THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

FEBRUARY 1970

THE ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

The Royal Observer Corps is the major component of our national reporting organisation and is established by Royal Warrant, as a Volunteer force operating as a Group in Royal Air Force Strike Command. Apart from a small nucleus of professional officers, the Corps is manned by spare-time volunteer officers and observers, who are men and women from all walks of life, and with ages ranging from 17 to 70. Uniform and rank structure is similar to the Royal Air Force but with ROC insignia. ROC personnel have the status of uniformed Civil Servants, but are subject to ROC regulations and an ROC code of discipline promulgated by the Defence Council.

HISTORY

In 1914, defence against air attack was the responsibility of the Admiralty and ground observation reports of any aircraft seen or heard within sixty miles of London were telephoned to the Admiralty by the Police. Early in 1915, this system was extended to cover East Anglia, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, followed by a further extension to cover the whole of England and Wales. In 1916, control of this ground observation system was transferred from the Admiralty to the War Office, and as a result, cordons of military observers were organised thirty miles outside vulnerable areas and in addition coastal posts were also established. During the early transition of control from the Admiralty to the War Office, use of police reporting was to a large extent discontinued, but in the light of experience the police were brought back into the system once again. Major General E B Ashmore, CB, CMG, MVO, then introduced a new system of aircraft position reporting which became known as the London Air Defence Area System, which was responsible for appreciably reducing the time-lag involved in aircraft position reporting. The London Air Defence System of 1918 can thus be taken as the origin of the Royal Observer Corps.

Studies for the air defence of the United Kingdom in 1924 included trials on nine observation posts in Kent reporting to a centre in Cranbrook; by June 1925, No 1 Group Maidstone and No 2 Group Horsham had been established for trial. On 29 October 1925 the Committee of Imperial Defence approved the system, which was then extended to cover Hampshire and the Eastern Counties and is usually regarded as the official establishment of the Observer Corps. On 1 January 1929 responsibility for the Corps was transferred from the War Office to the Air Ministry, and Air Commodore E A D Masterman, CB, CMG, CBE, AFC, was appointed the first Commandant on 1 March 1929. The Corps was manned by volunteer Special Constables until August 1939, and thereafter by volunteer Observers.

1939/45

At the outbreak of the Second World War the aircraft identification and reporting organisation of the Corps covered most of England, Scotland and Wales, and by early 1941 there was complete coverage by thirty-nine Groups organised in five areas. Operational control was exercised by the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Royal Air Force Fighter Command, through the ROC Headquarters at Bentley Priory.

The Corps was called out for duty on 24 August 1939 and maintained continuous day and night watch over the sky of Great Britain until stood down on 5 May 1945. The vital service rendered by the Corps in the Battle of Britain was acknowledged as outstanding, and on 11 April 1941 His Majesty King George the Sixth was graciously pleased to approve that the Observer Corps should henceforward be known by the style and description of the "Royal Observer Corps", in recognition of its long and valuable service.

The Corps also distinguished itself in other fields, in offensive operations by the Royal Air Force through adapting itself to new enemy tactics, in the success achieved by its "Seaborne" aircraft identifiers aboard ships participating in the invasion of Normandy, and its success

in meeting the flying bomb attacks. Another aspect of the work of the Corps during these years was the tracking of friendly distressed aircraft many of which were helped and guided to safety and many lives saved.

POST 39/45

Although the Royal Observer Corps "stood-down" after the war, the organisation was continued by a nucleus of full-time officers and by many volunteers who nevertheless continued to serve. By Royal Warrant the Corps was re-formed in its air defence role on 1 January 1947.

On 31 January 1950, His Majesty King George the Sixth instituted and created the Royal Observer Corps medal to signify the Sovereign's appreciation of long and meritorious service in the Corps. This medal is awarded after twelve years and a clasp after twenty-four years satisfactory service.

On 11 April 1950, His Majesty King George the Sixth further honoured the Corps by assuming the appointment of Air Commodore-in-Chief, Royal Observer Corps, in recognition of the Corps' record of service during the twenty-five years of its existence. On 1 June 1953 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second on the occasion of her Coronation assumed the appointment of Air Commodore-in-Chief.

On the 24 June 1966 at RAF Bentley Priory Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Air Commodore-in-Chief Royal Observer Corps, reviewed a parade of 103 Officers and 653 Observers representing all Groups of the Corps, and presented the Royal Observer Corps Banner, in recognition of the Corps long service and achievement. The Banner is accorded similar respect and courtesy as a "Queen's Colour", and the Royal Review marked the 25 Anniversary of the assumption of the style and description "Royal" Observer Corps.

MAIN TASK TODAY

The Corps is now training to carry out the vital task of being ready to report the position and power of nuclear weapons burst over the United Kingdom, and thereafter recording and reporting the intensity of the resultant radio-active fall-out. This information is given a scientific appreciation by civilian warning teams so that information on nuclear bursts and warning of the approach of fall-out can be transmitted to both military and civil authorities.

