Hill Platoon, Junior Leaders Training
By Richard Bond
1961-1963

With the benefit of hindsight, I think I was destined to become a soldier.

From as early as I can remember, the stories told me by my grandfather were military ones. Stories of military adventures with the Hampshire Regiment, of garrison duty in India, the terror of fighting on the North West Frontier (which we now know as Afghanistan), of infantry attacks against Turkish positions across broad fields of corn in the searing disease laden heat of Mesopotamia and finally the boredom of barracks on the Isle of Wight under attack from the air during WW2.

So why on earth would I want to join the army where in my young mind all that warlike stuff was likely to happen?

Truth to tell none of us ever thought that would be the case as we only saw travel, adventure where the British always came out on top and for me, getting my hands on a rifle and shooting for a sport.

It was, I suppose, a disappointment to my grandfather when I allowed my stepfather to talk me out of the Infantry and into the RAOC to "get a trade".
He was after all an RAOC Warrant Officer and tradesman himself and that he saw as my career and my future.

That was what took me to the Army Recruitment office in Edgware Road in London to sign up for the Junior Leaders Battalion RAOC in the early summer of 1961, a move my teachers at school thought insane.

The Swinging 60's

Joining up - summer 1961

I suppose my short army career started the day I swore my oath of allegiance at the CLRD (Central London Recruitment Depot) in Great Scotland Yard (NOT New Scotland Yard!) and when I found myself the only one there, in a vast room standing clasping a copy of the Bible in one hand and reciting the oath to the Queen.
With my stomach turning somersaults I underwent my medical in a huge unlit hall, still just me on my own with no idea what life would be like from that moment on.

I was so nervous during the swearing in ceremony that at the point where you have to say, "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the second her heirs and successors" I had the problem of wanting to snigger and laugh!

This has always been my downfall and has usually cost me an extra duty.

Whatever possessed me to start snorting my suppressed laughter on that morning in 1961 God only knows. But snort I did, and what a terrible look I got from the Major taking the oath from me.

Mind you, to this day that oath means a lot to me.

What follows now is an assemblage of items from the three years in “boys school” as we called it, and is a kind of sequence of events.
Although now after over 40 years I am not entirely sure that these recollections fall in the right order but they certainly occurred during a very formative three years as a Junior Leader with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps between 1961 and 1964.

The Journey South September 1961

I left home in north London arriving at Waterloo station on a bleak morning in September 1961 and travelled down on a Southern Railway (as it was called then) scruffy old train arriving at Brookwood station on an even bleaker late afternoon.
Stepping off the train with a group of lads we all seemed to drift towards the waiting, what I would forever know and love, the Bedford RL 3 tonner, and bounced off to Blackdown.

On arrival we jumped down from the back of the RL into Dettingen Barracks to the echo of distant boots crunching on gravel, the hoarse shouted commands of the RSM, assorted CSM’s and Sgt’s all mixed with various screams of abuse at unsuspecting boys for being too tall, too short, too fat.... bandy legged (personal one that!), too scruffy... and of course many names too crude to mention here!

Basic Training – Blackdown, September 1961

My first encounter with authority was a mild mannered Junior Corporal who was to be our “Room NCO” for the next few weeks of training was designed to lull us into a feeling of being wanted.
Our next meeting was with Sergeant “Geordie” Luke my first platoon Sergeant.
This would be followed once we had had our basic training, by transfer to our permanent “House”, mine was to be Hill with Sergeant John "Bongo" Bollers, would anyone get away with calling him that now these days?

But back to training and the six weeks we would spend bonding and learning that life was never going to be the same again. We would have our very first army haircut, short back and sides all over and done with in less than two minutes. We would move from this having been taught the very basics of marching in step, I was luckier than most as I had already learned to march from my grandfather and also as I had been an Army Cadet, to the QM Stores to be issued with our kit.

The QM’s Storeman would thrust items of kit at us, which we had to stuff into the kit bag that was the first item that was put in front of us. In went shirts, dark green lace up underpants, “denims”, boots, SD’s, mess tins, a “housewife” PE kit… on an on item after item which would be transformed into gleaming, perfectly polish or ironed items that would often end up being thrown from a window or from one end of the barrack room by a dissatisfied NCO.

