

## Royal Observer Corps



*Illustration 1: ROC cap badge showing the Spanish Armada era watcher. The Corps motto is shown at the bottom of the badge*

from the Prime Minsiter.

Dress included black berets instead of RAF blue (a tradition from World war Two when black Royal Tank Regiment berets were issued due to shortages of RAF issue berets). As a private purchase item, RAF forage cap or "chip bag" side hats could be worn. Other than this conventional RAF uniform with ROC rank insignia was worn. Those assigned to man cells were also issued with either blue or green coveralls. The flash Royal Observer Corps and the group number were worn at the top of each sleeve. Coloured Spitfire badges were also worn on each sleeve based upon the number of annual proficiency test passed at master level (stars were the same colour as the badge). The test consisted of 100 multiple choice questions and were different for post and headquarters members.

Tests passed	1	2	3	4	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40
Badge	Blue	Blue plus one star	Blue plus two stars	Blue plus three stars	Red	Red plus one star	Red plus two stars	Red plus three stars	Gold (introduced 1988)	Gold plus one star	Gold plus two stars	Gold plus three stars



*Illustration 3: Blue star worn below the Spitfire and above the cuff rank badge if appropriate. (ROC Museum)*



*Illustration 4: Red Spitfire badge (ROC Museum)*

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, plans were made to abolish the Corps. The events of 1991 however prompted a rethink. The ROC was integrated into the Royal Auxilliary Air Force (RAuxAF) although it remained a separate body and ROC ranks and insignia remained. Training became the responsibility of the RAF Regiment who instituted a series of weekend camps to enhance basic skills. In addition a two week camp was run each year to obtain specialist qualifications (extended from the one week camps that had run since 1948). This was in addition to the six one week camps that ran back to back taking 500-600 students each. A system of a tax free annual bounty of £500 for those who achieved a certain standard of training (in first aid, NBC, signals and aircraft recognition) was introduced and greatly appreciated by the volunteers.

With the events of 1995, the ROC was called up and members moved to their duty stations.

Formed in 1925 this was intended to provide coast watchers to observe inbound enemy aircraft. With typical British amateurishness, these were unpaid volunteers who were made into special constables (the only uniform was initially a lapel badge that the member had to pay for himself!). Used to supplement the radar system in World War Two (the radar was not available once the enemy aircraft had passed it when it crossed the coast). Given the title Royal in 1941 for its role in the Battle of Britain, the Corps expanded and recruited women. Some volunteers were used on board ships on D-Day to provide aircraft recognition who were rewarded with a special flash on their uniform.

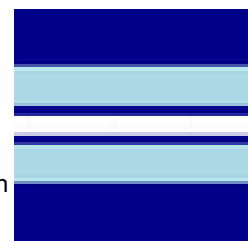
In the 1950s the improvements in technology and the increased role of nuclear weapons led to a re-rolling. Emphasis was placed upon nuclear reporting with bunkers designed for seven days habitation being developed although these were very spartan).

Composed of volunteers under a small cadre of about 70 full time professional staff plus about 100 civilian (MoD) support staff, it was under the command of RAF Strike Command and headed by a serving RAF Commodore. Full time members had to undertake a four week long training course at RAF Cranwell. In a unique way, commissioned officers remained civilians and did not receive a Royal Commission but instead a Warrant



*Illustration 2: Example of shoulder flash from No 2 Group (Horsham). Those deploying to Europe with the Royal Artillery or RAF Regiment wore a variant in OG on the DPM jacket (Private collection of Leading Observer Mary Black)*

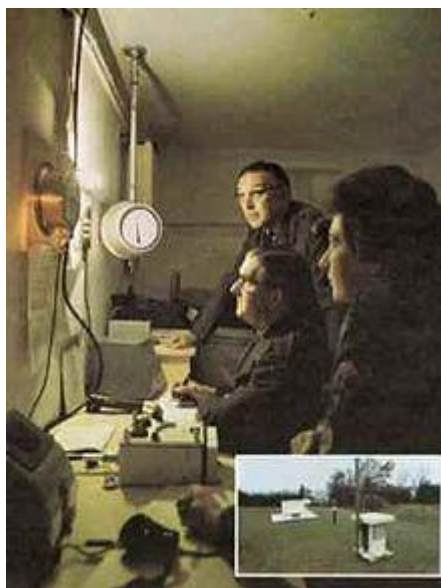
The ROC Headquarters was at RAF Bentley Priory. Under this were five area commands. These in turn each had five groups under their control, each controlling a varied number of individual cells totalling 1563 (including Northern Ireland). The headquarters had a staff of about 20, each, area commands had up to four staff and the group headquarters had up to ten staff including handymen (these were significantly increased from pre-war numbers which were about twelve, two and three respectively).



