October 1954 to December 1957
PETER ROBERTS



The autumn years of a Boy Soldier.

In 1954
Dien Bien Phu, the French fortress in Indo-China, falls to the Veit Minh after a 55-day siege.
British troops pull out of Suez after being in Egypt for almost 75 years.
Myxomatosis decimates Britain's rabbit population.
Comet *jet planes are grounded, following a series of mysterious crashes.*
Nine years after the end of the Second World War, rationing finally comes to an end.
A polio vaccine is developed and tested.
American evangelist Billy Graham conducts a three-month tour of the U.K.
Rock around the Clock *and* Fly me to the Moon *are 'Hits of the year'.*
Roger Banister runs 3 minutes 59.4 seconds to break the 'four-minute mile' barrier.
Germany beat Hungary 3-2 in the World Cup Final.
Oxford win the 100th boat race.

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No mention in any history book to recall the fact that Peter Roberts accepted the 'Queen's Shilling' and in doing so increased the strength of the RAOC.

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I recall it was a chilly but dry day as the bus did a U turn and I alighted in Blackdown around mid afternoon 11th October 1954.
I had set out early that day from my home in Bourneville, had my first glance at London as I rode the Underground between Euston and Waterloo, and on to Brookwood aboard a Green Train.
I walked the few yards back to the cross roads doing a two handed battle with my very heavy, extra large and fully expanded suitcase, (*…you know, the one with metal ratchet type hinges front and back that get caught up on the nets of the overhead luggage racks on trains, so you're grateful for once to your mother for feeding you all that spinach and stuff, whilst you pull half the carriage apart trying to retrieve your precious brothel creepers, boot lace ties and the like; all the things that the recruiting Sergeant failed to tell you would be out of fashion before you had a chance to wear them again*).

Standing on the opposite corner was a very big man, (I was 6ft 1in but this chap was like the proverbial brick built s--- house), carrying a big shinny stick.
As I crossed the road towards him he asked, "*Where are you going son*?"
(*I was soon to learn that if 'son' became 'sonny' you were in trouble*).

I recalled the Recruiting Sergeant Major wore a peaked cap similar to the one this person was wearing, and also carried a cane, although much smaller than this one's stick.
I started to reply, "*I'm looking for the RAOC Boys School* ***Sergeant ... mmm... er... er***"; I could not remember the other word.
Bad mistake, very bad mistake!!

As his shiny stick went skywards he uttered, (*more like bellowed*), those immortal words I shall never ever forget.
"*Sergeant! Bloody sergeant! I haven't been a bloody sergeant for years. See this Crown on my sleeve* ***sonny****? That makes me a Sergeant Major and don't you ever forget it. I am Sergeant Major Hall and you call me Sir".*

Throughout my time as a Boy soldier and on into Man service, my second dad, CSM Fred Hall, later to become RSM and then taking a QMs Commission, was respected by everyone and known to all affectionately as "Baggy Hall".
I thought of making a dash back to the bus but it was already on its way towards Deepcut and Aldershot.
Anyway it had been a long day and it didn't even count towards my eight years with the Colours or the four on the Reserve that I had signed on the dotted line for.
There was no such thing as "see how you like it, and if you don't you can go home" in them days.
There was to be no escape for me. [I still posses my signature on that dotted line of my salmon pink Army Form B 271A].

Baggy probably had a secret smile to himself over my obvious discomfort and grovelling apology, for his tone changed back just as quickly as he directed me to the company office.

After the orderly room had done its bit to welcome me it was the QM stores next for bedding, locker padlock, Pyjamas, a two piece denim suit complete with a handful of bakerlight buttons, KFS and the first of many white crock mugs, (It is amazing how easy they get chipped or broken as they disappear out through the barrack room windows, always open during kit inspections, as some eagle eye finds a minute speck of tea stain under the handle), plus a few other essentials including two pair of boots covered in pimples which I was informed had to be removed.
Why make them like that in the first place if you don't want them I thought?
All this was loaded onto the QMs hand cart and I was shown to my first 'Bed Space' in F Block, Body House.

It took longer than usual for me to get fully kitted out and to be told I was no longer NYA, but 22825485 Boy Roberts P.

