A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JUNIOR LEADERS BATTALION ROYAL ARMY ORDNANCE CORPS
1945 – 1982

By Major General L T H Phelps

Boys Training

In September 1949 the Boys Training School had moved from Aldershot to Haslar in Gosport, Hampshire under a new OC, Major R A J Wiggins, himself an ex-boy soldier. Major Wiggins set about improving standards, both in sports, for which there were excellent facilities, and in military and trade training and education. Recruiting improved as (for a time) did the quality and, in one case in particular, the physical size. The particular case was Boy Tett, who on joining at 15 years of age, was already 6' 6" tall. Under Major Wiggins's direction the famous "Toy Soldiers" were formed in late 1950. They gave their first performance at a searchlight display on Portsmouth United's football ground, Fratton Park, the curtain-raiser of some five years of publicity and recruiting displays up and down the country, including an appearance at the Royal Tournament in June 1952. Reporting on a display by the Toy Soldiers a year later, the London Star commented: "Their precision drill in the style of uniform of Wellington's day, has given them a reputation of being one of the Army's best showpieces for recruiting boys over 15". But by 1955 the demand on the Toy Soldiers has become such that it was interfering with training, and with reluctance the activity had be discontinued.

By 1953 the urge to recruit increased numbers of boy soldiers at the expense of quality caused overcrowding of the accommodation at Haslar in Gosport and discouraged intake of a high standard. The error was put right by a purge of certain unsatisfactory elements, and by moving the unit back to Deepcut Surrey in early 1954, to become a company of 9 (Regular) Training Battalion, with Major W R Eccles taking command of the Company. In the autumn of the following year, the Company was divorced from 1 Battalion, once again becoming a separate unit as the Junior Leaders Battalion RAOC Boys' School. At the same time the School became responsible for training REME boy entrants for the trades of clerk, storemen and regimental dutymen.

There had been for some time dissatisfaction within the Army over the term "boy soldier". It was a disincentive to recruiting, and did not give a true image of the potential of the junior soldiers as the future NCOs of the Army and indeed, for a sizeable percentage, commissioned officers. Hence in 1957 the term "boy" was replaced by "Junior Leader" and the RAOC Boys' School was retitled the RAOC/REME Junior Leaders School. That this change was well-conceived is borne out by the fact that the RAOC junior leader recruiting figures for 1958 were double those for 1957. A further change came in 1959 with the name of the establishment being changed again, this time to the RAOC/REME Junior Leaders Battalion. The appointment of CO was upgraded to Lieutenant Colonel, with Lieutenant Colonel J W Harley-Peters being appointed to the command. Yet while all those changes were occurring and following a decision made by the War Office in 1956, to group Boys' units into large units of around 1,000.