Bob's Memories of Company Sergeant Major Frederick Halls, RAOC
By Bob Crickard
(Body Platoon 1954-57)

There were two Company Sergeant Majors for the RAOC Boys School in 1954. Frederick 'Baggy' Halls, the CSM for "A" Company, was an ex Scots Guardsman and Bob Cox, the CSM for "B" Company had spent all his service in the Corps. Bob was a reasonable, run of the mill, average CSM with no peccadilloes to distinguish him from many others in the Corps. Baggy, on the other hand…

Baggy Halls was the epitome of a Guards Brigade Company Sergeant Major. He enjoyed his reputation as a martinet, a disciplinarian of the first order and as a caricature of a Sergeant Major. He was tall, wide-beamed, heavily built with reddish hair and the complexion of a discerning man who appreciated a fine malt whisky. He relished the admiration and respect of his boys and he devoted effort to establishing his credentials as a character never missing an opportunity to consolidate his claim to being a "card". . He had a wealth of idiosyncrasies that the young soldiers ruefully appreciated even though they were the subject of Baggy's attention.

He would, when inspecting the boys on parade, check one for an "idle" belt, meaning the belt was too slack, and order the boy's name to be taken. Then, when inspecting that same boy from the rear, he would comment that the belt was also idle from the back and order that the boy "lose" his name yet again. Once, when he had called me from the ranks to march out and halt in front of him, he commented in a loud stentorian bellow, "Boy Crickard, there is no movement in the whole of the British Army Drill Manual whereby both feet are off the ground at the same f***in" time!" He would cleverly ignore the snickers of the other boys on parade. On another occasion, knowing that I came, as he did from the county of Angus, which is devoted to farming, he expressed his dissatisfaction that I was not maintaining the regulation thirty inch pace by roaring," Step short Boy Crickard, you are not behind a f****n' plough now!"

As part of our uniform we wore peaked caps. We would cut and alter these caps to make them look like guardsmen caps. This mutilation was totally against regulations and Baggy would dream up some fiendish schemes to penalize us. On one occasion he ordered a whole platoon of boys to remove their "slashed" caps, rip out the peaks and throw them to the ground. The peaks were collected and burnt so that they could not be refitted. The platoon had to wear the peakless caps for a week looking to all intents and purposes like midgets drafted into Kaiser Willem's First World War German Navy.

In addition to cutting the peaks we would, using a stiff clothes brush and soapy water, brush the crown of the cap so that the nap all lay in the same direction giving the surface a shiny appearance. One morning, when the parade ground was covered in slush, he noticed that Pete O'Hara had scrubbed the surface of his cap. Not in one direction, but in reverse segments, so that it resembled the crown of a top hat with four shiny brushed quarters. Standing in front of O'Hara he slipped the point of his pace stick between the side of the boy's face and the offending hat. With a flick he whipped it off and pinned it upside down on the wet red slushy gravel of the square. Keeping the hat pinned to the ground with the point of the pace stick and reinforcing his instruction with the corresponding motions he recited "When you scrub your hat, Boy, you do not go back and forward, back and forward, but around and around and around". He then flipped the cap, by now sodden and shapeless, up on the tip of the stick and deftly returned it to O'Hara's head from where dirty watery trails ran down his face for the rest of that parade.

At the end of every term, there were three a year, the boys would be sent on end of term leave. In those days pay was always paid, in cash, on a pay parade. The money for the leave period, plus allowances and savings or credits, would be paid to the boy soldier then immediately taken back to be sent by mail to his home address. Normally the money would be collected from the Bank for paying out on the day of collection but this was not always possible and sometimes the money had to be held in the orderly room safe overnight until paid out on the day of departure. On these occasions Baggy would place guards on the safe - literally. I remember having to sit, in the middle of the night before, for my allotted two hours on top of the safe in the Commanding Officer's office.