May 1969 – 1971
BLACKDOWN MEMORIES
by Brian Stoddart

Part II

Brian Stoddart has at long last got around to providing the second part of his memories of Blackdown from 1969 to 1971.

Since the first part uploaded on the site some years ago he has continued to serve as a Reservist WO1; he completed his tour with HQ Theatre Troops in 2007 and moved to HQ 1 Arty Bde, also at Netheravon, employed as SO3 G1/G4. This was followed by a tour as SO3 G3 O&D at HQ DAAvn at Middle Wallop, before he deployed for a final operational tour as Staff Assistant to the Kosovo Protection Corps Coordinator - a British 2 star General - based in Pristina.

He still loathes the AGC(SPS) despite wearing its badge, although attempts to represent Clerks on the Staff to the best of his ability; he fully admits however, that he may not be as good as he sometimes thinks he is.

His sojourn in Kosovo ended in 2009 and since then he hasn't done very much at all; however, at the time of writing, he was mobilised for Op OLYMPICS, working out of Army HQ in Andover, a post which will cease in September 2012. Thereafter, which brings to a close 40-odd years of service, he really will have to think about hanging up his CEFO for good!

Introduction

I have to admit that even only half a dozen or so years on from the previous effort, I cannot quite recall all that I had hoped; I have tried to put what follows in some sort of rational order but inevitably, some of it may appear jumbled, so please forgive any ramblings and inaccuracies. If I've got it horribly wrong please feel free to publish your own version and set the record straight.

Term 2 and beyond

So it was, sporting our freshly-purchased stable belts that we were fully absorbed into B Company. The details of subsequent terms now seem to blur into one another, however, the pressure on drill and fieldcraft was upped, as was education.

Drill

As readers will recall, practically every day began with a Muster Parade, usually carried out at Company level – or did that itself culminate in a full Battalion parade? I just cannot remember. What I do remember is the focus on both foot and arms drill, given no small emphasis by the excellent Tosh Hannigan. As our standard improved – as indeed it had to, given the unswerving scrutiny of the CSM, Kenny Maule – Tosh did his best to make it more interesting. Carrying out "Forms" in both slow and Quick Time, was mastered relatively easily, but to give us all a challenge, he taught us "Sentry Drill" which involved secret signals by either tapping the butt on the ground or displaying two or three fingers (I think) down the foregrip, which all indicated a simultaneous Present or whatever was required with the none too light SLR.

There were progress tests in place, rejoicing in the initials RPC – Regimental Proficiency

Certificate - Class 3 or 2; this covered, and again I may not have this quite right, examinations in Weapon Handling, Drill (Foot and Arms), Marksmanship, Fieldcraft and I think that was it.

Preparation for the Drill part of this took place in Winter, so I suspect that must have been late 1970; Greatcoats were the dress, over our No 2 Dress, and I remember preparing our 37 Pattern belts for this by marking them to show the length adjustments required when worn over such a bulky ensemble. The coats themselves had to be pressed, and this was achieved by using an iron and a mess tin of water and shaving brush. Pressing such thick serge required considerable effort, and the sight of boys actually kneeling on the 6 foot table (which was our ironing board) attempting to secure creases into sleeves and skirts alike, became commonplace in the fevered atmosphere of testing.

Fieldcraft

I am slightly ashamed to say that I can hardly recall much of this at all. Lessons took place in the green-painted corrugated iron huts located between the living blocks, or on occasion, our TV Room. Rudimentary tactics were chalked out on a blackboard by the Pl Commander and then off into the field we went. We wore our green combats, KF shirt *with ties*, steel helmets garnished with hessian and plastic scrim, 37 Pattern webbing consistent of small pack, "L" straps, cross straps, ammo pouches, water bottle (who can ever forget the taste of rusty water from those wretched items?), and bayonet frog. Small packs were stuffed full of socks, spare shirt, washing kit, boot polish and brushes, mess tins, and with a groundsheet carefully rolled so that a small portion overhung the opening but was secured by the buckles. We adorned our faces and hands with thick brown camouflage cream from a tube, apparently manufactured by Max Factor, and marched across the main road to the training area; the unlucky ones carried the L1A1 Light Machine Gun (LMG) basically the famous Bren Gun of WW 2 fame, modified to take the NATO standard cartridge of 7.62mm, whilst the rest of us lugged SLRs.

