

NO CHANGE OF PACE

By Tim Gellel, Head of AAHU.

The pace stick is the Regimental Sergeant Major's badge of office. The pace stick carried by the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Army (RSM-A), has a longer history than the post of RSM-A itself.

Shortly after Warrant Officer Wally Thompson was appointed as the first RSM-A in 1983, he was presented with a pace stick by one of Army's most famous RSM, Geoff "Fango" Watson.

Watson was brought up in Hobart by his mother, his father having died of wounds on the Western Front in 1917.¹ After joining the 22nd Light Horse Regiment (The Tasmanian Mounted Infantry) in 1930, Watson was selected as one of the 100-strong Australian Army contingent sent to London in 1937 for King George VI's Coronation.

Watson later transferred to the Australian Instructional Corps, which comprised Permanent Force warrant officers and senior non-commissioned officers from all arms of service, who were posted as cadre staff to the part-time Citizen Force units. That period of his service included regimental roles in RAAC units, culminating in his appointment as the RSM Duntroon in 1944.²



Lieutenant General Sir Phillip Bennett looks on as Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Fango Watson (formerly RSM Duntroon 1944-54) prepares to present the pace stick to the RSM-A, Warrant Officer Wally Thompson (right), Canberra, 30 May 1983.

¹ Lieutenant Colonel A Argent, 'The RSM' in *The Duntroon Society Newsletter* 2/1988, October 1988 accessed at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54518c4be4b0bea70c60aab5/t/54ebcf9be4b0feaa477a3689/1424740251192/2-1988-web.pdf> on 12 March 2022.

² Lowry, Robert, *The Last Knight: A biography of General Sir Phillip Bennett AC, KBE, DSO*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2011, pp. 18, 354.

In keeping with the British Army tradition, the RSM Duntroon role was, like the British Army's RSM Sandhurst, regarded as Army's senior RSM appointment. And it was in that role that Watson was appointed as RSM to the Australian Victory Contingent and returned to London for the 1946 Victory Parade to commemorate the end of the Second World War. There, his British Army counterpart, Warrant Officer Arthur Brad, presented Watson with his pace stick.³

This pace stick became the first brought to Australia as a symbol of office.⁴ Upon his return to RMC, one of the Staff Cadets under Watson's instruction recalled the pace stick:

‘which none of us had heard of, let alone seen, before. Fango must have practised with it along the decks of the ship on the voyage back from the UK in those more leisured days. Certainly he was most adept as he strode along in front of Beer Block twirling it at 120 paces a minute’⁵

Fast forward to 1983, when Lieutenant General Bennet, who as an RMC cadet had been impressed by Fango Watson's professionalism and character, established the post of RSM-A to ensure Army's senior leaders had immediate access to advice on matters affecting soldiers. In a ceremony at Army Headquarters (then Army Officer) on 30 May 1983, Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Fango Watson presented that pace stick to Warrant Officer Wally Thompson.⁶ Since then, that pace stick has passed to every RSM-A as a badge of office for Army's senior most soldier.

³ *Army News*, ‘Fango's Bark Heard Again: Historic Pace in Army's Heritage’, Number 596, 16 June 1983, p.2.

⁴ Terrett, LI and Taubert, SC, *Preserving Our Proud Heritage: The Customs and Traditions of the Australian Army*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, NW, 2015, p. 118.

⁵ Lieutenant Colonel A Argent, ‘The RSM’ in *The Duntroon Society Newsletter 2/1988*, October 1988 accessed at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54518c4be4b0bea70c60aab5/t/54ebcf9be4b0feaa477a3689/1424740251192/2-1988-web.pdf> on 12 March 2022.

⁶ Lowry, Robert, *The Last Knight: A biography of General Sir Phillip Bennett AC, KBE, DSO*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2011, pp. 173-174.