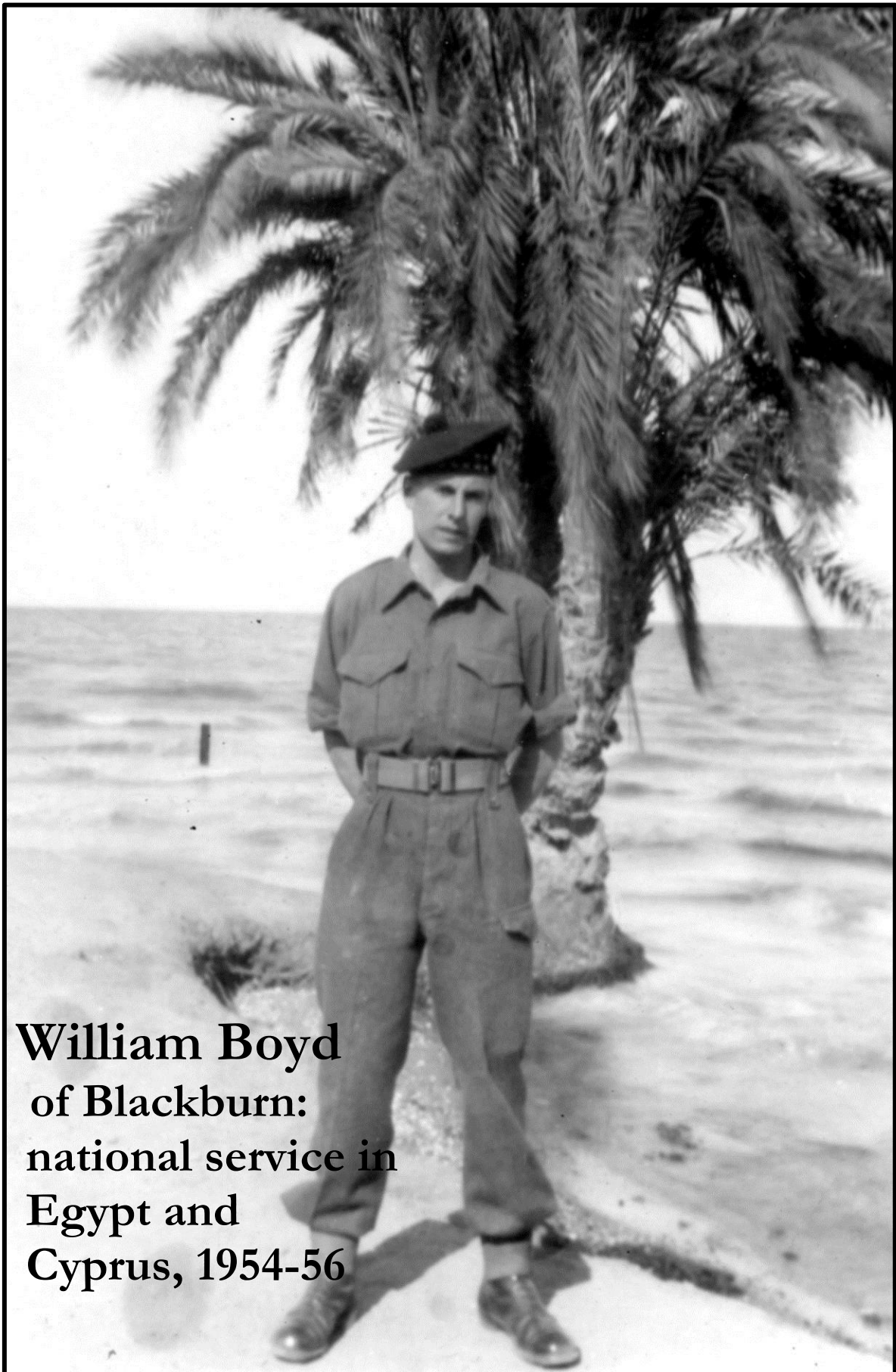


A National Serviceman's story



**William Boyd
of Blackburn:
national service in
Egypt and
Cyprus, 1954-56**

Autumn 1954

My compulsory medical was long past, fading in my mind. My apprenticeship was nearing a close, but serious thought and contemplation of my future never entered my mind. Thoughts of the morrow, as they say, never seemed to bother me.

I knew that I would be notified for conscription into H.M. Forces, but the thought now lurked only in the back of my mind and when it did emerge was quickly pushed back into a dark recess, like some unwanted commodity in the back of a cupboard.

The fact that a considerable time had elapsed since my medical etc. was largely responsible for my attitude, so I did not exactly welcome the summons when it inevitably arrived in the buff-coloured envelope. I was required to present myself at the depot of the local infantry regiment before the hour of four o'clock in the afternoon of 18th November. The fact that I was to be an infantryman didn't go down too well with me; perhaps I thought myself a cut above a mere foot soldier, harbouring thoughts of the R.A.F. or the artillery or some other branch of the services (ruling out the Catering Corps).

When the time came for me to leave home, I remember leaving by the front door with a feeling of calm acceptance of what might be in front of me. My mother hovered in attendance as I left, but we were not a demonstrative family so it was just a case of saying a quiet "cheerio". Even so, I'm sure she would be feeling a bit down. My father of course was at work down the pit but I'm sure the thought of my departure would intrude on his thoughts.

The bus which I boarded in Edinburgh was fairly quiet, but even so it was not too difficult to identify a few other young men, glum of face, who might soon turn out to be brothers in arms. Such proved to be the case when we reached our destination. I look back and recall one young man who sported a hairstyle which I later learned was known as a "Perry Como". Obviously he was of the Teddy Boy fraternity and had adapted the style of his favourite singer of that name.

During the course of that afternoon, approximately sixty conscripts had reported for duty. Various corporals and a few sergeants appeared to be in charge of our arrival. I have no clear memories of the next few hours, as we became further confused and disorientated, being marched in groups to different areas, gathering various items of uniform and kit as we went. Loud-mouthed corporals harried us like dogs after sheep until the kit-bags were full, stuffed in any old way to be sorted out later. Items of clothing were distributed, I might add, with scant regard as to how they would fit.

One thing easily recalled is that in very short order everyone was given an extremely short back and sides, no mercy shown – so much so that I was unable to distinguish my fellow traveller with the "Perry Como" from that time on.

My first visit to the cook-house that evening didn't merit a mention in the good food guide and I was to find that during my two years' service there were some meals or parts of meals which I just couldn't stomach.

Our accommodation was in a large barrack type building where we were allocated a sagging bed in a long room, eight or ten beds down each side. Shorn and dispirited, the evening wore on, occupied by getting our new belongings sorted out, to the accompaniment of shouted instructions from a corporal who seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly and grinning at our obvious discomfort.

Probably, like myself, everyone was pretty tired, not surprising after such a hectic afternoon, a traumatic change in our everyday lifestyle. Even so, no one was permitted to retire to bed until "Lights Out" which was at eleven o'clock. Eventually we crawled into this strange army bed with its tired mattress - no more tired than its new inhabitant. Overcome by the mental rather than physical emotions of the preceding few hours, I was asleep almost instantly.

The First Few Days

I came awake with a start. There was light and noise, other heads emerging from grey blankets, bewildered and confused as I was. It seemed or felt like the middle of the night. A corporal was banging bed ends with a stick and shouting at us to get our feet on the floor. In the background another noise intruded, which in my sudden awakening took a little time to recognise; after all, I was unused to hearing the shrill sound of the bagpipe at six o'clock in the morning. This was the traditional awakening of the Scottish infantry regiments, the tune of course "Johnny Cope".

It would be a day or two before things started to fall into place and become familiar, but meantime we were left in no doubt that we had to learn quickly. Beds had to be made in a certain manner, blankets and sheets folded just as was required.

Although we had been issued with two sets of the khaki battledress uniform, everyday wear in the barracks was denim: not, I hasten to add, of the Levi variety. I think there was some hairy underwear which was issued new(?), two shirts, socks, two pairs of boots. The battledress, denim and other items of clothing had obviously been in use by others.

Before being marched to the cookhouse for our first army breakfast, everybody had to be washed and shaved, performed in three or four wash bowls shared between sixteen men. Every morning thereafter of course it was a rush to get there first. The time between breakfast and eight o'clock muster parade had to be used to clean up the barrack-room, getting everything up to a state of tidiness that would pass inspection. We were introduced to a heavy instrument on the end of a pole which we had to push back and forth over the wooden floor. This item was called a "bumper" and was supposed to produce a shine on the floor - which it did, reluctantly.

The custom was that everyone appeared for muster parade at eight o'clock, when each man was inspected. Such inspections became gradually more thorough as we learned the ropes and got our kit into better condition.

Our first few days comprised an introduction to drill on the hallowed ground of the Square (never to be trodden on, unless on business), and quite a lot of physical training. Apart from this, many boring hours were spent, especially in the evenings, polishing all the brass appending to the canvas gear, such as large and small pack, ammo pouches, water bottle, holder, straps, etc., which, when all assembled on one's back and buckled to one's belt gave one the appearance of an overburdened camel, and was known as F.S.M.O. or Field Service Marching Order. The modern day version might be the Bergen which I've seen on television.

The other real pain was the two pairs of boots of dimpled leather which I don't wish to dwell on, other than to say that they had to finish up nice and smooth, with toe-caps gleaming like black glass.

All canvas of course was blanched which had to be carefully applied in order not to splodge the polish on the brass fittings. Uniform trousers, shirts and jackets had to be ironed which none of us had done before, but we just had to learn, for creases had to be seen to be sharp.

Learning the Ropes

Three weeks were to pass before we were allowed out of barracks, and then in uniform as mufti was forbidden. In those three weeks I think we experienced a hardening up process: everything to be done with so much haste, more physical training, and ever increasing drill parades.

Another aspect about which I had to learn was living cheek by jowl with other men. Many were tradesmen like myself from town and country and not too hard to rub along with.

The sixty or so recruits or intake as it was known were split into three groups, each group under the charge of a drill sergeant and two corporals. Not unnaturally there was fierce rivalry between the sergeants which led them continually to put pressure on the recruits to out-do the other squads.

Soon each soldier was issued with a personal weapon which was the Lee-Enfield 303, used in both world wars, and now getting a bit out of date. More modern weapons were now being designed, starting with the Belgian F.N., a number of which were allocated to the battalion later in my service.

The Lee Enfield, although becoming outmoded, was considered first class for rifle drill, which subsequently added to our misery on the Square, as it weighed approximately nine pounds. We had to learn to handle it in a military fashion, mostly for such ceremonials that were to come. No rifle is complete without a bayonet, of course, the scabbard and hilt of which for inspection purposes had to be treated in the same manner as our boots, i.e. boot polish melted over the surface and buffed up to a brilliant shine. The rifle itself had always to be kept scrupulously clean, anything less being considered a cardinal sin. All this, mind you, before we had fired a shot.

Eventually the day came when we were taken to the firing range in the Pentland Hills. We fired our first shots mostly from one hundred yards, half of us firing while the others stood below ground level at the butts, and indicated by pointer on the target where the budding marksmen had put their shots.

In succeeding shoots we were firing from greater ranges. Our training which was taking place over the winter months was made rather unpleasant with the low temperatures in the hills; indeed on one occasion one of the recruits was reduced to tears with the intensity of the cold wind. He was in a different squad from me and I never saw him again. He simply disappeared, quietly transferred to one of the corps maybe.

Our training progressed to include the light machine gun (Bren) and Sten gun and on one occasion we were issued with two fragmentation grenades. After being lectured on how they functioned, we were taken to an out-of-the-way Ministry of Defence property and threw them from behind the safety of a brick wall, under the watchful eye of an N.C.O.

Our initial training was to last for eleven weeks, a continual round of drills, physical training, kit inspections, a constant routine of being kept on our toes and usually one step from being in trouble.

We went regularly to the range for rifle practice and when this included rapid fire, the heavy thump of the recoil left us with a bruised shoulder. Despite this I gained a small reputation for being something of a marksman, especially when target shooting took place indoors at the barracks with .22 rifles at twenty-six yards.

This led often to a slight escalation of my finances as we used to contribute three old pence and the best score took the money. Money, or the lack of it, was always to be a sore point during my two years' service, less so for me as I was a non-smoker and wasn't so eager for drink as some of my colleague, especially I think those from the city.

Discipline

Everyone hoped for a weekend pass from mid-day Saturday until Sunday night. Permission was never confirmed until the last minute, the threat of withdrawal held over us if our efforts on the parade ground or elsewhere did not measure up to our instructors' approval

After the euphoria of release, the Sunday evening return to barracks was something to be dreaded as it was not an inviting prospect. Our uniform etc. had to be attended to before Lights Out in preparation for Monday morning muster parade, when we would be individually inspected by the training sergeant who was invariably accompanied by a corporal who carried a notebook in which to enter the names of those caught out in some sartorial misdemeanour.

The unlucky ones among us were at some point during the day assembled at the company office, deprived of hat and belt and double marched in front of an officer, usually a major. This was accompanied by much shouting from the N.C.O.: quick march, mark time, right turn, etc., until you found yourself confronted by the aforementioned officer who was then regaled by the

sergeant with a list of our wrongdoings. The major in a quiet voice then informed us individually, for that is how we were taken, that we were in breach of the army code of military discipline. We would then be asked if we had anything to say, (but generally excuses were not acceptable in the army,) and would we accept his punishment? – as if we had any choice in the matter.

Generally minor misdemeanours were awarded with three days C.B. (Confined to Barracks), or longer depending on how serious your crime was. If it was bad enough, you could quite easily be locked up in the guard-room. For C.B. you had to attend the guard-room morning and evening and you were allocated some menial tasks of an onerous nature such as washing pots in the cookhouse.

After the officer was finished with you, the same shouting and bawling accompanied your departure, tackety boots hammering the floor boards. The noisy performance was probably designed to confuse and intimidate, for it must be remembered that we were still young soldiers with a great deal to learn. In time we would be able to take it all in our stride.

Passing Out

Part way through our training an open day was held, with parents invited to attend. I remember showing my Mother into the barrack-room; she never said anything but I sensed her dismay on seeing the row of sagging cots; although we didn't enjoy a luxurious home life by any means, she was obviously struck by the Spartan style of army existence.

A short drill display was put on and a visit to the gymnasium where all manner of small arms were laid out for viewing. I sensed that very few of our guests were impressed by all this. The biggest majority of them were women, our fathers probably being at work, or simply declining to come.

Eventually our initial training came to an end and climaxed with the traditional passing out parade. Great preparations were gone through in terms of spit and polish, knife edge creases in tartan trews and battle dress, blouses, brasses gleaming, cap badge sparkling, rifle butt glowing. Eventually we were on the square, a sprinkling of visitors present. The band played, a senior officer inspected the parade, gave a short speech, took the salute and then departed, probably to the officers' mess.

Our own celebration took place in various pubs in the city. Most of my friends were indigent city dwellers and were more at home in the hostelry environment than I was. I fear I was sorely out-classed when drinking alongside them, so not surprisingly the following morning was not one that I look back on with pleasure. But the army takes no account of sore heads or sick stomachs – it was business as usual.

Off to Egypt

The battalion was at this time stationed outside Suez in Egypt where they had been since returning from the recent Korean war. In preparation for joining them we were transferred to a different part of the barracks, known as Holding and Drafting company, and we existed there in Nissen hut accommodation until such time as those whose business was to do so arranged our passage to the Middle East.

