May 1969 – 1971
Brian Stoddart
Part 1

Brian Stoddart joined Junior Leaders in May 1969 and left in 1971. He trained as a Staff Clerk and by his own admission was lucky in his postings and generally (with the odd glitch!) greatly enjoyed his Regular career. His bête noire is the formation of the AGC which, he claims, has led to the application and even acceptance of "an appalling mediocrity in clerical support in formation HQs". He is still serving as an NRPS WO1 with HQ Theatre Troops in Netheravon. He has offered up the following pages with, he readily admits, no small application of rose-tinted spectacles.

BLACKDOWN MEMORIES

As I recall it was drizzling slightly on May 6th 1969 as I stepped off the train at Brookwood. My Dad – who had accompanied me from Salisbury – shook my hand and wished me good luck. I didn't want Dad to hang around even though I was grateful to him for his guidance; it may sound silly now but back then I had never travelled anywhere by train, and navigating my way from Salisbury to Basingstoke, to Woking and thence to Brookwood, would surely have taxed me. But as a sensitive fifteen year old I did not want anyone else to see that I could not even begin my Army career without a parent helping!

I picked up a grip containing my worldly possessions, straightened my tie (yes – a tie!) and trod towards the exit. A huge figure barred the way; a tall (obviously) Guards SNCO clad in raincoat and pure presence demanded of me if I were "For the Guards sonny?" "No Sir" I squeaked, "Fuck off then" he replied. Feeling mightily glad that I was not destined for the Household Division I continued on my way where I espied a shiny green minibus sporting the Ordnance badge, where a Cpl in No 2 Dress asked a similar question, though in friendlier terms, "You Ordnance Tich?". This was Cpl "Mac" MacGregor who was to become a guiding light in the months ahead. I hopped in the back where a few other slightly worried looking lads were hunched and we were off to Dettingen Barracks.

Why?

Since I had been a child I had always wanted to join the Army, though I cannot really remember why; it may had had something to do with the proximity to where I lived of Salisbury Plain and its military units. In those far off days it was customary to visit relatives on Sunday afternoons and it seemed to me that nearly every weekend my sisters and me squeezed into Dad's Ford Prefect and trundled across the Plain to Tidworth to visit an Uncle and Aunt at Home Farm or somewhere else beyond, which in every case meant we passed through the camps of Bulford, Tidworth and sometimes Larkhill. In those days these camps were immaculate with endless manicured grassed areas and interesting gate guardians, such as the Centurion tank at Bulford. The ranges at Bulford were sometimes populated (presumably by TA) which meant I had a chance to see this strange species called "Soldiers". These were also the days when military displays came around every year and I remember being thrilled by the parades of military might at Tidworth Tattoo, Middle Wallop Open Day, and of course the impressive firepower displays including a rocket launch at Larkhill Day which took place *every* year. Members of the Army Board take note: if you want to recruit successfully get young boys on shiny green vehicles, let them have a play then watch something noisy; it can't fail.

Not unnaturally this exposure to the military all rubbed off on a young boy; remember these were the days when if you didn't pass the Eleven Plus (I didn't) one was destined for the

building sites, or the local factory. All pretty uninspiring. What the Army did was all so different. The recruiting posters all promised to let you see the world, and the jobs all seemed interesting. Recruiting literature then didn't try and pretend they were civilian jobs but that you would be part of something truly different and special. My weekly Eagle comic even carried advertisements whereby Junior Apprentices could join the Army at 14!

ACF

As soon as I was old enough I had joined the local Army Cadet Force which was located in the next village. This was an artillery sponsored unit from Larkhill although we were frequently training or being tested with a detachment in Salisbury. Weekend camps took place at Tilshead and were quite demanding. Mostly it was all good stuff for teenage boys with an emphasis on assault courses, map reading, small-scale attacks and inevitably drill. Camps could be robust and one had to learn to get along with other boys from a variety of backgrounds; this was no bad thing, and together with the secret knowledge of how to use blanco and brasso was to stand me in good stead.