Once across the road we attempted to put into practice the preceding chalked plans; this was normally accompanied by fairly robust encouragement form the Platoon Sergeant and Corporals; we were also harried by the junior JNCOs. All that really seemed to sink in was the realisation that I was unfit, physically weak, and understanding even the most basic of tactical movements seemed beyond me. Soaked in sweat, we were put through endless permutations of the tactical art, so that all of us eventually received some understanding of fire and movement, and of course, camouflage and concealment. These latter skills involved weaving foliage in and out of our equipment and adding to the already impressive combinations on our helmets. But, it was hard physical work and doing anything useful with the – to me – heavy and cumbersome SLR was a real test, let alone when it came to my turn on the LMG.

The contrast between camouflaging our equipment and the exhortation to Blanco it and shine the brasses was never quite resolved in my mind and I wondered how our forbears in, say, World War 2 concealed themselves in the field; later of course, we sallied forth into Aldershot and purchased '58 Pattern Webbing from Henry Du Bora – the well known purveyor of everything military that we were never issued with. More later.

At least we looked (or so we thought) like real soldiers, but I am afraid, that to this very day, I have hardly a tactical bone in my body.

Education

I seem to recall it was in this second term that a few of us were ordered to take our GCE O Levels in English. I'm not sure I was that enthused at the time, but the English tutor, Mr Smith, seemed to think it was appropriate, and whilst I am sure there were others, I believe

that Paul Arnold, and myself, certainly took the exam in a hut in Aldershot. We passed, and sad to report, that is the only O Level I have. Direction that I take O level Art – possibly in the same term – came to naught; I remember sitting in an empty hut, again in Aldershot, surrounded by paints and brushes, gazing at the green printed examination papers, searching for inspiration. It never came and I produced a poor piece of work and knew I had failed long before the drive back to Blackdown, which I think was provided by the then, Lieutenant Mobley, who had been detailed as invidulating officer.

My artistic tendencies though were rewarded in 1971, by my coming first in the Army Arts and Crafts Competition, for "Painting in Other Media" with my rather futuristic and bloodthirsty rendition of a Cold War scenario (turned hot) depicting a knocked out Soviet AA SP Gun, and wounded and burning crew. In due course, I also picked up a prize for the design of the College magazine "The

Thunderbolt"; it was by no means brilliant but I was pleased to be rewarded with the prize of one Guinea, handed to me by the College 2iC, Major Pearson. My efforts can be seen within the College Magazine section elsewhere on this site.

The subjects taught were English, Maths, Current Affairs, Geography, and Map Reading. The staff were a mix of RAEC and Retired Officers, and I think some genuine civilian instructors such as Mr Smith, mentioned above, but I may be wrong. The AEC itself was a spider-hut complex, which whilst confusing at first, soon provided a refuge between lessons and if the Instructors were slack or easily fooled – not very often at all – places to skive off. It was during sometime in 1969 I think, that Paul Arnold and I, suitably enthused by the imminent Moon landing, took it upon ourselves to escape the tyranny of a lesson in Map Reading and watch the event on the TV in our Quiet Room. We were rumbled, by Corporal Macgregor I think, and marched into a very irate Major Richmond, who ran the Education Centre. I don't think much became of this, and we never received any punishment that I can recall, but I don't think we pushed our luck again until probably in our final term.

Map Reading at least took us out of the classroom, and groups of boys were to be seen in around a five mile radius of the barracks, equipped with OS maps and prismatic compasses, trying, and in some cases, failing, to identify where they were and all too often, how to get back to camp.

Current Affairs was an interesting subject taught by the unforgiving but enthusiastic Lt Col (Retd) Schofield; I think that Current Affairs was a bit of a misnomer as we didn't seem to discuss much that was topical, but received instruction on the origins of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but at least those lessons paved the way for setting what we did in the Army in context, and why we even *had* an Army in those far off days of the Cold War.