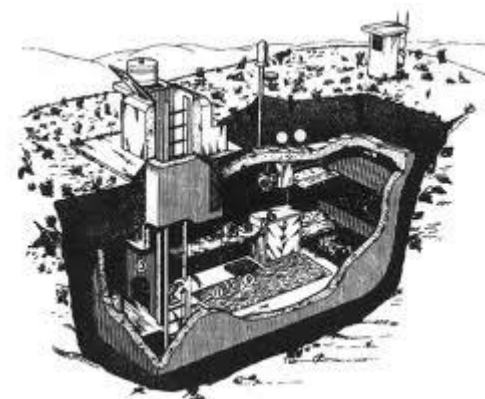
*Illustration 5: ROC Stable belt colours, also used as a TRF from 1996*

Volunteers were placed into two categories, category A volunteered for 50 hours of service and category B who volunteered for a minimum of 12 hours (although most did many more). When the British troops were given the orders to assist the German Army, the ROC was issued with weapons and ammunition under a secret plan. Each cell (usually of 4) was issued with one L2A3 Sterling SMG and three L9A1 Browning High Power pistols along with a total of 164 rounds of ammunition. A shortage of pistols however resulted in some being issued an extra one or two L2A3s in lieu of the L9A1s. This was intended to allow the ROC to have a self-defence system in the event of civil unrest. Some groups headquarters appear to have been issued L1A1 rifles although this was not officially part of the inventory. The source of these is unknown. Group and area headquarters were usually guarded by detachments of RAF Regiment personnel or occasionally Army Home Service Force troops as a precaution against Pact special forces attacks.

During the nuclear strikes of 1997, the ROC provided a system of reporting that greatly aided the co-ordination of what little aid could be provided. Many of the reports are



*Illustration 6: Above and below ground picture of an ROC post in action. Note the instrumentation being monitored. (ROC Museum)*



*Illustration 7: ROC training pamphlet illustration of a typical bunker. (ROC Museum)*

improving their bunker (the example in the ROC Museum shows a small library shelf containing a collection of well thumbed paperbacks and a Monopoly set). Perhaps the most important item in the bunkers was however the boiling vessel or BV built into the wall to provide hot water. This source of almost constant tea and coffee was beloved

now on show at the ROC museum at RAF Bentley Park. The standard of professionalism of these reports is astounding when you consider that many have just watched their communities die.

In the aftermath of the strikes the ROC had little to do other than sit and report on further strikes, the bunkers did not have the capability to provide a long term base of operations and the numbers in each cell were too few to provide a unit to assist. As a result the cells generally reported as long as they could before striking out on their own. Many attached themselves to what remained of local government as NBC experts.

Each cell manned a 4.75 x 2.25 x 2.25m bunker under a 200mm concrete slab. Power was 12v car batteries which could be recharged using a small generator. Each cell had a EMP hardened dedicated landline to report to a designated cell which had a VHF radio for higher communication. Despite the hardening many failed during the strikes with the higher than expected effects of EMP. Fortunately the extensive network of cells allowed for this and reports generally got through to higher levels.

Entry to a cell was by a vertical ladder with a steel trapdoor which descended 25m. As the war progressed, these cells reported the nuclear strikes and the VHF cell in each cluster became a focal point for communications until the final collapse of authority. Life in the cells was far from ideal, with very limited amounts of power available using the 12v car batteries, a pattern of sleeping at night with shifts to observe was usually instituted although some cells worked on the principle of releasing one member of staff to go home to charge the batteries on a nightly basis. Many ROC members report being expert card players by the end of their service as there were few other means of passing the time. Some also worked on

## Cell stores

A typical cell had the following items, many variations occurred depending on what was available

