

Contribution from Vic Longyear

One of the first pupils – Drake 1947 - 1950

The Start of a New Life.

Returning to England I worked for a short time in London for GB Kalee, a subsidiary of the J. Arthur Rank film company, in Wardour Street, Soho. It was not easy to get a job for such a short time before National Service. I quite enjoyed it as the personnel were very nice. My digs were in Lancaster Gate and consisted of a narrow room with a gas ring for cooking. The gas was supplied on the insertion of coins in a meter which seemed to gobble up money. I was soon called up for my National Service about three months after starting at Kalee's.

It was on a cold, miserable winter day in January 1951 that I was instructed to report to a centre for recruitment on Clapham Common. There was a perfunctory interview to establish which service one might wish to choose or were suitable for. I was surprised to have my choice of service and regiment (The Royal Engineers) being accepted because my father had been a serving officer in the Royal Engineers, this being considered as a strong claim. Regimental loyalty and tradition were of much greater importance than presently obtains.

A medical examination followed which must have been quite degrading for some boys who had led a sheltered life. The examination was carried out in a large hall partitioned by a few screens with a desk with (presumably) a medic for each discipline sat behind it. Everybody stripped to nudity and progressed from one partition to the next getting colder and colder as the time wore on.

There are only two incidents that stick in my memory, other than the embarrassment of wandering around naked: one when approaching a doctor at his table and saw his mouth moving but producing no sound. He then repeated it when I was about ten feet from him but this time there was a whisper which I could hear. I was informed that this was a test of my hearing when he resumed his normal talking voice. The second incident was far worse. Walking to one partitioned area in the nude I was told to bend over at which time a gloved digit was thrust into my anus without warning: quite a shock. The rest of the examination made no impact on me after that. I believe that we were part of Group 5102 intake.

After a short time, January 18th 1951, I was given a rail warrant to Farnborough in Hampshire where I joined a group of others of my age waiting for transport to camp by 3

ton open truck to take us to Guillemont Camp which was the location of No. 3 Training Regiment, Royal Engineers, Cove near Farnborough.

We were taken to our quarters which were of the 'Spider' type. A 'Spider' was a wooden building with six large rooms emanating from a central block of toilets and ablutions area. Each room housed 20 to 30 men with a small room by the door for the NCO in charge: in our case Corporal Jones. We then proceeded to the stores to draw our clothing etc. We staggered back to the billet with blankets, uniforms, rifles and a mountain of webbing equipment and, most importantly, a big one pint china mug for tea and combination cutlery set of knife, fork and spoon. This latter had to be carried in the correct military manner grasped in the left hand resting on the left buttock when marching to meals. Breaking the mug was expensive as they cost 1/6d (over 30% of a days pay) to replace.

The boots that I was issued with were brown, as there were no black boots of my size in the stores, and was instructed that they must be black and shining by the next morning.

I found that the room I was in was composed of 'OR1s' ie Other Ranks 1, designated as potential officers. There were three other classifications of ORs 2, 3 and 4 being potential NCOs etc. I never found out what an OR4's potential was: cannon fodder? Everybody in the room in which I was located had a degree, School Cert, had come from public school or had some strong claim for consideration as officer material. Some were well qualified such as William MacMillan Bell, BSc, AIMEchE whose full title appeared on every letter from home, much to the company sergeant's (a mean-mouthed, rat-like individual) amusement on giving out post on parade. This reminds me of a chap called Spettigue whose name was always called out to rhyme with fatigue no matter how often he was corrected. Another name that comes to mind is 'zero, zero, zero' (his last three numbers) Walker whose father was an admiral. His father eventually took the salute at the passing out parade when we completed our training.

Another chap, Symes, was totally out of place with us. He played the clarinet but only classical music. He was one of those unfortunate people that could not co-ordinate his leg and arm movements when marching and was therefore not required on the passing out parade.

No 3 Training Regiment.

Basic Training

The layout of the camp was a Parade Ground of fine gravel some 100 yds square surrounded by blocks of buildings. One side was made up of the Regimental offices. Opposite to that were the cookhouse, mess hall and NAAFI. On the remaining sides one was the billets and the other class rooms. The SDI1[1], QMSI Jones, had his billet facing the square so that he could see what was happening on his beloved square. He was a martinet and we later suffered under his eagle eye as training NCOs. He was polished and shining from head to toe with never anything out of place; never without his pace stick. Our billet was on the side of the Spider away from the square on a side road running outside where we were to parade each day to march to meals, receive mail and general information.

