FEBRUARY 1958 – SEPTEMBER 1959
William H. "Bill" Chamberlain
GORDON HOUSE

I travelled down from Accrington (actually I was born in Carlisle but brought up in Accrington) by train on 3 February 1958, and on leaving London found the train from Waterloo to Brookwood was full of soldiers and new recruits.

I cannot recall which of the permanent staff met us at the station, but it did not take long to bundle us into a 3 Ton Truck to take us to Deepcut.

On arrival we were finally taken to a building, after what seemed an age, allocated a bed and then "marched" over to the cookhouse for a meal. I say "marched" not in literal terms, more in "get your bloody feet over here at the double" sort of marching.

I would get to know the internal workings of the cookhouse in more graphic detail later on.

The first few days were a sad affair for me as the Manchester United team had their fateful air disaster shortly after my arrival.

I do recall that members of the permanent staff remarked that it was the largest intake of Junior Recruits to assemble at any one time. That made it all the more fun, and easier to settle in, quickly making friends (and enemies) in those first few weeks.

In fact over the coming 12 months the "recruit squads" at various times of the year seemed to get even larger.

I have little recollection of the names of the Training Officers other than those Major Ted Macey & Captain John K. Head, however I have much to thank them for, as they managed to put me on the right track.

Major Macey with his little conjuring tricks and immense patience, and Captain Head never without his pipe and with his dog in constant attendance (now known to be called Pru (the dog that is), not the most apt of names for a Boxer)

Having been to Grammar School, and having opted out to take employment rather than go on to A levels, I was glad to be able to re-establish my educational standards.

Many of the other staff I found to be more than fair and easy going, once the disciplined exterior had been peeled away,

Sgt Bollers, Sgt Meaker, Sgt Fenton, CSM Woods, RSM Tara McCann, Sgt Titmuss, and Capt. Jack Thompson.

I was overly keen on playing sport of any code, but was never good enough to be selected for the Battalion Teams, other than on a few rare occasions in the soccer team.

However there was a good Second XI soccer league and I played regularly for that side.

My recollections of the art of Boxing was to be knocked out cold by Eric "Willy" Williams who proved to be a very good boxer.

I actually should have said I have little recollection of being KO'd, as I was out cold in under 30 seconds after a flurry of punches, and some of the guys had to carry me back to Gordon House.

We had a reputation for having good boxers in Gordon House, Bob Manners, Alan Batchelor, and Tony O'Shaughnessy come to mind

The charabancs use to leave from behind Hill House on a Friday evening for all points... they were usually full and any boy who had managed to get a weekend pass (very, very, rare) was lucky to get seat join the “men” from across the road, all escaping for a weekend.

Some guys never returned either... well not until they had been "knocked up" by local Bobbies.

In the main however we just looked forlornly through the window at the lucky ones being able to get away for the weekend.

However we did have "terms" and some were able to get home on leave about 3 times a year.

Although there were options, for those who did not wish to go home, to participate on various “exercises” such as mountaineering, trekking, skiing etc.

Must be noted that we could barely afford to go anywhere that often anyway, on the meagre "pittance" we received, (unless you got a rail pass for leave).

You can understand why certain "members" ran "the rackets" as a few of the guys were vulnerable, being short of cash almost as soon as they got their pay.

I can recall lads hitting the NAAFI, after parading and signing for their pay, and being “on the scrounge” that very night (after settling their current debts), and if not that night then certainly soon after.

If you smoked (and most did), you either controlled the amount or you borrowed at 2, or even 5 to 1 return.

Even the rail passes were known to be up for "sale", as you could nominate your destination at time of leave.

It is surprising that many of the "well off" sons of the serving military were not averse to operating on these lines. I must have been bloody strong willed as I can recall borrowing the odd fag from pals (and equally lending them).

I cannot recall having had to borrow from one of "the mob" too often and than paying back at an extortionate interest.

There was a clear out during my time there (1959) and a few guys got "done", and well deserved too as they preyed on the younger, more timid and vulnerable JL's. I recall many boys crying on the quiet, both at night and during the day.