Eventually, towards the end of January 1955, we were given three weeks' embarkation leave. The evening we returned to barracks was extremely cold, with about nine inches of snow on the ground. I can never recall feeling so cold in my life. The Nissen huts were totally devoid of heating and we were not unnaturally dispirited, returning to this environment after three weeks at home.

The date of our departure was imminent, so several items of tropical clothing were issued. I remember screwing up my courage and going back to the Quarter Master with a pair of pyjamas which had very obviously never been laundered since the previous owner had worn them. Surprisingly the Q.M. Sergeant didn't berate me for my audacity and just handed me another pair, which on inspection were no better than the first. I never wore them.

We were now denied any leave of absence from the camp; indeed we felt continually under observation at this point as it was not unusual for some of the more rebellious spirits to suddenly absent themselves from the coming departure. I was particularly sorry for one of my friends who was leaving behind a young wife and child.

After being piped into the Caley station (now of course no longer functioning), we travelled by rail to Liverpool overnight, arriving at Lime Street station the following morning. Trucks were waiting to take us to an army barracks, the name of which I never found out. It was here that we had our breakfast, then it was back on the trucks again. We were taken to the docks where we handled a great deal of material and small cargo obviously destined to be carried in the same ship as we were to travel in, although at this point there was no vessel of any size in sight.

This all changed when after coming back from lunch at the same barracks and emerging from the dockside warehouse we were confronted by a huge wall of white steel which of course was the side of the troopship.

Lots of other soldiers from many regiments had now arrived, and eventually we were allowed to go on board and directed below to one of the troop decks where we found rows of steel poles vertical between the decks, held against which was a narrow bed frame that could pivot down to the horizontal and be suspended on the outside by a chain at each end. These sleeping arrangements were known as "Standeers": in this case two high and side by side, which meant that four men slept supported by two poles. The bedding, such as there was of it, was stored in lockers along the side of the ship and only brought out when in use.

The "Devonshire" - that was the name of the ship - sailed later than afternoon without ceremony. None of us were on deck to witness the departure as we were too busy settling in and getting accustomed to our new surroundings. The motion of the ship was the only indication that we were now underway.

I soon learned that I was not a very good sailor, for within a few hours of our departure I was feeling the effects of sea sickness, I was not really very surprised at this for I never really had a strong stomach. Somehow or other we prepared our bunks from the stored bedding which was rolled in a canvas cover. This cover was laid on the wire bed frame and the bedding on top - not much of it as I have said, but it was quite warm in the ship

I fell asleep in spite of feeling unwell and passed a poor night in these strange surroundings, waking early the next morning feeling really dizzy and sick. I remember lying full length on the deck with several other unfortunates trying to roll up my bedding so that it could be stored away in the locker.

This state of health lasted a few days until we were clear of the notorious Bay of Biscay. During this time we didn't do too much, but many of my colleagues were collared for various fatigues, mostly of the cleaning and cook-house variety. Fortunately I was spared this unwelcome duty and began to feel better as the ship ran further south into better weather.

Each morning every soldier was mustered on deck by their lifeboat station, and there we had to stand in ranks for a boringly long time. This was to enable the ship's master to make his inspection of the ship. A further inspection took place at ten o'clock in the evening but this must have been much more casual as we were not obliged to vacate the troopdeck.

Unfortunately we were not allowed the run of the ship, but were confined to a limited area, something similar to the steerage situation experienced at one time by all the immigrants leaving their homelands for a new life in America.

Apart from these minor irritations the voyage began to take on quite a pleasant aspect. We reached and passed through the Straits of Gibraltar during the night so were denied a view of the

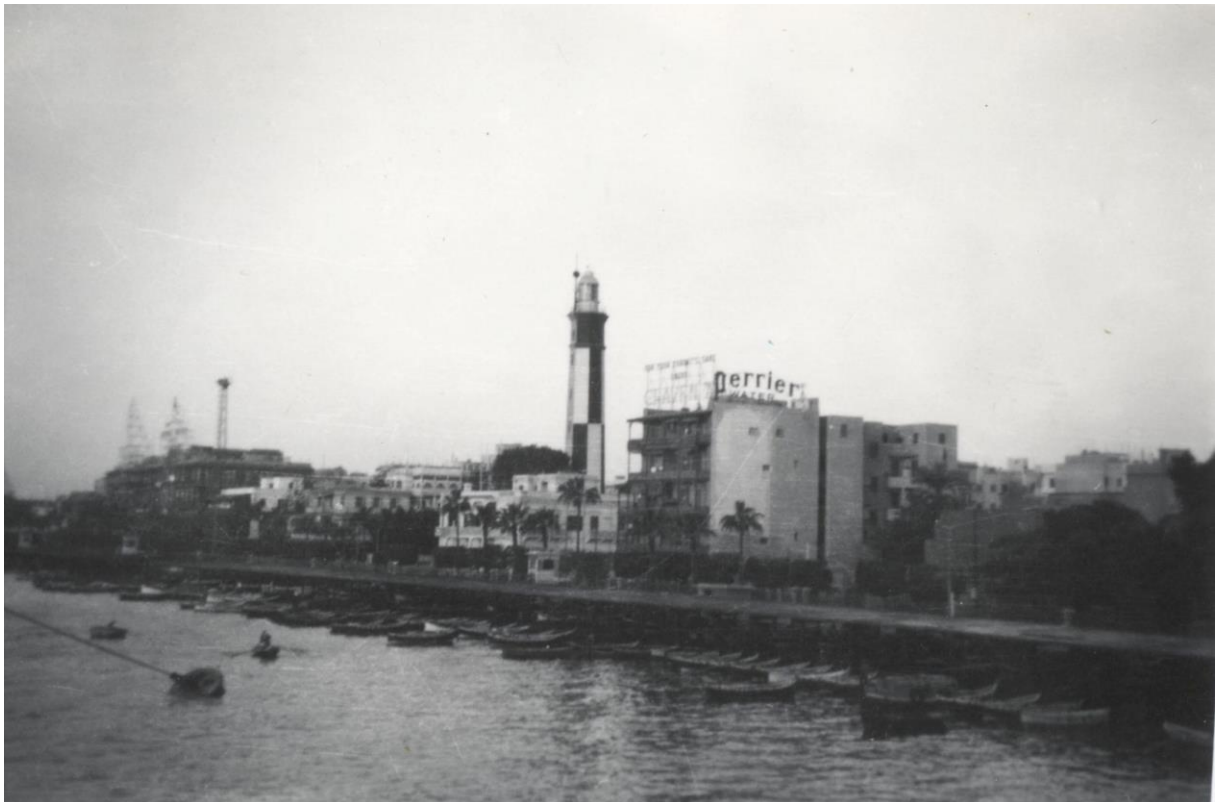
famous rock. Now that we were in the Mediterranean the weather was becoming pleasantly warm and we had time to enjoy it. There was a certain amount of physical training, weapons handling, etc., even shooting at weighted balloons tumbling in the ship's wake, more designed to fill in our time than with any serious purpose.

Port Said

It became apparent that our journey was soon to end, when the ship's crew began to erect huge searchlights on the prow of the vessel. This I surmised was to enable the pilot to navigate through the confines of the Suez Canal during a night passage. My contingent were disembarking at Port Said of course, but the ship was destined for the Far East with the rest of the soldiers on board.

After ten days at sea without sight of land it came as a surprise to me when going on deck one morning I found the ship was confined on both sides by barren sand banks, and the hitherto sparkling blue of the Med. had turned into a dirty turgid brown colour. By the time we had gone through the morning routine and had our breakfast etc., the port had come in sight and everyone crammed on deck for a first view of foreign landfall.

The ship slowly drifted to a stop in the middle of the waterway, high rise buildings rose on one side, all looking so dry and sun-baked, each sporting huge advertisements on their roofs, sharp against the sky and probably neon-lighted by nights.



Port Said

The waters of the port were alive with small boats which, when the ship anchored, seemed to converge on it from all sides, the owners calling out to us and holding up their tawdry souvenirs.

Everything was strange and interesting. The native boatmen (in these enlightened times I must refrain from referring to them by the three letter word that was in general use at that time) were most persistent in their sales pitch, calling to us from their "bumboats" thirty feet below

deck level. So persistent were they indeed that I even observed one chap clambering up the anchor chain and when I went down to the troopdeck there was another trying to sell some white powder substance which could have been anything – I didn't bother trying to find out. There seemed to be no problem with language, long association with elements of the British Army and Navy having given them opportunity to speak English quite well.

After a time a flat, open-decked vessel drew alongside into which we disembarked, but some time elapsed before we moved off. During this waiting period we became very uncomfortable - in battledress uniform, unprotected from the sun which was hot even this early in the year and compounded by the heat and light from the vast white steel walls of the ship. We were all very glad when we eventually moved off to cheers and waving from those still on board.

After moving some distance up the harbour, we landed at a jetty where we found lorries waiting to take us on the next stage of our journey. As we began to move south, the atmosphere of foreignness was enhanced by the arid and barren condition of a huge percentage of the countryside. On our left hand or east side there was a certain amount of irrigated cultivation, and a cluster of poor-looking hovels marking a village attested to the lack of prosperity.

The few times we stopped for any reason, we were quickly surrounded by the locals dressed alike in their long white gown-like gallibeyas (I use the word white advisedly). We were obviously newcomers with our white faces, and maybe they thought we would be gullible and fall for their sales talk. Everyone seemed to want to sell something; I think trying to make a living was very hard for them.

By way of contrast, on our right or west side, there was mile after mile of barbed wire lining the roadside and enclosing military property and encampments of many branches of the British army and Air Force. I believe that much of the dannert wire I have just mentioned went back to the days of the Second World War and was used in part to confine the vast numbers of Axis prisoners captured in the Western desert after the defeat of Rommel.

With Alpha Company at Suez

It was evening by the time we reached our destination just outside the town of Suez at the south end of the Canal where it actually joined the Gulf of Suez itself. The long day had taken its toll and we were quite tired after our journey. The early semi-tropical darkness had fallen by the time we had been to the cookhouse and had something to eat, after which we collected bedding from the stores along with some other essentials, and were then shown to our quarters, which turned out to be four-man tents. Sleep came quickly to end our first day on foreign soil.

When we awoke to our strange new surroundings the following morning, the camp seemed strangely quiet until we found out that the largest part of the battalion were out in the desert on exercise. We spent most of that first day acclimatising ourselves to our new surroundings and getting all our gear into order.

It seemed that we were to be attached to A (Alpha) company to continue our training, and here I will explain that an infantry battalion consists of six companies, comprising four rifle companies, one support company - which as the name implies supports the rifle companies with heavier weapons in the shape of medium machine guns, mortars, anti-tank guns, etc. The sixth is Headquarters company which houses administration clerks, cooks, bandsmen, medical orderlies, etc., even sanitation personnel, important in warmer climates such as where we were.

It was every soldier's duty to acquaint himself with company orders; these were pinned up on a notice board in front of the company office every day. To my dismay I found my name up for twenty-four hour guard duty the following day, which of course was only our second day in camp. This came about because there was such a depletion of personnel due to the aforementioned battalion exercise.

Anyhow there nothing else for it but to get my uniform pressed and everything else cleaned and polished. I was slightly apprehensive for the simple reason that I knew that guard mounting

with the battalion was taken seriously and performed in a ceremonial fashion. The new guard was subjected to a rigorous inspection by the Adjutant Officer of the day accompanied by the R.S.M., the latter conducting the formalities.

My apprehension was borne out when the duty officer found a small speck of dirt on or within the lettering on my cap badge and he just said "Take his name", for the Duty Sergeant who was also in attendance to get my name and number into his notebook. This literally meant I was on a charge and would appear before the company commander the following morning. Less than two days with the battalion and in trouble already.

After the guard mounting, we the new guard took over the guard room. I was allocated first stag, first period of two hour duty along with the three others. I was to be on the main gate while the others patrolled sections of the perimeter. The guard commander read us the standing orders, he then took my rifle from me, handed me a Sten gun and said 'Shoot to kill', whereupon I was marched to the main gate to relieve the sentry there who was waiting to go off duty.

The last sentence may sound a bit dramatic but basically the British were not popular in the Canal Zone and there had been much unrest in the past. Local natives were well known for slipping through the wire for the purposes of theft, and if discovered by the sentry, would be challenged three times. If the person or persons ignored the warning the sentry was authorised to shoot him dead, and being dead meant they couldn't testify.

I appeared before the Company Commander the following morning in the usual noisy manner, but thankfully he was inclined to take a lenient view of my misdemeanour; due perhaps to our so recent arrival, so I was reprimanded and dismissed. During my stay in the army, this occurrence cropped up a number of times but thankfully, for the most part, I managed to keep my nose clean, and any punishments incurred were fairly trivial – though anyone getting into serious trouble had a very nasty time of it. I say I kept mostly out of trouble, but I know that a couple of slip-ups later in my service resulted in the loss of a tape. This did not unduly bother me as any kind of promotion, in the army especially, would alter my attitude to the rest of the men with whom I had joined, and more particularly, their attitude to me.

We remained several weeks in the aforementioned Alpha company where our training was ongoing, with forced marches into the desert being particularly strenuous. Fortunately at this time the real summer heat had not set in, but even so we lost a deal of sweat - but better these conditions than the ones we left at home.

Further up the Canal

During this period the battalion moved lock, stock and barrel to a camp further up the canal. The four man tents came down quite readily and together with all our personal equipment we loaded ourselves onto lorries and took our departure.

It would appear that at this point all the British held camps were being vacated from the south end of the canal and in turn being occupied by Egyptian troops. It looked really as if Egypt was building up her army at this time.

On one occasion I was able to observe a party of them in training, and even bearing in mind our own beginnings, their efforts were extremely awkward, even laughable; but this would not be fair, as probably their transition to military life would have been much more traumatic than ours. I'm sure most of them would have had a poor education and what about boots? That introduction would take some getting used to.

Our new quarters soon became familiar, the usual tented accommodation, we were bordered on the south (over the inevitable barbed wire) by a more permanent encampment known by the Egyptian name of 'El Hamrah' occupied by a unit of the R.A.F. I learned of this from a sentry who I got talking to when I was doing a similar duty on the other side of the wire. On the north side in a similar camp to our own, a contingent of the Life Guards were in residence, but nobody seemed to have had any contact with them – all I ever saw was the

occasional flash of a breastplate which was probably the only means of us knowing who they were.

On the west side there was nothing, nothing but miles and miles of desert, apart, that is, from a large slightly sinister-looking building which turned out to be an M.C.E. (Military Correction Establishment): in other words, a military prison. This is where serious punishment is meted out to those who have tried to buck the system, or have otherwise strayed from the narrow path which the British Army requires one to tread.

Access to this house of horrors, oddly enough, was via a road running through the middle of our camp. We soon found out that it was totally guarded by black African troops and when we encountered any of them on this road, we would often try a little banter saying "You Kikuyu Johnnie" at which they would laugh and protestingly deny it.

In explanation of this, we were all familiar with the recent Mau-Mau troubles for which the Kikuyu tribe was largely responsible, so when we met these friendly soldiers it was a subject both sides knew about, and so became a chance for some friendly laughter.

