

## Visit to RMAS

A truly gorgeous morning in May saw 28 members driving through the Royal Military Academy's stunning campus grounds to arrive at the splendid portico of Old College, where we met our tour guide Alan. He took us first to the Wellington Room for refreshments and a brief overview of the foundation of the college.

A Military College was established at Woolwich in 1720 to train cadets for commissions in the Royal Artillery. In 1799, a school for staff officers was established at High Wycombe.

The concept of the Royal Military College was the brainchild of John Le Marchant. He opened the Junior Department of the College in 1802, to train "Gentleman Cadets" for the infantry, cavalry and Indian Army. The Junior Department moved from Marlow, in 1813, into the present buildings at Sandhurst, which were designed by James Wyatt. A few years later, the Staff College opened there.

The Sandhurst Estate, some 1800 acres of virtually useless heath land, had been bought by the Ministry of War for £8000 by William Pitt.

The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst was formed in 1947. In 1974, the RMAS became the sole establishment for male initial officer training in the British Army. In 1992 a new Commissioning Course finally unified the training of male, female and foreign cadets.

We began our tour in the Entrance Hall, where a portrait of the Royal Family at Prince Harry's passing out parade hangs, and the furniture was made from trees felled by the great storm of 1987.

Moving into the Indian Army Memorial Room, formerly the chapel and, later, the dining room, we learned how the East India Company formed a militia to protect its interests, especially its gold bullion. However, when the French threatened the enterprise, the company requested help from the British Government. 5000 troops were initially sent, at the company's expense, with many more following. The Government then decided to take control and took over both the expense and the running of the Indian Army.

Although the British Army was the best in the world, they were fought to a standstill in Nepal by the Gurkhas, whose courage and skill as fighting men so impressed the British that they were invited to join the Army. To date, 26 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Gurkhas, the most of any regiment.

Stained glass windows, together with displays around the room, tell the story of the British Army around the world, not just in India.

Alan next took us to the Lord's Room, named in honour of Academy Sergeant Major John Clifford Lord OBE, who was taken prisoner in WWII and determined to keep up standards, and morale, at his camp. He succeeded to such an extent that the prisoners were able to form a guard of honour for their liberators.

One example of his extraordinary affect on his fellow prisoners is that when he asked for 300 men to volunteer to sleep out in tents, in heavy snow, so that the 300 weakest survivors of a 1000 mile forced march from another camp might sleep indoors, those volunteers came forward, two of them paying with their lives.

While in the Lord's Room, Alan provided us with some very interesting statistics, explaining that some 2000 people apply to RMAS annually, of which 1200 are called for three days of interviews. Of these, 720 are selected, all less than 27 years old. Because of the stringent selection process, only 5% fail to complete the course, which begins with a gruelling five weeks of 20-hour days known as the 'hell weeks'. Of these recruits, 7% are warrant officers, 80% hold degrees, and 60% are from state education, with an average age of 23.

Cadets pick four regiments that interest them during their first term, two of which they will visit during their second term, after which they make their final choice.

13% of cadets are women, who receive only two concessions: a lighter pack and a shorter wall on the assault course. In all other respects they are equal with the men. Generally, the women tend to excel.

The college has a staff of 800 and offers a wide range of courses of different duration.

Our last stop was the Royal Memorial Chapel, which stands beside the equestrian centre once used by Princess Anne. Outside the West Door is statue dedicated to the Other Ranks who fell in both World Wars. It is a copy of the original cast with stand in Monchy-le-Preux as a memorial to the 37<sup>th</sup> Division in the Great War.

The chapel itself is now aligned North/South, having been much extended to reach its current form. A book in the Chapel of Remembrance records the deaths of soldiers on active duty since 1947, while another book records the deaths of officers up to WWII, some 29,000 in total. There is much of interest, including regimental memorial pews, a silver font given by the Machine Gun Corps, marble regimental panels recording past Sandhurst Cadets who gave their lives in the Great War, and regimental banners that cannot be touched until they fall to dust, at which point the remains are buried in consecrated ground.

One of the two bombs that landed on RMAS during WWII blew out all the stained glass windows in the chapel, and it wasn't until 1974 that the Army was in a position to replace them. By this time, the art of creating stained glass had all but vanished and the only person who could be found to do the work was 101 years old. Amazingly, he was able to complete the task, dying just one day after the last window was finished. While working on the commission, he ensured that his knowledge was not lost to future generations by teaching his craft to his son—then aged 78!

Returning to the Entrance Hall, we took our leave of Alan and headed out onto the Parade Ground with its stunning view of the lake. It was a great privilege to be standing where both Prince William and Prince Harry had so recently been, as each in turn had passed out with the Royal Family proudly looking on. It was a fitting end to an excellent tour.