Such boyhood experiences drew me – not unnaturally perhaps – towards armoured fighting vehicles and at the Castle Street recruiting office in Salisbury I found that an organisation called Junior Leaders existed practically pan Army and that they would take me at 15; great! I could leave school and not have to worry about taking GCEs or even CSEs. A day off school and a trip to Bovington ensued where amongst several other hopefuls we were hosted to great effect by the Junior Leaders Regiment Royal Armoured Corps. To be honest, these days all I can really remember was the quality and quantity of the ice cream on offer, and being a little dismayed by the amount of physical education required, but the tanks were great! I was just 15.

Following the entrance tests in April 1969, I was summoned for an interview by the recruiting sergeant, a tall, kindly but deaf Gunner. He informed me that with my talents, I would be wasted in the RAC, and that perhaps I would be of greater use to the Army as a Staff Clerk. I never quite found out what these supposed talents were but he did assure me that I would work in "high-powered HQs, help Generals, receive good promotion prospects, and yes, the RAOC did have a Junior Leaders". So it was, that as my Army-issue Bible reminds me, I was attested into the Army on 14th April.

First Day

I feel that my first day in the Army should be engraved in my memory yet in truth I cannot remember much of it; I recall queuing and being documented and meeting the Platoon Commander of Rowcroft Platoon, a Lt Roger Bensaid, who I knew slightly from a similar visit to the barracks as I had undertaken at Bovington. Haircuts soon followed and I was mortified that my already short Cadet haircut was deemed insufficient by the Platoon Sergeant, Sgt Smith. Drawing up of kit seemed to take forever before we were finally ensconced in our barrack room. The Junior NCOs, that is the *junior leader* JNCOs, chased around and showed us what was expected of us and how to construct for instance bed blocks. My room corporal was a LCpl "Tich" Pentz, who was REME. The Junior Sgt was a Chris Morris who perversely perhaps, I was later to meet as a major in my last 6 months of the Regular Army.

Settling into barrack room life didn't seem to be too much of a problem; several of my room mates were former cadets and this gave us a great advantage when getting to grips with kit and the routines and even basic drill. It was all a bit like weekend Cadet Camp. I certainly do not recall ever being homesick. Life was certainly brisk and the days were filled. Reveille was at 0600hrs with lights out at, I think, 2200hrs. In between, we marched

from lesson to lesson, from training hut to training hut, and of course, spent a considerable amount of time on the square.

Kit

There was great emphasis placed on kit and turnout, and the JNCOs spent considerable time and effort patiently explaining and demonstrating what was required. Keen aspirant that I was, I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would learn how to press a greatcoat, and this on a 6' table covered with a blanket. Steam irons did not appear to have been invented and I believe we used a mess tin full of water and a shaving brush to acquire the creases.

Our uniforms included 2 suits of combat dress; these were the days of green combats, which we wore with KF shirt and tie. Boots were of the ammunition variety and we had the old 37 pattern webbing which included "Anklets, Web" – never "gaiters"! We were issued with 2 sets of No 2 Dress, 1949 Pattern Battledress, 2 pairs of boots, obviously 1 for "best", a pair of shoes (leather soled), 3 KF Shirts, 2 ties, 2 No 2 Dress shirts, 3 separate collars and associated studs, a housewife, mess tins, socks, hideous and almost unwearable "Shorts, cellular" (underpants), comparable long johns, PT kit of a less than inspiring design, plimsolls, a rather depressing raincoat, a greatcoat as mentioned above, a unique heavy duty pullover of 1943 vintage, with a strange brownish-pink colour with brown suede shoulder and elbow patches, 2 sets of denims, a pair of khaki woollen gloves and finally 2 sets of pyjamas. More warlike apparel was limited to a steel helmet and the webbing referred to above.

