1 May 1934 – 26 September 1937
ex Boy Cpl John Porter

I sat a competitive examination: - Boys for enlistment into the Army as Apprentice Tradesmen. In my case this took place at Stirling Castle in November 1933.

There were 509 entrants countrywide, 195 qualified (38.31%) and were enlisted, 101 qualified (19.84%) but no vacancies, 213 failed (41.85%).

The results testify to the standards required by the Army.

I received notice, dated 26 January 1934, that I had attained the required standard and had been accepted for enlistment and I would receive instructions for enrolment at an early date.

So on Sunday May 1st 1934 in Stirling Castle the "King's Shilling" was pressed into my palm and as an enlisted Boy I took the night train from Alloa, over the Benjamin Baker (1882-90) Forth Bridge and on to King's Cross.

I fumbled my way through the Metro - my first time underground - to Waterloo and ended up via train and bus at Hilsea Barracks, Portsmouth, 1/2 mile south of the "Creek" on the London Road. I was 14 1/2 and kinda lonely.

Hilsea was the R.A.O.C. Depot and my new home for the next 4 years 7 months. But now alas all gone, except some perimeter wall and main gate on the London Road.
A housing complex no less!

The boys section was quartered in a long double storey building comprising 2 twin wings of 4 barrack rooms each, with external built on ablutions 2 up and 2 down, each serving 2 barrack rooms.
(This facility was believed built by Italian labour during WW I) and was located at the back of the camp near and parallel to Copnor Road.

Those who enlisted with me of which we were nine:

Ayley, Stanley
Bennett, Dennis Roland
Bolton, Ronald Arthur (discharged 1935)
Lambert, Leonard John
Perry, James Alfred
Sherman, Ronald
Stratford, Edward Ralph
Trott, Victor

Notables: Bugler Anfield (ran 100 yds in 10.1), P.T. Instructors Darkie Dodd and Sam Duffield, R.S.M. "Wiggy" Bennet M.M., Adjutant Capt. Viner. (both sticklers for 100%).

My 1936 group photo portrays 117 boys, 3 Royal Marines, and 2 Egyptian civilians, all armourers in training by the 12 civilian (ex Army) instructors, also shown.
A fairly substantial organisation.

So Boy Service was enjoined and I mostly bring to mind what that entailed: Lesson 1. At all spare times - Spit and Polish, essential preparation for weekly drill and Church parades, monthly kit inspections. Then fatigues any old time, night school, the desperate need to gain the 1st class Education Certification, twice weekly P.T. and cold shower after. My guess is every boy was subject to this form of educational "therapy".

When Hore Belisha became Defence Secretary (?) he introduced hot water geysers into barrack rooms. Luxury, hot water to shave!!

However, the 1930's were not all drudgery. In 1935 King George V celebrated his silver Jubilee and I was one of the dozen or so boys in no. 1 dress, lining London Road as the King & Queen's carriage glided past on the way to the Naval Review at Spithead.

The Navy was huge, 160 warships at anchor as far as the eye could see, and a heart pumping blaze of light extravaganza at night. It was 16th July 1935. The BBC's designated announcer for the occasion was ex Navy and he enthused, telling the world that "the whole bloody fleet was lit up". ---- Long deafening pause. Then he was suspended for using unseemly language. Puritanical days.

On another occasion we rehearsed a toy soldier routine and 2 busloads of boys spent 4 days under canvas, contributing our thin red line stuff at the Tidworth Tattoo.

Then George V died and we wore black armbands and assumed a pious mien.
Then the build up to Edward VIII's abdication. The press were ultra discreet, so we all speculated wildly and took sides.

So yet another Coronation. All the boys were bussed to London. The 12th May 1937 found me 1/3 of the way from the Victoria Monument in the Mall. A front row spectator to a British Empire pageant that marched and trotted and rolled to the beat of their military bands seeming endlessly before the new crowned George VI rode past with splendid mounted escort. Powerful regal stuff.

I met him in person, nearly 4 1/2 years later, but more of that anon.

