MEMORIES OF AN EX-BOY SOLDIER
By TERRY COOK
30 AUGUST 1954 to DECEMBER 1956

The 30th of August 1954 was a big day for this skinny 15 year and four month old boy.
I was about to embark on a train from my hometown in Cambridge to a place I had never heard of called Blackdown.
It was over a hundred miles from home, and for someone who had never been further than London it was a long way.

The journey was uneventful, the London underground railway from Kings Cross to Waterloo was quite an experience and I arrived at Brookwood railway station full of confidence.
I thought that there would be someone there to meet me but after a while the station porter pointed the way to the bus stop.

The bus stopped out side of Boys Wing 1 Regular Training Battalion R.A.O.C. my home for the next two and a half years.
I wandered through a gap between two buildings into a courtyard and was walking around, a very loud voice shouted "oi you Poet come here!'
A very large man with a stick under his arm asked me if had come to join the army or the Corp band.
I said I was joining the Boys Wing.
"In that case " he said, "You had better go and get a Hair cut"
That was my first contact with C.S.M Hall {Baggy} and was to last until I left Boys Wing two and half years later in January 1957.

Settling in with several other new recruits in an upstairs room in Baker house was uneventful and friendships were formed and lasted for many years.
We wandered around in civvies for about a week before being issued with one set of denims {two sizes too big}.
No uniforms or any other kit were available for some time and I was told my army identity was for a time NYA BOY COOK T.M.
We were all kitted out about two weeks later and I was given the number 22825452.
I felt that at last I was in the army.

I moved downstairs to Room 1 and met my roommates.
Old sweats: Tingle, Twomath and Tonkes, and not so old sweats Brian Gill, Brian Booth, Tony Halls, Johnny Forty, Bill Hocking, Nelson {Nellie} Haddon, Les Greaves, Brian Sheppard, and John Spicer.
From then on until December I got into the routine of military training, scrubbing, bulling, and bumpering and studying for my ACE 3rd class education certificate.

Our house Officer was Capt {Perry} Mason, and our house sergeant was Sergeant Ken Middleton.
Our C.O. was Major W.R. Eccles, and the Adjutant Capt. Hubbard.

Other permanent staff included Captains Camfield, Pearson and Captain Mike Linfoot a great officer who was tragically killed in Aden in the early 1960s.
There were numerous boy corporals and about five boy sergeants {no lance corporals in my early days} and B/CSM Barnes. A very strict but fair boy NCO.

There didn't seem to be too many boys around camp at the time that I arrived at Blackdown. That was because many of them were away at the Edinburgh Tattoo doing Toy Soldier displays.
When they came back the number of boys swelled to about two hundred and were housed in four houses Baker House, Body House, Horne House and Swiney House.

We broke up for Christmas in mid December and I went on my first bit of leave since joining, for two weeks.

We returned to a very cold Blackdown in early January and soon got back into the run of things.
1955 was going to be a very busy year for every one especially me.
There was so much activity going on, with Military training, education, sport, and the beginning of a new Toy soldier display.

There was also a call for boys to form a Drum and Bugle band and the buglers would also be playing the Fife.
About fifteen boys started learning to play under Drum Major Colman ex Grenadier Guards.
I wanted to be a drummer but ended up with a bugle and a fife.
Later on I did manage to get on the drums as well.
We progressed quite well and played along side the R.A.O.C. Corps band on a few occasions at senior passing out parades and also led the boy's wing to church in Deepcut every Sunday morning.
The band got bigger and at one time we had about six side drummers, two tenor drummers, base drummer, two cymbals and about eight buglers, led by Boy Drum Major Tony Crisp.

Most of the boys wing were involved the Toy Soldier Display and we had many engagements.
We attended Aldershot Tattoo, Colchester Tattoo, York Tattoo, White City Tattoo; we also performed at Blackpool and on the Isle of Wight.
We all enjoyed the displays especially the travelling.
My own part in the display was as the Messenger and then rejoining the cavalry as they prepared to charge the opposite army.
The final act was the general salute with the cavalry in front and after we had lowered our lances Boy Richardson used to neigh like a horse.
It started as a bit of fun but ended up as part of the act.

Also during the year a small group performed in the Top Town TV show between Aldershot and York, this was staged at Blackpool and I was one of four Buglers to take part.

