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DEFENCE & SECURITY NEWS

Australian Air Force Cadets – 70 years of service

“We loved the integrated service with the RAAF and played our role as seriously as our ages would allow, whether washing dishes in the airmen’s mess or being observers on air-to-air combat training. No one marched as keenly, saluted as snappily or worked as hard on aircraft recognition, as the cadets of my day. I regard it as a privilege and positive advantage in life that I was trained in so many things by the ATC – values that have stood me in good stead in my later life.”

– His Excellency, Mr Michael Bryce, AM, AE

Many thousands of former Air Force cadets have had their adult lives enriched from their teenage cadet experience. For example, many Australian defence and airline pilots received their first exposure to flying as young boys courtesy of the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC). The professional instruction they received during their time with the cadets instilled in them a disciplined approach to flying and safety, an approach that has remained with them into their military or commercial flying careers.

These pilots are now happy to use that skill by volunteering as instructor pilots so that today’s cadets can receive the same experience. The major airlines’ support for this activity, which enables the pilots to pass on their knowledge and experience to today’s generation, is greatly appreciated by the cadets and the AAFC organisation.

But today’s Air Force cadet organisation has come a long way from the early beginnings in 1941. The Air Training Corps (ATC), as it was first called, was formed to provide a reservoir of recruits for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). By the end of 1945, almost 12,000 ATC cadets had enlisted in the RAAF – 7000 of them as aircrew.

The ATC was then a part of the RAAF Reserve and the ATC cadets wore RAAF uniforms, but were distinguished with the words “Air Training Corps” on the shoulder and Cap Badges. Boys between 16 and 18 were eligible to join the ATC, which rose to a peak strength of 13,000 in 1943. Cadets visited RAAF Squadrons and were taught subjects that would help them transition to the RAAF.

At the end of the war in 1945, the ATC was reorganised and downsized. The imperative for the ATC to be a conduit for RAAF recruiting was replaced by a broader goal of developing air-mindedness and worthwhile ideals of service among Australian youth. Though a much smaller organisation, the ATC flourished for another 30 years. Some cadets benefitted from the introduction of RAAF flying scholarships, which assisted them to gain a private pilot’s licence, while others participated in the international air cadet

exchanges in the United Kingdom, Malaya, Singapore, and the United States. Glider flying training with approved gliding clubs also began.

In 1976, following a government move to disband the cadet corps, the ATC was again restructured and funding was much reduced. The new organisation was known as the AIRTC and its members were no longer part of the Air Force Reserve. Ultimate control of the AIRTC, however, still rested with the Chief of Air Force, as it does today. In 2001, there was another name change to the Australian Air Force Cadets and, with it, a new national headquarters and structure, including appointment of the first national commander.

Today, the AAFC is a vibrant organisation of more than 7000 male and female cadets between the ages of 13 and 20, plus around 1100 staff, with wings in all Australian states and the Northern Territory. It is sponsored and administered by the RAAF, but still organised and run much the way it was in the early years.

To celebrate the AAFC's 70th birthday, individual wings and squadrons held functions throughout 2011. The major national events were the 70th anniversary dinner attended by 400 cadets from all over Australia held at RAAF Williams, Laverton, Victoria, in October, and a parade the following day where the Chief of Air Force took the salute.



AAFC 70th anniversary parade

[Photo: Department of Defence]

Since the formation of the AAFC, some 40,000 cadets and staff have passed through the organisation. The AAFC National Council is keen to capture that experience to help support the cadets of today and tomorrow. To do that, the Council is currently exploring interest in the formation of an AAFC alumni association. If you were a former cadet or staff member, please help this initiative by registering your interest in the alumni. You can do this by going to www.aafc.org.au/alumni and following the prompts.

Air Commodore Peter Growder (Ret'd)
Australian Air Force Cadets National Council