

OUTSIDE THE TWIRE

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ADGies – DEFENDING AIR OPERATIONS

Resilient, innovative, open-minded and armed to the teeth, but “definitely not special-forces” – that’s what you’ll find if you take a closer look at the Royal Australian Air Force’s Airfield Defence Guards.

Far from being a typical ‘guarding’ entity, patrolling a base and checking IDs at the front gate, Airfield Defence Guards – or ADGies, as they are affectionately known – are very much a mobile, outside-the-wire fighting force of considerable capability. They are also a relatively small group of people with a heavy responsibility, thereby necessitating proficiency in a wide range of skill sets, equipment and weapon systems.

ADGies have been around since the Vietnam War, when the RAAF owned Australia’s battlefield helicopter fleet, where many were employed as door gunners. In fact, an ADGie was one of the very last Australians to lift his feet off Vietnamese soil, during the evacuation of Saigon at the end of Western involvement in that country.

But it was in 1997 that today’s ADGies really found their contemporary niche – during the evacuation of Cambodia on Operation Vista, when Australian aircraft on the ground in a hostile foreign environment

came under threat, not so much from marauding insurgents or warfighters, but panicked crowds desperate for a seat on the only flight out of Dodge. The vulnerability of our aircraft under such circumstances, and the invaluable presence of the ADGs on point security that day, was painfully obvious.

While the loss of a single aircraft, such as a Caribou, Hercules or, in the near future, a C17 Globemaster or Airbus A330 Multi-Role Tanker Transport on a tactical mission may be quantifiable in monetary terms, the loss of the scarce strategic asset could be decisively detrimental to Australia’s interests.

Today, the Aircraft Security Operations aspect of the ADG suite of responsibilities sees the RAAF’s foot soldiers deployed world wide in just about every recent theatre of Australian involvement – Solomon Islands, East Timor (INTERFET and current), Indonesia, Pakistan, Iraq and even Cyprus during the recent evacuation of Australians from Lebanon.

This, though, is but one aspect of what

ADGies actually do in potentially difficult, dangerous and complex environments.

ADGies are non-commissioned members of the Royal Australian Air Force who provide the specialist ground defence force required to protect air-power assets from the effects of hostile ground action in and around air-force bases and installations. They are responsible for protecting our air assets, infrastructure and personnel against attack by enemy ground forces – or even from the passengers within an aircraft.

Put simply – as the situation dictates, ADGies can be tasked with the security of single or multiple aircraft or facilities anywhere from the cockpit door out to several kilometers from the perimeter fence. Or even more succinctly, ADGs provide the security necessary to sustain air operations.

A summary of the tasks engaged to achieve this goal could also include; protecting (mainly cargo and passenger) aircraft at foreign landing sites – whether established airports or remote landing



Airfield Defence Guards



strips; securing forward-operating bases by conducting vehicle check points and patrolling operations or, denying an enemy the freedom to approach to within striking or reconnaissance distance of a protected airfield, whether that enemy be an insurgent rabble or highly-skilled special forces.

One thing that needs clarification before further explanation, though, is to say that ADGs are essentially an operational, warfighting force, very similar to and closely modelled along infantry lines. What they are not – as is often wrongly assumed – is a peacetime, home-base taskings such as at crash sites, and a host of other ad-hoc tasks as requested by higher commands who know they are calling on a very capable and highly trained group of professionals.

That said, however, the skillsets inherent in the ADGs make them ideally suited for peacetime, home-base taskings such as the delivery of weapon and security training to other base personnel, search and rescue tasks, off-base security tasks such as at crash sites, and a host of other ad-hoc tasks as requested by higher commands who know they are calling on a very capable and highly trained group of professionals.

Officer Commanding Airfield Defence Wing at RAAF Base Amberley near Brisbane, Wing Commander John Leo concedes that the name 'guard' may conjure up a false impression of what these people actually do.

"Yes, we guard an airfield – but it's not a static kind of guarding. We are very much a mobile force and, in that regard, we are very much comparable with infantry in the Army," he says.

"Where we differ from the infantry is in the fact we can operate almost autonomously in very small groups – often in half-section sized, five-man groups.

"In that respect, our people often experience command and control responsibilities at a much more junior level."