I struggled at Maths and as we were required to pass the Army Certificate of Education (ACE) – in

3 grades - was greatly concerned at my lack of progress. Luckily, or initially at any rate, Lieutenant McKeon (or possibly McKewan) spotted my predicament and began to tutor me in the intricacies of basic calculations; just as his efforts were beginning to bear fruit and the scales fall from my eyes, he was posted. I have never recovered from that, and during my Regular career struggled to attain the qualification so necessary for Warrant rank; I still panic when ever I am faced with figures.

PT and Sport

The recruiting literature of the 60s made much of these; just about every sport you could imagine was catered for, or at least included in the glossy pamphlets on display in the

recruiting office. The reality pretty much lived up to it as well, if, *if* you were sporty in the first place. I wasn't.

The physical state of those arriving at Blackdown varied, and reflected the normal growth rates of boys. Some were physically strong and fit, others were rather weedy – that was me! I was 5 feet 2 inches when I joined and weighed roughly 9 stone on a good day. I had thought, and indeed hoped, that the Army would remedy this. It seemed to me that it didn't. For a start the issue PT kit was not of a style to inspire. It was ill-fitting, with red and white collared vests which gave a vintage look, and the shorts were ridiculously long and baggy. Even by 60s standards, they were dated. Footwear consisted of thin soled plimsolls, and dress for the Gym dictated khaki socks rolled down over these. Oh, and the plimsolls had to be polished. The PT staff, headed up by SSgt Madden, whilst technically competent, were merciless in their approach to those who couldn't cope with their high standards. They were stinting in their praise - if given at all - and often scathing when some hapless wretch failed to climb the ropes set high in the ceiling of a Gym built in the 1900s.

I tried to take this in my stride with what good humour I could muster, but all too often fell foul of the PT staff. There was none of the developmental coaching and encouragement that is the standard nowadays. It seemed to me, that once the gladiators for the various sports teams had been identified, then the rest were fair game for what became ritual humiliation. I had high hopes that the Army would turn me around physically; in the event I just became taller over the 7 terms spent at Blackdown. It wasn't until the mid to late 70s that my physical fitness approached anything like a reasonable standard, and that was down largely to my own efforts.

One wasn't permitted to undertake sports on a Wednesday afternoon until the Army Swimming Test had been tackled; I couldn't swim so it was off to Aldershot swimming baths every Wednesday afternoon. Sports afternoon was organised in that the whole Battalion mustered and then fell out to the respective sports teams. Non-Swimmers mustered separately and awaited the 4 ton truck for the 30 minute drive to Aldershot. Once there, we struggled manfully to do as the PTIs bid. This was confounded in that issue swimming kit came in 2 types: one was fairly modern in design, dark blue with a thin white stripe down the sides. The other type of trunks was dark blue overall and appeared to be mainly wool in composition. To describe them as girls' knickers would be pretty accurate. Couple these to some 15 year old skinny frames and one hardly felt the part. Needless to say, I had the second type. More humiliation!

One of my swimming novice partners was Taff Jebson; I got to know him pretty well even though he was from a different Company - we were very tribal in those days. We passed our test together, and it was both a shock and with great sadness that I learnt of his death later that year from a mortar bomb explosion.

It was shortly after passing this test – which must have been Spring 1970 that I fell foul of the CSM and OC. During one of our rare visits to Aldershot on a Saturday afternoon, I had looked up the Prince Consort's library; the Blackdown library, located in the AEC was pretty impressive, but being an avid reader, I sought much more. The Prince Consort's provided what I was looking for in spades. It was a veritable gold mine of military history books, the specialised type of which I had never come across before. I was hooked, and setting a pattern for later terms, decided to skive off a sports afternoon. Having only just passed the swimming test, I fell through the gaps for the sports teams, who were generally only interested in identifying gladiators for their respective teams, so it was quite easy to sneak out of Dettigen barracks and catch the bus to Aldershot. A brisk walk took me to the library on Knolly's Road, and there I spent around 2 hours happily immersed in various historical works. I took

several books out and caught the bus back to Deepcut, feeling mightily pleased with myself. However, escaping on a regular basis proved difficult and I could not get back to the library to return the books I had borrowed. Fearful of a fine, I did the only thing possible a polite, young, potential Staff Clerk could do: I wrote a letter explaining that I was unable to return the books by the due date but would endeavour to do so as soon as possible. Disaster awaited me.

