

N.W."Bill" Hutchinson, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

When I was 17 and for reasons that do not concern us here, I decided to enlist as a soldier. I presented myself at the recruiting office in Worcester. The recruiting sergeant wasted little time on pleasantries and as I had no preferences apart from wanting to get as far as possible from home, acquainted me with the DCLI.

I lived in rural Worcestershire. Somebody had to.

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I had a simple written test to do, mainly dictation, I remember, possibly to see if I was able to write my own name and do simple arithmetic.

At the time of which I write I was under age, so I was only able to sign for a six month provisional period of service. At the end of which I could, if I wanted, sign up for the full time of seven years with the colours and five on the army reserve (known as 'seven and five'). This agenda was acceptable as I had no intention of backing out and, after a caution reminding me of the binding nature of the agreement, I took the oath and the King's shilling and from that moment I was in the army. A railway ticket to Bodmin was given me with instructions to catch such and such a train and to change at Bristol and Exeter for connection to Cornwall where I was to change once more at Bodmin Road for the local train to Bodmin. So off I set into the unknown.

It may seem incredible in these days of extended travel and a shrinking world for me to admit that as the train passed between Dawlish and Teignmouth the track ran along the coast and I saw the sea for the first time.

At Bodmin Road station the train stopped and I got down from the carriage, the only passenger to do so. I sat and waited. No-one came, so I sat on and looked at the moorland hills thinking "Is thi what it has all come to?" After a while a toy-town train pulling two carriages chugged into view. It stopped, I got on and it reversed back along the track in the direction from which it had appeared. When it got to Bodmin I was met by a lance-corporal who led the way to the DCLI barracks, which I found, to my surprise, were barely more than a stones' throw away. Up the hill we went, skirting the war memorial and into that granite built keep.

Once we were through the archway the view opened up. Across the barrack square was an expanse of lawn and flowering shrubs, all trimmed and well maintained. In front of the barrack blocks and sheltered by a clump of trees was a small, unheated swimming pool. Away to the right, beyond the barrack blocks, rose the high ground of the moor under its canopy of sky. A meal was waiting for me in the dining hall which I ate in lonely state. Curious glances were directed at me from the kitchen area making me feel somewhat embarrassed.

I stayed for the first night in the recruits room. This was the fief of a bemedalled old soldier whose employment was to give raw recruits like me a first taste of our new profession, with words of wisdom and advice to guide us on our way. The bed allotted me was hard but adequate, consisting of three two-foot square horsehair mattresses known as "bisquits" on a metal bed frame, and I slept well after my long journey.

At daybreak next morning a bugle call outside the window blasted me awake and I heard the call being repeated at various points among the buildings. My bed was quickly stripped of its coverings and I was shown that the bottom half of the frame could be slid on runners underneath the top half and the three mattresses so arranged with one as a seat and two placed upright like a chair back and all covered by the folded blankets into something resembling a fireside chair. An arrangement universal to every barrack room I later came across.

A short time later I heard the noise of pounding feet outside on the path and saw a group tearing up the hill as though their very lives depended on it. "What are they running for?" I asked. "They're not running" replied the old soldier, "They are marching, and that's the pace you will be marching at from now on". I began to entertain doubts as to the wisdom of what I had entered into. 140 paces to the minute was almost a casual stroll by the time I had been in the regiment a few weeks.

Later that first day I was taken to a barrack room. "Waterloo" was its name, on the left of the entrance of the block, next to the square, which was to be my home while at Bodmin. A number of young men like myself were already in occupation. When sufficient numbers of us had been assembled we would be formed into a squad to commence our training. Until that time life seemed to consist of endless roll calls and counting of files in the ranks and constant references to notebooks by our NCO instructors. Did they think we would abscond so soon? We may have felt like doing so later but not then.

It soon became clear that all this checking and cross-referencing was pattern of service life. The senior ranks would always want to know where we were and what we were doing for, as I later found out, everyone no matter what his rank, was always at all times answerable to the ranks above about those in the ranks below.

Another curiosity was the way we recruits were never allowed to do anything on our own initiative. We were always marched and escorted everywhere. No doubt it may have offended someone's tidy mind had we been left to wander like sheep and not go about our business in smart and soldier-like ways which was always at 140 to the minute.

I noticed that everyone not an NCO was dressed in a curiously shapeless baggy canvas suit, buttoned up to the neck and with five brightly polished buttons down the front. The jacket had two patch pockets, one on each side. Trousers bottoms flapped around ankles and in colour of every shade from a dark red sandstone to a washed-out biscuit. This working dress was known as 'canvas' (naturally) and was the recognised wear of other ranks in the barracks thus saving wear and tear of the uniform proper. The variation in colour was caused by constant washing and laundering during which the original sandstone dye became washed out of the material. This bleached appearance was a mark of the length of service of the wearer.

In our new canvas suits we newly joined ones stood out like sore thumbs. No old soldier would be seen dead in new canvas and would spend days soaking it in a bucket of water, thumping and pummeling away until the colour was reduced to a satisfactory anaemia. There were no pockets in the trousers so apart from having nowhere to put our hands, had we had been foolish enough to do so, we also had no safe place to carry money. This little problem was solved when we found that the jacket had a double reinforced seam down both sides at the front to give stiffening to buttons and buttonholes. A slit with a penknife about three inches up from the bottom solved the problem.

Clothing and equipment was issued to us from the quartermaster's stores. Two of everything from top toe. We had been given our army number, and this number was stencilled or punched on every item issued to us. Even our boots had our number stamped on them at the ankles. This was a wise precaution for some of my companions, while not perhaps lightfingered could, if given half a chance, be rather communal with other people's possessions.