Life as “Nigs” – “C” Company

For the period until we were given a number and moved into our new “house” we would be called “nigs” and have to shout out “NYA Junior Private Bond” oh how I yearned to be 216 Bond!

So the first day standing at the foot of bed was almost unbearable as I blurted out for the first but certainly NOT my last the mantra “217 J/Pte Bond, SIR!!

I think we had to wear a silly hat too before we progressed to our SD caps and then much later berets. But it would always be that were “nigs” and only a year away before being a “sweat” and not so far off to being an “old sweat”

Sadly, life as a “nig” was not a happy one. We were often bullied, robbed and generally made to feel that we were worthless but I have to say, that for the majority it never broke us.

Once we got rid of the hat, the “NYA” and settled into our platoons we soon became part of the team and happier days followed.

Religion and when to keep quiet about it

An early lesson learned and for the innocent, a big mistake here, was to speak of openly about your religion.

I was a catholic boy from an Irish school in London and so innocent that when the big lad from Glasgow and his Geordie mate woke me up one night and whispered to me, “What religion are you mate? ” I simply and honestly answered, “Catholic”!

The result, I was then terrorised for the next 2 weeks until they got bored with the taunting of me.
Their taunting largely failed because coming as I did from London I was totally unaware of any sectarian divides and had never heard the song “The Sash” or even of “King Billy” come to that.
So as these taunts failed to inflame me the two religious zealots soon moved on to a more enlightened victim and left me alone to ponder how I would for the rest of my life avoid speaking too loud about religion.

Buddy Holly and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome for Junior Leaders

Our room Cpl. was a funny lad. He sat in his corner screened off from the rest of us and never had a conversation with us at all ever, all he ever did was order us around and march us to lessons, training or meals.
But what he did do was leave me with a legacy of life long dislike for Buddy Holly” who’s record he played day in day out for the whole time we were in training.
From morning ‘till night the “Buddy Holly Story” banged away on his small record player on and on and on.

To this day I can’t hear Buddy Holly without being transported back to that barrack room and that flaming set of songs, the noise, shouts, orders, the dim lighting at night, the old death trap of a coke stove (how none of us were suffocated I will never know)!!
So, Junior Leader PTSS

Boxing or how to avoid it! - Autumn 1962

We all remember what an important part of our training was.
From the early days of PT when were introduced to the gentle art of “milling”!! Remember

that, line up tallest on the left shortest on the right then form two ranks and we would end up paired off with someone of a similar height?

I was paired off with a lad called Burt, I can't remember his first name and when our one minute to box came and as we put on our gloves he leant forward to me and whispered "go easy on me Dick" and I, like a fool whispered back in a quavering voice "OK" – what followed was an onslaught of punches from poor old J/Pte Burt that sent me spinning off with a thick lip and throbbing ear and not a chance to even throw a punch.
Ding! Went the bell and it was all over… I don't think I ever spoke to him again!

Later on there were the inter-platoon boxing competitions and it seems that despite my small stature and failure in my early milling experiences I was somehow put forward to box for Hill Platoon a prospect so terrifying that I nearly deserted.
In any event I was more scared of arriving home to my grandfather and telling him what I had done that doing three minutes in the ring.

So, after going up for my medical (wearing my boxing gloves) the MO and his stethoscope standing just near the ring looked me up and down, placed the stethoscope on my chest, listened briefly and then looking me in the eye said "you are scared aren't you"? "Yes" I said… "Fit to fight" he called and into the ring I went only to emerge 1 minute later with the call "Red was too strong for blue, red is the winner" Guess who was blue?

So, when several months later the call for boxers came again not a single one of us volunteered so Sgt. Bollers demanded that we volunteer.
Not a voice was heard, so he approached each of us in turn asking us to box and in turn we each declined.
So infuriated by this he called us cowards and told us what we were doing amounted to mutiny and that we would be punished. And punished we were!!!

Block punishment and how NOT to prolong it! - Autumn 1962

After the refusal of the whole of Hill Platoon to box so started the week long block punishment that consisted of endless warm up drills, you know the ones where everything is undertaken and twice the speed of sound, running in full kit around the sports field and the Pirbright assault course on and on.
In any event sometime during one of these terrible acts of revenge against us some fool decided to call Sgt Bollers a racist name and he heard it… well the punishment got worse and worse as the fool in the ranks constantly muttered the insult as we passed Sgt Bollers.
In the end we had taken as much as we could and turned on the fool and shut him up. The punishment then stopped.
However, on the final run to the assault course I "fortunately" developed the most terrible stomach pains and ended up in hospital with some sort of blockage of the bowel of some kind.
I later discovered that it may well have been and inflammation of the duodenum. In any event it saved me from further punishment AND boxing!

