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An Introduction to the Air Force

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AIR FORCE

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Our Air Force attracts a wide range of people to its ranks; people of different ages, backgrounds and personalities.

The common goal among those who join, however, is a desire to serve their country, and dedication to a unit with long-held traditions and a strong history.

At Enlistment ceremonies around the country, dozens of Australians join our Air Force each month – like an 18 year old wanting adventure and to be challenged; a softly spoken school-leaver who simply loves her country; or the son of Sri Lankan immigrants, looking for direction and a secure career path; and a soldier's wife, seeking the same personal growth she's seen in her husband.

These are just some of the newest members of the RAAF – the Royal Australian Air Force.

"I'm really looking forward to it. I think it'll be a real challenge, and I like the fact that I can learn and earn a qualification and get paid, all at the same time," 23 year old Denham Selvadurai, says.

Denham has enlisted into the RAAF as an Avionics Technician. Before he begins training in this field, he needs to go through 11 weeks of recruit training, an intense course which offers a glimpse into life in the Air Force.





“The Air Force can open up a world for someone,”

Denham’s father, Johann, says he’s proud his son has chosen this path, both for his career and for his life in general.

“I think an experience like this will be really good for him. It will help him to settle down and I think he’ll mature because of it,” he says.

The Enlistment Ceremony, where recruits swear allegiance to the Queen and loyalty to defending Australia’s interests, follows months of processes – applications, interviews, physical tests, psychological assessments and medical checks.

It’s a lengthy process that’s not taken lightly by any of the recruits, nor the Enlisting Officers. It’s strictly designed to ensure that those who enter the Air Force are best suited to the structure, discipline and responsibility necessary for life in the military.



More than 850 people enter and complete Air Force recruit training each year, and it’s a decision, the Enlisting Officer tells the new recruits, that they’ll never regret.

“The Air Force can open up a world for someone,” says the Commanding Officer of Number 1 Recruit Training Unit (1RTU).

“Broadly speaking it’s for people who are willing to serve in a uniformed service and for people who are willing to serve anywhere,” he says. “There are very few people in the Air Force that haven’t served in a variety of locations in Australia or overseas.”





Recruit training teaches the basic skills required for life in the Air Force; weapons, ground defence, physical training, and drill (or marching), as well as the history and values of our Air Force – adaptable, flexible, responsive, professional, motivated and dedicated.

“We are the means of preparation to life in the Air Force. And there’s a great sense of achievement for those on the parade ground when they graduate,” the Commanding Officer says.

Enlisting alongside Denham is 25 year old Kina Noble. Married to an Army soldier, Kina says she’s seen the personal benefits of being a part of the Defence Force family, and now wants to experience the same mental, physical and emotional development as her husband.

“Being a soldier’s wife, I’m used to, and I’ve been told about, what life’s like in the Defence Force. But more than that – I’ve watched my husband Simon mature and benefit from his training... and I want that for me,” Kina explains.

“My family weren’t that surprised to hear I was enlisting, and they’re really happy for me. They’re a bit worried, of course, but I know I’ll be fine.”

But saying goodbye is never easy. The ages for enlistment range from 17 to 54, and for some recruits, this will be the first time they’ve left home.





Some have just left high school and their parents are hugging them goodbye, knowing that this is just the first of many trips away; others are saying goodbye to their children and to their husband or wife, seeing this as a new chapter in their lives and an opportunity to rediscover them.

Indeed, for all of them it's a daunting experience, but it's one they all look forward to challenging themselves to complete.

"Sometimes in life you've got to make a move and make some changes," Denham says. "Now, my job everyday will make a difference to the next person and that means a lot to me. I'll be doing a job that serves a greater purpose."

The newly enlisted recruits travel from around the country to Number 1 Recruit Training Unit (1RTU).

On arrival, the recruits are divided into 'Flight A' and 'Flight B' and are given a tour of what will be their new home for the next 11 weeks. It's a large base, with accommodation, training facilities and administration buildings scattered over the facility.

In the background is the occasional whirr of a plane's engine from the nearby air strip, a constant reminder to the recruits that this is their life now.



“Sometimes in life you’ve got to make a move and make some changes,”





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“When you first arrive here it is a bit of a culture shock,” Aircraftwomen Recruit Noble says, no longer called by her first name by her Instructors or peers.

“From the moment we enlisted, we’ve been in training and it is quite challenging – but in 11 weeks, I want to get to the point where everything’s just routine, and I’m confident in what I’m expected to be able to do,” she says.

Accommodation for the recruits is shared living quarters – male and female recruits are divided into separate buildings, with six beds to a room. Beside each bed is a basic desk and lampshade, and all recruits are provided with a locker to store their belongings and large kit boxes to be kept underneath each bed.

The recruits are given haircuts on day one; the male recruits have their heads trimmed to a close ‘number one’, while females have their hair trimmed and then instructed to pin their hair into neat buns.

Identical uniforms are distributed to each of the recruits, different uniforms for different activities – Disruptive Pattern Camouflage Uniform or CAMs as they’re called, PT gear for physical training, and their Service dress ‘Blues’ – a light blue shirt and navy blue pants to be worn on parade.





“It’s been a bit of a culture shock but I know I’ll get used to it. By the end of the 11 weeks it’s all going to be routine, I’m sure.”

Even their drink bottles and backpacks are identical – the only difference between each is the nametag with the recruits’ surname taped onto the front.

