Memories of Haslar
By Bob Walker
1951 - 1953

I joined the R.A.O.C. Boys Training School at Haslar Barracks Gosport on the 1st October 1951, eleven days after my sixteenth Birthday; this was unusual in its self, as the age of joining for most boys was fifteen.

I had no desire to join the army on leaving school so had spent my first year trying a variety of jobs, most of which I disliked. I had been an Army Cadet (Royal Hampshire Regt), so acting on my fathers advice, I tried for the army at first wanting to go into the RAMC. However not having any formal educational qualifications I was judged unsuitable, on the advice of the recruiting officer I joined the RAOC not knowing then what it was or what it stood for, having passed the usual inspections I was sent on to Haslar Barracks Gosport Hampshire.

As a consequence of joining late I was unable to complete my training and education to the standard of the other ‘inmates’, I did however gain third and second class education certificates and third class trade and rose to the dizzy heights of Boy Corporal before leaving at the age of seventeen and a half years in 1953. My early days flew by with so much attention to bulling and learning the routine of the school. I was for the first six weeks known as Boy NYA Walker, I recall the day very clearly when I was summoned to the CSM’s office and given my AB64 part 1 with my regimental number 22558066, which I was told to learn and remember. I recall marching around the square (never crossed it uninvited) reciting two two five five eight oh six six. Feeling that at last I belonged and pretty proud too. Shortly after that it was pointed out to me by the more senior Boys what a low life anyone was bearing a 2255 number. A 22292 number being far superior in every sense. Of course later I was in a position to point out to those who followed me anyone without a zero in their last four where inferior to us.

I look back on that period of my life with a great deal of nostalgia which has been fuelled in the main by finding Keith Lennard-White some three years ago, he and I have spent many hours chatting over the internet recalling those halcyon days. We both knew each other in Haslar; although he was slightly senior to me having joined some months earlier. Keith was one of twins, his brother Colin, tragically died aged 16 in March 1953, from complications following an appendicitis operation carried out at the Naval Hospital Haslar, and is buried at the Haslar Cemetery.

There were lots of tears shed on the day of the military funeral it was very difficult for a lot of the boys to maintain their composure that day. It is still a difficult memory for Keith to recall even today. Keith eventually changed his name from Todd as he was known during his time at Haslar.

At the time I joined the C.O. was Major R.A.J. Wiggins; the CSM was WO2 Eglington the B/SM was F. N. Webster, (now Lt.Col Retd, and living in the USA). A word on CSM Eglington, he was a Sgt. Major of the old school, very strict but fair, would brook no nonsense. He had a waxed moustache carried a drill stick, not a pace stick, always placed on his hip pointing skywards when giving words of command. He had one memorable trait which every boy remembers his habit of replying to an individual with "Balls or Balls", for instance, looking at you on parade he would ask "You cleaned your cap badge this morning Boy", "Yes Sir!", "Balls all Balls" he would bellow. Then pulling the offending object from the boy’s cap show him the back and hurl it to the ground. Then you would find yourself on

cleaning parade at 6 o-clock, having to show all your brass to the house Sgt. This would invariably mean that you would have no time for a visit to the NAAFI that evening.

There were approximately 120 boys resident at the time I joined who were divided up into Houses, Body, (the one I was in), Hill, Horne, Richards, and Williams. The barrack blocks were single story affairs with a long veranda at the front, which ran the length of the five blocks, with the Drill Square in front. Each block consisted of two bunk rooms at the entrance occupied by the permanent staff NCO and the senior B/Sgt with three rooms each connected by a through door to the next, no corridor, five windows in each room three on one side two on the other with a coke stove between the two. Each room housed about 12 boys; no lockers, no carpets and only four folding chairs per room, plus a 6ft GS Table. There were urinals, toilets and sinks at the bottom end of the barrack block; showers and baths were in a separate building. Floors were polished wood, beds were black painted folding GS, flock mattress, one pillow, three blankets two sheets. Above each bed was a two-door cabinet about two-foot six by one foot six with a shelf across. Under the cabinet were four coat pegs on which the Great Coat, best uniform and denims were hung. Beds were “made up” boxed blankets each day. No civilian clothes were allowed, only one pair of black oxford shoes, if you had none then it was boots for every occasion, or plimsolls as slippers.

The regime was very strict, some bullying by the older boys, with the usual pecking order from boys who were senior to you in service followed by B/Lcpls, B/Cpls, and B/Sgts, though the latter commanded a great deal of respect with their rank alone. I never came across any bullying by the permanent staff though they too could be harsh disciplinarians.

