



The History of RMA Sandhurst



Gentlemen Cadets

Students at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, both of which closed on the outbreak of war in September 1939, were known as gentlemen cadets.

Unlike modern Officer Cadets, who are technically private soldiers and are paid and clothed as such by the MOD, gentlemen cadets were not subject to military law. Their parents paid tuition and boarding fees, in the same way as at a public school or university, and also paid for uniforms (of the same pattern as worn by subaltern officers, but without badges of rank), books, and mathematical instruments.

Fees were reduced for the sons of serving or former officers, and there were also a number of cadetships (comparable to scholarships). Admission was by competitive written examination in a variety of academic subjects, and candidates passed in, in order of merit, according to the number of marks they achieved. There were no practical tests of aptitude for leadership such as were first introduced during the Second World War and which continue to form the basis of the present-day Army Officer Selection Board. This had the effect of confining entry to either the RMA and or the RMC to public schoolboys, often from families with a military connection.

The Royal Military Academy 1741-1939

This was the older and more senior of the two establishments from which the present RMA was formed. It was set up in 1741, near the Royal Artillery Depot at Woolwich, with the aim of producing, in the words of its first charter, "good officers of Artillery and perfect Engineers". The Corps of Royal Engineers, originally an all-officer corps, was not formally separated from the Royal Regiment of Artillery until 1787. Both remained under the control of the Board of Ordnance until 1856, and were collectively referred to as the Ordnance Corps. The RMA provided the high level of scientific education required by these two corps, while at the same time ensuring that their officers had the same level of military training as those serving in the Line.

Until 1870, most cavalry and infantry officers obtained their first commissions and subsequent promotion under the purchase system, for which no formal military education was required. After the establishment of the RMA, all officers of artillery and engineers had to attend the academy as gentleman cadets and were only granted their commission after completing the course. On passing out, they were placed in order of merit. Promotion in the Ordnance Corps was by seniority, not by purchase. This was a great incentive to study. A difference of one or two places in the final order of merit at the RMA could result in many years difference in later promotion, as the career pyramid narrowed in the higher ranks. An immediate effect was in limiting a gentleman cadet's choice of arm. When there were more candidates for the Royal Engineers (which formerly offered better pay and wider prospects of employment than the Royal Artillery) than there were vacancies, the places were offered to cadets highest in order of merit.

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After 1920, when the Royal Corps of Signals was formed as a corps separate from the Royal Engineers, it drew its regular officers from cadets trained at the RMA. Between 1922 and 1939, up to half of the officers of the Royal Tank Corps were also drawn from the RMA. In 1936, it was decided that the RMA should be amalgamated with the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. Before this decision was put into effect, both establishments closed on mobilisation in September 1939, as, in the light of experience during the First World War, no regular commissions were to be granted in time of major war. The senior cadets of both establishments were commissioned at once. The juniors were called up into the Territorial Army as private soldiers. They were then dispersed to various Officer Cadet Training Units, according to the arm or branch for which they were intended. When the post-war RMA was set up, many items, including the archives, pictures, silver and statues were brought to Sandhurst from Woolwich. The new Science block (now the home of the RMA Academic faculty) was named the Faraday Hall, in honour of Sir Michael Faraday, one of the many distinguished scientists who taught at the RMA.

Two expressions from the old RMA passed into the language. "Talking Shop", meaning "to discuss subjects not understood by others", derives from the RMA being commonly known as "The Shop", as its first building was a converted workshop in Woolwich Arsenal. "Snooker", the table-top game, was invented by a former cadet of the RMA, where the members of the junior intake were known as "snookers", from a corruption of "les neux" (the new guys).

The East India Company's Military Seminary 1809-1860

The East India Company maintained its own separate military establishment until 1858, when the government of British India was transferred to the Crown. In 1798 the Company began to send cadets to the RMA to train as officers in the Indian artillery and engineers. In 1809 it set up a military seminary at Addiscombe House, Croydon, based upon the RMA. After the Mutiny of 1857-58 it was decided that, for security reasons, all artillery and engineers in India should be part of the British Army. The establishment of the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers was increased accordingly. Addiscombe was closed and its functions were undertaken by an enlarged RMA. It was then decided that officers for the Indian Army should be provided by the new Indian Staff Corps. All candidates had first to serve for two years on probation as subalterns in the British Army. Those who did not wish to purchase commissions in the British Army prior to joining the Indian Staff Corps were able to attend the Royal Military College at Sandhurst instead. Thus both the RMA and the RMC continued the link with the Indian Army established by the EICMS at Addiscombe.