The library staff were sufficiently impressed with my good manners; in fact, they were so impressed they decided to write to the OC of B Company, Major Porter, pointing out to him that they were, indeed, *very* impressed, and that he was lucky to have under his command such a polite individual. Sergeant Hannigan informed me that I was required at Company Office and to report to the Sergeant Major, the fearsome Kenny Maule. I seem to remember that it was couched along the following lines, "Stoddart! Get yourself along to the CSM now; you're in the shit!"

I duly reported to the CSM, who promptly marched me in to the OC. I didn't initially, notice the twinkle in his eye but that was because one didn't often look the CSM in the eye in any case. The OC patiently explained what it was all about, and asked did I not realise that I should be attending Sports? Did I not realise that I could easily be charged? And then confusingly, pointed out that if I really wished to visit the Aldershot Library, I only had to ask!

After being briskly marched out, the CSM gave me what one used to refer to as "The Gypsy's", and that was more or less that. For some terms to come however, the CSM would sometimes ask me, "Here young Stoddart, read any good books lately?"

Tregantle Fort and Sennybridge

This Palmerston era fort will be familiar to all I suspect. I cannot recall when we were first sent there – perhaps it was as recruits, perhaps a little later. I do know we went there several years running. The first time I was detailed off for baggage party, which meant that along with around half a dozen others we filled 2 x 4 tonners almost to the brim, with Army issue suitcases and kit bags, and then attempted to fit ourselves in as best we could. The journey was unbelievably long and spent, for the most part in misery; I seem to remember it was cold, and very, very uncomfortable.

I now have only hazy memories but amongst these are living in the high-ceilinged barrack rooms, enduring the miseries of the Guardroom, shovelling coal and lugging it up steps to ensure the Sergeants' Mess were kept warm, appalling food, route marches, and endless other duties. I don't seem to think that there was much enjoyment factored into the curriculum. We spent some time on the ranges below the Fort, and somewhere along the line I believe we spent some time at Pier Cellars undergoing Adventure Training. I may have merged several years' memories into one but also remember visits to HMS Raleigh, the Commando Tarzan Course (bloody terrifying), rock climbing, rudimentary sailing, abseiling (which in actuality consisted of a long controlled graze down a brick wall) and a semblance of tactical training conducted on Dartmoor. There was also the added frisson of the Fort being haunted; it may have been just such a ghost who defecated in the bathhouse as I remember RSM Dorning getting us all on parade, bringing us to Attention, and bellowing "Someone has shit in the bath; that boy is to dress forward now!" or words to that effect. Needless to say, no one did. I am sure some collective punishment must have followed but if it did, I have no recollection of it.

Summer Camp also took us to Sennybridge for at least one year; I recall it was a hutted camp but am unable to recollect what we did there in any detail. I seem to remember tramping over

the Brecon Beacons for what was an eternity, and even more range-work, but beyond that, not very much.

Recruits

Somehow, I managed to get myself promoted to Lance Corporal, and put up my first red-bordered stripe. I cannot quite recall how it all happened but a mere half dozen of us ended up in charge of the next tranche of recruits; however, I may be out a bit on this and perhaps it was when I chalked up my second tape. In any event, myself, Paul Arnold (as Junior Sergeant) Collin Durbin, Dave Dion, Bob Boughen, Gordon Lloyd-West, and possibly Ivan Mykolojenko all ended up running a recruit platoon. If I've missed off other worthies who made the grade, forgive me, I just cannot remember any longer. In fact, I don't remember much about this period at all; I recall I was moved across to become the QM Corporal, the main tasks being to get brooms repaired by trudging down Deepcut village to a carpenter, who would fix the wretched half dozen or so broken ones I had taken, only to be broken almost immediately I got them back to the barracks. However, it did mean I could skive off and treat myself to a coffee or something in Pauls' café.

At the same time as running recruits, somehow we were still undergoing RPC tests and ACE exams at the Education Centre. I can't quite remember how it all knitted together but we did it; RPC 2 involved us having to give a lesson in both Drill and Weapons so that we had to prepare for around 20-odd lessons, not knowing which ones we would be tasked with.