It would not be unusual to find one in the ablutions sobbing his heart out, there were a few bullies around in those days too and I recall some of the bullies vividly but will not mention their names.

How sad, even today, that the most vulnerable amongst us seem to stand out as a target for those who think power is in being able to intimidate the weak and less fortunate.

I recall quite a few ex Borstal guys who, whilst tough characters, were totally the opposite of what I expected and befriended some of those smaller and weaker willed boys.

My one regret was to rebel against being marched to Church on a Sunday, which did not go down well with Tara McCann or “Timber” Woods.

Time spent at the local Keys café hotspot are fondly remembered, (although visiting any local “hotspot” was frowned upon), as were weekends in Camberley seeking the local talent, and trips to the Blue Pool.

I seem to recall that it was Vic Helliwell, who had a relative that owned the coffee bar in Camberley that we frequented.

I recall the Queens visit and the preparations for it, and then on the day we were all lined up down by the church. Bloody spit & polish for that was horrendous.

I was close to Brummie McHale and Piggy Goldstone on the day, standing in front of Keys Café.

Tywyn in North Wales… … … what an experience, sent on an "outward bound and mountaineering course".

Who was the Officer in Charge… none other than Lt. Chris Bonnington?

I enjoyed that week, most of the lads were Cadets or from other JL's establishments, we had a bloody great time.

It was, if the truth be known, the hardest week of my army life… assault course every other day, woken a 6am and doubled down to the sea every morning and having to run in and submerge fully… … … it was bloody freezing.

If you thought Bodmin Moor was tough then trekking over and along the horseshoe ridge, and on to Snowden was scary. The team exercise, in groups of 4, over Cadre Idris and through Snowdonia was really tough.

Having to check in at reference points spaced up to 20 miles apart meant you had to march and climb hard, the crossing of the mountains between Ffestiniog and Bala without a bloody road in site was excruciating on the feet and lungs.

We were tempted to take a disused mining railway track through one mountain, but decided against it… we were not total idiots.

I picked up a poisoned finger whilst on top of Cadre Idris, fog down to 10 feet, heavy drizzle and only a compass and a map with us… we camped on top of the mountain and came down in daylight at the double with my hand the size of a football and a tourniquet on my arm.

Remember no radios in those days, in the middle of nowhere until we hit ground level.

Mistake… we tried to get to Tywyn through the marsh to the north… impossible, and we had to retreat and it took us another hour and a half to hit camp. We were well ahead of our schedule but I was almost delirious. Straight to the medic and antibiotics and sling.

When I finally returned to Blackdown I had to have a nail removed so as to get at the poison and clean it up… … … yes you are right it hurt like hell and I screamed so loud the nurse put the lint she was carrying over my mouth and pressed it so hard I could hardly breath never mind scream.

Advantage … … light duties for a week.

I am sure some of the guys will remember begging to be allowed an "initiative test" at the weekend so as to get out of the place.

Once completed the weekend was yours.

I was fortunate to have Captain Jack (Mad Jack) Thompson as OIC of Gordon House.

He was very receptive to these "initiative tests" and I managed to get out on a few, one took me to Fratton Park to obtain Jimmy McIlroy's autograph (Pompey v Burnley) I did the job and then bombed into Brighton to stay with my Aunt.

Capt Thompson was a Burnley fan as he came from my neck of the woods in East Lancashire.

He also gave me another weekend pass, just prior to leaving the JL's, so I could go down to Plymouth to see a young lady I had "befriended" during a the previous camp at Fort Tregantle.

I also took to baby-sitting for some of the staff, to earn a few bob on a Saturday night and that helped keep the wolves at bay too.

Many of the guys in Gordon House at that time will possibly recall the saga at the Looe Pilchard Factory; it was one of the memories you carry forever.

Had I not been posted to Hong Kong who knows!

I do not regret in any way my pre-occupation for the female form, which was always paramount in my mind when an excursion was planned.

Fort Tregantle, oh what memories!

It all seemed like good fun, but it was actually hard graft at times and the exercises were great at making friendships stronger.