The Royal Military College 1800-1939

Until 1870, the usual way for an officer of the cavalry or infantry to obtain his commission was by purchase. A new candidate had to produce evidence of having had "the education of a gentleman", to obtain the approval of his regimental colonel, and to produce a substantial sum which was both proof of his standing in society and a bond for good behaviour. When a promotion vacancy occurred, the senior officer of the immediate lower rank in the same regiment had the first claim to be promoted, subject to being able to produce the as appropriate sum laid down by Parliament for the rank in question. Promotion to colonel and above was by seniority without purchase. Staff appointments, which carried promotion, were by selection, not purchase, but an officer reverted to his regimental (normally purchased) rank on expiry of tenure.

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When an officer left the Army, the price of his last commission was refunded, thus realising a large capital sum for investment elsewhere. The system was subject to abuse, as very rich men could pay their juniors not to take up their right to promotion, but had the advantage of allowing wealthy officers to obtain command of a regiment in their twenties, while at the peak of their fitness and energy. By contrast, in the Ordnance corps, where promotion was by seniority, it was common to find officers in their forties still serving as subalterns. The greatest weakness of the purchase system was its reliance on officers learning their duties by experience after appointment, rather than by training prior to it.

The Royal Military College was formed in 1800 in response to the disasters experienced by the British Army in the early campaigns of the French Revolutionary War. Its founder was Major General John Gaspard Le Marchant, a cavalry officer who studied his profession seriously and had the ear of King George III. He planned a college consisting of three parts. The Senior Department would train officers in staff duties. The Junior Department, similar to the RMA but with less emphasis on science and technology, would train gentlemen cadets to be junior officers. The Legion, made up of the sons of non-commissioned officers, would act as a demonstration battalion and at the same time give these boys an education to fit them as future NCOs. The Senior Department was formed at High Wycombe from a school privately founded in 1799 by General Jarry, a French émigré. It moved to Farnham in 1814, from where it joined the Junior Department at Sandhurst in 1821. In 1858 it was renamed the Staff College and in 1862 took over its new building at Camberley, at the edge of the Sandhurst estate. It remained there, sharing many facilities with the cadet college, later the RMA, until 1998 when it was amalgamated with the Royal Naval and Royal Air Force Staff Colleges to form the Joint Service Command and Staff College, now at Shrivenham. The Legion was eventually formed at Chelsea as the Duke of York's School, now at Dover, but did not become part of RMC.

The Junior Department of the RMC, formed as a college of gentlemen cadets, began in 1802 at Remnatz, a converted country house at Great Marlow. When the experiment proved successful, a new site was purchased at Sandhurst Park, Berkshire, where, after several false starts, the new Royal Military College (now Old College, RMA) was first occupied in 1812. The purchase system was still in force, but gentlemen cadets who completed the course and were recommended by the College authorities were granted their first commissions without purchase. Moreover, when there were more candidates than vacancies, RMC cadets were given priority. Despite these advantages, the RMC gained a reputation for disorderly behaviour, rioting, and bullying comparable with unreformed public schools of the period, with the average age of the cadets being about fifteen. Gradually the age was raised, but the College failed to lift the more irksome petty rules intended for schoolboys rather than young men. This led to the Cadet Mutiny of 1862 in which the cadet battalion withstood a three-day siege in one of the earthworks used for fortification training, before finally surrendering to the C-in-C, HRH the Duke of Cambridge, who came down in his coach from London to restore order.