After 2 years training we became eligible to sit a trade test and if we passed, received additional 2p per day. We could sit every few months, so I sat all 4, ending up with 1/7d per diem, most welcome, and promoted to Boy Cpl.

By now though, I was approaching my 18th birthday and on 26.09.37 I was transferred to Man Service on 2/- per diem and issued with my .303 rifle.
Just one year 5 days later, on 1st October 1938, I listened to Neville Chamberlain declaring "peace in our time", whilst waving his piece of paper.

My apprenticeship ended on 19th December 1938 when I qualified as a class II Armourer. Ayley was the only other to make class II, the rest had to settle for class III. Ayley topped my marks by approx. 1%, so he got 1st choice of posting from a select list of vacancies.
I had 2nd choice and luckily Chatham was available, and I arrived in the Royal Engineers, Brompton Barracks, early in January 1939.
My brother lived in Chatham. He was a Royal Scots reservist, later surviving Dunquerque, but was killed during Montgomery's eighth army break out at El Alamein on 24.10.42.

Barely 9 months after I qualified, on the 3rd September 1939, at 11 a.m., Chamberlain announced to a sober nation that a State of War now existed between the United Kingdom and nazi Germany.
Then followed the "phoney" war. Sometime in February I found myself posted as No. 1 armourer to the 7th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers, a component of 51st Highland Division. We motored to the Front and then past bombed out Vitry-le-Francois, helter skelter south of Paris and to the Channel coast.
Come 12th June 1940 at a cliff top near St. Valerie en Caux the Division was "sacrificed" and we were all marching to a Kriegsgefangenenlager.
Selby, McQueen and I made two escapes, but were re-caught.
Selby wouldn't try again, so Fusileer Jack McQueen and I had a third go in Cysoing on the Belgian border. This time we made the safe house of Monsieur/Madame Lefevbre.
Some days later off to Lille and to the small business of most heroic Monsieur/Madame Mortier-Prevot.
France had been divided into three zones.

Zone Interdit. Forbidden to enter and forbidden to leave. Roughly an eighty-mile Channel coast strip.

Zone Occupe. An approximate line running across the country south of Bourges.

Zone Non Occupe. Relative free of German control and run by the Vichy Government.

Once through the heavily patrolled Zone Interdit it was a series of breaks and hideaways to reach Lyon and the American Consulate. From there on to Marseilles and Fort St. Jean in the Vieux Port, home of the Legion Etrangere.
McQueen and I trudged up a sharp slope and entered the Fort to be met by the Commandant. I spoke: - Bonjour mon Capitaine. Nous sommes deux Anglais qui sont evade des boches et sont arrive ici. ..... His face lightenend up- Mon Dieu, un Anglais qui parle Francais. c'Est formidable.

It was just short of 11 a.m. on the 11th November. Surely a positive omen.

From then on it was more of the same, but with lighter heart. To Perpignan, a cold climb over the Pyrenees, incarceration by the not too friendly Spanish Guards and finally Gibraltar, on the 24th April 1941. Boarding the troopship HMT Empress of Bermuda on 8.5.41 and 10 days later I stepped down the gangplank onto English soil, Liverpool the 18th May 1941.
My version of the Grand Tour had taken 339 days. After a de-briefing in Golden Cross House, it was full circle back to Hilsea.

The R.A.O.C. continued the training of Armourers until the formation of the R.E.M.E. in late 1942, when we were all automatically transferred to this new Regiment on 1.10.42.

In October 1941 I was stationed at 51 Section R.A.O.C. Aldershot, on circuit duty when I was called into the C.O.'s office. There I was instructed to present myself not later than 10.15 a.m. at Buckingham Palace on Tuesday 4th November 1941. My folks had received tickets.

It was all quietly orderly. I took off my cap and was ushered to my place. Name called out and I stepped forward.

The King pinned a medal on my tunic, looked me in the eye and shook my hand warmly. Simple? I could scarcely believe this was happening!

I completed my 12-year colour service on 25th September 1949 in the rank of W.O. II having declined the offer to soldier on for another 9 years.

At the age of 30 I was an unemployed civilian.