The Guard Room situated as usual at the main gate, was the one place most boys feared, not for the odd chance of being incarcerated there, but because it was the final frontier to any trip into town. In ‘Booking Out’ one had to pass the inspection of the RP Sgt, woe betide you if there was a flaw in what he considered a perfect turnout. Failure to make the standard meant a return to the barrack room to rectify the fault, and to rejoin the queue thereby losing more time out of camp.

There were a few racketeers amongst the boys making profit from individuals, the law of the cigarette was the main culprit, most boys smoked as was common then, and a cigarette could command a shilling (5p) at the weekend. You could also borrow two shillings (10p) for four shillings (20p) back. If you were wise you would buy five cigarettes from the NAAFI and sell three, thereby recouping your debt with a bit of profit. Incidentally pay was fifteen shillings (65p) a week out if which three shillings (15p) was held back for extra pay for leave at the end of term, in addition there were stoppages for barrack damages etc. The indication of values in today's money against the value of the money of those days bears no resemblance to the spending power between the generations.

There was a summer camp on the Isle of Wight during term times which only a privileged few went on. Which incidentally if memory serves me right was stopped in favour of the Toy Soldier Displays, more of which later.

The uniforms, which were Service Dress, had brass buttons, collar badges and cap badge, we wore SD caps, and blanched web belts, woe betide you if any of it wasn’t pressed to perfection and polished to the nth degree see CSM Eglington above. Mind you this only came with weeks of experience, hours spent bulling boots, preparing for kit inspections (every Saturday morning), church parade every fortnight. The everyday dress for drill and other duties was as I recall, denims, which had to be pressed for parades. Muster parade being the exception always SD uniform for that. Sports were actively encouraged, football, rugby, cricket, being the mainstays, athletics too, also boxing for those with the talent, I enjoyed and

took part in Cross Country running, (I suppose I always wanted to get away), but not much else.

By the time I had reached halfway through my service there the barracks had become very crowded due to the ever-increasing number of recruits. The powers decided to move the older boys to Fort Gomer, out near Lee on Solent, it had previously been occupied by the Royal Tank Regiment. Eventually I reached the time when I along with others of my year was moved there. It was a Napoleonic fort built around 1858 it had a moat fed from the sea, which emptied on the tide leaving stinking mud flats, as the sewage went out into the moat you can imagine the smell.

The barrack rooms were similar to railway tunnels cold dank with only one window at the far end. To complete the dismal picture the place was infested with rats, which we trapped in the rooms using issued traps. When one was caught the other rats came out and feasted on it. I would say that it was a terrible place to house young soldiers, but as always we made the best of what we had. I do recall some happy times. Although a lot was done to improve conditions there in my time it was still remained pretty grim. Incidentally the NCO in charge of the vermin control was himself an ex-boy B/Sgt Ted Young who had returned to the permanent staff as a Corporal and been sent on a course to deal with the problem. Fifty years later we were to meet up again to discover we live within ten miles of each other. There were no toilets attached the barrack rooms so you had to use the detached facilities across the way, at night if you had no torch, you made a lot of noise on leaving the room to scare the rats before venturing to use the facilities.

Fort Gomer continued to be used as an overspill for Haslar until mid 1954 after which both places closed and the Boys moved to Blackdown, North Frith Barracks, the rest as they say is your history.

Toy Soldiers.

The formation of a display team of Toy Soldiers was the idea of Major R A J Wiggins, and was formed in 1950 - 51. The uniform was based loosely on that of Wellingtons Army, which in my time consisted of Red Jacket, White Trousers, and crossed white sashes, a white belt completed the outfit. We wore a black and yellow Shako and carried a yellow wooden rifle. The drills consisted of a variety of manoeuvres forming lines and wheeling in Star formation. The finale was a reverse “Mexican Wave” in which the lines of boys fell face down in sequence after the canon was fired. There were also drummers and “mounted Calvary” consisting of a cloth and wooden framed “horse” in which the Calvary man trotted. We had a “Duke” who inspected the troops, and a parade commander, who in my time was B/Cpl, Later B/SM (the voice) George Atkinson, his very clear words of command were a feature on which everyone commented. We performed on numerous occasions at military open days and fetes around the UK, receiving high praise for our turn out and drill. We featured as an item on Pathe News, the BBC, and a number of magazine articles, notably the Illustrated News and Picture Post. The climax of my year was our being invited to perform at the Royal Tournament Earls Court in 1952. We performed on matinees and evenings. Her majesty the Queen and other members of the Royal Family attended the Tournament as did many other dignitaries of the day. We were called on to provide part of the Guard of Honour on several occasions

Field Marshall Montgomery saw us, at the Royal Tournament, as a result we were invited to perform at the El Alemien reunion at The Albert Hall in the same year.

I along with all those other “ex-boys” who served their time at Haslar Barracks and Fort Gomer look back these fifty odd years wondering where the time has gone, but above all with a sense of pride in our School.