I was part of the shooting team, football team, I threw the javelin, ran middle distance and cross-country. Played basketball and dabbled at rugby {I didn't last too long at that} with my mate Chris 'Gaucho' Clifton.

All the time I was at Boys School our mentor and trainer at sport was SSI Burdett the physical training instructor.
Thanks to him our boxing team was the best in the Southern Command and some of the names of note B/Sgts Milburn, Ling, Walker, and Henley and Boys Clarke, Scott, Noble, Richardson, Martin, Crickard, and B/Cpl Howlett.

Another happy event I recall was when every one was called to QM stores for issue of anodized Buttons Badges and insignia, no more polishing brass except for buckles etc on webbing.

The Mountaineering club went on two trips during the year, one to the Lake District where it rained nearly every day. It was so wet we slept in a farmer's barn every night.
The second trip to Llanberris in North Wales was drier and every one had a great time.

I, and quite a few others, completed our Intermediate education certificate and the little White Star Badge appeared and was sewn on the left sleeve of our No1 SD jacket.
What with crossed Bugles and Crossed Rifles {Marksman} on my right sleeve I was getting quite a collection.

Then an unexpected promotion to Boy corporal after only eight months in the Boys Service, {no Boy Lance Corporals in my early days At Black down}, together with Dave Walker, Bob Crickard, {Later B/CSM} And John Diffin {Later to Become first J/RSM of the Junior Leaders}, I believe John Diffin went on to become an officer.

I think it was mid year when the first of the R.E.M.E. boys came to Blackdown.
The REME boys integrated well and lasting friendships were formed.
Some of the names I recall were Ken Miles {one of the first R.E.M.E. Boy corporals} "Trigger" Tregaskis, Wilson, Blacker, Martin and Drake.

I captained the Boys Wing Football team and cricket eleven 1954/55 and 1955/56 and we were very successful.

Inter house competitions were always keenly contested and I don't think any one house dominated any event, although Baker House were always top of the drill competitions.
I remember the Judge every year was one R.S.M. Brittain Grenadier Guards, supposedly the loudest voice in the British Army.
Permanent staff N.C.O instructors included Sgt Ken Middleton, Cpl Terry Rankine, Cpl 'Pop' Day and the well-known Sgt {Sammy} Norman Bruce Of Scottish Rugby Union Fame.
Our CSM {Baggy} Hall ably led these NCOs.
I remember too on parade days he would walk up every line doing his Cap inspection.
It was usual for most boys to slit the peaks of their caps and put a toothbrush handle behind their cap badges, he would take the hat of anyone who had damaged his hat {as he put it} lay it on the floor and walk over it.
If it just had a strengthener behind the cap badge he would just break it in half. I am sure he took great satisfaction in doing this.
As most boys took great pride in their appearances, they hated wearing caps that made them look like bus conductors.

Two of the main civilian visitors to Boys Wing were the photographer and a fruit seller who came nearly every week.
The fruit man was very popular and most boys used a bit of their meagre pay to buy six penny worth of grapes, or apples, bananas, pears and what ever else took their fancy. Nobody spent a fortune as our pay was 17/6d {seventeen and sixpence} per week of which FIVE SHILLINGS was held back for credit at leave time and paying for lost or damaged gear.

So the princely sum of twelve shillings and sixpence was all we had to pay for our Blanco, Brasso, boot polish, toiletries, cigarettes, {if you smoked} and entertainment which was a couple of visits a week to the Globe Cinema or trip down to the cafes in Deepcut.
Mid year holidays came and went and it was back to education, this time studying for the senior certificate.
This study was to last until mid 1956 when we would sit the exam.

Normal activities carried on until Christmas i.e. sport military training and inter house competitions.
Then the day before we were to go on leave disaster for me, I fall over and break my ankle and end up in Aldershot Military Hospital where my right leg is put in a cast, I am given a pair of crutches and sent back to Blackdown.
Everyone hands their bedding in the next day and head off home on leave.
I have to stay back an extra day so that my cast can set properly.
After all the boys had gone I was on my own and spent most of the day in the office with sympathetic permanent staff.
The next day I was given transport to Brookwood railway station and put on the train.
My problems started at Waterloo railway station, if anyone has been on crutches and trying to carry a big suitcase they will know what I mean.