Less than two weeks into my career I woke one morning with a raging temperature and could not get out of bed at Reveille.
Jock Oddie our platoon Sgt. was sent for, he then sent for a medical orderly, who in turn sent for the M.O.
An ambulance came and I was sped away to spend three weeks in Aldershot Military Hospital with Glandular Fever.
As my recovery started I learnt how to lay to attention in bed during Matrons rounds with the starched sheets tucked in across my hips so as produce no creases, and should you happen to

be addressed by this Matriarch "*are you being well looked after*", the answer was always, "*yes thank you ma'am*"?
What else was there to say whilst in the presence of one particular male nurse who was an expert dart player when it came to injections?

I was eventually handed a white shirt and red tie and allowed to recuperate by visiting the town centre.
Actually this served as a good grounding, for on later visits, (making use of the free Sunday TCV, usually an ancient Bedford QL, to Aldershot's OD church), I was able to point out to the uninitiated all the places of interest, like the Tattoo artist and the free NAAFI Club dances; not that anyone of us ever took to the floor.

Those early couple of months seemed to fly by as I learned to recognise from a distance the rank of anyone approaching, and with luck to duck out of the way, and if this was not possible, which hand to salute with.
I also learnt how to bull toecaps without the use of 'Luton's' Straw Hat Dye and how to spend my 'Credits' paying for a new SD cap.
'Baggy' had mistakenly ordered me to take one pace forward instead of one back before his next command of "Mark Time" after a lesson in "Ground Headdress"!

Christmas leave was upon us.
By this time Bob Crickard had become one of my firm friends.
Living in Scotland he had related numerous stories about 'Hogmanay'. They sounded too good to be true, so Bob joined me to spend Christmas with my parents before we travelled north to sample a Scottish New Year.

I met a group of Bob's old pals and we all agreed that a certain member of the group, who of course was not in on it, would go home to his tea-total family in a state of bliss.
What a time we had.
Crowds gathered in the main square of Brechin City, (more than ever went to watch the football team), as the clock crept up to the Midnight hour.
Everyone carried a bottle containing warming fluid, (Winter nights are very cold up there); anything other than tea, coffee and Oveltine was acceptable.
As the Chimes of Midnight rang out all the girls got kissed, NO! KISSED, well not that early anyway! Men mostly shook hands!
Whoever you exchanged greetings with you also exchanged bottles, and each took as much as you could get in one good swallow.
'First footing' followed and I met many wonderful people.

Bob's friend was duly deposited in a semi foetal position on his doorstep. We rang the doorbell then found we were needed urgently elsewhere.
Bob's parents lived about two miles from the city and we had cycled in. How we got back with the bicycles in tact I will never know.

This same pattern of events was repeated the following year when it was Bob's turn to be 'uninformed'!!
What a night, have you ever been a little unsteady trying to ride a bike single handed whilst holding a couple of hundred weight sacks slung over the saddle and handle bars of another at around four a.m.?

I guessed who's turn it was the following year when I was not included in the whispered conversations.
I tried to avoid any liquid other than Whisky. Some hope!
My Aston Villa scarf turned to ice around my neck as I dipped it into a steam to try and revive my brain. In a friends house someone said "Look they have drunk him under the table" and that's where I was.
I also have vague recollections of trying to turn myself inside out into someone's W.C.
I woke not knowing or caring what day or time it was to the gentle voice of Bob's mother screaming somewhere in my head that it was four O'clock.
In one hand she held a glass of Whisky in the other a glass of Port.
Happy New Year she beamed as I was offered both glasses.
I have never been able to stand the smell, let alone the taste of Whisky from that day.

That night I sheepishly revisited, with Bob reminding me where we had been, the families who had suffered my antics the previous night. I was again made very welcome and it was as if nothing unusual had occurred less than 24 hours previously.
I shall treasure those memories always.

I never did manage to convince the leave clerk that I was entitled to the same extra two days 'Travel time' that all those originating from North of the boarder or from Ireland were granted, and so always had to return ahead of Bob.