In looking at the makeup of the RAAF's ADG 'mustering', it may be enlightening to further compare their structure and overall capabilities in comparison to the more easily recognised infantry – remembering all the while that central to the ADG role is a countering capability to the conventional tactics of infantry and, indeed, special forces.

An ADG rifle section is made up of 10 men – as opposed to nine in an infantry section. This basic building block (which is often split into two teams of five), carries an array of weapon systems as appropriate to the task at hand. Notable, however, is the fact they carry, as standard, two 7.62mm Mag 58 machineguns, as well as 5.56mm F89 Minimi Light Support Weapons. While the Army dropped the Mag 58 in favour of the Minimi some years ago for the basic section patrol (but are set to re-adopt perhaps one per section), the RAAF never let the capability go in the first place. As Wing Commander Leo says, "there's no such thing as over armed. If you turn up for a fight – you want to win".

Building on the rifle section, three rifle sections come together to form a rifle flight, with a headquarters element of four (as opposed to three in infantry) making a total of 34 men per flight, compared to 30 in an infantry platoon. That, by simple maths, equates to eight heavy-hitting Mag 58s per flight.

Also in the ADG armoury are 9mm Browning pistols, 9mm MP5 sub-machineguns, 12-gauge shotguns, F88 Steyr (carbine/sniper-scope variants), 7.62mm and .50cal sniper rifles, 66mm anti-armour rockets, 84mm Carl Gustav anti-tank recoilless rifles, hand grenades, Claymore mines and an assortment of police-type batons, cuffs and accoutrements.

Outside in the vehicle compound is an array of motorbikes, quad bikes, Land Rovers (some being the cut-down, weapon-mounted 'gun-buggy' variant) and, as a recent addition, Bushmaster Infantry Mobility Vehicles.

These latter are modified (or about to be) at ADG request, with three weapon mounts on the roof (as opposed to two in infantry guise) and 10 seats (nine for infantry). Interestingly, however, these two major after-market modifications may well be adopted by the Army after examining the ADG capability.

Unlike infantry, which form the basic building blocks on which an army is built, ADGs are not in or of themselves, a primary target for an enemy. Airfields have a wide range of high-value targets – including key equipment, personnel and infrastructure – much more important to an enemy force.



Understanding this is a key enabler to the ADGs' unique, flexible and imaginative selection and use of weapons, equipment and tactics on their battlefield.

The list of weapons above points to one particularly interesting capability (among the many) embedded in the Airfield Defence Guard suite of assets – a sniper pair, trained by the Army, but acting very much in a counter-sniper mindset. Contrary to traditional sniping, where a marksman and his number two can spend hours or days stalking a prey or simply waiting for an opportune target, ADG snipers are mobile, inserting into an intelligence-identified

potential kill zone or relocating quickly to an area where an enemy has been detected. They do this on cross-country motorbikes, dropping and camouflaging these short of a target area before proceeding on foot – stealthily – for the engagement. Often, knowledge of the mere presence of this capability is sufficient to put an enemy on the back foot.

Likewise, knowledge of the presence of or, when the fight starts, hearing the din of a Mag 58 in action, or the crack of 7.62mm rounds close by, can have a profoundly negative psychological impact on an enemy's disposition.

Central to the ADG *modus operandi* is the notion that an enemy must first reconnoitre an airfield before he launches an attack. Hearing or seeing a Mag 58 in action might cause him to think there is a far larger force (since infantry only carry Mag 58s in a large-force support role) protecting the airfield and thus cause him no inconsiderable degree of angst or miss-judgment in attempting his reconnaissance.

With enemy psychology in mind, ADGs also often work in cooperation with the base Military Working Dog Section. The presence of a dog, backed up by the impressive firepower, can also be a debilitating deterrent to even the most skilled enemy's plans.

To test this in an exercise environment, ADGs have in the past secured a base against the attentions of the Australia Special Air Service Regiment in an enemy role. Was this effective, or even taken seriously by either side? Well, as one ADG put it, "we were determined to prove ourselves and I'm quite sure they didn't want to be shown up by a bunch of RAAFies". But, while both sides probably claimed the victory, there's no doubt both groups learned a great deal from each other.

