This memory was donated by
Rod Steed, Baker House, 'A' Company



On Being a Boy
Memories of RAOC/REME Junior Leaders School, North Frith Barracks, Blackdown. November 1957 to December 1958.

I had left school in 1956 and, following the necessary advice of the time 'to learn a trade', I had gone to North Gloucestershire Technical College, in Cheltenham. At school I had been very keen on fine woodwork, but could not get an apprenticeship. So I had gone to NGTC to do a year, full time, as a student apprentice in the building department, where we covered all aspects of the building trade, carpentry, bricklaying, plastering and plumbing etc. But carpentry was not fine woodwork! So when I left I applied to join REME as a boy entrant, knowing nothing of Army Apprentice Schools, only that REME was for the technically minded. So I presented myself to the Army Recruiting Office in Cheltenham and a time served Recruiting Sergeant in the Royal Gloucestershire Regiment arranged for me to join

REME – as a Junior Leader! Three of my uncles had been in the RE during the war (which had only been over for 12 years at this time!), My grand dad had been in the Royal Marine Light Infantry during the Boer War (!), my dad's uncles served in WWI, my dad had poor health and had not served in WWII, so there was effectively no military tradition in my family. So it was a leap into the unknown.

After all the pre-enlistment stuff had been done, medicals etc (my medical found I needed glasses, so the first thing the Army did for me was to allow me to see clearly!), the day of enlistment eventually arrived. Early on the morning of November 5th, 1957 (Bonfire night/Guy Fawkes day), I left home for the Army Recruiting Office in Gloucester. There, I was sworn in, along with two adult entrants who were joining the Royal Military Police. The three of us were given travel warrants and taken to Gloucester station and put on a train. The two potential MPs got off at Woking and I travelled on to Brookwood station. I don't remember exact events but I ended up in the back of a 3 tonner to be deposited eventually in the school at Blackdown, Straight into Baker House and allocated a bedspace, then, as it was quite late, to the cookhouse for a meal and a sea of strange faces. The new recruits were called 'Nigs' at that time, I can remember 'where are you from mate?' and 'he's a Nig'!

Those early days as a 'Nig' are something of a blur, kit issues etc, and the start of basic training. SD uniforms were issued with GS buttons, you were issued RAOC or REME buttons ('Staybrite', thankfully, not brass!), depending on Corps, and had to be sewn on carefully so the insignia was upright! A new life regulated by the bugle call from reveille to 'lights out'. Sgt Barnes, RAOC was our drill instructor and Sgt Titmus, REME (something of a father figure) was the House Sgt for Baker House. An introductory talk by RMS 'Tara' McCann and the OC, Major Amato. The most telling moment for me, of the enormity of the step I had taken, was the requirement to parcel up all your civilian clothes (apart from underwear!) and send them home, a second cutting of the umbilical cord! From then on your whole life was Army and khaki coloured! There were a few letters home laced with home-sickness! If one had known then, that this was going to be your life for almost a quarter century, then it obviously wasn't going to be that bad! Basic training was a bit of a trial, learning foot drill and rifle drill, weapon training, learning 'the rules' of the Army etc, etc. 'Bulling' boots, pressing uniforms to get razor sharp creases, buffing brass on cardboard. Even to this day, the smell of Brasso and shoe polish say 'Baker House' to me! All a bit of a 'Rite of Passage' one may say, taking a raw boy and turning him into (the semblance at least!) of a trained soldier, albeit a junior one, in six weeks. I remember one nasty little Glaswegian recruit (about 5ft nothing); I won't mention him by name. He thought it funny to stamp on the toe-caps of some-ones (not mine!) newly bulled boots, I think he only did it once! But he really came down to earth on our first live firing with the venerable Lee Enfield 303. He was noticed to be trembling a lot has he assumed the prone position (I think the term is shit-scared!) and did not hold the rifle firmly into his shoulder, as he squeezed the trigger the considerable recoil took the rifle backwards, flying past his right ear. We all found this highly amusing especially as he was berated by the attendant Sgt and told to hold on to the f..cking thing like a man!