The Cuban Missile crises and NBC training Junior Leaders style - 1962

At some stage during early 1962 the Cuban missile crises blew up, almost literally, and we were introduced the "cut price" version of NBC protection as deemed appropriate for Junior Leaders.

Training involved wearing 1914 issue gas capes over our small packs, a white hand towel for wrapping around our faces to protect us from the flash of a nuclear explosion and our woollen gloves to also assist in the protection from the attack.

We were also instructed on how to avoid the shockwave by laying down as low to the ground as possible, in fact we should try and lay in the gutter by a kerb stone to provide the lowest profile possible.

I retained these survival techniques in my head 'till this very day and hope to heck that I never have to use them other than to avoid being detected by the police when drunk as a skunk in Portsmouth!

The Kennedy Assassination
(Or being in the wrong place at the wrong time – Winter 1963)

Out of Bounds

Being out of bounds was a frequent and somewhat secretive challenge to authority by Junior Leaders.
It attracted minimal risk with maximum benefits, usually in the shape of a cake and a cuppa.
However, on the night of the 22nd November 1963, the day that President Kennedy was shot in Dallas three of us, dressed only in denims and daps, had sneaked off to the Salvation Army hut for a tea and doughnut.
We had hardly had time to bite into the things when the Orderly Sergeant burst in and shouted for us to get back to camp!
We were terrified as we knew, we were not only out of bounds, (it was 6pm in the evening), but we were also "improperly dressed" and that we would no doubt attract more Staff Parades or worse.

In the event, the sergeant was not interested in why, who, or what, we were. He was far more interested in telling us that a massive crises had occurred, the Kennedy was dead and they thought the Russian's had done it.

So, scared witless now about the prospect of nuclear war (we had just got over the Cuban missile crises) we dashed back for briefings from very serious and sombre officers.

Remembrance Sunday's

Desertion? - What me sir? - Winter 1963

Each year in November there was the traditional Remembrance Day parade and often those of us who lived in London were allowed to attend a religious service (if you were Catholic – this WAS a time to admit you were one) at Westminster Cathedral in Victoria. Of course, you

had to go up in full uniform of greatcoat with black armband go to the service and then return to Blackdown.

What we did therefore was go to the service and at the first possible moment dash out and scamper off home having arranged with the others to meet at Waterloo and then all return to camp together.

This worked well the first time I did it but on the second occasion and heavens knows how Sgt Bollers knew we had skipped off home and was waiting for us when we got back to camp.
To our horror he read us the riot act and told us we had deserted and that he would have to consider what next to do.
To be honest I can't remember what happened but I fear we must have had a few Staff Parades to do as a punishment.

Memorable people

RSM "Tara" McCann

A fearsome man and probably the scariest person I ever met in my life was RSM McCann. He was I have to say scarier that any armed and slightly mad Cypriot National Guardsman, Policeman or Libyan Paramilitary policeman with a serious grudge against me.

RSM McCann was very tall, very smart and very scary indeed.

My first direct encounter was when I had the terrible duty that I am sure we all dreaded fell to me.
That was the one where you had to clean Battalion HQ on one evening and in winter set the fire going in the death trap coke stove in the RSM's office, this was a major challenge to some of us at the best of times let alone when under the eagle eye of RSM McCann.
This duty for some sadistic reason also included cleaning the RSM's Sam brown belt, to HIS standard.

When my first and only time came to undertake this task two things that could go wrong did go wrong.

The fire wouldn't light in the freezing cold winters morning
A parker fountain pen from the RSM's desk went missing

How I overcame the first problem involved a very kindly civilian clerk who helped me get the fire going but I was unaware of the second event until the following night while watching a boxing tournament when from the ring the referee halted proceedings and made the following announcement.

""Junior Private Bond report to the RSM in Battalion HQ now"!

So with that awful churning feeling that you get deep down in your bowels I set off for the RSM's office.
He was sat as his desk, a green shaded desk lamp shining down onto his hands his Sam

brown only recently polished by stretched tight across his chest, he positively radiated power. I was terrified.

