Bob's Memories of Toy Boy Soldiers
By Bob Crickard
(Body Platoon 1954-57)

A memory that might well be enhanced and embroidered by the passage of time.

The Toy Soldier display of the RAOC Boys School was at one time relatively well known in military exhibitions and tattoos throughout the United Kingdom. The boys gave successful displays at White City, Haringey Arena, Rushmoor Arena, York, Edinburgh, Blackpool, Exeter and many other venues. They appeared on television several times. However, due to the ever present need to economize in defence spending, a decision was made to terminate the display program.

The display had consisted of two armies, one red one blue, clad in the uniforms of mid nineteenth century Europe, complete with white cross belts and tall black shakos. Both armies would march on woodenly with stiff legs and arms from opposite ends of the arena. They shouldered wooden muskets that had a cleverly concealed charge of cordite that would be electrically detonated during the battle scenes to give the sound and smoke of musket shot. The two forces would form up in elongated lines facing each other at a distance of a hundred and fifty yards with the red army supported by a huge cannon, which for portability purposes was made of ply and balsa wood. There was also a troop of toy soldier cavalry, which comprised of twenty boys each surrounded by a wooden frame mounted with a hobby horse head and draped to the ground in a white canvas overhang, who would subsequently charge the thin blue line.

After an initial meeting and exchange of courtesies by the "mounted" leaders of both armies the battle would commence with the red cavalry, their pennanted lances levelled at the front line of the blue army, charging, felling the whole of the blue front line, regrouping and returning victorious to their lines. The red army would then take aim with their muskets and together with the cannon would fire at the remaining second row of the blue army who would fall down consecutively, from left to right, like upended dominoes. An announcer on a Tannoy system would give a running commentary and explain the intricacies of the manoeuvres to the audience.

The order and content of the displays never changed; the red army unfailingly rode through the blue without casualty. The red army cannon consistently roared and chopped down all the rear line of blue army wooden tops. And the announcer would always call for supporting applause from the audience for the victorious red army.

The charge designed to give the muskets their rather realistic sound effect was the same one used in the cannon but with obviously a reduced realism and effectiveness. The gunner in charge of the cannon was a lad from Hull called Sandy Sanderson who deeply resented the watered down crack his weapon made at the climatic point of the display. Sandy yearned for an honest to goodness boom and was determined to manufacture one. The last scheduled display at Blackpool might provide the ideal opportunity.

Late in June the boys travelled to Blackpool to appear at the Royal Lancashire Agricultural Show. Sandy having decided that it was now or never and having collected several charges from friends in the red army ranks of musketeers prior to the display, wired the bunch together and placed the boosted charge in the compartment made for that purpose in the barrel of the cannon.

Totally unrelated to Sandy's discontent a universal feeling of inferiority was prevalent in the ranks of the boys who represented the blue army. The consistent defeats wreaked upon them

by the red army each time they took the field took its toll of their normally cooperative team spirit. They too decided to change the script for their final appearance at the Royal Lancashire. It was decided that the charge of red army would not on this occasion go unopposed.

On the day of the exhibition both armies took the field as normal with the announcer describing the fictional events that had led to the impending battle. He announced that the red cavalry, wheeling into position in front of the impressive red army, would charge and decimate the unfortunate blues. At the sound of the trumpet the rather unwieldy toy cavalry bounced blissfully unaware across to the front line of the blues who, as they themselves went down, managed to upend each of the red riders. This naturally made the scripted call for applause for the victorious returning cavalry redundant but the announcer blithely drew the audience's attention to the positioning of the red army cannon which would soon be fired with devastating effect.

At the signal, Sandy's men went through the motions of loading the cannon with gunpowder and ball. The loading completed they pulled the piece into position in front of the red army, took aim and detonated the charge. With an enormous blue and yellow flash that had to be seen to be believed and a deafening roar both wheels of the gun snapped off to fall sideways, the barrel disintegrated into a thousand flying shards that soared to at least fifty feet in the air and Sandy and his crew, their faces blackened by the close proximity of the discharged gunpowder, were thrown backwards on to their bottoms. Most of the shakos of the front row of the red army were blown awry and many of the soldiers held up their arms to ward off the descending chunks of wooden cannon that rained down. Pure pandemonium reigned and the blue army, heartened by the disaster that had befallen the normally successful reds, charged across the field to wreak vengeance of the bemused reds.

An enterprising electrician realising that extensive deviations to the script were taking place blacked out the arena to allow the by now somewhat chastised "warriors" to leave the field of battle to the accompanying prattle of a bemused commentator.