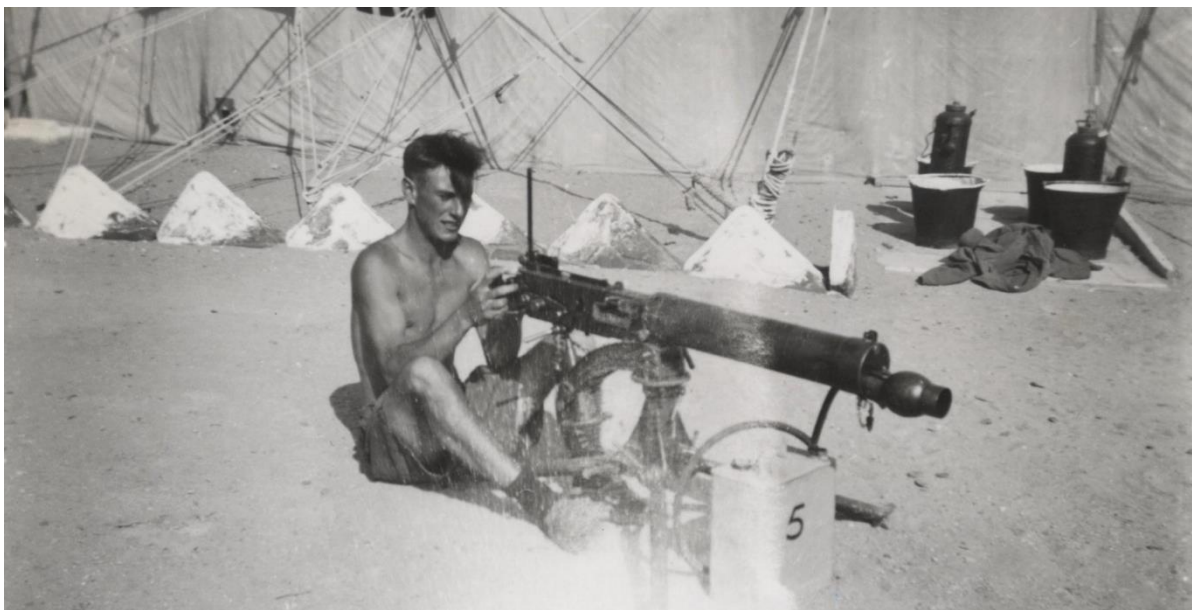
The mention of black soldiers brings to mind a fact which I have not hitherto mentioned, and that was the sheer volume of coloured troops in the area. I'm sure they quite outnumbered the British. I formed the opinion, rightly or wrongly, that they were the subject of very strict discipline from their white officers.

Machine Gun Section

Now after this period of advanced training we had received in A. Coy., our original contingent were all split up and allocated to different companies within the battalion. I myself with a number of others were integrated into Support Company, the duties of which I have already explained.

I found myself in the medium machine gun section and began exhaustive training in the use and maintenance of this particular weapon which is now long out of date. Some of the more intricate parts of the weapon mechanism had to be stripped down until we could eventually dismantle and reassemble it using a blindfold.

The gun itself weighed close on one hundred pounds when taken with its mounting, but was normally carried in these two separate parts. Even so, with ammo and ancillary equipment, it made for a heavy burden when being carried manually over the hot desert for any distance.



Private William Boyd, Machine Gun Section

Thankfully the guns were normally transported using open-top jeeps and here I had my first real introduction to driving. There may have been no traffic problems in the desert but the desert floor is seldom flat or smooth so decisions had to be made quickly as to which direction to take. Inevitably we got stuck fairly often in soft sand which necessitated the use of steel sand channels which we carried with us, and when shoved below the wheels eventually got us onto firmer ground.

One evening we were taken out into the desert for a night shooting exercise. There were four guns, and four targets perhaps about eight feet square had been towed out earlier to predetermined positions. We set up on a slightly elevated position and by the time it was full dark we were ready for firing.

The means of sighting was effected by the use of a dial sight fixed to the gun. The machine gun officer read out the angle of sight and elevation, which when transferred to the instrument should have put the gun on target. We commenced firing: at five hundred rounds a minute, considerable money was being spent on ammo! One gun wasn't firing properly. The officer was going spare, perhaps apprehensive as to the outcome of the exercise. We stripped down the extract and loading system but everything seemed alright. Personally, I suspected a certain cup-shaped part at the front of the barrel had not been screwed on, but I declined to mention it in case suspicion fell on me. My suspicion as to the nature of the fault was borne out when we stripped the guns for cleaning next morning.

The Lieutenant had grounds for apprehension, if such was causing his ill temper the night before. When brought in and examined, it was found that the targets had sustained no damage whatsoever, and were in the same pristine condition as when they had first been placed in position. We heard unofficially the following day that our officer had been up in front of the C.O. and called to account.

Living Conditions

Reveille was at half past five during the Egyptian summer, and our day-to-day life became pretty routine. We kept our personal gear in good order and set up in a certain way. There was not much cleaning required of our living quarters which consisted only of a concrete slab, with the canvas roof of the tent supported by two large poles, and guy ropes all round. The canvas walls were never utilized and kept rolled up at each of the four corners. All that we had to do was brush the inevitable sand from the concrete floor and also the sand area within the guy ropes.

We slept on normal army beds: everybody slept naked with one sheet and this is where we could be found every day after the mid-day meal until four o'clock: on top of the bed - siesta time, you could call it - then we were back on duty after four.

Of course there were always guard duties, which were considered onerous at the best of times. We would gather at the small square near the guard room and main gate, our backs to the sun in case the heat dulled the high polish on our boots, rifle held in two fingers in case sweat from the hand marked the blanched sling or polished butt. We sometimes had to provide guards for other facilities up and down the canal road. My first outwith the camp was at Brigade H.Q. I was on the second stag, twelve until two, so I missed the regular meal time. When I got to the cookhouse, there was no one else there, but I got something to eat and a mug of tea. When I was drinking the tea, the heat within the cookhouse combined with the fact that it was an exceptionally hot day brought me out in a sweat, which while I was sitting there, ran down my chest in a continuous little rivulet. Writing home at that time and explaining the intensity of the heat had relatives wondering, but since the advent of foreign holidays, people are now more familiar with the daytime temperatures in foreign climes.

I was included in an overnight guard on the outskirts of the nearest small town which was Fayid. The camp was bordered on one side by the Sweetwater canal (so called because it

contained fresh water). This canal was hugely contaminated with every filth one could mention and was besides being used as a public convenience by everyone. The water was used for all cooking, drinking and washing purposes. I imagine that houses having facilities such as running water would be very much in the minority.

Among many other horrors, this canal was home to a tiny fluke-like creature which got into the blood stream of the native population and caused a disease called Bilharzia. Those affected – and we're talking a large percentage – suffered from general weakness and listlessness.

I was allocated a certain section of the perimeter to patrol and at the commencement of this I found myself being scrutinised by a soldier at the entrance of a nearby tent. I immediately recognised him as belonging to my home town and signalled my recognition. Afterwards I went for a chat with him which I cut as short as I possibly could, in view of the fact that I had absented myself from my post, a court martial offence.

We had been provided with compo rations to see us through the night; these are all tinned good of course, but no one had one of the small tin-openers commonly provided and which we usually carried around. We had to resort to using the bayonet. Some of my colleagues were ready to be sick when someone reminded them that they had been stalking and stabbing these huge frogs that had emerged from the canal earlier in the evening.

This canal I have been going on about ran parallel to and about half a mile from the main shipping canal and as far as I could see was the sole means of supporting life and cultivation in the area; nor was there much in the way of animal husbandry. The only thing that gave character to the countryside was a fair abundance of date palms which were tall and stately.

The following morning in this particular camp we were guarding, when the first rays of the rising sun hit the water, I was amazed to see a veritable cloud of insects rise into the air, suspended about three feet above the surface, probably drying their wings in preparation for the

daily torment that they would inflict on man and beast; no wonder the aforementioned frogs were so large!



Special Dhobi

From time to time special parades occurred for visiting dignitaries such as government ministers, etc., which of course meant extra drills and spit and polish for us poor squaddies. Normal guard duty uniform was K.D. (khaki drill), washed and ironed, everyday wear, boots and P.T. shorts, and a shirt and belt for ordinary parades and going to the cookhouse, etc. On special occasions however it had to be 'Special Dhobi'.

After 'special dhobi', ready for special parade

All our laundry was done by local labour known as 'dhobi wallahs'. They worked mostly at night and slept or lazed away the warm hours of daylight. With cheeks bulging with water they would spray along the seams of the various garments in front of the iron. Special Dhobi was achieved by liberal quantities of starch to make garments more stiff and add extra sharpness to the creases; nevertheless when in parade for any length of time the damp patches would soon show down our backs.

As already mentioned the dhobi wallahs often worked at night. The problem arose when they indulged their fondness for the strident Arabic music on Radio Cairo which wailed on all night. The adjacent Charlie company lines bore the brunt of this cacophony, preventing the men from sleeping. Obviously this state of affairs had to be resolved, which indeed it was. I think in this case the 'laundry lyrics' had to be reduced decibel-wise.

As well as the laundry, the cookhouse and sanitary duties offered work to some of the locals; even our hair was cut by an Egyptian who was always complaining that he was cutting our hair oftener than he was paid for. I think he had legitimate grounds for his complaint as we had to get it cut on average every week. This being one of the R.S.M.'s pet subjects, it was wise not to run the risk of his wrath.

There were also a few indigenous who might be said to be freelance: one I think was more Sudanese than Egyptian, and sported tribal marking on his face. He went round the camp with a two-wheeled barrow of sorts from which he sold a variety of candy and chocolate bars, etc. This character was known as 'Abdul'. Unfortunately I found that his prices were out of keeping with our income.

We had a NAAFI, of course, but it wasn't very good, run by a non-European. It was a place to go for a drink, soft in most cases, but the local beer (Stella) was available. Anyone who was a customer of Abdul or visited the beer bar, often fell into the clutches of 'Zabre', another local whose speciality was money lending. He was often seen scouring the camp for those who were trying to avoid him.

Day to day routine

Our training continued apace. An occasion that I recall concerned a large pictorial view of a small town or village from which we had to talk the man on the gun onto a particular target. This was achieved by referring to a prominent feature then going to three o'clock or seven o'clock or whatever to put the gunner onto the target. When my turn came I went through the procedure and guided the gun onto an objective, all the while being listened to by the M.G. officer. When I was finished he suggested I might have used another point of reference which indeed I had considered but thought it too much in the background.

Normally one didn't reply to an officer other than the obligatory "Sir", but in this case I replied quietly that I had thought it to be a little inconspicuous. I remember him looking at me for a moment, but it was only later that I realised that he hadn't expected a reply, nor indeed the use of the word itself. Various mutterings from my colleagues led me to think that few of them were familiar with the word.

Friday nights were spoken for: Saturday morning was the R.S.M.'s drill parade, very regimental, so Friday was very much a night for the spit and polish. Few exceptions were tolerated at this weekly event so when we were marched by companies to the parade ground outwith the camp on the Saturday morning, the R.S.M. had nearly the full battalion under his command.

The unremitting sun beat down as always as we stood in lines three deep at the open order, awaiting the start of his inspection. Our boots were shining, soon to be dulled by the heat of the sun and dust when drill commenced. The boots were set off by tartan hose tops with the khaki cloth puttees wound round the boot tops and onto the leg. K.D. shorts and jacket creased sharply, the white triangle (pyramid) on the red background on each shoulder, this being our

division sign. Here and there bonnet ribbons lifting on the occasional eddy of warm air as we waited not without some apprehension for the first word of command.

The front rank was brought to attention, and the pipes broke into the Skye Boat Song in slow time. The R.S.M. and Duty Sergeant marched to the far right of the parade and commenced to scrutinise the appearance of each individual; the sergeant, note book at the ready, took the names of any who didn't measure up, later to be dealt with by their company commander. If he considered the fault to be severe, he would command two men to fall in at each side of the unfortunate soldier and double him to the guard room where he would be placed in a cell.

After being inspected, the front rank were stood at ease while the centre rank became the focus of attention, the music again in a slow march time being played this time by the military band. During this prolonged period of tension, it was not uncommon for a man here and there to collapse to the ground in a faint. They were thoroughly berated by the R.S.M. before being literally hauled to the rear of the parade, sweaty face still adorned with the gritty sand of the parade ground. There they were left unattended until they made their recovery.

When the rear rank was finally inspected, once more to the keening of the pipes, it was time for the more energetic pursuits of the drill square. This mostly took the form of rifle drill which the R.S.M. seemed to favour. Each movement was carried out for as many times as it took for him to bark out "I'll accept that".

As the sun rose higher in the sky, five hundred bayonets flashed at his every command. There was no let up until he was satisfied that every move was accomplished by simultaneous action on our part. Eventually, after what seemed like an endless morning, we were finally marched off, first to sign our rifles back into the armoury and then a short breather before lunch.

Lunch ! Much too grandiose a name for the culinary efforts that were mostly on offer - I think the least said on this topic the better. We had for our use two enamel plates and an enamel mug, and we emptied any garbage left on our plates into a large bin which was usually full to overflowing.

Regular visits from a native contractor removed this swill, probably to some pig farm somewhere. Our plates we then slipped into a barrel of some sort of sterilizing liquid then into water for rinsing. This water was no hotter than what the sun had made it so more often than not there was still a film of grease remaining.

No surprise therefore that many went down with a dose of dysentery. I contracted a mild dose myself but prompt action and a visit to the medical corporal furnished me with a course of tablets (Sulpha Guanadine) the size of an old threepenny bit. One had to start by taking quite a lot at one go - I think it was eight - decreasing at regular intervals as the symptoms improved.

I have stood on parade and watched green material running down a man's leg in front of me which he had recently ingested at the mid-day meal. On many occasions there was no bread available, the substitute provided being hard tack biscuit which of course raised a few grumbles but in the main we just accepted it since we weren't dining at the Ritz.

Meals were taken in a long tent with bare wood trestle-like tables and forms, and like our living accommodation had no side walls. We were served our food outwith the mess tent and a juggling act followed depending if both plates were in use. Sometimes you might have to leave your food and go back for tea or something: this was not always wise as your rations were then open to appropriation by others. I watched one day when one man had left a slice of bread unattended which had a good dollop of jam to enhance it. Along came this other chap who obviously had been out of luck in the jam stakes; he proceeded to scrape the jam from his colleague's bread onto his own in order to make good his deficiency.

Off duty

Some Saturday afternoons for the sake of change, when we were off duty and had sufficient piastres in our pockets, we would take a taxi up to Fayid, which was about seven or eight miles away. The taxis were readily available and were cheap at five new pence, a shilling in old money. Of course we never went alone, always two or three for the sake of safety. In spite of an outward show of friendliness, the cultural, and especially religious differences set up apart, also the political aspect entered into the equation, so basically they were not to be trusted.

The taxis were of the larger American manufacture and would patrol up and down the miles of road serving all the British installations so it was just a case of waiting until one came along. Sometimes the driver would have a young boy with him and if the taxi became full the youngster would stand on the rear bumper and lean forward onto the sloping rear of the vehicle for the duration of the journey.