As always I enjoy my Christmas leave, but am not very mobile. I celebrate with family and friends but spend most of my leave at home.
The dancing and playing football went by the wayside and as the leave drew to a close, made arrangements to travel back to Blackdown with other Cambridge lads so crossing London was not a problem this time.
George Tagg, John Harris, Mick Gleeson and Pete Barnes gave me great assistance in the journey back to a very cold Boys Wing.

A new term starts but there is no sport or fun games for this boy soldier.
Another invalid who also has his right leg in plaster joins me. Freddie Downs damaged his leg while on leave so we travelled together almost everywhere.
Hobbling along side by side and in step. Every one had a good laugh as they said it looked quite comical.

It was also very frustrating, as I had become a spectator at all the sports that I would have normally been taking part in and got little consolation by just watching.
The plaster finally came off after nine weeks but there would be no football or running sports for some time.
There were no parades either as I was Excused Boots as well.
I worked very hard trying to get some strength back into my ankle but it was not until I came back after the Easter leave that I was able to take part in the sports again.

One of the good things that happened while I was unable to play sport was that I got to watch two R.A.O.C men playing in a Corp football trial.
They were of course Bobby Charlton and Duncan Edwards who were just making their names as players for Manchester United.

Our boxing team also had a visit from Nicky Gargano a Commonwealth medallist also an R.A.O.C man.

Another great event for me, I am promoted to Boy Sergeant almost a year after promotion to corporal and moved to Horne House as House Sergeant.

I have now been in all four houses since I joined the boys.
That is Baker, Body, Swiney and Horne and I have fond memories of each stay.

I am again selected for the Boys wing shooting team and we are successful at the Corp shoot at Bisley, where we win the young soldiers team competition and I am placed third in the Boys Individual event.
We also win the RAOC unit competition that included permanent staff.

The boys cricket team gets off to a good start with wins over the R.E. Boys And R.A.S.C Boys and carry on unbeaten for the season.
Myself and two other boys are invited to play with the permanent staff cricket eleven and win the Aldershot and district minor unit cricket final.
The team Skippered by Major Eccles was also unbeaten through the season.

Many of the older boys have been studying for their Senior Education Certificate and have to stay back for a couple of days for exams while the rest of the boys are off to the Isle of Wight for our first annual camp.

We follow two days later after exams and compete against the R.E., R.A.S.C, and A.C.C Boys at football, Boxing and athletics.
The R.A.O.C. boys are eventual overall winners and I receive a great honour of being selected as R.A.O.C boys wing captain to receive the winner's trophy.
We then packed up all our gear, and proceeded back to Blackdown to prepare for our summer leave.

After two weeks leave the hiking/climbing club boys returned to Blackdown a week early for a foray up the west coast of Scotland.
We all had to join the YHA {youth hostel Association} as we would be staying in Hostels for the trip.
Led by Lieutenant {Lewy} J.K Head we travelled by train {overnight} to Fort William, which was our first stay at the youth hostel.
We had pleasant evening before a roaring fire having a singsong with a group of young ladies before a few of us went outside for "walkies".
Hence one of our members earned the nickname "THREE FINGERS" {and it wasn't for catching his fingers in the door}.
I still have a group photo of some of us ex-boys that he signed as such.
Your secret is safe Bob if ever you read this.

Next morning after breakfast it was a leisurely climb up to the top of Ben Nevis were we ate our daily ration of dry oats and sultanas {prepared daily by Lt. Head} and it is rumoured that we were the only boys ever to had their oats on top of Ben Nevis.

Back at ground level we packed up camp and got back on the train for a ride to the seaport of Mallaig where we embarked on a ferry for a trip that took us past the Isle of Skye to a place called the Kyle of Lochalsh.

Back on land we begin the first part of our hiking holiday and make it to our next hostel at Balmacarra.

After a goods nights sleep, we rise early, have breakfast and prepare rations for the day, which include the inevitable Oats and sultanas and a bar of chocolate and a couple of two inch thick sandwiches.

I'm not sure how many miles we travelled each day but none of us seemed to mind as we were all quite fit.

The next stop after that was a little place called Kishorn.
The hostel was right on the side of a Loch and after settling in we went out to the Loch and found that the rocks around the edges were covered in Winkles.
We gathered as many as we could and took them back to the hostel where we cooked them and shared them out.
The next day we even picked them from their shells, as we walked along the road to our next stop at Stromeferry.

Each day that followed was much the same, but the scenery and weather was as good as you will see anywhere and I vowed that one day I would return, and did so in 1964 and my son and his family went there in 2004.

