This memory was donated by
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Baker Platoon 1965-1966

A JUNIOR LEADER OF MEN?.....NOT QUITE!

(Memories of a Boy Soldier)

It was late April in 1965 when a brown O.H.M.S. letter with my name on it dropped on the doormat. Opening the envelope with trepidation, it contained instructions for me to report to some place called Blackdown on Tuesday 11 May, directions of how to get there and a travel warrant for the train. Like many other youngsters of that era, it was the furthest I had travelled on my own. Resplendent in my new posh jacket, trousers, shoes, shirt and tie purchased from the Co-op, I strode off with an attaché case containing spare underwear, toiletries and a packed lunch, still leaving room to spare.

On arrival at Brookwood station, an anxious group of us were met by an army driver of a Bedford RL 3 Ton truck saying "All those for the RAOC Junior Leaders at Blackdown, get on the truck now!" Climbing into the back of that `not so clean' lorry, the crotch seams of my new strides decided to part company. Good start for the first of the two four zero army numbers!

Rolling up at Dettingen Barracks, the sight was as welcoming as Wuthering Heights on a bad day. After a quick welcome at the HQ Coy offices, we were taken to the barrack block, assigned a bed-space, then off to the QM's for our "Initial Issue 1157". Never in my life had I had so much stuff that was just for me. Next stop, the Bedding Store for our mattress, blankets etc, bedside table, mat, padlock and a nice new white china pint mug. Attempting to carry that lot back to the block in one go required the total gripping capacity of an octopus. Clutching the mattress with my hands, knees and teeth, I struggled back to the accommodation. All of a sudden..`kerchink', out fell the mug landing on the ground ending up in pieces. "Gawd. What else can go wrong?" I thought. In the barrack room, Sgt Pete Davies our recruit instructor, asked each of us if we had any deficiencies. This was a new word to a naïve youth being presented with a something with more than two syllables. When it came to my turn I said "No Sergeant, I wasn't issued with any!" Nose to nose, with veins raised on his neck, he hissed "Are you taking the piss boy?" Sniggers from others in the room!

The following day was Wednesday, our first Muster Parade. We were dressed in our new uniform of denims, KF shirt, `37 pattern belt, gaiters and a beret big enough to land a helicopter on. To finish off the ensemble, the beret sported the old brass and nickel "Kings" hat badge. This we had to place in a boot polish tin lid with a small amount of burning Brasso

to clean off the protective wax layer before we could get a shine on it. After another welcoming address, this time from Major Gomez, it was off to the Barber Shop for short back and sides to make us presentable for the next ritual - pay parade. Marching into the room on the thick brown polished lino floor, I approached the 6 ft trestle pay table. Halt, slide, arms waving, falling back whilst still travelling forward, the hobnails in the boots connecting squarely with the shins of the paying officer Capt Williamson. The table went flying with the neatly stacked notes and coins violently travelling to the 4 points of the compass. I pulled myself up to the kneeling position, elbows on the edge of the upturned 6 ft table, stupidly throwing up a salute and declaring my name "Junior Private Thomas sir!" Nursing his now grazed legs, Capt Williamson retorted "Stand over there out of the way you idiot. You can wait until last!" Needless to say, the resultant delay whilst the scattered money was picked up, checked and counted before the payout could recommence didn't exactly endear me to my contemporaries. Finally, with the princely sum of £1 in each of our hands, we were given a list of items we needed from the NAAFI. Blanco, boot polish, Brasso, yellow duster, wet razors etc. There may have been just enough change left over to buy a packet of 5 Cadet cigarettes. No single Fling, Nelson or meat patty in a bread roll this week for most of the boys. Luckily, I had worked in civvy street for just over 3 months before joining, so with the £12 that I took with me, I was loaded in comparison.

Break time saw us at the back window of the Cookhouse. Armed with my new mug that cost me 1 shilling (courtesy of my first red entry P1954), I lined up with the rest of the guys for a slice of Madeira cake and half a mug of tea, only for that miserable Irish cookhouse labourer to shout accusingly "You've had your ****ing cake. **** off!" Never set eyes on him before in my life, but no cake. A fellow recruit Stu Umpleby gave me half of his cake. Good bloke was Stu.