Arriving at Fayid we might wander round the shops which in one part of town were conventional glass fronted places of business, while in another area they were literally cardboard shacks. The latter stocked all sorts of tawdry goods and souvenirs, anything from a shaving mirror to a fringed tablecloth with camels or palm trees or some such embroidered on it.

We were more inclined to linger in these cheap shops for the sake of a little entertainment, as the stall holders insisted on haggling over the price of items we had no intention of buying. We were always Jock McGregor No. 1 until we refused to buy anything, in which case, needless



to say, we became No. 10 with often an ungentlemanly epithet thrown in. When they heard your voice, their usual greeting was “You Jock McGregor fae Aberdeen?” Growing tired of this one day I said, “No, I come from Kirkcaldy”, that being the first town that came to mind. I was astounded when he replied “Ah, the lang toun”. I hadn’t heard the expression myself until that moment. Normally when in Fayid we would round off our visit by going to the cinema which for some reason was called the ‘Cameronia’, after which it was back to camp before ‘Lights Out’.

Near the camp there was an open air cinema which were not uncommon, so perhaps we would go there instead of Fayid and afterwards call in at a facility situated a very short distance from our main gate. This was in fact one of the Church of Scotland canteens, of which there were a few dotted up and down the Canal Zone. Similar establishments were run by St Martin in the Fields. What their full range of services were I don’t know, but the few times I visited them they were providing services similar to the NAAFI.

Tam Henderson at Fayid

Anyway as I say after being to the cinema we went to the canteen, and bearing in mind our penurious state, it was the bottom of the menu for us, egg and chips. This was a real treat in contrast to the army fare.

By the time we got into camp it would be about 10.45pm, just in time to see a probable two rows of defaulters parading in front of the Guard Room and get to our lines before the duty piper and bugler blew for lights out. (Not that we had any lights.)

You may wonder why I refer to our regimental area as a camp. The fact is that the only semi-permanent buildings were the cook-house and the armoury. Everybody lived or worked under canvas and at no time during my service abroad was I billeted in anything other than tented accommodation; so by no stretch of the imagination could the camp be referred to as a barracks.

You can imagine then that going to the cinema was one of our few pleasures which was provided at adjacent establishments which were not army but R.A.F. Now here were real barracks with proper roads and all the proper facilities which we were without, even to the extent of moving pictures. I would bet they even had proper toilets: ours were housed in a kind of hut where one sat on a sort of box over a hole in the ground. No one visited here after dark, after hearing tales of what lived in the dark recesses of said holes.

We were fortunate enough to be allowed into those two R.A.F. bases, one of which I have mentioned which was 'El Hamra'. The other one also had the Arabic name of Kasfareet. The army had first call on our time day and night, even so we seized the chance when it presented itself to visit the cinema at those two neighbouring camps. I was always amused to notice on leaving the small number of defaulters compared to double rows when we entered our own gate a few minutes later.

As I have previously explained, many of our tasks outwith our own camp consisted of the never-ending guard duties. One duty which was a bit more pleasurable was the main gate guard at Ladysmith camp in Fayid, occupied by the W.R.A.C. This was the only camp perhaps even in the whole of the Canal zone which was inhabited by FEMALES.

We were well aware of course that this interesting situation existed, as our occasional Saturday forays into the town sometimes took in the so-called Lido which was little more than a small beach on the shore of the Bitter Lakes. There were also some premises there which one afternoon I saw being used for dancing. Presumably the ladies who were all in mufti would be from the aforementioned camp.

I never knew of anyone who got on friendly terms with any of the girls for one thing we were much further down the canal and being in such short supply would be well spoken for by members of the what I would call more glamour regiments: for instance, the Irish Guards were garrisoned in Fayid right next to Ladysmith.

One day I was lucky enough to be included in that day's guard contingent and as I stood at the main gate I could see a number of the girls moving about round their accommodation. The fact that they were girls was in no doubt as was evident by the scantiness of their attire. It wasn't very often that we saw young women in their underwear.

In Britain the W.R.A.C. didn't enjoy a very good reputation; in fact they were unanimously considered to be an ugly, pimply lot, and common with it. I don't know if that was a bit harsh. However, whether it was the bronzing effect of the sun, or whether it was outright deprivation, I do not know, but the general opinion was now somewhat different, and elevated these girls to film star status.

Our mid-day and evening meal were taken in the camp dining room - such a change from our own. There we were sitting at a table for four surrounded by a large number of the opposite sex. Inevitably the Duty Lady Officer was doing her rounds, stopping at our table and enquiring if everything was all right? Were there any complaints? We assured her to the contrary, especially being slightly in awe of her and somewhat abashed in the presence of all that femininity.

The only other guard duty I had where there was a female presence was at the bulk issue supply depot for the NAAFI. I patrolled part of the perimeter on the last stag which was ten to midnight. There was an inner and outer barricade of barbed wire; the inner fence was maybe for us as several women were to be seen on the verandas of their quarters taking the evening air which was warm and balmy. As it was with the WRACs and indeed ourselves, when in camp they were scantily dressed, so naturally they were the object of our interest.

Kabrit – by the ‘seaside’

Along with two others, I was sent for a week to look after an officers’ club at a place called Kabrit, which was situated on a little peninsula at the bottom end of the Great Bitter Lake where it was joined to the lower half of the main shipping canal. It was not much of a place and we had only one visit, and that only from a few officers from our own regiment. There was nothing of interest round about, except an installation and a small pier belonging to the Canal Authority.

One day I rigged up a fishing line of sorts and baited it with a piece of fish which had been sent down from the battalion as part of our rations. Judging by the smell and look of it, it didn’t look fit for human consumption. I tossed the line into the water from the pier and in no time a fish had taken the bait. I pulled out what I took to be a species of perch about five inches long. No way was I going to unhook it, for its spiny dorsal fin was constantly flicking up and down, opening and closing, and I could see what might easily happen. I offered the still flapping fish to a young local boy who had been watching. He immediately seized it and many fears came true when the dorsal fin opened up the palm of his hand so badly that there was blood everywhere.

At a later date Support company returned to a point near Kabrit and put up a number of tents, establishing a small camp in fact. It turned out this was for recreational purposes, so that the various companies of the battalion could spend some time there. That first morning we laboured away at erecting the tents, and as the day wore on to full heat, it began to dawn on us: one, that we were getting very thirsty; and two, that no one had organized a water supply to bring with us.

We did not get supplied with drinking water as such in normal circumstances; tea three times a day with meals; all other liquid intake had to be paid for at the NAAFI. There was running water in the wash areas but this was unsuitable for drinking, at least not without sterilizing tablets. Nowadays much emphasis is placed on keeping one’s fluid intake topped up, but the advent of plastic bottles filled with cool spring water was yet to become reality.

However, I digress, as they say. Our thirst was getting to be a problem, but then a truck arrived down from battalion, not with water, unfortunately, but luckily the driver had a “chattie”. Now a chattie as we knew them was a rough clay vessel probably used locally, which when holding water had the property of keeping the contents fairly cool.

We gathered round like animals, grabbing the clumsy pot from each other in a frantic effort to alleviate our thirst, spurred on by the feat that the water would finish before we got any. I would normally have thought that the mouth would dry up with thirst, but as each eager mouth embraced the narrow neck of the chattie, it was plain to see that it was getting covered in white slimy slobber. This was in no way a deterrent as we pushed and shoved to get to the precious liquid. Perhaps the craving could be likened to a junkie who has gone too long without that which feeds his habit.

If these few days at the seaside were meant to be a holiday, they failed miserably. I think I was just as pleased to get back to camp.

Under the desert sun

From time to time we made a foray into the desert, sometimes by jeep and often on foot, perhaps to practice fire on the ranges or on one occasion to experience firing a rocket launcher

at the remains of an old tank, of which many were dotted about after being abandoned during the desert campaign.

We really got sand in our boots when the battalion prepared for an exercise deep into the desert. Soon we were joined by other elements of the Brigade, so things were obviously going to be on a large scale. We were out for several days and from the outset we were joined by a number of other units, including a tank regiment and our neighbours the Life Guards whose transport included a number of half-tracks. I wondered if they had been captured from the Germans during the War, for I had never seen them in use by the British and had only seen them before in war films at home.

The exercise took place in and around the Shuna Wadi. I recall one morning just after first light seeing a whole column in front of me, including the aforementioned vehicles, tanks, lorries, jeeps. I felt at that moment as never before – a feeling of what going to war might be like.

The activity of the day, however, soon dispelled any feelings of morbidity and being stuck three of us in a jeep with the gun soon became distinctly uncomfortable. We were glad when we were quite frequently stopped, and rushing around getting the camouflage netting over the vehicle.

We may have been uncomfortable in the jeep but worse was to come when we were made to carry the gun in its component parts plus ammo boxes etc. for miles across the desert under the hot mid-day sun. I was glad when one night our section lost radio contact and were virtually lost. I ended up sleeping the whole night on the sand and woke up amazed to find I had got through the whole night without being disturbed for sentry duty.

After the usual breakfast out of the compo-rations, we set out again and soon established contact with the rest of our group. Maybe these manoeuvres made some sense to the top brass, but they certainly made none to me. After three or four days constantly on the move, we eventually returned to camp a shade darker with constant exposure to the sun (no thoughts of melanoma then) and our boots flayed to the bare leather with the constant abrasive action of the desert sand.



Private Boyd (right) with pals at the Pyramid

The Egyptian summer wore on. The heat really didn't bother us, although anything really strenuous was normally carried out in the morning when it was relatively cool. Reveille at five thirty elicited the usual performance from the duty piper and bugler. On one particular week the whole pipe band in full dress uniform paraded from five-thirty till six. I suspect this was a form of punishment: perhaps their musical performance was not up to standard and the Bandmaster or Pipe Major was exacting retribution.

One time a party of us did have an early rise, breakfast about four-thirty and into the back of a truck to take us to a place called Abu-Sultan near Ismaila, where we were to renew or supplement the never-ending coils of barbed wire. Dannert wire, to give it its proper name, has in these modern times been largely supplanted by razor wire in areas of defence or incarceration.

An amusing incident occurred on the way up when “Dirger” Bell, whom we had had to drag from his bed at the last minute and throw into the back of the lorry (thus saving him from serious trouble), having had no time to visit the latrine, decided to relieve himself over the tailboard of the truck. Unfortunately an indigent native happened to be walking along the otherwise deserted road and as we passed received the full pressure of Dirger’s bladder.

The area we arrived at was a deserted barren place with no buildings above ground, but dotted with underground bunkers. Abu-Sultan was an ammunition dump and criss-crossed with light gauge railway lines for loading purposes. We toiled on throughout a long morning without the benefit of any refreshment, so we were glad to get back on the lorry to return to camp.

On our return journey we stopped briefly for a swim in the canal just where the upper half joins the lake. The sand was burning hot and scorched our feet as we “hot-footed” it into the water. The dip was refreshing but ended quite soon when a large ship approached from the northern end, forcing us to abandon the water before the huge volume of water pushed in front of the ship became too dangerous for us to remain.

A day out in Cairo

During that summer a number of us - that is the few who had sufficient funds to be able to afford it - were offered a day trip to Cairo, which had some appeal to me. We were not allowed to go in uniform, but a cheap pair of trousers and a shirt took care of that.

People weren’t widely travelled in those days and the limit of my urban experience was confined to the central areas of Edinburgh and Glasgow, more so the former as the direct bus service led to occasional visits to the Zoo and even Portobello. Of course those childhood excursions were conducted round about the second half or just after the Second World War when travel was strictly limited.



Cairo

Cairo was nothing like those two cities and will always be easy to conjure up in my mind’s eye: the heat, the noise, the smells and colours, the teeming masses of pyjama-clad citizens invaded the senses. In referring to the masses of people, it has to be said that they were

overwhelmingly of the masculine gender, women in Egypt were mostly noticeable by their absence. Those few I did see were nearly all clothed top to toe in black with only their eyes showing. If black apparel was the uniform of married status, then I never clapped eyes on a young unmarried woman.



Cairo Museum

Our first port of call was Cairo museum where all the artefacts recovered from the tombs were on display. Everything was very interesting, but sadly the ignorance of youth or lack of further education at that time made me and my companions less than fully appreciative of what we were seeing. The feeling of awe and respect which they should have been accorded was lacking.

From the cool quiet of the museum we were back on the bus, this time en route to the Pyramids, through the crowded streets full of noisy traffic of every description vying with each other for a share of the road. Donkey cars could be seen in the middle of this chaos, lorries, horns blaring, tram cars, passengers crammed inside and people hanging on all round the outsides like bundles of washing hung up to dry. Not quite lost in all this mayhem, the street peddlars advertised their wares with strident calls (every one a bargain).

More striking than the tallest skyscraper, our first glimpse of the pyramids, so large and imposing. We had turned onto a road running parallel with the river Nile on our left. Many house boats moored along the banks, and a few single-sailed feluccas traded up and down. Soon Cairo Zoo was on our right and shortly afterwards the bus began to ascend onto the plateau above the city where the Pyramids are situated.

We stepped out of the bus onto the ever present sand and made our way on foot to where there was an obvious entry point. We were unhindered with other sightseers as there were few travellers about at that time, a few native Egyptians of course were never far away, looking for any piastres that were going. Maybe they were under the illusion that the British Army was well paid. Piastres, by the way, were always referred to by service personnel as “akers”, I don’t know why.

They are built completely of huge stone blocks, and if you wanted to go up you had to jump all the way to the top. We found that entry was not available at ground level, so anyone wishing to enter the Pyramid had to leap up over several courses of huge square stones before finding the aperture which allowed entry. A few of the blocks were moved to allow access inside, and ropes were hanging from somewhere holding wooden planks which we ventured across at our peril.



Entrance to the Pyramid (lower right)

Basically we were certainly inside the Pyramid, but in reality there was not much to see. We went along a corridor where guides were holding hand lamps, and on up a very steep passage roughly about thirty-five degrees. Our footing was on wooden boards crossed by smaller straps of wood which helped us clamber up to a doorway, just an opening really where we had to bend down to get through into a quite small chamber, dominated in the centre by a large open trough for want of a better word, which I imagine contained a sarcophagus at some far distant time in the past. If there was anything further of interest it was not made available to us, so we all made our way back outside where we wandered around for a while, had a look at the Sphinx, which was quite close, and more or less ignored the other two Pyramids in the group. They were a fair walk away across the sand, and one pyramid looked much the same as another.

What with the less than luxurious bus journey across the desert to Cairo and the subsequent sightseeing, we were more than ready for our lunch which was served *al fresco* at a hotel on the road running down from the plateau. I can't recall the menu in detail other than that it was quite simple, but I found it extremely pleasant, a far cry from the dreary monotonous fare available in the far less salubrious surroundings back at camp.

So after this pleasant interlude, we resumed our sightseeing which took us this time to the mosque of Mahomet Ali. A magnificent building situated again on higher ground overlooking the city, containing the remains of a holy person held in great reverence by the Moslem community. The splendour of the mosque both inside and out was awe inspiring, especially inside where we were allowed after removing our shoes.

After visiting the mosque, we moved back into the city and wandered through the souk or bazaar where we were harangued on all sides to buy the goods on offer. Such a density of population, I recall looking into one little workshop where the normal floor to ceiling height had been sub-divided horizontally and a man was crouched over a sewing machine, or something similar, in the upper half of this modification, such was the urgent requirement for space.