When we started our training proper my squad had four NCO instructors. In order of seniority they were Sgt. Attwood, of medium height and of fair appearance. Under him was L/Sgt Hall, with dark piercing eyes. The quartet was completed by two L/Cpls. One, Smith, rather aloof in manner and ambitious for promotion was later commissioned at the start of WW11 and Emrys 'Jack' Davies, tall and energetic. Many years later we met again at a regimental reunion and became great friends. Sgt. Attwood shortly left Bodmin to rejoin the second Bn. as CSM of "A" Company. His replacement as our chief instructor was Sgt. "Dickie" Best, strict and yet fatherly to us recruits. Later as CSM of, I think, "C" company in the second Bn. he was killed in the fighting in Tunisia.

Of the officers stationed at the depot during my time there only two stand out in my memory. One was Major Cruddas, the CO. I once saw him early one sunny afternoon crossing the square on his way to the officers mess. He must have been to a function of some description for he was dressed in full morning wear, top hat, tail coat, striped trousers, spats and a tightly rolled umbrella. Tall, languid and slightly stooped he was a cartoon by Spy come to life on the barrack square at Bodmin. The other Captain the Lord Carew, spectacled and roly-poly. Later, when I was with the second Bn he was CO of HQ Company where I learned at no little cost of myself that it was best if I kept out of his way and that of his Sgt Major who had no great love for me as a private.

On the barrack square we were taught the basics of foot drill. Simple movements like turning to the right or left. Starting to march and halt without giving the instructors apoplectic fits. Learning to adjust our stride to the regulation thirty inches so that everyone from the shortest to the tallest in the squad covered the same amount of ground in a given number of steps. It was remarkable how quickly we became a cohesive group and took pride in being so.

Saluting was high on the list of things for we new bods to learn. Pay parade was a test of our efficiency in this respect. I remember the drill for this only too well. One marched as smartly as possible up to the paying officer's desk when one's name was called, halt, salute, take one pace forward, take your pay in the right hand, transfer it to the left, take one pace backward, salute, right turn, pause and march away. .... How boring it must have been to the young officer paying out.

To expedite matters at pay parades it was the common practice to fall in in alphabetical order. Later, while serving in the second Bn everyone's life was enriched by the presence of a fiery little NCO known to one and all as Sgt. Brimstone. The inference should be obvious to my readers. He was a fussy little terrier of a man but, unfortunately, a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic and would be continually tinkering over trifles. During pay parades he was prone to question everyone's name to satisfy himself that we were all in proper alphabetical order, often giving us moments of sheer joy in the process, such as "What's your name?" "Phillips sergeant". "What are you doing here among the Ps? Get up there with the Fs" -and other scholastic gems.

At Bodmin there was a sergeant of the Education Corps. I had only ever attended a village school so hearing him lecture was the first time I had heard anyone talk in depth on a subject. His talks on regimental and military history were a delight to me. I don't know that the others thought much of his lectures but they interested me. I'm sure he opened my mind more than hitherto.

After more than half a century memories of those early days remain. The boring weekly coal fatigue, a whole afternoon spent delivering coal to the various messes and married quarters. Evenings spent on the twenty five yard indoor rifle range where as a natural left-hander I was made to fire a rifle from my right shoulder. The day Sgt. Attwood asked if anyone could play cricket—good I thought, I'd like a knock so up went my foolish hand. "Right" he said "The depot staff are playing a team from the town, you will be an umpire". "But I can't umpire a match", I wailed. "You can now". Never volunteer. A lesson learned and never forgotten.

Sunday church parades to St Petroc's Church in Bodmin town centre where we sat under the old colours that were carried by men of the regiment long before we were born and who had lived and died under them. I used to dream of what tales those old colours could tell, which I'm afraid often happened during the endless sermons so common in those days.

My time at the depot passed, sometimes quickly, often slowly but my squad gradually became more skilled at soldiering and thoughts of moving on to join the second battalion began to enter into our conversation. Eventually the day came when we said goodbye to the barracks ....not with too much regret .... and we marched from the square, through the arch of the keep, past the war memorial and down to the station to begin our journey to the regiment, then stationed at Alma Barracks, Blackdown, near Aldershot. For the first time under our own steam and without an escort of NCOs.

At North Camp station a truck was waiting for us into which we piled with our baggage and equipment. I started regimental life as a private in B company

The battalion moved from the Aldershot area in the autumn of 1938 and moved to Moore Barracks, Shorncliffe, near Folkestone in Kent. This was an appropriate move for this was the place where Sir John Moore began to train the first Light Division during the peninsular wars. The barrack buildings were rather old fashioned but nicely situated on the cliff top overlooking the sea. The Channel's changing moods during our first winter there were a source of some interest and when the spring of 1939 came, most of our spare time was spent on the beach. Not that I had much time to spare on such pleasures for shortly after we moved to the area someone, somewhere, decided I was to become a signaller.

Once again I packed my kitbag for another move. This time to HQ company, the home of all the specialist platoons. I trained to become a signaller with some success under the signal officer Lt. Vawdry. He too was later to become a casualty of war while serving with the 5th Bn during the invasion of mainland Europe.

During the time of my signals training a draft was sent to the 1st Bn in India and with it went most of the squad I had trained with at Bodmin.

I know of only three of us who survived the war, though there must be others who outlived those battles. I often wonder what became of them all.

Written in 1995 for Bill Hutchinson's daughter Anne