

The History of the Army Cadet Force



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The ACF can trace its beginnings to 1859 when there was a threat of invasion by the French. The British Army was still heavily involved abroad after the Indian mutinies, and therefore had very few units in this country. The Volunteers were formed to repel the possible invasion. History was to repeat itself in 1940 during the Second World War when the Home Guard was formed to help counter a threatened invasion by the German Army.

Immediately following the formation of the Volunteers came the start of the Cadets. In 1860 at least eight schools had formed Volunteer companies for their senior boys and masters, and a number of volunteer units had started their own cadet companies. Typical of these were the Queen's Westminster's who placed their 35 Cadets at their head when they marched past Queen Victoria at her Hyde Park Review of the Volunteers in 1860.

As in 1940, the 1859 invasion did not materialise. The cadet movement continued, however, because many social workers and teachers saw in it great value as an organisation for the benefit of boys, particularly bearing in mind the appalling conditions in which so many of them lived. Among these pioneer workers was Miss Octavia Hill who had done a great deal to establish the National Trust. She was certainly not a militarist. She formed the Southwark Cadet Company in order to introduce the boys of the slums of that area to the virtues of order, cleanliness, teamwork and self-reliance. The present conception of the Army Cadet Force as a voluntary youth organisation, helped and inspired by the Army, really stems from that time and has continued throughout the ACF's history.

After the conversion of the volunteers to the Territorial Army (TA) by Lord Haldane in 1908, public schools and Universities were asked to produce units of the Officers Training Corps, and other Cadets Corps were formed into school units and open units for boys who had left school. The title "Cadet Force" was introduced and the administration of the Force was taken over by the newly formed Territorial Associations.

In the First World War a big expansion of the Cadet Force took place and the War office reassumed responsibility for its administration up until 1923 when the Territorial Associations again took over. In 1930 the Government ceased to recognise the Cadet Force and withdrew financial support from it. Everything had to be provided by private raised money and even wearing of Regimental badges and buttons were forbidden. A body known as the British National Cadet Association (BNCA) was formed with the aim of getting official recognition restored. They achieve this aim at least to a limited degree in 1932 and by 1936 certain services and small grants were provided. The BNCA had the responsibility of running the Cadet Force.

During the Second World War a big expansion of the Cadet Force took place in January 1942. The War Office took over the organisation. Equipment and accommodation were increased grants and free uniforms were authorised. The BNCA continued to deal with such matters as sport, competition shooting, and the general welfare of Cadets and many other aspects of cadet work. The BNCA became the Army Cadet Force Association (ACFA) in 1945 and continues to be responsible for those aspects of cadet training and activities, which are not the direct concern of the MOD. In addition, the ACFA are advisers to the MOD and other Government bodies on all matters connected to the ACF.

As a result of the recommendations of a Government committee in 1957, the Cadet Training Centre at Frimley Park, Surrey was opened in 1959. This centre provides courses for officers and adult instructors of the ACF and the CCF and also leadership courses in the summer for a limited number of senior Cadets.

The centenary of the ACF was celebrated in 1960. The chief event was the presentation of the banner to the force by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh at a ceremony at the Tower of London. During the year, this Banner was passed from unit to unit and county to county throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. It was trooped in many places before various distinguished people were laid on the altar of numerous parish churches and cathedrals at special Centenary Year Services. The Banner is now housed at the Cadet Training Centre, Frimley Park. Another highlight of the Centenary Year was the review of large representative parade of the ACF and CCF by HM the Queen and HRH the Duke of Edinburgh in the grounds of Buckingham Palace. This was followed by an impressive thanksgiving service in Westminster Abbey.

Recent changes in the ACF have resulted in the provision of a more modern and workmanlike uniform and the introduction of the Army Proficiency Certificate (APC) which replaced Certificate A. Certificate A had been in use in the Cadet Forces in various forms since 1910.

There are about 4,000 Cadets in some 1,600 detachments, which are to be found in every part of the United Kingdom. The ACF continues to play its part as the Army's own voluntary youth organisation and is a valuable recruiting source for the Regular Army.