The end of basic training coincided with Christmas leave, due to the large amounts of money we were receiving (!) about 6 or 7 weeks pay, we were all assemble in the Gymnasium in the barracks opposite North Frith (Dettingen?). Duly paid, we were given a Registered Post envelope, which was for the bulk of ones money to be put into and sent home by Registered Post – we were not to be trusted with our pay! I put the bulk of my money in the envelope and some how the 'system' missed me, so being very green I turned to a mate and said what

do I do with this and he said ‘bung it in the post box’ – which I did! The ‘system’ then caught up with me and I was interrogated as to what I had done with my money, when I told them and me being so naïve, I was believed and the money did arrive home for my leave.

After Christmas leave it was back to Blackdown and into the routine of military training, weapon training (weapon safety drilled into our minds) and education. I remember live firing on the ranges, we all had to take a turn in The Butts, indicating position of shot on target, then pasting-up. On one occasion I was indicating with the pointer which was on a long bit of 2 x 2 timber. As I pointed high on the target, a shot rang out and a round went through the handle of the pointer about 18 inches above my hand. Wow I thought, perfectly drilled! We had very little spare time, activities most evenings except Wednesday, Friday night was weekly hand-in-laundry-night and ‘Shine night’, bumpering the floors and scrubbing ablutions preparing for the all important Saturday morning room inspection and then drill parade which, were part of the inter-House competition. Route marches some Saturdays. The actual drill competition was judged by instructors from the Guards Depot, at nearby Pirbright. Sunday brought church parade and the march, behind the school band, through Deepcut village to the Garrison church. A boring hour of church hypothesis and indoctrination, then the march back. If it rained, the white blanco from your buff belt ran down your SDs. Of course the RCs missed all this, going off to their own service and escaped the marching bit!

Some time about Easter 1958 the Queen made an official visit to the RAOC Garrison at Blackdown, which included the Junior Leaders School, although she didn’t visit North Frith Barracks, some of the (RAOC?) boys were selected to meet her and to shake hands. This caused a series of hand and finger-nail inspections for the ‘chosen’! For the rest of us, it was the particular foot and arms drill instruction required of ‘lining the route’. After hours of training, the appointed day came and Junior Leaders, standing about a yard apart, lined a portion of the road through Deepcut village, the rest of the RAOC garrison lining the remainder. At the appointed time we were called to attention, presented arms in a Royal Salute, the Queen and the Duke sailed past in their Rolls Royce and that was it! All over in a matter of seconds!

Having read the ‘Memory’ entries much comes back to me. Names, Perm Staff:
A Coy OC, Maj Haworth, I remember him approving my civilian clothes pass, everything listed, even the colour of socks. On booking out at the Guard Room what you were wearing was checked by the RPs. CSM Middleton, Capt Linfoot, OIC Baker House. Eventually Maj Macey (**from 1958, although the web site says 1959**). He used to do amazing martial arts demos in the Dettingen Gym! His party-piece was squashing a metal beer bottle top between thumb and forefinger! Maj Macey, driver and Land Rover disappeared in the Cypriot Panhandle late sixties? Lt Jake Head, Sgts Boller, Jannaway, Fenton, Bruce. Sgts Barnes and Titmus already mentioned. WO2 Hurley RAEC, a real character, when Orderly Officer he would do foot inspections at lights out to ensure everyone had washed their feet! Boys: Wiget White, J/Cpl Tregaskis, Titch Richards, forever on ‘Jankers’! The Bullivant twins, Geoff and Mick. Geoff was a room-mate in Baker house, now deceased I read. Roy Venables, Pete Borthwick, Pat Coulter, ‘Charley’ Farley, Mick(?) Tulip. J/Pte Tulip had a habit of baiting one the National Service P/S Education Sgts in lessons, always answering a request or order with a long drawn out ‘Yes Saaaaaarjint’. Fred Maskery (J/RSM), Mick Fryer, John Drain, Alf Vickers, First names escape me but also Chown, Chinnery and Lowery.

How many Houses were there? Baker, Tope, Gordon, Rowcroft and Joslyn?
‘Lewey’ Head adventures were memorable, a very wet day/night spent on Hawley(?) lake.

The boys gave these exercises ‘Dib Dib’ label with connotations of Boy Scouting connections!