Nearly every item of this had to be ironed, even socks! The JNCOs harried us and demonstrated what had to be done; the nightly ritual of bulling boots took place either on the edge of ones bed, or in the TV room which somehow managed to squeeze in 30 odd boys and their tins of polish and yellow dusters.

Even today I can remember the peppery smell of the khaki jelly-like gunge of Fleet Blanco 103. Hitherto, in Cadets only our belts and anklets had to be covered in the stuff and our Blanco was a pale green compressed cake-like substance which required water to be applied. Now, every last item of small pack, ammo pouches, belt, L-straps, cross straps and bayonet frog had to have this stuff applied perfectly with a small scrubbing brush. There was even a Blanco table in the ablutions; actually a tin shelf which was nearly always swathed in a khaki scum from Fleet 103. It was truly an amazing substance and I wonder what became of the firm Fleet when the Army finally got rid of 37 pattern webbing? A bonus was that the tins came in very handy for all sorts of things such as pocket money, spare brasses and collar studs.

Of course, anyone who has used 37 pattern webbing knows that applying a thin layer of khaki paste is insufficient for its maintenance, and every last piece of brassware had to gleam like gold. We were issued a strange brass template for this purpose called confusingly, a Buttonstick (we at least were the generation which benefited from "stay bright" buttons). This was an essential tool for polishing the ends of straps etc, for woe betide you if any metal polish strayed on to the webbing material. Conversely, an equal amount of wrath would descend on you if any Blanco ventured on to the metal. This was all demanding stuff and some never quite mastered either the polishing, or applying the Blanco to the right consistency. Deals were struck in which someone who was good at back brasses would attend to his mate's belt, in exchange for a once over on his less than perfect toecaps. Such are the relationships in the training regime and of the barrack room.

This emphasis on kit was all absorbing and we took great pride in our rooms to out do the others. Tich Pentz showed us how to put some 13 creases in our shirts and this became the

Platoon norm. These days I cannot believe we quite so obsessed – it's just bullshit to the nth degree (!) That said, then it was all part and parcel of the life we had joined, and I suspect the drills involved probably enhanced many careers along the way even if only by sowing the seeds of attention to detail. Best boots were transformed into works of art, and even our daily "workers" had to have highly polished toes and heels. They were frequently checked for the correct number of studs and hapless recruits were often seen hammering some in with a weighted bed- leg end.

Term Routine

That first term concentrated on drill to a fairly large degree or so it seemed. We also endured the rigours of the Gym, which presented a hurdle I never really overcame during my 7 terms at Blackdown; I was just too small at 5'2" and was known as "Tich" Stoddart for all my time there. Even at the end of 7 terms I never really put on any weight, just got slightly taller. What really caught me out was the emphasis on education, and I had joined to get away from school and all that education stuff! I supposed I must have ignored those pages showing boys in classrooms being lectured by staff wearing Service Dress, but that is what happened. It seems that next to drill, we had education periods nearly every day of the week.

As if being marched down almost daily to the Education wing "Spiders" wasn't enough, two times a week we had to attend "Hobbies"; these ranged from Canoeing, Photography, Woodwork, Art Club, Model Railways and a fair few others which I cannot now recall. The Corps of Drums was also an option. I chose Art, which was a fairly painless undertaking having generally shone in this at school. My efforts were rewarded some terms later when I won the Army Arts and Craft Competition one year for "Painting in other Media". However, I flunked my O level which the AEC had directed that I take! Hobbies was quite a good concept as it provided an outlet for some directed relaxation if that is not too much of an oxymoron. It also ensured that we mingled with boys from other areas in the battalion as we were exceptionally insular during our recruit term.

