

The Australian Army Apprentices Scheme 1948 – 1995

Introduction

Just prior to World War Two the Australian Army introduced training for Army Workshop Apprentices in the trade of fitting. On completion of their apprenticeship the tradesmen were posted to Australian Electrical Mechanical Engineers AEME which, following King George VI grant of the title “Royal” on 10th November 1948 became Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME).

On 14th July 1948 approval was given for the selection of sixty-two Army Apprentices to be enlisted for 9-year engagements in the Australian Regular Army. Approval was also given for the enlistment of AEME apprentices still serving as such, who had reached 18 years of age and who were enlisted under certain specified provisions.

Army Apprentice School

On 2nd August 1948, the first intake, consisting of young lads between 15 and 17 years of age, commenced training at Balcombe Camp, Mt Martha on the Mornington Peninsula south of Melbourne Victoria.

In the early years, the first three years of training and instruction was provided by both Civilian and Service instructors at Balcombe. On achieving the required Army and Civilian standard the apprentice was allocated to a Corps for the final year of training under the guidance of an Apprentice Master.

This training cycle change in 1972 with the introduction of the 2-year x 2-year scheme for trades other than the electronics technician which remained 3-year x 1 year. Under this 2 x 2 scheme, following successful completion of the first two years at Balcombe, Apprentices were Corps allocated for completion of 2 years on the job trade training supervised by Apprentice Masters.

Successful completion of the 4th year ensured the civilian requirement for civilian indentures had been reached. Also, at the conclusion of the 4th year Apprentices were required to complete and pass an Army Trade Test for the indentured trade.

The trades that were offered:

Fitter and Turner, later redefined as Fitter Maintenance
Vehicle Mechanic

Electrical Fitter
Electrical Mechanic
Radio Mechanic, later redefined as Electronics Technician
Plumber and Gas Fitter
Bricklayer (discontinued 1972)
Carpenter and Joiner
Blacksmith (discontinued 1971)
Welder
Junior Musicians (1952 – 1983)
Clerks (1955 – 1965)
Architectural Draftsmen (1957 – 1958)

Generally, all accommodation, training, mess, medical and dental facilities at Balcombe Camp were housed in what was temporary corrugated iron clad huts. Hot in summer and freezing in winter.

By 1960 it was realised the site could no longer service the ever-expanding size of the intakes. Investigations commenced for an alternative suitable site which concluded with Bonegilla in NE Victoria near Wodonga being selected.

Construction of a \$43,000,00.00 purpose-built facility was undertaken with the school moving into the new Latchford Barracks in December 1982 ready for the next Intake of Apprentices in January 1983.

The new Latchford Barracks housed the Army Apprentices School, School of Military Survey, 6 Camp Hospital, 19 Dental Unit, and the Central Food Preparation Facility RAAOC. The complex also included printing facilities for the area, an audio-visual facility, library and sporting complex.

The new barrack accommodation provided individual rooms formed around a common room, laundry and drying room, showers and toilets. All barrack blocks were interconnected by covered walkways. Quite an improvement on the Balcombe huts that in some cases the door opened onto dirt that became mud when it rained.

1984 saw the first intake to include female apprentices. This continued until the Army Apprentice scheme was discontinued during 1995.

In 1991, following an employment restructure of the civilian staff trade instructors, the Army Apprentice School was retitled the Army College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and abbreviated to ACOT. 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 of (15 years) for Army Apprentice applicants. Ultimately the decision was taken, and the Chief of Staff announced in late December 1994 the under-age soldier trade training scheme would cease and the school facilities would be used to train Army Adult Trade Trainees.

During 1994 however, traditional recruitment of Army Apprentice applicants continued, leading to 112 young (some under 17 years of age) male and female applicants accepted and enlisting into the Australian Regular Army on 16th January 1995 with the rank of Apprentice. This special group was deemed by the Army Apprentices Association Incorporated at its Annual General Meeting on 19th October 2019 to be known as the 50th Intake.

Instead of the progressive military training being conducted concurrently with the technical training for the duration of time at the school/college as had occurred previously. The 50th intake, after the initial few weeks of regimental training undertook the same 13 weeks of training as adult recruits passing through the recruit training battalion at Kapooka.

Saturday the 8th April 1995 saw the end of an era with the last parade of the Army Apprentices Battalion held at the Army College of TAFE, Bonegilla with the 49th Intake graduating from apprentices to trainees to complete their training.

Despite the last parade the Company structure continued with the 49th remaining in Delta Company and the new 50th Intake put in Alpha Company. This structure continued through to 1st November 1995 when all trainees were handed over to the trade wings. Whilst at some stage the members of the 50th Intake and the graduated 49th intake were referred to as trainees there is evidence many of the 50th Intake retained the rank of Apprentice well into 1995.

The final change for ACOT occurred on 1st December 1995 when the Army Logistic Training Centre was formed. The new super College was to incorporate both the military and technical training being conducted at that time. It continues the proud traditions and high standards first established by the Army Apprentice School and carried on by the Army College of TAFE.

Across the years, graduates of the Army Apprentice Scheme were credited with being the backbone of the maintenance of the mobility and firepower of an ever increasing complex, diverse and technically oriented Australian Army. By 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.

Revised 30th October 2019 by Association President Keith Lowe - 22nd Intake Fitter and Turner.

References: Original work by Norm Wells – 14th Intake Vehicle Mechanic, Book “From Boy to Soldier review committee notes, The Story of RAEME – Theo Barker, With Skill and Fighting – Craftsmen of the Australian Army 1942 – 2014 – Max Carmichael with Frank Benfield and Keirin Joyce, Apprentice Nominal Roll, ACOT Journal 1995 and interviews with WO1 Wayne Davis – 50th Intake Electrical Fitter.