As a side note, I was further promoted to full Corporal but have no recollection as to why or even how. I'm sure I didn't really earn it although Tosh Hannigan berated me once in the final term for not having pulled my finger out sufficiently to obtain Sergeant. Oh well.

Change of title to "Apprentices College"

Early on in the second term, we were informed that the term "Junior Leaders' Battalion RAOC" was to be changed to the less inspiring "RAOC Apprentices' College"; I felt a little put out by this. Even though I was unaware of any particular leadership training, I felt that the term "battalion" was somehow more martial than "college". Of course, I was to find out during my adult career, that the Army has a wonderful knack for changing for no apparent real reason, and messing around with the tried and tested. It wasn't as though there was anything particularly technical to qualify using the term "apprentice" as any actual *trade* training was conducted at the adult depot in any case.

Also at around this time, we changed Platoon Commanders; the affable Lieutenant Roger Bensaid left and was replaced by Lieutenant Phillip Gee. Whilst personnel changes are inevitable in the Army, or indeed, any organisation, for such a unit as Junior Leaders' – sorry – or a College – the effect can be unsettling, and so it was. He did not seem to be particularly approachable but in fairness, that may be the purview of an adolescent. It was however, noticeable that he and the Platoon Sergeant did not see eye to eye.

Rowcroft Platoon also bade farewell to Corporal Macgregor, who moved on promotion to another platoon. His replacement was a Corporal Flynn, who I recall was tall, and possessed a set of No 2 Dress that was rather bizarrely faded. Other than that, I cannot remember very much about him, save that he was friendly enough and a competent instructor.

Discipline

These of course were what today's progressives would label "the bad old days of the Army Act"; well, be that as it may but we all knew where we stood, what was expected of us and what the punishments were. In other words, we knew how to behave ourselves. In a way, enough said; those Blairite reformers who imposed the Human Rights Act on the Armed

Forces with hardly a whimper or protest from the joint chiefs and the members of the Army Board have a lot to answer for. The Generals in particular should be ashamed of themselves for military discipline now is but a shadow of what is necessary to keep soldiers in order. I'll shut up now.

Those who could not or would not come up to standard even whilst drilling on the square could be consigned to the Guardroom with a below of "Getaway!"; thereafter they were at the tender mercies of the Provost Corporal, Corporal Frost, whom we disliked with a passion, not least as when booking out to go to Aldershot or Frimley Green, he would usually find fault in our dress (the answer of course was not to book out at all but this particular penny failed to drop until a few terms later). Of course, looking back from this distance, the Provost Corporal was only doing his job; across the intervening years I have often hoped for more disciplinarians of Corporal Frost's stature and resolve, but expanding on that thought belongs to my adult service, so has no place here.

The full range of military punishments were liable to be applied to any Junior who went through the Military Law system, and errant boys would be seen being "rifted" around the square or worse, on fatigues polishing the 2 cannon at the edge of the square. Milder punishments included reporting for Staff Parade, at 2200 hours, always in No 2 Dress, but on occasions, complete with a locker or, and I swear this was true, with complete bed space; the whole, bed, locker, bedside locker and mat being transported over to the Guardroom by the hapless soldier's mates!

There were other forms of discipline within the Block; as a young second-termer, I had a tendency to desire to have the last word. Effectively, I was cheeky and one day, particularly cheeky to the Platoon Sergeant. Tosh Hannigan had just about had enough of my smartarse answers and in a trice I was pushed into a steel locker, and this was then dropped down the stairs; thence to the landing on the first floor, and finally to the ground floor. I didn't know which way was up and the hanging bar detached itself as the locker travelled downwards, and we rattled around together until the ground floor brought the bruising to a stop.

Bullying? Unacceptable behaviour? Assault? Psychologically scarred? Not a bit of it; I learned not to gob off to the Platoon Sergeant.

POSBs

Ah, the blessed Post Office Savings Book; I recall we were to all extents ordered to open an account with the Post Office. Periodically, these were sent off to be "made up", that is to reconcile how much had been allotted to the account from one's wages. The idea really was to encourage saving; of course, the bulk of our wages went into "Credits" so that we went on leave with a decent amount of spending money. But POSBs allowed us to indulge in extras such as funding a trip to the cinema in Aldershot, or even a meal out somewhere on a Saturday afternoon.