In May of 58 I was sent on a course with some others (can’t remember the names), to the Army Outward Bound School at Towyn in North Wales (I have read Bill Chamberlain’s account of Towyn, don’t remember Bill, but were you there at the same time?). A very interesting time! I was put in ‘Mallory Patrol’, all ‘Patrols named after famous explorers etc. Into the sea at day-break, the Irish Sea is bloody cold in May! Abseiling off some gentle cliffs, no fancy harnesses, just wrapping the rope around you in the correct manner and controlling decent with the rope in the right hand. Wearing PT shorts to stop rope-burn in susceptible areas! I still bear a small scar on my upper right arm where an initiative test went wrong and I brought a piece on angle iron down on my arm. Our instructor was a Sergeant of Polish origins. I have never had a head for heights and did not take to rock climbing. Sgt ‘Polish’ told me it was easy just like going up stairs, to which I replied ‘But it hasn’t got a f..king banister!’ So he sent me back to the barracks in disgrace! Even now, when I see rock climbers on sheer rock faces, my scrotum contracts! Later, exercises out in the Welsh mountains around Snowdonia, hiking from Trig point to Trig point where each new destination map reference was secured in a compo tin. We were boys from several Junior Leaders Schools, in my group were Royal Armoured Corp and Royal Signals. On one of the first nights there, a J/Trp Rose, RAC, came into our room which contained some of his mates and bullied one of the Signallers, can’t remember the details but it involved switching off the lights and punching this unfortunate guy. On one of our ‘hikes’ I was confronted by the said J/Tpr Rose who demanded I hand over the map reference, or else, for the next Trig point that we had just retrieved after scaling a relatively steep hill. I told him to f..k-off! Then turned my back on him and walked away, the expected attack never came! So that lesson was absorbed – never accept bullies and bullying! Our attempt at climbing Cadre Idris was cut short in appalling weather because large lumps of rock started to slide down the mountain! Discretion instead of valour on that occasion! Trying to sleep in a two-man Bivvy with water flowing through it! Being taken into the mountains on your own with a ground sheet and sleeping bag, being told to find somewhere to sleep - we’ll find you in the morning! A very lonely place is a Welsh mountain when it is dark, wet and cold! Coming ‘home’ to Blackdown after Towyn was really appreciated!

Reading Jake Head’s ‘Memories’ piece he asks does anyone remember the layout of the barrack blocks? Yes, two up two down, about twenty to a room, coal fired stoves. ‘Quiet’ room at ground level, ablutions on both floors but no showers. Room above quiet room was occupied by Perm Staff. In Baker, one of those was J/Pte Tulip’s RAEC ‘Saaaaaarjint”! And the camp layout; on entry to North Frith, immediately on the right the ‘Drill Shed’, then all the houses with Baker the first. Opposite Baker was a block housing the RAOC Corps band, behind that was School/Bn HQ, QM stores and armoury. The Guard Room was a long way from the barrack entrance, down near the woods. To the left were almost all wooden buildings including Company Offices and class rooms, then the NAAFI, Cookhouse, Bath-house (no showers in the blocks), the Sgts Mess and the Parade Ground. Behind the Houses there was a coal yard which issued coal for the barrack room fires. In winter there was never enough coal, so this meant clandestine raiding parties to nick more coal from the coal yard. Weekly pay parades at the Coy office were followed by a mandatory weekly hair-cut where we were immediately relieved of some of our meagre pay! At some stage, ‘A’ company office burnt down, Capt Linfoot had had a small outboard motor in his office, I can still see the blob of molten aluminium that was once the engine! I remember a trip to a local swimming pool in the summer, The Blue Lagoon (?), ending in nasty sub-burn.

