

Memories of National Service at the Depot in June and July 1952.

Peter Etherington

“I caught the train at Thornaby, changing at Darlington for Richmond. On the way I met men like myself, called up for National Service with the Green Howards. We viewed our immediate future with a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

We left the gloom of the station and passed onto the crushed sandstone forecourt at Richmond. There, a number of army trucks were waiting. A smiling Sergeant in battle dress, sash and cane welcomed us, introducing himself as Sgt Len Madden. In the bright sunshine he literally shone. I remember thinking he was the smartest, cleanest man I'd ever seen. Clambering into the 3 tonne trucks, a problem for some of the less agile: we were transported through the town and up the hill to Alma Barracks.

I noted the date, 1873 on the great gate posts. We drove across the square and got out near the Dining room, forming up to be led to our barrack rooms in the militia huts. We were split into three groups, totaling 80 to 90 men. My group under Sgt Madden were led to the centre hut.

Here we chose a bed, dropped our meagre personal effects and then 'marched' to the dining room where we were, if I remember correctly were formally 'attested' into the regiment.

Then to the QM's store, above the stone gym. We drew our boots, mine were of smooth brown leather, how the hell would I get them black? Festooned with gear we returned to our barrack room, here we met our Corporal, whose name I forget, who briefed us.

We were Paardeburg platoon, named after one of the regiment's South African battle honours. We were to be at the Depot for six weeks basic training then on to the newly reformed 2nd Battalion at Barnard Castle.

Marching to tea, our newly acquired pint pots grasped behind our backs, inevitably to loud cheers, some unfortunates crunched their pots so a new one had to be purchased. We had a good tea then back to begin cleaning our brasses, blanco-ing the strange items of webbing, how did they go together. Now dressed in denims, our civilian clothes parcelled in brown paper to be returned home on the morrow; we began making friends. My chums were Peter Brown, a joiner from Middlesbrough, Geoff Maw, a builder from Cayton and 'Tiny' Brown from Middlesbrough. (M'Boro'). Others were Dennis Lynas and Des Templeton, also both from Middlesbrough. After Lights Out I heard sobbing. For some it was the first time from home and one or two took it badly. So ended our first hectic day as soldiers.

From then on the pace increased-leaving little time to do other than work and learn! Visits to the Tailor with our battledress, to the barbers for a 'military' haircut, (both in the little buildings by the north east wall.). To the Medical Room for inspection and jabs. Standing in line I turned to the tall man behind me, he was green from head to waist. When the orderly touched him he passed out.

We learnt the meaning of NAAFI break, the room above the medical room serving this purpose and looked forward, twice daily to this simple break. We learnt Foot Drill, to march in step, the new terminology and protocols, "*Attention!-Stand at Ease, Salute---*" "*Why salute?*" asks the Corporal. "*Thats right....'tween warriors.--- But you don't salute the man....*" and so our education progressed.

Battle dress, having returned from the tailor provides another challenge, it needed pressing. No iron! Our Corporal produces one, at a price, I have it still! Being a tailor's son I learnt to press clothes at an early age. And at 6d a battle dress I soon began to supplement my meagre 15/- per week pay. This was the greatest culture shock for me, the drop from a craftsmans wage (£7-£8), to this, was huge. Nevertheless it was adequate, we had little requirement for money and even less time to spend what we had.

Daily PT in the gym near the cookhouse developed our bodies and our confidence, *"It's all a question of mechanics!...."* said the instructor, dressed like a wasp.

Frequent kit inspections ensured our equipment was up to standard. We stood quivering by our beds. *"Knife, fork, spoon, razor, comb and lather brush,"* chirps Captain Anderson, cane striking the items, to correct my layout and raising a quiet smirk around the barrack room.

Now properly clad we drew rifles and progressed to arms drill, *"Slope, present, for inspection, port arms;"* *"When you are given this order after live firing the officer will check your weapon and pouches and you will declare, no live rounds or empty cases, Sir!"*

We progressed to weapon training; , the Mk 4 Lee Enfield rifle and the Bren gun being cleaned , stripped and flung about until we could handle them blindfold! *"Load!....Unload!....First IA....."---* *Gun cleared and ready for inspection---Sir!"*

The open air life suited me, but for some, the physical demands and exposure to the elements was a new experience. Mostly however the weather was kind as we trained on the Square or on the grass at the rear of our huts. When the weather was inclement we drilled in the Drill shed near the main gate.

After two weeks we were allowed out of barracks. My first outing was delayed by fatigues: being detailed to scrape 'tatties for the cook house. On release, I presented myself before the great mirror on the guardroom veranda, was 'booked out' and flew through the gate into the arms of my girl friend (later to become my wife). How good it was to feel free again, feeling smart in my uniform and conscious now that I was a Green Howard.

