MY TIME AS A JUNIOR LEADER
in Parsons House 1959-1960
Eddie Hillan



It seems incredible as I look back in time that it is more than 50 years ago that I was a Junior Leader. I was 16 years of age at the time when I travelled up from Dublin to Belfast to join the Army as a junior entrant. Neither of my parents were aware that I had going to Belfast so needless to say I had a lot of explaining to do when I told them where I had been. Fortunately after some discussion (strong arguments) it was agreed that I could proceed, if accepted as a Junior Leader.

So it was that I arrived in Deepcut in early February 1959 together with another Irish lad by the name of Jimmy McGuinness. We had both travelled overnight on the Ferry from Belfast to Heysham and then by train via London arriving in Deepcut in the late afternoon. As I recall it was a freezing cold day with a thin layer of snow on the ground, it wasn't exactly a very welcoming scene and we were two very scared and apprehensive youngsters not knowing what lay ahead of us.

I remember we were approached by a Junior/Cpl (Chippy Chandler) who directed us to the Company Office and from there we were told to report to the QM stores where we were issued with our bedding and other kit before being shown to our bed spaces in Recruit House (Parsons). Our room NCO was Junior L/Cpl Gordon Webster.

I'm not sure why, but the next day Jimmy and I had to hand in our civilian clothes to the QM Stores (perhaps it was because it was thought we would abscond back to Ireland!!!) and for the next twelve weeks or so we lived in our denims. Our House Sergeant was the late Georgie Luke who took us all in hand and tried to mould us into shape by putting us through the rigours of recruit training, no easy task by any means. Training was a real sharp shock to the system, getting up at 6.30am each day and lights out at 10pm with lots to do and not a minute to spare in between!. Although most evenings during recruit training we were allowed

to the NAAFI or the WVS for 30 minutes or so, just enough time to have a double fling and a Cornish Pastie before rushing back to carry on our kit cleaning or room jobs before lights out. He must also have had the patience of Jobe to take on such a mixture of testosterone charged youngsters!!!

We came from all manner of backgrounds, some from broken homes, some from Orphanages, and many were children of serving soldiers who wanted their son's to follow the family tradition of an army career, unfortunately not all of these youngsters felt the same and had a fairly tough time coping with the training regime. It wasn't unusual to hear someone softly sobbing after lights out and several were discharged before the end of training.

Through the hard work and perseverance of Geordie Luke we were eventually declared as trained. Normally, back in those days, we would then have been split up and sent to one of the other Houses but it was decided that we would remain together as a squad in Parsons House under Sergeant Luke and Lieutenant Clifton. That was a decision welcomed by us all as by then we had become a close knit group who looked after each other and in some cases were to remain friends throughout the Army and beyond.

After recruit training we settled into a routine as Junior Leaders and time was spent learning military skills and general education subjects, but we also had much more free time to pursue sports and hobbies. Like most others, I was a smoker back then. I can still remember those cross country runs over the tank tracks and through the woods on Wednesday afternoons, at the finish, total agony, collapsing onto my bed gasping and swearing that never again would I smoke a cigarette! But every opportunity was given for individuals to participate in a wide range of activities, and encouragement was given irrespective of ability levels. Although we didn't realise it at that time all these things were teaching us many important lessons for the life ahead. It taught us to be more confident as well as being responsible as individuals, but also we learned the importance of being honest and fair when dealing with people and of working as a team whenever the need arose.

Despite being kept very busy, we still found time for high jinks and mischief or to get into trouble, and punishment, when it came, could be severe but we accepted it for what it was and got on with things. I can remember Christmas 1959 when the huge Battalion Christmas cake was stolen from the Cookhouse, the news of the theft got round like a flash and within minutes just about every Junior Leader in the Battalion profited, there were pieces of cake hidden in pillow slips, greatcoat pockets, bedside lockers and helmets and not one crumb as found by the Orderly Officer when he came round to investigate!! Or the time the Colonel's car was taken from outside Headquarters and was eventually found down in the middle of the woods!! Bullying was rare but it did happen and when discovered the culprit was soon sorted out.

The world to-day is a very different place to what it was then and we all have our own story to tell. Yes life as a Junior Leader was tough in many ways and conditions were not the best, but great credit must be given to those instructors such as the late Georgie Luke who took the time and interest in each one of us to teach us the basics of service life which was a great advantage for the years ahead. I went on to serve in the Corps for the next 32 years and always looked back on my days as a Junior Leader with great pride. Some names that come to mind from those days: - Charlie Catchpole, Tom Delph, Trevor Whitehouse, Basil Haddock, Tich Watson, Nobby Clarke, Ginge Jeffries, Paddy O'Connell, Alan Eastwood,

Frank Pratt and Ron Barr; where are they now? I especially remember the late Mick Hinson, Mick was a great friend, we served together in 17RVD, our first posting after Junior leaders and I met him briefly again many years later, I was saddened to learn of his passing.

By Eddie Hillan
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