- 1 landline set (battery powered with 10 sets of C cell batteries) with spare hand-powered handset
- 8 NBC suits (usually OG headover models)
- 4 Mark VI respirators in 58 pattern pouches
- 12 spare filter canisters
- 1 medical satchel complete with a copy of "Battlefield First Aid Aide Memoir"
- 4 camp beds (either wood frame or metal folding)
- 4 sleeping bags (58 pattern)
- 1 stationary box with report forms and ROC Training pamphlet set
- 8 doses atropine in auto injectors
- 1 chemical detector set
- 4 books chemical detector paper
- 1 set aircraft recognition posters
- 1 set chemical and NBC warning markers
- 1 electric cooker
- 1 boiling vessel
- 2 large dixie cooking pots
- 1 ladle
- 40 ration packs (boil in the bag type)
- 1 water purification pack
- 1 chemical toilet
- 2 pairs binoculars
- 20 heavy duty rubbish sacks
- 10 double layer rubbish bags (for human waste)
- 1 pack of cards (using aircraft silhouettes)
- 4 body bags
- 2 blankets to set up privacy curtains for toilet area and/or female ROC members
- 1 card detailing local authority locations and contacts
- 4 pairs anti-flash goggles
- 4 blue nylon foul weather clothing (jacket and trousers)
- 4 sets of mess tins
- 4 sets of knife, fork, spoon
- 4 58 pattern water bottles with mugs
- 2 25 litre jerrycans (water) – empty
- 1 crate 12c car batteries
- 1 generator
- 2 25 litre petrol jerrycans
- 2 folding 6' tables
- 4 folding chairs
- 1 set 1:50,000 OS maps of the local area
- 2 prismatic compasses (often ex WW2 issue)
- 4 individual dosimeter for measuring individual exposure



by the members of the ROC and most carried extra tea bags or a jar of coffee (occasionally supplemented by an illegal hip flask of brandy or whisky) to while away the long watches.



*Illustration 9: A typical example of a Group Control, in this case 16 Group at Shrewsbury. this is evidently a pre-war photo as the building is unguarded and the damage caused by marauders in 1998 is not visible. (Private collection of Observer Janet Young)*

the UK. The observer's original group number was retained. Twelve members were also assigned to the Joint Services Air Defence Wing at Larkhill to teach aircraft recognition techniques. With this proving a success, twenty were assigned to the Joint Service NBC Training Wing to teach reporting techniques.

The most unusual post was that of the No17 Group (Watford) Easy 4 Windsor Post which was in the Brunswick Tower of Windsor Castle until the 1960s when it moved to a basement. This post was officially visited by King Charles and other members of the Royal Family on a number of occasions and unofficially on several others, the duty log bearing their signatures is now in the ROC Museum as are several of the many photographs which they were happy to pose for with the duty staff. It was unique in that observers during exercises did not have to provide their own food but were fed hot meals by palace footmen (a tradition started by King George V).

In 2002 the ROC in England was officially stood down and a final parade was held in front of King Charles in Canterbury. The national banner was placed into storage and the ROC was placed into suspended animation as its members and former members marched past to the regimental march "Skywatch."



*Illustration 11: Royal Observer Corps Medal (note the design on the rear mirroring the cap badge). (ROC Museum - medal belonging to Observer John Cornwall)*

are missing was set up at the same location and features a warning beacon in the form of an Armada era beacon with a

In addition based upon experiences in the 1980s a number of ROC personnel volunteered to assist in aircraft recognition roles with the RAF Regiment and Royal Artillery's Rapier batteries as the weapon was becoming more reliant upon visual acquisition in the face of Pact jamming of IFF signals. These were mainly based in the UK but a detachment of 400 volunteers was deployed to BAOR in March 1997 (over 2500 volunteered). These wore the standard RAF regiment equipment (i.e. as per the British Army) with ROC insignia with the addition of a further shoulder flash curved downwards reading "Air Defence." This could be retained after the individual returned to



*Illustration 8: 2623 Squadron (City of Birmingham) RAuxAF Regiment Rapier system at RAF Laarbruch June 1997. Under magnification the figure on the left can be seen to be wearing ROC insignia (MoD)*



*Illustration 10: Post war picture of the secret entrance to a bunker in Anstruther in Fife. This was disguised as an ordinary house. In 1996 the regional government was secretly housed here along with the ROC cell. When Scotland declared itself independent the cell expanded to become the regional governments NBC Response Centre under the control of the Scottish Government. (Museum of Scotland)*

carved stone in the form of the cap badge in front. Low granite walls with bronze plaques listing the dead and missing form a circle around the beacon. Each year on the 5<sup>th</sup> May the beacon is lit night and day to commemorate their sacrifice. It is also lit on 11<sup>th</sup> November every year during to commemorate those who died prior to the Third World War.

*"...and so I again give thanks on behalf of a grateful nation for the brave and dedicated men and women who gave up their time to ensure that reports of the blackest days in the war were accurately given to the authorities following in the traditions of our ancestors who lit the beacons warning of the Spanish and more recently Hitler's Luftwaffe. Without you many more would have died in those bleak days. You can rest easy now, your work is done. I give you your final command, not dismiss but fall out as your country may need you again. ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS, FALL OUT."*

*HRH King Charles III  
Canterbury, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2002*

There are rumours that some of the cells were not ROC at all but a cover for a stay behind system designed to form the nucleus of a resistance movement if the Pact invaded the UK. So far the only source that has given any evidence of this ("Secret Resistance" by Harry Truelove, 2007, Grantham Free Press) has been discredited but rumours persist. Interestingly a similar use of the ROC had occurred during the Second World War when the unit was used to provide covers to a number of specialist electronic units and other secret units known as "ghosts" (these were actually classified as secret until 2045).

