OFFICER CADET SCHOOL PORTSEA –
THE RAAF EXPERIENCE

Every airfield should be a stronghold of fighting air-groundmen, and not the abode of uniformed civilians in the prime of life protected by detachments of soldiers.

Winston Churchill

The majority of the RAAF’s training needs are met by in-house establishments. However, a few niche training requirements have been frequently provided by Army, Navy or civil schools. Since 1983, the Royal Military College, Duntroon (RMC) has provided training for officers of one specialist category of the RAAF—Ground Defence Officers. However, for a period the Officer Cadet School, Portsea (OCS) was used to deliver the training to enhance airbase security.

The end of World War II resulted in a dramatic reduction in strength of all three Services of the Australian Defence Force. For example, the RAAF strength dropped from a wartime high of about 182,000 personnel to 7897 by December 1948. Even while the numbers were being reduced, the Defence Force still required officers to command the peacetime force. In the Australian Army a combination of graduates from RMC and remaining wartime officers initially formed the regular Army officer corps. By the early 1950’s, with the advent of National Service and rising commitments in Korea, there was a considerable increase in the demand for officers. The Army was short of about 1000 officers, and RMC could not make up the shortfall. In January 1952, OCS Portsea was established to help fill the shortage.

OCS commenced with a 22-week course for future officers of the Australian Regular Army, as well as cadets from some foreign armies. Course content was regularly updated and oriented towards providing cadets with the skills needed by junior officers in most corps of the Australian Army. Increasing training needs saw the course duration increased to 44 weeks.

During its 33-year history, OCS graduated 3,544 officers—2826 for the Australian Army and 688 for the Armies of the Philippines, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Uganda, Fiji and New Zealand. Of particular note is that in addition to army officers, 30 RAAF members graduated from Portsea as Ground Defence Officers.

The creation of specialist Ground Defence officers had its roots in World War II, when RAF airfields and facilities in Europe were found to be vulnerable to attack and destruction by enemy land and air forces. As a secure base is essential for the generation of air power, the RAF acted, becoming the first Commonwealth air force to form its own ground defence units with the establishment of the RAF Regiment in 1942.

Following the RAF’s lead, the RAAF created a large organisation to provide ground security for RAAF bases in Australia and the Pacific. By mid-1945, RAAF ground defence elements, as part of the First Tactical Air Force, had landed at Tarakan, Brunei and Balikpapan. This forward deployed force included five rifle companies, and medium machine gun and heavy machine gun platoons. All units were commanded by RAAF officers skilled in the doctrine and tactics of land operations. This force eventually matured into No 2 Airfield Defence Squadron (2AFDS), in which many RAAF OCS graduates would later serve.

As the post-World War II force reduction commenced, constrained RAAF resources were predominantly used to fill air operational crew. Ground Defence became primarily a part time task with only a very small cadre of specialist officers and airmen forming the core with the knowledge and necessary skills for protecting RAAF airfields. Most of these personnel were trained in ground defence operations while in service with the Commonwealth armies or air forces—the Australian Army, the RAF (in particular the RAF Regiment), the British Army and the RAAF. However, by the early 1950’s this pool of experienced officers was exhausted and a search began for an alternate source.
Unlike the scale of the Army’s requirement, the RAAF’s ground defence category was small, making a stand-alone course, initially at least, unviable. With the establishment of OCS, the RAAF noted the considerable advantages in training its potential Ground Defence Officers at the Portsea facility.

RAAF Officer Cadet Roly Brazier became the first RAAF cadet at OCS in June 1956, starting a RAAF presence that lasted until December 1957. The first wave of RAAF cadets totaled nine graduates; after that, the RAAF elected to establish its own short course for ab-initio Ground Defence Officers to meet an immediate and sizeable shortfall in numbers. This short-term need perhaps justified the independent RAAF course, but both the cost and relatively small numbers soon resulted in the course becoming unsustainable. The RAAF re-established links with OCS for its Ground Defence Officer training, and the second wave of RAAF cadets started with Officer Cadet Robert Matthews in 1968.

By 1971 the category again reached its workforce strength ceiling and the RAAF presence at OCS ceased. However, by 1976 the strength of the Ground Defence category had once again been depleted and RAAF cadets, with Officer Cadet Ken Thackeray being the first, were again marching into OCS. The RAAF presence at OCS continued intermittently until Officer Cadet John Holloway graduated as the last RAAF cadet in December 1983.

The opening of the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) in January 1986, led to RMC taking responsibility for non-tertiary, general service officer training for the Australian Regular Army. Army officer training was now provided by both ADFA and RMC, thus OCS’s capacity was no longer needed and the school was closed in December 1985. All future RAAF Ground Defence Officers would be trained in RMC.

While all OCS cadets shared the same training, the careers of Army and RAAF graduates differed markedly. Initially, the RAAF considered that ground defence was not an enduring or viable career for most OCS graduates. The expectation was that after some years as a Ground Defence Officer, most would transfer to the then Administrative or Equipment branches of the RAAF officer corps. Officer Cadet Bob Halverson from the June 57 Class followed this path to become an Equipment Officer, while most others simply left the RAAF at the end of their engagement.

Rising regional tensions in the 1960’s forced the RAAF to a more operationally focused stance that had a significant impact on the RAAF’s OCS graduates. The increased importance of ground defence became apparent, particularly with operational deployments to Thailand and South Vietnam. Ground Defence became an enduring element of the Special Duties Branch of the RAAF.

Demand for dedicated Ground Defence capabilities generated an increase in the number of officers required, a trend that has been noticeable at the end of each major combat deployment including Timor and the Middle East. Ground Defence Officers now served full careers in that category but for many years promotion above Wing Commander was generally not possible. Eventually recognition of the quality of OCS graduates broke the glass ceiling. Of the 30 RAAF cadets who graduated from OCS four retired as Group Captains (including Bob Halverson who became an Australian Senator and Ambassador to Ireland) and one as an Air Commodore.

The realities of an increasing operational tempo for the Australian Army from the 1950’s onwards provided an unexpected opportunity for the RAAF’s Ground Defence category to be maintained on a sustainable basis. With increasing Joint training models being adopted since the 1970s the OCS model is now a common feature across the ADF. Not only does common training prove cost effective, but ensures a common doctrinal and tactical understanding of the Joint operating environment—exemplified by the current Ground Defence Officer category.

Key Points

- The need to maintain air base defence to sustain air power resulted in the formation of the Ground Defence category within the RAAF during WWII.
- The Ground Defence Officer training at OCS is an example of cost effective means to sustain an essential, but niche, capability within the RAAF.
- Common Joint training is a means to ensure common understanding of doctrine and tactics across all arms of the ADF.