Some time about the fourth or fifth week of our training a parents' day was held.

It was quite a nice day and a good number of families arrived in the morning. They assembled in the stone gym and were met by the Major Chads who welcomed them on behalf of the regiment. Tea and biscuits were served.

Like many others, My parents attended, accompanied by my brother and his girlfriend. Assembling on the square they watched as the three platoons paraded and gave a display of our prowess in Foot and Arms drill. How proud we felt watched by our families and senior officers as we marched to and fro across the Barrack Square practicing our drills and slapping our rifles about like veterans, or so we thought.

Displays were given, gymnastics in the gym and weapon training on the Officers Mess lawn. I was chosen with two others to demonstrate our skills on the Bren gun. There we lay on the grass under the orders of Sgt Marsden our Platoon Sergeant and responded as he rapped out his orders. My father, an old Lewis Gun man, stood watching all this and fortunately someone took a rather grainy photo of this. I treasure it to this day.

Then lunch for all in the dining room, then we were free to leave barracks with our families. We walked down to Richmond and visited the Castle. I then saw my family off on the train and returned to Barracks. It had been an unforgettable day.

In the following weeks we discovered the pleasures of the Route March. Along Green Howards Road, up to Kirby Hill, down the road to Aske we tramped. Comradeship developed and the humour and banter was wonderful. Our relationships with our leaders improved, becoming more relaxed and confident.

At last to the Ranges at Bellerby; "*Zeroing! You must achieve a group!*". Amazement as the Armourer adjusts our sights and delight as we hit the bull for the first time. We eat our haversack rations together laughing and joking.

One particularly hot day our OC. decides we shall march back to Richmond and the Transport sent back, loud groans ensue, "*We'll be late for tea!*" "*Fall in! Quick March!*" orders our gallant Captain, stick in the air in theatrical fashion. 400 yards progress, "*HALT! Oo! Aargh!*" Our Captain on the floor. Twisted ankle. "*Recall the Transport!*" We get back in time for tea after all!

Interest was taken in our welfare. Aptitude tests in the stone gym, discussion with Personnel Selection Officers, checking abilities and, if necessary, placing you accordingly. I took a trade test in the little workshop at the back of Howard block and duly passed as a Plumber B111. I never used it, but it made me feel good.

We learnt about the regiment and its history, with visits to the Officers Mess, the great oak dining table, the painting of the Menin Crossroads, the silver, made a lasting impression on me.

Visiting the Sergeants Mess, sensing the calm solid atmosphere of the place, "*You can aspire to this my lads....*" Then there was the collection of regimental items, the forerunner of the museum, housed on the ground floor of Howard block. The great German machine gun, captured during the First World War, the Russian drums. It was all inspiring and gave a lasting impression.

June ended, the OC Depot Major Chad retired. Parading under RSM 'Lofty' Peacock we gave the OC three rousing cheers and then onto the drag ropes to draw his Land Rover through the main gate for the last time.

Training continued with increasing rivalry between platoons, "*Who was to be best?*"

The great day of our Passing Out parade dawned sunny and warm. We paraded on the Square before our families and friends, officers and others. The band strikes up. We march past, three platoons in review order, the Union flag flies on the Officers Mess lawn, the regimental flag on the saluting base. We step out proudly to 'The Bonnie English Rose'. "*Eyes. Right!*", proudly we salute our Colonel. "*Halt! Into line. Open order.*" and Brigadier Cooke-Collis inspects the Company to the

strains of 'Marie Teresa'. I close my eyes, rock on my heels in the hot sun. How splendid it all was. We are chosen as 'best platoon'.

Later, refreshments with our families, demonstrations of PT and weapon training on the lawn and then out of barracks for the rest of the day. We left for Barnard Castle to join the 2nd Bn at Streatlam camp the next day. On arrival we were immediately granted a week's leave; well deserved in our eyes.

Many, many years have now passed since my training at the Depot. Looking back, my main impressions are:

1. Amazement at the efficiency of the organisation.
2. Astonishment at the quality of training, probably the most effective I've ever experienced.
3. Surprise at the humanity of the Officers and NCO's, as they moulded such a motley crew into potentially effective teams, while working to extremely tight targets."

Peter Etherington joined the regiment at the Depot on 5 June 1952.

After service with the 2nd Battalion in Egypt, he was de-mobbed from the Depot to the 4th Battalion in June 1954. He served as Corporal in the 2nd Bn Intelligence Section. On secondment from the 4th Bn to HQ 150, then 151 Inf Bde (TA) as Int Sgt, he served until 1966, completing his service as a Company Sergeant Major.