So the interrogating began, where was the pen, whey did I take the pen, what had I done with the pen and tell him now!
I was dumbstruck as I had never in my life stolen anything and I was mortified that anyone, especially RSM McCann could think I had.
Well, I stammered and stuttered and swore that I had not seen let alone taken his pen and just at the point when I could feel the pressure forcing the tears to well up (something I was saying over and over in my head" don't cry") He stood up, "alright" he said in a softer tone, "I believe you, now go back to your company, dismissed".

That was probably my last encounter with RSM McCann but one well remembered.

A Military training

Lessons learnt as Junior Leaders

Recently, I sat down and decided to list the things I had learnt in the army.
Not the military things, not shooting, drilling and bulling.
The other stuff, the life skills we all take for granted and then wonder how we ever knew to do them in later life.

Domestic skills;

Sewing on a button or, and tacking up a trouser turn up.
Darning a pair of socks – not needed much these days I agree
Cooking with the very basics, from scratch
Making a bed (Hospital corners and all that)
Having a proper shave
The importance of drinking water on a long journey
Ironing a shirt
Pressing a pair of trousers
Cleaning your shoes
Being clean

Oh OK and the less than useful military one's;

Using Luton straw-hat dye to shine the welts of your boots.
Shaving the top of your SD cap and brushing a circle into it
Slashing the peak of your cap
Putting soap in the creases of your trousers
Having your shirts tailored and the pleats stitched in
Squaring off your belt brasses with a wooden block for a better finish
Blending black, dark tan and ox blood polish to create a tortoise shell finish for your chinstrap.
Cardboard in your kit layout to square off the edges

And the future business skills;

Shooting straight, fast and accurately – Good when in debate
Thinking fast
Planning
Calculating risk
Team building
Confidence
Assertiveness

There is much more I'm sure, but most of these skills were all either developed or certainly sewn as seeds before we were 17.
See what awesome creatures we going to be unleashed on an unsuspecting world.

Sports

Shooting

For me it was a continuation of an obsession I had had since I was taught to shoot by my grandfather. He used and aiming point (the card you aimed at while your instructor looked through a pinhole to see if your aim was true. I started with an air rifle, progressed to a .22 target rifle then a .303 Lee Enfield No 4 and on joining the army, the dear old 7.62 Self Loading Rifle. I also fired Bren, Sterling, Webley .38, and later Browning 9mm.

But it was with rifle where I excelled winning several trophies and medals in both .22 and SLR competitions.
This was the one sport I took with me when I left the army and one which I have only had to give up after the ban on all self loading rifles after the Hungerford murders and then my collection of pistols after the tragedy of Dunblane.

One day I will start shooting again but regrettably it is unlikely to be in Britain.

Drill, Church Parades and Drill Competitions

Drill

Geordie Luke told me one day that I should have joined the cavalry!!

He then went on the tie a cord around my knees to stop me being "bow legged"

One memorable day during warm up drill a group of visiting army cadets started to laugh at us as we were drilled up and down, left and right.... faster and faster... Geordie was not happy with us and was making sure we knew it.
So as we started to make the occasional mistake the cadets laughed more. That is until Sgt. Luke had his fill of them laughing so what did he do, he marched us right into them and then turning us left and right and about until they tumbled like skittles.

The laughter soon stopped and he made it clear to them that they would not laugh at us again. He marched slowly way then, faultlessly.

Church Parades

I recall so many Sunday's with Church parades down through Deepcut to St Barbara's Church. The band playing and the Permanent staff all decked out in No 1 dress the band playing loudly the various marches and the few faces peering at us from outside Keyes Café as we marched down to St Barbara's Church.

Drill Competitions

The inter-platoon drill competitions were very cut throat as each platoon was determined to outdo the others in turnout, the precision of our drill and the sheer pride of winning.

We would spend weeks drilling and memorising movement and stamping out bad habits, like the "Blackdown shuffle" and the equally elaborate slide into the about turn.

Kit would be reduced to its basic state and the build back up to the highest standard we could achieve.
There would be experts in cleaning chinstraps, bulling boots, burnishing bayonets, making out white buff belts smooth and pure in colour and others working at our brasses.

There would the task of ensuring our rifles didn't rattle with loose parts yet at the same time were tweaked just enough to allow a nice sound as they were snapped into the present arms.

