leave the ARA to attain their success in civil industry and commerce.