“It’s a very different world,” Aircraftman Recruit Selvadurai says. “It’s been a bit of a culture shock but I know I’ll get used to it. By the end of the 11 weeks it’s all going to be routine, I’m sure.”

Throughout the base, everyone marches as they move from location to location; right arms swinging straight by their sides, their heads looking straight ahead. There’s no unnecessary movement made when you’re in the Air Force.

On some of the footpaths are white lines to help recruits pace out their marching strides. Almost half a metre apart, the strides are strong and firm and in time with Instructors calls – “Left, left, left, right, left ...”

Recruits march between training locations, from their classroom to the Parade Ground, and from their blocks to the Mess Hall where they eat all of their meals every day.

Filled with rows of tables, the Mess Hall is packed each day with hungry recruits eating their meals in as short a time as possible to enable them to spend some more time on catching up on any project work they have.

“We get about 15 minutes for lunch, but if you’re at the end of the line you might only have about 5 minutes so you eat as soon as you get to the table to finish your meal,” Aircraftman Recruit Selvadurai says.





Some of the lunchtime meals on offer include Tandoori Chicken Chops, Curried Vegetable Hot Pot, Quiche Lorraine, Penne Bolognese, Salad and Fruit, but the strict timetabling for recruit training does not allow time to sit and enjoy an after meal chat.

“The meals are excellent,” Aircraftman Recruit Selvadurai says, “but you don’t get much time to enjoy and savour them.”

The recruits wake at 5 o’clock every morning and are in bed by 10 o’clock every night, with most of the time in between timetabled towards drill, physical training, weapons training, classes and meal times. It’s a strict routine, but it prepares the recruits well for life in our Air Force.

“Every second of every day is taken up, and there never seems to be enough time to do everything,” Aircraftwoman Recruit Noble says, “but it’s all about learning how to complete tasks and act instinctively and exactly.”



From learning how to maintain and handle weapons, how to defend an aircraft and take care of equipment, as well as the history and laws of the Air Force, Aircraftwoman Recruit Noble says the key lesson she’s learnt has been about self-discipline.





“I do think I’ve changed – I feel stronger, not just physically but mentally too,”

“It’s about being efficient, and doing things in a very orderly and quick fashion and keeping your mind switched on constantly,” she says.

Recruit Selvadurai agrees. “When I do my job, I have to follow specifications and guidelines – I have to do it properly or lives are at risk,” he explains. “So if my Instructor tells me to fold the top of my bed down by 30 centimetres, they don’t mean 29.5 centimetres, they mean exactly 30 centimetres.”

“It might seem strict at the start, but you start to realise that if you can learn to do the little things accurately and properly, it then applies to when you have to do the bigger things accurately and properly,” he says.

After just a few weeks, the recruits answer their squadron leaders with confidence – “Yes Sir”, “No Sir”, and they walk with a natural marching stride.

“I’ve been able to do things that I would never have done before. It’s a real eye opener into what goes on in the Air Force, but more importantly into what I’m capable of doing,” Aircraftwoman Recruit Noble says.

“I do think I’ve changed – I feel stronger, not just physically but mentally too,” she says.





And while she misses her family and friends, Aircraftwoman Recruit Noble says she's gained lifetime mates.

"We've been doing lots of team building activities, and learning to lose the 'I' and replace it with 'We'. In all of our tasks, everyone's got to make it home, whether that's doing PT (physical training), or running 4 kilometres or doing 30 sit-ups, we encourage each other to succeed," Aircraftwoman Recruit Noble says.

Eleven weeks after they first enlisted, an F/A-18 Hornet – Australia's primary air combat aircraft – roars over the recruits standing proudly at attention in the middle of the Parade Ground for their Graduation Ceremony.

Proud parents, grandparents, partners and children fill the seats, watching their loved ones perform the drill they have rigorously been practicing.

Dressed in their perfectly ironed blue shirt and navy pants, with their spotless and shining black shoes, the recruits try to maintain a serious face as they see their loved ones, some for the first time in weeks.





“I’ve learnt skills like how to handle pressure and stress. Recruit training has taught me so much about self-discipline, self-control and self-determination,”

“When I first came to 1RTU, I saw one of the previous courses graduate and I remember looking at them and thinking ‘Oh, no, can’t even get my arms swinging together, how am I going to slow march that whole parade?’,” Aircraftman Recruit Selvadurai laughs.

“But I did it. I just needed to practice, and I’m so proud of myself that I’ve finished the course,” he says.

No longer shy reserved individuals, these graduating recruits are very different to the people who first arrived for training. They’re a confident team who each have the basic training required to defend their country. They leave 1RTU to undergo specialist training at bases around the country, before being posted to a base in Australia or even overseas.

Personally, they have transformed into mature, confident and strong people, both mentally and physically.

“I’ve learnt skills like how to handle pressure and stress. Recruit training has taught me so much about self-discipline, self-control and self-determination,” Aircraftwoman Recruit Noble says.

“I’m so glad I enlisted. I admit there were times when I wasn’t sure, but now I look back at what I’ve accomplished, and it’s been the biggest achievement of my life,” she says.





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For Aircraftman Recruit Selvadurai, who joined the Air Force to give his life a new direction, he only wishes he'd enlisted earlier.

"My life has permanently changed now," Aircraftman Recruit Selvadurai says, "I'm so proud to be a member of the Air Force team."





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