Distribution of POSBs, amongst all the other mail, was the responsibility of the Post Room Corporal, known as "Mitch". I remember he sported Para wings, OG trousers, and his office was adjacent to the Guardroom, but unlike the Provost Corporal, he was a kindly soul and well disposed to us frantic youths.

WRVS

Inevitably known as "the Weavers" this glorified canteen became a focus for all; in addition to dispensing hot and cold drinks, and stickies, it also sported a colour television, which meant we could watch Star Trek and then, the highlight of the week, Top of the Pops; the attraction of the latter should not be underestimated – remember, we were teenage boys with

hormones a plenty raging throughout our systems - and the lissom forms of Pan's People in actual *colour*, was a great magnet.

I recall that this was run by Mrs Highton, a kindly, mature lady, who, if one was so disposed, could whinge to until one's whinges were abated. I'm not saying she was a Duty Mum, but perhaps that was the subliminal role.

Armoury

This was located not far from my Block, Rowcroft Platoon, and was an easy enough tramp down past the Battalion Training Wing and then an inevitable queue up the iron stairs, where we had to deal with Jack the Armourer, who seemed to possess 3 moods: Bloody Minded, Difficult, and Very Difficult, and that was just on drawing the rifles out; when returning they were subject to further investigation and one or all of the moods described.

Smartness

In Juniors, smartness became an art form; it was bred into us, and we became, initially, obsessed by it all; eventually, this became second nature, and we tended to look down on those whose footwear were not gleaming, or sported shirts and trousers which clearly were not pressed. We would scrutinise one another with an intensity which would put a Guards Adjutant to shame. It is not necessarily a healthy condition and yet I still tend to have no truck with those who are scruffy and unpressed! Juniors made martinets out of all of us.

More on Kit

Juniors seemed to make everyone a Kit Obsessive. We felt, probably quite rightly, that we were hardly equipped with state of the art personal kit and equipment. Whilst our Combat Clothing was the same as that issued to the rest of the Regular Army, we were not pleased with the contrast of having to wear it with '37 Pattern Webbing, or hobnailed boots, or Ammo Boots as they were known. We yearned after more modern additions and by mutual agreement, most of the Platoon members acquired, rubber-soled footwear, Boots DMS (Direct Moulded Sole). These went no small way in making us feel more professional, and at long last we didn't clatter and skid around the square or even within the block, where the corridor floors consisted of concrete – albeit *polished* concrete. It must have aided us in our tactical efforts as well; one can hardly ever creep up on someone in Ammo Boots.

Of course, it didn't stop there, it never does; buckling canvas gaiters - sorry - Anklets, Web around our calves wasn't quite the image we desired, so off it was to Aldershot's famous surplus shop, Henry Du Bora's, on a Saturday afternoon we went, to purchase Puttees. Quite why we thought that yard long lengths of khaki bandage were an improvement on the anklets was never satisfactorily explained, except we thought that Regular soldiers wore them (as they did, save I discovered that once in "Man's" service, quite a lot of the Regular Army used Anklets Web, although often blackened with boot polish). So it was that we bound our ankles with these khaki bandages, but of course we didn't wear them over our trousers as they were designed to be worn, oh no, we tucked them in around elastic bands which were either heavy duty rubber bands or cutdown lengths of Army issue braces; yes I know it sounds weird now, but that is what we did. The word elastic thus becoming a noun in the process, prompting cries of "Who's got some spare *elastics*?" from time to time within the barrack room. Incidentally, I discovered later that the word Puttee does indeed mean Bandage in Urdu (sorry for the history lesson).

According to the official illustrations of black and white orders of dress photos in each room, Combat Dress was to consist of Khaki Flannel Shirt worn with a Tie; how we were meant to operate effectively on exercise, working up a considerable sweat whilst being slowly

strangled was a compete nonsense. The solution was obvious: yet another expedition to Du Bora's again to purchase the camouflage scrim scarves, which we wore as a type of cravat. It wasn't that much cooler than wearing a tie, but we thought we looked the business!