I did three drill competitions, we won one, lost one and there was another where just the day before, I sliced deeply into my fingers with a razor blade while cleaning bayonets.
I had to stand down and then simply tidy everyone up as they went out on parade.

The day would start with a special breakfast, and then a warm up drill followed by the final kit cleaning.
Once dressed we would form up as a Drill Squad and the shuffle out onto the square to be given one final clean before the Guards Sergeant who was judging us would come to inspect.

Then we would drill to perfection smoothly and confidently with all the awful dragging of feet and shuffling consigned to the depths only to emerge again sometime in the not too distant future.

Closing the Blackdown roads

One of the more "exciting" things we used to do on an annual basis was to close the roads within the Blackdown garrison.
We got kitted out in combat kit drew our rifles and were then set off to put up check points along the roads stopping all cars and showing them an "order" that said something about the roads being War Department property (I am sure it wasn't MOD then) most people took it well some on the other hand certainly improved our language skills!!

The mystery of the missing tug-o-war rope!!

For the life of me I don't know where the idea came from or even why. But on a dark night in 1962 it was decided that Hill Platoon needed a nice long tug-o-war rope to coil up as an escape route from the upper floors of our block - I don't know why this set us off on a

mission in the depths of the night to steal a rope from opposite the then Officers Mess where opposite that was a large MT RASC MT Shed.
Well set off we did, (don't have a clue who we were led by either), to get this flaming rope in the dark, no torches or anything, just the moonlight.

So, we find the rope in the dark (how did we know it was there in the first place?) and proceed to pick it up. Well, can anyone recall ever having to pick up about 50 yards of 2" thick rope between perhaps 10 lads?
We struggled back with this burden, which soon sapped our energy most of which had already been sapped by the surge of adrenalin as we broke in and broke out of the MT Sheds, a long length of rope that weighed several Junior Leaders!!!

Once back at Dettingen and the safety of Hill Platoon block we set about the task of cutting it into pieces - one length for each upstairs room. Well, we tried and tried with knives and teeth and finally gave up.

Our platoon Sergeant "Topper" Brown came the rescue next day with a hacksaw and strangely no questions as to the origins of the rope.
I am sure he got a reprimand over the incident though and never took it out on us - he looked so sad about it that we felt punished ourselves.
Shortly after this the ropes were standard in the rooms!!

Taking Leave, and where NOT to go in London.

During the early 60's my part of north London was, and probably still is, a mixed community of Greek Cypriots and Irish.
The area was fairly rough and just at the junction of Hampstead Road and Camden Road two pubs sat either side of the road, one mainly Irish the other attracting mainly Cypriots who had arrived from the Island after the end of the EOKA troubles.

Neither ethnic group seemed to take much notice of me as a soldier in uniform until one evening arriving on leave and emerging from Mornington Crescent tube station I noticed that one pub was daubed with blue painted letters "EOKA". . and the other with "Up the IRA".
In those days the only one that would spark a hint of danger to me was the one with EOKA painted on it in three-foot high letters.

So here I was wearing No 2 Dress for the first time and feeling very much the proper soldier having at last discarded the awful SD uniform for something so much smarter.
In any event as I stood waiting to make up my mind about buying a newspaper, a bag of chips or setting off for the short walk home, two youths came by, one clearly Cypriot and the other very much an Irish lad, one spat at my feet and snarled something about me while the other stood glaring threateningly at me and twirling a key chain.

So, without a care in the world and with the confidence of youth I simply ignored them and stood my ground.
They stared at me for some moments and then clearly dumbfounded by my failure to walk away and the fact that I stared back as hard as I could and at the same time managed not to twitch they decided enough was enough and walked off… an incident like this never happened to me again, after all, it was my home and they were the foreigners in it.

The 17 Pounder Field Gun incident

One summer day, I can't remember when precisely, I was told to go with some other lads get aboard two 3 toners and go to Aldershot.
We had no idea where we were going until we arrived at a large warehouse where we were shown two rather grubby looking 17 pounder field guns – I think they were either WW1 or WW2 vintage.

So, having hitched these things up to the trucks we set off back to Dettingen where we were told to position them either side of the saluting base on the barracks square.
They stayed there until later in the year when, bored one winter's night we decided to move them.

On this occasion we were not very daring, only pulling them into the middle of the square.