The College was closed in 1870, when the purchase system was abolished and first commissions were, for a time, awarded by written competitive examination. The buildings were used to train successful candidates in military skills while they waited to join their regiments, but this did not prove satisfactory, and in 1877 the examination became for appointment to the RMC as a cadet, rather than for a commission. In practice the cost of the college fees was much the same as that formerly charged for an ensign's commission, and this, plus the school fees required in preparation for the entry examinations, meant that the social composition of the Army's officers remained unchanged. The RMC was not large enough to train all the subalterns needed by the Army, so an alternative route, favoured by those who failed entry to the College, was to obtain a commission by nomination in the Militia. It was then possible to transfer to the Regular Army after a period of full-time service and passing the College's final examination. In 1912 the RMC was increased in size to eight companies, six of which were accommodated in the New College, completed in that year. Another two companies were added during the First World War, during which 3,274 former gentlemen cadets of the College gave their lives. After the war, the RMC formed into four large companies instead of eight small ones, as infantry battalions had done in 1912, with College HQ corresponding in size to a battalion headquarters.

The Officer Cadet Training Units at Sandhurst 1939-1947

On the outbreak of the Second World War the Royal Military College was replaced by the Sandhurst Officer Cadet Training Unit of two wings. These became respectively 101 Royal Armoured Corps OCTU and 161 Infantry OCTU (RMC). A London TA unit, the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps, formed the RAC OCTU and the Royal Military College formed the Infantry OCTU, with the subtitle RMC. Officer cadets of 161 Infantry OCTU were allowed to wear the RMC cap badge, although they were in fact soldiers belonging to the various regiments into which they were called up for the duration of hostilities. In 1942 101 RAC OCTU amalgamated with 162 Reconnaissance Corps OCTU (formed from the Infantry Battalion of another London TA regiment, the Honourable Artillery Company) to form 100 RAC OCTU. At the same time, the Infantry OCTU moved to Mons Barracks at Aldershot, where it remained, retaining its RMC associations, until 1946. It then returned to Sandhurst, while the RAC OCTU moved to Bovington.

The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst 1947-1972

The new RMA combined the best features of its two predecessors in a course lasting eighteen months, later increased to two years. It was organised into three colleges, Old, New, and Victory, each with a headquarters and of four companies, named respectively after battle honours of the period before 1914, the First World War, and the Second World War. The whole came under Academy HQ, corresponding in size to a divisional headquarters. Each college and company consisted of a proportion of cadets at different stages in their training. On exercises and in domestic administration, the under-officers and senior cadets performed the duties of subalterns and NCOs. Each intake handed on the standards and traditions of the Academy to its successors in an unbroken line.

The course included the traditional military subjects such as drill, infantry tactics, skill-at-arms, fieldcraft, etc, with a strong emphasis on the development of leadership skills, which both the RMA and RMC had assumed that cadets naturally possessed. Indeed, the motto of the new RMA was "Serve to Lead", replacing the Latin "Sua Tela Tonanti" (Their weapons are Thunderbolts) and "Vires Aquirit Eundo" (It gains strength as it goes) of the RMA and RMC respectively. There was a strong academic element taught by civilian lecturers. These were fully integrated into the cadet companies and tended to remain at the Academy longer than their military colleagues, most of whom spent no longer than three years in post. Academic subjects included Science, Mathematics, Languages, Modern Subjects (a term adopted from the older universities) and Military History.

The long course allowed ample opportunity for extra-curricular activities, many of which were continued from the RMA and RMC. Among these were amateur dramatics and musical societies (including jazz bands and glee singing), a literary society ("the Polished Bun Club"), a Russian Circle, a military history society ("the Napier Society"), a debating society, a film club, and many others. Sports included rugby and association football, cricket, hockey, athletics, swimming, boxing, deep-sea sailing in the yachtWish Stream, rowing, and mountaineering. For the air-minded there was a flying club, and some Officer Cadets became parachute-qualified as members of the Edward Bear club. Those who passed the selection undertook the normal parachute training course at No 1 Parachute Training School at RAF Abingdon. The successful candidates were awarded a Parachute Badge Without Wings. Edward Bear accompanied Cadets whenever they parachuted together - for example, during military exercises at the French Army Academy at St Cyr.