To be selected as a member of the advance party, going down a week early to set everything up, beds, kitchen utensils, and clean the place.

When we had a break we would have a fag sitting on the bank at the rear of the Fort overlooking the range. Lazy days!

But best of all we seemed to have some free time to explore Plymouth.

I was first class at Map Reading and on one Map Reading exercise where teams of 4 JL's would be driven around quite lanes for what appeared to be ages, in a "blacked out, all canvas sides tied down", 3-ton truck.

Then dropped off in some "remote" location and told to find your way back to camp.

On this occasion it was a narrow lane with high banks, a visit to the top of these overgrown banks did not reveal any landmarks to give us a reference, so we selected the direction in which to trek and were about to throw our rucksacks over our shoulder……when around the bend came an old car (one of the classic Riley's it may have been, with a large drop down trunk at the rear).

The driver an older gentleman asked what we were doing and when told of our task said " throw your stuff in the boot I'm going right by there".

We jumped in (bloody large car) and he kind drove us back to the Fort, however we were not "mugs" so we asked to be dropped of at the side.

We gathered ourselves together, had a quite fag, and then marched in over the drawbridge to the dismay of all.

The 3-ton truck had not even arrived back.

It probably remained the speediest completed exercise for many years, the unfortunate thing is I cannot recall with any certainty who my other teammates were that day.

My map reading skills were never in demand…!

We were never averse to utilising any method of travel to attain the end result.

On the Bodmin Moors exercise (they were hard graft but fun), I recall the mist never lifted on one exercise and on another it was just a constant drizzle.

From Bolventor to Brown Willy, where we bivouacked, we could not see a bloody thing 100 yards ahead.

Down over on to the Camelford road, where we (Chris McHale, Denis Dennis, and Alan Batchelor and I) tried to hitch a lift.

A short wheeled base wagon stopped, and I climbed up on the tyre and was about to get over the removable side when I realised what was in the back.

Too late…Chris threw his rucksack up and over the side and into what was left of the remains of a load, after the driver had tipped at the local abattoir.

Blood all over the floor, we were not put off (we must have been knackered to be so desperate) and he dropped us off a few miles further on and we were all glad to get off the "bloody" thing.

We then thumbed a lift in a coach (luxury) that dropped us at the junction, just after Delabole, that lead down to our destination at Trebarwith Strand.

At the bottom of the hill, in the village, sitting on a wall by the small harbour was Capt. JJ "Wacky" Thompson awaiting our arrival.

First again as usual and I think we took him by surprise.

Then the trek over Bodmin again, another night spent under a groundsheet put up against a rock on Rough Tor this time, before being picked up at the other side of the Moor.

Recall the day out arranged by "Wacky" Thompson for Gordon House to Newquay, a bloody good day out with the usual mates spent mostly chatting up the girls.

I was close pals with Alan Batchelor, amongst others, and stayed at his home in Fulham on a couple of weekends. He equally went with me to my Aunt's in Brighton.

We were to sail to Hong Kong on the TS Nevasa together, and having seen him briefly on a visit to Bicester, where he was stationed in 1963, we lost touch.

It is with regret that even today I cannot locate him.

I remember vividly the visit by a civvy tailor to **Gordon House**, who measured most of us up for smart Italian 3 Button Suits with silk inner lining. He then returned for a couple of fittings before we had our pride and joy – bloody hell we were smart ba****ds.

It did not bother us that we still had to pay for the suit over many weeks to come on, the "never, never".

Organised forays into Kingston on Thames, Staines, Woking etc with a bunch of Gordon House pals would always be planned with one thing in mind – it seems we were all on the same wavelength.

My recollections of the collection of trophies in the Gordon House "Quiet Room" is a lasting one, by trophy's I don't mean cups and shields, but rather anything that we considered worthy of capture and could be "lifted" (manhandled) on our excursions or trips.

Road signs were commonplace, and pub memorabilia prominent.

Raiding other Houses was commonplace and it became the norm to have some of us on "Guard" at weekends.