The Shooting Incident.
Does anyone remember the shooting incident in early 1958? In 1958 the standard service rifle was still the Lee Enfield 303, which had been in service since WWI. As part of the soldier and his weapon 'culture', we drew a personal weapon from the armoury on Monday mornings, were responsible for them during the week, and they were returned to the armoury on Friday. (I'm sure that was the routine – but I may be wrong). Basically, this meant keeping them clean and secure in your barrack room locker. I must make it clear that these were fully serviceable rifles. Today, of course, anyone mindful of security would have 'had kittens' with this arrangement! Rifles were in ordinary lockers secured by a cheap padlock bought from the NAAFI and in the case of Baker House and the house immediately behind, were less that 100 yards from a public road and the camp entrance was open, unguarded and unfenced. The IRA, even in those days, could have had about twenty rifles by just walking in and taking them during the day from unoccupied barrack rooms and driving off in a vehicle!

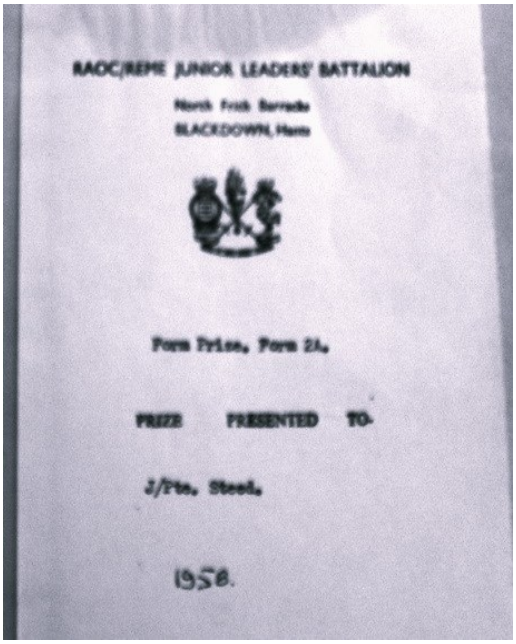
The woods, immediately behind North Frith barracks, were a favourite playground for us with a Saturday afternoon to spare (probably before going into Aldershot to the pictures on the No 44 bus). This area had obviously been used for training for years, probably during the war, (only 12 years ago at this time) it was littered with old slit trenches and some boys from Baker House (not this one!) had found quite a large quantity of old, but live, 303 ammunition in these slit trenches. Much of it was corroded, but some was in pretty good condition. A pile of this stuff was brought back to Baker house, then the fun began! The rounds were pulled apart and the cordite extracted. It was great fun to throw the cordite on the barrack room fire and see the resulting flare. Someone took the end off a bed and put cordite into the tubular end and lit it, the resultant jet of flame was spectacular! This was of course, bloody dangerous, especially when you consider that you had a mix of young boys, live ammunition and serviceable rifles at hand! The inevitable happened of course! At this stage I was living in one of the top floor rooms in Baker house, in the lower rooms the ceiling had a large beam, about 1ft square, running across, wall to wall. I don't remember the exact chain of events or the name of the person, but some of he ammunition had got passed around the house and this bright spark in the lower left barrack room decided to try some of the ammunition in his rifle. Apparently he stood in the middle of the room with the muzzle of the rifle sloping upwards, and fed rounds into the breech one at a time and squeezing the trigger. Most were duds, but of course, one of the rounds was not! This shot, in an occupied barrack room, went, thankfully, into the aforementioned ceiling beam and no-one was hurt. The resulting consequences of this incident were quick to follow: the guy responsible for firing the shot was discharged within the week. All serviceable rifles were withdrawn and instead we were issued with un-serviceable Drill Purpose (DP) weapons. On reflection, I'm sure that the incident was largely suppressed, no one was censured for finding and bringing the live ammunition into the barracks, after all, it had been found lying around on MOD land. No doubt the school hierarchy were glad there was no spilt blood. Had this event become general knowledge and got into the Press, it would have done the 'Boy Service' image untold harm.

I'm glad to see stories written about Fort Tregantle! Home from home on the edge of Bodmin moor! My own memories are of quite a forbidding place with walls about three feet thick. I remember us all lining up to have a shot on the rifle range at Tregantle, which faced out to sea. (The range is clearly visable on the Tregantle aerial photographs). Then a fishing boat came into view and shooting had to be abandoned for safety reasons. When Charley Farely and I went to book out at the Guard Room we had great trouble in convincing the RPs (national servicemen who were not the brightest candles on the Christmas tree) that we really did have identical last 4 numbers in our service numbers, showing our ID cards convinced

them! Crossing Bodmin moor was like being back in North Wales – very wet and cold! Treking over the moor to Camelford and on to Trabarweth Strand? Then back again. At Tregantle I got into the only fight I was to have in the Army, I can't remember his name, but one of the other boys and myself just rubbed each other up the wrong way and we ended up having a scrap over absolutely nothing. It ended in stalemate; we were both being bloody stupid and nobody 'won', another lesson for life!