Wing Commander Leo sums up the ADG/infantry comparison by pointing out that the Airfield Defence Guard fraternity is a much smaller group of people, operating a much wider array of weapons and equipment.

"While the infantry as a whole may use much the same kit as we do, it tends to be used more by specialist parts of the infantry, whereas we have a lot more of our people involved in delivering these capabilities.

"Because we have such small numbers covering such a large area of responsibility, we have to use every aid available to us. We try to be as well armed as we can and employ every possible tactic and technique to get the job done."

So, how does one become an ADG? Entry to this exciting and, one would have to say, attractive employment stream is, in theory, relatively straight forward. The mustering is open to males only, between 17 and 50 years old, with passes in Year 10 maths and English.

After completing the RAAF's general-entry recruit course of 10-weeks duration at RAAF Base Edinburgh, South Australia (moving soon to Wagga Wagga), potential ADGs then



GROUND DEFENCE OFFICER

While ADGs are non-commissioned members of the RAAF, the closely aligned commissioned officer ranks belong to a separate mustering.

A junior Ground Defence Officer leads ADGs as the commander of a rifle flight and is very much a hands-on member of the team, carrying weapons, patrolling and leading his men in the field.

He also, of course, has a good deal of responsibility for the management and welfare of the men under his command.

A Ground Defence Officer completes basic RAAF officer training at Point Cook, near Melbourne, before entering the Royal Military College, Duntroon to undergo a full 18-month Army officer training course.

Once posted, his duties may also include: advise base commanders on ground-defence policy and options; train other base personnel; control an armoury; and, conduct combat-survival continuation training.

complete 14.4 weeks training at the RAAF Security and Fire School (RAAFSFS) at RAAF Base Amberley near Brisbane. This intense course is about to get even longer, however, expanding by a further three weeks to accommodate the demands of increasing roles and equipment suites.

Training at RAAF SFS is provided on small-arms weapons, high-explosive weapons and explosive stores, radio communications, field engineering, battle-craft and tactics, map reading and navigation, nuclear, biological and chemical defence, and first aid and casualty handling. New elements to be added shortly may include tactics surrounding the introduction of the new Bushmaster IMV.

The basic ADG course is physically very demanding. Accordingly, students are recommended to have a high level of physical fitness before commencing training.

Twenty-five-year-old Aircraftsman Brendan O'Brien from Brisbane, interviewed at the week-10 stage of training on the Basic ADG Course, says he was up to the course's challenges.

"I was a personal trainer before I joined the RAAF, so I was well prepared for this. I am enjoying the physical side but, to be honest, I haven't been pushed very hard so far," he says.

"On the other hand, I reckon any young bloke who is active and plays a bit of sport – particularly any of the footy codes – will definitely not find this course beyond them."

It is the physically demanding nature of the training, though, that may well be an aspirant's downfall. Of 46 starters on the Basic ADG Course that commenced in mid May, 12 had been removed by the 10-week mark, half through mainly minor injury (while the others had decided that being an ADG was not to their liking after all and were discharged from the RAAF at their own request). This is not the end of the line for the keen recruit, however. After recuperation and remediation, they are placed on the next available course at roughly the same stage of training at which they dropped off.

Nineteen-year-old Brendan Walker, a former student and part-time salesman, was one of those given a second chance after

being injured on an earlier course. He says his training so far has been "awesome fun" and he has learned a lot.

In an operational squadron, ADGs typically conduct an hour's physical training five days a week, first thing in the morning. Three of these sessions are formal lessons with a physical training instructor, while the other two are usually dedicated to sport and team-based activities.

Chief Instructor at the RAAF's Security and Fire School Squadron Leader Damien Fauser says that while there are other very tough jobs in the RAAF in terms of working in confined spaces or with extreme temperatures and so on, he has no doubt that Airfield Defence Guards work in a very demanding job.

"But it's not just from the physical side. We also encourage a high degree of lateral thinking and initiative in our training," he says.

"While there are some basic skills that we train to the point of being instinctive, we also look to develop people's ability to apply their own solutions to the wide variety of problems they may encounter in their operational service. This is especially true as individuals progress through their careers."

There's no doubting ADGs work hard. Shake hands with any one of them and you will instantly recognise the vise-like grip of strong, confident men.



