WHAT IF?
(Or - Confused, Random Recollections from 1961 - 1963!!)

What if the majority of us hadn't arrived on a chilly late-morning at Brookwood railway station - which in my case was a mere 11/2 hour train ride - but for all of us the start of a journey that would last for 2 years or so and have an impact that would last for the rest of our lives? Looking around the platform for some indication as to where to go and what to do next, I can remember seeing other pimply faced youths looking as equally bemused and certainly more than a little apprehensive about the future.

What if we didn't have Sgt Geordie Luke as our Recruit Platoon Sergeant? He seemed to be the classic Army Instructor - immaculate in his BD, medal ribbons on his chest, ruddy of complexion with a gravelly voice and a lovely way with words!! Certainly a man to be respected and feared, probably in equal measure. Even more feared was the first sighting of this mysterious figure known as the RSM. In our case RSM Paddy McCann. What a combination!! That's apart from all the other figures of great importance in our lowly existence as "Nigs".

What if we were not kitted out with uniforms that fitted where they touched. Shirts that were like Army Horse blankets and the tails came down to the back of our knees! Boots that had nearly as many pimples on them as we had on our faces!! Tin hats that had to have a "Spider" fitted inside, a Housewife - that was a mystery! 'Keks' and 'Daps' - all manner of weird and wonderful kit that had to become as familiar to us as our own faces. To be cleaned, polished, pressed and laid out countless times - only, in a lot of instances, to be told in no uncertain terms 'You ain't put enough @**@!!** effort into this Boy'. Bumper's, Hospital Corners on beds, Bed packs, Ablutions, Outside Areas - what a litany.

What if Paul Jones, George Tether, Tich Henson, Brian Kesson, Dave Brown, Barry Walker, Alan Coates, Bobby Hughes, Johnny Faithful, George Hendley, Tich Jackson, Chris Kimpton, Bob Davison, ???? Fennell and countless others hadn't shared the trials and tribulations of those first few weeks of unrelenting movement towards becoming a Boy Soldier? Of Passing Out of Recruit Platoon - if fortunate - in front of our parents at the end of term Passing Out Parade. Of going on leave after receiving our 'Big Pay' and Railway Warrants with a Leave Pass.

What if, upon return from leave, we didn't go to our respective Platoon Houses to be further moulded by the likes of Sgt Alfie Pownall, Sgt John Bollers, Sgt Tom Richardson, Sgt Jeff Page, Sgt 'Drummie' King, CSM Ben Allen, CSM ??? Pope. Starting to learn our Trades under the likes of Sgt Jock Ness, furthering our education under the 'Schoolies' like Lt. Gibby.

What if there wasn't the NAAFI Club and the WVS lady? What if there wasn't the March and Shoot at Ash Ranges, the Drill Competition, if lucky enough to be selected, Outward Bound at Towyn, Annual Camps, Ten Tors, Nijmegen Marches and the Keys Café in Deepcut?

What if there were no Sunday morning Church Parades, marching down to the Church behind the Corps of Drums. What if there were no Block inspections on Saturday mornings, no Show Parades, no Fire Picket Duties? No collecting the Block cleaning materials from the CQMS's Store in the Nissan Huts - always remembering to take a couple of sheets of newspaper so that the floor polish could be ladled out of a great big tub and unceremoniously dumped onto the

said newspaper held in cupped hands - with the kindly words “Don’t you @@??**@!! drop any of it, cause there ain’t no more”.

What if it wasn’t goodbye to SD and hello to No. 2 Dress? Two Shirts and three Collars, one Stud, Back and Front. Shoes, Walking Out and Forage Caps. How smart we thought we were - the shirt tails were “normal”, but those Collars had a life of their own!! Designed purely to frustrate even the most sartorially astute young man!

What if, after the 2 years or so, we didn’t Pass Out? We hadn’t gained at least one Trade, Army Certificate of Education III, II or I. Grown at least a couple of inches, put on some muscle, grown in confidence, matured a little. Swaggered a bit because we had done it! We were then “Old Sweats” with the odd tattoo, a command of some fine old Anglo-Saxonisms and the belief that these new “Nigs” have got it easy, not as hard as it was for us!

What if I had a better memory for names, dates and places? It would have allowed me to have made a better job of these ramblings.

What if the Old Boys hadn’t had a Reunion at Farnborough in September? Would we have had the opportunity to meet up again, to smile at past memories, to drink to past and those present “ex-Boys”, to re-live those times, to remember the characters, the laughs, the toil, the whole experience. To reflect upon the journey we all made and what we had become. How Junior Leaders had shaped us.

What if I had my time all over again? Would I have chosen to take that same journey? Without a doubt!! And I think that , if not all of us, most of us would too.

By Ex J/RSM Rod Craigie 2007