The staff appeared to turn a blind eye, and in fact some were party to our antics, it seemed as if they were proud that we (all JL's) could organise ourselves into teams of scavengers and pranksters?

One incident in particular comes to mind as the coach stopped at a country pub on route (cannot be precise as to where we were going or had been although on the way to or from a match at Bovington against the Tank boys springs to mind).

The owner threatened to call the police, as the coach was about to leave the car park (I cannot recall if they actually came), and we were ordered to return whatever had been removed, including the roadside swinging Pub Sign.

The stash surprised everyone in its enormity, by far it would have been the best haul ever, and it would certainly have been the talk of the camp had we have got away with it.

However if you leave a pub without any ashtrays, bar cloths, glasses, and the odd stool you have to put it down to bloody poor communication and planning. I blame the O I/C.

How "childish" those pastimes must appear now, and we might all have been served with ASBO's!

The Junior Leaders stands high and proud in my memory bank, and a great debt of gratitude is owed to that establishment and many of its staff.

They were instrumental in presenting me with values that have remained with me, and stood me in good stead throughout my life.

I forged a solid career outside the Army after I bought myself out in 1965, becoming a Company Board Director with a major UK based and Worldwide Group.

I was considered a fair and knowledgeable boss who possessed a good sense of humour.

Those values I think may have been destroyed by the service had I carried on, but nothing will ever diminish my good memories of those far off days and also the friends I made during those formative years.

Names from those far off days:

RAOC

Duncan "Jock" Learmonth, Brian Belcher, Gareth "Taff" Richards, Chris "Brummie" McHale,

Peter Goldstone, John Boswell, Alan Batchelor, Allan Alderman, Brian McHoul, Wally Ince,

Eric "Willy" Williams, Martin Peach, "Titch" Turnbull, Gordon C. V. Webster, Denis Dennis,

Edgar B. "Eddie" Haddow, Ron Warnock, Peter McCullum, Malcolm Fincham-Palmer,

Clive Fudge, Ritchie Hendy, John Pearson, John Broadbent, John Carter, Tom Harris,

Tim Snelling, Tony O'Shaughnessy, Bob Manners, Stu Madden, Graham Whittington,

Brian Belcher, Dave Quinn, Dave Schiff, Mick Cross, Jimmy Webber, Charlie "Jock" Ritchie, Richard "Titch" Smith, Richard Mulligan, Paddy Lugg, Taff" Evans, Les Wright, Bill Norman,

Phil Simmons, "Paddy" Simmons, Hessle Harrison, "Polly" Perkins, John Alford, Cliff Wood, Turner, Fidock, Figgins, Woods, Penny, Kit" Carson, Ray, Bell, Basson,

REME

Ted Taylor, Mick Fisher, Alf Vickers MBE, Alan Tipper, David Hughes, Chris Styles, Brian Read,

Tony Noirmot, Harry Underwood, Don Chapman, Danny Brennan, J.R. Scot, Sid Adams,

Richard Hunt, Jim A. Doherty, Ray Riley, Wilf. B. Laywood, T. Symington, E.J. Shaw, V. Winslet, Ken Horwood, Colin Ward, Trevor Thornton, Terry Willows, Roger Hill, Brian Drinkwater,

Ken Mumby, V.R. Helliwell, Jim Mason, G. Price, Geary, Davis, Keelor, Miller, Brookes, Cordiner, Tapner

STAFF

Major Amato, Lt Col Harley Peters, Major Ted Macey, Capt. John Head, Capt. J.J. Thompson,

CSM "Timber" Woods, RSM Tara McCann, Sgt Meaker, Sgt Titmuss, Sgt Bollers, Sgt Barnes, Sgt Fenton, Cpl Bill Lowery, Cpl "Pancho/Nobby" Pearce

It is pleasing to note that after all these years some of the names (and friends) from those far off days are at last in touch again:

Chris "Brummie" McHale, Peter Goldstone, Dave Quinn, Tony O'Shaughnessy, Stu Madden, John Broadbent, John Boswell, Bill Norman, Ted Taylor REME, David Hughes REME, Roger Hill REME, Alf Vickers REME