It was now getting onto late afternoon and the bustle of the city was quieting down but we still had a little time left to have a wander around before we were due to leave. I remember a man unusually tall for an Egyptian pursuing us with a tray of biro pens which he insisted we try on the loose pieces of paper which he provided. Soon there was paper being blown all up and down the street in the warm breeze which had arisen. The most interesting thing about this man, however, was the fact that his fluent English was delivered in the broadest Glasgow accent, equal to anything I have heard in that city. Obviously many civilian personnel were employed by

the forces in various roles even as they still were in our own camp. I can only assume that this chap had been closely associated with a Scottish regiment at some point, some of whom at least must have been born and brought up in the Gorbals.

Soon we were on our way back to camp and in the short twilight we drew into a “Resthouse” for a brief stop and a drink. These resthouses, as they were known, were very Spartan, very dark with very little glass to admit the sun, the idea being to keep the place as cool as possible. The furnishing comprised a few bare tables and chairs – and not many of the latter, for I imagine they would just get stolen. The only other customers when we arrived were the usual resident fly population.

Maybe these stop-offs - for that was all they were - may have been the fledgling forerunners of the modern service stations we know today. The one I have been talking about was native owned, perhaps government owned, I don't know. Probably their most frequent customers would be the drivers of the numerous fuel tankers often seen heading north from Suez.

So ended our day in Cairo; will I be back? Who knows, but I do know I will never forget it.



By armchair to Cyprus

Life at the camp continued as per usual, but we had always been led to believe that our term in the Canal Zone was to be limited, due to the fact that all British and colonial troops were to be withdrawn from the country. We were in fact expecting to go home, but as things turned out, this was not to be, not yet awhile anyway. I remember an old sergeant at the training depot telling us, “You're only going out for five minutes anyway.”

One day the whole battalion was unexpectedly mustered on the square and addressed by the Commanding Officer who informed us that our time in Egypt was at an end, suddenly cut short. He then told us that we would be moving to Cyprus where a Greek Cypriot faction calling themselves E.O.K.A. and led by Archbishop Makarios and Colonel Grivas were beginning to stir up trouble, presumably in order to squeeze the British off the island. Like the ordinary soldier in times past, present and future, we were never particularly enlightened as to the politics of the matter.

You may imagine that this gave rise to some excitement, and in a matter of days orders were issued to start packing. It was not just a simple matter of getting our personal kit ready but also all the stores and material in the camp associated with the day-to-day welfare of around five hundred men. The battalion was under strength at this time due to the previous situation where our departure for the UK was supposedly imminent.

Members of my company including myself were to form the advance party and one afternoon we were each settled into the back of a lorry and prepared ourselves to shake the sand

of Egypt off our feet. I was lucky in my choice of transport for right at the back was a large upholstered easy chair probably from the Officers' Mess, so I looked forward to a comfortable journey, taking my ease and viewing the receding countryside.

We were much disconcerted then, when only a matter of minutes into our travels we turned into another camp, where rumour got round and was eventually verified that we would be staying overnight and an augmented convoy would proceed the following morning.

We passed the remainder of the afternoon moaning about our disappointment at not being on our way, but soon it was dusk and we each went to our respective vehicles since we were still responsible even inside another military establishment.

I passed a comfortable night in my armchair and after breakfast the next morning we were finally on our way to Port Said. Our journey was uneventful and we arrived in the harbour area to find that our transport to Cyprus was to be a bit less than glamorous, nothing more in fact than a T.L.C. (Tank Landing Craft).

The afternoon was spent getting a ramp into position for the trucks to get onto a covered deck where they were manoeuvred into position, after which they had to be secured by means of chains with spoon-shaped ends which engaged in clover-leaf apertures cut in the steel deck. This of course was a task of some importance as it could have proved disastrous should any of the tracks come loose in a rough sea.

After a tiresome wait we left port well into the evening. There was still a bit of light however, and with the rumour of a large naval ship in the vicinity we had to remain lined up on deck. This was the custom and a mark of respect to a larger vessel, much as lower ranker has to salute someone more elevated in seniority. I have still to get a sight of this phantom vessel.

A far as I can remember, I passed a reasonable night but woke up feeling distinctly queasy. As is well known, landing craft are generally all flat bottomed which, even given the calm sea, made me a little squeamish.

The day passed fairly quickly and I'm sure would have been extremely pleasant, given the warm breeze and a clam blue sea, if only I could have had a stronger stomach to combat the mal de mer.

It was late afternoon before we approached Famagusta, which turned out to be our initial destination, so our journey had taken twenty-four hours by sea. It was obvious that we were expected, for when we landed a sort of field kitchen situation existed on the quay. This was quite a welcome sight as I don't think I had eaten much on board during the day; in fact, I don't remember there being much on offer.



Archbishop Makarios, leader of the Cypriot independence movement. (Wikipedia)

The quick darkness of the eastern Mediterranean was dropping by the time our lorries were off-loaded and got on our way out of town, of which I can only remember the tidy little bungalows, with people sitting out enjoying the relative coolness of the evening air.

The convoy journeyed west along the coast but everything was mostly in darkness. I think I even dozed off for a little while, still ensconced in my armchair. Eventually we arrived at another town which turned out to be Limassol.

Limassol

Soon we entered a camp which seemed to be in the throes of construction, where we were met again by a field kitchen, and got something to eat, which was unusual for the army at that

time of night. Sleeping arrangements were non-existent, so I chose to pass the night on the canvas roof of the lorry, but this turned out not to be a good idea when it got decidedly colder towards morning.

Obviously this camp in Limassol was just a staging post for us, for the next day we resumed our travels, still none the wiser as to our final destination. We continued by way of the coastal strip until we passed through a small township which we later became better acquainted with, and which was called Paphos, or sometimes Ktima. We did not stop here however, and continued a matter of a few miles until we arrived at a camp, which like the one we had just left seemed still in the process of being assembled or put together.

We were allocated some tents similar to those I have described in the canal zone: just the canvas canopy over a concrete floor slab and devoid of any furnishings (like beds). By this time it was getting on for late afternoon, the sun was still hot and we were dusty and sticky with our travels.

The camp was situated on a small promontory overlooking a beautiful beach, so we came to a unanimous decision that we would go for a dip in the sea. Since all our gear was packed away we ran across that beach as naked as the day we were born, not a stitch, and not much bothered by our lack of modesty. There was as yet no lighting installed, only that of the stars, so I suppose we had an early night. Despite the fact that we were lying on the unyielding concrete I remember getting a good night's sleep, wrapped in a blanket.

Grapes and lizards

And still our itinerary was not complete: once more we took to the road, leaving the flat coastal plain behind and turning inland where soon the narrow roads started to climb quite steeply into the foothill of the Troodos mountains. Here all was different from the flat dry barren landscape of Egypt; in parts quite colourful, green and pleasing to the eye as we went ever further inland. Here and there an occasional village could be seen blending into the rocky hillsides as if they had been camouflaged.

The road was for some distance a series of twists, turns and corkscrew bends, with sheer drops down one side. As we progressed, a further hazard presented itself: when the road became wet and slippery, we were puzzled until we met a number of lorries which were loaded to capacity with grapes.

It would seem that this was harvest time for the grapes and they were being transported to the wineries at Limassol. The sheer weight of the fruit on the lorries were crushing those on the bottom and the juice was running out onto the road, creating a dangerous situation. The roads were mostly quite narrow and often on a bend or even on the straight the drivers would slow down so that it was quite easy to lean out and grab a handful of grapes - which was quite a treat for us.

Eventually we ran through a small township, later found out to be Polis; no stopping here though. We left the town behind and halted about a mile further on, literally in a field. What a let down when we found that this was the end of our journey, at least for the time being.

Among the additional baggage we had picked up at Limassol were small two-man tents, which we now unloaded and started to erect. After a couple of days we had three lines of tents for the men, with two larger ones for the officers and guardroom. There were only two officers: a major whom we were unfamiliar with and a first lieutenant.

We were unused to the cramped conditions in the small tents. We slept in camp beds which could be stripped down or assembled in a couple of minutes. Our storage facilities consisted of a metal box in which to keep a spare shirt, socks, toilet and cleaning gear, and any other small essentials. The boxes were roughly two feet long by fourteen inches wide and twelve deep and had been with us since we joined the battalion. I was inclined to think that they had contained artillery shells at an earlier period.

The two camp beds and boxes took up all the available room, leaving a space of about twelve inches up the middle. It was impossible to stand up so any movement was done at the crouch. Two people moving about at one time was impossible.

The field had obviously had a cereal crop recently, judging by the remaining stubble, and if any spare moments allowed, we could lie on our beds and be entertained by small lizards darting in and around the corn stalks which by this time were getting well tramped down. After a few days however they went AWOL; maybe it was the army boots!

On active service

It soon became apparent that we were literally on an active service footing. For the next six weeks, twenty-four hours a day we were rarely out of uniform, other than to wash. Water came into the camp in bowsers [mobile water tanks] and we washed and shaved as best we could. Much later a half-inch copper pipe was laid across the field from a nearby installation, namely the Limni copper mine. A canvas screen was erected, the water led to a shower head, so the height of luxury was attained: a hot shower for everyone. I say hot because the sun heated the exposed copper pipe to the extent of providing hot water during the daylight hours.

From this point on we never knew where we would be next: roadblocks by day and night, village infiltration at the point of darkness, bridge ambush, also patrols by jeep around the area. One afternoon I went as escort to the major and his driver (the major drove) up through a mountain village where, as I was later to find out, the residents must have been very pro-E.O.K.A.. The major roared up the village street, if such it could be called, and stopped a few hundred yards further on, outwith the nearest dwellings. He then proceeded to scan the surrounding terrain through his field glasses and study the area round the village. When he was satisfied, we got back in the jeep and returned through the village at a rate of knots. I'm glad there were no donkeys loitering on the road.

At one point on our return we passed a stationery bus. When they saw us, up went the cry "E.O.K.A.". The major stood on the brakes and reversed back. He and I approached the bus where all was now silent; the driver remained by the jeep. The major entered the bus and ordered everyone out. They were a mixed bunch of women, men and youths, and also some children.

He concentrated his attention on the men, young and old, who were lined up with their backs against the side of the bus. The major, and I would say he cut a commanding figure, now demanded to know who had participated in the outcry. While this was going on, I had taken up a position whereby I could cover the whole group with the rifle.

Of course he didn't get any sort of satisfaction from any of them, which was only to be expected, but they had obviously got a fright when confronted, as it was a much chastened group of passengers whom we eventually permitted to proceed.

We never knew what would happen next; that was the situation, but on the plus side, there were no drills or parades such as we had in the Canal Zone. Guard duties as always but without the ceremonials. Nothing was put in writing, such as company orders that we were obliged to read in case we were down for duties the following day. Here everything was done by word of mouth since the odd civilian who visited the camp for whatever reason might have had the ability to read English.

No real surprise then when we were ordered to take to our beds one afternoon, signalling that something was in the wind. Of course going to bed in the middle of the afternoon and knowing there was a reason for it, wasn't conducive to falling asleep, even although this was something that of necessity we had got quite good at.

Night was well fallen, and as I lay half-awake wondering what was going to happen, I became aware of some entering the tent. By the light of the torch he was carrying, I could see it was the company commander. I could only assume that he was looking for weapons carelessly left lying around. He had no luck in our tent: I had my rifle in bed with me, although I could

think of better company even fully clothed as I was. As I mentioned previously, it was many weeks before we were allowed to undress at night. Of course it was still early days and maybe army intelligence didn't know whether the insurgents were strong enough to mount an attack.

A three-day operation

We were called out about half past two the following morning, and after a hasty breakfast we prepared to move out. It was to be three days before we returned to camp. The trucks, along with some from other elements of the battalion, dropped us about a mile from our objective, which not surprisingly turned out to be the village that the major had previously reconnoitred.

It was still dark, but the first hint of light was beginning to show on the horizon as we formed in line and began to file up towards the sleeping village. The long column of men marched quietly, no talking; rounding a sharp bend on the road, the village was now in sight. A small paddock on our right was occupied by two donkeys, one of which when we passed gave out with a sudden loud hee-hawing as if to warn the inhabitants that the enemy was at the gates.

Initially we were posted round the perimeter of the village in order to keep anyone from leaving. By this time it was fairly light and the villagers would normally be stirring but there was little evidence of this.

Our senior officers would have contacted the Mukhtar, or headman in the village, in the first instance and informed him that no one was to leave their homes without permission. It seemed that most of the battalion had assembled from their scattered bases round the island to



participate in this operation, along with other branches of the service, such as signals personnel, transport boys from the Service Corps, and of course cooks setting up their field kitchen. Talking about the latter, we had experienced nothing else since we had arrived on the island and this was to continue for some time.

It now came out that the whole village was under curfew for three days, people were only allowed outdoors escorted by ourselves, for short periods each day in order to water their animals at the well in the centre of the village, which was the only source of water.

In the afternoon of that first day we were formed into small groups and began to systematically search the houses looking for anything incriminating such as the obvious, weapons explosives or even inflammatory literature, etc. I found this part of the operation to be somewhat distasteful not so much I imagine as the householders themselves when we started rummaging in their cupboards, pulling stuff from under beds, looking in every box, nook and cranny. The people themselves mostly lived off the land and I would think that most of them were pretty poor. The houses

were small, not well furnished, but I seem to recollect lots of draperies and linen perhaps made by the women themselves.

I'm sure any innocent person would be outraged at this gross invasion of privacy but it has to be remembered that this village was not picked at random but was a known hotbed of unrest, and harboured many dissidents. I don't know if at this time some of the men were taken for questioning, as it seemed to me that in some homes they were conspicuous by their absence.

On the second night, I was on guard duty in part of the village, when it was time to go out there was no sign of the previous guard appearing to report in. After waiting for some time, the guard commander told me to go out anyway and hopefully meet him on the road in. This in fact did not happen, and as it was very dark - no street lighting, no electricity, no lights from house windows - I began to feel more than a little apprehensive. The narrow winding streets were pitch black and I felt very much alone as I moved as quietly as I could along one side, keeping close to the walls of the houses. Not a sound from any of them; the whole place was as silent as the tomb.

I continued on my way practically on tiptoe, following my rifle. I had a torch with me, but I was reluctant to use it as it would immediately destroy such night vision as I had, and also betray my position - a bit melodramatic perhaps but anyone in the village bent on reprisal had the advantage of knowing the geography like the back of their hand.

To cut a long story short, I eventually found the other sentry, and when I turned my torch on him, he was blinking not so much with the light but due to the fact that he had been sitting on some steps fast asleep until my approach disturbed him. Maybe I wasn't so quiet after all. Of course, I had to keep quiet about this incident or he could have been in serious trouble; even more serious he could have had his throat cut. The rest of the night passed without incident, but unlike my friend I thought it would be prudent remain vigilant in such a place.

Whether this operation bore any fruit I never found out and on the third night we were all quietly withdrawn so that when the villagers woke in the morning they had the place to themselves once more.

From Polis to Strombi

We of course went back to Polis, hopefully for a good wash and sleep, maybe even a quiet life for a day or two. A few nights later we set up a roadblock a few miles along the coast, right on the seashore, but there was very little vehicle activity; maybe the word got round quickly. When daylight came, the usual lack of sleep found us a bit disgruntled. We had to shave of course, cold water in our mess tins, the stubble still adhering when a truck arrived from camp and the cook slapped our breakfast into the same receptacle.