On one such occasion the train I travelled back to London on, ran into the back of another stationary Goods locomotive at Welling Garden City. The engine and first few coaches, including the one I was in were turned over.
Fortunately there were no fatalities and I somehow walked away without a scratch.
A large number of the passengers were military personnel returning from leave and would not make it back to there units before their leave passes expired. (I was not one of them).
We were advised to report to the Military Police at Waterloo Station who may at their discretion amend passes.
I had hopes of getting an extended leave, but was advised by the 'Red Caps' that as it was closer to Blackdown than Birmingham I should report back to my unit. "Shame"!

It is difficult after all these years to chronologically place the memories tumbling around like Lotto Balls in my head, no wonder I am lucky if I get one number correct, so I will just recall them as they come.

At the far side of the woods which bordered the barrack blocks was a sandy cliff face with a 'Death Slide' wire rope anchored top and bottom, but no pulley wheel.
This was always removed by the PTI after use.
I joined a group of adventurous soles daring to venture into the forbidden area.
Brian Sheppard, the older and taller one, decided that his leather waste belt would be equal to the absent pulley. Passing the belt over the cable and wrapping it around each wrist he launched into space. By about half way down he was almost stationary, and began swinging back and forward in his desire to keep moving. With still about a quarter of the danger zone left to cover, the belt decided it had received enough friction and snapped.
We all heard the thud and feared the worst.
Not so, the 'Good Fairy' had been visiting and piling up fresh sand, which fortunately provided Brian with a reasonable drop zone.

Another great pal was Terry Cook, (later to become God Father to my two oldest sons).
In his 'Memories' article he recalls our trip to Scotland.
We shared many great times including the boat trip with broken "olocks", (that's pretty close to what we called them).
Amongst those who accompanied us to Scotland was Mick Scott who, in addition to the 60 odd pounds we all had slung on our backs, also carried his own Bagpipes.
You have to do it yourself to fully appreciate the exhilaration of stomping across hillsides and valleys led by a true Piper.

On the platform of the railway station where we joined the train from the West Coast to Fort William, was a crowd of people all dress up in their Wedding day outfits and looking quite put out.
It transpired that the Newly Weds, to avoid being showered in confetti, had taken a taxi to the next station. How could we let them get away with that?
We gathered all the boxes of confetti and when the couple boarded the train down the line we let them settle in their reserved compartment before congratulating them and handing over the confetti. Less the boxes of course!

For some reason insufficient seats had been reserved on the overnight train from Fort William to London, and it was packed.
In true Boys School spirit we reorganised all available space by putting rucksacks between the seats as a bed for two, head to tail, which left two empty luggage racks for single beds. Those with a seat had to rest their feet on the edge of the seat opposite, so all footwear had to be removed.
I will leave it to you to imagine the chaos and language when someone needed to get out of the compartment.
Strange, we never noticed the smell until returning from a stretching of the limbs along the corridor or visiting the mobile 'Thunder Box'.
Re entering the compartment was a challenge only accepted by the need to rest?
This was proven beyond doubt when the Ticket Collector doing his rounds at some ungodly hour and demanding, "tickets please" slid open our compartment door and immediately slammed it shut again without uttering a word.
The worst boots and socks were reported to be singing 'Scotland the Brave' and belonged to a certain Boy who became Boy RSM.
"Who was that", you ask? Well there is no **Diffin**ative answer!

My favourite sports were Shooting and Basketball; I also became a member of the Boxing team, not by choice I must admit, but because SSI Burdett, our trainer, said I was the only Boy fitting the requirements for a 'Light Middleweight'.
Today he would be known as a 'smooth talker'!
I can claim to have never lost a bout, although I suspect today's Italian football team would have snapped up at least one of my opponents to instruct them the art of 'diving'.

My size made me an ideal sparing partner for 'Middleweight' Dave 'Punchy' Walker who would utter all kinds of threats if called by his nickname.
I suspect he was quite proud of it really as he never did retaliate.
Dave's best mate was little Brian Sheppard and he was asked by Dave before every fight, "what round do you want"?
Whatever the answer Dave always won his fight by a KO in that round. Now you know why I "enjoyed" sparing with him!!

Tony 'Scouse' Martin was like a whirlwind, dashing across the ring at the first bell to pin his opponent in the corner.
More often than not this proved enough to win him the bout, until on one occasion his opponent had the same game plan and they collided in mid ring.

