



THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY APPRENTICE 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 the Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (AEME) which, following King George VI's grant of the title "Royal" on 10th November 1948, became the Royal Corps of 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 (ARA). 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 Apprentices 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 were provided by both civilian and Service instructors at Balcombe. On achieving the required Army and civilian standards, the Apprentice was allocated to a Corps for the final year of training under the guidance of an Apprentice Master.

This training cycle changed in 1972 with the introduction of the 2-year x 2-year scheme for trades other than the electronics tradesman, 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 two years on-the-job-trade training supervised by Apprentice Masters.

Successful completion of the 4th year ensured the 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 offered **on enlistment** were:

- Fitter and Turner (redefined as Fitter Maintenance for five years only from 1971 to 1975)
- Vehicle Mechanic (redefined as Motor Mechanic from 1976 – the 1st Intake in 1948 were also enlisted as Motor Mechanics)
- Electrician (Vehicle and Plant) (redefined as Electrical Fitter from 1957)
- Electrician (Construction) (redefined as Electrical Mechanic from 1957)
- Telecom Mechanic (redefined as Radio Mechanic for 1954 and then from 1956 to 1971, and redefined as Electronics Tradesman from 1972)
- Plumber (redefined as Plumber and Gasfitter from 1973, except for 1975)
- Bricklayer (discontinued after 1970)
- Carpenter and Joiner
- Blacksmith (discontinued from 1971)
- Welder (discontinued from mid-1951)
- Musician (from 1951 to 1982)
- Architectural Draughtsman (1955 and 1956)
- Clerk (from 1955 to 1964).

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

By 1960, it was realised that 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 million 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 barracks accommodation provided individual rooms formed around a common room, laundry and drying rooms, showers and toilets. All barrack blocks were interconnected by covered walkways, quite an improvement on the Balcombe huts for which, in some cases, the door opened onto dirt that became mud when it rained.

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

Army College of Technical and Further Education

In 1991, following an employment restructure of the civilian staff trade instructors, the Army Apprentices 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 the General Staff announced in late December 1994 that 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 being accepted and enlisting into the ARA on 16th January 1995 with the rank of Apprentice. This special group was deemed by the Australian 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, NSW.

Saturday, 8th April 1995 saw the end of an era with the last parade of the Army Apprentices Battalion held at the ACOT, 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 being put into 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 that many of the 50th Intake retained the rank of Apprentice well into 1995.

Army Logistic Training Centre

The final change for ACOT occurred on 1st December 1995 when the Army Logistic Training Centre (ALTC) 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 Apprentices School and carried on by the ACOT.

Conclusion

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-increasingly 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
- 6th July 2020 by Association Committee Member and Newsletter Editor Jeff Heron – 21st Intake Radio Mechanic.

References:

- Original work by Norm Wells – 14th Intake Vehicle Mechanic, edited by Jeff Heron – 21st Intake Radio 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
- Interviews with WO1 Wayne Davis – 50th Intake Electrical Fitter.