ORGANISATION AND DEVELOPMENT TO MEET THE TASK

The basic reporting units of the Corps are Posts which are clustered in three or four throughout the United Kingdom, using a common landline and/or radio link between each cluster and their parent Group Operations Room. Eight to sixteen clusters comprise an average Group, and five or six Groups form the reporting organisation for a Sector Control, of which there are five to cover the United Kingdom. Command of the five or six Groups linked to each Sector is by an ROC Area Commandant and there are five Area Headquarters.

During the ten years following 1955 a total of 1,560 underground Royal Observer Corps Posts and 29 heavily protected Royal Observer Corps Group Headquarters were built to enable the Corps to meet its task. The Posts are evenly spread throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and extended to Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides. Each Post is designed as a self-supporting unit in which the crew of three or four can live and operate throughout the emergency, and is equipped with specially designed detection instruments and a communication system to adjacent Posts and the Group Operations Rooms. The Group Headquarters are designed to house a crew of 40/50 people throughout any emergency and are equipped with independent lighting, heating, ventilation systems and domestic facilities.

The Operations Rooms at Groups have operational displays using the basic information received from Posts and this forms the basis of the warning messages to the Public. The vulnerability of landline communications to nuclear attack is recognised and action to extend the radio network at all levels is going ahead, a modern system of automatic telegraphic data transmission equipment has been installed in all ROC Group Operations Rooms.

OPERATIONAL CONTROL

During the gradual transition from the original aircraft reporting role to the nuclear task, the operational control of the Corps passed from Fighter Command to the Home Office, in association with the Home Departments of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Whilst the whole of the capital cost of rebuilding and instrumentation since 1955 has been funded by the Home Office, the operating costs of the Corps are shared proportionately between the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office.

REORGANISATION 1968

Early in 1968 the Government Expenditure Review resulted in some elements of Home Defence being put on care and maintenance. The Warning and Monitoring Organisation was recognised as a specialised part of Home Defence with a function which was vital, but the costs of the ROC were reduced as a part of economies within the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation.

At present the Corps has 873 Posts linked to 27 Group Headquarters. In addition five selected Group Headquarters also house, in specially added accommodation, the Home Office Sector Controls which had hitherto been separately located. The task of providing most of the manning for these Sectors is now an ROC responsibility.

TRAINING AND THE ROC ANNUAL TRAINING CAMPS

The routine training of the Corps is based on regular meetings of spare-time Post and Operations Room crews, following a syllabus laid down by Headquarters ROC, and culminating in an annual test which takes place simultaneously throughout all Groups in March each year. This basic training for Posts is in the hands of Chief and Leading Observers, co-ordinated by Group Officers who normally have responsibility for up to two clusters. In the Operations Room each Duty Controller, with the Chief and Leading Observers, has similar responsibility for basic training. The routine training of both Post and Operation Room crews is reinforced at more centralised training meetings organised on a cluster or combined crew basis, and this process is continued at the larger Group Meetings and Training Courses arranged by the Group or Area Headquarters. Where possible Group meetings are held at RAF Stations. Practical exercises are arranged several times a year when the whole Corps is fully operational.

For the 1970 annual test a major change to the well tried and proven Royal Air Force "Multiple Choice" system has been made. A library of questions is being built up and will be expanded, and from this "bank", questions for all future tests will be drawn.

Since 1948 Annual Training Camps have been held for Officers and Observers from all Groups of the Corps. Past venues have been RAF Stations Thorney Island, Waterbeach, Stradishall, Wattisham, Tangmere, West Malling, Binbrook, Horsham St Faith, West Raynham, Newton, Weeton, Coningsby, Honington and Watton. Each of the five weekly Training Camps are held in series with the same programme repeated each week. The overall supervision is by full-time ROC staff officers but spare time officers and NCOs who attend Camp are co-opted to assist in the day to day practical training and supervision. The main body of each Camp assembles on the Monday and disperses on the following Saturday with the work being divided between lectures and practical training.

The annual Training Camps are the one occasion in the year when the Commandant and Staff Officers of Headquarters ROC are able to speak directly and at one time to representatives from all groups of the Corps, and it is also the one time in the year when procedures and training methods can be demonstrated to a standard pattern. This is also the time when the national character and importance of the Corps is amply demonstrated, and any understandable local outlook can be set properly against the greater national requirement. It is for the latter aspect that the visit by a senior Inspecting Officer on the Friday of each Training Camp is of such value. This is the only occasion when it is possible to invite Senior Representatives of the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office, and the Royal Air Force, to meet the Corps "en masse", and the effect on ROC morale is far reaching.

HQ ROC
ROC/216/Air
January 1970