The diminishing size of the Army and the increasing popularity of Mons Officer Cadet School as a route to a commission eventually brought this system to an end. In 1970 the junior company in each college was disbanded. In 1971 New College HQ and one company was disbanded and its two remaining companies were posted to Old and Victory Colleges respectively, so that the Academy then consisted of two colleges each of four companies. New College stood empty until 1972, when it was occupied by Mons College (the renamed Mons OCS) and the system of training at the RMA was radically changed.

Mons Officer Cadet School 1947-1972

After the Second World War, all fit men were conscripted, after reaching their eighteenth birthday, for National Service of up to two years with the colours followed by three in the Territorial Army or other part-time Reserves. Those who so wished could volunteer for three years as Short Service Regular soldiers, with the better pay and conditions. National Service and Short Service commissions were granted to provide the large numbers of junior officers required by a large army, but as both categories were only engaged for a limited period, the time available for Officer Cadet training was restricted to a few months. The war-time OCTU system was adopted for this purpose and two Officer Cadet Schools were set up. One was at Mons Barracks, Aldershot, previously used by 161 Inf OCTU (RMC) and the other was at Eaton Hall, Cheshire. Officer cadets of the Royal Armoured Corps or Royal Artillery went to Mons, while those of the other arms and services went to Eaton Hall. National service was abolished in 1960. It was decided to retain the Short Service system, as this improved the long-term prospects available to career officers. Eaton Hall OCS was closed and Mons OCS became responsible for training all Short Service Officer Cadets, as well as all those joining the Regular Army as graduates. As the supply of ex-NS officers dwindled, Mons also undertook the final training of candidates for Territorial Army commissions.

This proved very successful. The intensive OCS system trained cadets solely to perform the duties of subalterns, and was thus cheaper and quicker than the Military Academy system, which was intended to produce future field officers and generals. Some commanding officers found the former more useful than the latter. Increasingly, potential officers preferred to train at Mons, where they could gain all the benefits of commission in six months, while their Sandhurst contemporaries were still serving as cadets for a further eighteen. When the RMAS was unable to produce enough cadets to fill all the vacancies for Regular commissions, suitable Short Service officers were appointed to them. In 1972 Mons OCS moved the few miles from its ageing barracks at Aldershot to the empty New College at RMAS. The original plan that the two establishments should simply be co-located did not prove feasible and the decision was taken to restructure the entire system of Officer Cadet training, with Mons College as the major element of the RMAS.

The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst 1972-present

The essence of the new system was that all Officer Cadets should undertake an intensive course, based on that of the former Mons OCS, in what was at first called Mons College but was soon renamed New College. Cadets were granted their commissions after six months' training. Short Service officers then left the Academy. Future regular officers went (at first immediately, but later after a period of regimental duty) to Old College, where they followed a reduced academic or "professional studies" course. Language study was abolished, as were science and mathematics after surviving for a time as "military technology". Political and international affairs took the place of modern subjects and War Studies replaced military history. The various courses for graduates, Territorials, and officers appointed by virtue of their professional qualifications (chaplains, medical and nursing officers, lawyers, etc, became the responsibility of Victory College. The major change from the previous system was that each college now performed a separate function, and there was no longer a homogenous cadet body. The system of cadet government was therefore impracticable and many of the functions previously performed by the under-officers and senior cadets were undertaken by the platoon sergeants, who belonged to the permanent staff.

During the next quarter of a century, numerous changes were made to this system, reflecting the changing needs and organisation of the Army. The Women's Royal Army Corps College at Bagshot closed in 1981 and its Officer Cadets were transferred to the RMAS.

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By the end of the 1980s it became apparent that it did not serve the Army's interests to run three separate courses at Sandhurst: the Standard Military Course (SMC) for non-graduates, the Standard Graduate (SGC) for graduates and the Women's Standard Course (WSC) for females. Separate courses had become divisive and the rivalries institutionalised at Sandhurst were reflected in Officers' Messes after commissioning. It had also become clear that the shorter course for graduates was not satisfying the basic training objectives set by the Army. Consequently the SMC, SGC and WSC were all abolished and replaced in September 1992 by the Commissioning Course. Henceforth, men and women, graduates and non-graduates, British and overseas cadets would all be taught on the same course.