During the Boxing season all the team slept in the same room on the top floor of one of the blocks. Our early morning training excluded us from parades and all the normal room inspections etc. and our late breakfasts usually include steak, a real torment on all counts to the not so fortunate!

Sgt. 'Pop' Day and SSI Burdett coached and trained our Basketball team, of which I was a member, and in 1956 we became Army Boys' Champions an achievement we were all very proud of.
I cannot say from where, but I seem to recall being told that Pop Day became a Chelsea Pensioner. [**Can anyone confirm this?**].

Shooting was without doubt my favourite sport.
I little realised on my first experience with a real weapon during an introduction to the sport in the Miniature range, where it would lead.
CSM Hall as captain of the Shooting team said "*I want a word with you* ***son*****"**, so I new I wasn't in trouble.
My first target showed that I had potential and after a confirmation re-shoot I became a member of the Small bore team.

Then came the real thing on Ash Ranges with the 303, polishing each round before loading, blacking sights with the soot from burning rubber, running up and down the ranges to memorise the different applications at each firing point, all in preparation for the Corps Championships held each year at Bisley.
Teams from all over BAOR and the UK took part and it was a time for old friends, now rivals due to changes of posting to meet up and 'talk the talk'.
At the 1956 meeting the Boys' School as a team walked away with a host of the most prized trophies.
I personally won the Boys' Championship cup and was runner up by one point in the Young Soldiers championship.
Proud I was of my many medals, and I treasure them still.

I owe other achievements gained throughout my service to the coaching I received in Boys' Service. I became Corps Pistol champion at Bisley and was selected for the Combined Services team in Malta, shooting against the American Sixth Fleet team and although they piped us to the post on all the Deliberate and Snap practices, we beat them 'hands down' at the Falling Plates.
The prize for that? A bottle of Hop Leaf Beer, and I still have it 'unopened' since 1968.

Terry Cook mentions our appearance on the BBC 'Top Town' series held in Blackpool at the Grand Hotel, and I would like to add a couple of points he didn't mention.
There were three 'Beauty Queens' from each town, Aldershot and Catterick, taking part.
It was suggested that they should join us for a pre breakfast swim in the sea next morning.
The sea at Blackpool, in my experience, never rises above –10 degrees, there was an onshore wind whipping spray off the waves and we stood on the beach shivering.

One of the girls decided to brave it and went in. I tested the water with my feet but no way was I about to catch pneumonia.
Somebody had to go in to save our faces so Terry Cook took a run and dived in. His swim lasted about a minute as he joined the shivering girl wading back to the beach.
Towels were borrowed from the 'none swimmers' in an attempt to hide the deep blue colour and to bring back the circulation.

That same evening we were 'Live on TV'; Silver Buglers, Terry Cook, Davey Pearce, Jimmy Boyes and myself, were to end the show by marching onto the stage and sounding 'Retreat'.
Although the four of us made it onto the stage, only three of us actually played.
To reach the stage we had to march past the hotel swimming pool and it was at this point that Davey Pearce's bugle mouthpiece decided to try swimming!
We had practiced our routine all day without a hitch. This time we were 'Live' on TV and so Dave had to pretend he was playing.
The BBC paid us for our efforts; I think about 30/-, (£1:50 today), a lot of money to us. Unfortunately for Dave his little mishap had been spotted, and so as an 'inactive participant' he was not paid!
By the way Aldershot won the competition and the whole team were treated to a 'slap up' meal in the hotel.

'Adventure Training', as it was known, was I believe enjoyed by the great majority of Boys. Many of the activities were planned so that until we were actually aboard the transport we would be unaware of our destination.
One such 'Initiative Test' was for pairs of Boys to be dropped off at different points with an OS map and identical sets of instructions containing four different grid references and details of the information to be recorded at each location.
The locations could be visited in any order, but irrespective of your drop off point it required long treks criss-crossing the map.
On completion of the four tasks we were to make our way to a fifth grid reference to meet a member of 'Permanent Staff' who would give us a final grid reference of the camp site.