It must have been well into October and still very hot when the whisper went round that we were moving out. Funny how rumour so often precedes the fact; as was soon proved again when we were informed that we were going to a village called Strombi about half way between Polis and Paphos.

As some form of farewell gesture, the pipe and military bands assembled at an area near the camp, and adjacent to the copper mines, where a Beating the Retreat ceremony was performed for the benefit of the mining personnel and their families, at which the majority of the company was present.

I think this occasion was greatly appreciated by the ex-pats, providing them with some entertainment when such was not readily available, with the Greek majority on the island taking a belligerent stance against the British.

Once again we moved into an open field situation at Strombi, adjacent to the village and overlooked by a small hill. We were sandwiched between the two and also overlooked by the road which went up the hill. I didn't think we were too well placed strategically. Again we set too and got the tents set up, the C.S.M. (Company Sergeant Major) bawling and shouting if any were the least bit out of line.

After the tents were up we commenced digging a monsoon trench diagonally from one corner of the camp to the other, which suited the lie of the land. This of course was in

preparation for the onset of such winter as the area would normally get: obviously some rain was expected.

The ground was very hard, and although we were all pretty fit we found this unaccustomed task not much to our liking and plenty of grumbling went on, what with aching muscles, no respite from the hot sun, and the stubborn consolidation of the soil.

Soon we went on to build an Officers' Mess, a cookhouse, also a washhouse and a canteen of sorts - the latter not quite up to NAAFI standard unfortunately. This was when we saw the first Coca-Cola lorry coming into the camp and I got my first taste of this well-known beverage. All these glorified huts - for that is what they were - arrived in camp as prefabricated sections and since there were several joiners in the company we erected them with the assistance of several of the local Greek Cypriot men of the village. I have to say we got on quite well with them and I have wondered since if they were not afraid of reprisals.

It took us some weeks to get the camp towards some sort of completion, and apart from a few patrols by jeep during the hours of darkness we were not doing much operational work.

By this time the sun was losing strength and the nights were getting colder, which perhaps led to a few members of personnel getting a bit lazy about washing in the early morning chill; also washing shirts, underwear, and socks presented a problem, given the poor facilities and lack of hot water.

Not surprising therefore that a few of the men, notably three in particular, were looking decidedly scruffy, a fact that did not escape the eagle eye of our Sergeant Major. This culminated in a little ceremony which I had heard of but never witnessed. It was called a 'regimental scrub'. The three worst offenders were ordered onto an open space in the centre of the camp which in a proper barracks would have been the square. There they were forced to strip naked and with the whole company looking on were deluged with buckets of water, and scrubbed with long-handled hard bristled brushes. I neglected to say that there had been an influx of new men from a draft waiting for us when we arrived in Paphos; the three men in question had been included in that party.

The older hands such as myself who had known the camp cook for some time were often able to scrounge some hot water from him (in our mess tin) in order to get a comfortable shave. Little comforts such as this were cherished, especially since the early mornings were getting darker and much colder.

Billeted in the Police Station

The next situation I found myself in was that four of us were taken to a village in the centre of the island, and there billeted in the local police station. The village was called Amergheti and our reason for being there was never made very clear. The most common opinion mooted about it suggested that it was to safeguard the few weapons stored at the station, and ensure they were not appropriated by terrorist forces. The resident police were maybe thought to be inadequate in this respect. The police station was manned by an officer and three or four men. I never found out if the officer was Turkish or Greek; certainly his second in command was Greek and the others definitely Turkish.

Our main duty was to have one man on the gate twenty-four hours a day while the policemen went about their business. Of course we quickly got to know them, perhaps not so much in a manner of speaking, for the language barrier was a problem, and only the officer and his principal policeman had a little English.

We had our little camp beds in the same room as the two Turkish constables, one of whom was a particular source of annoyance. He persisted in non-stop conversation with his companion in his native tongue which prevented us from sleeping. On one occasion I became so exasperated that I grabbed my rifle, pointed it at him and pulled back the bolt, pushing it forward as if to chamber a round. He didn't know of course that the bolt hadn't travelled far enough to

engage the rim of the bullet and move it into the breach. Of course I was out of order, but it didn't half quieten him down for a while. Obviously he reported me to his superior, who had a word with me next day. I explained what had happened as best I could and I think he appreciated the fact that this man was not blessed with too much intelligence - a fact I had already surmised - and he more or less dismissed the incident.

We were there for two weeks without anything untoward happening, so it became a bit boring. We took it in turns to do our own cooking, opening the tins from the compositions (there being no fresh provisions supplied) and heating them over a spirit stove.

I remember offering the Turkish policeman some of the ham but I got an unconditional refusal since his Moslem religion strictly forbade it. I was fully aware of this of course and was just trying to take a rise out of him. I got one of them to get me some rice from the village one day, thinking it would be a change, but I had no idea of quantities and subsequently there was rice pudding all over the place.

Behind barbed wire

Soon we were back in camp again at Strombi where we heard that the guardroom or tent at our previous camp at Polis had come under machine gun fire. Luckily there were no fatalities. I never had any contact with our replacements there who belonged to the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

Nothing much was happening at this point, the usual patrols, and camp duties, the Sergeant Major going berserk from time to time as was his habit. He would maybe take it into his head to clean up camp, so he would line us all up and with our eyes on the ground we would advance forward picking up any conceivable item that could be lifted, down to the smallest broken match stick or whatever. Woe betide the poor unfortunate who he found had missed something.

As I have mentioned previously, we had never been in, or knew anything about the adjacent village which was just a stone's throw away, other than the contact with the few men who had been helping with the various bits of construction. Our world was strictly confined behind the barbed wire unless out on duty. An occasion did arise at one point when the sound of revelry and fiddle music aroused our curiosity. Word went round that there was a wedding taking place in the village and rumour also had it that the festivities would continue until food and drink were exhausted.

The latter night have seemed to be the case when the revelry went on throughout the day and into the night, and certainly through the second day, further than that I can't remember. What I do remember is that one of our number, a regular soldier and a corporal perceived the situation as a means of getting free drink, and accordingly slipped through the wire as soon as it was dark. The fact that he had achieved his object was in little doubt, when he approached the wire much later that night. He daren't try to enter by the gate where the guard room was situated, so chanced getting in by the same route as he got out.

Unfortunately for him he was spotted by the sentry patrolling the wire, but our, by now inebriated friend had been so well indulged at the party that he was in no condition to answer the challenge when it was issued by the guard. It was very dark of course and the sentry would have challenged three times so he was only following standard procedure when he raised his rifle and put a round through him, which in a manner of speaking put the final touch to his evening.

Being well into the land of nod, most of us heard nothing of this until the next morning, so well zonked out were we a mere rifle shot had no chance of disturbing us. There was absolutely no recriminations against the guard, the hapless soldier had been whisked away to the B.M.H. in Nicosia where things turned out to be less than final after all, and he eventually recovered from a bullet through the shoulder. I would imagine he would end up with a dishonourable discharge from the army.

Kali-mera in Amergheti

By now Christmas was approaching, heralded by squeals from the direction of the village. I reckon a few piglets were getting their throats cut to provide the festive fair. In camp the event passed very quietly without any indications of a religious nature; indeed I don't remember seeing the Padre since the canal zone, when we sometimes had to parade for the drum head service.

I'm sure the catering side excelled in the face of the difficulties and lack of facilities which they were faced with. We were happy with a quiet day and a better than normal meal, which was rounded off by a round of applause for our cook who as I said was now a familiar figure to most of us. And bear in mind that we were still at company strength, out of touch with the rest of the battalion, so over the period one got to know most of the personnel, even though some were outwith the zone of friendship, for example the corporal recently mentioned.

In the week following Christmas I was back at the police station at Amergheti, along with the rest of the previous party. Whether the village had harboured its troublesome elements, I do not know, but there was never any sign of unrest during the time I was there. In fact we saw little of nothing of the villagers as the police station was at one end of the street, and round a slight bend so we were unable to observe anything of the local life at all. As my Turkish policeman friend frequently put it, "E.O.K.A. feenish Amergheti".

It was increasingly cold during the nights and early mornings but we had to continue our two hourly stints on the gate as usual throughout the twenty-four hours of each day. One such morning in the first light of the new day, a flock of fat-tailed sheep came round the bend and past the gate, shepherded by a local who obviously hadn't been on intimate terms with a razor for some time. I could be wrong in saying he had the advantage of footwear, but his most obvious attire was a long overcoat which had obviously seem many years' service but sufficed to keep out the morning chill.

His hand lifted in greeting as he passed, and he wished me kali-mera – good morning – to which I responded in kind. A small event perhaps but one that broke the boredom of the moment, and I somehow felt the better for this passing exchange with a stranger in a lonely place in a strange land.

I had come to be on quite good terms with the police officer in charge, who on reflection would be more liable to be of Turkish parentage, as he had the darker, slightly swarthy skin rather than the smoother more sallow complexion of the Greek. As I may have earlier suggested, he gave me the impression of wishing to go forward in his profession and since his English was poor he asked if he might enlist my help. This took the shape of little stories, essays really, on subjects suggested by him, and written by me. This he hoped would further his knowledge not only of the subject, but also his understanding of the written words in English. Since none of my colleagues were inclined to volunteer their literary skills, I helped as much as I was able, and hope his knowledge of the English language was forwarded even in some small way.

Having passed Christmas in camp, obviously the New Year was upon us while we were at Amergheti. Hogmanay passed without much comment or celebration and of course we were not allowed drink. I was on duty from six until eight a.m. on New Year's morning when I heard the skirl of the pipes some way up the village street. The piper came marching down the middle of the street, closely followed by our machine gun officer who had arrived to wish us the compliments of the season and presented us with a bottle of beer, being our first foot. He didn't hang around very long, only ascertained that everything was in order and departed for the greater comfort of the officers' mess.

Apart from that, the four of us on the guard passed a very quiet New Year, which was no more than we expected. It may be worth noting that the piper, who had signed on - in other words was a regular soldier rather than a National Serviceman – was from my home town (using the term loosely) and indeed had been in the same class at primary school.

Before we left to go back to camp, the four of us were invited to a little party, if I can call it that, by the police officer and his two principal colleagues, one of whom had gone out and shot a rabbit or a hare. Provisions didn't seem to be in great supply in those hill villages; there was no Co-op to be found at the bottom of the street and most people seemed to be self-supporting.

However, there we were all grouped round the big pot in which the rabbit had been stewed. Cutlery or plates were not in evidence – everybody just dived in with the tools God gave them. A gourmet evening it was not, but thoughtful of our hosts and a pleasant break from the norm. Thus we finished our second tour of duty at the police station. It also turned out to our last, for we never returned to Amergheti.

A bit of the “old soldier” about us

Back in camp our first priority was to get our gear, clothing and equipment up to scratch. Neglecting to do so was asking for trouble and by this time we had a bit of the “old soldier” about us. Various expeditions round the countryside and waiting about in old barns, with the expectations of something happening never came to anything. The intelligence people maybe thought it would.

The trouble now was that the weather had taken a turn for the worse and it got very wet, which of course we did not appreciate after being used to all that dry sunny weather. The camp became a quagmire which made everything very difficult. The mud seemed to get everywhere; we would go out on patrol, rifle over the shoulder with the barrel pointing down to keep the rain out, but plodding over fields and such the muzzle sooner or later came in contact with the mud and got fouled.

This was illustrated one day when the truck driver delivering supplies to the camp was apprehended by the Sergeant Major who had noticed the man's scruffy appearance. The driver, who was a member of the Service Corps, after having a strip torn off him for his shabby turn-out, was asked for his personal weapon which turned out, like its owner, to be in an unacceptable condition, just such as I have recently described. Under ordinary conditions, he would have been immediately taken to the guard room under escort, but as things existed he got the worst dressing down he was ever likely to receive in his lifetime.

Gleaming boots and green blanco

Word got out - as it frequently did - that we were to be replaced in the near future by 40 Commando, and accordingly a Commando Brigadier was to be visiting the various units of our battalion in their scattered deployments. Normal routine was for visiting top brass or dignitaries to inspect the guard, so obviously a good turn-out was required, especially when the visitor was of such senior rank. Unfortunately for me I was chosen to be a member. On the day prior to the visit, I spent a good deal of time in getting everything ready. Although my boots were looking as good as I could make them, there was one member of the company who could really put an extremely good finish on them and this he volunteered to do for me.

After a few last minute touches and adjustments I and the rest of the guard were carried to the guard room. Literally carried as I say, since the camp was still in quagmire conditions, so no chances were taken in case contact with the mud sullied our pristine appearance.

There followed a nervous wait until word came that our distinguished visitor was almost upon us. Wooden pallets or duckboards had been laid in front of the guard tent so we lined up on a dry footing. The brigadier was duly met with some ceremony, with the company commander and various acolytes in attendance, after which he proceeded to inspect the guard. I am prepared to say that he was impressed by our turn-out; at least that was my feeling when he complimented me on my gleaming boots. His stay was brief, probably followed by a little gargle

in the officers' mess, a rundown on E.O.K.A. activity in the locality, after which the guard turned out to salute him on his departure. The excitement, or maybe more so, the tension was over.

The weather now started to improve considerably; the brief winter was over. Green blanco for our webbing was unobtainable so we had to scrub it until it was white again. The cookhouse area was raided time and again in search of the white powder that was used as a sterilizing agent. But nothing was good enough for the Sergeant-Major, and webbing laid out to dry on the tent flap or wherever was kicked around by him in order to exhort us to greater efforts to get it white - which was practically impossible.

Several soldiers now moved in from the commando unit which was to replace us. I was surprised how laid back they were in so many areas which with us would simply not be tolerated. For instance they had so many civilian clothes hanging up in their tents; I saw one in striped pyjamas, and another had a small bird in a cage. I reckon our Sergeant-Major was livid, but he had little authority over them. They were professional soldiers, of course; no danger they didn't know their job.

A few weeks later we left Strombi in the hands of the commandos to return to the camp that he had visited overnight near Paphos. Here was gathered all the rest of the battalion, whom we had not been in contact with really since we left Egypt. The camp had been much improved since our last visit, with even a cinema of sorts. We became a bit more active again here. I was in the cinema - I think it was the one and only time - when the bugle went for a company to stand to. I was enjoying the film so I was glad it was not for us, but just shortly afterwards, I was pulled out to act as escort to an officer and his driver, making a sweep of the countryside.

It was pretty cold in the open jeep and what with missing the film, I was pretty disgruntled. God know what would have become of us if the dissidents had had a decent ambush, or even a small amount of firepower to throw at us; I'm sure we would never have survived it.

Normally all the companies have their own separate areas where they operate day-by-day as independent units. This camp was not set up for this and it led to some confusion. There existed also a certain lack of organisation: things were not as regimental as they would normally have been.

Lethal stuff and rabble-rousers

I and my various tent-mates in the vicinity were rudely awakened one morning about half past seven. We had had a long lie, but there was a panic on. Get into uniform, get our rifles, no breakfast: it was as quick as they could bundle us into a truck and into town where several of us put a road block on the hill road coming down into Paphos.