Our last stop before returning to Fort William was at a place called Inveralligan.
It was to be a place that I will never forget.
After arriving Lt Head talked the locals into letting us use their fishing boats and also supplying us with a couple of hand lines and bait.
Lt Head and three others went in one boat, and myself and three others in the other.
Our boat decided to head across the Loch to a gap that led to the open sea.
It took ages to get there but we caught about a dozen Cod and started to head back.
It was on the way back that the problems started.
Firstly one of the rowlocks broke so we had one oar in the other rowlock and the other being used by standing up and using it like a canoe oar.
By now it was getting quite dark and we could see torchlights and lamps moving up and down the shoreline.
It got darker and I think we started to panic a bit and then the other rowlock broke.
Now there were two boys standing up using their oars.
We could hear people calling from the shore but they seemed so far away.
Eventually we reached the shore and received a big bollocking from "Lewy" but we had the last laugh as we had a dozen fish and they had one.

They were all cooked together and everyone had a good feed.
That was the last night of our hiking holiday, the next day we packed up and boarded a train that took us back to the Kyle of Lochalsh where we boarded the ferry back to Mallaig and Fort William.
We then boarded another train for the long trip back to Brookwood and Blackdown.
All in all a memorable trip with great mates great scenery and great food, but I have never eaten Dry oats and sultanas since.

The new term at Boys school begins and we get back into the routine of education, military training and sport.
We get the results of our senior education exams where it is joy for some and disappointment for others.
I am only successful in two subjects, my favourites English and map reading.
So its back to the classroom for three subjects only and hope I can be successful in my last term at the boy's school.

There are new items of interest in training, map reading hikes and initiative tests.
You never knew when you would be doing either as with the map reading it would be nearly dark when a certain officer {already mentioned earlier} would rouse up us senior boys tell us to pack our rucksacks and get on the truck which was waiting outside.
We were then driven around for several hours in the dark and dropped off in pairs and told to find our way to a checkpoint.
From there we had to walk across the countryside to another checkpoint using the compass where we would have to make camp. The next morning
If we all made it to the checkpoint we had breakfast and then had to make our own way back to Blackdown.
The initiative tests were vastly different, you were called to office, given a letter stating that you were in the army and doing an exercise in case Police or MP's picked you up. You were then sent practically any where in Britain to find certain details of your eventual destination.
You weren't allowed to take any money or to thumb lifts but I don't think anyone obeyed that order. It was great fun and there were many tales to tell once you got back.
All those who took part in these tests benefited greatly, I am sure.

The term gradually draws to a close and us older boys about to start our army service proper are getting ready to move down the road to 4 trade training battalion.

I look back with great pride of my time in the RAOC Boys School.
The training and encouragement I received during those early years served me well during my army days and also in civilian life.
The friendships made in those early days are still with me through the many photographs I have and even though we are not in contact anymore I often look through them and remember with great fondness those great times 50 odd years ago.

I remember the boys especially who took me under their wings when I first arrived at Blackdown:
Johnny Forty, Tony Halls and Les Greaves.
My other great mates:
Dougie Simpson, Pete Roberts, George Tagg, Bill Hocking, Brian Sheppard, Bob Crickard, Fred Mumford, Tom Bursford and Tubby Stevens and Chris {Gaucho} Clifton.
There are so many more mates and one whom I have been in contact with recently Pete Eldredge.
I remember too, a few of the permanent staff, Major Underwood, Major Eccles, Major Amato, Capt, {Perry} Mason, Capt. Pearson, Capt. Camfield and my cricket and football mentor the late Captain Mike Linfoot.
N.C.O's: -: CSM Baggy Hall Sergeants Ken Middleton, Norman {Sammy} Bruce, Fenton, Bill Odd, and Corporals "Pop" Day and Terry Rankine, and last but not least SSI Burdett my mentor at all sports during my time at Blackdown.

I still have other mementos of my Boy Soldier days.
My boot brushes still with the wooden parts painted white and my service number 22825452 stamped on the side.
A button stick and cap badge with the Kings crown, {these two items were given to me by an uncle who served in the Second World War} and I used them during my time with the boys.
I also have two Corps shooting medals a cricket medal and a boy's individual runners-up medal for the Javelin.
All these things and my photographs give me great joy as I look at them and remember.