There was of course, a remaining bugbear: the venerable '37 Pattern webbing. '58 Pattern was the obvious solution (I don't think were aware of '44 Pattern) However, we were not bold enough to acquire this until our final term – or perhaps we weren't allowed to tacitly utilise this until then. In any case, we begged, borrowed, or bought this in our final term, and really thought we were now professional soldiers. It did indeed feel better, and whilst there was no noticeable weight reduction, it did seem that such weight was better distributed. Foolishly, as my Junior days drew to an end, I sold it off to someone from the next term coming through; I was mortified to find that once I arrived at Headquarters 1st British Corps in Bielefeld in the Autumn of 1971, that I was promptly issued '37 Pattern webbing. Aaargh!

Trade Training

This took place in the final 6 weeks or so in the last term; the time taken reflected the chosen trades. I think these were limited to Technical Clerk, Storeman, and Staff Clerk; it may be that my memory is faulty and that Technical Clerks only became such beings after undertaking the Storeman's course but I simply cannot remember. Somehow too, I remember some boys learning to drive but that may have been while they were awaiting a posting, or had finished their course, whatever it may have been, early.

Prior to the actual training though, we were all shipped around various Ordnance establishments for a close look at the trades on offer within the Corps. By this time, we had - I think - merged into a composite group of final term-ees - or whatever the collective noun is. Thus it was that we visited such diverse locations as 16 Heavy Drop, the Aldershot abattoir (grim), the Master Tailor - possibly at Blackdown or even Horseguards, a vehicle depot at Aschcurch (where I managed to put a Ferret Scout Car in a ditch), and the petroleum depot at West Moors where I was bemused to find a Jerrican museum).

Then joy of joys, we visited Germany to continue the process and this included visits to an OFP deployed in the field, where we were permitted to process various stores vouchers (unbelievably dull - sorry chaps - but it was); the ammunition depot at Bracht, and a day out with an armoured battle group exercising at Sennelager, or possibly Hohne; it may have been the latter as we also visited the notorious Bergen-Belsen Concentration camp site, which made a powerful impact on so young a group.

Rather disappointingly, I encountered no Staff Clerks whatsoever; that would have to wait for the actual trade training.

So, we formed up each morning and were marched – although sometimes we ambled – across the training area from the back of Dettigen barracks to the newly built camp, now known as the Princess Royal barracks. Construction was still going on I believe and the most imposing structure was a large funnel-shaped water tower.

By now, obviously in our senior term, we were permitted to wear the new green issue pullover; this was worn with No 2 Dress trousers, and leather-soled shoes. Our red badges of rank were very conspicuous and it was with some trepidation that we entered Adult territory. However, a great attraction in all this was the presence of female soldiers of the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC), resplendent in all their young, female glory! One of the few perks of being trained as a Staff Clerk was that at least 50% of the class was female.

Whilst the presence of females concentrated the mind, disappointingly, the training wasn't particularly inspirational, although at the time we didn't know any different. The actual

training was carried out by so-called Programme Learning which meant nothing more than following instructions and information in a pamphlet. This was coupled with typing instruction which consisted of headsets, keyboards covered up ie the characters obscured, and an illuminated table showing key positions, displayed on a wall. The head sets would transmit something such as “A now! B now! C now!” and so on; this was repeated at ever increasing speeds with the respective letters illuminated to coincide with the instruction. This resulted in a touch typing speed of around 30 words per minute; the noise levels of some 20-odd students all hammering away at exactly the same time on manual typewriters was quite surreal.

Final tests involved the preparation of various types of service correspondence and the preparation of Part 1 Orders and the like. I don’t recall this being especially arduous and whilst mastering the typewriter was a technical enough challenge, I felt, instinctively, that there should have been more. This was borne out once I arrived at my first posting, and found my self completely overwhelmed by my lack of knowledge on British Army organisation, but that, as they say, is another story.