It was market day in the town and the road was busy with the country folk coming in on the ancient buses which not only carried them but their animals as well. We would get all the passengers out of the vehicle, searching all the men in the process. This of course was ineffectual as obviously we could not search the women. After searching the vehicle, and maybe shoving a goat out of the way and looking in

Looking towards the old Turkish quarter, Ktimbi (Paphos) ©Brian Harrington Spier, Flickr

the chicken baskets, etc., they would all file back on the bus. Generally this was accomplished without too much animosity or ill feeling. I think it was on this particular occasion that I was presented with a bottle of spirits by one of the passengers, but I knew from previous tastings that this poteen was liable to do more harm than good to those who imbibed with any liberality. Perhaps the person who gave it to me was not so much a friend - perhaps he was trying to poison a few of us! It was certainly lethal stuff.

Another day turned out to be a bit more serious; two members of the opposing faction were to be tried at the court in Paphos. Unfortunately this coincided with a local holiday or religious feast day, so it was not surprising that a large crowd of sympathisers had gathered in the town square. With some foresight the military were in position quite early to keep the crowd from converging on the courthouse. I was in an alley or small street leading off the square and although I couldn't see directly into it I could hear the noise and shouting.

There were two other soldiers besides myself with a sergeant in charge. We had put a roll of barbed wire across the street which was rapidly filling up with people, mostly men demanding to be allowed through. The mood of the crowd had changed: obviously the rabble-rousers had been at work, so now it just needed a spark for mob violence to erupt. Things were definitely looking ugly and I was preparing myself for trouble. I had the comfort of my rifle and bayonet, the latter appended to the muzzle in most circumstances as its intimidating effect was well known. Of course, this is not to say that members of the mob were not without a weapon here and there.

Eventually the situation was resolved when an extremely large and corpulent police officer arrived on the scene. He had a voice to match his size which he used to such good effect that the rabble began to disperse. I personally breathed a sigh of relief when things got back to normal, although we were kept there for the rest of the day until the court proceedings were ended.

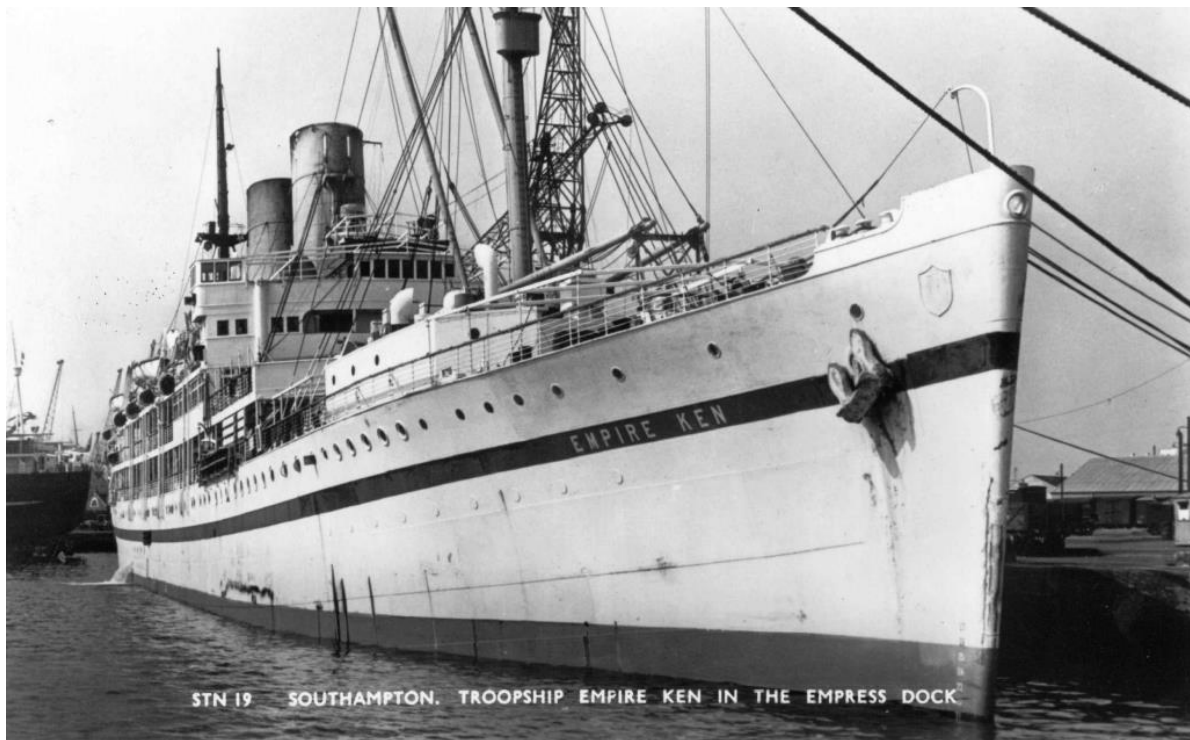
It wasn't long after this that news of our departure for the UK was confirmed. We in the ranks were not told the exact date but one Sunday morning the entire battalion was assembled, ostensibly for the purpose of having a church service, but this turned out to be a cover for a visit from a Brigadier who gave us a little speech and thanked us for our service relative to the military operation in Cyprus.

Occasions like this were mostly held on a hush-hush basis since in this instance it involved a high ranking officer important to the British operations and therefore a prime target for E.O.K.A. Secondly, word getting out that a force was leaving the island would boost the morale of the opposing faction.

Just a matter of days after this, the battalion moved down to Limassol to spend our last night in the camp in which we spent our first night on the island. Sadly we were travelling with two men short, killed by the Greek terrorists.

Seasickness

I think it was with growing anticipation the following forenoon, that we boarded the trucks that were to take us down to the docks where the "Empire Ken" awaited us. As the ship was too large to come alongside, we had to be lightered out. Eighteen inches of water separated the small boat from the ship's landing platform. While stepping over this gap, the man in front of me lost his rifle through no fault of his own. By sheer co-incidence, the forward swivel holding the rifle strap broke and his weapon plopped into the water.



The Empire Ken troopship was broken up on the Clyde in 1957. ©Tim Webb, Flickr

Soon we were settled on board, and spent part of the afternoon gazing over the side of the ship into the clear water, so clear in fact that we could see the sandy bed, maybe twenty-five feet or so from the surface. We were situated at the front of the ship and the sleeping arrangements were similar to those I have described on our outward trip on the “Devonshire”: simply vertical poles between decks, with the narrow frames supported by chains. The only difference this time was that they carried three bunks high instead of two.

The ship sailed that evening after a beautiful sunny day, but we were to learn that we had enjoyed the calm before the storm. In fact the next morning we woke to rough sea conditions judging by the way the ship was behaving, and from then on things just got worse and worse. No breakfast for us that morning; in fact it was a couple of days or so before I was able to eat anything at all. Conditions on the troop deck deteriorated to such an extent that everyone without exception was badly affected with sea-sickness. We were berthed near the nose of the ship and I had, unwisely perhaps, chosen a top bunk. The bow and stern of a ship is subject to the most movement and we had to hold onto the edge of the bedframe as we felt the bow of the ship tilt upwards at an alarming degree before sliding nose first into the trough.

The main doors to the deck had to be closed off to prevent the ingress of sea-water, and not before time, for although the distinct camber on the deck kept it dry in the middle, there was something like five inches of water sloshing along the outside hull on each side of the ship. The water was soon contaminated with the regurgitated contents of everyone’s stomachs. Floating around in this mess was every item of uniform you care to mention. Nobody cared; nobody in fact was fit to do anything - we felt so low and weak with the continual retching on an empty stomach.

At one point I got out of my bunk for some reason and found that I couldn’t get back in again; I just didn’t have the strength. The combined efforts of my two lower bunk mates got me there eventually. Perhaps it was just as well we couldn’t fully comprehend our predicament at that time. To any person feeling fit and *compos mentis* the scene must have looked like something out of a nightmare - which in fact it was.

I remember looking round at one point and by coincidence noticed one man sticking his head out of a middle bunk and looking up as if to say something to the man in the upper bunk. The latter person promptly vomited right over his neighbour's face.

I don't know how long we endured this state of affairs; certainly it was a few days before most of us regained the use of our sea legs and tried to hold down some food. The storm must have abated a bit to allow us onto our feet, but I was still retching and trying to bring up what wasn't there. Men queuing at the cook-house got to the door, got a whiff of the cooking smells, promptly started to gag and made for the nearest heads. I knew from previous experience that it was better to try and eat something, preferably dry and odourless such as a little dry bread or biscuit.

Gradually we got this episode behind us but I never felt really well for the rest of the voyage. One night I was detailed to do a stint at the stern of the ship, during which it was my duty to inform the bridge by telephone in the event of a person going overboard. I wouldn't have given much for their chances as it was a really dark night and the waves were still quite high with only the white caps giving them definition as they rolled relentlessly past. I had to know my port from my starboard so that when the ship's master did his inspection at ten o'clock (how many bells?), I was able to give him the correct answer to the question which I was told he would inevitably ask.

In the aftermath of the storm we sailed into Algiers one afternoon, the sea now a flat greasy calm under a cloudy sky. The purpose of our visit was to take on water, and those who wished to go ashore were permitted to do so. I would have liked to go myself, but like many more the rigours of the past few days had not quite worn off, and the thought of searching through kit bags etc. for tidy enough uniform was too much to contemplate.

I ended up like the rest with a place at the ship's rail to see what was to see, which, from what I can remember, was very little other than a lady strolling along the dockside with a monkey on a leash. I'm not sure which caused the most interest, the woman or the monkey. The town itself seemed to form a sort of amphitheatre round the harbour and when darkness descended and all the lights came on, it was quite a spectacular sight from our perspective.

Sailing for Blighty

Later that night the ship sailed for England (Blighty) and that night or the following night cleared the Straits of Gibraltar, still during the hours of darkness so that we didn't see the Rock either coming or going. After that we were heading north and soon we began to feel the bite of the colder latitude, especially considering the time of year.

On deck during the day we sought whatever shelter we could from the increasingly colder air and the breeze created by the ship's passage. Like most of the others, I had no reserves of fat; army rations were not so sumptuous as to lead to any risk of corpulence; also our recent unavoidable fast and dehydration had left us with no padding at all with which to fight the cold.

I was standing in the lee of some of the ship's upper works when I became aware of the two soldiers on one side of me quietly discussing the colour of my shirt. They had obviously joined the battalion in Cyprus and were envious of the faded quality of the cloth which had been bleached by the Egyptian sun. It has to be understood that in the army (I can only speak for the army) small things like this are to be coveted; they give one a sort of status, and arouse the envy of those without. It may be compared to a person in jail envying any small acquisition belonging to his neighbour.

Thank goodness the Bay of Biscay was on its best behaviour when we sailed towards the Western approaches, so I was spared further torture from the *mal-de-mer*; or was it that I had at last got my sea legs? Somehow I doubt it. We woke up one morning to find a lack of motion on the ship, and discovered we were alongside in Southampton. We had been warned the previous day that we would be docking and to get ourselves smartened up as best we could under the

circumstances, in preparation for an inspection by the Colonel-in-Chief of the regiment, Princess Mary.

After much hustle and hassle we disembarked with all our gear which was dumped on the dockside to await transportation, then formed up in the usual three ranks inside a large warehouse. For us it was a bitterly cold, frosty morning and we were kept waiting an interminable time before this (to my young eyes) quite old lady was escorted along the front rank, and that was the end of our welcome home, if that was what it was. I think maybe she too was feeling the cold and not too pleased to have to travel down from London or wherever at an early hour. For myself, the anticipation of arriving home had been seriously reduced by our experiences at sea. Had the weather been clement, as it had been on our outward journey, our pleasure at being homeward bound and our arrival once more on British soil would perhaps have been a more pleasurable experience, but unfortunately it was not to be.

We boarded a train that same morning, having seen nothing of Southampton other than the dockside. As we pulled out, the huge upper works of the old Queen Elizabeth was the last thing we saw towering over the adjacent buildings.

Home to Elgin

Twenty-four hours we were on that train, en route for Pinefield Camp, Elgin. It was not a very pleasant journey in those old-type carriages. I remember it got very hot, and we had no proper meals, having been provided with what the army describes as haversack rations, a sort of packed lunch. We all became very thirsty with the heat in the carriage and no access to drinking water, nor did the train stop anywhere where we might stretch our legs and refresh ourselves. The only stops seemed purely for technical reasons, or perhaps to take on water (for the engine), for of course at that time trains were still powered by steam.

Eventually the following forenoon we arrived at Elgin station, and from there were trucked to the camp on the outskirts of the town. The day was cold and wet and the few people about didn't seem impressed by our arrival. At the camp we were shown to the wooden huts that were to be our quarters, after which we were allowed to go to the dining-hall - which is much too grandiose a name for what we normally referred to as the cookhouse.

There was a man just inside the door selling papers which brought home to us the fact that we were back in civilisation, in a manner of speaking. No newspapers had been available to us all the time we had been out of the country. And apart from the couple of weeks we spent at the camp on the outskirts of Suez, we had never actually eaten in a proper building.

I suppose it dawned on us now that it would be safe to be out of camp on our own, and there were shops and pubs and dancehalls etc. once more, all of which we had been deprived of for the sake of Queen and country.

Naturally we were all keen to see our families again, but were disappointed to be kept in camp for three days in order to get properly settled in, and for some sort of order to be established. Being in a proper barracks and with the battalion all in one place, the military function naturally had to become fully regimental.

So it was on the third day, to put it rather biblically, that we found ourselves with a three-week pass in our pockets, stepping off a train at Edinburgh Waverley to be welcomed into the arms of family, friends and sweethearts, with whom the platform was thronged. The three weeks passed quietly, at least for me, enjoying the comforts of home in a relaxed atmosphere and appreciating home cooking which the army couldn't hope to match. Thank God for the NAAFI.



Home to Redbeugh Cottages, Blackburn

Nearing the end

As is usually the case, the time to return came all too quickly, but it didn't take long to get settled once more into the routine of military life. On our initial arrival at Pinefield, the camp had been occupied by fresh recruits sent up from our training depot and presumably they had been in residence during our leave. Now those men were allocated to the various companies, so we had to get used to seeing some new faces. Now it was back to the spit and polish, the drill parades, the ceremonial changing of the guard, the kit inspections, the immersion into an intensive training programme, designed to get six companies of men moulded into one cohesive unit.

The machine guns, which only got one practice airing in Cyprus, were released from their packing, once more stripped down and cleaned ready for their first outing. As I have previously indicated, the guns were normally transported in jeeps over a distance, and it was to this end that three others and myself were summoned into the transport office one day and requested to sign for one brand new Landrover and trailer.

The keys were not always readily available to us of course, but it was not long before we learned to twist the right wires to start the engines. The problem was that it was inconvenient to stop them, as it meant getting under the bonnet again in order to restart them. This state of affairs did not last long however: only until the transport officer was passing our company office one day and found two or three Landrovers purring away at the side of the road with not a key in sight.

Army life in Elgin was more predictable, with none of the diversions which were always cropping up in Cyprus. We were settled into a regimental routine of general training and of course drill parades were always the R.S.M.'s favourite. If it was a battalion parade we would be inspected initially by the C.S.M. in front of the company office. When he got really angry he would end up shouting and bawling, working himself into a fury, spittle flying from his lips into the faces of some poor unfortunate. Often the company commander could be seen smirking at

the tantrums in the background. From the company office we would be marched to the square, where the R.S.M. took over, putting us through the mill just as he had done in the Canal Zone.