"We need to deploy the best capability for the limited number of people we have – therefore we must have appropriate mobility, appropriate comms and at least equal if not better firepower than what we expect to come up against."

Wing Commander John Leo, Officer Commanding, Airfield Defence Wing, Amberley





ADGs work as a team, in groups of five to 10 men. Some typical tasks performed by ADGs are:

- patrol over extended periods, often over arduous terrain, regardless of climatic conditions, carrying the personal and mission equipment necessary to the task;
- patrol on foot and by vehicle by day or night in and around established and bare-base airfields;
- provide close protection to aircraft and infrastructure;
- construct field defences and obstacles such as weapon pits and bunkers, fences and roadblocks;
- conduct aircraft, vehicle, personnel or building searches and clearance operations;
- man crew-served weapons such as machineguns and anti-armour weapons;
- instruct other RAAF personnel in the handling and use of small arms such as rifle, shotgun and machinegun, and,
- provide close personal protection for high ranks or VIPs.



ADG riflemen are frequently absent from their home base and family for several months in any one year. During operations and exercises, they work in all terrains and climatic conditions by day and night and must be able to function in extreme conditions for indefinite periods and endure high levels of fatigue. One ADG told me he had often felt he had reached the limit of his endurance but, when he hit 'the wall' he realised that to quit would simply mean his mates would have to carry his load as well as their own – "and you just can't do that to your mates".

Far from being a downside to the job, though, this young man assured me it was 'character building'. Recognising I might think he was regurgitating a cliché, he clarified that such experiences had built upon his mental toughness just as surely as the physical exertion had built a stronger body. And he loved the job even more for providing those challenges.

The basic fitness standard required of a young ADG is that he be capable of running 2.4km in less than 10 minutes and complete 10 chin-ups and 40 sit-ups (without the feet being held). Some concessions are allowed for older members.

On graduating from training, an ADG will be posted to a rifle flight in an airfield defence squadron – either No 2 Airfield Defence Squadron (2AFDS) at Amberley in south-east Queensland or 1AFDS headquartered at RAAF Base Edinburgh near Adelaide.

1AFDS is a unique beast, though. In a reshuffle scheduled to be fully sorted out by January next year, this unit will be a composite full-time/reserve unit. But, uniquely, it will have elements scattered right around Australia – thereby affording opportunities for would-be part-time ADGs to join this challenging muster in their own capital city.

Another opportunity still open to ADG reservists – one that the Army gave away some years ago – is the old Ready Reserve Scheme – or at least a version of it. Under this scheme, reservists can join the RAAF, complete basic recruit and ADG training and the balance of 11 months full-time service – as far as possible in the same

calendar year – and then fulfill a remaining four years and one month on the basis of 50 days' service per year. While the older scheme has continued to run very successfully over recent years, further conditions to be introduced under the new High Readiness Reserve scheme will see very attractive sign-on, retention and medical-support bonuses payable to those who commit part time.

Wing Commander Leo sees the main challenge for the future is keeping sufficient numbers of new people coming through the school, as well as keeping those people we have, properly trained, so we can continue to provide the right people to fulfill the effect the Air Force is seeking.

"That may become a strategic challenge in the future as the job market dries up and competition for that diminishing resource becomes tighter.

"Currently, to be honest, recruits are queuing up at the front door to join the permanent force, but we do need to get the message out about the new High-Readiness Reserve and the excellent new conditions of service that offers."

If you haven't been convinced already that to join the ranks of the Airfield Defence Guards is an attractive proposition by dint of the personal and team challenges, the opportunities for travel and operational service and so on, then consider this. An ADG rifleman, straight out of basic training, earns more than \$45k a year. While this is similar to an infantry rifleman, wider skills, competency-based progression and quicker career advancement will see this base salary increase much quicker than in most other areas. The actual base pay group may also increase after attaining core skills and completing advanced courses. All ADGs keep a competency log book to record key achievements to facilitate this.

In the end, while it may sound like a strange argument, if you are into physical and mental challenges, teamwork and mateship, and advanced levels of weapons training – in other words, everything you would traditionally associate with the Army and particularly the infantry – then perhaps you should take a closer look at what the RAAF's Airfield Defence Guards have to offer.