The Identity Parade.
Does anyone remember the identity parade? As far as I can recall this was in early 1958. Some young girl from the local area was allegedly assaulted, whether this was of a sexual nature I don't know. The perpetrator was alleged to be a member of the Junior Leaders School. The result of this accusation was the whole school was called to the parade ground and formed up into long single files. Then, accompanied by the police, and possibly the OC and RSM a young teenage girl was led along the ranks of boys in an attempt to pick out the culprit. Actually, this was quite a nerve-racking process. Although I had never set eyes on the girl, I'm sure I was not the only one thinking; 'What if she picks me!' I'm not sure if anyone was actually picked out. Some years later, on returning from West Africa, while at The REME Regimental Depot in Arborfield waiting to go to Germany, the Reading police asked the Depot if they could provide men for an identity parade. Dressed in civvies, a batch of us were trucked to Reading police Station and duly lined up. The suspect, who was my height and wore glasses, stood along side me. But he was picked out! The Police paid us 2/- each for the privilege!

I did reasonably well at Blackdown, I won a form prize and was presented with a book...


RAOC/REME JUNIOR LEADERS' BATTALION

North Front Barracks

BLACKDOWN, Hants

Form Prize, Form 2A.

PRIZE PRESENTED TO-

J/Pte. Steel.

1958.

... which I still have and some time in the second half of 1958 I was made a J/Lcpl. Dizzy heights! Unfortunately I have no photos of this memorable period at Blackdown, my grandmother did have a photo of me standing outside Baker house, but like Granny, it is long gone. All of a sudden man-service was upon us and the issuing of Battle Dress. The dumping of the old SD, boy, were we grown up! At this time we senior passing-out boys were taken to the 25 yard range at Dettingen(?) to fire the Sten SMG. It had been raining heavily and the range sloped down into a deep depression in front of the targets and this was full of water.

After firing, we were going through weapon clearance, with weapons pointed correctly down range, Pat Coulter somehow had a round left in his magazine. In the act of clearing the weapon, Pat accidentally firing off this last round. The bullet hit the water a few yards in front of us all sending up a great spout of water. We were all somewhat surprised and Pat looked a bit pale! But it sure emphasised weapon safety! The passing out parade on Dettingen parade ground was of course our big event with proud parents and other family members attending. Then it was all over, my boy soldier experience was a thing of the past, but not forgotten. I was scheduled for trade training at 4 Trade Training, Bn, REME in Taunton.

Unfortunately, my career path through the Army meant that I never met any of the RAOC boys again and only a couple of REME boys, despite close RAOC/ REME connections via RAOC store sections in REME workshops. I met Michael Bullivant when he was posted to LAD, 1RNF as the LAD storeman in the mid sixties, I was a Cpl at the time, shortly after I left to do my Artificer course (1966-67) at SEME, Bordon. Although I didn't get to know Ted Taylor at Blackdown, we both ended up as WO1s in CVHQ REME, Bordon as our final postings, Ted as Chief Clerk and myself as ASM. We have exchanged Christmas cards ever since. On leaving the Army in May 1981, my family and I came out to Australia as soon as our immigration was finalised, arriving here on 31 July, 1981. I have Australian citizenship and have only been back to UK once, about eleven or so years ago. Just before we left the UK, I took my wife and two children to see North Frith Barracks, it had been demolished – a chapter well and truly closed!

Boy service has a long history in the British Army, being painfully shy, it gave me some self of the confidence that I sorely needed and I think it is the basis of the professionalism of the British Army. Boy service and the Army in general occupied almost a quarter century out of my life, it shaped the way I think and the way I do things to this day. Service life didn't make us rich in monetary terms, but it was priceless in terms of education, seeing the world and the bond of comradeship.