Passing Out Parade

Without fail, every Saturday morning would consist of standing to attention besides a bed space – having polished and cleaned the barrack room the night before – awaiting inspection by some College worthy; usually, this would be no one higher than the Company Commander, but on occasions this could be the Commanding Officer, complete with entourage of 2iC, RSM, Adjutant, OC, CSM, Platoon officer and Sergeant; I’m not sure that Paddy, the cookhouse pan-basher didn’t turn up as well. Usually, one’s rifle would be laid out on a taut groundsheet for inspection; lockers opened, and of course, bed packs made up. The JNCO in charge of the room would call us all to attention, who can forget those words of command, “Room! Roooooom, ‘shun!” as the great and the good inspected the gleaming weapon, or pored through the locker, including the Personal Drawer (which rather begs the question why it was called such). At the end of it all, the weapons were hurriedly re-assembled and following the Platoon Sergeant’s cry of “Get outside” we would clatter and slip down the concrete steps in our ammunition boots - no rubber soled DMS for us (at least not on rehearsals) - and form up into our Platoons before being marched on to the square for a parade rehearsal.

Sometimes, these were relatively benign affairs just to acclimatise us as it were to the trials of such a large scale event; at other times it would rate a full dress rehearsal with the Corps of Drums providing much needed rhythm to keep us all in step. It seemed then that we would go round and around the square 5 or 6 times until the CSM or RSM was satisfied, being harried all the way by the Platoon Sergeants and Corporals. We would pause for the much needed NAAFI break, when we would double over to the cookhouse for that strange tasting tea and chunks of cake. We probably really were the generation that had bromide put in our tea.

Then it was back round the square for a final and hopefully best effort. Of course, it followed that there was a parade at the end of each term, and we eventually got almost blasé about them, not that that attitude stopped us looking any less than immaculate. Turnout became an art form and woe betide anyone who was less than perfect.

These were impressive affairs with not just the Corps of Drums but a full military band participating as well.

Come the actual day, relatives would attend alongside the edge of the Square by RHQ in tiered seating; the cannons would be polished, Stickmen and Markers in position, then the wait for the Inspecting Officer, who would eventually arrive in a gleaming Bronze Green Staff Car. He would inspect the Senior Platoon with the Junior RSM conducting the Parade;

this was followed by the Battalion, sorry, College completing 2 circuits of the square, in Slow, then Quick Time.

As the finale, the Senior Platoon would march off to Auld Lang Syne in Slow Time; the music would cease, they would break into Quick Time, execute a Right Turn, and then leave the square, the *crunch, crunch*, *crunch* of their footsteps slowly receding as they marched away around the corner by A Company offices. A very impressive and even moving spectacle.

Summary

Well, I suppose that the Juniors system did what it said on the tin in that 17 years later I became a Warrant Officer. It *did* prepare me to an extent for adult service in that I arrived at my first unit pretty well qualified although I would have to play catch-up when it came to maths. But did I leave Blackdown ready to actually *lead*? I'm not sure I did; I was naturally keen, but this may just have been the coincidental enthusiasm of youth.

I was certainly smart and shiny - which in itself wasn't always welcome within the ranks of more adult soldiers, as I found out at Bielefeld, when I was strongly discouraged not to bull my shoes: "We don't do that here mate". I stubbornly refused to conform to such slovenry believing that the emphasis placed on shininess could not have been that misplaced after 7 terms at Blackdown, could it? But my adult service is another story.

Certainly, I cannot think of a better environment for 15 year olds than the system at Blackdown; it laid the ground for self-reliance and even an innate toughness and resilience. I would have to temper that slightly in that I consider the training received by the Army's junior leaders at Harrogate today, for only a year, is better than the curriculum I experienced from 1969 to 1971.

My son has been through the Harrogate system and came out from there, in my opinion, much better equipped for adult soldiering; the training there today really is first class, with no leavening of drills and skills despite the shorter time.

Would I do it all over again?

Damn right I would.

Postscript

That's about it; that's not to say I've put down everything, but perhaps I've gone some way to unloading a few memories; with any luck they'll inspire some others - that is - if you haven't been bored to death.

I'm sure that my memories are not finite or necessarily accurate, so if you feel that they are in fact, inaccurate, or that you can fill in some of the gaps, feel free to do so, and get your efforts to George Tether, who will upload them to this site. Surely it is now time to make sure our memories are recorded *somewhere*, for they now compose the historical record of a facet of the Army that no longer exists.