Bob Crickard and I had paired up and on arrival at our drop off point opened our sealed envelope, read the contents and decided on the order to go.
I cannot recall the first two locations or what we had to record, but our third location I remember was a place of the last public hanging of a 'Highwayman'.

Our last task was to visit a particular Police Station and to note the dimensions of the Prison Cell. This meant another long trudge in the dark.
How could we use our **Initiative** to save our tired limbs?
We studied the map and found a telephone box close by, phoned Directory enquires, it was free in those days, to obtain the local phone number of the Police Station we were supposed to visit, rang the Sgt. on duty and asked him for the information.
He was very helpful, quickly giving us the details required, as he had noted these down after being visited by other groups requesting the same information.

Grid reference number five, our next objective, was the summit of the centre hill of the 'Devils Jumps' at Hindhead.
Arriving there to find it deserted we thought we were in the wrong place, but no this was defiantly the correct place we agreed.
We made a brew, ate our Oatmeal blocks and Processed cheese and waited.

Headlights appeared, stopping for a few minutes before moving on along the track.
A short time later Cpl Terry Rankin appeared somewhat surprised to find us waiting, and even more surprised to learn that we had completed all our tasks.
He gave us the final grid reference and we arrived, again totally unexpected, in camp.

As the fog began to roll in, we pitched our two-man 'bivy', spread one of our ground sheets on the floor, then using our packs for pillows and with the other ground sheet over us we sort of slept!

Next morning search parties were still out looking for lost souls. We heard of two spending the night in a churchyard and another pair in the middle of a roundabout.
The fog had been so thick they had been unable to make the check in point.

One Whitson, I'm not sure which, but it was in May, we set out from Blackdown in fine weather for a few days training at Frencham Ponds, arriving in time to set up camp before the snow began to fall, (what long range weather forecast?) and by evening everywhere was under a good deep blanket. 'Blankets' yes 'Sleeping Bags' no, and only officers needed camp beds!
That night our two-man 'bivy' was home to Bob Crickard, Terry Cook and myself, we didn't sleep much but had an extra helping of 'Body heat'.

Payday was on a Thursday and was always eagerly awaited.
Of my 17shillings 6d per week, (87&1/2p in today's money), I collected 7 shillings, (the equivalent of 35p).
From this I had to purchase all my cleaning and ablutions needs and with luck 5 cigarettes, (the fruit van man who visited every Thursday would sell you a single 'fag' if that's all you could afford), if I was very lucky I might have 4d for the 'Globe' cinema. "*No mate the 'lamp shade' is perfectly still*".
What joy to reach the milestone age of 17.5 years, overnight I got a pay increase of about 300%?

At some point I was anointed with my first chevron, well somebody had to carry the can when things were not quite up to scratch.

Even as Senior Boys there was never any let up on standards of kit, turnout or room tidiness? I doubt that the customs of painting the inside of the coal bin white, (other than during the period of coal issues when the coal would be placed evenly around the bin), and the outside black, except for the rivets which were white, would be necessary today with the luxury of central heating.

Scrubbing the 6ft table with brasso added to the water to make it white, scraping the broom and bumper handles with used razor blades, or a piece of broken glass, so that they appeared as new.

Stealing a handful of sand from somebody else's fire bucket to clean the sinks with after all the 'Vim' had been used.
All these things sound a bit far fetched by today's standards, but when it meant that the 'best house' was awarded extra time off at the weekend, every effort was made to ensure no one let their house down.

The room NCO would check everywhere followed by the House Sgt.
Then our Platoon Sgt. did his round before the arrival of the inspecting officer.
None of this hurt anyone and fostered what in today's workplace would be known as 'Bonding'.

My last night as a Boy Soldier was something special, as I am sure it was for all those going on into 'Man service' with me.

As we were **the last 'Boys'**, before the name was changed to 'Junior Leaders', we were given a special Dinner Party.

What made it especially memorable was that during the meal we were visited by CSM Hall carrying two full crates of beer.
Placing them on the end of the table he did a smart about turn and declared "*and you did not get that from me*".

After almost half a century I can still say, those years I spent as a Boy Soldier taught me to grow up, I hope, in a responsible way, and led to the making of many friendships I will always cherish.

Given my time again I could not think of a better way to spend it.