The first day was instruction on how to wear the uniform and assemble all of the webbing, packs, pouches, frogs etc. For general work we were supplied with denim trousers and battledress blouse and second best boots and jack knife and lanyard which were part of the RE uniform at all times: the knife to show one inch of lanyard below the belt on the right buttock. This was followed by instruction on the webbing equipment and the various combination of straps etc to create, for example, Battle Order and Full Service Marching Order; the latter incorporating every pack, strap, pouch, frog and water bottle. Basic training was then started by hours and hours of drill on the parade ground, instruction in Regimental loyalty, rifle shooting practice and eventually with Sten gun and Bren gun.

We were taught to maintain our uniforms and equipment in the best condition possible and how to polish anything that didn't move. The planks of the wooden floors of the barrack room were polished by use of a long-handled 'bumper' and everything dusted until rubbing with white gloves on a surface showed no mark on the glove. Some bright spark thought that it would be a good idea to blacken the plank running longitudinally near the foot of the bed with boot polish: this to be polished and the feet of the beds to be lined up with it. This was taken up by the powers that be with alacrity and applied to all of the billets; more bull.

[1] Senior Drill Instructor, Quartermaster Sergeant Instructor.

Basic training lasted for 6 weeks which was mainly weaponry, digging trenches, marching, night schemes, marching, handling of small arms on the ranges, more marching and carrying out guard duties on the camp. Guard duties were for sixteen hours with a regime of two hours 'on' and four hours 'off'. For protection we carried a pick helve, metal bound at the top: far more lethal than a rifle in our hands.

For the first weeks we were not allowed to post letters in the post box which was by the company offices. Letters had to be given to the NCO I/c room to post as the Sergeant Major did not want to see 'a load of Gypsies' wandering around by the Company Office. Pay day after that first week was a bit of a shock. Our pay was 4 shillings (20p) a day, 28 shillings (£1.40) a week but when we received it on pay parade we found that there were deductions: National Insurance, sixpence 'barrack room damages' a further sixpence 'sports fund' and one shilling for the end of training celebration trip. There were further reductions if you had lost equipment and had it replaced from stores. Cigarettes were between 2/4d and 3/6d for a packet of 20; nearly a day's pay.

In these first few weeks we were for ever being given fatigues for some minor transgression of the myriad of rules. The fatigues were of a variety that I had never come across at school. One that I remember was removing all small stones from the rugby pitch on our hands and knees. Scrubbing the MI Room floor with a nail brush was another. Others were cleaning the urinals, polishing all metal fittings in the spider, marching around the perimeter road of the square in full service marching order (FSMO) for as long as the NCO required.

I always found it interesting to go to the firing ranges at Ash Vale near Aldershot. We used to march there in reasonably relaxed manner as compared with the formal drill. The weather was never really nice it being winter and one got quite wet laying at the firing points from 100 yds to 600yds.

The targets in the butts were manned by other members of your troop who would then change and the other group mark where the shots went.

Markers were housed in recesses within the bank below the targets to run them up manually in order to see where the hits were and signal with a long pole, on which was a disc coloured black on one side and white on the other.

Being markers in the butts really gave one the impression of the power in bullets when they hit the bank and the sand behind the targets. When shots were low and hit the bank protecting the markers they resulted in a heavy thud that shook the ground. When passing

overhead, through the target, there was a sharp crack followed by the thud into the sand.

It made one think what it would be like being hit by a bullet.

The Salvation Army or WVS always appeared on the ranges with a van serving tea, hot chocolate and buns, regardless of the weather. They were always greeted with real appreciation.

More mundane training was carried out doing "tin bashing" which involved a week in the cookhouse cleaning all the large, greasy utensils used in the cookhouse. I was fortunate in having my stint of this duty in the officers' mess in C Company which was remote from Guillemont Camp. There I had to get up at 4 in the morning to light all of the fires and ovens and get the utensils ready for breakfast. Fill all of the bunkers with coal for the heating etc. Wash up after each meal until clearing up after dinner before getting to my bed ready for the next day. I was thankful that it was only for 2 weeks. This represented the end of basic training and the start of the more technical training of the Royal Engineers.