Bullying

Were we bullied back then? The JNCOs certainly got amongst us if our efforts were not considered good enough. I also remember minor tortures after Lights Out such as being made to hold pillows out at arms length and being whacked with a broom handle if my arms dropped. Other ordeals were being "tooth pasted" out of bed with again, a broomstick. These cruelties – such as they were - tended to be an evening sport indulged by the JNCOs of the Platoon with no rhyme or reason involved in the selection of their victims, although if one had been lazy at drill that particular day then look out. At the risk of applying rose-tints to my spectacles these days I don't really think that bullying such as this was damaging or psychologically scarring in any way; it was more an exercise in the consolidation of power over us (as if it were needed) by the JNCOs. It didn't happen every night and was generally accompanied with no small degree of humour. There was no sexual-sadism in any of it as has since been reported over the intervening decades in all too numerous incidents. Those boys who had a less than ideal regime of personal hygiene were singled out for some pretty tough remedies but then, who wanted to live cheek by jowl with someone who smelt? Those boys who couldn't or wouldn't change their habits, tended to leave. Life in the barrack room can be demanding and so it should be; this of course, is anathema to those who today are changing every last aspect of the Army in the spirit of Blair's social engineering policies, but that is beyond my remit in dragging up memories. Just don't get me started over a beer!

Drill

Every day started with a Muster Parade; until we had mastered a decent degree of Foot Drill we did not attend Company Muster Parades. Instruction by the Excellent Corporal McGregor and Sgt Smith took place on that magnificent square at Dettingen Barracks; do you remember those two brass cannon? Instruction then was not fettered by political correctness and swearing, the like I had never heard of, accompanied much of the words of command. However, I don't recall any of us being particularly upset by this; foul language was just part and parcel of the Army as we saw it and appealed to our macho mindsets. To any former Cadet members foot drill wasn't too difficult although parading with some 30-odd boys was noticeably different from the generally small detachments we had reported to before.

Arms drill was something else – or at least for me. The Self-Loading Rifle, although looking superbly modern when compared to the old Lee-Enfield Mk 4 Rifle of Cadet days – was a beast in that I wasn't much taller than my weapon! It also seemed to weigh a ton. However, with some proper weaponry in our hands we at least began to feel like soldiers, and learning to present arms with bayonets fixed gave a great thrill, even if my arms sometimes vibrated with the strain of holding the "Shoulder" for too long.

Once we had mastered the basics and could march 13 paces, then "Halt! Check, One, Two!" we were allowed to join in the Company Muster Parade. I cannot now remember if there were two Platoons of Recruits in that first term, composing a separate HQ Company, or if we were then assigned to A and B Company respectively.

But to regress a little, I am fairly sure that only after a few weeks in Recruit Term, we lost our Platoon Sergeant, Sgt Smith; he was replaced by the Provost Sergeant, Sgt Tosh Hannigan. We were slightly in awe of the Provost Sgt, but "Tosh" (never to his face) became a vital component in our training and development. Firm but fair? Yes, but always with a sense of humour and a twinkle in his eye.

End of Recruit Term

We could not wait to finish our Recruit term, not just to advance with our training, but to lose the 37 pattern belts which we wore as a sign of our recruit status; we longed to get our hands on the Corps stable belts, although we had to pay for them from the PRI. This visible emblem of transition weighed heavily upon us and we all strove to pass the tests (mainly drill I think) which would facilitate this rite of passage.

Once that was out of the way we were destined for B Company, then commanded by a Major Porter, with the CSM, WO2 Kenny Maule, who had a fearsome reputation, and we were in greater awe of him than the RSM!

Time Off

I'm not sure we had any! The regime seemed to be devised to ensure we were never left to our own devices for very long; I am not even sure that as recruits we were even allowed off camp although I have some memories of snacking in Deepcut village in Paul's Café. Saturday mornings were taken up with a rigorous kit inspection of either best kit, or a weapon inspection with an SLR stripped and laid out on a groundsheet tautly wrapped around one's bed. A battalion parade followed and we went around the square at least 5 or 6 times before collapsing on our beds after lunch. This may have been during our second term as I cannot imagine that our drill was good enough during that first term