Now and then we would go to the ranges situated in the hills above Fochabers, either for rifle practice or to exercise on the Vickers. On one occasion we found ourselves surrounded by gulls' nests containing big, brown speckled eggs. Unluckily for the gulls we had some "gannets" among us who fell upon them with the idea of supplementing their diet. Cooking them or rather the means to do so was secondary at this point. I for one didn't participate in this desecration; fishy-tasting eggs were not for me.

On the plus side, being in Elgin, although it was quite a distance in miles from the Edinburgh area, allowed us to get home occasionally, providing we had the necessary pass and the requisite funds to finance the train journey. On other weekend nights, more especially a Saturday, a few of us would go to one of the pubs in the town, later to one or other of the dance halls, after which we would walk back to camp, hopefully with a bag of chips, for we were always starving. I was lucky in that I didn't smoke; those that did found they were often penniless, especially if they liked a drink as well. The army pay always had to be carefully budgeted if it was to last until the next pay parade. Alas, for many it seldom did.

About this time we got a new company commander who turned out to be a proper gung-ho type as the Americans would put it. It wasn't long until he had us all upon the moor several nights at time, playing at his idea of soldiers. He didn't know it at the time, obviously, but his card was stamped. When the battalion went back into Suez less than a year later, he was caught in a burst of machine gun fire and killed. I wasn't really surprised when I heard, for he seemed to be the type that wanted the medals, death or glory; unfortunately it turned out to be the latter.

Parades and ceremonial

About the time that summer was starting to make itself felt, drill parades were stepped up in preparation for a big parade in Edinburgh. The whole battalion moved to the depot at Glencorse, and one morning, spick and span, we formed up at the bottom of the Royal Mile and proceeded towards the castle, the pipe and military bands leading.

The whole of the Canongate and the High Street were at a standstill. So were we a short time later when we were halted some short distance below the entrance to the Castle esplanade. There was a lot of noise in spite of the absence of traffic, with children running up and down, the pavements filled with onlookers, dogs barking, people leaning out of windows in the upper storeys, just as they would have done in years long gone when the lords and their ladies passed, perhaps to St Giles or the Palace of Holyrood. Then as now, comment on their betters would be in no short supply.

But this was all in the background for us, for amid all this hubbub from the sidelines, we were tensed, listening for the word of command. I was well up towards the front of the parade where the street narrowed and the noise seemed to rebound off the walls. Even so, we were able to catch the order when it came. The drums rolled, the pipes cut in and we stepped forward as one, the summer sun reflecting on six hundred bayonets. After forming on the Castle esplanade, the usual ceremonial functions were gone through, the inevitable inspection by whatever dignitary took place (God know who that was), after which we marched down the Royal Mile, then were transported back to camp.

This parade coincided with the week-long occasion of the installation of the incoming Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Support Coy. was retained in the city to provide the ceremonial guard at his official residence, Holyrood. Here I had my turn on several occasions during that week to be right-hand sentry at the main entrance. There was a twenty-four hour guard which actually formed up on the Castle esplanade, and with pipes and drums marched the length of the Royal Mile to Holyrood, where the new guard went

through the usual ceremony of changing with the old guard: probably a similar version of that which Christopher Robin went down to see.

When this was all over it was back to Elgin and into the usual routine for a while. One day the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, probably being in the area doing his rounds, so to speak, visited the camp. We all had to be seen going about our soldierly duties, and when he approached Support Company's lines, he came over and spoke to me where I was more or less posing behind one of the guns. He asked me one or two questions, rate of fire, etc. I was aware that this was just polite conversation, as hopefully the interests of a man of the cloth would not include the workings of weapons of war.

Every regiment has a regimental day, which is just another excuse for another battalion parade. I remember one took place in Egypt but it was rather low key, whereas here at home, there would be more visitors and brass hats to contend with; so we were really talking of a sort of trooping the Colour situation and later a beano for the officers in the Officers' Mess. Following that came the Admin parade, a glorified stock taking I think, where we personally were involved laying all our kit out on top of the bed in the order required, and folded on rolled, also as required. By this time our shirts and especially socks were getting into a bad way and since anything deemed to be needing renewal had to be paid for, the mere thought of putting one's hand in one's penurious pocket for items of army clothing was enough to trigger an attack of anxiety. The arrival of an officer and two N.C.O.s was awaited with trepidation. Those soldiers short of certain items had all managed to make up their deficits, albeit temporarily, perhaps from someone who had appropriated a garment when the opportunity presented itself: remember all the stuff floating about aboard ship?

Anyway, we mostly got off unscathed, even if small items like well-darned socks etc. were passed from bed to bed to meet requirements elsewhere after those same items had been inspected on the other side of the hut and passed over when the inspection team had their backs turned. Luckily no one was caught at this deception.

My second summer with the forces was well through when we heard that Support Coy. had been chosen to form the Queen's guard at Balmoral. You may wonder why the company got preference in these more prestigious duties. I hesitate to say that we may have been thought to have a bit more savvy or common sense than the rifle companies, but in actual fact it does need a bit more knowledge to operate the heavier weapons, for instance in an out of sight situation, or during the hours of darkness.

Anyway we were introduced to the complexities of country dancing in preparation for the Gillies' Ball, which was certainly a change from the day to day normalities. Of course I'm only guessing, but I think it would have been more enjoyable had we been practising with a few members of the opposite sex. I certainly didn't fancy any of the partners I got; even so, we had to suppress our hilarity, officers being present.

The battalion as a whole was to parade for the arrival of the Royal Party, which annual event took place, I understand, in front of the Invercauld Arms Hotel. Alas, all these preparations were in vain when political unrest flared up again in the Middle East, in the Canal Zone, to be precise. The battalion was put on immediate stand-by, and my fellow Landrover drivers and I took our vehicles down to Granton on Spey to be painted in the desert colours which were so familiar to us from the past.

Highland clansmen at the Tattoo

Now at this time our draft had only about three or four months to demob, but each member of my intake was individually asked into the company office and invited to extend his service by six months. The request was met with a 100% refusal as far as Support Coy. was concerned, and didn't find any favour with the other companies, as far as I know.

Very soon after this the battalion moved bag and baggage down to our depot at Glencorse, which turned out to be just a staging post for a further move south. Our intake was not to be included in the move down to England and was to remain at Glencorse.

We were just getting settled in when a small number of us were moved to Redford Barracks in the town. Speaking for myself I was slightly apprehensive when along with my mates we were told that we would be participating in the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Events in the Middle East necessitating the movement of various personnel had obviously upset army show business at the Castle.

At Redford we came under the tutelage of two officers, one an Englishman from the artillery and the other an infantry officer from the Hebrides. The latter was a distinctive red-haired man with the island lilt in his voice. I've no doubt he would have been equally at home with the Gaelic, as he was with the English.

In reality, our part in the show was relatively simple and needed little rehearsal, for we were to play the part of a group of clansmen being met and opposed by a similar number of redcoats; in other words a skirmish was to take place on the Castle esplanade. During early practice, at one point the English officer was my opposing partner, when I pressed rather exuberantly, forcing him to step back in retreat. He was not best pleased by my enthusiasm and promptly got his own back by giving me a verbal dressing down. Maybe he visualised ending up as a casualty, the "English Patient" perhaps.

The "enemy" were from a different regiment and we only met them at a few practice sessions on the esplanade, but they were eventually kitted out in their distinctive uniform: tall hats and white belts, etc. We for our part were kitted out at an army store near the Castle with old Highland infantry kilts, bonnets, brogues, etc. Previously of course we had been issued with our swords (for the purpose of harrying the English!). This fitting out occasion will always live in my memory as we were also obliged to wear wigs, since it was unlikely that any wild Highlander would be going about with a regulation haircut. Come to think about it, barbers seemed to be pretty scarce in those days. There was among our number a small, mild-mannered chap of sallow complexion, and a slight cast in one eye. Never have I laughed so much in all my life as when he put on his wig. The eye defect, pale skin and wild hairpiece combined to give him such an authentic, hairy, Highland appearance that he had everyone rolling on the floor. The sheer hilarity of that moment will never be forgotten.

Eventually the evening came for our debut and we waited a little nervously in an area close to the bottom of the esplanade from where we were to make our entrance. Outside in the street we heard the tramp of many feet; our audience were about to take their seats. Well, as the saying goes, it'll be alright on the night, and so it turned out. A volley of musket fire put some of our men on the ground, but we set about the redcoats with some enthusiasm, with the audience shouting encouragement. The clash of steel on bayonet, our wild Highland appearance, the piper in our midst, under the dimmed floodlights, all lent a sense of realism to the charade. Judging by the applause, the crowd seemed to have been well entertained when we eventually retired under the cover of darkness - with the help of the electrician of course. Most nights it was two performances and we had to parade along with the rest at the end of the show, so we had to endure the lone piper, etc. twice a night.

All in all I suppose it was a pleasant change from the duties we would normally be pursuing. Of course there were a few wet nights, which was unfortunate for the audience, but as you know the show must go on. Our only consolation was a tot of rum at the end of the night: double if any of my fellow thespians (I use the term very loosely) were disinclined to imbibe. Another little bonus which we appreciated was the supper provided between shows which was never available in camp. If you had money, the NAAFI was sometimes there in camp, depending on where you were. In common with most of my fellows I found it to be a long time between four-thirty or five o'clock one day to seven a.m. the next morning, when at breakfast you could quite easily count the beans on your plate.

So after its usual three week run the Tattoo ended and it was back to barracks at Glencorse, to a more disciplined regime, wishing that the relaxed interlude we had just enjoyed had lasted a bit longer. But there were no regrets: we were three weeks further into our time, the end of which was now coming into sight.

The Suez conflict

Word from the battalion suggested that they were having a rough time, under canvas, and ankle deep in mud with the N.C.O.s coming down hard on the men in preparation for possible engagement in a hostile situation. This situation did come to pass when Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister at that time, ordered British forces back into Egypt to protect our interests in the Suez canal. Our regiment was the first to go back in, marching into Port Said, pipe band and all, but was soon confronted by a combat situation and especially sniper fire from high buildings.

Due to American pressure, the hostilities were short-lived. I don't know how many casualties we took but certainly Support Coy. C.O. was killed as previously mentioned. A year or so later, through the course of my work I came in contact with a man who had been there with the Battalion and had been awarded the George medal for picking up and throwing back a grenade which had been thrown into the back of the jeep in which he was travelling. I didn't press him with questions as I found him quite reticent about the incident, probably due to the fact that he was still having nightmares about it. His instinctive action, taken with no time for thought, undoubtedly saved his life and that of his companions.

Surplus to requirements

Back at Glencorse, I think we were becoming a bit surplus to requirements, with no positive roll or objective, since we were down to something like a couple of months or so from the end of our service. However, they always found something for us to do, guard duties being the favourite as usual.

About this time an unfortunate occasion arose with the death of a regular warrant officer on the permanent staff at the depot. He had apparently contracted cancer and his suffering had been short-lived. A party of us were hurriedly detailed for special drills peculiar to a military funeral.

On a cold grey day of continuous rain we were conveyed through to Glasgow where the interment was to take place at the Northern Necropolis. We formed two lines slightly apart from the family mourners who were few in number. The chaplain went through the usual litany, the piper and bugler did their duty, the coffin was lowered into the sodden ground to the accompaniment of a volley of rifle fire, which brought our part of the proceedings to a close. So a man who had attended many ceremonials in his military career had now attended his last.

On our way back to the main gate of the cemetery where our transport was waiting, we passed the pitiful scene of another funeral: a mere handful of people huddling round a hole in the ground, cowering against the driving rain. Our officer gave us an Eyes Left, and brought his sword to the salute. The mourners looked round, open-mouthed with surprise at this turn of events. I like to think that perhaps this little mark of respect brought a little dignity to what was obviously an extremely bleak and miserable occasion. Certainly I'm sure we gave those few people something to talk about.

This narrative now seems to be drawing to a close. In the weeks leading up to our release, the only occasion of note, interrupting the military normality, was our participation in the Armistice Day parade. A party of us were paraded in the square adjacent to St Giles' Cathedral where an inspection took place before the two minutes silence at eleven o'clock, when the whole city fell into a kind of hush. This short interval of quiet is still clear in my mind even after forty years; the only sound to break the silence was the calling of birds perhaps disturbed by the

unaccustomed absence of noise. Following the two minutes silence we entered the Cathedral for the service of remembrance.

The regimental colours hanging from the stone columns, dusty and faded, each bearing the names of past conflicts, served to remind me on this particular day of all those millions who had preceded me and of the great many who had not come home. This was the day that those shielded from war were reminded of their passing.

A feeling of pride

A few days later, on the fifteenth of November 1956, I walked through the barracks gate for the last time. At the time of my conscription, few would elect to enter the forces voluntarily. Army life was never a picnic at any time. The Brigade of Guards, Household cavalry, etc., all sustain a degree of glamour but are not excluded from the forefront of battle: witness the 2nd Scots Guards in recent times in the Falklands.

My inclusion into the oldest regiment in the British army eventually brought me some feeling of pride. As with all the rest of the Scottish infantry regiments, our variation in dress, by which I mean our particular tartan, our difference in music, our reputation in the field, the ceremonials and discipline even in two short years made us proud to be a member of those famous regiments.

The probable result of this became evident a short time after my demob when a young lady scathingly remarked of me, "he walks with a swagger". Even just two years with the colours can't be shrugged off in a fortnight.

Every man who has served in the forces has his own story to tell; most really don't talk much about it. I suppose few are really interested. Anyway, I have set down the main features of my little story. Perhaps someone, someday, who may never even have known that National Service existed, will flatter me by taking a little time to read about the service of

**23091453 Pte. BOYD, W.
First Battalion, Royal Scots**

Suez and Cyprus

In the early 1950s, Britain still had a military presence in Egypt; its Suez military zone covered an area the size of Wales and the troops were much resented by the Egyptians. In 1954 the British government agreed that its troops should be withdrawn by the summer of 1956; in return Egypt promised to respect international freedom of passage through the Suez Canal. However, in July 1956, President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal and Britain feared that access to its oil supplies in the Middle East would be lost. In November 1956, under a secret and devious plan, a small British and French force invaded Port Said and took control of the Canal. The crisis led to international uproar and the invasion was condemned by the US, USSR and the UN. In Britain, too, opinion was deeply divided. Prime Minister Anthony Eden's health broke down and he resigned. British troops were withdrawn and Britain was deeply humiliated in world opinion by the episode. The crisis is now seen as the beginning of the end of the British Empire, and of Britain as a world power.

Private William Boyd served in Egypt from January to late summer 1955 – the year before the Suez Crisis.

Some British troops were withdrawn from Egypt in 1955 to deal with another colonial crisis, this time in Cyprus, where Archbishop Makarios was leading calls for Cypriot independence from British rule. The Greek Cypriot EOKA group organised violent resistance against British troops, but since the British government was about to withdraw from Egypt, it was reluctant to give up Cyprus as a base for the Middle East. With violence against British garrisons increasing, talks opened in October 1955 to discuss the island's future, but failed to reach agreement. Independence for Cyprus was eventually achieved in 1960.

Private Boyd served in Cyprus from late summer 1955 till early spring 1956.