Among the former members of the ROC were :

Observer Shaun Potter who was the first person to officially report a nuclear strike on the UK and went on to be elected as MP for Hastings in 2009.

Chief Observer Harriet Calver who's voice is heard in the report being broadcast in the ROC Museum. Her report of the strike on London is abruptly ended in mid sentence when her cell was destroyed by a Soviet missile strike near the bunker.

Observer Captain George Grant who was elected President of the ROC Association on its reforming in 2007. He was the main voice behind the campaign for the Home Defence Medal award. Previously a Welsh Guards officer and 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division NBC Officer in the 1970s. During the war he had been made the group commander covering South Wales and had worked with the Welsh Government as an NBC advisor.

Leading Observer Brian Wilkinson was awarded the George Medal (the highest civil award) for his actions in rescuing three children from a burning house in Plymouth when on his way back to his bunker with fuel to recharge the batteries. The citation read that Wilkinson entered the

burning house bringing the first child out. On being told that there were two sisters upstairs he returned into the building and carried the two young girls out braving the flames starting to engulf the stairs to do so, having covered himself and them in a wet duvet to provide protection. Wilkinson is known to have survived the strikes but disappeared shortly afterwards and is believed to have died in late 1999.

Observer Commander Karl Thomas was the most highly badged member of the ROC. Lying about his age to enlist, he had served in the ROC since 1944 at the age of 15. He had attended the D-Day landings earning the "Seaborne" flash and by 1996 had achieved his gold Spitfire badge with three stars (an almost unique distinction). At the age of 66 he volunteered to be attached to the Rapier units in Europe! This was unsurprisingly turned down. He died of natural causes in 2008 and is buried in Folkstone.

ROC Ranks were:

Enlisted – silver cap badge, rank worn on the arm. These were all part time volunteer appointments.

*"I was called into the Captain's office and told that my request to be attached (to the Rapier unit) had been turned down. I wasn't exactly surprised but I was cheered up when the Captain observed dryly that I had been turned down as they couldn't work out which title would go where with the 'Seaborne' and 'Air Defence' both being due..."*

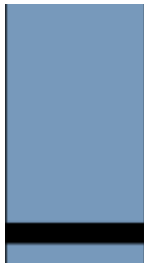


*From "A Lifetime Watching" by Karl Thomas and Jean Linnington ROC Museum 2008*



Rank	Abbreviation	RAF Equivalent	Badge	Dress	Remarks
Observer	Obs or Obs (W) for female	Aircraftsman/ Aircraftswoman	none		
Leading Observer	L/Obs or L/Obs (W)	Corporal			

Chief Observer	C/Obs or C/Obs (W)	Sergeant			
Master Observer	M/Obs or M/Obs (W)	Warrant Officer Class II	Never issued – proposed as above but with four bars		Never issued, it was proposed that this rank be introduced but the nuclear strikes of November 1997 put this on hold. When it was reconsidered in November 2001 it was quickly overtaken by the announcement that the ROC would stand down.

Rank badges were based upon those of the Royal Canadian (Volunteer) Storekeeper Corps which were issued to the ROC in World War Two as there was a shortage of normal corporal and sergeant insignia. They were also used (for the same reason) by the US Civilian Technical Corps during World War Two.

Officer – gilt cap badge, rank worn on epaulettes. Unless noted these were open to both full and part time staff.

Rank	Abbreviation	RAF Equivalent	Badge	Dress	Remarks
Observer Officer	Obs Off	Flying Officer		From this point and up, collar dogs reading ROC were worn on No 1, No 2 and No 5 dress	Lowest rank for part-time officer. Not available for full time officers.
Observer Lieutenant	Obs Lt	Flight Lieutenant			Lowest rank for full time officers. This rank often caused chaos on RAF bases when worn in shirt sleeve order as the rank looks very similar to the lofty Air Commodore rank.
Observer Lieutenant Commander	Obs Lt Com	Squadron Leader			Full time only (although higher ranks were open to part time volunteers)

Observer Commander	Obs Cdr	Wing Commander			Promotion to this rank was purely by merit and it was not unknown for Chief or Leading Observers to be promoted directly to this rank.
Observer Captain	Obs Capt	Group Captain			The most senior rank to be held by an ROC officer. Above this was Air Commodore which was a regular RAF officer.