SEPTEMBER 1962 – DECEMBER 1965
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We drove to Blackdown, my father and me. From Viersen in Germany where my father was a warrant officer at a massive Ordnance depot thereabouts. In fact I had signed on at that Ordnance base, before my fathers Commanding Officer. So I knew what the RAOC was and well knew what I was about – in as much as any fifteen year old knows what he is about, which on reflection probably means I didn't have a bloody clue what I was doing. We drove across Belguim and Holland and then down through England from Harwich, staying overnight at the Union Jack Club in London. That was a pretty primitive place in those days, little more than cubicles with large gaps at the bottom of each door, designed no doubt to discourage any homo erotic hanky panky. Not that I knew what a homo was, or what erotic meant and I was, of course, completely innocent as to the meaning of hanky panky. All of that was ahead of me.

My father would have known Deepcut very well indeed. By that time he had his long service and good conduct medal and was quite well known in the corps. He had been an infantry man during the war and had transferred to Ordnance on being wounded in Italy. He was one of those soldiers who had seen a bit but never ever complained. About anything. But he was shocked by Dettingen Barracks. He thought the accommodation was truly appalling and he knew a bit about rough barracks. I remember him complaining - almost the only time I ever heard him complain at all - to the recruit platoon Sgt. They were both Geordies and knew each other from the corps but my dad gave him some stick. Perhaps because they knew each other the recruit Sgt. managed to avoid my father seeing the shower block. I think if he had he may well have incited me to mutiny and taken me back home to Viersen. For the shower block was awful to behold. Many of us were to spend part of our winters in the years to come, lagging the shower block pipes. At times they pumped out as much asbestos as they did water, and both were both usually cold.

The starkness of the barracks was ameliorated slightly by the cookhouse which I always remember as warm and bright and welcoming, and quite modern in its way with fresh milk from a dispenser, something I had never seen before. I think they gave to us all, parents and recruits, buns and tea in the cookhouse. Many of our parents though must have left us there with some apprehension, such gloomy ancient barrack rooms, such primitive toilet and hand bowl facilities, were there only four toilets for 60 boys?

One of the remarkable features of life there was that there was no violence by the permanent staff against the boys. There was plenty of violence and bullying amongst the boys, but I never saw any of the permanent staff involved in it, or in naked bullying of the boys. It was surprising because corporal punishment was still prevalent in English schools, and widely used. If Blackdown had been, for example, a Catholic boarding school, then violence by the staff would have been natural, endemic and expected. So too if it had been a Borstal, and at times it was fairly close to a Borstal.

Amongst the boys bullying was widespread. And maybe the permanent staff turned too much of a blind eye. There were lending rackets that would have done the gangsters of the East end proud. 100% interest, 200% interest – a good beating if you were late. I was bullied myself as I am sure were many others.. And, god forgive me, I also became, at times, a bully. I recall one night returning from the NAAFI with a bottle of tizer or something, having been sent by the corporal to get it for him. I was set upon, for no other reason than it

was my turn to be set upon, by a group of young bullies' intent on giving me a beating. There was a Scots boy from my platoon who intervened. From Glasgow he was. Really a rather frail looking boy but those Glasgow Scots were as hard as nails. He was on his own but he told them all to fuck off and if they couldn't understand his Scottish accent they certainly understood his meaning, and quiet as mice, they all fucked off. By such chances you survived. And thrived.

There is a picture here of my recruit platoon, or at least those from my barrack room who were all in the same platoon of recruits:- http://i139.photobucket.com/albums/q306/bewigged/JuniorLeaders.jpg. Third from the left in the back row is, if I remember rightly, Pardoe. He was a boxer and very very frightening. No that's not true. He was in fact a very nice bloke. It was in the ring that he was frightening. He was small for a boxer but went in very fast and very hard. He was from London or somewhere like that in the South. He left the army shortly after boy service but then re-joined after experiencing a bit of civi life. He boxed for the corps. Wonder where he is now. Second from the right in the back row is a boy who I remember very clearly being bullied. He was slightly overweight and they went for him in a big way. I recall him being thrown down the stairs of Gordon Platoon in a sack. He suffered quite a lot. After Blackdown he went and became a paratrooper and returned to confront some of his bullies. He returned a real fighting soldier. It was a triumph and I often think of him. Kneeling at the front right is an Irishman who I curse myself for not remembering his name. He was from the North, just outside Londonderry. One Easter he invited a small group of about four of us, over to the North for a holiday. Sgt. Major Robinson came with us. His Dad had a farm and was a member of the B Specials but made us all most welcome with the tremendous hospitality of the Irish. Sometimes I travel up through Londonderry on my way up to the courts in Donegal and one day I will have a battery operated internet thingy and stop at that farmhouse and show him this site! Standing far right is Pat Hamilton. He was one who went to Northern Ireland with us. He was a footballer of some note. Also possibly the most handsome recruit of that year. His dad ran a pub I think, out in Northamptonshire. Kneeling in the very centre of the group, second row, is Jim Ainsworth. I am sure he became Junior RSM. Brightest of our year he went out to Singapore after passing out. We had a few beers together out there. He had a gift, I think, for languages and learnt Chinese. I suspect after that that he became involved in intelligence work for he virtually disappeared of the radar. He was ahead of his time was Jim, not for him the causal racism of the common soldier. Is that Flood with the cap tipped back at a jaunty angle? He was possibly more handsome than Hamilton. He used to dress like the Dave Clark Five, always immaculate. He was only from down the road in Farnbourgh. I suspect he didn't serve too long in the army. Nor did I for that matter.

The guy that I bullied is not in the picture although he was in that particular recruit intake. Crisp was his name. His father was a Sgt. Major in the Parachute Regiment, but poor old crispy wasn't very street wise. He had a really terrible time and I often think that it must have been particularly difficult for him to tell his Sgt. Major paratrooper dad that he was being bullied. I met him a few years ago, in Nottingham. His flat had been burgled and I was working as a Police Scenes of Crime Officer and went to gather bits of evidence. He was, I am pleased to report, very happily married and bristling with confidence. He had a fine singing voice and was making a few bob as a singer in the clubs around Nottingham. I was so pleased to see him and felt such a heel about Blackdown.