Thursday, it was off to the Gym for our first of many PT sessions. Not naturally gifted in the graceful art of vaulting over a big wooden padded box, I took a run up, jumped on the spring board which propelled me perpendicular upwards, caught my toes on the edge of the box, deflecting me straight into PTI Cpl Bill Disbury like a sack of spuds ending up with both of us in a big heap on the floor. As a consequence both my pride and left shoulder were hurt. This required me to report "Special Sick". At the company office, the CSM said "Where's yer small pack? Geddit now!". So it was back to the block to pack my pristine blancoed small pack with stuff that was needed should I need to go to hostpital. Luckily, my shoulder was just bruised, so with a blast from the heat lamp and a rubbing down with Algipan, I was sent back to rejoin my new chums.

After lunch, it was more drill on the disused parade square of Alma Barracks. I had missed the previous session when I went sick and the others had started doing drill movements "judging the time". Sgt Davis shouted "Thomas. Shout out the time!" Promptly looking at my wrist watch, I replied "It's nearly 2 o'clock Sergeant!" It was nose to nose again. "Smart arse eh!" he said hissing and spitting through clenched teeth. "See this square? Start running around it until I tell you to stop!" Blimey, I've not even been here a week yet. The rest of my time in recruit block went past pretty uneventful after that apart from a new boy who turned up a week late. J/Pte Seymore from Pontefract in Yorkshire was forced to join up by his mother to make a man of him, and it was obvious from the outset that it was a mistake. He was a mummy's boy who cried constantly in bed at night, especially when the room filled with smoke after his wet small pack he put on the top of the lit stove to dry out caught fire. Within weeks, his mother bought him out for £20.

After "Nig Block", I moved to Baker Platoon, A Company. My life as a Term 2 boy wasn't as bad for me as it was for others from my intake. As I was already 16 years old when I joined, whereas the other recruits were 15 years, I immediately started trade training as a Storeman. I used this advantage to strike up a rapport with others senior than me. Initially, I too was subject to the action of the bully boys, but when the ring leader of the bully gang had his steel locker tipped on him in bed as he slept, it was assumed it was me, and I was left alone. With an easier life in the offing, I wasn't going to let them know otherwise.

If playing any dirty sport, it was difficult to clean up afterwards as there was only one bath session per week, so you had to try and "top and tail" as best you could with the sinks in the platoon blocks. This was in the days before showers were installed in the blocks themselves. The solution was simple. Give up rugby and take up swimming. Take your soap, talc and clean underwear along. Job done ! It was in the Junior Leaders that I found the advantage of religion. By taking C of E religious study for confirmation classes, you could stay in a nice warm room with tea and biscuits whilst others were doing drill on a cold parade ground. Once confirmed by the Bishop of Guildford at Aldershot, I was allowed to attend Holy Communion at St Barbara's Church in Deepcut on a Sunday morning on my own. As such, I only had to wear civvies to church, was excused company church parade and could enjoy a leisurely breakfast with second helpings. Yes, at last, I had arrived!

I believe that the most depressing times we lads experienced was the journey back to camp following leave. Looking out of the train window at the lit windows of the houses flashing by, thinking of the people inside settling down to watch the Sunday night television. Our arduous journey was one of wondering if we were going to be in time to catch the last bus, booking back into the guardroom by midnight, getting our packed kit and bedding out of the Platoon Quiet Room, getting your kit stowed, bed made up and still having to prepare your kit for Muster Parade in the morning. Then you could go to bed until 06:30 hrs when the bugler played "Reveille" and some kind soul banged 7 shades out of the first steel locker in the room shouting "Hands off cocks. On socks!" Oh happy days !!!

I arrived at Blackdown as a gawky, 10 stone, 5 feet 6 inches, 28 inch waisted, bum fluff faced boy. I left as a bigger person in more ways than one, ready to take on the big bad world.

How did Junior Leaders shape me? More confidence, self reliant, not letting people ride roughshod over me, better tolerance of others, you only get out of life what you put in, and if you want something, you have to work hard to achieve it. Positive qualities that prepared me for manhood and for life's journey to come.

By Paul (Ambrose) Thomas
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